AN INTERVIEW WITH A WRITER -- H. KREISEL

Dr. Henry Kreisel

Dr. Henry Kreisel was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1922. He fled from Hitler to England and came to Canada in 1940. He received an MA from the University of Toronto and a PhD from the University of London. In 1949 he published a novel, "The Rich Man". Eleven of his short stories have been published in various magazines and collections and read over the CBC program "Anthology". He has also written plays for radio, heard on CBC Stage and Wednesday Night: the last one, "He Who Sells His Shadow", was broadcast in January, 1959; a new play, "Father and Son", will be heard in the near future. His critical works include essays on Conrad and Joyce; his contributions to magazines include "The Tamarack Review", "Queen's Quarterly", and "Prism". One of his stories, "An Anonymous Letter", will appear in an anthology of Canadian writers translated into Italian.

At our University Dr. Kreisel teaches "Early Twentieth Century English Literature".

This interview took place in Dr. Kreisel's office, Arts building, on January 23. Interviewers were Roberto Ruberto and Adriana Slaniceanu.

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Int.: Dr. Kreisel, why do you write?

Dr. Kreisel: I don't think I can answer this question very easily. I would say that things present themselves—sometimes a scene presents itself very strongly, even if you don't want it—and you write it—It is significant for you, although it might not be for somebody else. Once I saw a boy looking into a restaurant; he seemed confused and sad, and this image remained with me . . .

Int.: Then you wrote "An Anonymous Letter" . . .

Dr. Kreisel: Not immediately. Sometimes it takes years for the material to take shape, then you begin to understand the nature of the conflict that you think has some importance, one that you can use as dramatization of the situation.

Int.: It seems to me that most of your characters, Jacob Grossman, Herman O. Mahler, the man in "Homecoming" and the two sisters in "Two Sisters in Geneva" are solitary and misunderstood people. Is solitude your principal theme?

Dr. Kreisel: I don't know. I haven't written enough yet: a novel, some stories, two plays. That's not enough to see what I will be able to do, and what my principal theme will be. But still, what you say is right: I haven't deliberately done it, but it is a fact that most of my characters are people who are alone.

Int.: Does this reflect the position of the artist in society? A French author, Georges Simenon, if I'm not mistaken, said that writing is not a profession, but a "vocation to unhappiness". He doesn't think that an artist can ever be free. His point is that "if a man has the urge to be an artist, it is because he needs to find himself". From your own experience, what is your opinion?

Dr. Kreisel: My own experience has been that of the uprooted man. Naturally this experience has made me eager to try to understand what happens when people have to leave a way of life for another. You know the legend of the man who sells his shadow? . . .

Int.: Hoffman's story?

Dr. Kreisel: Not only Hoffman, but other authors have treated the same subject. A play I wrote for the CBC, "He Who Sells His Shadow", is based on this theme. This legend seems to me to hold something allegorical. In the twentieth century: it is the way people have become uprooted. My formative experience has been the violent break that occurred when I had to leave Austria in 1938. A young man, 16 or 17, suddenly cut off from the country in which he was born and went to school, a period of wandering about, trying to understand a new tradition and civilization . . . The experience of the people around me when I left Austria was that of the concentration camp: people who find themselves suddenly cut off and their whole pattern of life violently disturbed. Naturally I began to think of the meaning of all this, about the images I saw. Later I found some writers who had treated the same theme, that of the uprooted man: Conrad and Joyce, and in a lesser degree, D. H. Lawrence.

Int.: What about the artist who lives a normal life, the non-uprooted artist? Simenon's statement seems to me to be connected with a theme common to many artists, which in the Romantic period came to its exaggeration: Shelley, Byron, Vigny, Chateaubriand and Leopardi for example, and it is still present in modern writers. I am thinking particularly of the Hemingway hero, or of Thomas Mann's Tonio Kroger. Do you agree with the idea of the writer as a man in solitude, an unhappy man?

Dr. Kreisel: I'm not sure that I agree. The attempt of finding oneself doesn't necessarily lead to unhappiness. Not only the artist, but many other men are isolated and unhappy. I see the artist different in degree. Even the great Romantic artist who sees himself alone, is not a different human being. The great artists, Mann, Conrad, Joyce, reflect a condition that the artist sees clearer than other people, ordinary people, are involved. The artist reflects the reality of the society in which he lives, he is more sensitive, feels more deeply and has the power to express—that's what makes the difference. Even the business of finding oneself is not confined to the artist; every person has to go through the process. I think that it is possible to find a measure of personal happiness, but, for example, "the pursuit of happiness" is one of the most ambiguous of phrases. You can achieve personal satisfaction, but if you look at things that go on in the world or at the awful prospects that loom up before us, can you be happy?

Int.: Who is the author most concerned with the problems of today?

Dr. Kreisel: Albert Camus—unfortunately he died some days ago. Our times have a catastrophe in the background which is not human at all: the total collapse of civilized behavior in Germany during the Hitler era, and now the threat of the H-bomb on our head. We are in a state of potential destruction. Camus was the one who most honestly and without pretensions tried to face the fact. The situation is, in a sense, absurd, and yet we must believe that life has meaning and purpose, and that we can do something to improve the quality of society. Because when all is said and done, and in spite of all the evil man is capable of doing, he is still a pretty remarkable creature, and it would be a great pity if he were to disappear from the earth. So we must make sure that he doesn't.

Int.: Before, you mentioned Conrad and we know that you are fond of him. Is there any special reason?

Dr. Kreisel: As I said my experience has been that of an uprooted man, the same as Conrad's. His theme is: how can a man who has been cut off make a life for himself? —how can he live and what values can he hold? Another reason is that Conrad was a man who mastered English, although it was not his native language.

