

BACKGROUNDS OF ENGLISH- CANADIAN POETRY *

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THE history of Canadian poetry is so short, compared with that of Old-World nations, that the general reader requires little in the way of historical background in order to enjoy it. He naturally expects to find that our earliest poetry in English was written by men and women who came to what is now Canada from England, Scotland, and Ireland (the absence of a Welsh strain is conspicuous), either directly or by way of what is now the United States. Some poets of Irish extraction, unless they had come under the influence of the contemporaneous English tradition before coming to Canada, may show delightful traces of Irish folklore and, if they did not leave Ireland too early, of the romanticism of Tom Moore, who himself visited Canada in 1804, making the occasion memorable by giving us one of our two highly prized Canadian boat songs. Similarly, and more definitely, early poets from Scotland wrote in the manner of Burns. The early poets who came from England brought with them the classic tradition of the eighteenth century, and they and their successors were considerably slower than poets who remained in England in accepting, but ultimately did accept, the Romantic mode of writing poetry.

Two migrations from the United States, a minor and a major, affected the development of Canadian poetry. The minor, that of New Englanders to the lands from which the Acadians had been removed, could result, because of the predominance of Puritanism among the settlers, in religious literature only, which reached its lyric best in Henry Alline's *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1786, 1802). The major migration, that of the Loyalists, not only contributed largely to the development of Canadian poetry but reinforced for a time the prevailing conservative adherence to the eighteenth-century classical tradition.

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In the poetry of those who came to Canada after reaching maturity in the land of their birth, whether across the Atlantic or in what is now the United States, there is bound to be some expression of homesickness. What is significant from the Canadian point of view is the change by which the country of their adoption comes to be loved as home.

Patriotism in any land rests on two fundamental bases, love of the country itself and admiration for the achievements of its great men. Canada is still a young country, and in the days of the early settlers and for a considerable period thereafter, its history was very much in the making, so that patriotism rested almost wholly on the first basis, and even that, up to the time of Confederation, was regional. Till then, patriotism in what is now Canada could not be based on a unit larger than a province, and sometimes the patriotic unit was even smaller than that.

This makes it easier to understand the tremendous impetus that Confederation gave to poetry by Canadian-born poets, especially those who were entering the most impressionable period of their lives in 1867. All of the major poets of the "Confederation School",—Roberts, Carman, Campbell, Pauline Johnson, Lampman, and the Scotts,—were born in the short period 1860-2. Even the youngest of them could probably remember the accomplished fact of Confederation, and all received the full impact of its early effect on the new nation. They established a poetic tradition that is still the true Canadian variant of the great poetic tradition of the English-speaking nations, itself only a variant of the fundamental and indispensable poetic tradition of all time.

Of this universal tradition, no requirement is more fundamental than one that poetry shares with all literature and all of the other arts; namely, that the art process is not complete until the experience of the artist is communicated, through the appropriate medium of the art concerned, to those aesthetically capable of sharing the experience. Failure so to communicate can be due only to incompetence of the would-be artist in the use of his medium.

This and other basic aspects of poetic tradition Canadian poets on the whole, with characteristically sane conservatism, followed until after the First World War. Very few of them, major or minor, attempted even free verse, which, however it may have appealed to certain types of American and Continental French temperaments and however much it may be justified

in theory as an artistic rhythmic intermediary between the rhythm of prose and the meter of verse, seems to have had little appeal to Canadian poets and to have elicited little response from Canadian readers. Even MacInnes and Service, who stand strikingly apart from the main current of Canadian verse, do so almost wholly because of the content of their work, not because of their attitude to traditional poetic form. In general it may be said that the difference between major and minor poets up to 1918 is not in the kind of subject matter chosen or the artistic mould into which it is cast but in the degree of excellence attained in the use of similar subject matter expressed in soundly traditional forms.

Furthermore, the best Canadian poetry since the First World War has been written by poets who have remained true to the basic fundamentals of the authentic Canadian variant of universal poetic tradition, modifying the merely conventional aspects, as is always permissible, to suit their individual artistic temperaments. Without in any way sacrificing the clarity and imaginative power of their work, they have expressed themselves, to a large extent in genuine free verse, by means of imagery as startlingly original as that of the so-called "new poets" at their most obscure. In this worthy succession, outstanding younger poets are Kenneth Leslie, Arthur S. Bourinot, Robert Finch, Earle Birney, Audrey Alexandra Brown, Laurence Dakin, Charles Bruce, Anne Marriott, James Wreford (Watson), and Raymond Souster, and there are others who have made a commendable contribution, as the contents of the anthology will show.

