

2. Poetry in English

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THE MOST OBVIOUS development in the last ten years in Canadian poetry has been the change in audience relationships: the multitude of new poets coming out in recent years, and the sudden rise to popularity of a few poets as a result of new conditions. "Poetry Finds a Public" was one of the last section headings in the book *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada* edited by Michael Gnarowski and myself in 1967, and this is still the main fact. But the search for an audience was always a crucial issue for modern poetry, in England and the United States, as well as in Canada, since modernism represented a break with Victorian middle-class taste and the setting up of powerful élitist standards (*vide* Eliot and Pound) in order to re-establish an art of intensity, high craftsmanship, and relevance to contemporary reality. The shift from this resistant modernism, then, to a new type of popularism, touches on the very core of modern poetry. We say in *The Making of Modern Poetry* that "finding a public" is an ambiguous good. How ambiguous we may now consider.

The three Canadian poets who have emerged as popular "stars" in this decade are, of course, Irving Layton, Alfred Purdy, and Leonard Cohen. Layton's *A Red Carpet for the Sun*, the first of a

series of "Collected Poems", appeared in 1959; Purdy's obscure Ryerson Chapbook *The Crafte so Longe to Lerne*, in 1959, followed by *Poems for All the Annettes* in 1962. Leonard Cohen's first book had been published locally at McGill in 1956 (*Let Us Compare Mythologies*), but the next, *The Spice Box of Earth* was brought out by McClelland & Stewart in 1961 (wrongly given as 1965 in *Selected Poems*).

All three poets came into prominence at the beginning of the sixties, though Layton was well ahead of the other two. The moment and the milieu were significant: Layton had been on the scene for nearly twenty years without attracting much attention, and Purdy was already past forty when the Ryerson Chapbook appeared. Only Cohen was fresh and new, and he soon outstripped the others; he was much more in tune with the pop situation. ("All I ask is that you put it in the hands of my generation and it will be recognized.")

The key to this business of popularity and sudden stardom lies in the mass media: T.V. and the new promotional publishing. Stardom is not achieved without a good deal of promotional engineering. The poets, of course, were quite consciously building their own reputations, but that was because the oppor-

tunity suddenly presented itself. It had never been there before, not in the days of Scott and Smith, nor in the beleaguered Forties (Gélinas' *Tit-Coq* and Klein's *Rocking Chair*). We live in a blow-up culture. Mass media are magnifiers of personality, as we can see in the sudden rise to fame of the Pierre Bertons, Patrick Watsons and Laurier LaPierres. This new expectation carries over even into poetry, especially if poets appear on T.V., on film, on radio, and on LP records; and so we find poets becoming T.V. stars and idols in the new literary business.

In Canada, the process was escalated by an enterprising young publisher who saw an opportunity and exploited it to the hilt: Jack McClelland of McClelland & Stewart Limited. The fact that business opportunity is the key to this can be shown by other publishers who have jumped on the same promotion bandwagon: Jacques Hébert in French Canada, and recently M. G. Hurtig in Edmonton. Publishing is a matter of economics, we know, and the lure of profit (or fear of bankruptcy) has inspired the art of publicity and image-building even in such honest-to-goodness "sacred" precincts as poetry; the recent promotion by posters, advertising, T.V. interviews and window-displays, of one or two poets of total insignificance is very much a case in point. It must also be granted, however, that McClelland & Stewart have published many outstanding Canadian poets over the past ten years, and they have launched the valuable New Canadian Library series; in fact, the role of the publisher is very complicated in the current literary scene, and deserves much closer study.

It's been interesting to watch the poets'

resistance to the blandishments of crass popularity, since that's written on our escutcheon, while at the same time yielding to the delightful seductions of the businessman and the promoter. Here is Leonard Cohen writing on the rewards of fame in a poem about Irving Layton:

The town saluted him with garbage
which he interpreted as praise
for his muscular grace. Orange peels,
cans, discarded guts rained like
ticker-tape . . .

Yet at the same time, in typical Laytonian fashion, he writes about himself on the jacket of one of his books: "This book moves me from the world of the golden-boy poet into the dung pile of the front-line writer. . . . I say there has never been a book like this, prose or poetry, written in Canada."

One imagines such things should be said by someone else, rather than by the poet himself. But in Canada, once the poet has praised himself enough all the critics follow suit. In any case, this is an age of "Advertisements for Myself".

