# AMELIA

## *or: Who Do You Think You Are? Documentary and Identity in Canadian Literature*

*Stephen Scobie*

ALICE MUNRO'S TITLE *Who Do You Think You Are?* is one of those finely balanced phrases which subtly shift their meanings depending on which of the six words receives the major stress:

*Who* do you think you are?
Who *do* you think you are?
Who do *you* think you are?
Who do you *think* you are?
Who do you think *you* are?
Who do you think you *are*?

These various emphases transform the phrase from its pejorative use, to crush presumptuousness, into a serious question on the puzzle of identity. Is identity created by external, objective forces — what other people think you are — or by internal, subjective forces — what you yourself think you are? If you decide to alter your identity by thinking yourself into a new role, how do you go about making this new you manifest to the world?

Such questions are pervasive in Munro's book, and they surface even at points where the attention might seem to be focused elsewhere. For instance, the story "Wild Swans" is principally about the bizarre and disturbing circumstances of Rose's sexual abuse by a strange man on a train; yet the last page of the story is almost totally concerned with the puzzle of identity. The man has claimed to be a minister, but is not dressed as one: that is, his assertion of identity is not backed up by any external evidence. "Was he a minister, really," Rose wonders, "or was that only what he said? Flo had mentioned people who were not ministers, dressed up as if they were. Not real ministers dressed as if they were not. Or, stranger still, men who were not real ministers pretending to be real but dressed as if they were not."[1] It appears that Rose is troubled more by the indeterminacy of the man's identity than by what he has done to her. Nor is Munro content to leave the story there: she adds a half-page coda which pushes the puzzle of identity to even more dizzying levels of doubletalk.

She remembered, because she was in Union Station, that there was a girl named Mavis working here, in the Gift Shop, when Flo was working in the coffee shop. Mavis had warts on her eyelids that looked like they were going to turn into sties but didn't, they went away. Maybe she had them removed, Flo didn't ask. She was very good-looking, without them. There was a movie star in those days she looked a lot like. The movie star's name was Frances Farmer.

Frances Farmer. Rose had never heard of her.

That was the name. And Mavis went and bought herself a big hat that dipped over one eye and a dress entirely made of lace. She went off for the weekend to Georgian Bay, to a resort up there. She booked herself in under the name of Florence Farmer. To give everybody the idea she was really the other one, Frances Farmer, but calling herself Florence because she was on holidays and didn't want to be recognized. She had a little cigarette holder that was black and mother-of-pearl. She could have been arrested, Flo said. For the *nerve*.

Rose almost went over to the Gift Shop, to see if Mavis was still there and if she could recognize her. She thought it would be an especially fine thing, to manage a transformation like that. To dare it; to get away with it, to enter on preposterous adventures in your own, but newly named, skin.[2]

One could well argue that this brief passage, apparently tacked on to the end of a story about something else, is in fact the thematic centre of the whole book. Frances Farmer (1914-1970) was, as Munro says, a movie star; she was very popular for a brief period in the 1940's, but her character was too independent to fit in well with the star-making machinery of the Hollywood studio system, then at its most brutal and impersonal. Farmer later wrote an autobiography, *Will There Really Be A Morning?*, and two recent films, starring Susan Blakely and Jessica Lange respectively, have recreated the tragic and melodramatic story of her life. She was dominated by her fiercely ambitious mother, who, after Frances had collapsed under the stress of her personal and professional conflicts, had her committed to a mental hospital. There she was subjected to a partial lobotomy, which "cured" her to the extent of removing her will and her ability to assert herself. Later she made one more film, and appeared briefly as the hostess of a television talk show.

The relevance of this tragic career to Rose is evident at several points, not least in the detail that Rose also appears on a television talk show. Rose consistently sees herself as an actress, playing a series of increasingly unsatisfactory roles: as child, as wife, as lover, as mother — and as actress. In the final, title story of the book, she confronts herself in the person of Ralph Gillespie, who "does" Milton Homer, and who evokes all her doubts and ambivalence about acting, about telling stories, and about "performing" her various identities and roles. The name "Frances" echoes back to Rose's first major example of sexual abuse, Franny McGill, whose adolescent incest with her brother is described by Flo as "Relations performing."[3] The name that Mavis chooses to both disguise and pro-

claim herself as Frances Farmer is Florence: Flo. Although Rose's relation to Flo does not reach the macabre extremes of Frances Farmer's relation to her mother, it is clear that Flo, as the original audience for Rose's stories, remains to the end the dominating influence on her character. These two aspects of Frances Farmer — her troubled career as an actress, and her fraught relationship with her mother — are both thus points of reference for Rose's definition of her own identity. The tragic outcome of Farmer's personal conflicts remains as a possibility, or even a threat, to Rose: if she cannot answer for herself the question "Who do you think you are?" there are always other people ready to answer it for her, in potentially disastrous ways.

The preceding paragraph indicates some of the directions which could be followed in developing a full reading of *Who Do You Think You Are?* based on the implications of the Frances Farmer reference. That reference acts in the text as a kind of allusion — albeit a somewhat esoteric one, since Frances Farmer's life story would not be as familiar to a contemporary reader as, say, Marilyn Monroe's — and its richness depends upon the informed reader's awareness of such details as Farmer's relation to her mother, her lobotomy, and the collapse of her career. Amidst the welter of fictitious, false, or assumed identities — the molester who says he is what he does not appear to be, Mavis who lays claim to a false name by disguising it — the historical facts of the "real" Frances Farmer stand out as a touchstone, a point of reference to what we may call the realm of documentable reality.

