

CAROL COATES CASSIDY AND THE FORM DISPUTE

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NO-ONE WHO NOW READS the early issues of the *Canadian Poetry Magazine* can be insensible to the apparent 1930's proliferation of redoubtable poems by ladies with three names. Writers like Anna Letitia Wales, Maisie Nelson Devitt, and Jessie Playfair Bickford sprinkled the journal's pages with sincerity, piety, and (when World War II demanded it) a rather conventional-sounding patriotism. It is work like theirs that had inspired the anonymous Scott-like "God Bless the C.A.A.!" in *The Canadian Mercury* in 1929:

Rosie wrote some little rhymes
For the *Birdseye Centre Times*:
Gushing friends did then explain:
"This will surely bring you fame!
You must join the C.A.A."

By September 1945 their pseudo-Romanticism gave the *CPM* a reputation for having a "Keats-Shelley complex", a charge which the new editor, Watson Kirkconnell, attempts at once to refute. O. W. Macdonald, who had started the attack (in the *Canadian Author and Bookman*), wanted another Kipling or Service after all, and by implication Kirkconnell dismisses *their* work as "doggerel". The *CPM*, he adds, has printed some *experimental* verse, and (quoting Croce) insists that "Art is form and nothing but form."

Neither the charge nor the defence was particularly novel. In the December 1928 issue of *Canadian Mercury*, for example, Leo Kennedy had quoted S. I. Hayakawa's barbed classification of Canadian poetry as "Victorian, Neo-

Victorian, Quasi-Victorian, and Pseudo-Victorian” and himself called for “a Canadian Whitman, . . . a man of his genius and spiritual breadth” to “correctly interpret the whole Canadian consciousness.” Just as Kirkconnell’s statement prickles with thorny problems involving the difference between the form of art and the form of doggerel, so Kennedy’s raises some question as to how to define “correct”. But in talking of “spirit” and the “whole consciousness” of a people, he allows art to be made up of more than simple external structure. Which could take us back to sincerity and patriotism again, although — if injected with the genius of a Whitman — probably of an unconventional kind.

A. J. M. Smith’s rallying cry in the unused preface he wrote for *New Provinces* in 1936 to some extent bridges the gap between Kennedy and Kirkconnell. Speaking for Pratt, Scott, Smith, and Klein as well as for Kennedy and himself, he characterizes their purpose as one of “attempting to get rid of the facile word, the stereotyped phrase and the mechanical rhythm”, and of “seeking, as the poet today must, to combine colloquialism with rhetoric.” Spirit and structure are to come closer, in other words, to being united and indivisible. In the particular form of a given poem will be embodied the sensibility it attempts to convey, and thus, antedating McLuhanism, the rhetorical medium becomes at least part of its colloquial message. But if the method is mechanical and the home truth trite, or if the rhetoric is shallow and it still characterizes both technique and idea, then no correspondence between medium and message will salvage a poem from the junkpile. Archness and artificiality do sometimes afflict poems by Smith and Scott, but it is the other disease of being possessed by stereotypes that makes the work of Anna Wales, Vesta Pickel, and Jessie Bickford so much less artistically adept.

That both camps should find in the *CPM* an outlet for their work is paradoxical itself; that E. J. Pratt should as editor allow it even more so, for as his own writing testifies, he respected his craft. In the second issue of the journal (April 1936), he enunciates his editorial policy: for “tolerant consideration of genuine poetic effort and against identity with any form of aesthetic whether old or new.” He was against only “fatuous sentiment”, in fact, and the July 1936 issue elaborates:

Rhyme and metre do not make a poem; they produce nothing but doggerel. The real flesh and blood of poetry lies in turns of phrases, vivid images, new and unusual thoughts and manners of expressing them. A good poem is good because it is an unusual, imaginative, arresting way of writing English. We do not speak in poetry, except at rare moments; and if a poet writes so simply as to give the effect of spoken language, that effect is all the more startling and novel.

In the 1960's such an assertion sounds slightly weary, and perhaps even in 1936 the schoolmasterish tone reflects Pratt's tiredness with the excess of two hundred manuscripts he read every week. What it also does, however, is indicate one of the reasons for the apparent gentleness with which Pratt exercised his acceptance policy; what interested him about a work was not its intellectual toughness or its stanzaic structure but its lines, its imagery, and its individual phrases. A single striking epithet was taken as the promise of a poetic talent, and thus redefined, "form" — whether intentional or accidental, germane to the poet's ideas or unrelated to them — proved a touchstone to merit once again.

