

ETHOS AND EPIC

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ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY
CANADIAN POETRY

AN OUTSIDER who has read no Canadian poets might justifiably expect them to supply something rather American: the frontier rather than the sophisticated, the blunt rather than the subtle, the heroic rather than the maisonette, the didactic rather than the oblique. He might add something about the unlikeliness, for a long time, of aestheticism and preciosity; and there he stops. Not all that is distinctly Canadian bears upon poetry written by Canadians. Much that is American does. The outsider deserves some sympathy, as well as licence to get as personal as he likes. For (and here I must judge by my own experience) there are many subtle differences from the European and American traditions. With those I cannot be concerned here. But I do want to examine three aspects which seem reasonably obvious: the first two go together — the sharply visual quality of much Canadian poetry, and the unpoeticised bluntness of tone; the third is a potentiality which I hope will come to something like an epic of heterogeneous daily life.

Canadian poets writing now seem to have at their disposal most of the European modes. The Parnassian keeps pace with the Whitmanish when one might have expected the latter to dominate the scene with barbaric yawp, rambling exposition and asymmetrical shape. There is a strong tradition of it in the United States, sustained in varying ways by William Carlos Williams, Robinson Jeffers, E. E. Cummings and such poems as Allan Ginsberg's *Howl*. It is the sort of thing produced when the picaresque sensibility tries to write poems; it is far from the lapidary, but it does not seem to predominate in Canada any more than it does in America.

At one extreme we have something like Louis Dudek's *Europe*; at the other, the Parnassian (Robert Graves-like) poems of Jay Macpherson. It would be idle to propose a dichotomy: obviously, at times, the two modes mingle; obviously most poets attempt both modes of expression, although they usually manage one end of the formal spectrum better than the other — Dudek and Raymond Souster the Whitmanish, Miss Macpherson and R. A. D. Ford the Parnassian.

But having proposed the extremes as points of reference at least, let me allude to them at once by saying that I think the Whitmanish mode more suited to what I find the essentially Canadian manner of utterance. There is a brusqueness, a visual punchiness about this utterance which might seem to evoke, say, Carl Sandburg or Carlos Williams, but which is in fact less literary and less overlaid with allusions. Take Irving Layton's magnificent poem, *The Bull Calf*, for instance:

Struck,
 the bull calf drew in his thin forelegs
 as if gathering strength for a mad rush . . .
 tottered . . . raised his darkening eyes to us,
 and I saw we were at the far end
 of his frightened look, growing smaller and smaller
 till we were only the ponderous mallet
 that flicked his bleeding ear
 and pushed him over on his side, stiffly,
 like a block of wood.

This is the mallet rather than the lyre — for good reasons: the poem has to suggest the brutality of a necessary indifference. But, just as in this instance it is particularly true, so it is true generally that the thumping, emphatic and non-iambic quality of Canadian poetry lingers in the ear and prodigiously enriches its moments of tenderness. (Norman Levine's reading of this poem on the BBC Third Programme made this even more evident: Mr. Levine's deadpan voice, which Canada made, seemed to fit the poem extremely well. An Englishman reading the same poem would sound stagey and would probably force upon the lines rhythms of the wrong kind.) The curt context has no sound of the literarised, and that explains why an etiolated and almost hackneyed word like 'beautiful' is restored to an astonishing, pre-Tennysonian power:

Settled, the bull calf lay as if asleep,
 one foreleg over the other,
 bereft of pride and so beautiful now,
 without movement, perfectly still in the cool pit,
 I turned away and wept.

In that, the poem's conclusion, 'bereft' comes to us from an archaic world of 'poesy'; but instead of sticking out like a sore muse, it is subsumed by the regenerated word 'beautiful'. Regeneration in poetry is always an art of context. That is why the sudden self-exposure of the last line escapes the trite; we can think of other lines which might have preceded it and would have degraded it into a conventional trope. For example:

I strayed through the midst of the city
 On, through the lovely Archipelago;
 That night I felt the winter in my veins;
 Was it a year or lives ago
 I turned away and wept?

