CLASSICAL CANADIAN POETRY AND THE PUBLIC MUSE

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EVERYBODY SEEMS TO BELIEVE that classical Canadian poetry is mediocre; the question is not whether, but why. Various explanations have been advanced. At times this mediocrity has even been treated as its chief quality, an expression of the national virtues of sobriety and reasonableness. In this article, I propose to look into one aspect of the mediocrity of classical Canadian poetry, and to offer some explanations of my own, in the hope of stimulating discussion.

"Mediocre" means "of middling quality", not "bad". There is no doubt that some classical Canadian poetry is quite bad. But what we have, it seems, is a poetic landscape mediocre in the best sense, possessing few outstanding features, but rich in pleasant fields and wooded hills. Indeed, when one considers English and French poetry together, one discovers a body of work which is surprisingly solid for a country with so short a literary history and, until recently, so small a population. It compares very favourably with that produced over the same period of time by countries with much older literary traditions — nineteenth-century Spain, for example. Nevertheless, it is, even if in the best sense of the word, mediocre. One may apply to the Canadian poetic tradition the judgment Lampman applied, with great good sense, to himself: "There never was any great poet, but simply a rather superior minor one who sometimes hit upon a thing which comes uncommonly near to being very excellent."

Canadian poetry is also distinctive. Nothing better indicates a national identity than the fact that our traditional French and English poets, in spite of mutual ignorance, had a great deal in common. In this, they no doubt reflected a certain similarity between the two cultures. As John Porter recently pointed out in an

article in *Cultural Affairs*, "English and French Canadians are more alike in their conservatism, traditionalism, religiosity, authoritarianism, and elitist values than the spokesmen of either group are prepared to admit." The poetry, for its part, reflects a conservatism closer to that of pre-industrial society than to the capitalist conservatism of the United States: a very strong sense of the ties of orthodox Christianity even when these ties were rebelled against, a sense of the heroic, a strong attachment to place (usually expressing itself as an idealisation of the village and rural life of the poet's boyhood), a fondness for ornate and colourful language, a tendency to personify nature which went beyond the poetic conventions of the age and approached mythogenesis — and, on the negative side, a lack of wit (Canadian wit tended, and tends, to be annoyingly simple-minded), an inability to sustain intellectual argument on a high level of subtlety, and a lack of that daring which makes the poet an inventor as well as a singer and craftsman. Clearly these positive and negative elements were related to each other.

Simple definitions are often false ones, and I am not oblivious of nuance when I say that traditional Canadian poetry in both English and French seems to me very conservative even in the political sense, and that this quality is closely bound up with the Canadian character as it expressed itself in our formative years. The two most important factors in the history of this country have been the English-Canadian rejection of the American Revolution and the French-Canadian rejection of the French Revolution, rejections which were related even as these two revolutions were. Conservatism as such does not make for mediocrity; but a particular kind of conservatism does, and this particular kind of conservatism was strong in nineteenth-century Canada. It was most evident in what one might call "public poetry" — hence my title. It is in public poetry that the poet most clearly expresses what he conceives to be his role in society. My contention is that the peculiar qualities of nineteenth-century Canadian poetry, both the good and the bad ones, arose out of the poetic community's conception of its own role. This in fact was a misconception, but one which developed very naturally out of the confusions of the age itself, in which the aristocratic idea of art was dying.

I first became fully aware of this when I was working on a radio production of Heavysege's *Count Filippo*. There has always been a clash of opinions about the value of Heavysege's work. Smith has compared his Malzah to Ariel or Caliban, and has referred to *Count Filippo* as "brilliantly written and well-constructed . . . in the manner of Beaumont and Fletcher". Others have come to the conclusion that he is very nearly the worst poet who has ever lived.

I have, at times, almost inclined to the latter opinion. There is no doubt that Heavysege could write lines of incomparable grotesqueness. But his sonnets are good; and when, many years ago, I came across a copy of *Count Filippo* in the Toronto Public Library, my first impression was that it is a curious mixture of utter banality and originality, with some moments of great power and others of unexpected subtlety. Certainly, it seemed no mere "closet drama", but a truly imaginative if ludicrously uneven poetic drama, which I felt then would probably work in performance.

