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Butterfly In The Bush Garden: "Mythopoeic" Criticism Of Contemporary Poetry Written in Canada¹

...“national literatures” is a concept which was first established after the awakening of nationalities under the pressure of the Napoleonic superstate, which is therefore highly time-conditioned and hence... obstructive to any view of the whole.

E.R. Curtius²

What we long to see we readily believe that we have seen.

C.S. Lewis³

we seize on
what has happened before,
one line only
will be enough...

John Newlove⁴

A numerically representative sampling of poetry written in Canada in the last fifteen years, from Alden Nowlan in the Maritimes to Bill Bissett on the west coast, yields a variety of poetic subjects and styles. This variety would seem to contradict the claims of recent literary criticism to a “national” literature, definable by a number of dominant archetypes contributing to a coherent mythic evolution in a search for cultural identity.

There are two major difficulties to be encountered in positing a Canadian national literature. Firstly, there is confusion over which national identity is in question: for English-speaking writers, it is that of federal Canada; for writers in Quebec, it is more often than not that of a separate Quebec. Secondly, when national identity is applied to literature, criticism is limited to a sociological approach which considers the relations between literary and cultural values. Internationally, this sociological approach has been associated with Marxist criticism, as opposed to formalist theory and practical criticism.⁵ In Canada, its shortcomings have been masked by association with another approach,

that of Northrop Frye's persuasive, "mythopoeic" criticism.

In 1943, Frye reviewed A.J.M. Smith's first Oxford collection of Canadian poetry, the publication of which was a great impetus to consideration of poetry in Canada as a collective phenomenon. Thus began two decades of provocative criticism of Canadian literature, now assembled under the title of *The Bush Garden*. At the same time, Frye was working out a theory of literature based on a cycle of seasonal *mythoi*, in *The Anatomy of Criticism*. The two aspects of his critical activity — practical and theoretical — naturally influenced each other.⁶

Frye's definition of *mythos*, his basic working concept, is carefully maintained throughout the two works, and should not be confused with "myth", in its usual meaning of figurative explanation of natural or historical phenomena. Frye's myth is "the structural principle of the poem itself...the integral meaning presented by its metaphors, images and symbols."⁷ This definition is very close to Frye's concept of form—

I mean by form the shaping principle of the individual poem, which is derived from the shaping principles of poetry itself. Of these latter the most important is metaphor, and metaphor, in its radical form, is a statement of identity.⁸

— and here we find the jumping-off point of critics intent on discovering a "national literature" for Canada. Frye's successors have not been so careful in their definition of myth, and have translated his "fables of identity" into a limited number of truly Canadian themes, on the one hand, and the creation of a coherent, mythic super-poem to which all Canadian writers have contributed, on the other.

James Reaney published an article in a 1957 issue of *The University of Toronto Quarterly* entitled "The Canadian Poet's Predicament", in which he lists, by a "sampler" of quotations, the principal themes of Canadian literature.⁹ In thus revealing the poet's predicament — his traditional isolation — Reaney refers to the critic's dilemma: to decide for or against a Canadian "cultural memory".

I rather worry about...whether it's any use talking about the poet's predicament in national terms. It's sensible if you think living in a certain kind of nation has any shaping effect whatsoever upon that country's imagination. I happen to think that Canada is a very peculiar and different country; whether its national colour and shape have anything to do with the colour and shape of its poetry is a question that you might as well say yes to again — just to see what happens.¹⁰

Reaney is more interested in a poet's manifesto for the future than a critic's honestly dispassionate retrospect, so he opts immediately for the idea of a national poetry "— just to see what happens". But in bringing Frye's criticism back to the poet, he reduces the concept of *mythos* to a school-book definition of "theme", thus breaking up the unity of subject and form, and blurring the distinction between poetry and the individual poem, that Frye always observed.¹¹

In *Butterfly on Rock*, a "study of themes and images in Canadian literature" by D.G. Jones which appeared in 1970, the evolution of Canadian literature is likened to the Old Testament saga of expulsion from Eden and eventual return to (or recognition of) the promised land. *Mythos* thus becomes generalized myth. The pattern of Jones' criticism is similar to his poetic use of the Orpheus legend¹², and here is both the strength and weakness of his criticism — its proximity to the poetic vision — as he frankly admits in the Introduction.

