

editorial

SUMMER THOUGHTS

Instead of an Editorial

I HAVE ALWAYS THOUGHT that an editor approaching the summer issue of his magazine should be allowed some license, some freedom to leave topicalities aside and pass into speculation and the daydreams appropriate to an August afternoon. Even the cloak of the prophet, cautiously assumed, may not be out of place, and so I use this summer opportunity of putting into print some speculations of the present and future of writing in Canada which have long floated in my mind. For once I am picking the highlights and ignoring the shadows. There will be autumn and winter issues, after all.

Let me begin by saying that it seems to me that any literature, before it can produce major writing, must have first attained a minimum degree of complexity and self-consciousness. Any idea of a Golden Age when men composed great works of literature with simple naturalness is at best a delightful myth. As any classicist knows, the attainment of the kind of simplicity and directness which we really value in literature—as distinct from bucolic idiocy—depends on the prior acquisition of a high degree of sophistication and on the establishment of a tradition of experience that comes from the long living into an environment. Colonists do not produce fine literature, though explorers, returning to write in the lands they left, often do.

As an example of what I mean by the simplicity and directness we value, let us take the writing of Hemingway, whose qualities often lead to his being opposed in the minds of critics to obviously complex writers like Joyce and Proust. But in fact Hemingway's starkness comes at the

end of generations of very self-conscious thinking about writing in an American environment, and one can hazard the proposition that American literature had to go through the dark mazes of Melville and the parenthetical exercises of James in order to stand in the clean, well-lighted place of the Hemingways—a clean, well-lighted place which is nevertheless liable to lend itself to the Mithraic darknesses of the *corrida*.

It seems to me that literature in Canada, after a time lag owing to the country's later development, is now reaching a stage not unlike that of literature in America at about the time when James began to make his historic analyses of the nature of fictional process. To begin, as a pioneer country where people were concerned with the problems of making a new life and a new society, Canada tended either to produce work that did little more than echo English, American and French patterns, or to produce direct reportage and fairly direct satire like that of Haliburton. The pushing out to the frontier tended to perpetuate the pattern by its insistence on the value of raw rather than rendered expression.

During the past two decades, however, there has been what I see as a mutation in Canadian writing, a quite astonishing advance in complexity of feeling and also technique. We can see this particularly in poetry, in the poetry of Jay Macpherson and James Reaney, of P. K. Page and A. J. M. Smith and Douglas Le Pan; we can see that even Irving Layton, who shouts like a primitive, is really a sophisticate capable of handling his chosen forms with great deliberation, and that behind the massive facades which E. J. Pratt raises like Cyclopean masonry there is a cunning architect directing the strokes of the apparently rustic workman. I would certainly be willing to match the work of the poets I have mentioned, and of others as well, against the kind of poetry I have seen coming from England during the 1950's. Recently, it is true, one has heard complaints that the past few years have seen a diminution of the Canadian poetic urge of the 1940's; perhaps they have—I am not at all sure of this—but when we see it all in the perspective of time I still think that these twenty years between 1940 and 1960 will appear to us as a crucial stage in the development of a mature native poetry.

To a less extent, the advance in complexity applies to other forms of literature. In fiction, for instance, there is a quickened urge towards experimentation, towards forging more complex instruments for deline-

ating human predicaments. Ten years ago Malcolm Lowry seemed a rare and magnificent bird to roost in the western Canadian woodlands. Now, with writers like Richler and Sheila Watson and Brian Moore at work, I do not think this would still be the case. We can see even a basically conventional novelist like Hugh MacLennan, despite a naiveté which still astounds one, working with a growing complexity of craftsmanship and a growing assurance of mastery.

In fact, literature in this country is producing an ever-growing variety of responses to Canadian existence, and it seems to me that the maturity which such versatility suggests is confirmed by the emergence at the present time of an increasing interest in criticism as a form of writing which has a necessary part to play in our literary pattern. In this direction, of course, Northrop Frye has been our great pioneer, presenting a nobly wide view of the critic's function, and one need hardly stress either the international recognition he has gained or the influence he has wielded over a whole school of younger Canadian critics and even younger Canadian poets. In another way, the support which *Canadian Literature* itself has received during its first year provides a suggestive indication of the position which criticism, as a form of writing, is beginning to take in our literary world. I do not rejoice, of course, over the presence of criticism as such; as Oscar Wilde warned us long ago, it can be a very barren process unless it is sympathetically linked with the currents of creativity. But I believe that criticism does have a creative function when it becomes part of that process of exploration, of thinking about literary forms, which results in experimentation, and I hope criticism in Canada will develop along such creatively exploratory lines.

It would be unwise to make any emphatic prophesies about what may emerge from these signs of movement and growth in Canadian writing. No movement in the arts can either be planned or foreseen in detail. On the other hand, one may be justifiably tempted in a summer season to a little frank daydreaming, and one may find some food for daydreams in the fact that on occasion important changes in the general literary climate have begun in minor traditions. It was, after all, in Norway that Ibsen initiated a change that affected the whole look of European drama, and in the petty and powerless kingdom of Provence that the character of post-mediaeval lyric poetry was established. Perhaps it is not too much to hazard a wild hope that in some country like Canada

we might see—for example—a sudden move towards a break in what critics the world over are calling *the crisis in the novel*, the stagnation in fictional forms that has been hardening over the past two decades.

Daydreams apart, let us draw satisfaction from the fact that literature in Canada is a growing art. It is constantly receiving new writers from abroad and sending out its native writers to explore the world beyond—as James and Turgenev did so importantly in the formative stages of other literatures. It is a literature which as it grows becomes less and less content with itself, which is full of tentative variety, and which is not easy to define. We may indeed recognize at last that—as a minimum—present-day writing in Canada is something more than the product of the remittance men of European traditions, something more than the shadow of literature in America. What that something more is we find it harder to say, and I am not sure we should pursue it beyond rather tentative general thoughts. After all, it is the individual books and the individual writers, each secure in his autonomy as an artist, that should first concern us. Later, when we have considered, criticized and appreciated such works and such writers, it will be time for the literary historian to come and draw his conclusions. To fire the melting pot here and now, to attempt anything more than the provisional establishment of common denominators of contemporary Canadian writing, to see in it features that are easily and patriotically identifiable, may do some obscure service to political nationalism. It can only do disservice to literature itself.

Yet, in the meantime, one can at least consider the possibilities. And if here I have emphasized what is encouraging in them, there will be plenty of time for winter thoughts on what is wanting in Canadian writers and writing.