Munro uses this "documentary" image of Frances Farmer as one way to define Rose's predicament, and even Rose's identity. That definition takes place in a dialectic process: a dialectic between objective fact and various forms of subjective fiction or interpretation. For this dialectic to work, it is essential that Frances Farmer be an actual, documented character, and that the allusion be historical rather than literary or mythological. The appeal is to *the authoritativeness of fact*, to a category of reality which exists outside and independent of the text — admitting, of course, that as soon as it enters the text it becomes mediated, and "part of" the fiction. It is precisely this "dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective feelings of the poet" which Dorothy Livesay defined, in 1969, as the key characteristic of what she called "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre."[4]

LIVESAY SET OUT HER DEFINITION in a paper presented at the Learned Societies meeting in June 1969; it was published in 1971 in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, edited by Eli Mandel. Livesay adapted the term "documentary" from film, specifically from the work of the National Film Board under

the direction of John Grierson. The prevalence of the long poem in Canadian literature has frequently been noted; it may in some ways be seen as a psychological response to the sense of scale imposed by the country itself. Livesay argued that the Canadian long narrative poem did *not* follow either the "epic" pattern, "concerned with an idealized 'hero,'" or the Chaucerian pattern, concerned with "the development of individualized characters," or the American pattern "where the emphasis is on historical perspective and the creation of a national myth." Rather, she argued, Canadian poems are *documentary*, "based on topical data but held together by descriptive, lyrical, and didactic elements." Theme becomes more important than plot; and "our narratives are told not from the point of view of one protagonist, but rather to illustrate a precept." Above all, the documentary poem is characterized by that "dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective feelings of the poet": it can never be purely one or the other, but must always involve an active interplay between both.[5]

It is clear that to some extent what Livesay was doing was propagating as a general theory a definition based on her own practice: the finest examples of the "documentary poem" as Livesay outlined it are her own works, such as "Day and Night" and "Call My People Home" — poems which she had collected the previous year in a book entitled *The Documentaries*. Other convincing examples cited in her essay are Anne Marriott's "The Wind Our Enemy" and, of course, the major narratives of E. J. Pratt. A much less convincing example, to which the essay unfortunately devotes six out of its fifteen pages, is Isabella Valancy Crawford's "Malcolm's Katie": as fine and important a poem as "Malcolm's Katie" is, it is *not* documentary, by any stretch of the definition, and one suspects that Livesay was using any excuse to give it some prominence at a time when Crawford was unjustly neglected. A positively *disastrous* example, however, was provided by the citing of Earle Birney's "David." Livesay's erroneous and incredibly badly worded assertion that "this was no imaginary story"[6] resulted in legal action by Birney. (Indeed, it is remarkable that there have been so few legal actions as a result of the "documentary" claims made by writers.) Birney's suit, like that launched by Premier Lougheed of Alberta against the CBC over their "docudrama" on the Tar Sands, was settled out of court.

There are problems, then, with Livesay's examples; her definition, though, and her intuition in the naming of the form, were brilliant, and in many ways prophetic. In the fifteen years since her talk, there has been a plethora of examples of the "documentary poem." Not all of them have followed every aspect of her definition — most of them, for instance, have concentrated on a single protagonist — but all of them have maintained the dialectic of objective fact and subjective feeling, and the importance of grounding it in documentable reality, in the authoritativeness of fact.

What follows is a selected list (not a comprehensive one) of titles which could now be used as examples for Livesay's theory — all of them published since 1969. While Livesay's essay set the theoretical framework, the two books whose success and prestige established the form in the *practice* of recent Canadian poetry both appeared in 1970 (the year between the delivery and the publication of Livesay's talk): Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid.* These two definitive works depart from Livesay's definition insofar as they do focus on a single character (it might also be argued that Atwood's volume was, precisely, an attempt at "the creation of a national myth"), and they set a particularly important precedent in using that character as the persona, or speaking voice of the poem. "The effect is often ironic,"[7] Livesay had written; the irony of the documentary poem was to become the classic dramatic irony of all persona poems, the division between the voice of the poem and the implied stance of the author.[8] This dramatic irony is the major form taken by the documentary dialectic. At the same time, the technique of the persona enables the author, and, vicariously, the reader, "To dare it; to get away with it, to enter on preposterous adventures in your own, but newly named, skin."

Nineteen seventy also saw the publication of George Bowering's *George, Vancouver*, the first writing, in poetic form, of what was to become, ten years later, the novel *Burning Water.* The relationship between the documentary poem and the historical novel (or the dramatized biography) is a subtle one. The major advantage of the poetic form is that it is more amenable to the subjective side of the dialectic; it allows more scope (in tone, rhythm, imagery) for the ironic interpretation to be made manifest. Some "novels" are more "poetic" than others, however; so, though I would hesitate to include in this discussion the massive and inspiring novels of Rudy Wiebe, such as *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973) and *The Scorched Wood People* (1977), I do include Bowering's *Burning Water* (1980), Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), Timothy Findley's *Famous Last Words* (1981), and, indeed, before any of them, Leonard Cohen's great and prophetic *Beautiful Losers* (1966), in this respect as in so many others years ahead of its time.

By 1973, the form was in full swing. In that year Frank Davey published *The Clallam*, a poem which simultaneously stands in the tradition of Pratt's shipwreck poems and carries out a caustic deconstruction of Pratt's poetic. In 1974, David Helwig explored historic roots of the New World in *Atlantic Crossings*, while a deep sense of the history of place pervades both Al Purdy's *In Search of Owen Roblin* and Daphne Marlatt's *Steveston.* The biographical approach was resumed in 1975 with Florence McNeil's *Emily*, again using the central character (Emily Carr) as persona. Nineteen seventy-six, as previously noted, saw

Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*, as well as Gary Geddes' invented life of Paul Joseph Chartier, the man who tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament, in *War & Other Measures*. Don Gutteridge's *Tecumseh* concluded his tetralogy of poems on Canadian history. Also in 1976, one of the purest examples of the documentary form is to be found in Sid Stephen's *Beothuck Poems*, dealing with the genocide of the Beothuck Indians in Newfoundland and focusing on the girl Shawnadithit, the last surviving member of the tribe. In 1977, E. D. Blodgett presented the life of Vincent van Gogh in *Sounding*, while Douglas Barbour explored the life of a Canadian painter in *Visions of My Grandfather*. In 1979, Monty Reid used *his* immigrant grandfather's memoir as the base document for *Karst Means Stone*. My own *McAlmon's Chinese Opera*, although not published until 1980, had been written three years earlier; 1980's Governor General's Awards, going to *McAlmon's Chinese Opera* and *Burning Water*, were dominated by the documentary impulse. In 1981, Jon Whyte's *Homage, Henry Kelsey* paid tribute to the first English poet west of Ontario. In 1982, Gwendolyn MacEwen assumed the persona of Lawrence of Arabia in *The T. E. Lawrence Poems*, while Doug Beardsley also crossed genders to write *Kissing the Body of My Lord: The Marie Poems*, the life and times of Marie de l'Incarnation. Nineteen eighty-three saw Ted Plantos' *Passchendaele*, a detailed account of the World War I battle, assuming a fictitious and anonymous protagonist. Hovering somewhere in the background of all these is the great unwritten, or "failed" documentary of the period, Phyllis Webb's *The Kropotkin Poems*.