Some two years ago I had a chance to look at it again. Since I was producing radio drama for the C.B.C., I decided to commission a radio version from Peter Haworth. Mr. Haworth prepared a sensitive and intelligent adaptation, and the play was presented on a programme called *Midweek Theatre*. As it turned out, the play did indeed "work", in spite of great flaws which no editing could eliminate.

This makes *Count Filippo* something of a rarity. As everybody knows, Victorian dramatic literature is a kind of elephants' graveyard, into which hundreds of gigantic verse dramas have stumbled to die. Perhaps a better analogy would be one of those Siberian pits filled with the frozen corpses of mammoths, since we are dealing with extinct species. But here was a live mammoth. How could Heavysege, writing a pseudo-Jacobean drama as so many of his contemporaries had done, have produced one which worked?

The answer, I concluded, was to be found in the archaic nature of Heavysege's mind. He *was*, in a sense, a Jacobean, and his archaism of language was not merely a literary device, but an expression of his inner nature. Patmore, another archaic mind whose language surfaces are also sometimes abortive, was aware of this, as his often quoted review of *Saul* clearly shows.

> Shakespeare he also knows far better than most men know him; for he has discerned and adopted his method as no other dramatist has done. He takes not virtue and morality, and their opposites *generally*, as other dramatists do, but these under the single aspect of their dependence upon *spiritual influences*, of whatever kind: the direct influence of the Divine Spirit; and the influence of good spirits; and of the principalities and powers of darkness; and even the mysterious influences of music, the weather, etc., upon the moral state of the soul. Like most of Shakespeare's plays, this drama has the appearance of being strangely chaotic. There are hundreds of passages for the existence of which we cannot account until the moral clew is found, and it would never be found by a careless and unreflecting reader; yet the work is exceedingly artistic.

If one does not take "exceedingly artistic" to mean that *Saul* is constructed with sophistication and finesse, the above is certainly true. Heavysege was an emotional contemporary of Shakespeare. Canada has been a refuge for folk and archaic elements which have died in Europe. Folklorists have discovered medieval ballads and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century court songs magically preserved, though in an altered and countrified form, in the folk-music of Quebec; they have discovered Elizabethan slang in the dialect of Newfoundland; the tradition of classical bagpipe playing, "pibroch", survived in the Maritimes long after the Scots themselves had lost interest in it. In Heavysege we have something more remarkable: a Jacobean sensibility transplanted whole, though with some damage in transit, into the nineteenth century.

Perhaps the circumstances of his life help to explain the anomaly. He was a Yorkshireman, and a member of the artisan class, a cabinet-maker and carpenter. His parents were strict in their religious views, and rigidly moralistic. He was largely self-educated, and his reading was deep but very narrow; he seems to have found pleasure mainly in the Bible and Shakespeare. He met few writers of even moderate distinction, and his intellectual and artistic life was largely a solitary one.

In other words, Heavysege was born into a provincial and hence archaic sector of English society. When he was a child, his parents determinedly kept him "unspotted from the world". He escaped the conformity-inducing influences of formal education, and entered young into a trade which had maintained longer than many others the old handicraft traditions. True, he did leave provincial Huddersfield, but he did so only to go to even more provincial Montreal, ruled by an elite consisting of merchants, true-blue English Tories, descendants of French seigneurs, and a few annexationists.

Saul, which really should be reprinted, is indeed an astonishing work, a work that seems, when one enters into it without reservation, to display something like genius. Nevertheless, there is still a sense in which *Saul* is a failure. Why should this be, when there is so much talent apparent in it? I believe the reason is that Heavysege did not realize how deeply inimical his society was to the poetic spirit. His gigantic chronicle play was completely irrelevant, so far as the life of his time was concerned. We know that he was saddened by lack of recognition; we also know that he bore the uncertainty and drudgery of his daily life with Christian patience, but not without the very natural hope that he would be "discovered". Most of the criticism he received from Canadians — whether it was intended well or ill — did him more harm than good. *Jephtha's Daughter*,

which, unlike his other works, he carefully revised along lines suggested by well-meaning friends whose taste represented the norm of his time and place, is dull and conventional; and here we find another anomaly, since it is the most polished and self-consistent of his productions. Apparently Heavysege's genius and his lack of taste were inseparably related; he could write "correctly", but only by writing dully.

