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New Fiction: Illumination, Participation, Tact

SHOTGUN AND OTHER STORIES by Kent Thompson. Fredericton: New Brunswick Chapbooks, 1979. Pp. 107. \$3.00, pb.

JENNIFER by David Helwig. Ottawa: Oberon, 1979. Pp. 179. \$15.00, hb; \$6.95, pb.

RESERVOIR RAVINE by Hugh Hood. Ottawa: Oberon, 1979. Pp. 238. \$17.50, hb.; \$7.95, pb.

SO LONG, SEE YOU TOMORROW by William Maxwell. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980. Pp. 128. \$7.95, hb.

WINTER JOURNEY by T. Alan Broughton. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980. Pp. 344. \$10.95, hb.

I considered this miscellany of new fiction, three Canadian and two American pieces, in the richly affective context of a rereading of John Fowles' *The Magus*. I mention this because that novel invades, overwhelms and disturbs as only a great work of art can—and so inevitably provides a set of expectations for the reader's actions while still in its power, including reading other fiction. None of the works under review approaches the richness of Fowles'; some have occasional hints of comparable insight or intensity; one has similar pretensions. All in all Fowles, the tantalizing magician-craftsman, is not a bad point of departure for considering the five works under review. Any work of art, after all, aspires to be a field of energy in which to hold its audience. It attempts to create that mysterious fusion of text and reader which may illuminate or sensitize our obscure graspings to find, or escape, significance: to read it is to risk ourselves. With *The Magus*, as we ourselves are inveigled into becoming part of Conchis' (and Fowles') magic play, and find our own masks and roles revealed, we realize that it is inevitably those white spaces surrounding the black words on the page, those all-too-present absences of the subtext of the work, that are indeed ours to fill. It is ourselves, writes Heidegger, who are the beings interpreted by art.

Intensity, illumination, then, and tact: that crucial willingness to let the indeterminacies of the text participate with the reader in the making of meanings—with this structure of expectations I turned to the works under review. Kent Thompson's *Shotgun and Other Stories* illuminates, in quiet and sometimes subtle ways, a variety of the minor, wry epiphanies of everyday experience. Most of his stories are set in or

around Fredericton, New Brunswick, and evoke the raw landscape of the region, which emerges as a landscape of the human spirit— isolated, repressed, emotionally incoherent. Thompson builds up his stories carefully and their central figures—the ineffectual drunk, the confused adolescent, the restless intellectuals, the reminiscent old man—are pictured with unpretentious skill. A slight irony, occasional and usually tactful allegory, and a suggestion of complexity beneath otherwise bland surfaces are his strengths. Even if none of these stories are especially powerful—and occasionally their quiet subtlety verges on the ponderous—Thompson clearly has a fine touch as a craftsman, if not as a magician.

David Helwig's fiction has acquired a minor reputation as *romans à clef* and there are obvious continuities between *Jennifer* and his earlier work. It is the story of a forty-year-old divorcée adjusting to the demands of family, children, job, ex-husband, new lover, and the challenge of growing “happily into the habit of solitude,” becoming “trapped in a dim eternity of repeated gestures” like the patients among whom she works, or discovering new energies and growth. It's familiar territory and notwithstanding some skilled plotting and occasional humour, the treatment is often superficial and tedious. Helwig's protagonist comes across as tiredly vindictive, insufferably smug and bland. He provides her with a repertoire of clichéd ruminations but, seemingly, without irony or commentary. We are given capsule summaries of, for example, her marriage, her distaste for political protest, her passionless and puzzled sense of the sixties: “they learned to take marijuana for granted. They listened to Bob Dylan.” Jennifer describes another woman as “a symptom of the new world, usually naked, always a little stoned.” Such crassness doesn't endear her to us, and so far as her capacity for self-understanding is concerned, “Could she say that she wanted Tom, that she would have him whatever the cost? Not yet” or “Could she live with Tom. More to the point, perhaps, could she live without him” seem to represent her limits. Authorial manipulation doesn't help much either: any skillful text has its repertoire of indeterminacies, where the reader is invited to piece together clues, hints, and explicit directions, but Helwig's text allows for little more than bored indifference to his central character and at the end, a little impatient and malicious glee that she seems to be getting her pompous, self-deceptive lover Tom, “a mortal man, not a destiny,” we wince to overhear her saying in the last few lines of the work.

