

# CANADIAN LITERATURE No. 97

*Summer, 1983*

## POETIC FORM

### Articles

BY RALPH GUSTAFSON, G. V. DOWNES, GEORGE JOHNSTON, CATHERINE MCKINNON PFAFF, STEPHEN SCOBIE

### Poems

BY HENRY BEISSEL, PATRICK LANE, MIKE DOYLE, RALPH GUSTAFSON, R. A. D. FORD, ERIC TRETHEWEY, PAT JASPER, ERNEST HEKKANEN, FRED COGSWELL, ERIN MOURE, FLORENCE MCNEIL, GEORGE MCWHIRTER, CRAIG POWELL, R. G. EVERSON, DOUGLAS BARBOUR

### Reviews

BY DAVID WATMOUGH, E. D. BLODGETT, PATRICIA MORLEY, M. BENSON, TERRY GOLDIE, MURRAY J. EVANS, ANTHONY APPENZELL, DARYL HINE, DIANA BRYDON, BARBARA PELL, HANS R. RUNTE, L. R. RICOU, DONALD R. BARTLETT, IAN SOWTON, ALEXANDRE L. AMPRIMOZ, KATHY MEZEI, EVA-MARIE KROLLER, P. COLLET, DAVID O'ROURKE, PATRICIA KEENEY SMITH, DOUGLAS DAYMOND, PETER MITCHAM, PEGGY NIGHTINGALE, J. A. WAINWRIGHT, TARA CULLIS, IAN ROSS, DAVID F. ROGERS, GEORGE WOODCOCK, GARY BOIRE, LOLA LEMIRE-TOSTEVIN, FRANÇOISE MACCABEE IQBAL

### Opinions and Notes

BY LIONEL KEARNS, S. R. MACGILLIVRAY & J. D. RABB, DENISE DASTOUS & EMILE DASTOUS, ALEXANDER GLOBE

A QUARTERLY OF  
CRITICISM AND REVIEW

## UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA MEDAL FOR CANADIAN BIOGRAPHY 1982

Biography in 1982 took a fascinating turn — shifting its focus away from the self-effacing public servants who preoccupied writers last year, to look instead at the poseurs and the public figures who one way or another have attracted attention to themselves. Donald Smith's fast-paced account of *Long Lance*, for example, traces the life of a true showman, who pretended to be an Indian and (like Grey Owl) got away with it. Betty Keller's *Pauline Johnson* is another work to peel away the persona that an entertainer showed her public. Simma Holt's *The Other Mrs. Diefenbaker* probes a curious phase of a public career; and among other works which examined the lives of unquestionably influential men were the biography by J. M. Beck of *Joseph Howe*; D. H. Eber's lively pictorial account of Alexander Graham Bell, *Genius at Work*; Clara Thomas and John Lennox's study of the literary journalist, *William Arthur Deacon*; and Peter Newman's *Establishment Man*, a well-written attempt to appraise a contemporary business mogul, Conrad Black. The study of Deacon and the study of Howe are particularly marked by their scholarship and their thorough use of detail.

The University of British Columbia Medal for Canadian biography in 1982 goes to Betty Keller's *Pauline Johnson* (published by Douglas & McIntyre), a work which had to contend with detail in another way. The handicap Keller faced was the fact that Pauline Johnson's sister carefully destroyed the poet's papers, with what intent it is not sure. Pauline had singlemindedly constructed her public identity during her life — the biography demonstrates how the public could be manipulated by calculated appeals to romantic adventure — and what the papers may have shown can only be guessed at. Keller's accomplishment, in the face of such an obstacle, is to have amassed an extraordinary amount of data from other sources, and to have presented it in a most attractive, readable form.

Roy Daniells observed once that the value of Johnson's poems would be recognized "when the memory of her vigorous personality has faded"; what Keller's biography does is not so much reassess that work as probe the source of the vigour. Discovering much about Pauline's private life, her deliberateness and her motivations, Keller looks behind the mask to show something of the personality as it really was.

W.N.

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## RE:FORMING GIANTS

THE PHRASE “IMPOSING SHAPE” invites us to think of giants, whether statuesque or incredibly hulking, whether comic or latent with terrible power. One of Brian Fawcett’s stories opens with a child’s view of such size: “I was troubled by the giants,” his narrator writes, “and I spent a lot of time worrying about them.” The giants he animates are not very nice, and in any event by his definition “don’t speak quite the same language you do”; in desperation he seeks elves as allies, and comes to learn the chain of enmities that constitutes life. Fortunately these elves have power, too, and can vanquish rats, at least while the child grows.

But I want to think of “imposing shape” as an active process rather than a passive description: to think of it not as the image we receive so much as the thing we do — which in turn reveals the image that we create as much as any we discover. Margaret Atwood’s lines often tell of the vanity of such effort:

Things  
refused to name themselves; refused  
to let him name them.

But P. K. Page’s “Cook’s Mountains” tells of results:

By naming them he made them.  
They were there  
before he came  
but they were not the same.  
It was his gaze  
that glazed each one. . . .

We saw them as we drove —  
sudden, surrealist, conical  
they rose. . . .  
The driver said  
“Those are the Glass House Mountains up ahead.”



And instantly they altered to become  
the sum of shape and name.

The terrible tensions between mind and matter take some to discovery and renewal and others to the “progressive insanities” of the pioneer. But common to them both are the forms of sound, space, and saying we must always interpret — forms we find and forms we make, that animate art and language alike.

The “art and discovery maps of Canada” that Joe W. Armstrong has collected in his magnificent *From Sea Unto Sea* (Fleet/Lester & Orpen Dennys) offer us one glimpse of people’s efforts to grasp the unknown and wrestle it decorously into form. “In all seasons,” the editor writes, “there are those who traverse the land and sea and then later, with lines and symbols, transfer the image of geography to paper.” The earliest document in this collection — a Gastaldi wood-cut map from 1556, showing “La Nuova Francia” and its ultramontane neighbour “Parte Incognita” — is alive with both people and monsters: the people wandering through park-like trees that dot the land, the toothy monsters emerging from the waves offshore. Those unknown territories gather names over subsequent years — Septentrio, Anian, California Regio — as Mercator, Ortelius, and Champlain start to claim territory by both outline and word. Champlain names the beasts and flowers, and gradually more ships than monsters fill the seas; the corners of maps later acquire the cherubs of European fashion, and the maps themselves show the measured order of sextant and geometric plane. By the end of the eighteenth century, we have records of people’s imposing themselves on the land — plans of the fortress of Louisbourg, and diagrams of urban dwellings. In 1776 there is a last imposition of imagination — Antonio Zatta’s map of “Fou Sang” (now called British Columbia) and the rest of North America’s West Coast, with an elephant and dodo decorating it (“there is a certain similarity,” the editor writes, “between the outline of the elephant in the cartouche . . . and the . . . contour of America, as a giant, profiled elephant’s head with a trunk-like California”). The cartographers from the 1780’s onwards (Cook, Vancouver, Mackenzie, Rapkin) brought science to bear instead. Niagara replaces the monstrous beasts, county boundaries define Canada West, and social order as well as science establishes the new forms reality takes in the new world. But the giants remain.

\* \* \*

Maybe it was the extraordinary size and pressure of the new land that partly drew the idioms of Newfoundland into existence. Many local words derived from British dialects, of course, and the massive, instructive, monumentally entertaining *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (University of Toronto Press), which G. M. Story, W. J. Kirwin, and J. D. A. Widdowson have patiently compiled, repeatedly reminds us of that. But other people’s dialects are never entirely

adequate for our own realities; and if rerooting the language in our own home therefore takes a certain creative flair, that is something which Newfoundlanders have abundantly shown they possess. Newfoundland vocabulary, alive with metaphor, domesticates by sound — it takes the potentially barren and alienating spaces of land and sea, the pressures of person and dimensions of difficulty, and by reducing them all to human size gives the people accordingly a measure of power over them. Consider the batch of words that follows:

*bangbelly*: pudding  
*bay noddy*: outport dweller (derog.)  
*bubbly squall*: jellyfish  
*clumpet*: ice pan  
*duckedy-mud*: indeterminately brown  
*dwall*: half asleep  
*gatch*: pompous swaggerer  
*garnipper*: large mosquito  
*gommel*: fool  
*livyer*: coast dweller (as opp. to a migratory fisherman)  
*mauzy*: misty and close  
*nuddick*: bare round hill  
*nunnybag*: knapsack  
*ownshook*: female fool  
*scrod*: small  
*slinge*: avoid work  
*tuckamore*: scrub vegetation  
*yaffle*: armful

They *name* certain difficulties, as often as not, but they *declare* something else: a laconic capacity for play — for dealing with life on familiar terms, with more wit than worry, refusing to surrender to discomfort. “ ‘Twas hardwood matches at that time,’ ” says the authority quoted in the *Dictionary* as the source of one usage; “ ‘we used to call ’em hardwood wait-a-minutes, ’cause you’d have to scrape ’em on an ass o’ your pants, an’ he fizz, and fizz, an’ by and ’by he burn up that brimstone he come to a flame.’ ”

\* \* \*

To find the words to name reality and shape experience: this has always been one of poetry’s impulses. As Northrop Frye observes about the poems of Giorgio Bassani (*Rolls Royce and Other Poems*; Aya Press): “the few moments that break through to the centre of experience are as real now as they ever were, and a touch of their reality can still make our prisons of solitude and prejudice crumble into illusion.” Time matters to Frye, and his concern for the existence of *centres* over time describes a pattern all its own. The poems (translated by Irving Layton, Greg Gatenby, and others) reveal different senses of the shapes of perception; and the very fact of translation describes one of them. The Italian

texts are — visually — ornate symmetrical designs, signs perhaps of the historical order on which the poet calls even while he despairs of memory, weeps for loss, and fears for the future; the English texts, by contrast, while appearing to flow with a contemporary idiom, adhere to a single pattern: they are governed by the uniformity of the left-hand margin, as though continuously redefining order by a single border, a solitary edge.

Of two other recent books of poetry — by Ondaatje and Webb, from Island Press, both of them handsome examples of the printer's art and the poet's cast of mind — Michael Ondaatje's *Tin Roof* is riddled with borders both concrete and imagined ("There are those who are in / and there are those who look in"). All are apprehended as the separate poems recount the poet's experience living on the rims of the Pacific. But order is an elusive quality if the borders are not to enclose, if order is to be found at all in flexible forms; and perhaps that is one sense of estrangement that has led so many recent writers on a quest for freedom through traditional patterns rather than by rejection of them. From John Thompson, for example, stems much of the recent renewal of interest in the old Persian love lyric, the *ghazal*. Ondaatje admires ghazals; Patrick Lane has written them. And Phyllis Webb's *Sunday Water*, the other Island Press release, dedicated to Ondaatje, is subtitled "Thirteen Anti Ghazals" — not, Webb adds, because her poems oppose the form, but because they adapt it to her own purposes. In a preface she explains the difference between history and practice: "The couplets (usually a minimum of five) were totally unlike the conventional English couplet and were composed with an ear and an eye to music and song"; but if the poems took as their traditional subject a love for "an idealized and universal image," "Mine tend toward the particular, the local, the dialectical and private. There are even a few little jokes. Hence 'anti Ghazals.'" And her couplets — unrhymed, asymmetrical, crafted for the pauses of silence and intake as much as for the rhythms of utterance — follow:

Ten white blooms on the sundeck.  
The bees have almost all left. It's September.

The women writers, their heads bent under the light,  
work late at their kitchen tables.

Winter breathes in the wings of the last hummingbird.  
I have lost my passion. I am Ms. Prufrock.

So. So. So. Ah — to have a name like *Wah*  
When the deep purple falls.

And you have sent me a card  
With a white peacock spreading its tail.

This is song waiting for an understanding listener.

"The form of a poem," Charles Brasch once wrote, "is its principle of individuality." Well enough said — but the principles of form say things about critical attitude as well as about poetic aspirations. "[C]ontent does not make a poem," says Ralph Gustafson; "Words do." And that, too, is well said, for poetic accomplishment cannot be equated with aspiration alone, nor explained by measurements of inspiration. In the appositely-titled *The Insecurity of Art* (Véhicule), we find an anthology of 25 essays on modern poetics, edited by Ken Norris and Peter Van Toorn, which addresses some of these issues. Among other things a reminder of how much poetic theory in Canada has stemmed from English Quebec (from Cohen, Dudek, Glasco, Gustafson, Jones, Konyves, Layton, Morrissey, and more), the book collects a contradiction of views. There are celebrations of visual placement, attacks on emotional performance, enquiries into translation and concrete and open field and "post-feminism," dismissals of what is deemed the illiteracy of oral culture, and assertions of the primacy of the intellect in appreciating the *word*. These are political perspectives as well as formal doctrines, open to argument. They tell us something about how some poems work, but seldom why. They persuade by rhetoric and chart by example. And they are personal testaments, too, as when D. G. Jones adopts a temporal view of the progress of dream:

As long as this dream of earth and this hunger for the naked encounter with it remains inarticulate, unconscious or underground, it will remain sinister, perverse, a crazy distorting force in our lives. . . . It seems to me it becomes more and more articulate in the course of the years, the gradual filling up of the pages, poem upon poem, in this green inventory. It invades the city; it invades the mind, the alphabet, and the alphabet . . . begins to become flowers . . . sensations, the touched earth.

The desire here is not to impose an order on the world. It is to encounter the orders of the world, in the world. It implies a wholly different set of values and aspirations. . . . If it could become articulate in the city . . . it would transform the map of our lives.

This is both a dream of speech, of contact, and a narrative of political desire, aspiring to language in place and lodged in language in time.

In another context (*Canadian Fiction Magazine*, no. 42), Martin Vaughn-James takes up the artistic implications of *narrative*; for Vaughn-James the narrative draughtsman, as words become images, to be seen more than heard, they *begin to happen* in a different way. "Visual images seem to have an immediacy which automatically situates them in the present," he writes; they are fixed on the page. But the reader is animate, active, turns the page, allows the next image to replace the previous one until there is "an accumulation of replacements that have nothing to do with chronology as the entire process seems to translate into a series of arrested movements not so much through time as through space."

Space, sound, movement: a map of translation: these are the metaphors of our understanding.

\* \* \*

Metaphor.

In the images of sound is language transformed. We can manipulate the forms it takes and so reshape the ways we see. Seeing by saying, at one level we say by seeing too. All we have to do is abandon that donkey *formula*, lift the spirits with a dash of formaldejekyll, and recognize the lore of the letters we live by. For by us, they occupy space, make maps, draw their own conclusions:

C  
 F R M  
 U  
 C  
 I

F  
 O R  
 M  
 O S A

a      b  
   r    o    r  
       i  
       f  
       o  
       r  
       m

f o r m a l  
 f o r m a l

They pun visually as well as aurally, either in straightforward fashion —

formal

mat    mat  
 mat    mat

— or with an extra twist, asking readers to play games with the words they know and at the same time to be literal-minded with the words they see:

FORUNMED

UNIFORM  
UNIFORM  
UNIFORM  

---

PARADE

Letters have designs, and picture truths. They join in “magic squares” and can be caught in the act of dissolving:

<b>F</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>M</b>
<b>O</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>E</b>
<b>R</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>L</b>
<b>M</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>T</b>

Always on the edge of their next possibility, they invite the reader to take charge of reforming them, whatever challenge that might be, and cast their own spells.

Do such games with words remove us from reality? Not at all. Words are simply some of the elves we keep on hand to help us, while we grow, to continue to combat the giants and quell the rats.

W.N.



# WHITE SPRUCE

*Henry Beissel*

W  
ind  
fingering  
my green sharp  
combing the early mist  
the sun brushing my  
cones sliding through my tousled  
fir into dark stillness  
only the green wind sighs  
in my arms outstretched the morning  
branches the air to weave  
dark brown inner space nest in  
spiked green the pith the spine green spiked  
hard at the centre my body grows  
[in rings in bark sheath rising slow]  
heavy through phloem spring capillary sucking sweet blood  
rising up sap my stem my sap up rising  
from dark earth wells my roots fetch salt  
water sickering from cell to cell branching into green fingers  
pointing at reaching for pulling the light  
down into dark chambers melting the light into green into  
cones quivering with resin drops of light filtering down xylem canals  
down  
bark  
deep  
root  
deep  
dark  
earth

## *from* CHRONICLES

*Patrick Lane*

*We remember minutely and precisely  
all those things that did not happen to us.*

ERIC HOFFER

*I'm just picking scabs out of my mouth.*

JOHN NEWLOVE

1.

Remember the heart. Fog on the still river. First frost.  
Passion. Flowers. The love of windows in old cities.

The painting is a dead eye. A window going nowhere.  
This one is alive. This one has a chance to live. This one.

Look in or out. Beauty is starved and love is afraid.  
Dead children. The night in mothers. Remembered delight.

The heart is an argument with darkness. Moon silver.  
Dead eye. The room rings. I do not answer it again.

3.

Magpie, magpie, do not take a lower branch than this.  
Last home I dreamed I was night. Poverty and song.

Autumn. The crabapple grows its small and bitter fruit.  
The old attend to their gardens. Under the earth. Love.

The ones who are lost sing longer than the ones who are alone.  
Blind at birth, I want you back. Chrysanthemums in frost.

Return to the garden what you left when you left behind.  
I was thinking of last leaves. The beauty of beginning.

4.

The noun also moves, incomparable, describing peace.  
The young man is elegant. He knows the polite arts.

Even the highest bird must descend for the body's sake.  
No one goes. The cultural event is no part of praise.

Shoot an arrow. Write well. The etiquette of the chariot.  
Improvisational music. Notes from a tired verb. Reside.

The correct glass has nothing to do with wine.  
Imitations. We have forgotten how to be strangers.

5.

The line is doubtful. The meaning is clear. Endure.  
We remember a boy in wind, a bell in the open field.

Full moon, I love you, your falling and your rising.  
The cedar waxwings are drunk. Frost on the berries.

Rhythm. Give of your grace. The sun forgives.  
I am afraid of nothing. Blow wind. The bell is lonely.

The new world. The anvil. The water in deep well.  
Between your hips the only parasite is me.

6.

I tried hard to imagine a linen crow, a caftan magpie.  
I believe I believe. I am the problem to the solution.

The rhythms of pride are false impressions.  
Troubles in my mind. The search for complaint, complaining.

She holds the needle but sews no stitch in time.  
Holes in my socks. Fallen apples. Variance. Systems.

The love of the naive. The tender integrity.  
Born in woman I hide my words in caves. Water-cress.

7.

I crave the honey yet complain of life. Be vivid. Be.  
Exclude me. I am not fit to govern. Dictator. Maggot.

Parallel lines are relentless. The death of understanding.  
Quiet men. I make no sense of this.

And the world is not this, is this and not that.  
Forty-three years and still I refuse.

A knife in the life is the official heart.  
Give me nothing. A caftan crow, a linen magpie.

12.

Piano exercises. The citted islands.  
To make of winds a hand, the sea a birth.

Metonymy. Creating nothing. The mind. The implacable.  
Creating something out of nothing. Metaphor. Dancing.

First daughters walking the waters.  
O foamy dance.

The old man muttering. Pliny.  
Mangroves. He wandered the world. The trees, the trees.

16.

A bad line, breaking wrong, hurts the eye.  
The road going nowhere is going nowhere anyway.

A mouth in a tree cries forgive, forgive.  
Like a body fallen on a bed. A white bed. A body.

Forgive me in my sleeping.  
I did not know your name.

The eyes that name you have no tongues.  
Old roads. The arrival in time. Witnesses.

17.

The child slides from the bone cage.  
Only the rare eagle, the coyote, the enemy called man.

The answer to the answer. The wind knows where.  
Eat the soft shell of the womb. Stormy waters.

The eye turns to horizons. Interface. The between.  
It is this moment she remembers. Relief. Recognition.

A wet sack on the snow. Soft pain.  
She sings her seed to stand. Binding. The spare grasses.

18.

Who will explain the bones?  
The porcupine challenges my passing. Step aside.

West of the west is the last thing you want.  
Meet me again when I am hungry.

Politeness has nothing to do with it.  
The doe breaks through to clear water.

Old buck hides. Words come slowly. Or not at all.  
Goshun painted the young willows. This way. Now.

## AFTER

*Mike Doyle*

*to Mary di Michele*

It's a still life. The bottle is empty.  
The room is empty.  
The chairs in the room are empty,  
the table, bare  
except for the plate, with crumbs,  
the deflated cork,  
the butterdish in which there is only  
a smear,  
& the dulled knife  
carelessly tossed aside &, flung  
in a corner, the discarded  
newspaper.

The room is empty.  
The crumbs huddle together to keep warm.  
The newspaper flutters faintly  
& from the noise it makes  
seems to be reading itself almost  
aloud.  
The sea murmurs in its green bottle.  
The afternoon air stirs,  
& the knife glints & tautens, ready

# THE SAVING GRACE

*Ralph Gustafson*

THE SAVING GRACE IS POETRY. If one defines poetry as the enlightenment of fact, the worth of experience, the attainment of sensibility, the establishment of compassion — in any of the ways in contradiction to the disharmony, the structural collapse, the pollution of right ritual, the violence and disgrace of our times — then poetry is the saving grace. It is the saving grace because it exhibits the worth of sensible harmony, of man with man, of man with himself, of man with nature. We need this worth if we are to survive even on the most pragmatic level. And poetry does not leave man on a pragmatic level; its procedure is never toward the lowest common denominator; its procedure is toward the highest common factor; it is elitist, it demands the ablest men, the rarest quotient; it is after the elimination of the mediocre; it desires to be left with only the most peaceable delight, sensual and cerebral. With a fraction of this desirable attainment achieved, our world is solvent and worthwhile.

Poetry fools no one with romanticism and sentimentality. Its commencement is from the crudest foundation of disillusionment, the wringingest awareness of irony, the very hatred and futility that is in historical mankind. Poetry is restless from the absurdity of not knowing; the refusal of the heavens to answer is its subject-matter. There they are, those black holes stuck in heaven,

swallowing space  
Beyond ingestion while we walk streets,  
The universe up to something and Sophie  
Buying shoes for sore feet.  
Poor Sophie. Poor universe  
Not having Sophie know why.  
The colossal swirl and mammoth pinpoint,  
Children spinning tops, mankind  
Screwing openings, birth to incontinency,  
Dark about the eyes. Meanwhile  
The true and starry heavens going  
Somewhere with the reasons.  
Redundancy! Infinity turning inside  
Out while we eat prunes at breakfast.

We are kept ignorant; we are imposed upon. What insolence! We have to die to know the ultimate answer!



I want the answer,  
I'm here now with circumstance,  
Not exalted with God.

In the aspiring mind, even faith's not enough. Faith is an ignorance.

There he is: mankind in mid-Atlantic clinging to kindling,

This urge upon his mounting soul, height  
Magisterial and managed by a wind,  
Transcendent take-off fiddling Venus.

He is hero for a hairpin, spilled milk, an upright genetive with a creaky pump,  
seeking

Himself between his huff and misty glass,

for now we see through a glass, darkly.

His incompletion, mankind's, poetry abundantly acknowledges, not with melancholy but with paradoxical acknowledgement; its stance is that of John Falstaff's: Lord, Lord! man made after supper of a cheese-paring:

When a' was naked, he was, for all the world,  
like a forked radish, with a head fantastically  
carved upon it with a knife.

Poetry has no illusions. But it knows what is possible. There indeed Adam sits looking at permanent apples — and he's no more!

He shifts sitting bare-assed on the sod  
Adjusting his balls to comfort. Alas.

But, a poet in the beginning if he is a sinner in the end, he notes something:

The bee sucks. He watches the tendril.  
Above him falls syrupy melody.  
He thinks a thought. Perception is perceived.  
He sees himself sitting there, hearing birds.

Not much. But he's got his senses. At the very least, he perceives himself. He moves on, that first Adam.

Sometimes  
The far scent of a downward wind  
Overtops melancholy, fingers  
Build structures of outlasting music.

Mostly not, perhaps. Structures of music sound little in our day. We strive and something gives way, that flaw in the blood that has been there anonymous for who knows how long, and there we are, one day, stricken, mortal!

What a celestial  
Tautology to get there! fun in the dreaming,  
Irony in choice, tragedy in the waste,  
Getting nowhere with injustice.

THE CLICHES CATCH UP WITH US: life is brief and all is vanity. Looking around itself, poetry is aware of not much to praise. Wallace Stevens's attributive to poetry, "A sacrament of praise," diminishes itself. The majesty of man is derided. Youth is crucified in Cambodia for stealing a handful of rice; the bomb is hurled indifferently, a leg comically flies across the restaurant; in County Sligo a child is blown up in the boat of his grandfather; a little girl runs screaming down a road in Vietnam trying to tear the flaming napalm off her; a smell comes from ovens; treads roll in the streets of Budapest, Prague, Warsaw; accident is denied admission at a hospital. What newer? The poet makes his poem out of the unstructured world; he is driven to the last expression; he finds his lines in grievousness; his rhythm halts. His thoughts are confined to narrow nights:

It would seem that God is in nature  
But not in history. Roses bloom  
And are pretty. We can smell them. We also  
Smell ovens if you know what I mean. . .

The lack of divine  
Intervention is unaccountable.  
Loaves and fishes. But divinity since then?  
Best leave contemplation of history out of it  
And go smell jonquils.

And so he does, the poet, when the world seems insoluble and he gives way. Lacklustre, he gathers in to coteries. He goes to green gardens and cultivates his own shade from the glaring sun. He cuts up useful words into jots and syllables, scatters empty spaces around. He praises silence. He draws pictures with his typewriter. But the game does not satisfy. No one listens. Solipsism won't do. He gets sick of his ego, he gets bored with pretension. There is nothing for it but negative capability, losing himself to find himself. The true world greets him.

He is pitched headlong into irony and clarity. He is made human. The truth is delight. He is moral.

His defence against grievousness is the justification of his profession. Hollow pretension is exposed. He is returned to delight, the first function of his art. He knows that if his poem lies it is a bad poem. A poem cannot lie; its delight is spoiled — the magnificence of structuring verbal music, of moving it through its form so that the very outward existence of itself is the equivalence of its inner conviction, so that the very conveyance is the meaning of what it conveys. Untruth unravels it. He is on the side of love.

In agony he faces the world. He writes it down. Something is worth while. The poem and its meaning. He will make what he says engaging, significant, nay,

exalted, so that he will force listening. Revolutionary, he drags the world into acknowledgement, adjusts what is known

To new announcements.  
 The rage isn't easy.  
 Small minds persuade their triumph,  
 The electrode harms  
 Where no mark is left,  
 Abraham puts the knife  
 Through the throat of Isaac.  
 Channels run littleness.

But the challenge is the delight. He knows all about violence and mortality; they are what he is writing about with delight.

Born to greatness is the man  
 Who sees his skull:  
                                 Again that pool  
 Is come to that the torrent splashed to rainbow —  
 That love is made whose finish was all  
 That there was though morning was at the shutter  
 Stars that night would be held by.

We are still naked Adam. But we want to be, we want to be! Make the worst of the glorious mortality of biology, biological man! What a corkscrew of pumps and arteries and sluices and drainages!

Micturition and dawns, not one  
 Without the other, current for life.  
 Amalgam of rude civilities!  
 Not a naked early riser  
 Isn't in for it, handsomeness  
 In contempt, aspirations  
 In contradiction . . .

                                Mortalities of toilet!  
 Wheelchair, swaddling, whatever drinks  
 Has to go, nothing's for it.  
 Epitaphs prove the worth of repairs,  
 Birthdays confirm the ending!

O mortality, O crudities! How easy to put the site of evacuation and love together!  
 But not a man-jack who is potent but welcomes the hard on,

Take-offs, aftermaths and plumbing.  
 Notice at brink of dawn what's up!  
 Lovers love it, popes start washing . . .

No cold shower for the poet!

In the very tightest of straits, notice what the poet finds for comfort, for his poem: comedy; puns, plays and paradoxes! That's the saving grace: art and

comedy. Even in the veriest straits, the poet finds rescue: in affirmations and incongruities. He who laughs, lasts. Charlie Chaplin's immortality. The hitch of the leg as he walks into the battered sunset.

Once upon a time the day was sacred to Saturn; nothing prevented the grandeur of bawdiness and paraphernalia:

lovers came;

Thoroughbreds mounted; spuds sprouted;  
Autocracy crumbled; sails went up  
The river, majestic; pinwheels spouted.

Three achieved their poem, the others  
Shouted. Everything came off.  
Our Lady (a little tipsy) wondered

What it was really like. Mirth  
Compounded. Scheherezade gargled,  
Jongleurs juggled. (No joke).

Irreverence and uncensorship, these the poet does not forget even though some things are sacred and the sheriff beats at the tavern door and, like Falstaff, the poet is left standing empty-pursed at the Abbey door. Poetry is never solemn.

Assumption of comedy, abilities of objectivity, these are one way out of the dilemma. It is never easy, that laughter:

Never stay down  
For the count of ten, said the little girl  
Running nowhere, her napalm on fire,

And that Jewish kid in Warsaw  
With his hands up getting  
The handout. Ha, ha.

Nevertheless, it is either that, sometimes, or black despair and despair is what poetry cannot be, being, as it is, on the side of life.

Not all is despair. Bitterness is the only emotion denied a poem. Compassion and affirmation, the two irrefutable instincts of poetry, eschew it, bitterness. Try to take the bitterness affirmation away from everyman, the sensitive man, and see what happens. No sir, he'll none of it.

Even the suffering's worth it.  
When the ground-phlox blooms  
What of the pain; there is cessation;  
The jonquil is white, the oriole  
Sings? No? Then surely there is  
Remembrance, that first ecstasy? . . .

There is a sobering beyond all  
Comprehension. It is this leaving  
Of suffering, of birds, oriole and elm  
And remembrance and lake's side,  
And hearing of music.

The poet, everyman, remembers that day, that epiphany of experience how-  
ever rarely it repeats, that first ecstasy when it was also love.

Mind-boggling was the day.  
There was sun and a clear air.  
There was no fear of heart

Or lung or joint, the beginning of the end  
Anonymous, across the world no one  
Was inflicting death but in three places,

The television was turned off,  
The colour was highly placed, blue  
With white clouds, a quick bird

Across, ruby-throated, Lear  
Was read . . .

It was the radiance of roots working, natural  
Visitation, the iridescence,  
Green, of a red-headed fly,

Absurdity, evolutions of  
The inexplicable, tendrils, the wasp,  
Unswallowable sea-urchins, and of course

The mean mean enough to sit there  
Insensitive. Someone pushed a lawn-mower.  
Rabelais and Jesus had just met.

And why wouldn't, with the world like that, the poet write down affirmations?

The heart endures, the house  
Achieves its warmth and where  
He needs to, man in woollen  
Mitts, in muffler, without  
A deathwish, northern, walks.  
Except he stop at drifts  
He cannot hear this snow,  
The wind has fallen, and where  
The lake awaits, the road  
Is his. Softly the snow  
Falls. Chance is against him.  
But softly the snow falls.

THE IMPULSE, IN WHATEVER KIND OF MAN, is called creativity, we call it creativity. The poet calls it poetry. It is all the same thing. The poet is a lackluck, like all of us, but he targets love. He knows what he must do:

Oh, nothing now but I must out of oceans  
Lift leviathan like a Job, my Moby  
Dangle on a hook.

That is to say, nothing's left to do  
But drag up god in the wig of my words. The rest's  
A muddle of farewells.

He has believed that from the beginning. He ends up still determined to do that, "drag up god in the wig of his words." He knows that poetry is an art, that he is crafty. His poem is not the world but the world with something done to it. Poetry is not a substitute for anything, above all for religion. Poetry may give the poet solace and assurance and redemption but he knows that his poem is still only but a wig of words, not the real thing; no less necessary if divinity is to be exhibited, but still not the incarnation. The grace, surely it is and the dove descends, but only by angelic guidance.

His epiphanies are profane but no less of the nature of urgent beatitude. He says that no man can live without them. He finds them in the most wondrous areas, in the ordinary, the commonplace, the trivial.

The choice  
Between weedy violet and potential  
Ground-phlox massed in May and red  
And white and to be propagated is Troy  
Fallen or not, a thing of moment  
And momentous choice whether the midge succeed  
In swallowing smaller than itself or,  
Should birdsong cease? Let Helen  
Waddle down the street and be beautiful.  
I shall go to bed far later on  
And pull the sheet up over time.  
Now I watch the cataclysmic gulp  
By midges made and conjugate  
What question lies in oriole song  
Oblivious of Agamemnon and a thousand ships.

A segment of ten minutes can cause in the poet poetry. Especially if those segments of ten minutes are now few and mortality crowds in. Truth to tell, the mortality has attached itself to the poet from the start.

Never having clasped life so tightly  
As in the leaving of it, he listens to the call  
Of birds as though trees were an ultimate purpose.



He sits in the sun and grieves on behalf of those who have had to clasp mortality; he acts as though the turning on of a tap is important, as though flowers in a vase are significant. Mankind makes it easy to have done with the world and get out of it, the world's sanctification of cheapness and the handwashing. But not the immediate rare grace he can make of it will he do without, the morning's vastly responsible announcements,

Bats, belfry, proclamations,  
Bees at blossoms — the whole nightshirt  
Get-up and celestial existence of existence,

for the most trivial happening of a segment of ten minutes has happened to him:

Sun just reached the scarlet geranium  
Set out in the antique fire-bucket.

The fear of having missed a segment of significant ten minutes grips him, grips him the more he has time taken away from him. Waste and missings impel him to warnings. Regret is futile. A great compassion overcomes him, that the world lose the world, that an awareness of suffering has been missed, that what could have been exaltation was indifference. The most ordinary happenings of a day will bring this compassion upon him. The man nailing a step, repairing the biases of winter; she launching laundry out on a line that ran from the kitchen to the yard telephone, sheets smelling of winter's cold, each time the line is launched, the pulley squeaking, may have missed the significance, how those happenings of life quietly and lovingly lived may be thought neither important nor memorable, how, as they happen

neither  
She nor the man pounding the clear air  
Fixing the green step with another nail,  
Will be aware of the importance, twenty  
Years later thought of by him  
Who drove nails and saw laundry,  
Who thought little of cardinals and clothespins  
And now love life, loves life.

Too late, too late.

Cardinals and clothespins, cathedrals and doughnuts, what trivia! And what greatness when in the truth of poetry!

It all boils down to love. Love is the answer.

Love without hurt  
The only choice.

The poet writes it down.

The irreplaceable reconstitution  
Of desirable experience  
Is what he scrapes out . . .

The kettle of fish would boil over  
With clarity so to speak,  
Taps in the midst of heatwaves  
Run breathless  
Spring water,

Heaven would put pleas on its backburners  
And buckets of risen bread,  
That yeast in them, go bust  
Overflowing  
If the world

Listened.

The poet knows that love is short but that it is for all time; he knows that heaven is miles-high, that as he drives west into hostile territory he will be besieged, driven to draw into circular defences his wagons, but he primes his guns,

His immediate preference not celestial,  
But sundowns and prairies, pioneers  
Turning cartwheels to the next corral.

## THREE POEMS

*Ralph Gustafson*

## THE MIND NEEDS WHAT THE POEM DOES

White lilacs and Berlioz —  
Take them as standing for the world and what  
We make of it. Say it is Berlioz' opera  
*Les Troyens*, and let us say  
They are white lilacs clipped from the bush  
That last afternoon of May;  
With late evening, the dark fragrance  
In the room and burning Troy.

Which was as real as the other?  
 What man creates in meaning is  
 The world we live in though the rocky  
 Earth is what we ride on. Flowers  
 At the cost of wooden horses: heroic  
 Foolishness.

Stars we got free.  
 Fashioned, finagled implements.  
 A door-hinge, wheel, straight nails:  
 Worthier than the starry night,  
 What we make of them, histories.

More than ourselves, lilacs are amorous  
 Troy; without the town, abstract  
 Music is competent mockery.

## RAIN

The downpour is a cataclysm.  
 Trees slant, eaves along the house  
 Gush, no one can see beyond the walk.

The mind's drenched. Deserts blow sand.  
 What has that to do with it? Cellar  
 Windows spill, sills rise.

Each has his own anxieties truthfully,  
 Green is perhaps everywhere dry,  
 Ducks do not feel like song.

Each one's corner is his world, Allah  
 Yelling and Christ hanging and Buddha supine.  
 What is the god for rain? Oblique it pours!

Levels accumulate. Worms come out,  
 Lying on the grass openly,  
 Depressions wash over. I haven't spoken

POEM

Of the noise, the great swallowing ditch,  
Surfaces rush. Generalities  
Will no longer do, truth,

Truth, wrong positions, the universe,  
Are what it's about, misapprehension.  
Watch, outside! It can't last.

## IN THE EVERGLADES

All animals are holy,  
They are themselves.

The birds are sacred,  
The sky theirs.

The heron stands for hours  
On one leg

And the roseate spoonbill  
Seeks side to side.

The alligator eats once a week  
And slides in

And among the mangrove roots  
His small one waits.

A movement! The spotter  
Adjusts his lens,

He does not know why  
But feels worship,

The fat woman feels worship,  
And the camper, and the baseball

Cap, and bright eyes.  
No one is articulate:

The egret is beautiful and the blue  
Heron and the ibis.

No one can say why.  
Each is itself.

The people do not move,  
Each in identity.

## TRUCE

*R. A. D. Ford*

*“Le coeur, comme des rois, sous la forme de paix  
perpétuelle, ne signe donc que les trêves”*

— AMIEL

The war goes on, the words wound  
Murderously, the blood flows and quickens,  
Until the sacrifice is too great  
And the heart sickens.

The emissaries sound out the enemy,  
Cease-fire is called, the barrage dies down,  
The sky is seen again through the haze,  
And recognizable is the dawn.

Peace for a century should be ours,  
But the heart opts only for a truce,  
Though there is time enough for a hand-clasp  
In the ruins of those countless Troys.

We think it is the threshold,  
The going-in, the promise, the rosy  
Future. But the armistice  
Is like the wraith of a passing thought,  
And our hearts harden with the sight of peace.

# ROBERT FINCH AND THE TEMPTATION OF FORM

G. V. Downes

IT WAS CONSCIOUS CHOICE rather than the “naked non-chalance of chance” which determined the form of the poems in the last section of Robert Finch’s recent (1980) *Variations and Theme*. They are composed of twenty-six lines in thirteen rhymed couplets, a number which even the most casual Tarot student knows has been used since time immemorial as a symbolic representation of death and resurrection in the sense of change, becoming, the perpetual flow of Heraclitus where “Things that are known turn into unknown things.” Change, paradoxically, seems the one constant in Finch’s poetry. It is vividly expressed in his first volume *Poems* (1946):

Lost at the centre of change, seeing how strange is  
New beside old, we move, to stranger places  
For as we move, our sorrow moves, and passes  
Through us and we through it and so all changes

It is the subject of the last poem in the carefully orchestrated *Variations and Theme*, and therefore of some significance. A recent academic article by Finch is also concerned with the theme of change reflected in a very different way and in a different milieu — the use made of the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid by the French poet Benserade in the seventeenth century, a writer, incidentally, just as independent of fashionable trends as Finch himself. “Je suis dehors,” he remarked.

Such overlapping of professional activity and private occupation should alert critics to the possibility of there being more layers of meaning, more subtleties of association in Finch’s work than have been commonly noticed by his reviewers. With the admirable exception of William Walsh,<sup>1</sup> critics have tended to stress the superficial aspects of form in his poetry rather than treating the form as part of a total vision, an expression of patterns of mental structure and sensibility, one of whose outward and visible signs is coherent language. The very expressions used — “casual and arbitrary brilliance,” “careful and consummate workmanship,” “pure surface image,” and others more critical, “neat,” “brisk” — indicate the emphasis. And for all the notice that has been taken of his long involvement with French poetic theory and practice (the French who are so logically articulate



about their poetry) he might as well have been studying the culture of the ancient Sumerians. International, cosmopolitan, European — these epithets certainly reflect a consciousness of his wide cultural interests including German literature — but surely more relevant descriptions are required, and careful studies, to bring out the importance of this French background.

Reviewers have, nevertheless, been perfectly justified in picking up the effect of the gleaming surface, the organized débris of experience (sensation, emotion, memory) which make up the poem. For Robert Finch's eye is fundamentally that of the artist, a painter who has had many successful exhibitions to his credit between 1921 and 1978. He is also a musician, and in his academic persona a critic of aesthetic theory. This combination of visual experience, musical aptitude, and understanding of the creative process in the work of others is unusual in Canada, opening as it does perspectives in criticism as tantalizing as they are impossible to pursue here. To mention merely one example, there seems an obvious parallel between the position of the eighteenth-century French poets studied by Finch in *The Sixth Sense*, who were looking for new modes of expression in poetry and music to match a changing sensibility, and the early work of A. J. M. Smith, Frank Scott, and Finch himself in bringing fresh perspectives into the Canadian poetry of the 1930's and 1940's.

In considering the importance of form in Finch's vision, it seems to be essential to take his painting into account; he has been an artist for as long as or even longer than he has been a poet. From time to time, there occurs a fusion of the two modes of consciousness, and I do not mean by that simply the anthology pieces such as "Statue" or "Train Window" with their realistic evocation of a moment in time permanently caught on the page. In "Sea-piece" the poet uses pictorial terms to conjure up the image:

The pencil lines of the pale brown deck  
explode from the point of the mast's white crayon  
.....  
and the white net rope of the rails  
fences this gouache geometry.

Music is not forgotten. There are trombones too.

A more analytic approach can be seen in "The Painter ii" from *Silverthorn Bush* thirty years later:

I first studied bamboo-painting using bamboos  
Themselves as my instructors. Then I tried,  
Unorthodoxly perhaps, with an air of humour,  
In writing, supple, wiry, flowing as wind,  
To paint the sound of footsteps in lonely valleys,  
The colour of voices from a drifting night

Although Finch has experimented with many styles of painting, the element which ties them together, and relates the work to the poetry, is a sense of structure as firm as it is unobtrusive. This is particularly so in paintings where the nature of the subject lends itself to patterns in gouache or watercolour whose original form is architectural — blocks, triangles, oblongs, half-circles of houses and buildings. Their shapes may be very simply suggested *à la chinoise* with a few strokes of crayon or wash; complexities of inner space may be fully explored; or they may be presented flat face, as in a watercolour of a house in Prince Edward Island whose ultimate effect, while suggesting the primitive eye, is nevertheless one of extreme sophistication. There are also pure abstracts where the form is co-terminous with the rich, irregular blocks of colour.

One's first impression is that there are no human beings at all in this continuing panorama. This is curious, for the poetry is thronged with people, either observed passing by in park, street, or corridor, or so closely connected with the author that certain sequences such as no. 3 of *Poems* could easily be interpreted as plots for Jamesian novels or dramatic monologues reminiscent of Browning. This is equally true of individual poems of any date up to the present, including those in the most recent (1981) *Has and Is*, such as "Sight Unseen" and "Enclave," and the complex *Variations* VIII and IX whose shadowy protagonists are known only by the enigma of their responses against backgrounds whose material décor is elegantly sketched. The geography, whether it be town or country, is always more definite than the identities even though the psychological stance of the speaker is precisely indicated.

Finch points out that, in addition to the types of painting mentioned above, he has always executed works arising out of fantasy and dream where figures of people do indeed play a central role. It would be astonishing for someone exposed to French surrealism and the visions of earlier artists such as Odilon Redon not to bear some traces of these influences. But in the poetry, direct references to the subconscious are rare, and it is possible that this aspect of the changing protean psyche has found its most satisfactory expression in forms offered by art rather than in language. There are certainly dream worlds in Finch's literary work, but they are traditional rather than Jungian, idealistic rather than bizarre.

Yet the very absence of the human element suggests its presence off-stage. As in early Di Chirico paintings, there is a faintly disturbing quality about the empty streets and cafés, the quays where no boats dock. Even such differing works as a realistic drawing of ornamental cane chairs (used as a poster for the 1978 exhibition) and a more complex outdoor scene of two lighthouses at Grau manifest this sense of otherness. Who belongs to these seats with their intertwining knots, their Tarot wands-hearts symbolism? And where have all the ships gone? A simple trick of perspective, lines meeting on the horizon, allows the structure to point to more than itself.

ALTHOUGH THE OBSERVANT EYE is of course basic to Finch's poetry, the visual element, especially in his early work, becomes merely one of many in a closely woven network of images, feelings, sensation, and comment. And perhaps because his mind is a naturally reflective one as well as being acutely conscious of its own functioning, one enters into a universe where the moral is as pervasively present as the aesthetic. Birds become part of the problem of religious doubt:

pigeons that flaunt the feigned arcade  
in copper wings and ashen tails,  
that sink their beaks in necks of suède,  
or pinkly drift on smoky sails

("Doubt's Holiday")

The pond in "The Hole in the Day" becomes a symbol of illusion, while both sea and trees are constantly invoked as part of the inevitable process of human decay in time, with its corollary, in Finch's world, of spiritual growth.

William Walsh may be right, in a general way, in pointing out Finch's kinship with Matthew Arnold. But it would be more true to say that long exposure to the French habit of mind, and particularly to the *moralistes* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, has been instrumental in forming his marked tendency to generalize, like the Augustans, on human experience. And from both these sources come the witty epigram, the flourish of the rhymed couplet, the steady practice of poetry as intellectual fun in *vers de circonstance* or verses which are written deliberately in order to become familiar with the possibilities and limitations of a formal metre. The long sonnet sequences of Renaissance poets — Italian, French, English — also come to mind.

"No poem, however light, can afford to be less than perfect." This is the Margaret Avison of 1945, replying in the *Canadian Forum* to a howl from Irving Layton over what he considered an unfair review, and the statement seems to express succinctly the attitude of most serious poets of the forties who were indirectly or directly absorbing the influence of Eliot, Pound, Yeats, and the richly varied intellectual scene in Europe during the first part of the century. As a corrective to parochialism and watered-down Victorianism this experience could hardly have been bettered, and it is clear that in his formative years Finch received earlier, and more directly than most, the impact of a point of view on aesthetics which transcends fashion and which, apart from its classical roots, can be traced in modern terms back to Baudelaire and Théophile Gautier. The latter, pointing out that the artist must work at his medium, said "Que ton rêve flottant / Se scelle / Dans le bloc résistant," and for the poet the "bloc résistant" is language, that infinitely tricky medium facing thought in one direction and music in another.

And one must make it clear here that Margaret Avison was not discussing the merits of metrical or non-metrical verse, she was talking about sloppy writing from a poet capable of better things. Finch's practice, whether he is using metrical forms or not, brings him squarely into Avison's court, into the camp of the *artistes* rather than the *voyants*, artificial though Marcel Raymond's famous distinction may be, and particularly so if applied to English texts. Since some of Finch's most successful effects, such as "Scroll Section" and "Campaspe" are not in formal metre at all, one can conclude that the care for language which will be adequate to the occasion of the poem is for him an aesthetic necessity quite divorced from the choice of poetic pattern.

Useful though the distinction is for academic criticism, I find it difficult as a writer to accept any formulation of the creative act which says or implies that form is imposed upon content. What the reader finds in the poem represents a final crystallization of language dynamically at work in the mind after an infinite number of starts involving echoes and associations which eventually create a *text* that the author (originally struck by a phrase or a rhythm) may never have intended or expected. In this connection, one can say that twentieth-century explorations into subconscious mental processes, and a growing literary interest in authors' drafts, have both contributed to an understanding that the poem is a result of organic growth rather than a content poured into a restrictive form.

Finch is completely aware of the complexity inherent in the poetic process ("The Reticent Phrase," "The Poem") as well as the ultimate mystery of the origins of the word. But since metrical forms do seem to predominate in his work, it seems reasonable to enquire why, and to ask why he has not followed the paths of Dorothy Livesay, P. K. Page, and Earle Birney, whose first publications are roughly contemporary with his own, and who have all shown more enthusiasm for experiment in various ways. It is not as though Finch cannot hear and use the colloquial when he chooses.

One answer may lie in the Gautier quotation above, and in what Yeats called "the fascination of what's difficult." The fixed form, like Everest, is always there as a continual challenge. And if by constant manipulation of a certain form the writer makes it part of automatic or unconscious neurological processes, it is possible to arrive at the stage where the actual germ of the poem occurs as a spontaneously generated unit of language already attached to a rhythm which is characteristic of some fixed form. For some poets, such as Paul Valéry, who left such a valuable record of his creative life, the first intimation of a poem in the hinterland of the mind may even be a suggestion of rhythm without words at all. The value of such deliberate familiarity with form lies here: there is a fusion at the subliminal level of word and metrical stress which allows experiences to rise from the depths not just *in* form but *as* form.

"A shape to hold the form begin to bloom" — there appear to be other advantages offered by the metrical form. For those who enjoy practising it, there is an extra element of linguistic tension added to the already complex variables which make up the poem. Undoubtedly the counterpointing of natural speech against a basic beat allows the poet to create effects which might otherwise go unrealized, just as the search for a rhyme can reveal hitherto unsuspected truths about the realities of a theme which may or may not be the true subject of the poem. Would it be fair to say that all serious poetry, apart from pure narrative, is truth-telling of a kind, whatever the temporary masks donned by the poet for the exercise, and that metrical form helps in the process of listening to one's truths? "The word on the lips / Only re-shapes / The mask it rips" ("The Words").

A. J. M. SMITH USED TO STRESS that poetry — or any art — was a way of bringing order into chaos, and that the formal patterns of poetry enabled the poet to tame his experiences by becoming more conscious of them through the very effort of articulation. Finch's attitude to form seems to take the process one step further, because, as the religious poems in *Has and Is* make clear, the poet's act of creation parallels the Word: "And yet a Poet by this alchemy / Is making what is His belong to me." He has exploited an infinite number of metrical effects which, through the counterpointing of voice patterns against a basic beat, provide a continuing framework of musical expectation at a level which is subliminal rather than obtrusive. The patterns exist outside trends, outside time, and they do not depend for their impact on the personality or the emotionally charged voice of the poet at a public reading. But the reader must listen; the syntax may be complicated.

The variety of forms, in spite of the ubiquitous sonnet, is matched by complexity of thought and feeling. Finch's range is wide. The ironic manipulative wit of "The Rule" where there is just one stress in each line (except line 7 where both monosyllabic adjectives must have equal force) represents a deliberately formal art which simply amuses itself by its own expertise: "Adrift / Lest gift / Of all / Should pall / And much / At odds / With gods / And ends." In more classic form, the social scene is satirized:

While the refreshments spread and with them girths  
As imperceptibly as the conviction  
That gratified desire has no connection  
With either deaths or marriages or births

("All Their Parts")

But this flourish of technique is only, in a sense, the beginning. The door then opens on more deeply felt experiences such as some of the love poems or the simple religious certainty of the last poem of *Dover Beach Revisited*:

Once in a timeless interim I touched it,  
 Alone in a crowd, crowding the other lonely,  
 Unheard, unseen, with nothing at all that vouched it,  
 I touched it, it touched me, once, once only.

(“The Certainty”)

Some of Finch’s most effective work is seen when the natural syntax and emphasis of the voice breathes so easily in the formal pattern that the latter is simply absorbed into the total texture of the poem, as in “Effect of Snow — iii,” part of a suite in *Acis in Oxford* which in 1962 won Finch his second Governor General’s award as well as some criticism from poets who were listening to the beat of more modern drummers. This poem is particularly interesting because, like no. xiv of *Variations*, it suggests the world of dream, maya, illusion, which is never far from Robert Finch’s perceptions (“waking self and sleeping self”) and exists along with the perfectly observed momentary reality:

I have seen the snow like a mirage impending  
 Upon the eyelids of the dreaming air  
 .....

I have heard it sing one note against another  
 So quiet only the quiet heart could hear,  
 Or lay its silence down, feather by feather  
 On the discordant day, the restless fear

The arabesques of thought move out and back until they come to rest in controlled harmony.

The first poem in the suite is much sharper in its effects, both visual and aural, depending as it does on the contrast between black and white, dark sky and white ground, recalling a chessboard with trees as pieces. As so often, the moment is poised in a perilous equilibrium:

What is the move? One move from left to right  
 And the whole wood will move from bleak to bright.

What wood? An ordinary Ontario lot? Dante’s? Eliot’s? The tight form allows vistas to open here, although frequently in Finch’s work one finds endings which seem, because of the necessities of the stanza form, to close off the flow abruptly. This is, of course, one of the real disadvantages of formal verse; the second poem in the series illustrates this:

And, with its lacquered cornices of snow  
 A white pagoda, once a bungalow.

The descent into suburbia is disconcerting.

Looking at Finch's work as a whole, one is struck not just by his many voices but by the persistence of an angle of vision whose probing illumination spares neither the poet himself nor the *dramatis personae* he conjures up and buries in his well-wrought urns. The technical interest for the reader in many poems of the recent *Variations and Theme* lies in the way a traditional form can hold a subtle and mysterious balance between what is said and what is unsaid, for the poet's Jamesian eye, added to a Racinian sensibility, roves like the shifting camera of a contemporary film over scenes where only a look, a profile, a moving hand define the progress of the action. These scenes are dateless and in their own way timeless, and once the ear gets used to the convention of the rhymed couplet, for example, we are made free of moments of intensely realized drama. There is the ironically presented seduction scene where candles throw a Georges de la Tour light on two figures in a claustrophobic dining-room; on the next page, by contrast, a sunlit Mediterranean salon and garden, fresh as a Matisse, after a decision which seems also to involve a crime:

Hide,  
 Leave by the window on the other side,  
 From where detection will remain remote.  
 Pinned to the pillow is a pencilled note.

Pinned by a stiletto? The high decorum of Finch's art demands that the recipient's hysteria remain unsung.

Any definitive study of form in Robert Finch's work would be bound to consider not only the comparatively modern concepts briefly mentioned here, but also the aesthetic theories of the Renaissance and the eighteenth century when the dynamic relationships between the arts (music, painting, poetry, architecture) were not only more real than they are today, but also apprehended more deeply at a philosophical level. A final word is provided by Louis Dudek, discussing Phyllis Webb: "After all, what matters is the form, whether of joy or sorrow, when it comes to the ritual of art."

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> William Walsh, "The Poetry of Robert Finch," *Bulletin of Canadian Studies*, 2 (April 1978), 1-15.



# AND OF THE MEASURE OF WINTER WE ARE SURE

*Patrick Lane*

(for Miriam Mandel)

You have taken the measure of winter  
making  
with your craft a tree no one could climb  
so

upon your limbs the star-fruit hangs  
with the secret buried within  
the dark seed  
in the centre of your world molten  
red as the moment before darkness  
In your lives  
the mother took your moods  
took your brooding in her  
playing  
the measured line that broke you

The music sang to your care    the achiote  
the sweet despair  
the rare fruit that falls in wind

Winter you have beaten us again  
The beautiful dead are lying upon silence  
their mouths full of words  
unspoken  
of sleep of caring of the sweet  
prayer they uttered when sound was gone  
Grief  
and the note of release She  
cries on her bed where her body lies  
all of her gone but the flesh and the music  
as of birds leaving

O winter  
(I must leave here soon



# DREAMING OF RIVERS

*Eric Trethewey*

One autumn night in your thirties  
you bob up from sleep.  
You've been dreaming of rivers.  
Dazed, warm in the blankets,  
you turn the dream over,  
burnish the edges, hidden corners,  
before the glow goes flat  
in the morning light.

The Ellershouse River.  
Begin with the girl, the spot  
where your bodies blazed  
in the sweetfern.  
The river noses in there,  
shoulders the lane,  
turns back to the trees,  
and you trace the clear water  
upstream, slowly,  
bend by bend,  
pausing to fish as you did then  
the foam-scummed pools.  
You cross on a deadfall,  
skirt rapids to the oxbow  
on a lop-stick trail.  
There the land takes a breath, rises  
to the bridge and thick woods  
on the other side. From below,  
you see again how the trestle hovers,  
creaks like death in the air,  
and crossing over, smell that old  
preserver on the ties. On the far side  
the beeches sidle in to waterfalls,  
black pools, waterstriders moving  
in the gloom. Fishing gets better  
and you bring the boys in from the dream,  
give names to them,  
keep on climbing in your mind  
toward the thin source of the stream,  
push on until, short of it,

deep in the shadow of spruce  
and straggle of swale,  
memory stammers, repeats itself,  
and for all your cunning  
this river fades into other rivers,  
all rivers.

Holding on before daylight,  
you wheel in your circle of loss,  
pine and resin, damp moss fragrant  
on memory's air, and go for one more crack  
at the orange-bellied trout  
where the water hooks down  
through the trees, through the gorge,  
around water-honed granite,  
past the trestle to a pause, doubles back  
on itself, widens, lightens,  
and eases on down to the lane —  
where the hunted Indian, Shires,  
one step ahead of the Mounties  
leaped into legend that swollen spring —  
then over shoals, under willow overhangs,  
past cutbanks and, highballing on current now,  
you sweep through alders, by the mill,  
the bridge, past Deming's store,  
and wind through flat pasture  
to the big-bend camp-meeting  
shallows of baptism  
where the water leans back  
and foots it under the elms,  
to the swimming-hole full of bodies, breasts,  
and one final shoot through a meadow  
to the highway bridge  
and beyond where you've been yet,  
ocean bound now,  
with all those other rivers  
blinking silver through the trees,  
golden in the sun  
and though you've lost it again

you know it doesn't end here.

# RECYCLING

*Pat Jasper*

The usual ingredients cluttered  
my mother's sewing basket:  
pastel-headed pins, needles, tangled  
spools and a rattly button-box,  
in this case, a recommissioned  
pink Almond Roca tin.

Clothes never got thrown out  
at our house until they were  
shorn of eye-holing adornment:  
brass buttons, bone buttons  
squeaky leather buttons,  
assembled for reassignment  
again and again.

On days she wanted us out of her hair,  
she would let us sort them  
into satisfying patterns,  
string them into necklaces  
or barter them as coins  
in a rainy-day game of store.  
For lunch she'd fix us  
tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches  
with Almond Roca to sweeten  
our cranky dispositions.

Last week, taking refuge from the rain,  
I noticed pink tins stacked  
on the shelves of a real store.  
They hadn't changed a bit,  
except for the inflated price.

I splurged and bought one anyway,  
then went home and fixed  
tomato soup  
and grilled cheese sandwiches  
for lunch.

When the tin was empty,  
I couldn't bring myself

to throw it out  
but began to round up buttons,  
snipping off a second childhood  
for safekeeping in a can.

## THE DANCING IN THE WIND

*Ernest Hekkanen*

There are days when I find it hard to bend  
Skyward. Something in the flesh fails  
To hear the dancing in the wind;  
Something in the heart takes leave  
And I am grounded, among stones.

Where is the will that trains the beast  
To Fly. It has wandered off, a sudden fog  
Wafting across the ice-bright field  
To where the crows lurch and squawk.

## A SONNET IS AN EASY POEM TO WRITE

*Fred Cogswell*

A sonnet is an easy poem to write  
If you remember that it needs to be  
No more than a quadruple harmony  
In which grammar, sound, feeling, thought, unite  
To make, thereby, a new thing — one whose might  
Is more than its ingredients; designed  
To blend like music, eye, ear, heart, and mind  
Into its own crescendo of delight.

Whether you close two thoughts — octave, sestet —  
Or open one three times, then nail it shut  
With the sharp bang of a final couplet,  
In any sonnet you have but to put  
Right words in right places at the right times  
And just fourteen of them will do for rhymes.

# DICTION IN POETRY

*George Johnston*

**M**ODERN ENGLISH IS AN IMPURE and undisciplined literary language. It is style-less, a writer must make his own style in it. An important element of a style is its vocabulary. This matters in every kind of writing, but especially in poetry. Words carry their full weight in a poem and will embarrass it if they are out of place or under strain. Therefore it behoves a poet writing in English to know his words well.

