

# A CURSED AND SINGULAR BLESSING

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**S**OUSTER is one of those rare poets who, like a good wine, improve with age. I'm not sure whose age, Souster's or mine. My first encounter with Souster's work was in 1966 in Frank Watt's poetry seminar, somewhere in the catacombs of University College in Toronto. I had just returned from a year in England, where it was assumed that poets did exist in Canada, and from ten years of school and college in B.C. where, whatever the truth of rumours about home-grown talent, none of it ever seeped down into the classes. We were a motley crew, an actor, a religious, a radical (before that stance became fashionable), a schoolmarm from Ottawa, a couple of tired instructors from Ryerson. And myself, hot out of a Diploma in Education course at Reading University.

I had met Souster briefly through a friend of Victor Coleman and had spent a curious evening with him and friends putting together the pages of the first number of *Island*. I can remember nothing of what was said that evening. Souster was typically quiet with new people. He and Victor seemed very close and I felt like a distinctly alien spirit in the group because of my general ignorance and my academic ambitions. But I do remember Souster's poem, "A Death in Rutherford (in memoriam W.C.W.)" on the back cover of the magazine, which he signed for me:

We can't argue the right  
of your body to be lowered  
into peace:  
                                  but nothing else  
can be allowed to rot,  
mix with dust.  
                                  You belong  
to so many of us.

And I remember being impressed by the letter to Souster from Williams that was included in that issue. Souster was my first contact with an established poet, not to mention a Canadian one, and here he was receiving a personal letter from a more famous American poet. After expressing his inability to read and to appreciate Layton, Williams says:

But somehow when I read you I am moved. I am moved by your subject matter and I am moved by the way that has induced you to conform to it as the very fountain head of your art.

It is the way that the man speaks that we wait for. A poet does not talk *about* what is in him; he talks a double language, it is the presence in him that speaks. It is his possession by that presence that speaks. For the moment he is lost in that identity. And each age is marked by the presences that possess it so its poets are seized by them also, in the flesh, and strut about among us unknown. Poor powerless ghosts, their only life is that which they gain from the poets who lend them a life now and then.

We identify ourselves today (by our technique, unaffected) with those presences which live defeated about us. For do what we may, it is a technique which we have to understand and to master. Try to broaden the treatment of the line. You have to know what a line is, what it has to include, when to expand, when to move rapidly, trippingly and when to plod heavily along. I was happy to see you refer to Olson. But never forget that you are definitely you. You have a chance. *Light and Shadow* was the first thing that caught my eye. *The Lilac Poem* is also good. *To an Antisemite* has it also. There are others. Have confidence in yourself. You've got it.

The matter of subjects and presentation in Watt's seminar was decided early in the term by a cursory glance through the prescribed texts, one of which was Milton Wilson's *Poetry at Mid-Century*, then the only serious sampling of "moderns" in Canada. The more pushy students, myself included, wanted to try their hands at heavies like Smith and Klein and Avison and Jay Macpherson, while the slackers among us (usually the teachers) made grabs for Layton and Cohen and Souster. We staggered through a Toronto winter and through interminable term papers on Anglo-Saxon influences in Birney's poetry, on Pratt's leviathans, on the maple leaf poets, and one bizarre coupling of Pratt's *The Titanic* and Charles G. D. Roberts' "The Iceberg" with the unintentionally symbolic title of "Imagination on the Rocks". Finally, the first paper on Souster was presented; it was on Souster and jazz, and was delivered by a good-natured layabout from McGill named Joe. Joe was first of all a film enthusiast and therefore not taken seriously by the careerists in the class. As expected, his paper was

somewhat inconsequential; it was non-literary, lacked polish, quoted almost no critics, and did not use the magic-formula word of the graduate school, "synthesis". However, it *was* important as the first piece to draw north-south lines of influence between Canada and the U.S., rather than the strictly east-west lines between Canada and England that dominated our study of literature in the English language. Here was a Toronto poet-banker, not quite a Wallace Stevens, but a figure of some reputation, who read the American poets, who had correspondence with W. C. Williams and, most amazing of all, listened to jazz, wrote about it in poems, and identified in some mysterious way with the forces of resistance and anarchy that thrive (or thrived then) in the subsoil of American culture.

