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Introduction -
Canadian Poetry: Traditions/Counter-Traditions; Poésie candienne : traditions/contre-traditions

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Introduction
Canadian Poetry: Traditions/Counter-Traditions
Poésie candienne : traditions/contre-traditions

ROSS LECKIE, MARIE CARRIÈRE,
JOHN CLEMENT BALL, JENNIFER ANDREWS

DO WE STILL have *a* Canadian poetry? We ask this question not because Canadian poetry is an endangered species but, on the contrary, because it has never been so extraordinarily abundant and diverse. In the 1970s, when *Studies in Canadian Literature* began publishing, the phrase "Canadian poetry" connoted something of an official discourse in English Canada pertaining to questions of "Canadian identity" and nationalism. Even though the poetry of Margaret Atwood, Dennis Lee, Leonard Cohen, and others was counter-cultural, it was still bound up in a nationalist project, and the explosion of poetry publishing over that decade was coincident with the rapid expansion of the Canada Council for the Arts. The paradox was embodied in the person of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, who seemed capable of expressing the flamboyant style of late sixties and early seventies counter-culture even as he wielded the centralized power of the state, as displayed, for example, in the invocation of the War Measures Act. The result of this paradox was a poetry that was both oppositional to and celebratory of the traditions of Canadian poetry. The phenomenon was never so clear as in the poetry of Earle Birney, whose poems such as "David" were classics of Canadian modernism that he later revised into the "open field" poetics of the sixties and seventies. Birney was able to be both the iconoclastic modernist and the poet of a later era's radical, counter-cultural politics.

It seemed then that, despite the differences between individual poetic voices we could still speak of a "Canadian poetry," a tradition wound like a skein of wool through a central set of poetic and cultural concerns. It is dangerous to imagine one's own poetic period as more various or cosmopolitan than preceding ones; indeed, Alan Richards's paper in this issue demonstrates how Canadian modernists such as A.J.M. Smith and

F.R. Scott worked to re-envision Canada's unique landscape as a way of expressing a greater independence for a Canadian nation that was still imagining itself as a Victorian British colony. Nevertheless, if one were to attempt to unravel all the threads and filaments of current Canadian poetry written in English, one would almost certainly be left with a hopelessly decentred tangle of poetic and cultural ideas. It is as if Canadian poets are not so much anxious about the "question" of Canadian identity as they are desirous of exploding the very notion of *a* Canadian poetry, of seeking to imagine all possible worlds, of attempting to think through every imaginable way of conceiving what Canada might be. It is not surprising that critics of Canadian poetry have trouble keeping up.

Among the many reasons for this new multiplicity are, of course, Canada's changing demographics and our increasingly sophisticated and nuanced way of speaking about racial and sexual identities — as expressed, for example, in Kaya Fraser's paper on Dionne Brand, Andy Weaver's paper on Fred Wah, or Robert May's paper on John Barton in this issue. Other reasons include contemporary writers' extraordinary range of poetic practices and how this range embodies dramatically different poetic epistemologies. Each epistemology lays the foundation for a unique vision of culture, and, as all of our current poets are bound up in what it is to belong to a place called Canada, each of these cultural epistemologies defines a different way of imagining what it is to be Canadian. And so it is that Tim Lilburn's Saskatchewan can be our Saskatchewan, the one we learn about in school and the one presented to us in the popular media, even as Lilburn is showing us just how bathetic these notions of the province are.

Conversely, if we were to ask whether there is still *a* Quebec poetry, the answer would be a resounding but certainly nuanced yes, considering the internal cultural plurality, or what some critics even consider the transculturalism, of Québécois literature today. However diverse, *suffisante*, or *mineure* (to appropriate François Paré's terms), the contemporary poetry of Quebec and French Canada has no doubts about its autonomy as well as its sense of evolution over the past century, as most of the francophone contributors to this issue argue one way or another. However, here too the question of national identity remains a backdrop to aesthetic rather than political concerns pertaining to poetic form and subjectivity, most notably perhaps in Sandra Hobbs's paper on Réjean Ducharme; although she published in 1969 during the Quiet Revolution, Ducharme's decolonizing poetics and evocation of a postcolonial

hybridity stray far and beyond the nationalist project of the *poésie du pays* more or less of that same era.