TO SEE CAROL COATES CASSIDY'S NAME in print is at once to suspect her of the same poetic sins as all the other tripartite ladies, and to read Pratt's May 1940 review of her Ryerson chapbook *Fancy Free* (1939) — in which he finds her "free of cliché" — is to suspect him of his accustomed generosity. But such a judgment here would be a distortion. Though never a polished writer, Carol Cassidy did possess a talent for poetry, and Pratt was quite justified when he accepted her work for its occasionally arresting line and its frequent ease with imagery.

Her career, however, was short-lived, beginning with undergraduate verse she distributed among friends in Vancouver about 1930 and lasting into the 1940's. Since then she has effectively disappeared (into English progressive-educational circles), and is not even mentioned in the recent *Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature*. The omission is a genuine oversight, for particularly during the first decade in which she published, her work represented a definite experimental departure in verse form in Canadian poetry. From 1925 on, F. R. Scott and A. J. M. Smith had attempted to free Canada of poetic lushness; Raymond Knister and (later) Dorothy Livesay had discovered ways of uniting the lyric voice with a social conscience. But in Carol Cassidy's work there operates an exotic imagism that came in part, no doubt, from the American movements of the 1910's and 1920's which intellectually influenced Smith and W. W. E. Ross as well. It emerged also from her emotional sensitivity to the exactness, spareness, and diminutiveness of symbol that characterized the art of her native Japan. "Form in poetry . . . is moulded by content — also by the environment of the poet," she states in her foreword to *Fancy Free*, and the culture that prompted her best poems was Oriental.

Born Alice Caroline Coates, in Tokyo, the daughter of an authority on Japa-

nese Buddhism, she returned there in 1930, with her photographer husband Eugene Haanel Cassidy, and stayed in the country till 1937. *Fancy Free* illustrates the influence of Eastern “poetry, painting, flower arrangement”, and again the Foreword expresses the author’s intention and expectation :

Eastern art excels in suggesting what it does not say. Therefore a ruthless selection of significant detail is of paramount importance. A poem may consist of less than a dozen expressions, yet the imagination and the technique which inspired their choice and execution are calculated to create an illusion of the whole through an illumination of the part — an illusion extending far beyond the confines of the actual presentation.

The function of the reader, therefore, is an active one — to become a creator, to compose, so to speak, the sestet to the sonnet the artist has started for him. This is done by reflecting with more than usual care upon the tonal and rhythmic qualities of every word, savoring to the full each literal and emotional connotation.

Her aim is overt in “Gift”, where she expresses the desire to bring to the reader “only a poem, / exempt from the bonds of time and space, / infinite and everlasting”, and the effect is uninspiringly flat. The platitudinous abstraction encourages only a weary reaction, and the timeless, spaceless illusion for which she strives eludes both her and her readers.

Curiously, it is those poems more specifically founded in the immediate that transcend space and time. Influenced by the haiku, they work with precisely observed details which, perceived as images, communicate more than their literal meaning. The imagery of “Japanese April”, for example, is quite conventional:

April Earth,
a spring bride,
with cherry petal confetti
to congratulate.

Yet tightly controlled, as here, it reaches out beyond the stereotype to express a sense of delicately recurring beauty. The control lies in the form. Letting the image stand unexplained in one part of the poet’s method; maintaining tone through internal vowel harmonies — here, in the *a*’s, *e*’s, and *i*’s, circling at the end to the same sound with which the poem begins and so aurally reinforcing the idea of recurrence — is another. “Korean Dancer”, though longer, uses a similar assonant technique. Beginning “A white miracle of motionless satin”, it closes this way:

dips and streams,
flirts, exults, despairs,
till suddenly fluttering, abandoned falls
a symbol of coquetry completed.

An ominous gong crashes the clapping
across a stage searching for light.

The psychological and political implications of the final two lines give the poem a depth and humanity that phrases like “white miracle” do not at first lead us to expect. The personification of the scarf in the catalogue of verbs also might seem a little stale — yet it is that kind of animation which allows the last two lines to work symbolically as well as pictorially. It is a human situation, not an inert one, that the poem is about.

Political situations motivated the writing of quite a number of Carol Cassidy’s poems, but abstractions generally take over from images in them, to their detriment. Excerpts from “Four Poems: Bushido, 1937” will illustrate. The second part of the sequence, entitled “Troop Train”, opens with an intentional tonal flatness that admirably conveys the poet’s horror at the blind power of a war machine:

On the day of the tiger,
twenty-six cars packed with khaki bodies
ride out into the rain-soaked night
to be shot.

