

The Solitary Outlaw: Seeking the new power of words in post-literate society

The Solitary Outlaw
B.W. Powe
(Lester & Orpen Dennys)

By MARK KEMP

The five subjects of *The Solitary Outlaw* are all, according to B.W. Powe, "men who have felt the power, passion, and accountability of words."

It is this power of words that is the real subject of Powe's challenging, often brilliant, collection of essays, in which he investigates the role of the intellectual in modern society. Other than being figures of personal significance to Powe, the five men—Pierre Trudeau, Elias Canetti, Glenn Gould, Wyndham Lewis, and Marshall McLuhan—are connected by their tendency to stand alone (or speak alone) in the dehumanized crowd that twentieth-century mass culture can (has?) become.

Whether isolating or comparing the five separate subjects, *The Solitary Outlaw* comes together as a single essay that probes the effectiveness and the responsibility of the spoken and written word in our "post-literate" age. These genius loners, often forgotten or misunderstood by a society of "soulless consumers" continuously bombarded by the electronic media, are among the particular voices that Powe says we must pick out from the background of white noise. "To go beyond the wordlessness, the cynicism, and the shining surface of society, and recover the power of words" is the concern, and the cross, of the intellectual/artist.

Powe defines "post-literacy" as a condition "where most people can read and write to some extent, but where the literate sensibility no longer occupies a central position in culture, society, and politics." This condition prompts the question: "What happens to the reader, the writer, and the book in the post-literate environment?" along with



the implications of the answer—the loss of the "private self" in an increasingly mass society.

It is against this bleak possibility that Powe's five heroes of literacy react. Their rejection of cultural complacency and conformity makes "solitary outlaws" of them. Wyndham Lewis, the prolific novelist/essayist/social critic who was little read in his own time and hardly at all now, who outraged even his colleagues (among them T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound) and died alone and blind in Toronto, wrote of himself as the "Enemy" to a world populated by machines acting like people. Paranoid or prophet? Pierre Elliott Trudeau, the enigmatic, intellectual politician whose only consistency over the years was his "opposition to accepted opinions," has been called many things, and often by the same people, from media darling to dictator. The Canadian pianist Glenn Gould wrote brilliant critical essays on music and withdrew to near-seclusion, refusing to play except in the recording studio, because of his abhorrence of physical contact and crowds. And Canetti, the Nobel laureate whose most famous work *Crowds and Power* described "the disintegration of a centred self into a centreless mass," wrote of the decay and end of the medium of the printed word long before Marshall McLuhan envisioned it.

Powe's search for the centre of these five men's power is really a search for his own intellectual direc-

tion. His prose reveals, as we follow his deductive and inductive processes like ingenious Watsons to his Holmes, a wide-ranging and imaginative mind. It is ironic that much of the language of his book, while decrying the homogenization of mass culture, is drawn from the clichés and catchphrases of the culture. Popular song lyrics, terms from television and film editing, punning on names (Mulroney "in Irish slang—Mull-rooneyed, means to be conned"), sign placards and salesmen's jokes, the telegraphic, commanding half-sentences of marketing, and candid quotes recorded in bars, taxis and political conventions give the book a sometimes journalistic, sometimes scientific, and often collage-like feeling.

But if Powe is somewhat inconsistent in style and tone, so are his subjects: of Trudeau, he observes that his writings were rarely laudable for their consistency, but it was the tensions between opposites within him that enabled him to deal with the conflicting forces within the country. Despite the occasional excess of wordplay and of playful speculation, *The Solitary Outlaw* is an intellectual adventure and a fun read. The ideas Powe is throwing off are like sparks from a welding torch that scatter in all directions. However, the unifying theme of the nonconformist swimming against the strengthening current of mass society and its deindividuation succeeds in welding the whole solidly together.

GALLERIES

Sense of Place, an exhibition of photographs by Andrew Tomcik. Feb. 1-12. Founders Gallery (207 FC).

The Ice Cube Show, a part of York's Festival of Fine Arts. Feb. 8-12. IDA Gallery (102 Fine Arts Bldg.)

The Phase Show, two electronic sculptures and one wall work by Doug Back, Norman White, and Hu Hone. Glendon Gallery (2275 Bayview Ave.) until Feb. 21.

SEMINARS

Women in Art Series presents Wilma Needham, a multi-media artist and NSCAD faculty member, teacher of the course "Feminist Criticism of Art and Culture." Feb. 9 at 12-1:30 pm. Purple Lounge (3rd Flr. Fine Arts Bldg.)

THEATRE

"Joshua Jericho and the First Romantic Nightmare" will play at the Samuel Beckett Theatre from Feb. 24 to 27 at 8 pm. Tickets: \$2 Students, \$4 Adults.

York Theatre Dept. presents Maxime Gorkey's "The Lower Depth's" at Burton Auditorium from Feb. 8-12 at 7 pm. Matinee on Feb. 21 at 2 pm. Tickets: \$4.50 Students/Seniors, \$5.50 Adults. For reservations call the box office at 736-5157.

FILM

Calumet College Fine Arts presents Josef Von Sternberg's film "The Blue Angel" in the Calumet Common room on Feb. 10 at 6 pm. It's free.

Dept. of Humanities presents "Network" on Feb. 12 at 7:30 pm in the Nat Taylor Cinema (Central SQ.N.) Tickets available at the Dept. of Humanities, the Office of the Master, or the door.

"You Have Struck a Rock", a film about women's resistance in South Africa and "Roots of Hunger, Roots of Change, Business of Hunger," a film about drought, famine, and agrobusiness will be screened at Oakdale Jr. High School Cafetorium (315 Grandravine Dr.) on Feb. 10 at 7 pm. Free admission. Sponsored by Atkinson College.

DANCE

York Dance department presents a dancer's forum with a lecture demonstration to be given by Billyann Balay. Feb. 5th 2 pm. Studio 1, Fine Arts Building.

MUSIC

Graduate Programme in Music colloquium with Dr. Regula Qureshi, from the University of Alberta. The topic is "The Study of Performance: Lessons from Sufi Music." Thurs. Feb. 4 3:00 pm at 207 McLaughlin College.

Student Recital Series. Stefanie Bronzi (piano). McLaughlin Hall (Decary). Thurs. Feb. 4, 7:15. Student Recital Series. Rober Muir (piano). McLaughlin Hall, Tues. Feb. 5, 3:00 pm.

CHRY Lunchtime Jazz featuring Chilean folk music with Paul Acevedo. Vanier Junior Common Room. Tues. Feb. 9th at 12:00 noon.

Electronic Music Concert featuring students of the Electronic Media Workshop. McLaughlin Hall (DACary). Tues. Feb., 9th.

CJRT Soloists series featuring the Purcell String Quartet of Vancouver. Programme includes Shostakovich Quartet No. 7 and Mozart Clarinet Quintet with Patricia Wait (clarinet). Wed. Feb. 10th 12:30.

York University Wind Symphony Concert featuring James MacDonald. McLaughlin Hall (DACary) Wed. Feb. 10th 5:00 pm.

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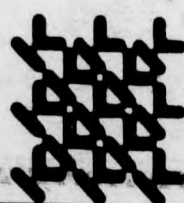
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