# CANADIAN POETRY AND THE COMPUTER

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WHEN READING THROUGH the works of the English Canadian poets of the 1880's, the critical reader is sometimes taken a little aback by the continued repetition of certain words and phrases such as "dream", "sleep", "vision", "trance", "spell", "secret", "mysterious", "unknown", or, if we prefer, there is "mystic spell", "charmed vision", "visionary moment", and "inappellable secret".

This insistence, at the diction level, on variations of the dream experience borders on the ludicrous and we are soon tempted to blue-pencil whole passages in Carman as examples of romantic excess, and to suggest that Roberts and D. C. Scott might have done well to edit their styles a little. Yet, is this approach ultimately helpful? Is an appreciation of the poets of the 1880's related to a stylistic norm which stresses neatness and economy, or does their very excess at the diction level point toward some fundamental understanding of the nature of things — a world view, a myth or a cosmology?

It is possible to dismiss this whole cluster of diction as simply vague transcendental aspiration, the Canadian backwash of Victorian romanticism. And there is no doubt that there is a certain amount of this involved; historically speaking, Canadian poetry has always been derivative. However, granted this fact, and granted that the common terms of diction are also very probably inherited, a more helpful approach might be the question of whether or not our poets did something unique with their particular inheritance. Did they construct a particular myth or cosmology from the common terms of romantic diction; and, if so, was there any continuance of myth or diction from the poets of the 1880's to those of the 1920's?

In Roberts' case, the reader soon becomes aware that he consistently uses the word "dream" and that it most often collocates with "sleep", "vision", "spirit", and "mystic". To determine whether or not these constant references to "sleep" and "dream" are simply the common coin of romantic diction as in, say, Keats'

"Sleep and Poetry", or whether they are associated in a structure unique to Roberts' poetry, it would be necessary to classify each occurrence of the word "dream" together with its most commonly collocated words; this would include categories such as the common night dream, the impossible wish, the day dream, and the waking vision, that moment which Wordsworth describes in "Tintern Abbey" when the poet is "laid asleep in body, and becomes a living soul" and is so enabled to "see into the life of things".

For Roberts' poetry, the purpose of the classification would be to determine whether he adopts any of these particular aspects of the dream consistently and whether or not each occurrence reinforces a particular myth of the poet's experience in nature. Further, because we already know from Roy Daniells' fine study of the 1880's poets in the *Literary History of Canada* that "dream" is also a very strong metaphor in Lampman's work, it might be worthwhile to attempt to determine if there is a complex associated with this word which passes from Roberts into the poetry of Lampman, Carman and Scott. But, the amount of listing and cross-referencing in a project of this scope would be quite prohibitive for any one person, and it is at this point that the computer comes into its own as a useful listing device.

BETWEEN 1966 AND 1968, the published books of seven poets, Isabella Valancy Crawford, Sir Charles G. D. Roberts, Archibald Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott, E. J. Pratt, Earle Birney, and Margaret Avison, were key-punched. Between 1968 and 1970, seven other poets, Charles Mair, Charles Sangster, Bliss Carman, A. J. M. Smith, A. M. Klein, Irving Layton and P. K. Page, were added.[1]

The procedure followed was the same in all cases. Each poet's published books in chronological order were key-punched on computer cards at the rate of one typographical line per computer card. The computer cards containing the poet's canon were then fed into an IBM 7044 computer for printout. Following proofreading and necessary corrections, the computer then drew up a word frequency count. This is an alphabetical index listing every word that a poet uses and indicating its frequency of appearance. On the basis of the critic's understanding of a poet's work, and taking into consideration both the frequency of occurrence of particular words and the apparent collocations or associations of clusters of words, a selected list of words under the heading of thematic categories was then drawn up by hand. This listing under headings was key-punched as a thematic

index and the computer then printed out concordances to the selected words from its memory bank.

