

MYTH, FRYE AND CANADIAN WRITERS

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WHEN ROBERT KROETSCH published *The Words of My Roaring* in 1966, I thought, the Canadian writer is finally home free. It was the first really exuberant novel to come out of the west. After those laborious novels of Grove's in which the heroes struggle to defeat or ironic self-discovery; after the beautifully realized but wracking winter of the soul from which the hero of Ross's *As For Me and My House* emerges, reborn, but barely; after the torturous journeys and almost pyrrhic victories of the women in Margaret Laurence's novels, Kroetsch's hero moves with a kind of magnificent inevitability towards his own triumphant self-realization.

J. J. Backstrom, undertaker and political candidate, has neither money nor education nor influence. He is running on the coat tails of Bible Bill Aberhart and his evangelical politics. But that has little to do with his success. He lives in his own imagination; like the studhorse man in the later novel he lives in his own myth, larger than life. Aware as anyone of the depression, the drought, the general helplessness of his world to change the situation, he is full of energy. Bitten or badgered as he may be by a nagging wife, by personal and mechanical failures, by his own sense of the impossibility and folly of his contesting the election against the elderly, respected and repeatedly successful local doctor, he nonetheless shakes these annoyances off as a grizzly might shake off the rain. And with the rain he wins the doctor's daughter and the doctor's seat in the legislature as well.

Here too we find the first real garden in prairie fiction. And there the great man — "I have these big fists," he says, "I have these perfect teeth" — lies with the moon, the waterlilies, the doctor's daughter. He is Adam in Eden, unused to the place but nevertheless making himself at home.

THE POET is the nth Adam, wrote A. M. Klein:

taking a green inventory
in world but scarcely uttered, naming, praising,
the flowering fiats in the meadow, the
syllabled fur, stars aspirate, the pollen
whose sweet collision sounds eternally.
For to praise

the world — he, solitary man — is breath
to him. Until it has been praised, that part
has not been. Item by exciting item —
air to his lungs, and pressured blood to his heart —
they are pulsated, and breathed, until they map,
not the world's, but his own body's chart!

So Klein, the city-dweller, despite the “daily larcenies of the lung,” proclaimed in 1948, nearly ten years before *The Anatomy of Criticism*. And three years later in *The Second Scroll* he celebrated the imagination of a whole people, in Israel, recreating the collective poem of language.

In 1954, Irving Layton wrote:

And me happiest when I compose poems.
Love, power, the huzza of battle
are something, are much;
Yet a poem includes them like a pool
water and reflection.
In me nature's divided things —
tree, mould on tree —
have their fruition;
I am their core. Let them swap,
bandy, like a flame swerve.
I am their mouth; as a mouth I serve.

The poet speaks with confidence. As in the case of Klein, it is a confidence rooted in a clear conception of the function and capital importance of the imagination, and one very like Frye's, that the imagination creates, and in the case of the writer, creates through the word, the myth within which men may live in communion with all life, within which all separate lives, nature's divided things, may find their identity with the whole of life, with the result that they may praise instead of curse the world.

quence, life may be praised. As the narrator says early in the story: "Thus it was that Pierre discovered what was expected of persons like himself (i.e. the artists) — that they should, thanks to them, rejoice and be sustained by hope."

Anne Hébert arrived at the same conclusion a few years earlier in a talk published in 1958 with the significant title, "Poésie: solitude rompue." There she proclaimed, "Notre pays — our country has arrived at the first days of creation; life here is to be discovered and named." And the convictions expressed in that essay provided the basic poetic platform for the Québec poet throughout the sixties. Whether he said so explicitly or not, the poet became the nth Adam, calling for and taking a green inventory in world but scarcely uttered. One may list a few titles: Yves Préfontaine's *Pays sans parole*, Roland Giguère's *Age de la parole*, Gatién Lapointe's *Le premier mot*, or Mlle Hébert's own poem, "Mystère de la parole," where she writes:

Silence, nothing stirs, nothing speaks, the word
breaks, lifts our hearts, seizes the world in a
single thunderclap, binds us to its dawn as the
rind to the fruit.