The bodies cheer,
wave paper flags and sing —
sing on their way to be shot.

The repetition later gets too easy, however, and Part III adds, cloyingly, “But I must still the protest in my throat”. Part IV, echoing the initial rhythms of Masefield’s “Cargoes”, returns briefly and effectively to the theme of the war industry:

Fifty-four bluejackets
in neat white boxes,
shipped home from Shanghai
ready for burial.

But when the poem, striving for climax, proclaims “what heaviness they hold”, we are removed again from the illusion of the image and thrust uncomfortably back into the world of the stock response.

DURING WORLD WAR II itself, Mrs. Cassidy's publications were privately printed — *The Tale of the Celestial Tea Pot* (1943), or the brief mimeographed excursion into fanciful drama called *The Jade Heart* (copyrighted by the Junior Leagues of America Inc. in New York in 1946). Rather like "The Emperor's New Clothes" in tone, combining a sense of comedy and a verbal rhythm, its social moral is less pointed and less clear. An emperor banishes a poet; the emperor's daughter grows up and falls in love with the poet, who (magically) is connected with the return of a jade ear-ring that her brother had tried to steal from her years before and had lost; the self-exiled brother returns as a prisoner; and the playlet ends happily when the emperor recognizes his prodigal son and allows his daughter to choose her own husband. The jade ear-rings and a migrating wild goose are recurrent images to argue the necessity for the poet's vision in the modern world, but neither the method nor the message is particularly fresh, and the Orientalism is by now an encumbrance rather than an ornament to her style.

When she turns directly to the war, her poems are even less successful. Like so many Canadian writers, she was committed to the cause and aghast at the destruction of lives, and her poems split in two directions — to the hyper-patriotic ("Open wide the airways of the world") and the maudlin ("Is that Human Lives Limited? / May I speak to God, please? / . . . yesterday I lost my son. . . / I must have another.") Objectivity was hard to achieve, and the controlled distance that imagism demands is lost even from the following excerpt from "May 1941":

. . . in the brain,
guns thunder the minutes down,
and marching feet
trample the ecstasy of May.

All these verses are contained in a handsome hand-printed volume (reviewed favourably both by Pratt in the *CPM* and by E. K. Brown in *UTQ*'s "Letters in Canada 1941") published by the Caronell Press in Toronto and variously titled *Poems* and *The Return and Selected Poems*. Besides the new works, it reprints pieces that had appeared in journals like *Chatelaine* and *Canadian Forum* as well as the *CPM*. Several were to be printed again in *Invitation to Mood* (1949), and except for a few privately distributed volumes and whatever verse Mrs. Cassidy may have written since, this constitutes her complete canon. The best works among

them remain those that capture images, and in individual lines she again reveals her craftsmanlike commitment to the beautiful in Japanese culture:

the fingers of a flower master
coaxing a chrysanthemum
to lift its tired head —
(The Return)

Stare straight up through the incredible blue
to see the oblique wings of a bird
slicing the sky
(Summer Reverie)

. . . against the ice-stencil of a window,
one leaf, a green flame,
leaping from a dry and brittle stick.
(The Flame)

The day, brittle with ice,
snaps underfoot
(First Flight)

But her rationalizing defence of such a commitment still intrudes into her work; poems that could stop with an image go on to explain it, and the initial effect is undermined. Though the poet affirmed that the reader should also be creator, rarely is the promise fulfilled. Possibly because the journals in which she published so demanded, her poems generally end up insisting on a particular response in an unsubtle fashion.

THE PROBLEM can be approached in another way by looking again at the critical pronouncements of the *Canadian Poetry Magazine*. Pratt's eclectic policy is reaffirmed in March 1943 when W. E. Collin translates Guy Sylvestre's article on Saint-Denys Garneau:

Poetry is the art of signifying, by means of words, bearers of rhythm and image, what things say to our faculties of knowledge and love taken in their totality. That which makes poetry art is essentially the creation of a beautiful intelligible form; what distinguishes it from the other arts is its own peculiar means of expression: the human word animated by its essential rhythm and delivering fancies conceived in the mind and heart.

