

NEW WAVE IN CANADIAN POETRY

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I THINK OF KING CANUTE. The son of Sweyn Forkbeard was not the backwater he is thought to be. He is supposed to have faced the ocean waves and regally ordered them to quit their task of pure ablution round earth's human shores. Being a hardheaded Scandinavian with much experience in his blood of tides and the affairs of man, he knew better. He assembled his court and, with a proper object-to-object relationship and concrete instance, demonstrated what happens when the monarch of all he surveys orders the waves to cease their allegiance to the moon. The irony was lost on his courtiers, and, as far as one can judge, is still lost on all good conservatives.

Canute was being a good poet. He was also being a good critic: obstinate and alert, with authority to demonstrate the absurd.

Though the possibility exists, since the Scandinavians got around and did more than their share to provide amusement for the wives while they dealt with the husbands, as far as I know I can claim no descent from Canute. Two affinities, however, come to mind. The *Tinglid* to protect the marches and borders, I am in favour of. And I have stood for hours gazing at the North Sea.

The occasion I recently had was the preparation of a revised edition of *The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse*. Since the first edition, compiled a year or eighteen months previous to 1958, the publication date, I have been aware that a revision to include the work of the new generation of Canadian poets was needed. In the inexplicable way Nature has of doing this, a cluster of poets seemed

to me to have been born similar in importance to the cluster born around Confederation and to the cluster born around the First World War. Because of those unmanageable restrictions publishers always come up with, for the revision I was given far too little leeway: sixteen pages added to the first edition, with some opportunity for internal thefts and manœuvres and dispositions requiring a foot-rule and scissors-and-paste. If I had little liberation, I was, however, strictly put to the necessity of examining acutely the poetry new since 1958.

Twenty-five years ago when in the *Pelican Anthology of Canadian Poetry* I first published abroad the work of English-Canadian poets, the survey was made with comparative ease. There was then nothing like the present national vitality in manuscripts, readings, subsidies, prizes, broadsheets, pamphlets, private presses, periodicals, and books of poetry from the commercial houses. Centres of activity were few and localized. Apart from *The Canadian Forum*, there was nowhere to look for published "advanced" work. The current anthologies were out of date; in fact, my ambition was to undermine them. The only permanent light in the gloom had been provided by Smith and Scott's *New Provinces. Contemporary Verse, First Statement, and Preview* had not yet appeared. Isolation was the problem: pretty much as it was in Lampman's day. The general cultural climate of Canada was one of provincialism, complacency, or indifference. During the decade following World War II, those negative forces were well in retreat. When next I made an anthology of poetry, the book was able to take advantage of a true perspective of the past, a present of rich provision, and was able to assume a confidence in the future which one or two critics, deploying themselves from abroad, felt bound to temper. The confidence has been proved anything but misplaced. The last ten years have produced a poetry that makes historical all questioning of Canada's poetic calibre. The poets already established write frequently poems of commanding quality. The younger poets on the scene possess a vitality recognized even this early as an "explosion." Of the vitality, there can be no doubt. Of the way they are choosing to explode, I am not so sure.

THE FACTOR distinguishing the new generation of poets (apart from the quotient of the time the poet has had to practise his profession, which I disregard as the poets, I think, would wish) is one of methodology. This can be defined, broadly, as the swing from the Yeats/Eliot axis to the Pound/Williams

axis. The content of the poetry is as it always has been. Birth, copulation and death with all the questions, anguish, elations and extinctions which those processes impose, still and obviously make up the emotional context of the new poetry. Nor would I except the social disillusion. There is nothing radically different in this poetry from the corruption found by Chaucer in his social environment or from the anguish that Tennyson went through because of his. As a matter of fact, the young poets find themselves less oppressed than Hardy did. This despite World War II and its bomb. What World War II imposed is an intensification of response. It is in the urgency and intensification that the difference lies; the degree of our folly.

Disillusion is irreducible; the inherited past is totally questioned. But the debris is being removed. We are in the midst, or at the beginning of, the re-creation. So radically have protests been lodged that the negations are proving no longer sufficient. One can't mistake these new poets. The dialogue is of the greatest interest. It is as if caught between allegiance to a secure cynicism and declarations of their own future. The universe is cold and indifferent. These poets declare an exaltation in objectivism to nature. The stars are mechanized. But the machinery is wonderful. Dogs treat their own kind better than man his. Love is the answer. It looks as if God is dead. But he isn't. It is only that man has not made Him work. No one ran up and shook Christ's hand, Mr. Kearns tells us, since he had his hand nailed down too. Mr. Kearns goes on to tell us that now he gets Christ's message: how this "love-junk" can really hang you up for good. Black humour. Not at the expense of God. Mr. Tom Marshall's "Astrology" too leads us in an interesting direction. The philosophies are "de-commissioned at last."

Interlocking roses
of our summer day
are no less blasted in the tides of dust.