The poem concludes with a kind of prayer that he who has received the office of the word take charge of all the oppressed and disinherited as of a heart grown dark with unrealized life, that both the living and the dead may find their lives justified in a single song between the grasses and the morning light.

WITH THIS LARGE AFFIRMATION of poetic faith, there is a sense in which Canadian writing comes of age. Klein or Layton or Anne Hébert have a clear *raison d'être* for their activity, and they write with a profound conviction as to the central importance and power of the imagination. No doubt that shrewd chameleon A. J. M. Smith had implied some such idea of a poetry's worth in *News of the Phoenix* and *A Sort of Ecstasy*. Some of F. R. Scott's poems have an intensely confident élan. Pratt's long and unfailing career implies such confidence. And the gist of "Brébeuf" and "Towards the Last Spike" is precisely that it is imagination that creates a vision of community and inspires men to realize it. Birney too has an unquenchable vitality and he has a stubborn faith in the imagination of Mrs. A. or Everywoman, who saves Vancouver from damnation. But he is also a man on the run, sniping at a world in which the

individual imagination struggles to survive and frequently loses, and in which the collective imagination is most likely to create a nightmare of destruction.

I remember receiving a note one summer in which Layton wrote that he was writing poems like a burst waterspout. He has been doing that for years. If we look back on the poets before him we do not get this impression of exuberant fecundity.

Roberts peters out between a wilful optimism and a spontaneous melancholy. Lampman dreams, increasingly alone, in the wintry fields. In French, Nelligan begins with a magnificent series of poems inspired by a passionate but hopelessly exclusive ideal and founders on the rocks of the excluded reality; much like the early Duncan Campbell Scott's Piper of Arll, he sinks in his golden ship in a sea of self-doubt. Saint-Denys-Garneau, a truly original talent, turns on himself, denies his joy three times over and forsakes the creative word for the iron cross of dogmatic faith. P. K. Page struggles against a metallic logos, an impersonal technical and rational order whose perspective must be resisted within as well as without, and for some years she is silent, preferring to map her own body's chart in a graphic line less prejudiced by analytic reason. As Margaret Avison puts it in her poem "Perspective," speaking of those who reduce their world to a rational geometry, "your fear has me infected."

It is the doubt within that is most corrosive: the artist's suspicion that his audience is indifferent or hostile; worse, his complicity with his audience, with a world suspicious of the wild energies or dreams loosed by the imagination. Some novels seem designed to dramatize our divided mind in regard to imaginative vision.

Callaghan's novels are a record of the defeat of the imagination. And it is the doubt, the indecision of the best as well as the worst that often ensures its defeat. McAlpine in *The Loved and the Lost* is an intelligent, highly educated, liberal person. He is even in love with the girl, Peggy Sanderson, whose vision of a more open society nonetheless shocks him. No more than the rest of his world can he trust in an order arising from dreaming desire, in an imagination that couples black and white, the church and the leopard. His distrust ensures the destruction of the girl. He abandons her the night she is murdered.

George Stewart in MacLennan's *The Watch that Ends the Night* is a similar case. He loves the girl Catherine and admires her masculine counterpart Jerome Martell, but he stands incredulous before their faith in "Eros, builder of cities". He trembles as they pour themselves out in exuberant activity as if they were themselves the creations and instruments of dreaming desire and the community

it would create. Catherine and Jerome live in their own myths. Almost to the end, Stewart remains a student, fascinated by the power of that insubstantial vision which they proceed to make incarnate in their lives. He ends a convert, but we can be pretty certain he will never be among the saints.

Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* was entirely preoccupied in dramatizing and exorcising that inner division or self-doubt. When Philip Bentley finally submits to Eros, risks rebirth in an illegitimate child, he ends his complicity, resigns from the church and resolves to be no more and no less than an artist. Yet it is not clearly within the scope of the book to indicate what this means, and the conclusion as it stands does not suggest that the artist will have a particularly large or important role to play, or that the life of the imagination may be of profound influence. Mr. Bentley may do no more than open a bookstore in Winnipeg and sketch, which for his own soul's health and, to a slight degree, for that of the body politic, may be something but not much.

