

Inhabiting the Interstices

II.

Poetry is dead, one said.

Not true, answered another, just different, centrifugal, inscribing itself within more and smaller discursive communities than has been the case until recently.

But *où sont, où sont les grands noms?*

Gone perhaps, like the monocular and monological notion of tradition that once sustained them, or perhaps their poetic powers have been disseminated into a prodigious plurality, while they themselves have been troped out of Phallologo Central by its dismantlers, who have assumed the maker's mantle by unthreading it into numberless new texts, intertexts, and Can-contexts—you see how slippery is this slope of temporizing words on which we camp, campaign, and champion our choices.

Mere rum-ram-ruffing by letter.

An apt allusion, for the alternative poetics dismissed by Chaucer's Parson gave English-speaking readers *Sir Gawain*, *Pearl*, and *Piers Plowman*: three powerful poems as different from each other as from the *Canterbury Tales*, and all four texts were produced by poets contemporary with each other and ostensibly sharing the same nationality, yet committed to fundamentally variant conceptions of their task and unaware of, possibly even uninterested in, each other's regionally-defined work, although their writings all reveal an absorbing openness to both local and international influences.

Yes, but only Chaucer's *comédie humaine* left us a living legacy by informing a national tradition, since even Langland's aleatory serial poem, as you might call it, his Zukofskian life's work, lost its ideologically-defined readership not long after the Reformation, and is now the specialized preserve of the Professors—like so many of the dead letters junkmailed by *our* would-be poetic contemporaries.

One man's junkmail is another woman's artifactual outpost. Even the oft-that-was-thought-but-ne'er-so-well-expressed was brought into rhyming line by logologues who addressed themselves to specialized textual communities—communities which they helped produce, define, and maintain, and whose ideologically-underpinned values were then represented as natural, national, and normative by the Professors, to use your word.

Perhaps, but common ground is still common ground, as common sense will tell you.

What was it Coleridge once said? That current common sense largely represents the advanced theory of the past? Common ground is also contested ground.

It seems we've reached an impasse, then—erred into an aporia.

Perhaps we have, although we could call it a point of departure as well, and take advantage of a common mode of closure in the premodern genre of the poetic *débat*: to turn the undecided contest over to the audience. . . . In any case, we need to cede this space, to cease our interloping on editorial territory that was meant for remarks on a narrower subject than the rumoured afterlives of Poetry: the place of poems in the pages of this journal itself.

External Interlude

"Critics and anthologists may continue to pronounce on the state of the art [in U.S. poetry], but no one has any idea what's going on, except in one's own valley and the immediate neighboring hostile or friendly valleys."

(Eliot Weinberger, "Travels in the Federated Cantons of Poetry," *Outside Stories 1987-1991* [New York: New Directions, 1992] 118.)

The current preoccupation with difference within Canadian poetry, among writers, publishers and readers, makes it extremely difficult to construct tourist guides to it, or even to construct a knowledge of it that could be construed as 'Canadian poetry'.

(Frank Davey, "The Collapse of the Canadian Poetry Canon," *Canadian Literary Power*, [Edmonton: NeWest, 1994] 101 n. 4.)

I.

Since its first issue in 1959, *Canadian Literature* has defined itself as "a quarterly of criticism and review" and distributed its pages accordingly. Since 1975, though, when Number 63 appeared with three poems by P.K. Page and another by Al Purdy, each issue has also included a selection of previously unpublished poems (in English) by Canadian writers, and in recent years these poems have been placed so that they inhabit the interstices between the critical articles, dividing and conjoining the larger tracts of expository prose as if in imitation of one of lyric poetry's traditional functions: to draw together the very same communities that its individualizing tendencies threaten or desire to dissolve.

Prior to 1975, the journal stuck more closely to its official definition, and only eighteen issues made space for poems. The first poem ever to appear (Wilfred Watson's "A Manifesto for Beast-Poetry" in No. 3) was offered to readers as an article, while the next ("New-Year's Verses of the Printer's Lad who carries about the Quebec Gazette to the Customers. January 1, 1785" in No. 5) was presented as a facsimile specimen of early Canadian printing. When poems did begin to be offered *as* poems, they were usually published as documents in literary history or in homage to a particular poet, the documents beginning with several of Malcolm Lowry's poems edited by Earle Birney (No. 8), the homages with two poems by A.J.M. Smith in a special "Salute" to their author (No. 15). Translations from the French figured prominently among the documentary printings (for example, Louis Riel's "To Sir John A. Macdonald" translated by John Glassco in No. 37), although one issue (No. 42) included "Poems of the Unofficial Cultures" in twelve languages from Estonian to Yiddish. Supplementing these documents and homages, the journal also ran more than a dozen advertisements between 1968 and 1972, mostly on the inside backcover, in which the Hudson's Bay Company presented a single short poem "as one of a new series written by Canadian poets" from Atwood through Gustafson and Ondaatje to Waddington—a remarkable form of publication for the lucreless art of poetry.

Canadian Literature has no plans to reinstall the poetry display window, but it does intend to continue publishing some forty new poems a year, reaffirming the necessity of interstitial as well as other sites and modes of discourse. In maintaining what now has the status of a tradition, the journal also reaffirms its own in-between place in a national gallery of literary periodicals that extends from *Brick* through *Canadian Poetry* and *Tessera* to *West Coast Line*.

Ideally, given its defining commitment to the nation-state's writers and their writing, *Canadian Literature* ought to be able to claim that its regular sampling of poems by writers both known and yet to be known is representative of current poetic practice in all its (Anglophone) diversity. In reality, though, it can do no more than offer something like a random sample of poems from a mailbag constantly restocked with submissions that include, among other things, pornographic songs "penned" by budding rock stars (and sent through their agents), short stories, handwritten notes from prison (usually without SASE), ambitious lyric sequences from poets looking for their first publication, and the latest work of established writers. Also, apart from being affected by the interstitial space allotted to it, the nature of the published sample is shaped by the fact that, once sifted, the mailbag's contents usually prove to occupy quite a narrow band on the poetic spectrum, or to vary the metaphor, to have been generated by the default setting of contemporary poetic wordprocessors: that of the vernacular anecdote in free verse.

There is no denying the power of the best of such poems, but one has to admit that most of them are the present-day equivalent of those Renaissance sonnets that now lie unread by the thousands. There is more to Canadian writing—to what Robert Kroetsch has wittily called "a literature of dangerous middles"—than one poetic mode, however fine its best instances, as any partial ABC of the country's Anglophone poets will suggest: Jeanette Armstrong, Robert Bringhurst, Anne Carson, Jeff Derksen, Christopher Dewdney, Claire Harris, Wayne Keon, Daphne Marlatt, Steve McCaffery, Erin Mouré, Michael Ondaatje, Stephen Scobie, Gerry Shikatani, Lola Lemire Tostevin, Phyllis Webb, Bruce Whiteman, and Jan Zwicky.

This is a call, therefore, for the widest possible range of submissions, which might even include longer texts (or parts of them), provided that the contributors would be willing to see the texts excerpted from by the editors, as well as unpublished translations (with the originals) from poems origi-

nally written in French or any other language by Canadian writers. *Canadian Literature* cannot become Frank Davey's impossible tourist guide, much less a Borgesian map so accurate that it literally overlays the territory, but it can try to publish postcards that reveal something of the vitality and variety that exist down in our many poetic valleys, those variously-defined in-between spaces in which the poems get made that inhabit the journal's own interstices. I.H.