That doesn't quite make sense: the first line is Lampman, the second Charles Sangster, the third Wilfred Campbell and the fourth Bliss Carman. But the lines' connotations might evoke, say, James Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night* or certain parts of *In Memoriam*. The traditionally poetic voice, with its usual images, terms of grief and approbation, rhythms, rhymes and calls to attention, renders certain words impotent and creates a monotony of tone. It is the singular asset of the Canadian voice that it can manage potent contrasts by giving its utterances a dishevelled, unsystematic look: there is little concern with attracting the reader's eye to the maintenance of form. Life and meditation are presented in a manner no more symmetrical or homogeneous than that of a newspaper page. But this manner can make the trivial arresting, make us look thoroughly at things over-familiar. Here is an example of this typically haphazard, disjointed way of writing; the excerpt is from Jean Arsenault's *Canada Canto*, published in *Delta* Number Eight:

And poor suckers bring
 their pennies to upstairs
 office, "bring coppers on time",
 shouts Joe

far (in Pound himself, as well as in its Canadian practitioners) released a torrent of self-conscious flippancy. But perhaps this only indicates that such a method, so close to rubbish, so apparently undisciplined, must operate by means of irony — its principal device being that of ironic juxtaposition in order to convey the exact impact of a kaleidoscopic world. Only time will show; and we should not expect from this method an absolute of any kind, whether of lyricism or starkness, whether of reportage or fantasy. The synoptic, which is its aim, is a genre apart. And there are not likely to be any rules.

THE PREREQUISITES for such a method are principally two: a robust, matter-of-fact tone (which I think many modern Canadian poets already have) and a complete view — of worlds pastoral, industrial, urban and commercial — which most of them seem to lack. What of the tone? It appears in the following, from Raymond Knister's *The Plowman*, as a rural factualness:

For Danny whistling slowly
 'Down in Tennessee'
 A fat white shoat by the trough
 Lifts his snout a moment to hear,
 Among the guzzling and slaving comrades,
 Squeezing and forcing

It turns up in this: *Train Window* by Robert Finch. The ostentatiously impassive sensibility retails the prosaic:

The truck holds eleven cakes of ice,
 each cake a different size and shape.
 Some look as though a weight had hit them.
 One, solid glass, has a core of sugar.

Finch's poem is every bit as 'poetic' as the world it depicts: the point is, if you are sufficiently attentive to the world, a straight account will suffice. What is poetic is not in the technique, but in the object contemplated. Finch seeks to intensify a deeply felt perception; so does Raymond Souster's *Drunk: On Crutches*, which is boozily lyrical in its hardboiled vernacular:

Simply being drunk makes it
 Tough enough to get around,
 But a guy hobbling on crutches —
 How does he figure it at all?

There is in the Canadian voice, in this un-English voice that I am noticing, a matter-of-factness which is vocally what imagism is visually. There is a reluctance to make the conventionally poetic sounds and lilt: this is it, says the poet, take it or don't. He isn't going to beguile us with euphony, with rhythms that guide us like banisters, with images that make the new familiar. Here, he seems to say, is a specimen — like a chunk of newspaper fitted into a collage. And from the nature of the presented object, the "form" and the tone proceed. W. W. E. Ross's *The saws were shrieking* shows this:

From the revolving
 of the saw
 came slices of clear wood,
 newly sawn,
 white pine and red,
 or spruce and hemlock,
 the sweet spruce,
 and the sweet hemlock.

Wallace Stevens would have turned this into a frenzied baroque on the lines of his *Bantams in Pinewoods*. But Ross's lines could have come from Carlos Williams, with his creed of "No ideas but in things". Take this:

so much depends
 upon
 a red wheel
 barrow
 glazed with rain
 water
 beside the white
 chickens

That is Williams — the child's innocent and undifferentiating eye, one stage before the elated wonder of Cummings. What we are given, by both Ross and Williams, is an ideogram which celebrates. This is the raw material chopped up into assimilable pieces, each of which is a cause for wonder and a good reason for lingering longer than usual. It is a *sans*

culotte mode, seeking to restore us to a sense of primal, unelaborated things. There is a perfectly justified (although perhaps naive) attitude which says: if you want to present unmanipulated specimens, you are more likely to get away with it if you write in the Whitmanish mode; that is, if you compile a collection rather than design a device. And, for me, what is distinctive in modern Canadian poetry is the mode in which the poets equal their French and Modern Greek counterparts, in which they do differently from the Americans (for even Carlos Williams and Pound build their ideograms into a larger fabric), and which is just not attempted in England: the mode of spiritual geography in terms of emblems. The whole process tends towards an attempt at modern epic.

