

CHANGING PATRONS

ALREADY DEEPLY ENGAGED in the massive task of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, the University of Toronto Press has now commenced another scheme equally vast, and in this case of international rather than national relevance. It is the great complete English translation of the works of Erasmus, the first of its kind, expected to fill between forty and forty-five volumes, and to be published — the Press announces — at approximately two volumes per year until the edition is complete in about twenty years' time. Already, in *Saturday Night*, Robert Fulford has made the appropriate comments, after surveying the magnitude of the project, with its thirty-three contributing scholars, located in universities the world over.

What seems to me admirable — perhaps I mean enviable — about this project is its assumptions. The editors and publishers not only believe that there is a serious need for Erasmus in English right now; they believe that there will be a need for a great deal of Erasmus in English over the next three or four decades. More than that, they believe there will *be* a next two decades, and that there will continue to be scholars, universities and libraries.

Perhaps the one melancholy fact about the project — and Fulford talks of this too — is that it constitutes a kind of viaticum on Latin scholarship, which, if not dead, is in perilous condition. Again to quote Fulford:

The project is, of course, uniquely a product of our own times — a few decades ago it wouldn't have been necessary; scholars would have assumed that anyone who cared to read Erasmus would read him in Latin.

The first volume of the *Collected Works* is entitled *Correspondence of Erasmus, Letters 1 to 141*; it consists of the letters written between 1484 and 1500, together

with a few replies Erasmus received from fellow scholars. It is an index of the energy of this remarkable man that his correspondence alone will take up about twenty volumes — or half the *Collected Works*.

Though time and fashion have made the literary language Erasmus used archaic in a world that sorely needs a similar neutral and eloquent means of communication, what he has to say is often timeless in its implications. True, like other writers, Erasmus sometimes framed his letters not only for the eye of his contemporaries but also for that of posterity; he was not above gathering them into collections to meet the greed of the early Gutenberg age for new publishable material. But modern authors who hoard their correspondence with a view to a library sale, and who are not above shaping their letters with a regard for how they will eventually look in print, can hardly dismiss such a practice as totally archaic. And in his less self-conscious moods, especially in the later letters in this volume, there are times when Erasmus (whom we have too often been inclined to regard as a titan of pure scholarship), emerges as the prototype of the professional writer, the post-mediaeval intellectual who parlays freedom of thought against precariousness of existence. Consider the following:

So I entreat and implore you, dear Batt, if you have a single spark of your former affection for me, to give your most earnest consideration to saving me. With your agreeable, easy-going disposition, you possibly believe that you have left me well off; however, I seem to be in a worse state of ruin than ever before, since X offers no bounty, my lady merely extends promises from day to day, and the bishop goes so far as to turn his back upon me, while the abbot bids me be of good hope. In the meantime, not a soul comes forward to give, save only X, whom I have already squeezed so dry, poor fellow, that he has not a penny more to give me . . . At the same time, I have many thoughts to ponder; Where shall I flee, without a rag to my back? What if I fall ill? Granted that nothing of this kind happens, what will I be able to achieve in the literary field without access to books? What can I hope to do if I leave Paris? And finally, what will be the use of literary productions if I have no recognized position to back them? Will monsters like the person I encountered at Saint-Omer be able to laugh at me, calling me a prater?

The age of private patronage has gone, and its passing has removed some of the acuter humiliations from the writer's life. Still, money remains a great subject in writers' letters, as in their conversations, and one could imagine a modern letter very much like that of Erasmus with persons being replaced by institutions, with an impoverished independent publishing house taking the place of the squeezed-dry X, and the CBC, the Canada Council, and one or other provincial

arts council taking on the roles of “my lady”, the bishop and the abbot. The very freedom that writers desire creates its everlasting precariousness, and until writers accept to be civil servants, which one hopes they never will, they will always be asking for bread — and snapping like Erasmus at the hand that feeds.

THE UNDUE DWELLING on violence in literature, like the undue dwelling on sex, may appear to the sophisticated a self-defeating process, since for them as readers its more or less rapid effect is a state of either ennui or ridicule. Sade shocks and then amuses and then bores; no sane reader can get through two of his books in close succession without vast skippings. But boredom and laughter — let us admit — are self-defensive reactions, and the fact that brutality and porn or near-porn may seem ludicrous to those who find a sense of balance essential in art and life does not mean that they are any less attractive to others, or any less significant as signs of the times. Nor are the problems surrounding such phenomena made any less complex by the fact that one finds, in censorship of any kind, a solution neither acceptable nor likely to succeed.

