

THE CANADIAN POET

Part II. After Confederation

A. J. M. Smith

WHEN WE TURN from the poetry of the generations just before and just after Confederation to that of the present or the near present, we find that there is the same distinction to be drawn between the explicit and somewhat journalistic *verse* that states or discusses in explicit terms the problems which face the people living north of the U.S. border, and the *poetry*, which expresses, (indirectly and implicitly), the *spiritual reality* which makes a nation.

To speak first of what I call the explicit verse, a very sharp difference will be observed at once. The poets of the earlier time wrote, as Lighthall had pointed out, cheerfully, hopefully, eagerly. They were expressing a faith — not necessarily a very informed one, but natural and very tenaciously held, something akin to what passes for conviction and opinion in the mind of the mythical man-in-the-street and is the basis upon which democratic elections are lost or won — a faith in the common interests and common heritage of all Canadians or, at least (and this cannot be left unremarked today) of all English-speaking Canadians. Sangster, Mair, Roberts all testified to this in their patriotic and political verse. The verse of the modern poet, on the other hand, tends to be critical and satiric. It is the flaws, shortcomings, and failures that the poet now sees looming large, while the ideal and the hope somehow fails to move him deeply enough for him to make poetry out of it.

One of the most explicit of the attempts made by a modern poet to come to terms with the problem of what it means to be “Canadian” was made — ironically enough, perhaps — by a young English writer, Patrick Anderson, who lived in Montreal in the late thirties and the early forties, became a Canadian

citizen, and edited an influential little poetry magazine called *Preview*, along with F. R. Scott, P. K. Page, and others, among whom for a time were Irving Layton and John Sutherland. Anderson was a fellow-traveller, if not actually a communist, and his view of Canadian history and the future of Canada was an orthodox Marxist one: "And the land was. And the people did not take it." But in a section of the poem called "Cold Colloquy", Anderson presented us with one of the first and one of the wittiest expressions in contemporary verse of our self-conscious and confused hesitation to enter into what the poet (in this case, at least) seems to believe is a great and manifest destiny.

In the poem the spirit of Canada speaks. It is in reply to "their" question — not "my" question or "our" question I must not fail to notice —

What are you . . . ? . . . they ask, their
 mouths full of gum,
 their eyes full of the worst silence of the
 worst winter in a hundred years.
 And she replies: I am the wind that wants a flag.

(That want at least has been supplied.)

I am the mirror of your picture
 until you make me the marvel of your life.
 Yes, I am one and none, pin and pine
 snow and slow,
 America's attic, an empty room,
 a something possible, a chance, a dance
 that is not danced. A cold kingdom.

Are you a dominion of them? they ask, scurrying

 Most loyal and empirical, she says, in ice ironic . . .

And so the poem goes on, purring in puns and definitions. After "What are you?" the question is, "What is the matter then? And the answer is, "The matter is the promise that was never taken." Inevitably there comes another question:

What shall we do then . . . ? they ask, English
 and French, Ukrainians, Poles, Finns . . .

and the poet answers — and now at the end the writer ceases to be a satirist, a writer of clever verse, and becomes a patriot and an idealist — like Sangster or Roberts. Though with this difference. They thought the Fathers of Confederation

were God. They uttered their *Fiat*, and lo! Canada was; the modern poet — if a poet writing in 1945 is modern — places the creation of a true Dominion still in the future. But he answers the question in spiritual and idealistic terms, not in terms of economics or sociology or the close-reasoned reports of Royal Commissions, but in poetic terms:

Suffer no more the vowels of Canada
to speak of miraculous things with a cleft palate . . .

How apt, how true, and how contemporary this is, after more than twenty years! What a perfect illustration of Ezra Pound's definition of literature as "news that stays news!"

