

POETRY AND THE DIVIDED MIND IN CANADA

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TWICE a week during the second term of the academic year I endeavour to arouse some interest in the poetry of to-day among a group composed largely of senior students. The class itself is typical of any similar University group in that its members have begun to think a little, and are not afraid to defend their ideas. A particularly thought-provoking aspect of the students, however, lies in the spontaneity of their response to the American poets. The Americans, as exemplified by Sandburg, Frost, MacLeish, Robinson, Millay, and the usual others, seem to establish a contact that is immediate at the same time that it is healthily questioning. For the undergraduate with some background of literary study, and an inquisitive mind about the work of the poet during, after, and re-involved in war, the writers of the United States provide a stimulus for critical discussion that is both the purpose and the blessing of such a course. The students recognize kinship with the aims and the subject-matter of the poet; they have little trouble in condoning the rhythmical and metrical departures. An average student is disposed to regard the extremists, such as E. E. Cummings, as "funny"; but even here the obvious connection with jazz rhythms reconciles the student to the rightness of the verse for the times. In some cases he will, unprompted, state the necessity for a redefinition of the word poetry, in order that it may include those aspects of the new verse which his previous training, stopping as it does with the collapse of the Victorian tradition, did not consider. This redefinition, I might add, in no way implies the complete discard of previous conceptions; rather it is prompted by a sense of the rightness of present poetry, and a wish to reorganize the older values so that this sense of rightness may be personally justified.

The poets of present-day England, however, provoke an altogether different response. When confronted with the works of Auden, Day-Lewis, MacNeice, the students openly declare themselves baffled. That part of the difficulty arises from the increased demand these poets make upon an advanced intellectual background, is obvious; but even the comparatively simple sections of their works produce an uncertain reaction, a dubiety of mind as to purpose and meaning. The stand for

Traditionalism made by the Wastelanders, their despair of the present and doubt about the future, have little in common with a group of young people who, while they would experience great difficulty expressing their ideas, nevertheless feel a vigorous certainty about their own futures. In the same manner, the use of an involved and intellectual imagery, which they instinctively interpret as a vitiated attempt to prolong and to expand a literary tradition that expresses a way of life no longer suitable to them, excites negative and occasionally caustic critical comments. The lyric spirit and the choice of material of Stephen Spender is appreciated, but even here the pervading atmosphere of personal fatigue and of almost desperate loneliness, both in some way bound up with Spender's unbreakable affiliations with the Old World, cause this appreciation to be much more a purely intellectual rather than an intellectual-cum-personal thing.

Political and social issues behind large sections of such poets as W. H. Auden are recognized as important; but they are remote from the minds of those whose country has not yet begun to consider seriously the possible desirability of alternate forms of government, or whose labour problem is not only small but concerns a group not directly related to the possible collapse of a complete social order. Like the American workman, the Canadian refuses to contemplate himself as an individual moving within a caste system; therein lies the difference between the British and the Canadian attitude on labour problems; a difference which affords immediate explanation of the greater reality, for the Canadian, of American as opposed to British poetry on this subject.

As a result of the student's instinctive reactions in favour of American poetry, and of his evident desire to study and weigh values which he feels to be a part of his own civilization and which he finds reflected in this poetry, one is drawn towards a number of natural questions. Are the trends of the English Canadian's thinking laid more closely to those of the United States than they are to those of the Old World? What is lacking in the poetry of Canada that the standard textbooks of the best modern verse include so little Canadian? I believe that the answers to these two questions interlock.

The careful reader will grant the point that contemporary Canadian poets are writing tentatively, that their small bulk of verse contains an uncertainty which would seem to rise from indecision—indecision as to aim as well as to expression. There

is often great delicacy of image, a certain adeptness in the handling of the line, and the communication of a very real understanding for and appreciation of nature. But Canadian poetry is cold. The most obvious criticism is that it seems much more the product of the fancy than of the imagination; in many cases, of the study rather than of the actual experience. Academically interesting as the results may be, neither do they have breadth nor do they have a sense of their own rightness.

What, then, is the matter? Everywhere the Canadian is surrounded by a wealth of natural beauty that has excited the admiration of literary visitors. Yet the poetry of nature which is being produced at present does little more than suggest that the poet is shy of his subject and avoids the full expression of any deep, sensitive reaction that he may feel. Perhaps the fault lies in the fact that nature is too close for us to view it in emotional perspective. Perhaps our accustomed acceptance of and occasional impatience with the essentially rural quality of our national life has bred a desire to escape from nature, or generated the opinion that the treatment of nature is an obvious and therefore in some way an undesirable theme for creative work. In any event, we have here the characteristic timidity, the sense of feeling for words, in place of the flow that springs from conviction and a well roused artistic excitement.

In the longer poems of the day, which not only deal with nature in connection with man but also derive a part of their value through the treatment of important national and international events, one encounters similar and further difficulties. There is frequent appearance of some of the most fortunate imagery in Canadian poetry; but the whole is seldom sustained. The experience recorded seems to be of a vicarious nature—the product of a mind that has tried but has not quite succeeded in projecting itself into the situation at hand. What is there is sound; unfortunately it is what is not there that is psychologically and poetically the more interesting. In a word, the poems lack the penetration which would give them something more than the surface appeal of narrative and the occasional excitement of fine imagery: that penetration into the inner psychological ramifications of any human experience which can bring to narrative poetry a significance that will transcend its purely narrative appeal. These poems tell a dramatic story, it is true; but the outcome is that the reader leaves the work with dissatisfaction in proportion to his sensitivity.