Perhaps unsurprisingly in this francophone context of poetry writing and criticism, the foremost subject appears to be the poetic genre itself — its innovations, the overt break from all constraints of versification, yet also the servility to a French European tradition, at least on the part of nineteenth-century poets who, perhaps for that very reason, have failed to leave their mark on the literary history of French Canada. As varied and wide-ranging as those of their anglophone counterparts, their critical and literary discussions about poetic form and genre take place, without exception, in the context of *modernité*. For obvious historical and linguistic reasons, Quebec and French Canada have always been to some extent under the influence of French theories and practices, but they have also made *modernité* their own and even, in the case of such contemporary Québécois women poets as Nicole Brossard and France Théoret, actually transformed it.

Another prevalent question raised in the francophone contributions to this issue is that of *intimité*: that is, the personal subject matter and even the lyrical tone or voice still very much characteristic of Canadian contemporary poetry written in French. The persistence of this feature presents a rich and interesting paradox, considering the counter-traditional, at times experimental, often playful, and even transgressive styles and themes adopted and exploited in the poetry. Given the aesthetic range as well as the contradictory tendencies within Quebec and among French-Canadian poetic practices, francophone critics may in turn have a challenging time keeping up with and encapsulating the poetry under one banner or epistemology — except, perhaps, possibly to refer (in a very paradoxical and open-ended way) to a *modernité intime*. But therein lies the sophistication and diversity of the genre at it is so widely practiced and studied in Quebec and French Canada today.

For all of these reasons and more, the time seems right for a special issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* devoted to poetry. Normally, submissions to *SCL/ÉLC* on poetry-related topics are outnumbered by submissions on fiction by over seven to one, but it was not always thus, as even a cursory comparison of recent tables of contents with our earliest ones will reveal. Of course, this trend reflects larger shifts in the academy, where fiction's star has been rising for some time; but since we knew there was lots of excellent criticism still being

written on Canadian poetry, we announced this thirtieth-anniversary issue in the hopes that it would gather in one place a representative sampling of the quality, variety, and continued relevance of Canadian poetry criticism today. Specifically, we invited papers with two general ideas in mind: (1) to seek out articles that would contribute to the beginnings of a critique of the cultural complexities of current Canadian poetry, and (2) to invite reassessments of the Canadian tradition from early settler contexts through modernism to the postmodern moment. We didn't know what to expect and were very pleasantly surprised by the wide range of poets treated and the array of critical methods used to offer striking new perspectives both on the familiar terrain of canonized poetry and on the techniques of strangeness employed by current poets.

Perhaps our biggest surprise came from the interest and attention given to the icons of popular poetry written in English. We did not anticipate that this issue would include provocative and subtle papers on John ‑McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" and Robert Service's *Songs of a Sourdough*. Nancy Holmes's remarkable essay on "Canada's Official Poem" combines intelligent close reading of "In Flanders Fields" with keen observations of the cultural and political contexts that surrounded the reception of the poem in its day and that now, almost a century later, enable it to speak articulately to our conflicted, ambivalent national identity. Holmes notes the poem's "official status" (it appears on the new ten dollar bill) and how this status has shaped the sanctity of the poem's public persona, but in her close reading she illustrates how the remarkable first two stanzas express an uncanny horror at war that is undermined when the final stanza rehearses bathetic trivialities about sacrifices for country and empire. Sharon Smulders reconsiders ideologies of masculinity in Robert Service's *Songs of a Sourdough*, famous for its poems "The Cremation of Sam McGee" and "The Shooting of Dan McGrew." Easily dismissed as popular doggerel evoking a nostalgia for the Klondike days when men were men, these poems are shown by Smulders to embody a masculine mythology that plays against "the constraints of bourgeois civility as incarnate in the ideal of Christian domesticity."

Katia Grubisic points to similar ideological ambivalences in the nineteenth-century writings of Charles Mair. Grubisic describes how Mair, in his admittedly romanticized Victorian writings of the Canadian west, grants natives a surprising degree of political agency and acknowledges their complex and vibrant civilization. His conservationist sympa-

thy for the ecological care Indians have for their land, however, runs counter to his role as government agent in the opening of the west and his complicity, therefore, in the frequently violent expansionist repression and destruction of First Nations culture.

La contribution de Luc Bonenfant se veut tout aussi provocante, étantLa contribution de Luc Bonenfant se veut tout aussi provocante, étant donné son analyse de certaines faiblesses dans la poésie canadienne-française du dix-neuvième siècle découlant de son rapport à la modernité française, certes qui aura servi de tremplin et trop souvent de modèles à s'approprier sinon à calquer. Le poème en prose se trouve à l'étude, sujet peu exploré par la critique d'autant plus qu'il est peu présent dans la production littéraire de cette époque. Il revient à Bonenfant de relever le paradoxe soutenu par cet état de dépendance filiale, puisqu'une telle réclamation littéraire dénie la mouvance et le dynamisme du genre même.

