

## Review Articles

### *A Canadian Prose-Poem*

This is a difficult book that demands much of the reader's own creative imagination, but it is a rich book that has much to give.\* It may well find a place in the history of Canadian literature because of its beauty and vitality, touching as it does the mysteries of man's quit *vis-à-vis* his fellows or confronted with the supernatural, and also because of its successful and moving use of modern fictional techniques. Some might call *The Double Hook* a novel, since its narrative and dialogue is in prose; I should prefer to call it a prose-poem, because its way of life is that of poetry's insights and because, like much of the most meaningful poetry, its method is "by indirection to find direction out". Of course it has a strong bony structure of plot: violent events occur in it—a murder, a seduction, suicide. But the most important thing in literature, and in this book, is not the crude events in themselves but rather what people think and feel about what they do and about what happens to them. It has a plot, but the flesh and the searching spirit of the book lie in its symbols which flow through it—sometimes flaring out in sudden meaning, sometimes growing like trees in a forest branching to touch other trees. Sometimes the symbols pierce like the barb of a hook, sometimes they touch and glide by. Often they change their meaning as things and words and people do in life, seeming for an instant to hook some enigma of life or death, some glory or fear, or some glory-fear, only to twist away and brush some other enigma with a moth's wing.

But if, first of all, we briefly glance at the bony structure of events, as one of the characters looked at the bony structure of the fish he had hooked, we shall do no harm to the book's meaning. It begins with a cast of characters who are named but only gradually individualized. Some are related by blood or by marriage, some are not, but all of them, living or dead, are brought willy-nilly into human relationship by the events. An old lady lives with her son and daughter James and Greta. Another son, William, and his childless wife Ara live not far away. There are other households nearby: that of

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\**The Double Hook*. By Sheila Watson. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1959. Pp. 128. Paper, \$1.75; cloth, \$3.95.

Felix Prosper "who sits like the round world all centred in itself", whose woman, Angel, has betaken herself and their children to the rooftree of Theophilus—though she will return before the play of bait and hook is ended; that of the widow Wagner and her son and her daughter Lenchen. And there is Kip who wanders looking about and "playing with the glory of the world". All these live in a fold of the hills in coyote country, "under Coyote's eye". We are allowed to visualize rocks, prickly pears, scrub cattle, a dusty road, a creek, a parched landscape to which rain comes, interiors that have lamps to be lit and to be cleaned; but in a sense the locale is the land of Everyman or it is No Man's Land (for no man and no place is an island unto itself). In the third line of the narrative James begins to murder his mother, and the act is completed in the fifth line. But the crude reality and the horror of that deed is veiled, as if to say that no act of violence is quite real until its consequences are seized by the mind and the spirit. James has murdered as an act of defiance and for freedom from the old lady whose tyranny had held him and his sister in thrall ("This is my day. You'll not fish today"); and as an act of freedom and in his search for life, "to drink fire into his darkness", he has seduced Lenchen. His acts of freedom have double-hooked him. He flees from the consequences of his deeds and from himself. For the first time in his life he feels quite alone "but the flick of a girl's hand frees him from freedom". He returns to a home burnt to ashes, but he comes back to Lenchen and to their child and he will build a new home. What is said by the Widow Wagner's boy of himself, is true of James: "he knew that he must become ash and be born into a light that burned but did not destroy". Symbols of light and darkness permeate the book. Light and fire oppose darkness, but fire can bring death as well as life. It brings death to James' sister Greta. In that small household where her mother had once dominated and tyrannized and where Greta had watched and waited in frustrated womanhood, now she would dominate.

A woman can stand so much . . . To be scorned by others. Laughed at when no one has come for her, when there's no one to come. She can stand it when she knows she still has the power. When the air's stretched like a rope between her and someone else. It's eruptions that can't be borne.

But James' and Lenchen's rendezvous with life and their begetting of a child bring home to her her own barren frustration and she feels the weight of nothing in her hands. She sets fire to her house and dies in it. ("I light the lamps in this house now," she had said to Angel). Felix Prosper fishes food in the creek and eats it, but he has caught something more than felicity:

He stood with a fish spine in his hand. Flesh mountainous contemplating.  
Saint Felix with a death's head meditating.

To all these men and women, death and its correlative life, murder and the birth of a child, have something to say.

The book has an epigraph which is extracted from its own text:

He [James] doesn't know you can't catch the glory on a hook and hold onto it. That when you fish for the glory you catch the darkness too. That if you hook twice the glory you hook twice the fear.

