

A POET PAST AND FUTURE

Patrick Anderson

BY JUNE 1971 I had been away from Canada for twenty-one years. For ten of these years I had been without my Canadian passport, and the little certificate which documented my citizenship and whose physical possession was one of the last acts of a despairing nostalgia; I had asked for it in Madrid and received it in Tangier. Of the two documents the passport was the more precious. It became the symbol of a fine transatlantic mobility; of dollars, supposing there were any; of a difference not easily defined; and it made me almost a tourist in the land of my birth. I had taken refuge in it on the one or two occasions when anti-British students ganged up on me in Athens. Once, indeed, when I showed it to an inquisitive waitress in a bar she had expressed some disbelief, pointing (as it seemed to me) to something sad about my face, the hollows under my eyes, the growing wrinkles of middle-age, as though a person so world-weary was unlikely to belong to such a fresh and vigorous part of the world.

The odd thing is that last summer, despite the above experience, I found myself sitting at my work-table in rural Essex writing poems about Canada. F. R. Scott had just posted me a batch of papers left in his house since, I think, 1947; the batch was nowhere as big as I expected; much of it was any way poor stuff, strained, rhetorical, beset by what Thom Gunn has called "the dull thunder of approximate words"; but there was an evocation of a lake-scene in the Eastern Townships which, with a great deal of revision, might just about do (it became the new "Memory of Lake Towns"). And then, almost simultaneously, a packet at the bottom of a cupboard produced various scribbles on the writing paper of the Hotel Morin, Baie St. Paul, scribbles which had been intended to delight my friends on the recently formed *Preview* but which had come to nothing in that

summer of 1942, and some of these lines I started to incorporate, with critical commentary, in a long new poem recalling that holiday ("Remembering Baie St. Paul"). An incident when a cop challenged me after midnight in a vacant lot opposite McGill provided the entirely new "Frisked!"; there was a piece about invigilating an exam at the long defunct Dawson College; and soon I found I was once more pondering the theme of snow (and, God knows, emptiness, childhood, negation, transformation, excitement, awe) which had been part of the rather gimcrack symbolic system with which I used to approach Canada, and which by no means always fitted in with my supposed Marxism.

Such poems were in obvious contrast with those I had been writing since my "poetic revival" of three to four years before, although the difference was principally of subject matter and the necessary dependence upon memory and the drama of time. My present work — and here I must apologize, perhaps already too late, for the autobiographical insistence, indeed the sheer egoism, demanded by my subject — my present work was drawn pretty directly from personal experience and concrete objects carefully and respectfully observed. As I sat at my window I faced an assimilated world: the plants on the sill, the clumps of lime trees, the stones of the path, the twist of the small road, the garden, the oaks by the farm, the distantly flashing lake, the house and its bibelots, even the Ford parked in the drive, had each at least one poem to itself. An ex-rhetorician maybe, I was now in danger of abasing myself before the ineffable solidity of fact; I was surprised how often I thought affectionately of Robert Frost and Edward Thomas.

As to this "poetical revival", which meant going over the old stuff (but there were plenty of poems I didn't remember, for I had only a smattering of magazines and papers) and then clearing up the naggingly not-quite-dead bits and pieces, embedded in psychological blocks, of my last burst of activity in 1954-57, and then starting afresh, it was a renewal partly prompted by an accumulation of evidence from Canada that I wasn't entirely forgotten there — that there was even, hopefully, a "renewal of interest" in my work. I heard that someone had fed "Poem On Canada" into a computer. Mr. C. X. Ringrose got in touch with me over his kindly, often perceptive but also inaccurate "Patrick Anderson and the Critics".¹ I read handbooks. I found a quotation here and there. Young girls from Alberta high schools wrote me that they had been assigned to appreciate my work, and where could they find some? Professor Wynne Francis's piece on the Montreal Poets reached me after a time-lag of several years.² And then, years later again, F. R. Scott sent me the typed transcript of a tape-

recorded conversation between some of the *Preview* editors which had taken place at a sort of reunion in 1966. Those present, apart from Scott, were Neufville Shaw, Bruce Ruddick and Margaret Surrey; the latter, as Margaret Day, had been a member of the group for only a couple of months.

