

We should all try to be critics, and not leave criticism to the fellows who write reviews in the papers.

T.S. Eliot

arts

Clearing the Ground razes all levels of Canadian literary criticism; pans Frye

By KEVIN CONNOLLY

Clearing The Ground: English-Canadian Literature After Survival
by Paul Stuewe
Proper Tales Press, 1984, 110 pp. \$5.95

Are critics in this country deciding what writers should write, and what readers should read? This is Paul Stuewe's assertion in *Clearing The Ground*, an aggressive critique of the Canadian literary scene released this summer by Proper Tales Press.

The book, Stuewe's first, is really about current critical styles rather than Canadian literature itself, and as such it marks a change from the sweeping thematic studies that have dominated Canadian literary criticism in recent years. It is precisely these general thematic approaches (Stuewe cites Margaret Atwood's *Survival* and D.G. Jones' *Butterfly On Rock* as prime examples) that the author is questioning, or rather, attacking in *Clearing The Ground*.

Stuewe argues strenuously against what he feels is a particularly dangerous monopoly on criticism in this country: that enjoyed by the thematic critic. While he does see some value in a properly conducted thematic approach to literature, Stuewe points out that most Canadian examples are little more than 'speculative musings,' and poor substitutes for detailed critical analysis. As a form of criticism, the thematic approach, because of its subjective nature, is particularly open to abuse, and therefore a poor choice for a prevailing set of critical criteria.

In a strong second chapter, Stuewe explores the perils of the thematic method at all levels of criticism, and gives numerous examples of its tendency towards banal generalities. He quotes reviewers saying "One of (Al) Purdy's recurring themes is his own personal history and geneology," that the novels of Morley Callaghan are based on the theme of the "conflict between sacred and profane love," and that Ethel Wilson's fiction displays the themes of "love, the complexity of human relationships, and the subtlety of truth." As Stuewe puts it, such a statement is "only marginally more profound than the observation that it is also written in sentences and paragraphs. Such notions are implicit in our conception of what quality fiction—fiction worthy of critical attention—should be like, and presenting them as themes

is about as insightful as presenting sodium and chloride as the 'themes' of salt." While Stuewe does have a tendency to overstate his case, his point is well taken, and his illustrations of the pitfalls of the thematic approach (using Margaret Atwood's *Survival* as an example) are very convincing.

It is in his exploration of the destructive influence that such a critical monopoly has had on Canadian literature, however, that Stuewe earns his highest marks. He shows effectively how the thematic approach has become the darling of the Canadian critical community, and how the overlap that occurs between academic and 'middlebrow' Canadian publications has hastened its bid to become an exclusive approach to Canadian literature at all levels.

Stuewe then goes on to examine the destructive influence the thematic approach may have had on the literature itself; how it has initiated a stream of works that seem tailored to fit the thematic critics' categories (his examples include Atwood's *Surfacing*, Matt Cohen's *Wooden Hunters*, and Oonah McFee's *Sandbars*), and how it has led to the deification of the thematic critic and the authors he favors. Though Stuewe stops just short of saying that these writers are creating novels to suit the critics, he does suggest that the overall effect of the thematic approach has been a decidedly negative one, reducing the quality of Canadian writing while effectively alienating potential readers. The popularity of *Survival*, as a basic text on most high school English curriculums, would seem to add strength to Stuewe's suggestion that whatever damage the thematic influence is doing, it is doing it on a widespread level. I think most students of Canadian literature at the high school level would identify with Stuewe's frustrations, having seen class after class reduced to the level of generalization and speculation, the courses themselves to little more than an extended session of 'Name that Theme.' Throughout the book Stuewe calls on the reader's experiences with Canadian literature as further illustrations of the widespread and visible symptoms of the thematic disease. Though most of *Clearing The Ground* is devoted to the isolation and identification of the illness, he does use some of his latter chapters to make suggestions as to some possible remedies.

Stuewe suggests that the most obvious solution to many of the problems that have developed in Canadian criticism is a return to a more rational, less ambiguous approach to literature; where writing is judged on the basis of its structural and stylistic strengths or weaknesses rather than the perceived significance of its themes. According to Stuewe, Canadian criticism has fallen prey to what he calls a "statistical fallacy," where the frequency with which a theme or motif appears is somehow equated with 'significance' or 'importance.' Stuewe points out that such an attitude has led to an unpardonable arrogance among critics who rate authors hierarchically, based on the alleged significance of their themes, rather than the quality of their writing. With such a system in place it now becomes possible to criticize an author on the basis of his themes rather than his creative abilities. Authors with complex or unorthodox styles, or multiple themes, are now ignored or denigrated while consistency and unity have become prerequisites for excellence, exaggerated in importance.