From all these examples, it may now be possible to assemble a new definition, or at least a description, of the documentary poem as it has evolved in Canada in the fifteen years since Livesay's essay. It is a long poem, or sequence of poems, usually of book length, and narrative in structure. The events which make up this narrative are documented, historical happenings, although the poet will frequently modify or shuffle these events, or add to them purely fictional incidents. The poem often focuses on a single character who took part in these events, and this character's biography (up to and sometimes beyond his or her death) provides the structure of the book. Many of the poems adopt the persona or speaking voice of this central character. The idea of the "document" remains within the poems, as a source of historical fact, and as an element of intertextuality: the central characters are frequently artists (writers or painters), or else keep journals, draw maps, or in some other way produce "collected works" which the poem may either quote directly or else refer to. The relationship of poet to persona is one of dramatic irony, and this irony is the major form assumed by the "dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective feelings of the poet," which continues to be, as Livesay perceived, the central characteristic of the genre. The documentary poem has close affinities with both the historical novel and the

"docudrama," but the poetic form remains, in most cases, the most effective way of registering the subjective force of the dialectic.

The obvious question to ask is why? What are the attractions of this form, that it should dominate recent Canadian writing to the extent that it does?

Some of the answers are rather pragmatic and superficial, but they cannot entirely be ignored. Success breeds success, and the prestige of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* was bound to attract imitators. Publishers tend to prefer a volume with a clearly defined (and exploitable) subject and form. Once the poet has made the initial choice of topic, a large store of material — incident, character, imagery — may be obtained by research rather than by inspiration. A good research project is always nice for a Canada Council grant.

Imitation may be restated, on a somewhat more exalted level, as the awareness of tradition. Once a form is *named*, its possibilities are opened up, liberated, made widely available. The poet may assume the reader's familiarity with certain conventions. The works within a tradition build upon and refer to each other. Speaking personally, I can say that in writing *McAlmon's Chinese Opera* I was very conscious of my predecessors, and the book contains several deliberate (though I hope unobtrusive) echoes and allusions to Ondaatje. How accidental is it that so many of these books — Atwood, Ondaatje (*Coming Through Slaughter*), Blodgett, Reid, Scobie, Bowering (*Burning Water*), MacEwen, Beardsley, Plantos — are divided into three sections?

Apart from these pragmatic considerations, however, the major reasons for the attraction and the usefulness of the form may be summarized under two headings: a fascination with the interplay between fact and fiction, history and imagination; and the attempt to define the identity of the self by a dialectic process of contrast to the other.

THE DOCUMENTARY POEM begins with an appeal to the authoritativeness of fact. Many writers in recent years have felt that, as Michael Ondaatje said in a recent interview, "Fiction can't compete with real people or events; that's why I'm drawn to historical subjects."[9] "I tell only what I know," Frank Davey wrote in 1964, "and speculate, never. Only with the validity of fact, and the form of the natural object, can a poem hope to survive in a world that admits only the real."[10] This is an extreme view, and few writers (including the later Davey) would accept it in quite so unqualified a form. Its ancestry is in Pound ("The natural object is always the adequate symbol") and in Williams ("No ideas but in things"); looking much further back, we might speculate that the documentary poem is a last-ditch defence against Plato's accusation that all

poets are liars. Several authors of documentary poems have taken refuge in the line that "Truth is stranger than fiction," and have been at some pains to explain to audiences that the more implausible stories in their poems actually happened, they wouldn't have dared to invent them.

Ten years later, in 1974, Davey returned to the idea of the "validity of fact" in his poem *The Clallam*:

> This is not a documentary of the *Clallam*'s
> sinking. There are documents
> but no objective witnesses
> of the *Clallam*'s sinking. The survivors
> were not objective. I
> am not objective. Only
> the objects we survive in.
> All the stinking white corpses.[11]

Davey is here using "documentary" to mean a purely objective form, which is not of course the sense I am proposing for it. He rightly insists on the non-objectivity of the author — and indeed, *The Clallam* goes on to become a forceful and unambiguous expression of Davey's personal *anger* at the events he is describing. His technique, however, remains "objective" to the extent that he rigidly avoids the transformations of metaphor. In *The Clallam*, as in his other work, Davey's poetic imprint is to be found in tone, rhythm, selection of incident — but not in image or metaphor. He remains true, always, to the Poundian precept.

In this respect, *The Clallam* is part of Davey's critical assault on E. J. Pratt. In his article "E. J. Pratt: Rationalist Technician," published in the same year as *The Clallam*, Davey goes over the familiar ground of Pratt's love for detailed research, or technical vocabulary of all sorts, and for historical accuracy; but Davey sees all this as part of Pratt's attempt to give a false impression of confident omniscience. "Pratt's rule seems to be," Davey writes, "that if an event is not totally knowable (and no event is), one must fake total knowledge."[12] The major technique for this fakery is metaphor:

> Metaphor in Pratt's work tends to be a restricting device. The subject of the metaphor is compared to a term or set of terms either less complex than the subject itself, or possessing a complexity irrelevant to the subject. The effect is to simplify or rationalize the subject, to make it appear definable and comprehensible when it has been neither defined nor comprehended. The subject is presented as if "dealt with" when in fact its own particularity and individuality have been totally avoided.[13]

Davey is essentially correct in his analysis of the evasiveness of Pratt's metaphors, and he makes a strong case for the need to preserve the integrity of the factual subject; but the parenthetical concession that no event is totally knowable does

indicate, again, the need for a dialectical definition of the documentary — such as that exemplified, in fact, by *The Clallam.*

Indeed, it must be admitted that all this talk about "objective fact" and "historical reality" rests on very queasy philosophical foundations. The appeal to "the validity of fact" is a response to a world which simultaneously accords its highest prestige to "scientific objectivity" and acknowledges the relativity of all perceptions. The whole notion of "fact" may itself be no more than a fiction, a linguistic construct — and thus subject, like all linguistic constructs, to the deconstructive play of Derridean "différance." The poetic *re*construction of fact which goes on in the documentary poem may then be taken as a model for our pragmatic daily use of all language — continuing, as it must, despite all theoretical inadequacies.