L' "étude synchronique" des poésies québécoise et française d'Isabelle Miron commence là où s'arrête l'analyse de Bonenfant. Portant également sur le lien avec la France (selon Miron une problématique typique des littératures mineures), l'analyse décèle l'autonomie propre de ces deux histoires littéraires mais aussi leur complémentarité, au-delà de toute "posture de compensation." La considération plus prolongée de la poésie féminine fait véritablement état d'une disproportion importante, soit entre la production abondante des femmes québécoises et celle moins visible de leurs contemporaines françaises

The essays by Alan Richards and Gregory Betts provide a marvellous counterpoint to each other. Richards speaks to the heart of Canadian modernism, scrutinizing the work of A.J.M. Smith and F.R. Scott in *The Canadian Mercury*. In an interesting correlation with Bonenfant's critique of nineteenth-century "borrowings" from the French European tradition, Richards argues that in this period both Smith and Scott are still struggling to free their diction and imagery from the Victorian Romanticism that their editorial statements in the magazine claim to have already been overthrown. Richards delivers a careful analysis of the difficult transition to modernism in three poems by Smith and four by Scott. Betts, on the other hand, resuscitates the poetry of Bertram Brooker, who was perhaps the most aggressive of modernists in his experimentations with form and verbal energy. Betts's long-overdue study shows how Brooker's experiments with language embody his deep belief in mysticism and the occult,

convincingly positioning Brooker within a strand of modernism articulated by Yeats and very much present in the work of Pound.

Canadian poetry does not have a defined "mid-generation" in the way we can speak of American poetry and the work of Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath, and others, or for that matter, of Quebec's *poètes de la solitude* Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau, Alain Grandbois, Anne Hébert and Rina Lasnier; nonetheless, Kathy Mezei and Jane Swann remind us that this is a particularly productive period for female poets. While Mezei cites P. K. Page, Margaret Avison, Dorothy Livesay and Phyllis Webb, her paper focuses on the poetry of Anne Wilkinson, arguing against metaphysical readings of Wilkinson's poetry that emphasize "polar oppositions," encouraging us to read Wilkinson's "ands" as "amplifying and conjoining." The metaphysical in Wilkinson's poetry is, therefore, interwoven with the everyday and with domestic activities, and the poems express Wilkinson's profound ambivalences around the idea of home. Swann writes on Page's poetry of the 1940s and 1950s, showing through a careful reading of key poems from this period how Page found poetic vision to be both enabling and disabling. Poetic vision can collapse the relation between subject and object, altering the very nature of perception; however, for Page this does not necessarily lead to the real, but can remain caught in an obsession with subjectivity.

Dans un contexte plus contemporain, la maison figure parmi les lieux clos qui s'opposent aux espaces ouverts de la ville dans la poésie québécoise des années quatre-vingts qu'aborde Luminita Urs. Venant soit alimenter soit interférer avec le privé, ces différents espaces citadins font penser l'intimité dans une poésie qui se démarque visiblement des pratiques ludiques, contre-culturelles et expérimentales des deux décennies précédentes. Comme le signale Urs, cette poésie de l'intime fait preuve d'une "nouvelle lisibilité" autant au niveau d'une forme libérée de toutes contraintes (donc toujours intensément moderne) que du contenu.

Raoul Boudreau se fait l'observateur lucide de l'oeuvre d'une nouvelle génération de poètes actuels qui viendraient constituer une relève fort attendue en littérature acadienne. Ces jeunes auteurs se distinguent parfois pour le pire, mais surtout pour le meilleur, de la poésie spécifiquement acadienne de l'époque nationaliste et contestataire des années soixante-dix. Cette jeune poésie a recours à l'intimité cernée par Urs ainsi qu'à une liberté formelle et linguistique. Cependant, tout

comme l'art de ces jeunes, la poésie acadienne est toujours en pleine évolution et s'insère dans le contexte des petites littératures qui ne cessent de s'inventer.

