

FRANK OLIVER CALL, EASTERN TOWNSHIPS POETRY, AND THE MODERNIST MOVEMENT

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THE EASTERN TOWNSHIPS are situated in southern Québec and are bounded on the south by the American border, the states of Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine, on the east by the Chaudière river, on the west by the Richelieu river, and on the north by the seigneurial lands lying south of the St. Lawrence river. Some twenty or so years after the American Declaration of Independence, an estimated ten thousand United Empire Loyalists received permission to settle in this area. They were then followed by English, Scottish, Irish, and French pioneer families. Thus, the population was predominantly English speaking, but in less than one hundred years, that is, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, francophones were to become eighty-five per cent of the total population in the Eastern Townships.

In spite of the change in linguistic balance, English culture flourished in the Eastern Townships in the first three decades of the twentieth century; Frank Oliver Call, poet, painter, professor, was at the centre of much of the literary activity in the area. He wrote an introduction to a book-length narrative poem, *Winnowaia* (1935), by one of the poets of the region, Minnie Hallowell Bowen, and he wrote a foreword to one of his volumes of poetry, *Acanthus and Wild Grape* (1920), outlining his position vis-à-vis the awakening interest in free verse expressed by poets of the first decades of the twentieth century. Given the content of his foreword and the nature of some of his poems, Call may be seen as one of the precursors or initiators of the Modernist Movement in English Canadian poetry

Frank Oliver Call and Louise Morey Bowman, another poet of the region who published imagist poems in free verse, are cited in the literary histories of Canada, though the mention is brief and limited. Contemporary reviewers take account of the way in which Call and Bowman are in the avant-garde of significant change in poetry. Amy Lowell and Harriet Monroe call attention to the Modernism of Bowman's verse; contemporary reviewers of Call's work — an anonymous reviewer in *Canadian Bookman* (1920) and E. E. Boothroyd in *The Mitre*

(1920) — analyze the split between the traditionalism of his verse and the interest he took in the phenomena of Imagism and free-versism.

In the late 1950's, two Canadian literary historians, R. E. Rashley and Munro Beattie, situate Call in their analysis of the evolution of poetry in Canada. Rashley focuses on Call's response to nature:

A little sequence of sonnets in F. O. Call's *Blue Homespun* indicates most clearly the change of direction. From "The Sugar-Makers," (*sic*) through "Trees in Autumn," to "Curtains" one passes from nature as spirit through nature as spectacle to nature as an intrusion between the poet and humanity.¹

An aspect of Call's Modernism may be seen in the speaker's alienation in the poem "Curtains"; he cannot survive long with the images of nature etched on his curtain; he needs to strip his windows "clean and bare / of birds and flowers" in order to "see the human crowd outside."² Beattie wrote that Call's free verse differs from conventional poetry, but concluded that the newness of Call's poetry is only a matter of surface appearance; his poems are "dull, their ideas dim, their versification flabby. Not one of them grows, with that exciting momentum of a real poem, into a whole in the mind of the reader."³ Beattie's estimate of Bowman's significance in the evolution of modern poetry is, on the other hand, positive and favourable. In his judgement, Bowman showed "a more authentic feeling for free verse."⁴ than other early modernists like Call, W. W. E. Ross, and Raymond Knister. Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski in *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada* allow a special space for Call's contribution; they reprint his foreword to *Acanthus and Wild Grape* under the rubric "The Precursors (1910-1925)," which also includes Arthur Stringer's foreword to *Open Waters* and John Murray Gibbon's "Rhymes With and Without Reason."

In the late 1920's, Ralph Gustafson and Neil Tracy were students at Bishop's University where Professor Call introduced them to English literature. He had already published four of his five volumes of poetry and was deeply interested in modern verse. He and Louise Morey Bowman, apart from the books they published, were also publishing in literary periodicals; Call in *University Magazine*, *Canadian Magazine*, *Westminster*, and *Canada West*, and Bowman in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (Chicago), *The Dial*, *The Canadian Mercury*, and *Canadian Bookman*. As a consequence of an acquaintanceship between Bowman and Amy Lowell, the latter visited the Eastern Townships. Both Lowell's and Harriet Monroe's excitement about the newness of Bowman's poetry is conveyed in excerpts from their reviews of her work on the dust cover of *Dream Tapestries* (1924). It was not until Gustafson went to Oxford that he received his first meaningful exposure to modernists like Hopkins, Pound, and Eliot. His first book of poetry, *The Golden Chalice* (1935), is highly stylized in the manner of Keats