One can never be sure that, as one reader suggested, the result is not simply another poem. If so, it is a possible poem, and one that is well worth writing. In other words, it seems worth the risks.¹³

Jones gives a shape to Canadian literature, a poetic shape; he makes a poem of poems, and also of prose. This approach has its merits, but they are limited to individual theme and the overall, evolving myth. The limits are those of form, of recognition that prose and poetry are different, and changing, media of expression. Jones' last chapter, "An Ancient Slang or a Modern" again admits, though tacitly this time, these limits; abandoning the myth of Eden-to-Israel, this essay concentrates on the language and form of contemporary poetry.

The most recent and most popular (in all senses of the word) critique of Canadian literature is Margaret Atwood's *Survival*, published in 1972. In her apologetic preface, Miss Atwood claims that her book is no more than "a vitamin pill...cheaper to acquire and faster to swallow" of information and ideas that have been compressed from previous, more original critical writing.¹⁴ But compression indicates metamorphosis, with ideas as with nature; moreover, since this book is destined for school use, it is likely that literary history for years to come in this country will be influenced by this critical digest.¹⁵

Survival implies too many variations on its title theme without adequately, if summarily, distinguishing between them. The result is a

confusing medley of man's triumph and/or acceptance of nature and his exploitation/victimization of other men (white and/or Indian) and/or animals. And although Miss Atwood gives these several definitions of her *mot-clé* in the course of the book, she does not pursue its most logical implication, that of the survival of inherited forms, literary and cultural, which has resulted in distinctive poetic and social patterns of development *within* the country. Canada is, after all, a federation of separate regions, and it is interesting to note that Frye, Reaney, Atwood and Jones have originated from or have been attracted to the "Central Canada (English)" axis of Ontario and English-speaking Quebec. The obvious example of protest against Ontarian cultural imperialism – the assumption that what is true for Ontario is true for all of Canada – is the opposing nationalism of "Central Canada (French)", the cultural "nation" of Quebec.

French poetry of Quebec represents (in spite of Clément Moisan and Ronald Sutherland) a distinct pattern of literary influence and development unlike that of other regions of Canada, distinguishable not so much from a thematic point of view – survival is nowhere so insistent a theme as in Quebec – as by its origin and interrelated images.¹⁶ Inheritors of the Symbolist movement in France, Quebec poets created a "poésie d'exil" that evolved, around 1960, into a new grouping of traditional images, that of "terre-Québec". Almost simultaneously, poetry in Quebec became overtly political.¹⁷ The declaration of *Parti pris* in 1963 indicated by its title and its editorial manifesto that literature was now a means to achieve the goal of national independence.

Prendre parti, essentiellement, c'est assumer une situation telle qu'on la vit; c'est découvrir en l'inventant le sens de cette situation, et l'organiser en fonction des buts et des obstacles qu'on y définit...

La parole...nous servira à créer une vérité qui atteigne et transforme notre société...nous ne visons à dire notre société que pour la transformer.¹⁸

Certainly the coherence of its purely literary development (common source, interrelated images, comparable movement and emphasis) and the increasing insistence of its thematic preoccupation mark Quebec poetry's participation in a "national literature", by the criteria of any of the critics discussed above. But it is not therefore a *Canadian* national literature; instead, it represents a unified, for the most part even homogeneous attack on the vague, diffuse notion of a unified,

culturally homogeneous Canada, poetic and critical expression of which is largely confined, as I have said, to poets from Ontario.