Int.: Did you find it hard to start writing in English?

Dr. Kreisel: When I made the decision to give up German and to write wholly in Elglish, I spoke to someone about the possibility of mastering a second language and making it your own. He said it would be impossible and this disheartened me. When I asked somebody else, he said it was difficult, but it could be done with some hard work.
When I came to Canada, I decided to take up English very seriously, to master the language and literature. At first some of the professors were hesitant, but they supported me when they saw I worked hard. Some of the University of Toronto professors were staunch supporters when I needed them — among these were Profs. Fairley, Woodhouse and Endicott, who were particularly helpful. They are great teachers.

Int.: Do you still write in German sometime?

Dr. Kreisel: No, I don't write in German at all. I haven't written anything in German since 1946 or earlier.

Int.: Is it impossible to do creative writing in more than one language?

Dr. Kreisel: I don't know that I would make a dogmatic statement. The individual has to answer this himself. Generally speaking you have to concentrate on one language. Thomas Mann wrote in German while in exile; there might have been an article or two in English, but that's all. There is also an interesting speculation that his language, while he was in exile, became a kind of studied language and lost the touch of colloquialism that was so strong in "Buddenbrooks". Joyce, for example: "Finnegan's Wake" is written in a language based on English, but it is almost beyond English. It is amazing how far writers living away become obsessed with the language as such.

Int.: Do you read German contemporary writers? Elizabeth Langasser, for instance?

Dr. Kreisel: I read a story by Elizabeth Langasser, but I haven't read much by post-war writers. I read Brecht, Mann—a good deal of Mann— as a matter of fact both Manns Heinrich and Thomas. I am very interested in Brecht, but I haven't been able to get all his works in German and I don't want to read him in translation.

Int.: What job would you take, if you weren't a teacher?

Dr. Kreisel: I never thought about it. I have been teaching for a sufficiently long time to find it satisfactory. I can't see myself doing anything else. Teaching itself is a way in which someone can render an important service to society. I think you feel that something is achieved, when you help other people to understand things. There can be a conflict between the writer and the teacher: all my energy goes into teaching; it is not a job you can do for a specified number of hours, but a way of life. It is a process which finds completion in a lecture room or in an interview with students who really care about what they are doing. It is another way of communicating, as writing is. After I had been teaching for two years, I was offered a job as a producer on CBC, but I decided against it. I like the direct contact with the students. In radio work you don't see the reaction of the audience, and it is particularly good to see the reactions, especially with good students who are really interested in their subject.

Int.: Can you give us an idea of your outlook on Canadian literature?

Dr. Kreisel: Canadian literature is in the early stages of development and has not yet produced any figure of world importance. At the same time there is quite a flowering movement, especially in poetry. The major difficulty is that Canada has been between two great literary nations. The public has had access, in its own language, to the English literary heritage and a good body of American literature. Most of Canada's literature is derivative, at least it was in the beginning; but there is now a desire to have an art that would express Canadian reality and ideas. It is not clearly definable, because in several cases it is not different from the American or English idea, but there has been an attempt, for example, to write history from a Canadian point of view —as Dr. Eccles has done recently. I would say MacLennan's "Two Solitudes" deals with a Canadian experience which is really unique: the English and French-Canadian confict. A. M. Klein reflects Canadian experience in "The Rocking Chair". Watson's poetry is deeply rooted in the English tradition, but the landscapes are Canadian. And so is Birney's poetry, and Reaney's and Mandel's. I wouldn't like to see a narrowly nationalistic art and literature however. Such a literature would be merely provincial. Narrow nationalism in the middle of the twentieth century is an absurdity.

Int: If you were asked to represent Canada by five books, which ones would you choose?

Dr. Kreisel: Morley Callaghan's "Collected Stories"; in spite of reservations, MacLennan's "Two Solitudes"; A. J. M. Smith's "The Book of Canadian Poetry"—I think poetry represents Canada better than prose, and I would have to choose more than five poets—Adele Wiseman's "Sacrifice"; Leacock's "Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town"; and W. O. Mitchell's "Who Has Seen the Wind".

Int.: That makes six now. Good. What about your plans for the future?

Dr. Kreisel: I have been working on a novel for about two years. It's about a European coming to this country—to this city actually. I have got about 300 pages written, but I am not satisfied. I will write further on Conrad, and do some plays for the CBC.

Newman Club Holds Seminar

At a special seminar held last Sunday in St. Joseph's college, 32 members of the Newman club participated in a day-long discussion on "The active Newman member and the better use of present facilities." It was the aim of this seminar to take a long look at the Newman club on this campus and arrive at some conclusions regarding its present status, together with some idea of providing necessary improvements.

Following Mass in St. Joseph's Chapel, the delegates were welcomed by President Morley Aboussafy. Brother Bonaventure, the club moderator, then gave the opening address, after which the Seminar broke up into groups to discuss the theme. The problem was attacked in three special sessions, the first of which attempted to define an active member. The second was devoted to the spiritual aspect of the Newman club, and the third to the educational functions of the club. Throughout the discussions the delegates had the assistance of not only Brother Bonaventure and Mgr. MacLellan, but also Dr. John McNamee and Mr. Wm. Dockrell, two Catholic professors on the campus.

Generally the seminar concluded that a greater effort must be made at the first of the year to reach freshmen and infuse in them a spirit of enthusiasm, not only in the social life, but especially in the spiritual and educational. It was felt that religious knowledge is not up to par with that of the subjects studied at University. Through a more concentrated effort, with the use of guest speakers and group discussions on pertinent problems, it was hoped this problem could be alleviated. Above all the seminar emphasized that through a group of active members the Newman club would be able to reach the many Catholic students on the campus who are not now taking part in Newman club activities and thus not reaping the benefits.