Reading this transcript was a bewildering, moving, embarrassing experience even to an incorrigible autobiographer such as myself. For about twenty pages the editors returned again and again to what they evidently considered my charismatic presence although, doubtless, they were also recovering their lost youth. I appeared as a kind of cult hero, like Percival in *The Waves*. And then, not unexpectedly, their enthusiasm flagged a little. Notes of qualification began to creep in. Bruce admitted I had had faults of personality, all the more sinister for being unspecified; Margaret felt that I had written only one good poem, the early and once popular "Summer's Joe"; Neufville wondered why he hadn't felt much urge to look me up when he visited England. Finally they all agreed I was dead as a poet, hadn't written any poetry in years; my six or so prose books didn't concern them much. In this rather alarming atmosphere of myth I couldn't help reflecting on a rumour I had been told about some years before, namely that I had been "seen on St. Catherine Street". Nor was this all. The editors went on to refer to another story which had apparently been current, the story that I was physically as well as poetically dead, my throat slit in a tavern brawl. (And indeed when I did finally get back to Canada last fall, and was dining with the Surreys on my first night, my old friend Hugh MacLennan happened to be at the next table, from which he told me with a look of gentle incredulity that he had read my obituary long since — "Oh yes, you died, I'm sure of that. You died after a protracted illness".) No wonder that a woman present at the tape-recording, but not herself an ex-member of *Preview*, described it as a *séance*, adding "I was bored, got rather drunk and broke up the proceedings by falling down the stairs." In this portentous context, reminiscent of the "passing" of Oedipus, Tennyson's King Arthur or the late James Dean, I had been sacrificially murdered and then born again on a Montreal street.

HOWEVER, BY THE TIME the transcript arrived, plans were already afoot for my returning to Canada for a brief tour of readings. There were several things I wanted to say. What I now knew of the generally accepted picture of the literary scene in the Forties seemed often inaccurate and some-

times unfair. No doubt my trip, supported by articles such as this present one, would enable me to attempt a rectification, an apologia.

One point I wanted to get rid of right away: I had not left Canada in the early summer of 1950 with the automatism of an Englishman naturally seeking his own country after a wartime period abroad. In fact over the next ten years prior to the dreadful moment when "landed immigrant" and "new citizen" must revert to "foreigner" — I had made many attempts to return, had written to many universities, had sought the advice of many friends. When Ronald Hambleton, a poet I much admired, interviewed me at the B.B.C. for transmission to Canada (this would be in the late Fifties) I recall becoming a little uneasy at the pathos of my plea to be allowed to return. And once an official at the High Commissioner's office, perhaps slightly misunderstanding my position, advised me to "do what adventurous youngsters have always done — get up and go!" even if it did mean "a process of shaking-down on one of our farms or in one of our lumber-camps."

Maybe my desire not to lose faith with Canada became a bit sentimental. I signalized it by including substantial pieces on my adopted homeland in every one of my early prose books where such an excursus was even remotely possible; there are long passages in *Snake Wine* (1955), *Search Me* (1957), while the *Character Ball* (1963) has no less than five story-chapters relating to Canada. In these books, which the critics usually described as "poetic" and which often contained sensuous material on the threshold of poetry, I brooded on various Canadian experiences, but not I trust without irony or humour. To tell the truth, I haven't felt particularly English for many years. "Englishness" is a muddle to me, as well as being associated with dark, awkward, painfully rejected areas of my childhood. The term is super-saturated, exhausted with the multiplicity of its implications. "Canadian", which outlines an emptiness, gives the artist freedom to move.

But the subject which needed most critical re-assessment, and where I might be able to say something of value, seemed to begin with the relations between the two little magazines, *Preview* and *First Statement*, which are generally considered to have dominated the literary scene in what Professor Wynne Francis has called "Canada's most exciting literary decade". It was here that inaccuracies seemed particularly rife.