The most obvious distinguishing feature of the French poetry of Quebec is language. The English-language Montreal poets, however, have a voice of their own, an attention to images, idiom and sentence rhythm that comes from living simultaneously in more than one culture. Klein, Layton and Cohen draw liberally on Biblical and traditional Jewish imagery, while Scott, Smith, and with them Jones and occasionally Gustafson show an awareness of language that comes with continual confrontation and translation. Scott's "tarte aux pommes profondes" is a facetious example; Jones' poem quoted below is more typical.¹⁹

Another example of distinctive regionalism is the independent development of West Coast poetry, that of bp Nichol, bill bissett, George Bowering, and also of younger poets such as Susan Musgrave and Tom Wayman. Inevitably (by geography) more subject to American than eastern Canadian influence, the West Coast poets have favoured simple, "imagist" statements and concrete poetic "objects". Nichol's *Journeying and the Returns* includes instructions for burning and the following short poem:

the sea
the sun

everything here

tide rolling in
ships moving out

mind in motion
eyes at rest

the continent stopped

against the west wall
called ocean.²⁰

I quote this poem because in a letter to Nichol, Margaret Avison (a good poet, but also from Ontario), praises this lyric as a "poem of Canadian absence", Canada being "a depressed, placeless place".²¹ Now, although the best minds in Canadian poetry would seem to be in agreement over the existence of "national" themes, I should still like to

question this interpretation of a poem which, to my mind, speaks not of Canadian "absence" but of tricks of perception, the in/out movement of a harbour view as the poet participates in the scene. I cannot imagine that this little poem is any more oriented toward a "national" Canadian theme than the intensely private world of Susan Musgrave's poetry and the seabound images which pervade it, or the formal experiment of bill bissett.²²

Contemporary criticism of poetry in Canada is, in the last analysis, not so much historical – a balanced retrospect – as teleological – a programme for the future, seeking in past and present writing evidence for the achievement to come. In the light of federal financial support for publication, and of frequent contact and influence that exists amongst recognized writers²³, such a national literature may indeed emerge in the future. But past and present writing in Canada still reflects as its most important common characteristic the relative isolation of the individual writer and, where there is mutual influence and interaction, a centre of attraction which does not go beyond the major geographical regions of Canada and which is often confined to a city or area (Montreal, Vancouver, Fredericton). Attempts to project a national literature for Canada belie these regional differences and subscribe, consciously or not, in some degree to the attitude of *Parti pris*. And the logical conclusion to this argument, to regard literature as a means to a political end, was reached by the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, held at Moscow in 1934:

...the basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism...demands of the artist the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality must be linked with the task of ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism.²⁴

Socialist realism apart, comparison with the *Parti pris* manifesto of 1963 yields striking similarities. Art has become a means rather than an end in itself, in the struggle for social justice. It is interesting to note that in a cultural rather than overtly political sense, the poet-critics Reaney, Jones and Atwood have made Frye's "mythopoeic" critical approach as *parti pris* as the Quebec review's opening editorial. This might be a case against the writer-as-critic, and for a more objective, independent criticism – independent not only from the future,

unwritten dimension of literature that should concern only the writer, but also from the political and cultural concerns and involvement which have dominated the critical works under discussion.²⁵

A literary tradition must be judged from the inside, as an accumulation of individual works and influences which, after several hundred years (certainly not within a bare centenary), leads to certain assumptions and conventions. It is doubtful if even the longlived literatures of England, France and Spain, for example, can claim to be independent literary traditions; instead, they could be more accurately described as national variants of the western literary tradition rooted in classical Antiquity and Christianity. To speak, then, of a distinctive and characteristic Canadian literary tradition would appear to be following too closely on the nationalistic preoccupations of Europe since 1830 and the Third World in this century. We should rather be wary of our own *Zeitgeist* and try to see once more the larger pattern of tradition judged in literary terms alone.²⁶

Within this larger, literary tradition, the poet speaks of universally significant themes informed by his own, local experience. His real environment in Canada is definable only in terms of areas and regions, even when he moves from one region to another, as Jones, Bowering, Gustafson, and others have done. It is certainly not that of the federal organization, an arbitrary historical structure scarcely able to bear political, let alone cultural pressures. As critics, Reaney, Jones and Atwood try to describe and programme Frye's "Canadian sensibility". But as poets, the sum of their own work is not (in Atwood's words) "Canadian literature, as *Canadian* literature"; it is at once local and universal, literature that, no more nor less, "happened to be written in Canada".²⁷

In *Phrases from Orpheus*, for example, Jones presents an apparently "Canadian" mixture of languages and poetic tones, from purely lyric to colloquial. But this actually speaks only of Jones' own place in a bilingual Quebec community, as he suggests a powerful and finally optimistic alternative to Yeats' Byzantium.

