

THE OLD AGE OF THE NEW

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IT WILL NO DOUBT seem unfair that I should use the receipt of review copies of eleven books of Canadian verse¹ as an excuse for writing an essay on the state of Canadian poetry. Has not each of these poets his own individuality? Is it fair, then, to think of him as an example of something? Unfortunately, while each of these poets does necessarily have his own individuality, as a human soul, he does not as a poet. There is a disconcerting sameness about most of the poems, all the more disconcerting because each poet clearly believes his statement to be intensely personal. More generally, one cannot help noting the similarities between this new Canadian verse and that produced in the United States, the United Kingdom and other English-speaking countries. It is as if all idiosyncrasies were being ironed out. There are those who would convince us that this monotony of texture is the result of that shared vision which comes at the beginning of a new and exciting era. I would put it down, rather, to the exhaustion of a style.

Since they possess so little individuality, there would be very little point in my discussing each of these books individually. Instead, I will select some passages which best illustrate the elements these books have in common.

It is true that the critics and poets together talk as if we were living in an era of literary revolution. And in a way, we are; but it is precisely the same revolution "begun" by Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1899) or by Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* (1897), a revolution which had already settled into respectability by the time T. S. Eliot came along. In short, we are living in an era of permanent revolution, which, as readers of Nazi and Communist history will know, is a peculiar kind of intellectual stasis characterized by a very rapid circular motion around the same point.

Kathleen Raine, a good poet, has recently published a fine book entitled *Defending Ancient Springs*, in which appears the following perceptive statement — “It might certainly seem that revolution for its own sake, transformation as such, an instantaneous gesture which expresses finally nothing but its own instantaneity, process as such, has become the be-all and end-all of art; process so accelerated that all images have dissolved into the flux of continuous transformation, so much so that form, in such art, can no longer be said to exist.”

Now, in the poems to be reviewed, form certainly does not exist; but then true form is rare. By form I do not mean what results from the skilled use of fixed rhyme schemes, regular metres, and the traditional repertoire of tropes. Every poet should be able to handle these, which have in themselves some kind of innate life, just as every composer should be able to write a traditional fugue and every painter paint a convincing nude. Even if the poet does not elect to use them in his mature work, the ability to handle them intelligently is indispensable evidence of an elementary but necessary seriousness about the craft aspects of his art. Yet a poet may be, like Auden, a complete master of all poetic techniques, and rarely succeed in creating work which is formally beautiful. I am referring rather to something which has the coherent, self-contained, living beauty of an apple or a new-born child: a poet without craft knowledge cannot realize such a work, but in itself it is the product of inspiration, and is unpredictable. This kind of formal beauty has been rare enough at any time in the past; it is much rarer in our century, at least in English. It is found in Eliot's *Four Quartets* but not in *The Waste Land*, in the last poems of Dylan Thomas, but not in his earlier ones, in Yeats but very rarely in Auden, in Edwin Muir and Vernon Watkins, occasionally in MacLeish, but almost never in Pound. Should we expect such a rare quality in English-Canadian poets, always provincial, but now provincial to a decadent tradition? What can we expect from those whose *masters* are such minor figures as Olson, Creeley and Ginsberg? Among Canadian poets I make an exception of Layton and Cohen, who are interesting examples of split personality: half of their verse is minor but good post-Symbolist work, dependent upon the European tradition: the other half, the ostentatiously North American half, is cheap, loud and shallow.

THE BEST FIRST; and it is depressing that the best poet in this collection should be George Bowering, because Bowering is not a major talent. His advantage is that he has a clearly defined aesthetic. It is a limited, almost a

jejune aesthetic; but it contains an idea, if not of the beautiful, of the appropriate: Bowering knows what experiences his style can cope with, and those it must leave alone. His poems are more or less innocent of truly poetic form, but they do follow, though obliquely, an "argument", and one finds, when one has finished reading them, that some kind of coherent statement has been made.