In his essay on Tim Lilburn, Gregory Maillet explores Lilburn's oeuvre in terms of Lilburn's own understandings of apophasis and the via negativa. Lilburn suggests that nature cannot be read in the Augustinian way as the book of God; its vast strangeness undoes language and naming, and naming in this way cannot create a home in the world. The contemplative in Lilburn's poetry, in Lilburn's words, is "an attentive name-cancelling darkness of mind." Lilburn's first principle of philosophy is eros, which is a desire to return to the world, and finds itself in poetry in a language that asserts and then cancels itself. In a different way, Robert May also sees a relation between eros and landscape in the poetry of John Barton, here contextualized by Barton's gay poetics. May describes how Barton assumes the identity of Emily Carr as his "drag persona," and how throughout his career Barton develops a complex metonymic relationship between landscape and desire. Landscape, and by definition a sense of nationality, is in some senses the ground of eros, yet landscape can never be touched, because it is mutable, marked by disease, by HIV-AIDS.

L'analyse méticuleuse de Lydia Lamontagne portant sur *Oeuvre de la première mort* du poète franco-manitobain J.R. Léveillé tisse un lien connexe entre l'espace, la mort et l'écriture. Lamontagne s'inspire du travail de Bachelard sur l'image poétique ainsi que les propos de Foucault au sujet de l'espace, voire de l'hétérotopie. L'étude aborde la réflexion complexe et intertextuelle de Léveillé sur la mort qui sous-tend une écriture qui se veut d'abord déconstructioniste, mais encore une fois intime, étant donné sa thématique. Selon Lamontagne, la thanatotopie poétique de Léveillé viendrait insérer son oeuvre dans le cadre d'une littérature de l'exiguïté évoqué ailleurs dans ce dossier.

The final two English-language essays in this special issue focus on difference, political agency and the problematics of language in the writing of Dionne Brand and Fred Wah. Kaya Fraser suggests that a more confident relationship between politics and the use of language in Brand's earlier essays and poetry is troubled and complicated in her collection *Land to Light On*. Fraser points to Brand's increasing sense that her language is struggling against itself and that Brand's 1997 poems offer "an unyielding interrogation of what all this talk is good for." Fraser hints at

how painful this is as Brand explores the violence of the sacrifices that must be made when using language. Andy Weaver's article presents a detailed explanation of Fred Wah's concept of "synchronous foreignicity." Weaver argues that Wah wishes to dismantle models (such as Jean-François Lyotard's) that understand experimental art as moving through a process of radical opposition to a dominant ideology followed by assimilation and recuperation by an amorphous capitalism capable of consuming any form of art and transforming it into a commodity. Weaver suggests that for Wah, experimental writing is always already both oppositional and mainstream, recuperated by and resistant to dominant ideology. Wah explores this notion particularly within conceptions of Canadian ethnicity, noting that even in his own heritage there are simultaneously clearly identified and blurred ethnic boundaries.

Une telle ambivalence face au discours dominant se déploie dans l'étude de Sandra Hobbs portant sur *La fille de Christophe Colomb* de Réjean Ducharme, cette fois à la lumière de la théorie postcoloniale, approche certes originale dans un contexte critique québécois. Si l'¦uvre fait forcément appel au genre traditionnel, il est peu étonnant que le code épique subisse ici un sérieux déboîtement. Bref, la contestation des discours historiques dominants dans la poésie ducharmienne passe par l'hybridation (au sens d'Homi Bhabha) du sujet énonciateur ainsi que la déstabilisation du genre épique, à savoir de l'héritage européen.

If there is a conclusion to be reached from the essays collected in this special issue, it would be that the question of "Canadian identity" is still important to current English-speaking poets and to the ways in which we read the poets of the past. In Quebec and French Canada, the issue of identity plays itself out rather in terms of a cultural and more specific literary autonomy in relation to Europe, but also (and perhaps most importantly) to individual poetic as well as critical practices. In the recent explosion of both approaches to analyzing poetry and in poetic practice itself, however, is the recognition that identity is not singular, and that even to speak of "identities" is too easy, too close to a metaphor of mosaic that is as outworn as it is glib. Poetry provides a special kind of language that is perhaps best able to embody the conflicted nature of Canadian identity, best able to articulate its difficulties. Poets and their critics in our contemporary moment seem generally not to feel the need to push for a definition of identity, and are more concerned with deconstructing nationalism, or transgressing it altogether

as in the case of Québécois and French-Canadian poetics, than they are with the strategic deployment of nationalism that typified the 1960s in Quebec or the 1970s in English Canada. It is not that Canada has necessarily become more inclusive. Barton and Brand in particular remain sensitive to the pain of exclusion. Nor is it that poets and critics are happy to embrace a "multiculturalism of poetics" — the review pages recently seem to be bristling with imminent war. There does, however, seem to be an acceptance that a debate between those of such diverse poetics would be preferable to an easy glossing over of difference in the name of a falsely unifying and reductive nationalism, poetic practice, or cultural movement.