The relativity of perception, and the indeterminacy of fact, are admitted most openly in the writing of history. It is a commonplace that, since the winners write the history books, they periodically have to be *re*written, in belated acknowledgement of the losers. Leonard Cohen casts his savage eye on this process in *Beautiful Losers*, which is already a kind of meta-documentary, commenting on the form in its distinctions between I's constipated ineffectuality and F's contemptuously easy mastery of historiography, as well as in F's and Edith's outrageous use of Pratt's "Brébeuf and His Brethren" as sado-masochistic pornography. Cohen's warning that historiography is simply another arena for power was especially timely in 1966, as Canada prepared to launch its Centennial project of self-validation. That period's interest in history *per se* (we've been around for a hundred years; we must amount to *something*) made a major contribution to the emergence of the documentary poem.

So, while the attraction of the documentary may begin with an appeal to the authoritativeness of fact, consideration of the difficulties involved in ever satisfactorily *writing* fact leads quickly to that borderblur area between fact and fiction, in which the categories collapse into each other (all statements of fact are necessarily fictive; a well-told lie takes on the authority of history), and the line between them exists only to be transgressed. Thus Gary Geddes, in his note to *War & Other Measures*, writes of his book that "what truth it may have lies [the pun is, presumably, intended] not in the 'facts,' all of which are fabricated, but rather in the psychology, which has been revealed over and over again in Canada since 1966 and which could not have been invented."[14] Similarly, in the Afterword to *Kissing the Body of My Lord*, Doug Beardsley writes: "I wish to stress that while many of the events, and much of the language, come from Marie's letters, and I consider her to be co-author of the book, a very different, fictional Marie emerges from these pages, a Marie of my own making."[15] And in my own *McAlmon's Chinese Opera*, after quoting Livesay's definition of the documentary,

I conclude that "it will be best if the reader accepts the McAlmon of these poems as a character in a historical fiction."[16]

The most extreme (and joyous) transgressions into the realm of fiction occur in the works of Michael Ondaatje and George Bowering (and so perhaps it is no accident that these are the authors who carry the stance and concerns of the documentary poem over into the form of the poetic novel). Whereas the authors' notes which I quoted above may be taken at face value, one can only regard as the most outrageous understatement Ondaatje's straight-faced claim, in the "Credits" to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, that he merely "edited, rephrased, and slightly reworked" his source material.[17] *Coming Through Slaughter* blithely predates by some twenty years the death of Isadora Duncan, and contrives to import a disguised Billy the Kid, some twenty years *after his* death, into Buddy Bolden's asylum. Most playful of all is George Bowering's glorious travesty of facts throughout *Burning Water*, imputing a homosexual relationship to Vancouver and Quadra ("Give us a little hug, now")[18] and quite unashamedly killing off his hero before he returns, as he historically did, to England.

*Burning Water* is full of deliberate anachronisms, bad jokes, and concealed quotations from other writers ("'The sea,' said Menzies . . . in mid ocean, 'is also a garden'").[19] These elements operate in the novel as one form of intertextuality, the general condition of all texts as existing in relation to other texts, and also as a travesty[20] of the whole idea of the *document*. The document is the point of intersection, for the documentary poem, between its equivocal realms of history and imagination. The document "proves" the historicity of the subject: but the document is itself no more than another instance of *writing*, and is not exempt from its own context of equivocation. Bowering acknowledges this through the technique of travesty; Timothy Findley "forges" documents (the supposed "transcripts" of taped recollections of Lady Juliet d'Orsey in *The Wars*) or else presents them in images of extreme contrivance (the "writing on the wall" in *Famous Last Words*).

In the poems, the documents occur in many forms and are treated in many ways. They may include actual historical accounts (as, quite extensively, in Don Gutteridge's *Tecumseh*), or transcriptions of interviews and oral history (as in Daphne Marlatt's *Steveston*). Works created by the historical character about whom the poem is written may function as "documents," whether they are directly quoted or only referred to. These may include novels, letters, journals, autobiographies, or other poems. Visual material may also be used as documents: the paintings, for instance, of Gauguin or Emily Carr. Doug Beardsley's book contains reproductions of seventeenth-century lithographs; Daphne Marlatt's text is counterpointed by Robert Minden's photographs; perhaps most dramatically

of all, Sid Stephen's *Beothuck Poems* incorporates the surviving drawings of Shawnadithit herself.

This documentary material may be quoted directly, as prose, or else presented as found poetry (*McAlmon's Chinese Opera* arranges as found poems the text of a rejection letter from an English publisher, and a list of Montparnasse street names). Monty Reid begins each poem in *Karst Means Stone* with a quotation from his grandfather's memoir. Jon Whyte arranges his whole sequence as a setting for the "jewel" of Henry Kelsey's original poem, which he quotes in full. Every poem in Gwendolyn MacEwen's book is an intricate weave of echoes and quotations from *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and other writings of T. E. Lawrence. Susanna Moodie hovers in the background of Margaret Atwood's work, a continuous presence, though there is very little in the way of direct quotation.

