

PERMUTATIONS OF POLITICS

THERE ARE TIDES in the social consciousness of artists, and of writers especially. Often the rising and falling of the waters of interest can be traced in the works of a single writer: Auden, for example, or perhaps even better Spender, returning, after two decades of imperfect aestheticism, to relive vicariously in the youth rebellions of the Sixties his own original revolt of thirty years before.

In the marginal area where literature merges into journalism such shifts of fashion, sensitive to the feeling of the time, are especially perceptible. Orwell was the classic example of a writer standing on that volatile frontier. Never sure that he was a good novelist, or a novelist at all in any strict sense, he combined a passion for the exact and appropriate word with a knowledge of his own timeliness as a journalist. In the twenty years of his writing life, Orwell remained acutely conscious of the social and political issues of his age, yet in his last days it seemed possible — given his growing interest in exploring a Conradian type of fiction — that if he had lived into the Fifties he would have followed most of the men of the Thirties into a detachment from current issues, out of which he would probably have emerged, as so many others have done, into the commitments of the Sixties.

Inevitably, with that change in climate, our age has become, like the decade of the Left Book Club and *The Road to Wigan Pier*, a time when journalists and even writers with more portentous ambitions turn back towards the disinherited, and immerse themselves again in that world of *les bas fonds* which fascinated the French quasi-anarchist writers of the 1890's, the Russian writers who appeared between the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, and the English writers in the age of the Spanish Civil War.

The best of all these works of documentary reportage to appear in Canada has been one that did not look directly at the distress of the present, but reminded us of it by holding up the misery of the Depression, admirably evoked, as a mirror for today or perhaps tomorrow. It was James H. Gray's *The Winter Years*, which appeared in 1966.

Neither of the two recently published Canadian books that strike me as symptomatic of the climate at the beginning of the 1970's is as well-crafted or as memorable a book as Gray's little masterpiece. And, even if craftsmanship or memorability are not merits at which their authors aspire, these books are not even so effective in the art of communicating experience. Both — *The Poverty Wall* by Ian Adams (McClelland & Stewart, \$2.95) and *The Underside of Toronto* edited by W. E. Mann (McClelland & Stewart, \$8.95) — reveal in varying degrees the limitations of perception which the development of the social sciences has imposed on the natural history of poverty in the later twentieth century.

The Underside of Toronto is far the more disappointing of the two books; its title is probably the most exciting thing about it. Anyone remembering Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, or even Thomas Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, will recognize by comparison the general poverty of insight in this uneven collection of pieces which Professor Mann has scrambled together, the prevailing lack of the ability to evoke sympathy or involvement, above all the widespread — but fortunately not quite universal — replacement of interest in the actual human being by an immersion in the generalities and abstractions of pseudo-science. It is clear that Professor Mann and the sociologists on whom he mainly relies have little sense of the uses of literature to further their desire to communicate knowledge, and one can only regard it as fortunate that not every aspect of the underbelly of Toronto has yet been explored by researchers with their notebooks and hidden tape recorders. On some subjects the editor has been forced to rely on enterprising journalists who got there before the survey squads. There, indeed, is something uneasy and apologetic in the way he introduces essays by professional writers who do not use the quasi-hermetic cant of the social sciences. Yet these essays — by Robert Fulford, Elizabeth Kilbourn, Jack Batten — are the best pieces in the book because they are concerned with making people directly aware of what it is like to live in the underworld or to go there as an observer with his senses unblinkered by theoretical preconceptions, and because — avoiding tribal lingo — they make the attempt to tell their stories in clear and attractive English.

Since, as Orwell argued, the clarity and precision of our language both reflects

and conditions our patterns of thought, it is not surprising that one finishes *The Underside of Toronto* with a feeling that the men and women whose profession it is to communicate their observations have produced accounts of the life of the poor and the neglected that are not merely more evocative and revealing but also — in the last analysis — more honest than the dense and arid writings of those who habitually subdue life as they meet it to the imprisoning network of research methods and classificatory conventions.

Rather firmly in the Orwellian manner is *The Poverty Wall* (Ian Adams), but it is the manner of Orwell at his least successful (*The Road to Wigan Pier*) rather than that of his best works of social reportage, *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *Homage to Catalonia*. The most telling criticism of *Wigan Pier* was that it was really two books; a direct report on the conditions of the English unemployed in the Depression, and a polemical discussion of the plight of British socialism. A similar criticism might be levelled at *The Poverty Wall*. Ian Adams has had a vast direct experience — both as an underdog and as a journalist — of the various faces of Canadian poverty, and there are many passages in which he describes his experiences with a starkness that is completely convincing and needs no polemic to support it. This is the personal and original content of *The Poverty Wall*. The rest of it — the statement of the hypocrisies that underlie current talk about the Just Society and the factual and statistical analysis of the true condition of the Canadian poor — needs to be presented, but not in this book. Indeed, its very presence induces a curiously schizoid tone, and in effect de-emphasizes the passages of personal experience and direct observation, in the same way as the opinionizing in the latter part of *The Road to Wigan Pier* defused the bombshell revelation of slum existence in the opening chapters of Orwell's book. Today one looks for new classics of the literature of social and political revolt, but in Canada they have not yet been forthcoming, and one is hardly aware of them elsewhere.

A SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT INTRUSION of politics into our literature during recent months has only confirmed the editors of *Canadian Literature* in their long-sustained view, that petty localism has no place in our assessment of literature or any other art. We refer to the recent agitation by a group of extreme Canadian nationalists against the inclusion of Warren Tallman among the jury that recommended the recipients of the Governor-General's awards for literature in 1969.

The objection to Warren Tallman, whose perceptive essays and reviews on Canadian writers and books are familiar to readers of this journal, is apparently that he is still an American citizen. Let us look at the facts more closely. Warren Tallman came to teach at the University of British Columbia in 1956. For the past fourteen years he has lived in Vancouver, and has shown every sign that this is his chosen home. If he has not decided to become a Canadian citizen, it may be that he is not impressed by the formal implications of a man's domicile, but that, in our view, is a matter of his personal choice. The important fact is that he has been fully involved for many years in the Canadian academic community and has applied himself sensitively over this period to the study of Canadian writers whom he understands more profoundly than many scholars who are birthright Canadians.

But, really, we do not have to prove even that Warren Tallman is a long-term resident with an acute perception of Canadian values to justify his inclusion on the committee selecting books for the Governor-General's awards. The criterion by which such books are chosen is not the extent or nature of their *Canadianness*, if such a quality can be assessed. It is their *literary value*, and that should be manifest to any good judge of books provided his language is the same as that of the writers he is considering. In the visual arts it has long been accepted practice in the case of important exhibitions to include on the jury at least one expert from another country, and the procedure has its value since it assures that there is always an eye whose vision is not coloured by the local influences to which we are all unconsciously subject. We believe that Warren Tallman combines with a peculiar felicity the understanding of one who has lived long among us with the objectivity of one who has not yet made a final gesture of commitment.

The editors of *Canadian Literature* are as aware as the most ardent nationalists of the dangers of American economic and political domination. They are equally aware of the dangers of a Canadian nationalism that narrowly denounces the participation of individual non-Canadians in our literary and artistic life. Our culture, like our society, is a river composed of streams that have flowed in across the frontiers; cut off the streams, and the river will die in the desert of isolation.