Twentieth-
Century
Literature

Modern Canadian Poetry
Author(s): Eli Mandel
Source: *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Special Issue: Modern Canadian Literature (Jul., 1970), pp. 175-183
Published by: Hofstra University
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/440816
Accessed: 02/11/2009 04:29

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Eli Mandel

Modern Canadian Poetry

The difficulty in writing about a modern movement in Canadian poetry is that many of its concerns appear to be local and national in a world in which, as Northrop Frye observes, "the nation is rapidly ceasing to be the real defining unit of society."[1] Obviously, the view that we are now "moving towards a post-national world"[2] makes more cultural than political or social sense, though it is for that reason that the contemporary arts seem more closely connected with revolutionary attitudes than with traditional values. It is this revolutionary aspect of the " 'modern' element in the culture of the last century"[3] that occupies Frye in *The Modern Century.* Considered as style, the modern exhibits characteristically anarchic features: deliberate fragmenting of literary form, either through disorder or parody; irrationalism; disruption or inversion of value systems; and disoriented versions of perception. In turn, the radicalism of style connects with radical, anarchic social (or anti-social) attitudes, particularly in what Frye calls a Freudian proletarianism that seeks to overthrow through pornography or sexual assault the repressive anxiety-structure of society. What is modern in Canadian poetry, then, we would want to connect with aspects of radicalism in its style and attitude. What, in fact, we appear to be left with, as a sort of national residue, is that which seems impossible to reconcile with radicalism in our poetry: its nostalgia, its longing for history, its impulse to define a Canadian past and to create a useable tradition.

On the whole, the sort of criticism which sees poetry as a reflection of environment simply resorts to any one of a number of dualisms to explain this apparent contradiction of the local and international in Canadian writing. Occasionally, we hear of the tension in Canadian life between vulgarity and daintiness. There are other, familiar pairs: American and British influences on Canadian poetry; realism and formalism; colonialism and nationalism; originality and imitativeness. Projected as a genuine rift in Canadian life, dualism becomes the ultimate secret, what Malcolm Ross speaks of as "the broad design of our unique, inevitable, and precarious cultural pattern." "This pattern, by the force of historical and geographical circumstances," Ross goes on to say, "is a pattern of opposites in tension . . . the federal-regional tension . . . the American-British tension . . . the French-English tension."[4]

If Ross's is an extreme version of dualism in Canadian life, it at least has the merit of defining one limit of our discussion: poetry dissolves into the dualities of space and time. But time and space (or history and geography) can be resolved into poetry, perhaps at another extreme limit. Seen as sociology, con-

temporary poetry seems to reflect or project the duality of a Canadian stereotype, at once reticent, conservative, modest *and* radical, ill-mannered, and visionary. The split, unbelievable at best, obviously dresses up in national clothing the familiar division of poetry into form and content. Local and quaint in the content of its rock-bound historicism, Canadian poetry still manages to be modishly perceptive in its sophisticated techniques. Whatever that division might mean, it disappears the moment we become aware that time and space may present themselves, not as sociology, but as myth.

Leslie Fiedler remarks on a "fact, too obvious . . . to have been properly observed or understood, that geography in the United States is mythological."[5] The possibility that Canadian geography is equally mythic has occurred to more than one critic: Northrop Frye in his reviews of poetry in the *University of Toronto Quarterly,* for example; James Reaney in his article on "The Canadian Poet's Predicament" and "The Third Eye"; D. G. Jones in "The Sleeping Giant," Warren Tallman in "Wolf in the Snow" and Milton Wilson in "Klein's Drowned Poet." It is not by the way to notice, however, that for the most part such criticism concerns itself with questions of national and cultural identity, or with the *distinctiveness* of the Canadian imagination. Where, as in Frye's comments, the mythic appears as a formal, and therefore autonomous, element in poetry, we find something closer to genuine cultural history, and his perception that with the Confederation poets, particularly Carman, myth developed out of romantic impressionism, provides a vital clue to what can be seen as the modern element in Canadian poetry. It is, paradoxically, in the longing for history that the modern appears, for out of that longing emerge finally both the hallucinated terror and the diminished self of contemporary art.