In comparison with lyric poetry, narrative poetry, especially when based on actual occurrences, has little opportunity to depart from indispensable tradition, so that E. J. Pratt, because of his almost exclusive devotion to narrative poetry based on fact, stands apart in solitary grandeur, an isolated mountain peak on one of the tablelands of the Canadian Olympus. In his critical discussion of the attitude of the poet to the permanent core of tradition (University of Toronto *Quarterly*, October, 1938, pp. 1-10), he is solidly on the side of the angels.

Had all of Canada's potential poets who have begun to publish since the First World War adopted the same sane attitude toward what is unchangeable in poetic tradition, it would have been much better for Canadian poetry. And such would probably have been the case had Canadian poetry been left to continue its natural course of development without the introduction

of new or revived poetic techniques from abroad. As Dr. Lorne Pierce has sagely said, "No nation can achieve its true destiny that adopts without profound and courageous reasoning and selection the thoughts and styles of another." Left to themselves or aided by sound constructive criticism, most or all of the younger Canadian poets interested in experimentation with new content and modification of established forms, as well as those who were accused of being unduly imitative of the work of the "Confederation Group", would probably have worked out their own salvation, as others before them had done, and as some of both groups did despite the fact that they were not left to themselves.

Three of our professorial critics were unduly impressed by the value of the poetry they studied while doing research abroad. In their criticism of Canadian poetry, though still talking about the old "colonial" criticism, which seemed to regard Canadian literature as necessarily inferior to English and American literature but which had disappeared evidently without these critics being aware of the fact, they introduced, ironically enough, a new and more harmful colonial attitude to Canadian poetry; namely, that its development would be faster and greater by grafting certain foreign techniques on the native tradition. Most of all they favored the method of one poem, *The Waste Land* (1922), by T. S. Eliot, who himself had said, at least two years before that poem was published, that youth is everywhere prone "to form itself on one or two private admirations." (*The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920.)) Moreover, many of the admirers of *The Waste Land* do not yet seem to realize that Eliot himself, soon after writing it, turned wholeheartedly to the English classic tradition.

What is the method employed by Eliot, an American expatriate who became a resident of England in 1914 and a naturalized subject in 1927, in writing *The Waste Land*? In content it shows, as C. Day Lewis (*A Hope for Poetry*, 8th ed., p. 23) aptly phrases it, "symptoms of the psychic disease that ravaged Europe as mercilessly as the Spanish influenza." The method is a blend of that of the seventeenth century English metaphysical poets with that of the French symbolists, by that time influenced for the worse by inheritance or accretion of undesirable aspects of the practice of the French decadents and Parnassians, by dadaism, dating from 1916 and in purpose utterly destructive of all accepted values in art and elsewhere, and by a development within itself, surrealism, which by 1924 was strong

enough to become a separate cult. Symbolism at its best, that is, when it has both clarity and imaginative power, is only one means of poetic expression; at its worst it results in obscurity, sometimes to the degree of incomprehensibility. The latter result is almost certain when the method of the metaphysical poets is used, for their imagery is characteristically far-fetched.

To give the ideas of his poem imaginative expression by this synthetic method Eliot turned for image and symbol to *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), by Jessie Laidlay Weston (d. 1928), a book on the Grail legend that shows its relation to pre-Christian fertility cults and that gave Eliot his title, plan, and much of his symbolism, and to Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, in particular to the material on the Phrygian deity Attis, the Greek Adonis, and the Egyptian Osiris, all three associated in one way or another with death and revival. These main sources of image and symbol are supplemented by quotations from and allusions to various literary and religious works, with most of which the general reader would be as little acquainted as with the main sources.

With regard to the influence of *The Waste Land* on Canadian poetry, W. E. Collin, who studied at the University of Toulouse, tells us in *The White Savannahs* (1936) that one of its effects was "to convert *The Golden Bough* into a manual for young Canadian poets", giving them a body of "myth and ritual and symbolism" through which to express their emotions, thereby increasing "the interest and strength" of their poetry (p. 194). Few persons acquainted with Frazer's monumental achievement would question the judgment of a recent panel of competent critics placing the one-volume edition among the first five of the ten greatest books, but to attempt to make its contents the basis of imaginative appeal in poetry before that content has become generally known is to take poetry away from the people, especially in a country like Canada, where the population as shown by the 1951 census is still only slightly less than half rural and where a large part of the statistically urban population was rurally reared.