LET US REVERT, after what must seem a long digression, to our main theme. Do we not find, in many classical Canadian poets, the same combination of talent and miscalculation? Is not this unfortunate combination most apparent in their public poems? This phenomenon is precisely due, I believe, to the fact that their poetic talents could only operate when they wrote in a state of illusion — an illusion, I have suggested, as to their social role. They could still deceive themselves, though not consistently, into the belief that their society valued their contribution to the spiritual life of the age, that they were as poets a functional part of the social body. Society was willing to aid them, though half-contemptuously, in this self-deception, and politely applauded the odes, political sonnets, and lyrics in which they expounded what they conceived to be the national ethos. From time to time the poets became aware of their true position, that of outsiders who were tolerated rather than loved or respected, and their tendency was then to retreat into a defensive subjectivity. Even in their most confident moments, however, the doubt as to their role was present, though hidden. The result was an uncertainty of intonation in the poetic voice, which might manifest itself as bluster, over-insistence on the obvious, vulgar and fumbling attempts to capture the sentimental popular imagination, and other features of bad style.

Thus a kind of universal schizophrenia is apparent. There is the real Charles Sangster, a playful, minor poet of springtime, with a pleasant taste for country girls. Then there is the Sangster who wrote *Brock*, with its marvellously comic closing lines —

> Briareus-limbed, they sweep along,
> The Typhons of the time.

The thought of Brock as Typhon is an image of horror worthy of Blake; but Sangster did not mean it that way.

There is Isabella Crawford, who could have written fine personal lyrics with a

gnomic force, but chose to waste her talents writing about men with axes, whom she did not understand. There is Charles Mair, an autumnal sensibility, a quiet lazy dreamer after the manner of James Thomson, who trickled his gentle talent away into the vast dusty mould of a chronicle drama about Tecumseh. There is Sir Charles G. D. Roberts, who should have written nothing but regional pastorals, but tried to write hymns of empire. Bliss Carman ruined his talent, as Desmond Pacey has pointed out, trying to be the spokesman of a crudely vigorous optimism which was alien to his sensuous, feminine and melancholy temperament. In Archibald Lampman and D. C. Scott, who came nearest to realizing themselves in their work, there is often an annoying split between impulse and diction.

Here we come a bit closer to our quarry, which is an elusive one, and must be surrounded: it cannot be dispatched cleanly and at first sight. As has been implied, every time our classical poets tried to fulfil a social function, to perform their public "use" as poets, which is to say, every time they tried to write a patriotic poem, a historical epic, or a serious theatrical work, the result was in some way embarrassing. On the other hand, when they described a personal experience, or responded to a landscape they loved, the result was often beautiful. Clearly, unlike the contemporary poet, they did feel they had a use, and so did their society. Poets were still expected to write ceremonial odes for the visits or noble or royal persons, for example, and were expected to give utterance to the great religious and political truths. Society did indeed demand poetry, and it demanded poetry on the same themes that poets of earlier ages had treated. For some reason, though, it seemed to demand bad poetry.

It is a curious fact that in nineteenth-century Canada literature became connected with the civil service in a way it has never been, one is inclined to think, in any other country outside Tsarist Russia. Sangster, Mair, Lampman, W. W. Campbell, D. C. Scott and Tom MacInnes were all civil servants, and Sir Charles G. D. Roberts was one of the official historians of the First World War. There was also a strong connection with the clergy: Campbell was a clergyman before he entered the Civil Service, F. G. Scott was an Anglican priest, and Roberts, D. C. Scott and Lampman were the sons of clergymen. Most of the other poets in the "canon" seem to have been involved in, or related to people involved in, high-level journalism, medicine or the law. They were an elite group, obviously: they were to a very large extent dependent upon public institutions for their living, and most of them came from "good families" of the old-fashioned kind. There was little connection with the world of business.

