

Opinion

'Survival' theme of CanLit critics screens rather than illumines

Your recent review of Paul Stuewe's *Clearing the Ground* was sensibly approving of Mr. Stuewe's argument: that what he calls thematic criticism has given certain writers a spurious esteem and fame to which their intrinsic literary merits do not entitle them and that theme hunting produces banality and deadened critical responses.

It is hard not to sympathize with his attack; "survival," like any idea adopted as secondhand insight, screens rather than illumines the work being considered. One can see that critical emphasis on certain themes as Canadian might encourage writers to concentrate on those themes, just as the Inuit carvers stick to animal subjects because other Canadians won't buy anything else.

But some, I think, are misleading; let me agree and differ on several points.

CLEARING the GROUND

English-Canadian Literature After Survival



PAUL STUEWE

In his choice of quotations from the critics, Mr. Stuewe shows the sharpness of a born satirist: the earnest truths that he pounces on evaporate at his merest glance. But the fun of "exploding" clouds the fact that there seem to be two types of thematic criticism that he dislikes but does not bother to distinguish: criticism that attempts to see something peculiarly Canadian in any piece of writing produced on Canadian soil (or conversely by Canadians in exile) and criticism that labors to reveal the universal schemes present in any work, no matter how peculiarly Canadian it seems to be.

Perhaps both types of commentary deserve to be attacked, but by beginning with the first type and then expending most of his energy on the second, Mr. Stuewe permits a certain cloudiness to obscure his argument.

Furthermore, *Clearing the Ground* does not say much about why thematic criticism has been dominant for the last 20 years. It mentions the nationalist fervor touched off by Centennial Year; and perhaps our characteristic need to be both Canadian and not Canadian, all at once, has led to the two types of thematic criticism I have mentioned above.

"Clearing the Ground does not say much about why thematic criticism has been dominant for the last 20 years"

There is also the sad fact that there are more professors than writers, so that the situation in regard to literature is the opposite of the usual economic situation in Canada: we have a critical industry without sufficient literary raw materials.

More significantly, though, (and here I threaten to become "thematic") the predominance of thematic criticism suggests the old Canadian puritanism and distrust of aesthetic. Literature is good if it reveals moral

and even theological truth; it is bad, or at least suspect, if it is "just" good writing. This anti-aesthetic bias is indeed deeply rooted in the Canadian sensibility, which means that Mr. Stuewe's attack is perhaps doubly needed but unlikely to lead to an easy victory.

Mr. Stuewe does not "pan" Northrop Frye, as the headline to your review suggests, but he does misrepresent him, I would say, on at least two counts. He is particularly peeved by Frye's contention that Canadian literature has no "classics." He pays less attention to what one might expect him to dislike, Frye's sensitive anatomy of the Canadian consciousness; but nevertheless *The Bush Garden*, along with Atwood's *Survival*, is his *bête noir*.

What is overlooked, though, is Frye's "right hand," his contributions to criticism as an international discipline. Surely Frye's greatest gift and challenge to Canada is his large-minded determination that we can best be Canadian by understanding and embracing the world.

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A second misunderstanding involves Frye's strictures on value judgments. Mr. Stuewe is easily able to show that Frye makes value judgments when considering Canadian literature, and he seems to think that Frye is unaware of what he is doing. But of course Frye is aware: he assumes that the educated person will develop conscious literary values and be able to distinguish "good" literature from "bad."

To be "literary" at all is to do these things, but our literary judgments will lack depth, sophistication, humanity, even, if we do not understand literature as a world whose foundation is the laws of the imagination.

Lastly, I would question Mr. Stuewe's attitude to the relation between literature and criticism. He is commonsensical and right to emphasize the primacy of literature as compared to commentary. But the situation is not easily summed up.

There remains the fact that some "critical" writing, like that of Arnold in an early age, or Frye now, is just as important, serious, imaginative and desired as the "creative" literature to which, at some level or another, it attends. There is no need to evoke deconstructionist theories here; our own reading experience will convince us that some of the greatest Canadian writers, like Frye, Innis and McLuhan, have made criticism a living thing.

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As refreshing as Mr. Stuewe's book is, it ultimately limits criticism too much, I think. It restricts itself to analysis of work from the realistic tradition in Canadian literature and ignores work in which "good writing" is less easily defined a criterion.

The new route for Canadian criticism, mentioned by the *Excalibur* reviewer, will not just lead back to stylistic evaluation, important as that is. If it does after clearing the ground, we may end up lost in the clearing, again.

—Doug Freake

Play a sermon, not drama

By PAULETTE PEIROL

Skip Shand calls the medieval morality play *Everyman* "a dramatized sermon." However, Theatre Glendon's production of play last week sermonized more than it dramatized the play's moral.