They began, surprisingly enough, with Professor A. J. M. Smith's introduction to the *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* — surprisingly because Arthur Smith is not only a leading literary historian and critic, but was himself fairly close to

Preview and became linked with its members when they contributed to the founding of *Northern Review* (he was a member of that journal's editorial board). Smith's statement that Anderson "in association with F. R. Scott, P. K. Page, Irving Layton, Louis Dudek . . . edited the experimental literary journal *Preview* is precisely 50% wrong, for Layton and Dudek were, of course, among the leaders of the opposition. And yet this egregious howler, perpetrated as near to the events as 1960, has its paradoxical interest, for if Smith — whose editorship has been called by Milton Wilson "a model of discrimination and scrupulous choice" — was right in his *feeling* about Layton and Dudek (he just couldn't be right about the *facts*), then the whole long argument that *First Statement* produced the vital, virile, honest, native element in modern poetry, and that *Preview* produced the over-complex, sophisticated, mannered, effete (and, indeed, cosmopolitan) element, becomes shaky indeed.

It is this argument which is at the back of Wynne Francis's "Montreal Poets Of The Forties". Written in a jaunty popular style, Professor Francis's article is amiable and, in its light way, readable throughout. But it does not strike me as a fair picture and it does not use words with the respect and wariness one expects from a critical mind. It was, of course, written a long time ago, out of what seems an excited identification with the Stanley Street people; it has its points and its insights; perhaps necessary as a gesture, it is only questionable as an attempt to write history. The general theme, which caused pain or at least irritation to us on *Preview*, is that the supposedly rival *First Statement* consisted of brash but highly creative and dedicated bohemian ruffians, battling it out on the edge of subsistence, facing life in all its naturalistic squalor, while the members of *Preview* were prosperous, professional, upper middle-class men and women, moving easily (and apparently often in academic dress) from the "stately buildings" of McGill and the "swank" boutiques of Sherbrooke Street to the "spacious lawns and lovely homes of Westmount". In order to build us up as Establishment figures, to make us into a big Goliath of an army for the Davids of Stanley Street eventually to defeat ("Patrick Anderson's influence was dwindling . . .") she has frequent recourse to the plural: "most were not newcomers to the literary scene . . . most of the other poets on the *Preview* roster had published frequently in such magazines as *Poetry Chicago* . . . Several of them were McGill professors . . . the large private houses of *Preview* supporters . . . a veritable galaxy of accomplished writers etc."

To my mind these statements, mediated by such words as "most", "several", "galaxy", are totally misleading, especially as they are meant to refer to the early

days of the magazine when it was making its name. *Preview* was always a very small group. The masthead of number 2 (I seem to have lost the first) consists of six names, one of whom was to withdraw immediately. This leaves us with four young and struggling writers (Page, Shaw, Ruddick and myself) and with the older and already well-known Frank Scott, to whom we assigned something of a paternal role; he was supposed to approve and advise but not to initiate; indeed we were sometimes a little suspicious of him because we thought that, with his passion for collecting little magazines and sponsoring movements, he might want us to close down once we had achieved some success. However hard she tries, Professor Francis can extract from this bag precisely 1 (one) professor with the then notoriously low McGill salary plus 1 Westmount house, to my mind interesting rather than "lovely", and so far as I recall without a spacious lawn. I very much doubt whether any of us four had already appeared in *Poetry*; I certainly hadn't. The fact that we were making *Preview* a show-case for our work proves that we were new to the literary scene: that was the whole point. And, far from being established, Shaw had transferred from teaching to a temporary job in a factory, Ruddick was a medical student, P. K. Page had a war-time job amongst her stenographers, and I was a teacher on insecure tenure at 130 dollars a month for only ten months of the year. None of us had a house of his own. I paid 17 dollars a month for my "mews".