A similar though not identical pattern may be discerned in the Quebec of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Pamphile Le May, Louis-Honoré Frechette, Gonsalve Desaulniers, Jean Charbonneau, Lionel Leveille and Paul Morin were lawyers, judges, or combined law with public service; William Chapman, Albert Ferland and Edouard Chauvin were civil servants with the federal or provincial governments; Nereé Beauchemin and Guy Delabaye were doctors; René Chopin was a notary. Most of the other poets of the period were journalists; some were priests or abbés.

Compare this situation with that in the United States, where, at least between the Civil War and the New Deal era, national and state governments ignored the arts on the whole. A few United States poets were civil servants; but most were employed by universities, or worked as journalists. On the other hand, there has been, in the United States, enlightened private patronage of a type very rare in Canada. Usually this patronage was offered, in the days before the great tax-exempt foundations, by members of an immigrant financial or capitalist elite, who patronised the arts in the manner of the European haute bourgeoisie. But they were much more interested in painting and music than in poetry. It is not surprising that nineteenth-century United States writers tended to be more "individualist" than their Canadian counterparts, and that they felt less identity with the aims of their governments. The great classics of United States literature are all seditious, as has been pointed out more than once, and United States poets who have consciously identified themselves with the political establishment, such as Archibald MacLeish, have found their poetic stock plummeting as a result. In Canada, one suspects, a MacLeish would have been "Dean of Canadian Poetry" several times over.

From the days of de Tocqueville on, visitors to or natives of the United States have been pointing out that it is a profoundly anti-poetic society. However, de Tocqueville, in his inspired and penetrating simplicity, appears to have come closest to the truth, namely, that United States society is anti-poetic because it is an anti-aristocratic and anti-monarchical, as such an archetypically capitalist society must inevitably be. The intellectual life of the United States after the Revolution and before the Civil War had, on its upper levels, elements of a refinement — though a thin, attenuated and provincial refinement — of essentially European and aristocratic or pseudo-aristocratic type, and the farmers and frontiersmen were producing a folk culture of real vigour. It is from such societies, when they mature, that poetry springs. But this society was not allowed to develop; it was cut down in the Civil War, and was finally obliterated by the rise of

industrial big business in the latter half of the nineteenth century. One of the profound and tragic beauties of Whitman's work is that he was glorifying a world which was disappearing, though he thought it the world of the future — the world of the farmer, the pioneer, the sailor, and the free, independent artisan. The America he heard singing was dying as it sang, and this gives his poems the heroic beauty of a great elegy, a beauty he could sense in the already half-mythical and archaic figure of Abraham Lincoln.

IN CANADA, THOUGH, the social effect of the Age of Business was delayed. Right through the Second World War we were still presenting an image of ourselves in our propaganda films as a nation of wheat-farmers, fishermen, sailors, trappers and dwellers in small country towns. French Canada, producing spokesmen like the Abbé Groulx, a clerical pamphleteer and historian who could have fitted very comfortably into the France of Charles X (I do not intend this to be taken as condemnatory of the Abbé) was even more archaic. Indeed, in the seigneurs, Canada had had a land-owning hereditary aristocracy up to 1854, and the habitants were not fully relieved of their "feudal" obligations until 1940. Our Governors-General, right up to the end of the Second World War, were English noblemen. Even our political radicalism — the agrarian socialism of the C.C.F. and the petty-bourgeois anti-capitalism of early Social Credit — had a piquantly old-fashioned quality.

Furthermore, many of the social ideals upheld by the "Establishment" up to the end of the Second World War were aristocratic ones. We were loyal to the monarch and to the land: Americans fought for Mom's apple pie, that symbol of happy consumption, but we fought for those waving fields of wheat. We considered ourselves (though mistakenly) a specifically Christian country, and thought it more important to be law-abiding than to be clever. Our propaganda media extolled the dignity of agricultural labour and idealised the simple homely virtues. Our official symbols, and the persons who embodied the ceremonial life of the state, were aristocratic in tone. Of all American states, only Canada could have produced such a figure as our late Governor-General, General Georges Vanier. In his nobility and his extraordinary public presence, he represented a type — and I mean this as a tribute to his memory — not found elsewhere outside historical films. He was a poetic figure. Our Houses of Parliament have on them carvings of all the animals and birds to be found in Canada. What could be more poetically archaic than that? One is reminded of the garden outside the

Temple of the Sun in Incaic Cuzco, which contained gold and silver images of all the birds and animals of the empire.