What is the glory? What is the hook? And what are the darkness and fear? Of course, we the readers are being fished for, and symbols are the bait and the lure. And equally we the readers are fishing too, casting for symbols and trying to hook their meaning. The symbols sometimes become plurisigns and when we have caught one we often find that we have hooked paradox. Antinomies are set up by the symbols and the inferences to be drawn from them: between glory and fear, birth and death, water and drought, light and darkness, possession and emptiness, freedom and servitude, to name a few. To hold a symbol fast is like trying to hold Proteus, the old man of the sea. As we read we remind ourselves that, used by different characters, the symbols may mean different things and that even to the same person they may alter their meaning as that person's circumstances change. In fact the play of the symbols in the book parallels the changing reactions in our lives to experience. But to say that the symbols may change their face is not to say that they lack underlying meaning. By art they are woven in their context into a total effect that leads the reader into himself and then outward toward what is other than himself. As in the case of a greater work, *King Lear*, which *The Double Hook* in some points resembles, different readers will not take identical meanings from it, but what they take will have a common denominator of meaning.

I shall venture to glance, for examples, at two of the central symbols at their work: *the old lady fishing and water*. There is a creek running shallow through a parched land: running water and living fish in it against the drought. Men fish in the creek, but *is* what do they fish? An old lady, fishing, is seen by many. She is dead, "fallen into death", but still she fishes and still she is seen fishing "with a concentrated ferocity".

If God had come into the valley, come holding out the long finger of salvation . . . drying up the blue signature like blotting paper, asking where, asking why, defying an answer, she would have thrown her line against the rebuke . . . she would have drawn a line with the barb when the fire of righteousness baked the bottom.

Different people think their different thoughts about her as they watch her or think of her. What is she fishing for? "so old, so wicked, fishing the fish of others" . . . "fishing dumbly with bait" . . . "It is not for fish she fishes" . . . "as if she were fishing for something she's never found" . . . "fishing upstream to the source where she's come to the bones of the hills." The source? Bones? The old lady is a revenant, but she is no wrath nor wandering cloud of ectoplasm; she is as in mediaeval ballads a woman who is dead and who is seen fishing, who later is seen holding a catch of fish that are stiff and *is*. She has fished in life and now she fishes still to the eyes of the living. Dead, she becomes a symbol associated with death. "The cows would turn their tails to her

and stretch their hides tight. They'd turn their living flesh from her as she'd turned her from others."

And what is the water in which she fishes? Water is life to the parched land and to its inhabitants. It is running low in the creek, "it would be hardly up to the ankles." But water can become death too. Ara, an onlooker,

felt death leaking through from the centre of the earth. Death rising to the knee. Death rising to the loin.

She raises her chin to unseat the thought. "No such thing could happen. The water was drying anyway." (The double book. If it dries up, drought brings death; but what if it is Death leaking from the centre of the earth and raising above the loins . . .) And Ara wonders where water started. Later, "she remembered how she'd thought of water as a death . . . now her tired eyes saw water issuing from under the burned threshold" of James' house, that had been the old lady's house, and Greta's.

But separating expanding symbols from their context is like separating single features of a man's face away from his expression. The effective symbols leap from ambush and take by surprise. They are woven into a thick texture of glancing colours. After drought storm comes and thunder speaks to "my servant Kip" as in the Old Testament a voice spoke to Jacob. "Coyote" is a brooding presence or doom over the land which he has made his pastime—or he is a Power "who reaches out reflected glory", who may bring down "those who cling to the rocks" or who may "set a man's feet on soft ground". The characters begin to play their parts—or rather to live and experience their destinies—"under Coyote's eye", and Coyote, sometimes sinister, always lurking unseen, ends the book with the raising of his eerie voice. Dumb creatures (and their Creator?) speak, if we have ears to hear.

What pattern may one have caught when the dance of the symbols has ended? Symbols can transfigure concepts and bring them into a world of light. This reviewer does not wish to change them back to concepts lest they should cease to dance. Let the reader fish insights for his own creel. One thing we may venture to promise the sensitive reader. He will have a quickened sense of what a German mystic called "creature-consciousness" and also of the *mysterium tremendum* that stands opposite to that. He who runs (and fishes) may read.