If one should turn aside from the nature and the narrative group, and regard those poems generally confining themselves to a reflection of artistic socialism, of the political and social issues which have captured the imagination of contemporary writers, one is struck with a sense of inadequacy that may be accounted for only in part by the conditions in the country. The industrialization of Canada has not yet expanded enough to justify a spontaneous outburst of the "smoke and steel" type of verse. In the same manner, the political situation in the Dominion, while it excites a good deal of protesting conversation, has not yet crystallized into factions which are wholly devoted to a political cause. Rather, the political character of the country is one of grumbling lassitude that watches with a fairly indifferent eye the forming or reforming of parties. Out of such inactivity poetry can arise only when the poet himself is sure of the rightness of that which he champions, and when he is willing to court social disaster by furthering it. To date, we have not produced the combination of fire and political conviction that is the mark of this particular type.

In the slightly increased speed of political thinking that the progress of this war has generated, and the inspection and resorting of personal political ideas that is being forced upon the intelligent Canadian by the magnificent stand resultant of the Russian experiment, there are signs of unrest. It is possible that this unrest may excite sensitive minds to the necessity of sharing their reactions through the medium of poetic expression. But there has been national unrest before, and the products are not noticeable. There has been a previous war; one in which the achievements of the Canadians were of sufficient nobility and self-sacrifice to inspire an equally noble literary response. The period of re-adjustment following the war, the infinite repercussions of the financial crash, the slow rise of a small but indicative interest in and understanding of the problems of labour are merely a few of the significant features of the twenties and thirties—of national importance all of them; but like the conflict which brought them in its wake, without a vigorous poetic voice.

Thus we have seen that the three major preoccupations of contemporary poets—the personal interpretation of nature, the voice of industry and the machine, and the apparent necessity for social and political change—have not yet struck fire from the Canadian stone. Nor has an alternate set of values prompted expression. We are faced, then, with the original difficulty:

what lies behind this apparent ineptitude? The key, I think, may be found in the divided mind, in the inability of the Canadian to decide what he is, or, more dangerous, what he wants to be. As a member of an enormous and only partially developed country, he is certain of a momentous future; but the actual outlines of that future have been so clouded now by word combinations, such as "post-war reconstruction", "large scale internal development", "the natural link between America and Russia in the airways of the future", "the half-way house in which understanding between England and America may be maintained", and all the rest of these powerful and flattering phrases, that an actual interpretation of Canada the country as a separate and recognizable unit is almost impossible to achieve. Until such an interpretation is more fully developed in the minds of the Canadian intellectuals and its national importance more widely felt, uncertainty of aim is bound to exist, and to be reflected in the literature.

Furthermore, there is in the Canadian mentality a second internal conflict, the literary significance of which becomes apparent when we examine the attempts to communicate those ideas rising out of the contact of man with his environment, or as the result of personal struggle, or out of man's connection with God and nature; in brief, those ideas which have always acted as a stimulus to the sensitive mind. Since such poetry is of the most personal kind, it necessitates careful mental and emotional analysis on the part of the poet, together with a sorting and weighing of the values of one against the other in order to discriminate between that which is fundamental, and therefore of permanent importance, and that which is merely transitory, and therefore to be discarded. But even before these decisions are made, the poet must have a conception which he feels intellectually and sympathetically justified in expressing. Thus the division of intellect and sympathy which has long been one of the conspicuous psychological characteristics of Canadian thinking is bound to have prevented the attainment of the necessary point of view.

The Canadian is sympathetically British; his ancestral background is inextricably tangled with that of the British Isles; his loyalties are unswervingly to Empire; he is pleased with and grasps at traditionalism. But at the same time he finds himself in the curious and awkward position of respecting all that is British while he has to admit to himself that he has a far more advanced understanding of the American mind

than he has of the Old World mentality. It is not for nothing that he feels at home in New York, and a self-conscious stranger in London. In brief, it is the conflict of the ideal with the fact. Under different conditions, the two would merge in artistic production; as it is, such merging is impossible, and will remain so until the Canadian has undergone careful self-examination. He must begin to evaluate actualities, to find a personal integrity, and to decide what he wishes to preserve from the culture of the Old World and from the strong movements of the New. Out of such examination and decision may be created an individual character which is no longer vacillating between two forces, or taking refuge in one side each time the other seems displeasing.

Inevitably a step in any direction will entail a certain amount of painful sacrifice; but convictions strong enough to brave the pain are of the stuff that makes literature. The divided mind cannot produce the form of concentrated expression that has always been the harbinger of literary greatness; nor can the divided mind give itself wholly to the overwhelming enthusiasm for a concept or a cause that is necessary to the highest form of poetic communication. It stands to reason that important intellectual or artistic achievement must be the product of undivided concentration. It has in the very sureness of its purpose no place for the interference of doubts. Decisions must be made constantly during its inception, and when the period of experimentation has passed, the established harmony between subject and medium should be so intricately interwoven that each complements and assists the purposes of the other. Thus a divided loyalty which is only too obviously carried over into the modes of poetic expression, a wavering between the not entirely satisfactory and almost invariably unsuitable thought processes of the present-day British poets and the uncomfortable knowledge of an understanding for and a sympathy with the matter and manner of American poetry, negates the possibility of such concentration, as well as the establishment of the desired harmony.

It is on the fact of this split personality, I think, that the explanation for the inadequacies of the present Canadian poetry rests. When our poets can free themselves from the omnipresence of two powerful and conflicting voices, neither of which should be entirely right for Canada, and when they can fuse with their own convictions that which they consider relevant from both cultures, we shall see the advent of a strong and indigenous Canadian literature.