One of the loveliest instances of reworking of a document occurs in E. D. Blodgett's *Sounding*. Blodgett takes a famous passage from one of Van Gogh's letters and uses it as the source for a graceful and moving lyric:

> to look at the stars always makes me dream, *as simply* as I dream over the black dots of a map representing towns and villages. Why, I ask myself, should the shining dots of the sky not be as accessible as the black dots on the map of France? If we take the train to get to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to reach a star. One thing undoubtedly true in this reasoning is this, that while we are *alive* we *cannot* get to a star, any more than when we are dead we can take the train.
>
> So it seems to me possible that cholera, gravel, phthisis and cancer are the celestial means of locomotion, just as steamboats, omnibuses and railways are the terrestrial means. To die quietly of old age would be to go there on foot.[21]

I stretched my hand
across the map
of france

to touch
the black o's of towns
peppered there

it was a map
vincent as you
had scanned

the day you saw
the dark towns of france
scattered back

against the sky
reduced again to dots

when you're dead
there is no train
to tarascon

you said
and when you live
the other train

is stopped

with what eye now
do you stare
upon the stars

walking forever
through our returning nights
within the white

and fired towns
gazing upon trains
moving minutely

across the map of france
approaching
stops forever out

of tarascons so
unknown within the clouds.[22]

In all these cases, the reader's appreciation will be greatly enhanced by a knowledge of the original source and context. The document is the necessary link, provided by the author, between the reader and the "real" material. The document guarantees the *accessibility* of the facts on which the poem is based: the reader is always free to check out for herself the newspaper reports of the sinking of *The Clallam*, or the letters of Marie de l'Incarnation. (Whether or not the reader actually does this is in a sense irrelevant; what is important is the reader's awareness of the theoretical possibility of doing so.) The documentary poem is never an enclosed, self-sufficient creation; the reader is actively invited to repeat the poet's research and engagement with the facts. The poem works both ways: it directs both poet and reader towards a fuller understanding of an historical character, event, or epoch, but it also directs them back to their own subjectivity, to their definitions of themselves.

ALTHOUGH MANY OF THESE POEMS do treat subjects directly related to Canada and Canadian history, a surprising number do not. Billy the Kid, Buddy Bolden, Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Robert McAlmon, T. E. Lawrence — the choice of these figures seems at times almost wilfully cosmopolitan. What is a Canadian poet doing writing about an American outlaw, Paris in the twenties, the war in Arabia? But in another sense, this separation in

space is no greater than the separations in time (between the twentieth and the nineteenth centuries, say, between the modernist sensibility of Margaret Atwood and the Victorian sensibility of Susanna Moodie) or in gender (Sid Stephen writing about Shawnadithit, Doug Beardsley adopting the persona of Marie). What they all have in common is a sense of *alterity*: the documentary poem opens the way to the other, the opposite.

Canada as a culture has been accustomed to a dialectical process of self-definition, to identifying its own characteristics in terms of what it is *not*: not British, not French, not American. Livesay's essay defines the Canadian long poem in precisely this way, in terms of other national traditions to which it does not conform. To take on a persona may indeed be, as Munro says, "To dare it; to get away with it, to enter on preposterous adventures in your own, but newly named, skin"; but the persona is also a mirror, whose very alterity reflects the image of the other who is/is not yourself.

In the brief poem which prefaces *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, and which thus stands, ambiguously, outside or inside the speaking voice of the sequence,[23] Atwood/Moodie writes:

> I take this picture of myself
> and with my sewing scissors
> cut out the face.
>
> Now it is more accurate:
>
> where my eyes were,
> every-
> thing appears.[24]

The "picture of myself" may refer either to the photograph of Moodie which appears in the cover collage, or to the whole book; the "myself" is most obviously Moodie, but may also apply to Atwood, substituting her persona for herself. Cutting out her own face, Atwood allows Moodie's to show through — or vice versa. The "every- / thing" which appears in the poems is a view of the nineteenth-century pioneer experience seen in the more contemporary terms of "paranoid schizophrenia." While the biography may be Moodie's, the voice is Atwood's: when the protagonist says, "I refuse to look in a mirror,"[25] the reader may well wonder which face she would in fact see there. Moodie provided Atwood with a means of defining her history, her cultural tradition and thus herself; indirectly, this book is fully as personal a volume of poetry as *Power Politics*.

One fairly minor detail which attests to the self-defining aspect of the documentary poem is the tendency of the writers to make "personal appearances" in their works. Sid Stephen closes his sequence with a brief section describing his own visit to Newfoundland, where he buys a keychain featuring a plastic Beothuck,

made in Taiwan, and speculates which party Shawnadithit would vote for in the upcoming provincial election. In *McAlmon's Chinese Opera*, the list of Montparnasse street names includes not only the addresses of famous bars and writers of the twenties, but also the street on which I myself lived in Paris in 1975-76. The more spectacular "personal appearances" of Bowering and Ondaatje will be discussed shortly. All such details are important, as assertions of the poet's presence in the work, the personal applicability of even the most remote historical material.

As Atwood seeks to define her cultural inheritance, so poets who use their own family history seek to define personal roots. "What I know, so little really, of you / & your life," writes Douglas Barbour, addressing his grandfather, whom he knows only from a handful of landscape paintings. The whole book, *Visions of My Grandfather*, moves between the poles of what is known and what is not known, what can be shared, inherited, or passed on through art and what is ineluctably distant, closed off by time. The prairie landscape is shared —

> i recognize you grandfather your great love for the land shines thru you
> knew it i know & i do it i look at it too with new eyes because of you[26]

— and the knowledge is passed on through the documents, in this case the grandfather's paintings, which "i share with you long dead / grandfather, whenever i lift up mine eyes unto the hills / above my desk." Yet the final image of the sequence is of a great secret, a withholding: the Sun Dance which his grandfather witnessed but never described, never painted.

In *Karst Means Stone*, Monty Reid also lives through a family history, and speaks in his grandfather's persona: but in a late poem, "Molly's Translation," he enters as himself — "my point of view, the youngest / son" — and when he makes the transition back into the persona — "and I (Samuel Karst now)" — the effect is less of clarifying distinct voices than of identifying them.[27]

The writers of documentary poems speak frequently of a sense of "possession" by the voices they assume. I can testify to this myself in the case of McAlmon, and I have heard Gwendolyn MacEwen speak in similar terms about Lawrence. In his Preface to *Passchendaele*, Ted Plantos writes: "The character that acts as narrator in this work introduced himself to me through a poem. . . . We were beginning to find sustenance in each other and share a common energy of mind and emotion that translated into language."[28] This is reminiscent of Doug Beardsley's description of Marie as the "co-author" of his poems. Paradoxically, such a "possession" can lead to a freedom, a liberation of the writer to imagine, or to be, aspects of his or her own personality which could not be expressed in the first-person lyric. This freedom extends as far as death itself: the documentary persona speaks from beyond the grave. George Bowering's subtitle for *George, Vancouver*

— "a discovery poem" — describes not only the immediate subject of George Vancouver exploring the West Coast but also the whole experience of the documentary poet *discovering* (as opposed to the fiction writer inventing) what is already there, in the factual material and also in his or her self.