After the works of Roberts had been key-punched and a word-index produced, it soon became apparent that except for function words and grammatical symbols, "dream" and words associated with it did indeed form the largest category of diction in Roberts' canon, as it also did in the works of Lampman and Scott. "Dream", "sleep", "vision" and its variants occur 217 times in Roberts, 368 times in Lampman and 221 times in D. C. Scott. In each case, it has the highest frequency of any thematic word occurring (an average occurrence would be from five to fifteen times) and indicates that for each poet the cluster of words associated with "dream" has primary significance. Further, by their continued appearance with a recognized structure of value delineated by a particular diction cluster, it was found that certain words such as Crawford's "love", Roberts' "dream", Klein's "little" and Margaret Avison's "sun" come to take on metaphoric significance. This is not to suggest that these elements of diction are always used as active metaphors. Yet, most often, the key terms emerge in context as a metaphor representing a larger myth.

In Roberts' work, the "dream" emerges primarily as a description of the poet's aspiration towards "the Spirit of Beauty" beyond nature. As this metaphor is explored through the thematic concordance, it can be documented that it becomes associated with a whole mythic structure in which Roberts expresses life as a "dream" emerging from the great "sleep" of Eternity, which is, in turn, a "dream" of God. Through the human "dream", man is put in touch with this eternal world. Referring to the dream experience, Roberts has two sets of terminology which he uses interchangeably; one set is connected with Darwinian evolution while the other is primarily Christian in nature.

This process is quite explicit in a poem such as "Origins" where the germ of life emerges from Time: "Out of the dreams that heap / the hollow land of sleep"; it then develops by evolutionary processes, only to return to its divine maker, God. Similarly, in his poem "The Marvellous Work", Roberts praises the evolutionary God whose "Eternal Cause":

> Is graven in granite-moulding aeons' gloom;
> Is told in stony record of the roar
> Of long Silurian storms, and tempests huge
> Scourging the circuit of Devonian seas . . .
>
> Athwart the death-still years of glacial sleep!
> Down the stupendous sequence, age on age, . . .

In the obscure and formless dawn of life,
In gradual march from simple to complex,
From lower to higher forms, and last to Man.

In effect, Roberts has taken over the general aspects of the Wordsworthian-Keatsean transcendental dream, associating it with poetic comfort. However, he changes a few of the essential terms of the dream experience to accommodate some of the problems raised by the Darwinian hypothesis. But, if the primary function of the dream metaphor is to alleviate pain, Roberts' choice was particularly unfortunate as it carries along with it its own built-in negation — that of the nightmare. So, although Roberts' poetic decorum precludes evil as a subject, whenever evil or death intrude into his poetry almost despite the poet, they do so, as does the nightmare, through the dream. The blinding of Orion, the capture of Launcelot, and the sick soul of the poem "One Night" all emerge from the dreaming state.

Archibald Lampman adopts Roberts' dream metaphor and with it much of his poetic myth including the "sleep" of time, the "dream" of human life and the possible evolutionary progress of the human soul. However, Lampman's concept of the poet is that of the passive observer who, standing a little apart from himself and from nature, is empowered to see into the nature of things. In this formulation, the unconscious creatures from the world of nature, such as the frogs and cicadas, become poetic emissaries from the world of dream which underlies the universe. This relationship is quite explicit in the poem "The Frogs".

In effect, the peace and comfort of the eternal dream, unconsciously known by the frogs, is passed on to the poet who lays himself open to this experience. But if the voice of the frogs can bring assurance of the eternal plan, the "dream" which underlies existence, there are other voices which remind Lampman of the fear and sorrow which are also a part of human life. The voice which comes out of the darkness, "the crying in the night" of Lampman's much anthologized "Midnight" would seem to be part of a larger sequence of poems dealing with the nightmare aspects of existence often specifically associated with the loss of the comforting "dream" as in the poem "The Loons".

The "dream" in D. C. Scott's work is first associated with "rest", "death" and "magic". In poems such as "The November Pansy", "The Height of Land" and "Lines in Memory of Edmund Morris" the transcendental attempt to reach a "mystic world, a world of dreams and passion / that each aspiring thing creates" is unsuccessful and the "secret" beyond nature remains "unutterable", a "something" that "comes by flashes / . . . — a spell / golden and inappellable". When

the transcendental dream does succeed, as it does in a series of "magic" or fantasy poems, it results in death for the mortal concerned, as in the poems "The Piper of Arll", "By the Willow Spring", "Avis" and "Amanda".

