

D. M. R. Bentley

Review Article

A Sacramental Vision of Canada

The Impossible Sum of Our Traditions: Reflections on Canadian Literature. By Malcolm Ross. With an Introductory Essay by David Staines. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986. Pp. 211. \$19.95.

My first meeting with Malcolm Ross took place some fifteen years ago in his graduate seminar on Victorian poetry at Dalhousie University, where he had moved not long before from Toronto. In fact, I had come to Dalhousie because of Malcolm Ross, for, in assessing the places which had been foolhardy enough to accept me as an M.A. candidate, my Milton instructor at the University of Victoria had observed simply: "Go to Dalhousie. Dalhousie has Ross." Neither name, I am bound to say, meant very much to me at that time. I had never been to the Maritimes, and Dalhousie's reputation had crossed the Rockies simply as a "Canadian Ivy-League College." We were not encouraged to read criticism (let alone Canadian literature) at Victoria, and I had not read *Milton's Royalism* (1943), *Poetry and Dogma* (1954) or any of Malcolm Ross's Introductions to Canadian works. The year in which my ignorance about Dalhousie and Malcolm Ross was dispelled turned out to be the most important of my intellectual and academic life. It is, of course, impossible to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but my long-suffering graduate instructors at Dalhousie—not least Malcolm Ross—did what they could to teach me to think and write clearly. They also played consummately the game of advocacy that is academics and, in due course, I departed for London to do my doctorate at King's. Malcolm Ross's parting words to me were "If you stay away from Soho, you'll do alright." Both as observation and advice this was accurate, and—though Soho did not remain unvisited—Dante Gabriel Rossetti (whom I had first studied in Ross's Victorian poetry seminar) took precedence over London's less than blessed damosels. All this is by way of indicating the very considerable bias

with which I come to *The Impossible Sum of Our Traditions*. A reader seeking a detached review of this enormously wise and beautifully written book should proceed no further: in these pages, Euthyphro speaks of Socrates.

A quick and convenient way of uncovering the assumptions that underlie the fourteen pieces in *The Impossible Sum of Our Traditions* is to quote brief passages from a pair of essays which appear near the middle of the volume, "American Pressures and Canadian Individuality" (1957) and "Critical Theory: Some Trends" (1976):

You will be hard put to find any two or three Canadians gathered together who can or will agree on the meaning of the word "Canadian." (117)

Our meta-critical quest has been plagued from the beginning by two obsessive questions. The first (and it seems perennial) is nationalistic: Do we have a recognizable cultural identity? The second is like unto it: Do we indeed have a culture, a literature, our own moment or place in the larger imaginative order? (126)

What is particularly revealing about these quotations and questions is not their relation to the concern for Canadian identity and culture that gives unity and direction to *The Impossible Sum of Our Traditions* but their style—specifically, their use of the cadences and terminology of the old Anglican Book of Common Prayer. This is revealing for two reasons: first, because it permits a recognition of the tone of gentle catechizing (and, very occasionally, sermonizing) that characterizes Ross's essays; and, second, because it points towards the Anglican and, more particularly, Anglican Catholic assumptions which permeate *The Impossible Sum of Our Traditions*, providing the sanctified ground upon which Ross builds his arguments and from which he launches his sallies against a variety of political and critical positions.

In the second of his books on seventeenth-century literature, *Poetry and Dogma* (published, it may be noted, in the same year—1954—as the earliest essay in *The Impossible Sum of Our Traditions*), Ross places on view the conception of the Incarnation that underlies all his perceptions about Canada and things Canadian:

. . . the Incarnation makes possible, indeed demands, the sacramental vision of reality. The flesh, the world, things, are restored to dignity because they are made valid again. Existence becomes a drama which, no matter how painful it may be, is nevertheless meaningful. And no detail in the drama is without its utterly unique reality. No thing is insignificant. (10)