The following passage, from a sermon preached in Upper Canada in 1824, must be one of the last statements, from an "Establishment" source at any rate, of the doctrine of degree.

> One is formed to rule and another to obey. Subordination in the Moral World is manifest . . . The beauty and advantages of this arrangement are obvious and universally acknowledged . . . The various relations of individuals and societies require a mutual exchange of good offices . . . The Magistrate requires the aid of his people, the Master of his servant. They are all dependent upon one another . . . The lowest order enjoys its peculiar comforts and privileges, and contributes equally with the highest to the support and dignity of Society . . . All discontent and murmuring at the inferiority of our Station is [therefore] most unreasonable.

Such ideas were echoed again and again by the spokesmen of what has been called "The Family Compact", in their disputes with radicals and liberals.

In times long past, attitudes and ideas such as this gave birth to great buildings of state, cathedrals, epic poems and verse dramas. They did not in Canada, because the tradition was dying, almost dead. But if one can personify a tradition, it kept trying, even in its dying hours, to do what it had done all its life. It was this tradition which continued, with the automatism of the moribund, to produce cathedrals and buildings of state in the Gothic style, epic poems in the Roman style, and verse dramas in the Jacobean style. No poet of the United States could address his country as "O Child of Nations, giant-limbed", or refer to one of his national heroes as Sangster referred to Brock, as one who "in his lofty sphere sublime / Sits crowned above the common throng." The nearest they came to such classical personification and apotheosis was in the Revolutionary period, when some popular broadsheets and ballads spoke of Washington in terms suitable to the eighteenth-century military aristocrat, with his code of honour —

> Great Washington he led us on,
> Whose streaming flag, in storm or sun,
> Had never known disgrace.

We have now to examine why a tradition which was certainly a noble one, and which, since it answers certain needs that seem to be part of the intrinsic nature of man, is an inherently vital one, did not produce work of more value. The answer seems to be that we are dealing here with an official "Establishment" ideology which, while it was largely respected by the people of the country, did

not rise from their common life, and did not rest upon an economic and political base consistent with its aims.

Official Canada, aristocratic Canada, was by no means alien or exotic: it was as native as the world of the logger and the wheat-farmer. But the concessions made after the MacKenzie and Papineau rebellions, which stifled what was a developing indigenous French and English aristocracy and nipped Church Establishment in the bud, prevented it from establishing roots in the economic, political and social soil of the country. Had we been at that time an independent country, this quiet liberal-capitalist revolution would probably have produced a society similar to that of the United States, which we would then have joined. (Indeed, as is well known, the Rebellion Losses Bill of 1849 strengthened the annexationists' cause immensely.) Fortunately we were not independent at the time: the United States dared not intervene, for fear of war with Britain. What happened instead was that the aristocratic idea, deprived of its local roots, became more firmly attached to the metropolitan centre. Those who belonged to the elite, or aspired to enter it, cultivated modified English accents and entered their children in schools modelled after the English type. Sometimes, as is usually the case with those who pursue refinement and taste as canonical virtues rather than graces of everyday life, the result was somewhat artificial. Brian Moore, in the book he wrote on Canada for Time Inc., tells of a remark made by an English lord about Vincent Massey. "Fine chap, Vincent," he said, "but he does make one feel a bit of a savage."

Beneath the level of the official elite, there was developing an economic life very similar to that of the United States, though less sophisticated and less cruel. Effective power was in the hands of businessmen, and what is virtue to the aristocratic mind is to the business mind either folly or obscurantism. Because the United States was above all the Land of Business, Canadian businessmen tended to become "Americanised". Indeed, in our conflicts with the United States in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, many members of the mercantile community played a treasonable or near-treasonable role, though there is no doubt that they would have been fiercely and violently nationalistic if that had been the profitable stance.

