

Book Reviews

Anne Smith, ed. *The Art of Malcolm Lowry*. London: Vision Press, 1978. pp. 173. Sterling 5.40.

In her brief "Introduction" to this collection of essays, the editor makes the somewhat curious observation that Malcolm Lowry is not yet a "respectably" established novelist, even though she also argues that in her estimation he is a worthy successor to James Joyce in the development of English fiction. The fact that many of the contributors to her own volume have been writing about Lowry for periods of up to thirty years (George Woodcock's first piece on Lowry, for example, was published in 1948) should have told her something about his "established" status, though I confess I'm not sure what she means by "respectably" — and the fact that she protects the word by quotation marks suggests that she is not sure either. By my count, Smith's volume is at least the seventh full-length study or collection of essays on Lowry, to say nothing of special editions of learned journals devoted to him, and countless separate articles published on both sides of the Atlantic. Surely here is respectability enough for the most demanding of critics.

The irony is that in her own case editor Smith had no need to be so cautious, for on the whole her volume adds substantial matter for the Lowry scholar and general reader alike, though one or two of the essays are somewhat disappointing. Of the eight essays, three are on *Under the Volcano*, two on *Hear Us O Lord*, one on *October Ferry to Gabriola*, and the remaining two on Lowry's techniques and vision in general, touching briefly on most of his works. This proportion is certainly correct, in terms of the stature of these works, but, though the essays on *Volcano* are first rate, this novel in my estimation has already been so thoroughly worked over that I would have preferred to see at least one essay on *Ultramarine* or *Lunar Caustic*, both of which illuminate aspects of Lowry's art that do not consistently emerge in his best known works. Still, there are some very good essays in this volume, particularly those by Costa, Tifts, Woodcock, and Bareham, all of which present refreshing and sensitive interpretations of Lowry's work and the genius that lay behind it.

In a sense, however, the eight academics who have contributed these essays have been upstaged by a non-academic, Russell Lowry, the writer's older brother, who contributes a substantial and remarkable "Preface" to this volume. He establishes his own role and credentials at the outset, and in passing serves up a mild caution for academics to mind what they are about:

My role is basically practical and factual with here and there maybe a touch of plausible speculation . . . I happen to know more than anybody about certain aspects of my young brother's life — but claim no place whatever in the world of scholarship. [The learned essayists], on the other hand, be they ever so steeped in literary wisdom, can have known him only briefly, if at all, and have had to base many theories, deductions and conclusions upon supposedly autobiographical parts of his writings or, more dangerous still, upon second or third hand versions of equally dubious material . . . (p. 9)

Four years Malcolm's senior, Russell Lowry recalls vividly many episodes and features of their youth, and he dispels a number of myths and suppositions upon which many of Lowry's critics and biographers have built their theories: Malcolm's unhappy, suffering childhood, his near blindness, his golfing prowess, his love of the sea, his linguistic talents, his vast erudition. Without identifying the biographer, he singles out for special censure one account of Lowry's life — "one deeply researched, documented, bibliographed and acknowledgement-spattered biography which contains at least ten crass mis-statements in the first three pages." Some of his observations are tinged with bitterness, and one can't help but feel that Russell still resents the attention heaped upon his brother. "Malcolm is no hero to me," he states, "never was, never could be." Incidental facts sometimes amuse us: Lowry was nicknamed Lobs because his face turned red as a lobster when he got angry; and they sometimes surprise us: it was Russell, apparently, who came up with the title for *Ultramarine*, simply because Malcolm loved jazz and wanted a titled related to "the blues;" critics to the contrary, it had nothing to do with Conrad Aiken's *Blue Voyage* or to any cosmically watery vision on the part of a budding novelist.