Two other distinguished contemporary Canadian poets have dealt with this theme, Earle Birney and Irving Layton, but in their treatment of it neither deviates very deeply into poetry. They have kept carefully on the surface of things, hewed to the line of satire, and steered religiously away from faith, hope, and patriotic enthusiasm. Birney is the wittier of the two and his destructive but very impressive analysis of our national weaknesses is salutary. It is found at its clearest in the poem is called "Canada: Case History", written in 1948. The definitions are witty and deadly, and their truth will be recognized immediately by men of all parties.

This is the case of a high-school land,
deadset in adolescence,
loud treble laughs and sudden fists,
bright cheeks, the gangling presence.
This boy is wonderful at sports
and physically quite healthy;
he's taken to church on Sunday still
and keeps his prurience stealthy.

(This one line is no longer true. We publish our prurience now, and occasionally put it on TV.)

He doesn't like books except about bears,
collects new coins and model planes
and never refuses a dare.
His Uncle spoils him with candy, of course,
yet shouts him down when he talks at table.
You will note that he has got some of his French mother's looks,
though he's not so witty and no more stable.

He's really much more like his father and yet
if you say so he'll pull a great face.
Parents unmarried and living abroad,
relatives keen to bag the estate,
schizophrenia not excluded,
will he learn to grow up before it's too late?

It's a good question, and we should thank the poet for asking it. I don't think we should expect him to answer it. It's for us to answer.

Let us consider now the Confederation ode in Irving Layton's new collection, *Periods of the Moon*. This ode is not of course a patriotic encomium like the cheerful exhortations of Mair or Roberts. It is an angry and effectively coarse satire. And it is not really about Confederation; it is about something more important than Confederation; it is about the way Canadians today think and feel (or *don't* think and feel) about Canada and Confederation and the Centennial — about what, in fact, is going to make the Confederation a reality or a sham. It is a satire on the artificially inseminated enthusiasm that government agencies, civic agencies, business organizations, and ad-men are feverishly drumming-up and which the poet feels — not without a certain grim satisfaction — will be in vain.

It is easier, no doubt, to point out weaknesses and errors, and cry "Stinking fish!" than to suggest remedies, corrections, and reformations. That is the job for the historian, the political scientist, the economist, the statistician, the member of a Royal Commission. Perhaps the poet may cheer when the good work has been accomplished, but if in the meantime he makes use of "satire, invective and disrespectful verse" — to steal a phrase from the title page of *The Blasted Pine* — to prick the bubble of our complacency and jolt us awake to a proper realization of our true position in relation to one another, to the United States, Great Britain, and the world at large, he will have performed an essential service.

WHAT THE POET as satirist and critic has been saying in verse, which when well written has the advantage of being concise and memorable, has been stated over and over again by our academic historians and political philosophers. Compare, for example, with the passage from Patrick Anderson's "Poem on Canada" I was quoting just now, these sentences by Professor John Conway, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* for November 1964:

We Canadians have so far failed to enter fully into our legacy, and this is our one great, overreaching problem as our centennial approaches. On its solution everything else depends. We have failed to vest sovereignty where it properly belongs — in the Canadian people. Instead, we have allowed it to remain in the British monarchy, and in doing so we have divided our country and inhibited our emotional and creative development as a people.

It is significant perhaps that here too, in the essay of a professor of history writing exactly a hundred years later we have the same conviction as that which the Rev. Hartley Dewart expressed in his Introduction to our first anthology — that creative maturity in poetry and the arts is the result of true nationhood. Professor Conway continues:

When we take the long overdue step and transfer sovereignty to where it properly belongs, it will become clear that Canadians — British, French, and European alike — have been and are engaged in a common enterprise which is of far greater concern than the separate concerns of each group; and just as the United States has given classic expression in literature, philosophy, and political theory to its interpretation of the New World, so will we begin to give classic expression to ours.

One might pursue this subject farther and give illustrations of the instructive and often amusing parallels between the writings of historians or social critics and those of the poets, or at least of the satirists among them, and place beside the verses by Frank Scott entitled “W. L. M. K.” —

— He never let his on the one hand
Know what his on the other hand was doing.

and

Do nothing by halves
Which can be done by quarters —

some sentences by Professor Underhill:

His statesmanship has been a more subtly accurate, a more flexibly adjustable Gallup poll of Canadian public opinion than statisticians will ever be able to devise. He has been the representative Canadian, the essential Canadian, the ideal Canadian, the Canadian as he exists in the mind of God.