Too often it seems that Helwig has not solved, or seen, that familiar problem of communicating trivia or tedium in an enlivening and

illuminating way. No one would regard, say, Bellow's Mr. Sammler or Laurence's Hagar Shipley, Joyce's Leopold Bloom or even Fowles' Nicholas Urfe as inherently exciting people; their real vitality is that of the author whose role it is to manipulate and cajole our responses by rich association, or by continually shifting perspectives upon their shufflings, ruminations, self-ignorance, posturing, blandness, busrides, and memories. Helwig does not, I think, intend his novel to be interpreted as a satiric attack upon a set of boring, self-deceiving, unadventurous people, but the work does not seem sufficiently subtle to persuade or direct its readers into a more affirmative reading.

Authorial manipulation is no problem for Hugh Hood. Indeed, in the *stylus dei* tradition of Augustine, Dante, Spenser, Milton and Chesterton, he speaks with the authority of the Divine, searching the Book of Nature (or to be precise, an Ontario at once like Provincial Tourist propaganda and the Garden of Eden) for signs of the Divine Hand therein writ. I must confess that, before I read *Reservoir Ravine*, Hood was known to me only by a few short stories—occasionally perceptive, humorous, and mainly about Montréal—which I read with that naive recognition of familiar locale that regional fiction may bring to the properly sentimental reader. With the novel before me and an increasing irritation, indeed repulsion, as I read it, I hurriedly tried to overcome my ignorance by bullying colleagues, culling Canlit. journals, periodicals, reviews, and reading another half-dozen or so books by Hood. *Reservoir Ravine* is the third of a projected twelve-part serial fiction, *un roman fleuve*, celebrating the whole of the present century by means of what he terms “documentary fantasy,” giving “an exact account, and in the most precise and credible detail available” of his subject. Hood invites (indeed himself makes) comparison with Proust, Spenser, Dante, Dos Passos and Tolstoy. Notwithstanding a respectable body of critics who praise his works—many, admittedly, like him, faithful Catholics—Hood himself seems to be his own greatest admirer, frequently asserting his superiority over virtually all other Canadian writers. He praises his own fiction for breaking “the forms of ordinary realism” and becoming “super-” or “transcendental” realism, thus assimilating “the novel to the mode of fully-developed Christian allegory” to exhibit “the transcendental element dwelling in living things.” In an earlier novel, one of his characters—with Hood's approval—asserts that “the true subject” for the artist (*pace* The Group of Seven whose work is sternly rebuked) “is the soul's voyage in the companionship of Jesus and his angels.” Such an example of “Truth, Beauty, and Goodness” Hood finds incarnate in Ontario—not merely that of his fiction but of his birth and upbringing. There, even the

highways are “primordial images of Good,” and a child’s blackballs, changing from black to white in the mouth, are likewise “allegories of sin and redemption,” “coextensive” and stemming “from the Divine Being.”

Well! Remembering with some relief Lawrence’s dictum of not trusting the teller but the tale, and recalling Fowles’ shimmering evocation of Greece in *The Magus*, I turned back to *Reservoir Ravine*. It tells the story, set in Toronto in the 1920’s, of the courtship of Andrew and Isabella Goderich, the parents of Matt, the series’ narrator-hero, whose elderly reminiscences form one chapter late in the book. Goderich signifies *Godes rice*, the Kingdom of God; Andrew perhaps the disciple from the sea since he comes from Nova Scotia. While here there is no allegorization so coy or crass—“tacky” is the slang word that kept unavoidably coming to mind—as the title of an earlier story, *The Fruit Man* [*God the Father*], *The Meat Man* [Jesus Christ], and *the Manager* [The Holy Ghost], nevertheless Hood’s allegorical structure is clear, bordering on the simplistic, and without intensity or illumination. His characters are pompous and pretentious; his style is either clogged with unassimilated lists from Eaton’s catalogues or topography, or sentimental and wordy; his moral observations superficial or, where they do require the reader’s active deciphering, unrewardingly simplistic. The banal may certainly be used in fiction—witness Barthelme’s wonderful plastic buffalo humps in *Snow White*—and the spirit of place, to use Lawrence’s phrase, is a crucial aspect of *The Magus*, as it is in fiction by Munro, Buckler, Oates, Updike, Roth and many others. But it seems that Hood has a radical misunderstanding of how art works, regardless of what it signifies: despite his well-put observation that “a city is a set of ways to feel,” he seems unable to evoke and make his reader part of the mystery, complexity, unpredictability, dislocation or even the redemption of twentieth-century life. Kent Thompson who, to be fair, is an admirer of Hood, once wrote of his own early work that it was “pretty pretentious stuff . . . a papering-over of an insufficient conception with a flowered wall-paper of prose . . . obscure, and not worth the effort of disentangling it.” I thought of his remarks as I ruefully pondered the contrast between Fowles and Hood. Fowles has no less a “fore-conceit,” to use Sidney’s phrase, a desire to communicate no less urgently, no less love for and a vision of the transcendent suggestiveness of place, but the tact and humility with which he handles his reader’s participation in the making of his meanings is incomparably superior.