Professor Francis is kind to me but her approach has the same picturesque and dramatic touches which enable her to begin her article with hundreds of words on the proletarian ambiance of *First Statement* before having to admit that *Preview* came first and that, although she hardly dares to believe this, the future editor of *First Statement*, John Sutherland, applied for membership in the senior group. I was a "poet aflame with purpose". I was "Audenesque in appearance and mannerisms", although on what evidence she bases a comparison of our quirks of behaviour I cannot think. But it is with my imminent departure from Canada that she is seen at her most portentous: "He felt towards the end that he had failed, that Canada had somehow won. His leave-taking was more like a baffled retreat . . ." This is nonsense. *Towards the end* I was probably happier than I had been for years. (There are such things as private lives and personal reasons as well as the mystical game of wrestling with Canada, although in fairness I have to admit I had enjoyed playing that game.) Far from feeling that *I had failed* I thought my new poetry much better than my old, and was grateful to John Sutherland for a 26 page-long, perceptive and often highly critical review of my work in which he nonetheless recognized and even celebrated the

new qualities.³ As for a *baffled retreat*, I departed from Montreal with considerable bounce, agog for new adventures, by no means certain that my absence would be either long or permanent. Technically I was still employed by McGill. And when, around August, having already booked my passage back, I did break that academic tie I was rewarded with two wonderful years in Singapore.

Let me attempt to put the situation with regard to *Preview* into a (substantial) nutshell.

I. It appeared in the spring of 1942 as a mimeographed foolscap folio, its shape and general appearance owing much to *The Andersons*, a single issue publication which my wife, Peggy Doernbach, and I had sent to friends at least a year before — and whose appearance, in its turn, was rather similar to a magazine I had produced at Sherborne School in 1932. II. It announced itself as a “literary letter . . . not a magazine”, doubtless because we wished to republish some of the work later, and was therefore not on sale to the general public. III. It achieved some immediate success, being welcomed by Arthur Phelps in a radio talk and receiving letters of approval from the American editors, George Dillon and James Laughlin. Smith also approved, putting poems by P. K. Page and myself into his pioneer *Book Of Canadian Poetry* (1943) where there was as yet no whisper of Layton, Dudek, and Souster. IV. It was the vehicle of a group of young people living in wartime conditions and neither prosperous nor yet with much in the way of professional prospects, together with F. R. Scott and, later, the not notably well-off lawyer-poet, A. M. Klein, who was to be given a special “visiting writer” type of job at McGill. Its meetings to discuss contributions were down-to-earth; you only drank if you brought your own beer. It owed much to two women, my wife and Kit Shaw. It occasionally opened its pages to outside contributors such as Mavis Gallant, Denis Gibling and James Wreford, who became a sort of editor-at-a-distance. By that time it was being published in quarto form, with a simple cover. V. Its editors declared themselves anti-fascists but only I, who became entangled in the far-left, deserved Professor Francis’s term “doctrinaire”. Professor Francis uses the plural quite unforgivably when she says “Many of them displayed strong sympathies with a continental communism of the Auden-Spender-MacNeice variety”, quite apart from the fact that “continental” is meaningless (which continent?) and that MacNeice was nowhere near the communist position. The editors drew much of their writing from a social concern with the experiences they met. VI. John Sutherland, who used to take pot-luck luncheons with me, proposed himself for membership of *Preview*, supporting his claim with a prose poem about a bee

which got grassblades stuck up its nose. Perhaps jealous of my new-found security in the group, I advised against Sutherland's immediate admission. Sutherland soon started *First Statement*. Irving Layton proposed himself, or was proposed, for membership. He was interviewed but not invited to join. VII. *Preview* didn't take all that much notice of the new magazine. They probably respected John Sutherland but had the feeling that he was surrounded (then as in the days of *Northern Review*) not by exciting bohemians but by callow, semi-literate youths whose voices had only recently broken. His acquiring a press, and the pleasant appearance of the first books he published, tended to change their attitude. Thus he published my first book, *A Tent For April* (1945), but not, as Professor Francis says, because no commercial publisher would have it; I was already preparing a book for Ryerson. VIII. Eventually the two groups came together. I recall that I suggested *Portage* for the title of the new magazine, and then the too pretentious *Northern Review*. Editorial sessions were not, as Professor Francis claims, "stormy" but *Preview* people did insist that Sutherland give up most of his lower-case gimmickry after the first issue. It is incorrect to imagine that the *Preview* group was immediately eclipsed because Sutherland became managing editor: in charge, that is to say, of the business side. They contributed much. A spot-check shows them dominating the third issue. Long after the notorious resignation I was represented by a substantial group of new poems in the spring of 1949.

