

ECLECTIC DETACHMENT

*Aspects of Identity
in Canadian Poetry*

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I
N THE CLOSING PARAGRAPHS of the Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* I made an effort to suggest in a phrase that I hoped might be memorable a peculiar advantage that Canadian poets, when they were successful or admirable, seemed to possess and make use of. This, of course, is a risky thing to do, for what one gains in brevity and point may very well be lost in inconclusiveness or in possibilities of misunderstanding. A thesis needs to be demonstrated as well as stated. In this particular case I think the thesis is implicit in the poems assembled in the last third of the book — and here and there in earlier places too. Nevertheless, I would like to develop more fully a point of view that exigencies of space confined me previously merely to stating.

The statement itself is derived from a consideration of the characteristics of Canadian poetry in the last decade. The cosmopolitan flavor of much of the poetry of the fifties in Canada derives from the infusion into the modern world of the archetypal patterns of myth and psychology rather than (as in the past) from Christianity or nationalism. After mentioning the names of James Reaney, Anne Wilkinson, Jay Macpherson, and Margaret Avison—those of the Jewish poets Eli Mandel, Irving Layton, and Leonard Cohen might have been added—I went on to say:

The themes that engage these writers are not local or even national; they are cosmopolitan and, indeed, universal. The bewildering multiplicity of scientific, moral and metaphysical data with which the poet must now come to terms, and the burden of guilt, fancied or real, which the disintegration of values in religion, politics and morals places on his unsupported shoulders, make it very difficult, if not impossible, for him to be anything but complex, divided, erudite, allusive, and

sometimes obscure. These, of course, are the characteristics of modernity in the poetry of Europe and the United States as well as of Canada.

So far there is no room for misunderstanding and little, I imagine, for disagreement. But now we come to the essential point:

But the Canadian poet has one advantage—an advantage that derives from his position of separateness and semi-isolation. He can draw upon French, British, and American sources in language and literary convention; at the same time he enjoys a measure of detachment that enables him to select and adapt what is relevant and useful. This gives to contemporary Canadian poetry . . . a distinctive quality—its *eclectic detachment*. This can be, and has been, a defect of timidity and mediocrity; but it can also be . . . a virtue of intelligence and discrimination.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the phrase *eclectic detachment* in the light of its applications, to clarify it if necessary, and to defend its validity. This is a useful undertaking, for even if it should fall short of its full purpose it cannot fail to stir up some lively controversy and stimulate thinking about the quality of Canadian poetry that might be exciting and helpful, and that might even ultimately lead us to discard a point of view that sees the Canadian poet as in a predicament, plight, or fix.

I FIRST USED the phrase *eclectic detachment* in an effort to define concisely the essential quality of the best modern Canadian poetry in 1955 in a paper read at the Canadian Writers' Conference held at Queen's University in the summer of that year, and the poets then cited as exhibiting this quality were Scott, Klein, Anderson, and Page, as well as Reaney, who, of course, had not then yet published *A Suit of Nettles*. Nobody took much notice of it at the time; but some comments in recent reviews have suggested the need for amplification and explicit illustration. Professor John Bilsland in the course of a detailed review of the new *Oxford Book in Canadian Literature* questions the validity of the phrase in a paragraph I will quote:

The expression [he writes] *eclectic detachment* sounds well: it seems to suggest a learned objectivity, the capacity in our poets to draw freely on diverse cultures and traditions.

I interpolate briefly here. It does not *seem to suggest*; it does suggest; as a matter of fact it states. I believe that one of the greatest advantages that a poet like Frank

Scott or Reaney or Klein or Gustafson really possesses is the fact that he is immersed both in the European and the North American cultural tradition—I use “cultural” in the widest possible sense to include the sociological and political aspects of environment and inheritance as well as the literary and the artistic—but he is not *of* it. He stands apart and, as all Canadian writers must do, he selects and rejects. He selects those elements from varied and often disparate sources that are useful to him, and rejects those that are not. Useful *to him*. This brings in the personal. Detachment surely does not imply in this context detachment from the Self or from personality. This is where Professor Bilsland, it seems to me, goes wrong. He continues:

One wonders if the very attractiveness of the fine expression has not misled Professor Smith. Surely a very marked quality of much of the best Canadian poetry is its intensely personal note. Many of our poets are highly derivative, but writers like A. M. Klein, Anne Wilkinson, and Irving Layton have achieved a decidedly personal utterance, not particularly eclectic, and not at all detached

The question at issue is: What is the Canadian poet detached from? *Eclectic* detachment would suggest that he is not detached from everything, but only from what he chooses to be detached from. This implies also that there are some things he chooses to attach himself to. I emphasise *himself*. It is someone, a person, a poet, who is attached or detached. The term *detachment* in this context has nothing to do with objectivity or impersonality. It is actually an affirmation of personality. Certainly in poets like Klein and Wilkinson and Layton it is.

