

ON THE DIVIDE

OUR RECENT ISSUES have reflected an anxiety which many people concerned with writing in our country are feeling today. We can see now, as Giose Rimanelli points out from a fresh viewpoint in a later page, that a Canadian literature exists. But we are still disturbed at the conditions to which the writers who make that literature must adapt. The consciousness of this situation appears in article after article submitted to us, and we have published several pieces of this kind because what they have to say seems to us urgently important. Underlying all these discussions is the realization that a literary "world" of the classic Paris or London kind, where writers could undergo their apprenticeship among other writers (with a full apparatus of publishing houses and literary journals), is not likely to come into being in Canada for a long time yet, if ever. Equally present is the related feeling that, though at the moment we are faced with an unprecedented crop of young writers publishing their works in the mimeographed journals that rise and die like mayflies in almost every city in the country, the chance of even the most brilliant of these new writers having the kind of leisure necessary to become latter-day Tolstoys or Flauberts is remote. The mere time to write the impressive literary masterpiece becomes more and more a luxury to be won only by the ruthless organization of the scanty spare hours that can be won from less congenial occupations.

How, in fact, is the writer to keep going so that he can write even minor masterpieces? In our last issue Thelma McCormack discussed in some depth the possibility of a new relationship between the writer and the mass media, and in a letter which reached us yesterday Hugh MacLennan remarked that in his view her essay "went to the heart of the modern writer's predicament, which is

common no matter where he lives," and added this most pertinent comment of his own:

. . . I was struck by her nostalgic reference to Proust, Joyce and Pound. There can be no such writers these days because the cost of living is too high. Hemingway says that in his time in Paris, when he knew Joyce and Pound, a couple could live, and travel, on \$5.00 a day. Now the cost of living in France, even in Grenoble, is about 20% higher than in Manhattan. Robert Goulet went to Mallorca and managed for a while, and then, in Hemingway's phrase, "the rich came." I spent a day in Palma last fall en route, and the only restaurant where I could get lunch before the ship sailed was as expensive, and almost as vulgar, as Longchamps. In the lovely mediaeval square of the city, plastered right across one of the most beautiful facades, was a Coca Cola sign with dimensions (according to my recollection) of about a hundred feet by thirty.

Is Marshall McLuhan right? Though he uses a kind of mystical jargon that sets my teeth on edge, he well may be.

Those of us who knew it even in its last days certainly look back with nostalgia to the writer's life of the twenties and thirties, when a productive existence on a shoestring in a Paris hotel, a London attic or a Cornwall cottage was still possible. In recent years the writer of these lines has travelled far, through Europe, Asia, Latin America, and he has come to the melancholy conclusion that the places where the writer who can bear isolation might live and work on a pittance are vanishing as rapidly as the big game in Africa. Portugal, some of the remoter parts of Spain, Mexico and Greece, the foothills of the Himalayas (as long as one keeps out of the English-style hotels) and Australasia are about the last possible refuges. And for how long?

Accepting that few good writers can function at rock-bottom as ascetics or paupers, one has to assume that the world-wide levelling-off of prices will soon mean an end to those economical gathering-places of the Happy Few which those of us who are now middle-aged were lucky enough to know in our youth. The writer who wants to live in the congenial physical surroundings of whatever may be the literary gathering places of the future will have to do so on hard cash earned at home; in that sense we shall all be — if not Sunday writers — at least holiday writers, working most of our time for the leisure in which we shall write what lies nearest our hearts.

The most favoured alternative to that possible new relationship with the mass media which Thelma McCormack has explored is the retreat to the campus. In one of our recent issues Robert McDougall rather pungently suggested that

writers would do well to avoid the deadly shades of the academic groves, and Earle Birney has replied. Writers who have become university teachers — and particularly writers with freelance pasts — realize that there is something to both sides of the argument; academic activity can provide financial security and even certain kinds of intellectual stimulation, but — as most universities are at present constituted — it makes too heavy demands on the very sort of energy which the writer should be conserving for his real work.

If the alternatives are so puzzling even to the writer who can regard himself as more or less established, how much more so are they to the apprentice writer in a country like Canada. The mass media at present can offer him merely a selection of various forms of cub journalism; at best he can write scripts for the C.B.C. and at likely worst he can become a reporter in an execrable provincial newspaper.

Here at least the academics — or a minority of them — offer an alternative in the various Creative Writing courses, programmes and departments which are appearing in Canadian universities. This is a phenomenon which can neither be dismissed summarily nor accepted lightly. Homer, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Stendhal, Cervantes: who were their Creative Writing teachers? But perhaps that question is too obvious; it may be argued, at least, that times have changed. So far as I know, not even the most dedicated of Creative Writing instructors suggests that he can make a silk purse out of a literary sow's ear; most of them are reconciled to the thought that the majority of their students will be diletantes with no productive future and that some at least of them will merely be trying for easy academic credits. But they do put forward the argument that, in the absence of a literary ambience of the classic type, their classes and seminars may provide the kind of environment in which a young writer of real promise can receive encouragement, advice, sympathy, and perhaps decide whether, so far as he is concerned, the writing game is worth the candle. On the other hand, many people — including a fair number of practicing writers — believe that even this type of academic interference with the development of writers will do more harm than good. Certainly the case for Creative Writing classes has not been proved, either by argument or by experience; but it remains open, and it is worth discussing.