When the poet seeks to discover life in a threatening landscape and to create a useable past, both space and time tend to become esoteric, exotic, and ultimately primitive. Certainly, as often as not in modern Canadian poetry, "the orient eye decides geography," a place remote from the poet's "natural country." So it is that Earle Birney turns up in Mexico, in South America, in Japan, in India; and Al Purdy, with suit-case full of wine bottles, sends his messages from Cuba or Baffin-Land or Greece; Leonard Cohen journeys to and from Montreal, to Hydra, and, "the only tourist," sends poems from Havana to Canada, while Irving Layton discovers allegories of poet and critic in elephants and trees in Ceylon, or comments on sun-bathers, politicians, poets and lizards in Portugal, Spain, Greece, and Israel. Nor are these simply the jottings of the poet as tourist, a Canadian version of the Fulbright Fellow. Often the suggestion is that the "foreign" space discovered bears its symbolic freight of time, history, and culture. For Birney and Purdy, in particular, the past or distant place speaks as a metaphor of the present and the familiar. Occasionally, the image of a journey or of distance reflects the perception of those for whom emptiness has for too long been a burden. For some, then, space becomes strict, northern, barren, as in F. R. Scott's Laurentian poems, Birney's arctic and westcoast poems, and Purdy's Baffin-Land poems. For others, it becomes overtly symbolic, as in Gwen MacEwen's "The Discovery":

> do not imagine that the exploration
> ends, that she has yielded all her mystery
> or that the map you hold
> cancels further discovery
>
> I tell you her uncovering takes years,
> takes centuries, and when you find her naked
> look again,
> admit there is something else you cannot name,
> a veil, a coating just above the flesh
> which you cannot remove by your mere wish
>
> when you see the land naked, look again
> (burn your maps, that is not what I mean),
> I mean the moment when it seems most plain
> is the moment when you must begin again.[6]

The place the poet occupies may be that curious one implied by Margaret Avison's extraordinary "Meeting Together of Poles & Latitudes: in Prospect," or it may be "the land the passionate man must travel," in Douglas Le Pan's "Country Without a Mythology," or "the desperate wilderness behind your eyes," in his "Coureurs de bois." For P. K. Page, it seems to be somewhere "behind the eyes / where silent, unrefractive whiteness lies," while for Margaret Atwood it is either "the mind's deadend, the roar of the boneyard" reached during the night in the Royal Ontario Museum or that incredible landscape, a deluge of unstructured space, in "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer."[7]

Atwood's mad pioneer brings us, as it were, to our senses: "It is," as Charles Olson says in a famous essay, "a matter, finally, of OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and, once there, how they are to be used."[8] The creation of a useable past is the creation of a mythology, or in Olson's version, " . . . a man's problem, the moment he takes speech up in all its fullness, is to give his work his seriousness, sufficient to cause the thing he makes to try to take its place alongside the things of nature."[9] Like the mad pioneer, we must expect strange things to happen to space and time. As Margaret Atwood puts it in her poem "Astral Traveller":

> Here the sense
> of time used to no
> gravity, warps
> in the old atmosphere.

In the same poem she suggests that "Getting away was easy" but "Coming back is an exacting theory." The "exacting theory" of her poem involves the problem of getting back into one's own body. For the Canadian poet the problem is how to handle the space-time warp of "the old atmosphere." Like astronauts in zero gravity, the poets find themselves involved in those contortions needed to resolve the paradoxes of "then" that is "now," and "there" that is "here." In Al Purdy's "Wilderness Gothic," for example, "gothic ancestors peer from medieval sky" somewhere just beyond Toronto at Roblin Lake. Birney's "El Greco: *Espolio*" plays ironically with a many-layered time: a contemporary version of a sixteenth-century painter's version of a crucifixion scene. Arched into the gothic forms of cathedral, the wilderness of Emily Carr's painting turns into the inverted whale-boat church that, in Wilfred Watson's poem, takes the painter as a kind of Jonah back through the wilderness itself to be cast out onto

the "coasts of eternity" where, as poet addresses painter, the final transformations work themselves into an ancient language:

> Then, as for John of Patmos, the river of life
> Burned for you an emerald and jasper smoke
> And down the valley you looked and saw
> All wilderness become transparent vapour,
> A ghostly underneath a fleshly stroke,
> And every bush an apocalypse of leaf.[10]

But if the wilderness for Watson reveals itself as Biblical vision, for Birney it is just as likely to sound in the voices of Anglo-Saxon bards (as in "Vancouver Lights" or "Mappemounde") and for Purdy in the sound of more ancient singers:

> Brother, the wind of this place is cold,
> And hills under our feet tremble,
> the forests are making magic against us –
> I think the land knows we are here,
> I think the land knows we are strangers.
> Let us stay close to our friend the sea,
> or cunning dwarves at the roots of darkness
> shall seize and drag us down. . . .
>
> Brother, I am afraid of this dark place,
> I am hungry for the home islands,
> And wind blowing the waves to coloured spray,
> I am sick for the sun –[11]

The lines are from Purdy's poem "The Runners," the epigraph to which is a striking passage from Erick the Red's Saga. It is worth quoting in full in order to elicit from it not only its remarkable sense that the primitive illuminates and comments on the contemporary but equally its capacity to create a powerfully surrealistic context of tensions between widely differing scales of value. The effect is not unlike that in Cavafy's remarkable poem "Expecting the Barbarians."