The function of personality in the poet is to create a thing, a persona, a poem; and in Canada the problem of the critic, if not of the poet, has been to relate this thing to its place and to its time. For the scholar, watching the critic as the critic watches the poet, the Canadian literary scene offers an almost classic instance of an easily isolable phenomenon: the quick and almost forced development of a compact and self-contained literary tradition—arising from the practice of the poets—and of an orthodoxy (rather rapidly changing)—arising from the sensibility of readers and the cogitations of critics.

The task that the Canadian establishers of a literary orthodoxy addressed themselves to with the greatest enthusiasm was the effort to isolate and describe some peculiar quality that might be felt to distinguish Canadian poetry. W. D. Lighthall in his Introduction to *Canadian Songs and Poems* published in London and Toronto in 1892 was quick to recognize that there are two main streams of Canadian poetry, which for convenience I have called the cosmopolitan and the native.

The present [he wrote] is an imperfect representation of Canadian poetry from a purely literary point of view, on account of the limitation of treatment; for it is obvious that if only what illustrates the country and its life *in a distinctive way* be chosen, the subjective and unlocal literature must necessarily be passed over, entraining the omission of most of the poems whose merit lies in perfection of finish.

The anthologist himself italicises for emphasis the phrase *in a distinctive way*; and it is interesting to note the assumptions implicit in his point of view: that what is distinctively Canadian (or perhaps merely local) will tend to be (a) technically crude and (b) impersonal or objective. This second condition is not, however, meant to imply coldness or insensitivity, but is an early perception of a view that later critics, looking back, were able to substantiate. This is the conception of Canadian poetry as being in its essence heroic and mythological rather than personal and lyrical which Northrop Frye developed in his *Canadian Forum* review of the first edition of *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (Dec. 1943) and his paper on "La Tradition narrative dans la poésie canadienne-anglaise" in *Gants du Ciel* (Spring 1946), and which is behind much of the thinking in James Reaney's brilliant essay "The Canadian Poet's Predicament" in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* (April 1957).

Lighthall's critical introduction is not all forward-looking and perceptive. It has (inevitably) the defects of its time. The book was just able to include some of the early poems of Roberts, Carman, Lampman, Campbell, and Scott; it illustrates the spirit of rather blatant nationalism characteristic of the post-Confederation period and prepares the way for the Maple Leaf school of versifiers and critics that was dominant until the late twenties. A few more sentences from the Introduction will suffice to indicate the tone.

The poets whose songs fill this book are voices cheerful with the consciousness of young might, public wealth, and heroism. . . . The tone of them is *courage*;—for to hunt, to fight, to hew out a farm, one must be a man! Through their new hopes, doubts, exultations, questionings, the virility of fighting races is the undertone. Canadians are, for the most part, the descendants of armies, officers and men, and every generation of them has stood up to battle.

This is not language or feeling or thinking likely to be echoed or approved today. Yet if we disregard the Carlylean or Kiplingesque rhetoric we find that it all boils down to the assertion that the characteristic note of Canadian poetry is the heroic. And to foresee so early a tradition that was to include *David* and *The Wind Our Enemy* as well as *At the Long Sault*, *Brébeuf and His Brethren*, and *Towards the Last Spike*, with nothing more than the somewhat tentative efforts of Heavyside,

Mair, and Crawford to guide him, is not an entirely despicable achievement.

The effort to isolate a peculiar Canadian quality in the poetry of the Dominion has since Lighthall's time become a kind of occupational hazard of the Canadian critic and anthologist. Lighthall's point of view is a little naive, and it is certainly too narrow, but it marks a beginning.

The modern critic has had not only a much larger but a much more varied and complex body of work to consider. In the last twenty years a new and incomparably more vital and sophisticated poetry has arisen in Canada; and it has made imperative an effort to assimilate it and evaluate it, which has called forth the talents of a remarkable school of new scholarly critics.

The new poetry and the new criticism have had their effect on the poetry of the past. The critics have had to raise their sights as it were and have imposed an increasingly severe standard of judgment, not only on the early pre-Confederation versifiers but upon the poets of our rather glibly or perhaps ironically named "golden age"—the Roberts-Carman-Lampman group. This is much better than adulation, but there is a danger too that something valuable may be lost.