Not only does this Catholic position explain the catholicity of the essays in *The Impossible Sum*—their discerning yet charitable refer-

ences to Northrop Frye and the *Boy's Own Annual*, to *The Stone Angel* and George Woodcock—but it also explains Ross's tendency to urge upon his reader in such essays as "Goldwin Smith" (1957) and "A Strange Aesthetic Ferment" (1976) both an appreciation of the interrelatedness of nature and grace and a recognition of the dangers of abstraction and asceticism. John Medley, the "friend of Pusey, and Keble" who became the first Bishop of Fredericton (Ross's birthplace) in 1845, brought to "Canada a sense of the kinship of beauty and holiness" (33) Ross asserts, adding in a subsequent essay on "Bliss Carman and the Poetry of Mystery" (1985), that "Medley, at whose cathedral altar Carman served" conveyed to the Canadian poet a sense of "the holiness of beauty" (50). Just as Ross's "sacramental vision of reality" leads him to affirm a connection between the beautiful and the spiritual (and thus to praise writers such as Carman and Callaghan whose work contains both "holiness" and "beauty"), so his understanding and acceptance of the implications of the Incarnation leads him to castigate with varying degrees of vigour those writers who, in his view, allow themselves to stray away from the real/Real world of sanctified things into the airless realms of abstraction. Thus Goldwin Smith, who had the benefit of being "at Oxford when the great Newman controversy was still in the air" and who, in his early works, exhibits "a lively sense of the living Presence of Christ in time" (79), came increasingly through scepticism to reduce "The Flesh . . . to the word—mere ethical idea, moral abstraction." "Indeed," argues Ross, this process of abstraction . . . [was] to take possession of Goldwin Smith's mind" (81), with all sorts of dire consequences, including the displacement of a belief in "the Christian brotherhood of man" (85) by a prejudice against blacks and Jews.

It is easy to see how the same "sacramental vision of reality" that leads Ross to condemn Smith as an abstractionist and a racist would, if consistently applied (as it very much is in *The Impossible Sum of Our Traditions*), yield an utterly open and accepting view of Canada, a nation that is "bi-cultural in origin [and] multi-cultural in prospect" (152). Before Ross's approving analysis of Canada's "rich multiple culture" (152) is examined, however, a few moments more must be taken to explore the implications of his abhorrence of abstraction for his estimates of various other critics of Canadian literature and culture. Given Ross's repeated assertion that "the idea," whether it is home-grown or imported, "must be made flesh—flesh of our flesh" (91), it is hardly surprising to find that in several of the essays in *The Impossible Sum of Our Traditions* he is in varying degrees critical of Northrop Frye, an "unselfconscious cosmopolitan" (25), whose notions of a peculiarly Canadian "garrison mentality" and "terror in regard to

nature" evidently strike Ross as wrong-headed for two reasons: (1) because they are predicated on a perception of nature as "meaningless," "blind," "menacing" and merely "physical" (186); and (2) because there is in Frye and his theories an abstracting tendency which is itself regrettable on two counts: for isolating literature (and literary criticism) from life and for falsifying the life in which, by virtue of the Incarnation, the Word/word is—or should be—grounded. Although Ross does not mention Frye by name in the following passage from "The Imaginative Sense and the Canadian Question" (1977), he evidently has the author of the *Anatomy of Criticism* in mind (and, in a curiously prescient way, could also be describing more recent practitioners of a language-centered criticism):

In the late Forties we had not yet begun the dolorous task of reducing literature to a set of word games We had not yet come to think of the great book as a way into the "verbal universe," into an order and orbit of wish-fulfillment and dream that transcended quite the mere seed-pot of human agony and hope. For us, the last innocents, literature was still not a way out of but a way into the meaning, the mystery, the tragedy, and the far promise of a real and redeemable human condition. I remember . . . discussing . . . , late into the night, John Milton's doctrine of salvation in *Paradise Lost* . . . as if the hope of the race hung on the issue (as, of course, it does). (146)