In structure and grammatical vocabulary English is a West Germanic language; its closest relations are Flemish, Dutch, Frisian, Platt-Deutsch and, at a slight remove, German. The first Germanic settlers of England, in the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries A.D., spoke pure dialects of West Germanic, which had a few borrowed Latin words. Then Danes and Norwegians began settling the country too, and the West Germanic dialects began borrowing their closely-related words. Somehow the language of the Celts had almost no effect on that of their conquerors, and the Romans left nothing in the language of the country they had occupied except a few place names. After the Norman Conquest, in the eleventh century, French words came into the vocabularies of these dialects in great numbers, and for nearly two centuries French was the language of Court and Church and of much literature, but not of the common people. By the fourteenth century West Germanic had re-established itself as the language of government and literature, as well as of the people. After the Reformation it was the language of the Church as well. The predominant dialect was that of London, which was mostly Anglian, and the language was known as English.

It was by now already an impure language, full of borrowed words, from French, Scandinavian, Latin direct and Latin through French. It was ready to welcome more. Important English scholars of the Renaissance made a point of writing in English instead of Latin, but they brought Latin and Greek words into it to give it substance, as they thought, and dignity. Shakespeare made fun of these hard words but he too made considerable and effective use of Latin words, and Milton used Latin words and constructions extensively. Our common speech and our literary language are both full of borrowings that Shakespeare and Milton brought into English.

Borrowing from Latin and Greek and, once again, from French went on in the eighteenth century, and meanwhile words had been coming in from Flemish and Dutch, from the New World, from Africa and the Middle East and, later, from India. With the advancement of the natural sciences and technologies in the nineteenth century, hundreds of new words were coined from Latin and Greek, and this process carried over into politics and the social sciences. English is now full of newcomers, words from these specialized vocabularies that have acquired popular currency. And there are modern regional dialects, claiming literary autonomy: there is American English, which has sub-dialects, and there are Australian and Canadian Englishes and West Indian English, and others. Besides these there are many slang vocabularies that arise from underworlds, from wars, from the media, from sports and other sources, which flourish briefly and are gone, leaving maybe a word or two more or less permanently in the language. Bureaucracy has contributed many words and turns of speech.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century some writers became dissatisfied with the impurity of English. Best known among these was William Morris. He made serious efforts to clear his vocabulary of borrowings, and went so far as to reintroduce English words that had become obsolete, and he invented modern forms for English words that had not survived the Middle Ages. Paradoxically one gets an impression of outlandishness from this purified English vocabulary at a first reading, but it grows on one, it has strength and grace, its moods seem true. It is not hard to feel a longing for such a language; Ernest Hemingway felt it. An awareness of the English in a literary vocabulary is most helpful in understanding its over-all make-up and quality. The great virtue of the study of Old English is the insight it gives into the heart and bone structure of our language.

The origin and family connections of a word may be learned from its etymological note in a good dictionary, or better, from an etymological dictionary. A poet also wants to know a word's history, what its meanings have been and how they have changed over the centuries. Many words have changed meaning somewhat in crossing an ocean. The stages and wanderings of a word's life, the ways it has been used, are all helpful things for a writer to know. Dictionaries are different from one another in the kind of information they provide; the most comprehensive and generous is the great *Oxford English Dictionary*, with its modern supplements.

To illustrate these preliminary remarks on the subject of diction I shall quote four Canadian poems. The first is "A Shadow," by Raymond Souster:

A shadow should be  
a *comfort*, a *companion*  
*especially* on cold winter nights.  
  
Mine's neither,  
being more of a *nuisance*,

either playing at stepping on my heels,  
or making like *terror*, *fond* of showing  
blackness so *close* behind  
darker than anything I've seen  
even deepest in myself.<sup>1</sup>

Souster writes as down-to-earth and consistent an English as one is likely to find in any writer. The words I have italicized are borrowings, mostly from French but they have been in English use for so long that they hardly colour the plain Englishness of the poem. Their meanings have changed little, though the early meaning of "comfort" is "a strengthening" and of "companion" is "sharer of bread," helpful things to know. The poem's English words have had their current sense for over a thousand years, as far back as can be known. The phrase "making like terror" sounds very modern, but there are early intransitive uses of "make." "Fond" is a borrowing, but from another Germanic language, Swedish or Icelandic. Its meaning has changed, though its earliest sense, "foolish," is still in it, and gives it its flavour. "Nuisance" was a stronger word to begin with, and meant something harmful. It was derived from a verb, and still feels like one. The English words have acquired shades of meaning and dropped them again on the way through the centuries; some fill many columns in the Oxford Dictionary; the verb "play" fills ten and the verb "step" seven.

Souster might scorn the bringing to bear of this kind of learning on his poem. I would not suggest that he had composed in a learned way. But I do know that he is a careful and well-informed poet, and it is clear that he knows his vocabulary. Few poets are as consistent; every word he writes has the ring of the same voice, and the same passion and conviction of truth.

Here is a sonnet, now, from Robert Finch's recent collection, *Has and Is*. It shows an almost opposite kind of skill and awareness of diction, so that whereas Raymond Souster's art is to conceal art, Robert Finch's is to rejoice in it.

This *rose* you give me cannot ever *fade*  
Until I *fade* with it and it with me,  
And should you give me others they would be  
Not a *succession* but an *accolade*.

The first *rose* is the last and all between,  
Its *fragrance* too is theirs, its *imbrications*  
In them *repeat* unending *celebrations*  
Of what is seen and what will yet be seen,  
*Incessantly discernible* as *roses*,  
Though clothed in *costumes infinitely varied*,  
The good *intent* that *launches* them is *carried*  
By the most *tenuous vehicle* it chooses,  
Even the *semblance* of a *voice* one knows  
Can make the *silence* blossom like a rose.<sup>2</sup>

It is not hard to see the difference in vocabulary between this poem and Raymond Souster's. It has twenty-one different borrowed words, five of which are Latin, and of the French borrowings many are late. Of the English words, a high proportion are merely grammatical: demonstratives, prepositions, conjunctions and auxiliary verbs. Much of the meaning is carried by the borrowings. This ratio of borrowed to English words is now more normal, for conversation as well as writing, than Souster's, though Souster's vocabulary draws less attention to itself. Finch's Latin words give an impression of wit and pleasure, one can share the poem's relish in the exotic sounds of "imbrications," and their rhythms and rhymes are sprightly. At the same time they convey a sentiment, gracefully, that we respond to.

MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S POEM, "Henri Rousseau and Friends" is as form-conscious as Robert Finch's, but its rhythms and its irregular verse pattern are very different. It shows the same candid delight in Latin, however, and a brightness of style in using it, along with a counterpoise of ferocity and gentleness of sentiment that is characteristic of Ondaatje's writing. Here is the third stanza, which speaks of the creatures in the douanier Rousseau's painting:

They are the *ideals of dreams*.  
 Among the *exactness*,  
 the *symmetrical petals*,  
 the *efficiently flying angels*,  
 there is *complete liberation*.  
 The *parrot* is *interchangeable*;  
 tomorrow in its *place*  
 a *waltzing* man and a *tiger*,  
 brash *legs* of a bird.<sup>3</sup>

Again, the borrowed words are italicized. "Dreams" and "legs" are from Old Norse and "waltzing" is from modern German, so they are borrowed from within the Germanic family. There was an English word "dream," but it meant "joy" and was displaced by that French word. "Brash," in this sense, seems to have been a sixteenth-century coinage; here it must mean "brittle" and in this context it is an unusual and effective word.

Ondaatje's stanza is quite as Latinate as Finch's sonnet, but its tone is different; the Latin words are used familiarly, they are not flourished. "Brash," whose origins are probably English, is the most attention-getting word in the stanza.

The second section of Margaret Atwood's poem "He Reappears" exemplifies another sort of diction altogether, cunningly employed, as one would expect.



You take my hand and  
I'm suddenly in a bad movie,  
it goes on and on and  
why am I fascinated

We waltz in slow motion  
through an air stale with aphorisms  
we meet behind endless potted palms  
you climb through the wrong windows

Other people are leaving  
but I always stay till the end  
I paid my money, I  
want to see what happens.

In chance bathtubs I have to  
peel you off me  
in the form of smoke and melted  
celluloid

Have to face it I'm  
finally an addict,  
the smell of popcorn and worn plush  
lingers for weeks.<sup>4</sup>

This poem is as English in its vocabulary as Souster's; its setting might also be his though he would not be likely to use it in so sustained and interlocked a way, almost as an allegory, nor in so sharp a voice. The key words, "bad movie," stand out, as they should. They are a pairing of English — *bad* — and a modern coinage from an old Anglo-French word — *movie* — and their combined sense is so narrowly modern as to be already slightly archaic. Many of the poem's words draw their meanings from a common but period-limited activity, that of watching a moving picture in a post-war cinema (as it is now more frequently called). The particular sense of "bad movie" may have been current in the 1930's but hardly before, and the single word "movie" already feels dated. The words "slow motion," "popcorn," and "plush" belong to the movie language; so does the third stanza, though its words, taken separately, have no special connotations. "Air stale with aphorisms," "potted palms," the adjective "worn" in "worn plush," and the image of climbing through wrong windows belong to the allegory but not to the special language, they are the poet's own words.

The poem's diction, as I have said, is mainly English, and the borrowings are old and well-established; only "fascinated," "aphorisms," "celluloid," and "addict" seem at all exotic, and "fascinated" and "addict" are often found in slangy company. Virtually every word in the poem, however, must be understood in something like a cult sense. The poet is aware of all this, and works with dazzling skill.

It is a very modern poem. One day, however, in the not too distant future, it will provide delightful drudgery for a student of Canadian Literature, footnoting the overtones of "bad movie."

All four poems have been consistent in vocabulary. Their words keep to the mood of the poem they are in and do not vary from its voice. Margaret Atwood's poem makes use of a specialized vocabulary, and does so with a sure touch; no word takes us out of the bad movie, though "aphorisms" was a risk. Consistency is not easy; Modern English is full of distracting sub-languages: those of the sciences, pseudo-sciences and technologies, of bureaucracy, of sports, of dialects, of jazz, business and so on. And especially since the eighteenth century, with the growth of huge cities, writers have been tempted by the seductive ephemera of slang. Few of the scientific, technical or bureaucratic vocabularies have depth, and a poet who knows the sound of his or her voice is unlikely to use them. Their meanings tend to be expressed in phrases rather than words. But the slang vocabularies, though their elements too tend to be phrases rather than words, have atmosphere, mood and often feeling. They are ephemera, however, as I have said, and may date the poem they are in, or cause it to be forgotten.

A poem's vocabulary need not sound natural. "Naturalness," using the word in a current, imprecise but intelligible sense, is one of poetry's less valuable attributes. A poem should read out confidently, however, without confusion, and in a consistently recognizable voice. It is proper to think of the voice as the poem's rather than as the poet's. Some poets do have a vocabulary of their own, but it is a limitation, even in a strong poet; it limits the kind of things that can be said. Limitation, however, is preferable to inconsistency. Inconsistency intrudes a false note. A poem should be true in its stuff, in the way that anything well made is.

Poetry is as various as life, and its conventions will be tested and altered constantly. But it must always work with words. They are wilful and treacherous, they will say what they are going to say regardless of the poet's intentions. The poet can simply know everything knowable about them and remember that they are living creatures. It is in their wilfulness that the poem will live or die.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Raymond Souster, "A Shadow," *Collected Poems*, Vol. III (Ottawa: Oberon, 1982), p. 198; rpt. by permission of Oberon Press.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Finch, "This Rose You Gave Me," *Has and Is* (Erin: Porcupine's Quill, 1981), p. 75; rpt. by permission of the author.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Ondaatje, "Henri Rousseau and Friends," *There's a Trick With a Knife I'm Learning To Do* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979), p. 10; rpt. by permission of the author.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Atwood, "He Reappears," *Power Politics* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 3; rpt. by permission of House of Anansi Press.

# IDIOM BIRDS

*Erin Mouré*

The cars in the shut lot are burning their doors.  
Sandwiches unravel their tongues,  
sucking the mouth.  
All the idioms have been written out.  
Modernity is a hard beak, to cherish.  
Unwrite idiom.  
Tip over idiom, tailless haunted bird,  
stable currency,  
that which speaks,  
that which wanders, cloud with trousers,  
yo-yo,  
brink, my sad revolver, my door.

Open up or be stolen, passing sentence  
in the getaway car,  
gunning its verbs like a motor.  
Unseal.  
Unrip & sew, bluster, speak, who listens, who hears  
or writes  
unless I'm smirking, pulling phrase  
out of the cupboards, idiom birds  
Come on, birds  
trying to dance their bone skulls  
on the window  
hard syllables named Apollinaire, their guns  
thrown in the gas-tank,  
trapped birds,  
my idiom, soft idiom, tastes like hay



# TWO POEMS

*Florence McNeil*

## KIRSTY KATE

Old Kirsty (said my mother) drinks too much  
they'll find her dead someday  
but my father said nothing could kill her  
and it seemed nothing could  
She was a hero to us  
and a joke  
bumping into swollen trees slipping on the finny blades  
of wet grass  
sliding along polished floors  
with scatter rugs flapping as she fell  
she stayed triumphantly in one piece  
Until that night a gathering  
with our living room a tangle of shoes  
abandoned for the intricate quick manoeuvres  
of quadrilles  
and the sounds of bagpipes still glowing  
like coals in the air  
Old Kirsty staggered to the front porch  
inhaled seaweed while the rain  
sprinkled its blessings on her  
and raised her voice like a heron in pain  
When the Roses Bloom Again she sang  
and slipped head over heels  
down steps wet as a salmon's back  
And when they rushed half laughing half frightened  
to prop her up adjust the crepe dress  
now tangled indecently around her  
like sodden fish scales  
she raised her head and whispered fart on the roses  
and closed her eyes  
her face suddenly old and leathered  
like the skins of kippers blanched in supermarkets  
the bones of her face outlined in the rain  
and the party as empty now as a parched stream.

## ALLAN STEWART

Allan Stewart sits at his window  
in his green eyeshade with his book  
with the words that fade like  
spots on a bleached out sheet  
looking over the treetops  
that slant downwards like  
a green ski slope  
to the ocean with its fishboats  
splashed by a green sun  
and the mountains blown sky high  
tinted snapshots in the clear day  
His world is split into two halves  
the preface a summer when his eyes were whole  
his body perfect as the  
ads for muscle tone he cut from magazines  
And ever afterward  
after the green fingers of gas  
rushed his lungs  
And the magazine ad was trampled  
in the slime of the trench

And still  
wars later  
he wakes his hands impaled  
in a wet pillow  
his eyes liquid blurs  
even now  
when his war has been rationalized into a  
hundred leather volumes  
with their spines split  
mould eating the golden names  
even now  
when they have all become myths  
he sees only through a split screen  
on one side  
the perfect clarity  
of form and line  
on the other before his eyes  
the words that rush and tumble  
that fuse into small repetitive explosions  
that even the greenest flare of light  
cannot control.

# PRATT'S TREATMENT OF HISTORY IN "TOWARDS THE LAST SPIKE"

Catherine McKinnon Pfaff

IN A LECTURE DELIVERED IN 1969, "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre,"<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Livesay argued that it was the documentary poem, and not the lyric or historical epic, that formed the most enduring tradition in Canadian poetry. From Lampman on the path was clear. Poetic development was "not into straight narrative but into the use of facts as the basis for an interpretation of a theme."<sup>2</sup> Livesay's examples were drawn from the poetry of Crawford, Lampman, D. C. Scott, Pratt, and Birney, as well as from her own work. *The Roosevelt and the Antinoe* (1930) was the Pratt poem that she chose to discuss but the later work, *Towards the Last Spike* (1952), would have served her purposes equally well. It has all the features she requires of a documentary poem. Thematic interest takes precedence over a simple chronological narrative, there is no single protagonist, the natural landscape plays an important part, there is conflict between men and between men and nature, and there is a concern with the oral qualities of the work. Perhaps most important is the statement that a successful documentary poem needs to be based on solid factual knowledge. With this point E. J. Pratt would have agreed wholeheartedly.

Since his experience with "The Cachalot" in 1926, the composition of all Pratt's longer poems had been preceded by extensive research.<sup>3</sup> The facts, or at least all the important ones, had to be correct. The poet constantly sought advice from others and would revise on their recommendations. With *Brébeuf and His Brethren* (1940) Pratt immersed himself in the Jesuit *Rélations* and seems to have emerged convinced that the documents often spoke best for themselves. When he decided to write a poem about the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway he chose to tell another central story of Canadian history. The tale had already been chronicled by the historians and the biographers. Their books were readily available to Pratt and he made extensive use of them. His remarks about *Towards the Last Spike* in a speech given shortly before the publication of the poem in 1952 contain no surprising news about his methods of research:

I am fully aware that the historians know much more about that span of 15 years than I do, and that the geologists are more familiar with the Canadian strata than I am, and that the Railroad engineers know [more] about tunneling and curves

and gradients than I ever hope to learn, but in accordance with my usual methods of writing, I have gone to these specialists for needed information besides what I have learned in spending four summers in the Rockies and on the Coast.<sup>4</sup>

The pages of notes on history and geology that he took attest to the poet's effort in mastering the technical side of the subject. Pratt, however, was not a historian, but a poet. The desire to bring his material to life and to shape it in accordance with his own design made as many demands on him as the claims of factual accuracy.

When Pratt chose to write a poem about the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, he was choosing to retell a story from Canadian history that had already been extensively documented. For sixty-five years biographers and historians had produced a bulk of material, a good deal of it of mediocre quality, which was meted out annually to Canadian students. Most adults retained little more than a vague outline of the story and some of the names. Pratt seems to have known little about the subject before he began work on the poem. A marginal note in one of the earliest notebooks shows him in a familiar Canadian dilemma: "Look up the difference between CN & P" he scrawled.<sup>5</sup> In the early fifties when Pratt was writing *Towards the Last Spike* the story of the railroad was in Canadian books and not in Canadian minds. Over the next twenty-five years the situation would change somewhat. Donald Creighton produced the first volume of his biography of Sir John A. Macdonald in 1952 and the second in 1955. The interest in Confederation which the 1967 Centennial generated was bound, sooner or later, to focus on Confederation's inevitable partner — the railroad. By the 1970's the country would see Pierre Berton riding a steam engine and the phrases "The National Dream" and "The Last Spike" would stare from Canadian bookstalls and television screens. All this development, however, was yet to come when *Towards the Last Spike* was in the process of composition.

The careful documentary approach Pratt favoured is evident right from the beginning of the poem. The sub-title which appears in the original edition of 1952 sets out the historical framework of *Towards the Last Spike*. It announces boldly that the poem that follows is

A Verse-Panorama of the Struggle to Build the first Canadian Transcontinental from the Time of the Proposed Terms of Union with British Columbia (1870) to the Hammering of the Last Spike in the Eagle Pass (1885).

Such an approach may have helped many readers who, unfamiliar with the outline of the events, might have been puzzled by a freer or more revolutionary treatment of the material. But Pratt was not writing another textbook account and he refused to spoonfeed his readers. Some, but not all, of the chronological narrative is there. No time is lost in explaining who Onderdonk is. Pratt assumes that what the reader does not know he will look up. He had learned from *The*

*Titanic*, from *Brébeuf and His Brethren*, and from *Dunkirk* that the way to treat large-scale adventures was to concentrate upon the dramatic incidents and principal characters and to eliminate all that was not essential to his view of the events and people involved.<sup>6</sup> The eliminated material throws into relief the parts he chose to retain and both tell a good deal about his thematic concerns. *Towards the Last Spike* is a remarkable poem for the way it both casually assumes some of its story (much more casually than *Brébeuf and His Brethren* for instance) and meticulously records the rest.

AN EXAMINATION OF THE Pratt Papers, preserved in Victoria University Library, Toronto, is the natural starting place for an examination of Pratt's source material. There in Box 6 are two thick exercise books with manuscript drafts and extensive notes (Numbers 43 and 44); a file with loose pages torn from an exercise book and covered with more draft passages (45); a third notebook written, for the most part, in ink (46); a corrected typescript bearing a close relation to the published text (47); an incomplete typescript (carbon copy) which seems to have served as Pratt's copy for public readings (48); and, lastly, a file containing several talks or speeches he gave about the poem (49). Notebooks 43 and 44 and loose pages 45 are early drafts closely written with a dull pencil. They are extraordinarily difficult to read; in places, illegible.<sup>7</sup> Notebook 46, largely in ink, is much easier to make out. All the notebooks, however, contain tantalizing information. They are covered with marginal notes which reveal the poet's constant concern with accuracy. "Watch chronology" he put beside an early version of Macdonald's catalogue of Arctic explorers (44) and against the passage that has Sir John summarizing two centuries of Canadian history (*Towards the Last Spike* [hereafter *TLS*], *Collected Poems*, p. 362), he wrote: "look up the date of [Union] Jack" (46). The poet also sought to provide solid factual bases for his own imaginative passages. A preliminary draft of the section entitled "The Gathering," in which Pratt discussed the miraculous contribution of oatmeal to the building of the railway, did not satisfy him and he added the note, "put in a little more physiology" (44). He adopted his own advice and the published version had the liver, the duodenum, the amino acids. Often, but not always, in these early notebooks he wrote on the rectos and reserved the versos for notes and for reworking difficult passages. On one verso he can be found experimenting with the cards for the more elaborate poker game of the early drafts (43). The ideas and notes he jotted down were often not incorporated into the poem. "What names did Indians give the mountains" (43) and "George Brown was a Scot" (43) were matters he deliberately chose to neglect.



The notes in these scribbles also indicate many of Pratt's sources. "Sandford Fleming 113T" (43) is a typical entry, and notebooks 43 and 44 are full of references to T., to G. or M.G., to Bruce H., to McNaught., and to MacBeth. Checking the manuscript references has made it clear that Pratt read and took notes from the following books:

T. Thompson, Norman and J. H. Edgar. *Canadian Railway Development from the Earliest Times*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1933.

G. or M.G. Gibbon, John Murray. *Steel of Empire, the Romantic History of the Canadian Pacific, the North West Passage of Today*. Indianapolis & New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1935.

Bruce H. Hutchison, Bruce. *The Fraser*. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1950.

McNaught. Macnaughton, John. *Lord Strathcona*. Makers of Canada Series, Anniversary Edition. London & Toronto: Oxford, 1926.

MacBeth MacBeth, R. G. *The Romance of the Canadian Pacific Railway*. Toronto: Ryerson, 1924.

There are other books that Pratt must have used though the references to them in the notebooks are less direct. His portrait of Van Horne (*TLS*, pp. 364-65) contains childhood biographical details reported only in Walter Vaughan's *Sir William Van Horne*. This book, originally published in 1920, was re-issued by the Oxford University Press in 1926 as part of the popular Makers of Canada Series and was bound together with Macnaughton's *Lord Strathcona*. Like most of these books, the Vaughan was in the Victoria College Library and perhaps even among Pratt's own books.

Howard Angus Kennedy's pamphlets for the Ryerson Canadian History Readers Series, *Origin of the Canadian Pacific Railway* and *Lord Strathcona* (both Toronto, 1909) are also likely sources. These slender pamphlets rely for their information on other books and fill out the facts with national pieties. They were miserable histories, but there was something in the first of them which appears to have interested Pratt. Praising the leaders of the C.P.R. enterprise, Kennedy writes:

Every one of them was a genius in his own way. Stephen and Smith, full of the faith that "removes mountains," had to raise the money when that was nearly as hard as squeezing blood out of a stone.<sup>8</sup>

Opposite the poetic description of Smith (*TLS*, pp. 362-63), Pratt wrote in an early notebook: "blood from stone why not? the myth?" (43). "Blood from stone" does not appear in the poem, but the image of "water from rock" (as a sign of Smith's miraculous powers) does, and the two phrases are sufficiently close to suggest a connection. "The faith that removes mountains" as well as the possibility for a pun may have acted obliquely on Pratt to produce the Atlas analogy for Stephen (*TLS*, p. 363).

It is also likely that Pratt read general histories like *Dominion of the North* (1944) by Donald Creighton, his colleague at the University of Toronto. The first volume of Creighton's biography of Sir John A. Macdonald, *The Young Politician* (1952), appeared too late to have influenced Pratt in his characterization of the Prime Minister though it is possible that he heard oral progress reports from the author. Sandra Djwa in her fine study, *E. J. Pratt — The Evolutionary Vision*, suggests that *Towards the Last Spike* reflects the influences of Harold Innis's writing.<sup>9</sup> She may be right in saying that Innis's communications theories — especially in *Empire and Communications* (1950) and *Bias of Communication* (1951) — shaped Pratt's thinking, but there is nothing in the manuscripts or in the finished poem to suggest that the poet regarded the arid, highly statistical *A History of The Canadian Pacific Railway* (1924) as a valuable source for the story he was telling. The books of Gibbon and MacBeth were more congenial to him than was the Innis history. They, as their very titles indicate, emphasized the romantic adventure of the undertaking and not the details of economic development.

If one examines Pratt's use of the material that he culled from these secondary sources some interesting points are revealed. Descriptions of the landscape are sometimes unexpectedly close to the history text. In the part of the poem about railway construction on the prairies these lines occur:

The grass that fed the buffalo was turned over,  
The black alluvial mould laid bare, the bed  
Levelled and scraped.

(TLS, p. 368)

In *Sir William Van Horne* Vaughan had written:

Following upon the heels of the locating parties came the ploughs and scrapers, tearing into the old buffalo land, moulding it and branding it to the new bondage of progress.<sup>10</sup>

Following Vaughan, as he so often did, R. G. MacBeth provided this description:

The ploughs and scrapers of this great constructive army were making their way through the buffalo wallows and casting up a high grade where the Red River cart had worn deep ruts in the rich dark mould.<sup>11</sup>

Quite deliberately, then, in this picture of the prairies Pratt is reporting what he read. Of course, his natural descriptions are not always like this: some of the finest passages in *Towards the Last Spike* are those which portray the Pre-Cambrian Shield as a great lizard, and for these the sources provide no parallels. Such writing is the result of Pratt's imaginative grasp of Canadian geological history. The image of the reptile is successful partly because it is flexible enough to survive extensive development. The poet devotes the whole of the section entitled "Number Two" to the lizard, returns to her in "Dynamite on the North

Shore,” and has her sound the closing notes of the poem. The initial description is sufficiently broad in its outlines (the lizard is ageless, sprawling, strong) that Pratt’s emphasis can fall on different aspects as it suits his needs and the personification is never forced. Thus, in one place, he can suggest that she is something of a curiosity, an anachronistic dinosaur “Top-heavy with accumulated power / And overgrown survival without function” (*TLS*, p. 370) and in another place insist on all her primeval terror — “She’d claim their bones as her possessive right / And wrap them cold in her pre-Cambrian folds” (*TLS*, p. 379). The description of the dynamiting of the North Shore of Lake Superior begins in an almost playful way as the poet adopts the point of view of the lizard. She is puzzled and irritated by the “horde of bipeds” crawling over her with their unfamiliar accessories:

They tickled her with shovels, dug pickaxes  
 Into her scales and got under her skin,  
 And potted holes in her with drills and filled  
 Them up with what looked like fine grains of sand,  
 Black sand.

(*TLS*, p. 370)

A prolonged passage like this runs the risk of diminishing the reptile’s stature and so the poet moved away from the actual events of the narrative to emphasize the creature’s noble past and her endurance of natural forces from the Ice Age on.

It wasn’t noise that bothered her,  
 For thunder she was used to from her cradle —  
 The head-push and nose-blowing of the ice,  
 The height and pressure of its body: these  
 Like winds native to clime and habitat  
 Had served only to lull her drowsing coils.

(*TLS*, p. 370)

It is the lizard’s strength and immense geological age that make her so formidable an enemy in the poem’s conflict between small man and intractable nature.

A second reason for the success of the image of the lizard is as important as the first and leads us back to the documentary qualities of the poem. It is just because the other natural descriptions of *Towards the Last Spike* are largely realistic and familiar that the reptilian landscape is able to command such a dominant position in the natural imagery of the poem. Every Canadian recognizes the prairies of *Towards the Last Spike*. The mountains of the section “Number Three” with their “terror and beauty” are equally familiar. True, the controlling metaphor for this passage is a powerful and resonant phrase of Sir Edward Blake’s (“That sea of mountains”), but even a Canadian whose experience of the Rocky Mountains is limited to a winter landscape on a kitchen calendar should find nothing strange in such a description. Nothing, not even the increased

personification of "Internequine Strife," rivals the scale of the lizard image. Pratt quite wisely saw that the importance of the latter would be lost if combined with an elaborate array of other monsters and so he always framed his fearsome reptile within a recognizable and well-documented Canadian landscape.

Pratt must have been delighted when he discovered historical facts that also rang true imaginatively. Both Vaughan and MacBeth reported that Van Horne arrived in Winnipeg on December 31, 1881 when the temperature was forty degrees below zero. Pratt records these circumstances of time and temperature in the stage instructions that head Van Horne's soliloquy in *Towards the Last Spike* (pp. 364-66) and then goes on to develop their imaginative possibilities. MacBeth had commented on the sense of exhilaration that such temperatures can produce and there is just such a feeling in the Pratt passage. When Van Horne scrapes the deep frost off the window and surveys the winter sky, he experiences the same challenge of the West as Macdonald did in a parallel section (*TLS*, pp. 349-50) but with none of the Prime Minister's premonitions of disaster. Van Horne sees nature at her most unbending but is confident in his ability to command the future passage of events. He is a man charged with energy, caught for one moment on the eve of a new year, on the eve of a great adventure.

Many of the stories of *Towards the Last Spike* are recounted by every historian of the C.P.R. All of them explain the origin of the name "Craigellachie" which Pratt footnotes on p. 348; all produce the famous Opposition phrase that the railway would not pay for its own axle grease (*TLS*, p. 356); and all describe the scene of the hammering of the last spike (*TLS*, pp. 386-87). Pratt could have got from almost any of them Van Horne's order that the last spike be iron and his one sentence speech at the ceremony in the mountains in which he is supposed to have said, "All I can say is that the work has been well done in every way." Pratt's version of this appears in the finished poem as

It ended when Van Horne spat out some phlegm  
To ratify the tumult with "Well Done"  
Tied in a knot of monosyllables.

(*TLS*, p. 388)

**I**N ALL THESE CASES the poem adheres closely to documented events, but sometimes the treatment of history could be a good deal freer. The section entitled "Suspense in the Montreal Board Room" is a good example of this. In a talk about the poem, Pratt explained that the passage had originated in a passing reference of Van Horne's "to their school boy antics in flinging chairs around," a reference which he had elaborated in the poem.<sup>12</sup> Besides a draft of this section in notebook 46 Pratt wrote "ecstasy" and "Taken from MacBeth, Change a little." MacBeth does record the episode and so do Vaughan and

Gibbon. All speak of the relief experienced by Angus and Van Horne on the receipt of Stephen's London cable and of their subsequent high spirits but two of their descriptions do not extend beyond a picture of flying books and chairs. Gibbon is the only one to mention the clerks who waited outside the board room to collect the sketches Van Horne doodled during meetings. It is Thompson and Edgar's account on page 160 of *Canadian Railway Development from the Earliest Times* that provides the closest parallel to Pratt's passage though they place the event in a different context. According to them, the railway sponsors were in Ottawa awaiting a government decision and when the guarantee of money came through their exuberance overflowed:

At last the message came! "I think we waited until the Minister left the room," said Van Horne, "I believe we had that much sanity left us and then we began. We tossed up chairs to the ceiling; we trampled on desks; I believe we danced on tables. I do not fancy any of us knows now what occurred, and no one who was there can ever remember anything except loud yells of joy and the sound of things breaking."

Van Horne's comments found their way into the poem in

Two chairs flew to the ceiling — one retired,  
The other roosted on the chandelier.

and in

He leaped and turned a cartwheel on the table,  
Driving heel sparables into the oak,  
Came down to teach his partner a Dutch dance;

(*TLS*, p. 385)

It is obvious that Pratt's picture of the scene in the Montreal board room is a composite one. He cites MacBeth in a draft, he adapts Gibbon's amazed and waiting clerks into an "immobilized messenger," and he draws on all of the suggestions of the account in Thompson and Edgar's book. As he said, he did elaborate the story and there is a good deal that is pure high-spirited Pratt — the vivid descriptions of the waiting Van Horne and Angus, the maps, blotting paper and inkstand thrown through the window, and then Van Horne turning cartwheels and stuffing a Grand Trunk folder down his colleague's trousers. The facts of the record are there in Pratt's passage but his exaggeration of them makes the story loom larger in the poem than it does in the histories. "Suspense in the Montreal Board Room" becomes another way of characterizing Van Horne — of demonstrating his tremendous natural vitality — and it provides a dramatic climax for one important side of the Railway story, the achievement of financial security.

Pratt relied more heavily on some of his sources than on others. Gibbon's *Steel of Empire* seems to have been one of his favourites probably because it contains a good deal of information that does not appear elsewhere and because it incor-

porates many first-hand accounts. Many of the details of the Western surveys could have come from Gibbon. The picture of Rogers certainly did.<sup>13</sup> *Steel of Empire* is the only source which tells that Smith bent the first spike of the ceremony which marked the completion of the railroad — a fact which Pratt considers important enough to include in his own poem. Where statistics differ he often adopts Gibbon's estimate, as with the number of tracks and locomotives sunk in the muskeg.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the most interesting evidence for his use of Gibbon is the vivid description of the mule which is closely based on a detailed first-hand account of the construction. *Steel of Empire* quotes from a man called Stephen Pardoe:

The horses knew as well as the foreman when 'unhook' should be called, while each mule was a foreman unto itself in that respect. A minute or two before the expiration of each five-hour of work one wise old mule would bray, and from that time until 'unhook' the air was hideous with fearful sounds. Stolidly patient, incredibly strong, endued with infinite and devilish vice, no mule would move one second before 'hook up' sounded or one second after the correct time for 'unhook' to be called had passed.<sup>15</sup>

In *Towards the Last Spike* the idea of mule unionization is Pratt's, as is the happy thought of the animals unhinging their joints and unhitching their tendons, but all else is documented history which the poet is content to retell.

Pratt's research for *Towards the Last Spike* also led him into the study of some primary documents. The *Debates of the House of Commons* were available at the library and his scribblers reveal that he consulted them. In exercise book 43 he made some notes on Blake's April 15th, 16th, 1880 speech and in 44 there are several pages of notes on Blake's Pacific Scandal speech in the House of Commons, November 3rd and 4th, 1873. The latter he may have known through a small pamphlet entitled *Three Speeches by the Hon. Edward Blake, Q.C., M.P. on the Pacific Scandal*.<sup>16</sup> It contains the speeches in Bowmanville (August 26, 1873) and London (August 28, 1873) to which Pratt's notes also make reference. Although he read the historical record carefully, Pratt chose to handle the texts of the speeches freely in his poem. In *Towards the Last Spike* he is more concerned with the problems of rhetoric that the speeches raise than he is with their actual statements. His typical approach is to describe the effect of the speech on its audience, as in the lines describing the members of the House of Commons listening to Sir Edward Blake:

The minds went first; the bodies sagged; the necks  
Curved on the benches and the legs sprawled out.

(TLS, p. 361)

as well as to insist on the power of some of the most well-known phrases. Out of the parliamentary record he picks words like Sir John's "I throw myself on this

House; I throw myself on this country; I throw myself on posterity . . .” (November 3, 1873), and his “from sea to sea” or Blake’s “to build a road over that sea of mountains” and “lost in the gorges of the Fraser” (April 15-16, 1880), and has them carry the force of the whole speech. There is nothing about stripping the Knights of Malta (*TLS*, p. 354) in Blake’s 1873 address to the House. This phrase enters the poem because Pratt read the politician’s speech, grasped the progression of the thought, and then imagined its movement again in different terms. The “Knights” are also a remnant of an extended passage in an early draft which will be examined later.

Pratt found his source material all around him. He was fond of consulting people he knew when he ran up against a technical problem. He tells of asking nutritionists and physiologists about the exact effect of oatmeal on the digestive system (for the lines in the poem on pages 347-48) and asking Scots and doctors about the effect of alcohol on a melancholy man (for the treatment of Sir John A. Macdonald, pages 383-84). A “physical instructor and coach” provided him with the proper terms for the tug-of-war in Sir John’s nightmare (*TLS*, p. 349). George Douglas, Professor of Geology at Dalhousie University, furnished him with some of the geological information he needed, as did an engineer who worked on the Connaught Tunnel in the 1920’s.<sup>17</sup> In general, his geological sources are harder to trace than his historical ones. He may have read full-length first-hand accounts of the early surveying parties, such as George Monro Grant’s *Ocean to Ocean* (1872), though the scribblers provide no direct evidence for this. Notebook 44 includes the only full geological notes which sort out some names and classification of rocks and record the heights of mountain ranges. The muskeg is treated in some detail and a quotation from the *Winnipeg Tribune* appears to be the source for the treacherously inviting grass of the muskeg and especially for the lines

And herds of cariboo had left their hoof-marks,  
Betraying visual solidity.

(*TLS*, p. 379)<sup>18</sup>

SINCE PRATT SAW MUCH OF THE STORY of the building of the railroad in terms of five individuals, the reading of biographies was an important area of his research. Once this was accomplished, as a poet, he had to take documented historical figures and make them into living men. This was partly accomplished by using “soliloquies” for Van Horne and Macdonald and by dramatically recreating the parliamentary speeches of the Hon. Edward Blake. Since the poem is a narrative and not a dramatic one, however, Pratt was always in and out of the minds of his principal human subjects rather than simply pro-

jecting their voices. Neither story nor personality was the end of his tale: he needed to present both in terms of the shaping themes of his poem. To do this, he apparently decided to treat his biographical research on William Van Horne, Donald Smith, George Stephen, Edward Blake, and John A. Macdonald in quite different ways.

Some of the portraits of *Towards the Last Spike*, like that of Van Horne, and, to a lesser extent, that of Smith, are careful reconstructions. The lives of the two men were well-documented and Pratt had read the full-length biographies which appeared in 1926 in the Makers of Canada series (Macnaughton, *Lord Strathcona*; Vaughan, *Sir William Van Horne*) as well as the character sketches in the general histories. In the treatment of both men Pratt adhered closely to his sources. Not only did he incorporate many of the facts that the biographies reported, he also followed them in their interpretation of the character. In the case of Van Horne, all the early material on childhood (*TLS*, pp. 364-65) came from Vaughan. So too did the facts that the railway manager flourished on only a few hours of sleep (Vaughan, pp. 83-84; *TLS*, p. 364) and was fearless of physical danger. Vaughan reported that he would cross unsteady trestles from which men had fallen to their deaths a few days before (Vaughan, p. 111; *TLS*, p. 372). MacBeth wrote that Van Horne hated incompetence and that he was a practical joker (MacBeth, p. 78). All the sources agreed that the manager was a dynamo (MacBeth, p. 78), a whirlwind of activity (Vaughan, pp. 83-84), an adventurous pioneer, and something of a visionary (MacBeth, p. 77). He even had a reputation among railway workers and in government circles as a kind of superman (Vaughan, p. 115). Pratt's Van Horne incorporates all these qualities though the poet, of course, could work with broader strokes than the biographer. He could condense a long anecdote into two lines — the boss who fired Van Horne when he received a shock from the boy's buried ground wire (Vaughan, pp. 16-17; *TLS*, p. 364) — rearrange the chronology of youth, embroider the schoolboy caricatures (*TLS*, pp. 364-65), and dramatize his subject's thoughts. He could also insist on doing something that good biographers do only cautiously: juxtapose past and future for the purpose of interpretation:

He would come home, his pockets stuffed with fossils —  
Crinoids and fish-teeth — and his tongue jabbering  
Of the earth's crust before the birth of life,  
Prophetic of the days when he would dig  
Into Laurentian rock.

(*TLS*, p. 364)

Pratt was able to portray Van Horne very much as his sources had because the outstanding aspects of the man which they had noted (the miraculous quality of his achievements, his almost supernatural powers in confounding time and space) were the very qualities that appealed to the poet. Van Horne's place in a poem



about the superiority of vision and dream to logic and argument was an obvious one.

Like Van Horne, Donald Smith is introduced into the poem in a detailed biographical passage. The facts, from the Highland ancestry to the melon-growing in Labrador, come from Macnaughton. Howard Angus Kennedy's *Lord Strathcona* added a few more touches.<sup>19</sup> In the Smith portrait, however, Pratt's selectivity is more obvious. His Smith has the heroic character of a man who "fought the climate like a weathered yak / And conquered it" (*TLS*, p. 363). There are no weaknesses in him, and Pratt says nothing about the early suffering from snowblindness which caused Smith trouble with Hudson's Bay officials and almost led to his resignation (Kennedy, p. 6). Moreover, the poet makes no mention of the well-documented coolness between Smith and Macdonald, a result of Smith's action during the Pacific Scandal when he spoke against the government (Macnaughton, pp. 185-86). Macdonald's grudge was long-held and it even prevented Smith's direct participation in the early meetings between the Canadian government and the businessman sponsors of the railway scheme. Pratt's poem conveys rather the opposite — Smith is the first man to whom Macdonald turns when the Londoners desert him (*TLS*, p. 362). *Towards the Last Spike*, then, rounds off the edges of Smith and simplifies his character. The poet does give two vivid pictures of the man — one in his early days in Labrador and the other on the famous occasion of the hammering of the last spike — but he is as much interested in Smith's mythic qualities as he is in the facts of life. Smith as "a miracle on legs" is a line of thought that may have been suggested by Pratt's sources. We have already noted the connection between Kennedy's "blood from stone" and Pratt's "water from rock," and Gibbon too referred to Smith as Moses.<sup>20</sup> The development of this idea, though, along with the extraordinary alchemical powers given to Smith, are all Pratt's own creation.

The treatment of George Stephen is even freer than that of Smith. This was perhaps because there was not such a wealth of biographical material available on Stephen (Volume I of Heather Gilbert's *Awakening Continent — The Life of Lord Mount Stephen*, published by the Aberdeen University Press, did not appear until 1965) and perhaps because the life of the stalwart banker did not lend itself to such vivid treatment as that of his quicksilver cousin. At any rate, Pratt's portrait is a sketchy one which reveals the biographical facts incidentally as they relate to the theme and story of the poem. Stephen's Banffshire origins and his early days as a draper's apprentice emerge in Macdonald's fear of a man "Tongue-trained on Aberdonian bargain-counters." The "Banffshire-cradled r," which distinguishes Stephen's speech, is as irritating to the Prime Minister as the businessman's skill in close, logical argument (*TLS*, p. 377). Like Pratt's Smith, his Stephen is a heroic figure, a "banking metallurgist" with mythic dimensions. His wizardry with stocks and bonds turns them into minerals and mountains and,

with a neat reference to the peak in the Rockies named after Mount Stephen, Pratt claims of the man:

He grew so Atlas-strong that he could carry  
A mountain like a namesake on his shoulders.

(*TLS*, p. 363)

Pratt does not disturb the simple outlines of his figure by incorporating Stephen's initial reluctance to become involved, his constant caution, and his frequent depressions when business troubles would cause him to dissolve into tears.<sup>21</sup> For the same reason he eliminated from the railway story the tangle of rival syndicates and the financial details of the various contracts. He had to tell a coherent tale and one that concentrated on the most dramatic points. All his efforts in psychological understanding went into Macdonald and Van Horne and the supporting characters had to be crisp and clear in their outlines.

With Edward Blake and John A. Macdonald, only a few of the recorded biographical facts were of interest to the poet. Blake, in any case, had been largely neglected by the historians and there was little material available apart from thumbnail sketches in general texts and biographical dictionaries. Some of the few notes Pratt took on Blake ("prodigious memory," notebook 44) suggest that he may have looked at J. C. Dent's *The Canadian Portrait Gallery* (Toronto: John B. Magurn, 1880). Other notes he jotted down were facts widely known about Blake. "Put in Blake's respect for sequence" (notebook 43) probably originates in the frequent observation that the politician dealt with matters in exhaustive detail. This also seems to have put the idea of Euclid into Pratt's mind, for an early draft describing Blake's rhetoric reads:

A fact annointed with Euclidean unction,  
He could deliver as a gospel truth.

(notebook 43)

Beside another early draft of the section which became in the finished poem "Blake in Mood," Pratt wrote "Euclidean mind" (notebook 44).

The sources available on Macdonald's life were much more extensive. By 1950 a good deal had been written about Canada's first Prime Minister. Many, but not all, of the early books and pamphlets were essentially appreciations, and this laudatory tone was generally carried over into productions of the next century.<sup>22</sup> The treatment was almost uniformly formal with the occasional chapter that reported, with varying degrees of frankness, the details of Macdonald's private life.<sup>23</sup> Pratt's portrait was quite different. He seems to have been under no illusions about Macdonald's pragmatism. In one of his notebooks he wrote down the quotation, "He recognized the truth that there was a time to oppose and a time to accept" (44), and, in the poem, dwells on the nickname "Old Tomorrow." His Macdonald, however, emerges as an intensely sympathetic figure. The situa-

tions in which the Prime Minister is viewed are almost always intimate (tormented by insomnia, snuggled into the sheets, sunk in depression) but the picture that is produced is that of a hero whose only rival in the railway story is Van Horne.

Even Macdonald's most notorious weakness, his fondness for alcohol was somehow connected with his genius. In his treatment of the two politicians Pratt was not interested in an objective presentation of the facts. His Blake is a caricature and much more of a villain than the man of the history books. His Macdonald is the supreme politician — long-sighted and nimble on his feet. This free handling of the two leaders allowed Pratt's themes to be developed in terms of opposites.

Against an early draft of the Blake-Macdonald debate in notebook 43, Pratt wrote in the margin "logic versus vision," and this is the most important of his oppositions. It is bolstered, however, by a whole series of related contrasts — close argument *vs.* magic phrases or metaphors; slow or dragging time *vs.* quickened tempo and musical command; the ascetic, the plain, the home-grown *vs.* the luxurious, the romantic, the foreign.

This last contrast is perhaps even more evident in the drafts of the poem than it is in the final version. In a long passage that survives all the way to typescript 48, there is a portrait of Blake at the time of the Pacific Scandal which seems to have come entirely from Pratt's imagination.<sup>24</sup> The politician is introduced as he sits in an Ottawa restaurant. The poet tells us that Blake dislikes eating out because the meals served are not plain enough for his taste. Hors d'oeuvres, he feels, are no food for an honest man, and he suspects seasonings and spices are only used to disguise poorly-prepared meals. Alcohol holds no temptations for him:

For him, as well the port had no seductions.  
His appetite was in his moral sense.

When his dinner arrives he discovers that it is bad and, after chastising the chef, he hastens back to the House of Commons with his exhibits to confront "the Management." The dirty-green sardines in their rusty can (Exhibit A) and the greasy herrings (Exhibit B and perhaps there because of a marginal phrase in notebook 44 — "Put in somewhere how Blake detested oil . . .") are revolting specimens.

But these were not the things concerned him most  
Malodorous with the whiff of barnacles  
Staled by the Firth of Clyde they were but *entrées*  
Brought over in the busy Allan holds  
And being fish they could have suffered sea-change.

It is Exhibit C, an omelette smothered in parsley and mushroom sauce, that really arouses his ire. Its greenish tinge proclaims it could not be an honest egg and when Blake lets it drop, it bounces upon the floor.

This hardness had a cause: it was its age.  
 The orator raised his voice: "Some months have passed  
 Since it was cooked. Why this delay? It was  
 The trick of Prorogation of the House  
 Designed to calcify the egg, depress  
 The fumes, desensitize the public nose;  
 Had long been prearranged and failed its purpose  
 For no deodorant in art or nature  
 Could offset this.' He passed the dish around:  
 The smell was hybrid, with a foreign air  
 As from Chicago, a domestic air  
 As from the stuffy steamship offices  
 Of Montreal, and something that defied  
~~Analysis.--What hen had laid the egg?~~ The membranes find the hen  
 Who owned the hen? Where did it roost or nest? that laid this egg  
 Who brought the egg in from the barn? Who cooked it?  
 Whatever corn it had mixed with oats  
 The hen had picked up from a Yankee stable.

The connections between the rotten egg and the Pacific Scandal are clear though most readers would probably admit that the conceits are strained and that Pratt did well to leave the passage out. Nevertheless, the early version is interesting. Its broad humour and the high spirits suggest affinities with the extravaganza "The Witches' Brew" and remind us that, right from the beginning, Pratt conceived the railway story with strong comic elements. Furthermore, though he scrapped his early description of Blake, he incorporated some of its suggestions into the revisions and when he talked about the poem at public readings, he continued to think about it in terms of his original conception.<sup>25</sup> "The Ministry of Smells" and the lines —

He told the sniffing Commons that a sense  
 Keener than smell or taste must be invoked  
 To get the odour

(*TLS*, p. 354)

— that we find in the finished version are obvious remnants of the "bad omelette" passage. Knowing the drafts also restores to the final lines of this section some of their intended force. The picture of Sir John holding his nose (*TLS*, p. 355) is a more comprehensible one in its original context of the reeking parliamentary chamber

someone opened a window  
 The air was fetid for the omelette  
 Itself, feeling its stir of molecules  
 Had changed to sulphurated hydrogen

(Box 6, no. 46)

than it is when it follows the description of dragging time and sleeping members.

FINALLY, THE DRAFT PASSAGE provides a detailed picture of Blake of which only the outlines are retained in the final version. In both, Blake's eating preferences are taken as signs of his personality and political-moral stance. His longing for plain food at the restaurant (which is evident in notebook 46) or his opinion that "A meal was meant by nature for nutrition —" (*TLS*, p. 354) explains not just his censure of luxurious luncheons but the solid factual content of his substantial speeches and his contempt for the expansive free-ranging mind. Macdonald is obviously the man who lets his thoughts

Roam, like a goblet up before the light  
To bask in natural colour, or by whim  
Of its own choice to sway luxuriously  
In tantalizing arcs before the nostrils.

(*TLS*, p. 354)

And Blake has no use for such dreamers.<sup>26</sup> Their moving eloquence is equally foreign to him, for his speeches are "massive in design" (*TLS*, p. 360) and lose their listeners in excessive detail. Sometimes, however, Blake stumbles on a magic phrase and then Macdonald fears the consequences. In *Towards the Last Spike* the power of the right words is real. Words can make mountains into seas and they can threaten to decide the question of railway subsidies by transporting the Commons to a dangerous mountain ledge and leaving them shivering below an avalanche (*TLS*, p. 360).

Successful communication was, of course, an old Pratt theme. The power of the female ape in "The Great Feud" sprang from her ability to command a response in her audience:

She spoke: and every throat and every lung  
Of herbivore and carnivore  
In volleying symphonic roar  
Rang with persuasion of her tongue.

(*Collected Poems*, p. 162)

In *Towards the Last Spike* Pratt portrays the building of the railway as a struggle "Against two fortresses: the mind, the rock" (*TLS*, p. 372), and of these two jobs

The moulding of men's minds was harder far  
Than moulding of the steel and prior to it.

(*TLS*, p. 358)

The tools for moulding men's minds are words, and so the heroes of Pratt's poem are not only visionaries but also individuals who can convince others that their dreams can be transformed into reality. Van Horne is a man of practical affairs

whose job is to fight the rock and direct the laying of the steel, but he is also a dreamer and a man who “loved to work on shadows” (*TLS*, p. 364). When he surveys the sky in Winnipeg, he *knows* that the task ahead of him can be accomplished; it is the sceptics, not the dreamers, who are insane, he thinks. In Montreal he presents his plans with such energy and daring that the financiers forget their doubts, throw in their lot with him, and approve his grand scheme. Like Van Horne, Macdonald is also a dreamer; and he has an even bigger audience to persuade — not just a board, but a country.

The Pratt Papers suggest that it was this idea of two visionaries that was the starting point of *Towards the Last Spike*. The exact order of the poem’s composition is difficult to determine, but it appears from notebook 43 that Pratt began writing with a passage about two men sweeping the sky with telescopes. This symmetry is preserved in the published version with the two “soliloquies” — Sir John surveying the sky with a telescope and Van Horne looking at the stars — though there, since the passages are separated, Pratt seems to feel that the connections between the two men have to be expressed through a direct comparison (*TLS*, p. 365). An interesting direction the poem could have taken is illustrated by a page in notebook 43 headed:

[one illegible line]  
Two people looking at the stars  
Two farmers looking at the market train.

Draft titles for the first section of the poem continue this idea. In scribblers 43, 44 and 46 Pratt headed the beginning of the poem “Star Gazers and Land Surveyors” and 44 also has the suggestive alternative title “Land and Mind Surveyors.” So, right from the start, Pratt had made the connection between visions of the future and telescopes and between the comparable activities of land and mind surveying. He had decided on his shaping theme and it was in terms of that theme that he would see the principal characters and events of the railway story. Sometimes, as in the case of Van Horne, Pratt’s biographical and historical sources would suggest the same interpretation of the facts, and the poet carried on where they left off. On other occasions, as in the descriptions of Blake and Macdonald, the documented material had to be more freely treated. In these sections and in the parts of the poem about public opinion on the railway issue, Pratt developed his picture with broad imaginative strokes. It is clear that the strongest influence on these “logic *vs.* vision” passages was not carefully researched material but the religious parallels and the Biblical echoes that sprang naturally to Pratt’s mind. The struggle between those who believe in the railway and those who do not is like the opposition between St. Paul and Doubting Thomas (*TLS*, p. 346); laying the line across the barren prairie is an act of faith in a different future (*TLS*, p. 368); and Sir John’s “From sea to sea” is a Biblical phrase

confronting Blake's pagan one (*TLS*, p. 360). The Bible is full of visionaries or dreamers as a line in an early draft of the beginning of the poem reminds us. Joel 11: 28 is rewritten as Pratt describes the expanding country straining into the future — "How what the young men saw in vision what / The old had dreamed" (notebook 43).

The idea of the visionary, or what Sandra Djwa, who explains *Towards the Last Spike* in terms of T. C. Smut's concept of holism, calls the idea of Personality, is obviously at the centre of the poem, but there are also other imaginative organizing principles at work. Perhaps the most important of these is the musical theme which Professor Djwa traces from the note hard to catch to the swelling symphony.<sup>27</sup> She may well be right that Pratt is picking up a line of imagery already evident in Smut's writing but it is interesting to note that Sir John as a maestro on a podium may have been derived from so simple a source as a nineteenth-century cartoon entitled "The Grand Ministerial Overture" published in the *Canadian Illustrated News* of February 13, 1879, and that the development of the musical theme went on from there. Moreover, the musical command is not just the successful orchestration of various instruments — it is the forcing of a faster tempo. Edward Blake and Alexander Mackenzie are associated with dragging time and "five years delay" on the railway. The slow progress of the minutes during Blake's speeches in the Commons is unbearably tedious and the reader's restlessness is increased by the description of the cautious pace of the stolid Mackenzie. He is content to move the railway

Across the prairies in God's own good time,  
His plodding, patient, planetary time.

(*TLS*, p. 357)

When Macdonald returns to office in 1878, he has to begin delicately but he manages to drown Blake's warnings, his "beautiful but ruinous piece of music," with the stirring martial tune of fife and drum. By the end of the poem this music has become a "continental chorus," but the drumming rhythm is still insistent and it drives the country forward into the era of faster times and broken records met in the lines which introduce and set the mood for *Towards the Last Spike* — "It was the same world then as now — / Except for little differences of speed / And power" (*TLS*, p. 346).

In Pratt's railway poem there are two other elements that are closer to fantasy than to record though one is advanced a good deal more seriously than the other. The personification of British Columbia as a reluctant fiancée seems to have been an attempt to render vivid a necessary part of political history and to provide another sympathetic picture of Macdonald, this time as the desperate suitor. The general idea was not a new one and it could easily have been suggested to Pratt by another cartoon. This one by Henri Julien was originally published in the

# Canadian Illustrated News

VOL. XIX.—No. 7.

MONTREAL, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 1879.

SINGLE COPIES, TEN CENTS.  
\$4 PER YEAR IN ADVANCE.



THE GRAND MINISTERIAL OVERTURE  
AT THE PARLIAMENTARY OPERA HOUSE, OTTAWA, 13th FEBRUARY.



# Canadian Illustrated News

VOL. XIV.—No. 9.

MONTREAL, SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 1876.

SINGLE COPIES, TEN CENTS.  
\$4 PER YEAR IN ADVANCE.



BRITISH COLUMBIA IN A PET.

UNCLE ALEX :—Don't frown so, my dear, you'll have your railway by-and-bye.  
MISS B. COLUMBIA :—I want it now. You promised I should have it, and if I don't, I'll complain to Ma.

*Canadian Illustrated News* of September 9, 1876. It depicted the Prime Minister of the day, Alexander Mackenzie, in the guise of Uncle Aleck attempting to conciliate a sulky niece, Miss B. Columbia, who threatened to complain to her mother (Great Britain) unless she got her railway immediately. When Gibbon reproduced the cartoon in his book (about half its original size), he retained only the large caption "British Columbia in a Pet" and eliminated the short dialogue between uncle and niece.<sup>28</sup> It seems entirely possible that Pratt's eye was attracted by the illustration in Gibbon's book and that both the shortened caption and the drawing suggested a romantic rather than a familial relationship to him — hence the transformation of the avuncular Mackenzie to the anxious lover Macdonald who appears in the poem (*TLS*, pp. 351-52).<sup>29</sup> As usual all the embroidery connected with these personifications (California as the sailor-lover and rival, the Lady soaping off the engagement ring) is Pratt's own. In fact, the original drafts of the passage on p. 352 were much longer than the final version, and contained an elaborate poker game along the lines of that in *The Titanic*. It survived as late as typescript 48 where the section was entitled "Across a Telepathic Table." Pratt also continued to refer to the poker game in later parts of the poem. After the line "It was the following burning corollary" (*TLS*, p. 360), draft 47 had the line "Springing from that erotic poker game," and original versions of "Threats of Secession" continued to speak of "the poker debt so many years unhonoured" (notebooks 44, 46). Eventually these later poker references were expunged and "The Long-Distance Proposal" was substituted for "Across a Telepathic Table." In the final version the game only lurks in the background in phrases like "A game it was and the Pacific lass / Had poker wisdom on her face," and "She watched for bluff" (*TLS*, p. 352). The poker passage is like the omelette one. Both seem to have no origin in documented events,<sup>30</sup> both show a high-spirited Pratt enjoying himself immensely, and both were largely eliminated before the poem was finished.

The "oatmeal" passage in the section of the poem entitled "The Gathering" is quite different. In one sense it seems as if a move inside a Scotsman's stomach is a move away from the railway story but, in fact, the passage is closely connected with two of Pratt's themes. He remarked afterwards that he knew many nationalities were involved in the construction of the railroad, but that he had decided (as two of his sources, Gibbon and MacBeth, had) that the key men were the Scots.<sup>31</sup> In *Dunkirk* the poet had already had some fun with Scottish names but here the common racial origin most evident in "the everlasting tread of Macs" is taken seriously. Stephen's Highland burr speaks to Macdonald more powerfully than the speech of other men and he cannot ignore its demands (*TLS*, pp. 366-67). The Prime Minister is portrayed not only as a nimble politician but also as a clan chieftain and the "general of the patronymic march" (*TLS*, p. 348), as courageous as he is canny. The other important Scottish touches in the poem are the

insistence on the ancestry of Smith and Stephen and the view of the hammering of the last spike as a victory accomplished by a people who had suffered bitter defeat at Flodden almost four hundred years earlier.

The second theme with which the "oatmeal" passage is connected is the complex question of the relation between man and the natural world in the poem. This was a matter of limited interest to the historians and the geologists, but it was of great interest to Pratt. When he suggested that the men who built the railway grew into rock themselves (*TLS*, p. 347), when he explored the resemblances between the human struggle against the land and the great battles among the elements ("Internecine Strife"), and when he envisioned the Canadian landscape as a great lizard, then he brought some of his most revolutionary innovations to the railway story.

