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A Painter in Wonderment Before
his World *by George Woodcock*

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FOREWORD

A Painter in Wonderment Before his World

In calling his autobiography, “A Speaking Likeness”, Joe Plaskett tells us a great deal about the kind of book it is, and how it is related to his life as a painter. For it cannot easily be fitted into the ordinary patterns of autobiography. It is not a “confession” in the same sense as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s eponymous pioneer work, for Joe is reticent about his intimate personal life, and in his own way reclusive, even when hospitably opening his exile’s doors to all visitors. As he remarked about his self-exile in France from the Canada where his work is known, admired and even rooted: “I enjoy remaining anonymous in the city of my adoption, unsought after and free to work without the intrusions celebrity brings.”

Yet though there is this personal shyness, which evades intimacies rather than refusing them (“there is in my attitude towards people a detachment: I think I am more loved than loving,” as he says) Plaskett has never been reticent in talking about his art, and for as long as I can remember his exhibitions (at least since the mid 1950s at the New Design Gallery in Vancouver), one of their most attractive

features has always been the introductions he would write to his own catalogues, virtual essays in painterly problems and aspirations. These introductions led me to appreciate their writer in prose as much as in paint, and so it is that I agreed — with eagerness — to write this introduction.

But if *A Speaking Likeness* is only a limited confession, evading the sentimental irrelevancies that make for a sensational exposure of the artist's soul, it avoids at the same time another familiar kind of autobiographical pattern: the chronological narrative. *A Speaking Likeness* embraces Plaskett's whole life up to the present, but it sidesteps the trap of linearity and offers us a faceted picture rather than a sequential one. We are rushed rather breathlessly in the first two chapters through the essential details of the painter's life from the days he first began to draw and aspired to become a painter in his father's New Westminster rectory to the dedicated and joyful years of creation that he has spent on and off for the last four decades and more in Paris. Then we are taken out of the rush of time into a series of slowly moving presents, chapters that read more like essays than narratives, with titles like "Inhibitions", "Exhibitions", "Meaning", "Texture", which show problems having meaning while they are being talked of rather than in the past. Two of these sections are particularly vital to the whole concept of the book: "The Self-Portrait" and "Mirrors and Shadows". Let us pause at this point, for we are near to the heart of the book's structure and of its spirit.

As a painter, Joe Plaskett might be called a conservative — he has even described himself with some irony as a "reactionary" — because he went through and finally rejected during the 1950s both Abstractionism and the other non-figurative approaches to painting. I shall come back to this rejection of conventional Modernism from another angle, but for the present the point to be made is that, by liberating himself from a Modernist orthodoxy (which now seems to be disintegrating), Plaskett has been left free to pursue his passion for light and colour and their emotional coordinates in forms and genres which the great artists of the past followed but which were rejected by the recent apostles of pure form. He is, without excuse, a landscapist, a

painter of still-life and a portraitist who seeks the other largely in himself. Seeking is essential to Plaskett's aesthetic view and equally to his painterly methods. In his view:

Meaning in living forms seems to await discovery. The artist is there to lift the veil. I like to think that the flower, fruit or table napkin is alive, begging me to make its presence felt. This may be subjective, animistic and anthropomorphic, but why should I care?

But always there is a dialogue in figurative painting of any authenticity between artist and subject, and in revealing the presence of whatever he paints the artist is exploring pictorial possibilities, translations from the language of life into the language of art, unless of course we accept Wilde's idea that nature (at least as it appears in our consciousness) imitates art and so speaks the same language, a notion that is not far from one's mind when one contemplates the painter's awareness as Plaskett exhibits it in these essays.

It is in portraiture that the dialogue between the artist and his subject takes on its most complex and also most perilous forms.

A portrait is not done solely through the initiative of the artist [Plaskett tells us]. The sitter becomes collaborator — not a passive receptacle into which the artist pours his magic, but an active participant. Success depends as much on him as on the artist.

And often, in the centuries since the Renaissance, when the artist was first recognized as an individual, painters have been inclined to follow Dürer's prolific example and paint themselves. This is not necessarily a manifestation of neurosis, or even of self-love, or, as Joe Plaskett has shown in the long series of self-portraits he has attempted and often completed, this kind of involvement can also bespeak a detachment of the kind one sometimes senses in reading this book. When the artist — he says — "takes on his own face he has no need to flatter or even search for a likeness, but instead to concentrate on pictorial possibilities."