Here you will see the arts of verse and prose coming close together — prose as concise and pointed as verse, and verse as sensible as prose. But I must leave

this tempting field to the graduate student of Canadian literature who wishes to find a subject for a dissertation that may prove both useful and entertaining.

INSTEAD, I will offer some general observations about the state of poetry and the status of poets here and now.

The situation today is immensely different, not only from a hundred years ago but from the time in the middle twenties when I, along with F. R. Scott, Earle Birney, A. M. Klein, Eustace Ross, and Raymond Knister, began to write. I say "along with", but that's not quite accurate. I knew Scott and Klein, of course, but Ross and Knister and Birney were unknown to us. I followed avidly the European and American literary journals and little magazines — particularly *The Dial* in New York and *transition* and *This Quarter* in Paris. (In Canada there was only the *Canadian Forum* — and it had one fine feather in its cap: it had printed E. J. Pratt's "The Cachalot".) We were astonished and delighted to find in the pages of the avant garde magazines writing by Canadians — Morley Callaghan's first stories and poems by Raymond Knister — and when some of my poems appeared in *The Dial* I found also those of another Canadian, W. W. E. Ross — hailed recently by Raymond Souster as "the first modern Canadian poet."

These were the first stirrings of the new poetry movement in Canada. But for the most part as the twenties came to a close the picture was still pretty dismal. The maple leaf school of patriotic nature poetry under the aegis of the Canadian Authors Association and a group of genteel traditionalists among editors and publishers forced most of the new young poets to look outside Canada, knowing that acceptance by *The Dial* or *Poetry* (Chicago) or one of the Parisian experimental magazines meant that we had attained a higher standard of excellence than was demanded by any Canadian journal — always excepting the *Forum*.

The atmosphere, indeed, when I began to write, is very well summed up and expressed in Frank Scott's now famous poem "The Canadian Authors Meet." It was not until 1936 that we were able to persuade a Toronto publisher to bring out a little group anthology called *New Provinces* containing work by the Montreal poets Scott, Klein, Kennedy, and myself and the Toronto poets Finch and Pratt — the latter only being well known. The book made no impact at all — except perhaps on other still younger poets — only eight-six copies were sold, and the new poetry movement, which in Canada seemed to be limited to the books

of E. J. Pratt, had to wait until the early forties to get under way. Then, with the criticism of W. E. Collin and E. K. Brown and the first books of Birney, Klein, Scott, myself, and a little later P. K. Page, Patrick Anderson, Raymond Souster, Dorothy Livesay, Louis Dudek, and . . . but the list grows too long, and has never ceased to grow.

Today, after the amazing acceleration, starting in the forties and continuing through the fifties and sixties with an ever-increasing ferment, Canadian poetry presents at first sight a bewildering spectacle of schools and individuals busily writing, gesticulating, reading, declaiming, quarrelling, praising, lecturing, teaching, applying for grants, appearing on television, grinding out little mags on mimeograph machines, and frequently producing new and genuine poetry.

AT ONE TIME it seemed to me that Canadian poets could be roughly divided into two schools, the native and the cosmopolitan, and I think it was Northrop Frye who added the necessary corrective — that this dichotomy is not a matter of division between poets or groups of poets but a division within the mind of every poet. The division that exists today, however, between poets and groups of poets is between the traditional or academic, the cultivated poets, you might say, and the new primitives, whose tradition goes back no farther than to William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, or his disciple Robert Creeley, and, in some cases, to Allen Ginsberg. This is an American school of (if I may be allowed a paradox) sophisticated primitives. They hail from San Francisco and Black Mountain College — Cid Corman's little magazine *Origins* was published at Black Mountain and rather surprisingly, among the Canadian writers it published were Morley Callaghan, Irving Layton, and Margaret Avison. The chief influence of these western American experimentalists has been felt in Vancouver, in the little poetry magazine *Tish*, and in the verse of such poets as John Newlove, George Bowering, Lionel Kearns, and even younger writers featured in Raymond Souster's recent anthology *New Wave: Canada*.