Reading the serious reviews of the *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* I have been surprised to see how far the revulsion of feeling has gone and how sudden has been the reversal of fortune. Everyone seems ready to discard the colonial pioneer poets to the junk pile. "Victorian versifiers like Heavysege and Sangster and Mair," wrote George Woodcock, "were dead before they reached the grave." And this critic's praise of Lampman, Roberts, and Carman is distinctly unenthusiastic. "One should not over-disparage Lampman," he warns I suppose himself, and goes on, in an obvious effort to be fair, to say *something*, however vague, in praise of the group. His praise, however, is pretty much nullified by the qualifications that precede it. "[Lampman] and Roberts may have been minor Victorians, colonials in their dependence on English models, and almost completely derivative, but they did bring to Canadian poetry what it needed before it could even start—a sense of the image and a high craftsmanship. . . ." Nevertheless the critic found it laborious "except perhaps in nostalgia for the Edwardian afternoon, to read through as much of the Confederation poets as [the] anthologists . . . give us." Millar MacLure in *Tamarack* No. 17 agrees. He confesses a long-standing inability to assume a scholarly stance before the verses of the Confederation poets. "Lampman," he declares in a rather self-conscious effort to be unscholarly, "is a good old cheese, but Roberts and Carman belong on captions in the New Brunswick Museum (Carman's verse is to poetic speech what Baird's Lemon Extract used to be to Demerara rum)." On the earlier poets he is considerably more

severe. "I can see no reason for taking either Heavysege (lie heavy on him, earth!) or Mair more seriously than John Hunter Duvar. . . ." Norman Levine, reviewing the Oxford Book in England, speaks "of the dead wood of the nineteenth century" and of "the much overvalued output of the poets of the 1860s." Donald A. Davie, an unprejudiced outsider, finds only *one poet* before Pratt—Lampman, of course.

I cite these opinions not mainly because they come from intelligent, responsible, and serious critics but because nothing like this emphatic and widespread denigration of the past found its voice when the three editions of *The Book of Canadian Poetry* appeared in 1943, 1948, and 1957 or when Ralph Gustafson's Penguin anthologies came out in 1942 and 1958. I myself would not wish to discard and do not think it necessary to scorn our older poetry. It is worth preserving because it shows us what our ancestors were able to do when they tried to do their best. They do not and could not provide us with a tradition, but neither do they offer us horrible examples and furnish us with something consciously to reject. They simply show us what it felt like to live here in 1840 or 1860 or 1890. These earlier poets did not have what the modern reviewer might call advantages. They had not read Hulme or Eliot or Dylan Thomas, but we must not condemn them entirely for having read Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, or Matthew Arnold,—as most of them, and I think fruitfully, had. Do we condemn the Bartlett prints because they are not like the paintings of the Group of Seven or later abstractionists?

The more tolerant point of view I have been outlining has never of course been without its exponents, and if I call one or two of these as witnesses it will bring us back to where we started—to the question of our sense of identity and to some illustrations of our *eclectic detachment*.

NORTHROP FRYE, who has the catholicity of the true scholar, is able to see the always changing and always developing kaleidoscope of our literary history as a single pattern, and thus can see also the characteristic virtues and defects of the Confederation poets in the new perspective that modern poetry places them in. Frye excels in the art of making just discriminations. Speaking of Roberts, Carman, Lampman, and D. C. Scott, he says—

All four are romantic and subjective poets, at best when confronting nature in solitude, in moods of nostalgia, reverie, observation or extra-sensory awareness.

Their sensibility is emotional in origin, and they obtain conceptual precision by means of emotional precision. . . .

After speaking of the greater frequency of Lampman's successes and of the common tendency for Roberts and Carman to "let their sensibility get out of focus," he ventures some more general assertions, which bring us closer to the question of a Canadian tradition—though I am not sure whether *habit* might not be a better word.

This subjective and lyrical sensibility, sharp and clear in its emotional foreground but inclined to get vague around its conceptual fringes, is deeply rooted in the Canadian tradition. Most of its characteristics reappear in the Group of Seven painters, in Tom Thomson and Emily Carr, with their odd mixture of *art nouveau* and cosmic consciousness.

This is followed by a statement that every Canadian writer and reader should take to heart:

The Canadianism of Canadian poetry is of course not a merit in it, but only a quality in it; it may be revealed as clearly in false notes as in true ones, and may be a source of bad taste as well as of inspiration.

These sentences from Northrop Frye's general survey of poetry in Malcolm Ross's *The Arts in Canada* (1958) bring us back to the idea of *eclectic detachment*. For the person living in Canada, there are two things he cannot be detached from—his personality and his Canadianism. These are both invisible and often unconscious attachments, and they condition the inevitable way in which emotion and thought rise out of sensibility. Where freedom of choice comes in is in the intellectual effort of the artist as maker who seeks to eliminate bad taste and encourage good, who chooses the true note and rejects the false. In Canada this task is made easier by the absence of conventional bonds that fasten us to an oppressively superior tradition such as that of English poetry and leaves us free to pick and choose just those poets (or just those aspects of those poets) that can satisfy our needs. The most exciting poets of the present revival have found refreshment and nourishment in the most widely varied and often surprising sources—James Reaney in Chaucer and Spenser; Irving Layton in Nietzsche, Catullus, the Hebrew prophets, and William Carlos Williams; Jay Macpherson in Blake and Northrop Frye; Ralph Gustafson in Job, Hopkins, and Melville; Margaret Avison in Tycho Brahe, George Herbert, and Marianne Moore.