As case studies, Stuewe uses Morley Callaghan and Frederick Phillip Grove, both having been elevated to divine status by the prevailing critical fashion, and both, according to Stuewe, having achieved it at the expense of good critical judgement. Stuewe takes passages from Grove's celebrated novel, *Our Daily Bread*, and manages to come up with some classic examples of literary clumsiness. At the same time Stuewe presents examples of similar situations handled by other, less celebrated, Canadian writers, and shows them to be far superior to the Grove passages.

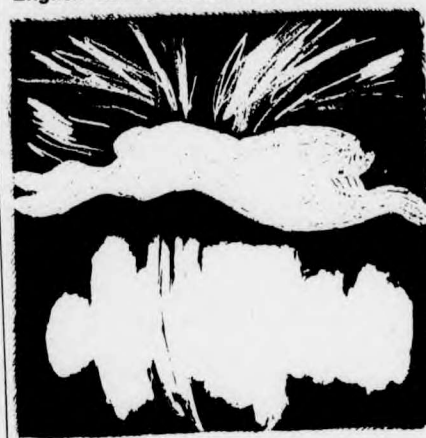
Whether or not this small sampling is actually representative of an overall trend would take far greater research than Stuewe offers us here. It does, however, provide us with evidence that Grove's reputation may be inflated at the expense of other prairie writers.

In his discussion of Morley Callaghan, Stuewe is even more convincing, with evidence of a baffling trend that has raised Callaghan's reputation to dizzying heights at the same time as his literary output is displaying a marked deterioration in quality. Stuewe sees Callaghan not as 'Canada's greatest novelist,' but rather as a once-promising writer who has fallen victim to a creeping 'creative atrophy.'

This irreverent stance, when combined with

CLEARING the GROUND

English-Canadian Literature After Survival



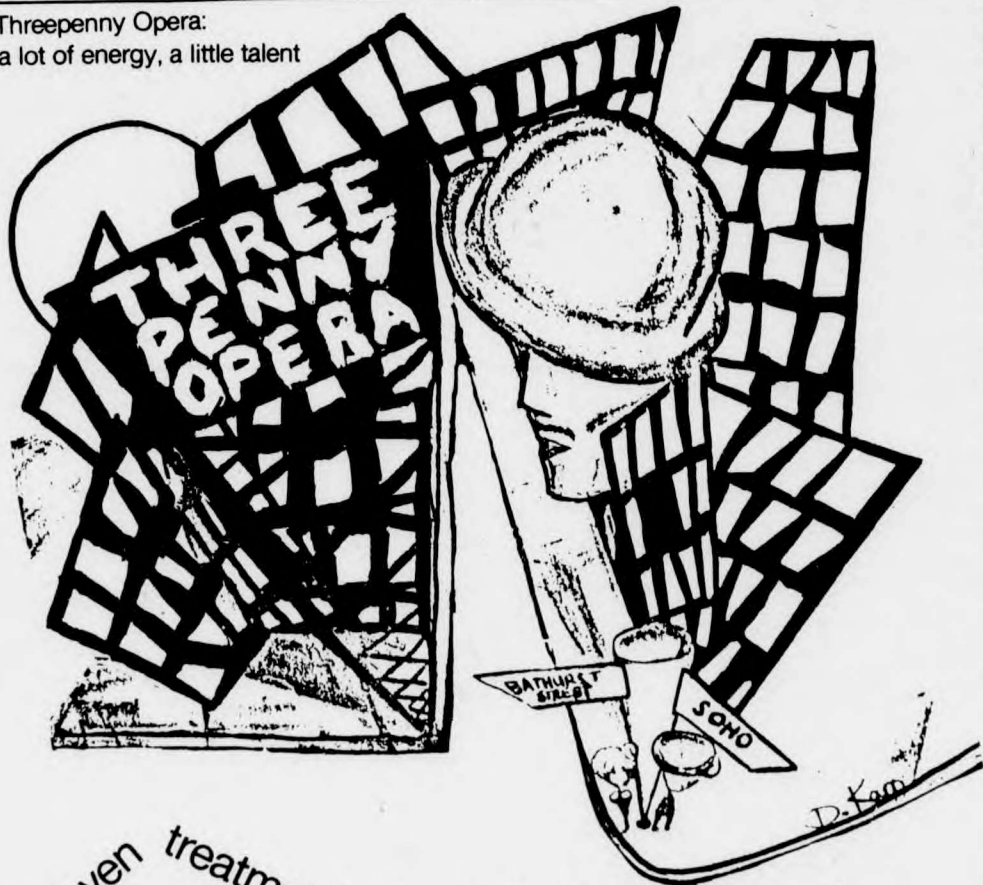
PAUL STUEWE

New volume of LitCrit fairly stews CanLit

the far-reaching implications of Stuewe's critique, is the backbone of what is a rather important literary statement. Stuewe includes claims calculated to infuriate virtually all levels of the Canadian literary establishment, backing them up with a persuasive series of specific textual examples. Though some of Stuewe's suggestions would take a great deal of research to prove, the overall persuasiveness of his argument would seem to encourage such efforts in a variety of directions.