> It was when Lief was with King Olaf Tryggvason, and he bade him
> proclaim Christianity to Greenland, that the King gave him two
> Gaels;
> the man's name was Haki, and the woman's Haekia. The king
> advised
> Lief to have recourse to these people, if he should stand in need of
> fleetness, for they were swifter than deer. Erick and Lief had
> tendered
> Karlsefni the services of this couple. Now when they had sailed past
> Marvel-Strands (to the New World) they put the Gaels ashore, and
> directed them to run to the southward, and investigate the nature
> of the
> country, and return again before the end of the third half-day.

What we have been observing to this point is how that which appears as the Canadian writer's conservatism (his nostalgia, his longing for history, his impulse to define the past and a useable tradition) becomes, almost as it were by law, not only myth, but theory of myth; a vision not only of the primitive, but of the sources of the primitive. Creating its own space and time, a mythic geography reveals the mask of imagination, a primitive blood-streaked face. In John Newlove's "The Pride," the poet thinks of all the great mythic masks

and stories of the tribes. Meditating on "This western country crammed/with the ghosts of indians," he asks,

> But what image, bewildered
> son of all men
> under the hot sun,
> do you worship
> what completeness
> do you hope to have
> from these tales?

And the answer begins to form as he calls to mind the past. History is a nightmare of blood and battle:

> in summer and in the bloody fall
> they gathered on the killing grounds,
> fat and shining with fat, amused
> with the luxuries of war and death,
>
> relieved from the steam of knowledge,
> consoled by the stream of blood
> and steam rising from the fresh hides
> and tired horses, wheeling in their pride
> on the sweating horses, their pride.

But if history is blood, imagination too is blood-soaked. Place, event, and poem are so interfused, it is not possible to tell one from the other: "Those are all stories; / the pride, the grand poem / of our land, of the earth itself," a poem like "the sunlit brilliant image" that "suddenly floods us / with understanding shocks our / attentions." For the contemporary poet, the identification is complete: "at last we become them / in our desires, our desires."[12]

The longing for history appears finally, as in Newlove's poem, as an image of primitive desire, the imaginative source of poetry. But in what sense can this be said to be either modern or radical? There are two possibilities. One is suggested by a comment of Fiedler's, another by Charles Olson.

Concerned to develop his argument that the return of the primitive in "the new western" involves what he speaks of as "the alteration of consciousness," Fiedler notices, "the real opposite of nostalgic is psychedelic, the reverse of remembering is hallucinating."[13] The point at issue is not to invoke Fiedler's own version of redskins and palefaces, but to remind ourselves of the connection between primitive and contemporary modes in poetry. At its extreme limit, the mythology of space and time turns into a myth of primitive hallucination. The progressive insanities of a pioneer "transmute memory into madness, dead legend into living hallucination."[14] Among contemporary poets, the most striking manifestation of the return of the primitive as hallucination, of course, is Cohen's *Beautiful Losers,* but something of the same process can be seen in the phonemic tantras of bp Nichol, in the concretism of Joe Rosenblatt, and in Bill Bissett's visionary chants and ideograms.[15] And as Cohen's invocation to "Alexander Trocchi, Public Junkie" reminds us, the myth of hallucination involves more than poetry as madness. Its context may very well be McLuhan's tribalization, or it may involve what Frye speaks of as a sadistic withdrawal from society in the linking of criminality and art, in addition to the pastoral withdrawal in the communal idea of freedom and spontaneity. Whatever its

specific form, the Canadian version of hallucinated terror and freedom obviously depends more heavily on contemporary literary conventions than on some nebulous version of Canadian character or local culture. Gary Snyder and Allan Ginsberg are clearly more pertinent to the themes we are concerned with here than, say, the Social Credit or the Toronto-Dominion Centre. Modern poetry is international in style and radical in its attitudes; that is to say, it is fundamentally anti-social in its manic, sadistic, and pastoral concerns. To the extent that Canadian poets share not only this international style but the radicalism of their contemporaries, we can speak of them as modern poets.

