

Terry Whalen

Review Article

Too Genteel: A Review of *Vapour and Blue: Souster Selects Campbell*, in Classic Canadian Poets Series (Sutton West, Ontario: The Paget Press, 1978).

This is the second selection of Wilfred Campbell's poetry to appear in the past two years, the other being Carl F. Klinck's *Wilfred Campbell: Selected Poems* (Ottawa: Tecumseh Press Ltd., 1976). The bias of both books shows in a marked tendency to see the *Lake Lyrics* (1889) as the collection which is most representative of Campbell's achievement. Both selections encourage the notion that Campbell is at his poetic best when celebrating the Canadian landscape or more usually, evoking the surface beauty of the Ontario lake district. Raymond Souster's title is chosen from one of Campbell's more dreamy, more wistful poems ("Vapour and Blue"). It is the same poem which Carl Klinck quotes at the outset of the introduction to his selection. Both seem to share a sense of the centrality of the poem as representative of Campbell's sensibility. That poem concludes with the lines,

Here where the jewels of nature
Are set in the light of God's smile;
Far from the world's wild throbbing,
I will stay me and rest me awhile.

And store in my heart old music,
Melodies gathered and sung
By the genies of love and of beauty
When the heart of the world was young.

Souster's selection of his title from this poem, and the selection itself, help abet the common notion, once expressed by Desmond Pacey, that Campbell is a poet attentive to the "surface of nature".¹ In this selection, he is presented as a wistful poet, and a poet of joy. Of the 41 poems selected, 27 are from the early *Lake Lyrics* (1889), 5 are from the very optimistic *Beyond the Hills of Dream* (1889), and the 8 poems chosen from the deeply troubled *The Dread Voyage* (1893) are the handful of contented poems which Campbell included in that collection. The only other poem in the selection is the moody "Into My Heart the Wind Moans" from *A Sheaf of Winter Lyrics* (1907). It seems appended as a small indication that Campbell was capable of despondency in his declining years. At the end of such a relatively joyful selection, it even appears included in

token regard for the darker side of his sensibility. This is a selection which favors those poems which have given Campbell his lopsided reputation as a poet of lyric mood, a sort of minor Wordsworthian, and a very genteel poet indeed. Given the obvious neglect his work has suffered, almost any selection of Campbell's poetry is a welcome event. It is, nonetheless, a bit disconcerting that the more tough-minded side of his poetry is not made more visible in this book. As the title indicates, Campbell is here presented as a poet of "vapour" and "blue".

Souster's single page introduction is written in the tone of eulogy. He confesses: "I've always retained a soft spot in my heart for this least known, least remembered of the *Big Four* of the post-Confederation poets", as though appreciation of Campbell must be admitted as a kind of holiday away from one's critical senses. This is almost as disturbing as his comment that, "when he was content simply to write in his purely lyrical style, Campbell was quite capable of producing some very pleasant poems."² In fact, Campbell was not only a more able craftsman than is usually assumed, he was also a more profoundly realistic poet than a long tradition of commentators have allowed. When we see either a complete collection of Campbell's poetry, or a selection which includes the better of his restlessly doubting poems, he will be recognized as a more ruggedly explorative poet than it is presently respectable to claim. His starkly ironic "Morning on the Shore", still buried in the dusty oblivion of *The Dread Voyage* (1893), stands as a caveat to all critics and editors who associate his achievement with the poetry of "vapour" and "blue".

The lake is blue with morning; and the sky
 Sweet, clear, and burnished as an orient pearl.
 High in its vastness, scream and skim and whirl
 White gull-flocks where the gleaming beaches die
 Into dim distance, where great marshes lie.
 Far in ashore the woods are warm with dreams,
 The dew-wet road in sunny sunlight gleams,
 The sweet, cool earth, the clear blue heaven on high.

Across the morn a carolling school-boy goes,
 Filling the world with youth to heaven's stair;
 Some chattering squirrel answers from his tree;
 But down beyond the headland, where ice-floes
 Are great in winter, pleading in mute prayer,
 A dead, drowned face stares up immutably.