For Hell's the Lord's
Bijouterie,
A Byzantine world

Where the clock-work birds
And the golden bees
Eternally repeat

What the heart once felt
The mind conceived.

For the mind in time
Is a perishing bird,
It sings and is still.²⁷

At her best, even in the *persona* of Susanna Moodie, Margaret Atwood follows suit: she speaks of particular experience and at the same time, of universal imagination.

His feet slid on the bank,
the currents took him;
he swirled with ice and trees in the swollen water

and plunged into distant regions,
his head a bathysphere;
through his eyes' thin glass bubbles

he looked out, reckless adventurer
on a landscape stranger than Uranus
we have all been to and some remember.²⁹

As Jones himself recognized when praising Reaney, "It is not the theme of making a dumb nature articulate, but the actual doing so that is significant."³⁰ Thus Canadian poets ignore the demands of current Canadian criticism, even when they are critics themselves, and speak to the world with authentic, if diverse and divided voices.

Footnotes

1. Discussion is limited to poetry, because I think the "mythopoeic" approach is, in this area, truly limited and distorting. The novel, which can present ideas without transforming them so entirely into literary forms and images, is more open to explorations of cultural environment and identity.
2. E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, tr. Willard Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 13.
3. C.S. Lewis, *Allegory of Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 66-67.
4. John Newlove, "The Pride", in *Poets of Contemporary Canada*, ed. Eli Mandel (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), p. 82.
5. For reception of Marxist literary theory in Quebec, see Paul Chamberland, "Aliénation culturelle et révolution nationale", *Parti pris* 2 (1963), 10-22, and Jean-Marc Potté, "Un appui critique à la néo-bourgeoisie", *Parti pris* 2 (1964), 6-9.
6. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), and *The Bush Garden* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971).