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### The Lyric Craft of Miriam Waddington

*The Season's Lovers* is Miss Waddington's third volume of poems.\* In it she makes metaphysical lyrics that are governed by venerable images like the city as a macrocosmic being, the paradox of intermingled selves that remain ultimately strangers, the word as error, and the dream that outrealms reality. These images are exciting ones that have long been the matter of good poetry, and precisely because of this they are very difficult to manipulate well. Their very richness is embarrassing; in using them it is difficult to avoid using, for instance, the seventeenth-century manner. While there is no particular virtue or merit in "being original" (tables of degrees in originality are a device of lazy reviewers), there is great virtue in putting things meaningfully for one's contemporaries. In *The Season's Lovers* it seems to me that the meaningful poetic statement, or the modern manipulation of old images, has been on the whole successfully brought off.

The organizing, dominant image of the first three sections of this volume is the City. In the first section, "Poets and Statues" (one poem), the City is projected as miraculously instinct with tragedy in innumerable forms and also with excruciating wonder. It can be a desert kingdom, but the poet-queen can also summon up the water to plant an oasis with a magic garden. Section Two is called "The City's Life". Here we move from the loss of a kind of urban Eden in "When World was Wheelbarrow" to an ironic vision of the New Jerusalem—in this case the New Montreal—in "The Through Way". The urban Eden of the first of the poems is imaged in the simple juxtaposition of the crocus, the brash first-comer in city gardens, with the youthful, enthusiastic performance of the city's multiple activities. The Fall is imaged in a fall of snow; mobility falls into immobility; speed into lethargy; sensitivity into deafness; innocence into ignorance. The central irony of the poem is that the urbanites know enough to fall off from an innocent enthusiasm but not enough to understand their own fallen condition. In "The Through Way", the New City is ironically set forth in a climactic fusion of the garden and the city:

I sit and drive, hands sleep at the wheel,  
 My eyes continual messengers  
 For the strangeness of love; though no one asks them to,  
 They do a workman's duty,  
 And over the broken city, the dynamited stairs,  
 They plant the asphalt field.

Part Three, "To Be a Healer", gives a vision of the City as prison in which prisoner, poet, and healer are almost identified—are equally trapped and equally guilty. "In a Corridor at Court" contrasts the dark weight of imprisonment with the bright buoyancy

\**The Season's Lovers*. By MIRIAM WADDINGTON. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1958. Pp. 56. \$2.50.

of freedom while bringing in overtones of the trapped beast: the court, like the zoo, is powerfully haunted by the ghost of freedom:

...only my brow is weighed by iron bars

Which criss-cross window like a bloodied rope,  
or press like law with all its heavy books  
against lost freedom's lovely antelope,  
whose leap has left a mark upon the air,  
and stirred the stillness in the corridor.

In Part Four, which is headed "No Earthly Lover", the large society of the *Co* is brought down to its lowest common denominator, the society of two. In the first three parts a number of selves are expressed in their being as diverse parts of a city; in this last part whatever is cosmic is expressed in its being as the tensile, paradoxical union of two selves. To reduce these poems even further into prose, one might say that they read like a dialogue between the agonizing beatitude of oneness and the blessed cure of twoness. The trinitarian who likes his three terms might prefer to read these poems as a threefold movement between the loving self, the beloved self, and the union between the two which is cosmic in import but totalitarian and mercurial in practice. In celebrating the union, these poems fix it; in fixing it, they deny it. This is the eternal lyric predicament and whatever else they are, these poems are a moving imitation of the predicament. Hence the cry to unfix at the end of "Song", which is a poem about love (as poet and painter) asserting themselves in and through each other:

Draw me falcon, paint me bird.  
Erase my poem, love my word.

"You Are My Never" is a piece of very high metaphysical jinks in which affirmation equals the fusion of two negations; nowhere does Miss Waddington put more strongly the paradox that twoness is the condition of oneness.

Although some self or other is not necessarily the dominant image in any given lyric, surely one of the chief characteristics of the lyric mode is that its final subject is always the self. In submitting this I do not propose to commit the personal hero; I have no suggestions or gratuitous illuminations whatsoever about Miss Waddington's personal life as a result of reading her poetry. The self of a successful lyric is a fully projected, poetic self. It should exist in an uncluttered situation that is evoked, implied, or realized well enough for the reader not to have to play an elaborate game of hide-and-seek with the poet's "real" personality. There are many degrees to drama, and even the lyric is dramatic to the extent that it achieves the poetic self in rapport with some object. This object may be vague, concrete, ambiguous, personal, in potency rather than in act, and so on—it makes no difference. Within this lyric situation there are two main directions of movement: initiative and responsive; that is to say, the lyric initiates the self either initiating a situation or responding to one, either establishing a rapport

towering from within one. The self's intenser modes of operation or awareness are essentially spasmodic and discontinuous, and the lyricist imitates these modes in celebrating his poetic self in motion. For the finished poem the structural corollary of this is brevity; the stylistic corollary is the metaphor—small in space but large in connotation—or, in any case, the heavily freighted image.