There is, of course, more to quarrel with in "Montreal Poets Of The Forties" than the niggling problem of facts. There is the suggestion that *Preview* poets "excelled in tightly-structured metaphysical exercises . . . highly metaphoric poems rich in Marxist and Freudian allusions", a line of approach which is quickly connected with the term "imported" and then, obviously more suspect, "English" followed by a frequent reiteration of the epithet "sophisticated" — even Smith has a touch of colonial naiveté when he describes me in the Oxford anthology as having a "sophisticated European sensibility", as though Americans and Canadians were still wet behind the ears. In contrast to this, *First Statement* believed in "a masculine, virile [notice the indicative redundancy] poetry of experience . . . They would not write of the phoenix and the hyacinth but of Berri Street and De Bullion. Scorning the *artifice* [my italics] of metaphor and symbol . . . etc." Now it was an American critic, Cleanth Brooks, who first taught me the functional nature of metaphor and it was an American poet, Hart Crane, who showed me the varied use of symbol in "The Bridge" and my favourite "The Broken Tower". If a symbol is *artifice* then surely it doesn't amount to

much? The fact that I acquired my "modernism" during two years in New York is often forgotten (see for instance "Dramatic Monologue" in *Preview*, June 1942 or, indeed, "The Plotter" in *The Andersons* and later, oddly enough, in *First Statement*).⁴

When Bruce Ruddick wrote in a poem of "the dark tough slum of the rectum" he was, as a young medic, writing directly from his experience and, not that it matters much, we can be pretty sure that he didn't have a phoenix or hyacinth in sight. His rectum was, one suspects, neither "imported" nor "English" but resolutely Canadian or, better, universal. Furthermore one has only to read quickly through *Preview*, whether with particular attention to such poems as Ruddick's "Plague", Page's "The Stenographers", Scott's "Boston Tea Party", my "Drinker" and "Portrait", Klein's "Rocking Chair", or the prose in which Neufville Shaw met a factory worker, P. K. Page evoked a tubercular French-Canadian family or a bourgeois poetess presiding at tea, Bruce Ruddick described a conversation on the way to a lunatic asylum in "Old Minka's Weather" or I encountered a mixed-up American soldier, to see that *Preview* writers drew very heavily on their actual living and were able to express this with crisp simplicity and vernacular tang. There isn't much of the "metaphysical exercise", but then writers don't often publish their *exercises*, do they? I should say we were compassionate people, often writing from anger, often writing quickly and loosely, and far from "the cold, intricate brilliance of . . . intellectual gymnastics" which Professor Francis sees in us.

I have only to add here that some of the *First Statement* brickbats could be justifiably hurled at me although I suspect I was too muddled to be "brilliant" and too romantically naive to deserve their other epithet of "sophisticated". I was neurotically compulsive as a writer, had to produce at least one poem per weekend, enthused over now one "influence" and now another, tried far too many things, was often word-intoxicated (rather, alas, than aiming for the "tightly-constructed" or even the "intellectual") and had remarkably little confidence in myself. I was also undeniably English although I had had little to do with the "Poets of the Thirties" while I was in England, my heroes still being Housman, Yeats, Owen. On the other hand I must have had a bit of judgement, if only because I omitted such a mass of my *Preview* work from my collected volumes. There are many poems in the magazine which I can scarcely bear to read and several which I had forgotten completely. I have been in danger of subscribing to the legend that I was simply an imitator of Thomas and Barker,

since I had periods, or just hours of the day, when my dependence on someone or other was grovelling.

In a brief critical note to my entry in *Contemporary Poets of the English Language* (St. James' Press) Mr. John Robert Colombo comments on my three volumes of poetry in the following terms: "The poems suggest a wide reading in Eliot and Auden and especially Dylan Thomas . . . He had been called, perhaps unkindly, 'a kind of tea-drinking Dylan Thomas'." The last phrase is arresting, comic and memorable, but is there any possible justification for finding in the 97 poems published in book form more than seven or eight which show any Thomas influence at all? As for reading widely in Eliot and Auden, didn't *all* of us in our youth read *all* of them? Since Mr. Colombo assigns my "Poem of Canada" to the wrong volume, he may well betray here a failure to check on what I really wrote. Poverty, by the way, forced me to drink tea; by the time I was writing my five or so "late" Thomas poems in 1947-49, one of which was addressed to Thomas himself and set in a bar, I was putting down about as much beer as he was. Were Mr. Colombo not the most incommunicative and letter-shy of editors I should enjoy tackling him on these points.