Bowering is a fairly close follower of the Black Mountain poets of the United States, Creeley, Olson and the rest, who are in turn followers of William Carlos Williams, and that eminent Sinologist and Egyptologist, Ezra Pound, or, as Bowering calls him, "Ez Pound". Their remote ancestor is Walt Whitman: not the prophetic oracular Whitman, who produced some of the most beautiful poetry of his age, but the Whitman of naturalistic snapshots, who often descended to bathos. This group, like the surrealists, neo-metaphysicals and Communists of the last generation, has a clear idea of what poetry should and should not be, and a corresponding set of political and social ideals. It also has the advantage of being at the tail end of one of the few poetic and political movements truly indigenous to Anglo-Saxon North America. Politically it springs, if one traces it back far enough, from the petit-bourgeois and frontier radicalism of the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian epochs of United States history, a kind of quirky utilitarianism which was reflected in Canada in the movement led by William Lyon Mackenzie (some of whose speeches, surely the most boring ones, have recently been versified — by somebody named Colombo, I believe). In this century, a similar impulse has expressed itself in Technocracy and Social Credit. The Black Mountain poets have a Leveller's concept of history, and an obsession with tools, whether mechanical or hand-directed. There is a hatred of "polite letters", in the old European and Bostonian sense ("poetry — PAH!" George Bowering says somewhere); but this understandable rejection of a long-dead tradition hides a deeper rejection both of finely-tuned wit and formal beauty. Even more deeply is hidden a rejection of any view of the world or poetry dependent upon non-materialist cosmologies. These poets are materialists to the core; but because they are archais-ing materialists, this fact is sometimes missed: it is clear that Olson, their master, loves flowers, old harbour-charts, sailing-ships and hand-tools, and he has at times vividly evoked 18th-century America; but things do not become spiritual by being old, and he is still utterly engrossed in the world of things. (He is also interested in astrology and the "occult", but simply as representative of a less tangible order of the material world.) Their world-view is horizontal, but has no place for the vertical. Thus, in language, there is a complete rejection of the idea that there are "high words" and "low words". One word is as good as an-

other, just as one man is as good as another, an idea Olson has attempted to justify by misquoting Dante on the use of "combed" and "shaggy" words. Words of themselves are considered to have no resonance or beauty: how can they, when events have no meanings other than those the poet gives to them? The other side of the coin is a kind of Pelagianism of vocabulary; this is sometimes mistaken for obscenity by casual readers, but is really evidence of an odd flat innocence, which assumes that the traditional associations of obscene words may be abolished by fiat. One is reminded of Gladstone among the prostitutes.

There are however, inconsistencies. Decadent Europe is rejected; but curiously enough decadent Asia is accepted. Bowering, for example, has expressed his fondness for the extremely refined, perhaps over-refined, *Tale of Genji*, in which Lady Murasaki Shikibu displays a sensibility one would have thought quite antithetical to his own. If Lady Murasaki, why not Jane Austen or Henry James? The Black Mountain poets and poetasters have inherited from Ezra Pound a fondness for "exotic" ancient and Asian cultures — archaic Greek, Egyptian, Chinese and Japanese, to which has been added, recently, an interest in ancient Mexican civilization. These cultures are used as standards, against which is set, to its disadvantage, the culture of the Christian West. Unfortunately, these cultures are superficially understood as a rule: Olson's *Mayan Letters* are, in places, ineffably silly. This superficiality seems to be a family curse, passed on from Old Ez. "I once asked Arthur Waley," Graves says in *The Crowning Privilege*, "how much Chinese Pound knew; Waley shook his head despondently."

Bowering's *Baseball: A Poem in the Magic Number Nine* is dedicated to the United States poet, Jack Spicer, who has described himself as "member of the California Republican Army which hopes by violent means to establish an independent California which will ally itself with France and China." In a very small way, Bowering is trying to make baseball, as Melville made whaling, a symbol of the cosmic process. In the first section, Bowering compares the world to a baseball thrown out into space:

In the beginning was the word, and the word was
'Play Ball!'