Bowering's presence is only implicit in the poem, which ends "Let us say / this is as far as I, George, / have travelled."[29] But in the novel, *Burning Water*, he is a full protagonist:

> When I came to live in Vancouver, I thought of Vancouver, and so geography involved my name too, George Vancouver. . . . What could I do but write a book filled with history and myself, about these people and this place?[30]

It's a good definition of the documentary — "a book filled with history and myself" — and it stresses the key role of the author as the *creator* of a historical past. "Without a storyteller, George Vancouver is just another dead sailor."[31] So the storyteller is constantly present in his story, walking through the rain of Trieste, or "sitting down in that chair in that tax write-off study, producing."[32] Even when there is no direct reference to Bowering as a character, he reminds us of his presence in the jokes, the literary allusions, the anachronisms, the caustic commentary of the observing Indians, and the increasingly drastic distortions of historical fact. One can sense, also, an increasing indulgence for the character of Captain Vancouver: Bowering moves closer to his namesake as the novel progresses, and the ending is genuinely tragic.

Another variation on the possible relationships between author and persona is to be found in Gwendolyn MacEwen's *The T. E. Lawrence Poems*. MacEwen has always displayed a strong attraction for the exotic, highly coloured and emotional life of Greece, Egypt, and Arabia; and in the short stories of *Noman*, she attempts to infuse that sense into Canada itself, mythologizing Mackenzie King, and metamorphosing the country's very name into the alterity of Kanada. The Lawrence poems, then, are clearly personal as well as historical; Lawrence enables MacEwen to explore the psychological attractions of violence in very much the same way as Billy the Kid did for Ondaatje. The Lawrence poems are a brilliant impersonation, and often draw very closely on Lawrence's own writing, and yet, possibly because of that very sense of strangeness, they are completely identifiable as Gwendolyn MacEwen poems. Lawrence, for all the wealth of documented detail that surrounds him, remains a mysterious and inaccessible personality; the poems, for all their lucidity and vividness, never dissipate that mystery.

In the same way as one can understand the qualities, both of attraction and of alterity, which drew MacEwen to Lawrence, one can understand Phyllis Webb's attraction to the "saintly . . . Prince in his dungeon,"[33] Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), Russian anarchist, writer, and geographer. Kropotkin's long years

in prison provided Webb with a documentary image for her own concerns with confinement, restriction, silence, and failure. Her long-projected and (as she herself says) legendary volume, *The Kropotkin Poems*, is itself a "failure," in that it was never completed, though the fragments published in *Wilson's Bowl* are among Webb's finest works, that is to say, among the finest poems ever published in Canada. "Consider the dead / for whom we make elegies," Webb writes in her portrait "Kropotkin," "how they differently / instruct us."[34] The lines might serve as a motto for the whole documentary impulse. Section II of "Poems of Failure" provides the incisive moments of historical detail (significantly, mostly moments of disguised identity):

> Kropotkin, old Prince Peter
> with your forty barges on the Amur
> with your hammer in Finland
> dressed up in your merchant's costume
> dressed up as a *page de chambre*
> dressed up as an eight-year old Persian
> Prince with real jewels in your belt for
> Madame Nazimova 'who was a very beautiful
> woman.'[35]

Part III makes the transition to the poet herself, through an image of reversal: "As above, so below."[36] Ultimately, Webb's own sense of failure denies her the possibility of accepting Kropotkin as a full persona:

> The simple profundity of a deadman works at my style. I am impoverished. He the White Christ. Not a case of identification. Easier to see myself in the white cat asleep on the bed. Exile.[37]

One is left, then, with a *series* of documentary images of "Solitary Confinement" — Socrates drinking hemlock, Dostoevsky in the House of the Dead, Ezra Pound "under the Pisan sunfire," the children of Treblinka — and the poet's appeal, "give me / a face."[38] In contrast to the confidence with which Atwood cuts out Moodie's face to substitute one of her own making, Webb's poems (which, despite their ostensible "failure," cut to far deeper levels of doubt and affirmation) admit the crisis of self-definition from which the documentary poem springs.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of that crisis, apart from Webb, is to be found in Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*. After Buddy Bolden's collapse at the height of his parade, Ondaatje introduces a passage describing his own visit to New Orleans, "tak[ing] fast bad photographs into the sun."[39] The stress here is on the similarity between persona and author, perceived or intuitively grasped across the broken glass divisions of alterity.

> When he went mad he was the same age I am now. . . . When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory. For I had

done that. Stood, and with a razor-blade cut into cheeks and forehead, shaved hair. Defiling people we did not wish to be.[40]

In the final pages of *Coming Through Slaughter*, Ondaatje tries desperately to return Bolden to the safe distance of pure objectivity, the "thin sheaf of information"[41] from which he had forced his way into his author's imagination. Tables of chronology, transcripts of interviews, extracts from *A Brief History of East Louisiana State Hospital*, tape recordings of old jazz musicians who scarcely mention Bolden at all: all show the depths of Bolden's fall, and all hold him at arm's length from the author's awareness of that moment when "[I] push my arm forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself."[42]

"Drawn to opposites, even in music we play. In terror we lean in the direction that is most unlike us."[43] These lines sum up the ambivalence, in all of Ondaatje's writings, towards "my heroes," his "white dwarfs": Billy, Buddy, his father. *Running in the Family* is the most extended exercise in self-definition by dialectic with the other. What Ondaatje does openly, all the documentarists do more or less implicitly. The authors are drawn towards their opposites, the images of alterity, setting between them the distances of era, country, gender, yet always recognizing in the image something of themselves, a territory that awaits discovery. And in the intensity of the documentary's dialectic, the exchange becomes complete; possession occurs; the mirrors shatter; the barriers break down. As Robert McAlmon (or his author) says at the end of his life:

> I am watching my face
> in the mirror collapsing:
> not even my eyes
> can keep their distance.[44]

I HAVE DEFINED THE DOCUMENTARY mainly in terms of the long poem, or the poetic novel; but obviously the *documentary impulse* may be present in many forms: in fiction, in drama, in the whole interesting genre of the "work poem."[45] As I began this essay by taking an example from a short story, I would like to end it, by way of symmetry, with another illustration of the workings of the documentary impulse outside the field of the long poem, this time in song.