So then, we have the new publisher, the self-promoting poet, and the new media to account for stardom among poets. Apart from this there has also been a radical change in the audience for poetry, at least in a certain part of it, the teen-age and hippie group. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* appeared in 1956; in Canada, Leonard Cohen, Canada's Messianic hippie, published his first book in the same year. It could be argued that by the 1950's the aesthetic of modern poetry had at last reached a wider audience and had penetrated the consciousness of the young. But it was only one particular strain of poetry that did so: in America, the open rhetorical line of Ginsberg charged with hysterical sensationalism;

and in Canada street language in free verse and the slapstick sex bit. Essentially it is the moral release of the young that poetry helped to back up. At the same time, poetry readings, prizes and grants, university invitations and articles on poet personalities in big commercial newspapers and magazines played a role in creating a new audience and making it possible for a few poets to emerge as popular idols.

Since poets have long hoped for a larger reading public, and many have laboured hard to spread poetry abroad and build an audience for good poetry, through mimeo magazines, lectures, and small-press book distribution, the sudden materialization of huge audiences and successful poets has taken them very much by surprise. Blatant vulgarity, sick humour, exhibitionism, have suddenly become a popular glut on the market, where twenty years ago sentimentality and smug decency were the stock concealments of the establishments and power blocs. Profumo, Sévigny and Madame Munsinger have done their work, letting Prufrock



and Bloom take over from the bureaucracy and the bourgeoisie. They have brought in Louis Ferdinand Céline, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and Allen Ginsberg as the new spokesmen for literature. Canada is only a peripheral stage in this great shift, and our little theatre rocks as the great auditorium topples or leans to one side.

What our three most popular poets have in common, for instance, is not difficult to define. All three are popular comedians, entertaining cynic jokesters who succeed with young audiences and with young readers. The comic element became dominant as each poet reached the popular level. Lionel Kearns, reading at McGill, pointed out with perfect candour that the poetry-reading circuit encourages the writing of comic gag-type poems because these always go over well, whereas serious poems tend to drag. Cohen, Layton, Purdy — to rank them by their rating — are all three generous exploiters of sex as an entertainment come-on, very much like the skin movies and advertisements that play for gross audience response. They're the Belly Dancers of poetry, with Layton as the star attraction. Sex, in fact, is the *summum bonum* and the source of all positive feeling, such as there is, in each of the three poets: a very odd conclusion to reach in the history of poetry and of human thought. Many a quizzical reader must feel, as I have felt occasionally —

Why should we praise the poet in you
For doing what any dog can do?

However, all three top poets are gifted, and each one of them has his own distinct character. Though they've played to the gallery they haven't quite "sold out" in any real sense and they have developed

their own energies immensely under the powerful stimulus of public acclaim. Each of them has become prolific under pressure: Layton, who used to turn out about six poems a year for the first decade and a half, suddenly began producing a book a year; Cohen has written hundreds of recitation pieces and songs, as well as two novels, within ten years; Purdy has gone travelling on Canada Council grants, to Cuba, to the Canadian north, and to Europe, to find material to meet the new demands. It was Layton who was first lauded as a "prolific poet"; but by now it should be obvious that popularity makes poets, no less than stand-up comics and movie stars, terribly prolific. (Bliss Carman was prolific in his time, turning out more than fifty titles in a short lifetime, most of them now unfortunately forgotten.)

Integrity, we should remember, has been the prime virtue of the great twentieth-century poets. The entire modern movement was a retreat from the idols of the marketplace to the private household gods of art and knowledge. They wanted, as Pound said, —

Some circle of not more than three
 that we prefer to play up to,
 Some few whom we'd rather please
 than hear the whole aegrum vulgus
 Splitting its beery jowl
 a-meaowling our praises.

So that any flirting with popularity runs counter to these principles. But of course the present generation is willing to erase the distinction between art and popular entertainment, an error that none of the great moderns could conceivably have tolerated.