And he adds, talking of the friends who are disturbed by the "likenesses" he presents of himself:

They see me only as a gentle, pleasant fellow and are upset when I present myself as I see myself, with some intensity and sometimes irony. I do not see myself, when I paint, as a social creature, for at that moment I am not being social. I try to see myself as an object as neutral as a piece of still-life, or, as few see me, intensely concentrated on a problem, elated and baffled at the same time and unaware of the need to present an acceptable face to the world.

Plaskett remarks of his autobiography, "This book is a self-portrait, reinforcing all those I have painted . . ." but I would argue that there are many essential differences, above all the difference of media, of prose from paint. Literary possibilities and pictorial possibilities are markedly different, since thought, which is not absent from any good painting, finds different ways of expression at the end of a pen and the end of a brush. The failure to understand this is the reason why, though many painters have fancied themselves as writers, few have succeeded — Delacroix, Cézanne and D.G. Rossetti certainly, Edward Lear oddly, and, in Canada, Emily Carr.

On the strength of his catalogue introductions, his occasional essays, and of this book I am now introducing, I would include Joe Plaskett in this company. He is at once elegant and eloquent, detached and involved at the same time, looking at humanity, as he says, "amusedly, ironically, but ultimately with compassion." Yet he also looks at the visible world with passion, so that he could say, like Théophile Gautier in a well-known sentence, "*Je suis un homme pour qui le monde extérieur existe*", or, like George Orwell, could claim "to love the surface of the earth, and to take pleasure in solid objects . . ." Add to this, on Plaskett's part, a fine ear for the sonorities of prose, an almost perfect pitch.

It is evident that all this implies a wider, though certainly not a deeper view than that shown — for all their ambiguities — in Plaskett's painted self-portraits, which are among the most austere of his works. In *A Speaking Likeness* it is in fact the "likeness" rather than the pictorial possibilities that seems to be the writer's main objective. But, as all autobiographers know, their art — even where it is not deliberately fictional — does not present a photographic image of reality. It is rather

a matter of reflection — or even refraction — of reality passing through the writer's mind, as if it were a liquid membrane, before it becomes visible to us, so that the word "likeness" is now even more appropriate; as in the case of mirror image, the "autobiography" is "like" the actuality of its author's life, not identical.

And here we become involved in that self-confessed obsession with mirrors which plays as great a part in Plaskett's paintings as in his recorded memories, ranking a separate chapter, "Mirrors and Shadows", after his essay on "The Self-Portrait", a proximity that makes the connection entirely clear. Mirrors for him have a "fascination" that "lies in illusion. Physically it is all on the surface of the glass, but mentally the image is deeply embedded within. Peering darkly, I come face to face only with a mystery."

"Peering darkly" — the echo of St. Paul's "through a glass darkly" should not be missed, for it not only links us with Joe Plaskett's never entirely repudiated Anglican childhood but it also alerts us to what, beyond mere *trompe l'oeil* space, may lie behind the surface of the canvases.

Mirrors and reflected light occur to one constantly in considering Joe Plaskett's paintings and even in remembering one's personal encounters with the man himself. I had met Joe on and off during the early 1950s, at the Vancouver Art School where my wife was studying pottery or in the houses of painter friends, but my earliest memories of him relate to the year from 1957 to 1958 when my wife and I lived in France, and Paris seemed to be full of Canadian friends. The poet Phyllis Webb was there, as were the painters Molly Lamb and Bruno Bobak. We would meet in the cafés and the cheap eating houses of the Latin Quarter — the Brasserie Alsacienne and the Crêperie Bretonne — and sometimes in the great salon which Joe rented for twelve years in an apartment on the boulevard St. Germain, which he described as "full of ghosts and the relic of a fabulous past, the setting of a dream I was daily living," the place where he could carry out his personal version of *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

Indeed, it was a place of splendid echoes, a remnant of *la belle époque* and Haussmann's great reconstruction of Paris, but filled with