Other novels such as Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* or Wiseman's *The Sacrifice* may be seen to touch obliquely on this theme and to be more hopeful. Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* was one book which, in form as in theme, affirmed the central importance of imagination, of vision or myth, in creating a community in a world divided and infected with fear. Yet none of these authors has impressed us by writing like a burst waterspout.

These are no doubt questionable and certainly invidious comparisons. Yet thinking back on so much of our writing, noting how even Souster depreciates his muse, disguising her in the most ordinary, even dumpiest dress, remarking how Dudek seems compelled to document his vision with fragments of conversations and observations on two continents, as if they were droppings from Pegasus, guaranteed evidence of the scientific validity of the vision of Atlantis, we may detect a certain inhibition and doubt, a lack of faith or fear of heights in the writer, especially if we turn to a Layton or a Frye or an Anne Hébert for comparison.

LAYTON IS PROBABLY our first important poet to pour out books, good, bad or indifferent, with an absolute conviction as to the significance of poetry and the power of the word. He creates and lives in his own myth, most validity in his role of poet in the poems themselves. There he becomes Orpheus, Adam, the dying and rising god, the living word through whom the identity of

all nature's divided things is manifest. He is worshipped and praised, for through him the vision of the community of living things is ever created anew, life is justified and men may praise, not the god but the world.

At best, it is not in himself but in his office as poet, as instrument of the imagination, that Layton finds his authority. As such, it does not matter what sort of scribbler his particular audience may think him to be; he knows that the poet is not irrelevant or powerless, but central to their lives. As he says in "The Fertile Muck":

. . . if in August joiners and bricklayers
are thick as flies around us
building expensive bungalows for those
who do not need them, unless they release
me roaring from their moth-proofed cupboards
their buyers will have no joy, no ease.

It is he who can extend their rooms for them, enlarge their world.

"How to dominate reality?" the poet asks, and replies, "Love is one way, imagination another." And, as the final image of the poet sitting with his consort implies, surely they are inseparable. Eros inspires us with the vision of what we would create, and the imagination comprehends that vision along with its opposite. It comprehends the distance between what we are and what we might be, without losing faith in the transforming power of dreaming desire. Its capacity, as Frye would say, to provide the goals of human work.

It is, I suggest, the courage of such convictions that has increasingly sustained a number of writers in this country and contributed to the remarkable literary production of the fifties and sixties. Such convictions are shared by other writers, of course. By Blake, who has contributed a good deal of Frye's conception of poetry, but also in varying degrees by a Rilke, a Yeats or a Breton, whom Prof. Alquié cites in his rather dry observation:

The surrealist idea that "the imaginary is what tends to become real" is calculated on the casualty of desire. Desire tends in effect to realize what it imagines.

I quote M. Alquié's remark, because long before anyone in Québec had ever heard of Northrop Frye, the poets and painters were being strongly influenced by the surrealists. That is not an influence shared by writers in English Canada, though it has contributed to a shared conception of the nature and function of poetry. Yet that conception, I suspect, would have developed any way in Québec, and it often appears closer in its terms to a Frye or a Klein or a Layton than to Breton or Professor Alquié.

Fernand Ouellette describes his coming to be a poet as a spiritual birth, an experience of liberation consequent upon his intimate recognition of the two poles of life, the dark and the light, and of the need to reject a Jansenist or Manichean dualism in favour of a vision that comprehends them both (a central theme in recent Québec poetry and, as I have tried to suggest elsewhere at some length, in English-Canadian literature as well). Ouellette, writing of how the profound affront of death, as the ultimate privation, is yet comprehended or transformed on the poetic or metaphysical level by an even more devouring hope or expectation, remarks:

It's the awareness of death and of hope which transforms me into a demiurge, and not all the "isms", such as surrealism.