If we take Purdy and Layton as the gauge, our star poets belong essentially to the frontier branch of Canadian

poetry: the school of direct speech, direct relation to life, and reductive realism. The parallel recognition of Raymond Souster in this decade, more modest than the others but still remarkable — discouraged as it is by the poet's unwillingness to play the personality game and to go on tours and readings — confirms the general ascendancy of a school. (I should know, since I have always favoured this kind of poetry; but victory is fatal to some revolutionaries. We must have opposition, or we may be obliged to succeed.) Leonard Cohen, a temperamental romantic, affiliated with the young generation of feeling and flowers, has simply been drawn into the orbit: see his "Cuckold's Song" and "Homeward Thoughts of a Tourist in Havana". The main drift of this group of poets is toward primitive realism — even "stupid realism," as Northrop Frye once called it — a nostalgia for the mud mixed with a hankering for lost divinity. "A mixture of sacred oils and sewage water," was once my description of Leonard Cohen: it's always a question of which predominates, the oil or the water.

(As for the new Leonard Cohen, who has "given up poetry" for Rock singing, the idol of little children dressed up in Cecil B. De Mille costumes, who "rank Cohen right up there with the other great poets of the day, with Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Jim Morrison of The Doors and Peter Townshend of The Who" — he has gone completely out of our range. The *Quod Erat Demonstrandum* of absurdity.)

Looking at Purdy and Layton, more specifically, we must observe that Canadian primitivism comes very late in the day. Poets like Bliss Carman and Archibald Lampman, at the end of the last

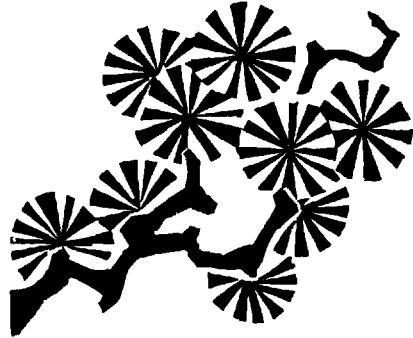
century, were far more cultivated, both intellectually and in their view of poetry, than our own Purdys and Laytons are. The present crudity is in fact a reaction to the refinement of our predecessors; its vigour and vulgarity is a working-class rejection of the manners and sensibilities of the late-departed bourgeoisie. On this score, I am myself more sympathetic to the poetic drive of a Souster, Layton, Purdy or Nowlan than I am to Daryl Hine, Glassco or A. J. M. Smith. But then, as critical reader I am aware of the dialectic involved, and I can see the devastation that a one-sided primitivism might work in poetry. The results are already apparent in the sequel to the Tish school and the prolific publications of some of the new presses — House of Anansi, Very Stone House, Coach House, Weed/flower, Island, Garglia, Gryphon and so forth — more presses than there were sometimes poets in the past. The degeneration of poetry to a teeny-bopper fad is, in fact, a further aspect of this barbarization.

Because the paradox follows — or is it a mere correlative? — that with the rise of a few star performers and idols, the crowd of minor poets, small presses and magazines has increased phenomenally, blurring all literary distinctions. In 1958, writing in the Quebec quarterly *Culture* on "Patterns in Recent Canadian Poetry" I opened by saying that "In a recent count of book-publishing poets writing in Canada in English I was able to put down no less than fifty names." It was easy to do then. Repeating the same count today, and using only the poets published within the last ten years, I find more than a hundred names. But there are scores of additional ones in the little magazines and on the campuses, intense young

people writing and publishing poetry. Reciting poetry, composing, singing poetry to the guitar has now become a sociological phenomenon much more than a literary art, and the flood of new writing has dramatically changed the entire literary environment.

Three years ago, several of us conceived an association of Canadian poets, consisting perhaps of two dozen names, to represent poetry before the foundations, international conferences and other official bodies, or on formal occasions. We were to help young poets, stand as surety for certain standards, encourage worthy support for poetry. As the association came to be organized, and as its objectives were defined and redefined over the months, it finally emerged as the League of Canadian Poets, already numbering over a hundred members, and promising many more — representing, in short, the whole miscellany of the current literary explosion.

I don't criticize the League; I only cite this to illustrate the change in the poetry scene, from a situation where twenty poets or so might be thought to represent all the reputable poetry of the country,



to one where more than a hundred poets aspire to the laurels.