*Hejira* (1976)[46] is perhaps the most successfully integrated of all Joni Mitchell's albums. Its central theme is flight, and the ambivalence of the notion is summed up in the title itself: Mohammed's journey from Mecca to Medina was both an *escape*, a running *away*, and the precondition of spiritual fulfilment, a running *to*. Every song on the album speaks of travel, and of Mitchell's compulsion towards it: she is "A prisoner of the white lines on the freeway," seeking the

"refuge of the roads." Proposing a truce with her errant lover, she says, "You lay down your sneaking around the town, honey / And I'll lay down the highway." On the jacket illustration, her own black cloak becomes transparent to a picture of a limitless desert highway; in another photographic image she extends her arms like the wings of "a black crow flying / In a blue sky." The ambivalence of flight as escape as against flight as fulfilment is further explored in songs which balance Mitchell against other characters: her friend Sharon, who has opted for home and security; the old jazz man Furry, who rejects Mitchell's interest as that of a rich dilettante whose "limo is shining on his shanty street"; or the archetypal wanderer, trickster, Coyote. The richest song on the album, which contains all these ambivalences within one perfect documentary image, is "Amelia."

Amelia Earhart (1898-1937) was the first woman to fly across the Atlantic, in 1928. She was a pioneer in several areas of aviation, making solo crossings of the Atlantic (1932) and of the Pacific (1935). In 1937, she and co-pilot Fred Noonan were attempting a round-the-world trip when their plane vanished without trace in the South Pacific. There have been persistent rumours that the flight involved espionage activities, and that the disappearance may not have been accidental; and also that Earhart is still alive, living under an assumed name somewhere in the United States. In Joni Mitchell's concert film, *Shadows and Light*, the performance of "Amelia" is accompanied by a montage of historical photographs of Amelia Earhart.

The song opens with a picture of the singer-protagonist at her most characteristic, travelling:

> I was driving across the burning desert
> When I spotted six jet planes
> Leaving six white vapor trails across the bleak terrain
> It was the hexagram of the heavens
> It was the strings of my guitar
> Amelia, it was just a false alarm

The "six jet planes" are presumably (because of their close formation) military, and so provide a vague echo of the putatively military nature of Earhart's last flight. They present an image of flight higher and more distant, unattainable, than anything yet achieved by the singer (or by Amelia), yet she links herself to them by the repetition of their pattern in the six strings of her guitar: music is for her the medium of flight. In the *I Ching*, the hexagram of six unbroken lines is a sign of creative power, usually male — both the singer and Amelia intrude upon the stereotypically male preserves of flight, travel, exploration. The song's concise and brilliant conjunction of the planes, the guitar, and the hexagram suggests the aspirations of its characters (flight, music, creativity, discovery) along with their dangers. The recurring chorus-line — "Amelia, it was just a false alarm" — re-

tains an open-ended indeterminacy of meaning, due to the lack of specific reference for "it," but is also a repeated reassurance of mutual support. The possible dangers of flight (Amelia's death) may be no more than "false" alarms (the rumours of Amelia's continued existence). Or the falseness of the alarm may be because the flight itself is worth it, whatever the fall.

The following stanzas continue to outline the singer's restlessness and dissatisfaction. Travel provides "A song so wild and blue / It scrambles time and seasons if it gets thru to you." The singer reveals that she is travelling to escape a lover who has (in a line that stumbles expressively over its reluctant rhythm) made "His sad request of me to kindly stay away": for her, the road is both "cursed and charmed," as it leads her to a freedom she isn't at all sure she wants. Throughout these stanzas, Amelia remains as a constant reference in the chorus line, whose undefined sense of reassurance is clearly directed by the singer as much towards herself as towards Amelia. (Earhart's fate in the South Pacific is also perhaps hinted at in the lines "Where some have found their paradise / Others just come to harm.")

The historical Amelia does not occupy the foreground of the text until the fifth stanza:

> A ghost of aviation
> She was swallowed by the sky
> Or by the sea, like me she had a dream to fly
> Like Icarus ascending
> On beautiful foolish arms
> Amelia, it was just a false alarm.

The oxymoron of "beautiful foolish" echoes the "cursed and charmed" of the previous stanza; the mythological reference to Icarus universalises both the beauty and the foolishness. This full emergence of the "documentary" Amelia into the text enables the singer to arrive at her own most searching and honest self-definition:

> Maybe I've never really loved
> I guess that is the truth
> I've spent my whole life in clouds at icy altitudes
> And looking down on everything
> I crashed into his arms
> Amelia, it was just a false alarm.

("Clouds," like "Blue" earlier, is a reference to one of Mitchell's best-known songs.) The ambiguities of these last lines are very rich: the singer sees her flight, like Earhart's, ending in a crash — but it is a crash back into the arms of the lover from whom she has taken flight. The lover is, then, in a sense, death: his arms welcome her as the ocean welcomed Amelia. Yet even this alarm is "false."

The final stanza of the song returns to the road:

> I pulled into the Cactus Tree Motel
> To shower off the dust
> And I slept on the strange pillows of my wanderlust
> I dreamed of 747's
> Over geometric farms
> Dreams, Amelia, dreams and false alarms.