Nevertheless, to them, the virtues inculcated by the official elite were matters of convenience only. The monarch was a kind of hereditary president or a means of preserving social stability, thus a mere convenience. Love of the land made sense only if agriculture were more profitable than other forms of economic activity; thus, those waving fields of wheat were merely sources of income, and

had no mystical beauty. Labour had no dignity, only a price. The law was to be respected only if it encouraged business growth; if it hampered the expansion of business, it was to be changed. Christianity, to steal a phrase from a man who understood capitalism well, was the opium of the people, and thus of value, but only if one did not insist on a Christian business ethic. As to art, it was a diversion or an intellectual consumer product. Thus the businessmen, who were and are the effective rulers of the country, had no use for odes, epics or verse dramas. The poets were serving an idea which was, in terms of the everyday life of the country, completely hollow.

From time to time this struck home. In his sonnet, *The Modern Politician*, Archibald Lampman indicates how close he came to understanding the situation.

> What manner of soul is his to whom high truth
> Is but the plaything of a feverish hour,
> A dangling ladder to the ghost of power?
> Gone are the grandeurs of the world's iron youth,
> When kings were mighty, being made with swords.
> Now comes the transit age, the age of brass,
> When clowns into the vacant empires pass,
> Blinding the multitude with specious words.
> To them faith, kinship, truth and verity,
> Man's sacred rights and very holiest thing,
> Are but the counters at a desperate play,
> Flippant and reckless what the end may be,
> So that they glitter, each his little day,
> The little mimic of a vanished king.

The thought in this sonnet is at once deeply traditional and savagely acute. But the diction is Victorian Synthetic, that grandiose and magniloquent substitute for true grandeur and magnificence which was as much a product of the "age of brass" as Lampman's politician himself. Lampman has adopted an aristocratic voice to express an aristocratic sentiment, but the voice of the Victorian aristocrat was that of a dog who is all bark and no bite, and is only waiting for the burglar to toss him a bone. I do not want to be misunderstood; Lampman is no hypocrite; he feels all he is saying; but his muddled idea both of his role and of his relationship to aristocratic ideals has led him into writing his poem in such a manner that it is almost rendered ineffectual.

Had the poets realized what was going on, they might have produced work of great value. One of the advantages possessed by French writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, was the fact that aristocratic and

capitalist-democratic ideas had been fighting openly, and on a high intellectual level, ever since the Revolution. Later socialism, the child of capitalism, had entered the battle. Thus, Claudel, Péguy and Bernanos knew they were being "reactionary". Writers in the United States, too, acquired a social consciousness; and it is interesting that this consciousness showed itself in its most refined form in New England and the Southern States, where the traditions of eighteenth-century British America had retained a vestigial life. James, Eliot and many Southern writers also knew they were being "reactionary", though in many cases they had to visit Europe to acquire an understanding of their role. Some French-Canadian writers also achieved this awareness.

In English Canada this did not happen, and the reason it did not happen, it seems to me, is that here the aristocratic tradition kept an appearance of vitality well into this century, just as it did in Britain. By a series of most astute compromises, British aristocracy and the monarchy had lasted through the revolutionary violence of the late eighteenth century, and the more subtle pressures of the nineteenth. But there is no doubt that one of these compromises was accommodation to the business ethic. It was the sort of thing that was never talked about when one was wearing one's ermine; but in the process man discovered a new kind of hypocrisy, a new combination of mean calculation with high and pompous speech. The aristocratic ideal of the Victorian elite was largely a matter of "keeping up appearances".

Now the essence of keeping up appearances is that the appearances must be entered into with just the right degree of irony and inner detachment. If one allows the pretended motives to become real ones, then one becomes an anomaly. An aristocrat may keep up the old house, and perform all his ceremonial functions. But if he begins to think like an aristocrat, he will begin to scorn the capitalist ethic. Thus, since the world is dominated by capitalism, he will cease to be effective. He will fail. If he has enough power or money to avoid failure, he will probably be attacked in the press as a spokesman for obscurantism, or an enemy of the people. Nor can he afford a spokesman (poets have usually been, in their public character, spokesmen for aristocratic ideals if not aristocratic practice) who gives his game away by setting up standards he cannot meet. Therefore he favours in literature a certain hollowness, pomposity and lack of reality which will correspond to his own nature. An aristocratic elite which has made this fatal compromise will tend to support an official idea of culture and morality which is at once empty, affected and pretentious. This was the character of Victorian art at its worst. In Britain, it was carried into our own century by the old *Times*, the

B.B.C. at its stuffiest, and certain aspects of the Anglican church. It is in this manner that avant truths become clichés.