So much the better, and the more the merrier, one might say. But democracy is not without its handicaps. The new presses, with generous Canada Council grants, produce sumptuous books, some of them specifically subsidized for de-luxe design and production — not shoe-string first books such as John Sutherland of First Statement or the early Contact Press used to bring out. The latest poets get themselves translated into Spanish in Mexico, into French in Quebec; they win luscious grants and prizes, get appointments as “Poets-in-Residence”, contract in advance for the sale of their worksheets and papers to generous libraries; they appear at readings before packed houses before they are weaned: in general the scramble goes on for the great prize, which is to be the next Cohen-of-the-land, whether one writes good poetry or not. Prophecies are easy to make: one can predict that the popular will become more mediocre as time goes on — a highly desirable change, since the distinction between art and mass appeal will again become clear — and that good poetry will return to its minority audience, perhaps a smaller audience than ever before. The “new barbarism” will have its reaction, just as Victorian sentimentalism did, and the retreat will be to a more esoteric refinement.

In the meantime we have the sad consequences of the present dislocation. Looking at the list one can see twenty-one books by poets of rank which have come out in the past ten years. But most of these books have been neglected by the general reader and by the critics, since the star system imposes an inevitable penalty — all others must suffer a tem-

porary eclipse as failures in the great race. Books have appeared within the decade by Earle Birney, A. J. M. Smith, James Reaney, Phyllis Webb, Eli Mandel, Daryl Hine, John Glassco, F. R. Scott, R. G. Everson, Raymond Souster, Eldon Grier, Roy Daniells, Dorothy Livesay, George Woodcock, Alden Nowlan, Miriam Waddington, Philip Child, Fred Cogswell, D. G. Jones, Robert Finch, P. K. Page. With poets of this calibre — Birney, Smith, Hine, Page — it’s not a question whether they will emerge as stars, or whether they will become “major poets” with the next book, but what line their individual development has taken, outside all movements and parties, and what their total conception and achievement has been. Each of them deserves some serious study. Of this they have been deprived by the confusion of standards in general, the misplaced emphasis on popular success, and the absence of any serious criticism in Canada. Young critics do not turn their sights on these poets to give them a close reading and a clear-sighted intellectual interpretation; the reviews are skimpy and ignorant, while the bread and circuses game continues. This is one of the side-effects of frontier cultural conditions, or to quote McLuhan — “Canada as a borderline case”.

Some of these poets in the past decade have brought out their Collected Poems, rounding out a full career: Smith, Scott, Souster, Birney. The opportunity is excellent now to study in full and in detail the work of these poets and several others, Ralph Gustafson, Dorothy Livesay, John Glassco. Layton and Purdy are not to be excluded, of course; though one would have to ask, if Purdy can now do nothing but write, what he had been doing for the first forty years of his life. As for

Cohen, his *Selected Poems*, the fruit of ten short years, is a bit premature as the harvest of a life's work.

The great boom of young poets began in 1964. Look at the list, year by year, of new names appearing on the scene (usually the first book of a new poet):

1959: Peter Miller, George Walton, Al Purdy.

1960: Kenneth McRobbie, Milton Acorn, Paul West, Mike Strong, Richard Outram.

1961: Gwendolyn MacEwen, Margaret Atwood, Phyllis Gotlieb (first small books of each poet).

1962: Alden Nowlan, Robin Mathews, Frank Davey, Padraig O'Broin, G. C. Miller.

1963: Dave Solway, Michael Malus, Harry Howith.

1964: The list jumps to eight names: George Bowering, Gerry Gilbert, Roy Kiyooka, John Newlove, David Wevill, Steve Smith, Pierre Coupey, Seymour Mayne.

1965: Now twelve new additions: Francis Sparshott, E. A. Lacey, Joan Finnigan, Luella Booth, Bryan McCarthy, Michael Parr, Tom Eadie, Tom Marshall, William Hawkins, Fred Wah, Lionel Kearns, Anne Kekes.

1966: Sixteen new poets: Bill Bissett, Henry Beissel, Rona Murray, Michael Gnarowski, Glen Siebrasse, Lakshmi Gill, Eugene McNamara, Richard Clarke, John Grube, David Cull, Renald Shooler, Mervin Procope, Ivan Burgess, Dorothy Farmiloe, Jim Brown, Cyril McColgan.

1967: Seventeen new names: Dennis Lee, Michael Ondaatje, George Jonas, B. P. Nichol, Michael Collie, Chuck Carlson, David McFadden, Nelson Ball, Barry Lord, Ken Belford, J. Michael

Yates, Victor Coleman, Joy Kogawa, G. S. Buri, George Farkas, Len Gasparini, David Phillips.