This is why I find nothing specifically different about Jay Macpherson's poems, nothing specifically Canadian; she is a transatlantic Elizabeth Jennings, composing hermetic paradigms that don't really make poetry out of the modern scene. I don't think that is true of Ronald Bates, Fred Cogswell, John Glassco, George Johnston, Alden Nowlan and James Reaney. Miss Macpherson seems nearer to European sophistication and sophistry, and is therefore in greater danger of composing cerebral riddles in the manner of the English "Movement". Her little paradigms are nearer to ballad than to Whitman: she is at once more traditional and more avant-garde than her contemporaries. Their stand is quite often rawness, the unfancy, the unpoeticised. Take, for example, Fred Cogswell's poem about Lefty:

There was Lefty and there was the hen.
 He had her hung up with a cord
 round her neck too tight for a squawk,
 and he was sawing off her legs
 with a dull jack-knife. Sawing and whistling . . .

He heard me as I walked in
 and turned, standing there,
 and you could almost have heard
 the blood dripping off the end
 of the knife-blade for a minute.
 'You son of a whore', I said.
 'You son of a whore'.
 And Lefty broke and cried like a girl,
 And I left.

The logical outcome of this is raw vision in raw form for subtle reasons. But mere use of the speech of everyday cannot ensure the achievement of an illustrious vernacular: only the old tricks of word-juggling can effect that. The poet is a reporter, yes; he is also a verbal artist. And where the sheer magic of the object contemplated fails to enliven the words, the result is likely to be an ordinariness that only verbal magic can redeem. The laconic tone is not enough in itself: it has to be subtly interwoven with other tones and other techniques — as it is in Pound's *Cantos*, James Reaney's *A Suit of Nettles* and Dudek's *Europe*.

AFTER TONE, the complete view. Few Canadian poets seem rounded enough. The new industrial landscape doesn't seem to have caught at the poets' imaginations, whereas the pastoral in its literal and literary senses seems ineluctable. Milton Wilson, writing in *The Canadian Forum* (June, 1959), puts some pertinent questions apropos of John Glassco's *The Deficit Made Flesh*:

What are (he asks) the typical images and attitudes of the typical Canadian poem? Ralph Gustafson provides us with a list in the introduction to his new Penguin anthology. Among the things included are the primal sea, a good deal of diving, green out of the white of winter, antagonistic hills, and symbolic eyes and fishes. It's a good list. It fits a few poets from a few parts of Canada, and what more can we ask? But there are plenty of alternatives. What about a vision of the collapsed mine or barn, the soiled and discarded virgin, the ghost town, grey snow, roads that peter out or lead to a dead structure, fruit gone soft before it ripens, parricide before puberty?

I can't really say how pertinent Mr. Wilson's answers are — they do seem Audenish, and tempt me to think up an eclecticism of my own which includes the national prurience, the seedy schoolroom on the Indian reservation, Old British Fish and Chips, sleazy beer-parlours, desolate plains, blue lakes, "plaid" shirts, the cult of virility and Scottishness,, picture-windows, gaudy and finny cars, galoshes, "homes" rather than houses, dead moose and pure cold. A slightly fey list, yes; but a list that one should be able to compile from Mr. Gustafson's anthology. One can't, however, because many Canadian poets see their country as idealised pastoral. For every George Johnston, with his *Cruising Auk*, the publishers provide a dozen vaguer visions.

But there are signs of epic method, as a careful reader of the Gustafson and Smith anthologies can see: Pratt's broad historical vision; Ross's imagistic pungency; blunt Knister and the Scott of the satirical reportage; Finch's matter-of-factness; Birney's own Perse-like vision of history and exploration (as in *Pacific Door*); Layton's concern for the delicious, tart variety of life; Anne Marriott's feeling for prairie and Le Pan's invigorating piece-of-an-epic, *Canoe-trip*:

What of this fabulous country
 Now that we have reduced it to a few hot hours
 And sunburn on our backs?
 On this south side the countless archipelagos,
 The slipway where titans sent splashing the last great glaciers;
 And then up to foot of the blue pole star
 A wilderness

One would like to see something such as Neruda has done for Chile. My own guess is that it will have to be done in the Whitmanish, capacious, untidy mode; in the Canadian voice and in visual terms. Life's quality will have to be transferred to poems. Perhaps Canada is the country where young poets might find some use for Eliot, who has had next to no following in England and has exerted most of his influence in Greece, India and France. His method of the disjointed epic is perhaps just what is needed: something comprehensive without the sheer bulk of Pound's *Cantos*. After all, in a country that is more of a myth than of a conurbation, the epic writer is the man most likely to succeed. When history's magic and the modern scene have been brought subtly, grandly and colloquially together, the epic of a "fabulous country" will be a dignified reality, and not — what it may seem at present — another figment of right-minded, chauvinistic humbug.