Why not take up penmanship, ornithology? Only the fullness of transience will do.

So give me
conjunctions of dust; make again
the knotted turning of the seasons start;
give me the whole fire of your heart.

"To be mad for an answer," Mr. Newlove defines the position. No one pays any attention. Yet

Good company, fine houses
and consequence people,
you will not turn me
into a tin factory . . .

except for the shooting,
how much will your funerals cost

in your consequential houses?
I know where the god is
hiding, starved. I have slept
in the turning mountain.

Intense is the de-commissioning of philosophies the world has run on. As intense is the determination not to be negated. These poets assert the positive Self and they ask no quarter. What they demand, as Miss MacEwen writes, is

sweet wounds which burn like stars,
stigmata of the self's own holiness,

and which

appear and plot new zodiacs upon the flesh.

There is no answer except in "peculiarities and particularities" (John Newlove). On the other hand, it takes more courage

than red
wheelbarrows
give
to love:
flesh & dust

(Pierre Coupey).

It is as if the new Canadian poets are being forced to what they won't believe. It is as if nullity is being *imposed* on them. They will have none of it.

By those who want a disillusioned affirmation, these fresh sensibilities are not to be ignored.

INTENSITY DIFFERENTIATES the content of the new poetry. The urgency is unmistakable. It is this intensity that explains the radical acceptance of the prosodic revolutions in contemporary poetry. Yeats had the leisure

to prophesy and warn of the Second Coming with traditional formality. These poets have not. They are in the midst of the advent of the Pitiless Beast. Immediacy and objectism are the demands; freedom from the traditional linguistic formalities. Hence, Ezra Pound and his renovations: the shift in poetic processes from "formal" to "open" composition.

I am convinced that this shift in methodology is (and was) needed and salutary. I am not at all convinced that what is being made of this formal revolution is salutary. I am second to no one in his admiration of Ezra Pound. He is the greater maker. But some grave warnings are in order. Claims are being made on behalf of the disciples in Canada that are unfounded. We are being admonished that everyone not Poundian is benighted. No poet he. Claims are being made that the New Wave is writing *better* than anyone with dry feet. (I trust I have made it clear that I am on the side of renovation, immediacy, experiment, encouragement, willingness, even violence. One other note: by "disciples" I mean the laying on of hands not only by Pound but William Carlos Williams, Olson and Creeley and the Black Mountaineers, Birney and *Delta* and *Tish*, or however the descent. Pound is the great progenitor). The "Poundians", by and large (a qualification on behalf of those poets I have already quoted, if relevant, and one or two others), are *not* writing well.

Harm is being done. The *New Wave Canada* poets are being pushed into a coterie (they seem willing enough). Labels and righteousness and pieties are taking over. This would not be good even if the Poundians were writing well. I now am not speaking of content, emotions, exultations or exaltations, propulsions or environments. I am speaking of structures. The new formalities have as their correct objective the achievement of greater interference with the instant of cognition. To name the procedures leading to this, "syllabbling" or "kinetics" or "field composition", is valid. But the debate being made of this is a debate over nomenclature. The principles are nothing new. Losing sight of this has led to critical arrogance. The tiresome witness of this is the seemingly unending hostile alignment of poets who have washed dishes for a living and those who eat (generally less well) in the Universities. A poet is either good or he is bad.

A more serious damage is being done by æsthetic arrogations. The claim to be exclusively right on the part of the Pound axis repeatedly refers to music: cadence, natural phrasing, "the pressures of the breath", rests and pauses, the space, the broken line to notate rhythm, thematic counterpointing. I think this aspiration to achieve the condition of music eminently right. Poetry strives toward the condition of music. We have returned to the æsthetics of Pater, at least in this respect.

“Reprendre à la musique leur bien,” says Valéry. The æsthetic of modern poetry is to take back its own from the greatest of the arts; to overcome the displacement by metres of tempos; aural statics, deafness. Nothing new, of course. *Vide* “Beowulf”. But a new start made necessary by the similes and rhetoric of the Victorians and the poverties of the Georgians. The movement goes back to Poe, his “suggestive indefiniteness”, passed on through the French Symbolists to T. S. Eliot; goes back through the Provençal poets to Pound. “To compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome,” says Uncle Ez.

Poetry, however, is not music. Two mistakes have been made. First, the error of thinking that notation is music; secondly, the error of thinking that language can communicate as music communicates. It can't. Poetry uses language. Poetry, however much we strain to prevent it, to be itself carries a burden of logical meaning. Music uses the logic of aural structures and is thereby dramatic. This language cannot do. Without its integument of syntax and grammatical structure, poetry is undramatic. Without the drama of syntax there is no tension. Poetry must resolve more than sound and rhythm; it must also resolve its linguistic meaning. I do not find this sad. I find this inevitable. The poet has the greater challenge. We should have remembered all about this. We reject Swinburne and Carman.

Doors and windows
 Builded Bliss.
 But where's
 The bloody edifice?