It is Ross's insistence on the interconnectedness of Word and Flesh, literature and life, that leads him in "Bliss Carman and the Poetry of Mystery" to express his general dissatisfaction with the impersonalism of much modern criticism (an "unfleshing [of] our sympathies... [an] uprooting [of] us from the soil of our own experience and affections" [45]) and his particular dismay at the imprecision of one Carman critic, Donald Stephens, in his inauthentic account of the poet's reputation and upbringing. A careful "attentiveness to historical and social backgrounds" (Staines, 17) is, in Ross's case, the inevitable, scholarly consequence of a belief in the sanctity and uniqueness of all things, as, indeed, is a certain hostility to those who lack a "sacramental vision of reality," who fail to see the interconnectedness of Word and Flesh. Thus Margaret Atwood, a writer for whom "crucifixion is execution and nothing more," presents us in *Survival* with "a rhetoric, not a poetic"—an abstract and Frygian myth of Canadian life and literature that is unacceptable to Ross precisely to the degree that it is "one-dimensional" and "de-natured" (140). More acceptable to Ross are such critics as Frank Davey and Doug Jones, the former for seeing art as "testimony to the presence of a 'Reality' beyond imagination" (136) and the latter for marrying "vision to deed, the ultimate to the immediate" (137). In comparison with Atwood, who hardly knows the

“ground” (141) on which she stands, these critics (and with them Marshall McLuhan, Francis Sparshott, the early George Bowering, the later John Sutherland and a few others) at least sense the holiness of that ground or, to put the matter somewhat differently, appreciate the connection between art (Frye’s “verbal universe”) and something both larger and more ordinary, be it Reality, nature, belief, or simply life.

As well as conditioning his responses to various Canadian critics (and, indeed, dictating the Canadian writers whom he most admires: Morley Callaghan, Bliss Carman, Stephen Leacock and Margaret Laurence are principal examples), Ross’s High Anglican aesthetic, his belief that “all things . . . participate . . . in larger relationships and values . . . without ceasing to be actual, specific, concrete” (*Poetry and Dogma*, 10-11), shapes and sharpens his awareness of the Canadian identity and Canadian culture as a whole. An inkling of the way in which Ross’s Anglicanism informs his perception of Canada can be gained from the presence of the word “incarnates” (lower case, note) in the following passage from “The Imaginative Sense and the Canadian Question” (1977):

Our regions retain identity. But each region, as it grows in social and cultural and racial complexity, incarnates in varying degrees a Canadian-ness, at once precarious and propitious, which is born of the tensions that interplay and interact in the national life. (155)

This is not “Nationalism as a substitute for religion” (which, as Ross says, “is worse than empty. It is a blasphemy” [149]), but an analytical focusing of the “sacramental vision” on a subject—the tension between regional and national identity—to which it cannot (since it is all encompassing) be irrelevant. At the very heart of the Canadian identity, in Ross’s view, there lies a dynamic and imaginative interplay between “larger relationships” (the “totality” of Canada) and the “actual, specific, concrete” (the “locality” of each region). As well as ensuring that our “Canadian-ness” does not succumb to the “devouring process of abstraction” (82), such an interplay (or “tension” or “dialectical embrace” [151]) affords Canadians in all regions the opportunity to see their unique realities as part of a larger whole, a greater significance. Thus both partners in the embrace between “totality” and “locality” should find themselves strengthened and enriched, the regionalist with the assurance that “nothing living is left behind or lost” (26) and the nationalist with the materials for an enduring Canadian identity:

If we are not to lose ourselves, if we are to survive . . . I believe we must try to remember who we really are — a multi-cultured people in a nation

resonant with a happening that is still happening. We must, in our deepest imagination of ourselves, see and recognize in the life of each locality the evolving life of our totality (161)

As envisaged in Ross's "roving" [and bifocal] mental eye" (22), Canada becomes a dynamic and multi-dimensional mosaic of opposites in tension, a "hope, confronting both the anarchic and the totalitarian . . ." (25). Little wonder that Ross finds the separatism of a Silver Donald Cameron, who fantasizes about the "four Atlantic provinces" comprising of a new nation called "Atlantica" (158-159) as appalling as "the world revolution in technology" (181), which could subsume both Canada and her regions into an amorphous "global village" in which "an equitable ordering of the media" would be "beyond the competence of provinces, rival corporations, even single nations" (181).