By references to the players whose careers he has followed, and who are now dead or retired, Bowering laments the fading of physical beauty and strength; in the eighth section he playfully fields his own lineup (left field Terpsichore, second base Polyhymnia and so on); in the ninth section the end of the game is compared to the coming on of physical age, and the deaths of civilizations.

The theme is a very traditional one. Homer, Pindar and the Elizabethan dramatic poets (if it is not ridiculous to mention such names in this context) had the ability to use games as symbols of the deep movements within the individual personality and within history. Many Amerindian games had a deeply symbolic aspect, particularly the Mexican game of *tlachtli*, to which more than one recent poet has referred. Bowering handles this old theme at a very low level of intensity. There is a certain wit here, but it rarely rises above amiable fooling:

God is the Commissioner of Baseball.
 Apollo is the president of the Heavenly League.
 The Nine Muses, his sisters
 the first all-girls baseball team.
 Archangel Michael the head umpire.
 Satan was thrown out of the game
 for arguing with the officials.

These are images one might playfully develop in conversation over a cup of coffee; they lack resonance and inevitability. The writing is “clean”, with no words wasted, but this is not quite enough to make prose poetic. Bowering often makes the fashionable mistake of confusing the conciseness of the poem with that of the telegram:

He’s still got big black moustache, shoots pool
 with his belly hanging over the rail.

The poem has, in fact, the thin neatness of the very minor poetry of the late 18th century; the images are pebbles arranged side by side, and a tone of suburban whimsy pervades even the “cosmological” parts. Bowering, in certain of his passages, might be a tone-deaf John Betjeman.

Like many contemporary poets, Bowering writes manifestos which only confuse us, because they seem intended to compensate for the defects of his verse. “What do I think about poetry?” he has written on the jacket of an earlier book, *Points on the Grid*, “Mainly that the job is a spoken art and that what is written down is a score, poetry being closer to music than any other artform. The written thing is no more the poem than the score is the symphony. Scores are written because you can’t take an orchestra or a poet to every farmhouse on the Canadian tundra. But meticulous care should be taken with notation of the poem, because you are trying to make a suggestion of the things the voice does”. And he adds, “Rhythm, I’ve always been told, is my forte.”

A somewhat ingenuous way of disarming us. What we are reading, it seems, is

not the real poem, only its "score", so we are not to judge it until we have heard Mr. Bowering speak it; a chance few of us will have. The truth is that rhythm is not Mr. Bowering's forte: his rhythms (which are prose rather than verse rhythms) are few and repetitious, and tend here towards short lines of prose dominated by a thumping and graceless ametrical beat with vaguely trochaic tendencies.

An even more obvious use of the red-herring manifesto is found in the preface to *Pilgrims of Peace*, by Bonnie Day. "Some of these verses are booby-trapped. They look innocent and old-fashioned and on the surface deceptively simple, and when you least expect it, they explode with meaning. So don't say I didn't warn you." In fact, these poems *are* innocent and old-fashioned, and it would be unkind to say any more than that about them. It is strange to read such a collection in conjunction with these others, which are so resolutely "modern" (though no less conventional); but maybe *Pilgrims of Peace* indicates one thing, that a return to regular rhyme and metrical patterns, and an avoidance of self-consciously incongruous imagery will not in itself "save" poetry.

A CONSIDERATION of these eleven books forces one to a conclusion which also arises, if with less brutal obviousness, from a consideration of the more complex and proficient work being produced in the United States, namely that the "experimental age" is over. "Free verse" has congealed into thick and sodden prose; and perhaps it is becoming clear that there never was such a thing as "free verse", but that most verse which passed under that name, if it was not versified prose, was either written in variable metres, which are as old as the Greeks, or psalmic verse, as derived from Scripture by Whitman, Claudel and others. The use of the startling image has become a nervous tic; the desire to shock the bourgeois has become either a childish amorality or a dogged and habitual obscenity; the learned evocation of the past has become a superficial exoticism; and the poetic demotic, which was to sweep away all "rhetoric" and "fine writing", has become a grotesque dialect with no relation to the speech-habits of any North American class. The "modern" techniques have been vulgarized; it is the characteristic of a vulgarized form that it becomes a universal template into whose shape the most incongruous materials are all too easily cut.