There is little here that is particularly revolutionary. There have been others who have rebelled against the tyranny of the prevailing thematic fashion, or who have expressed a distaste for *Survival*, and the arrogance of Canadian criticism, but I would venture that seldom, if ever, has such a dissenting voice been brought to bear on so many aspects of the 'CanLit' scene. For this reason alone, *Clearing The Ground* is a very important little book, and one that may be looked back on as a starting point for some rather important changes in direction for literary criticism in this country.

ThreePENNY Opera:
a lot of energy, a little talent



Uneven treatment of classic Brecht musical

By JASON SHERMAN

The ThreePENNY Opera
written by Bertolt Brecht
Bathurst Street Theatre
Through September

It would make little sense and take more time than necessary to offer criticism of the play *The ThreePENNY Opera*. There is much to be said, both for and against what Mercury Theatre's Jon Michaelson has done with the production. One thing Mercury has done with it is have a good deal of

fun. Part of the reason for this fun is to be found in the work of Patrick Tierney, who provides consistency and perfect comic timing in the role of Peachum. This is both good and bad: good because it is rarely a pleasant experience to sit through the poor performance of a major role; bad because Tierney is the only actor who escapes doing so. His co-actors suffer by implicit comparison, a comparison they could all do without.

There is something to be said for the fact that this production has been subsidized by the go-

vernment's Summer Canada job creation project, which means that many of the actors are students. The one frightening thought that comes from this is that what these people must almost certainly be studying is acting or singing, or some such theatre-related activity. The reader might wonder why this point is being emphasized: the reason is that Brecht demands to be played, as does any great dramatist, by actors skilled at their craft. Anyone who throws in nonsense about "Brechtian" acting techniques—being outside one's character and all that—really cannot claim to know what he or she is talking about, since even Brecht never straightened it all out.

The point is that people like Stephanie Young as Polly, Jack Langedyk as Macheath and John Bourgeois as Brown were wandering about the stage, reading their tightly written lines and generally wondering what their characters were all about. Langedyk particularly seemed to be torn between playing a crazed Clark Gable and a "mucho macho" Tom Selleck. Where was the hint of evil behind gentility which marks Macheath's character and so makes any sense of his character and indeed the whole play? Young and Bourgeois, for their parts, set the cause of wooden acting back several years. Young's confrontation with Lucy were almost as embarrassing to watch as they were poorly staged.

In fact, the staging in general was at best awkward, and one scene in particular demonstrates this. It is when Macheath visits his whores (who, we might as well add, were the most amateurish and tacky elements of the production. Oh, they tried to be vixens all right, but anyone who could not have known better might have sworn that their communal saunterings across the stage were therapeutic help for broken hipbones rather than invitations). They all lie down, all five of them, in an impossibly small space which even the best of actors could not pretend was otherwise, and start rolling about and generally playing up to what we can only take to be the director's lavish fantasies of whoredom; but, wait now, is there any reason for that one girl's elbow to be smashing

into that other girl's face, and whoa! didn't the far one nearly fall off the platform? Well, this sort of realism is a touch too uncomfortable. It takes away from whatever it is supposed to embellish, and this is simply not good when you are beginning with a minimalist production.

Enough. It might surprise the reader to learn that we recommend this production for the reason stated earlier: it is fun. It also manages to convey the humanity of the play, most particularly through the performance and grace of Denyse Karn as Jenny. Her rendition of the Pirate Song is nearly classic, and might well be in later performances. But the play in general moves along quickly, as it must, much like the pacing of the first great song—which ends with a nice bit of invented business in which Macheath knives to death the ballad singer. There

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are other moments worth remembering, and almost all of them are the songs. This is because they are songs, and songs are almost always the most memorable part of an evening. They are well handled and the 12-piece orchestra is outstanding. The orchestra is abrasive and unobtrusive: this may seem contradictory, but this is exactly what "Brechtian" musical theatre needs. His (and here in collaboration with Kurt Weill) was a reaction against music which subverted the lyrics. The simple formula which was produced by this reaction—sad lyrics for happy tunes and the obverse—is understood by director and orchestra.

We should also mention the energy of the production, an energy best exemplified by the performance of Barbara Nicholson, who plays Lucy. It would not be quite fair to say that she "steals" every scene she is in, simply because she deserves the attention of the audience in such scenes. It is merely unfortunate that she was not given a larger role.

Recommended