Indeed, the question of whether brutality or an exaggerated preoccupation with sexuality should be encouraged or discouraged or forbidden is not the real point. Both exist, and there is a kind of symbiotic sub-culture which unites those who produce extreme works in both directions and those who read or see them on the screen. To a great extent the relationship is a passive one; few of the people who watch violent films go out to imitate the brutalities they have witnessed. The real question we have to face is why in a society that has become theoretically more permissive there should be an upsurge of the kind of fantasies — in literature, in film and to a less extent in the other arts — which one had hitherto regarded as typical products of repression and of the fantasies of liberation it produces. The answer obviously is that if we have to take such extreme advantage of our freedom, then we are not yet free. This, of course, is what many contemporary radical intellectuals say when they argue that violence in the arts is a form of extreme protest against the decaying society in which we live, and which we must destroy before a non-violent world and its appropriate arts can come into being. The essential flaw of such an argument seems to lie in the fact that historic precedents, at least from the triumph of Lenin in 1917, have demonstrated that violence used to destroy the old order has an obstinate tendency to perpetuate itself in defence of the new order, so that the non-violent world and the new art it would allow to flower are indefinitely postponed.

Nevertheless, I could see little realism in the arguments of those writers who

during the 1950s took a quasi-pacifist standpoint and condemned violent art somewhat fatalistically as a sign of social decadence, rather than attempting to understand either its works or its motivations. The last decade has demonstrated that — whether just or not — their condemnations have had little effect. It is therefore rather surprising that we should have had to wait until 1974 for a book that — even in a rudimentary way — attempts a sensible analysis of the causes of violence in literature and the other arts and — without either applauding the phenomenon or condemning it outright — tries to present a sound response.

The book is *Violence in the Arts* (Macmillan, \$7.50), by John Fraser, a critic of English origin who now teaches at Dalhousie. It is a brief book — 162 pages plus notes — and it can be regarded as no more than a reconnaissance for the exhaustive survey of the phenomenon that one day needs to be written. But, such as it is, the book is timely and useful. Basic to Fraser's historical analysis — and to his whole argument — is the contention that there is an essential difference between violence in the literature of earlier ages, and violence in literature, film, etc. after the rise of Nazism. Violence in the classic works from antiquity down to the nineteenth century was qualified by concepts of justice and nobility. Unmitigated violence tended to be isolated in highly formalized works like those of Sade and Octave Mirbeau, which had obviously no connection with real life. (Fraser ignores the hints of an emerging preoccupation with gratuitous violence in the works of pre-World War II writers like Gide and the early Sartre.) But by making it a political necessity, the Nazis first made violence part of the "very fabric of society". (Again, not enough attention is paid to the extent the Nazis built on Stalin's transformation of Chekist violence into a political way of life.) To begin, the rest of the world was revolted by the Nazi excesses, but, as often happens in such cases, revulsion was transformed into fascination, and more and more often we have been imitating the Nazis in recent years, either directly — as in Algeria or Vietnam — or vicariously in our arts. Because the Americans lack a tradition of self-criticism, their country has become — as it were — the eye of the hurricane; there is a curious touch of loyalty to the homeland in Fraser's rather gauche argument that the English are saved from American extremities of violence by having the right combination of anarchic instincts and conventional behaviour patterns (though perhaps the murder statistics, which he does not quote, give support to his point).

As I have suggested, there are many weaknesses in *Violence in the Arts*, but these must be balanced against a resolute effort to come to terms with the phenomenon, made in a clear prose that reflects both its writer's sanity and his

admitted debt to Orwell. "When the only options [he argues] are pure non-violence or undiluted violence, it becomes harder for the kinds of intermediate relationship to be worked out that may in fact render violence unnecessary." Violence in action as well as in the arts is what he obviously means, and he suggests that we can grapple with the problem, as earlier ages did, by recognizing that there are different kinds of violence, with different moral aspects. "One still has to decide, sooner rather than later [he goes on] which party one backs and agree that if violence is essential for its survival it must use violence. In other words, one has to come to judgment. And in general, violence or the possibility of violence is a great sharpener of judgment." The flaw in that argument, of course, lies in the fact that the calm self-defences of some of the worst Nazi criminals suggest that they too had come to judgment, but without a sharpening of the kind Fraser might wish. And wrong judgment — which is always a human possibility — is less irredeemable when it is unaccompanied by violence. For all that, *Violence in the Arts* is an honest and welcome attempt to face with candour a problem — or perhaps rather a cluster of problems, social as well as artistic — which so far have been largely avoided, either from prejudice or, worse, from embarrassment.

GEORGE WOODCOCK

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