The structure of the play is simple: God is displeased with the ways of man and sends Death to reprimand Everyman and "set him straight." Everyman begins a journey in which he seeks companions to accompany him to Death. The allegorical characters of Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin and Riches betray him, leaving Everyman with only Good Deeds. Both Knowledge and Good Deeds lead him to his Confession. Here he is aided by Beauty, Strength, Discretion and Five Wits, although these too abandon Everyman and he dies with only his Good Deeds. The play's moral seems obvious: Everyman must take account of his life in order to die gracefully with a good conscience.

Everyman, despite its simplicity, poses theatrical problems, especially in the context of twentieth century drama. To adapt any medieval play successfully for a twentieth century audience, its universal qualities need emphasis and the production made appropriate concessions.

Andrew Stern's set was appropriately ambiguous. Mixed contours of carpet, burlap and netting covered by leaves and debris transformed the stage into a barren, rugged terrain reflecting the pilgrimage motif of the play. This did much to suggest the universality of *Everyman*, not restricting it to a particular place of time. The stage branched into the aisles of the audience, and had a well-concealed opening underneath, allowing (with the upstage wings) five separate entrances for characters.

A life-sized, mal-proportioned crucifix, however, served as a constant reminder that the play was not about Everyman or even Everyman who believes in God, but rather Every Christian man. *Everyman* is indeed a Christian resolution to the problem of morality, but the crucifix was heavy-handed.

Another integral difficulty of the play is how to personify abstract qualities such as beauty, riches, and discretion. Again, the imaginative costumes of Stern helped, as he used subtle details to distinguish characters, from the length and shape of the sleeves to the fabric of the costumes.

Yet the actors, despite a generally good grasp of medieval English, lacked distinctive vocal characterization. Peta Coffeng, playing the Messenger and Knowledge, and Janet Snetsinger, playing Death and Discretion did at least have intonation and spoke to the audience directly (especially in the roles of Knowledge and Death). The other characters merely read their lines without seeming to understand them, least of all believe in them. The play then sounded like a choral sermon. This lack of emotion distanced the audience and made it difficult to empathize with any character, including Everyman, (Colm Magner) who was so nervous in the first half of the play that all one could feel for him was embarrassment.

Everyman contains humorous moments, such as when the Cousin excuses herself for leaving Everyman by saying, "I haveth a cramp in my toe," and when Riches complains of being "too brittle". This humor however was lost in the austerity of the production's tone.

The audience, filling the theatre to capacity on Friday evening, seemed politely and academically interested throughout the play; proving that *Everyman* can sustain itself in the age of modern drama.



Political rapper Scott-Heron urges audience to purge post-election gloom

By RICHARD UNDERHILL

The father of political rap arrived in town not a moment too soon.

Ronald Reagan's new lease on life in the United States led to an inevitable gloom that the people of Toronto were eager to purge, and Gil Scott-Heron's sold out Thursday night performance at the Bamboo encouraged them to vent their collective frustrations.

Scott-Heron was the right man for the job. Spoofing the 'B-movie actor, Ronald Ray-gun,' has been his task for a number of years. He has left almost no area of American life untouched; no political or sociological stone unturned. Gil Scott-Heron should be labelled 'armed and dangerous, a health hazard to politicians.' Unfortunately he is a political prisoner of the reluctance of most radio stations to give him airplay, and is thus nothing more than an irritating tick to the powerful in America.

However, for Scott-Heron, who has been writing and performing his poetry for over 15 years, victories and defeats on the floor of the political arena are not as important as the individual concerns and education of his audience. "Anything you can do to get people involved in their own destiny is a good thing," he says.

Primarily a poet, Scott-Heron's performances have evolved over the years, from the sparse, tribal accompaniment of drums and flutes to the protrusive funk that his current band more than adequately extols.

His voice has a rich confidence that gently leads one into a cynical web of political and social commentary. His 'rap' is eminently danceable—bassist and 'minister of entertainment' Robert Gordan and drummer Steve

Walker made damn sure of that—but his message is the key.

Thursday's post-election gig opened with

Winter in America, a tune written in the seventies but still a fitting post-mortem for the politician-weary American public. "It's winter, winter in America, and all of the healers have been killed or forced away. It's winter, winter in America, ain't nobody fighting because nobody knows what to say," sings Scott-Heron.

Turning to a more directly accessible topic, Scott-Heron focused his attention on the controversial drug 'Angel Dust' as the band laid down a richly textured carpet of drones and random noise which Scott-Heron screamed over in mock drug delusion, eliciting enthusiastic crowd support. His most popular number was, not surprisingly, *Re-Ron*, a blatant attack on Reagan. Definitely the funkiest tune of the evening, *Re-Ron* featured a virtuoso solo performance by bassist Robert Gordan, and ended with the delirious crowd chanting, "We don't want no Re-Ron, we don't want no Re-Ron, oh no!"

Although most of his music was didactic, Scott-Heron aimed his arrows with wit and poignant accuracy, breaking up the preachy atmosphere of much of his material with barbed puns.

Gil Scott-Heron and his band would be a welcome addition to any newscast, a sort of five minute street level look at the news of the day. Harvey 'Quirk' beware.