Furthermore, when I look, for instance, at the twelve poems printed in *Poetry* for March 1943, and which were subsequently awarded one of that journal's prizes, I can find no Thomas or Barker, not much trace of anyone else, little by way of notably "English manner", but instead a quiet voice speaking with directness and simplicity ("War Dead", "Military Camp", "The Airmen"). And only a night or two ago, shuffling some mouldering package which I hadn't looked at carefully for twenty-five years, I came across a dozen unpublished poems from the same high old days of *Preview* which seemed, so unfamiliar they were, to present me with a new poet altogether, very young, very lyrical, very brief, writing often a lean free-verse in which he responded to the rich darkness of a Montreal alley, a neighbour's dress on the line, people crowding round an orator at an open-air meeting, a blind man, a group listening to music, a male neighbour dressing for a party or "Notes For A Dream Landscape". At least at the moment of re-discovery these poems seemed as light and precise as butterflies. Still what I emphasize now is that I had plenty of faults but that these should not be allowed to obscure the clear-eyed directness of my colleagues.

THE SAME SLANTING towards *First Statement* is seen in *The Making Of Modern Poetry In Canada*, edited by Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski. This is certainly a very useful book despite its unscholarly lack of an index and its rather smug claim to present “essential articles” but it quotes not a single one of *Preview*’s always succinct editorial notes, which at times amounted to manifestos, while its chapter on “The Early Forties” when my magazine undoubtedly led the field, is largely concerned with the opinions of John Sutherland and with material concerning the editorial split in *Northern Review*, a journal which only began in late 1945. Louis Dudek seems the more excitable of the two editors. In 1954 he numbers me amongst those “as angry and concerned about life values and the realities as ever, and no longer to be shelved away as ‘socialistic’, or ‘imitative’ of English trends” but by 1958 he sums up *Preview* as “derivative” and showing an “esoteric” unawareness of the need for local literary stimulus, for variety, for native expression, a position echoed in an article of the same year by the opinion that of the *Preview* group, with the exception of Klein and Scott, “none have (sic) survived”.⁵ The victory has, of course, gone to Layton, Souster and himself, poets “characteristically rooted in Canadian life and speech” and spurning “the engrafted English stock”. Thus, in the four years between 1954 and 1958, years in which I produced the Canadian sections of my first two prose books and also the radio play, “A Case Of Identity”, with its scenes of poetry making in Montreal and its conversation with John Sutherland at the Coliseum skating rink, I had somehow fallen by the way.

Professor Gnarowski has at times something of the vivid imprecision, the picturesque brandishing of words, that we have seen in Professor Francis.⁶ A *strangely* tense yet respectful entente existed between the *elder* statesmen of *Preview* and the *turbulent turks* of *First Statement* (my italics) but what does the Professor mean? Was there an “entente”, was it “tense”, why was it “strangely ” tense? — to proceed no further. *Preview*, we are told, belonged to those who believed in “a universal content of ideas lodged in an English-language culture, dominated by a social theme which could be best expressed in the cosmopolitan language of the intelligence.” Well, what — as a supporter of the opposition — does he want? Specifically Canadian ideas not viable elsewhere, lodged in a culture of gobbledygook and expressed in the native — but it isn’t — language of the intestinal tract? (This would tie in with *First Statement*’s hippie primitivism and bad manners as instanced by Professor Francis not me: “huzzahs . . . insults . . . to fight, spit, sweat, urinate and make love in their

poems.”) Certainly there is a hint of D. H. Lawrence a few lines further on. The disappearance of my colleagues and myself from *Northern Review* led to “the emergence of a more virile grouping among the poets of Montreal”. I always think recourse to virility as a value-judgement is dangerous, especially where women are concerned (*their* manly Miriam Waddington versus *our* languishing Patricia Page); it smacks of the Hemingway-Callaghan fight and makes me want to match Bruce Ruddick, who used to roll naked in the snow and was one of the most belligerent men I have met, against, say, the undoubtedly ebullient Irving Layton.