The "Preface" thus provides a useful and salutary preparation for our reading of the eight essays, and it particularly encourages us to stick to Lowry's texts and to be wary of exotic or autobiographical interpretations. "If his writings are works of genius," Russell cautions us, "let them be recognized and admired as such, for what they are, rather than for what they are not. And the autobiography of my young brother is one thing they very definitely are not." One of the essayists in particular, Perle Epstein, fails to heed this caution, and her essay for me constitutes an unrewarding and somewhat perverse interpretation of one of Lowry's finest works, "The Forest Path to the Spring." Just as her earlier study, *The Private Labyrinth of Malcolm Lowry*, revealed more about the Cabbala and mysticism than it did about *Volcano*, so this present essay reduces "Forest Path" in a sense to an exercise in Zen meditation. The musician/narrator of this story thus becomes the "meditator," his fellow squatters are like "Japanese *rashi*," summer visitors who come occasionally to bathe are "part-time monastics," and the seven Scotsmen who rent their shack to the narrator are "like a group of crazy Zen monks testing the fortitude of the probationer at the gate of their monastery." At this point, one inevitably recalls a line from Shakespeare: "There was more foolery yet, if I could remember it."

Happily, the essays by T. E. Bareham and George Woodcock do much to offset this violation of "Forest Path," for they see the story within the total context of *Hear Us O Lord*, the other six stories of which Epstein makes no mention whatsoever. Bareham argues persuasively for the unity of these stories, seeing them as a "connected curve," in which pattern we can legitimately trace recurring motifs, scenes, characters, natural elements — in short, the standard substance of all of Lowry's fiction. Woodcock takes to task those critics who "neglect the importance of the perceived environment, of place in its most direct and concrete sense," and suggests that it was Lowry's extraordinary sensitivity to the geographical elements of place and space that ultimately enabled him to create the polarities of hell and heaven as reflected in *Volcano* and "Forest Path." What Bareham and Woodcock acknowledge and build upon is the complexity of Lowry's vision as it is reflected in *Hear Us O Lord*, a vision that incorporates many layers and many elements, including

the mystical. But to interpret any one of the seven stories in reductionist terms, as Epstein does, is to violate both Lowry's genius and his accomplishments.

Sherrill Grace doesn't go as far as Epstein in imposing an exotic interpretation, but her reading of Lowry's works in terms of an "expressionist vision" nevertheless compels her from time to time to yoke things violently together, as it were. What she does is to set up a somewhat artificial distinction between Lowry as solipsist and Lowry as visionary, and then uses her theories of expressionist art to demonstrate that these two views are really compatible after all. Her essay is useful in providing information about relatively obscure expressionists in art, music, and film, but less successful in tracing their influence on Lowry, except as it was manifested in film. Grace's essay picks up after she gets through defining her terms and forcing Lowry into *a priori* patterns, and her discussion of the influence of expressionist films on *Luna Caustic* and *Volcano* is particularly enlightening.

The three essays on *Volcano*, as might be expected, reflect vastly different approaches and concerns, but all are in their own way equally substantial and useful. Richard Hauer Costa exploits his long-standing involvement with Lowry's fiction (since 1947) to present us with an overview of Lowry scholarship over the past thirty years, an overview which transcends the merely factual by virtue of his own personal enthusiasm. The essay is useful as a starting point for the beginning Lowry scholar, but it also serves to remind the established critics of the strength of some of the earliest Lowry criticism, by such scholars as R. B. Heilman and David Markson. Stephen Tift provides us with a profound and lengthy examination of the elements of tragedy in *Volcano*, which he discusses essentially in terms of what he calls "reflexiveness." "By describing tragedy as a meditation on tragedy," he explains, "by blurring the boundaries between fictive interpretation and concrete experience, the novel continually inverts fiction and reality." All this is complex stuff, but Tift applies his abstractions against the actions of the Consul in convincing fashion, and leads us to see how the double forces of guilt and inevitability move Firmin inexorably away from the possibility of salvation.