When Pratt praised Stephen Vincent Benét's poem on the American Civil War, *John Brown's Body* (1928), it was not just for its careful historical treatment, but because he saw in it passion fused with the facts.<sup>32</sup> He brought his own passion, perhaps even his own brand of nationalism, to the story of the railroad. The political oratory, the character of the builders, the land itself, are all there but expressed in terms of enduring Pratt themes — heroism, vision, communication, and evolutionary struggle. The perspective is intimate as often as it is panoramic and, while the finished poem is considerably more restrained than the early drafts, it still contains strong comic elements. *Towards the Last Spike*, in fact, presents the same combination that Sir John A. Macdonald hoped that his speech on the Selkirk pioneers would deliver: "Romance and realism, double dose." The poet himself put it more modestly when he explained that "It is half a record and half a fantasy."<sup>33</sup> Since both aspects of the poem are so vividly conceived and so carefully executed, Pratt's last narrative work is an entirely successful documentary poem.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The lecture was published in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, ed. Eli Mandel (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 267-81.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>3</sup> Carl F. Klinck and Henry W. Wells, *Edwin J. Pratt — The Man and His Poetry* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1947), p. 51. Since this paper was originally written, Susan Beckmann has explored the subject more fully in "Java to Geneva: the Making of a Pratt Poem," *Canadian Literature*, No. 87 (Winter 1980), pp. 6-23. There is discussion in this valuable article of the sources of many of the narrative poems, but not of *Towards the Last Spike*.

<sup>4</sup> Pratt Papers, Typescript, Box 6, no. 49, Victoria University Library (Toronto); quotations from Pratt Papers are used by permission.

<sup>5</sup> Pratt Papers, Notebook, Box 6, no. 43.

<sup>6</sup> Klinck and Wells, p. 46.

- <sup>7</sup> Jay Macpherson makes the same observation about her experience with the manuscripts of "The Witches' Brew" and notes that the dull pencil was caused by "the childhood economy of cutting all new pencils into three before using them." See *Pratt's Romantic Mythology: The Witches' Brew* (Pratt Lectures, 1972), pp. 4, 18.
- <sup>8</sup> Howard Angus Kennedy, *Origin of the Canadian Pacific Railway* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1928), p. 21.
- <sup>9</sup> Sandra Djwa, *E. J. Pratt — the Evolutionary Vision* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1974), pp. 134-35.
- <sup>10</sup> Walter Vaughan, *Sir William Van Horne* (Toronto: Oxford, 1926).
- <sup>11</sup> R. G. MacBeth, *The Romance of the Canadian Pacific Railway* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1924).
- <sup>12</sup> Pratt Papers, Typescript, Box 6, no. 49.
- <sup>13</sup> Compare J. H. E. Secretan's description of Rogers (from *Canada's Great Highway* which appeared in Gibbon, p. 215) with Pratt's description.  
Secretan: He was a master of picturesque profanity, who continually chewed tobacco and was an artist in expectoration. He wore overalls with pockets behind, and had a plug of tobacco in one pocket and a sea-biscuit in the other, which was his idea of a season's provisions for an engineer. His scientific equipment consisted of a compass and an aneroid slung around his neck.  
Pratt: Now Rogers was traversing it on foot,  
Reading an aneroid and compass, chewing  
Sea-biscuit and tobacco.  
Moberly's remark to Macdonald which Pratt quotes (*TLS*, p. 353) also comes from Gibbon (p. 159).
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239. Gibbon is quoting from an article in *Engineering Wonders of the World* by J. M. Gibbon and Stephen Pardoe.
- <sup>16</sup> It was in the collection of the Victoria University Library (Toronto) and is now kept in its Canadiana section.
- <sup>17</sup> These debts are acknowledged in the typescript of the York Club speech, Pratt Papers, Box 6, no. 49.
- <sup>18</sup> As recopied by Pratt in typescript, Box 6, no. 49, the quotation from Pallon (?) in the *Winnipeg Tribune* reads:  
apparently the tussocks are important as a warning to keep well back, as the tussocks may present a friendly uniform grassy surface around the edge, so hard to tell where the meadow ends and the (concealed) lake begins. Some of the tussocky muskegs look as if they had been methodically pockmarked by moose hooves.
- <sup>19</sup> For example, the description of Smith as a young Hudson's Bay Company trader (*TLS*, p. 363) ultimately originates in Macnaughton (p. 76) but Kennedy's version is so much more detailed and vivid (pp. 5-6) that it may well have been Pratt's main source.
- <sup>20</sup> The context is different. Gibbon (p. 347) is referring to Lord Strathcona the imperialist not Donald Smith the railway builder, but the image may still have suggested something to Pratt.
- <sup>21</sup> The point is made in Walter Vaughan's *Sir William Van Horne*, p. 120.
- <sup>22</sup> The pamphlet on the Prime Minister in Louis J. C. Taché's *Men of the Day: A*

*Canadian Portrait Gallery* is an example of a pro-Macdonald view. Sir Richard Cartwright's *Reminiscences* (Toronto, 1912) is, by contrast, highly critical.

<sup>23</sup> The exceptional book is Biggar's *Anecdotal Life of Sir John A. Macdonald* (Montreal, 1891).

<sup>24</sup> There is certainly nothing in Blake's speeches to suggest it, and even a remark like Gibbon's "The odour so far acquired by the Canadian Pacific Railway was not that of Araby" (p. 199) is nothing in comparison with Pratt's soaring vision of the rotten egg in the House of Commons.

<sup>25</sup> See the notes on his reading copy in which he summarized parts of the poem:

I had to put the charges in the form of a menu which is offered to the House of Commons by the Hon. Edward Blake, leader of the Opposition. He presents the dishes which are not very savoury, the main dish is an egg now an omelette which through age has become very high.

(Typescript, Box 6, no. 48)

The same point can be found in other speeches.

<sup>26</sup> The passage about wine illustrates my point that in *Towards the Last Spike* it is the far-sighted dreamer who has a taste for alcohol. "Hollow Echoes from the Treasury Vault" also demonstrates the efficacy of whiskey. Sir John's drink is his medicine; when he has drained the glass he can see clearly the task that lies ahead of him. The whiskey also has the magic Scottish touch responsible for so many of the poem's miracles.

<sup>27</sup> Djwa, pp. 132-33.

<sup>28</sup> Gibbon, p. 179.

<sup>29</sup> It is even possible that Pratt looked quickly at the cartoon in Gibbon's book and assumed he was seeing Macdonald and not Mackenzie.

<sup>30</sup> Nothing in the material consulted suggested that Macdonald was a poker player. In one of the Parliamentary debates he uses an image drawn from gambling and then apologizes to the House for doing so. The Poker Game passage that was eliminated from the final poem reads as follows:

The Lady dealt the cards. It was agreed  
That one-eyed Jacks were wild. With easy grace  
She floated Sir John's five across the baize.  
He asked for but one card upon the draw.  
Quite unconcerned, she looked at her three queens —  
The three were on the deal — and on the draw  
A one-eyed Jack, an ace. Could he beat that?  
Where was the other queen? the other aces?  
Where was the other Jack — a tricky knave  
That might have smuggled up MacDonald's sleeve?  
She took a casual look at Sir John's face,  
A mask as imperturbable as hers  
Except for arrowy flashes in his eyes,  
Searching for filly quivers on her lips.  
The bidding started, slow and meditative,  
As lacking confidence. Sir John studied  
A "flush." He wanted a "full-house," but this  
Was good. He "anted" and the Lady raised it.  
To speed it up, she took her handkerchief  
And tapped her nose. The orange-blossom fragrance  
Acted like overproof upon the Knight.

(Box 6, no. 47)

He doubled, so did she; again the Knight.  
 Was his a straight? A flush? or a full-house?  
 A straight flush? Hardly on a bet of chances.  
 There must be bluff behind those chipmunk eyes  
 Engaged in forthcoming a contract-time.  
 There was a lull before his next advance;  
 So she must keep him in the game. She pursed  
 Her lips ever so slightly to betray.  
 A doubt to match the flicker of a shadow  
 Which caught unguarded those Disraeli features.  
 It worked! The bidding leaped to a fresh pace.  
 She looked at the wild chap beside the queens.  
 Four of a kind was good enough to risk  
 The skyline of the Rockies as her limit —  
 "Begin the Road in two years, end in ten"  
 Sir John, dropping his mask, threw in the chips.  
 (Box 6, no. 46)

<sup>31</sup> MacBeth, p. 58; Gibbon, p. 296.

<sup>32</sup> Klinck and Wells, pp. 50-51.

<sup>33</sup> Pratt Papers, Typescript, Box 6, no. 49.

## THE COAST OF CHILDHOOD

*R. A. D. Ford*

The coast of childhood looms close,  
 And there is a sudden pinching  
 Of the muscles below the heart —  
 Either a premonition of the end,  
 Or a spilling-over of regret.

And suddenly I have a desperate need  
 To know the books which define us,  
 To pursue the contours of the past,  
 To seize the inevitability  
 Of decay in our precarious age.

I want to walk back into time  
 With the clear eye of understanding,  
 And to search on those distant shores  
 For the word lost long ago, knowing  
 It is not there and never was.

# TWO POEMS

*G. McWhirter*

## FINDING

The pickers out visiting the good  
Spots, startled by my dogs, seem clumsy  
Or ashamed, as if caught  
Relieving themselves,  
Bent over, there. They show me buttons,  
A whole regalia of mushrooms  
Minted by the rain.

Each finding what they need  
Cherishes the difficult search. For no reason  
Light threads onto a thin, dead branch.

Between dense firs, there's the tallest dogwood  
Too. Her long elastic arm  
Has grown thin with reaching for that thread.

## SUCCESSFULLY

Will all that weight of water on the web  
Break or brighten it. Because the high meadow  
Grass is laced beautifully with both webs and water

This morning. So, how should her hand depress  
The boy's ignition properly. And will he peg  
The whole tent of day again for her. The shoulder sags,  
The bare body skids hotly into eiderdowns

And skies, the weightlessness of sleep. Two-ton  
Slumberer, at the centre of each coupling sulks  
A spider, scenting infinities, but nothing sticks  
To its wet web. Too soon the sun dries out the dew.

If everything were as sly and slow and successful  
As the damp snail mounted on the mushroom,  
Devouring it on the ground beside you.

## A WOMAN AT 4 A.M.

*Craig Powell*

gulps from the glass beside  
her bed      watches the starlight  
chill her thumbs      pale  
beam      journeying a thousand  
years to reach her  
   wrenches  
her lover's hair      "Wake!  
look at me!      tell  
me I am alive"      the  
clock clatters

## HERD OF STARS

*R. G. Everson*

The stars are a larger herd than buffalo  
and an excellent opportunity  
for clubby sportsmen, but we can't kill Heaven  
easily as passenger pigeons, baby seals  
or the celebrated last Great Auk at Fogo Island.  
  
We could shatter the moon with a rocket  
and end our fine days blowing out the sun.  
The gun clubs likely can't get many stars  
from the herd far off and careless of mankind.

## GATHERED FROM THE AIR

*Mike Doyle*

Since somewhere around December 1910  
I have measured out my life in finding  
what will suffice: petals  
on a wet black bough, ice  
on a red hot stove, no ideas  
but with real toads in  
a red wheel barrow, dependable,  
in the hyacinth garden.  
  
The imperfect is our paradise  
although *Idaho mi fe* &  
my little horse must think it queer.



# GADJI BERI BIMBA

## *The Problem of Abstraction in Poetry*

*Stephen Scobie*

I dreamed I saw Hugo Ball  
the night was cold I couldn't even call  
his name though I tried  
so I hung my head and cried

I dreamed I saw Hugo Ball  
and he looked fine he stood tall  
but he lived in a world of pain  
I never saw Hugo again

bp Nichol

ZÜRICH, 1916: a city at peace in a world at war; a city of exiles, of refugees, of revolutionaries both artistic and political.<sup>1</sup> On the Spiegelgasse, Alley of Mirrors, a narrow street climbing up from the banks of the river Limmat, Lenin sits waiting for his closed train, for his moment in history. And just down the street, obliquely across the Alley of Mirrors, in an emblematic juxtaposition which has delighted writers and historians,<sup>2</sup> is a cafe in which Lenin occasionally eats, and which also houses the Cabaret Voltaire, the birthplace of Dada. In Switzerland, the linguistic crossroads of central Europe, there came together Jean or Hans Arp, sculptor and poet, from Strasbourg; Tristan Tzara, writer, from Bucharest; and Hugo Ball, dramaturge and religious visionary, from the Rhineland Palatinate of Germany. At a time when the nationalist ideals of European high culture had produced the institutionalized insanity of trench warfare, Dada proclaimed the end of that high culture. It promoted the cult of the irrational, the chance, the spontaneous: in the various possible (and later fiercely debated) origins of its name, "Dada" was a child's rocking-horse, the affirmation of the Russian "yes," the tail of a sacred cow, a repetition of the initials of Dionysius the Areopagite, or merely nonsense syllables. In place of art, Dada promised anti-art, and in doing so fell into the inevitable paradox of producing art again, such as the lovely, chance-generated drawings of Arp, or the oddly haunting and compelling poems of Hugo Ball.

On June 23, 1916, Ball wrote in his diary, "I have invented a new genre of poems, 'Verse ohne Worte' [poems without words] or 'Lautgedichte' [sound

poems].”<sup>3</sup> Ball’s claim to have “invented” this form of experimentation may well be challenged, and the date is also in dispute, but the name he used for it — sound poetry — has (despite certain theoretical inadequacies) persisted to this day. On that evening, the diary continues,

I gave a reading of the first one of these poems. . . . I had made myself a special costume for it. My legs were in a cylinder of shiny blue cardboard, which came up to my hips so that I looked like an obelisk. Over it I wore a huge coat collar cut out of cardboard, scarlet inside and gold outside. It was fastened at the neck in such a way that I could give the impression of winglike movement by raising and lowering my elbows. I also wore a high, blue-and-white-striped witch doctor’s hat.

On all three sides of the stage I had set up music stands facing the audience, and I put my red-pencilled manuscript on them; I officiated at one stand or the other. . . . I could not walk inside the cylinder so I was carried onto the stage in the dark and began slowly and solemnly:

gadji beri bimba  
glandridi lauli lonni cadori  
gadjama bim beri glassala  
glandridi glassala tuffm i zimbrabim  
blassa galassasa tuffm i zimbrabim. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Ball, who was later to retreat from this kind of experimentation into a both literally and metaphorically Byzantine mysticism, never developed a fully articulated theory for sound poetry.<sup>5</sup> His remarks are scattered through his diary, *Flight Out Of Time*, whose entries he often reworked and revised before publication. On the day after his performance at the Cabaret Voltaire, he wrote, “In these phonetic poems we totally renounce the language that journalism has abused and corrupted. We must return to the innermost alchemy of the word, we must even give up the word too, to keep for poetry its last and holiest refuge.”<sup>6</sup> And the following year, on March 5, 1917, he concluded, “The next step is for poetry to discard language as painting has discarded the object, and for similar reasons.”<sup>7</sup>

Sixty years later, in 1978, the Dutch sound poet Greta Monach repeated the same simple faith:

Familiarity with music from an early age led me to think in terms of abstract art.

Given the fact that, after music, the visual arts also emancipated from the figurative into the abstract, it seems a matter of course to me to follow this example in poetry.<sup>8</sup>

It is not, however, “a matter of course.” I would call these two statements — so strikingly similar, despite the sixty years of experience and experimentation between them — simplistic, even naïve, precisely because they propose, as easy and obvious assumptions, that there is a direct parallel between the history of painting and the possible history of literature, and that abstract poetry is both possible and desirable. Not that these propositions are necessarily invalid: but

they cannot be made as assumptions, they have to be argued. It is my purpose in this essay to suggest some lines which that argument might follow.

It should be clear that, by "abstract poetry," I do not mean simply poetry which is *about* abstract ideas, or which uses abstract vocabulary, like, for example, Eliot's "Burnt Norton": "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future," etc. Rather, I mean abstraction at the deeper levels of poetic structure, syntax, and semantics. But it will be useful, before going any further, to clarify the various senses in which the word "abstract" is used, and in doing so I am greatly indebted to a book by Harold Osborne entitled *Abstraction and Artifice in Twentieth-Century Art*. Osborne speaks of the "Constant misunderstandings and confusion [which] occur, even among artists themselves, owing to failure to grasp the difference between . . . two uses of 'abstract.'"<sup>9</sup> The first use, which Osborne classifies as "Semantic Abstraction," derives from the fact that "Both in philosophical and in everyday language 'to abstract' means to withdraw or separate, particularly to withdraw attention from something or from some aspect of a thing." Thus,

a work of figurative or representational art, i.e. one which . . . transmits information about some segment of the visible world outside itself, is said to be more or less abstract according as the information it transmits is less or more complete. In this sense abstraction is equivalent to incomplete specification. . . . Abstraction in this sense is a matter of degree and the term has no relevance or application outside the sphere of representational art. It is a factor of the relation between a work of art and that which the work represents.<sup>10</sup>

Under this heading of Semantic Abstraction, Osborne is able to discuss such diverse schools of painting as German Expressionism, Neo-Impressionism, Cubism, and Futurism.

"But," Osborne continues,

"abstract" is also commonly employed as a general descriptive term denoting all the many kinds of art production which do not transmit, or purport to transmit, information about anything in the world apart from themselves. Other terms that have been used are: "non-representational," "non-figurative," "non-objective," "non-iconic." "Abstract" is the term which has obtained the widest currency although it is perhaps the least appropriate of all both linguistically and because of its established use in a different sense within the sphere of representational art. There are many types of pictures and sculptures within the wide spectrum of twentieth-century art which are not pictures or sculptures of anything at all; they are artefacts made up from non-iconic elements fashioned into non-iconic structures. These works are not more "abstract" or less "abstract." There is no relation between the work and something represented because the work represents nothing apart from what it is.<sup>11</sup>

Under this second heading, "Non-Iconic Abstraction," Osborne discusses the work of such painters as Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian, and such general movements as Suprematism, Constructivism, and Abstract Expressionism.

It is obviously in this second, non-iconic sense that Hugo Ball and Greta Monach intend the notion of "abstract poetry," and many of the rhetorical manifestoes of sound poetry have postulated this kind of "abstraction" as an ideal. At the same time, there is a large body of experimental work which fits into the loosely defined area for which the term "sound poetry" is a generally accepted, if not entirely accurate label, but which is not "abstract" at all, in the non-iconic sense. It may, however, be possible to see this writing as "abstract" in Osborne's *first* sense, especially when we consider the potential of that suggestive phrase, "incomplete specification." So another purpose of my essay is to attempt an application of Osborne's terminology to the whole field of sound poetry.

**F**IRST, HOWEVER, I HAVE TO CONSIDER the parallel to painting suggested by both Ball and Monach. They pointed towards painting because it was the clearest example (or even the *only* example) of an art form which had actually made the transition from a representational to a non-representational discourse. The painters, in turn, had sought their inspiration in music,<sup>12</sup> whose ideal self-reflexive containment had been described, by Schopenhauer and by Walter Pater, as the "condition" towards which all art "aspires." Kandinsky, in *On the Spiritual in Art*, speaks of the "envy" with which artists in other media regard music, "the art which employs its resources, not in order to represent natural appearances, but as a means of expressing the inner life of the artist."<sup>13</sup> Music, of course, had always possessed this characteristic; in the space of approximately sixty years, from 1860 to 1920, painting, through a conscious and heroic struggle, acquired it.

In 1890, the French painter and critic Maurice Denis wrote: "We must remember that a painting, before it is a warhorse or a nude or any kind of anecdote, is a flat surface covered by colours arranged in a certain order."<sup>14</sup> This statement later came to be regarded as one of the first slogans of abstract art, and as a foundation for the dogma of "flatness" which Tom Wolfe burlesqued in *The Painted Word*,<sup>15</sup> but, strictly speaking, it refers not to non-iconic abstraction but to semantic abstraction, or to a balance between representation and self-reflexiveness.<sup>16</sup> The painting is not yet *only* surface and colours: these things may come *before* the nude or the anecdote, but they do not displace them. The Impressionists had "abstracted" light, in Osborne's sense, by withdrawing attention from other aspects of representation. In doing so, they brought the painting forward to that "flat surface" which Denis speaks of, thereby setting up an unresolved tension with the recessional "depth" of the image, which they still organized by traditional perspective. That tension in turn became the focal point for the semantic abstractions of Cézanne and the Cubists, who may push their visual analysis and

synthesis to the very border of the non-iconic, but who never cross it. Indeed, the theory of Cubism, as enunciated in its most dogmatic form by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, is violently hostile to non-iconic abstraction: "Let us hope," wrote Kahnweiler in his definitive study of Juan Gris, "that all 'abstract painting' — which is neither painting nor abstract — will soon disappear. It has done a great deal of harm, for it has largely prevented Cubism being understood and has turned more than one painter and collector against real painting. It has absolutely nothing to do with real painting."<sup>17</sup> However, despite its own theory, Cubism became — historically — a stepping-stone on the path towards non-iconic abstraction. The great Cubist painters — Braque, Gris, Picasso — never painted any non-representational canvases; but other artists, like Delaunay and Malevich, passed through Cubism to the purified realms of, respectively, colour and form. By 1912 Delaunay was painting the brightly coloured discs of what Apollinaire christened Orphism; other painters, such as Kuka and Kandinsky, had achieved non-iconic abstraction through other, more idealist routes; and in 1914 the Russian Kasimir Malevich arrived in one giant stride at the minimal abstraction of form, painting a black square on a white ground.

It is an understandable error — though I think an error nevertheless — to see the history of modern painting as a steady progression (or, in Monach's word, "emancipation") towards the non-iconic, the minimal, the conceptual, zero. The imagery of the "avant-garde" supports this notion of an advancing line, and allows the dubious terminology of statements that Malevich was "ahead of" Braque, who had "gone farther than" Cézanne. Abstraction is not the sole goal of painting; and if there is a "line of advance," then it has been twisting back on itself ever since that black square. One major problem of contemporary painting is that there is no front line any more for the avant-garde to man. Everything is possible, from minimal conceptualism through to photo-realism, so no one style occupies a privileged position. The contemporary painter must move eclectically through the whole range of possibilities the last century has laid out before him — or else, as a *naïf*, bypass them altogether.

Given, then, this exemplary progression, in painting, away from representation towards the many and various forms of abstraction, what possible consequences are there for poetry? There are indeed many significant parallels between literature and the visual arts, but they are parallels of analogy rather than of identity. During the twentieth century, there has been a continuous interchange between poets and painters, and there have been many attempts to translate the effects of one medium into another. Apollinaire, for instance, developed the principles of literary collage, in his poem, "Lundi, Rue Christine," as a direct result of the Cubist collages of Braque and Picasso; his original title for the volume *Calligrammes* was *Moi Aussi, Je Suis Peintre*. But he was not a painter, just as Picasso was not a poet. The process of translation — whether from one language to

another, or from one code to another within the same language, or from one artistic medium to another — always involves change; whenever it clings too closely to the stylistic or structural features of the original, it fails; it succeeds only when it adapts to the conditions of the new medium. What Greta Monach calls the “emancipation from the figurative into the abstract” is a process which must be worked out, not in terms of painting, but in terms of literature: not in terms of shape, line, and colour, but in terms of language.

It is at this point, obviously, that the analogy between painting and literature becomes problematic, and that Hugo Ball’s casual assumption that poetry can “discard language” stumbles upon the intractability of the medium. Can language in fact be rendered truly abstract, in either of Osborne’s senses? A totally non-iconic art declares its own materials — sound, harmony, and rhythm in music; shape, line, and colour in painting — to be sufficient, without any need to support themselves by external reference, or to justify themselves in terms of their fidelity to some preconceived standard of “the real.” Music — excluding for the moment such mixed media as opera and song — may indeed evoke emotions, may “express this emotional substratum which exists, at times, beneath our ideas,”<sup>18</sup> but it does not refer directly to objects, or concepts, or fictional worlds. The note B-flat does not signify anything except itself, and its place in relation to a series of other notes: in this it is quite different from the word “guitar,” or from the curved line, however abstracted or formalised, which signifies “guitar” in many Cubist paintings. That line, in turn, is adaptable: while it may be made to signify a guitar, or a mountain, it may also be made to signify nothing but itself, or its place in relation to a composition of other lines. A word, however, is always significant. The word “guitar” must always direct the listener — provided, of course, that the listener speaks English — to the mental image or concept of a wooden stringed instrument; it can never be construed purely as an arbitrary composition of the *g*, *t* and *r* consonant sounds with the vowels *i* and *a*. Language is inherently referential. As a medium, it resists abstraction much more strongly than painting did: the difference is not simply one of degree, but of kind.<sup>19</sup>

**I**F, THEN, WE ARE TO TALK AT ALL about an “abstract poetry” — a poetry, that is, that abstracts not merely at the level of vocabulary but at the level of structure — we must look at techniques whereby the inherent referentiality of language may be circumvented or subverted. How can this be done? If the word is to be retained as a compositional unit, then it must be placed in a context which will drastically qualify, undercut, or cancel altogether its function as signifier: this will lead the writer towards what Bruce Andrews has called “an experimentation of diminished or obliterated reference,”<sup>20</sup> or, more simply, to Osborne’s “incom-

plete specification,” semantic abstraction. If the word is *not* retained, the poet moves to non-iconic abstraction, and must work with sub-vocal elements or speech: individual letter-sounds, phonemes, morphemes, or the whole range of pre-verbal vocalization: grunts, groans, yells, whistles, passionate gurgling, heavy breathing.

The kind of context in which word-meaning may be cancelled is simply illustrated by Richard Kostelanetz in terms of a tongue-twister:

If a Hottentot taught a Hottentot tot to talk 'ere the tot could totter, ought the Hottentot to be taught to say ought or naught or what ought to be taught 'er?

Kostelanetz comments:

The subject of this ditty is clearly neither Hottentots nor pedagogy but the related sounds of “ot” and “ought,” and what holds this series of words together is not the thought or the syntax but those two repeated sounds.<sup>21</sup>

The form cancels the content: the words are dis-contented, reduced to patterns of sound. This principle can be applied in a multitude of ways: through chant, through repetition, through simultaneous performance by several voices impeding the understanding of any single voice, and through all the technical devices of tape manipulation such as multi-tracking and phase distortion. Ernest Robson describes how a writer

may destroy contextual meaning with such excessive repetition that attention to grammar or meaning is eliminated by exhaustion of all its information. Once this elimination has occurred the residual messages are acoustic patterns of speech. Then by default no other information remains but sounds, sounds, sounds.<sup>22</sup>

The technique of simultaneous readings was certainly used at the Cabaret Voltaire. Nicholas Zurbrugg comments that

The Dada poets manifest the two main tendencies of all twentieth-century creativity—the impulse towards abstraction and the impulse towards expressive simultaneity. While the impulse towards abstraction reduced language to elementary sounds (just as abstract art reduced the subject-matter of painting to non-figurative, elementary forms), the impulse towards simultaneity attempted to communicate several sonic statements at the same time (just as the collages and montages of the Dada artists condensed several visual statements by juxtaposing and superimposing images in one composite message).<sup>23</sup>

Ball himself may have picked up the notion of this use of repetition from the painter whom he most admired, Wassily Kandinsky. John Elderfield, in his Introduction to the translated edition of Ball's diary, notes that

In . . . *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky makes only a brief mention of literature, but it is a very significant one. Just as images are the outward containers of spiritual truths, he writes, so words have two functions: to denote an object or notion, and to reflect an “inner sound” (“*innerer Klang*”). The inner

sounds of words are dependent upon the words' denotive context — but the poet's task is to manipulate his material so as to efface this outer meaning, or at least to permit other meanings to emerge in "vibrations" that will affect the audience on a spiritual level. Repetition of a word can "bring out unsuspected spiritual properties . . . [and] deprives the word of its external reference. Similarly, the symbolic reference of a designated object tends to be forgotten and only the sound is retained. We hear this pure sound . . . [which] exercises a direct impression on the soul."<sup>24</sup>

The mystical tone here would certainly appeal to Ball. Brian Henderson, in his very detailed and perceptive account, "Radical Poetics," plays particular stress on the idea of sound poetry as an attempt to recover an original Adamic language. "Dada's dismantling of the word," he writes, "was a process that was to release the hidden energies of it. . . . This dismantling of the word for the Word is Hermetic, and would not only be an unmasking, but a revolutionary spiritual act."<sup>25</sup> Theorists of non-iconic abstraction, whether in poetry or in the visual arts, return frequently to such appeals to a mystical ground or justification. Religious chants have long used repetition as a means of occupying and distracting the foreground of consciousness in order to facilitate the unconscious mind's access to a state of meditation. Ball himself noted that, while performing at the Cabaret Voltaire, "my voice had no choice but to take on the ancient cadence of priestly lamentation, that style of liturgical singing that wails in all the Catholic churches of East and West."<sup>26</sup>

There are, obviously, infinite gradations available to the writer/performer/composer, depending on the degree of intelligibility the piece allows, between semantic and non-iconic abstraction. The American musician Steve Reich has created a brilliant piece of what I would call sound poetry (though he presumably calls it music), whose sole acoustic material consists of a few words on tape. Reich describes the process of composition:

The voice is that of Daniel Hamm, then nineteen, describing a beating he took in the Harlem 28th precinct. The police were about to take the boys out to be "cleaned up" and were only taking those that were visibly bleeding. Since Hamm had no actual open bleeding, he proceeded to squeeze open a bruise on his leg so that he would be taken to the hospital — "I had to, like, open the bruise up and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them."

The phrase "come out to show them" was recorded on both channels, first in unison and then with channel 2 slowly beginning to move ahead. As the phase begins to shift a gradually increasing reverberation is heard which slowly passes into a sort of canon or round. Eventually the two voices divide into four and then into eight.<sup>27</sup>

The piece thus moves from a completely intelligible phrase, isolated from its context — in Osborne's term, given "incomplete specification" — to purely abstract or musical noise, in which no linguistic element can any longer be de-



tected. Apart from its intrinsic fascination as a compelling and hypnotic work, "Come Out" thus illustrates the range and the limits of sound poetry.

Repetition, however, need not always be used as a means of cancelling surface meaning, but rather of insisting on it. bpNichol's "You are city hall my people" uses its emphatic repetitions as a means of enforcing a very direct statement, which is clearly and syntactically *about* civic politics. The work of Gertrude Stein, though it attenuates meaning to a precarious edge by its insistent and convoluted repetitions, never cancels it entirely. I would prefer to argue that Stein's work is "Cubist," bearing in mind that Osborne includes Cubism in his category of semantic abstraction. Again the notion of "incomplete specification" would come in very handy, especially in relation to those works of Stein which correspond most closely to the "synthetic" stage of Cubism, namely, her later "Portraits," and the "still lives" of *Tender Buttons*. But that is a whole different paper.

Another technique for undercutting the meanings of words is to arrange them, not in terms of their syntactic or semantic relations, but at random, using chance techniques to generate the text. Tristan Tzara, in 1924, gave his "recipe" for a Dada poem:

Take a newspaper.  
Take a pair of scissors.  
Choose in the newspaper an article which is the same length as you  
wish to make your poem.  
Cut out the article.  
Then carefully cut out the words which make up this article, and  
put them in a bag.  
Shake gently.  
Then take out each scrap of paper, one after the other.  
Copy them out conscientiously in the order in which they came  
out of the bag.  
The poem will resemble you.<sup>28</sup>

And, indeed, it usually does. One of the theoretical advantages of chance structures is that they are supposed to be impersonal; they free the artist from the compulsions of self-expression, and liberate his imagination to operate in areas he would otherwise never have access to. While this is true to a certain extent, an artist's personal style is too fundamental and pervasive to be entirely denied or disguised, even in chance-generated structures. Arp's drawings, for instance, determined by the positions in which dropped scraps of paper fell to the floor, are absolutely identifiable as Arp's work. The same is true, as Tzara suggests, in poetry.

Brian Henderson argues for a stricter conception of chance as producing "the disappearance of the self" or "a kind of pure detachment of being."<sup>29</sup> In doing so, he aligns himself with Steve McCaffery in the espousal of a Derridean sense of the primacy of *writing*, which questions the metaphysics of presence and the

location of value in the authenticity of an authorial *voice*. The problem is that a great deal of sound poetry depends, absolutely, on the authenticity of voice. While I am intrigued by the Derridean focus on writing, and recognize the kind of autonomy that a text can (or indeed must) take on, I am still reluctant to abandon the notion that the writer, when faced by the infinite range of possibilities which chance-generated structures open up, still has a role to play — a role which depends upon the existential authenticity of the *choices* he makes in such a situation. “The poem will resemble *you*.”

More complex chance structures have been worked out by recent writers, most notably by the American musician and composer, John Cage. Refining on Tzara’s elementary methods, Cage has created and performed “treated texts” based on Thoreau’s *Journals* and on James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. The Thoreau text — *Empty Words* — uses the *I Ching* to determine the chance selection of phrases, words, syllables and individual letters from the original, which are then performed by Cage in counterpoint to periods of silence whose frequency and duration are also chance-determined.<sup>30</sup> The result is minimal and austere, yet also — thanks largely to Cage’s compelling performance and presence — totally fascinating.

The treatment of pre-existing texts in this way has sometimes been referred to as “homolinguistic translation,” and has been practised in Canada by bpNichol, in *Translating Translating Apollinaire*, by Steve McCaffery, in *Intimate Distortions*, and by Douglas Barbour and myself, in *The Pirates of Pen’s Chance*. Take, for instance, the following poem:

the incantatory paintings etc.  
proposed it art  
challenges Plato

order ordinary imitations  
painting for bed

Plato’s  
Aristotle’s

therefore useless  
because

counters dangerous in  
in advocates decorative  
a outside  
the upon Greek  
through works is which off the form  
even discarded reality

the conceive a the  
content lucidly content  
definition X<sup>31</sup>

This work, I submit, conforms exactly to the notion of “incomplete specification.” Its text has been “abstracted from” another text — in this case, the opening page of Susan Sontag’s famous essay, “Against Interpretation” — using the technique of reading only the left-hand margin, the first word of each line from a page of prose, where the line divisions have been produced by the accidents of a particular typesetting. The vocabulary is still, identifiably, Sontag’s; but the information which would allow the reader to specify the message — i.e., the surrounding words and syntax — is incomplete. The result is a poem which hovers on the edges of meaning, without ever totally abandoning or embracing it.<sup>32</sup>

WE HAVE BEEN DEALING SO FAR with poems which use complete and identifiable words, albeit in contexts which severely limit or obscure their intelligibility; all such works fall, I would argue, into the category of semantic abstraction. Non-iconic abstraction is possible only when the word is abandoned altogether, and the performer moves into the area of non-verbal vocal sound. Here the problem of the inherent referentiality of words is by-passed by resorting to fragments of vocal sound at a pre- or sub-verbal level. Although the elements of language are still present, they have been abstracted from any semantic context, in the same way as non-iconic painting abstracts line, colour and shape from their representative functions. Vocal sound becomes self-sufficient and self-reflexive, as the total material and subject-matter of the composition.

Hugo Ball’s attempts in this direction may now appear, in retrospect, quite tentative. Although his poems use invented “words,” in no recognizable language, many of these words are in fact quite clearly onomatopoeic, and he gave most of his poem titles — “Clouds,” “Elephant Caravan” — whose specifications of a referential subject-matter must inevitably affect and condition the response of the listener.<sup>33</sup>

Ball’s fellow Dadaist, Raoul Hausmann, asked the obvious question:

Why bother with words? . . . It is in this sense that I differ from Ball. His poems created new words . . . mine were based on letters, on something without the slightest possibility of offering meaningful language.<sup>34</sup>

From as early as 1918, Hausmann wrote poems at this level of non-iconic abstraction, which was taken to its highest pitch of sophistication by Kurt Schwitters in his great *Ur-Sonate*, begun in 1923, and the subsequent history of sound poetry affords many further examples. Among recent works, I would cite particularly Tom Johnson’s “Secret Songs,”<sup>35</sup> which use rigidly limited series of letter-sounds to produce vocal patterns of astonishing energy and grace.

It is not the purpose of this essay to trace a complete history of sound poetry, or to enter into the many quarrels about who discovered what first, but it is worth

noting that the principles of non-iconic abstraction in poetry had in fact been fully stated and put into practice, at least three years before Hugo Ball's much better-mythologized performance at the Cabaret Voltaire, by the *zaum* poets of Russian Futurism.<sup>36</sup> *Zaum* (two syllables) is a contraction of "zaumnyj jazyk," which may best be translated as "transrational speech" — though later Soviet critics have tended to use it simply to mean nonsensical gibberish. The three leading poets associated with *zaum* are Velimir Khlebnikov, Alexei Kruchenykh, and Ilya Zdanevich, known as Iliazde. The first of these poets to achieve recognition in the West was Iliazde, whose *zaum* play, *Ledentu as a Beacon*, was published in Paris in 1923.

Kruchenykh was the most extreme of the three (so much so that it became far too easy for later critics to dismiss and forget him altogether); he had a genuine dislike for all previous literature, and Pushkin was his favourite target. He once declared that a randomly chosen laundry bill had better sound values than any of Pushkin's poetry; and he also claimed that the following *zaum* poem of his was "more Russian than all of Pushkin's poetry":<sup>37</sup>

	dyr	bul	shchyl
		ubeshshchur	
		skum	
vy	so	bu	
r	l	ez	

This poem was first published in January 1913; later that year Kruchenykh published his manifesto *Declaration of the Word as Such*. He declared the bankruptcy of normal language, which keeps the word chained in subordination to its meaning. Vladimir Markov summarizes his argument: "Whereas artists of the past went through the idea to the word, futurists go through the word to direct knowledge. . . . The word is broader than its meaning (this statement later became Kruchenykh's favourite slogan)."<sup>38</sup>

Velimir Khlebnikov held a more restrained view of *zaum*, believing it could be used to create a "universal language of pure concepts clearly expressed by speech sounds." He developed an esoteric linguistic theory based on the beliefs that "the sound of a word is deeply related to its meaning" and that "the first consonant of a word root expresses a definite idea." For instance, he believed that the letter L expressed the idea of "a vertical movement that finally spreads across a surface."<sup>39</sup> By discovering these original meanings he hoped to create a new, universal, and (in contrast to Kruchenykh) meaningful *zaum*, which he idealistically believed would put an end to all misunderstanding, strife, and war between people.

By 1919, however, Khlebnikov had abandoned his ideas, and wrote that "A work written entirely with the New Word does not affect the consciousness. Ergo, its efforts are in vain."<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Tristan Tzara eventually wrote that sound

poetry "became ineffectual as soon as the poem was reduced to a succession of sounds."<sup>41</sup>

These reservations must, of course, be taken seriously. Just as many respectable critics, such as Kahnweiler (not only conservative cranks), have argued that abstract painting betrays the very function of art, to provide an imaginative representation of material reality, so many listeners to non-iconic abstract poetry have concluded that it betrays the essence of language, and that it performs, less effectively, the functions of music. Response to this argument would have to stress those aspects of sound poetry which, even in its most abstract manifestations, continue to link it to poetry. It is an art which is based on the *voice*: not the singing voice, but the speaking voice, the primary medium in which language exists. It is also an art which, in almost all of its forms, uses, or plays with, the notion of a *text*.

THE MOST SERIOUS ALTERNATIVE to the name "sound poetry" is the description "text-sound," which obviously places a strong emphasis on the presence of a text. That text may be a highly elaborate system of notation, or it may be a few squiggles on a scrap of paper; in the inventive work of the English poet Paula Claire, the notion of "text" has been expanded to allow the poet to "read" anything from the bark of a tree to the wall of a room. Most commonly, the text is simply the basis for improvisation. But the presence of a text, whatever its form, continues to imply a relationship to meaning. Even individual letter sounds — *b*, *k*, *u* — convey, if not meaning, at least an awareness of their potentiality to combine into meaning.

I suspect that it is this potentiality which ultimately distinguishes text-sound from music. Richard Kostelanetz, in what is certainly the most thoughtful attempt so far to define text-sound,<sup>42</sup> attempts to make that distinction by excluding from his definition any works which use specific pitch — but this definition, it seems to me, runs into trouble with various forms of chanting, such as Jerome Rothenberg's "Horse Songs," or the works of Bill Bissett. Text-sound, I would submit, always deals *not* with sound *per se* (music), but with sound *as an aspect of language*: and even when that aspect is isolated (abstracted) from all other aspects, isolated even from meaning, its *ground* is still in language, and its practitioners are called, properly, poets.

Sound poetry is a manifestation of one of the most important general tendencies of twentieth century art and culture: self-reflexiveness, the urge in all the arts to examine their own means of expression, to find their subject-matter in the exploration of their own ontology and structure. The question becomes not so much "what is language about?" as "what *is* language?"<sup>43</sup> Sound poetry is analytical,

and often highly theoretical, in its approach to language: but it combines this intellectualism with a delight in the physicality of language, and the performance pieces which derive from the theory are often very entertaining, at an immediate level, even for audiences who know nothing of the theory.

One major division within sound poetry is between those poets who use a wide array of tape technology — multi-tracking, editing, splicing together sound collages — and those who don't, who rely exclusively on the sounds which can be produced by the unaided human voice. This division shows up clearly in the theoretical justifications which the two groups offer for their work. Tape artists talk of the need to make aesthetic use of the latest developments in technology: not to use what is available, they say, is as stupid as attempting to ignore the typewriter or the printing press. Steve McCaffery summarizes the ideology as

the transcendence of the limits of the human body. The tape machine, considered as an extension of human vocality allowed the poet to move beyond his own expressivity. The body is no longer the ultimate parameter, and voice becomes a point of departure rather than the point of arrival.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast, the non-technological sound poets tend to justify their work in deliberately primitivistic terms, speaking of it as a *return* to earlier, more basic poetic forms, such as the chant. The Swedish poet Sten Hanson writes:

The sound poem appears to me as a homecoming for poetry, a return to its source close to the spoken word, the rhythm and atmosphere of language and body, their rites and sorcery, everything that centuries of written verse have replaced with metaphors and advanced constructions.<sup>45</sup>

And Jerome Rothenberg:

what is involved here is the search for a primal ground: a desire to bypass a civilization that has become problematic & to return, briefly, often by proxy, to the origins of our humanity.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the most extravagant of all the manifesto-writers — he has a flair for these things — is Steve McCaffery. His 1970 statement, "For a poetry of blood," describes sound as "the poetry of direct emotional confrontation" and as "the extension of human biology into a context of challenge."<sup>47</sup> He believes that the energy released in sound performance

marks an important stage in establishing the agencies for a general libidinal depression. Sound poetry is much more than simply returning language to its own matter; it is an agency for desire production, for releasing energy flow, for securing the passage of libido in a multiplicity of flows out of the Logos.<sup>48</sup>

McCaffery argues against tape technology on the interesting grounds that tape is not performance but writing:

For if we understand writing as what it is: the inscription of units of meaning within a framed space of retrievability and repeatability, then tape is none other

than writing. To transcend writing, and the critical vocabulary built up around the logocentricity of writing, and to achieve a totally phonocentric art, must involve a renunciation of these two central canons of the written: repeatability and retrievability, a claiming of the transient, transitional, ephemeral, the intensity of the orgasm, the flow of energy through fissures, escape, the total burn, the finite calorie, loss, displacement, excess: the total range of the nomadic consciousness.<sup>49</sup>

In speaking for myself, both as a critic attempting to define the theory of sound poetry and as a poet attempting to perform it in practice, I would find much to agree with in McCaffery's comments, even if I would hesitate to phrase my ideas in such an ecstatic fashion. It is clear that the *energy* of live performance is a major component of the attraction of sound poetry, both for its performers and for its audience. Further, as McCaffery says, the flow of this energy comes "through fissures": through the tensions between sense and sound, between language as content and language as dis-contented, between semantic and non-iconic abstraction, and through the displacements between the decorum of the printed page and the unpredictability of live performance.

At the same time, I must acknowledge some uneasiness with the romanticism implicit in phrases like Hanson's "rites and sorcery," Rothenberg's "primal ground," and McCaffery's "nomadic consciousness."<sup>50</sup> Sound poetry may indeed reach into this area of our experience, but it is not confined to it: sound poetry may also be used in very controlled, intelligent, witty, classical ways.

To investigate the various forms of abstraction implicit in language may indeed lead one towards a mystical sense of Kandinsky's "inner sound," Ball's "alchemy of the word," or Henderson's "Adamic language"; but it may also induce a sense of the precariousness of language, the sheerly arbitrary nature of those configurations of sound on which the whole of our human intercourse depends. I would like to close this essay by describing an experiment of my own: like so much of the work I have been discussing, it was undertaken in a spirit as much whimsical as serious, and has produced, I think, a result as beautiful as it is arbitrary, as profound as it is meaningless. Prompted by my usual spirit of cheerful iconoclasm, I took one of the greatest speeches in Shakespearean tragedy — Macbeth's response to the news of his wife's death — and subjected it to a simple linguistic shift. I moved every consonant one forward in the alphabet: *c* became *d*, *t* became *v*. Generously, I left the vowels alone. The result is what I suppose Derrida might call a trace, or a deferral, of the Shakespearean original:

Tje tjoukf jawe fief jeseagves;  
 Vjese xoumf jawe ceep a vine gos tudj a xosf.  
 Vonossox, apf vonossox, apf vonossox,  
 Dseeqt ip vjit qevvy quade gson fay vo fay  
 Vo vje matv tymmacme og sedosfef vine,  
 Apf amm ous zetvesfayt jawe mihjvef goomt

Vje xay vo futvy feavj. Ouv, ouv, csieg dapfme!  
 Mige't cuv a xamliph tjafax, a qoos qmayes,  
 Vjav tvsuvt apf gsevt jit jous uqop vje tvahe,  
 Apf vjep it jeasf po nose; iv it a varne  
 Vomf cy ap ifiov, gumm og toupf apf gusy,  
 Tihpigyiph povjiph.

These final words — “Tihpigyiph povjiph” — do indeed form a sequence of abstract sounds “signifying nothing.” Or, do they?

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This essay is a re-working of “Realism and Its Discontents,” a lecture presented to the NeWest Institute’s conference on that topic, held in August 1980 at Strawberry Creek, Alberta. A slightly revised version was then published in *Aural Literature Criticism*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Precisely, 1981), pp. 39-48. A more substantially revised version was delivered as an Inaugural Professorial Lecture at the University of Victoria in March 1982.
- <sup>2</sup> See George Rickey, *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution* (London: Studio Vista, 1967), p. 42, and also, of course, Tom Stoppard’s play, *Travesties*.
- <sup>3</sup> Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, ed. John Elderfield (New York: Viking, 1974), p. 70.
- <sup>4</sup> *Flight Out of Time*, p. 70. This is the text as given in Ball’s diary. The version published in his *Gesammelte Gedichte* (1963) is longer, and has many variants. For a detailed discussion of the poem, see Brian Henderson, “Radical Poetics” (Ph.D. Dissertation, York University, 1982), pp. 125-31.
- <sup>5</sup> See Henderson, p. 119: “The recognition of the futility of actually achieving a natural language with a fallen tongue pushed Ball first, in the direction of the sound poem, and then straight on through and out the other side. For the sound poem, though it strove for the divine, was only a striving human image for it, with which the poet became dissatisfied.”
- <sup>6</sup> *Flight Out of Time*, p. 71.
- <sup>7</sup> This quote, which is not included in Elderfield’s edition of the diary, is given by Hans Richter, in *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), p. 41.
- <sup>8</sup> Greta Monach, “Statements: dated the 16th of July 1978,” in *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue*, ed. Steve McCaffery and bpNichol (Toronto: Underwhich Editions, 1978), p. 23.
- <sup>9</sup> Harold Osborne, *Abstraction and Artifice in Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), p. 25. My own earlier versions of this essay suffer from such a confusion, and several of their arguments have been recast within the framework of Osborne’s terminology.
- <sup>10</sup> Osborne, pp. 25-26.
- <sup>11</sup> Osborne, p. 26.
- <sup>12</sup> See Peter Vergo, “Music and Abstract Painting: Kandinsky, Goethe and Schoenberg,” in *Towards a New Art: essays on the background to abstract art 1910-20*, ed. Michael Compton (London: Tate Gallery, 1980), pp. 41-63.
- <sup>13</sup> Quoted in Vergo, p. 41.



- <sup>14</sup> Maurice Denis, "Définition du Neo-Traditionnisme," first published in *Art et critique*, August 1980; available in Maurice Denis, *Theories* (Paris: Hermann, 1964).
- <sup>15</sup> Tom Wolfe, "The Painted Word," *Harper's* (April 1975).
- <sup>16</sup> See Joseph Masheck, "The Carpet Paradigm: Critical Prolegomena to a Theory of Flatness," *Arts Magazine*, 51, No. 1 (September 1976), 93: "We should remember that what Denis actually said was that a picture is a plane with colour patches arranged in order *before* it is something else. That is far from saying that it could not also *be* something else; in fact, it implies that the picture *will be* something else."
- <sup>17</sup> Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *Juan Gris: His Life and Work* (New York: Abrams, n.d.), p. 170.
- <sup>18</sup> Teodor de Wyzewa (1885), quoted in Vergo, p. 47.
- <sup>19</sup> It is of course possible to argue, at a more complex philosophical level, that the referentiality of language is an illusion. Jacques Derrida, for instance, questions the metaphysics of inherent "presence," and sees the linguistic sign as a "trace." Such ideas are explored in Steve McCaffery's "The Death of the Subject," *Open Letter*, Third Series, No. 7 (Summer 1977), 61-67, and in Chapter IV of Brian Henderson's dissertation, "The Horsemen: Adamic Language and the Politics of the Referent." However, even if we grant these arguments on a theoretical level, we still have to deal, on a pragmatic level, with the concept of language as having referential value, and we still have to act *as if* that were not an illusion.
- <sup>20</sup> Bruce Andrews, "Writing Social Work & Political Practice," in *Aural Literature Criticism*, p. 92.
- <sup>21</sup> Richard Kostelanetz, "Text-Sound Art: a Survey," in *Text-Sound Texts*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: William Morrow, 1980), p. 14.
- <sup>22</sup> Ernest Robson, "The Concept of Phonetic Music," in *Aural Literature Criticism*, p. 113.
- <sup>23</sup> Nicholas Zurbrugg, "Regarding Recorded Literature," in *Aural Literature Criticism*, pp. 62-63.
- <sup>24</sup> *Flight Out of Time*, pp. xxvi-xxvii.
- <sup>25</sup> Henderson, p. 103. See also pp. 11-12, and Chapter IV, *passim*.
- <sup>26</sup> *Flight Out of Time*, p. 71.
- <sup>27</sup> Steve Reich, liner notes to "Come Out," on *New Sounds in Electronic Music*, Odyssey 32 16 0160.
- <sup>28</sup> Tristan Tzara, *Sept Manifestes Dada* (Paris, 1963), p. 64.
- <sup>29</sup> Henderson, pp. 79-80.
- <sup>30</sup> John Cage, *Empty Words* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1979).
- <sup>31</sup> Douglas Barbour and Stephen Scobie, *The Pirates of Pen's Chance* (Toronto: Coach House, 1981), p. 64.
- <sup>32</sup> Cf. Steve McCaffery, "The Death of the Subject," pp. 63-64: "Language is material and primary and what's experienced is the tension and relationship of letters and letteristic clusters, simultaneously struggling towards, yet refusing to become, significations."
- <sup>33</sup> See also Henderson, p. 127.
- <sup>34</sup> Quoted in Zurbrugg, p. 63.
- <sup>35</sup> Tom Johnson, "Secret Songs," in *Text-Sound Texts*, pp. 168-71.

# ABSTRACTION

- <sup>36</sup> The material in the next few paragraphs is recapitulated from my earlier essay, "I Dreamed I Saw Hugo Ball: bpNichol, Dada and Sound Poetry," *Boundary 2*, 3, no. 1 (Fall 1974), 213-26.
- <sup>37</sup> Quoted in Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: a History* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1969), pp. 44, 130.
- <sup>38</sup> Markov, p. 127.
- <sup>39</sup> Markov, pp. 302-03.
- <sup>40</sup> Quoted in Markov, p. 374.
- <sup>41</sup> Quoted in Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (New York: Wittenborn, 1951), p. 397.
- <sup>42</sup> See *Text-Sound Texts*, p. 15: "The first exclusionary distinction then is that words that have intentional pitches, or melodies, are not text-sound art but *song*."
- <sup>43</sup> See Henderson, p. 82: "Because of the multivalent manner in which radical poetics perceives the relation of word to world, the writer's function is to maximize the precipices, the bridgeless gorges, and the unfordable rivers, all the mysterious topology of syntax and language the reader must confront."
- <sup>44</sup> *Sound Poetry: a Catalogue*, p. 10. In relation to this and the next quotation, I must acknowledge a certain irony in quoting McCaffery, who does not do a great deal of tape work, in support of tape, and Hanson, who is best known for his work in tape, against it.
- <sup>45</sup> *Sound Poetry: a Catalogue*, p. 47.
- <sup>46</sup> *Sound Poetry: a Catalogue*, p. 53.
- <sup>47</sup> Steve McCaffery, "For a poetry of blood," manifesto issued in 1970, distributed by the author.
- <sup>48</sup> *Sound Poetry: a Catalogue*, p. 72.
- <sup>49</sup> *Sound Poetry: a Catalogue*, pp. 35-36.
- <sup>50</sup> Henderson distinguishes between "primitivism" and "the truly primitive," and concludes that "Our attempts at returning to what we consider primitive are doomed to be parodies" (pp. 110-11).

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# 'THE WIND AND THE SNOW'

*Douglas Barbour*

i

sunchilld  
          lake a white expanse  
moving  
          the snow  
streams  
sideways below  
over crust  
of / dunes of  
  
white      (snow)  
  
blowing

ii

'wind of madness'  
  
a thot blown  
chill thru chinks of wall  
  
that frozen   outside  
moving inside  
  
here   & the furnace  
failing  
to hold it out  
  
that wind

iii

snow blows  
to the head   the world  
bled white  
          threads of  
strife   rife  
with wind lashing the lake ghostly

POEM

what shifting  
there below

'windblown'

that snow

iv

i see

'solar wind' or  
a vision of cosmos

'galaxies like grains of sand'  
blown out there

it traverses centuries  
of white

wind in my ears  
blowing

about &  
far

theres that distance &  
the few lights are  
stars

in the far hills

dark  
ness falls on all

sides for the  
wind/blown

seeds of  
snow

or near inside/  
outside

chinks of (white)

light *swarms*

v

in the trees

surfsound

(my face  
freezing slowly red  
ears hurt)

green waves

(above white in  
substantiality)

windtosst

vi

where language & landspace meet  
flickering  
before the eyes the shift

of grains of windblown  
snow

an utter  
fade

*into*

what opening out  
is all around us

*there*

that white

vii

there

watch it go  
lightly

oh yeah

*there*

that wind  
that snow

## books in review

### NEW TALENTS

JOHN METCALF, ed., *Third Impressions*. Oberon, n.p.

MERNA SUMMERS, *Calling Home*. Oberon, n.p.

KEATH FRASER, *Taking Cover*. Oberon, n.p.

FOR A COUNTRY notoriously deficient in decent magazine outlets for shorter fiction, paying respectable remuneration, it remains a happy wonder that the individual collections and anthologies of short stories continue to appear without abatement as book publishing seasons follow upon one another. It is equally fortuitous that houses of the calibre of Oberon are sufficiently underwritten by the public purse to build their reputations from both the veterans and the promising apprentices of a literary genre which not only seems to suit the Canadian temperament but also to fit the fragmented times in which we live.

Significantly, none of the stories appearing in the three-author collection, *Third Impressions*, appeared first in those few periodicals that pay more than peanuts (Editor Metcalf charitably refers to the primarily campus publications in his interesting introduction, as "literary magazines") and if it were not for the likes of Oberon I suspect they would not appear at all.

But whatever the genesis of publication, our gratitude or our gripes become realities only in terms of our response to the stories themselves. *Third Impressions*, the work of three writers who have never appeared in book form before, is generally competent and occasionally startling. That latter description I unhesitatingly apply to the second of Barry Dempster's three contributions: a tale of a white

man's visit to India with a dying, elderly Indian. In the intensity of evocation, the searing analysis of human conduct on alien soil, this proved one of the most memorable stories it has been my pleasure to read in many years.

In "Dangerous Fish," Barry Dempster makes playful presentation of a magic spell cast on an inhabitant of a small town in (presumably) Ontario. This charming if slight story is surprisingly — considering its powerful predecessor, "The Burial" — couched in unremarkable prose. His final contribution, "Barry's Bay," is concerned with a son's youthful perceptions of adult anguish in the person of his father. A soft melancholy, not to say madness, tints these paragraphs, and again I was convinced that a substantially talented writer is being presented here.

Don Dickinson, the second contributor, belongs more to the routine world of North American genre fiction. His stories are not badly done, indeed, at a certain level, they are quite *well* done, but sometimes the themes are hackneyed, and, as in the case of his "Fighting The Upstream," the work seems stale and repetitive, especially in the light of prison evocations from more assured and practiced pens. On the other hand, the tangy and invigorating resonances of small-town life in his "Kozicki & The Living Dog" also convey a humour which proves welcome antidote from an overdose of the sometimes unduly breathless prose of some of our high-profile recorders of small-town Canadian life who seem so unaware of Sherwood Anderson, who did it all so very well for Ohio, so very long ago.

The final contributor to this anthology, Dave Margoshes, is the weakest writer of the trio — given the extant evidence. What faintly discernible promise informs "Truckee Your Blues Away," and the rest, is ultimately drowned in a sea of formulas. This is "creative writing" at its insufferable, self-conscious worst, when

we can actually perceive the talent stifled from a refusal by the author to risk making a fool of himself and leaping beyond the labels of classroom construction.

Merna Summers' second collection of stories comes some eight years after her impressive *The Skating Party* which, as here in *Calling Home*, centred primarily upon the female experience in rural and small-town Alberta. It is, in fact, a matter of an author loyally clinging to a thoroughly familiar canvas — even though we have moved somewhat from remembered childhood in some of the new tales.

But it is not those regional and traditional constituents which provide the engaging signature of this author. It is her steady insistence on restricting her literary canvas to a very special kind of person: those who normally live undramatic and quiet lives; whose horizons are the immediate facts of life and death, work and play, illness and domestic celebration. In her story, "A Pailful of Patridges," she refers to "people who took risks and squeaked through, and people who played it safe and lost out." The impression one gets is that the distance between the two kinds of folk is not very far.

What in the hands of a less careful and consummate artist might end up as so minuscule an arena for human conduct that characters appear doll-like and the reader grow restless for oxygen, emerges here as powerful female sensibility in total control, spinning eloquent images from the stuff of the commonplace, which live on in the memory as stark ikons of reality. If the tears and laughter of Summers' universe are muted, they are neither less bitter nor joyous for all that.

I have stressed the ubiquity of feminine viewpoint in these stories but the very first tale, "Ronnie So Long At The Fair," is told by a seventeen-year-old boy, in relation to his parents and preparing for his first date. It is a gentle, not highly

original story, but somehow it exercises a special power in that although we are privy to Ron's closest feelings, there is always that sense of a mother's knowingness in the perception of the author as narrator.

Because so often Merna Summers treats of gentle women who repudiate the histrionic and loudly declamatory, the sub-theme of her fictions is frequently along the line of the worm finally turns: "Calling Home" and "City Wedding" being cases in point. But this is in no sense a handicap. *Calling Home* may be a book of largely domestic whispers and quiet longings, but the urgency is as authentic and the art as palpable, for all that.

With Keath Fraser's *Taking Cover* we enter a wholly other world of range, sensibility, and goal, which makes comparison with his fellow Oberon authors not so much odious as silly. We do not pursue the bovine in estimating horses, nor the equine in judging cattle. Quite simply, *Taking Cover* marks the debut of an important new west coast writer who, already in this first volume, suggests a legitimate contender for major international recognition.

The stories are sharply diverse in subject matter and such is the energetic interest in the faculty of language persistent throughout the book, that the very textures of all eight stories are refreshingly divergent, too.

As a sort of foretaste or signpost to Fraser's fixation with the loom of language we have his first story, "Roget's Thesaurus," a brief reconstruction of the old English lexicographer's rumination in his ninety-first year. The very second paragraph embarks with a sentence which remains a presence throughout the 138 pages of this collection: "I fiddled with sounds and significations."