In its emphasis on a dynamic tension or balance between opposites, Ross's view of the Canadian identity exemplifies a further facet of his Anglicanism: a belief that the right way is the middle way, the *via media*, between, as it may be, Rome and Geneva, New York and London, nation and region, totalitarianism and anarchy. It is Ross's characteristically Anglican sense of a creative equipoise between opposites that makes him both a champion of the "dialectical embrace" and an enemy of sterile extremes—a protector of a fence (Canadianism) which serves, not as a boundary or a barrier, but as a site of communication and, when necessary, a norm against which such extremists as Cameron and Atwood can be judged. A word very frequently used by Ross to describe the typically (or ideally) Canadian equipoise between extremes is "irony"—the "Dynamic irony [that opens] outwards against—and through—a world of shut-ins" (25) in the Introduction to *Our Sense of Identity* (1957), the bitter-sweet irony that makes Leacock "love . . . what he hates" (95) in the Introduction to *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1970), the "ironic tension of eternity and time" (109) that Ross finds in the religious novel, Callaghan's *Such is My Beloved*, that occasions the most explicit and extensive discussion of "the traditional symbolism of Catholic art" (101) in *The Impossible Sum of Our Traditions*. "Cosmic irony, social irony, even religious irony . . . is a phenomenon that marks us out and makes us what we are," asserts Ross in "The Imaginative Sense and the Canadian Question" (1977), "And it occurs in dazzling variety in so much of our literature . . ." (154). Since Ross defines "Canadianism" in terms of this irony that is "energy in tension" (26), he inevitably and implicitly defines the central lines of Canadian in terms of writers who seem to him to typify his sense of a "fence-leaping which is also... a fence-keeping" (24). In considering the Confederation poets, for

example, he delineates several patterns of “opposites in tension” (89) in their work, including “the American-British tension” (90) and—another recurring theme of Ross’s (and one carried forward by W.J. Keith in his recent *Canadian Literature in English*)—a tension between the “individual accent” of a poet and the characteristic “openness” of Canada to influences from elsewhere, especially Britain and the United States. Thus Lampman is acclaimed because “even his ‘nature’ poems are tense with the shadows of opposite values” (92) from the world of ideas and, in a later essay, Sidney Warhaft is praised for writing “one of the first essays to comprehend both the Jewishness and the universality of a poet who is very much a Canadian poet” (157)—A.M. Klein. Such affinities and assessments make quite clear why Irving Layton (another poet praised in the Introduction to *Poets of the Confederation* [1960]) dedicated “A Tall Man Executes a Jig” to Malcolm Ross, a kindred spirit surely in his affirmation of the creative energy inherent in the “dialectical embrace.”

Although Ross’s assessment of the past accomplishments and future prospects of Canadian culture are largely positive and optimistic, he does admit on occasion that the “bifocal” perspective underlying Canadian irony can produce a “schizophrenic situation” (118) and he does allow that there are dangers attendant upon the “openness” of Canadian society, particularly to influences from south of the border. Typically, however, Ross boldly affirms that the benefits to be gained from being creatively open and affirmative far outweigh the dangers of the closed mind and the negative attitude, the walled garden that grows only abstract toads, or not toads at all. A “Canadian culture isolated from the American” is neither possible nor “to be desired” (175), he affirms in “Canadian Culture and the Colonial Question” (1982). If a “global village” is what the future holds, then efforts must be made to secure Canadian “access to a global audience” (182). The combination of the regional and the universal that characterizes the culture of this place of grace, this home of a “North Americanism which is Canadian and not ‘American’ ” (23), will continue to be enriched by ideas imported into Canada and, in the future, may very well do more than it has in the past to enrich the world with its own particular and recognizable tensions and ironies.

Not everyone will share Ross’s optimism about Canadian culture or share his analysis of the Canadian identity, but most readers will respond positively to his deeply Christian and warmly humanistic affirmation of the interconnectedness of all things, not least in the land God gave to Cain. As his very title makes clear, Ross’s fundamental message in *The Impossible Sum of Our Traditions* is that we must seek totality, unity and interdependence without sacrificing locality, differ-

ence and independence. Or, as Ross himself puts it with his usual succinctness: "The task for us has always been to find the centre" (91).

The Impossible Sum of Our Traditions would have benefitted greatly from the inclusion of an Index, but, otherwise, Ross has been very well served by his editor and publisher: the volume is meticulously edited and informatively introduced by David Staines and it has been attractively printed and durably bound by McClelland and Stewart.