This is Campbell writing at his best, and writing from that realistic side of his sensibility which to date, too many have ignored. Roy Daniells must have been reading Campbell's lesser poems when he said that "There is something wilful about his deliberate infelicity of phrase, insensitive rhythm . . ."³ The first stanza of this poem has all of the accomplished imagery and enacting rhythm

which is central to his achievement in the finest of his celebratory poems. At his best, he is as competent a craftsman as any of the post-Confederation group, and he is unique in his ability with the concluding image. Here that image registers a sharp recognition of a violence in nature, a brutal aspect which is difficult to atone with its beauty. "Morning on the Shore" is a poem which is central to any understanding of Campbell's sensibility because it sharply dramatizes a frame of perception which is also operative in many of his apparently innocent renditions of landscape. Within this frame of perception, he is intent on unmasking the reality behind "the surface of nature", intent, that is, on piercing through the "vapour" and "blue". It therefore becomes an irony of tragic dimension that his editors and critics so often render him as a pale poet of mood.

In "On the Shore" (also still buried in *The Dread Voyage*) there is a similar ironic comment on the romantic view of nature. In this poem, even though the natural scene is presented in a catalogue of blessed particulars ("Here all is young and glad, the laughing shore,/The sunshine, the glad birds . . ."), there is finally a sense of the irrelevance of that appearance to the reality of an old man "beside the rude hut door", who is presented in the concluding image of the poem,

With palsied hands, chin bending to his knees,
Mending dead youth in meshes of net.

It is crisp poetry of this order which betrays the inaccuracy of comments such as that made by Desmond Pacey when he said that "Usually he [Campbell] insists on interpreting nature—and always in terms that immediately recall Wordsworth."⁴ Souster seems to assent to this sense of Campbell as a genteel nature-poet, both in his selection, and in his comment that "we can still read his delightful 'Indian Summer' with pleasure." Even though that poem is not *apparently* troubled, an adjective like "delightful" tends to distract us from the sense of ambiguous quiet which the poem evokes. That quiet is not only deeply mystical in purport, it is also vaguely threatening. As for the common view that Campbell is of the order of sensibility which we associate with Wordsworth, the view of him as a sort of Wordsworth in Canadian mukluks, there is the fact (which will be news to many) that he actually disliked Wordsworth's poetry. In his "At the Mermaid Inn" column in *The Toronto Globe*, he said as early as July 30, 1892, that,

He [Wordsworth] had a gentle, innocent, but childish manner, an interest in life and man's destiny, but his mind was not original enough to lead him beyond the commonest orthodoxy of his day, and he was too much wrapt up in himself and his own little world of shepherds and lambs and commonplace gardeners to feel the pulse-beat of the great humanity outside.⁵

For Campbell, Wordsworth looked upon nature with too genteel a regard. The landscape which Campbell knew was splendid in appearance, but often violent in its reality, and devastating in its disregard for the human.

Only the publication of much more of Campbell's poetry, and more of the poetry which blasts aside the "vapour" and "blue" will redeem him from the too genteel reputation which he seems presently stuck with. As a final note, it should be indicated that Souster's selection is hardbound, contains a photograph of Campbell, is nicely jacketed in additional gloss cover, and is fifty pages in length. Carl F. Klinck's selection is paperbound, fifty-nine pages in length, contains thirty-six poems, and has, as far as it goes, a provocative twelve-page introduction. It is certainly the better buy of the two.

NOTES

1. Desmond Pacey, *Creative Writing in Canada* (Toronto and Montreal: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1967), p. 72.
2. Souster, p. xiii.
3. Roy Daniells, "Minor Poets: 1880-1920", in *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, Second Edition, Vol. 1. General Editor, Carl F. Klinck (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1976), p. 439.
4. Pacey, p. 72.
5. Wilfred Campbell, "At The Mermaid Inn", in *At The Mermaid Inn*, ed. Arthur S. Bourinot (Ottawa: Quality Press, 1958), p. 43.

Allison Mitcham

Review Article

The Novelist as Reporter: Gabrielle Roy's *Fragiles lumières de la terre*

Gabrielle Roy's latest book, *Fragiles lumières de la terre* (1978), is of exceptional interest to anyone concerned with the development of the craft of a major novelist. Because this book is the work of an accomplished reporter, many of whose 'reports' are essentially stories, the reader who has followed Gabrielle Roy's brilliant career as a prize-winning novelist is led to speculate about the correlation between reporter and novelist. After all, Roy does not stand alone in literary annals as reporter-novelist, but is in the company of such formidable movers of human hearts as Crane, Hemingway, Saint-Exupéry and Solzhenitsyn. Indeed, what one critic has said of the work of Saint-Exupéry is really true of the output of all these writers—that their books are frequently "des reportages vêtus en romans ou en essais sur la quête d'un humanisme".¹ Yet how, one asks, is Roy like these others—and from what special source comes the dual nature of such achievements?