I can't really let “elder statesmen” pass, not when I think of myself at 29 humping a large puppet-theatre onto a truck with the assistance of one Jewish boy-boxer and two elderly ex-Wobblies in order that Peggy Doernbach and I could present our plays to a house-meeting somewhere in the Cartier division; it just doesn't sound elderly, to my way of thinking, and it isn't all that “esoteric” or “sophisticated” or “English” or “effete”. But there is a more important point than this. Professor Gnarowski says straight out, and apparently from the viewpoint of 1943-44, when he himself certainly wasn't around, that the *First Statement* people “were obviously destined for the greater achievement”. I shouldn't think that this was so at the time; whether it is now is a matter of critical discussion, though one would have thought that events have developed beyond the time for either group to have much relevance beyond an historic one — I cannot believe that substantial numbers of poets today are against what Louis Dudek once called “the unreal universe of language” or what Michael Gnarowski describes as “the cosmopolitan language of the intelligence”. Canadians are not brutes or philistines. But, since this is an apologia in its way, I can't help feeling the literary historians of the future may have considerable respect for the achievements of *Preview*: Page's *As Ten As Twenty*, Klein's *The Rocking Chair*, the later poems of Frank Scott and the like. And, to instance a mere contributor, hasn't the work of Mavis Gallant shown exciting development? What else may turn up?

AND THEN, in October of last year, I found myself back in Canada. The experience was not of the sort that I feel capable of examining in these pages. It was one of the big occasions of my life: but bewilderingly quick, sharp, poignant. In a sense I was constantly rubbing my eyes. I didn't really have time to think. Although I had planned to take notes, record conversations

on tape, make use of my camera, I did none of these things. I had brought several folios of poems with me but I felt thoroughly confused by the typed sheets and seemed to make my choice for readings in a slapdash but unadventurous way, as though I scarcely knew my own work. I felt a reluctance to return to my early, Canadian poems, the anthologized pieces in particular, but at the same time I took few risks. In any case the "poetry reading" brings out the ham in one, makes one play for laughs; how can one come out of the blue, a man absurdly half a myth, and a fading myth at that, to share with strangers those intimate strategems, those crucifixions upon some half-understood but all-demanding meaning?

In Montreal, Ottawa, Lennoxville it was a period of Indian summer. The leaves already looked brittle as paint. Their stillness was arguably the stillness of art, but not quite the art of one's favourite painter. Not even the passing of Mr. Kosygin in one direction, and Miss Germaine Greer in another, nor the departure of yet one more member of the League of Canadian Poets flying east, flying west, with his typescript in his briefcase, was likely to agitate them much. To me the air was charged with greetings. From time to time I would relax with an old associate, as likely as not from *Preview*, as though we sat together on a hill and viewed a distant prospect, out of which our friendship rushed forward to suffuse us as the sun races up from behind a passing cloud. Who talks of literary problems, new work, book-reviewing, publishers' advances, the difficulty of running an English department, at such a moment? I would withdraw from my friends to a Montreal tavern. I was used to being alone and just looking. I was faithful to Peel Street.

If to my friends I was a figure of the past, and all the more so because there had been little communication between us over the years, to the various academics I met I must often have seemed no more than a provider of footnotes for a literary portrait long since completed. I sensed a possible awkwardness here. "Patrick Anderson of *Preview* . . . of the Montreal literary scene in the Forties . . . that would-be Marxist with his unproletarian tone of voice and his obsession with snow", and here the fellow was, full of twenty years of book-writing and journalism and criticism, positively an English man of letters in his small way, and actually claiming to be writing poetry still, to be riding quite a creative wave, with *Canadian poetry* (whatever he meant by that) as a not inconsiderable part of the product! It so happened that the people I have had to take issue with here, Professors Francis, Dudek, Gnarowski, were amongst my amiable hosts. I was able to talk things over with them and to offer my version of dis-