Bizarre forms of imagery, specifically developed to embody states of anguish or visionary derangement are used to express perfectly normal, indeed rather

mediocre emotions, as in the following quotation from Helene Rosenthal's "Better Housekeeping" (in *Peace is an Unknown Continent*)

In the morning
reading of race riots
I wield the vacuum
cleaner, with less than
my usual assurance.
I avoid
 the space
under the bed
where my responsibility
lives like a hamster
fed on scraps of
vegetarian pity.

(One might also note, parenthetically, a not untypical carelessness with the English language: presumably it is the hamster, not pity, which is a vegetarian.)

Jagged rhythms, whose original purpose was to realize an explosive tension, are used to express serene feelings or calm thoughts, as in the following strange tribute to the Parthenon by Ralph Gustafson (from *Mainline*) —

Proportion is all things of beauty.
Dimension, go beyond dimension.
It won't satisfy. Measure nothing,
Only in relation, the cornice balanced
Against the line, the line against
The truth, not as an existence
But as a meaning, the marble line
The respect to itself, the incumbent gods.

The specialized vocabulary of the exact sciences is used, not because the poet has a passionate love of scientific truth, but because he wishes to give his lines an air, usually spurious, of "wit" and learned precision.

Perhaps enzymatic indolence
dissolved the neuron sentries.

("No Exit", by Michael Freedman)

Love between man and woman (or in some cases a homosexual relationship) is seen exclusively and stupidly in terms of the sexual act. Indeed, in terms of the specific discharge of semen, which is usually described in language at once brutish and clinical. (There is no need to embarrass the reader by quotation.)

There is a specifically anti-Christian bias, and, in the case of some Jewish poets, an animus against both Christianity and Judaism. More generally, there is an antagonism to all religions. One does find occasional references to Eastern religions, but these are usually thrown in in order to score a point against Christianity. I see no evidence here of any serious interest in Eastern religions, even in Buddhism: most references to the East indicate no deeper knowledge than may be obtained from a few pocket books. Instead, there is an interest in magic, not as a form of supernatural philosophy (in which sense it has deeply influenced much European poetry), but as a reflection of a "higher" state of matters. Sometimes, indeed, magic is seen as simple technique, an easy way to power and knowledge. This is the world, not of Dr. Faustus, but his servant, Wagner, who now-a-days would probably take LSD, and compulsively play the *I Ching* and the Tarot cards.

I know a white magic,
a mystical magic —

Bonnie Day sings with her usual candour; but more often than not this obsession is beneath the surface.

When political ideas are expressed, they are usually nihilist or anarchist, unless they descend from the Jeffersonian radicalism I have discussed earlier. There is a hatred of authority, not because it is misused (the traditional argument of satire), but simply because it *is* authority, whether moral or coercive. Here, again, only the activists express this idea bluntly and openly; usually it is one of the unstated premises of the poem. Admittedly, such ideas do have a certain juvenile dash.

A very high proportion of these verses begin and end nowhere in particular. It is not a question, it should be noted, of implicit form, or of poems which are formed according to new principles. They are, simply, boneless. Far from attaining the formal beauty discussed earlier, most of these verses do not reach the level of craft competence. John Hulcoop, in introducing his book, *Three Ring Circus Songs*, makes a rather touching confession —

Sometimes there's everything to say and so many ways to sing it that you don't know where or how to start. Departure is also a problem when there are too many places you feel you might go to and too many earth-roads, sea-roads, air-roads you could travel by to arrive there.

I would venture to say that no true poet ever feels that way. Rather, he feels the poem has only one possible form and there is only one possible way to achieve it: the problem is finding the form and the way.

There are more ways of forestalling criticism than those discussed so far. Freedman makes the obligatory references to Dachau and Hitler, but it doesn't make his poems any better. Indeed, it is from his collection that I will select my nomination for the Worst Image of the Year —

. . . joy wells from your face
lubricating the distance.