7. Frye, *The Bush Garden*, p. ix.
8. Frye, *The Bush Garden*, p. 177.
9. James Reaney, "The Canadian Poet's Predicament", *University of Toronto Quarterly* 26 (1957), 284-295. Cf. George Bowering, "Why James Reaney is a Better Poet: than any Northrop Frye Poet; than he used to be", *Canadian Literature* 36 (1968), 40-49.
10. Reaney, "The Canadian Poet's Predicament", p. 284.
11. Cf. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 131-140.
12. D.G. Jones, *Butterfly on Rock* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970). See George Bowering, "Etre chez soi dans le monde", *tr. R. Lacasse, Ellipse* 13 (1973), pp. 82-103. Also, reviews of *Butterfly on Rock*, by W.H. New, "Quelques arpents de papillons", *Canadian Literature* 47 (1971), pp. 94-97, and by Douglas LePan, in *University of Toronto Quarterly* 41 (1971), pp. 90-91. LePan comments, "The method [Jones] has chosen virtually precludes critical examination in depth of individual works...[and] it runs the risk of giving undue prominence to works which contain explicit affirmations..." The same could be said, with even more reason, of Atwood's *Survival*.
13. Jones, *Butterfly on Rock*, p. 4. New's review, "Quelques arpents de papillons", comments on the final chapter "so curiously tentative, compared to the others, and so like an essay from a book yet to be written rather than the conclusion to this one."
14. Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), pp. 12-13.
15. As George Jonas notes in *Maclean's* (August 1973), p. 14, "*Survival* was published in 1972 and everybody noticed it...posterity is maddeningly unfair in that it generally extends its grace to those who were already appreciated in their lifetime. It may not be enough to be known, but it is useful, because the unknown seldom survive."
16. Clément Moisan, *L'Age de la littérature canadienne* (Montreal: Editions HMH, 1969); Ronald Sutherland, *The Second Image* (Toronto: New Press, 1971).
17. *Archives des lettres canadiennes: la poésie canadienne-française*, ed. Paul Wychzinski (Ottawa: Fides, 1969); Gilles Marcotte, *Une littérature qui se fait* (Montreal: HMH, 1962) and *Le Temps des poètes* (Montreal: HMH, 1969); Guy Robert, *Littérature du Québec: poésie actuelle* (Montreal: Deom, 1970). See also the reviews *Gants du ciel, Liberté, La Barre du jour* and *Parti pris*.
18. Editorial, *Parti pris* 1 (Octobre 1963), p. 2.
19. A.M. Klein, *Collected Poems*, ed. Miriam Waddington (McGraw Hill-Ryerson, 1974); Leonard Cohen, *The Spice-Box of Earth* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961); Irving Layton, *Collected Poems* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965), *passim*. F.R. Scott, *The Blasted Pine* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1962), p. 33, and *The Dance is One* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973); A.J.M. Smith, *Collected Poems* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 99, 84, 64: both Scott and Smith include translations in their collections. D.G. Jones, *Phrases from Orpheus* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967).
20. bp Nichol, *Journeying and the returns* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1967), part III.
21. Margaret Avison, "Letter to bpn", included in Nichol, *Journeying and the returns* (broadsheet).
22. *West Coast Seen*, ed. Jim Brown and David Phillips (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1969), *Mindscapes*, ed. Ann Wall (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), *Storm Warning*, ed. Al Purdy (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971) contain selections. Cf. Bowering's sense of known place, of his own environment, in the preface to *In the Flesh* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 8: he associates this sense of place with his lyric writing, and notes that his environment is western (B.C. and Alberta). For him, "in southern Ontario there is no place. At least not the kind you can get lost in & find your way in."
23. Northrop Frye observed in 1956 that "much of Canada's best poetry is now written by professors or others in close contact with universities." (*The Bush Garden*, p. 175). The contact and communication possible among universities are furthered by the League of Canadian Poets - see Louis Dudek, "The Writing of the Decade: poetry in English", *Canadian Literature* 41 (1969), 111-120 - and by the national institution of the Canada Council. See George Woodcock, "On the Resources of Canadian Writing", and Robin M. Farr, "Sources of Financial Assistance to Authors and Publishers" in the Royal Commission report on *Book Publishing: background papers* (Toronto: Queen's Printer, 1972), pp. 61-85, 86-110.

24. Abram Tertz, *On Socialist Realism*, tr. George Dennis (New York: Random House "Vintage", 1960), quoted p. 148.
25. Cf. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 3-13. The functions which Frye ascribes to criticism are derived from his concept of art as "dumb" creation: interpretation is needed because "poetry is a *disinterested* use of words; it does not address the reader directly." Criticism must have "some measure of independence from the art it deals with." (pp. 4-5) Cf. Jones' "other poem", Atwood's manifesto, and socialist realism as a programme for both creation and criticism.
26. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, pp. 6-7, 12-14; Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, pp. 61, 90 speaks of "the prison of the *Zeitgeist*". Curtius' inclusive approach is that inevitably reached by comparatists. Cf. Jones' references to the participation of Canadian literature in the larger western literary tradition, *Butterfly on Rock*, pp. 6-8, and Atwood's brief comment, *Survival*, p. 17.
27. Atwood, *Survival*, p. 13.
28. Jones, *Phrases from Orpheus*, p. 8.
29. Atwood, *Journals of Susanna Moodie*, p. 30. Cf. Al Purdy's review of the *Journals*, "Atwood's Moodie", *Canadian Literature* 47 (1971), 80-84: "I believe in Atwood-Moodie. I think the Moodie conveyed by Atwood is...a real person... However, the Atwood-Moodie persona crosses me up in 'Death of a Young Son'." (p. 83).
30. D.G. Jones, "The Conquest of Medusa", *Canadian Literature* 40 (1969), 68-71.