The virtue of Brian O'Kill's essay on "Aspects of Language" in *Volcano* resides in the fact that it relies totally on the variant texts of this novel, and doesn't try to vindicate any particular theory of language. He demonstrates quite convincingly, and by comparisons with Faulkner, how Lowry's increasingly complex vision of experience was manifested by an increasingly convoluted sentence structure. If it is true, as Russell Lowry opines, that "Malcolm must be laughing his head off" at the antics of some of his critics, he may well be laughing at the way O'Kill diagrammed one particular sentence — of its 165 words, only five constituted the principal clause, and they were the five least important words in the sentence. All the rest of the words form "overlapping" or "branching" or "cumulative" clusters which, O'Kill argues, help us to understand the multiple experiences of Yvonne's life which culminate in this particular moment. I don't intend to read Lowry in this meticulous fashion, but O'Kill convinces me that maybe I should — and more than that we really can't ask of a critic.

I end where I began — with the editor, and with my regret that she didn't attempt to make some assessment of Lowry's art in light of what her contributors had to say. What is needed is obviously more than a 100-word Introduction, and while it may be admirable from one point of view for an editor to let her contributors do all the talking, a book of this nature could be enhanced by an extended statement by the editor of what it in fact has accomplished.

Hallvard Dahlie

Dorothy Livesay, *Right Hand Left Hand*. Erin, Ontario: Press Porcepic, 1977. pp. 287. \$6.95.

Dorothy Livesay's title, *Right Hand Left Hand*, refers to the manual labour of the working class, whose toil, courage and suffering the book celebrates. It refers to the writing of authors and poets, another kind of manual labour. It refers especially to the harried and divided lives of women, which are shown as juggling acts, requiring a deft balance of private and public, domestic and professional, female and ladylike selves. And it refers to the political turmoil of the 1930's, when left and right wings struggled for the upper hand. Livesay deals with all these topics and more, as her subtitle suggests: "A True Life of the Thirties: Paris, Toronto, Montreal, The West and Vancouver. Love, Politics, The Depression and Feminism." To this list she might have added, "And Literature."

The book consists of a collage of poems, plays, stories and articles; of retrospective commentary; of letters, articles and interviews by friends and acquaintances such as Morley Callaghan, Leo Kennedy, Ted Allen and Norman Bethune (even a note from S.J. Perelman); of photographs, paintings, newspaper clippings, playbills and a menu. All these fragments combine in a mosaic, a portrait of Canada in the 1930's as seen, for the most part, by an energetic poet, social worker and political activist. The book is full of fascinating insights, stray facts and images of a decade that has received increasing attention, some critical, some nostalgic, from Canadian writers. The problem with the collection is that it tries to do too much. It is part memoir, part social commentary, part literary history; but all these only in scattered parts. It offers observations and insights rather than a sustained vision.

As a memoir, for example, it consists of souvenirs of Livesay's busy life as student, social worker, journalist and so on. Yet this "true life," while certainly forthright, tells us little about the woman or the formation of her political and literary convictions. There is little sense of a growing personality or even of a distinctive temper of mind to lend coherence to the fragmentary memories. This last point is the main disappointment of the book: Livesay does not dominate it enough. The observations she made at the time are not especially acute: "Tonight we go to an open communist meeting protesting against Polish imprisonments. Ought to be good stuff. Certainly Europe's in one hell of a mess. I don't see any way out but the death and burial of Capitalism." And her brief commentaries, while setting letters such as this one in context, make no attempt at prolonged interpretation; they

provide only basic, narrative information. Thus the pact between Hitler and Stalin, which brought the decade to an end by challenging and disillusioning so many radicals in the west, elicits only the ambiguous remark: "The Stalin-Hitler pact was a shattering psychological blow, not fully understood (as historians now believe). Russia's scheme was to awaken Chamberlain-led Britain to the dangers of the world threat of fascism." Such an event and claim deserve further explanation. The most unperceptive comment — faithful to the unperceptive spirit of the time, perhaps, and included for that reason — comes in a letter written from Munich in 1934 by her sister Sophie:

Last night Hitler spoke over the radio. Of course, I couldn't understand it so finally I went to sleep . . . One can find out nothing here, so I'm giving in: that is, I'm friendly to the few Nazis I meet. On Wednesday night three of us went to a charity (Winterhalfe) concert given by the S.S., sworn to death Nazis in black uniform.