1968: A partial list only: Red Lane, Richard Sommer, Raymond Fraser (his third book), Heather Spears, Gerald Robitaille, Peter Stevens, Robin Skelton, Stanley Cooperman, David Weisstub, Schoel Shuster, Sandra Kolber. . . .

Simply to list these names in series is to realize the kind of problem involved. There is an escalation in progress, and it has not yet reached its peak — although our pocketbooks may have reached their limit. Bookstores, reviewers, grants officers are bewildered by the confusion. The publishing of poetry is strapped by over-production and problems of distribution and sales. A collapse of this South Sea Bubble is no doubt inevitable and eventually the run for poetry will lose its interest. Many of these are one-book poets who will perish in one season like the spawn of the Nile; but a good number will keep reproducing, so that for some years we may expect a cumulative effect. The list of poetry books published in 1967 came to over 45 items, while in 1959 the number was only 18. There has been a threefold increase within the last ten years.

So this is how the scene has been changed and transformed: by the rise of a trio of poets to unprecedented popularity and by the rapid influx of new poets (and publishing groups) with tastes and attitudes very much at variance with the past. The critical job is to discriminate, if this is still possible, and to distinguish the worthwhile trends in all this confusion, if any exist.

Behind any such criticism there must remain one overriding question: What was the grand objective of the twentieth-

century revolution in poetry, and how far is any new development getting ahead with this main objective? In other words, modernism, the discovery of the modern art form and its content; are we advancing (as Stephen Spender argues we must continue, with constant reaffirmation, to do) or are we backtracking and getting snarled again in the by-ways of exhausted or irrelevant technique?

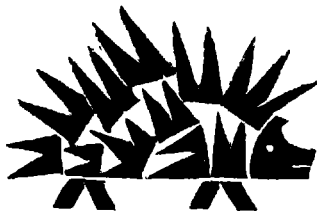
I said above that Layton, Cohen and Purdy have much of the naturalistic primitive in their style and attitude. They're primarily reductive and anti-traditional. Of the senior poets who have been cowed by their success, many are decidedly traditionalists: George Johnston is an extremely clever verse-maker (New Yorker style) who writes in routine mechanical meters; Roy Daniells, George Woodcock, Fred Cogswell, Robert Finch write dully and in depth in traditional forms; Ralph Gustafson and John Glassco try radically to renew the old with bravura and experiment. All this stands in polar opposition to the Ameliasburg style of Alfred Purdy or to the rhetorical bombast of Irving Layton. Modern poetry, as in Eliot and Pound, worked out of a combination and opposition of these two elements, the profoundly traditional obsessions and the new energies of the twentieth century. To separate the two is to destroy the balance and the tension of high acrobatics: to produce barbarism on the one hand, and sterile

formalism on the other. This is, to some extent, what we are tending to get, in recent years.

In contrast to Purdy and the primitives, consider the very tight intellectual poetry of Daryl Hine. The poems in *The Wooden Horse* (1965) are far superior in poetic conception and craftsmanship to anything in the popular poets: "In the Museum of Science and Industry" is a complex work of art: "The Lake" is a lyric that would put Leonard Cohen to shame. The same may be said of certain poems of Margaret Avison and James Reaney; they are sophisticated and complex in a way that Layton with all his major claims can never hope to be. Layton's critical prefaces reveal that his poetry is based on a vulgar romantic misconception of the poet's role and method: it never occurs to him to ask if Virgil or Horace wrote that way; if Dante roared; or if Spenser and Chaucer had the prophetic fury. The truly superior poets are free of this kind of nonsense; but they, on the other hand, lack the visceral vitality of the wild man.

It pains me to take this point of view, because I am temperamentally on the side of the naturalists. But the New Barbarism in Canadian poetry, especially among the young, demands this kind of criticism. The vast majority of the new poets belong to the junk-heap school; they are for the most part self-repeating products, inferior derivatives of Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Gary Snyder and other fifth-run epigones of the modern derivation. Never before, in fact, have poets been influenced by mediocre contemporaries to the extent that these poets are: Pound at least went to Propertius, and Eliot to Dante.