All too easily, for one of this author's erudition and academic background — the Vancouver-born writer did a Ph.D. in

English at London University before returning to Canada to teach for five years at the University of Calgary — the so-called fiddling could have resulted in a lacklustre didacticism, or even the pomposity of a Robertson Davies. But mercifully not so. There are the occasional jarring notes of a strained simile or misuse of metaphor in *Taking Cover*, but these are merely the passing affectations of literary youth and thus not to be lingered over.

The fact is that Fraser emerges here as a natural writer, deeply caring for his personal prose, and not as an English scholar who has taken to fiction rather than crossword puzzles. The substantial "Le Mal de l'Air" is a bitter-sweet distillation of marital relationship — couched in an impressively assured style. Then there is so very little of the neophyte about this author who comes to us fully fledged and almost in total control of both method and goal. Incidentally, Fraser here, as with both Barry Dempster and Don Dickinson in his "The Part He Sees His Country," reminds us afresh that "The Great Canadian Traveller" as a literary idiom has not been exhausted with the likes of Audrey Thomas, Dave Godfrey, and Margaret Laurence.

The laconic economy and quick nudging of specifically Canadian events and references will most certainly assure his story, "Healing," of a perpetual anthology life. And apart from those obvious elements of Canadiana, it is also worthy of wide dissemination for its acrid fidelity to late twentieth-century circumstance and the vivid evocations of Western Canadian living, if for nothing else.

There are stories in this collection — the title story is one of them — which project a viewpoint of arguable dimensions. But even here the writer rather than the polemicist wins through, and the reader is seduced into an appreciative acceptance. And that is artistic power indeed.

DAVID WATMOUGH

## WINGING IT

ALICE MUNRO, *The Moons of Jupiter*. Macmillan, n.p.

A FEW YEARS AGO I came across Munro's "Dulse" somewhat by chance in a copy of *The New Yorker*. As I recall, it was a puzzling experience, and I began to wonder what new shape her work might be taking. I was somewhat apprehensive. There was no question that the story bore the imprint of Munro's style, particularly the unprepared shifts of point of view, the interweaving of several lives, the general sense of abandonment, all skilfully captured by choosing a setting in a guest house on an island in the Bay of Fundy. It had, of course, its little odd sides, in this instance an old man in pursuit of Willa Cather's past. But where, I asked myself, was the word that would edge the story, willy nilly, toward the kind of quirky epiphany so clearly manifest in her earlier fiction, the word that would suggest, as the narrator remarks in "Marrakesh" how "there was in everything something to be discovered"? Perhaps there was none; and I was apprehensive as one would be for any writer who has unquestionably reached the mastery of her craft. Would the next step run such risks that one could not predict the outcome? The question is apposite, for there was no doubt in my mind that Munro was capable either of remaining a mere success or of finding some way deeper into the mystery she has chosen to explore. She has chosen neither to abandon what she does so well nor to continue in quite the same vein; and her new collection, *The Moons of Jupiter*, is an achievement that surpasses her previous work, and for one reason: for the former clarity, didactic in its purity, she has substituted a will to surrender to whatever the story might suggest in its own demands to discover itself. Such a change implies a change with regard to Munro's understanding of her art; and



while new narrators no longer radiate with the same wit, it now appears as if the wit belongs wholly to the design of the stories, a design to which both author and reader must yield.

Because Munro has chosen to explore a mystery, she faces more than the usual problems of craft that writers of short stories face: the figure through which the several levels of her fictions connect is at once the vehicle and the obstacle. It was the vehicle so long as the narrator was permitted to appear in control of the narration and to be the object toward which discovery aims. When, as in her recent collection, the story itself is the discovery, then the vehicle becomes obtrusive in a competitive way. What happens is that the figure, particularly some revelatory metaphor, is dropped. To drop what is often perceived as the mark of the short story requires incredible assurance, for it means that one must surrender to something beyond skill. That Munro has been aware of the risk — that something must follow upon skill — has been apparent at least since the concluding story of *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, in which the narrator, a relatively clear autobiographical persona, observes of her mother that "she has stuck to me as close as ever and refused to fall away, and I could go on, and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same." It is that act of surrender that gives her new stories their power: they adhere not so much because of the narrator's telling, but because of the author's persistent yielding to what the story is telling her. So far as I am aware, Munro's method is not one that "works a story up," but rather one that pares away to what can minimally remain and still survive the pressures of its implications. This means that the burden of the stories is borne by the material gaps on the page as well as by the concession to multiple

focus, while staying within the limits of the traditional bounds of the form.

Thus, if one must speak of a special kind of loss, the loss of a somewhat obtrusive narrator impelled to identify, to display, often with dazzling grace, her awareness how all action conduces to metaphor, what can one say of what remains? Now that the narrator finds herself on a par with other characters in the story, suddenly characters that formerly appeared peripheral, those marvelous gestures that could be tossed off because they were needed for discovery, what were once hardly more than rhetorical figures are now indispensable in themselves. Such are David and Kimberly in "Labor Day Dinner," Albert's wife and sister-in-law in "The Visitors," the wonderful infiltration that Kay makes in "Bardon Bus." A whole story, "Pure," is dedicated to such a figure. Readers of Munro will not be surprised by figures like these; but what is new is their gain in definition that follows upon the narrator's self-effacement. Where they were once drawn with whim, sympathy, and even a slight condescension, subsumed as they were by the narrator's more privileged position, they now appear with an overwhelming gust of compassion. Consider the wonderful, epiphanic conclusion of *Lives of Girls and Women*, when Bobby Sheriff did "the only special thing he ever did for me" and danced "like a plump ballerina." The narrator's comment on the dance, no matter how adolescent and how appropriate to the narrative, implies the sense of the old style in high relief: "People's wishes, and their other offerings, were what I took then naturally, a bit distractedly, as if they were never anything more than my due." That this is a tendency, focusing either the narrator in first person or some central protagonist, would be difficult to deny; and it inheres in Munro's understanding that figures of fiction are not

symbols but metaphors of identity whose enactment is in the telling, in how the story sets forth to find Del or Rose or whatever other masks "I" would choose.

I have said that this new collection is characterized by Munro's willingness to yield to the demands of the story, and I am aware how close this borders upon cant. I want, however, to emphasize the apparent lack of focus in *The Moons of Jupiter*, for it is this lack, the frequent absence of protagonist or guiding narrator, that allows her text to emerge polyphonically; and the absence of that particular pressure allows one to slip from the object of discovery to the process of discovery itself. This shift of perception is one that enhances the author at the narrator's expense, and we are almost allowed to see how the author goes about the assembling of sequences, almost permitted to know when a character will enter and for what reason. I say "almost," for part of the delicacy of Munro's art is the pressure it puts upon the traditional short story without becoming overwhelmed by post-structural play. Munro never seems to refine her art without first earning title to the refinement: to be merely new would not seem sufficient. But the effect of her gradual move away from emphasizing ends and endings is such as to make of her fiction a meditation both upon her craft and the life within which it dwells, a life whose language is honed and loved well. One thinks of the late essays of Montaigne when whoever "I" signifies is drawn inevitably into its text, its shape bent to fit whatever shape its fiction assumes. I want to mention "Dulse" again as a story of such capability, and "Bardon Bus" and the exquisitely wrought "Labor Day Dinner," its voices continually drifting into minds and through the air of windows. And how do the ephemeral sequences of "Hard-Luck Stories" cohere? Simply because of apparently shared themes, or because of

their quality of being so accurate — I almost said "classic" — that their ending is only arbitrary? And they do not end, for their telling is only an occasion for further meditation, further unknowing. As the narrator observes of one of the listeners, "Something unresolved could become permanent. I could be always bent on knowing, and always in the dark, about what was important to him, and what was not."

It has become a commonplace in the criticism of Alice Munro to speak of her as always suspended between the conventions of fiction and confession. The change that these stories witness, I would suggest, no longer permits such a distinction and for what may appear a paradoxical reason. The mark of a documentary (or confession) is its reliance upon artifice to suggest the real. Fiction, by contrast, requires but art to produce the real. Munro, by abandoning her will to order through identity, her desire to urge pattern into metaphor, by shifting the weight of perception from narrator or protagonist to the endless surprise of plot, has chosen to make us believe that the real yields only to art and not to some unresolved collusion between fiction and quasi-autobiography. What, then, are we to make of the word "connection" that, one way or another, is used in several of these stories, and as a sub-title to the first half of the initial story? The narrator herself of the title-story furnishes an answer, and it is an answer that could be used as a commentary on the technique of the whole collection: "I ask my mind a question. The answer's there, but I can't see all the connections my mind's making to get it." That willingness, however, to distinguish "I" so from "mind," to let "I" articulate while "mind" invisibly and independently connects, is at once magnanimous and decisive, for it has released Munro from the tyranny of "meaning." To choose to explore myster-

ies one must be prepared for certain sacrificial acts, and also incalculable discoveries, where one must be prepared, as Munro remarks in "the Turkey Season," to "Never mind facts. Never mind theories, either." It is to enter a country where contradictions, lacunae, even the unwanted come with the territory. It is the art of the meditation: to lay bare as part of the routine exercises of the spirit.

E. D. BLODGETT

## BLEAK HOUSE

NORA KEELING, *The Driver*. Oberon, \$17.95; pa. \$8.95.

DON BAILEY, *Making Up*. Oberon, \$15.95.

GEORGE MCWHIRTER, *God's Eye*. Oberon, \$15.95; pa. \$7.95.

THE SOPHISTICATED STORY, these days, has little regard for narrative, very little use for plot. Sometimes one misses this old-fashioned element. Implication, innuendo, and the endless ironies of human relations can pall. If these collections fail to fully satisfy, it may be for this reason.

Nora Keeling's work is strong and acrid. She writes with a Swiftian distaste for life-in-the-flesh. Whether the characters are engaged in eating, washing, elimination, or sex, our attention is relentlessly directed to the grossness of the bodily functions. Have you forgotten what flesh entails, Keeling coldly enquires? Let me remind you. And she is accurate: painfully, unerringly accurate.

The title story is told by a pregnant woman who miscarries at seven months. The baby is born dead. The narrator's distaste for her husband and his family, with whom they are living, is palpable. Returning from hospital, she must suffer through family meals, and washing rituals. Her husband is circumspect: "one would hear only discreet swishes of water

and a single apologetic rush of it. . . . Hubert was much different, urinating and defecating loudly, splashing wildly in his tub, slamming the toilet seat and singing happily off-key all the while."

Her husband's kiss forces her to focus on his nose, "beaky, with flared nostrils out of which curled several black hairs, like parasitical insects. . . ." The story closes with the narrator's secretive departure from the house and people whom she finds so distasteful.

In "The Bird-Winged Truck Driver," a thirteen-year-old marriage crumples slowly, "deflated, sunk in like a jack-in-the-box." The driver/mechanic who, over these years, has repaired so many household problems is now called upon to service the lonely woman: "It was good, so good, she has yet to come down, his blunt fingers, always knowing where to put themselves, in what manner, which one, how, the red throb, the tip, the cat's breast sound, the honey scent, wild, the square bed . . . and then she, the driver now herself . . . the girl could walk on his damp grass, each blade erect and of a hue."

"Armand's Rabbit" is a bitter little tale of broken marriages, lust, and boredom. Again, the time spans more than a decade. On a holiday in Paris with her husband, Catharine discovers her lover from her student days. At the end, it remains unclear whether or not the husband will tolerate the affair: "She supposed that she would go back with them all whenever they were ready to go." Catharine is strangely passive with regard to husband and children; lust seems the only reality. Keeling writes well, but the aftertaste from these stories is unpleasant.

*Making Up*, Don Bailey's second book in two years, is a series of semi-connected stories in which some of the basic characters recur. The first narrator, a single parent with a three-year-old son, calls himself a very ordinary man. The prose,

deceptively simple, is clear and finely balanced: "Apparently even as a lover I was aimless. I didn't seem to care about making a career. She said I was a nickel-and-dimer. I preferred to think of myself as a dreamer. Apparently it boiled down to the same thing."

Bailey's characters are loners, suspicious of love, wary of commitments after harsh experiences. But they are also scrappers, ready to fight for another chance, "beginning to make up a new dream." The title image catches the muted optimism of Bailey's typical protagonist and of the collection as a whole. The pun is a nice one. "Making out" is adolescent; "making up" suggests the activity of the artist, the lover, the dreamer.

George McWhirter has made a name as a poet with collections such as *Catalan Poems*, *Queen of the Sea*, and *The Island Man*. *God's Eye* is a poet's prose, evocative and sensuous. Set in Mexico, these stories expertly conjure up that country of sun:

God had transferred his face to Mexico. He let it shine in Morelos in the hallowed months of December to February. The tall grass turned to burnished straw, as if forged directly from the sunlight and dropped down from heaven as beautifully and unmistakably as rain. . . . He had watched the cattle and birds being drawn to lagoons to drink; the birds spinning in the webbed sky, dangling diamond black and angel white in the sticky threads. Released, they retreated, lifted elastically into the sky again.

McWhirter's people find themselves in tenuous relationships and ironic situations. "Nobody's Notebook" blends a lover's triangle of three males with a spy intrigue. An italicized refrain pulses through the notebook jottings: "He loves me, he loves me not; we never love at all." Secure in the knowledge that such a murder is of little interest to either police or press, the Mexican observer murders his American rival: "The readers could fill in the details. They would like that."

In "The Cicada and the Cockroach," the friendship of a young American girl and a Mexican goatherd makes an amusing if sardonic tale. But "Something to Grin At" is black, black humour, illustrating a maxim from an earlier tale: "Mexicans . . . treat people like shit and animals like animals."

I come back to the sense of disappointment with which I began. Is optimism out of fashion, as well as narrative? Bailey is the only writer, of three, to give a nod in these directions. Does fine writing have to be bleak? Obviously not. We have writers such as Laurence, Wiseman, Callaghan, Hood, and Wiebe to reassure us on this score.

PATRICIA MORLEY

## AIMER ET SE CONNAÎTRE

JEAN-FRANÇOIS SOMCYNKY, *Peut-être à Tokyo*. Naaman, n.p.

NADIA GHALEM, *L'Oiseau de fer*. Naaman, n.p.

JEAN-ERIC PARISIEN, *Nadeige*. Naaman, n.p.

TRIPTYQUE DU DESEPOIR, ces trois ouvrages se donnent pour but la quête de l'amour et de la compréhension humains. C'est une quête menée soit à travers le voyage soit à travers l'érotisme ou le rêve hallucinatoire et dont l'aboutissement est la déception et la désillusion.

Les divers décours dont se sert J.-F. Somcynsky dans son recueil de vingt-six contes lui permettent d'explorer l'amour dans une optique érotique. Ses récits respirent la sensualité et la volupté. Tous les sens sont assaillis: on sent la fragrance musquée des femmes, on voit leurs corps sensuels, on entend leurs voix langoureuses. La musique "mystérieuse et charnelle" se lie aussi à cette volupté des sens.

Cependant, cet érotisme nous présente une image négative et parfois violente de

l'amour; liaisons furtives, hommes rapides, viols réguliers; bref, toute la gamme, jusqu'à la décapitation en plein acte sexuel. La tendresse que l'on associe habituellement à l'amour est absente dans la plupart de ces récits. Quoi de plus révélateur que cette phrase du conte allégorique "La Marche des baobabs": "Quand les baobabs s'approchaient, la tendresse cachée au creux de leurs ventres massifs, les autres arbres s'éloignaient." On cherche la richesse que l'amour peut offrir mais on ne trouve que la méfiance, le refus et même la mort: "Je comprenais qu'à travers cette femme splendide, l'aile de la mort m'avait frôlé."

L'amour n'est que déception et illusion, ce qui explique l'importance accordée par l'auteur au rêve. Mais le salut ne s'y trouverait point. Le "grand rêve érotique" de Suzanne dans "Une Semaine de printemps" ne se réalise pas. L'amour, rêve éphémère, est toujours hors de portée. Aimer, comme voyager, donne un sentiment illusoire de liberté: on ne se libère pas de soi-même.

Cependant, le tableau n'est pas totalement négatif. L'auteur semble vouloir dire que l'essentiel entre les êtres humains, c'est le dialogue — il nous faut la communication spirituelle ainsi que corporelle. Les hommes et les femmes se doivent une égale franchise.

En dépit d'un style parfois trop lyrique, Somcynsky nous livre une oeuvre qui brille par sa clarté et par la force de son expression. Des récits réalistes se côtoient à des récits allégoriques, fantastiques et parfois cocasses afin de nous convaincre qu'un nouvel ordre est possible.

Comme Somcynsky, Nadia Ghalem se sert du rêve, de l'aspect hallucinatoire d'une existence dont les contours sont flous. Elle veut souligner l'état éphémère de l'homme; dans ses cinq contes, l'homme est aliéné à la société dans laquelle il se trouve. On cherche le rapprochement, la certitude dans la vie, mais

on ne trouve que le doute, l'impuissance d'agir et la non-appartenance. Dans le premier conte, par exemple, Pascal, l'homme marginal, "se sentait étranger comme tous les métis qui sont chez eux partout et nulle part." D'où la nature schizophrène de l'homme; on a envie "d'être au coeur du monde et de le fuir en même temps." On fuit ses émotions dans le rêve mais ce n'est qu'une échappatoire illusoire — "la chute brutale de l'illusion perdue."

L'homme inadapté à son environnement se voit très bien dans "Le Recommençement," où Mourad, immigrant algérien, se sent aliéné à son pays adoptif, et dans "L'Oiseau de fer," où Jean, jeune garçon indien, se sent déchiré entre deux cultures et sait qu'un jour il devra choisir entre les deux. Ghalem propose une solution pour l'Indien qui ne veut pas perdre ses anciennes coutumes mais qui sait qu'il ne pourra jamais y retourner. Jean saura concilier le métier de pilote avec son héritage d'Indien. Cependant, cette conciliation ne se fait pas. La fin nous apprend que Jean est devenu ouvrier. Son rêve ne s'est pas réalisé. La conclusion pessimiste surprend un peu, vu que les quatre premiers contes nous ont donné une impression plutôt positive. Trois sur quatre se terminent par des points de suspension, laissant ainsi la possibilité de guérison, d'un meilleur monde.

Le style de Ghalem, embelli de nombreuses métaphores, est net, concis et souvent elliptique. Son entrée en matière se fait de façon immédiate et elle ne s'attarde pas sur des détails inutiles. En contrepartie, il y a parfois un certain décousu qui alourdit le rythme de sa prose. Mais cette reproche est mineure et ne mitige nullement l'importance de ce recueil divertissant et instructif.

A la différence des deux premiers recueils, l'oeuvre de J.-E. Parisien est, selon lui, un récit, mais c'est un récit qui résiste à toute définition. D'une part, c'est une

histoire qui décrit les malheurs d'une jeune fille paysanne qui surmonte son sort injuste. Nadeige représente la martyre typique de la classe paysanne qui souffre beaucoup en peinant pour des maîtres bourgeois. Ayant eu un enfant du fils dudit bourgeois, elle se voit obliger d'envoyer le petit chez des parents et, pour subvenir à ses besoins, elle devient prostituée. Trois années passent avant qu'elle ne voie son fils; période pendant laquelle elle fait d'énormes sacrifices pour lui. A la fin, comme par miracle, elle gagne une fortune à la loterie.

Histoire banale? J'en conviens, mais intercalés dans ce récit peu original sont quelques épisodes qui esquissent en parallèle la soi-disant philosophie d'Yves Lamoureux, père de l'enfant de Nadeige. Ces épisodes ne sont rien d'autre qu'un pamphlet sociopolitique de la part de l'auteur. Il utilise une vieille technique — le débat littéraire — afin de véhiculer ses sentiments et opinions personnels. Mais le problème, c'est que cette dialectique est hors-propos; elle interrompt le fil de l'histoire et, à vrai dire, nous fatigue par la manière verbeuse, vague et pédante dont elle est présentée.

En effet, le défaut le plus sérieux chez Parisien est que son écriture est péniblement lourde. Que dire des phrases ampoulées comme "le crépuscule pubère," "autant de spectacles auxquels se refusent mes orbites exaspérées" et des clichés comme "condamnés à fouiller le fond des verres de clairin à la recherche de leur identité perdue."

En outre, les deux sociétés qu'il décrit — bourgeoise et paysanne — sont trop unidimensionnelles. D'une part, il y a la bonne paysanne souffrante mais tenace, remplie d'amour mais répudiée et finalement récompensée pour son "bon coeur," et, d'autre part, le réquisitoire véhément dressé contre la bourgeoisie haïtienne, personnifiée par Yves Lamoureux (surnom ironique!), homme arrogant, froid

et calculateur; homme sans coeur qui abuse des sentiments de Nadeige. Ces deux portraits sont trop transparents et se réduisent à des stéréotypes flagrants.

En somme, une structure plus cohérente et un style plus clair et plus précis auraient fait de *Nadeige* un récit passionnant qui nous aurait brossé un tableau fascinant d'une société troublée. Nous ne pouvons que regretter ce qui aurait pu être.

M. BENSON

## FANTASY FOUR

VIRGIL BURNETT, *Skiamachia*. Porcupine's Quill, \$4.95.

FRANCES DUNCAN, *Dragonhunt*. Women's Press, \$5.95.

JOHN ROBERT COLOMBO, *Years of Light: A Celebration of Leslie A. Croutch*. Hounslow, \$9.95.

DAVID HELWIG, *The King's Evil*. Oberon, n.p.

ALL OF THESE WORKS are in some way associated with fantasy. But very different aspects of fantasy. And with very different results.

One might call *Years of Light* a hobby-horse book. Colombo has produced a number of volumes on Canadian science fiction and this is one more, on Canada's greatest sf fan. Colombo's brief history of Canadian fandom is interesting but extended quotations from Croutch's writing suggest that his neglect is not unwarranted. I don't care what obscure writers Colombo wishes to read, I just don't think he should inflict them on the rest of us. This is especially the case when some of the excerpts are sub-Reader's Digest jokes and sexist and anti-welfare comments of the sort heard in every neighbourhood bar.

The one aspect of more general interest, which Colombo mentions only briefly, is the comparison which can be made between the "fanzines" (fan magazines)

and the literary little magazines. Both are produced cheaply, have very small circulations and are often decidedly idiosyncratic. Yet most of us would have quite a bit of respect for Louis Dudek's *Delta* and not much for Croutch's *Light*. The questionable political diatribes of the former are eccentric, those of the latter are nutty. Is this, as fans would claim, just another example of the bias of the mundane? (a word which sf fandom uses with venom).

Burnett's book is yet another reworking of classical myths. The prose is banal and superficial and completely lacking in the dark undercurrents of the illustrations which accompany it. To me the drawings are a bit too redolent of the Black Sabbath style poster art we all suffered through some years ago but Burnett is obviously a fine draughtsman. A certain taste will find his pictures attractive but he should keep his pens away from words.

A too unrestrained imagination is the problem with Duncan. I can understand her interest in updating the story of St. George and localizing it in British Columbia. As one might expect given the publisher, Duncan links it to a feminist search for identity. After all, hasn't everyone been telling us that all myth is just such a reflection of the search for self?

Duncan employs a variety of contemporary feminist issues and images in shaping her story. The central character, Bernice Carswell, a reclusive eccentric, has a series of dreams, many associated with TV. Among the subjects which arise in the dreams are ravished maidens, assault on women, rape, pregnancy, the anti-war movement, ecology, weddings, an old folk's home and girl guides. In the main action of the book, Bernice's journey with the septuagenarian St. George, there are a number of similar elements. For example, Bernice digs up clams, that old symbol of female sexuality, but instead of eating them she gives them a "gift," a



## A.M. Klein: Short Stories

*Edited by M.W. Steinberg*

A vibrant collection of little-known short fiction by the author of the remarkable poetic novel *The Second Scroll*. Here are stories of Jewish life focusing on legends, festivals and ceremonies, well-known character types, and familiar aspects of life in the home, in the synagogue, and on the streets. Also included are social and political satire and parodies of literary debates and the detective story. Together they form an invaluable addition to the canon of Klein's works. (Collected Works of A.M. Klein) \$35.00 cloth, \$14.50 paper

University of  
Toronto Press

plastic pearl, and then replaces them. Thus a woman places a seed but without destruction. At the end of the novel, when they do become a meal there is little subtlety in the reference to clam as "holy water."

Perhaps all these ideas could have been yoked together into something coherent and meaningful but Duncan hasn't done it. It makes me think of that old saw, "Write about what you know." I think a corollary of this for writers of fantasy is that they must make it seem as though their subject is as familiar to them as Alice Munro's small-town Ontario is to her. They cannot, as Duncan seems to have done, assume that just creating weirdness is enough. At the end of the novel, she says of Bernice, "Yet she cannot destroy George for to destroy a myth destroys the mind, while to renew a myth, to harbour it, to imbue it with a personal significance, benefits the mind — indeed, benefits all minds which the myth will ever touch." One is left with no question as to what Duncan meant to do. That she has not done it should not deny her some credit for grasping at such an unreachable Grail.

I am tempted to say much the same about David Helwig's *The King's Evil*, but this is a reach by much a more sophisticated arm. Also, the myth is a bit more novel and a bit less mythic. Helwig's hero is not a wandering peasant everywoman but a plain overweight CBC radio producer, who has the personal problem of the desertion and then death of his lover and the professional problem of an obsession with history at a time when the "New Men," hotshots with their ear to a rocking contemporary pulse, have taken over.

The hero has taken a leave of absence to gain some clarity in his life. He is secluded in a colonial farmhouse, built by United Empire Loyalists. He finds a book which seems to have belonged to

Charles I, who claimed the God-given ability to cure, by royal touch, the king's evil, scrofula. Did Charles escape the scaffold and come to North America? Did an imposter die in his place?

The hero considers writing a radio documentary which tells the tale. But he has recently been working on a study of art forgery. And his graduate thesis was *Gods in Exile: A Study of the Iconography of Monarchy*. And the first owner of the house, a possible descendant of King Charles, was the faithless lover of a black slave. And the present owner of the historical records of the house is a British aristocrat who is pretending to be her deceased brother, Lord Firebrace, because she was discarded by a later descendant who has the same name as the first owner of the house.

And more. All in one hundred and thirty pages. I suppose such a jumble could work in such a brief space but I don't see how. It certainly hasn't in Helwig's case. This is especially irritating because individual elements are often quite good. The best I think are a very frightening scene in which the hero gets caught in the basement of the house and, later, the strange wispy conversations with the "Lord."

But in both cases Helwig takes the time to develop his material. And both episodes are essentially descriptive. When the novel turns to philosophical dilemma or almost Leonard Cohen-like explorations of a chaotic mind it is far less satisfying.

I suspect that many readers of this novel will just discard it as a lot of imagination with no place to go. Which is too bad. I personally wish I was seeing it as an editor rather than a reviewer. At double the length, with the stream-of-consciousness elements and a few other bits deleted, it could be a gem. The resonance of Helwig's ideas on radio, art, the U.E.L., history, etc., should have created



a novel on the level of *The Wars* or *Fifth Business*. As it is, it scrapes in just a few steps higher than *Dragonhunt*.

TERRY GOLDIE

## NO PLACE LIKE

BETTY CLARKSON, *Tom, David, and the Pirates*. Borealis, \$8.95.

JANICE COWAN, *The Secret of Ivy Lea*. Borealis, \$15.95; pa. \$7.95.

NELL HANNA, *Where the Heart Is*. Borealis, \$7.95.

FINDING A NEW HOME, retaining or returning to an old one, is the focus of these three fine children's books, set (respectively) in seventeenth-century Newfoundland, contemporary southeastern Ontario, and turn-of-the-century Russia and Alberta.

Betty Clarkson's *Tom, David, and the Pirates*, written for the eight- to twelve-year-old reader, is an entertaining adventure story about two boys who leave Plymouth with their fathers in 1672 on a voyage to St. John's. There they pass the fishing season and winter, finally sailing home the next year. The voyage out and fishing season provide a larger structure for an episodic plot which includes a storm at sea, escape from pirates by cover of fog, a near capture by Indians in Newfoundland, and the boys' final triumph: during their stint as sentries, they spot and help to disperse by cannon a pirate attack on the colony. This book admirably combines these adventures with a great deal of "educational" material — on the Indian Skull Dance, whaling, drying cod, egg-gathering from the now extinct Great Auks — without any irritating shift of gears from narrative to historical detail. The young reader will feel, along with Tom and David, the tug of homesickness for their return trip to England, balanced by the fascination of their life in St. John's — epitomized in the bustle of fish-

ing boats, the fishermen's shouts in different languages, the smell of rotten fish, and the scream of the gulls.

Janice Cowan's *The Secret of Ivy Lea*, also written for children ages eight to twelve, similarly plays on the theme of "home" with an intriguing plot set in the Kingston and Thousand Islands area. The home in question is the Grahams' family cottage, to be either kept or sold after their grandmother's death. As if the rumour, and some evidence, of the cottage's being haunted (*who* cut the grass before their arrival?) were not mysterious enough, the adventuresome children happen upon a few smugglers using the cottage's twin islands as a base. They also discover Martin, an escaped German prisoner-of-war who has been in hiding on the second island, with their grandmother's blessing, since World War II. Although captured by the smugglers, the children and Martin contrive their own rescue and the cottage of Ivy Lea remains in the family, with Martin as no-longer-incognito custodian. The book excels as adventure story, but adds to the danger and unexpected turns of its plot the portrayal of a very close and fun-loving family whose affection for one another and family ties to Ivy Lea provide emotional depth to fast-paced adventure in woods and on water.

In *Where the Heart Is*, written for the younger teen reader, Nell Hanna fictionalizes the life of her father Nick, born in the Ukraine in the late nineteenth century. As a boy in 1894, Nick accompanies his family on their migration to a homestead in Alberta. There he eventually sets up a place of his own, marries, and has a family. Scenes of the joy of young married life alternate with tragedy when Nick's oldest son dies of exposure, lost in a hailstorm, and his wife is struck down by influenza after World War I. The last chapters of the book show Nick as grandfather, finally wondering whether or not

his second son will survive the Second World War as a flyer. While the print is regrettably small in this book, the author's prose is rich in concretely descriptive vignettes of rural life; the deep sentiment of the book's many episodes, moreover, is never maudlin. Indeed, the counterpoint of joy and sorrow in Nick's fortunes, and those of his siblings which frame the narrative, plays above the deeper ground-bass of the family's emotional transition from their Russian to their Canadian home. This theme and its emotional resonance bind the episodes together as Nick and his loved ones discover that their new home is "where the heart is." For even as Nick, numb with lonely grief, mourns his wife at her fresh grave, his thoughts turn to his adopted country:

This special land of life. It had given him so much and taken so much from him. Why need it always be the thing he needed and treasured above all others that he had to lose? The frozen clods of clay fell loud upon the casket and he turned to go away. The glare of the snow beneath the afternoon sun almost blinded him. He lifted his face to the blue of the eastern sky, soothing blue. From it and from somewhere out of the distant past he heard someone say with firm conviction,

"Thou land of hope . . ."

MURRAY J. EVANS

## TENUOUS PAST, OPEN FUTURE

*The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*, chosen and with an Introduction by Margaret Atwood. Oxford, \$19.95.

WHEN A. J. M. SMITH compiled the first important (one can equally justly use the word "great") anthologies of the work of poets in our country, the *Book of Canadian Poetry* and the *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*, he was doing much more than picking a collection of good or even significant poems. He was discover-

ing and charting the lines of a tradition, establishing a canon, and in the process laying the foundations for a mature critical approach to Canadian poetry, especially Canadian poetry in English. Smith's classic collection had been out of print for years when Oxford University Press invited Margaret Atwood to repeat Smith's task a generation afterwards by preparing a *New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* for the 1980's. A fine poet, an acute critic, a scholar respectful of the past as well as sensitive to contemporary trends, Atwood seemed from the beginning an excellent choice for the task, and, grudging though one may here and there be about choices that conflict with one's own preferences, she has put together a collection that stands well beside its predecessors, both because of its good organization and because of the richer resources from which she has been able to select.

Atwood's "Introduction" is a modest and sensible discussion of the problems involved in selecting an anthology out of a young tradition, most of whose notable practitioners are still alive and even — many of them — in the full flow of their creativity. It is true, as she says, that "All cultures are, to some extent, retrospective: we see where we are and where we're going partly because of where we've been." But it is also true that in the case of a culture like ours, an anthology to be meaningful and helpful must be "not only gathered from the past but aimed towards the future." We do not have the vast body of ancient accomplishment out of which an English anthologist like Helen Gardner could construct her *New Oxford Book of English Verse* and virtually ignore what had been going on in poetry for the twenty years before the book's publication. Canadian poetry is a tradition that still, even in the 1980's, is in the process of becoming, and so every significant anthology of it must be greatly different from its predecessor.

Atwood's *New Oxford Book* is somewhat longer than Smith's, and the difference is actually greater than it initially seems since, unlike her predecessor, she includes no verse in French, disarmingly pleading her ignorance as well as considerations of space. *The New Oxford* includes 121 poets against the 71 English poets whom Smith presented in 1960. Even here, the difference is magnified by the fact that no fewer than 20 poets whom Smith included are left out of the *New Oxford*, and since these include names like Leo Kennedy, L. A. Mackay, A. G. Bailey, and Roy Daniells, which still carried a great deal of weight in the early 1960's, we are clearly observing a refining of critical perception that is due more to a general shift in taste, a beginning of the process of winnowing by posterity, than to Atwood's personal preferences, though these have played a great part in many of the selections.

Of course, any anthology embracing a succession that, however tenuously, stretches nearly four centuries from Robert Hayman in Newfoundland down to the present, is bound to build itself around a nucleus of poems that have stood the wearing of time ("old chestnuts" as Atwood calls them), and there are plenty of these in the early pages of the *New Oxford* — bits from *The Emigrant* and *The Rising Village*, "Tantramar Revisited" and "Low Tide at Grand Pré," "The Canadian Authors Meet" and "The Lonely Land" and "David." But usually, when Atwood necessarily represents a well-known poet by one or two familiar pieces, she will also pick something that evokes an unfamiliar aspect of his work.

This process is intensified as time goes on and Atwood deals with living and younger poets. Two of the poets represented in the anthology remarked to me that they had been surprised and even at first disconcerted by the pieces she put together to represent them, but afterwards

recognized that while avoiding their showier pieces she had in fact picked other less obvious examples that, read together, gave a new, yet faithful, view of their poetic personae.

More than half the poets in the *New Oxford* — 70 to be exact — were not present in Smith's 1960 volume, and though these include Pauline Johnson and Robert W. Service (whom Atwood has somewhat quirkily rescued from deserved oblivion), almost all are poets whose first significant work was done after 1960, the generation that begins with Purdy and Nowlan, Acorn and Lane, and includes, of course, Atwood herself. And perhaps the most significant aspect of the collection, which makes it so faithful a reflection of the state of becoming in which Canadian poetry still functions, is that it reaches out to the younger poets whose promise may justify such an act of faith, such as Roo Boorson and Sharon Thesen and Mary di Michele, new names to most of us, their poems dated from the 1980's and touched with freshness. Their future is open, unpredictable, but so, this book truthfully exemplifies, is that of Canadian poetry itself.

ANTHONY APPENZELL

## AT HOME AT HOME

DAVID SOLWAY, *Selected Poems*. Signal Editions, \$6.95.

DAVID SOLWAY, *The Mulberry Men*. Signal Editions, \$4.95.

IN ONE OF THE TWO formal apologies ("Apologia," "Apologia Pro Vita Sua") in his *Selected Poems*, David Solway, an unnecessarily apologetic poet, writes,

I study that austerity  
the profligate assault,  
And I must fast with Emily  
before I feast with Walt.

This laudable if too self-deprecatory program is largely fulfilled by the modest,

ironic, generally well-behaved, indeed accomplished poems in these two books. It is refreshing amid so many windy would-be Whitmans to come upon work so beautifully and unpretentiously circumscribed, and so agreeably readable. Of course Solway's talent, temper, and technique are very different from Dickinson's, whom he would presumably not include among his "New England Poets":

They are a peculiar species, never grow  
extinct,  
regulate their number, control admission to  
the race.  
Though their minds travel freely like  
airplane executives  
they are most at home at home.

(But should not that be "free"? Occasional such grammatical slips, like the confusion about the past of "lay" in "The Reason" — admittedly a vernacularly vexed and vexatious verb — are surprising in so suave and polished a poet.) If she was an ecstatic and expert, if slapdash mistress of common metre, he is a wry and competent versifier, worldly where she is unworldly, the conjunction "before" in the first quatrain quoted above betraying a manly refusal to relinquish altogether ambitions to greater sweep and wider reference, as in some of his less successful poems, such as the "Requiem" for another Whitman. Apart from a rather Durrellesque preoccupation with Greece, resulting in some of his best ("Pastoral," "The Trees") as well as some of his weakest efforts ("Island Report," "Patmos"), Solway is, unlike the mentally adventuresome homebody of Amherst, himself "most at home at home":

some chess, a walk, and the half-read book  
the joyous indefinable of speech,  
the habit of loving, the accustomed look,  
and days lived gladly for the sake of each.  
(*"I Call the Heart"*)

No poet should be judged by his subject matter, though that forms the basis for

too much critical judgment as well as perhaps inescapable approval or aversion. Solway's subjects are various, and sometimes ingenious, yet thematically unified enough to give a convincing impression of an attractive personality. Rarely does he slide into a silly machismo ("Fragment," "For Robert Graves") that seems, in so decent and intelligent a poet, more embarrassing than offensive.

Pleasantly varied as they are, the poems are difficult to describe, perhaps because they are so easy to read. Knowing that "Language is the longest wall in the world, and the strongest" ("On Learning Greek"), the poet has constructed a series of linguistic windows for our amusement and occasional instruction. The metrical conventions here seem casual and, as fully mastered forms should, effortless, even natural. Solway's language, quiet and colloquial, is a medium and not, like that of so many modern masters and disasters, a topic or an end in itself. Apt and decorous, the exact — and I do mean exact — phrasing of these sometimes moving poems is indispensable to our pleasure; even at their most anecdotal or opinionated, they could not be paraphrased without great loss. If David Solway's craft does not provoke the sort of physiological response that Emily Dickinson, among others, said poetry should — and which to my knowledge no Canadian poem to date has done — it affords a comfortable enjoyment far from easy to obtain or to produce these days, its effect less like Dickinson than, say, Walter Savage Landor:

Heat and light may go their separate ways.  
Here, where I live, by the coast, the seawind  
Cools the mind and cleans the innocent air.  
Light skips like stones off water, ricochets  
from tree to tree, so light and unconfined  
you'd swear that you see angels everywhere.

This is writing of a very high order, all the more impressive for being so far from flashy. Those who would imitate it, and

that would not be easy, should consult the precepts so amusingly set forth in "Lampman Among the Moderns."

Nothing, as anyone who has tried to write it or teach others to, will know, is more difficult than comic or light verse. In *The Mulberry Man* David Solway largely succeeds in this demanding, and delicate, genre, not so remote after all from some of the less solemn or bitter moments in his *Selected Poems*. He has avoided the tweeness that seems to afflict most poems written for children, through a real sympathy with childish concerns (e.g., "Speculations of a Five Year Old Boy on his Daily Walk Down to the Beach," "Poem to My Sons," "Poltergeists," "Report to the Teacher: What My Sons Do in Greece"). And if occasional imperfect rhymes (so much more discordant in "light" than in "heavy" verse, of the sort so common in popular music) offend my ear, perhaps they would not bother a modern child.

DARYL HINE

## NEXUS & BIRNEY

Nexus, WRC 1-2258, 59, n.p.

EARLE BIRNEY HAS ALWAYS been an innovator, experimenting with the forms of poetry, extending language beyond the limits of typescript into the shapes of concrete poetry and beyond the limits of the printed page into performance. His recordings with the musical group Nexus continue that experimentation.

For all but one poem on volume one, the musical accompaniment has been improvised, implying that a possible multiplicity of interpretations may be aroused by any single arrangement of words, yet in practice Nexus creates the same eerie atmosphere for each of Birney's nature poems. Initially exciting, these improvisations grow tedious as they become pre-

dictable. One becomes grateful for the straight readings, such as "Vancouver Lights," that are unaccompanied. In contrast to the serious awe that nature seems to inspire, poetry itself is accorded much less reverence. The opening poem "Poet-tree" establishes the spirit of playful fun that characterizes this album and Birney's work as a whole. This sense of play emerges most successfully in the clever parody "Twenty-third Psalm," where the swelling church music adds greatly to the poem's satiric point. Here is one of the few instances where the sound effects unambiguously complement the poetry. They also work well in reinforcing the homespun humour and references to popular songs in "McSimpton's annual boat excursion to Nanaimo." The scripted "Never Blush to Dream," however, makes Birney sound like an aged Leonard Cohen, trying to sing a ballad in an off-key voice, subordinating meaning to an inappropriate tune. These poems work best when the words remain dominant.

This album should work well as a teaching tool. Its range and variety are satisfying. The tone fluctuates from the magical evocation of "Alaska Passage" through the elevated seriousness of "Vancouver Lights" to the insobriety of "McSimpton's annual boat excursion" (all from the first side, "Pacific Door") to explore the numerous shades of wonder expressed by the lover on the second side, "Love and All." And as usual with Birney, there are a multiplicity of voices: McSimpton, the Pacific ocean, the bourgeois traveller, the cynical American, the lover, the aging poet, the devil himself. My first year students dismissed one of the most accomplished of these collaborations — "Alaska Passage" — as mere sixties nostalgia, yet fourth-year students found it stimulating. It succeeded in sparking their own creativity and helped them to see how poetry might interact with other dimensions of their lives.

After listening to this album, I have mixed feelings about the value of such collaboration. The fixed readings the musical accompaniment assigns each poem restrict the openness of individual interpretation that the poetry retains on the page. Yet if they help students begin to hear poetry as living art, their purpose will have been served. Taken in the spirit of play in which this album is offered, it remains a delightful testimonial to the adaptability of poetry.

DIANA BRYDON

## TOWARDS POETRY

SHAUNT BASMAJIAN, *Surplus Waste and Other Poems*. Unfinished Monument Press, n.p.

ROBERT CLAYTON CASTO, *The Arrivals*. Studio Press, n.p.

DON COLES, *The Prinzhorn Collection*. Macmillan, \$7.95.

GARRY RADDYSH, *White Noise*. Thistledown, \$16.00; pa. \$7.95.

WHILE POVERTY OF IMAGINATION and language, or private self-indulgence, characterizes some of this work, we can rejoice in the appearance of more than one writer with accomplished and accessible poetic powers.

*Surplus Waste and Other Poems* by Shaunt Basmajian is, unfortunately, all too aptly titled. Basmajian, a Toronto poet, writes of urban despair, the derelict and disillusioned, and of his own memories of unrequited love. His poems have the ring of sincerity, apparently rooted in his autobiographical experiences as an unemployed part-time poet/sometime cab driver. Too often, however, the realism becomes simply commonplace, the themes trite and the techniques uninspiring. His diction is rather impoverished and unpoetic at times, and his errors in syntax and metaphor seem less like poetic licence than problems with the language. He also

has a habit of ending many poems with a repetition of their first lines — refrains that are not resolutions but evasions. His best poems have a strong, simple directness:

when the seasons change  
and the years wither away  
one by one and old age  
finds him like a forgotten  
pair of slippers left inside  
a closet

But too many seem to echo this complaint:

the part time poet  
seems to always have  
something to write about  
but just can't put it on paper

The distinctive feature about Garry Raddysh's second collection of poetry, *White Noise*, is the amount of white paper interspersed among the short lyrics. Raddysh, a Saskatchewan native and "prairie poet," does not on the whole portray a particularized prairie landscape, for his most common themes replay a familiar litany of male-female relationships: betrayal and boredom, lies and misunderstandings, self-seeking and mutual destruction. He has invented some novel images and poignant descriptions to capture the characters and their relationships: "the killing of souls / and brief resuscitations / many rumours / of love." But my final impression of the book is one of frustration. There are too many silences and ellipses, too many abstract references and private meanings — too much white space and white noise for communication:

the red dawn  
is a warning  
nothing  
I have said  
touches  
the root of man

*The Arrivals* is the second book of poetry from Robert Clayton Casto, an American-born writer now living in To-

ronto. In this collection he reflects on contemporary experience, often in specifically American settings, with great versatility and richness. Through a range of characterizations, evoked with wit and authenticity, he comments on social injustice and particularly on the middle-class materialism that is insensitive to the drama and poetry of life. Casto creates the tin flute-player, the Chinese concubines, the old man in the Old Folks Home, the political candidate, Zamira the nautchgirl, frustrated Miss Tillie, the black man at Sauer Beach, and the Jewess of Pinsk — all with precise description and powerful imagery, in moods from pathos to irony to eroticism. He displays versatility in form, too. Several of his lyrics are unusually long; almost all have a narrative element. His use of rhyme and metre is effective, although the way he splits words into syllables can be a distracting mannerism. Although some poems seem deliberately obscure or too cleverly cute, the majority in this collection illuminate the real world with imaginative meaning:

I think that death is a clotting a slow  
coagulation  
and the underground fires they burgeon they  
scatter they swallow  
us up! They have set aside death.

With the acclaim that has followed the publication of Don Coles' third book, *The Prinzhorn Collection*, his editors can no longer describe him as "the best unknown poet in the country." Coles, who teaches at York University, spent twelve years of his youth travelling in Europe; many of the poems in this collection draw affectionately on those memories. He deliberately writes poetry which is accessible and contemplative, rather than esoteric or self-indulgent. Most of his themes deal with the intersection of the personal and historic pasts, the passage of time and the mutability of life.

The title poem refers to "a collection of letters, journals and drawings made by the inmates of a mental institution near Munich during the late nineteenth century and preserved by Dr. Hans Prinzhorn." The poem, written in the form of a letter, has a chummy, personal voice which contrasts ironically with the revelations of horror and pathos. Direct quotations, "the uncontested rhythms of truth," are framed by metaphysical comments on human evil and despair:

One would not wish him that,  
God knows. Indeed, on humanitarian  
Grounds one would not wish God  
That. Though presumably He  
Already has it, never mind what one  
May wish.

The most common mood in this collection is nostalgia for the past. The humane, intelligent voice of the poet recaptures lost places and people with exactness of imagery and description; prosaic events assume epiphanic importance. These "strange little intensities" are linked in memoirs of his childhood and youth, as well as biographical poems on Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Ibsen. Drawing on these memories and writers, and others, he attempts to redeem the past through art ("I Long For People Through Whom the Past . . . in its large lines, continues to be connected with us, related to us"). The most moving poem in the collection is the final cycle, "Landslides," the poet's tribute to his dying mother. These eloquent images of mortality guarantee their own poetic immortality:

Images it was sufficient to reflect on  
Only a little,

The briefest glance  
Towards which may, however,  
Deliver us.

BARBARA PELL



## OF WOMEN, MEN, & MUSES

GUY GERVAIS, *Gravité: Poèmes 1967-1973*. L'Hexagone, \$9.95.

MARIE LABERGE, *Aux Mouvances du temps: Poésie 1961-1971*. Leméac, \$15.00.

JULIE STANTON, *La Nomade*. L'Hexagone, \$6.50.

A MAN, MOTHER EARTH, and his Muse, a woman revealed as no longer girl and not yet quite human, the Muse as avenger of women and judicator of men: these are the triangular constellations of love, life and meaning which structure *Gravité*, *Mouvances*, and *La Nomade*. And the collections themselves form a scalene triangle for the reviewer, in which Julie Stanton's contemporary verse narrative, closer to Marie Laberge than to Guy Gervais, towers over her fellow poets' widely differing voices of the past.

By 1969, date of his fifth book of verse (*Poésie I*), Guy Gervais had settled in that primaevial land of stone and snow and sand which is his habitual domain. There he spent many years, listening to a voice which was dictating to him the first half of the present collection. He then rebelled against the "incarnation mythologique des facultés d'inspiration" ("Avant-propos") he felt he had become, and finally broke through to the true light of "la raison brûlante . . . et . . . tranchante."

Nowhere, alas, not even in "La fleur déchiffrée" or in "Le verbe silence," does reason burn through the mystical mist enveloping the mother-matrix of a frozen *Welterfahrung*. In order to understand time ("j'ouvre mes fleuves devant toi pour connaître le courant de mes années de sang"), space ("quel est ce monde que traduit sous nos yeux le vol d'une colombe"), life ("alors que reste-t-il de nous que reste-t-il quand tu es passée présente avec ton avenir," in "Origine mère"),

and poetry ("Le pouvoir magique des syllabes trahira-t-il un jour son mystère"), perhaps mind, body and soul require more than the relentlessly repetitive evocation (in descending order of frequency) of wings, birds, sails/veils, roses, flowers, sea, sand, dawn, rocks, and trees. Despite

les glaces les magnifiques instances de l'azur  
espoir figé d'un transparent envol au-dessus  
même du gouffre  
cette douce tension des plumes sur les yeux  
de cristal,

the gravitational pull of Guy Gervais' anthropomorphism is too strong for "l'oiseau du sombre automne" to resemble Mallarmé's *cygne/signe*.

Critics have been kinder to Marie Laberge the painter (shows throughout Quebec) than to the poet (her 1965 du Maurier poetry prize notwithstanding). Could time have so altered our reading as to justify this re-edition of her first six collections of poetry? Marie Laberge had remained silent during the decade of edible women, female eunuchs, feminist flights and the fear thereof, resurfacing only in 1979 with the peaceful and reconciling *Chants de l'épervière*. Her early work, perhaps misunderstood in the cloud-gathering sixties, appears today as the ingenuous, yet often stirring echo of a doomed epoch.

*Mouvances* is the intimate diary of regretfully remembered childhood and youth, of tender and painful love, of wifehood and childbearing and being a woman:

Etre née femme être né noir en Amérique  
être femme ou rien rien qu'un ventre.  
("L'Hiver à brûler," 1968)

It is the sometimes naïve, sometimes desperate quest for self-understanding and fulfillment:

Ah laissez-moi mourir du temps  
De ces bagnes que l'homme invente  
Laissez-moi mourir de vivre



Et cracher ma révolte  
 Et laissez-moi naître de moi.  
 ("D'un cri à l'autre," 1966)

In herself, not in the societal games (see her explanations in *Archives des Lettres Canadiennes*, iv, p. 574) of sexual politicians or total women, the poet finds her very own truth: the suffering which is the *human* condition.

Through thousands of millenia and a thousand new beginnings, through centuries of ice and fire La Nomade follows on an apocalyptic trek the march of MAN-made civilizations from Babylon to Egypt to Brasilia and New York. Over volcanoes and blackened fields are strewn "ses aïeules / leur robe nuptiale et leur credo saignés à blanc," the earth is drenched with "le sang de ces vierges soudain noix en éclats / sous l'enclume des sexes assassins," and everywhere can be heard "les clameurs des femmes / couchées dans le chaos / asservies au profit des dynasties de pacotille" and "leur cri étouffé dans le lit du vainqueur." In the face of so many abortive promises, cowardly betrayals, and false hopes, La Nomade, nauseated by her own beauty, mutilates her body and fills eight days and seven nights with cries of eons of abeyance. "Sans nez et sans yeux / sans chevelure / sans sexe ni namelles," she is led by La Bête, her double, echo and future (comparisons with Marian Engel would be most inappropriate), and together they set out to raze pyramids, sphinxes and cities, desecrate Pharaonic tombs, topple the pedestals of seducers, silence entire peoples of executioners, and abolish tyranny, oppression and captivity. "Vers quelle délivrance marche-t-ELLE / . . . / vers quels horizons sans compromis / quels éveils / marche-t-ELLE"? In a mythical act of sexual transubstantiation La Nomade becomes La Bête and, "demain est une Bête qui porte l'éclatement / des gorges de femmes." As Goethe's "Ewig-Weibliche" or Aragon's "avenir de l'homme," WOMAN

will breathe the initiatory breath and continue to march "*sur un monde à finir puis à refaire de nos noms / au noeud des certitudes et de la mémoire.*"

This, Julie Stanton, poet, novelist, journalist and prophet, beholds and, in italics, comments on. Everyone may not be disposed to accept her book of revelation and her exegesis, but few can escape being struck by the power of her word, the driving rhythms of her chant and the cruel clarity of her narrative design.

HANS R. RUNTE

## A DANGEROUS BOOK

ROBERTSON DAVIES, *The Rebel Angels*. Macmillan, \$16.95.

THE REBEL ANGELS represents the best and worst of Robertson Davies. All the characteristic quirks of his personal style are here: the satirical sharpness of the Salterton trilogy, the potent mixture of philosophy and melodrama that distinguished the Deptford trilogy, the fascination with strange lore, and the didacticism in imparting it. These have become Davies's trademarks and are by now almost a formula for his success on the critical marketplace. Less innocent aspects of the Davies style also emerge here, with a force that makes one reconsider the entire body of his work.

Despite his ridicule of self-help books in *A Voice in the Attic*, he applies some of their principles in his own writing. His novels cater to that universal desire to feel that one is gathering useful information as one reads, thus flattering their readers into thinking that they are coping with a world slightly above their usual level. While flattery may have its place, here it is disguised insult. Davies's tone has always been magisterial; *The Rebel Angels* patronizes its readers in more subtle ways. It is not a demanding novel.

But it is an insidiously dangerous one, because it encourages complacency and snobbery, disguising them as wisdom, at a time when the search for wisdom is genuinely endangered.

At first *The Rebel Angels* appears designed to expose the sterility of inherited traditions and elitist institutions through its presentation of a fictional university (a very thinly disguised University of Toronto). It quickly becomes apparent, however, that although Davies attacks the contemporary university for choosing knowledge above wisdom, the "wisdom" he advocates would return us to the values of the middle ages. For Davies, the university's strength lies in its mediaeval roots and its faithfulness to them, and not at all in its questioning of inherited assumptions or its search for a better way of being. In exposing his rebel angels of the university as fakes (after setting them up as straw men to knock down), he concludes, illogically, that rebellion itself is therefore suspect. His heroine's fate neatly illustrates his argument. Supposedly a highly intelligent, independent woman, she learns in the course of Davies's narrative that her true strength lies less in her educated intelligence and the expression of her own will than in her primitive gypsy roots and the subjection of her will to that of the man she marries. His excellence, in turn, is indicated by his wealth and good taste. The reader has already been told that the "Political Maenads" or "Women's Lib sisterhood," like the "Political Gays," "make a public cause of something too deep, too important, for political, group action." Davies's message is clear, although it appears to be the result of some muddled thinking. True liberation lies within the individual alone: it is neither a political nor an economic matter. Economic success, however, as in the case of Arthur Cornish, does indicate individual worth. Women best achieve their individuality through submission to

a man in marriage. Maria uses the analogy of a subject swearing allegiance to a monarch — a comparison with interesting political implications that does suggest how, try as he might, Davies cannot completely depoliticize what he would like his readers to see as merely natural.

While it may not be customary critical practice to object to a work of fiction for its underlying philosophy before considering its technical accomplishment, with *The Rebel Angels* it is impossible to separate the two. It offers itself as a novel of ideas, and only works on that level. Furthermore, the aesthetic problems in this novel spring directly from its assumptions about human nature and authority. Critics have commented before on the conservative tendencies of Davies's "Tory Mode" and its roots in Ontario tradition. *The Rebel Angels* takes this part of our heritage directly as its subject, while continuing to embody the unexamined assumptions of that world view in its form and language.

Whatever one may think of the novel's celebration of the status quo, one cannot fail to notice serious deficiencies in the handling of voice. The antiphonal narrative structure — the telling of the story alternately by Maria Magdalena Theotoky and the Reverend Simon Darcourt — seems an excellent idea in theory; it fails in practice because the two voices are not clearly enough distinguished. Both characters sound too much like Dunstan Ramsay, or David Staunton, or Samuel Marchbanks — in short, like Robertson Davies. One suspects that is because Davies is less interested in projecting himself into another being's consciousness than he is in getting his own point of view across. This preference most seriously damages the credibility of Maria, about whom both the story and its argument pivot. How could anyone believe in a contemporary young woman who speaks of being "had" and "tumbled" by the man she

thinks she loves? The language suggests a nineteenth-century masculine perspective, establishing a false note in the novel's opening pages. Maria, like Darcourt, exists solely to provide Davies with a fictional mouthpiece. Indeed, *The Rebel Angels* seems uncomfortably like the failed novel of another character, Parlabane: each puts the arguing of a case above the need to develop a credible narrative, and each hints that its caricatures refer to real people, and its scandals to real events, in a somewhat offensive manner. There is a disturbing hint of prurience in *The Rebel Angels*: Davies needs to condemn Parlabane, but he delights in his wickedness.

Unlike Parlabane, Davies can tell a good story when he cares to, so that there are many entertaining moments in this book. Parlabane himself is a convincing embodiment of evil; and there is just enough self-parody to suggest that none of this should be taken too seriously (as in Maria's reference at McVarish's cocktail party to one of Davies's favourite quotations: about chastity having the body in the soul's keeping). And there is just enough serious amplification of earlier themes and references to Davies' fictional Toronto (Hollier and Parlabane went to school with David Staunton) to keep a Davies fan hooked. Despite the problem with voice, then, the message is not unattractively packaged. Perhaps one needs to live outside Toronto to see how dangerous such nostalgia for a mediaeval past can be, and how false to our own experience. Davies has always been strongest in satirizing human pretensions. When he starts embodying them, and choosing heroes like Francis Cornish to take all his prizes, his writing becomes suspect.

The novel pretends to engage problems of deep human significance. How may we learn from the past? What is the role of the university and its scholars in our society? What can repressed areas of experi-

ence teach us? How can we distinguish wisdom from knowledge? How should we live? Raising these questions might have been a service in itself if Davies were not so quick and pat with the answers. Because he is, some readers may leave *The Rebel Angels* satisfied. Not me.

DIANA BRYDON

## MOUNTAIN POETS

ROBIN SKELTON, ed., *Six Poets of British Columbia*. Sono Nis, \$7.95.

JOHN HARRIS, ed., *Roothog: Contemporary B.C. Writing*. Repository, n.p.

ALLAN BROWN, *By Green Mountain*. Penumbra, \$5.95.

BRIAN BRETT, *White Monster*. White Rhino, \$7.00.

RONA MURRAY, *Journey*. Sono Nis, \$5.95.

LINDA ROGERS, *Queens of the Next Hot Star*. Oolichan Books, n.p.

ROBIN SKELTON, *Limits*. Porcupine's Quill, \$6.95.

SID MARTY, *Nobody Danced with Miss Rodeo*. McClelland & Stewart, \$8.95.

DALE ZIEROTH, *Mid-River*. Anansi, \$6.95.

ALTHOUGH THESE BOOKS were presumably stacked in the same pile because they share connections — from intimate to very tenuous — with green oceans and oceans of green, the two anthologies among them illustrate the unlikelihood of finding a reviewer's generalization. Most of the many anthologies of writing in British Columbia, with the exception of Gary Geddes's *Skookum Wawa* and R. E. Watters's centennial anthology, suggest that the writing is best comprehended as a scattering of islands, defined by region, by poetic, or by friendship.

The title, *Six Poets of British Columbia*, for example, might well be thought to imply six major, defining poets in British Columbia. But Robin Skelton seems to have no such aspiration: in fact, the anthology gives no indication why these

particular six poets should be brought together. Presumably a one-time association with Sono Nis, or with the University of Victoria's Creative Writing Department is sufficient justification for the grouping. Skelton himself seems evasive about his intention, and the banal travelogue and compendium of themes which serve as an "Introduction" is surely the most disappointing thing in the book.

Other than its lack of coherence the selection is pleasant enough, beginning with Rona Murray's family anecdotes and meditations on ghosts, and some of Charles Lillard's more straightforward wilderness narratives. The selection from Leona Gom includes too many poems where personal reminiscence is an end in itself, and too few of the poems, such as "Stone," in which she reveals character through trying the voices of her subjects. Ken Cathers's poems are more regionally documentary than the others, but they seem to me quite uninterested in any implications beyond the observed details. Theresa Kishkan, the most oracular poet of the six, is far less likely than the others to lapse into careless or trite endings. She, and Harold Rhenisch, the poet here most devoted to describing natural landscapes (through some skilfully and revealingly extended metaphors), are the best represented poets in the collection.