and Shakespeare. Wendy Keitner writes of Gustafson: "Although he was in contact with F. O. Call, a stylistic innovator and early Canadian advocate of free verse, Gustafson remained oblivious of the student-led literary rebellion being fomented a hundred miles away in Montreal at McGill University by Frank Scott and A. J. M. Smith."⁵ He was, however, encouraged in the writing of poetry by Call and F. G. Scott, who was also a professor at Bishop's. Gustafson in his reminiscences about Call does remember Call's lectures on modern poetry: "During my first year I learned that Tennyson was not the only one who wrote poetry, but that Vachel Lindsay did [too] . . ."⁶ Gustafson recalls poetry readings that took place at the time involving Call, Bowman, and Tracy, and asserts in his reminiscences about the literary milieu of the Townships that "the English literary heritage in the Eastern Townships is long and vast."⁷ More than thirty books of poetry were published in the period 1917-44.

LOUIS DANTIN, THE CRITIC chiefly responsible for bringing Nelligan's poetry to the attention of the public, was also the first Québécois scholar to pay particular attention to the literary activity in French in the Townships. He published an essay titled "Le mouvement littéraire dans les Cantons de l'Est" (1930) in which he gives serious attention to the Alfred DesRochers group of writers (Jovette Bernier, Eva Sénécal, Myriel Gendreau and others), writers who were affiliated with or who worked for *La Tribune*, a Townships daily newspaper and publishing house. DesRochers, now regarded as one of the major voices in French-Québec poetry, exerted considerable influence upon the *La Tribune* poets and also upon Neil Tracy, urging the poets of the region to eschew Modernism and the trappings of free verse: "I was, as I am still, a dyed-in-the-wool fervent (*sic*) of scanned lines."⁸ He is esteemed today for his craftsmanship and as a defender of traditional verse. His work was relatively well-known in the 1930's when his books received literary prizes; in the years following early recognition, he published little. The mid-sixties marked a revival of interest in his work that coincided with the new nationalism accompanying the first stirrings of The Quiet Revolution. Louis O'Neil establishes that thirty books of poetry were published in the 1920's and 1930's by French poets of the Townships.⁹

On the English side, three of the four major contemporary voices in the poetry of the Eastern Townships are those of native Townshippers; Call, Gustafson, and John Glassco (D. G. Jones is a latecomer, though he has lived in North Hatley for over twenty years). Call was born in West Brome, Québec, in 1878, the grandson of a Vermont blacksmith, the son of one of the owners of the woolen mill at Call's Mills. He was educated in the Townships (Stanstead College, Bishop's, B.A.

1905, M.A. 1908) and did post-graduate studies at McGill, the Université de Paris and the University of Marburg. Call taught in the Eastern Townships, in Frelighsburg and Stanstead, and at Bishop's College School before becoming Professor of Modern Languages at Bishop's University (1908-45). Call never married. He lived his retirement years in Knowlton, a few miles from Call's Mills, and died there in 1956 at seventy-eight years of age.

Call won the Québec Literary Competition Award for *Blue Homespun* in 1924; three of the six prize winners that year were Eastern Townships poets: Call, Bowman, and R. Stanley Weir, the original translator of "O Canada" into English. Call received a bronze medal from "l'Alliance française" (1938), was a member of the "Institut historique et héraldique de France" and was a "Chevalier de l'Ordre latin" (1940). He was president of the "Eastern Townships Art Association" (1942-43), and a member of the advisory council on awards for *Canadian Poetry Magazine* (1936-45). Also, he was one of the vice-presidents of the National Executive Committee of "The Canadian Authors' Association" (1945). As a painter, Call took part in group exhibitions held in Montreal and New York; most of his paintings are still-life depictions of flowers. His own flower garden on the Bishop's campus occupied the site of the present day library. For many years before the construction of the library, Bishop's annual convocation was held in Call's garden when peonies were in full bloom.

An inveterate traveller, Call made frequent trips to Europe, particularly to Belgium, Germany, and France. Much of his writing is influenced by his European experience. He also travelled widely in his home province; *Blue Homespun* is an outgrowth of his walking tours in Québec. Photographs of Call and accounts given by family, friends and former students show him to have been a man of sensual aspect, an aesthete of pale complexion, light blue eyes, and sandy hair, who wore grey suits and walked shoulders held back, arms dangling, hands sometimes swaying behind his back. The nicknames "Esther" and "Mother" were given to him by his students, some of whom he employed as chauffeurs for "Bluebird," the name he gave to the automobile he owned but never drove. A former neighbour in Knowlton recalls her first image of Professor Call — he was sitting in his living room in an armchair beside the fireplace, a book in his hand, a rose in a vase next to him.