Professor Malcolm Ross in the Introduction to his recent paper-back selection from the Confederation poets sees this eclecticism in them also—and sees it, I think,

as a kind of limitation or brake on a too obvious nationalism:

Our leap from colony to nation [he writes] was accomplished without revolution, without a sharp cultural and ideological break from Europe, without the fission and fusion of Civil War. Roberts and Carman learn as happily from Emerson and Royce as from Browning, Rossetti, and Verlaine. And Darwin is made to take on the look of a Miramichi backwoodsman! True, Lampman and Roberts suddenly find they are Canadians. But they are also (and at the same time) thoroughgoing provincials (with a feeling for place), and thoroughgoing citizens of the world (with a feeling for time).

The terms *provincialism*, *regionalism*, and *colonialism* are not generally o.k. words, and a good deal of Canadian criticism has been a wasted effort either to deny or excuse these appellations. Professor Ross sees, however, that these local applications do not rule out but in Canadian poetry go along with cosmopolitan ones.

Our group of Confederation Poets is important for us [he continues]—among other reasons—because already it shows forth the peculiar and inevitable “openness” of the Canadian culture.

It is in an “open” culture that an eclectic detachment becomes possible. Milton Wilson, literary editor of the *Canadian Forum*, and perhaps the most receptive to advanced trends of all Canadian literary critics, had already developed this idea in some brilliant paradoxes in a paper read before the Association of Canadian University Teachers of English at Edmonton in June 1958 and easily available in the *Tamarack Review* No. 9. Part of his purpose was to reconsider “that doubtful quantity, our ‘sense of identity’.” He does so by dealing with the problem first in relation to space—the effect of the vastness and the emptiness of the country into which a small number of quite divergent regions have been placed at intervals—and then in terms of *time*.

When we speak (he says) of a recognizably Canadian poet we usually mean a regional poet who uses the distinctive objects and actions of his locality as poetic material. . . .

After mentioning some of the regions where an active poetry seems to be flourishing particularly at the present time—Montreal, New Brunswick, southern Ontario and Toronto, and the West Coast—Wilson goes on to point out that labels don’t always stick, that the regionalists hop about a good deal, and that “our regionalism is perhaps more a way of looking at things than a rooted stance.”

Perhaps our identity is to be one of Miss (P. K.) Page’s ‘Permanent Tourists’, and

our larger sense of place is best expressed by the kind of hopping regionalism exemplified in (Earle) Birney's *North-Star West*—(or F. R. Scott's *Trans-Canada*)—with its transcontinental series of scenes joined by compressed air, and its rapid shifts of perspective.

The effect of this is named by the critic, accurately enough but hardly I think discriminatingly enough, as “a kind of continental discontinuity”. Not discriminatingly enough because I discern the very same phenomenon in the contemporary poetry of the United States. It is a continental one, a North American one, not merely a Canadian one.

Mr. Wilson, admitting that all discussions of the Canadian poet's sense of space tend to be fanciful and arbitrary, says that “something more substantial can be said about his sense of poetic time”. What he goes on to say is something quite new and at first seems startling, if not bizarre; but through paradox I believe he has hit on the truth, and like the poor brother of the fairy tale discovers in our very limitations the source of our special good luck:

We have often been told [he writes] of our necessary dullness because we had no Revolutionary War, no French Revolution, no War Between the States. In poetry likewise we had no Renaissance, no neo-Classicism, no Romanticism. But one of the advantages of a poetry less than a hundred years old is that all the things that couldn't happen when they should have happened keep happening all the time. . . . The Canadian poet can be *avant-garde* with whatever material he chooses. . . . I even wonder whether colonialism may not be, in theory at least, the most desirable poetic state. It gives you a catholic sense of all the things poetry can do without embarrassing you by telling you what at this particular moment it can't. . . . The Canadian poet has all the models in the language (not to mention other languages) at his disposal, but lacks the deadening awareness that he is competing with them.

This bring us round full circle to freedom of choice and eclectic detachment. There is only one flaw, as I see it, in this provincial paradise. There is a serpent lurking in the phrase “lacks the deadening awareness that he is competing with them”. It seems to suggest a double standard—which I am sure is far from Mr. Wilson's intention. The Canadian poet, like every poet, is in competition with every other poet, past and present, or, more precisely he knows he must be judged by as severe standards as any. And I believe that it is an informed freedom of choice that comes from being Canadian that has made it possible for our best poets to sustain this test—and perhaps more easily than if they had been Englishmen or Americans.