Miss Waddington is a passive lyricist. The movement of her poetic self is almost invariably responsive. The situations she projects are of the sensitive and intelligent self in the various attitudes of response from ecstatic to revulsive. The ultimate theme of *The Season's Lovers* is in fact the horrific glory of responsive self. Hence there is in Miss Waddington's work a peculiarly direct relation between the lyric form and its content; her content is almost lyricism itself. This proposition is neither meliorative nor pejorative: her way, though striking, is just one way of doing things.

How well does Miss Waddington do things in her own way? My own opinion would be, very well. But for literary criticism the question simply raises another, more important one: what is the technique of these poems? in what consists their lyric artistry? If the imitation of the self in its brief, heightened movements is the essence of lyricism, then the lyric of all forms can least afford moments of thematic and verbal leisure. Of all forms it is the one in which tense self-containment and self-consistency are at a premium, the one which can least afford to settle into the prosaic logic of discursiveness. The secret of that first requirement lies in the taut manipulation of images and rhythms; the secret of the second in the inviolable poetic self: the reader must be free of having to postulate the artist's everyday self. In lyrics the commonest form of the lapse into discursiveness is the confusion of the everyday with the poetic self; the two other lyric diseases are slackness of rhythm and inaccuracy of image. Let me go afield to—or rather, aboard, Miss Macpherson's work (*The Boatman*) to illustrate. In no volume of Canadian lyrics would the personality hunt be more irrelevant, and nowhere are images and rhythms, in their own way, more taut and trim. Although *The Boatman* has a system, it is not discursive; although it bears an obvious self, this is a purely poetic self. These qualities fuse with the precision of the imagery and rhythm to give as it were a perfectly firm, crystalline surface which guarantees, or constitutes, Miss Macpherson's particular, tacit lyricism. Some readers no doubt consider this surface hard and cold and wish the *Boatman* nothing so much as a good icebreaker. But it is precisely because of this still, flat surface that we can see with perfect clarity beneath us a poetic self going freely about its lyric business in a highly self-contained and self-consistent universe. Not Freudian, not Jungian critics—only God Himself could cut through this ice and fish for the poet's real self. Granted that Miss Waddington and Miss Macpherson are doing different things in different ways; granted that their respective lyric dramaturgies are quite dissimilar; granted that critical metaphors of a surface do not apply at all to *The Season's Lovers*: granted all these things, this digression will have been useful if it gives meaning to the

assertion that, occasionally, Miss Waddington's muse dips to be discursive and that, very occasionally, her image slips off target. Take, for instance, the last stanza of "The City's Life": she—the "woman possessed by cities"—

... does not own the burglar's forcing tools  
 Or have his abstract grasp of puzzling parts,  
 All she has are her own human channels,  
 Eyes that observe, a pulse that beats,  
 A heart that moves to other troubled hearts;  
 Somewhere she keeps her mind's prepared collation—  
 Numerous theories, projects, and some orphan facts,  
 But she is impatient and values them much less  
 Than all the discontinuous evidence,  
 Which haunts her every step and holds her powerless  
 Against the city's life, its poignant annals.

This poet responds to nothing more vividly than to the single, discontinuous member within the multiple, flowing body, but here the response strikes me as too much of a prosaic statement, too much of a commentary. There is about those lines something too clinically analytic for a poem that is not about clinical analysis; they seem more of a mnemonic evocation of a private impression than the imaginative projection of a dramatically self-sustaining situation. But there are not many moments like this in *The Season's Love*. Miss Waddington is a social worker, and when one considers what a harrowing and dominating business it must be for a sensitive self continually to be encountering other, troubled selves, it is a considerable measure of success that so few of her lines are merely discursive. The difficulty of her tune and her skill in playing it are most apparent in Part Three, especially in "The Drug Addict", "The Non-Supporter", "My Lessons in the Jail", and "The Women's Jail",—all of which are potent, well-realized lyrics.