In Scott's early work the death theme is associated with the dream and with rest; in his later work it becomes associated with a dying world. In the poem "The November Pansy", he suggests that a "seed" of life might be dropped from the dying world to re-kindle life elsewhere. This linking of human death with the suggestion that the earth is growing old is dominant in Scott's later work and it seems to mark the end of a cycle in which Roberts' evolutionary "germ" of life has burst up into fruition and is now decaying.

IN CONSIDERATION OF THIS ANALYSIS, it would appear that a critical re-evaluation of the work of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts is necessary to point out that Roberts did establish a poetic myth with his inherited romantic diction, that the function of this myth was to reconcile the Darwinian germ of life with the Christian world spirit, and that this myth was adapted with some slight variations by Roberts' major successors, Lampman and D. C. Scott. Further, it would appear that the early work of E. J. Pratt, supposedly a sport in the Canadian stream, might have developed in response to the poetry of Roberts.

Pratt's ode, *The Iron Door* (1927), provides a good transition from the 1880's to the 1920's because it is a poem which has its roots in the earlier group, yet, in development, it rejects the transcendental dream. The whole visionary experience of the poem is specifically contained within a human "dream", undercut by contrast with the reality of "terrestrial day". But, if Pratt rejects the dilute romantic aspirations of the earlier "dream" poetry, he does so by turning to the law of tooth and claw which he finds explicit in Roberts' tales of the wild and some of the later poetry. "The Great Feud", for example, has its genesis in the first two chapters of Roberts' book, *In the Morning of Time*, which was first published in 1919, just as Pratt was beginning to write. In Chapter One is the setting for "The Great Feud" — the red clay estuary complete with giant lizards, the prototypes for Tyrannosaurus Rex, and bloody internecine battle. Here too are members of an evolving man-like species associated with the rudiments of reason — prototypes for the ape mother and her brood.

Similarly, a prototype of the battle between cachalot and kraken in Pratt's poem "The Cachalot" (1926) is to be found in a tale entitled "The Terror of

the Sea Caves" from Roberts' book, *The Haunters of the Silences* (1907).[2] It is substantially Roberts' concept of the national epic and the military sea poem (cf. "The Shannon and the Chesapeake") which recurs in Pratt's later poem, "The Roosevelt and the Antinoe". In addition, the whole iceberg section from *The Titanic* (1935), including suggestions of the berg's eventual disintegration as a part of a natural cycle, can be shown to have a strong relationship with Roberts' poem "The Iceberg", first published in *The University of Toronto Quarterly* in 1931.

Pratt's progress would appear to be contained within the framework of the older Darwinism established by Roberts and Lampman. The difference between Pratt and his predecessors (and in parallel development to the later poetry of Scott) is that he continually uses the earlier pre-formulated world view to suggest its opposite. "The Great Feud" is a dominantly stavistic structure emerging from the evolutionary Darwinism of one of Roberts' later romances. A second difference between Roberts and Pratt is that the latter shifts the focus from external to internal nature as he explains in *Newfoundland Verse*: "the fight / with nature growing simpler every hour, / her ways being known". Man using the full resources of his courage, reason and self-sacrifice can resist the primal forces of the sea; however, when the primitive forces of external nature are internalized within man, "these blinded routes" are almost without cure: "the taint is in the blood". So that where Roberts searches external nature for the "secret" of "beauty" or "life", Pratt turns inward in an attempt to find the existential "why" of human behaviour.

It is at this point in clarifying the details of a poet's myth, that the computer can be of considerable help to conventional scholarship. One of the great surprises of the Pratt word-index was that the encompassing metaphor appeared to be that of "blood" rather than the expected "sea" or "water", although, of course, "sea" is a larger category than blood. Yet, as each reference to the word "blood" was followed through the thematic concordance, it began to appear that Pratt internalized the tides of the sea within the veins of man, as is explicit in the lyric "Newfoundland":

> Here the tides flow,
> And here they ebb;
> Not with that dull, unsinewed tread of waters
> Held under bonds to move
> Around the unpeopled shores —
> Moon-driven through a timeless circuit

Of invasion and retreat;
But with a lusty stroke of life
Pounding at stubborn gates,
That they might run
Within the sluices of men's hearts . . .