As a literary and social history of Canada, the book enjoys the same strengths and faults. It observes the major events of the decade with a fine sense of bustle and concern, of indignation at injustice, of admiration for the dignity of strikers, workers and unemployed; but again without offering sustained analysis or a distinctive, personal perspective. It is full of political concern, but not of politics. "If I had the time and space really to record the facts of belonging to an underground movement in the U.S.," Livesay notes, "I might, even today, compromise some of my good American friends." The point is that she does not take time or space, but confines herself to passing observations. The same is true of literature. In a conversation with Louis Kon, Livesay declared: "I did not want to write lyric poetry anymore. All that was finished. My guide was Lenin." This decision, a denial of one of her major poetic talents, receives no further attention, and we are left to judge the outcome ourselves from the poetry included. Her earlier articles on literature are either popular or polemical. Her later ones, however, are more revealing, especially a memoir of Raymond Knister, written in 1943, and a lecture on Canadian poets' reactions to the Spanish Civil War delivered in 1976.

There is no point in criticizing the book for what it does not intend to do. *Right Hand Left Hand* is not history or criticism or even autobiography, but a little of each. As such it is a period piece, providing glimpses of an interesting period and an interesting personality.

J. M. Kertzer

The E. J. Pratt Symposium, ed. Glenn Clever, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1977. pp. 172.

The gamut of critical approaches aired at the Pratt Symposium, held at the University of Ottawa in May 1976, is an indication of Pratt's position at the nexus of prewar and postwar movements in Canadian poetry.

The papers given at the Symposium may be grouped into three general categories. Remarks by Ralph Gustafson and Carl F. Klinck are mainly biographical in nature. Germaine Warketin, Robert Gibbs and Peter Stevens emphasize stylistic aspects of Pratt's poetry, while Peter Buitenhuis, Glenn Clever, Agnes Nyland and Peter Hunt comment on Pratt's subjects and

themes. Sandra Djwa's article, easily the most perceptive and controversial article of the collection, attempts to resolve formal and thematic preoccupations in a consideration of Pratt's place within the Canadian literary tradition.

The reminiscences of Gustafson and Klinck strike a warm and personal note that is in contrast to the purely intellectual sparring of the other critics. With Pratt, they see in literature "an opportunity for fun and for the deepest purposes of mankind, all without teaching, all without didacticism." Obviously, the friends' criticism is influenced by their memory of a genial, witty man who shared many of their interests and frustrations in a common attempt to establish a distinctively Canadian poetic tradition.

The other critics are outside this circle of personal friendship and a common past, outside, too, the preoccupation with technique that makes every working poet see form as his dominant concern. "I stress the point that language makes a poem, not its contents," insists Gustafson, himself a poet:

Pratt liked verbal scope and music that you could hear. He wasn't superficial; he was simply, first, a poet whose materials were language. First, language; then, as you will.

Warkentin interprets the form-content duality in an outworn, over-simplified sense: for her, language is "the poetic garment in which [Pratt] clothes [experience] and the ethical perspective within which he works." Gibbs deflects what could have been an interesting discussion of the lyric genre by defining lyric as "the true voice of feeling," as opposed to rationalism, and thus substituting a thematic for a genuinely formal concern. In recognizing that Pratt has pointed to complex and ambiguous relationships of language to experience and ethics, Stevens arrives at a paradox: although the poet is "spokesman for the heroic action," poetry may be, in fact, "totally inadequate for the expression of action." Warkentin, Gibbs and Stevens are sensitive to the stylistic aspect of Pratt's poetry. But their criticism, while claiming to be of Pratt's use of language, tends always to explain the poet's formal choices in terms of his moral or philosophical purpose. These critics work retrospectively, from the themes of the finished poems to a view of the poet at work. They interpret the poem's theme as the poet's purpose, thus missing Gustafson's insight — "first, language; then, as you will" — in a false reconstruction of the creative process, and failing to see the poems as linguistic structures, the poet as artist rather than "spokesman for the heroic action."