I remember some stir being created by that paper and by the one that followed, on Souster as a social critic. Souster's colloquial manner and his shocking eight-line mini-parables provided a welcome break from the control, the metaphorical complexity, and the mythical allusion in A. J. M. Smith's verses. And yet some of us still felt uneasy; we felt, first, that imagist poems at best were well-laid paving-stones on a dead-end street, that they gave little and asked little of a reader. All that one could say of them was, so what? Secondly, we suspected poets with ideas, especially those who expressed their ideas directly rather than indirectly through sound and image. Souster, after all, was a bit too raw, too common; perhaps, in retrospect, we thought he was just a bit too Canadian. His muse was flat-footed from pounding a beat in downtown Toronto.

WE WERE NOT entirely to blame for our blindness to Souster. I discovered two years ago while making selections for *15 Canadian Poets* that Souster's didactic verses, his slices of seedy city life with embarrassing moral and philosophical tags, constitute only a small part of his work. We had been reacting in part to Wilson's selections in *Poetry at Mid-Century*. The Souster who emerges from those pages is quite different from my Souster: mine is far more lyrical, his imagination stirred more by the mysteries of change and loss and death than by signs of social and political injustice. Wilson's selection was one-sided, as if to balance the other very academic offerings in his book. Souster's new selection, *The Years*, however, makes it possible to see the range and scope of his abilities as a lyric poet and, also, to understand the relation between his lyricism and his didacticism. It contains 63 pages of poems from the sixties, 58 from the fifties, and 29 from the forties.

The Sixties poems are interesting because they reveal the play of Souster's moral imagination upon the fabric of public events, most of which have been popular with the media: Vietnam, Biafra, pollution, drug-trafficking, and militarism generally. What emerges from almost all of Souster's social commentary is the question of personal responsibility. Souster is no Marxist or Socialist with a political or philosophical programme against which to measure the events of his time. His position is that of the beleaguered humanist, troubled, as he suggests in "The Problem", with the matter of empathy, or sharing:

How to share the aching feet  
of the already limping  
deliverer of handbills.

Souster feels guilt for his insensitivity to, and unwillingness to be involved in, the conviction of a fellow-poet for trafficking in drugs; and he laments the inertia that works against his anti-war convictions, that leaves the responsibility of protest to the young ("Peace Demonstration, 1967"):

So it is left for these,  
our restless, unfulfilled  
youths of the sit-ins,  
peace marches, to carry  
the burden of guilt  
for all of us, spelling it out  
on their crude signs, hammering it home  
as the police move in to drag them  
night-stick them into  
waiting paddy wagons.

In this new selection a certain irony and self-consciousness emerges, which saves many of the poems from either banality or sentimentality. In "Confrontation", for example, Souster's poetic persona struggles with his inclination to shout "Bloody Butcher" at the president during a visit to Expo; when he is escorted away by the Montreal police, he cannot help making his point again but this time modified to "Bloody Butcher, sir!" "Report to the Military Governor" is a fine piece of controlled irony which makes its statement humourously and economically:

In the City of Toronto itself  
only one incident, and even that  
hardly worthy of record —

One of our tanks  
in circling their City Hall Square,  
brushed against a large piece of sculpture  
(purchased, they tell me,  
from an Englishman named Moore) ;

at which their mayor,  
who had witnessed the accident,  
stormed from his council chamber  
shaking both fists at our troops,  
who, not sharing his concern,  
seized him and strung him up  
(by the golden chain of office  
he happened to be wearing)  
on that same oddshaped casting,  
where I'm told he swung  
like a pendulum keeping  
not very accurate time —

whose body, however,  
I'm very proud to report,  
wasn't hung up by the heels  
like that sad man Il Duce,

which shows if nothing else  
the good sense the moderation  
of Our Glorious Revolution  
of November 31st.