puted facts, having regard rather to the *Preview* group as a whole than to my own work of then and now. (A poet's sense of what he is doing is in any case both intimate and technical; he does not communicate easily his concern with raindrops splintered upon a flushing pane or the way the colour of a flower at night is guessed before it is made out, nor how a theme puts itself at risk as it is coaxed into one form amongst many possibilities, or a mood slowly discovers itself among wandering patterns of words.) But had I realized earlier that my especial sponsor, Michael Gnarowski, was still firmly committed to the "other side", believed my third volume, *The Colour As Naked*, a too-literary anticlimax to the preceding collections, and proved himself therefore entirely unconverted by Mr. C. X. Ringrose's arguments, I might well have remembered to quote that gentleman's conclusion to his article on myself and the critics: "If Patrick Anderson ever does return to Canada, he would be justified in demanding a reassessment of his poetry, or at least that we abandon the current clichés about his work."

A warmer attitude was noticeable elsewhere: In that final crowded meeting at my old university of McGill, Louis Dudek insisted on taking the chair and paid me the compliment of the most flattering introduction I have ever received, a compliment all the greater because he insisted on himself reading aloud a poem I had thought long unfashionable and about whose flourish of images I still had doubts — none other, in fact, than "Winter In Montreal".

One product of my tour was that I read, and certainly with enjoyment, *The Selected Poems Of Irving Layton*. I had been led to believe two things: first, that Layton had been for many years the front-runner amongst modern poets, especially those of the *First Statement* persuasion; and second, that the discovery of a "native", "virile", Canadian voice had had much to do with Ezra Pound (that most cosmopolitan of poets), W. C. Williams, the Black Mountain, Charles Olson's projectivism and so on. To my great surprise I found that Layton was writing like a *Preview* poet somewhat matured: traditional, if a little loose, socially-concerned if also romantically self-preoccupied, often Canadian in subject matter but "engrafted" with many another stock, above all a Laytonian rather than a nationalist. Couldn't he have written my "Frisked"? — and couldn't I, if he'll forgive me, have had a fair shot at his "Berry Picking"? Ignorant as I still am of Souster and Dudek in any depth, I began to suspect that the long and for all I knew boringly familiar controversy which I have been arguing about here was never very meaningful, and lost its small but conceivably useful bite way back in the early Fifties.⁷

One final point. I am no philosopher but I have been intrigued for years by T. S. Eliot's suggestion that the appearance of a new writer, and presumably also the reappearance of an old writer reborn, subtly alters the literary perspective. As I sit here in my Essex farmland, nearly twenty-two years out from Canada — or better, nearly six months — and put my pen down on paper to continue work on a poem or to finish this present article, I am very slightly and almost imperceptibly changing the situation three thousand miles away.

NOTES

- ¹ *Canadian Literature*, No. 43, pp. 10-23.
- ² "Montreal Poets of the Forties", *A Choice of Critics*, Oxford University Press, 1966.
- ³ *Northern Review*, Vol. 2, No. 5, April-May 1949. I led off this issue with five new poems, including "An Apple before Bedtime".
- ⁴ When I read the long series of journals I kept in New York, and which include my preliminary visit to Montreal and Quebec in 1938, I am surprised at how quickly I became Americanized. I seem never to have fallen back on a cultural base in England. Nor, to judge from the endless bits and pieces of reportage, diary, political analysis, did I do so in the Forties. As a practicing poet I felt closer to (less afraid of) American poets than English.
- ⁵ *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada*, ed. Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski, Ryerson Press, 1967, pp. 172, 212, 280. Dudek goes so far as to state bluntly that it was "*First Statement* which became *Northern Review*", forgetting that the dying John Sutherland still counted, if not quite legally, *Preview* among his three ancestors in the summer of 1956.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, The Role of Little Magazines in the Development of Poetry in English in Montreal," pp. 212-222.
- ⁷ I don't believe you can construct a literature on the basis of Imagism, a useful but short-lived movement, or on the proponents of the "new austerity" and the "anti-poem".