The geometric patterns of the opening stanza (six parallel lines) have now been brought down from the air to the earth ("geometric farms"), though earth only as seen from above. Amelia's primitive biplanes have become the impersonal bulk of the 747s. Yet for all the inconclusive sadness of the singer's lonely dilemma, Amelia remains to her as a source of dreams, of comfort, of affection: one cannot judge the song properly without hearing the aching tenderness with which Mitchell's voice, on every recurrence of the chorus line, caresses the name "Amelia" (or without hearing, in the concert version, the high, soaring, ethereal flight of Pat Metheny's guitar solo).[47]

"Amelia" is obviously not a "documentary poem" in the central sense which I have attempted to define. It is not a long narrative, and the song itself has comparatively little to say about Earhart's career. In its fullest version, however, that in the concert film, the photographs of Earhart testify to much of that history, and act, in the classic sense, as the poem's "documents." "Amelia" is rather a mini-documentary, a small scale model of the form. The references to Earhart are what prevent the song from falling into the flaws (all too prevalent in much of Mitchell's work) of maudlin self-indulgence: Amelia provides a solid reference point for the song, both factually (in the insistence on her historical reality) and emotionally (in the mysterious assurance and love of the repeated chorus line). And the figure of Amelia provides the singer with the necessary pole of alterity by which to complete her own dialectic process of self-definition. If what she arrives at is indeed "the truth" about herself, it is the truth of Amelia Earhart that has enabled her to reach it — just as "the truth" of Frances Farmer enabled Rose also to arrive at an answer to the central documentary question of identity, Who Do You Think You Are?

NOTES

[1] Alice Munro, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1978), p. 64.

[2] Munro, p. 64.

[3] Munro, p. 25.

[4] Dorothy Livesay, "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre," in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, ed. Eli Mandel (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1971), pp. 267-81.

[5] Livesay, pp. 269, 267.

[6] Livesay, p. 279.

[7] Livesay, p. 267.

[8] Note, however, that there is still a difference between this use of the persona and that in, say, Browning's "My Last Duchess" or Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": namely, the essential difference that the documentary persona is an historical character, not an invented one, created and manipulated by the author solely for the purpose of the poem. Eliot could invent anything he liked about Prufrock; Atwood had to accommodate the immutable facts about Moodie. More subtle precedents for the documentary persona might be cited in Ezra Pound: "Homage to Sextus Propertius," for instance, although few documentary poems rely so completely on *translation*. Pound's Hugh Selwyn Mauberley is of course a fictional character, but he takes on a strange quasi-historicity, and can thus be used in a documentary manner, in Timothy Findley's *Famous Last Words*.

[9] Urjo Kareda, "An Immigrant's Song," *Saturday Night*, 92, no. 12 (December 1983), 48.

[10] Letter to Peter Miller, quoted by bp Nichol in his Introduction to Frank Davey, *The Arches: Selected Poems* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1980), p. 8.

[11] Frank Davey, "The Clallam," *The Arches*, p. 77.

[12] Frank Davey, "E. J. Pratt: Rationalist Technician," *Canadian Literature*, 61 (Summer 1974), p. 71.

[13] Davey, "Rationalist Technician," p. 73.

[14] Gary Geddes, *War & Other Measures* (Toronto: Anansi, 1976), p. 78.

[15] Doug Beardsley, *Kissing the Body of My Lord* (Edmonton: Longspoon, 1982), p. 63.

[16] Stephen Scobie, *McAlmon's Chinese Opera* (Montreal: Quadrant, 1980), p. 93.

[17] Michael Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (Toronto: Anansi, 1970), p. 110. For some detailed examples of Ondaatje's manipulation of documents, see my previous article "Two Authors In Search of a Character: Michael Ondaatje, bp Nichol, and Billy the Kid," *Canadian Literature*, 54 (Autumn 1972), pp. 37-55, especially p. 49.

[18] George Bowering, *Burning Water* (Toronto: General, 1980), p. 29.

[19] *Burning Water*, p. 126.

[20] There is an interesting exploration to be made of the whole notion of the documentary as a form of travesty, not excluding the association of the transvestite. Tom Stoppard's play *Travesties*, which plays quasi-fictional games with the historical conjunction of Joyce, Lenin, and Tzara in Zurich in 1916, is, arguably, a kind of documentary.

[21] *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, sel., ed., and introd. by Mark Roskill (London: Fontana, 1963), pp. 272-73.

[22] E. D. Blodgett, *Sounding* (Edmonton: Tree Frog, 1977), p. 24.

[23] A similarly ambiguous position is occupied by the very *last* page of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, which may be interpreted as being spoken either by Billy or by Michael Ondaatje.

[24] Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Toronto: Oxford, 1970), p. 7.

[25] Atwood, p. 13. See also Sid Stephen, "*The Journals of Susanna Moodie*: a self-portrait of Margaret Atwood," *White Pelican*, 2, no. 2 (Spring 1972), 32-36.

[26] Douglas Barbour, *Visions of My Grandfather* (Ottawa: Golden Dog, 1977), unpaginated, section 9.
[27] Monty Reid, *Karst Means Stone* (Edmonton: NeWest, 1979), p. 68.
[28] Ted Plantos, *Passchendaele* (Windsor: Black Moss, 1983), p. 7.
[29] George Bowering, *George, Vancouver* (Toronto: Weed/Flower, 1970), p. 39.
[30] *Burning Water*, p. 7.
[31] *Burning Water*, p. 7. "Dead Sailors" was in fact Bowering's working title for the novel, and some early extracts appeared under that name.
[32] *Burning Water*, p. 18.
[33] Phyllis Webb, *Wilson's Bowl* (Toronto: Coach House, 1980), p. 15.
[34] Webb, p. 28.
[35] Webb, p. 15.
[36] Webb, p. 17.
[37] Webb, p. 21.
[38] Webb, pp. 25, 29, 31, 43, 41.
[39] Michael Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter* (Toronto: Anansi, 1976), p. 133.
[40] *Coming Through Slaughter*, p. 133.
[41] *Coming Through Slaughter*, p. 134.
[42] *Coming Through Slaughter*, p. 134.
[43] *Coming Through Slaughter*, p. 96.
[44] *McAlmon's Chinese Opera*, p. 84.
[45] The comparison has been suggested by John Lent, writing about Tom Wayman in *CVII* (Autumn 1982).
[46] Joni Mitchell, *Hejira*, Asylum 7ES-1087 (1976). All quotations in the final section of this essay are taken from songs on this record.
[47] The soundtrack is available on *Shadows and Light*, Asylum 2XBB-704 (1980).