Call's personal library and some of his papers are in the possession of his nephew in Knowlton. In Call's personally inscribed copy of Charles G. D. Roberts' *Poems, New Complete Edition* (1907), Roberts wrote, in the margin of the Table of Contents, beside the poem "Manila Bay": "I think that this is one of the worst ballads ever written." Call notes in the margins of the same book: "Dr. Roberts tells me that these are three of his favorites" — "The Night Sky," "In the Wide Awe and Wisdom of the Night" and "O Solitary of the Austere Sky." Some of

Call's correspondence with Gustafson is extant, as is a handwritten list Call drew up which he titled "Literature of the Eastern Townships," naming a few dozen writers whose work was published in the years 1910-30 (Bowman, Bowen, Des-Rochers, F. G. Scott, Florence Randall Livesay, and others). Among Call's papers, and in his library, are unpublished poems by Bowman as well as copies of her books personally inscribed to him. Call's and Bowman's alliance seems to have been quite strong.

Call's poetic output consists of five volumes of poetry published in Toronto and London, England; approximately three dozen poems appear in Canadian and American literary magazines. He also wrote three books of prose: *The Spell of French Canada* (1926), *The Spell of Acadia* (1930), and *Marguerite Bourgeoys* (1930). He wrote his first book, *In a Belgian Garden* (1917), about the contrast between the world he knew before the advent of World War I and a world scarred by the ravages of the war. *Acanthus and Wild Grape* marked his entry into the *vers libre*/Imagism arena; the first part of the book is written in set forms while the second part, "Wild Grape," is in free verse. It is the only one of his five books in which the sonnet is not the principal mode of expression. His third book, *Simples and Other Poems* (1923), contains a handful of poems republished in *Blue Homespun* (1924). The latter is a volume of sketches in sonnet form of rural life in French-Québec. Call's poems do not resemble William Henry Drummond's parodies of habitant life, nor are they as rich and complex as A. M. Klein's depiction of rural Québec; they are straightforward portraits of the habitant's daily life. Call did not publish another book of poetry for twenty years until *Sonnets for Youth* (1944).

There is a schism in all of Call's books, a juxtaposition of old and new realities. On the one hand, Call is a poet drunk with gods, the Christian deity and the legendary gods of Greek, Japanese and Chinese mythology. On the other hand, the speaker in a poem Call published in 1920 says: "old gods are dead."¹⁰ The immediate realities, the war, and the industrialization of the modern state leave Call's speaker deeply alienated. Call says of the modern epoch: "A monstrous brood is born, / Black, strong, beautiful."¹¹ He visited Belgium before and during World War I and was stunned by the desecration wrought upon its gardens. Call compares the ravaged gardens of 1917 Belgium with the idyllic gardens he had visited just a few years before. This theme dominates his first volume of poetry. In "A Chinese Poet," published in a later volume, he imagines Li Fu in his garden writing poetry. The speaker bridges the gap of time by reading the poetry of Li Fu in a garden of his own: "To-day, / In a walled garden half a world away, / And in another tongue, I read his scroll."¹² The Belgian garden no longer exists, but the words on the Chinese poet's scroll are left unaltered by time.

THE DEATH AND DESTRUCTION generated by World War I, and the dehumanizing consequences of industrialization engender in Call a sense of human mortality and impending doom. In art and architecture, he discovers quality and meaning; artifacts and mythologies bring to life a past he is capable of relating to; they signify for him a world of continuing life, of enduring beauty and unending pleasure. There are poems in which, for an instant or a day, as a result of experience in nature or contact with a loved one, the speaker feels elation. However, the general picture from the early books is of a man whose world has gone to pieces and lost meaning because of world war, a man who has no illusions about modern industrial developments. Why, Call asks the modern poet,

will you sing of railways,
Of Iron and Steel and Coal,
And the din of the smoky cities?
For these will not feed my soul.¹⁸