This misadventure with music has led to the broken line, the jettisoning of metre, the placement of spaces and rests and pauses on the printed page which have so bemused and bewildered the conventional reader. The advantages gained have been several: natural breathing, the physiology of cadence, modulations and juxtapositions. The method of counterpoint, the fugue, the canon. Some of the modern poetic structures are as strict as serial music. Mostly, these “liberated” poems are unholy messes — the result of not perceiving the difference between music and language, the typewriter and rhythm, the lungs and the intellect: D. H. Lawrence's “swoonings” and Eliot's “Quartets” (I am not being religious). A warning should be directed at the New Wave poets presently “exploding.” What we are getting is implosion. The poem itself is injured.

The errors are in mistaking the conditions of music for those of language and in mistaking notation for music. On these two errors hang all the flaws of the prophets.

I QUOTE FROM POETS of the “new direction” which the introduction to *New Wave Canada* assures us is “at least vigorous and very sure of where it is going.” There is no question of the vigour. But listen:

Fragments, all I have, the chips
off the block, the truth
in my words, of it.

You must find your
own words, & breath
for the words,
for it.

(Mysteriensonaten #10)

sung as the shrill
bird . the word
offers the ear
cheer, as it be

(a song)

determines the rhythm
the encounter moves to—

(song)

The sun is mine
And the trees are mine
The light breeze is mine
And the birds that inhabit the air
are mine

(Song)

For my friends
whose marriage is dissolving in the hills
all this water is superfluous

(Song)

These are not the whole poems, and the poems are not inaccessible in meaning. They are just tone-deaf.

To illustrate fairly the lapse of dramatic tension because of the crippling of syntax, entire poems of some length should be quoted. Inadequately, I give a fragment:

Dog with three legs
 with a name as round as
 his head is as round
 as his eyes are

his many
 many other
 bignesses
 his eyes
 come into
 his eyes, look
 at you, you
 look back
 (etc.)

After the first four lines, the sound is nowhere the meaning. But what I illustrate here is the danger of relying solely on visual (rhythmical) structure for tension. When syntax lapses, tension lapses. Drama of the *intellect* is missing.

It is significant that the three poets in *New Wave Canada* who are impressive are each alert to the meaning that is in the music of words and syntactically dramatic: David Dawson, George Jonas, and Michael Ondaatje. I judge that they know the rules to be broken.

My criteria in judging such adventure (vitality) consist of three negatives. I consider dead (though it may look alive typographically) the poem (1) in which the liberation (disfranchising of syntax, referents, metre, punctuation, or whatever convention) defeats communication, or so delays it that the poem is injured, or so assumes an arrogance that the reader is left to write the poem: when the theoretical poetry is so inaccessible that Frost's "immortal wound" has to be self-inflicted; (2) in which the structure or the lack of structure of the line goes against natural phrasing, the instinctive physiological *and (nota bene)* intellectual pacing; (3) in which the manipulation is not accumulation and is not worth the poetry gained.

These experiments and impulses and indifferences and disenfranchisements must not get out of hand. It would be too bad. We will have protests and not poetry. We are being presented with poets, with serious and needful significances to communicate, doing so in poetry that is ugly in sound, ugly in shape, unchallenged in craft, and impoverished of drama.

One or two trespasses and then I am done. The enormous amount of confessional verse; personal complaints against the universe; "the private soul-at-

any-public-wall." The world is a terrible place. It is redundant just to discover that. Secondly, my own weary complaint: the inverted romanticism: if it is ugly it must be realer than if it were not; the city of Toronto made responsible for the acne on a girl's face.

One can write well and be young:

"all the lonely rose time of summer"

"thank god for the birds at dawn"

"the falling rain's a harp for me"

Youthfully, the emotions of these lines are what they should be. Expressively, a poet should not be found dead with them.

It is toil, this poetry. And, says Pound: "Mais d'abord il faut être un poète."

The 1966 winner of the University of British Columbia Medal for Popular Biography is D. J. Goodspeed for his book *Ludendorff: Genius of World War I*, published by Macmillan. This is the second time the medal has been awarded for a book treating a non-Canadian subject, and again the work demonstrates a maturity of approach and a lucid style. Ludendorff has warranted a thorough biography for some time; his proud dedication to the war and to the aims of his country as he received them, complemented by his military acumen, led to his being one of the most powerful and catastrophically influential men of this century. In a surprisingly sparse year for biographical writing in Canada, *Ludendorff* is alive with character, certain in its details, objective in its judgments, and sympathetic in its approach. Thoroughly documented and indexed, it will still reach more than an academic audience. Mr. Goodspeed has, in recreating Ludendorff's complexity and in examining his involvement in his society and his influence upon the century, written a well-paced narrative and an absorbing book. The Selection Committee this year was C. W. Humphries, of the Department of History, D. G. Stephens and W. H. New of the Department of English, at the University of British Columbia.