*Roothog* is another anthology very off-hand about its *raison d'être*. Again, a loose past association with the press — in this case, Repository — seems to be the criterion for selection. John Harris's "Inter-duction" midway through the volume pretty much sends up the whole idea of anthology. "A bit of description. Some memorable phraseology. Personal revelation. Tricks and not that cheap." This piece of tedium correctly implies that the book contains a good deal of the unscriptive, and the unmemorable. In the midst of much self-indulgence, however, there is some good work. Bill Sherm-

brucker's story, "Aga Dawn," is delicate in its perceptions, yet straightforward, without the obvious yearning to be *artiste* that clutters much of *Roothog*. Mark Slade's story, "The Drop," drawn from the grotesque horror of Vietnam, has a memorable surprise ending. Paul de Barros, although his narrative is exceedingly, even intentionally, banal, includes some intriguing discriminations between British Columbia and the U.S. Northwest. Among the poets, I found David Phillips particularly readable; in Don MacKay's work the touch of crazy imagination also stands out. Ken Cathers, who seems so bland in Skelton's anthology, is much better represented here by poems which always extend the descriptions of Vancouver Island scenes and events through some touch of linguistic inventiveness.

This desirable combination is, in fact, missing in too much of the poetry in these nine books. If the poet concentrates on anecdote or landscape, rather than on pure linguistic play, he is obliged, surely, to go beyond the one dimension of his language which strict description might demand. Alternatively, such a poet has at least to give some exactness to the time and place and feeling of an experience if recording the experience is all there is in the poem. Alan Brown's *By Green Mountain* illustrates the difficulty exactly. Brown bounces between the haiku and the breezy anecdote. Thus, his poems have some nice phrases depicting some fresh images, but the effect is diffused with vague formulas and incongruous colloquialism. As in his "Lake Shuswap," most of Green's poems define "a kind / of not-place" by their lack of particularized sensation, or emotion, or incident. Brown, it seems, can't decide whether he wants to be Al Purdy (whose introduction to the book hints at how unlike Purdy's poetry Brown's is) or Emily Dickinson.

Brian Brett's *Monster*, with its deckle edges and marbled cover, the most hand-

We record with regret  
the death earlier this year  
of

## CHARLES MORRISS

whose commitment to the fine art  
of printing gave readers over  
several decades an appreciation  
of the aesthetic pleasures  
of design.

some of these books, is subtitled "An Autobiography." Using the idea of the self as monster, Brett's pure poems appear to mythologize his life, fusing it with the life of the race: the monster he discovers is both man and god and animal and thing. But there's a familiar problem: Brett doesn't provide enough localizing detail to identify the peculiar individual human experience which here touches, and is touched by the universal patterns of birth, love, learning, and acquisitiveness. As a result, the book is sometimes stirring, especially in its blend of the absurd and the ugly, but it usually moves on a fantastic, almost ethereal plane, where it's impossible to empathize with the protagonist. If the reader can agree that the "mind breaks down when something comes singing out of the chaos," it's too much to expect him to be satisfied with the vague shape of a biography beneath the chaos, when the confessional tone asks for a much more intimate involvement.

Rona Murray's *Journey*, with its intermittent nautical metaphors, also has an implicit biographical structure. And Murray's story is far more accessible than Brett's. At her best, in a poem like "When," Murray integrates an accurately recorded domestic incident — removing finished pots from the kiln (her husband is a potter) — with images which carry ideas of birth, journey, language, and the formation of the earth itself: the result is a moving love poem. "The Death of the Bear" shows Murray's talent with a slightly less immediately personal subject. Here the anecdote of a bear trapped, then shot and hauled into the community, is incorporated into the Haida myth of a woman copulating with a bear and giving birth to cubs which are half-man, half-god. Because Murray handles these poems so well, it is sad that their effect is diminished by so many poems that fail to convey the exact shape of her crucial personal experiences. In poems such as "Departure," "Elegy," or "Exorcism," where a precise location in space or time is lacking, the result seems mere exercise. On other occasions, as in "Before Spring," with its confused metaphors of maze, worms, crocodiles, drowning, and words, Murray strains tortuously, too anxious to be poetic. The best poems — there are a half dozen memorable poems in the collection — combine, as in "My Father," a simply told anecdote with a subtle metaphorical extension of its possible meanings.

By combining eloquent prose narrating her experience, and compact lyrics testing the limits of its meaning, Linda Rogers sustains this accomplishment throughout a whole book. Of the books in this pile, *Queens of the Next Hot Star* is both the most immediately exciting, and the one asking to be reread and contemplated. "There are some times in real life," she writes, "when I think I am in a dream and I can't walk or fly or speak the

truth." The observation might describe the method of the book, which moves between a pure recounting of the poet's friendship with an old Indian woman, Maggie Jack, and the poet's dreaming the voice/the dreams of Maggie, her people, and her spirit. Rogers writes a powerful, lyric prose, restrained yet passionate in its feeling for Maggie's pain and love. By contrast, the poems might at first seem annoyingly obscure. And then one recognizes that these are poems with "two tongues," that Rogers is sometimes speaking in her own voice, sometimes in Maggie's, sometimes in a communal voice, sometimes as totemic spirit. Other poems create a dialogue between Maggie and Linda. The result is a rich blend of folk story and native myth, of D'Sonoqua and Alice in Wonderland, of the English and indigenous tongues, of daughter and spirit mother, of feminism and humanism. *Queens of the Next Hot Star* is an extension of reverberating shamanism — from Evans and Carr to Marlatt and Musgrave — which animates so much writing connected with the West Coast. It deserves a far lengthier discussion.

If Rogers is the most exciting poet in this group, Robin Skelton is the most polished (ignoring, now, his Introduction to *Six Poets*). Skelton's experience shows in many poems which discover a delicate perception in apparently unremarkable incidents, and add a twist of metaphor to make it memorable. These are, on the whole, the sparest poems Skelton has written, with short lines, in 2- or 3-line stanzas, with simple diction, and limited allusiveness. Skelton is also able, with a few exceptions, to discard the poems which dwindle into vague imprecision. The sense of various levels of language intersecting we might expect from a poet who will so often write poems for the love of language *per se*, and whose subject is so often words themselves: nonetheless, it is in effortlessly connecting the pithy,

witty discoveries thus made with the engaging of the five senses in place and time that he has his most characteristic success: "as if breath alone // were the essential / message, words and words // no more than gravel / thrown against the pane" ("Something").

The remotest island of B.C. poetry is found where mountains meet plains on the eastern edge. Dale Zieroth, although he now lives in North Vancouver and although *Mid-River* is largely set in the Columbia Valley near Invermere, still writes in a manner more associated with his native prairie. Sid Marty, even more markedly, has his obvious ties in Alberta, and makes the broadly colloquial narrative the essence of his poetry. Both these are second books of poetry, impatiently awaited after impressive first books appeared in 1973. Marty's *Nobody Danced with Miss Rodeo* is, after *Headwaters*, a disappointment. Like so many Canadian poets Marty takes Al Purdy as his primary model and inspiration: "'the stories are either true,' croaked the muse [a magpie], 'or they are lies told by the characters.'" This muse inspires some diverting and ironic incidents, but Marty seems satisfied with superficial mimicry, and finds little of the Purdy magic. The poems are often factual and boring. The book is openly opinionated, even angry, about man's destruction of nature, but the result, as in "Big Game," is bad poetry:

When the game comes down to water  
to drink from the clear, blue Bow  
in ranges cut by highways

They will die, one after another  
beneath the wheels

In the paradise of the middle class.

The sincerity of Marty's concern is evident. But in such a poem, or in "Greyhound," on the futility of Indians observed in the Calgary bus depot, the impact disappears in cliché, or overdone imagery, and pathetic endings. Marty

can't sustain a tone or a metaphor in the larger works. Thus, despite the emphasis on story and character portrait, the most memorable poems are the shorter, more controlled lyrics, such as "For My Sons," a nicely turned observation on poetry and family life. Three-quarters of the poems in this book could be compressed to half their length. Marty, it seems, confuses a sense of colloquial sprawl, the rambling of barroom gabble, with empty diction and unthinking formula. The poet's obligation, and here Purdy so often excels, is to show us the poetry inherent in the repetitions and rhythms of Canadian speech. Marty only fulfils the obligation in "The Fording," the last and best poem in the bunch for emotion, image, development, meaning and even narrative. Marty, here, as he showed in *Headwaters*, can combine straightforward narrative — "With a whoop, with a shout / they are riding toward me now" — with energetic verbs, metaphoric surprises —

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"Smashing the dewy alder shrubs to rainbows / over a plain of trembling orange flowers" — in order to enrich the one and make familiar the other. Unfortunately, there are too few of these successes to make a book.

Dale Zieroth's *Mid-River*, on the other hand, fulfils the expectations created by his first volume *Clearing*. The influence of Al Purdy's colloquialism and love of story is, in Zieroth, seldom an excuse for mere slackness. There is more attention to multiplying metaphors here than in the first collection. Also there's a very marked new attention to assonance and alliteration: "let us also / see clearly how love can finally / carve and quip inside the duel and dance at last / out through the two of us." Zieroth's descriptions of the Columbia Valley are vivified by a nice choice of metaphor, especially those implicit in his verbs. Although Zieroth's metaphors are seldom carefully inter-linked, and the variations on a single metaphor are seldom used to sustain his longer poems, a taut narrative line always holds things together. His ability is newly evident in some domestic poems provoked by the birth and growing of his young daughter — "Birth," "The Eyes of the Body and Not the Eyes of the Mind," "Fear of Failure" — which move in new directions and are among the best poems Zieroth has written.

L. R. RICOU

## THREE NOVELS

PERGY JANES, *Eastmall*. Potlatch, \$8.95.

GILBERT CHOQUETTE, *Wednesday's Child*, trans.

David Lobdell. Oberon, \$17.95; pa. \$8.95.

JAKE MACDONALD, *Indian River*. Queenston House, \$16.95; pa. \$8.95.

*Eastmall* is the story of two brothers and their tragic clash of wills and ideologies. Craig Andrew Wareham is a young man on the make, the stereotypical modern

entrepreneur who has total disregard for the environment and "the quality of human life." Morley, an idealist, opposes Craig's attempt at building Eastmall, a business complex in Old St. John's. In addition to dramatizing what happens when men put personal principles before concern for others, the novel points up the timeless theme that "materialism is death to the spirit."

The major weaknesses of *Eastmall* involve characterization. The brothers are essentially stock figures: villain and hero (although Morley's "martyr complex" leaves him not quite a hero). Janes's method of devoting alternate chapters to each brother adds to the wearying effect upon the reader; and one can never quite dispel the feeling that one is being *told*. Moreover, there is never any profound questioning of self. Hence the imaginative and emotional tension which might have resulted from using two centres of consciousness does not materialize here.

The strengths of *Eastmall* are worth recording. Janes's strongly lyrical passages convey an acute sense of place and a deep love of downtown St. John's with its seasonal and even diurnal changes of appearance and mood. Emily Birkshire, Lenni Contois, Donna and "Rabbit" Ryan — all secondary characters — are convincingly presented. The most exciting and convincing episodes involve these characters: Emily's break with Craig; Lenni's rebuke of Craig; and, best of all, Craig and the "Rabbit" in business negotiations. And, of course, there is the significant Theme: Janes adds Morley's "NOTES" found after his death as a kind of Afterword. These notes reveal a Prattean concept of the evolution of human history, and concern for keeping down the beast within. The "tigers" stalking in our "forest" are greed for money and power, and "worship of Party and State." The solution is in "Gandhi's, not Lenin's way. . . ." Yet too much is finally sacrificed for



Theme. The names, business methods, and personal idiosyncrasies of Craig and his associates make *Eastmall* a thinly disguised fictional rendering of prominent personalities and controversial events in St. John's over the last two or three years. Apparently wanting to add his shot to the battle, Janes seems to have included too much and written too rapidly.

Quentin Géricault, the protagonist of *Wednesday's Child*, is called home from a Christmas vacation in Spain to find himself burdened by his father's last requests: first, that he never sully the family name; and, second, that he marry his cousin Bernadette. Quentin, it seems, is destined not to fulfil either wish.

A believer in "the Spirit" — disembodied beauty — he hopes some day to "be able to love." He secretly "worships" the photograph of a nude British actress, and this at least keeps him out of trouble. That is, until he goes to teach literature at the Cégep de Saint-Croix in order to escape from "the stultifying domain of Linguistics" at the University. At the Cégep he becomes infatuated with Véronique Mercier, "a mediocre little student" whom he later admits he "had transformed in his imagination into an idol."

Quentin finds it impossible to function as either teacher or suitor. Neither his psychiatrist nor his priest can help him. Events at the college seem to conspire against him until the Board feels obliged to relieve him of his duties. He then attempts suicide, and is placed in the intensive-care unit in a psychiatric clinic.

Later while convalescing, he is murdered by Richard Croquefer, who claims to be of the Spirit, too — the Spirit of Evil. However, Quentin had already been "reborn," reconciled with human nature: "the co-existence of such antithetical states as absolute perfection and human deficiency was, in fact, inevitable, the two conditions being inseparably linked, the indissoluble components of a single, exis-

tential, transcendental whole." Through his infatuation with Véronique he had become acquainted "with the loving, painful, human side of his nature." Through his image of her he had fallen "in love with the entire world."

Admirable sentiments, but alas, Quentin Géricault is no Prince Hamlet! Quentin is simply too weak a character to hold one's interest (despite the author's parody and irony) through so many pages. The title is, ultimately, the greatest irony: not Fate, but self, is the villain here.

*Indian River*, Jake MacDonald's first novel, is not so ambitious as Janes's nor so abstruse as Choquette's, but it is more successful than either of those. His protagonist, twenty-five-year-old Dominic Chambrun, son of a wealthy chemical wholesaler, is trying to escape from the dangerous company he has been keeping in Winnipeg. He ends up as a fishing guide at Indian River Lodge, owned by unscrupulous Rusty Arnold.

Dom soon becomes infatuated with Elena Thunder, a beautiful young Indian widow who reminds him "of some heroine from a Thomas Hardy novel." (Her companion and co-worker at the lodge warns Dom that he has made Elena "a real fantasy target.") Dom wants to marry Elena and settle down in the North, but "She's had it with the north, and all its politics, and its poverty and feeling of doom."

Exploited and ravaged by American entrepreneurs and tourists, the North is now threatened by Acid Red, an industrial pollutant. The death, earlier, of "Mr. Pike" (Rusty's father), the deteriorating health of Cracked Joe Thunder, and the deformed and cancerous bears (the Thunders's family totem) are all attributable to their eating fish from the polluted river. Far from being a wilderness Utopia, the area is a veritable "combat zone." In fact, Dom is murdered by Cracked Joe, the man he is trying to help. The final

image in the Epilogue symbolizes the decay brought about by white man's greed.

In contrast with the entrepreneurs and tourists, the workers at the Lodge are an interesting lot: "All of them longed for something." Their names are indicative of their personalities — Cracked Joe, Narcisse, Boner, W. D. Loon, and Cowboy Copeland. The last one is boisterous, lonely, compassionate and informed. His life provides a rough parallel with Dom's in that he too had come North to begin again; and his life too was a symbol, a gesture of no more apparent significance than "the old tree toppling in the forest where there's no human ears to hear it fall." Yet the Cowboy's life, like Dom's life and death, does affirm the strength of human love and does at least sound a warning. That affirmation and implicit warning are articulated by Kenny Blossom, the one worthwhile American in the novel: "If things become contaminated it's because the man has a contaminated heart, not because there's something wrong with his [technology]."

*Indian River* has an interesting plot: dramatic but not melodramatic. The emotional stance is compassionate but never mawkish. The characters are interesting, and the theme significant. Humour and irony accentuate the seriousness; and the literal is nicely balanced by the figurative. Jake MacDonald has written a fine first novel.

DONALD R. BARTLETT

## PASTORAL LINES

LUANNE ARMSTRONG, *Castle Mountain*. Polestar Press, \$6.95.

JANE MUNRO, *Daughters*. Fiddlehead, n.p.

SUNITI NAMJOSHI, *The Authentic Lie*. Fiddlehead, n.p.

AMONG HIS GENERAL, introductory propositions about pastoral, Renato Poggioli suggests that it is "a private, masculine

world, where woman is not a person but a sexual archetype" and that "pastoral remains a masculine dreamworld." In spite of this I kept seeing (I hope not hallucinating) lineaments of pastoral in all three of *Castle Mountain*, *Daughters*, and *The Authentic Lie* — all three of them written by women. They give us no shepherds, though some may not be too far off in the Aegean locale of several of Jane Munro's poems. But for one thing, that primary denizen of modern pastoral, the child, is vital to all three collections; not only the daughter-child but also the writers' sense of women-as-daughters comes across very strongly. For another thing, each collection in its own way records a kind of retreat, a backward/inward move for purposes of refreshment, beginning again, or therapeutic working through; the *move in* turns out to be necessarily a *move back* and this move back enables a return with the words that are both the means and the account of self-renewal or self-definition.

In *The Oaten Flute* (posthumous, 1975) Poggioli goes on to propose his versions of pastoral, or subspecies of the bucolic imagination. To his pastorals of innocence, of happiness, of self, of childhood, we may perhaps add — in admiration not condescension — the domestic pastoral to help describe Armstrong's *Castle Mountain* and Munro's *Daughters*. In both, a presiding feminine consciousness moves in the charged interstices between people, spaces, contents, and events of a home; she reflects on her *self* among various roles, moods, and stances in her complex domicile. In "Froth,"

She stares into the morning fog.  
It seeps.

Where are the stiff weathers?

For once, she'd like  
some tool of atmosphere —  
a dry fog,  
fathom of coral —  
on which she might hang up

her weight of skins,  
foam and expand, easily.

And wordmaking, trying to find voice and words is (very explicitly in *Castle Mountain*) essential to homesteading. Thus Luanne Armstrong in "Draught," where draught turns out to be "Nine generations of sour Scots farmers behind me / never a poet / a heritage of dust":

Before I could remember, this place  
held voices,  
my grandfather's, my father's,  
now mine. . . .

I wait.  
I want new voices to come  
from the broken hill  
like water from stone  
witching for power  
to well up from dust;  
the voices of buried gods, barbed  
under fences, and plowed earth.

Or Jane Munro in "At the Mouth of Desolation Sound":

When does letting go bare the soul, and  
when eat it?  
The spiral of voices twists to a fragile edge;  
she puts herself to her ear and listens  
to the gulf amplified. Without this  
open-ended  
shell of narrative she would feel homeless.

In Suniti Namjoshi's *The Authentic Lie* most domestic roles and rooms are lacking; furnishings are carefully selected literary period pieces, biblical to modern — the degree of self-conscious intertextuality is pronounced. What dwellers we run into and what voices we hear are almost exclusively inside the persona's head. So this collection is not at all a "domestic pastoral" in the sense I've been trying to describe; but it is dominated by a daughter-child mourning for a lost father-giant ("Discourse with the Dead") and the note of pastoral elegy is unavoidably strong especially since its prevailing key, or mode, is dream. There is even a kind of apotheosis, at the end of "Discourse with the Dead," that's a very nice blend of affirmation, distancing, and resignation.

Perhaps this attempt to catch all three writers in one sort of pastoral net or another is just a reviewer's casting for something elastic but tidy to say about three distinct and otherwise quite different works. They are different, of course. For example, the male husband/lover figure: in *Castle Mountain* he is a present necessity to the word, self, and homemaking project and he's celebrated in several love poems; he is neither so present nor so necessary in *Daughters*, where he's celebrated fewer times and, through the persona of Poppi, the Cretan bride, occasionally and neatly chided for various chauvinisms: "He corrected my English. I was not prepared to correct his Greek." And in *The Authentic Lie*, where he is perhaps swirled in the turbulences of having to let the father go, he appears rarely and only as a disaster to whom women are wishfulfilling dream-objects: "The landscape of hell is the body of a man, not wide-awake / and not quite dead." For example, the speaker's stance and tone: from the engaged, almost entirely undistanced, firmly situated voice of *Castle Mountain*, through the more detached, multiple voices of *Daughters* uttering a greater variety of situations and locales — often in virtue of the Poppi persona — to the polished, succinct urbanities of voice and stance in *The Authentic Lie*, from which I get the impression of words like lotus petals floating on a formal pool that multiplies perspectives and glints with many ironies.

To conclude, still in the comparative mode: of the three volumes *Castle Mountain* is the least pretentious in a literary sense and the most straightforward about the need to write and about the place, the station of writing within a cycle or spiral of growth; the "Invocation" goes

Now  
to sing joy  
in small voices . . .

teach us now  
this small weaving  
from dust

while the "Incantation" (which to my mind should be the last, not second last piece) goes

Out of this silence, stories  
out of this distance, movement  
and slow change;  
out of going forward, power  
out of standing still, peace;  
out of rage, silence

and so, presumably, back again to stories. *Daughters* is the most ambitious in the way of seeking fresh images, locutions, and rhythms even though, in mode, it is often more conventionally narrative than the other two. My use of "conventionally" is not perjorative. Once or twice, as in the case, say, of "Matrix," a poem is incoherent. There is so to speak a syntax of rhythm as well as of grammar and the former will often carry the production of meaning in an absence of the latter. I think that, on occasion in *Daughters*, both species of syntax give way simultaneously; I'm well aware, though, that the demand for certain kinds of coherence may well be a masculine vice. Then *The Authentic Lie* is by a long way the most formal and self-consciously literary of these three volumes. I have already mentioned its pronounced intertextuality: there is an elaborate substructure of literary allusions; there are retellings of myths, nursery rhymes, and fairy stories as well as an effective continuation of an *Alice in Wonderland* conversation that's nearly as zany-but-shrewd as its original. The whole opening section, "Discourse with the Dead" is a carefully orchestrated, four-part movement with scrupulous attention given to the visual/spatial effects of variation in type and placement on the page. Ideally I suppose a work of art should, either simultaneously or seriatim, move us, instruct us, and engage our interest in how it's done — in its execution, as Henry

James would say. On the whole I am moved the most by *Castle Mountain*, instructed the most by *Daughters*, and the most engaged — as a matter of interest in its execution — by *The Authentic Lie*.

IAN SOWTON

## UNE CONSCIENCE

ALAIN CHEVRETTE, *Le Premier Homme*. Naaman, n.p.

PIERRE PAUL KARCH, *Nuits blanches*. Prise de Parole, \$8.95.

JACQUES LAFLEUR, *Décors à l'envers*. Naaman, n.p.

PASCAL SABOURIN, *Quand il pleut sur ma ville*. Naaman, n.p.

ENTRE PASCAL SABOURIN, Pierre Paul Karch, Alain Chevrete et Jacques Lafleur on pourrait établir un grand nombre de points communs. Il suffira ici de rappeler que ces quatre écrivains sont des universitaires, qu'ils se rattachent aux genres de l'imaginaire (selon divers degrés, il est vrai), que la narration chez eux ne suit pas les règles imposées par les vieilles traditions et qu'enfin, ils sont tous les quatre des exemples de renaissance régionaliste dans le domaine littéraire — cette dernière appartenance n'étant pas toujours explicite au niveau des formes du contenu.

Commençons par les deux textes franco-ontariens et signalons au passage que ces derniers font partie d'une littérature qui a été trop longtemps négligée.

*Quand il pleut sur ma ville* de Pascal Sabourin est un récit que l'on pourrait qualifier d'existentialiste. Mais le narrateur de ce roman philosophique n'est jamais poussé vers les extrêmes; sauf, naturellement, lorsqu'il s'agit de l'idéalisme abstrait. La femme qui l'aime, Cécilia, n'est ni aussi docile que la Marie de *L'Etranger*, ni aussi sauvage que la Madeleine de *Poussière sur la ville*. D'autre part, la pluie semble garantir cette

opacité du monde dont tout esprit philosophique a l'air d'avoir besoin pour s'ériger en conscience douloureuse. On pourrait ainsi relever toutes les constantes du roman existentialiste dans *Quand il pleut sur ma ville* et l'exercice ne manquerait pas d'intérêt pour un étudiant en littérature comparée qui serait tout heureux de retrouver ici le couteau étincelant du malheur, jadis perdu par Meursault. Mais il faut être juste et reconnaître que le récit de Pascal Sabourin est bien de notre temps et qu'au-delà de l'existentialisme il rejoint la tradition des générations perdues. Ce texte est, en effet, étrangement près de *Conversazione in Sicilia* de Elio Vittorini et de *The Sun Also Rises* d'Ernest Hemingway. Or, il y a un pessimisme brumeux qui a plané sur nos littératures depuis le début de ce siècle. Après l'éclaircie des années soixante nous y revenons. Il est beau aussi de revoir des mots comme "la Vie" et "la Vérité" revenir sous la plume de Sabourin. C'est du moins là un premier pas vers un certain vitalisme philosophique qui, lui aussi, s'était éteint depuis Gabriele D'Annunzio et Gaston Bachelard. Mais cette confluence idéologique est très réservée: "Oui, il y a demain. . . Mais il y a la pluie, demain."

*Nuits blanches* de Pierre Paul Karch est un recueil de douze contes fantastiques. L'auteur reprend ici une tradition où les influences de Hoffmann, d'Edgar Allan Poe et d'autres ne manquent pas de se faire sentir. Malgré quelques imprécisions stylistiques — qui n'auraient pas dû passer le bureau du rédacteur — il faut reconnaître que ces contes sont très bien travaillés et offrent la cohérence thématique qui caractérise les textes fantastiques de qualité.

"Fleur de Pavot," le dernier conte du recueil, constitue un bon exemple de cette unité thématique qui engendre le récit. C'est l'histoire de la maison d'un botaniste qui, en nourrissant ses plantes

des "pertes séminales" de son jardinier et des "menstrues" d'Anna-Maria sa servante, finit par créer des monstres végétaux qui dévorent leurs "parents." Mais plus que le récit, ce qui fascine le lecteur c'est la progression des structures thématiques. C'est ainsi qu'au début on a l'impression que l'animisme des plantes n'est qu'une obsession du jardinier. Par exemple, celui-là a d'abord l'impression que "les feuilles mourantes" se roulent vers lui "comme pour lui mordre le talon," puis il trouve que l'"inhospitalité" des plantes l'irrite "comme une feuille d'ortie." D'autre part, la servante est victime de la même paranoïa. Pourtant, quand elle tente d'aborder le sujet avec le jardinier, ce dernier se moque d'elle. Les images convergent ainsi vers la fin du récit et c'est donc le discours symbolique qui prépare l'action finale de la plante humaine. Cette progression bien dosée contribue grandement à ce que depuis Roland Barthe on appelle "Le Plaisir du Texte."

Voilà donc deux textes franco-ontariens dont la portée reste universelle et le régionalisme implicite. Il y a là une subtilité qui survivra la cause idéologique plus que l'on ne pourrait le penser.

Les deux autres textes peuvent aussi être géographiquement identifiés: Ils nous viennent de L'Estrie.

*Le Premier Homme* d'Alain Chevette est un roman qui, comme *Quand il pleut sur ma ville*, évoque les difficultés et la solitude de l'esprit philosophique. L'imaginaire joue cependant un plus grand rôle chez Chevette et la pluie — qui n'était qu'un sombre symbole chez Sabourin — est tout autre chose ici:

Il s'était mis à sourire, il sentait que la pluie tombait pour lui; elle était pure et blanche, comme un sapin de printemps. . . Il avait l'impression que la pluie était formée de milliers de petites roches se désagrégeant à la descente. . .

*Le Premier Homme* constitue ainsi une belle méditation et l'on s'attache fa-

cilement à ce Thomas rêveur dont les mots nous guident vers la grandeur du silence. Le nom de ce personnage est d'ailleurs peut-être une clef car il évoque, ici et là, *Thomas l'imposteur* de Jean Cocteau et *Thomas l'obscur* de Maurice Blanchot. On admirera sans doute la beauté singulière de ce roman où le protagoniste devient au fond la victime des personnages qu'il a inventés. Un grand bravo donc à Chevrette qui a au moins découvert que la littérature est une grande illusion — le pain de l'esprit.

*Décors à l'envers*, un recueil de cinq nouvelles, de Jacques Lafleur s'inscrit également sous le signe de la conscience. Dans "Mourir..." nous pénétrons l'esprit d'Antoine, un vieillard qui en est à l'agonie. La conscience du personnage est là, toujours là, pour assister à la disparition des perceptions sensorielles, puis à la désintégration de la mémoire. Au fond, même la mort semble impuissante face à ce tremblement de l'être au sein du néant:

Antoine venait de réaliser qu'il était mort, probablement depuis fort longtemps déjà, mais cela n'avait aucune espèce d'importance, aucune signification. . . .

Dans les autres contes c'est toujours la conscience qui soutient la narration, cette dernière étant tendue elle-même vers la mort, l'amour et l'interrogation permanente de la vie. C'est en ce sens que les personnages de Lafleur sont clairement définis; tel ce François à qui semble échapper l'amour absolu de Nathalie ("Nathalie et François"):

Il aimait profondément la vie mais, même s'il parvenait toujours à se maîtriser, il demeurerait marqué depuis son enfance par l'absurdité de l'existence et le spectre de la mort.

Ces livres d'aujourd'hui constituent des ensembles de signes qui nous renvoient aux référents culturels qui nous obsèdent. Nous les avons aperçus: quatre textes,

deux régionalismes, une conscience qui ne peut être évitée. . . .

ALEXANDRE L. AMPRIMOZ

## WINDOWS ON INVENTION

THERESE BONVOULOIR-BAYOL, *Les Soeurs d'Io*. L'Arbre HMH, n.p.

JEAN-MARIE POUPART, *Angoisse Play*. Leméac, \$5.95.

NADINE MACKENZIE, *Le Prix du Silence*. Fides, n.p.

BERTRAND B. LEBLANC, *Horace du l'art de porter la redingote*. Leméac, \$9.95.

JEAN-YVES SOUCY, *Les Chevaliers de la nuit*. Les éditions La Presse, n.p.

NONE OF THESE FIVE NOVELS possesses the ebullient, panoramic imagination of Michel Tremblay's Plateau Mont-Royal or Victor-Lévy Beaulieu's endless Beauchemin family series; however, three, at least, are windows opening onto the inventive world of recent Quebec fiction. Thérèse Bonvouloir-Bayol's *Les Soeurs d'Io* is yet another story of a deserted wife who, after the inevitable descent into solitude and depression, slowly begins to piece together the shards of her broken life. Written in the guise of a journal, and in the lyrical, melancholy and slightly dazed tone, all too common to these kind of novels, the book spans a short year during which the narrator returns to Montreal and begins a feeble rediscovery of the city, her Quebec heritage, the strong pull of family and church (needless to say, during a long, hard winter). An obligatory voyage to the Gaspé — which has lately become symbolic of the new, regenerative frontier — is included, as are a few desultory love affairs. The journal is interspersed with flashbacks of the narrator's life with the egocentric Frederic, but these diminish as her state of mind improves. Also dispersed throughout the

text are maudlin philosophical sentiments, such as the following resolution arrived at after hours of insomnia.

A cette intersection de ma vie, il est moins important pour moi de creuser une empreinte dans l'histoire — fût-elle aussi humble qu'un relèvement généalogique — que de me réaliser en tant que Personne.

The occasional, pretty lyrical passages describing Quebec's winter and scenery are overshadowed by the banality of the tale, the weak characterization of the narrator and her irritating inability to move beyond a life determined by men towards that dignity she claims to be seeking. Somehow the trials of the narrator do not measure up to those of Io, seduced by Zeus and condemned by the jealous Hera to flee in torment, pursued by gadflies, until kind Prometheus directed her to the Nile, where she was, at last, restored to her original condition by Zeus.

*Angoisse Play*, by the experimental and playful Jean-Marie Poupart, is interestingly enough a revised edition of his 1968 novel. As the changes are minor but diachronic, it is worthwhile to remember that the context of the novel is the turbulent 1960's of the Quiet Revolution. The author himself suggests that the novel be read with the same attitude one visits the anthropopithecical section of a Natural History Museum, that is quizzically. In the revised version, although very few words are changed or added, Poupart inserts commas, periods, and capital letters, thus diminishing the stream-of-consciousness and subduing the uninhibited, automatic writing more characteristic of the 1960's. The result is a more cryptic, distant, deliberate, cold, and enigmatic text.

This novel is also narrated in the first person in the form of a journal, but through a hot Montreal summer, and with numbered rather than indented paragraphs. The "angoisse" is played out by an unpleasant, overweight young man,

a writer who is completely unreliable. He may or may not have a roommate called Anna; he is a misogynist, obsessed by sex, a destructive iconoclast and arsonist, given to cynical and amusing statements such as "Rien ne me donne plus de plaisir que de faire dire à quelqu'un qu'il est un imbécile" or "Dieu a toujours été correct avec moi" or "celui qui n'est pas capable d'être superficiel ne sera jamais un auteur de génie." Both Poupart and the narrator, Blaise Augustin, mock the conventions of narrative and the accepted codes of human behaviour. And so Blaise makes the wonderful observation that it was a pity that Camus had killed off Meursault at the end of *The Stranger* because he could have carried on in the style of Colette with "The Stranger at School," "The Stranger in Paris." As a play on the narrator un-writing his narrative and hovering, teasingly, between fiction and autobiography, *Angoisse Play* is clever, but not as profound as Quin's *Prochain Episode*, which also experiments in narration.

Nadine MacKenzie's *Le Prix du Silence* is a conventional thriller where the hero, a newspaperman to an Eastern European country, tries to escape to Canada after he has been exiled to an "Intellectual Club" for stating his opinions openly. The description of this isolated prison for dissidents, a futuristic and illusory idyllic retreat for intellectuals is the only section of real interest and horror.

Since the only form of higher education in Quebec until 1960 was the *collège classique*, it is surprising that so few novels have emerged, describing this unique, anachronistic, priest-run institution that has so influenced the intellectual life of Quebec. Bertrand Leblanc's *Horace ou l'art de porter la redingote* (the redingote is the uniform worn by the boys in the 1950's) genially fills this gap. However, except for its Quebec setting, it is a

familiar boarding-school tale, with its parade of eccentric teachers, inspiring teachers, harsh daily routine, desperate, covert sexuality, and predictable misadventures. The Horace of the title is an irascible and charming nonconformist who manages to learn very little except the cunning circumvention of rules. Inevitably the novel is replete with the continuing battle against the Catholicism that orders the boys' days and directs (and stifles) their intellectual and moral development. Although humorous and evocative of the 1950's and of the *col-lèges classiques*, *Horace* is a series of descriptions and anecdotes rather than a thoughtful study of a sentimental education, despite Leblanc's apparent desire to portray the context behind current intellectual life.

The most absorbing of these novels is *Les Chevaliers de la nuit* which joins the ranks of the many Quebec novels with adolescent heroes. Soucy creates the world of a *rang* (country road) in Abitibi in 1959, where the Savard family from Montreal joins other dreamers, recluses, and misfits in abandoned homesteads, to attempt once again the dream of Colonization. At that time, Abitibi received the last feeble trickle of the wave of Colonization begun in the nineteenth century in order to settle remote regions of Quebec and reinstate the agrarian ideology, precious to both church and state. Soucy, however, focuses his attention on the two adolescent Savard boys — Robert, and in particular, the sensitive and imaginative Rémi — who as the *chevaliers de la nuit* explore the mysterious night kingdom among the pines and creeks of the surrounding forests.

Aïe, chercher, découvrir, posséder; connaître les choses invisibles. Etre des chasseurs de mystère. . . . Faut inventer.

Their night is not the underground night-world of Djuna Barnes or Marie-Claire

Blais, nor of the creatures that inhabit the wilderness. Instead, the boys, by performing their own secret rituals for the "Black Goddess," Satan, or their courtly ladies, entering a "haunted house," slipping through the night to spy on their neighbours' drinking parties, give free rein to their fantasies and begin that long descent into the self, apparently necessary to adolescent creative geniuses. Yet Soucy is more successful in describing the burlesque *soirées* of the frustrated and comic inhabitants of the *rang* and the boys' preoccupation with sex than in portraying the artist as a young boy. As he resorts neither to irony and therefore distance nor to a complex lyrical probing, Soucy does not always succeed in creating a plausible adolescent mind.

Although the blurb on the back cover suggests that the novel might be a political allegory I think that is an exaggeration of Soucy's theme of the perniciousness and necessity of "la rêve." As Rémi reflects:

Tout le monde rêve . . . Pourquoi les adultes abandonnent-ils leurs rêves à la première difficulté, pourquoi n'ont-ils pas le courage de les défendre, la volonté de les réaliser coûte que coûte?

The Savard père, an ineffectual dreamer (practically a stereotype father in Quebec novels) who fails to draw sustenance from his land; the priest, a dreamer of grand schemes and possible pederast; Sonia, reluctantly tied to family and endless winter nights (a modern Maria Chapdelaine), who dreams of poetry and adventure; and Rémi, himself, a saner, if less precocious and talented and Machiavellian version of the adolescent heroes and heroines of Marie-Claire Blais, Anne Hébert, Réjean Ducharme, Jacques Poulin, are characters frequently encountered in Quebec fiction. Therefore, *Les Chevaliers* is not a political allegory, but a "condition of Quebec" novel with the adolescent hero representing the struggle to shrug



off an ignoble past, to overcome the betrayal of dream by adults (the previous generations), and to accede to a dream of self.

Using a conventional narrative form, Soucy adopts what has become a practicable use of *joual* — for dialogue only (I have no idea whether he successfully recreates the dialect of Abitibi). Pure French is reserved for descriptions and for Rémi's interior reflections. Occasionally self-consciously written, sentimental, with a predictable narrative outcome, Soucy's novel is soothingly satisfying and more importantly, begins that difficult task of drawing the reader into the world of his characters' lives, a world one leaves with reluctance, upon closing the book.

KATHY MEZEI

## LE REGNE DU SCORPION

ROGER FOURNIER, *Le Cercle des arènes*. Albin Michel, n.p.

MONIQUE JEANNOTTE, *Le Vent n'a pas d'écho*. Editions du Blé, \$8.50.

ANDRÉ VANASSE, *La Saga des Lagacé*. Libre Expression, n.p.

THE GRAVEST CRIME a contemporary Québec author can commit in the eyes of his critics is, it seems, not to be a stylist — i.e., to relinquish the challenge of experimental language and genre and revert (or should one say regress?) to traditional realism. Roger Fournier, author of numerous novels — the best known perhaps being *Moi mon corps mon âme Montréal etc.* (1974) — has been consistently chastized by Québec reviewers for his repetitive combination of sensationalist eroticism and conservative narrative. Classified by Victor-Lévy Beaulieu as a "p'tit [Henry] Miller" (*Le Devoir*, 16 décembre 1972), Fournier suffers in a comparison with Hubert Aquin, for instance, in

whose work eroticism is so strongly integrated into a self-reflexive text as to function as a figure of writing and reading itself. It should come as no surprise then that Québec critics react with irritation to the vogue Fournier has enjoyed in France since the publication of *Les Cornes sacrées* with Albin Michel, a vogue confirmed by the Prix France-Canada awarded to his most recent novel, *Le Cercle des arènes*. As in the case of Marie-Claire Blais's *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* (recipient of both the Prix France-Québec and the Prix Médicis), reviewers like Reginald Martel in *La Presse* and Jean Basile in *Le Devoir* feel that France identifies today's literary scene in Québec with the wrong books; that is, with books tending to perpetuate French myths about the presumable intellectual state of its former colony. Whereas Blais's novel was accused of solidifying folkloric — if somewhat perverted — notions of the French-Canadian family, Fournier's *Le Cercle des arènes* comes under attack for suggesting to French readers that it represents a sensual revolution à la D. H. Lawrence without, however, committing itself to an epistemological revolt at the same time.

It is easy to see why *Le Cercle des arènes* should have stirred such annoyance among its Québec reviewers. It is a conservatively presented story of a young man by the name of Sébastien who, while in Paris, runs out of money, cables to his father in Canada to lend him some, and instead of simply receiving a cheque, finds "Papa" himself standing on his doorstep. Father and son then embark upon an effort of "rapprochement," not an easy task because Sébastien — an illegitimate child — has grown up with his mother. The plot thickens when a young woman joins the couple for a car-drive through southern France; there is erotic tension aplenty with Sébastien suffering through every imaginable Freudian com-

plex in his attempt to monopolize his father. The story ends in the "cercle des arènes" in Orange; watching a bull-fight, the threesome presumably resolve their psychological problems.

*Le Cercle des arènes* addresses itself to three themes: the decadence of France (*vs.* the innocence of Québec), the decadence of a womanizing father (*vs.* the innocence of a son), and female sensuality as both a catalyst for and reconciliation of all psychological (and national) conflict. It would take considerable virtuosity on the author's part to salvage these more than outworn themes from banality, and Fournier does not succeed in convincing the reader that they deserve further attention. His treatment of the father-son relationship elicited an ironical "Mon Dieu, est-ce possible, on ne crie plus maman. La littérature québécoise semble avoir fait un pas" from Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska (*Le Devoir*, 17 avril 1982), while Sébastien's father's drunken speech on female power has not the slightest bearing on his behaviour toward "les femelles," as he likes to call them.

If *Le Cercle des arènes* because of its naïveté makes somewhat embarrassing reading, Monique Jeannotte's *Le Vent n'a pas d'écho* leaves one speechless; are we back in the days of the historical novel and the *roman du terroir*? Set, for the most part, in a Québec village during the 1860's and after, Jeannotte's novel tells the story of Marie-Claire whose father forbids her to marry her love Adhémar at the age of fifteen. She moves west with her motherless family, writes letters to her lover (they are lost), he writes letters to her (they too are lost), she returns thirteen years later to find — surprise! — Adhémar married, although (as he deserves) miserably so. The narrative contains numerous regionalist terms and syntactic peculiarities painstakingly glossed in footnotes, in the best tradition of the kind of folkloric writing the writers of the Quiet

Revolution objected so strongly to. The book is out of time and out of place, without being able to claim the saving grace of parody.

No greater contrast could be imagined to the two novels reviewed above than André Vanasse's *La Saga des Lagacé*. A first novel, *La Saga* is an intelligent, amusing fantasy, very much a literary — that is, allusive — narrative that reminds one of Vanasse's usual occupation as a critic. The Lagacé clan, consisting of father Samuel, mother Rose-Aimée, and their children Alexis, Bertrand, Cybèle, and Emile, live in a house as eccentric in looks as its inhabitants are in behaviour. Gaston Bachelard's spirit seems to hover over scenes describing Samuel all but destroying his family's domestic life by throwing everything — furniture, houseware, and the baby — out of the window, the same Samuel building a mushroom-shaped tower for his writer-son Emile (a latter-day Nelligan), and green-eyed Cybèle ascending her very own staircase to her room.

As the house provides a precariously stable frame for the Lagacé family to live in, the clan itself maintains a modicum of bourgeois respectability in their retiring mother, a nun manquée, and in Alexis, a wealthy dealer in men's ties. Both, however, are helpless against the more eccentric members of the family, like Bertrand who melts down his mother's jewellery, almost blows up the house, and gets his rich brother to finance his schemes. Bertrand is fascinated with water (another Bachelardian phenomenon), perhaps the most appropriate medium for the Lagacés's amorphous world; among his more spectacular (if imagined) feats is the conversion of all water supplied by Hydro-Québec into oxygen. All of Bertrand's projects come to nothing, however; despairing, he drowns himself by jumping off a bridge. Cybèle, his sister, seems more successful. Her liquid eyes

open into an entrance to a phantasmagoric not a scientific world; her iris draws those who look at her into their personal and collective past and sends them on journeys through their body molecules. Emile, the writer, maintains a tellingly tentative connection with "reality," by peeping through the cracks in his floor and fantasizing wildly about Cybèle's body. From Emile's perspective, *La Saga des Lagacé* may be read as an allegory of a writer's situation in Québec, perched precariously atop his country's changing traditions and waiting for the birth of its identity in the shape of Cybèle's sexless child.

Although Vanasse's themes are not much more original than Fournier's (not to mention Jeannotte's), his presentation of them is sufficiently so. Literary echoes are treated with sophistication and critical distance; oscillating between metaphor and metonymy, they are released from their status as cliché. If the novels reviewed above can be considered at all indicative of fiction-writing in Québec at the moment, one may well ask oneself whether the realist novel has become an impossibility there, objectionable because it confirms a split between form and content no longer legitimate since the moment (in the words with which Vanasse concludes his novel) "où le Québec faisait son entrée dans le règne du Scorpion."

EVA-MARIE KROLLER

## DE LA CHALEUR A L'ENFER

LOUIS CARON, *Le Canard de bois*. Boréal Express, \$12.95.

JACQUES BENOIT, *Gisèle et le serpent*. Libre Expression, \$12.50.

*Le Canard de bois* est le premier volume d'un triptyque qui a pour titre "Les Fils

de la Liberté," série romanesque dont l'action se situe à l'époque des Patriotes.

Déjà dans *L'emmitouflé*, Louis Caron faisait un parallèle entre deux personnages et deux époques. Toutefois, dans *L'emmitouflé*, le narrateur se contentait de s'identifier à son oncle, sans entrer dans des détails sur ses expériences personnelles. Dans *Le Canard de bois*, le récit des aventures de Hyacinthe Belle-rose, en 1837, et celui de l'initiation à la vie de Bruno Bellerose, son arrière-petit-fils, en 1935, s'entrecoupent d'un bout à l'autre de l'ouvrage. A mesure que Hyacinthe se libère du passé pour s'engager dans le présent, Bruno vainc une à une ses multiples peurs — peur de la nuit, peur du patron, peur de compagnons brutaux, peur de la femme, peur de la mort — et devient un homme. Malheureusement, l'adolescent ne réussit pas à nous émouvoir autant que Hyacinthe et les personnages si vivants qui gravitent autour de lui. Le monde de Bruno et ceux qui le peuplent sont moins intéressants, moins convaincants. Caron l'a sans doute senti puisqu'il accorde moins de place aux aventures de Bruno qu'à celles de Hyacinthe. Et si la structure du roman en est quelque peu déséquilibrée, il ne faut pas trop s'en plaindre, car c'est toujours à regret que l'on quitte Hyacinthe, ses alliés et même ses ennemis pour revenir à Bruno et à ses frayeurs d'adolescent.

Malgré ses inégalités, *Le Canard de bois* est un beau, un très beau roman, sans doute le plus émouvant que l'on ait jamais écrit sur les événements de 1837. Bien qu'il déclare avoir dépouillé des "piles d'ouvrages" sur l'époque, l'auteur dit aussi qu'il ne vise pas à faire oeuvre d'historien ni à servir de cause politique. L'être qui l'intéresse c'est

le citoyen obscur qui tient la fourche, la faux ou le bâton, qui a faim, qui a froid, qui n'a pas dormi depuis des jours et qui n'a qu'une bien vague notion de l'aventure parfaitement illégale dans laquelle il s'est laissé entraîner au nom de la justice même.

Tel est Hyacinthe Bellerose. Parti, plein d'ardeur pour les Bois Francs avec sa jeune femme, Flavie, il revient dans son village, le cœur brisé. Sur une traîne, il ramène le cadavre de Flavie, tuée par le choléra. La terre, sur laquelle il a trimé pendant cinq ans, a été cédée à la British American Land parce qu'il n'a pu payer les redevances exigées. Tout ce qui lui reste est un petit Irlandais que sa femme et lui ont adopté pour remplacer leur enfant mort-né. Hyacinthe est mal reçu au village où l'amour de Flavie lui a fait des ennemis. Ils se sont d'ailleurs mariés sans le consentement de leurs parents ou du curé en se déclarant mari et femme au cours d'une messe. D'autre part, abruti par trop de souffrances, Hyacinthe ne seconde guère son père et ses frères qui peinent du matin au soir sans parvenir à payer le cens au seigneur anglais. Ils sont exploités par Smith, le marchand anglais, qui leur paye un prix dérisoire le bois dont ils ont eux-mêmes besoins et la glace qu'ils découpent péniblement à même le fleuve. De crainte de perdre leur terre et d'être chassés de leur maison, les paysans se soumettent. Mais Hyacinthe est d'une autre trempe. Il refuse de courber l'échine devant les maîtres anglais et leurs acolytes, dont le notaire et le curé sont les plus dévoués. Il trouve d'ailleurs une alliée en Marie Moitié. La belle Métisse, courageuse et généreuse, finira par prendre la place de Flavie dans le cœur de Hyacinthe. Lorsqu'il a fini de sculpter le canard de bois — celui dont Bruno méritera d'hériter, lorsqu'il aura surmonté sa peur — il est libéré de l'emprise de la morte et devient l'amant de Marie, à qui il offre le canard. En même temps, il prend la défense des victimes de l'injustice et de l'arrogance anglaises. Ainsi, cet homme qui ne se mêle pas de politique, qui n'y comprend d'ailleurs goutte, prendra, malgré lui, une part active aux événements de 1837, lorsqu'il verra les siens dépossédés de leur terre et chassés

de leur demeure. Hyacinthe Bellerose ne se révolte pas contre un régime; il se rebelle contre toute forme d'injustice, fût-elle divine.

Plusieurs facteurs contribuent à la réussite de ce roman grouillant de vie. Louis Caron possède à fond l'art de conter: aucune fausse note dans ce style simple et direct qui va droit au but. Partout, le ton est juste, qu'il s'agisse de description ou de dialogues. Mais c'est surtout dans la peinture des personnages que l'auteur excelle. Hyacinthe et Marie sont criants de vérité; ceux qui les entourent, même s'ils ne jouent qu'un rôle effacé, sont aussi profondément humains. D'ailleurs, il n'y a guère de méchants dans *Le Canard de bois*. Même le seigneur Cantlie et son homme d'affaires, le notaire Plessis, ne sont pas dépourvus de sensibilité. Sans doute l'abbé Mailloux fait-il beaucoup de mal, mais c'est qu'il est ignorant et qu'il a peur. Car si les méchants sont rares dans le roman, en revanche, les faibles y sont légion: c'est la peur qui fait que de pauvres êtres se soumettent, sans se rebeller, aux pires injustices et souvent, c'est aussi la peur qui pousse les maîtres à commettre ces mêmes injustices.

Louis Caron a voulu offrir à son lecteur "un bouquet d'humanité" et il y a certes réussi. La sympathie qu'il ressent pour ses personnages est communicative: il se dégage du *Canard de bois* une profonde chaleur humaine.

Dans *Gisèle et le serpent*, en revanche, il s'agit plutôt de chaleur démoniaque. Jacques Benoit a toujours eu le goût des personnages bizarres et des situations insolites. Dès *Jos Carbone*, il peignait des êtres mystérieux, apparemment sans passé, vivant au fond des bois et esclaves d'instincts brutaux. Mais il réussissait à rendre ces personnages étranges à la fois convaincants et émouvants. Dans *Gisèle et le serpent*, il outrepassa les bornes. Sans doute ne cherche-t-il pas à raconter une histoire vraisemblable; en fait, une atmos-

phère de rêve, ou plutôt de cauchemar, règne à travers tout le roman. Sur la couverture du livre, nous lisons d'ailleurs que Gisèle est née d'un rêve qu'a fait Benoit:

L'héroïne en était une femme et il lui arrivait une de ces aventures comme il ne s'en voit que dans les rêves. Je décidai de lui faire quitter le monde d'où elle était issue pour le faire entrer dans la réalité. Je la baptisai Gisèle, et aussitôt elle se mit à vivre à mes côtés. . . . Dangereuse et fascinante comme toutes les femmes, imprévisible, capable de tout. Un vrai serpent.

Et il est vrai qu'au début du roman, la mystérieuse Gisèle est captivante. On comprend que le docteur Rabouin soit tombé amoureux d'elle. Mais elle a de si déplorables fréquentations qu'on cesse bientôt d'être fasciné. Car Gisèle est éprise d'un serpent nommé Tournoukriel — Toutou pour les intimes. Freud n'étant jamais bien loin lorsqu'il est question de serpents, Toutou remplace avantageusement un mari peu ardent. Après tout, si un ours peut procurer l'extase (cf. Marian Engel), pourquoi pas un serpent? Mais contrairement à ses confrères reptiliens, Tournoukriel n'est pas un simple suppôt de Satan; il est le diable en personne. Grâce à lui, Gisèle acquiert le don d'ubiquité et la faculté de se transformer en "rampante bête." Ainsi, elle voit tout, elle entend tout et se hâte d'envenimer — c'est le cas de le dire — tout ce qu'elle a appris afin de pourvoir mieux nuire à son entourage. Engagée par Radio Canada, elle obtient toutes les promotions rêvées pour elle et pour ses amants, car Tournoukriel ne suffit pas à la brûlante Gisèle. Elle confie ses expériences à un cahier noir mystérieusement tombé entre les mains de Rabouin. Après une série d'aventures "diaboliques," le malheureux médecin se voit forcé de devenir l'assistant du docteur Barbin, alias Tournoukriel, le démon n'en étant pas à une transformation près. Ce ne sont pas non plus les idées sinistres qui lui font défaut; les malheureux pa-

tients qui ont l'imprudence de le consulter subissent d'atroces opérations dont ils se réveillent l'oreille à la place du nez, les jambes à la place des bras, ou victimes d'autres changements de cette espèce. Après les expériences les plus abracadabrantes le héros parvient à s'extriquer de l'emprise des démons et le roman se termine de façon heureuse — il s'agit après tout, d'un ouvrage humoristique — et inattendue.

On ne peut certes reprocher à Jacques Benoit de manquer d'imagination; peut-être, justement, en a-t-il un peu trop. Il est vrai que la démonologie est dans le vent; mais même les fantaisies démoniaques devraient avoir des limites. Sans doute le roman montre-t-il que, si les entreprises du diable réussissent bien ici-bas, c'est qu'il trouve parmi les hommes un terrain propice. Celui de Radio Canada, selon l'auteur, convient tout spécialement aux exploits de Tournoukriel, qui semble aussi se sentir à l'aise parmi les médecins. Mais l'auteur n'aurait certainement pas inventé une histoire aussi absurde dans le seul but de décocher quelques flèches. Il est probable qu'il cherche tout simplement à s'amuser et à amuser le lecteur. Et le roman contient, à l'occasion, des passages désopilants. Mais, en général, on n'a nulle envie de rire de toutes ces aventures morbides racontées avec un détachement voisin du cynisme. Que Gisèle, déguisée en serpent, vienne semer la panique parmi des gens compassés, voilà qui peut prêter à rire, mais la souffrance physique, la maladie, le suicide et la mort n'amuse guère que les sadiques. Benoit cherche à être drôle à tout prix, et c'est là un excellent moyen de cesser de l'être. La vulgarité et le mauvais goût ne sont jamais excusables, et il y a dans *Gisèle et le serpent* beaucoup de vulgarité et beaucoup de mauvais goût. Peut-être est-il des rêves qu'il voudrait mieux garder pour soi.

P. COLLET

## WRITING ABOUT WRITING

DAVID STAINES, ed., *The Callaghan Symposium*. Univ. of Ottawa Press, \$6.00.

KEN MITCHELL, *Sinclair Ross: A Reader's Guide*. Coteau Books, \$7.00.

DOUGLAS DAYMOND and LESLIE MONKMAN, eds., *Canadian Novelists and the Novel*. Borealis, \$23.95; pa. \$15.95.

*The Callaghan Symposium* is part of the "Re-Appraisals: Canadian Writers" series held at the University of Ottawa each year, and is the outcome of the university's seventh annual symposium on April 24-25, 1980. The yearly fest has already given us valuable volumes on Grove, Klein, Lampman, Pratt, Crawford, and D. C. Scott; the Morley Callaghan collection might even be better.

Unfortunately, it starts off badly. Although editor David Staines's introduction is competent, despite its overestimation of Callaghan's influence on younger writers, the first essay by Leon Edel, "Literature and Journalism: The Visible Boundaries," is a chatty ramble. Edel does make some pointed remarks about the anti-intellectualism of the press, but does not give the young Callaghan enough credit for consciously choosing (as opposed to being brainwashed by Hemingway or indoctrinated by the *Star*) his fine, skeletal style.

David Aaron's "Morley Callaghan and the Great Depression," Patricia Morley's "Magician and Illusionist," and Barry Cameron's "Rhetorical Tradition and the Ambiguity of Callaghan's Narrative Rhetoric," are by contrast well-researched and for the most part solid papers. Aaron notes Callaghan's concern for the individual — not "social types" — and provides an interesting discussion of *Such Is My Beloved*, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and *Heaven's My Destination* in arguing Callaghan's aversion to easy Marxist answers. Morley looks at Callaghan's novels of the

seventies — an area where more work needs to be done — and offers some shrewd insights into the much underrated *A Fine and Private Place*. In a very scholarly fashion, Cameron argues that Callaghan's fictions are in fact parables, though perhaps doing an injustice to the complexity of Callaghan's characters; for Cameron they are simply "principles of behavior."

The real gems in the collection belong to Ray Ellenwood, Barbara Godard, and especially Larry McDonald. Ellenwood's unlikely "Morley Callaghan, Jacques Ferron, and the Dialectic of Good and Evil" is one of those papers which is actually interesting to read from beginning to end. Taking note of their obvious differences, Ellenwood proceeds to point out really striking similarities between Callaghan and Ferron in both Catholic vision and symbolism, concluding that Dante might be a more productive approach to Callaghan than Hemingway. Godard's "Across Frontiers: Callaghan in French" (added after the symposium) is a painstaking exposé of Callaghan's frequent misrepresentation — in style, emphasis, even tense — by translators seeking to add to or interpret the text. McDonald's "The Civilized Ego and its Discontents: A New Approach to Callaghan," destroys many of the hackneyed myths about Callaghan's work and solidly locates him as a modern writer who is alive to the discoveries of Freud and Darwin, sensitive to social injustice, and perhaps more influenced by Mencken than by Jacques Maritain.

The panel discussion with Glenn Clever, Brandon Conron (whose observations are always insightful), Donald Stephens, and David Helwig is enlivened by a number of Helwig's candid remarks about how bad he thinks Callaghan is as a writer. *The Callaghan Symposium* is concluded with David Staines's helpful bibliography of Callaghan's publications, although Staines might have been more

emphatic in recommending David Latham's excellent "A Callaghan Log," published in the Spring 1980 *Journal of Canadian Studies*.

Ken Mitchell's *Sinclair Ross: A Reader's Guide* is a difficult book to make out. Certainly the lucidity of its prose is refreshing, which results in the plot summaries being very good reads. The lack of a more disciplined approach, however, is also the book's most glaring weakness. It is not enough that Mitchell is quickly given to hyperbole ("giant," "astonishing," "No one has yet come so close to divining the truth at the centre of prairie life"), but his plot summaries are rarely more than that: rehashing in abbreviated form what Ross has done better in the original. Particularly disturbing is Mitchell's announcement on the second page of the introduction that we should look up Lorraine McMullen's text on Ross if we want an "excellent" scholarly analysis. Mitchell explains, "This book is for a more general audience, one which may be only vaguely aware that the Canadian plains have produced in James Sinclair Ross a literary artist of international stature." But two questions immediately arise: (1) who in a "general audience" would possibly buy a book on Sinclair Ross?—it's not exactly vacation reading; and (2) is Ross's work so voluminous and/or complex that a Reader's Guide is necessary?

If we leave these questions aside and look at the book on Mitchell's terms, we find he is not always faithful to his own purpose. With *As For Me and My House* Mitchell leaves his safe insights behind to indulge in a little scholarly speculation. He argues that Mrs. Bentley is a good deal bitchier than even the conventional view would have her, and that Philip is not so much the ineffectual dotard he so clearly seems to be, but a tragically henpecked, frustrated artist who deserves the bulk of our sympathy. Mitchell is quite

right to draw our attention to the occasional unreliability of the narration, but it shouldn't take a feminist to point out the obvious: Mrs. Bentley has sacrificed her own art in order to worry over and pamper a husband incessantly given to sulking; she has been made to feel guilty because Philip is too immature to accept responsibility for his own decisions and actions; and, lastly, she loves the man enough to adopt his own out-of-wedlock son with the incredibly naive hope that this plus a change in scene will improve their marriage. If anything, she might be better advised to get out of the relationship while she can. Fortunately, *Sinclair Ross: A Reader's Guide* concludes with two of Ross's own stories, "No Other Way" and "Spike."