*Red is the sea-kelp on the beach*
*Red as the heart's blood,*

This is a natural metaphor for a Newfoundlander, but, more importantly, it is also a natural metaphor in terms of Pratt's modified Darwinism. Man, evolving from the sea, still carries part of the sea within him. In Pratt's myth, the bloodstream becomes an evolutionary battleground where the forces of instinct (associated with cold-blooded creatures) and those of higher reason (associated with warm blood) are continually at war. As Pratt writes in "Under the Lens":

Along the arterial highways,
Through the cross-roads and trails of the veins
They are ever on the move —
Incarnate strife,
Reflecting in victory, deadlock and defeat,
The outer campaigns of the world,
But without tactics, without strategy.

Creatures of primal force,
With saurian impact
And virus of the hamadryads,
The microbes war with leucocytes . . .

Once it was flood and drought, lightning and storm and earthquake,
Those hoary executors of the will of God,
That planned the monuments for human faith.

Now, rather, it is these silent and invisible ministers,
Teasing the ear of Providence
And levelling out the hollows of His hands,
That pose the queries for His moral government.

As is suggested by these examples, Pratt internalizes both good and evil and associates them with a physiological metaphor of the bloodstream. In Pratt's published books of poetry, "blood" and its variants (appearing 265 times) are primary nouns and have the same significance in Pratt's poetic myth as does that of the "dream" in Roberts' world view. Clustered about the metaphor of blood

is a series of related nouns: "vein", "artery", "love", "hate", "instinct", and "reason". As might be expected, "red" (with its variants of "crimson" and "scarlet") is the dominant colour.

In Pratt's work, the blood line not only determines the pedigree of the creature, but it also establishes its physiological possibilities for good or bad. It is this aspect of the blood metaphor, suggesting the Biblical "sins of the fathers", which is evoked by the woman representing universal humanity in *The Iron Door* when she asks why "blood" and "time" should always bring forth a "Cain". Cyrus, on the other hand, in *The Fable of the Goats*, evolves a sport "leucocyte" in his Aryan bloodstream which enables him to make peace with the Semite goat and so save universal humanity through moral evolution. Consequently, as has been expressed in the critical formulation of John Sutherland, Northrop Frye and Desmond Pacey, Pratt's poetry moves from "stone to steel" or between the ethical norms of "the temple and the cave"; what has not been noted, however, is that it does so along the metaphor of the bloodstream.

In this connection, it is important to see that for Pratt the whole process of life from microscopic spore to man constitutes the evolutionary process. In his structure, Christianity is the evolved pinnacle of human conduct, and when man falls away from this ideal, he can only fall into atavism:

> But what made *our* feet miss the road that brought
> The world to such a golden trouve,
> In our so brief a span?
> How may we grasp again the hand that wrought
> Such light, such fragrance, and such love,
> O star! O rose! O Son of Man?

Because of this, an understanding of the relationship between Roberts' book, *In the Morning of Time*, and Pratt's poem, "The Great Feud", is important to an understanding of Pratt's work. Roberts was writing of man's evolutionary progress at the very time when Pratt, a pacifist, sick at heart at the carnage of World War I, was coming to the conclusion that man was not progressing but retrogressing to his animalistic past. *In the Morning of Time* provided a structure of immense ferocity embodied in animal form which perfectly expressed Pratt's feelings regarding the bloody, brutal and unreasoned precipitation of World War I. Then, too, Roberts' stress on "reason" and evolutionary "progress" indicated to Pratt the precise lines of argument with which he must disagree. "The Great Feud", with its perversion of reason and the moral law, its bloody internecine

combat and the concluding implications of cyclic recurrence, is Pratt's atavistic answer to Roberts' evolutionary progress.

Pratt's substitution of an atavistic myth for Roberts' evolutionary Darwinism is, perhaps, the key to much of Pratt's work. This explains Pratt's fascination with the giant creature, the survival of the fittest, and the emphasis on the power of the superior creature, be it man or machine. And because Pratt is also holding in suspension Wilhelm Wundt's mechanistic physiology which stresses the unreasoned mechanical response, that which links the animal, fallen man, and the machine is precisely this mechanical instinctive response. When man or his representative (such as *The Titanic*) falls from reason to instinct, there is a magnificent rush of unbridled power. And it is this response to the removal of reason which fascinates Pratt.