His work is dominated by a sense of loss: death in wartime, death in nature, death as an omnipresent force which is depicted mostly through metonymic images emanating from the natural world. Death is a “dark wing” hovering overhead. His preoccupation with death is accompanied by an obsession with growing old. Thrilled by the sounds of “The Old School Bell,” Call nostalgically yearns for the innocence and freedom of youth. He would make Faust’s pact with Mephistopheles if he could be released from the grasp of “Time’s relentless fingers.”¹⁴ The quest for immortality in Call is a search for truth and beauty, an embrace between beauty and timelessness. His poetry reveals a yearning for the past; old world remnants are the epitome of beauty unaltered by the passage of time. He imagines what an old world object might say, think, or do if it were addressing itself to the notion of immortality; he empathizes with the object and infuses life into it. In the following haiku, Call blends past and present to create an image of timelessness:

Darkness.
Shadows in my soul.
The vision of your face.
Dawn and music.¹⁵

At the turn of the century in Canada a handful of poets in different regions began to show the signs of twentieth-century Modernism in their style and subject-matter; Imagism and free-versism are new concepts to be contended with in poetry. Among the precursors of the Modernist Movement is Frank Oliver Call. His work did not meet the fate that befell other early Canadian modernists like W. W. E. Ross, R. G. Everson, and Raymond Knister; their early modern verse

did not appear until thirty years after the poems were first presented for publication in book form, whereas Call published *Acanthus and Wild Grape* in 1920. In his foreword to the book Call outlines the schizophrenia some poets of his generation experienced; he wrote traditional verse — he also experimented with the forms of free verse practised by free verse imagists. He divided his book into two parts, the “Acanthus” section, written in traditional verse forms, and the “Wild Grape” section, a collection of free verse. The idea for this division came to him, he explains, upon looking at a picture of Corinthian architecture. His attention was caught by an old column virtually in ruins. At the foot of the column, he saw carved acanthus leaves and noticed wild grape running and twisting around the fallen acanthus. The image figured forth for him the situation of the poet in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In his foreword Call wrote:

The modern poet has joined the great army of seekers after freedom, that is, he refuses to observe the old conventions in regard to his subjects and his method of treating them. He refuses to be bound by the old restrictions of rhyme and metre, and goes far afield in search of material on which to work. The boldest of the new school would throw overboard all the old forms and write only in free verse, rhythmic prose or whatever he may wish to call it. The conservative, on the other hand, clings stubbornly to the old conventions, and will have nothing to do with vers libre or anything that savours of it.¹⁶

The following poem is modern both in style and in subject-matter:

THE FOUNDRY

Two monsters,
Iron and Coal,
Sleep in the darkness.
A poisonous scarlet breath blows over them,
And they awake hissing and writhing,
And spew forth blood-red vomit
In streams like fiery serpents.
Then from the reeking pools
A monstrous brood is born,
Black, strong, beautiful,
But we turn away our tired eyes,
And try to find the sky above the smoke-clouds.¹⁷

The rhythm of the poem is generated not by metrical structure but by a straightforward alignment of images. Call is not a full-fledged modernist; the last lines of “The Foundry” take the reader back to a more conventional mode of perceiving experience. His fellow Eastern Townships poet, Louise Bowman, who published books of free verse in the early 1920’s, wrote poems that were more purely imagistic than Call’s, even though she is not a poet of the same stature.

Bowman’s poem, “City Child’s Easter,” is the best example in the work of the

two poets of the influence of Amy Lowell's Imagism. The images carry the weight of the poem virtually without comment:

CITY CHILD'S EASTER

FRAGRANCE

Of Hot Cross Buns:
 Pots of white lilies: sunshine: magic eggs:
 New skipping-ropes — but old old winds
 Of Faith¹⁸

Harriet Monroe, in reviewing Bowman's "modern and individual imagination," states that "such faults as she might be accused of are not Victorian reminders."¹⁹ There is in the poetry of Call and Bowman a foreshadowing of Modernism in Canadian verse.

THE PERIOD IN WHICH Frank Oliver Call's first books of poetry appear is a transition period in the history of Canadian poetry; the Confederation poets publish their most important work in the late nineteenth century, and the voices of the first modernists, Smith, Scott, and Klein, do not begin to be heard until the middle of the third decade of the twentieth century. No major works by twentieth-century poets emerged in the period 1900-25 with the exception of E. J. Pratt's *Newfoundland Verse* (1923). Poets like Ross, Knister, and Call, while they are regarded as minor poets, are in fact of particular significance because of the role they played as transitional figures, poets whose work reflects the changing scene in Canadian poetry as it evolves from the Confederation period to the Modern period. Call published five books of poetry in his lifetime, a serious body of work. Though he experimented with free-versism and Imagism, his later work shows he was most comfortable writing in traditional forms. An example of Call at his best, writing sonnets, is the poem "White Hyacinth"; the strength of the poem lies in the speaker's powerful retelling of the Hyacinthus story:

WHITE HYACINTH

We put the dog-eared lesson-book away,
 Pondering the classic story. Pale and dead
 Before our eyes young Hyacinthus lay
 Upon the Spartan shore. From stains of red
 Beside the blue Aegean, star on star,
 White hyacinths sprang up to greet the dawn,
 Each leaf a cry of pain, re-echoing far
 A voice that mourned for beauty past and gone.
 You paused a moment as you left the room,

Bending a slender form above a bowl
 Of white and blue where hyacinths were abloom.
 Once more the far Aegean seemed to roll
 On flower-clad shores, but brought no cry of pain,
 For Hyacinthus breathed in life again.²⁰

The classic story comes alive at two levels, the past and the present; the speaker and the youth beside him become Apollo and Hyacinthus brought to life in the present. Call catches the reader by surprise with the strength, suppleness, and simplicity of the lines: "You paused a moment as you left the room / Bending a slender form above a bowl." At its worst, Call's work is more predictable, loaded with adjectives, and characterized by overzealousness on the part of the speaker who urges the reader to love that which he loves.

Call's poetry was anthologized by Bliss Carman and Lorne Pierce in *Our Canadian Literature: Representative Verse English and French* (1922), by John W. Garvin in *Canadian Poets* (1926), and also by Ralph Gustafson in his *Anthology of Canadian Poetry* (1942). Modern anthologies do not include Call's work. The period in which he wrote and published four of his five books of poetry (1915-25) is neglected. Anthologies and literary histories give full attention to Lampman's and Carman's late nineteenth-century poetry; modern Canadian poetry begins with Smith, Scott, and Klein. Call's importance, apart from his merit as a poet, is as a transitional figure. His work is representative of an in-between period; his poetry, both traditional writing and experiments in Imagism and free-versism, is an integral part of the history of poetry in Canada.

NOTES

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¹ R. E. Rashley, *Poetry in Canada: The First Three Steps* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1958), p. 106.

² Frank Oliver Call, *Blue Homespun* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1924), p. 41.

³ A. Munro Beattie, "The Advent of Modernism in Canadian Poetry in English 1912-1940," Diss. Columbia 1957, p. 146.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁵ Wendy Keitner, *Ralph Gustafson* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), p. 21.

⁶ Ralph Gustafson, "Some Literary Reminiscences of the Eastern Townships," *Ellipse*, No. 25/26 (1980), p. 149.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁸ Neil Tracy, *The Rain It Raineth*, introd. Alfred DesRochers (Sherbrooke: La Tribune, 1938), n. pag.

⁹ This figure was taken from Joseph Bonenfant's account of the writers of the time based on Louis O'Neil's estimate. Joseph Bonenfant, "Le mouvement littéraire des Cantons de l'Est," *Revue d'histoire littéraire du Québec et du Canada français* (Montréal: Bellarmin, 1982), p. 35.

- ¹⁰ Frank Oliver Call, *Acanthus and Wild Grape* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1920), p. 18.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- ¹² *Blue Homespun*, p. 43.
- ¹³ *Acanthus and Wild Grape*, p. 42.
- ¹⁴ Frank Oliver Call, *In a Belgian Garden* (London: Erskine MacDonald, 1917), p. 31.
- ¹⁵ *Acanthus and Wild Grape*, p. 76.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- ¹⁸ Louise Morey Bowman, *Dream Tapestries* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1924), p. 61.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, n. pag.
- ²⁰ Frank Oliver Call, *Sonnets for Youth* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1944), p. 2.

SIGNS

Lloyd Abbey

When you came in for routine surgery
 a poster in the hall read: "Coping
 With Cancer. Monday Meeting. Eight PM."
 The impossible word was a placebo. Every
 time we looked we smiled at your anxiety
 at "routine hysterectomy:" "At least
 you don't have *that!*" "Cancer" being to us
 like "nuclear holocaust" or "genocide":
 a thing that only lives in flesh — in books:
 abstracted paragraphs; a half-life in the
 mind. But now they've told us: "cancer." And
 the poster seems quite changed; the words are flesh.
 Each time I scan them I see other signs
 behind. The words say: "Coping With Nuclear War,
 Coping With Work Camps, Coping With Hunger." And, as we
 calculate your odds for death or life,
 we use those other signs as ballasts: "What uplifting
 thoughts," I say, as you half-way smile, "At least
 not *that.*" The words are hanging in the hallway.