A strong contender in the Embarrassing Self-Consciousness class is the beginning of his "Mistaken Boundaries" —

a hebrew's kiss
frightens you.

CAN ONE DETECT ANYTHING NEW at all in these poems, a "trend"? Perhaps one can detect a trend towards giving up the game entirely, towards a flattening out of the poem to the point where it becomes simple and manageable, a "poetry for everybody". The best poems in these eleven books (apart from Bowering's *Baseball*, which does show, as I have said, some art) are little descriptive pieces, "episodes from life", which might well have been paragraphs in short stories or novels. The best of them are those in which the imagery is thinnest, is either conventional or non-existent; and the reason for this is probably that a materialistic point of view, which does not recognize a higher level of events to which physical events may be compared, is not favourable to the development of effective imagery, indeed has no need for it. There are many verses in this category — Helene Rosenthal's "First Noel" and "Domestic Poetry", Dorothy Farmiloe's "Goodbye, Linda", Len Gasparini's "Union Station, Toronto" and "The Photograph of My Grandfather Reading Dante" and David McFadden's "The Flowermaster".

Every morning I look
and my dahlias are come bigger.
Every second day I water em
every third I hoe.

Soon I'll have to get out the stakes
for tying support, then
a little nitrogen, some chlorodene
just before blossom time.

Then they will blossom and I'll find out
how I'll make out at the fairs
am I first prize material this year
or second or third

and the thought sticks in my mind
leaving a weird series of afterthoughts
the thought of vandals hopping the fence
kicking all my dahlias down.

It is doubtful whether this can be called a poem, but it does make a simple unified statement. The inability to make a more complex metaphorical statement is shown by Helene Rosenthal's "Peace is an Unknown Continent". I will quote the first half of the poem. I might have chosen others just as bad by other poets: indeed, most of these poets are much worse than Helene Rosenthal, who has, at least, read a few books.

By degrees
 configuration
 of the heat-hazed land
 subsided
 at the zero
parallel.

It was a plotting time for her
a spacing time but slow . . .
pajamas didn't fit well
and she slept poorly.

 It is my seasonable job
 she said
 to navigate
 a mutinous crew.

The trouble was her dreams
which charted by old instinct,
while she held a compass
learning how to read
small, faceless digits
that shivered
ever north past alien forms
to magnet icecaps.

 Moby Dick
 makes exiles of us all

she said.
My brain is a white monster.

Sometimes the sea grew multiform
remembered shapes,
sargassos of vegetal nets
she had to cut through
to hold course.
The days kept keel
trimmed to the steel point
of the north star's gleam.

Necessity
is a good tool
she said.
Always it is contemporary.

At Cancer
she cut the tropic cord,
pulled with an even knot
to secure the cyclone latitudes
and went below.
The current warmed
a green pocket of sleep
wedged
between advancing
arctic
floes.

...
Snow logged the days.
Wind thinned the hours.

A psychological crisis of some unidentified kind (at first I thought it was the pain of giving birth, but this approach didn't work) is figured as a journey by ship into the polar regions. Apparently it is not important that we know what this crisis was, since the poet does not tell us; but we are entitled to ask that the image of the journey by sea be itself consistent, and carry us through a convincing analogue of the experience the poet wishes to embody. It is thus in *The Ancient Mariner*, and in the magnificent odes of Claudel. But genius is rare, and we are not entitled to ask any more than that the image be adequately realized within the context the poet has set himself — realized as well, perhaps, as the sea imagery of Olson's *Maximus Poems*.

If the following exegesis seems bizarre, the reader must blame my literal mind.

I take the first verse (“By degrees . . . zero parallel”) to mean that as the ship moved towards the equator, the land, as seen from the sea, became less mountainous. The voyage seems to have started below the equator; I could not guess at the coast-line referred to.

I take the next verse (“It was a plotting . . . she slept poorly”) to mean that the captain-poet coped with the boredom of the voyage by finally getting down to plotting a course. The fact that her pajamas didn’t fit well may seem trivial, but such apparently small matters become very important in the tropics.