Further, as Pratt accepts that aspect of popular Darwinism which suggests that inheritance is carried along the bloodline, these evolutionary or atavistic struggles are always carried on in that arena. "The Witches' Brew", Pratt's farcical version of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, establishes an underwater Eden where the fall from cold-blooded to purely human (warm-blooded) sinning is accomplished through an alcoholic apple in the bloodstream. "The Great Feud" is again about the fall from instinct to reason and the return to brute force through demagoguery and a "yeasty" ferment in the blood. *The Titanic* also invokes a fall from steel to stone, and Brébeuf, associated with hubris, falls from Christianity to demonism or black magic. Similarly, the characteristic technique of Pratt's shorter poems is the flashback to the primal past, as in the reversion to the wordless hate of "Silences" or to the void before the earth began in "The Ground Swell".

As THIS DOCUMENTATION would indicate, there was, in fact, a very close relationship between the major poet of the 1880's, Sir Charles G. D. Roberts, and the major poet of the 1920's, E. J. Pratt — a bend in the stream of Canadian poetry rather than the sharp break suggested by present critical comment. Further, it is possible that A. J. M. Smith, D. C. Scott and A. M. Klein, although busy carving out new provinces for poetry, were also fully aware of the work done by their predecessors and contemporaries.

In this transmission, D. C. Scott would appear to be significant. One of the surprises of the A. J. M. Smith concordance was a substantial "death", "love",

"beauty", and "dream" complex not unlike the formulation of D. C. Scott's concordance. This is not to imply that D. C. Scott's sometimes metaphysical *Beauty and Life* (1921) was to Smith as Roberts' work was to Pratt, for Smith's whole canon is much more profoundly influenced by Eliot's fertility myth. Yet, there are significant parallels with the older poets in Smith's work. In this connection we might compare D. C. Scott's "Variations on a Seventeenth Theme" — a series of modulations on death using the primrose, Eliot-fashion, as an organizing metaphor — with Smith's habitual practice. Then, too, Smith's poetic technique of metamorphosis, often related to successive shadings of reality, would seem to be quite close to Scott's poetic (cf. Scott's "The Tree and the Birds", and Smith's poem "The Fountain"). Similarly, there are continual parallels with D. C. Scott's concept of the timeless geological North ("Lines in Memory of Edmund Morris") in F. R. Scott's work, as well as a strong emphasis on the evolutionary concerns of Roberts and Pratt.

If it is Pratt's concern that man is in danger of reverting to his animalistic past, in the poetry of Abraham Moses Klein, man very often *is* an animal, and a predatory animal at that, as in this description of Hitler:

> Fed thus with native quarry, flesh and gore
> He licked his whiskers, crouched, then stalked for more.

Hitler is also specifically identified with an atavistic fall and the concept of inherited evil: "Judge not the man for his face / out of Neanderthal! / . . . the evil of the race / informs that skull!" "Animal" is Klein's largest category of diction, recurring some 400 times with "blood" also a substantial category, occurring seventy-six times. In Klein's work, "blood" is most often associated with the spilled blood of the small and innocent creature. Klein's poetry appears to suggest two worlds: one is the world of the "Black Forest" ethic where the good little man is pursued by the ravening beast; the other is the reconciling art world of Biblic wood and fairy tale where the small boy of "Bestiary", hunting at his leisure, can stalk the "beast, Nebuchadnezzar".

It is one of the ironies of the development of Canadian poetry that E. J. Pratt and A. M. Klein, both fundamentally kind and compassionate men, should, by virtue of their differing historical and religious perspectives, have been fundamentally influenced by diametrically opposed aspects of the same myth or world view. Pratt, strongly influenced by the Darwinistic superior creature, is fascinated by the spectacle of immense strength and power, the giant whale, the enormous iceberg, the largest ship the world has ever known; Klein, who has been made

tragically aware of the immense danger of unbridled power during the Nazi era, holds as exemplar the good little man, the homoculus, the dwarf.

This would imply that Roberts' evolutionary Darwinism has become atavism in the works of E. J. Pratt and that the whole concept funnels into the Aryan myth, where it is picked up by A. M. Klein in the late thirties. In a real sense, Canadian poetry has been a direct response to a world view or *weltanschauung*, and if it may be hypothesized that an appreciation of the Puritan mythos is essential for an understanding of the poetry of the United States, it might be equally hypothesized that for Canadian poetry, coming as it does 300 years later, an understanding of the ramifications of popular Darwinism is essential.

