

A.R.M. Lower

### **"The Dorian Gray Phenomenon": Explained?**

Anne Boutelle says (in the Summer, 1977, *Dalhousie Review*) she has observed a phenomenon so common in Canadian novels that it needs explanation. She herself has no satisfactory explanation, but she calls for one. With some hesitation, I respond to her call. As a mere historian, I may not be fitted to tread the Elysian fields of Literature, either Canadian Literature or English Literature, but there is no law against my having a try. Although I have no claims to speak with authority, I have read in the various divisions of English Literature all my life and, more important for "The Dorian Gray Phenomenon", have over the years never ceased to cogitate on Canadian life and culture.

I shall not dispute the finding, but take it for granted: those who are more deeply acquainted with the field than I am may examine its validity. Why do Canadian characters wear masks (if they do) and what is underneath when the mask is stripped off? The answer must lie in the kind of country Canada is and therefore in the kind of people it produces. To most Englishmen it is probably still just "that country out there": it has made little concrete impression on the English mind. To many Americans it is still "the north woods", summer resort country. To a recent Francophone writer in the *Journal of Canadian Studies* there was nothing worth a second glance between the Rockies and Quebec. The efforts of a relative handful of people have gone, during several lifetimes, to fill up that space on the map with some meaning and to make an environment that was more than hunting and fishing country. Whether those efforts are to be successful is now being challenged, and if future characters in Canadian novels are not to be depicted as wearing masks, the challenge must be met and turned back, and from being a collection of people, guests as it were in a hotel, Canadians must become not a mere collection of people, but a people. Otherwise the efforts of our authors are vain: they are trying to clothe the dummy figure and give it life. I think one of the authors in the Boutelle selection says as much.

As far as I can make out, in this peculiar country called Canada, there are still few Canadians. And by that I do not mean individuals born in Canada, but people consciously and unconsciously woven out of this country and its destinies, soaked as it were in its spirit, their lives absorbed in it, as little affected in their view of their life and fate by the existence of other countries as is the citizen of Sweden or of Switzerland—or Francophone Quebec. This is the attitude I found in Australia and in little New Zealand, in both of which countries there is a *people*, such as we do not yet have in English Canada. In this country no one would question the existence of a *people* in Quebec: an integrated community of human beings subtly conscious of all being “members of one another”, no matter how sharp their personal or factional differences may be. French Canadians are one in heart: the same glances, the same gestures, and the little subtleties, held in common. French Canada, of course, is a blood community such as English Canada can never hope to be, and it has all the strengths and weaknesses of the extended family. It is hard to wear a mask in the presence of your own blood relatives.

There is at least one other example in Canada of the integrated community, and that is Nova Scotia. What has just been said about Quebecois could equally well be said about Nova Scotians. As a non-Nova Scotian myself, I was immediately struck with this—this communal consciousness—when I went to live a happy year in that province. The differences between Nova Scotia and Quebec are largely matters of size. If Halifax were a Montreal, there would be the same vigorous local cultural phenomena as in Montreal. As it is, one quickly notices this vigorous localism with its own “tang” and outlook. It may be regional, but it is something more than regional. Nova Scotian localism differs from that of Winnipeg, for example, which city sees itself readily as part of the greater Canadian whole.

This line of analysis could break Canada down into innumerable communities, many of which wear their own face and seek to wear no other. I do not mean faces of mere local pride, which are legion, but authentic, home-grown faces, with their own *look*. One thinks at once of the many inland communities in the stretches between the two oceans—many in Newfoundland and the Maritimes of a clear authenticity, Manitoulin Island in Lake Huron, the Icelandic settlements in Manitoba, some, more or less similar, even in as recently occupied areas as the Pacific Coast. If there seem masks hiding in the relatively few areas that have been the subjects of imaginative depiction, perhaps it is because there are lacking Thomas Hardys to do the painting—persons who do not look through glasses darkly when looking at their subject.