Certainly Anne Hébert arrived at her view of poetry through a painful exploration of her own imaginative world, discovering gradually that her personal imprisonment in silence, her sense of isolation and paralysis, was shared by others and was indeed a reflection of a cultural paralysis, a collective vision bequeathed by the past. She came to recognize and reject the past, in the rapacious kings who, in "Le Tombeau des rois", propagate themselves through her; in the wraith-like Michel, who secludes his bride in the closed rooms of the novel *Les chambres de bois* and cannot bring himself to consummate their marriage; in *la grande Claudine*, the bitter, puritanical and fierce jailor to her son François who begins the story "Le Torrent" by saying, "I was a child born dispossessed of the world."

For Anne Hébert, rejecting the old vision and going on to articulate a new, was again a liberation and a birth into the world. It was a living demonstration of the transforming power of the word. In her 1958 essay on poetry, "Poésie: solitude rompue", she writes:

... I believe in the virtue of poetry, in the clarion health of all just speech, lived and articulate. I believe in the solitude broken like bread by poetry.

A year later, during a round-table discussion of Canadian literature, the critic Gilles Marcotte broke in at the end to say:

Je tiens à souligner ... I am concerned above all to emphasize that literature is not simply a diversion, however noble; it is one of the means we have been given to be born into the world, to possess the world. Under this head, the attention which we give to Canadian books is a human act of extreme importance. We cannot abstract ourselves with impunity — that is, without becoming humanly im-

poverished — from the literary or artistic creation taking place in our midst — at the point I would dare to say of our incarnation . . . Besides, to my way of thinking, it is impossible to be truly interested in literature — conceived again as a means of possessing the world — while totally ignoring that which is being born right here.

Robert Kroetsch was to say essentially the same thing, more simply, during the interview with Margaret Laurence included in the volume *Creation* published by Anansi last year:

“In a sense,” he said, “we haven’t got an identity until someone tells our story. The fiction makes us real.”

It is much the same conviction that lifts John Newlove out of his usual preoccupations with the experience of isolation, the lack of communication even between lovers, to a large vision of communion that forms the rather magnificent peroration to his poem “The Pride”. There the Indian and the white man, the dead and the living, all will find themselves at home at last, “in amazement”, when the whole of their lives have been grasped and made articulate by the imagination. Then, he says, we shall dwell on nothing else but those rooted words; we shall dwell in nothing else. We shall become the others in our desires, which are their “hard-riding desires”. That vision may be compared to Layton’s in “A Tall Man Executes A Jig”, where the tall man finally comprehends the living and the dead, the bones of badgers and raccoons, all the generations of life, englobes them, digests them, and becomes one body with the world.

DESPITE DUDEK’S irritation at Frye’s emphasis on the Bible as furnishing the most complete grammar of the western imagination, we may note that many of the terms used by the writers themselves are Biblical, that the more profound religious concepts furnish the language in which they define their experience of poetry and their sense of its significance.

Anne Hébert managed to effect an imaginative revolution without cutting herself off entirely from her cultural heritage. She re-interpreted the Christian tradition of her province giving new stress to the *incarnation* of the Word, to the figure of Adam making articulate the Word incarnate, naming and praising the world, to the communion of all life realized in and through the word. And this was doubly possible because she could see in the religious experience defined in these theological concepts the analogy to her experience of poetry.

The poet is not, she protests, the rival of God; but a witness to His grace. Perhaps she would concur with Coleridge in saying that the imagination is the repetition in the finite mind of the infinite "I am". Certainly it is difficult in Miss Hébert's view not to see him as the rival of the priest.

However that may be, the function of the writer has taken on something of that large significance during the past two decades. He is the imaginative man, whose vision reveals and whose articulation makes possible an order and a community. For some in Québec it may be primarily a community of language and culture. For many it goes well beyond that to mean a community with the land and the sensuous world, the world of action and their own bodily life. And such a community is most explicitly evoked in Newlove's "The Pride", and, in terms of its absence, in Atwood's poems on Susanna Moodie or "Backdrop Addresses Cowboy", where the indifferent and hostile progress of western man across North America is seen to have developed an absurd Hollywood parody of a real community. And it is a spiritual failure, as the voice which speaks for the land, for the dead, for the community of life not realized, indicates in the concluding lines, saying, "I am the space you desecrate/as you pass through." For finally it is a vision of a universal communion that is implied or explicitly adumbrated in the work itself.

