

Allison Mitcham

*THE NORTHERN IMAGINATION*

Moonbeam: Penumbra Press, 1983. Pp. 103.

Reviewed by Theresia Quigley

In the "Introduction" of her most recently published study of Canadian fiction, *The Northern Imagination*, Allison Mitcham suggests that "the Canadian imagination in many of its most original flights is inspired by the North" (p. 9). However, whereas English-Canadian writers such as Margaret Atwood, Robert Kroetsch, and Harold Horwood have only fairly recently begun to use the Canadian northland as a fictional theme, the northern awareness, Mitcham states, has long been an important part of the French-Canadian literary myth as a route of escape towards personal freedom and self-realization.

The two main French-Canadian writers discussed in some detail in this study are Gabrielle Roy and Yves Thériault. Students of Mitcham's work are familiar with her views on Gabrielle Roy and will readily acknowledge her to be one of Canada's outstanding scholars in this regard (see her *The Literary Achievement of Gabrielle Roy* [Fredericton: York Press, 1983]). It is therefore her study of Thériault's work which will possibly be of greater interest to the reader of this particular study. Aspects of his fiction are compared to such English-Canadian writers as Harold Horwood, Fred Bodsworth, Grey Owl, and Farley Mowat; however, according to Mitcham, Thériault's work is particularly influenced by the philosophy of Henry David Thoreau. For him, as for Thoreau, North America's first inhabitants are of primary interest. He believes them to have preserved valuable secrets passed down from their ancestors, and feels that much can be learned from them about life and survival. Thériault's concept of love, as discussed here, with special references to D. H. Lawrence, Margaret Fuller, and George Gissing, reveals a fresh and interesting view of his fiction which may not have been explored sufficiently in the past.

Violence as a dominant theme in Canadian fiction is explored in a chapter intitled "The Violence of Isolation." André Langevin's *Le temps des hommes* figures prominently in this study as do Marie-Claire Blais's *La Belle bête* and Anne Hébert's *Le Torrent*. Among English-Canadian writers, Mitcham singles out Frederick Philip Grove as the first whose fiction, to a large extent, is based on his views of northern living. She compares Grove's conception of the positive aspects of northern life to the views expressed by Rainer Maria Rilke; however, she does not fail to point out that Grove was clearly "aware of both northern dream and northern nightmare" (p. 65). Other English-Canadian writers discussed are Hugh MacLennan, Sinclair Ross, Henry Kreisel, and, particularly, Margaret Atwood, whose female protagonist in *Surfacing* is, according to Mitcham, "the first woman character in contemporary Canadian fiction to precipitate a northern venture and to hold the reins of the undertaking" (p. 95). Though Mitcham's book is by no means voluminous, the author does manage to cover a vast amount of literary material in this thought provoking comparative study of Canadian northern fiction. As always, Mitcham writes lucid, uncluttered prose; her ability as a scholar and as a teacher of literature is clearly evident in this work.

Elena J. Kalinnikova

*INDIAN-ENGLISH LITERATURE: A PERSPECTIVE*

Atlantic Highlands, N.J.; Humanities Press, 1982. Pp. 232.

Original Russian edition: Moscow: NAUKA, 1974.

Reviewed by S. Krishnamoorthy Aithal

Elena J. Kalinnikova's *Indian-English Literature: A Perspective* is the first book of history of Indian-English literature written by a Russian scholar. Critics outside India have written on individual Indian-English writers and their works, but few outsiders have attempted a full-scale history and presented a synoptic view of the whole of this new literature of India. Cut

off from both time and space, the foreign historian of a literature inevitably faces enormous difficulty in coming to terms with his/her subject. There is, of course, the advantage of being able to make an objective assessment, but such an assessment will be meaningless unless it is based on a real understanding. Kalinnikova combines a genuine appreciation and understanding of Indian-English literature with a dispassionate outlook.

Kalinnikova focuses her attention on representative Indian-English poets and novelists. Starting with Henry Derozio, she traces the development of Indian-English poetry in the works of renowned poets like Toru Dutt, Aurobindo, and Sarojini Naidu, and in the recent poetry of Dom Moraes, Nissim Ezekiel, Pritish Nandy, and Kamala Das. The tradition of the novel is represented by Venkataramani, R. K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Mulk Raj Anand, Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, Raja Rao, Nayanatara Sahgal, Manohar Malgomkar, among others. One may question the inclusion of a writer like Abbas among the representative novelists, and the exclusion of a poet like A. K. Ramanujan. One may also criticize Kalinnikova for distributing her attention somewhat equally among many of the writers included in her study. The book is, however, largely noncontroversial. There are no radical revisions of accepted reputations. The evaluations of the writers and their works are generally accepted in Indian academic circles.

The visits by Indian-English writers to Russia are warmly recalled by Kalinnikova. Ties of friendship and indebtedness are carefully noted. The writers of the two countries are occasionally compared with one another. The comments of Russian critics on Indian-English writers are, wherever available, quoted. But for these references, Kalinnikova adopts a neutral attitude towards her subject. She makes practically no mention of class struggle or socialist realism, the framework within which most of the Russian critics function. Obviously, there is room for disinterested scholarship in Communist Russia.

Kalinnikova's objectivity is clearly revealed when she argues that the Indian national style of living can be expressed through the medium of English. Though there exists a whole body of Indian-English literature of considerable merit, questions are sometimes raised by critics as regards the propriety of the continued use of the language of the former rulers of the country and the adequacy of a foreign language to express the stresses and the aspirations of the Indian people. Kalinnikova takes the view that Indian-English writers and Indian writers in the regional languages are both part of a national tradition, and they enrich the Indian culture in different ways.

With a stricter exercise of the relevance of response, Kalinnikova would have gained in compactness and force. The book contains too many unnecessary biographical digressions, as has been pointed out by an Indian reviewer. There are other kinds of digressions. The section entitled "The Development of Journalism and Press in India" in Chapter 1 discusses at length the creative works of Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya. The section on the poetry of Harindranath Chattopadhyaya is placed among six other sections on Indian-English fiction in Chapter 3. The titles given to the sections are somewhat journalistic and throw little light on the subject of discussion. The English translation and the editorial work leave considerable room for improvement. These shortcomings do not, in any way, lessen the value of *Indian-English Literature: A Perspective*, particularly to those who want a brief introduction to the field.