THE HEROIC, EPIC, ARISTOCRATIC VIEW of Canada was just such a "truth", and it was made into a cliché in just the same way. For Canadian history *is* epic and heroic. Something of it comes through, for me, in Fréchette's *La Decouverte du Mississippi.* I am naive enough to be thrilled by the confidence of a stanza like:

> Jolliet! Jolliet! deux siècles de conquêtes,
> Deux siècles sans rivaux ont passé sur nos têtes,
> Depuis l'heure sublime où, de ta propre main,
> Tu jetas, d'un seul trait, sur la carte du monde
> Ces vastes régions, zone immense et féconde,
> Futur grenier du genre humain!

The same heroic quality is to be found in Cremazie's *Le Drapeau de Carillon*, D. C. Scott's Indian poems, and parts of Pratt's *Brébeuf and His Brethren*, which has moments of real nobility. I do not claim that any of these are "great poems". The heroic quality I speak of is a matter of temperament, not talent; it is flawed by obvious stupidities; and I put it down to a certain archaism in the Canadian temperament. There is nothing similar in the poetry of the United States. There is a hidden sadness and disillusion even in Whitman. Indeed, there is nothing quite the same in any poetry I have read, except perhaps in André Chènier's sketch for *Le Chant d'Alonzo*, which was to have been part of a projected epic, *L'Amérique*, and begins, "Salut, o belle nuit, étincelante et sombre . . . " Perhaps it is significant that Chènier never wrote the epic; perhaps it is also significant that this great poet, who had once thought himself a liberal revolutionary, discovered, at the very foot of the guillotine, that his sympathies were aristocratic.

Curiously enough, we have never understood the ideological basis of this heroic quality — a quality which, though I do not profess to be very sensitive to painting, I seem to find also in the paintings of the Group of Seven and Emily Carr. We have always thought of it as a response to the Canadian landscape, which is certainly very large. But this is almost to take a naive environmentalist view, and in any case, if the size of the landscape explained it, we would expect to find the same quality in the poetry of the United States.

I would say that the mediocrity of our classical public verse, at its dull average, is very closely linked to the virtues it has at its best, and that both its mediocrity and distinction are closely related to the archaic and anomalous quality of nine-

teenth and early twentieth century Canadian society, which was in many respects as "backward" a society as Ireland and Spain are today. To illustrate more clearly what I mean, I will quote some lines which indicate these two qualities, so closely related.

Sangster's *The Soldier of the Plough* begins thus:

> No maiden dream, nor fancy theme,
> Brown Labour's muse would sing;
> Her stately mien and russet sheen
> Demand a stronger wing.
> Long ages since, the sage, the prince,
> The man of lordly brow,
> All honour gave that army brave,
> The Soldiers of the Plough.
> Kind heaven speed the Plough!
> And bless the hands that guide it;
> God gives the seed —
> The bread we need,
> Man's labour must provide it.

This stanza is a real museum of anomalies. The first quatrain is a model of Victorian ineptitude, a crown of coal in which the phrase "fancy theme" is perhaps the sootiest gem. The line, "Long ages since, the sage, the prince," has, in its balancing of images of traditional wisdom and inherited power, a truly archaic ring, almost a folkish dignity; but it is followed immediately by "the man of lordly brow", which is a line suited to a poet of the Romantic Revival, such as Sir Walter Scott, looking back at the Middle Ages. "The Soldiers of the Plough" is the kind of image Victorian journalists loved to use when they were feeling sentimental about farmers. "Kind heaven speed the Plough; / And bless the hands that guide it" reminds one of *Hymns Ancient and Modern.* Yet the stanza ends with three lines ("God gives the seed . . . " etc.) which are absolutely mediaeval in feeling.

In other words, we have in this one stanza a poet whose mind is moving from a truly mediaeval, rather peasanty sensibility to a Victorian counterfeit of that sensibility. Obviously he does not know the difference; there is no irony or deliberate contrast here.