That is why I cannot share Anne Boutelle's feeling that Francophone literature also is given to the symbol of the mask. Insofar as my reading goes, Rinquet, Roger Lemelin, Gabrielle Roy all draw unmasked characters. Perhaps this mask metaphor simply represents mere chance, at least for many Francophone writers, though I think there are probably good reasons, for it has some reality in the case of Anglophones. It is hard to believe that the mordant French intellect could have much patience with masks. The mask in French Canada might have been expected to have something to do with the covering shield of the church. But even before that shield began to be lowered, there was considerable realism of outlook in some novels. Take, for example *Les Vendeurs du Temple*. As I remember it, it was playfully satirical about Church and priesthood. It is easy to understand why it did not need to be fierce—given the closeness of cleric and layman, much the same as in English Canada. In neither half of the community has there ever been felt much need for violently snatching off the mask from Church and clergy. Leave that to time. It has taken much more time in French Canada than in English, but the result will probably not be too different.

Imaginative writing in English Canada seems to suffer from the lack of that very note of authenticity which I think is to be found in French Canada and which, in English, crops up occasionally in depictions of localities. One or two good books by Martha Ostenso came out of the Icelandic settlements. There probably have been a good many others, most of them minor and only depicting things. It seems to me that the matters of which Anne Boutelle complains, such as the spectre-like conception and the weirdness of accent (surely Margaret Laurence is full of this), rise because either there is no authentic society behind these writers or that they have failed to penetrate it. Why take a lonely old woman of ninety off on a lonely tour to the Pacific coast, if not in an effort to make a bid for the unusual, the bizarre? Why not depict her in her rocking chair, behaving and thinking as ninety-year-old women do, however that is? It would have been better to keep her down to eighty. Why make men crawl through claustrophobic tunnels in Switzerland? Why not observe Toronto (as Kingston was once so successfully observed)?

I think you come on a good deal of the trouble in Morley Callaghan's book set in Montreal, *The Loved and the Lost*. Here you have the wealthy, the blacks, the restaurant keepers, the pathetic little Protestant do-gooder who ultimately gets killed, all nailed down in vivid colours. But what is the picture so presented (a pretty good one, it seems to me)? It is the picture of a city, but could one call it a community? Hardly,

since there seems to be no common factor. Everybody jostles everybody else, and there are no real links one with the other. The picture presented must be a picture of confusion, of anarchy. It must represent worlds of clashing values and of no values, so no wonder that everyone wears a mask. What is under the masks? Private worlds, presumably, at which the narrator without going farther, picking out one or two and exploring them in depth, must draw his line.

A very good contrast, as I remember it, is offered by an older novel: Gwethalyn Graham's *Earth and High Heaven*. The author picked out one stratum of Montreal society, the wealthy WASP, and observed it accurately. The result rang true, and I can recall no masks. And that was because there was order to be looked at, not anarchy. It was not the narrator's business to tear various easily imagined masks from comfortably-off business people but to describe their interaction with each other and make them into real people.

Of all the writers referred to by Anne Boutelle, the most conspicuous Ishmaelite of the lot is surely Frederick Philip Grove. Why not? Who was he? A still unanswered question, a perpetual outsider, as I can testify from my personal acquaintance with him. How could he have possibly depicted Canadian society in other terms than the unusual, indeed, again, the bizarre? Not that some of his incidents are not realistic enough. That business in *Settlers of the Marsh*, marrying the local prostitute, could easily be drawn from the life he observed. It is a situation, in fact, that gets pretty thorough discussion in most frontier communities. But it is not a normal or average situation. It is in the region of the *weird*, and if Grove had been an insider, given his powers, no doubt his handling of the whole incident, if used at all, would have been very different.

When Grove leaves people out and observes Nature for itself (*Over Prairie Trails*), the result is different. Grove is no outsider there. When I use the word *outsider*, I may stumble on a major difficulty for our novelists and poets. Many of them have not penetrated our world because they are really outsiders (Arthur Hailey), or because by alienation they have put a curtain between it and themselves. So many writers seem to look upon the achievements of their fathers and find them—bad! They see materialism, greed, corruption, dishonesty everywhere rife, and they throw in the sponge. This probably gets reflected in imaginative work, particularly in depictions of the relations of men and women. It may be reflected in the unhappy wife whose depicter is referred to by Anne Boutelle. But our Canadian women are not all Margaret Trudeaus, and one would think realistic depiction would in-

volve analysis in terms that come home to most of us, to analysis in terms of universals, not aberrations.