Gwen MacEwen may follow strange gods, those figures whom Miss Atwood characterizes as the male muse, and in whom the world and the word become one. But when we are addressed as "My friends, my sweet barbarians" and invited to "consume our mysteries", though in a world of computers and super-highways and Alexandrian libraries, we are being invited to the same communion meal as Anne Hébert had in mind. Miss MacEwen wishes us "bon appétit", but she also reminds us not to forget the grace. The world of *Breakfast for Barbarians* is a world of continuous incarnation and transubstantiation. Consuming we become one body with the world, which is the word incarnate.

Paul Chamberland's career seems designed to illustrate Frye's theory of historical modes and his view that since the 19th century we have been moving from a low mimetic through an ironic towards a new mythical mode. Chamberland begins with the inherited tradition of symbolist and surrealist poetry; he moves in *The Sign Poster Howls* and *The Unspeakable* through a period of ironic tirades, confessions of pain and outrage reminiscent of Ginsberg's "Howl" and other poems: he has now begun to speak like a prophet, in oracular utterances, proclaiming the spiritual truths of the age of Aquarius, announcing the imminent birth of the gods. It is a world of myth in which he writes:

I have placed my confidence
 in the whole of reality
 in the immense
 joyous and beautiful
 child bride
 whose body
 is riddled with suns

Chamberland is now the William Blake of Québec poets, proclaiming the reality of vision, the sanctity of Eros, the infernal divinity of man as God's accomplice in his incestuous relations with himself. He echoes George Whalley quoting Coleridge to the effect that behind all poetry there lies the conviction that everything has a life of its own and we are all one life. "I am the Unique and the Universal" he writes in his "Canticle for the New Age".

I am the Ancestor, I am Man. In me all men
 advance towards the light, whose seed since the
 beginning of time has shone in the gloom: dark egg,
 divine embryo. I will be Man on the day that all
 men are born in the divine radiance, that day Heaven
 and Earth will be forever reconciled.

He is also the nth Adam. He continues:

I invoke my eternal name, my legitimate paternity.
 I am the first Adam. I bear in my flesh all the
 wounds of man. From the beginning of time I have
 been driven by desire.

The writer's role is now conceived in increasingly hieratic terms. "We are waiting," he says, "for the electronic Vedas, the return of a writing, sacred and absolute." Finally, Chamberland affirms the supreme relevance of the creations of the imagination when he writes, "We do not write poetry: rather poetry, which is Reality, engenders us."

Clearly, with such convictions, the writer need not despair of his *raison d'être*, even in a mass society. Poetry finds its justification outside the particular talents of the poet or the particular tastes of a cultivated élite. It shapes the myths in which we live; it shapes us. And Northrop Frye has argued just that.

BUT WHY, we might ask, do the poets like Layton attack the critic, often with some venom? Are they not allies? Perhaps Nietzsche, who is one

of Layton's mentors, can suggest an answer. Nietzsche distinguishes between the philosopher who *creates values* and the philosophical worker whose job it is "to determine and formalize some large reservoir of value-judgements, that is of *former value-creations*." As a critic, the greatest part of Frye's work is of the latter type. His job has been to order and classify, to clarify and explain the type, whether he is talking about the specific forms of literature or the nature and function of the creative imagination. The motive of such workers, says Nietzsche, is to make everything that has heretofore happened and been evaluated into a visible, thinkable, comprehensible and handy pattern; to abbreviate everything that is long, to abbreviate time itself; to *overpower* the entire past. Frye has articulated a critical perspective of such clarity, scope and persuasiveness that he has succeeded in doing just that. An enormous and admirable task but not in Nietzsche's view the primary one, which is to create the future. And that, I suspect, would be in Layton's view the role of the poet.