All these writers in their search for truth seem to need to search out difficult and precarious situations and to dive recklessly into them without ever first sounding the depths. Apparently, such individuals do not even seem to hesitate on the relatively secure platforms from which they launch themselves with alacrity. They are all adventurers. Although most readers will think at once of Crane's testing as a correspondent, shipwrecked off the coast of Florida in an open boat, or of his encounters in the New York slums; of Hemingway's search for self and stories at war, when fishing, or on safari; of Saint-Exupéry's daring flights across desert and sea; of Solzhenitsyn's struggles against oppression in the Gulag and elsewhere, they are likely to scratch their heads and give up when asked to imagine Gabrielle Roy during anything more adventurous than teaching school in Manitoba or writing in the tranquility of her summer home. Yet they would be wrong if they overlooked the adventurous side of Gabrielle Roy's character—her absorbing interest in testing her own and others' reactions to precarious situations.

In *Fragiles lumières de la terre* Roy emphasizes her fascination with unpredictable situations, and, what is more, justifies jumping into them. After all, how else is one to find out enough about human nature? she wonders. In one of the 'stories', "Les Sudètes de Good Soil", Roy explains that she is unlikely to get at the truth about the community she is to report on unless she cuts herself off from all opportunities for immediate escape to the outside. Consequently, after arriving at her destination she dismisses her conveyance outside the house

where she hopes to stay and finds herself now stranded on the prairie more than forty miles from the nearest hotel. She has made no contacts or arrangements beforehand. As she waits on the threshold, she is obviously most concerned about how she will be received, but she is also filled with the wonderful sense of adventure and excitement which inhabits most of Roy's most warm-hearted characters. Her justification, by the way, for this action is that "to know people well one must place oneself at their mercy!" ("Car je professais alors que pour bien connaître les gens il fallait être à leur merci!") This attitude is apparent from first to last in her fiction. For instance, it is clearly Luzina's belief in *La petite poule d'eau* (1950), just as it is the young teacher's in all the stories in *Ces enfants de ma vie* (1977)—though particularly in the final one, "De la truite dans l'eau glacée".

This openness to the unexpected and acceptance of all life has to offer seems to me the key to the success of the first pieces in *Fragiles lumières de la terre*, all of which, by the way, have been exhumed from a most unlikely source—*Le Bulletin des agriculteurs!* Several date back as far as 1942—three years before the publication of Roy's first novel, *Bonheur d'occasion*, the book which made her internationally famous—and they shine with the insights about human nature and the West in particular which have made three of her books about the West—*La petite poule d'eau* (1950), *La route d'Altamont* (1966), and *Ces enfants de ma vie* (1977)—so delightful and successful. They attest powerfully to the belief which Stephen Crane puts forward in the preface to *Maggie*—that "environment is a tremendous thing in this world and often shapes lives regardlessly." Gabrielle Roy herself corroborates the significance of these environmental influences when she remarks: ". . . de tout ce que m'a donné le Manitoba, rien sans doute ne persiste avec autant de force en moi que ses paysages."²

It is, then, from this western landscape and its diverse peoples that she professes to have learned what are for her the essentials of her life and craft—a deep sympathy for all human beings and an overwhelming feeling that no one is a stranger ("Il n'y avait plus d'étrangers dans la vie; ou alors c'est que nous l'étions tous")³. Roy elaborates on her gratefulness for the "marvelous gift" which Manitoba has given her:

. . . y avoir entrevu, toute jeune encore, la disparité de l'espèce humaine . . . et que pourtant nous sommes tous en fin de compte des êtres ressemblants. . . Toutes ces choses, je les ai dites et redites et ne peux faire autrement que de recommencer chaque fois qu'il est question du Manitoba, car pour moi ce spectacle des dépayés qu'il m'a offert toute jeune est devenu inséparable de mon sentiment de la vie.⁴

and

Les *Mille et Une Nuits* de mon enfance, ce furent ces voyages dans les petites Wallonies, les petites Ukraines, les petites Auvergnés, les petites Écosses, les petites Bretagnes du Manitoba, et aussi les répliques presque exactes du Québec éparpillées dans la plaine. J'y acquérais sans doute

déjà ce sentiment de dépaysement, cette sensation de dérive de nos habitudes qui, par la légère angoisse qu'elle engendre, n'a pas son pareil pour nous obliger à tâcher de tout voir, de tout saisir, de tout retenir au moins un instant.⁵

Roy's sympathy for minorities⁶ seems linked to her concern for the individual rather than the group. Certainly, whether in fact or fiction, Roy tends to avoid generalizations about the group to which an individual belongs—so that in *Fragiles lumières de la terre*, even when her essays are entitled "Les Hutterites", "Les Mennonites", "Les sudètes . . .", Roy focuses on the individual to show aspects of the mentality of the group. Thus, when she writes of "Les Sudètes of Good Soil", Roy introduces us in the first sentence to Elizabetha Haeckl, just as if she were introducing her protagonist in a short story:

Elizabetha Haeckl sourit lorsque je posai ma valise sur le seuil de sa cabane et demandai:

—Pourriez-vous me faire une petite place? J'aimerais bien rester chez vous quelques jours.