But, although Canadian poetry has developed in response to the prevailing popular philosophies and literary influences (even Pratt has a few poems suggesting Eliot's fertility myth structure), it does not seem possible to argue that literary climate alone can explain the links of connection between our poets. Current interest and mere chance do not seem adequate explanations for the fact that Roberts and Pratt choose to write of the struggles of cachalot and kraken; that Lampman and Smith invoke machine hells in corresponding accents; that D. C. Scott, F. R. Scott and Earle Birney turn to the North land as the new Eden; that Pratt and Klein both write ironic litanies of progress noting that man has turned to the beasts of the field for his instruction; that Klein's little hunter seeks out the enemy "spirochete" in Pratt's "whispering jungle of the blood"; that Birney uses the following terms: "Andromeda" (1), "apotheosis" (1), "architrave" (1), "Armagadding" [Armageddon] (1), "Betelgeuse" (1), "cordite" (1), "hieroglyphed" (1), "narwhal's" (1), "pleiades" (1), "saurian" (1), "saurians" (2), "trilobites" (1), "tyrannosaur" (2), usually once, and with implications of Pratt's schemata; or further, that when insisting on man's need to accept responsibility for his own evil, Birney equates man's potential savagery with the iceberg of Pratt's *Titanic*, suggesting "the iceberg is elective".

These persistent linkings suggest that we need to re-evaluate one of the major issues of the 1940's — the question of the continuity of Canadian poetry. The term "continuity" has an unfamiliar ring in this context. In most critical texts we stress not continuity, but the division of the Canadian stream into four unrelated groups: those of the pre-1850's, the 1880's, the 1920's and the post-1940's. If such a continuity does exist, how may it be indicated? Northrop Frye, reviewing A. J. M. Smith's *The Book of Canadian Poetry* in 1943, states that he senses a "unity of tone" in Smith's selections. In his later essay, "The Narrative Tradition of English Canadian Poetry" and his "Conclusion" to the recent

*Literary History of Canada* (1967) this has been expanded to suggest a unity of tone achieved by a dominant thematic pattern — one of the cruel North characterized by a forbidding nature and a "garrison mentality". However, if we are to accept John Sutherland's angry dismissal of Smith, Frye and the Canadian tradition in his preface to *Other Canadians* in 1947 or the tacit editorializing of his lineal descendants, Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski in their recent anthology of criticism, *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada* (1967), there was not only no continuity in Canadian poetry prior to 1940, there was no Canadian poetry worthy of consideration prior to 1940.

Disregarding the question of poetic worth, I think this assertion can be disputed on the basis that there simply has not been enough work done in the area to be able to make so final a statement. I am inclined to agree with the later Sutherland, writing in *Northern Review*, when he suggests, somewhat elliptically, that it might not be a bad idea if the Canadian poet were not unaware of his place in the tradition of Canadian poetry. The necessity for this is obvious, and I would think that it would apply equally to Canadian criticism, too. Without an understanding of our own development, we cut off our poetic roots: without Roberts, Pratt is not entirely explored; without Pratt, we negate aspects of Klein and Birney; without D. C. Scott and Lampman, aspects of Smith's poetic are incomplete. Similarly, Layton's insistence on the image of man as a "dis-eased animal", Cohen's "Lines from My Grandfather's Journal", Avison's preoccupation with the technical terms of space, Page's "dream" metaphors, and Atwood's *The Journal of Susanna Moodie* do not emerge from a cultural vacuum, but are intimately related to the development of writing in Canada.

FOOTNOTES

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[2] In the case of Pratt's poem "The Cachalot," there is also very likely an intermediary text, Frank Bullen's *The Cruise of The Cachalot; Round the World After Sperm Whales*, 1898. From notes contributed by both Pratt and Roberts to an anthology of sea poems for school children entitled *Verses of the Sea* (1930), it would appear that both poets were familiar with Bullen's work. As Bullen's work came after *Moby Dick* and does share some similarities with it, this supports Pratt's contention that he did not read *Moby Dick* until after the completion of "The Cachalot."