Souster's sense of his own guilt does not make good poetry when it expresses itself in the form of complacent moralizing or righteous indignation. The posture of complacency is mostly absent from *The Years*, but the indignation is not. I heard Souster read "Death Chant for Mr. Johnson's America" several years ago at the Central Library in Toronto and I don't think I'll ever forget the air of quiet embarrassment that hung over the audience when Souster finished — not at the catalogue of atrocities and inhumanities but at the patent phoniness of the tone. It was a self-indulgence, but one that took ten minutes. Warmed-over rage is as unpalatable as warmed-over porridge. Even the Ginsbergian rhetoric did not help. We know all about "addicts readying fixes in dirty washrooms" and "mountains of used cars in East River". And there was Souster, who always avoided name-dropping and literary allusion, making references to Jeffers, Crane, Ginsberg, and Pound. He even felt obliged to flog the dead horse of

Pound's imprisonment in the States. Seeing the poem in print, I still feel that it is unworthy of Souster, an aberration he allowed himself in the pressure of events. He is not capable of such a large statement, such sweeping generalizations, without descending to posturing and self-caricature. I can't help thinking of Williams' remark in his letter to Souster about the *presences* haunting the age; none of them would be given a new lease on life in this poem.

Auden once argued, in this connection, that "The characteristic style of 'Modern' poetry is an intimate tone of voice, the speech of one person addressing one person, not a large audience; whenever a modern poet raises his voice he sounds phony." There's sufficient truth in this observation to make it worth considering. In an age of unprecedented change and information accumulation, when our ears are full of cries from the marketplace, the music hall, and the political arena, finding a convincing voice is not easy. Souster's response to these pressures has been, for the most part, to cultivate his own garden, to remain faithful to his early inspirations. He remains, in his own words, an unrepentant regionalist, content to chronicle and celebrate the emotions, the things, events, and people, of his immediate experience. One of his most convincing voices is the still, small voice of the imagist, of which there are several fine examples in *The Years*, such as July Noon":

Barricade of clouds  
anchored down  
a few flickering butterflies.

Any moment now  
the really bugged cicada  
will open all the stops  
on their crazed calliope.

In this moment's zone of silence  
a poem writes itself.

and "Morning Lake":

Ghost-like  
unreal  
mist holding its fog veil  
far over the lake.

Overhead  
sun beats down  
skies ride high and blue  
at mid-morning.

But look!  
 A dark finger shows  
 at the edge of the veil,  
 becomes as we watch  
 some part of shore  
 tied to a pendant  
 of green-blue water.

These poems, like the earlier “Study: The Bath” and “Six Quart Basket”, are free of what Olson calls the “lyrical interference of the individual ego”: eye and mind are concentrated on the image and what it gives off in isolation. Too many poets, as Souster argues, in “The Cobra”, “can’t seem to get beyond / the wonder of themselves, / it holds them, / fascinates them, like the swaying death / of the cobra.”

There are in Souster’s best lyrics a simplicity and an unpretentiousness that are disarming. “There’s No Way Out of It”, the first poem in *The Years*, has a beautiful falling movement that is almost unbroken by asides, non-sequiturs, or personal allusions; nor does the form of the poem call attention to itself:

There’s no way out of it —  
 each leaf will sift down  
 slowly, grudgingly  
 to the cold, bared ground,  
 grass will push out  
 another blade of grass,  
 skies will do their best  
 to hide the sun, clouds will put  
 their darkest faces on.

It will be all squirrels  
 and acorns (acorns, anyway)  
 along the street, maples red  
 and proud for a week, then  
 humbled by the wind. It will be  
 so unlike death that only  
 pure fools and ageing poets  
 won’t be taken in.

And it’s happening  
 outside my window at the very moment  
 of a long September day.

With one thing that’s sure,  
 there’s no way out of it.