But running counter to it, though apparently not in direct conflict or open dispute, were two other critical attitudes. The first is that represented by Clara Bernhardt's statement in December 1939 concerning the poet's function: to make a reader *see*, like the blind man in John's gospel — the good poem will have "an idea or thought", "emotion", "music", and be "sincere". (It is this concern for sincerity which seems to have guided the naming of the "prize" poems in the journal each year. The sentiment expressed seems to have been more important than the quality of the line.)

The other attitude is couched in Watson Kirkconnell's assertion in September 1944 that the magazine "will now carry articles on form and poetic law." The word "law" is the troublesome one, for by June 1945, under the guise of continuing Pratt's policy, Kirkconnell turns to attacking Spender and Eliot for "lawless originality", "novelty without clear significance". As a result, with the rules thus effectively decided in advance, experimentalism fades; sentiment again takes over from verse quality; and (for all the resurgence of fresh talent that appeared while Earle Birney was editor from September 1945 to June 1948) the future character of the journal was set. Vanity presses started to advertise in it, and with their vacuum seal of approval, the *CPM* ceased to be a significant voice.

The exact direct effect of such a dispute on a writer like Carol Cassidy is impossible to gauge, yet it is obvious that her own writing falters because of just this internal conflict. The cause of form is espoused, while the poet gives birth in the same breath to the "preaching", the "stuff of prose", that during Birney's editorship, Charles Bruce's "Remarks on Verse" vehemently decried. When Ryerson brought out *Invitation to Mood* in 1949, nothing much had changed. The occasional sociological poem like "Black Reverie", about Paul Robeson and race prejudice, is interesting for its concern, but even that expresses a conventional "white liberal" position, and the poem (like many others in the book, "inviting" a particular "mood") seems in retrospect a little highflown.

Repeated here, too, are several pieces from her 1941 volume which indicate an attempt to arouse jocularity, but their mood is one less of humour than of unfulfilment. "Humour" is "the Alchemist" in "Parting", for example, but the love poems are wry. "Meeting", similarly, begins equably enough:

The other side of argument we shall meet again,
I know,
after the silence.

With what speech shall I greet you then?

a laughing quip, perhaps,
or a level maxim to formulate the spirit's unity?

But it goes on to plan the other person's glacier-like response before it happens and — therefore — to formulate an equally glacial reply. Hence there is no real humour and no release.

"Greeting Card" expresses most directly the poet's wish:

Upon the chaste scroll of the New Year,
I would inscribe for you
with bold and flowing strokes,
the Good Luck symbol,
and with full brush delineate,
the ideograph of Laughter.

In the light of other poems, that "*would* inscribe" takes on the tone of powerless desire rather than firm intention; contentment seems beyond reach, and in the last poems of the book, all of which seek transcendent revelation and use phrases like "the path to peace", "the karmic toll", and "the Cosmic Will", the poet's need for a "symbol of the Infinite" within which to walk *embraced, aware, and circumscribed*, is palpable. In a poem like "Museum Piece" lies her only apparent answer:

On the ancient fresco from the monastery of the Joyful Conversion,
are schoolboy names, scribbled with surreptitious brush,
upon the sacred folds of Buddha's robe.

Brought now to the World of the Western Sun from far Shensi,
how curious that the mischievous have achieved immortality
beside the sublime!

Here the poet still wavers, however, between a relaxed acceptance of the fact and an almost Calvinist upset that it should be so. The poem itself gains from such ellipsis, but as an eschatological answer it would obviously prove within this frame of reference uncircumscribing and so unsatisfactory.

Quiet and deceptively atonal, the poem is one of the best of her later works, but during the 1940's when the poetic climate in Canada changed so radically, she ceased being an innovator and her position among Canadian writers considerably waned. The qualities for which A. J. M. Smith included her "First Flight" in his first *Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943) were not developed, and from subsequent editions she has been excluded. For all her commitment to imagery, she was never really able to reconcile language and perception in any

consistent way. Her doctrine of poetic form did not in her own writing withstand the pressures of conventional techniques, and so — like the journal that discovered her — she was capable of uncritically publishing some amazingly flaccid lines. Other times she pared her words down till only illusive images remained; by bringing them together she could illuminate the world she saw, and suggest in a few details the larger issues that she accepted as infinite and human truths. “Today I am a god,” she wrote in *Fancy Free*, “for I have made a universe with flowers.” On rare occasions it was so, as when in *Invitation to Mood* she asks “Would you with boundaries bind the subtle spaces of affection?” and answers:

Sooner count sand,
crack stars,
or garner moonbeams in a sieve.

At those times, however uneasily, she became the poet she had the talent to be.