Nevertheless Pratt is regarded, especially by those critics who openly adopt a thematic approach, as just such an advocate of heroism. From accounts of daily life in a harsh climate (Buitenhuis) to dramatic occurrences such as the loss of the *Titanic* and wartime convoy management (Clever) and turning points in Canadian history (Hunt and Nyland), Pratt's poetry shows man faced with odds that dictate a heroic response. Such accounts of heroism are the stuff of national myth. To the thematic critics, Pratt's "mythopoeic" function is clear. As Nyland writes,

E. J. Pratt is an original poet and his work deserves attention as a presentation of Canadian history and as a contribution to Canadian poetry. It puts history into poetry, and perhaps more important, poetry into history.

Hunt's view is similar: *Brébeuf and his Brethren* is "a highly significant poem" because "it captures the main essence [sic] of its sources." Hunt is at pains to justify Pratt's poem on the basis of historical accuracy; one example of his proof is a comment on Brébeuf's vision of a horde of demons:

Such visualizations were common in the middle ages, and we must not forget that Brébeuf, after all, was born in 1593, a year when the morality-play tradition was still fairly strong, and Shakespeare was reflecting it.

We must not forget that Brébeuf, after all, lived in the seventeenth century, not the fifteenth; that he was born a Catholic a generation later than Shakespeare, a Protestant; and that the "mystères" and "passions" of medieval tradition had been banned by the Parlement of Paris in 1548. Hunt's faulty historical overview, designed nevertheless to convince us of Pratt's historical accuracy, does a disservice to Pratt's learning and meticulous care for detail. It also weakens the critic's thematic approach to the poem.

Djwa's paper is a more legitimate historical study. She examines contemporary influences which may have encouraged in Pratt a sense of the myth-making function of his generation of Canadian artists. The Group of Seven, for example, maintained that "an Art must grow and flower in the land before the country will be a real home to its people." But this role sat uneasily with Pratt; "the extent of this unease is shown by the depth of his irony," says Djwa. In an excellent analysis of "Come Away, Death", she demonstrates the complexity of Pratt's imagery as well as the extent of his poetic skill. Even so, in response to the feeling of his time, Pratt turned to national subjects and the poems which resulted are imbued with his recurrent theme of heroic conflict. Djwa concludes, "Pratt, then, provided a usable mythic view . . . as such, he was our first modern."

Djwa's paper is a study of tradition; she shows Pratt fulfilling a contemporary aim to create a distinctively Canadian artistic tradition. She suggests that Pratt's skill as a poet was bent to the service of this aim. Certainly Pratt was aware of contemporary cultural idealism when he chose his subjects. We can be equally certain that he chose his subjects for their literary potential — for their aptness to the poetic forms he wished to develop. Djwa's survey of the development of a Canadian tradition stops short of the consideration which would make her formal-thematic synthesis complete: consideration of whether or not critics of the Seventies should echo artists of the Twenties and Thirties in demanding and praising poets who "set to work to create . . . national myths."

My own hunch is that the "mythopoeic" approach to Canadian poetry is outworn. We have grown up now; our poets need no longer proclaim themselves Canadians first, Romantic "legislators" second, and artists a poor third. Accordingly, our critics should now judge poetic works as art rather than as philosophy or fables of identity. Surely Pratt is to be praised for having written out our mythic complexes, for having written them, moreover, in admirable verse, and for having liberated his successors from this onerous, if once necessary, myth-maker role.

Barbara Belyea