I take the next verse (“It is my seasonable . . . a mutinous crew”) to mean that the crew is mutinous, which is not surprising, in view of the revelation in the next stanza (“the trouble . . . to magnet icecaps”) that the captain does not yet know how to read a compass. However, we are to understand that she has sailed these waters before “by old instinct”, which must have been quite a trick.

I do not know what is meant, in the next verse, by the line “Moby Dick / makes exiles of us all”; but it has a fine ring.

In the next verse, she is in the Sargasso Sea, which lies between 20° north and 35° north.

The observation in the next verse, that “Necessity is a good tool” also has a good, somewhat brassy ring, though it lacks the fine insouciant clangour of the statement about Moby Dick.

In the next verse she has reached the Tropic of Cancer (23½° North), where she performs a mysterious, but apparently efficacious operation which makes it possible for her to get some sleep. We must assume she falls asleep almost immediately, and sleeps for several days, since she awakes (no time having passed) to find herself surrounded by ice-floes.

The last two lines I translate roughly as “there was snow and wind”. I had some difficulty with the word “logged”, since in verse 6 the days have been compared to ships. A ship’s log is used to measure distance travelled, and one would assume the poet means that snow measured the distance travelled by the ship; but since the ship is itself a measurement of time this does not make sense. If the poet means that the days were remembered by how much snow they had, then the word “logged” is inappropriate, because of its very specific meaning as a nautical term. It is also difficult to understand how wind thinned the hours, since, on a sailing ship, a wind would increase activity, and thus “fill out” the hours, and lack of wind would cause them to drag.

It would be cruel to continue further. Enough has been said, I think, to indi-

cate that the imagery has neither been thought nor felt out, but is quite meaningless when read carefully, though it sounds vaguely impressive if one gallops through it. This is true of many of the poems in these books, most of which really do not merit discussion. It is true also of many more sophisticated poems written in the United States and England. Helene Rosenthal's poem, and the other poems under review, are specimens of a literary tradition in the last stage of senility.

IS POETRY DEAD? I can hardly think so. It has merely reached a very low point. There have been such nadirs before — when the mediaeval tradition degenerated into dry pedantry and abstraction, when the metaphysical image became first far-fetched, then ridiculous, when all Augustan heroic couplets began to sound the same. Something new replaced them, and something new will replace the present tradition. It will necessarily be “modern”, since this simply means poetry not written in the past. It will hardly, however, be “in the modern tradition”. If the “modern movement” really began with the publication of *Un Coup de Dés* in 1897, it probably ended with the 1929 crash. The poets of the thirties discovered little that was new; if anything, they settled territory which had already been explored. By the forties, perhaps, the land was exhausted. Since the Second World War, we in the English-speaking world have been living off our capital, and the account is now overdrawn.

¹ *Typescapes* by David Aylward (Coach House Press); *Lebanon Voices* by Bill Bissett (Weed and Flower Press); *Baseball* by George Bowering (Coach House Press); *Pilgrims of Peace and Other Poems* by Bonnie Day (Coach House Press); *Mainline*, edited by Dorothy Farmiloe (poems by Fred Cogswell, Alden Nowlan, Eugene McNamara, Dorothy Farmiloe, Algirdas Kryzanasuskas, Andrew Suknaski, Josephine Ryan, Al Pittman, Donald Polson, Len Gasparini, Rick Hornsey, Ralph Gustafson, C. H. Gervais, D. B. Kuspit, N. West Linder, Linda Wagner, George Bowering); *21 x 3* by Dorothy Farmiloe, Len Gasparini and Eugene McNamara (Gryphon Press); *Poems from Ritual* by Michael Harris and *Through the Telemeter* by Michael Freedman (privately published, Montreal); *Three-Ring Circus Songs* by John Hulcoop (Talonbooks); *The Saladmaker* by David McFadden (Imago); *Peace is an Unknown Continent* by Helène Rosenthal (Talonbooks).