And a little later in the 'story' Roy remarks that "Le foyer d'Elizabetha, c'est un peu celui de tous les Sudètes." (p. 68). Similarly in "Les pêcheurs de Gaspésie", Roy admits that Elias Langlois, the individual on whom she focuses, is representative of his 'country', La Gaspésie:

. . . Les pêcheurs de Gaspésie ont acquis l'habitude de regarder les étoiles et le soleil levant et le fin pointillé des vagues sous les gouttes de pluie; et cela leur a fait une âme sage et en même temps fraîche comme l'aube elle-même. Cette vérité m'est devenue visible et claire à travers le père Elias Langlois. Sur ses traits, à travers des perles de pluie, luisait le visage de son pays. (p. 88)

Roy's 'actual' people, then, those who emerge from her essays, who are the subjects of her reporting, are so much of the same fibre as the characters of her fiction that the more one reads of Gabrielle Roy's work the more one is hard-pressed to differentiate between the people she has encountered in real life and those she has confronted in her imagination. Roy herself frequently does nothing to dispel this difficulty; indeed, she adds to it in *Fragiles lumières de la terre!* For instance, in the third essay on "Le Manitoba" (p. 113), she speaks of returning to the scene of *La petite poule d'eau*, stating that, just as a criminal is said to wish to return to the scene of his crime, so the novelist wants to revisit the things and the people he has long thought about and "interpreted"⁷ in his books. The novelist, says Roy, has this inclination because he wishes to check on the credibility of the beings and scenes he has created. From this and other statements, the reader simply cannot help having the impression that Roy has *actually* gone back to check on Luzina and her family and on the 'country' they inhabit, as if indeed they exist not only in the author's imagination and in ours, but in fact!

Even her 1947 speech to the Royal Society, "Retour à Saint-Henri" (p. 161 ff)—though apparently more tongue in cheek than her account of her return to the 'country' of *La petite poule d'eau*—is a flight of fancy which almost convinces the reader that Roy has indeed been back to Montreal, back to Saint-Henri specifically, to look up the characters who lived so vividly in *Bonheur d'Occasion* . . . that she is making a factual 'report' on their condition.

Yet whether Roy writes fact or fiction, she always returns to the basic conviction about the writer's commitment to truth. Indeed, she regards the writer's vocation as a search for truth and an exposing of its essences. Because of this commitment, Roy herself finally opts for the vocation of novelist rather than that of reporter. As she explains, she feels the need to change the facts enough to bring out most forcibly the multiple aspects of truth!⁸

NOTES

1. Léon Thoorens, *Panorama des Littératures* (7), "France de 1715 à nos jours", Marabout Université, Editions Gérard et Co., 1969, p. 412.
2. *Fragiles lumières de la terre*, Les Editions Quinze, Montréal, 1978, p. 156.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
6. Roy is only one of our contemporary Canadian writers whose imagination has been fired by the minority mentality. Among others are Yves Thériault (*Aaron, Ashini, Agaguk, N'Tsuk*), Henry Kreisel (*The Rich Man, The Betrayal*), John Newlove ("The Pride"), Mordecai Richler (*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz, The Incomparable Atuk*). . . . Hugh Hood in his essay, "Moral Imagination: Canadian Thing" even theorizes about the Canadian affinity for minorities by saying, "Everybody in this country has the psychology of a member of a minority group, and not a very important minority group either." This attitude he feels is most significant—and good—because it has prevented Canadians from being dominated, as Americans are, by the psychology of the mass.
7. Stephen Crane also is concerned with the implication of this word—as at the end of "The Open Boat".
8. This sort of paradoxical statement is typical of Roy and one of the most interesting facets of her writing. ("Car si l'on fabrique dans le métier, c'est ordinairement pour mieux rendre compte des aspects multiples de la vérité. *Fragiles lumières de la vie*, p. 113).