Or let us consider Frederick George Scott's *The Wayside Cross.*

> A wayside cross at set of day
> Unto my spirit thus did say —
>
> "O soul, my branching arms you see

Point four ways to infinity.

One points to infinite above,
To show the height of heavenly love.

Two point to infinite width, which shows
That heavenly love no limit knows.

One points to infinite beneath,
To show God's love is under death.

The four arms join, an emblem sweet
That in God's heart all loves will meet."

I thanked the cross as I turned away
For such sweet thoughts in the twilight grey.

The first couplet is a conventional little prelude in the Victorian manner, a couplet which Archdeacon Scott might well have used to help him get into the poem, but which he should then have thrown away or rewritten. Well satisfied with it, he went on. And went on to what? Four couplets which might have been written by a contemporary — a minor contemporary, certainly — of George Herbert. These images have an emblematic sharpness and intellectual clarity, showing great things imaged in familiar and homely things, which is metaphysical, not simply influenced by metaphysical verse, as are so many other early twentieth-century poems. (Archdeacon Scott died in 1944.)

But then the poet, as if somehow embarrassed by the reality of the poetic experience, begins to drift back into a Victorian facsimile of piety. In intellectual content, the next couplet is still metaphysical, but in style it is sweet and sickly. The concluding couplet is utterly banal, and the last line, which ought to climax the poem, is the weakest of all. Once again, we find the genuinely poetic and the falsely poetic side by side, and it appears the poet does not know the difference.

In the poetry of Duncan Campbell Scott we find a dark, fierce and direct poet living in the same body with a gentle and dreamy "sweet singer" of rather feminine temperament. In this case the personality is not divided between true poet and false poet, but between major poet and minor poet. Yet here again Scott is not aware of his two-sided personality. In fact, each poet keeps intruding into the other's verses. Both are at their best in such poems as *Night Hymns on Lake Nipigon*, but their mutual presence is just what keeps this poem, which has extraordinary moments, from being the great poem it almost is.

It is my contention that we are dealing here, not with a form of mental illness, but with a cultural phenomenon —a phenomenon which is certainly present in much nineteenth-century verse, but is apparent with particular obviousness in English-Canadian nineteenth century verse, for reasons which I have tried, in a necessarily circuitous manner, to examine. Many of the classical Canadian poets thought of poetry as a public as well as a private art, and they shared this view with their readers and the elite which sponsored them, or into which they had been born. The social ideas they sought to embody in their poems were, to a large extent, conservative ones — more conservative, perhaps, than many of them realised. But they did not understand, at least they did not understand clearly, the real ambiguity of their position in relation to society, a society which demanded that it be reflected and expressed in poetry because this was still, to those who spoke English, the noblest of the arts. However, this society had in reality a deep-seated contempt for poetry. Thus the relationship between the Canadian poet and society was a false and even a poisonous one, which vitiated the poetic impulse at its source, and resulted in a body of poetry notable for its vacillation between the truly poetic and the pseudo-poetic.

For the reason indicated at the beginning of this article, I have confined myself largely to a consideration of this situation as it affected English-language poets in this country. That French-Canadian poets found themselves in a similar position is indicated by the following lines from *La Patrie au Poète*, by Albert Ferland, whose dates are 1872-1943.

> Rêveur, pourquoi m'aimer comme on aime une femme?
> Tes yeux se sont mouillés d'avoir vu ma beauté;
> Pour comprendre ton coeur et vivre ta fierte,
> Poète, mon enfant, il me faudrait une âme!
>
> Les noms des fiers Aïeux dont l'honneur et la foi
> Font pensif l'étranger qui traverse mes plaines,
> Chante-les, plein d'orgueil, dans tes strophes hautaines;
> Poète, ces grands Morts ne revivent qu'en toi.
>
> Va, Barde, primitif des vierges Laurentides,
> Va t'en pleurer ton coeur comme un fou dans les bois,
> Fidèle au souvenir des héros d'autrefois,
> Tandis que l'or vainqueur fait les hommes avides!
>
> Poète, mon enfant, tu me chantes en vain,
> Je suis la Terre ingrate où rêva Crémazie;
> Célèbre si tu veux ma grave poésie,
> Mais pour toi, mon enfant, je n'aura pas de pain!