By having access to the manuscripts of the "young Canadian poets" who were to appear in *New Provinces: Poems of Several Authors* (1936), Collin was able to write of their work and yet synchronize the publication of his book with that of theirs. Of the six poets in *New Provinces*, Pratt and Finch, as we have already seen, are in the great tradition. The other four are F. R. Scott, largely responsible for the publication of the volume,

A. J. M. Smith, Leo Kennedy, and A. M. Klein. With the finest of scholarship but with amazing critical inconsistency, Collin proceeds to minimize the achievement of two of Canada's great poets, Marjorie Pickthall and Archibald Lampman, by showing the influences that had shaped their poetry, and then to magnify the achievement of the Waste-Landish poets by exactly the same method, showing what influences had shaped their poetry.

The late E. K. Brown (1905-51) studied at the Sorbonne. His criticism of Canadian poetry in the annual *Letters in Canada* from 1935 to 1949 and in *On Canadian Poetry* (1943, 1944), for the first edition of which he got a Governor-General's Award, tends to underrate the work of conservative Canadian poets and to overrate that of those who follow the Waste-Land formula. Answering complaints of admirers of the poetry of Roberts to the effect that the critic had been "grudging" in his comments on the work of the poet, Brown says that if there is any ground for such complaint, "it lies in the fear I had lest his great age, the strong loyalties he evoked, and the immense influence he had come to wield should prejudice the reception throughout the country of some kinds of poetry that he did not fully appreciate." (*L. in. C.*, 1943, p. 134). In his book he says, "The poetry of the Montreal group and their disciples and associates is the core of Canadian verse during the past twenty years." (p. 70, 1944 ed.) He gives them space in proportion to this opinion.

The attitude of A. J. M. Smith to the established Canadian poetic tradition seems to be almost wholly the result of a bias in favor of the seventeenth century English metaphysical poets acquired while doing graduate work at Edinburgh under Professor Grierson, authority on John Donne, although before Smith left McGill he had come into close contact with symbolism by way of study of the later and more obscure Yeats, who, like Eliot, was influenced by French symbolism. In any case, Smith, in his introductions to the different editions of *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943, 1948), is fair to the poets who established the Canadian tradition, though his criticism of the neometaphysical poets of Canada is unduly slanted in their favor.

As might be expected, the new poets and their sponsoring critics tended to blame the difficulty that Canadian readers experienced with the new poetry, because of its obscurity, on the inability of those readers to appreciate ideas in poetry. This attitude is clearly implied as late as 1952, when the genial

journalistic critic B. K. Sandwell, an ardent admirer of the new poetry and criticism, intimates in a review of Earle Birney's *Trial of a City and Other Verse* that Canadians are not so surprised as they used to be at finding ideas in poetry. Canadians have never been surprised at finding ideas in poetry. They have been surprised and mystified at finding ideas presented in the form of virtual cryptograms instead of in the form of genuine poems, but not in the works of Earle Birney.

It is particularly unfortunate that much of the new Canadian poetry of ideas has been obscure, for in this field, the field of the reflective lyric, Canada needed and still needs most development, and yet it is in this field that the new methods of writing poetry, whether the cocktail method of *The Waste Land* or the pure method of the seventeenth century metaphysicals in England, are almost certain to result in obscurity. The new poets of *New Provinces* were followed by those of *Unit of Five* (1944), edited by Ronald Hambleton, who had visited England and there met some of the leftist poets. Besides examples of his own work, with its far-fetched imagery, he included poems by James Wreford (Watson), who has so far rid himself of metaphysical tendencies as to deserve and win the Governor-General's Award, P. K. Page, Louis Dudek, and Raymond Souster, who, as we have seen, belongs among the poets of the authentic Canadian tradition. In *Other Canadians, an Anthology of New Poetry in Canada, 1940-1946* (1947), edited by John Sutherland, Managing Editor of *Northern Review*, who has been associated with a number of new but mostly short-lived intellectual magazines and who certainly does not favor the Eliotic manner, are represented, besides poets of *Unit of Five*, Kay Smith, Irving Layton, and Patrick Anderson.