Douglas Daymond and Leslie Monkman have put together a very intriguing collection in *Canadian Novelists and the Novel*. Bringing to the task a wide reading in Canadian Literature, already reflected in their two-volume anthology, *Literature in Canada* (1978), Daymond and Monkman have assembled "a selection of views by major English-Canadian novelists of the last one hundred and fifty years concerning the theory and practice of their art." The result is very good. The book is divided into five sections: The Pre-Confederation Novel, The Novel in the New Dominion, The Rise of Realism, Regionalism and Nationalism, and The Contemporary Novel. The last section might have been more interestingly divided into the contemporary and post-modernist novel, but there is a bonus of sorts in that each section is spiced with an essay by the leading critic (according to the editors) of the period.

The result is a collection full of surprises—how early the call for a native literature began, how good William Arthur Deacon and Desmond Pacey really could be—as well as things we have come to expect from our best writers:

insight, ironic humour, and complaints about lack of recognition and royalties. Of course, everyone will quibble over who's in and who's been left out — by my own count at least eight could be dropped and a Melville or Twain wouldn't have hurt the nineteenth century — but the book as a whole is large in its breadth, entertaining in its reading, and helpful for anyone interested in an insider's view of the development of Canadian Literature. It is regrettable that the text has not been better produced — the cover is unimaginative, one page is missing, and the paper could be upgraded — because the content is well worthy of it.

DAVID O'ROURKE

## SANEST INSANITY

HEATHER CADSBY, *Traditions*. Fiddlehead, n.p.  
A. F. MORITZ, *Black Orchid*. Dreadnaught,  
\$5.95.

CHRISTOPHER WISEMAN, *The Upper Hand*.  
Enitharmon/NeWest, \$10.95; pa. \$5.95.

ERIN MOURE, *The Whisky Vigil*. Harbour,  
\$3.95.

TOM WAYMAN, *The Nobel Prize Acceptance  
Speech*. Thistledown, \$14.00; pa. \$6.95.

HEATHER CADSBY'S FIRST BOOK, *Traditions*, is one of technique applied to truth. She is a poet who holds with no school or fashion. Her perceptions are individual, often unexpected, both uncomfortable and heartening. In particular poems, Cadsby has an acute ear for the conversational phrase that rings through like a refrain. There is, as well, a narrative interest in *Traditions*. You read the book somewhat like biography, because you sniff immediately that real life exists between the covers, transformed yes, but still recognizable. Blood beats and nerves flutter. As reader, you are invited to interact and identify.

Cadsby lets personal pain through; though she can be full of self-irony, she

doesn't let it obliterate intimate disappointment. "At a Party" has the woman dressed like "boiling understatement," playing "a question machine" because "It's my main means," and finally heading "for the safety of bores." This poet traps the stinging inadequacies of social intercourse and pins them like Prufrock wriggling on a wall: "I'm prepared to kill someone / but I might make a friend." Since Cadsby's needlepoint screen is of the ordinary (if not plainly) domestic life and since her technique is not a pyrotechnical one, it *can* fall flat. The risk is endemic. However, most poems pulsate quietly, revealingly. "Stones" is a gift of a poem, about a daughter who saves pebbles, treasures "as closed as she is," arranging them around her "like a fortress to keep out fate." The sympathy between mother and child is full of knowledge and understanding — a twinge of regret, a sigh of acceptance.

Nevertheless, Cadsby is not simply a poet of gentle gestures. Her poems often harden at the edge with anger and frustration. The signature piece might well be "Hungers": "Dull things hidden in underbrush / mysteries that nudge and fidget"; or "The Savage Tradition" in which the freezer's contents become "A whole week cold as ice."

On quite a different poetic dimension, although with the same potential for concern, is A. F. Moritz's *Black Orchid*. For Moritz, poetry is pure: "The word most nearly approaches its own reality." The nature of poetry is not so much information as sacramental," maintains the poet. If Cadsby's poems breathe biography, Moritz's glow prophetically. His work is both personal and visionary. The book's Introduction and Afterword provide a context both necessary and deserved for Moritz's "pure image" explorations. He is after "the perfect metaphor that can temporarily substitute for heaven"; he succeeds in taking "the insufficient ma-



terials of the physical world" to "literally remake them into something numinous." According to Moritz, the poet must retrieve the phenomenal and the personal world from an insidiously seductive technological environment that is moving rapidly from the peripheries to the centre of our culture. Because poetry proceeds through "experiencing and testing experience," it can accept no second-hand formulation." Moritz's poetry, difficult and beautiful as it is, justifies this serious moral and philosophical questing through the deadly attractions of modern life.

In his uncompromising work, there is the huge tremor of Blake. The best one can do is to quote a few of his positions. From "Fields in the Grass":

the light comes here  
not as a way but as a hand that gently  
presses the body back in the grass,  
slips as heat through the skin. . . .

Often, there is the uncanny shock of recognition, as in "Modern Love," a phenomenon "so refining / its heat drifts far from the fire." Moritz can be a tortured Romantic in the manner of Dylan Thomas. Again from "Fields in the Air" and its cloud eulogies, we read: "And the young gods / would return from the boiling loam as crystal flowers / the first warm day, when the fountains are turned on." Yet his sensuality can be precise on an icy grasp. From "Ulysses en Route," we are made to feel the sun "falling like a drop of lead into the brain." In one mood poem, Moritz immortalizes the character of annual dejection: "February was my mentor in misery, / that hollow pamphlet from yellow skies, / basin of dead sparrows."

Christopher Wiseman's *The Upper Hand* is a reticent book which emerges, one feels, from a reticent sensibility. Most of the poems seem born of return — to a place of former life, in this case, England. No longer green and scepter'd, the isle, a point of generation, has also become the

focus of tense, restrained resolution. In "Flamborough Head," the mind, though "starved and landlocked," survives. Cemeteries and memories of war are visited and revisited with numbing emotion. It's as though, like a tied cottage, the poet cannot detach his own life from the great presences of earth and stone so pregnant with personal and global history. Those of us who are British-born will recognize the dilemma. We find ourselves full of feeling, but silenced because there is too much to say, and we know it has all been said.

High on Devon cliffs with his mother, the poet is strong, "first born," whereas all too frequently, the quality (though often subtly exquisite, as in "Rivaulx Abbey") is infected by a quiet melancholy, the premature disappointment surrounding the stillborn. You expect more, since fine craft and genuine perceptions abound, but the poems are too predictable, still half buried and yearning for release. In a sense, lack of opportunity is Wiseman's theme. Where is the illumination, the transformation that should be waiting like some prize at the end of a contest? When Wiseman does find the right switch, he can both soar and dive. In "The Field," man tells boy how he witnessed the Lysander's crash that killed two men. When son asks where the hole is, the poem answers:

I drive on,  
hunched tightly around  
that scarred place inside me,  
cratered, still smoking,  
that I can never show him.

Wiseman's vague poetic personality springs to life on the sharp rocks of real subjects; poems like "The Assassin," "Three Journeys From Munich" have an urgency. The poet's character sketches, in "The Major," for instance, are also vivid. Overall, nevertheless, this poet's England is a place of unrelieved, nostalgic yearning.

Erin Mouré's *The Whisky Vigil*, while not quite written in an alcoholic stupor, is as her publisher puts it "organized around that theme." A character moves through geography; reads a letter "over and over in different parts of the room, as if / that could make you speak louder"; becomes alternately Jekyll and Hyde. Although there is an astute sensitivity at work to make these poems, the experience from which they derive may be too limited, too pathetic for anything but its own stubborn, untranslatable reality. There are moments of unrelenting anguish: "she has no more sentences, / she puts her fingers, blunt hammers, into the twisted lonely / holes of trees." Yet such lines as "The traffic spins thru her" or "Her whiskey rattles in her arms" can take you only so far. The process seems sad and futile, if not lugubrious — wrapping a coffin in Christmas paper. One or two poems become valiant, even visionary. "Whisky" puts much into perspective: "Your head a stone dull and uncut . . . The old rope of / fatigue tied thru you." So does "Tricks," with its awful emptiness: "I feel I am in the world and there is no god in it with me." Over a whole book, however, the subject proves too maudlin for the art to redeem.

Tom Wayman's *Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech* is a selection of the poet's best wry observations on the doings of one irresistible Wayman, "the lovable everyman . . . who is caught up in the complexities and absurdities of an ordinary world." His poems shower charm as generously and gently as April, while reaping the full advantage of the picaresque in bemusement and curiosity, coaxed slyly forward. With coy graphics and straight captions, we follow Wayman through the vicissitudes of love and work and travel to realize that a little bit of him lurks teasingly in most of us, rendering a literary life the sanest insanity of them all.

PATRICIA KEENEY SMITH

## IN MINOR KEY

PAMELA BANTING, *Running Into the Open*. Turnstone, n.p.

BRIAN BARTLETT, *Cattail Week*. Villeneuve, n.p.

ENDRE FARKAS, *From Here To Here*. The Muses' Company, \$4.00.

ORIN MANITT, *Adam 2000*. Broken Images, n.p.

MARY MELFI, *A Queen is Holding a Mummified Cat*. Guernica Editions, n.p.

A. F. MORITZ, *Signs and Certainties*. Villeneuve, n.p.

GEORGE MORRISSETTE, *Finding Mom at Eaton's*. Turnstone, \$4.00.

ROBYN SARAH, *The Space Between Sleep and Waking*. Villeneuve, n.p.

KENNETH SHERMAN, *The Cost of Living*. Mosaic Press/Valley Editions, \$5.95.

ANDREW WREGGITT, *Riding to Nicola Country*. Harbour, \$3.95.

IN HIS INTRODUCTORY NOTE to *Canadian Poets 1960-1973*, a listing of poetry published over a period of slightly more than a decade, George Woodcock notes the absence of "the high craftsmanly standards of earlier small presses" and then acknowledges the "surprisingly large proportion" of very good verse. The present gathering of ten volumes, several by poets who have published previous collections, suggests a significant improvement in the quality of production and design by small presses and offers a broad range of poetry which is, for the most part, neither abysmally bad nor startlingly good.

Kenneth Sherman's *The Cost of Living* is among the most interesting and promising of these collections. Although his control over his material is uneven in places, and although several poems seem to lack sharp focus and imaginative intensity, Sherman's best work reveals an effective balance of sense and sensibility as well as a disciplined and unpretentious use of language. Some of the most compelling and precise poems in this collection offer fresh perspectives on figures and motifs from the *Old Testament* — "How the

Snake Got Shafted," "Cain," "Joseph" — or focus attention on the Holocaust as in "Gutenberg":

In the beginning was Gutenberg  
yet the words have brought us here  
to this godless gate  
where the chimneys' tongues  
lap sense from the sky.

These lines from "Lot's Wife" reveal something of the vivid and direct quality of Sherman's style:

Do not look back  
woman without a name.  
Do not look back  
to where the souls curl quick  
like scorched leaves  
like witch's shoes  
upon the jealous tongues of flames.

Andrew Wreggitt's *Riding to Nicola Country* concentrates on the social landscape of British Columbia's southern Interior — "an Indian woman / with an unborn child," mineworkers "Bandaged like mummies in greasy work clothes," "Cowboys easing down to small town bars," "Jeanne, the retarded girl / alone against the wall of a country bar," the workers "Slashing trees for the power line / a knife-cut through bush," and Whiskey Bill, "a clever drunk / immune to disease / the fists of policemen." Despair, violence, and physical or mental suffering are frequent themes here, and there is perhaps too little variation in tone. The best poems develop effortlessly through a careful accumulation of details toward conclusions frequently open-ended and resonant. Among the most precise and engaging of these poems are a series of lyrics based on the violent exploits of the notorious McLean Brothers. The sequence ends with these lines:

Hands behind backs  
fingers tightening to triggers  
a memory of soothing metal  
gathering thick in fists  
Hanging from a web  
of January sky  
gaunt bellies tight  
knotted with dreams of revenge.

The poems and prose pieces of Mary Melfi's *A Queen Is Holding a Mummified Cat* are imaginative and surrealistic, employing arresting images and striking juxtapositions. Melfi displays an intensely private imagination and frequently creates a off-from-reality sensation. Her weakest poems strain toward the unusual and falter amidst broken rhythms and prosaic phrasing. Her best poems develop easily, offer satisfying surprises, and reveal a deeply felt sense of alienation and isolation. "On My Raft" suggests the illusive, dreamlike and unpredictable qualities of her work:

On my raft  
I used the arms of a mannikin  
to push myself onwards.

But then my distinction  
took on the shape of a cat

It sits in the bathtub and  
occasionally bleeds for Miss So and so.

*The Space Between Sleep and Waking* by Robyn Sarah is a slim volume of generally quiet and reflective lyrics that range somewhat unevenly from a gentle yet persuasive evocation of a housewife's sense of loneliness and lost opportunity in "Maintenance" —

And it's the  
other one, the one called maintenance,  
I mostly am shouting about.  
I mean the day-to-day,  
that bogs the mind, voice, hands  
with things you couldn't call poems.  
I mean the thread that breaks.  
The dust between  
typewriter keys

— to the jarring, banal, and too personal lines of "Two Sisters": "Her sister. Come all this way and / will go again. Soon. The expense, for / so short a visit." Shallow and trite lines mar a number of these poems, but, at her best, Sarah offers flashes of insight with concrete and uncontrived images and simple detail as in the six lyrics of "The Cyclist Recovers His Cadence":

Somewhere a bicycle wheel  
spins on, up-ended,  
and though you know the trick  
that's kept it going, its oil-smooth  
tickticktick still calibrates  
the space between sleep and waking.

Many poems in A. F. Moritz's *Signs and Certainties* reveal an unsettling uniformity of tone, but this is largely offset by the variety of subject-matter, Moritz's generally clear grasp of rhythm, and the apparent effortlessness with which he manages familiar images in poems such as "Views":

This huge tree: sleeping  
against its truck, we thought  
the stars were its distant berries,  
the sky its foliage, the sun and moon  
a pair of mating birds  
who wove a monotonous chase  
of courtship through its limbs.

On occasion a diffuseness intrudes on these poems, and "Signs and Certainties" reveals the tendency to dissolve into a disappointing flatness:

But if poor in fruit  
she spreads herself with leaves  
and covers the ground with shadows deeper  
than black water, then the straw —  
nothing but chaff — will be pounded  
on the floor with no result.

Despite such lapses, there are interesting and intricate poems in this collection, and Moritz reveals a distinct voice which shows promise of further accomplishment.

Brian Bartlett's *Cattail Week* and Pamela Banting's *Running Into the Open* share a sensitive awareness of nature as well as a capacity for spare and controlled lines and a concern for visual clarity. Both collections, however, are uneven, and many poems lack a consistent imaginative intensity and rhythmic tension. In "Among the Rows at Seven P.M." Bartlett's style is lean and direct —

kneeling in half-light I touch  
tangled roots and weeds,  
worms multiplied by a spade,  
bones of forgotten horses

— and "In Memory of George Frederick Clarke" demonstrates restraint and care in the development of tone and image:

Birchbark canoes in his attic were white  
dreams.  
Spearheads, hatchets and stone bowls  
glimmered under dusted glass.

Unfortunately, these features are not always sustained throughout a poem, and too often, as in "Ribbons of Bark" ("Crimson woodpeckers, none leaders, none led, / knock from your final forest nervously") or "Swamp to Swamp" ("Now in clanging banging darkness / sudden frog voices ring"), his poems lapse into overstatement and prosaic flatness or suddenly jar with dull images and clumsy lines.

Pamela Banting's poetry offers a pleasing variety of subjects and reveals considerable promise, but her writing is at times quite rudimentary and needs more consistent and careful tuning. The poems in *Running Into the Open* range from the moderately pleasing to the plainly mediocre. These lines from "Old Man in the Garden" suggest the flat and awkward syntax that is one of her major weaknesses:

Every three days                      he pumps  
water from the river                      next  
morning he and the hoe  
are at it again

A number of Banting's poems emphasize her engagement with and response to the prairie environment, and in her most successful works such as "The Awakening" and a sequence entitled "The Erotics of Space" natural imagery and stripped syntax are effectively combined to express deeply felt emotion:

beautiful man — who —  
strides — across — earth — sky —  
and — mountain, dance  
green on the earth with me.

A similar tautness and simplicity appears in "Clouds," a poem which perhaps hints

at this poet's only partly successful struggle with her craft:

Clouds like bits of albumen  
thread the sky  
suspend sky in place  
for awhile

and I  
clumsy astronomer using spread —  
eagled words like calipers  
can get a fix on it.

Endre Farkas' *From Here to Here* is the most obviously avant-garde and experimental of these collections. This selection ranges from conventional lyrics to stanzas of prose and works reflecting the influence of sound and concrete poetry. Energy and wit are prominent features of Farkas's style although his effects at times seem forced or too consciously unconventional and contrived. Some poems lack adequate discipline and rely too heavily on repetition and simplistic contrasts, but the strengths frequently outweigh the weaknesses, and this poetry taken as a whole reveals a refreshing range of skills and a kind of vitality apparent in these lines from "That Midnight Jazz":

**O listen!**

hear the kicking into that midnight jazzing  
the drive/  
the drive/  
the drive  
the life in rooming  
house riddles glisten  
like thighs  
bebopping  
improvising

Orin Manitt's *Adam 2000* and George Morrisette's *Finding Mom at Eaton's* are the least satisfying of these collections despite the obvious sincerity of their emotional content. Manitt's twenty lyrics are accompanied by a tedious and pretentious introduction (not, incidentally by Manitt), which lavishes praise on the poet and reminds the reader that "the apparent simplicity of Manitt's poetry obscures the

subtle craftsmanship and superior subtle intelligence displayed at every stage." In fact, there is nothing superior about these poems although they do reveal a concern for tone and an awareness of the importance of precision and economy in the use of language. Regardless of these and other positive features including a mature sense of important themes, there is little that is striking or memorable in these poems. Much the same can be said of *Finding Mom at Eaton's*, a series of poems recounting a man's search for his natural parents and, by implication, his past and a portion of his identity. These are extremely personal statements, and one feels a certain intensity and immediacy despite the flatness of the style; however, the distancing and transformation necessary to elevate art beyond life and the merely personal have not occurred. Morrisette employs a range of forms and rhythms, and the narrative structure is clear, but these poems do not reveal an adequate control of emotion or language and seldom create a sense of depth or resonance.

Many distinct voices can be heard in these volumes, yet none suggests the presence of a major new talent. Most of these poets are capable of satisfying lines or stanzas, and, less frequently, individual poems that are without significant flaws; however, although several show considerable promise and a potential for further development of their craft, few provide evidence of a capacity for major poetic achievement. This present assortment nevertheless emphasizes both the continuing energy of the little presses as well as the variety, range, and potential of many of the poets they are committed to publishing.

DOUGLAS DAYMOND



## PARNASSUS CLEARANCE

KEN NORRIS, *To Sleep, To Love*. Guernica Editions, n.p.

PETER STEVENS, *Coming Back*. Sesame, n.p.

GLEN DEER, *Excuses for Archery*. Longspoon, \$7.00.

EUGENE MACNAMARA, *Forcing the Field*. Sesame, n.p.

DON KERR, *A New Improved Sky*. Coteau Books, \$5.00.

DON DOMANSKI, *War in an Empty House*. Anansi, \$6.95.

J. D. CARPENTER, *Swimming at Twelve Mile*. Penumbra, n.p.

ALL SIGNS INDICATE that this country now has the heaviest concentration of poets the world has yet seen. The greatest blessing to some of them has been finding agencies like the Canada Council which get them on their feet, so to speak — out and about and into print. Gone are the days, apparently, when poets could be born to blush unseen. Meanwhile, back at the little magazines, slim volumes for review have been really piling up. And the worst thing that can befall them, possibly — short of being totally ignored — is to wind up in a kind of spring clearance on Parnassus at the tender or not-so-tender mercies of some unknown reviewer. This has been the fate of the seven gathered here.

Considered as narrative, the pieces which form *To Sleep, To Love* may be said to tell the story of someone in love who suspects at times that he ought not to love, that the facts of his life are not congenial to it, that his interest in verse gets in the way, that his verse will be about love, unsuccessful love, about the violent thoughts it stimulates, about the void it leaves when the object of it is not there and so on, around and around a labyrinth of agonizing convolutions and out suddenly with such a chirrupy conclusion ("The Birds") that we confirm

what has been suspected all along: it is he, not the gods, who has more than a slight addiction to soap opera. Also, the volume arrives trailing clouds of sweet puffery from several quarters — *Quarry* and *The Gazette*, for instance. Such confections notwithstanding, it would be slack not to explain that its many bromides — "Life is but the way we look at it" ("Mountain Outlook") — are often administered with an imagery — "your voice shaped and shaded by the density of telephone wires" ("You Sound Sad Tonight"), the leaves swaying "in the breeze like soft pendulums" ("The Birds") — which ought to serve as a very strong reminder that a yearly check-up with an oculist is not a bad idea.

Along with volumes of completely bad verse there is also another category — a cottage industry practically — with training functions. Through it a tenderfoot poet is given encouragement and a means to practise for future developments. Sometimes one wonders whether it is right to fell the forests for this sort of thing. *Coming Back*, for example, tackles one or two promising ideas, as in "This Hotel Room" and "Metamorphosis at the Construction Site." But the remaining pieces — extremely tedious stuff — almost two dozen of them, draw repeatedly on the same old bag of effects: moaning, shuddering, pattering, fluttering, scuttling, and things that go clink in the night, scenes so fraught with TV horrors, a worry-wart narrator so spooked that even a "hang-nail's a cataclysm." Imagery likewise is overripe, the word choice and observation on which it depends, careless and likely to detach the retina of the mind's eye. But why go on? Simply try bringing these into focus: "the buoys / bobbling on their anchors" ("Driving Through It"), "ankle deep in shards of accusation" ("This pretty pace"), "its surface / scruffed by paws prancing" ("Territory"), "smears / of shit like lonely mushrooms" ("No

Phoenix"), "he [a heron] has waddled awkwardly / through the tall weeds" ("Heron Found and Lost").

*Excuses for Archery* is another book which draws substance and manner from popular TV violence — country and city style — although it is at a more advanced embryonic stage than *Coming Back*. Consider the words *archery* and *poetry* as interchangeable for a moment and the book demonstrates that certain matters are as neatly impaled, occasionally, as one might expect ("Things Given," "Excuses for Archery with Grady," and "The sun plays Painter"). In other places, a skewering takes place, forced and messy ("Hot your blood witch-kid, it's snowing," or "A Few pages from Black Mask"). A comic knack ("In the Plant") and, overall, an aptitude for colloquial lingo — of the tough-guy strain — raise expectations but in the end illuminate little of significance.

Quotations, epigraphs, and other scene-setting paraphernalia serve decoratively maybe, and as security aids no doubt, but as intensifiers in poetry they ought to be used — if at all — sparingly. *Forcing the Field* is cluttered with them, and this is a shame. Some of the pieces stand up well without them. Others, because of all the cryptic signposts (visual aids — well executed — nuggets from Emerson and Kafka and so forth) make for a disheartening game, like a paper chase on a windy day.

*A New Improved Sky* is inspired by two things — a hearty nostalgia for the past, in Saskatoon mainly, and uneasiness about now and what is to come. In both cases the quality of inspiration is slender, strained and trite, the writer having been blinded by items like the demolition of local landmarks, the minutes of committee meetings and the compulsion to recast them in wearisome detail. Several pieces, in fact, would benefit greatly from condensation. But this is not to imply that

the book is a failure as a cultural record, or a failure of love and sincerity (these are all too perfectly obvious), but — an age-old problem — a failure to resolve the difficulty of remaining true to parochial interests and immediate to the world at large. Redeeming lines pop up occasionally ("the building has a flat latex stare" — "Edward Hopper's 'Early Sunday Morning'"); surface accuracy and gusto lend fondness and vitality to some pieces ("Fishing lake ball tournament," "Whatever is . . .") — but the content of this book, overall, is undernourishing.

Together with all the welcome growth of interest in poetry nowadays, there thrives also — particularly among hard-shell artsy types — that deadliest of all cancers, the religion of acceptance: the dogma that anything which fails to add up must be poetry. Thus *War in an Empty House* descends among us already — in its blurbs — a critical success. It would be nice to share the enthusiasm for it, to join those who we learn effervesced over the writer's previous books. It would, indeed, make life easier. But one finds small consonance between all their fizz and pop and the actual contents of this particular commodity. Many of its pieces seem, in fact, merely depictions of either some kind of subconscious activity or some surreal territory where a variety of verbal wallpaper is unwound, resembling here and there Poe-*sans*-horror, Dr. Suess-*sans*-joy, and Salvador Dali-*sans*-humour. Readers who simply find life all too short, and those who prefer their poetry to articulate and make comprehensible what emerges from the subconscious, might like to skip this one.

What ranks *Swimming at Twelve Mile* above the other books examined here is its notably even quality and the poet's — J. D. Carpenter's — eye for striking compositions. There is also resourcefulness with techniques and words — but no excess. Big themes like death and life's iron-

ies are examined alongside the small delights that abound everywhere. A new life of surfaces gives vitality to the book. Readers looking for a bargain should grab this one.

PETER MITCHAM

## EXTREMES

ROBERT WEAVER, ed., *Small Wonders*. CBC, \$9.95.

MARTIN AVERY, *Cottage Gothic*. Oberon, \$15.95; pa. \$7.95.

SMALL WONDERS is a collection of twelve short stories commissioned by the CBC for broadcast and subsequent publication. Perhaps this fact accounts for their technical straightforwardness. These are not experimental or innovative exercises — although their authors are established and frequently innovative writers, who must have been most conscious of the intended original medium and audience for the stories. While relying on strong narrative lines and dramatic incident for the most part, the stories also achieve the economic realization of character and mood which is the essence of fine short story writing.

Robert Weaver's decision to arrange the stories in alphabetical order by the author's names may exacerbate the patchwork quilt effect of the volume. For example, readers are called upon to make a rather abrupt change of gears if they move directly into "The Year of the Revolution" by Alden Nowlan after reading Joyce Marshall's "The Case of Cassandra Dop." Both stories have academic settings, but their similarity ends. The former is an ironical look at the fate of those revolutionaries who occupied administrative offices in the cause of social justice in the late 1960's. Nowlan's satire is, in fact, rather heavy-handed despite some neat thrusts. Professor Rosscoe is the right-wing antagonist of Professor Sandoval (who had the misfortune to marry "just

before legal marriage became unfashionable") :

Professor Sandoval . . . predicted that one day soon Professor Rosscoe would be hung from a lamppost.

Professor Rosscoe's disgust at Professor Sandoval's having said "hung" when he ought to have said "hanged" was militated by his pleasure in the prediction. "He says they're going to hang me," he reported happily to his wife.

"Dear me," she said, and went on preparing their dinner.

"Is that all you have to say?" Professor Rosscoe said. "The man says he is going to hang me."

"Oh, I'm sure the President would never allow that," she said. "After all, Professor Sandoval doesn't even have tenure."

The contrast between this and "The Case of Cassandra Dop" is extreme: Marshall's story centres on the reaction of a colleague to the gradual unfolding of the sordid details of Cassandra Dop's murder by her sadistic boy friend. As a policeman questions her, he reveals a self-loathing in Cassandra her colleague dismissed too easily. The colleague's reactions progress from impatience through shock explanations for sudden death (a hit-run driver, an intruder) through horror to exhausted outrage at being called upon to deal with identification of the body and with the knowledge that she failed to recognize any signs of Cassandra's dangerous distress.

The last story in the collection, Helen Weinzwieg's "Causation," concerns another twisted relationship, but despite the title, her characters' motives do not ring as true. Both the virile young piano tuner seeking the easy life and the aging former opera singer who takes him into her home are stock characters, playing out an ugly game, but one which is not really interesting to anyone but themselves. On the other hand, both Jane Rule and Kent Thompson are successful in developing empathy with the central characters of their stories which reveal the low-key



pleasures that relieve life's numbing oppression. Margaret Atwood's "The Sin-Eater" is the richest of these stories in its originality and in its challenge. One wonders whether listeners were able to comprehend fully the narrator's shifts backwards and forwards in time and from reality to dream, but for a reader it is a story to be savoured, read slowly and re-read. W. P. Kinsella's "The Night Manny Mota Tied the Record" is in the vein of *Death Takes a Holiday* or *Heaven Can Wait*, but set in a baseball stadium where a fan is offered the chance to take a baseball hero's place in death. Or is he? It is simply good fun to read.

As a volume, *Small Wonders* is not a coherent collection: it is too varied in theme, tone, mood to achieve any sort of unity. While it may be rather indigestible if indulged in at one sitting, it is, nevertheless, enjoyable light reading for odd moments.

In contrast, Martin Avery's *Cottage Gothic* is an intricately interwoven collection of seven short stories. In the last three stories, he comments on his perceptions of himself as a writer and on the state of Canadian literature. As he does so, he answers some of the questions readers may have asked about the earlier stories but raises many more. The result is that the reader returns to the beginning of the volume looking for more clues. An example: In the second story, "Hockey Night in Canada, Jr.," the narrator describes an encounter with former hockey teammate whom he calls Hockey Night in Canada, Jr. The hockey hero's fate, mysterious death at 21, after achieving fame as a player and corruption by that fame, is revealed in the last section of a rather enigmatic story. In "NBSS: The Ugly Brothers," the fourth story, the narrator identifies himself as Hockey Night in Canada, Jr. At this point the reader mutters something like, "Why not? They're his stories. The narrator can be anyone he

says." But in the sixth story, "Winter Carnival," the narrator contemplates his own story published in a journal:

It was a first-person story about Hockey Night in Canada, Jr.

There is something comforting about a story written in the first person: you know the main character, or the narrator, is not going to die. There is a lot of death in short stories. But the teller of the story never dies. He can't. Who would tell the story?

But the question remains: am I or am I not, Hockey Night in Canada, Jr?

The story in the magazine by Martin Avery is called "Gravenbridge." There is no such place. I cannot remember writing the story. And yet, here it is with my name on it. The story is written in the first person. At the end of the story, the narrator dies.

It gets very complicated, doesn't it? It's too complicated for me. Fiction is a difficult form.

In the title story, the narrator sets up a number of "possibilities for violence and cliché" but abruptly ends the story with the disclaimer,

No, cottage gothic is just a regional style of architecture.

...

This is not a story by Atwood, Valgardson or Joyce Carol Oates. There is no room for gothic romance and mystery in the backwoods of cottage country.

But the penultimate section of the last story is a series of nightmare vignettes from the tourist village the narrator is creating near his old home town. Abruptly a new section begins:

Perhaps all this gore surprises you. Or perhaps you recognize these scenes from Canadian literature. This kind of violence is new to me. No-one ever dies in any of my stories.

All my stories are the same: set in cottage country, they describe an individual who is feeling disturbed to some degree. He decides to do something about it: take a trip, have a holiday, go for a walk, get back in touch with the real world somehow. In the end, his contact with the world makes him crazier than ever.

As these extracts suggest, these are both self-conscious stories and the work of a clever and witty young writer who moves from past to present to fantasy in apparently free association. As he passes from reminiscence of youth in cottage country to introspection about his own sense of personal disintegration, he manages to satirize many institutions of small-town life. Without being obvious, he broadens the satire to encompass perspectives of Canada as a whole and its place in the world.

PEGGY NIGHTINGALE

## SINGING AGAINST DECLINE

*Collected Poems of Raymond Souster, Volume Two 1955-62 and Volume Three 1962-74.* Oberon, \$25.95; pa. \$12.95 each.

*Collected Poems of Raymond Souster, Volume Four 1974-77.* Oberon, n.p.

RAYMOND SOUSTER is undoubtedly a major Canadian poet—he is included in any notable anthology, he has won the Governor-General's Award, his deceptively simple style and passionate concerns for social justice and "being alive" have influenced other writers and won him a not insignificant readership. Thus Oberon Press has produced four volumes of Souster's *Collected Poems*. The assumption is that a poet of Souster's stature and longevity deserves no less. Perhaps the industry of Canadian Literature deserves no less either: Oberon writes, "We believe this series will prove as important to Canadian poetry as the New York edition of the works of Henry James was to the American novel." However, on the basis of Volumes Two (1955-62) and Three (1962-74), it can be argued that a carefully edited *Selected Poems* would have done Souster and his native poetry more justice. The Oberon production suggests that Souster should finally be read

in bulk, lugged about in several bound suitcases, his every piece of creative apparel tried on for size, the rags with the riches, the sackcloth with the finery. As Souster says, "[each volume] contains all the verse . . . that I wish to remain in print."

But, for all this quantity, Souster offers indeed a mixed bag of goods. He is obviously, in the best sense, an eclectic writer, responding in verse to human experience of all kinds, and especially that of daily consequence. He is awake to what he calls the "beautiful and terrifying world" in which man's plundering of this planet and his fellow inhabitants stands in dark contrast to extraordinary moments discovered and lived: moments in lanes behind houses "where spring air [is] somehow warmer, more gentle, more life-giving in its touch," or on country drives where a chance turning reveals

around a farmhouse door  
... a girl who waved to us  
and tossed her chestnut hair  
larger, more beautiful  
than the whole afternoon.

There are also vital scenes remembered: the now-dead stripper Rose la Rose "writhing, gyrating . . . / caught up in the rhythm's spell!"; and boyhood baseball games so powerful still in the mind's eye that Souster cannot mourn, even if "all the smoke [is] gone forever . . . / from my fast one." The lost territories of youth, especially the river ravines of Toronto, before urban sprawl and pollution changed them forever, provided a space in which the natural and human worlds could complement one another; occasionally, such a space is found today:

In these times keep your mind as calm  
as this pool, go out boldly into life,  
let it burst all around you; let it blossom  
right through your heart like this spring that  
today  
promises never to end:  
and be earth's  
forerunner.

Souster is indeed a poet who sings in the face of his own and all the world's decline. Those vanished friends of years ago are much on his mind, as are those who, now older like himself, lie dying with "unconquered spirit," though the poet always knows this is "somehow terribly, certainly, finally you." Not only memories, but the genius and pace of jazz sustain, with the constant awareness of life's flow into art and art's flow into life. Souster frequents the clubs where he shouts "Blow it, man" to those with the "hard lines of time" etched in their faces, but who "force out / all hate, sickness, fear / from [the] dazzling end" of their instruments "pointed high at heaven / lowered straight at hell." Or he ponders the connection between words and the objects they represent, the latter continually attracting, shaping articulations:

and a poet reads on about pomegranates,  
the whole barn of a building glows  
from those fruited halves, those quarters,  
blood-red, bleeding on a table. . . .

When Souster puts his full attention into his short lyrics, *completing* the representation of reality with words, conveying to his readers that the poet's vision takes its sustenance from the "fresh green world," his directness and conviction are triumphant, revealing a voice that is "let . . . go . . . to wander down / the flowerbeds / . . . to welcome each bird that lights on the still-barren / mulberry tree." The problem is that in the bulk of the *Collected Poems* Souster is largely a poet of unfinished business, one whose sustained attention to subject-matter yields before fragmentary perception. Time and again he seems to jot down responses to what goes on around, but fails to shape such response into anything beyond the banal or personal. The impression is given of a writer who carries with him a notebook which enables him to record on-the-spot reactions to experience, simply for the sake of documentation. So Souster

waves good-bye to his aging father and mother after a visit, realizing that "*one day they'll not be here / to say goodbye!*" — and that comment is all the poem amounts to. There are far too many similar pieces that are well-intentioned but slight, such as "A Letter to Biafra":

I once sent a letter to Biafra  
but received no reply.

I've often wondered  
if it ever got there,

and if it did,  
was there anyone still alive  
to answer it.

A brief focus of the poet's eye, a snippet of craft.

It is to Souster's credit as an artist that he and his other, uncommon revelations of the commonplace do emerge from under so much ordinary verbiage. In his best poems, Souster's love of life and language are delivered not in fastballs, but in dazzling slow curves and change-ups that constantly nick the inside corners of our hearts and minds. His contribution to Canadian poetry cannot be measured in terms of quantity; rather it is quality, those realized lines and visions that prompt us to listen hard to the poet because, as he insists, "we're really blood brothers, / both of us acting out / in the best way we can / our crazy poems of living."

The fourth volume in this series contains "the last 84 poems from *Change-Up* (1974)" and all the poems from *Extra Innings* (1977). The verse from the earlier book reflects many of those established Souster concerns about man's relationship with the natural world, urban injustices, and life — fragile but magnificent — in the face of death. The limitations of the writing are still evident: the fragmentary perceptions and weak endings of poems, the failure of Souster's use of language to measure up to the chosen subject-matter that so obviously

affects him (as in a memorial poem to John Berryman), and the sentimental "notebook" response to what goes on around.

But in *Change-Up* Souster offers something new — two poems under the general heading "Pictures From A Long-Lost World." One is about an execution in Kowloon, China, in 1896, and the other is a commentary on Adolf Hitler staring across the Channel at Dover in 1940. This historical subject-matter, it seems, will not allow the poet to escape with glib remarks; experience beyond the personal demands investigation and poetry commensurate with the depths and variations of human existence. Souster does present verse of consistently high quality in the eighteen poems in *Extra Innings* that provide more insights into "A Long-Lost World." Most art about the First and Second World Wars: some of these reveal the ironies of military action and professionalism; others display the cruelty of war and those who wage it, as in the gut-wrenching description of the horrors of the quarries at Mauthausen near Auschwitz. Two of the finest attempts to convey something of the individual caught in the webs of history are not found in war-poems but in "Louis Riel Addresses The Jury, Regina, July 1885: A Found Poem" and "Antoine de Saint Exupéry, 31 July, 1944, Poretta, Italy." Riel's speech, in which he asks the world to re-assess its conceptions of sanity, insanity, prophets, and the responsibilities of government, is delivered with dignity and force. As for the mystical French aviator, Souster portrays the man and the symbol in a prose poem of startling evocation about Saint-Exupéry's final flight "lost in the limitless reaches of the sky he charted out as no man then or since, ending somewhere between wind, sand and stars. . . ."

In these significant poems, some of the best he has written, Souster's business is never unfinished. He has discovered a

larger type of verse that, with its attention to detail and sustained awareness of life's complexity, horror, and beauty, complements the shorter, pure lyrics that are scattered like wildflowers among the tamer growth of these four bulky volumes.

J. A. WAINWRIGHT

## CULTURAL MARKERS

*Paper Doors: An Anthology of Japanese-Canadian Poetry*, edited by Gerry Shikatani and David Aylward with translations by David Aylward. Coach House, n.p.

FORTY-ONE YEARS AGO last winter, twenty-five thousand Canadians were taken out of their houses and herded into cattle barns on Vancouver's exhibition grounds. Their houses, businesses, fishboats, and household goods were confiscated. The families were split up and sent to primitive "camps" in the interior mountains for four years. Once the war was over they were dispersed across Canada and the Pacific.

I mention the devastating story of the Japanese-Canadians' Evacuation because it has become the central fact of their history. All emotion, all self-knowledge, all achievement is unconsciously measured against this moment of humiliated disillusionment. The details of the life led in the evacuation camps have become what Gerry Shikatani, editor with David Aylward of *Paper Doors: an anthology of Japanese-Canadian poetry*, calls in his excellent introduction "cultural markings": "The poems may not recount ethnic experience as data or story, but they are in fact, repositories for the collective experience which exists as fundamental myth beneath the surface of language. And what could be termed 'cultural markings' — . . . these shape the sensibility."

The book he and Aylward co-edit is ambitious and provocative. Provocative because it challenges our fondly-held

ideas. Ambitious, because it attempts to present a panorama of Japanese-Canadian poetry. Such an attempt aims toward two books in one, poetry in Japanese and poetry in English. But the two groups of poems share more than the jostle of genes: they tell the same fascinating story. Minority status (or rather, lack of status); the evacuation, the pain, survival, the aftermath, the pride and shame mixed up together: the cultural markers are the same. Furthermore, the linguistic gap here is a marker itself. It is the age-old immigrant "shokku": when the first generation ("Issei") speaks, the second ("Nissei") answers, but in English; and the third ("Sansei"), now thoroughly anglophone, can't answer at all. When we turn the page from an English poem to a Japanese one, we are experiencing for a moment the enormous rifts that are simply facts of life for an immigrant family.

Aylward helps the anglophone cope with the Japanese poems by means of his skilful, tripartite translations. First we see the visual shape of the original haiku or tanka. Beside it, the phonetic rendering enables us to pronounce and hear the pattern of sounds. And finally an English version adds a translation of the lexical level, together with a careful (though at times overdone) attention to spacing to suggest the Japanese emphasis. It's a tour de force, possible only with poems from such a tradition of brevity. The quality, in general, is high; several authors, such as Minoru Furusho and Takeo Nakano, are award-winning tanka and haiku writers and have earned impressive honours in Japan.

The authors are not presented chronologically and their poems are not dated. This is disappointing, because the development of the poetry (here hidden) is fascinating. Even from the beginning, the poets write not about Japan, but about the new experiences in Canada: Christ-

mas, February winds, April Fool. Chusaburo Ito uses the resignation of the tanka, for example, to capture melting snow or a prairie farm. Only rarely does consciousness of Japan obliquely suggest itself, as in this snapshot by Sukeo Samushima:

From the air  
it looks the same —

an endless plain of snow  
My second home.

Takeo Nakano moves on to confront the drama of the evacuation, and the P.O.W. camp at Angler, Ontario, directly:

They make me wear  
the rising sun  
on my back.

Should I be proud  
of this perfect target?

or more subtly:

Night thoughts on this journey  
far away  
from my family . . .

Cricket comes to me  
crying.

As we move from the Japanese into the English poetry, from first to second generations and from leaving Japan to re-discovering it with Canadian eyes, it is a pleasure to find Roy Kiyooka and Joy Kogawa's poems again. From *Wheels*, Kiyooka takes us on a physical and mental snapshot-studded "Roots" tour of Japan, filled with humour and sensitivity. Kogawa's poetry is remarkably varied. She presents private abstracts ("Minerals from Stone") and public witnesses ("What I Remember of the Evacuation") with equal authority, and can move from "Zen Graveyard" to the fully North American "Finally That There Is" with impressive grace. The youngest poet, Kevin Irie, is a real find. True, his poetry is "safe" in terms of technique, but at twenty-seven he is to be commended for the rare practice of walking before he

tries to fly. And indeed his "Crow in Flight," original in the sense of Hopkins and Stevens, does fling itself into the air despite its flaws and can be read aloud magnificently. "Autumn" confirms the nice deftness of Irie's ear, and "The Camps: Burning the Dead" reminds us that the evacuation is pure drama in its emotional violence, its philosophical ironies, and its cultural revelations. I find it very instructive to note that Irie, like several other of these poets (such as editor Gerry Shikatan in his successful "Cultivated Earth") adopts what I call an Asian-objective tone for the poem. This tone — artfully achieved by carefully manipulated juxtapositions, omission of modifying words, and reinforced by a resolute, slow rhythm — gives the same sense of bald, irrefutable truth as the lean brevity of the haiku. They are both hands-off poetry: the author seems to efface himself and his opinions, and the resultant eloquence can be shattering.

Shikatan implies Irie is a Nissei, or second generation. One wonders why there are *no* Sansei poets here to add their third dimension. Some Sansei are approaching fifty, and even the Yonsei are entering their twenties. Similarly, if the intent is a panorama, why limit the poets to those still living? A quarter or a third of the scene is missing. The editors have begun ambitiously, but have pulled their punches somewhat. . . .

"Ambitious and provocative": I use "provocative" because *Paper Doors* opens a real can of worms. It makes us face some facts about Canadian literature we've preferred to ignore. In defining CanLit most of us still struggle with the alien-wilderness/youthful identity complex/branch plant-colonial combination. We ignore hyphenated-Canadian literature because we perceive immigrant art as a temporary phenomenon of restricted interest, and classify literature in minority languages with the art of the mother

country. Yet a movement that has lasted the entire twentieth century is hardly temporary; and since relatively few Canadians are not of immigrant stock the overall phenomenon of immigrant literature should in fact have something to say to and about us all. Furthermore, hyphenated-Canadian writing is radically different in informing consciousness from that of the mother country. It is no accident that Japan's anthologies include only the more traditional poetry of its expatriates. There is simply little else in common. If you compare a contemporary Japanese from Tokyo — aggressive, confident, intolerant — with a poet from this book, minority member and survivor of the evacuation, you find that in outlook, knowledge, experience, and even language, the two are worlds apart.

The fact is that this poetry, even when written in Japanese, is far more Canadian than it is Japanese. It's a matter of those cultural markers again. Where else could one find tanka so rich in images of ice, snow, and duck hunting? What gentleman in Osaka knows or cares about Choi-chi Sumi's "gurein erebeta" (grain elevator)? And as what must be an enormous portion of (largely un-anthologized) Canadian writing, hyphenated-Canadian literature deserves to be read and learned from. The stories that underlie it, such as the tale of the Japanese evacuation, form collectively the story of Canada. Few editors (except, as Aylward and Shikatan point out, John Robert Colombo and J. Michael Yates) have understood that such an endeavour does not fragment and polarize. Instead it reveals and celebrates common bonds of emotion, experience, and strength.

*Paper Doors* has its flaws, but in opening our eyes to this fact and some highly rewarding poets it thoroughly deserves its place on our shelves.

TARA CULLIS

## PRECIOUS TONGUE

MARGARET MACDONELL, *The Emigrant Experience: Songs of Highland Emigrants in North America*. Univ. of Toronto Press, \$27.50; pa. \$10.96.

PERHAPS ANCESTRY HAS GIVEN ME a feeling for the themes of exile and lost-and-found homelands present in the songs Margaret MacDonell has collected, and for the haunting and eloquent language in which they are expressed. From boyhood I recall a sense of wonder and excitement about the *Mòd*, the yearly festival of Gaelic poetry, song, and music, held in Dundee on the eve of the Second World War. Much later, something of an exile myself, I was able to take an evening class in Gaelic for one winter. It was held in a Vancouver high school, and was taught by a remarkable lady from Lewis, Mrs. Malcomina Thompson, who for many years passed on to pupils of all ages in far-off Western Canada a warm enthusiasm and love for her mother tongue, and something of her knowledge of its rich treasures of story and song.

These treasures are revealed in a fascinating way by the texts and translations presented by Dr. MacDonell, who is chairman of the Department of Celtic Studies at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. She is a Canadian native speaker of Gaelic, who learned the language from her parents, and deepened her awareness of its resources as a result of the stimulation of her teachers, Sister Mairi MacDonald at her own university and Charles Dunn of Harvard. Her texts have been principally selected from printed sources: collections of Gaelic verse and periodicals such as *The Casket*, published weekly as Antigonish since 1852, and *Mac-Talla (Echo)*, published at first weekly and then fortnightly at Sydney, Cape Breton, from 1892 to 1904. The work of twenty-six bards is represented in the anthology,

ranging from Donald Matheson (1719-82), who grieved over the misery of his people in Sutherland and saw emigration to the Carolinas as a passage of the Israelites out of Egypt, to anonymous Cape Breton bards of the 1920's who wrote of their feelings about migration from their New World homeland to Boston and California. Tantalizingly, Dr. MacDonell withholds from us the verse of a twenty-seventh bard, Alexander MacLean (*Alasdair MacEoghain*), who lived on the River Denys, Cape Breton, at the turn of this century, and impressed his fellow-Gaelic speakers in Inverness County with his powers of impromptu satire — an ancient form perfected by Irish bards whose command of invective was such that it was said they could rhyme rats to death.

The book provides a full biographical and historical commentary to amplify the texts. As a result of this and the serviceable translations of the disciplined intricacies of the original Gaelic, we penetrate as readers into that "world we have lost," as Peter Laslett and other social historians have called it, of a pre-literate society. In this case, the society consists of a warrior aristocracy in the Highlands and Western Islands of Scotland, violently torn apart in the eighteenth century by political reorganization and military defeat, then aggressive land improvement measures which brought depopulation where policy and war had failed to effect change. Visiting Scotland in 1773, Dr. Johnson became aware of the "general discontent" of the Highlands, and when he inquired about the subject of a song sung by some ladies on the island of Raasay, he was told "it was a farewell composed by one of the Islanders that was going, in this epidemical fury of emigration, to seek his fortune in *America*." This seems to be the first recorded mention in English literature of the songs of the emigrants. Burns, of course, sympa-

thized with the motivation of the emigrants, and in the "Address to Beelzebub" of 1786, he satirized the efforts of the alarmed members of the Highland Society, "which met . . . at the Shakespeare, Covent garden, to concert ways and means to frustrate the designs of FIVE HUNDRED HIGHLANDERS who . . . were so audacious as to attempt to escape from their lawful lords and masters . . . to the wilds of CANADA, in search of that fantastic thing — LIBERTY."

To a degree, the songs of the emigrants are formulaic, as John MacInnes describes them, performing the "celebratory act of uttering names, energizing a poetic map or ancestral territory and reinforcing a sense of identity." Thus Anna Gillis took leave of Morar in 1786 before emigrating to Upper Canada by recounting the place names of the MacDonald territories on the mainland and among the Hebrides, and she encouraged her clan to face the challenge of the future by recollecting their warrior ideals:

The MacDonalds were always wont  
to stand boldly in the face of hardship,  
eagerly putting opponents to rout,  
faithful, intrepid in adversity.

Religious feeling is reflected in some of the compositions, as in the case of those of Donald Matheson of Kildonan, who saw the hand of Providence in the exodus from the Highlands. However, Rob Donn, a contemporary bard from Strathnaver, is reported to have said to Matheson: "There is more piety in your poetry, and more poetry in mine." While not entirely fair to Matheson, the epigram points to the fact that the emigrant poetry in certain moods stressed the values of this world rather than religious hope. Calum Bàn MacMhannain, for example, a Skye bard who sailed to Prince Edward Island with Lord Selkirk's colonists in 1803, presented the voyage in the *Polly* in terms of a spirited adventure, and described in bitter words the distressing state of the

homeland which forced emigration on him:

A new master has come  
into the land,  
a sad, woeful matter.  
The people are leaving;  
their possessions have dwindled  
They haven't a cow to put to graze.  
Some were put to rent,  
others died;  
rare were those that survived.  
What would it profit me  
to remain in this land  
where I can learn nothing by shoemaking.

I'll go to sea;  
I'll follow others  
in search of a place to dwell.  
We'll get new land  
which can be bought outright,  
and we'll not be charged a shilling for it  
[afterwards].  
Better for us the shelter of the forest  
than the heather-covered hills  
facing towards Grobainn.  
On the bare, forbidding rocks,  
when the cold weather came  
the moorland seemed endless.

In contrast to Skye, the new home of this bard became *Eilean an àigh* / "isle of contentment," where it could be said *Bidh an coirc' ann á fàs* / "Our seed is fruitful here."

To be sure, the America or Canada of the reality facing the emigrants, when they sought to make a living in the New World, did not always square with the high hopes of their departure from the homeland. One result of this was the poetry of dispraise, for example, the "Song for America" of John the Hunter MacDonald (*Iain Sealgair*) from the Braes of Lochaber, who landed in Cape Breton in 1834. He was unhappy in his new home at Mabou Ridge, and complained of the country and its inhabitants:

I am bound, brought low,  
in the land of snows and sere grasses.  
It is not what I have been accustomed to,  
looking at swarthy folk,  
ugly, drab, dull,



with wide trousers, the loutish long coat,  
an unattractive style.

You'll see groups of them drinking  
at the store if you go there.  
They are rowdy and boastful,  
intoxicated by drink;  
their place untidy, mud under their feet,  
glass flagons raised to their heads,  
peeling off and tearing their jackets  
like a pack of tinkers.

Another Highlander, Kenneth MacDonald, who settled in the Bras d'Or region in 1842, found his first winter there so numbing that his "Song for America" says that he was ready to sell his cattle and go home:

Cape Breton is so cold  
that one's very ears will freeze  
the frost penetrates the axe so deeply  
that only fire can thaw it out.

...

America, the white-coated,  
I would much prefer to be in Gairloch,  
where spring comes in March  
with real warmth in the sun.

A similar fluctuating viewpoint about emigration to Nova Scotia has recently been depicted with considerable artistry in Donald MacKay's historical novel, *Scotland Farewell: The People of the Hector* (1981), about the aftermath of Culloden and settlement in Pictou County.

The westward movement of settlers in the 1870's and 1880's to the prairies also brought out powers of invective, as in a song by "Resentful Donald" (*Domhnall Diombach*) entitled "Donald's Testimony about Manitoba":

A thousand liars, well-rewarded,  
went about with books  
extolling the North West  
and the excellence of Manitoba.

There was no information pleasing to  
women,  
from the Butt of Lewis to Barra Head,  
that was not being propagated about the  
land,  
with unhesitating promises.

We reached the land of promise,  
The frost was as hard as rock,  
more than twelve feet into the ground;  
not even an ant could survive it.

Yet, a persistent theme in the emigrants' poetry is that the New World is the land of freedom: *Tìr na saorsa, tìr na buadh* —

Land of the free, land of endowments,  
where the rent is not demanded from the  
tenants,  
and where the cruel bailie is not seen  
forcing the people into exile

as the "Reply to Resentful Donald" puts the matter. Answering the complaints of *Iain Sealgair*, his cousin Allan the Ridge MacDonald sings:

The land you left is a land without kindness,  
a land without respect for tenants;  
they are sorrowful leaving it,  
fearing the stormy seas.  
Poor people, sons of cotters,  
without stock or herd —  
it is not fitting to dispraise the land of  
promise  
where they are now respected men.

Now that you have come across the sea  
to this fair land,  
you will want for nothing the rest of your  
life;  
everything prospers for us.  
You'll get honey from the flowers,  
sugar and tea;  
better that than the land you left  
with the rabble in charge of its forests.

As the emigrants made a success of settlement and took root in their new country, we can trace the poetic act of appropriating the landscape, for example, in Duncan Black Blair's song of the 1880's about a river in Pictou County, Nova Scotia:

Come with me to Upper  
Barney's River in the forest,  
where strawberries grow  
and an abundance of ripe nuts.  
The tall moose very proudly  
makes his circuit with elk-like grace;  
the squirrel whizzes  
back and forth among its thickets.

In time, too, migration westward or to the south from the early settlements produced songs of nostalgic affection for

Cape Breton: *Far an cluinnear fuaim na pìob / Agus pìobaireachd le farum* — “where could be heard the sound of the pipes / and piping of a high order”; or for maintaining the old custom of visiting friends on New Year’s Day.

In his recent *Introduction to Gaelic Poetry*, the foremost critic of Gaelic literature, Derick Thomson, is politely dismissive of most New World Gaelic verse, noting the survival in it of panegyrist and invective styles from the eighteenth century, well represented for him by the work of John Maclean (*Iain MacAilein, Bàrd Thighearna Cholla*), who had been bard to the Laird of Coll before emigrating in 1819 to Pictou County. Thomson says of him and his successors: “the links with the Scottish tradition were closely kept; there were occasional new themes suggested by the new environment, but no new voice or style.”

The measure which Thomson applies to this New World poetry and to much that was composed in the homeland during the nineteenth century, finding little in it to inspire enthusiasm, is possession of “special individuality, strength and gravitas.” He finds these qualities in William Livingstone of Islay (*Uilleam MacDhùnléibhe*), John Smith of Iarsiadar (*Iain Mac a’Ghobhainn*), and Mary MacPherson of Skye (*Mhàiri Mhór nan Oran* — Big Mary of the Songs), all of whom championed freedom for their people in the nineteenth century in one way or another in the homeland, and tapped a vein of bitter social criticism. Thomson also responds favourably to the modernist movement in Gaelic poetry in this century, to which he has himself contributed work that is innovative in technique and theme. Yet, if these intensities and developments are absent from the poetry of the township bards and isolated practitioners represented in Margaret MacDonell’s anthology, we do find them keeping their ancient language sinewy, overcoming the

heartache of the loss of the old homeland, and singing the song of the freedom of the new one.

We are not allowed to forget, of course, that we are dealing with song-texts. In an appendix, nine airs to accompany songs are reproduced from a variety of printed and oral sources. Dr. MacDonell believes that the decline of the Gaelic singing tradition in the third and fourth generation of families outside Scotland makes it difficult to recover more of the music of the songs. Since song-texts divorced from their music have less than their full vitality, it is surely to be hoped that the appearance of this book will encourage others to collect all that is possible of Gaelic emigrant songs and music from oral tradition whenever it survives. Repertoires of traditional fiddle and pipe music, for example, would seem to be promising sources for airs.

Also, emigrant songs and airs are still to be recorded from tradition-bearers in the Highlands and islands of Scotland, as the field workers of the School of Scottish Studies have shown. In 1952, Calum Maclean recorded Kate Ross of Lairg singing *Cur cùlthaobh ri Asainnte* / “Leaving Assynt behind,” with its account of an emigrant who left the “land of the Gaels” when “young and foolish,” went to “Great Glasgow of the shops,” and ended up “sad and weary, / Walking the streets of Canada.” The songs of emigrant bards are still vividly remembered on Tiree, particularly among those who come from or have associations with Balephuill — *baile nam bàrd* (township of the bards) — which was the home of *Iain MacAilein, Bàrd Thighearna Cholla*, who went to Nova Scotia in 1819. When Margaret Mackay was collecting traditional material on Tiree in 1973, and it was known that she came from the Canadian prairies, she received a particularly warm welcome from Hector Kennedy of Hilipol, connected with *Iain MacAilein’s*

family, who sang for her with great feeling the song *Manitoba*, occasioned by the departure from *baile nam bàrd* of two brothers, one of whom was the bard *Iain Dhomhnuill 'ic Eachainn*. Kennedy could provide many details of these and other Tíree emigrants of the 1870's and 1880's who went first to Bruce County, Ontario, to stay among fellow-islanders and then pass on to the Canadian West. It is relevant to note that Hector Kennedy cannot read or write Gaelic, and his traditions of *bàrdachd* (poetry) and *seanchas* (genealogical and township lore) are entirely oral, which was the case of many of the bards who emigrated to Canada, for example, Calum Bàn MacMhannain of Skye and Prince Edward Island, or who were born there in the first generations of emigrant families and stubbornly held onto their traditions. Margaret MacDonell is aware, of course, of the resources of the School of Scottish Studies, and records her gratitude to Dr. Mackay for information about Gaelic settlers in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The research base of *The Emigrant Experience* is, in fact, very wide, reflecting devotion to its subject and great sympathy and affection for the bards whose story it tells.

In *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), especially in Chapter III — "Unity and Diversity: The Region" — T. S. Eliot made a strong case for valuing the contribution of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales to what he calls the "constellation of cultures" in Britain and, in particular, to the dominant culture of England. In his view, there would be an irreparable loss if these "regions" were to lose their own languages. By extension, the book reviewed makes the same point about Canada: its larger culture needs knowledge and understanding of its tributaries, among them the songs of those emigrant Highlanders and Islanders and their descendants. To Gaelic speakers and those who do not have that language, it says in

the words of the Laird of Coll's bard that Gaelic must live:

*na tréig gu bràth i,  
'S na leig air dìochuimhn' ri linn an àil s' /*  
never neglect it  
and do not let it be forgotten in this  
generation.

IAN ROSS

## POETRY CHRONICLE

GILBERT LANGEVIN, *Le Fou solidaire*. L'Hexagone, \$5.95; *Issue de secours*. L'Hexagone, \$5.95.