I have written a good deal of Canadian history, and I think I know the flecks and shadows upon our experience pretty well. It would be easy to become cynical about the nature of this country and its people, and pessimistic about its fate. So far I have managed to avoid both. Nor have I ever been tempted to see things in terms of *couleur du rose*. Objective analysis and depictions has been the mark I have shot at.

It might also help to free us from one of our heaviest handicaps—our deeply marked habit of looking over our shoulders to see what our betters, the English and Americans, are saying about us. There cannot come much good work out of an imitative society, and Canada, English Canada more particularly, has been nothing if not an imitative society. Our leading magazine over the years slavishly modelled itself on its New York prototype. Ceasing to imitate, if that should ever come to pass, would bring us closer to authenticity, and that in every walk of life, not merely literature. I used to tell my students, just to make them uncomfortable, that they were not real people at all, sitting before me, but ghosts. If they wanted to see real people, people who were themselves, I used to counsel them to go twenty miles south, across the line and they would find real people, people who are not constantly looking around to see if Mummy or Uncle approves. Most of them used to be just puzzled; some saw what I was driving at.

Personally, I do not like people with masks on. But since we are all scrambling up to the top (seeking "upward mobility"), in the barbarous jargon of the sociologist, we are all something other than what we are pretending to be, we are wearing masks. And since there is such a constant game of musical chairs being played, this must go on for a long time yet. Moreover, another old theme of mine, our population (from the Ottawa River westward) is a constantly changing one—in by the front door from Europe, out by the back to the United States. The proportion of people firmly rooted, generation by generation, must be microscopic. How can you write a story about the individual drops of water in the river that is flowing rapidly past you? No wonder you have to fix them up with artificial properties in order to make them real at all.

This constant change-over in personnel has a good deal to do with what in other lands has always been one of a reliance on imaginative writing. In England when Lord Forefathers steps out on the stage, everybody knows exactly where he stands and what he stands for. Or the cockney, or the Scot. As for the United States, Sinclair Lewis did not need to invent Babbitt; all he had to do was to introduce him. Literature

places considerable reliance in the folk figure and the "character", *Falstaff*, for example. Or among folk figures, the sailor. In Canada we once had our folk-figures, the fisherman and especially the lumberjack; these have now disappeared. There is no genuine typical figure. Emanating from the right pen, possibly the *tycoon* might serve. But would a *tycoon* wear a Canadian face?

It is always easy to present *the type* and make caricatures—good men and bad men. Most countries do this with clever and stupid representations of foreigners, the stage Frenchman in England and the stage Englishman in France. Shakespeare did this in his *Henry V*, so there is good precedent for a "mask" of that sort. But can you imagine a stage Canadian? I once saw a war play in London that exhibited a number of soldier types. Most were readily identifiable. When they brought on a sample Canadian, they presented a young fellow, scarcely more than a boy, talking in a semi-feminine voice and saying nice things about home and mother. He hardly corresponded to the men I knew, but the English playwright must have picked up the image somewhere or other. I suppose he had sized us up as an immature lot who had not as yet learned our way around. That may be the point—immature people in an immature society. Perhaps that is why we have elderly lechers hiring their mistresses to seduce their sons. Perhaps that is why certain women novelists are so fond of the fortune teller's words "that will show them, we are not sitting in any back seat."

And that, of course, is not to say that any one specific individual is "immature".

It does, however, surely point to the need for deeper and more intensive knowledge of Canadian life and experience in the past of people who write about it. That brings the discussion over into areas of politics, sociology and history, at which point most "creative" writers bow out. Well, they leave the field to us historians. If they knew very much about us, they would find that we have all, each in his own way, been pegging away at these problems of Canadian identity for considerably more than half a century. We have got somewhere too, we stodgy "social scientists" (I don't like the term); and if the "creative" people would draw on the stores we have provided for them, they might not continue to be troubled with these masks, ghosts or spectres which, Anne Boutelle charges, haunt them.

Anyway, at the present juncture in Canadian history, there are more disturbing spectres appearing than those conjured up by certain novelists. When we get women writing about sexual engagement with a bear we recollect that according to W.S. Gilbert among the items which the Lord Chancellor had on his list who never would be missed, was the lady novelist.