Consistent application of either the Eliotic or the metaphysical method may carry obscurity to the degree of incomprehensibility. To the inherent weakness of at least the latter method was added the result of the utterly mistaken notion, particularly emphasized by Smith, that poetry speaks the language of the intellect. Ideas, the legitimate basic content of reflective lyric, can never *in themselves* be poetry, for the simple reason that they *are* expressed in the language of the intellect. They become poetry only when expressed in language that *communicates* them to the reader with clarity approaching the best of which the language of the intellect is capable and also with the power that all readers have the right to expect from poetry; that is, in the language of the imagination, which always has

been, still is, and always will be (unless the leftists should succeed in destroying poetry altogether) the language of poetry.

Even the language of imagination will not produce poetry of ideas (or any other kind) unless the imagery, symbolism, and other means of appeal to the imagination fall within the range of the reader's experience. He will not get the ideas because he cannot comprehend their intended expression. Hence the absurdity of trying to write Canadian poetry of ideas for the imaginative appeal of which *The Golden Bough* is a manual or the far-fetched imagery of the metaphysicals the only means. In the latter case, the new poets fail to realize that originality is not enough. The imagery of the lunatic is the most original possible to man but the least sharable. Some of the imagery of our neometaphysicals is dangerously near the "lunatic fringe." The newest idea cannot become poetry unless it is *communicated* with clarity and power through the language of the imagination. The oldest significant idea will make a good new poem whenever a good new poet expresses it in imaginative language that is startlingly fresh and yet so sharable that some readers may even wonder why they themselves had not thought of putting it that way.

Where were the supporters of our Canadian variant of world poetic tradition while leftist critics were encouraging "new poets" to write in the manner of foreign poets. By the time that *New Provinces* was published, the older university professors interested in Canadian literature and the journalistic critics had for several years been working so harmoniously together that the former were no longer regarded as "academic" but rather were looked upon as guides, philosophers (in critical theory), and friends. Indeed, some of the professors had been conducting weekly book columns in the newspapers, notably A. M. MacMechan (1862-1933) as "The Dean" in the *Montreal Standard* and W. T. Allison (1874-1941) as literary editor of the *Winnipeg Tribune*. The professorial critics who had a sound attitude to tradition either did not fully realize or did not take seriously what the leftists were trying to do or were so busy with their worthy pursuits that, except for the article by Pratt referred to earlier, virtually nothing was published to correct the errors in the theory of poetry advanced by their leftist fellow professors. This theory either bewildered the journalistic critics (who had come to trust professors) or gave them an inferiority complex as regards their ability as critics.

The effect that this state of affairs has had on the Canadian reflective lyric may be partly indicated by a brief general consideration of the work of poets who consciously followed the borrowed methods of writing poetry and of those who, without realizing what the former were doing, simply wrote in a similar manner. If we symbolize by sunlight the clarity of expression that characterizes every good reflective lyric, then the various degrees of obscurity found in the works of the "new poets," whether from poet to poet or from poem to poem by the same poet, may be symbolized by haze, smoke, fog, mist, and "smog". At times, even the most obscure achieve clarity by letting genuine poetic gift triumph over mistaken theory, as a persual of their poems will show. But a preponderance of obscure poems in a volume, whether an anthology or a book by an individual poet, made it decidedly detrimental to the cause of true poetry, never more so than when it was a book that had been awarded a Governor-General's Medal by a panel of leftist judges. Such an award might ensure the sale of the book but would not ensure its being read. Readers confronted with such a volume would naturally say, if this be poetry, I'll none of it, which means that they would turn away not only from the "new poetry" but also from that written in the authentic tradition. Canadian poetry was relatively the least read of literary types in Canada from 1936 till the end of the first half of Canada's century. The obscure poets took poetry away from the people, and, as one college president wittily remarked, they did not give it to anybody else.

Fortunately, the tide has turned, as shown by the fact that many of those whose poetry has suffered through the practice of unsound methods are abandoning those methods, and pre-eminently by the fact that the 1951 Governor-General's Award for poetry went to Charles Bruce, whose work has always been, as Vernal House, the competent poetry critic of the *Globe and Mail* has phrased it, in "the best Canadian tradition." The last half of the twentieth century may still be Canada's in poetry, as in other things.