In Canada, however, it is not groups or broad general divisions that stand out most clearly, but individuals — men of vigorous personality, who go striding up and down the land (aided and abetted by the Canada Council, the CBC, and the universities) speaking their poetry and standing up for the poetic way of life, as opposed to the life of unimaginative acceptance in the mechanized world of ad-men, mass-communication, and pollster politics. It is their immersion in this

world they never made and don't like that makes so many of our best poets — Earle Birney, Frank Scott, Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen — satirists and ironic comedians in a surprisingly large proportion of their work and forces some of the younger poets into abstract expressionism, black humour, and the cultivation of pop art as a revolt against the conformist art of the establishment.

Of recent years also some of our best poets have realized that to be Canadian is not enough, just as to be British or American is not enough. In the thirty years that include what happened at Guernica, Belsen, Dresden, and Hiroshima, events of such stupefying horror occurred — and are still occurring in Viet Nam — that the poet is forced to realize that his responsibility rests with all mankind and that he shares the guilt of all mankind. Something of this is felt in the poems of India and the Far East of Scott and Birney, of South America and Mexico by Birney and Louis Dudek, and in the poems of Germany and Spain in Irving Layton's newest collection.

In the prefaces to his last four or five volumes — he has published five since 1961 — Layton has presented the conception of the universal moral responsibility of the poet with vigour and clarity; and while the presentation is sometimes marred by an accretion of personal "soundings-off", these do not invalidate the truth and passion of the poet's main message. "Today, poets must teach themselves to imagine the worst. . . . If the poet is to win back the praise he once enjoyed as the supreme 'interpreter of the age' he must learn again to address himself to the moral and psychological dilemmas of his time. Though satisfying verbally and technically mere blabbermouthing is out. . . ."

If this should mean discarding of about sixty per cent of Layton's own poetry, the rest would be the stronger for it. And I take it as a sign of continuous development that this element of responsibility, strength and sincerity has been increasing in proportion with every volume he has written in this decade.

As I close, I would like to set beside the prefaces of Irving Layton the preface written in 1941 by a young Canadian named Bertram Warr to a small pamphlet of his poems published by Robert Graves. Warr was a pacifist, who had tried to enlist in the Red Cross but was drafted into the Royal Air Force and was killed in action over Germany on April 3, 1943.

Ours [he wrote] is an age of renunciation. It is an age of probing and reflection, of scrutiny of tradition and dogma in the hard light of reason. And with each abandonment of the outworn things that for so long had meant security to us, we grow just a little more tight-lipped. We feel the new hardness of scepticism, and as tie after tie is cut, in manners, religion, science, the whole field of contact be-

tween man and man, there comes over us the lassitude of disillusionment. . . . We are not yet ready for this new world that has grown up from the second decade of the century. Successive shocks have proved too much for us and we have been driven into retreat, still clinging to the shreds of old things, and too untried to step forward and gaze upon the new in their true light. We have gone backward to lick our wounds and debate, somewhat morbidly, whether to carry on the fight, or to renounce with all the rest, those other bases of our being, Beauty and Love and the Search for Truth.

Many of the most serious of our younger poets have, perhaps, gone backward to lick their wounds, but one thing is clear, even in the most far-out of the Beat poets, that the search is still, if sometimes in the most unexpected places, for Beauty, Love, and Truth. The contemporaries and compatriots of the Canadian poet today may not be any longer Yeats or Eliot but rather Lorca and Brecht, Pablo Neruda, René Char, William Carlos Williams, and Mayakovsky, and the art that he must aim at is neither native nor cosmopolitan but universal.