Something may be said for the creative nature of Frye's work. Yet we may agree that it is one thing to articulate in discursive terms a conception of poetry and another to prove it on the pulse. And beyond the conception of poetry to find the motive of the poem, the necessity within the vision.

Nietzsche's distinction here suggests his distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian imagination. The Apollonian artist is not unlike the philosophical worker who overpowers, abbreviates and makes visible an ordered past. His bias is towards spectacle, to fix the world in a vision, large, splendid, richly varied, perhaps, but intelligible to the light of reason. The Dionysian artist plunges into time, risks himself and his world in the flux, dark to all except his desire, to the élan of the dance to which he abandons himself. His is the spirit of music that Nietzsche linked to the birth of tragedy, which gives us the title of Layton's poem and reveals his bias, whereas Frye's is surely towards the Apollonian.

It is the Dionysian poet Layton cultivates, and whose irregular footprints so horrify those whose rooms he would extend; and in a time of cultural disintegration, when the visible or articulate order is so largely diseased, it is the Dionysian imagination that we may need to cultivate, abandoning ourselves to Eros and the deepest springs of our desire. And that is itself no easy matter when we have been so bombarded by voices telling us what we ought to think we desire. "The writer," complains Chamberland, "has a rapport with the whole of the word presently broadcast":

not a commercial that doesn't leave me cold. I am battling the lie, the systematic immorality of the establishments. My weapon is rhetoric, I mean the most lucid awareness that can be exercised in language.

Let the imagination take power: let it destroy the obsolete codes that fossilize man's brain.

We are on trial, he says:

Our dreams accuse us
 No use pleading not guilty
 And let's not swear to tell the truth, the whole truth
 and nothing but the truth
 We do not even know how to tell the difference between
 true and false

A major preoccupation of the contemporary writer is and probably will be the delineation of diseased desire, an inventory of what in truth he does not desire.

But it may be necessary to prove as well Nietzsche's aphorism: "The greatest epochs of our lives come when we gain the courage to rebaptize our evil as our best."

I think of a streak of perversity in us, that leads John Newlove to frighten himself, time and again, in the night, in the mountains; that leads Susan Musgrave to the "Mackenzie River, North", the vast emptiness "like continents of tooth and stone", where there is "nothing about for us/but fear/And moving,/always moving,/ out of the night/it comes". That led Frank Scott to celebrate the same river, which "turns its back on America".

For it is one of the problems of established culture that it has distinguished the world so thoroughly into black and white and attacked so much of life as a darkness, telling us to desire only the light. And the Apollonian vision and the impulse to overpower the past lends itself only too easily to an excessive and at times almost paranoiac desire for light: the desire to analyse it into a series of rational elements that can then be dealt with systematically by a series of rational techniques, so that man can control life as it were from the outside, rather than participate in it. Then, whatever is dark, if it cannot be eliminated in fact, disappears from the vocabulary and from consciousness.

There is a strong messianic cast to the very terms used here so often to define the role of the artist and of the imaginative vision he serves, as if it would deliver us from the dark once and for all. In part no doubt it does, but it must do this continuously, and, more radically, it must deliver the dark itself, not just make it disappear.

That is why one must insist on the Dionysian quality of Layton's imagination that can dominate reality; it must be qualified by the title of the poem in which he speaks of that imagination; it must spring from "the fertile muck".

Ouellette, too, while leery of the primitive connotations of the word "myth" and anxious to insist on the continued value of the most lucid awareness, also insists on the necessity to breathe, as he says, darkness as well as light, on the virtue of the obscene. The obscene, he suggests, is the crudity of sexual hunger, of raw appetite; and any expression of grief or despair that goes beyond certain limits will be considered raw, crude, obscene by society. Yet, definitively, he writes, it is in accepting the excessive hunger of sex, of poetry, of sainthood that one comes to accept oneself, one's own being. And it is through the power of "crudité" that one advances, he insists, towards God, the infinite, the eternal, towards love, towards the great hope, "le grand désir". The way to the stars is through the fertile muck.