But there is another sense in which the myth of space and time may be said to be modern, and though in some ways it is less extreme than the terrorist side of the pattern, it suggests even more important possibilities. Attempting to work out "the degree to which the projective involves a stance toward reality outside a poem as well as a new stance towards the reality of a poem itself," Charles Olson is led to comment on what he speaks of as "objectism":

> Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. . . . It comes to this: the use of a man, by himself and thus by others, lies in how he conceives his relation to nature, that force to which he owes his somewhat small existence. If he sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of artificial forms outside himself. But if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share.[16]

For obvious reasons, Olson's statement belongs here, most patently because of his influence on a group of poets writing from Vancouver: Frank Davey, Lionel Kearns, and George Bowering, among others. A more serious consideration is Olson's redefinition of the role of ego and the place and meaning of perception in poetry. Historically, it has been argued, myth develops as a psychologizing of romantic impressionism. As a narrative of contending powers of the psyche, it objectifies the self in cultural history and nature. So, at least for some time, myth was understood (at least according to rumour) by such poets as Douglas Le Pan, Wilfred Watson, Anne Wilkinson, and Daryl Hine, and so it was presented (more or less programmatically) by James Reaney and Jay Macpherson. No one is likely to deny Miss Macpherson's achievement in *The Boatman*, still the most beautifully coherent and lyrical book of recent years. Nor should Watson's and Reaney's contribution to poetic drama be ignored. But Olson's poetic opened the way to a radically different approach to the myth of emptiness in space. Instead of "singing himself and singing by way of artificial forms outside himself," that is, by way of the imposed design of psyche and story, the poet opens himself to the language of objects and their secrets. Whatever one makes of the theory, in practice its impact could scarcely be ignored.

The laconic comes to be favoured over the elaborated structure; the unemphatic tone seems more precise than the singing voice in dramatic or ironic lyrics; the poem as experience, apparently extemporized, is preferable to the poem as literature, a structure set apart for contemplation. And while it is virtually impossible to see any extensive body of work as solely the product or character of one pattern in poetry, it seems clear enough that Ray Souster's continued concern with the observed object or process of perception, on the one hand, and Al Purdy's curious brand of psychological realism, on the other, have assumed a more significant role in the development of contemporary poetry than, say, the more dramatic and flamboyant assertiveness of Irving Layton's work. The poets represented in Souster's anthology *New Wave: Canada* speak variously. Michael Ondaatje's elegantly controlled world of "slight, careful stepping birds," "parrots and appalled lions," is not likely to be mistaken for Victor Coleman's quiet measures. But it is openness and "objectism" that dominate in the anthology, as they dominate still in so influential a contemporary magazine as David Rosenberg's *The Ant's Forefoot.*[17] With *New Wave: Canada,* in fact, the shift away from psychological myth to the myth of the object is virtually complete, and the "open-ended" poem of process and perception replaces closed structure and "literary" form.

Souster dedicates his anthology "To W.W.E. Ross, the first modern Canadian poet," and in his brief preface, the book intends to mark a sharp revaluation of contemporary developments. Where it had long been maintained that the modern movement in Canada begins with the witty, complex, socially aware poetry of A.J.M. Smith, F.R. Scott, and A.M. Klein, and the vigorous narratives of E.J. Pratt, from the point of view of writers like Souster, Purdy, and the *New Wave* poets, the contemporary begins with Ross, Dorothy Livesay, and Raymond Knister. At a glance, the difference between the two groups appears to be in the influences upon them, the one group responding to Eliot, Yeats, and Auden, the other to the American imagists, Pound, Williams, and Olson. But more important than a reassessment of literary influences, the revaluation of the past implies a change in sensibility and vision. As Bowering puts it in his "Bright Land": "What gives it to you . . . your eyes . . . as in the old literature," but "It is, as I've said, your approach / does it."[18]