"SA POESIE N'EST NI CRI ni chant," affirmait Pierre Nepveu; "elle est le pouvoir souverain de l'affirmation sur tout ce qui, en nous et dans le monde, est dispersion et mort" (*Livres et auteurs québécois*, 1973). Langevin continue sa tâche, sa poésie sage représente la mise en vers d'un discours moral. Poèmes brefs, vers courts, aucune faute de goût, pas ou peu de violence, c'est cette régularité, cette brièveté, ces limitations choisies, ce flou voulu qui donnent à la poésie de Langevin un certain charme, le charme peut-être de la désuétude, une certaine "aura." Mais le lecteur ne risque-t-il pas de se lasser de cette forme brève et régulière, de ce vers qui trop souvent manque d'image, de musique, de couleur, de souffle, d'envergure? On est heureux d'y découvrir parfois la révolte bien surréaliste contre la vulgarité et l'ignorance bourgeoises, la pureté merveilleuse d'un Eluard (*Issue de secours*) ou de savourer un distique pour sa simplicité, pour sa justesse:

Je reviendrai parmi vous  
nu comme une grande misère  
(*Le Fou solidaire*)

MICHEL GAY, *Plaque tournante*. L'Hexagone, n.p.

On se demande tout d'abord, et c'est le cas de bon nombre de recueils poétiques

québécois — voir *Pylônes, Architecture pressentie, La Surface du paysage* — quel est le but de l'auteur qui choisit son titre dans un domaine spécifique, que celui-ci appartienne à la construction, aux mathématiques ou dans ce cas-ci à la mécanique et à la biologie. A la page 10 de ce mince recueil de 23 textes, l'auteur nous donne une définition de "la plaque tournante et sensible," tirée du *Petit Robert*, définition fictive qui en même temps cumule et occulte les sens disponibles. Nous reviendrons sur cette définition, notons auparavant qu'au fil de ces textes nous avons pu retrouver, avec ou sans guillemets, avec ou sans italiques — et il est certain que nous en avons laissé échapper — dix de ces définitions. On sait que Hugo se servait abondamment et de façon semblable du dictionnaire de Louis Moreri; serait-ce une façon d'inclure ce poète dans son oeuvre? En effet il est intéressant de noter aussi la façon que Michel Gay a d'user de la citation. On reconnaît par exemple la présence de Mallarmé, "un coup," "quel nombre lancé quand" = *Un Coup de dé*, sans parler chez ce dernier de l'emploi qu'il fait de la symbolique de la fenêtre. On retrouve Duchamp et la "question des devantures," Lautréamont dont le "Viel océan, aux vagues de cristal" (*Les Chants du Maldoror*, I, 9) retentit chez Gay dans "plaque de verre ou de cristal" et "vieil océan," il y a Boris Vian, Chloé étant un des personnages de *L'Ecume des jours* et maints autres auteurs auxquels fait appel ce texte.

Mais revenons-en à ce que la définition de "plaque tournante et sensible" occulte. Le *Petit Robert* dit: "plaque neurale d'un embryon." Or le livre n'est-il pas dédié à Chloé? Et à la page 15, c'est-à-dire au centre du livre — mais au texte 9/neuf — on peut lire: "Une blancheur. Le chant des oiseaux que ton petit doigt fouineur désigne si maladroitement, la main pointée partout, imitant en cela, pourquoi pas, le premier papillon qu'il m'est venu à

l'idée de t'offrir, devenu peut-être, en toi, papa, sous sa forme adulte, ailée." Chloé, elle est l'envers, l'autre côté de la plaque de verre, elle est l'intertexte, elle est le "ver(s)" de "verdure" (sens de Klóé en grec), l'avenir, l'imaginaire et elle est écloison — "Chloé" = "éclo(s)" = "éclatement," "éclampsie," "déclenchement" — du "ver" du papillon "devenu papa en toi." Elle représente aussi le moment d'un aveu intime et de la reconnaissance de ce que son oeuvre doit aux autres créateurs, car le papillon voltige — "la main pointée partout" — de même que le "coucou" est "grimpeur."

D'ailleurs si *Plaque tournante* est parallèle à *L'Amour fou* (les *Post-scriptum* répondant à la lettre l'André Breton au dernier chapitre) en passant peut-être par Hugo et ses *Contemplations* — pour M. Gay son oeuvre et sa fille se rejoignent, se confondent: "Tu sauras un jour ce que c'est cette fiction, tu seras elle" et elles sont gaité, gai savoir. *Plaque tournante* c'est le plaquette Chloé.

FRANÇOIS TETREAU, *L'Architecture pressentie (Précis d'intuition)*. L'Hexagone, n.p.

Si nous croyons déceler chez Claude Beausoleil (*La Surface du paysage*) la présence diffuse de Francis Ponge, chez Tétreau il est là en exergue et dans "le parti" que lui aussi a "pris" "des choses." Voyez de Ponge "La Mousse" (*Le Parti pris des choses*, N.R.F., 1967) et de Tétreau "Paprika." C'est la même écoute, la même attention donnée à l'inertie, au détail et transmise avec un semblable bonheur d'expression, non qu'il y ait de la part de Tétreau plagiat mais on retrouve chez ces deux poètes une sensibilité parente. En effet le rythme de l'écrivain québécois est plus varié, des moments calmes sont suivis ou coupés de moments saccadés, l'image y est plus virulente. D'ailleurs le propos de Tétreau c'est de nous éveiller aux dangers de la ville, de

les dénoncer. Il s'agit d'une variation sur un thème surréaliste exposé d'une manière elle aussi surréaliste. Le corps de la femme y est comme chez Eluard, Breton, etc., le lieu d'une métamorphose; elle est celle que permettra que se retrouve l'équilibre, que se régénère la ville, que soit refusé un ordre pétrifiant qui est en train de précipiter l'humanité vers la catastrophe. La poésie de Tétreau plus sentie qu'intellectuelle, l'intuition c'est l'irrationnel, vibre et fait vibrer, accroche et frappe, ses images ont cette force qui fait qu'elles heurtent la sensibilité du lecteur et s'imposent dans son imagination.

JEAN-LOUIS ROY, *Terre féconde*. Leméac, \$6.95.

La tâche allait être ardue, un grand thème, un thème traditionnel et longtemps favori de la littérature québécoise, tout allait résider ici dans la façon de traiter ce sujet, dans l'inspiration, dans la maîtrise dont Roy allait faire preuve. Or tout, même la récolte, est laissé au hasard et à une certaine facilité: vers réguliers ou non se suivent, la rime est souvent puérile:

Tels des confettis infimes les arbres flottent  
Comme un tissu soyeux coupé en redingote.

On tombe dans l'hétéroclite qu'aucun souffle poétique ne veut animer, revigorer. Sur "Vergers d'Occident," "Du doux matin d'Asie couleure perle pubère," "Du sielnce soyeux habité par Mozart," "palabre d'Afrique," "main de l'Amérique," le lecteur ne fait que trébucher, trop c'est trop, "Terre piégée" que l'auteur n'a pas su éviter.

JEAN-PIERRE LEROUX, *Dans l'intervalle*. Leméac, \$4.95.

Avec cet ouvrage on demeure en effet "dans l'intervalle." Ils ont en commun avec Langevin qu'il cite en exergue la facture, la brièveté du recueil et du poème

mais si chez Langevin l'on reste sur sa faim, sur un non résolu, un non affronté avec Leroux on se trouve plongé dans une totale ambiguïté, dans l'"équivoque," dans "l'énigme" et on reste sur "la tangente." Il s'agit au moyen de l'écriture d'une mise en question de l'écriture, comme chez Beausoleil, mais dans ce recueil-ci l'on se situe bien en deça car il n'y a ici aucune démarcation nette par rapport à ses prédécesseurs — René Char et Roland Giguère — aucune innovation mais simple expérience sur le langage et choix d'une lisibilité ambiguë. Suffit-il de se laisser bercer de sonorités, de se laisser prendre au charme de l'énigmatique?

MARCEL SABOURIN, *Chansons*. VLB Editeur, n.p.

*Chansons* se présente comme le reflet d'un Québec à un moment précis, 1964-1971. Bon nombre des thèmes — la libération des femmes par les femmes, la définition des rôles homme/femme au sein du couple — ont été repris depuis avec plus de vigueur par des femmes interprètes et compositeurs. On regrette de ne pouvoir toujours trouver l'unité qui devrait être présente dans chacune des parties, d'où peut-être les "Bâtard I" et "Bâtard II." On peut dire sans se tromper que ces chansons souffrent d'être lues, y perdent leur force, la chanson choisissant souvent pour être efficace un texte et des structures simples. Leur écriture ici doit beaucoup aux automatismes, le jeu des sonorités primant le sens. La langue de Sabourin est une langue québécoise authentique, l'auteur sait user avec bonheur de la satire et garder toujours un ton personnel et vif. Nous ne dirons rien de la préface pompeuse en regard de la simplicité de l'expression de ce recueil.

ROLANDE GIGUÈRE, *A l'orée de l'œil*. Editions du Noroît, \$35.00.

Chez Giguère les lignes s'appellent comme

s'appellent les mots quand la sonorité prime le sens, quand le projet est avancé par la main, même si peu à peu avec plus ou moins de retard il le réinvestit (voir la légende accompagnant le dessin). C'est bien d'ailleurs, nous semble-t-il, l'un des sens que contient le titre du recueil qui le situe sur les rives de la conscience. C'est aussi pour cela que le dessin de Giguère est répétitif, variation sur un motif pour un même dessin et dans plusieurs dessins différents. D'ailleurs comme si l'apprentissage permettait d'atteindre à une couche plus profonde et plus riche, la ligne va se compliquant donc s'obscurcissant jusqu'au point où ayant révélé "son bestiaire" elle s'y tisse sa toile et s'y perd même si c'est pour renaître "comme naît l'oiseau," "comme naissent les géodes" et comme si l'artiste refusait de se laisser dévorer par sa chimère sans parvenir pourtant à garder ses ailes: "l'élévation" ne se fait plus en effet que par décapitation, jeu des forces centripètes et centrifuges qui accompagnent le vertige.

Les résultats d'un tel exercice sont irréguliers et la profondeur de la méditation, la descente de plus en plus pénétrante de l'artiste en lui-même n'entraîne pas forcément une meilleure réussite, le dessin devient un mode de connaissance. Cependant cette expérience nous révèle combien est riche l'imaginaire, la personne profonde de l'artiste, combien il est sûr et maître de sa technique. C'est un beau livre.

J.-H. LETOURNEUX, *Pylônes*. VLB Editeur, n.p.

LeTourneux poète dont la voix provient des chantiers à su, pour nous y faire pénétrer, pour nous faire partager pleinement, brutalement aussi ses expériences et leur réalité, choisir la hauteur, la force qu'il fallait à son écriture. Les pylônes situent son recueil mais ils sont aussi l'armature (la structure) dure, roide, froide, haute, hautaine même de son oeuvre, ils l'enca-

drent et en constituent l'intertexte de même que ceux qui s'élevaient à l'entrée des temples égyptiens. D'où l'exotisme, d'où parfois de trop somptueuses métaphores, d'où une poésie qui par moments peut sembler artificielle. Seules convenaient pour se faire écouter sur un tel sujet à partir d'un tel lieu et d'un tel milieu — et sa crainte s'exprime ici et là dans son recueil: "Mère, oui je suis là, l'étranger. N'arriverai jamais" — l'éloquence, la fulgurance de l'épique que rien ne limite ni dans le temps ni dans l'espace. Ce n'est qu'à cette hauteur que LeTourneux pouvait donner libre cours à son lyrisme, à son spleen mais aussi à l'expression de la souffrance physique et morale associée de si près aux rigueurs d'une nature indomptée d'une solitude totale, à l'expression de l'amour, de l'amitié et de l'ivresse de la réussite liée à la persévérance, à l'endurance. Peut-on regretter un lexique trop riche, un style parfois compassé?

CLAUDE BEAUSOLEIL, *La Surface du paysage*. VLB Editeur, n.p.

C'est par la nouveauté de son écriture que l'oeuvre de Beausoleil s'imposa, avec celle de Des Roches, comme une oeuvre d'avant-garde.

En effet, devant ces "textes et poèmes" où la clarté succède à l'hermétisme, une certaine linéarité à une dislocation syntaxique complexe, le lecteur se retrouve devant un "paysage" aux aspects contrastés et variés. Ceci se reflète d'ailleurs aussi au niveau de la typographie. Reste à savoir si seule a changé "la surface" donc l'apparence du recueil, ou bien si le texte, le contenu lui-même a changé. C'est bien, nous semble-t-il, ce dont le titre du recueil, entre autres choses, veut s'assurer, c'est que "la surface" et le "paysage" ne font qu'un de même que l'apparence du texte et le texte. Et on remarque tout d'abord que ce sont les textes

les plus lisibles qui s'imposent au lecteur. Serait-ce que l'efficacité de ces séquences vient de la difficulté de ce qui précède? L'auteur ayant alterné du lisible à l'hermétique, on pourrait dire que les moments lisibles s'enrichissent de la tension exigée par la complexité du passage antérieur. Une chose est certaine, le lecteur dérangé par la difficulté, se sentira dérangé cette fois par la facilité pour découvrir que "rien n'est moins certain que ce que l'on semble avoir cerné," "l'apparence est peut-être la forme la moins palpable." Ainsi est mise en doute la conception que nous faisons de lisibilité, de simplicité, de "quotidien," de "surface." Dans cet ouvrage, ces moyens d'amener le lecteur à rompre avec ses habitudes de lecture sont multiples et vont du plus subtile au plus grossier; il cite à ce propos Lyotard. A coup sûr on se serait passé de certaines techniques grâce auxquelles il veut déranger (voir par exemple "poly shit / poly tic").

Son but c'est du même coup de marquer son refus d'une littérature et d'une culture devenues institution: "la littérature relève du savoir qui peut être humaniste, informatif, créatif. le Texte lui est un non-su, un nowhere, ce qui le rend intolérable, comme idée et comme réalisation à tous les tenants de la mise en conserve intellectuelle et académique." Lui veut relever un défi: "faire du Texte comme on fait du ski." Finis le poétique et le sacré, la poésie est le geste le plus trivial, dans la parole la plus banale, dans le fait le plus quotidien; tout cela a une épaisseur et de même que notre être est multiple, un instant est pluriel. C'est au poète de savoir faire passer le courant, de faire en sorte que soit possible — et Beausoleil cite Barthes — "le passage incongru «dissocié» d'un autre langage, comme l'exercice d'une physiologie différente."

Et c'est, dans ce sens, la partie appelée "Angles" où le travail sur le texte nous semble la plus réussie, la plus innovatrice.

L'écriture y coule claire et pleine de sérénité, elle met côte à côte, mais comme sortant d'un même élan, l'acte et son verso, son double, le corps et ses gestes, couches, "angles" multiples d'un même instant, richesse et complexité de l'éphémère, "la scène se passe au présent pluriel."

PAUL CHAMBERLAND, *L'Enfant doré*. L'Hexagone, \$7.95.

Paul Chamberland devait, en 1981, publier trois recueils de textes poétiques: *L'Enfant doré*, *Emergence de l'adultenfant* et *Le Courage de la poésie fragment d'art total*. Il est à noter toutefois que le poète a eu soin d'intégrer au titre de *L'Enfant doré* la date de sa composition, d'où son importance. Cette importance est-elle liée aux événements politiques, sociaux, internationaux ou plutôt à un fait personnel? Connaissant l'engagement total de Chamberland, on devine que tout cela est présent dans ce besoin de circonscrire *L'Enfant doré*. Cependant si déjà, dans *Demain les Dieux naîtront* et *Le Prince de Sexamour* il avait annoncé la fin de la Civilisation dite moderne, de la Culture (avec un grand C), de la Machine antisociale et, prenant le rôle du prophète, prédit l'avènement de la "Sphère et Civilisation harmonique," dans *L'Enfant doré*, il occupe carrément la place du médium: "je suis un relais spécifié," "je me découvre être le laboratoire d'une spécifique mutation," "je ne suis que ce milieu fertile," de celui à travers lequel s'accomplira le passage. En effet c'est "Transmigraphie" qui conduit à *L'Enfant doré*: "du futur fonds sur moi irrésistible Enfant doré je suis ta proie ta nourriture ton sol placentaire ta materia prima ta gangue," écrit le poète. On peut donc être tenté de lire un poème intitulé *Appel d'Akénaton à Smenkhare à travers les étoiles*, comme le message livré "A Paul" et qu'il doit transmettre. Il prend

la relève, il est le "mi" qui permettra le retour de "l'Enfant doré," du "peuple dieu" sur terre afin que s'établisse l'harmonie. "O Pharaon, mon corégent / ma coessence en un seul peuple-dieu / reviens à sol / les temps sont accomplis / tout est prêt / renais de moi, enfin, moi, ta mère mâle fourmi-reine, / corps délectable, / preuve du dieu, / parais!" continue le poète dans ce même poème. Il nous dira dans *Emergence de l'Adulte-fant* que l'écriture poétique véhicule un mode symbolique et intuitif, parfois lyrique, la vision du nouvel amour." Et en effet dans *L'Enfant doré* le choix qu'il fait de la religion de l'Égypte ancienne, du tarot, de textes gnostiques, Lao-Tse, Rûzbehân, Hermès trismégiste et tant d'autres est symbolique, comme est symbolique le fait qu'il précise dans ce recueil, "ça fait 34 ans que j'existe." Il est dans la lignée de ceux qui tentèrent par leur voix, leur message, de faire en sorte que s'accomplisse la révolution totale, la métamorphose de la boue en or. Et c'est surtout les différentes formes de cette écriture-limite, écriture-frontière, écriture-ouverture en l'homme amour, qui est intéressante. Elle constitue la cornue qui distille, elle tente, ramassé, efficace, percutante d'être le principe actif et dynamique qui ouvre sur un nouvel âge amoureux. Cette écriture fonctionne selon un triple niveau: écriture poétique, écriture analytique (voir *Soleil double*) et écriture que l'auteur nommera "métagrammes," les citations prises à certains auteurs ayant été intégrées à son propre texte.

Il est heureux que Chamberland ait réservé les pages théoriques pour la fin, on peut ainsi apprécier le très beau texte de "Journal d'un intraterrestre" et les poèmes de la partie centrale du recueil. C'est un ouvrage plein de lyrisme, un recueil-somme (plutôt que synthèse) car il correspondait à un moment exceptionnel dans la vie de l'auteur et dans l'évolution du "Kébèk." Est-ce pour cela qu'il

devait attendre 1981 pour le publier et sortir la même année deux autres recueils?

GATIEN LAPOINTE, *Arbre-Radar. L'Hexagone*, n.p.

Il est clair, dès le titre — qui n'a rien ni de spécialement attrayant, ni de spécialement séduisant — que le lecteur allait avoir à vaincre maints obstacles. Tout d'abord à essayer de le lire, de se le lire, on sent monter une certaine irritation: les mots semblent avoir été jetés pêle-mêle, dans une phrase fort complexe, à la syntaxe disloquée et ponctuée de blancs, de tirets et où l'on cherche, très souvent en vain, le sujet des quelques verbes qui y apparaissent. On remarque (mais comment ne pas les remarquer, il les a mis en relief) les jumelages du type "tige/tigre," on peut en dénombrer des dizaines et cela tourne très vite au procédé. C'est donc ailleurs que dans ce jeu intellectuel que réside l'intérêt du recueil. D'autres points de repère vont nous permettre de continuer la lecture. On retrouve, en effet, une certaine diffusion (plutôt que disposition) du texte en séquences de longueur variable avec une préférence cependant pour celles de 4 ou 5 lignes. Lapointe a attaché une grande importance à la typographie. Au texte en caractères réguliers se mêlent quelques passages en italiques, qui accentuent ou développent le thème évoqué précédemment, et quelques voyelles ou mots brefs (mots clefs) en majuscules alors qu'au centre du recueil l'auteur a placé toute une séquence en caractères majuscules. Serait-ce vers ce centre que convergerait l'ensemble?

DE LA BOUCHE D'OMBRE... JE PRESSE LA  
MAIN DE MON ENFANCE J'ECOUTE BATTRE  
LA VIOLENTE EMOTION

écrit Lapointe. Et aussitôt retentit en nous le poème de Hugo, "Ce que dit la Bouche d'ombre." Tandis que Hugo écrivait dans son poème:

Sache...

Que tout a confiance en la création;



Et l'oreille pourrait avoir sa vision,  
Car les choses et l'être ont un grand  
dialogue.  
Tout parle . . .

Lapointe dans un communiqué de presse sur *Arbre-Radar* demande: "N'entend-on pas encore, des fois, des matières d'arbre, d'ours ou d'astre grouiller et grogner dans notre chair?" Il est lui aussi venu "écouter" (ce verbe revient souvent sous sa plume), réentendre, capter et retransmettre ses visions, car il s'agit davantage de visions que d'images. Bien vite on est certain qu'il est question aussi d'un "corps-radar." De "LA BOUCHE D'OMBRE," "gueule vorace," "l'égarant de jouir" monte aussi "une vapeur monstrueuse": "ces tenailles qui têtent par coups tout le poitrail rotant rut du vin de l'ancestrale grotte . . .," la chair y est noircie de "l'ancienne nuit" et c'est de cet "effroi," de cette "extatique Chimère" que Lapointe tente de la libérer. Ce parallèle ne veut pas réduire le poème de Lapointe à celui de Hugo, au contraire, ce n'a été qu'un moyen d'en découvrir la richesse. Pour "acquitter" le corps de "l'ancienne nuit," il le dira comme si enfourcher Pégase et le laisser piaffer, pousser le dire jusqu'au paroxysme, exacerbation des pouvoirs du langage, c'était le blanchir, l'amener à aspirer au plaisir qui "désenténébre." "C'est le songe," nous dit Lapointe, c'est le sien et c'est sa raison d'être; "c'est le son j'E," ou "E est blanc," nous dit Rimbaud, car de Nerval à Yves Bonnefoy en passant par Rimbaud, le poète a choisi ses relais.

C'est une oeuvre qui avance en dévorant, en effet si l'on est pris par le texte, c'est par sa voracité. C'est là que réside l'efficacité de l'écriture de Lapointe.

On aimerait noter que Beausoleil a cité Hugo en exergue et Lapointe l'a mis au centre de son oeuvre, c'est que l'un et l'autre ont voulu aller "au-delà," faire apparaître les multiples facettes d'un même instant et dégager le corps de la

conception simpliste, monolithique qu'on s'en fait pour en jouir dans sa complexité.

DAVID F. ROGERS

## HERACLITEAN KNOWLEDGE

AL PURDY, *Bursting Into Song: An Al Purdy Omnibus*. Black Moss, \$9.95.

HENRY MOSCOVITCH, *New Poems*. Mosaic/Valley Editions, \$7.95.

BILL HOWELL, *In a White Shirt*. Black Moss, \$7.95.

HENRY BEISSEL, *Cantos North*, with lithographs by Friedhelm Lach. Ayorama Editions, \$90.00 (six folios); luxury edition, \$300.00.

IT IS A STRANGE and sad thing that, in the early 1980's, a poet in his mid-sixties as near to the Canadian bone as Al Purdy should not be able to bring out a *Collected Poems* that would allow readers and students to follow, between one set of covers, his development and his achievement seen as a whole. But the economics of large-scale commercial publishing — and especially the high cost of printing — seem to make this impossible. Such volumes are becoming much more infrequent than in the past. The only recent retrospective collections that come immediately to my mind are those of F. R. Scott and of Robin Skelton, the latter brought out by a western publishing house, Sono Nis, that has close links with its printer.

Purdy's new volume, *Bursting Into Song*, draws attention to this situation. It is called an "Al Purdy Omnibus," but in fact it is only the back half of the bus. As Purdy explains in his "A Sort of Intro.," *Bursting Into Song* has to be read "with an earlier selection, *Being Alive*, plus another book called *The Stone Bird*" to appreciate "what I think is my best work." *Being Alive*, which is subtitled "Poems 1958-78," was itself a reflection

of publishing tendencies as early as 1978, for instead of reprinting all of Purdy's poems from volumes that were quickly running out of print, McClelland & Stewart offered merely a selection. It was a good selection, sensitively done by Dennis Lee and including all the spectacular virtuoso poems and much else, but quite obviously, like many of his readers, Purdy is not content.

*Bursting Into Song* is designed to fill the gap. It does not complete the whole range of Purdy's poems up to *The Stone Bird* (his most recent collection) but it does make up for the absences in *Being Alive* by restoring all the poems which Purdy thinks worth preserving and which Dennis Lee, for spatial or critical reasons, decided not to use. Its arrangement, by Marty Gervais who runs the Black Moss Press which publishes the book, is, as Purdy says, "much less deliberate and studied," but that is hardly likely to disturb readers who will again have access to good (and not always so good) poems from out-of-print collections that Lee did not choose to select.

Purdy suggests that, because so many of the "lighter" poems were included in *Being Alive*, *Bursting Into Song* is "a more serious collection, not to say solemn," but in fact the sardonic comedian is freely at work even here.

"Bend over,"

the doctor said  
(he was an extremely treacherous person),  
and stabbed me with a

pickle fork and  
grinned for very joy —

("Miss Adventure")

for nobody makes friends with an onion  
except another one  
and then they don't trust each other  
like two skunks

("Helping My Wife Get Supper")

Still, I think one can say that in *Bursting Into Song*, despite the lyricism implied in its title, a more demotic and didactic Purdy appears than in *Being*

*Alive*. Dennis Lee picked off the best of the erotic poems and of the moving poems of historic nostalgia and topographical passion. There is nothing here as spectacularly good or as lyrically moving as "The Country North of Belleville" and "The Necropsy of Love," as "The Cariboo Horses" and "Arctic Rhododendrons." But there are the poems of direct human contact like "Joe Barr" and "Percy Lawson," compassionate and empathetic, and often in their own way tenderly comic, like "Washday," in which Purdy remembers the slightly ambiguous encounter on a remote Arctic island when he helped an Inuit woman with her daily chores.

In most of these poems there is a sense of probing awareness which Purdy recognizes when he talks of "the pure joy of some discovery in a poem, feeling a personal euphoria flow from me to the poem and back to me," and which gives its own exploratory character to his work. When I look at many of Purdy's poems in terms of their content, I am reminded of prose analogies — the sharply observational narratives of Victorian naturalists like Darwin and Bates or of early investigators of urban low life like Thomas Mayhew. Purdy's triumph is perhaps to have reversed the direction Herodotus initiated when he brought the matter of epic poetry into prose; he has transferred the matter of anthropological and historical prose into poetry, and has done so with an unusual combination of concrete visualization and natural euphony. The strange lurid portrait of Purdy on the cover of *Bursting Into Song* suggests a man in vatic trance, and there is in fact a shamanic feeling about much of this poetry, a sense of common reality transfigured, which I think explains the way Purdy can touch our feelings by evoking some banal situation in common speech, but common speech given the rhythms of incantation. Certainly, equipped with

both *Bursting Into Song* and *Being Alive*, the reader will possess most of Purdy's memorable poems and hear most of his various voices.

Purdy's considerable production of poems — he estimates that those he thinks worth preserving would fill a 300-page volume — is the result of years of continuous writing, and of publishing what he writes in collections issued at fairly short intervals. Few years pass without another Purdy volume coming either from McClelland & Stewart or from some more private press. In comparison with him, Henry Moscovitch and Bill Howell are extraordinary slight producers and cannot be regarded as poets in the same devotedly professional sense. *New Poems* is the first book Henry Moscovitch has published since *The Laughing Storm* appeared in 1961. Bill Howell's *In a White Shirt* follows eleven years after his only other volume, *The Red Fox*, which came out in 1971.

Bill Howell has spent the intervening years mainly in radio production, but his poetry carries few signs of this vocation, and indeed has the tone and attitude of escape from mundane considerations that might justify one calling it Sunday poetry, a series of small releases from routine into fantasy and nostalgia. There is no great sense of commitment, but one is aware here and there of feelings of warmth and even regret for the sites of the poet's Maritimes childhood:

And here

We still are, where this place is  
amazingly as it was once, or was it  
twice, we went here anyway, then  
as now, whatever the weather.

There is never the kind of complex obsession with place and time, with personal experience reaching into tradition, that inspires the elaborate structures of Purdy's poems of Loyalist Ontario. The tone of Howell's poetry is simple and muted, given to descriptive image rather than to

metaphor, and always returning, as if to an emblem of escape, to the figure of the fox as trickster.

To see, after all these years, a new book by Henry Moscovitch is a reminder of the days when Montreal was a great centre of English poetry in Canada. The historic magazines published there, *Preview* and *First Statement* and *Northern Review*, are more than a quarter of a century in the past; many of the poets who made Montreal such a centre in the 1940's and 1950's are either dead, like A. M. Klein and Patrick Anderson, John Sutherland and John Glassco, or departed, like P. K. Page and Irving Layton and Leonard Cohen. Of the few who have remained — F. R. Scott and Louis Dudek among them — Henry Moscovitch lapsed into the longest silence, at least so far as publication is concerned, though there seems to be internal evidence in *New Poems* that he has been quietly writing all along. In a rather fulsome prefatory poem, "Stanzas to H.M.," Leonard Cohen credits Moscovitch with writing "the bravest songs we have of loss and love's repair," and certainly loss and the endurance of loss are poignantly present in his work. It is the peculiarly compelling work of a man who has remained privately devoted to his art over the years without the sense of a need to offer his heart immediately to the public, a poet to whom Cohen's description later in his dedication, "well-ordered and alone," seems clearly to apply.

Reading Moscovitch's poems I am reminded, by their form as well as their mood, of those modest fountains in Japanese hermitages in which a thin, unbroken and oil-smooth jet of water falls into the mirror of an old stone basin. The poems are arranged in narrow columns — like water jets — with lines rarely of more than four syllables, and in feeling they have the cool certainty of falling water, and the Heraclitian knowledge

that it is never the same water or, by analogy, the same human situation.

The days go by  
like swift  
running water.  
I am disturbed  
in my little shell.  
I miss you  
but it's not that  
as I can hardly  
remember your name.  
The years  
have erased you  
from my memory.  
I hardly know  
what to call you:  
force or destiny.  
When you come  
back you will  
find me lost  
in the fields  
of another.

*Cantos North* by Henry Beissel, another Montreal English poet who is a good deal more productive than Moscovitch, is an elaborate example of the printer's craft, handset, assembled in six folios of two cantos each, and accompanied by lithographs "about Canada" by Friedhelm Lach; there is even a luxury edition of twenty copies priced at \$300.00. After the cool economy and certainty of Moscovitch's tiny lyrics, *Cantos North* seems like a sprawling and unfocused work. Of course, its subject — the vast untidy land of Canada — has the same attributes, but one of the functions of poetry is to draw a pattern out of chaos. For me the pattern that emerges out of Beissel's poem is neither clear nor very significant. Frank Scott, in a eulogistic note, describes *Cantos North* as an "epic," but it has none of the epic's relentless narrative movement, and one can best consider it as a series of geohistorical odes, devoted to the life of man in the great Canadian wilderness. Examining the work in detail, one finds clear lyrical passages, striking images, but the real uniting sweep is lacking, so that even the virtues of the poem tend to become im-

pediments. Unlike Purdy, it seems to me, and unlike Pratt also, Beissel has not succeeded in bettering those who have preceded him in prose. As an evocation of the experience of the north, *Cantos North* falls short of Hearne's or Thompson's original narratives or, for that matter, of Donald Creighton's mytho-historical interpretations of them. Pound set a bad example when, in his *Cantos*, he tried to do in verse what could be better done in prose, and Henry Beissel has been influenced in more than his title by the Pisan master.

GEORGE WOODCOCK

## POETRY & PROSE

GEORGE BOWERING, *Particular Accidents: Selected Poems*, ed. with an intro. by Robin Blaser. Talonbooks, \$5.95.

FRANK DAVEY, *The Arches: Selected Poems*, ed. with an intro. by bpNichol. Talonbooks, \$4.95.

FRED WAH, *Loki is Buried at Smoky Creek: Selected Poems*, ed. with an intro. by George Bowering. Talonbooks, \$4.95.

BILL BISSETT, *Beyond Even Faithful Legends: Selected Poems 1962-76*, ed. bill bissett, intro. by Len Early. Talonbooks, \$5.95.

BP NICHOL, *As Elected: Selected Writing 1962-1979*, ed. bp Nichol and Jack David, intro. by Jack David. Talonbooks, \$5.95.

TALONBOOKS' SERIES of selected writings is a potpourri of poetry and prose, picture and sound poems, drawings, doodles, song-chants, "konkreetisms" and a host of uncategorizable works. Each editor has had free rein in the compilation of his own volume and each, thankfully, has considered carefully the implications of juxtaposition: the essentially interpretative act of anthologizing. The result is something of a very mixed bag.

On one hand we get a welcome variety within an overall series format (there are no consistent/perspective principles of selection). Individual introductions for

the most part are critical and intelligent, outlining the basis of selection, a brief biography, and the literary significance of the poet. Best of all, each volume has a comprehensive bibliography which is, most notably in the case of Bissett and Nichol, a scholarly contribution of the highest sort.

On the negative side we have rather a large dollop of hype, jargon, and bathetic platitudes, especially in the introductions to Wah, Bowering, and Nichol. Consider for example Bowering on Wah:

Wah's poems tangle with the phenomenal, the first act of noticing something, & they try to signify it without overusing "society's" name for it, which latter is next to be peeled away after we have discarded abstraction & description, & their simi-lies. In the poem "Here," we catch the poet's attention as it is caught, attention being for Wah more important than reflection. Thus rime is more important than reason.

Rhetorical? Deliberate overstatement? We've not, it seems, heard the last of Martinus Scriblerus or Charles Kinbote.

But critical bathos aside, the series is a significant one, particularly as it gathers in one convenient place representative selections by three of the co-founders of *Tish*. Although each is decidedly an individual "voice," the present volumes accentuate by proximity the connections, inter-lacings, the networks that join participants into a coherent group. In every case there is the obsession with language as political tool: inherited verbiage as ideology, as imposed, and therefore as suspect idiom to be treated with critical dubiety.

Robin Blaser has made an intelligent choice from Bowering's voluminous output, using stuff from as far back as 1961 as well as (to name a few), *Baseball*, *Autobiology*, *Curious*, and *A Short Sad Book*. bp Nichol has thoughtfully excluded Frank Davey's pre-1970 works because "the published work from 1970 on is vastly superior & gives a much clearer

picture of the author's intent & power." Hence, excerpts from (among others) *Weeds*, *Arcana*, and *War Poems*. As an anthology Bowering's *Wah* is the most balanced of the three, starting with *Mountain*, progressing through each of the subsequent collections (including superb extracts from *Pictograms*) and concluding, though not always wisely, with some previously unpublished poems.

By far the most successful volumes are those self-edited by Bill Bissett and bp Nichol. Not only do we get an interesting insight into what each artist considers worth re-presenting, but also an astonishing gaze into the range, versatility and power of two "renaissance" poets. Len Early, whose introduction is the clearest, least cliché-ridden, and most cogent of the lot, sensibly remarks of Bissett (and it might also be said of Nichol):

Bissett's poetry was so closely identified with the political/cultural convulsion of the 1960's that even its admirers were bound to wonder how many of its features would retain interest as the years passed. This selection should reassure them. In the first place, it will remind us that his poetry had deeper sources than topical issues and literary fashion. In the second, it shows that his best work has always been charged with the energy and formal ingenuity of enduring art.

Further along:

Objections to avant garde poetry in the name of "the tradition" . . . usually imply either an undeveloped or a fixated aesthetic sense.

These two volumes set out to unfix, to loosen up those hardened aesthetic arteries. Bissett offers a large selection, running back and forth throughout virtually the entire canon, incorporating voices "erotik, politikul, humorous, lyrikul, sound-vizual, narrative, meditative, konkreet, collage, nd song-chants." Nichol opts for a "definite pattern" and groups his works according to formal properties (visual poems, sound poems, prose, and so on).

In both cases the intention is the same: to share the vision, the energy, the delight, the moment. From Nichol's "Maps" here published for the first time:

a trance  
your eyes wide open or  
  
a heightening  
letting defenses drop  
opening the senses  
up & out  
widening into the wide world

No "selected writings" ever convey the essence of a movement or group or individual *oeuvre*. But the anthologist's juxtapositions can provide a convenient point-of-entry, a critical indicator of what any given accomplishment is about.

GARY BOIRE

## FOR WORDS

ARTHUR ADAMSON, *Passages of Winter*. Turnstone, n.p.

MICHAEL BULLOCK, *Lines in the Dark Wood*. Third Eye Publications Inc., \$7.25.

STEPHEN GUPPY, *Ghostcatcher*. Oolichan Books, n.p.

KEVIN ROBERTS, *Stonefish and Other Poems*. Oolichan Books, n.p.

NATURE AND SEASONAL CHRONOLOGY have long served as metaphor for the different stages of man throughout literary history. The classical view holds the metaphor as instrument of clarification to reveal a reality of a world which is basically unchanging. Linear time, periodicity with its own particular imagery, settings, and spatial configurations, evolves towards one temporal climax of winter and death. But there is also a more romantic view of a cyclical process associated with the seasons where although man exists within a temporal structure beyond his control he holds the power to move through cycles where vertical time becomes a fallacy. Arthur Adamson's

*Passages of Winter* is a collection of poems where the cyclical overcomes the temporal and the dark images of winter give way to spring and summer solstice. Adamson's theme is not new — a fact he is well aware of — but in the face of a basically unchanging world he recognizes each individual's responsibility to impose himself and creatively adapt and shape his own:

in my acute sameness and difference I  
call  
my sameness nature's gift and curse . . .

each  
human a monster offspring lover flame  
of a creating mind that no god could stamp.

In reading *Passages of Winter* I was reminded of Coleridge's theory of the imagination which holds the power of reconciliation between opposites: sameness with difference, the old with the fresh, nature, that "primal genial artist" with man's creativity. It is refreshing to read of winter as an integrative passage which intensifies the living span instead of symbol of alienation and fragmentation. I do think, however, that the link between nature and Adamson's poetic imagination could have been stronger had he left a more individualistic stamp. Also, many of the illustrations at the end of the poems should have been left out. They tend to overstate and undercut the poetry.

In *Lines in the Dark Wood*, Michael Bullock writes "how tempting to seek solace / in despair" and his latest book is indeed a struggle against loneliness, advancing age, death of loved ones, the dark wood a state of mind so threatening it can never be considered labyrinthine or exploratory with hope of light at the end. Bullock, who is an artist as well as a writer, fills the page as he would a canvas. Images of "tall green ferns / looking askance / from one red tulip eye" transform innocent gardens into forests and jungles which recall exotic settings of Rousseau paintings, as does the photo-

graph of the writer on the back cover, peering through broad-leaved foliage. His impression of a setting sun — “a splodge of orange ink / soaks slowly away into the blue-grey blotter / of the evening sky” — could also have been Monet's. Several of the images are beautifully sharp (“the heron / dying on its perch of bone”) but eventually they all veer inward where all is tangle and web and “only the thorns that embrace us / console us with the knowledge / that our blood is still warm. . . .” Even the last poem, “Paris in the Rain,” one of the three poems of “Re-birth,” ends on a note of defeat and artistic impotence: “rapacious clouds / have bitten off the finger / that could part this curtain. . . .” Unfortunately Bullock's lines, those “needles of light” required to gather his dark thoughts, are never bright enough to pierce the dark mood of this book, and both writer and reader are left in the dark.

*Ghostcatcher* is an appropriate title for what I believe is Stephen Guppy's first book of poems. While it is not inaccessible, it is elusive, as Guppy's voices either “hover in doorways like birds,” “gleam and fade,” or are “lost in forests.” There are poems about the anima, female personification of male unconscious usually identified with vagueness and the forces of darkness, about men who have drowned chasing dreams, and children who burst into flame. The images do not merge as much as blur and dissolve into a dreamy quality luring the reader away from any sense of reality. To add to this dreamy quality, many of the poems read as sing-songs. Lines are metrically divided into equal parts — which is almost never encountered in poetry anymore — and while rhythm may reinforce content, in this case it only serves to call attention to itself and becomes forced and monotonous. The poem which stands out is “October Turn,” where Guppy's clear language stems from the everyday and grows

into wider but never careless meaning, and the rhythm, quiet and internal, moves with a pulse of its own.

“Stonefish,” the title poem of Kevin Roberts's sixth book of poetry, *Stonefish and Other Poems*, is based on elements of Gauguin's life in the South Pacific. The relationship between despair and creativity continues to be the centre of modern art and there is perhaps no finer example than Paul Gauguin to personify the artist as romantic symbol. The long poem of 35 pages attempts to capture the complex relations of the artist caught between nature and culture, the ideological and the traditional, desire and some forbidding governing law. No longer able to live within the confines of European values, Gauguin sought to trade the “white / celluloid collars tight / black weave / of his coat” for “this place / where all things curved / bright as vahines' hips.” The trade-off, which is never achieved, proves to be destructive. Behind the bright colours, the sensuality, beauty, lurks Gauguin's demon, his guilt: “the stonefish / spines flared upon its / back / awaits the dancing / foot.”

While I found Roberts's poetry very competent I kept hoping for a language that would transcend the familiarity of his theme. Gauguin may not have been able to solve the tensions of his personal life either in Europe or in the South Pacific but he was the cause of a great moment of liberation in the history of Western Art. He was one of the first artists to risk his medium, colour, as an expressive end in itself instead of a means of describing aspects of the natural world. While Roberts understands this in Gauguin he seems reluctant to take any risks with his own art. It seems that most writers, unlike most modern artists, have not yet grasped the significance of thinking about their subject on the basis of literary practice instead of neurosis.

There is no finer example of artistic

practice as end in itself than Gauguin's *Vision after the Sermon* where two distant figures, Jacob and the Angel, struggle against a background of red. This background thrusts itself forward and becomes the subject of the painting. In view of this masterpiece it's difficult to convince oneself of what Roberts describes as "the great poison of Gauguin's mind." For in the final analysis (and to quote Roberts quoting Gauguin) "seul le travail / explique l'homme."

LOLA LEMIRE-TOSTEVIN

## AQUIN EN RELIEF

RENE LAPIERRE, *L'Imaginaire captif*, Hubert Aquin. Quinze, \$10.95.

DANS SON INTRODUCTION, René Lapierre met en relief ce qu'il considère avec pertinence être à la source de la ferveur envoûtée que l'oeuvre d'Hubert Aquin suscite: elle est lieu d'un jeu de ressemblances et de sollicitations entre auteur et lecteurs. Toutefois, avant d'être lieu de projection et d'identification pour le lecteur, l'oeuvre l'est d'abord pour son auteur, ce à tel point que Lapierre constatera: "Lire, écrire ne constituent donc pas chez Aquin des actes libres, mais plutôt les simples épisodes d'une quête de la connaissance et de l'identité condamnée à s'étourdir dans le vertige du texte spéculaire." En tant que reflet de l'identification narcissique aliénante, l'oeuvre d'Aquin s'avoue oeuvre fermée aux yeux du critique, d'où il met en question sa modernité. Sans que Lapierre se réfère explicitement à Lacan, il saisit que l'oeuvre acquinienne s'affirme sous sa plume comme illustration du stade du miroir. Au reste, son étude de la matière romanesque, parsemée de nombreuses références psychanalytiques, recoupe d'essentielles notions lacaniennes. A ce sujet, le titre *l'Imaginaire captif* est lui-même

frappant. Bien que le projet du critique ne soit pas de montrer la captivité d'un auteur et de son oeuvre dans le registre imaginaire par rapport au registre symbolique, il n'en découle pas moins qu'il rencontrera la théorie lacanienne de la refente en démontrant que les narrateurs d'Aquin, de *Prochain Episode* à *Neige noire*, se projettent constamment dans des doubles d'une manière telle que chacun entretient invariablement une relation avec le Même plutôt qu'avec l'Autre. Il en résulte que "l'écriture d'Aquin est l'exemple même de la dépossession" puisque "du roman d'espionnage au cinéma, en passant par la peinture, le théâtre et l'histoire, son univers culturel la cautionne sans cesse; tout la complique et lui ressemble à l'infini, mais en revanche, tout la dispense d'affirmer sa propre identité, de s'éprouver comme différente et de passer par cette différenciation pour arriver vraiment à elle-même, à ce qui la fonde en dépit de ce qui lui ressemble."

Dans cet esprit, René Lapierre prouvera de façon convaincante, d'une part, que les prisons des narrateurs-écrivains d'Aquin sont des complexes culturels, d'autre part, que l'absence d'identité qui en est la conséquence voue l'écriture à devenir principe de mort. Cette aliénation du romancier dans ses identifications imaginaires et dans son discours, il la fait ressortir en tenant toujours compte des composantes et personnages propres à chaque roman, ce qui donne souvent lieu à d'intéressantes et pénétrantes réflexions. Pour *Prochain Episode*, relevons l'oscillation d'une écriture impuissante à se stabiliser soit sur le registre fictionnel, soit sur le registre scriptural; pour *Trou de mémoire*, l'enfermement d'un discours qui s'avoue fascinant trompe-l'oeil déployé sur le vide, d'où la parole recèle ici l'infinie valorisation du manque originel; pour *l'Antiphonaire*, l'écriture-maladie en ce sens que l'écriture s'identifie dans ce roman-limite au haut mal qui l'habite et



la possède; pour *Neige noire*, l'appartenance simultanée à la parole et au silence d'un texte-scénario qui en appelle à un sacré à la fois divin et diabolique, donc à une ambiguïté qui débouche sur l'impossible dénomination. Dans le chapitre "L'oeuvre dispersée, la mort manquante," Lapierre élaborera la mise en question initiale de la modernité de l'oeuvre. S'il range Aquin hors de la modernité, c'est que son oeuvre, à la différence des récits ouverts et ludiques de Sabato, Borges ou Michaux, ne s'abandonne ni à l'incertain, ni au possible; c'est qu'elle programme et circonscrit la lecture, qu'elle se révèle incapable d'imiter, tout en les détruisant, la tradition et les codes réalistes qui l'instituent, à savoir Balzac, Holbein, Paracelse, Shakespeare. . . Cherchant au contraire à se fonder sur eux, l'imaginaire d'Aquin demeure de ce fait un imaginaire captif. Ces réflexions du critique sur la modernité et le traditionalisme d'une oeuvre ne sont pas sans inciter le lecteur à s'interroger sur les critères de la modernité ici retenus: y aurait-il lieu de les élargir, de distinguer entre autres des variantes et particularités nationales?

En résumé, le livre de René Lapierre est captivant et bien écrit. Le regard lucide et aiguisé que l'auteur porte sur l'oeuvre presse le lecteur d'Aquin à "la ferveur envoûtée" de dépasser cette dernière.

FRANÇOISE MACCABEE IQBAL

\*\*\* *Wyndham Lewis: Letteratura/Pittura*, ed. Giovanni Cianci. Sellerio Editore, Palermo, n.p. By an irony he would hardly have appreciated, Wyndham Lewis has become an academic commodity. Alone of the great modernists, he still remains largely impenetrable to the general reader. Among writers and painters he commands the respect accorded to an original mind and a tireless diligence, but he had no imitators. A cult of dilettantish devotees has slowly built up, yet it shows no signs of a capability to provoke a widespread revival of devotion to *The Enemy*. But for the scholar, Lewis (with his monstrous idiosyncrasies and

his wayward erudition) is a gift; students may not like him, but the material for an endless series of papers is there, and now they are beginning to appear abundantly, and not in English only. The latest Lewis collection, *Wyndham Lewis: Letteratura/Pittura*, is published in Sicily, and includes contributions in Italian, French, and English. It ends, appropriately, with a survey by Bernard Bergonzi of other such collections on Lewis. The contents are not uninteresting. There are sane discussions of what Vorticism really was, the consensus being that it was nothing more than Lewis and that Pound was an intruder. And some little-discussed texts are considered. But one misses the insights of fellow writers and of the dwindling remnant who knew Lewis himself.

G.W.

\*\*\* J. L. GRANATSTEIN, *The Ottawa Men: The Civil Service Mandarins, 1935-57*. Oxford, \$24.95; pa. \$14.95. The underlying thesis of Granatstein's book is that Canadian federal administration was shaped by a small group of civil service mandarins operating between 1935 and 1957 who departed from earlier bureaucratic traditions by becoming sharply politicized and whose particular brand of nationalism led them into alliance with the Liberals. That era has ended. "Intelligent generalists, such as the Ottawa Men, came to be replaced by hordes of 'experts.'" But the mandarins of that classic period helped to transform the country and to "alter the way Canadians lived, acted and thought about themselves." The crucial question, "For better or for worse?" is left virtually unanswered, though in general Granatstein admires the men of whom he writes without disguising the thirst for power that drove them all. It is a smoothly written book, but this quality adds to the deliberate and deadening neutrality with which Granatstein tends to evade the question — crucial in a country like Canada — of the powers a central bureaucracy should wield in a confederal society. The result is that in detail — as a series of portraits of individuals encapsulated within their careers — the book is effective, but as a reflective study of a class and a time it lacks a clear direction.

G.W.



## BIRNEY'S BEAR

EARLE BIRNEY's "Bear on the Delhi Road"<sup>1</sup> has long been a favourite poem of mine. It has also been a source of some anxiety and frustration, because I have never been able to understand it completely. I know it as a series of words; I know it as a structure of images and statement; I carry it in my head and use it to relate to that world out there that surrounds this consciousness in here that I call me. The poem says something to me that is very profound and very important, but I have always failed to pin it down and explain exactly what that something is. At least that has been the situation until now. Recently I have come upon an article by anthropologist Robin Ridington<sup>2</sup> that seems to account for my fascination with Birney's poem, and to illuminate the basic truth that it expresses. Before dealing with Ridington's ideas, however, I would like to discuss the poem, setting out my insights and responses up to the point at which I used to become overwhelmed and bewildered.

Birney tells us that the poem developed from an experience he had while traveling through India in 1958. On the road outside Srinagar, he came upon a curious sight: two men with a wild bear. Although his encounter with the trio was momentary, the experience was vivid and unforgettable. The significance of the event seemed unquestionable but also ungraspable, and so the image stayed in Birney's mind for more than a year before he was able to exorcise it by putting it into the poem that we know today.<sup>3</sup> For Birney, this bear and these men stood for some basic relationship between man and nature, for some fundamental process in

which we, as civilized and cultural beings, are involved.

Birney begins the poem by setting up the scene of the men and the bear on the road, the opening line presenting two important points of reference:

Unreal tall as a myth  
by the road the Himalayan bear  
is beating the brilliant air  
with his crooked arms

Besides rendering an effective visual image of the bear, the words are loaded with information. The bear, exaggerated in stature and somewhat incredible in this particular circumstance, is characterized as "unreal" and compared to a "myth." The two words are placed strategically at either end of the first line. They are, in fact, the poles of the axis on which the poem will turn. However, the question arises as to why these terms apply to this particular bear, who is certainly real enough to make his captors lively.

About him two men bare  
spindly as locusts leap

The figures of speech tend to humanize the animal, who has "arms," and to dehumanize the men, by comparing them to spindles and insects. There seems to be some kind of reversal going on, or is it an exchange? Birney fills in more details of the scene:

One pulls on a ring  
in the great soft nose His mate  
flicks flicks with a stick  
up at the rolling eyes.

It is not a case of torture but of training, as the poem goes on to point out.

They have not led him here  
down from the fabulous hills  
to this bald alien plain  
and the clamorous world to kill  
but simply to teach him to dance.

The adjectives set up a pattern of contrast between the bear's natural home, the hills, which are now characterized as "fabulous," and the "clamorous world" of men,

which happens to be the bald plain that is alien not only to the bear but to his keepers, who have come here for the purpose of exploiting the animal by turning him into a performer and then putting him on display.

They are peaceful both these spare  
men of Kashmir and the bear  
alive is their living too  
If far on the Delhi way  
around him galvanic they dance  
it is merely to wear wear  
from his shaggy body the tranced  
wish forever to stay  
only an ambling bear  
four-footed in berries.

The relationship between men and bear is becoming more detailed and complex. In order to render the bear amenable and marketable, the men must wear him down. The word "galvanic," as applied to the dancing men, is the key to the central metaphor of the poem. The word is derived from the name of the eighteenth-century inventor of the electric cell, Luigi Galvani, who demonstrated the flow of electricity in a circuit by attaching frog legs to a wire between zinc and copper electrodes in an electrolyte solution of sulphuric acid. As the chemical action took place in the cell, the current in the wires animated the frog legs. I remember in my high school physics class we did the same experiment, but used a galvanometer in place of the frog legs. It is Galvani's primitive model, however, that underlies the poem's image of dancing men and rearing bear. The metaphoric figure is composed of two corresponding images. On one hand we have the allusion to Galvani's electric cell, its frog legs dancing in response to the current that is flowing through the wire. On the other hand there is the poem's image of two men dancing around a bear, connected to him by a rope and a stick. The animation of the men is powered both literally and figuratively by the energy of the bear. The frog legs and the men will dance until

they have exhausted the charge in their respective energy cells. In the case of the bear, this charge is his energetic determination to remain a natural, wild bear. Depletion of this energy will result in the bear's domestication, after which the men will be in control and the bear will dance for them. Of course, their aim is to reduce and channel the bear's energy rather than to use it up completely. As the poem mentions, a dead bear will not provide them with a livelihood.

The poem would present few problems if it were to end at this point, but it goes on to comment once again on the men's activity and the process in which they are involved:

It is no more joyous for them  
in this hot dust to prance  
out of reach of the praying claws  
sharpened to paw for ants  
in the shadows of deodars.

Birney then presents us with the interpreting statement to which the poem has been leading:

It is not easy to free  
myth from reality  
or rear this fellow up  
to lurch lurch with them  
in the tranced dancing of men.

It was here that my comprehension of the poem habitually faltered. I could appreciate the irony that both the natural wish of the bear and the civilized dancing of men are characterized as "tranced." I could also understand that the bear, as a finished product ready for circus tents or carnival lots of Delhi, would at best be able to "lurch" in spastic parody of human locomotion. However, I was baffled by the second equation that the poem draws up. Although I could glimpse some of the implications of the metaphor, I could not fully appreciate the correspondence between the attempt to "free / myth from reality" and the effort to "rear this fellow up," using either or both senses of the verb "rear." Clearly, my problem

was in comprehending the meaning of the two abstract terms, "myth" and "reality," in the concrete context of the poem.

In his paper, "Monsters and the Anthropologist's Reality," Robin Ridington discusses the relationship between myth and reality as he interprets his experience of encountering the culture and traditions of the Athabaskan Dunne-za Indians of the Peace River area. The problem that he sets out to explain is the existence of the dual and conflicting realities of the Dunne-za and himself.

In Dunne-za tradition, as in the traditions of many other North American native cultures, there was a time when the relations between people and animals were reversed. Giant animals that spoke and had culture hunted humans, who were their game. In these stories about this time, terms normally used to describe animals were applied to people, and human terms were used for the giant animals.<sup>4</sup>

To the Dunne-za, traditional stories, which we would classify as myths, are not outside nature or human experience. The giant animals that characterize these stories now lie buried in the earth, giving shape to the various contours of the landscape and exerting an influence on the lives of people.

When Dunne-za children are sent into the bush to obtain "supernatural power" . . . they experience directly the power of the giant animals. It is from these giant animals of mythic times that the Dunne-za acquire the powers that enable them to perform competently as adult members of their society. The giant animals are encountered directly by every normal person at the time of the childhood vision quest experience, and they remain a constant presence behind the appearance of everyday reality. Through the vision quest people learn to exert a controlling influence over the animals of the real world.<sup>5</sup>

Ridington goes on to point out that the giant animals "are intelligible transformations of the natural animals upon which the people's lives depend." The Dunne-za

"live by making contact with animals in the bush and transforming them into cultural resources, such as food and clothing." In their myths, "where human-like animals overcome animal-like humans," the pattern is reversed, until Saya, the culture-hero-transformer, sets things right.<sup>6</sup> Just as the mythic events are interpretations of the Dunne-za hunting and trapping activities, their day-to-day activities are concrete expressions of their underlying myths. The unity of this experience is fundamental to their traditional world. The giant animals, therefore, are not a separate, occult, reality, but rather an essential component of the context of Dunne-za life.

The function of myth as Ridington has explained it here is similar in any culture. Myths reiterate and stabilize our historical and traditional relationship with the world as we experience it. In the Dunne-za situation there is no need to "free myth from reality," because the categories are functionally inseparable; myth is part of reality. In a less integrated culture, such as our own, myth has a more ambiguous status. We can, and frequently do, identify and study it as an isolated form. Nevertheless, even for us there are certain rudimentary mythic patterns that remain a presence behind our everyday lives. Many of our own public rituals, the bullfight, the rodeo, and the circus, for example, act out the residual myth of man's triumph over, and domestication of, the wild beasts. This fact accounts for the lasting appeal of these forms of entertainment and the fascination Birney had with the stark example of the ritual which was being prepared once more at the side of the Delhi Road.

Let us consider what is going on in the poem in the light of Ridington's illumination. The task that the men have laid out for themselves involves transforming a natural item, "an ambling bear / four-footed in berries," into a commercial

product, the humanoid dancing bear from which they will eventually make their living. At the same time this task also involves freeing myth from reality in the sense of transforming a real bear into a mythic entity: the trained bear as symbol of man's technical domination of nature. The two transformations are parallel and mutually dependent: one motivates the process, whereas the other interprets it. Unlike the Dunne-za, we, as analytic and specialized beings, have developed the technique of separating the real and the mythic here on this bare and alien plain of our clamorous civilization. Birney's poem gives us a rare perspective on this separation and on the nature of the myth-making process itself. The experience of comprehending the poem is the experience of standing back to witness a parody of our own technological competence. That is why the poem is a masterpiece. In its metaphor of the bear and the electric cell, in its vivid and evocative imagery of the insect-like men and their exaggerated charge, in its sonorous and ironic play of words, the poem illustrates and comments on the mysterious exchange which is basic to the history of civilization: man's simultaneous exploitation of nature and creation of myth. Technological man's involvement in this process parallels that of the Dunne-za, though the outcome of our involvement is much less inspiring than theirs. Birney, of course, is not endorsing the process or the particular myth with which the poem is concerned. He is merely laying it bare.

We are the men on the Delhi Road, even as we sit in our warm houses and turn on the television or fill our cars with gasoline and drive to the movies. Perhaps we are about to watch a bear in a Walt Disney cartoon. Anyone for a dance or a trance?

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Ghost in the Wheels: Selected Poems* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> "Monsters and the Anthropologist's Reality," in *Man-like Monsters on Trial: Early Records and Modern Evidence*, eds. Margorie Halpin and Martin Ames (Vancouver and London: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1980), pp. 172-86.

<sup>3</sup> Earle Birney commenting on the poem at various public readings, and in conversation with the author.

<sup>4</sup> Ridington, "Monsters," p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> Ridington, p. 173.

<sup>6</sup> Ridington, pp. 173-74.

LIONEL KEARNS

## THREE LAMPMAN LETTERS

READERS WITH A PARTICULAR INTEREST in Lampman studies will be delighted to learn of the discovery of three letters from the poet's father, the Reverend Archibald Lampman, to one Joseph McNeely. McNeely, whose brother John had married the poet's aunt, was a farmer in Lanark county and discovered what he thought were promising rock formations on his land. He then contacted the Reverend Lampman to arrange to have samples of the rock assayed to determine their value. The letters in question, donated to the Chancellor Norman M. Paterson Library, Lakehead University, by a direct descendant of Joseph McNeely, and dated respectively "Sep. 18th 1886," "Sep. 23. 1886," and "Sep. 12. 1888," constitute replies to McNeely's enquiries. The earliest letter recounts the Reverend Lampman's visit to the Geological Survey Office during which he learned, among other things, that "they [the Survey Office] could not send out a man to satisfy every 'Sporadic' attempt that scattered parties might make to find metals." He goes on to note that "'Sporadic' is a new word to me; it means separate, isolated." The letter of "Sep. 23. 1886" reports the actual findings of the assay ("copper

pyrites, a useful order of iron") and, like the earlier letter, contains the usual wishes to be remembered to family and various friends. It is the letter dated "Sep. 12. 1888" which is the most interesting of the three. In it the Reverend Lampman notes that Mr. B. T. A. Bell of the [Canadian] *Mining Journal* wished to mount "a large exhibition" of ore samples, including some from the McNeely property. Among the fairly precise instructions which McNeely is then given for the shipment of these materials is an admonition that they "must be sent him [Bell] not later than the 19th inst." and then follows this intriguing paragraph:

To comply with this proposition will cost you some trouble; but no more than a man who will grasp at all means and helps to gain his end is bound to incur. Whether this or that Ticket will win in the Lottery none can know. I have been groaning under the heavy load [in manuscript "burden" has been struck out and "load" written in over the eliminated word] of idleness and self-burdened old age: have some kind of pity and regard for me if you can. . . .