Souster has little interest in logical discontinuity and metaphorical complexity; he sees the poem as an *utterance* that moves as quickly and directly as possible to its inevitable conclusion. If there is a problem with this poem, and with several other fine lyrics in *The Years*, it is that Souster feels moved to tidy up after himself, by tying together apparently ragged ends, by summarizing what has already been adequately rendered through the imagery. The last two lines seem unnecessary here, even considering their usefulness in terms of structuring; so also does the last line of "This Heat Crazed Day", where the 'situation' of the poem, clearly presented through juxtaposition of images of youth and age, life and death, is sadly spelled out for the reader. What Lawrence said of free verse is worth repeating: "free verse has its own *nature* . . . it is neither star nor pearl but instantaneous plasm. It has no finish. It has no satisfying stability, satisfying for those who like the immutable. None of this. It is the instant; the quick." Writing good free verse, like riding bareback, is beyond the capacity of most poets; either their poem sits dully in the yard swishing its tail or careens wildly all over creation, endangering both rider and bystanders. In the face of these difficulties, a poet may be tempted to harness his imagination unnecessarily, to use in practice shaping devices that he would reject in theory.

**S**OUSTER'S LYRICS also contain his best social criticism. This criticism seems most convincing when it comes indirectly, when, in the course of talking about what he knows intimately, Souster reveals his awareness of the texture and quality of life around him. In "Forecast", the persona of the poem contemplates his own death, not a glamorous, violent highway death but a slow withering death from life in the sunless, polluted city:

Although my best nightmare  
 is a violent highway death,  
 me crowding the dotted-line  
 to pass the slow-poke ahead,  
 not seeing the car coming up  
 at express speed until the last  
 stabbing thrust of his headlights —

and although I sense my luck  
 has almost run out by now  
 at cross-walks, most street corners,



I now forecast my certain death  
 on a warm day like this, the haze  
 iron-heavy in the streets,  
 no real sun shining through,  
  
 both lungs refusing at last  
 to breathe in another choking breath  
 of blue-coated, lifeless exhaust smoke.

Here is Souster at his best: determination to use the imagery of the city, with its highways, dotted-lines, and street corners; the colloquial manner that can accommodate to good advantage everyday expressions like “slow-poke” and “run out”; the capacity to render weak common nouns — like light, smoke, haze — more concrete through subtle adjectival constructions. The success of this poem lies in voice and image: where an ecological diatribe would have failed, a powerful comment is made indirectly through the images in this very measured variation on the traditional lament for the passing of time. The violence of death by collision is carried over into the description of death by pollution in the images of “irony-heavy” haze and “blue-coated, lifeless exhaust smoke”; if anything, the latter death appears not only unglamorous and pedestrian, but also intensely horrifying. The poem has a strong rhythmic push, a relentless headlong quality, that is achieved by the naturalness of the diction, the subtle manipulation of syntax and absence of full-stops; the rush of the initial image of the speeding car merges with the slower but equally deadly instruments of death, like iceberg and *Titanic*.

There is much to say about Souster’s verse, about his concern for craft, especially his untiring preoccupation with the *line* as something more than an arbitrary way of breaking up prose poems. I am reminded of Williams’ advice to Souster to “Try to broaden the treatment of the line” and of Souster’s own statement in “In the Same Joyful Way”, where he compares the poet with the steam-shovel and other wrecking equipment at work in the city:

if, say, we could rebuild  
 the poem with such fire, such abandon,  
 all trickery, cross-purposes forgotten,  
 if it only dance and sing! —  
  
 who knows how many  
 of the old walls might crack,  
 aye, even fall,  
 under the smashing force of the line reborn!

Anyone interested in Souster's verse would do well to consider his many poems about the poetic process. Souster has never been a tub-thumper or played the personality game that the public and the media encourage; his real concern, as he says in "Invocation to the Muse", has been to write good poems:

Nevertheless, desiring nothing  
And expecting little, living only  
For your secret inner praise, I give thanks  
That you should have chosen me for your cursed  
And singular blessing.

*A cursed and singular blessing.* Souster's range is not large but his concern for technique is, as Pound would say, a test of his sincerity. In *The Years*, he describes one of his Jazz favourites, Ed Hall, as "a man at one with his art, not fighting it, / not trying to prove a damn thing." The less Souster tries to prove, the more at ease he seems with his craft.