One young Canadian poet who seems to have epic intentions or an embryonically epic mind is Ronald Bates, whose first volume, *The Wandering World*, appeared recently. Mr. Bates is a conventionally serious poet, examining his world in terms of histories, myths, interiors and landscapes. There are really two poets in him: one is rhetorical, requiring a good deal of elbow-room and long fluent lines; the other seems to arrive by way of Yeats and Auden: a little cramped, a little too self-conscious and rather too dispassionate. But in his rhetorical rôle Mr. Bates is out-

standing: he creates a massiveness of colloquial flux in which everything appears relevant. He thinks in large units — in fact, units which seem appropriate to the wandering world of his title. These units, or deep poetical breaths, are just right for his celebration of the Canadian continent, of the vast hinterland of his own memory, for the flight of gull or goose, the leap of salmon or even of the enthralled watcher's heart. Surely the following is magnificent without being in any way magniloquent:

And so spring comes, it may be after
 One year, or two, or five,
 But Spring must come at last, and one must hear
 Above the sounds of traffic in a sun-drowsed square,
 The crack of spring-ice breaking on a thousand lakes,
 While, in the blue, behind a Gothic spire,
 A wild goose arrowhead spears north.
 And the pull of the outbound tide at last
 Goes with the sun.

That suggests great things to come. But when Mr. Bates attends to the paraphernalia of the modern scene, he seems to be forcing himself: he gets off-hand and takes all kinds of clichés on trust; many of his combinations are wilful and cerebral. For instance: "We cannot escape. Blood is thicker than / Transmission oil or octane gasoline." Yes, it is; but my assent to that is not assent to a-truth-turned-into-poetry. Or take this stanza from *Overheard in the Garden*:

Don't let him in. Your last clue:
 Avoid the garden; shun the dark;
 Shadow the suspect in the park.
 You may find out that he is you.

Most of Mr. Bates's suspenseful paradoxes evoke the glibbest and emptiest stunts of Auden — which is a pity, for the attempt to cope with detectives, Palm Beach suits, cocktail bars and high heels is laudable. It seems to me that Mr. Bates makes this attempt in much the same spirit as he might take a cold bath; he keeps slipping back into the elegiac mode. In that mode he is astonishingly good. What he needs now is a texture that will carry all kinds of mixtures. Somehow, I feel, he hasn't yet found out how to fuse the trappings of industrial society with the lyricism of the great outdoors.

But he is certainly either a signpost or a weathercock. He encourages us to believe that Canadian poetry may yet handle a national theme robustly, subtly, vividly and above all in modern terms. If poets such as Mr. Bates keep on looking with their own eyes instead of those of their predecessors, we might not have to wait long. It is a measure of Canadian poetry's promise that the best of the younger English poets — Elizabeth Jennings, Ted Hughes, Dom Moraes — suggest quite different and less exciting maturities. Confronted with, involved with Canada, the coy colossus, poets will have to be ambitious and bold. It is hard to see how one or two of them, already on the right lines, can fail to make an epic about a country already (and still) mythologised.

INDEX. As articles and reviews appearing in *Canadian Literature* are regularly listed in the *Canadian Index to Periodicals and Documentary Films*, we have decided to print our own index once every twelve issues instead of once a year. The first index will therefore be sent out to those readers who request it between the Spring and Summer issues of 1962.

PLANS AND PROJECTS. In shortly forthcoming issues will appear a symposium on aspects of Canadian literature by **Ethel Wilson**, **Eric Nicol** and **George Woodcock**, and a long two-part study of isolation in the Canadian novel by **Warren Tallman**. **R. E. Watters** will discuss the Canadian character of Leacock's humour, **Chester Duncan** will assess the radio programme Anthology, **Robert Fulford** will analyse the approaches of popular Canadian periodicals and **Ruth McKenzie** will discuss the immigrant in Canadian literature. There will be individual studies of Mordecai Richler by **Nathan Cohen**, of Irving Layton by **Robert Weaver**, of A. M. Klein's poetry by **Milton Wilson**. **Hugo McPherson**, **Jean-Guy Pilon**, **Louis Dudek**, and **Philip Stratford** will contribute articles discussing aspects of the contemporary literary scene in Canada. Finally, in the Autumn will appear the first of a series of articles assessing achievements in Canadian writing for children.