It was with relief and gratitude that I turned to William Maxwell’s novella, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. This is his first novel since *The*

Chateau (1961), and is an intriguingly intense account of an old man's recollections of a murder during his childhood. Maxwell, too, is interested in the interaction of place, history and spirit—indeed, it was revealing to see some of the same details of fashion and manners by which Hood is so caught put to much more subtle and suggestive uses. Maxwell evokes the mysterious currents of association and suggestion that unite us to our physical surroundings, most especially in childhood. He picks out the way minor details; arbitrary incidents, embarrassing hiatuses in our lives, may all link us beyond words or formulations to our own pasts or to each other's—and, most impressively, how such associations haunt our adult lives. Like Fowles and unlike Hood, Maxwell doesn't simply tell us; he opens up our experience of this realization. Our adult memories, like a "continually retouched photograph" become "a roundabout, futile way of making amends," a "form of story-telling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling." Memory, the pressure of our private histories, like good fiction, is made up of conflict and indeterminacies, gaps in recall and logic, which we anxiously fill or compensate for. Like readers of fiction, we continually ask ourselves for explanatory sub-texts; we speculate on how we have escaped the destruction that has fallen on others, or dwell obsessively on what we never quite achieved. John Updike once remarked that our keenest memories are those of events which never happened, people we never met or loved, but who remain for us a perpetual, tempting possibility. In memory, we continually recreate our lives around those events—and they are the more vivid because they are more "ours" than many events in our public lives. Maxwell's novella is a fine evocation of this realization.

T. Alan Broughton's *Winter Journey* casts the mind, perhaps inevitably, back to Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*: two Americans, seeking respite from masochistic relationships, and encountering aspects of themselves with which, in hope, they return to America. Broughton's Americans are a bruised divorcée whose therapeutic affaire with an amusingly devious Italian forms an interesting contrast with that of her son, with his music teacher. The setting is Rome, disturbingly rich, "worn and yellowed," its "labyrinths" of intimacy and warmth, contrast sharply with the nervous egocentricity of their American characters. It becomes a subtly changing mirror of their moral discoveries, "a city with no destination . . . but with layers of time older than memory." Broughton's Rome is what Hood asserts his Toronto is, a set of complex reflexive feelings, but here the complexity of that assertion is evoked, not merely thrust at the reader. The novel recalls Hawthorne, then, yet I was also reminded of Fowles: the myth of

the Mediterranean as a healer. Do North Americans, incidentally, recreate California as our Mediterranean? Perhaps Pynchon's San Narciso in *The Crying of Lot 49* is a useful corrective here!

Broughton's interest is primarily psychological not philosophical, however; as in his striking first novel, *A Family Gathering*, he is particularly sensitive to the delicacy of family relationships, especially between children and parents. His observations force the reader into constant self-interrogation, into questions motivated by their urgency rather than the possibility of final solutions: how do we relate the contingent present to our family or cultural roots? How can our family or sexual relationships bear the burden we place upon them in a shifting, unpredictable world? Do we solve our emotional impasses by fleeing them? The novel is full of delicately evoked scenes where such questions occur to the reader. By the end, Nancy and Carey return from the semi-pastoral world of Rome, itself almost a fiction where the characters "go around in circles, acting out again and again, the things" that they must "work out in time," to America, where there are "real nets, something to struggle with." Like the readers of fiction, they have withdrawn, to discover that the sojourn in a strange world may end, but its impact will continue. As Fowles' Conchis remarks, the great work of art "is acted, and then it continues to act."

I started by placing my consideration of these novels in the context of a rereading of Fowles. The emphasis is important. One of the marks of the great work of art is its perpetually changing demands upon us, its capacity to surprise and to demand that we return to it and relive and rethink its problematic nature, and our own. Of these books, only perhaps Maxwell's and Broughton's make such demands. But all, in different ways, make us aware of the astonishing possibilities within contemporary fiction. The great works, the works that demand rereading and whose meanings are sufficiently disturbing and illuminating to make those rereadings as strange or perplexing as our first encounter with them, are perhaps made possible only by the experiments, the relative failures and successes of less satisfying works. And we all know how much we need our fiction-making capacity, as writers or readers, to make bearable or joyful the increasingly complicated maze of contemporary life, what Fowles terms our "fragments of freedom, hazard, an anagram made flesh."

GARY F. WALLER