Consider, for contrast, the variety of



sensibility and technique in four poets of a preceding generation, Phyllis Webb, Eldon Grier, James Reaney and D. G. Jones. All four are aesthetically aware, freely imaginative, experimental, knowledgeable. Compare these to any handful of poets from the recent multitudinous progeny, or take only the most active and prominent: George Bowering, John Newlove, Michael Ondaatje, George Jonas. All the new poets are pretty much of a kind, and not exceptionally well-trained. Souster's collection *New Wave Canada*, which represents these poets in breadth, is really incredibly boring in its sameness. The new Anansi anthology *Canada First* is not a whit brighter or better-skilled. I think the reason lies in the one-dimensional flatness of the modern strain presented; it lacks mind, it lacks tension, it lacks intellectual contrasts. It represents only one-half of the modern complex: in derision of William Carlos Williams, the simple democratic line.

This is not to dismiss all that has appeared within the last ten years. Peter Miller is one of our most valuable and neglected poets; he has stopped writing (discouragement?), but his three published books show a beautiful skill and ease, and a cultivated "Old World" mind at work. The inoculation of the New never took, and he is always something of an exile in the Canadian world, but he is a most rewarding poet to read, and to re-read.

Eli Mandel has continued to write in this period; he is worth some close study. Milton Acorn has written some passionate and powerful poems. Alden Nowlan is a poet of major interest who has emerged in the Sixties; the current number of *Fiddlehead* is dedicated to his work. Eldon Grier, too, is very fine; his

poem "Kissing Natalia" (in *A Friction of Lights*) is more truly human than all the love lyrics and sighs of Leonard Cohen. (The contrast speaks for itself: Cohen's women are mere abstractions, sex objects without character and without identity, merkin pleasures.)

On the negative side, I find the Cassandra-like pretensions of Gwendolyn MacEwen tiresome; and Phyllis Gotlieb much too clever — and trivial — for her own good. (She is a constructivist, and deserves some kind of award in this category.) Margaret Atwood is sensitive but she lacks strong rhythm; those intimate broken lines, sometimes one word in a line, are hardly the art in excelsis. We must distinguish between psychological documents and poetry. John Robert Colombo, again, is a stimulating littérateur, a non-poet who also writes non-books (sometimes called Found Poems); a definite ornament on the literary scene.

Other poets? Frank Davey has promise, perhaps; so does Kearns, more likely perhaps. I enjoy the work of Harry Howith immensely. I hope to see more of Renald Shoofler, of Gnarrowski and Siebrasse, of Raymond Fraser, and of several others — even those I have criticized harshly. Poetry is an experience in novelty, like eating strange foods, before one becomes committed to preference and admiration. We should be able to enjoy it all, a little, at least while the first reading lasts.

The crucial question remains: are we advancing in the live modern direction? Modern poetry was to be an authentic expression of twentieth-century life, a new kind of poetry achieved by experiment and radical innovation. It was to be deeply rooted in reality (the domestication of romantic idealism), and it was to

be a vital renewal of poetic traditions. Finally, it was to express the vitality and freedom of a new-emancipated humanity.

It is easy to be critical. But for all our multi-media experiments and novelty-chasing, our life-realism lacks range and objectivity (especially among the young); our traditionalism is either excessive (in some poets) or it is nothing (in others); our freedom (teeny-bopper, teen-age, middle-age) is a waste of breath and a waste of life—it has no direction and no value. Leonard Cohen, for example, has wasted his talents in wilful excess; he is a sad and tragic figure, not the triumphant success one would imagine. But consider the alternatives: Daryl Hine, in the opposite camp, is much too secretive, much too enigmatic, closed within a system of traditional gestures; Ralph Gustafson, also a fine craftsman, lacks visceral drive, committed passion: his

best are artificial poems, polished mantel-piece decorations, like his “Row of Geraniums” in *Sift in an Hourglass*. In the best poets the experiment is too timid, there’s a lack of vigour; while in the worst there’s only mindless energy, uncontrolled release.

Earle Birney, perhaps, is the most satisfying modernist of them all, and a very big figure still; also F. R. Scott, who resembles him in this. But these are “old moderns” who knew what it was all about; where are the new moderns who are equally gifted, equally intelligent, and equally well-informed, to take on the task of continuing the making of modern poetry? The job is only half done, or a quarter done. We have a very long way to go, and the world is changing much faster than our poetry is changing. Shall we begin?