Space finally comes to be occupied not by legend but by objects. And at this point, the terror of emptiness recedes. The spiritual project of humanizing the wilderness and of creating a useable past paradoxically turns itself inside out.[19] It reaches completeness with its realization of the object and its acceptance of what is there. One is reminded of the terrific ironic force in Robbe-Grillet's remarks: "if I say, 'The world is man,' I shall always gain absolution; while if I say, 'Things are things, and man is only man,' I am immediately charged with a crime against humanity."[20] There is a literature for which Robbe-Grillet's comments are appropriate, the anti-arts of Mailer and Genet, the silences of Beckett and Pinter, the randomness of Burroughs, a parodic universe of chance, change, magic, occultism. Its end is silence, as Susan Sontag understands: "From the promotion of the arts into 'art' comes the leading myth about art, that of the absoluteness of the artist's activity. . . . The later version of

the myth posits a more complex, tragic relation of art to consciousness. . . . Art is not conscious per se, but rather its antidote. . . ."[21] In brief, "the pursuit of silence." It seems possible to claim that where we find a poetry which substitutes "chance for intention," where magic is afoot and "Art is the enemy of the artist," we find a poetry that seeks the same renewal or renunciation that informs so much contemporary writing. At the very least, we might notice that the narrative hero of *Beautiful Losers* dissolves in the last pages of his book into a radio, a giant cinema image, and finally nothingness: "His presence was like the shape of an hour glass, strongest where it was smallest." The "feature of the evening," we are told, according to some purists, is "this point of most absence."[22] It is a point, we might believe, from which anything could begin.

York University
Toronto

[1]Northrop Frye, *The Modern Century* (Toronto: Oxford, 1967), 18.
[2]Frye, 17.
[3]Frye, 57.
[4]*Poets of the Confederation*, ed. Malcolm Ross (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1960), xi.
[5]Leslie Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (New York: Stein and Day, 1968), 16.
[6]Gwendolyn MacEwen, *The Shadow-Maker* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1969). Referred to here as well are Earle Birney, *Selected Poems* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966); A.W. Purdy, *Wild Grape Vine* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), and *North of Summer* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967); Leonard Cohen, *Selected Poems* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968); Irving Layton, *Collected Poems* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965); F.R. Scott, *Selected Poems* (Toronto: Oxford, 1966).
[7]Margaret Atwood, *The Animals in That Country* (Toronto: Oxford, 1968); P.K. Page, *Cry Ararat* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967); Douglas Le Pan, *The Wounded Prince* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948); Margaret Avison, *Winter Sun* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1960).
[8]Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," *Human Universe and Other Essays*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 55-56.
[9]Olson, 60.
[10]Wilfred Watson, *Friday's Child* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955).
[11]A.W. Purdy, *Wild Grape Vine.*
[12]John Newlove, *Black Night Window* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968).
[13]Fiedler, 175.
[14]Fiedler, 176-177.
[15]Leonard Cohen, *Beautiful Losers* (New York: Bantam Book, 1967); bp Nichol, *Journeyings and the Return* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1967); Joe Rosenblatt, *Winter of the Luna Moth* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1968); Bill Bissett, *Of The Land Divine Service* (Toronto: Weed/Flower Press, 1968), and *Lebanon Voices* (Toronto: Weed/Flower Press, 1967).
[16]Olson, 59-60.
[17]*The Ant's Forefoot*, ed. D. Rosenberg (Toronto: Coach House Press); *New Wave; Canada*, ed. Raymound Souster, (Toronto: Contact Press, 1967); Souster's own work should be looked at in *The Colour of the Times* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1964), *As Is* (Toronto: Oxford, 1967), and *Lost and Found* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1968); Anne Wilkinson, *The Collected Poems of Anne Wilkinson*, ed. A.J.M. Smith (Toronto: Macmillan, 1968); Jay Macpherson, *The Boatman* (Toronto: Oxford, 1968); James Reany, *Twelve Letters to a Small Town* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1962); Daryl Hine, *The Wooden Horse* (New York: Atheneum, 1965).
[18]*Thumbprints*, ed. Doug Fetherling (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1969). See also George Bowering, *Rocky Mountain Foot* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart,

1968); W.W.E. Ross, *Shapes and Sounds* (Toronto: Longman's, 1968); Dorothy Livesay, *The Documentaries* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1968); and *Day and Night* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1944); Raymond Knister, *The Collected Poems of Raymond Knister* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1949); A.J.M. Smith, *Poems: New and Collected* (Toronto: Oxford, 1967); A.M. Klein, *Hath Not a Jew* (New York: Ryerson, 1940), and *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1948); E.J. Pratt, *Collected Poems* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958).

[19]Northrop Frye, "Letters, in Canada: Poetry, 1952-1960," in *Masks of Poetry*, ed. A.J.M. Smith (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962).

[20]Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Nature, Humanism, Tragedy," in *For a New Novel* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 52.

[21]Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence," in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 4-5.

[22]Cohen, *Beautiful Losers*, 305.