The surprisingly despairing tone of these remarks suggests not only the disappointment of a man disillusioned by what he saw as the narrowly focused activities of an increasingly materialistic age — a perception shared in full measure by the writer of the sonnets "Reality" and "To a Millionaire" — but also something of what must have been the prevailing atmosphere in the Lampman family household. Shortly after he took up residence in Ottawa to work in the Post Office Department, Archibald Lampman was joined by the rest of his immediate family. The household then, and for several years thereafter, seems to have consisted of the Reverend Archibald and Mrs. Lampman, the poet himself and the three sisters, Sara Isabelle ("Belle"), Annie Margaret, and Caroline ("Bebe"). The ordinary expenses of daily living would have been quite enough to strain

the resources of most families of this size at that time, but, in addition, Annie Margaret had aspirations to be a concert pianist, for which expensive lessons were necessary, and Caroline wanted a career as an artist. The financial resources available to fund all this were modest enough: to Lampman's salary as a clerk in the Post Office Department (less than \$750 a year until 1890, according to Desmond Pacey), there was only what the Reverend Lampman had as pension as a retired Church of England in Canada clergyman. Apparently to help ease the financial burden, Mrs. Lampman assumed a role as the manager of a music academy specializing in dance. Even so, the disparity between the money needed and that actually available resulted in a home dominated by the necessity for utmost frugality. The financial situation was further exacerbated by Lampman's marriage to Maud Playter in 1887, and more still by Annie's removal with her mother to study piano in Germany.

This background makes more understandable Lampman's acerbic complaint in November of 1888 to his Toronto friend, May McKeggie, that both "Belle" (who had not yet succeeded "in hunting up anything to do") and "Bebe" (who "is working at the art school") were still at home. And it is in this context that we must see the remarks quoted earlier of the elder Lampman to Joseph McNeely. Quite clearly, the debilitating financial strain which evoked the commentary by both Lampmans suggests that there was a real basis for the anxiety felt by the poet and that we are dealing here with something other than merely the subjective response of an overly sensitive romantic spirit. It seems clear, too, that the happy family atmosphere even of the Nicholas Street address, referred to by almost every critic from Carl Connor to Margaret Whitridge, must now be seen in a qualified way. Finally, it is clear that

those interested in pursuing further details of the Lampman biography for the light which may be shed on both the poet and the work will have to take into account such letters as these of the Reverend Archibald Lampman to Joseph McNeely.

S. R. MACGILLIVRAY  
J. D. RABB

## JACQUES GRAND'MAISON

JACQUES GRAND'MAISON, universitaire, écrivain, théologien, sociologue, auteur de plus de vingt-cinq volumes, a aussi écrit de nombreux articles dans les revues spécialisées et les journaux. Il a publié chez Leméac, en 1980 les deux livres: *De quel droit?* (*Les Fondements critiques*, tome I); *De quel droit?* (*La Pratique sociale*, tome II). L'auteur nous parle de l'évolution historique du droit; il nous situe les idéologies dans leur "contexte socio-politique" et il nous explique les "pratiques sociales des droits" et plaide "pour une pédagogie sociale du droit."

Dans *Les Fondements critiques*, l'auteur tente de répondre à la question sociale du droit, et quand il interpelle "*de quel droit?*" il le situe dans la société actuelle, c'est-à-dire "une nouvelle conscience qui interpelle, les deux grands systèmes dominants du monde contemporain": le capitalisme et le communisme. Jacques Grand'Maison vulgarise d'une façon remarquable les synthèses soumises à son attention, mais il oublie, parfois, de préciser le sens des mots et la valeur réelle des idées. A titre d'exemples, il nous parle d'"une nouvelle conscience" en passant de Socrate à Sakharov, "leur conscience"; "de la conscience moderne, on se demande avec objectivité, comment établir, avec clarté, les rapports ou les différences de la conscience morale de la conscience psychologique?"

Le rôle de la conscience morale est de

juger les faits, les actions; la conscience psychologique s'étend à tous les faits psychiques; la conscience morale s'appuie nécessairement sur la conscience psychologique, car pour juger un acte qu'on vient d'accomplir, ce qui est le cas vraiment typique, il faut que je connaisse l'intention, le motif auquel j'ai obéi; or, cette connaissance est l'œuvre de la conscience psychologique. Aussi ces deux consciences sont, au fond, intimement liées. La conscience morale, sans la conscience psychologique, serait probablement restée superficielle et confuse, car c'est par "l'examen de conscience," par la recherche anxieuse des faits et des actions, qu'elle s'est entraînée à l'analyse interne, à une introspection de plus en plus subtile.

Quelle serait la valeur intrinsèque du droit sans une conscience objective et scientifiquement éclairée? Et quand l'auteur se pose la question: "*De quel droit?*" il nous parle des droits de l'homme, des droits linguistiques, de La Charte des droits. . . Il explicite le point de vue individuel et le point de vue social tout en précisant la nature du droit, fondé sur la force, l'utilité sociale et sur la liberté. Dans *Les Fondements critiques*, l'auteur précise qu'il y a dans chaque personne, un droit primordial, absolu, éternel, qui fonde la justice, ce qui signifie qu'il y a dans la personne raisonnable et libre, une valeur absolue, qu'elle ne doit jamais être traitée "comme un moyen, mais comme une fin." Jacques Grand'Maison nous convie à la prudence quand il nous parle "du libéralisme" et "du collectivisme," qui, selon lui, tendent "à balayer les différences culturelles et qualitatives." Et dans toute évolution, il faut tenir compte de la liberté de chaque individu qui n'a de limite que dans la liberté d'autrui; par suite, il y a autour de chaque individu, une sorte de cercle sacré, à l'intérieur duquel il est inviolable; le cercle de liberté est son droit.

La conception du rôle historique est universelle, c'est en son nom que des esclavages ont été abolis, que des révolutions ont eu lieu, qu'une multitude d'institutions protectrices de la personne humaine, ont été créées; que les nationalités, considérées comme des personnes collectives, ont proclamé leur droit à l'existence et à l'indépendance. Et l'auteur n'a pas oublié le point de vue d'Auguste Comte, pour qui l'individu n'a pas cette valeur mystique que lui attribuent les idéalistes, les rationalistes, les Kantians. Il n'est qu'une partie d'un tout, une cellule dans l'immense organisme social. Il n'y a donc aucun droit inhérent à l'individu. Il n'a que des devoirs et pas de droits. Ce que nous appelons le droit est donc concédé par la société à l'individu. Elle peut, en cas de besoin, le modifier ou le supprimer, c'est une institution sociale. L'essentiel du débat revient donc à ceci: Où est la véritable existence du droit? Dans l'individu ou dans le groupe? La théorie individualiste implique une sorte de mystique de la personne humaine; mais la théorie sociologique implique une mystique du groupe, considéré comme un être réel, supérieur à l'individu.

Après ce bref rappel historique, l'auteur revient au "tournant actuel" avec des dessous idéologiques; et ces "dessous idéologiques" se traduisent par les conflits de travail, l'incapacité des gouvernements, des syndicats à assumer leurs responsabilités respectives. A chaque crise, le même scénario se répète: "Une loi spéciale," que ce soient l'éducation, la santé, les pompiers, les conducteurs du métro, etc. . . . "Une loi spéciale"! Une convention collective signée à la vapeur, et le droit est sauvé. La démocratie est saine et sauve.

Etat législateur, employeur, planificateur, promoteur, entrepreneur, coordonnateur, médiateur, distributeur, contrôleur, tantôt accélérateur, tantôt amortisseur, tantôt compresseur, tantôt moteur, tantôt preneur. Je charge à dessein, dit l'auteur, pour bien

montrer l'enchevêtrement des rôles de nos machines institutionnelles modernes et particulièrement de l'Etat.

Succinctement, Jacques Grand'Maison se méfie autant de l'Etat que des syndicats. Les contradictions internes de ces deux pouvoirs "renvoient aux calendes grecques" toute réponse qui conduirait à l'action positive et qualitative. De part et d'autre, on est beaucoup plus préoccupé d'idéologies que du bien commun. Les faits le prouvent: après le compromis libéral, l'idéologie socio-démocrate, l'idéologie marxiste, etc. Et l'auteur termine *Les Fondements critiques* en réfléchissant sur la morale traditionnelle, la morale libérale, la morale socialiste, la morale chambrée, la morale libertaire. Il se demande: "Que serait le droit sans la morale? Après avoir nuancé la morale juridique, la morale de la lettre, et non de l'esprit; il nous dit que le rationalisme a pris la place, aujourd'hui, au dogmatisme religieux. On déshumanise pour bureaucratiser, structurer, encadrer et établir des infrastructures. La morale doit établir une éthique "d'une conscience adulte" responsable, prise dans son individualité, face à la société universelle "des cinq continents." En établissant l'hierarchie des valeurs, la morale, à partir de la conscience morale et de la conscience psychologique individuelle, soutient et donne au droit, sa substance et sa raison d'être.

Dans son deuxième tome: *De quel droit (La Pratique sociale)*, Jacques Grand'Maison analyse les fondements critiques du droit. Il s'appuie sur une philosophie de base, qui est "l'ultime garantie du juste, du vrai, du bon, de l'honnête, du pur, de l'intègre." On sait depuis longtemps que tout ce qui est humain n'est pas nécessairement la rectitude idéale et parfaite. Il aborde "la pratique plus pertinente des droits" et il le fait "comme un pédagogue social soucieux d'aider au façonnement d'une pratique



des droits aussi riche et qualitative que les autres pratiques sociales." L'auteur ne se contente pas d'expliquer et de critiquer les pratiques sociales du droit; il les confronte avec leurs principes, leurs fondements, en les évaluant à partir d'une donnée sociale qu'il élabore graduellement tout au cours de son analyse. Cette étape, il la veut "exploratoire" en ce qui concerne "les pratiques sociales du droit," en expliquant la véritable dynamique du droit et en faisant appel à son histoire, tout en considérant les forces adultes, latentes et positives du peuple "dans le champ de la conscience et de l'expérience des citoyens." Jacques Grand'Maison analyse avec soin la démarche critique et historique, qui servira à l'élaboration d'une pédagogie sociale et philosophique de base du droit.

Dans *La Pratique sociale*, l'auteur étudie les questions de choix politiques, sociaux, économiques et culturels, reliés aux problèmes démocratiques dans un cadre de liberté, axé sur la règle du droit et de sa législation. Le paradoxe des droits, selon Jacques Grand'Maison, ce serait que les "citoyens capables de se prendre en mains, de faire leur propre politique, d'abord à partir de leur expérience, plutôt qu'en fonction des règles extérieures." Au lieu de se fier à la machine des droits, et de se débrouiller avec un million de lois qui sont modifiées quotidiennement. Il importe de bien discerner ce qui fait avancer ou reculer les choses. Il faut que la continuité, au moins relative, soit assumée, sans trop rompre avec le passé, en évoluant dans le présent, face à un futur à construire pour une société juste. Il s'agit, en somme, de bien démêler ce qui dans les faits, dans le concret, ce qui appartient aux moyens et aux fins, dans les domaines psychologique, sociologique, culturel, moral, économique et politique. Tout ne se résoud pas par la démarche juridique, il faut tout démêler, en faisant appel aux sciences humaines,

dans leur ensemble. Cette démarche critique vient remplacer le droit dans ce qu'il est, pour le renforcer dans ce qu'il doit être.

"Ma petite expérience de pédagogue social," affirme l'auteur, à plusieurs reprises, lui a donné une conscience nette de combien il était difficile de faire comprendre aux gens, d'assumer et d'aller au bout de leurs problèmes, de leurs diagnostics. La Révolution tranquille québécoise, n'a pas sécurisé les individus et la société. Au contraire, tout est controversé et tout est à refaire à la base. Et le sociologue-pédagogue écrit: "On se retrouve aujourd'hui devant certains culs-de-sac pour assumer un tournant on ne peut plus compliqué. La nouvelle tuyauterie a pu rendre des services indéniables, mais ce qui fait de plus en plus de difficulté, c'est ce qui y circule, c'est la source même; c'est aussi ce qui en sort au bout."

Pour ce faire, le pédagogue invite les avocats et les juristes, à sortir de leur domaine, à aggrandir leur champ de vision scientifique vers un universalisme qui viendrait englober leur propre discipline juridique, par une intelligence plus pénétrante de leur époque dans l'évolution des êtres en particulier et dans la société en général.

Le contexte pluraliste s'accompagne de données de plus en plus problématiques, à l'égard de nouvelles découvertes, dans tous les domaines, afin de mieux maîtriser cette pédagogie du droit et des droits. Sous prétexte de pluralisme, on ne peut écarter l'exigence fondamentale: "La Charte des droits et des libertés des personnes." Elle contient les orientations de fond qui exige un consensus minimal en vue du bien commun, avec une bonne philosophie de base, sinon la société perd son sens et son impact face au changement historique. Peu importe les débats idéologiques que fera naître La Charte, ils peuvent être utiles. A quoi bon reviser le code civil et d'imprimer de nouvelles lois, si on ne comprend pas la philosophie de base de La Charte pour le bonheur et la liberté intégrale de tous les individus?

Cette complémentarité des droits et des libertés ne peut se définir et s'appliquer, dans la vie respective des personnes, sans une véritable éducation en profondeur du sens social et du bien de l'ensemble. On y insiste. Si ma liberté commence là où celle de l'autre finit, il est impérieux, en démocratie et dans la Cité, qu'on tienne compte de la complexité des exigences et des identités en présence. Depuis le fameux message de Jésus: "Pax hominibus bonae voluntatis," les problèmes, dans l'univers et le temps, se sont accentués. La richesse étant dans la diversité, dans la vie de chaque être raisonnable, aux tendances et aux passions morales et psychiques distinctes, le droit n'a jamais réussi, à ériger une Charte de nature à répondre aux attentes infinies des désirs moraux, intellectuels et humains de l'être qui pense, qui travaille, et dont l'ambition, souvent concurrentielle est insatiable. Même les plus vertueux, parmi les humains, (on ne doit pas se le cacher, l'histoire le prouve à satiété), ont des tendances vers le bas. Prendre et donner, quelles différences dans la nuance! Et quand l'idéalisme doctrinal, fait réfléchir la conscience, on se doit de revenir vers le réalisme dans l'espace et le temps, avec ses concepts angéliques (et d'animal) que l'instinct de la bête tenaille et flatte.

Pour *Un Nouveau Contrat social*, dans la première partie du livre, Marc Brière, juge au tribunal du travail, au Québec, s'évertue à nous faire comprendre l'évolution du droit québécois, dans le contexte nord-américain, depuis quelques décennies. Marc Brière, dès l'introduction, nous avertit qu'il n'a pas lu Rousseau et qu'il ne connaît pas *De l'esprit des Lois* de Montesquieu. Pour un Juge qui doit établir la cause à effet de l'évolution du *Contrat social* depuis lors, cette constatation nous laisse sur notre appétit à savoir comment peut-il associer les liens historiques, s'il ignore ses principes et ses sources? Et pourtant Jean-Jacques Rous-

seau avait un peu de génie! En lisant *l'Emile* (1762), notre savant juriste aurait vite compris que l'exemple vient de haut et de la nature, peut-être? Jean-Jacques Rousseau, si on le comprend bien, disait que la société corrompt l'enfant. Qui est la société? Vous et moi? Que pense la jeunesse actuelle des aînés, des penseurs, des informateurs publics et autres? Quand une province, un pays, n'ont pas de travail à offrir aux jeunes de vingt ans? Comment voulez-vous leur enseigner les valeurs et le droit?

Quand on est juge du tribunal du travail, que l'on s'appuie sur la morale, avec un système politique social, où les riches deviennent de plus en plus riches et les pauvres de plus en plus pauvres, la responsabilité morale ou juridique est-elle de juger à partir de haut, ou s'il ne serait pas mieux de former des juges pour mieux aider et valoriser la société en donnant aux jeunes leurs droits de vivre et d'occuper une place au soleil? N'est-ce pas Jean-Jacques Rousseau qui affirmait: "Tout est bien sortant des mains de l'auteur des choses, tout dégénère entre les mains de l'homme"? Il fut le premier à éveiller les cœurs et les esprits au sentiment proprement romantique de la nature; son amour pour elle avait pour corollaire un profond pessimisme social; *Le Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1750); *Le Discours sur l'inégalité* (1755); ainsi que *La Lettre d'Alembert* sur les spectacles (1758) dénoncent les méfaits de la civilisation et les injustices des rapports établis entre les individus. Son oeuvre fondamentale concerne la philosophie politique. *Le Contrat social* de Rousseau va plus loin que Montesquieu et Voltaire dans la défense de la liberté et l'instauration de l'égalité entre les différentes classes sociales; son but est de concilier les libertés individuelles et les exigences de la vie sociale, bref, de fonder un ordre social "naturel." On sait que *Le Contrat sociale* inspirera *La Déclaration*

*des droits de l'homme* (et de la femme y compris). Il contient toute la philosophie de la Révolution. Brière nous parle du Code du travail, des dispositions particulières au secteur public, de la loi sur la santé et la sécurité au travail; de la loi sur les normes du travail; de la dynamique dans les relations de travail. L'auteur a le mérite de reconnaître, avec beaucoup de franchise, que "personne ne semble satisfait de la situation, ni les patrons ni les travailleurs, ni les autres." Les principales causes:

grèves, vandalisme, agressions de toutes sortes reviennent constamment; le public est de plus en plus pris en otage; des rouages importants de l'Etat sont paralysés; on dit l'économie menacée; on reproche au syndicalisme d'être trop fort ou l'on se plaint qu'il soit trop faible.

Dans tous ces mécanismes évolutifs, Brière admet que les québécois veulent se réaliser eux-mêmes en voulant "une refonte globale de leur société." Ce n'est pas en "civilisant" ni en "judiciarisant" qu'on va perfectionner le Code du travail, mais c'est surtout en faisant évoluer l'esprit du droit du travail et en améliorant le climat social en totalité. Et l'auteur a confiance dans l'avenir, il affirme que malgré "toutes nos gaucheries et notre droiture," nos "timidités et nos audaces," il est convaincu "que nous, Québécois, sommes en train de nous façonner un nouveau petit modèle de société bien à nous."

Il faut dire que Jean-Jacques Rousseau et Montesquieu connaissaient mieux notre tempérament latin, avec notre caractère individualiste, et que c'est avec beaucoup de difficulté que nous respecterons le Code du travail dans sa version actuelle. Brière, sans insister, on lui suggère de mieux lire la deuxième partie écrite par Jacques Grand'Maison, dans ce présent travail, où il nous dit que nous avons un comportement d'adolescent voire infantile. L'état/adulte est de nécessité pour bâtir un Québec viable et cohérent.

Dans la deuxième partie de *Un Nouveau Contrat social*, Grand'Maison parle de la société en projet, "le contrat social, un mythe"? D'une nouvelle pratique sociale du travail qu'il nous faut redéfinir avec tous ses dynamismes culturel, socio-économique. . . . Cette jeune société, à racine judéo-chrétienne, d'un modèle d'avenir unique, détaillé, monolithique, avec un peuple capable "de faire la société, son histoire, sa politique, sa culture, son économie." L'auteur nous convie à agir en fonction de nouvelles synthèses, qui tiennent compte des meilleures expériences des forces qui sont à l'oeuvre chez nous et ailleurs. Il importe de discerner ce qui fait avancer et ce qui fait reculer les choses, principe important dans l'idée du sociologue et pédagogue, qu'est Grand'Maison. Etant de surcroît théologien, appartenant à un ordre religieux, il demeure fidèle à ses engagements politique, social et culturel; il défend des principes de base, auxquels on ne peut pas mettre sa bonne foi en doute. Il est direct, sincère et absolu. Pour le constater, on a lu *Jacques Grand'Maison, le Roc et la Source, entretiens avec Gilbert Terrab*, où l'auteur se raconte avec un naturel déconcertant, et une dynamique toujours renouvelée! Qu'il parle de son enfance, de son cheminement intellectuel, sa liberté de parole nous pénètre et nous fait réfléchir avec clarté. Il est une invite au travail sérieux et bien fait. Issu d'un milieu familial modeste, mais affectueux, il évolua, au milieu de cinq enfants, où il apprit avec art et intelligence, le sens de la vie qui impliquait lutte et travail. Après des études au séminaire, à l'Université, au pays et à l'étranger, il se mêla aux débats de son temps: conflits syndicaux; grèves entre patrons et employés — A Saint-Jérôme, à Tricofil, industrie autogérée, où il faisait partie du conseil d'administration, il apprit combien il était et est difficile d'établir ses propres règles, de

les respecter face à la société démocratique.

Jacques Grand'Maison, dans ses entretiens avec Gilbert Terrab, universitaire, avoue que "l'utopie autogestionnaire," ce mouvement coopératif, Tricofil en particulier, était une aventure audacieuse, un peu naïve. Par contre, il se console en disant qu'il a mieux appris à connaître les humains (on passera sous silence tous les millions que le bon gouvernement québécois a investi pour que cette industrie devienne rentable, qui, on le sait, fut un échec économique et social) et pour ce faire, il cite Aristote: "on ne comprend bien que ce qu'on a vu naître." Même la naissance d'une industrie autogérée par des humains, n'enlève pas les obstacles idéologiques, intellectuels, théoriques, les conflits de personnalité. Si tous les individus étaient égaux, ce serait peut-être l'idéal, étant donné que les individus, dans l'ensemble, sont faibles vis-à-vis d'une infime minorité de forts. . . . Tous les déchirements ont pour cause, souvent, cette latence dans le psychique des êtres rationnels qui deviennent irrationnels, dès qu'un intérêt personnel est en jeu. Et par extension, Grand'Maison déclare avec sagesse, en parlant de notre évolution québécoise:

Depuis la révolution tranquille, nous avons développé une attitude, un comportement collectif en porte-à-faux, à savoir: l'illusion de croire que nous pouvons tout faire en même temps et sur tous les terrains à la fois: les meilleurs salaires du monde, les meilleurs services publics du monde, les meilleures mesures sociales du monde, le contrôle total de l'économie (des autres), l'indépendance du Québec, c'est là un comportement adolescent, pour ne pas dire infantile.

On est d'accord! Pourquoi? C'est toute la vérité. Après avoir parlé: "De quel droit"? avec une nouvelle approche pour *Un nouveau Contrat social, ses entretiens, dans le Roc et la Source*, nous font prendre conscience de notre idéalisme, de nos rêves, un peu de notre réalité, de notre

immaturité et de notre manque de sagesse en général. C'est grave et sérieux.

DENISE & EMILE DASTOUS

## APOCALYPSE NOW

*Frye's Vision of the Bible*

NORTHROP FRYE's *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982) presents the first comprehensive structuralist interpretation of biblical literature. Its publication thus matches the significance of his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), which remains a touchstone of structuralist literary theory. From the title and frontispiece on, the debt to Blake remains as deep as it has been since *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) opened that poet to serious academic study.<sup>1</sup> The style of *The Great Code* intensifies Frye's familiar *bricolage*. Erudite, unabashedly allusive, extravagantly theoretical, often leaving specific texts unrecognizably in the background, the book is lucid and seminal, exhibiting the author's formidable power for synthesizing masses of detail into systems that are at once elegantly simple and capable of complex intellectual development. A profoundly original scholar, Frye has also proved a brilliant popularizer, as in *The Educated Imagination*. At a time when the humanities seem under siege, it is gratifying to see Canada's foremost literary critic figuring as a cover story for *Maclean's* (April 5, 1982), to see such a demanding book as *The Great Code* displayed prominently in bookshops across the nation, and to hear from the publisher that the volume sold over 10,000 copies in Canada during the first five months and reached a fifth printing after a year.

The book grew out of the university classroom, and the introduction deals shrewdly with the problems of teaching

the Bible in a secular context by using a mixture of tact, wit, and Socratic irony. The subject is neither biblical scholarship, nor theology, nor even the Bible itself, but "the impact of the Bible on the creative imagination," that is, "how or why a poet might read the Bible" (pp. xxi, xvii). The first part of the volume, "The Order of Words," consists of four theoretical chapters on language, myth, metaphor, and typology; the second part, "The Order of Types," mirrors the first with four chapters investigating specific aspects of biblical rhetoric (ch. 8), narrative (ch. 7), imagery (ch. 6), and theme (ch. 5). A promised second volume, awaited impatiently, will survey "the Bible's relation to Western literature" (p. xxi).

The organizing principle of the Christian Bible, indeed for *The Great Code*, is "Typology" (ch. 4). Early Christians saw Christ as the fulfilment (the antitype) of the Old Testament (with its prefiguring types); appropriately, Frye discusses the royal metaphor at length in this chapter. Unlike modern writing, which bases its conclusions on past observation, typology concerns itself with "the future, and is consequently related primarily to faith, hope, and vision" (p. 82). Typology is thus a theory "of historical process: an assumption that there is some meaning and point to history" (p. 81). These insights save typology from its too frequent whimsicality: here it becomes the tool for finding thematic coherence in a diversified and self-contradictory book.

Chapter 5, "Typology II: Phases of Revelation," sets out the book's *pièce de résistance* of biblical criticism. In 34 breathtaking pages, Frye distills the essence of biblical themes in a structure of thought that many books of several hundred pages fail to convey. Seven roughly chronological biblical stages are distinguished: Creation (with its concomitant Fall), Revolution or Exodus (where God

forges the oppressed Hebrews into a nation), Law (which codifies the Revolution), Wisdom (which individualizes the Law), Prophecy (which individualizes the Revolution), Gospel (which as the antitype of all the previous phases, gives an enlarged vision of the possibilities of human life), and Apocalypse (which destroys the mode of vision that keeps man enslaved in the world of time and history).<sup>2</sup> Occasionally specific texts are treated at length, Creation and Ecclesiastes with particular illumination. But this chapter, more than any other piece of biblical criticism I know, points the way out of the impasse of analytical historical criticism to an integrative reading of the Bible. By indicating how each phase contains the seeds of what follows and the fruition of what precedes, Frye recreates the phenomenological experience of the reader familiar enough with the book that he or she can hear, in any given text, scripture's own cross-references and deeper echoes.<sup>3</sup>

Chapter 2, "Myth," unfolds several important critical commonplaces. *Mythos* is a way of organizing writing, whether narrative stories or conceptual arguments. Myths are not unfactual fictions, but "the stories that tell a society what is important for it to know, whether about its gods, its history, its laws, or its class structure" (p. 33). This didactic element explains why the Bible is so "violently partisan" (p. 40). While history is the record (usually damaging) of what man has already done, myth presents a vision of what man might become. The corresponding seventh chapter deals with biblical myth as "Narrative," that is, as typical action. A U-shaped plot defines its structure, beginning in an ideal situation, descending to the world of disaster, then rising again after repentance to deliverance. The Exodus is seen as the typical action of deliverance, and Christ's resurrection as the antitype. After a brilliant

exposition of the well-worn theme of Exodus typology in the Gospels, Frye throws new light on the myth of the first-born. Jesus, as first-born, becomes the antitype of all the exiles and rejected first sons of the Old Testament, as well as of the Passover lamb and the slayer of the sea monster Leviathan.

Chapter 3 discusses "Metaphor" in terms of self-referentiality. It "is the [Bible's] words themselves that have the authority, not the events they describe" (p. 60). Acceptable as this statement may be in some current critical theories, it seems more germane to Frye's thesis of typological development that in different parts of the Bible words are chosen *intentionally* to delineate different *mythoi*. In other words, the system is not as closed as some theories would make it.<sup>4</sup> At any rate, Frye finds the "primary and literal meaning" of the Bible in the interconnection of all its words and the various meanings they evoke. These crystallize into the primal metaphor found at the beginning of John's Gospel — that Christ and the Word, or the Bible, are identical metaphorically. Chapter 6, "Metaphor II: Imagery," looks at "the Bible as it appears to practical criticism" (p. 139). Though this could be the least theoretical approach, Frye structures the chapter by contrasting the divine and demonic examples of images that are grouped in a sevenfold hierarchy on pp. 166-67. Such systematic study of images can even untangle textual knots: Revelation 15:6 is discussed on pp. 157-58.<sup>5</sup> The chapter ends by arguing for a comprehensive typology of metaphor, where every image is equal, in fact identical with everything else because Christ holds all categories together.

The first and last chapters, on "Language," reveal what Frye is ultimately essaying in *The Great Code*. Chapter 1 sets out to isolate the particular linguistic mode of the Bible by expanding Vico's

distinction between three types of language that have succeeded each other chronologically. The first, "metaphoric" or "hieroglyphic," type corresponds to a mythic age where the gods are immanent, where mind and body are not divided, where poetry is the primary mode of expression, and where metaphor (this is that) "convey[s] the sense of the presence of a numinous personality in the world" (p. 24). The second, "metonymic" or "hieratic," type of language corresponds to the heroic age, where the "soul" is felt to be imprisoned in an alien body, where syllogistic prose becomes the dominant genre, and where metonymy (this is *put in place of* that) uses abstractions to talk of a transcendent God. The third, "descriptive" or "demotic," type of language corresponds to our own anti-metaphysical age, where the "mind" forms part of the human body, where writing becomes scientific, and where truth describes "objective reality" (this is this) and unmasks mere appearances.

This scheme provides the second quintessential insight of the book, though the implications affect a type of criticism different from Frye's. The modern critic lives in a demotic society that communicates descriptively, yet the Bible has metaphoric and metonymic aspects that resist purely descriptive approaches, as a century of historical criticism has shown. The literary critic is faced with even greater complexities, since the Western cultures he studies view the Bible from a variety of different metonymic perspectives. Western writers who use the Bible also introduce a second metaphoric level corresponding to the literary usages of their time, accompanied with a second non-biblical metonymic structure, and (since the Renaissance) a strong dose of the descriptive mode's distinction of illusion from reality. This outline is the first I have seen in print to grapple with such complexities. Uninterested in pursuing

the ramifications of historical considerations, Frye typically catapults the discussion light years farther by trying to integrate all the phases into a new supra-metaphoric phase in the last chapter. In the first chapter, after 24 closely reasoned pages, it comes as something of a surprise to discover that the Bible belongs to a fourth class, "oratory" (*kerygma*, to use a New Testament term), which is the vehicle of revelation. At the top of p. 29, Frye even admits an uncharacteristic inability to relate oratory and revelation to Vico's threefold scheme.

This impasse is created by a confusion between *types* of language and the *means* used to convey ideas. Oratory and revelation are not so much *phases* of language as *voices* belonging to different phases. Each phase of culture has a different view of truth and a different means of conveying it: revelation unveils reality in the metaphoric phase, oratory or *kerygma* expounds the truth in the metonymic phase, and description explains facts in our own demotic phase. Thus, in the metaphoric phase it is difficult to distinguish the oracle from the divinity, revelation from reality, the Word from God. Revelation is the vehicle of poetry belonging to the metaphoric phase. The Greeks, for example, speak of "muses," "genius," and "inspiration," all of them allowing the poet to embody the numinous sphere directly in words: the *Iliad* begins, "Sing, goddess, the wrath of Peleus' son, Achilles." In the second phase, reality is not revealed, but mediated. A reasoning audience must be persuaded of the truth through oratory, syllogism, allegory, sermons, commentary, and any number of metonymic devices. In the classical world, rhetoric provides the informing structure, as with Cicero; in medieval ecclesiastical circles, doctrine is the great mediator, as in the sermon or the commentary. The same mediation appears in the poetry of this phase: just as

the gods are no longer prime actors in the *Aeneid*, so Virgil mediates the story, beginning "Arms and the man I sing." In the third phase, persuasion normally consists of explaining the facts, as in the empirical proof for a scientific theory, ideal parliamentary debate, or even Frye's books. Similarly, the modern epic usually rests squarely on fact or sense perception, and might even delineate a pluralistic universe, as in the novel or in Browning's *The Ring and the Book*: "Do you see this Ring? . . . Do you see this square old yellow Book . . . ? Examine it yourselves!" (I.1, 33, 38).

Where does the Bible fit? Frye rightly points to several metonymic tendencies — its rationalizations (p. 10), the problem of translations (p. 11), its conception of a transcendent God (p. 27), to which could be added the abstract theses in Judges and Kings, the Exodus typology in Hosea and Isaiah 40-55, the elaborate allegories in the New Testament (e.g., Galatians 3:6-29; 4:22-31; James 2:21-24), etc. But, as Frye himself hints, the balance tips more toward the metaphorical in the Bible. Its language is "almost obsessively concrete" (p. 27), with an elemental power when vows are sworn (p. 6) or when God reveals his name in Exodus (p. 17) and speaks to bring Creation into being (p. 18). The Bible usually makes no distinction between subject and object (p. 6), between mind, body, and soul (pp. 19-20), nor, it could be added, between imagination and intention and action (cf. Genesis 3:6 and Matthew 5:21-30). Symbolic gestures and oracles characterize the prophets' activities in the Old Testament, and Jesus preferred teaching in parables and similitudes. God may be transcendent in the Bible, but only in Job, Ecclesiastes and some lamentations is he a *Deus absconditus*. He is immanent in Old Testament history and incarnate in the New Testament. As in all didactic endeavour during the meta-

phoric phase, the true prophet becomes God's own mouth, revealing the divine will without intermediary: "Thus saith the LORD" is the prophets' formula; Jesus' style is "Verily, verily I say unto you."

The last chapter, "Language II: Rhetoric," begins with phenomena that a reader stumbles over first: the style of the Authorized Version, the Bible's oral quality, the parallelism of Hebrew poetry, the aphoristic "auguries of innocence," the editorial levelling of "authors," the Bible's capacity for self-re-creation, and so on. Here Frye is closest to the descriptive aspects of modern biblical scholarship, though familiar subjects blossom anew under his green thumb. The last dozen pages embark on an ambitious polysemous critique for the Bible, isolating four imaginative levels, or "wider contexts of a continuous sense, unfolding like a plant out of a seed" (p. 221). The first level is the literal level of myth and metaphor described in chapters 5 and 6. On the second level, myth and metaphor collide with their opposites, the human contexts of history and concept that the Bible grew out of and sought to unify. On this level, "man creates his gods in his own image" (p. 228). The third level grows dialectically out of the first two, moving from knowledge to the existential plane of faith, which soon meets its complement in doubt. Facing the bedrock of doubt in "the total nothingness of death," the ultimate question becomes, "What speaks to us across our own death?" (p. 230). This leads to the fourth level, a mode of vision beyond the constraints of myth, history and faith, framed in the language of love. Glimmerings of this kind of vision have shone throughout the book, from Ecclesiastes' "program of continuous mental energy . . . determined to smash . . . through every locked door of repression in his mind" (p. 123) to the metaphors of decentralization, particularly and interpene-

tration (pp. 100, 167-68) where Christ becomes the one knower in a new heaven and a new earth, like Blake's Albion encompassing all, where opposites cease to exist, where nothing is objective, nothing dead, where eternity shines in every grain of sand.

Here Frye passes far beyond anything that can be found in the Bible or in most Western interpretations of the Bible. He ends not as a reader of biblical myth, but as the forger of a new myth substituted for the biblical religions. The concluding vision is radically Romantic (specifically Blakean) in the imaginative sense, subjectivist or idealist in the epistemological sense, totalitarian in the ideological sense, and neoplatonic, gnostic<sup>6</sup> or eastern (cf. p. 168) in the philosophical and religious senses. Frye is undoubtedly more intellectually impressive and practical than most theoretical critics. But often the Bible disappears from view, so that one is tempted to reach for Dr. Johnson's touchstone: "I refute [Berkeley] *thus*."

Some practical problems with Frye's technique can be highlighted by viewing his polysemous critique from the non-idealist standpoint. His "literal" level confusingly subsumes everything "verbal" in the Bible, ranging from the strictly literal to the figurative, the mythic, the narrative, and the typological (pp. 224, 226). In fact, for Frye this level is less literal than typological. Such a focus may be appropriate for the English Christian tradition, with its Old Testament ending in Malachi's prophecy of the second Elijah preceding the Messiah, and with its New Testament focusing on *faith* in the *person* of the Christ. But this interpretation allows the Old Testament no voice of its own. The myth, metaphor, and typology of Hebrew scripture concern a *place* that is regained through obedience to the *Law*: the Hebrew Bible ends with the promise of the restoration of Jerusalem in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23.<sup>8</sup>



Like many literary critics, Frye views the Authorized Version as the *exclusive* vehicle of the "literal" level of the Bible. Indeed, the AV supplies the handbook for biblical myth and metaphor in the English tradition because most English writers read it, and because the metonymic interpretations of the English tradition are embedded in its language and chapter headings. But this position leads to a parochial impatience for everything outside the bailiwick of the AV and its tradition. Critical biblical scholarship is viewed excessively negatively (p. xvii and note, p. 202, etc.), while modern textual omissions are attacked without a clear explanation of the facts (pp. 141, 163).<sup>9</sup> Even though the AV is sufficient for English literature or for a general structuralist approach, the reader interested in the myth and metaphor of Mark or Job must become familiar with some of the textual, philological and other knowledge that has accumulated since 1611. Who today would turn to Nahum Tate's acting version of *King Lear* or to the bad quartos for a study of Shakespearean myth and metaphor? For many critics, a more satisfactory treatment of the literal level of the Bible appears in Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, the only book I know other than *The Great Code* to present a synthetic literary approach to the Bible.<sup>10</sup>

Non-idealists will find the emphasis of the second level of history and concept misplaced, since they view texts as creative expressions of writers responding to the cultures they have grown up in. Frye's uneasiness with the Bible's insistent reference to history, to levels of reality outside itself, will have to be limited to one example here. He sweeps aside the differences between Protestant and Roman Catholic translations, commenting that he is "not concerned with the true meaning of such words as *episcopos* or *ecclesia*, but, for the most part, with

nouns so concrete that it is practically impossible for any translator to get them wrong" (p. xiv). Firstly, even concrete words can change dramatically when they are translated, "carried over," from one phase of language to another, as when the metaphoric Hebrew phrases "nostril of God" and "heat of God" become the metonymic English idiom "wrath of God" (cf. another example noted on p. 18). Secondly, the connotative overtones of concrete words can change radically when they are incorporated into a structure of thought different from the original. As Frye himself sagaciously points out, "all commentary is allegorical interpretation, an attaching of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery" (*Anatomy*, p. 89). *The Great Code* takes images from a book of faith and metamorphoses them into a secular manifesto for the imagination. Finally, one sympathizes with the determination not to get bogged down in the quagmire of denominational wrangling, but (as Frye knows) writers have a habit of responding to the intellectual debates of their times. The word *ecclesia*, for example, can stand for different concepts at the heart of quite different views of the world, as a list of a few poets will have to demonstrate: Dante, Langland, Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Blake, and Eliot. For each of these writers, the community that the word "church" stands for on the second level resolved into different existential and visionary stances on the third and fourth polysemous levels. King James I realized this when he called for a new translation, not because of any literary deficiencies in the Anglican Bishops' Bible, but because the widely used Calvinist Geneva Bible contained a marginal note to 1 Kings 15:13 exhorting the punishment of monarchs for lapses in piety. James's qualms were fully justified: both his mother and his son were executed as much on religious as political ground. At any rate, Frye's metaphoric critique levels

the significant differences between world views that have an historical habit of confronting one another.

Frye's third level of faith is more an imaginative than a doctrinal quality, so that it can be treated here with the fourth level of the fulfilled imagination. This level of vision reduces the Bible *and the entire universe*, with all their superabundant variety and antitheses, to a single monad. Historically, similar views have had a very uneasy relationship with the biblical religions, which have tended to focus on the individual in the existential flux of a history that exhibits elements of good and evil, sin and grace. As an introduction to the Bible and its influence on most Western writers, this fourth level and the participating Apocalypse of chapter 5 are highly misleading. Critically, the goal resembles the *Anatomy*, where a critical meta-system razes the particulars of different books and the individuality of their various authors.

Of course, the historical, non-idealist approach has equally serious shortcomings, which Frye exposes ruthlessly. The contribution of *The Great Code* is to have opened the Bible to students of literature as no other book has. What is even rarer for an academic work, it unfolds a vision of the possibilities of fulfilled human experience, so that the external world enters the argument more seriously than in the *Anatomy*. *The Great Code* will exercise enormous influence in the humanities, the final effect of the book being aesthetic and Frye being the most poetic of scholars. To everything there is a season; with Frye we turn from the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves to a vision where the fire and the rose are one.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The title was suggested by a phrase in Blake's *Laocoön*, "The Old and New Testaments are the Great Code of Art" (see p. xvi and note). The enigmatic frontispiece from Blake's *Job* heralds the possibility of

human deliverance from the chaos and darkness within creation (see p. 196).

<sup>2</sup> As a critical tool for showing how the various parts of the Bible foreshadow and recapitulate each other, Frye's system is unparalleled. To cavil over details seems ungenerous. Nevertheless, a few oversights and misplaced emphases deserve mention. The Psalms are not systematically included in the chapter, though they belong to the phase of Wisdom, adapting to individual piety the great themes of Creation (Psalms 104, 29, 96), Revolution (105), Law and Wisdom (1, 73, 119), and the lamentations and thanksgivings that individualize the religious concept of retributive justice (most of the Psalms).

A crucial phase, Monarchy, is omitted, possibly because the royal metaphor is dealt with at length in chapter 4. The Israelite monarchy viewed itself as the antitype of all four previous phases, which it proceeded to subsume. As far as Creation is concerned, the Israelite king assumed several divine prerogatives, being styled "son of God," "begotten" at his coronation, seated at the "right hand" of God himself (2 Sam. 7:14, 16; Pss 2:6-7; 89:26-27; 110:1-3; 132:11-14). Occasionally cosmological images were associated with these prerogatives (Pss 72:5-7, 17; 89:29, 36-37, and the decoration of Solomon's Temple—see W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1953], pp. 147-55). The Exodus is not so much subsumed as suppressed by the monarchy, since an absolute king views the idea of the equality of all members of society as subversive to his power. Psalm 78 presents the history of Israel as a "parable," explaining why the "stubborn and rebellious generation" of the Exodus (v. 8) necessitated the election of a king, David, to organize God's chosen people (v. 70; cf. 1 Kings 8:16). The period of revolutionary theodicy under the Judges is dismissed with contempt by the final, monarchical editor of that book (21:25; cf. 17:6 and 18:1). The Law becomes the king's prerogative (Pss 72:1-2; 99:4), while the rhetoric of the court suggested the absolute sursevivence of all Israelites to the crown (2 Sam. 14:17; 19:27; 1 Kings 3:16-28). Because the Law included sacred as well as civil and criminal jurisdictions, it is no surprise to see the earliest monarchs absorbing the nation's religious traditions. David moved the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:12-19), while Solomon built and personally

dedicated a Temple to house it beside his royal palace (1 Kings 8). The monarchial absorption of the phase of Wisdom was complete. Solomon was credited with composing "three thousand proverbs" (1 Kings 4:32); all of the biblical and apocryphal wisdom books except Job and Ben Sirach were attributed to him. Similarly, David, credited in the titles as author of 73 Psalms, was by New Testament times considered as author of the entire Psalter, including Psalms that are not ascribed to him in the superscriptions (see Acts 4:25 referring to Psalm 2, and Hebrews 4:7 referring to Ps 95; cf. 2 Sam. 1:17-23; 3:33-34; 22:1-23:7).

The phase of Prophecy is dialectically antithetical to the phase of Monarchy, without which it makes little sense. But Frye's description of Prophecy is so heavily coloured by Christian typology that it is closer to biblical apocalyptic. Actually, Old Testament Prophecy does not extend "from creation to final deliverance" (p. 128) as much as it sees everything *sub specie exodi et legis*; it is concerned with contemporary renewal, with reformation. The prophetic voice works itself out in a dialectical struggle with the Monarchy. The destinies of Elijah and Elisha are intimately connected to the fate of the house of Ahab and its usurpers. Where the prophets envisage a continuation of the royal line, they speak of an ideal Messiah ruling righteously (e.g., Is. 9:2-7). Intimately connected with the revolutionary and legal phases, Prophecy attempts to keep the social revolution alive in a post-revolutionary society. Prophecy perpetuates national and denominational concerns (for Israelite and Jew), while apocalyptic moves to the genuinely "wider perspective" (p. 106) of the redemption of the individual (Jewish or Gentile) and the renewal of the universe (heaven as well as earth).

To this reader, the phase of Apocalypse belongs next after Prophecy: it first appears in the Old Testament book of Daniel. Biblical apocalyptic remains firmly anchored in what Frye calls the passive "panoramic" stage, where a series of marvels and terrors leads to the end of the world in the near future (p. 136). Frye's active "participating" Apocalypse is found neither in the Bible nor in traditional Christianity, but in Blake, the Neoplatonists, the gnostics and some millenarian cults. (See Kathleen Raine's study of Neoplatonism in *Blake and Tradition* [Princeton, 1968]. For the gnos-

tics, see the *Treatise on Resurrection* 49.15 ["already you have the resurrection"], the end of *The Gospel of Philip*, and the introduction in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* [Leiden: Brill, 1977; repr. New York: Harper and Row, 1981], pp. 53, 151, 5. See also Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* [New York, 1961]. On disputes concerning the canonicity of the New Testament Revelation, see A. Wickenhauser, *New Testament Introduction* [New York: Herder, 1958], pp. 562-63.)

While biblical apocalyptic merely revives and expands an Old Testament form, the Gospel phase introduces something radically new. Though Paul is given short shrift, his letters and Acts fit into this phase. Frye is right about Jesus' conviction of the Gospel being a realized eschatology in the here and now; typologically, it is the most advanced phase in the Bible. In other chapters, *The Great Code* sees the Gospel as the fulfilment, since Christ is the antitype of all biblical imagery and myth in chapters 6 and 7. Frye could have followed a micro-cosmic hint in Blake's *The Everlasting Gospel*, which finds the antitype of all the Bible, including the transfiguring Apocalypse, in Jesus (*Complete Writings*, ed. G. Keynes [London, 1966], p. 754):

He laid His hand on Moses' Law:  
The Ancient Heavens, in Silent Awe  
Writ with Curses from Pole to Pole,  
All away began to roll.

Though introducing the phase of Monarchy upsets the sevenfold perfection of Frye's model, early Christians sometimes used an eightfold scheme. Since the resurrection took place on the day after the Sabbath, the Lord's Day was sometimes called the eighth day. See Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964), pp. 396-99 (especially the quotation from the *Epistle of Barnabas* 15:3-8 and nn. 36-37), and pp. 19, 28, 34 (n. 123), 36, 140, 176-78.

A final implication should be mentioned. Any phase can be resuscitated at any later period. Thus, seventeenth-century England was Christian, subscribing to the main points of the Gospel and Apocalyptic. But the seventeenth-century monarchists' use of the Bible was coloured by a return to the precepts of the Old Testament Monarchy, while Milton, Cromwell, and the puritans returned for their inspiration to the phases

of Revolution, Law, and Prophecy. Frye's situation of the book of Job, a wisdom book conversant with the crises familiar to the Monarchy and Prophecy, is an excellent example of a biblical book that straddles more than one phase.

<sup>3</sup> Frye criticizes the "analytical and historical approach" to biblical studies of the last century, which has led to a "criticism in which disintegrating the text became an end in itself" (p. xvii). Similar dissatisfaction with the most corrosive aspects of this type of approach is now being voiced among biblical scholars themselves. Brevard S. Childs's widely used text, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), acknowledges its debt to analytical learning (pp. 17, 40, etc.), but concludes that biblical scholarship has come to a "sterile impasse" (p. 16) that leaves a chasm between critical reconstruction and the biblical text that a reader comes upon, and that allows for no resonance of language and imagery between parts of the Bible (pp. 40-41). Unfortunately, Childs has too few literary skills to produce a successful new reading of the Bible.

<sup>4</sup> In writing as suasive as myth, no words are chosen gratuitously. Whatever images do not fit perfectly are drained of their received meaning and filled with new thematic significance. See Roland Barthes's seminal essay on "Myth Today," *Mythologies* (Frogmore, England: Paladin, 1973), pp. 109-59. Childs points to a "fundamental dialectic" that affects the composition of the text: "the literature formed the identity of the religious community which in turn shaped the literature" (*Introduction*, p. 41).

<sup>5</sup> In Rev. 15:6, the angels are usually "dressed in linen." Three of the best Greek manuscripts read "dressed in stone," a variant that not only alludes to one of the author's favourite books (Ezek. 28:13), but also parallels other patterns of imagery inside and outside Revelation. In the English tradition, the angels are dressed in stone only in the Revised Version (1881) and in the Douay-Rheims Bible (1582), the latter following a pre-Clementine Vulgate tradition. The Clementine edition of the Vulgate (1592) reads *lino* ("in linen"); *lapide* ("in stone") is read in the Vulgate of Jerome (ca. A.D. 386) and Alcuin's edition of the Vulgate (before 800), in both fourteenth-century Wycliffite English translations, and in the Latin commentaries of Bede (d. 735, see Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 93.178), Beren-

gaudius (d. 859, *PL* 17.985), Anselm (d. 1117, *PL* 162.1555), Rupert of Deutz (d. 1129, *PL* 169.1111), Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173, *PL* 196.821) and Martin Legionensis (d. 1221, *PL* 209.387).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the paradoxes of *The Thunder, Perfect Mind*: "I am the whore and the holy one. / I am the wife and the virgin. / I am the mother and the daughter. . . / I am the barren one / and many are her sons." *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, pp. 271-72. See further n. 2, paragraph 4 above.

<sup>7</sup> Saturday, 6 August 1763 in James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (London: Oxford, 1953), p. 333.

<sup>8</sup> A recent structuralist study makes this point effectively. See Michael A. Fishbane, "The Sacred Center: The Symbolic Structure of the Bible," *Texts and Responses: Studies Presented to Nahum N. Glatzer*, ed. M. A. Fishbane and P. R. Flohr (Leiden, 1975), pp. 6-27.

<sup>9</sup> Ancient editors did not expunge John 7:53-8:11, since the passage appears in only one of the dozen extant Greek manuscripts before the eighth century. (For technical details concerning the crux, see B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [New York: United Bible Societies, 1971], pp. 219-22.) Furthermore, the passage — as stylistically different from John as the Mills are from Blake — is printed in all modern English translations with a note explaining the textual difficulty. Frye rightly complains about the silent omission of the trinitarian formula in 1 John 5:7, particularly "considering the historical importance the verse has had" (p. 163). But if no note records the omission in the Revised Version (1881), Revised Standard Version (1946), New English Bible (1961), Jerusalem Bible (Reader's ed., 1968) and New American Bible (1970), an annotation explains the difficulty in the Jerusalem Bible (Library ed., 1966), New American Standard Bible (1971), New International Version (1973) and the Oxford Study Edition of the New English Bible (1976). Regrettably, the comment that the trinitarian formula "does not explicitly appear in the Bible except in 1 John 5:7" (p. 163) is wrong: Matthew 28:19, a passage without textual variation, has an unambiguous reference to all three persons of the Trinity in the AV and in every modern translation.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981). Although interested in general structures, Alter's criti-

cism is firmly anchored in the cumulative particulars of specific biblical texts. Limited to the prose narratives found in Genesis through 2 Samuel, the book investigates such phenomena as type-scenes, dialogue, repetition, modes of characterization, and point of view.

ALEXANDER GLOBE

RECENT REFERENCE BOOKS include Justin Wintle's biographical dictionary *Makers of Nineteenth Century Culture 1800-1914* (Oxford, \$55.50), a substantial guide to the ideas of the period as well as to the people; hence, though none of the figures indexed is Canadian, Canadian Culture nonetheless bears the imprint of those who are. *Canada on Stage 1981-82* (CTR, \$44.95) is another in the series of illustrated theatre performance yearbooks. *Journal of Modern Literature* (9, no. 3-4) includes a guide to criticism of a number of Canadian writers. In *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 23 (Gale, \$74.00), there is an 18-column summary of commentary on Jack Hodgins. *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, vol. 8 (Gale, \$74.00), contains an article on Frye by Donna Olendorf; *TCLC*, vol. 9 (Gale, \$76.00), summarizes W. W. Campbell criticism; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 15 (*British Novelists 1930-1959*; Gale, \$148.00), contains an excellent article on Lowry by Ronald Binns, and vol. 13 (*British Dramatists Since World War II*; Gale, \$148.00) an article on Simon Gray that scarcely mentions Gray's Canadian connection. *Contemporary Authors*, vol. 107 (Gale, \$76.00), features Buffy Sainte-Marie. Robert Dubuc has published a bilingual *Vocabulaire bilingue de la production télévision* (Leméac and CBC, n.p.); and P. G. Socken a computer *Concordance de "Bonheur d'occasion" de Gabrielle Roy* (Univ. Waterloo & ECW, \$85.00).

Recent reprints include Gilbert Parker's romance of Quebec history, *The Seats of the Mighty* (Tecumseh, \$9.95); Frederick Philip Grove's collection of literary essays, *It Needs to be Said* (Tecumseh, \$9.95), with a fine introduction by W. J. Keith, which probes the historical ambience and moral purpose of Grove's literary rhetoric; Norman Duncan's story collection *The Way of the Sea* (Tecumseh, \$9.95), helpfully edited by Jack Adams; Jean-Charles Harvey's *Fear's Folly* (Carleton Library, \$6.95), with an excellent introduction by John O'Connor; *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer* (Penguin, \$6.95); Robertson Davies's *The Rebel Angels* (Penguin, \$3.95); Hugh Brody's *Maps and Dreams* (Penguin, \$6.95)

and *Inishkillane* (Douglas & McIntyre, \$10.95); Guy Vanderhaeghe's *Man Descending* (Macmillan, \$8.95); and several volumes of selected poems, by Phyllis Webb (Talorbooks, n.p.), Rachel Korn, translated by Seymour Mayne (Mosaic/Valley, \$12.95; pa. \$6.95), John Robert Colombo (Mosaic/Valley, 2 vols., \$8.95 and \$9.95), George Johnston (Golden Dog, n.p.), and Fred Cogswell (Guernica, n.p.).

*Capilano Review*, Nos. 24/25 (\$6.00), is devoted to the art and comments of Gathie Falk, with a special page devoted to the artist's diagram of identity, whereby being "artist" and being "woman" and being "lover of raspberry jam" are all shown to have "significance." *Canadian Poetry*, no. 11 (Fall/Winter 1982), is devoted to A. J. M. Smith. *Liberté*, no. 145 (\$4.00), contains literary statements by the most prestigious of contemporary Quebec writers. And *North Dakota Quarterly*, which includes in its Spring 1982 number an appreciative and instructive commentary by Sherman Paul on recent Canadian "long poems" (or, as he prefers, "serial poems"), intends to publish a special Canadian issue late in 1983.

NOTE: In *C.L.* 96, footnote 61 was inadvertently left off the end of J. R. Nursall's article "To Dare to Attempt Impious Wonders." It should read: "Raymond Souster, 'St. Mary's Street: 3 A.M.' (1954), in *Collected Poems of Raymond Souster*, p. 262."

Douglas Barbour's *Two Poems*, "Art Objects for an Inner Landscape:" (*C.L.* 96, pp. 58-59) should have divided after "it says:".

W.N.

## LAST PAGE

I HAVE BEEN TRYING to read André Brink's *A Chain of Voices* (Oxford, \$19.95), with little success. Billed as a masterpiece about the race cruelty of South African history, the novel is admirable for its conscience more than its craft. It winds together the lives of two boys, white and black, who grow up to grow apart and to flare into violence — a familiar theme in South African writing. The prose would have us believe in several narrators reflecting on their own connection with the main events — the white boy, the black boy, an old black woman who is both mother and mistress, others — but unfortunately it's all a chain of one voice. The prose style does not differentiate them. And the novel reads as though it wants desperately to be a movie instead.

By contrast, Maurice Gee's fine novel *Plumb* (Oxford, pa. \$6.95) is an engrossing fictional

— *written* — experience, inviting readers to partake of a whole society by requiring them to partake of its language. Told from the perspective of an aged Nonconformist/pacifist/politician-preacher, it reveals how a whole culture (New Zealand) has shifted uncomfortably out of its Presbyterian middle-classness. At the same time, it records the kinds of sacrifice that has entailed. The rebellious preacher, locking himself away with his own conscience, gives little thought to how his reach for independence affects his family (his wife, who kills herself in servitude; his children, who opt for safety and security wherever they can find it and as soon as they can: conservatism, marriage, America). In his last days, Plumb revisits his children in an endeavour to make his peace with them; they receive him quizzically at best — not without love, but not without relief when he finally goes, either. If the most alienated son, homosexual and bitter, cannot forgive, that underscores the reality of the tension established by his father; the fact that as readers we are allowed to see through Plumb's mask of self-satisfaction — and yet with understanding! — to the meanness that lies beneath underscores the technical dexterity of an admirable novel. *The Halfmen of O* (Oxford, \$10.95) shows that Gee can write a captivating adventure-fantasy for children as well. A cross between Persephone and Tolkien, it tells of a child's capture by the halfmen who live underground, and of a battle of will and soul that regains for the world a balance between good and evil.

Among recent Australian novels and stories, there is more of a sense of hell than evil, a hell identified with Brisbane, middle-classness, "okkerism," and suburban life. A brittle wit is the typical medium for such critiques. The self-reflective stories of Graham Jackson's *Square Crib* (Univ. Queensland, n.p.) regale themselves with anecdotes of competitive drunkenness; Geoffrey Dutton's *The Eye Opener* (Univ. Queensland, \$8.50) is a satiric sexual romp, as though by Fielding out of Tom Sharpe, through the art of recent mores, and vice versa; Gerard Lee's *True Love and how to get it* (Univ. Queensland, \$12.95) parodies conventional romance by conventionally embracing the new-found freedom of vernacular oaths. Rather better, funnier, and more serious is Peter Carey's *Bliss* (Fitzhenry & Whiteside, \$18.25) which begins when a man named Harry Joy, who has been dead for nine minutes of bliss, is electrified back to his life of punishment. Declaiming against fate, he parades in tracksuit and sandshoes through his reclaimed days, cataloguing the ironies of pre-

sumed ordinariness: sexual ambition among his peers, drugs and incest among the young, mercantile callowness among his colleagues, for which he is rewarded by incarceration in an asylum. So far, so bizarre. But at this point the novel vengefully chases its Message: that in a sixties-ish Alternate Lifestyle, replete with its ostensibly refreshing obscenities, is the truth that makes us children free. Like the other Australian publications noted here, it reads finally like a book from twenty years ago, luxuriating in the release from previous linguistic restrictions, but longing still for a literary form that is commensurate with imagination's reach.

W.N.

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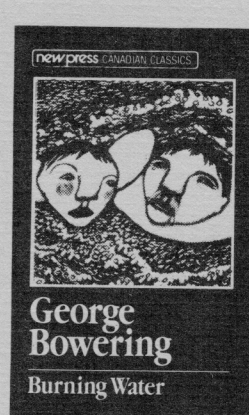
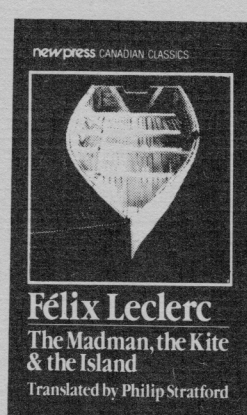
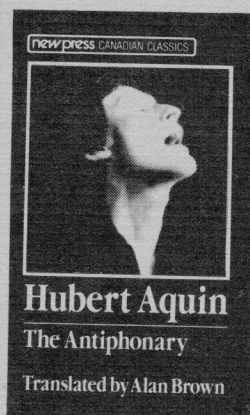
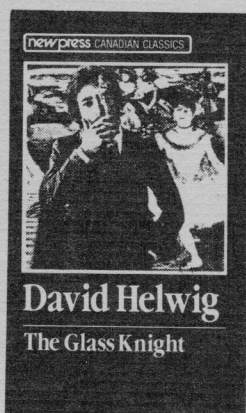
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