Thus, though the Canadian writer may have arrived at an assured and profound sense of the writer's office, with no need to justify the fictions he creates, as no more than irrelevant "fictions", he is still in no position to whip off an apocalyptic vision of the communion of saints, and he may still feel compelled to do battle against the powerful but possibly seductive light of a Frye.

For the artist is almost as much in the dark as ever. He must look deep to discover the real springs of his desire, and he must prove its rhythms in his pulse, beginning with the first word and the second, one by one, one after the other. He must test the false desire against those same rhythms. It may lead Chamberland at this moment to proclaim: "The Milky Way leaps with the inordinate joy of God." It may lead equally to Dale Zieroth's: "Times are when we're/no longer sure of the things/we wanted to say," or "My life fragments too easily, things/have no core, break up,/sometimes end. I am not tough," lines seemingly flat, but with curious rhythms, carrying conviction. Or Dennis Lee's "Glad for the Wrong Reasons," in which after a nightmare of absence, the glad racket of garbage cans and the familiar features of his domestic life, he can say, "Jesus, there is/something about our lives that/doesn't make sense . . ." Or the devastating opening lines of Susan Musgrave's "Once More":

We sit by the river
you, drunk already,
and I
your day's feed.

It is perhaps a negative conviction, but it is a conviction.

Miss Musgrave may discover that her most earnest desire is for death or madness: she begins a poem called "Celebration":

Being someone's last woman
and the only passenger of the day
I rode out after madness . . .

Yet given Miss Musgrave's world, her desire for death may be honest, her desire for madness a desire for sanity. In that obscenity she may find a Dionysian music, the birth of Tragedy. "To be born," says Ouellette, "is to have a sharpened awareness of the two poles of life and to feel the tragic in our very being." "We begin to live," said Yeats, "when we begin to conceive of life as tragedy." Yet Layton's "The Birth of Tragedy" concludes with the poet:

noting how seasonably
leaf and blossom uncurl
and living things arrange their death
while someone from afar off
blows birthday candles for the world

There is always the point in any society when it is no longer appropriate to rage against the dying of the light. Our mutability is a token of our community with life as a whole. The local tragedy opens into the divine comedy. Frye could speak to that, but let me repeat Ouellette: "It is the awareness of death and hope which transforms me into a demiurge and not all the 'isms' . . ."

The more extravagant the vision of a radiant community the more it is necessary to recall the opacity of the individual fate, the fertile obscenity of death. Thus Ouellette insists upon remembering the deaths at Hiroshima, the deaths on the highway, the death of the man carried out of the barber shop, your death, my death, his own. Therefore Layton, crying his visionary conviction, there is no such thing as death, there is no death anywhere in the land, brings his hand down on the butterfly on the rock — not because he takes a sadistic delight in breaking butterflies, but because he must assert two realities at once: one life and the many unique, mortal lives. There is no divine comedy except through the individual tragedies. Any other proposition would be false.

DURING THE PAST GENERATION Canadian writing both in theory and in practice, both in French and in English, has discovered an assur-

ance, a range and depth, a boldness, that suggests it is entirely at home in the world of the imagination. The news of the phoenix no longer comes to us in rumours, from abroad. The Canadian writer can now live in that fire. Yet he is also aware of the dark that makes the light flame. He is prepared to fly, but he is also aware of the gravity that will ensure that his imaginative flight does not become weightless, an endless drift in free fall. Therefore it is not plain sailing. He has no guaranteed technique. It is with a paradoxical assurance he proceeds.

I am reminded of the strange phrase of Roland Giguère, Poetry is an obsidian lamp: "La poésie est une lampe d'obsidienne."

I am also reminded of Gwen MacEwen, whose "Shadow Maker" may provide a conclusion to these remarks.

I have come to possess your darkness, only this.
My legs surround your black, wrestle it
As the flames of day wrestle night
And everywhere you paint the necessary shadows
On my flesh and darken the fibers of my nerve;
Without these shadows I would be
In air one wave of ruinous light
And night with many mouths would close
Around my infinite and sterile curve.

Shadow-maker create me everywhere
Dark spaces (your face is my chosen abyss),
For I said I have come to possess your darkness,
Only this.