The only important image in Miss Waddington's poetry that seems a bit imprecise and lax to me is that of the drowned (or drowning) person. In "Poets and Statues" the early phrase "she drowns in heat" sets vibrating connotations that merely cluster up to the impact of the latter image of the magic oasis. In "You Are My Never" the notion of being united in division, of being something as nothing, is expressed in geographic imagery that manages to remain strikingly suspended, or medium-less:

... And though we're polar and must lie apart,  
 We have our tropic where we fuse within.

We cross no fields, no cities and no miles,  
 For nothing needs no medium to sin,  
 Here never loves his no one with denials  
 And arbitrates against himself to win.

So be my never and long may nothing live,  
 Bless all distance and intensity  
 Which strain our kisses through a starry sieve,  
 And drowning you have also here drowned me.



The paradox of a placeless geography and of locales that are a medium for nothing gives great power to the poem. Everything's going nowhere very satisfactorily until, with talk of drowning in the last line, we enter a specific medium with a vengeance, and a cold and clammy one at that. I am aware that this last line completes the cosmic geography of the poem. I am also aware that the juxtaposition of stars with the sea reinforces the notion of proximity simultaneous with infinite distance. Even so, on suddenly landing in the water like this the reader gets into what seems to be the wrong swim of things, and he has to flounder pretty hard before perceiving that there is a kind of rightness to them. I don't mind floundering hard as long as the labour doesn't dissipate the poetic force of what has gone before. Drowning, after all, is drowning: its primary state is of being good and dead, suffocated, picked clean, well lost at sea. Water baptizes into everlasting life only a few of the famous literary drownees; but it thoroughly drowns them all. Unless a poem's whole element is water, drownings should be very carefully arranged. Miss Waddington does have a poem whose whole element is water: "An Elegy for John Sutherland", in which Sutherland's death is quite appropriately imaged as a drowning. But here, too, the image is a bit lax, though for a different reason. Death by drowning (or death as drowning) is easily one of the oldest and richest poetic images. It can be used as a standard, mass-produced piece of poetic furniture or rediscovered as an infinite reservoir of genuine variety. In this elegy I do not think that that infinitude has been plundered of any compelling new variety. Perhaps I should conclude this strain on dry land. "People Who Watch Trains" is a poem that is really excellently conceived, but even here I am not quite sure: are the people watching the trains go by genuine symbols of the loss of enthusiasm or are they only argumentative evidence of it?

Rhythm is the other secret of lyric artistry, and Miss Waddington has solved completely the rhythms appropriate to her work. There are three rhythmical idioms in the lyric mode: that in which the rhythm precedes the content and its impact; that in which the rhythm follows the content; and that in which the two coincide. Think of a ship riding waves and let ship be poetic content and waves the rhythm. Sometimes the waves move faster than the ship and so overtake and go before it; sometimes the ship outstrips the waves; and sometimes, their forward speed being equal, the ship appears to ride a single, continuous wave. Many of Donne's poems are in the first rhythmical idiom; you must catch his rhythm to perceive his content; the rhythms are prior—not in import but in impact. Wallace Stevens' poems are often in the third idiom where the content, not the rhythm, has the prior impact. His rhythms are corroborative; they confirm the passage of his content like the waves that fall away from a ship's wake. Miss Waddington is a poet of the second idiom where content and rhythm tend to coincide. One of her favourite rhythms is based upon a run of ten-syllable lines, caesuraed into 4/6 cadences, which is briefly held up, or rested, in an unbroken, decasyllabic cadence. This ground rhythm coincides with the poet's ultimate content, namely, a very powerful, at-

tractive drive of the self toward other selves together with an equally powerful, repulsive drive away from them. This paradoxical movement is rhythmically conveyed, or cradled, in the double to single, dividing to uniting, pattern of the cadences. It is a bad poem in which content and rhythm coincide merely to cancel each other out. In *The Season's Lovers* this happens only in "An Elegy for John Sutherland", which seems to me to be quite the weakest poem in the collection. Otherwise, the strongly tensile motions of the poet's theme are well rhythmised in her cadences.

In this essay I have written, perhaps *ad nauseam*, of poetic and everyday selves as they figure in a definition of the lyric art. Translated into the terminology of public utility, Miss Waddington's imitations of the self-in-motion are yet another assertion of the value and the cost of individuality. They are also another assertion of the individual's entity, if not his primacy, in the so infinitely complicated social dance. What is there more useful than making such assertions? The faithful will have heard this unspoken times before, but here we are again: the lyric craft (as practised well by Miss Waddington or anybody else) is no parlour game; it has absolutely to do with matters of life and death.

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