Contemporary Canadian Poetry circa 1998: Some Notes

Douglas Barbour
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Abstract
Notes only, and from a position I tend to think of as on the margin. But I have been reminded all too often of the fact that my margin is pretty close to many other peoples’ centres and so I can’t even make that claim with any sense of real justification. Let’s say that I write from a site which takes certain kinds of innovation as positive, and which recognizes that many other margins, of class, race or ethnicity, gender, as well as poetic practice, are circling on the peripheries of official culture. I will also admit, right up front, that I cannot possibly do justice to the vast range of writing in Canada today, and that this series of notes can only attempt to give some sense of that range, and of the writers working in various fields within it. In that sense, this is a highly provisional overview, a glimpse from one point on the circumference of some of what lies within. I will mention a number of writers, most of whom will stand as signs of many others unmentioned. This is inherently unfair, and I recognize that fact. My own biases undoubtedly influence the directions many of these quick glancing notes will take. In order to suggest something about poetry in Canada circa 1998, I think it necessary to look at some of the developments of the past decade or so.
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Are we past the post yet?
In 1998, is there an audience for poetry beyond the coteries, in Canada? Where does or would such an audience be found? Canadian poetry is taught in the universities and colleges, and poetry readings in such venues probably get the best audiences, and those are not huge. Still, poetry in Canada, as in most other english-speaking countries, is not a major force in the literary arts. Maclean’s, Canada’s weekly newsmagazine, reviewed only one book of poetry in 1998, and, I think, for some years. It was not Canadian; nor was it a major work although it was received as a masterpiece. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s flagship radio program, This Morning, also reviewed only one book of poetry this past year on its ‘Talking Books’ Sunday morning segment, the same book. There two Canadian poets, Lorna Crozier (one of the most popular poets of the past decade and published by the one major press still doing poetry, McClelland & Stewart) and Mark Abley (Book Reviews editor for The Montreal Gazette) and a British media watcher talked about how ‘noble,’
‘interesting,’ and ‘tragic’ this volume was. What does it say about Canada’s status as a post-colonial nation that it was, in fact, Ted Hughes’s Birthday Letters, a work that also made it onto the Maclean’s national bestseller list for a few weeks? Actually, I would like to know how many Canadian poets bought and read Birthday Letters; certainly it’s clear that for many ‘common readers’ its publication was the most telling moment in Canadian poetry this past year (and one which reveals the continuing power of British imperialism, at least in the arts, not to say that this book didn’t have the same depressing effect in Britain itself, and in the United States).

A little bit of canonization
I’m sorry to report that for more than a decade there have been no new major anthologies of Canadian poetry. The one anthology used in most post-secondary institutions remains Fifteen Canadian Poets x 2, the first incarnation of which, Fifteen Canadian Poets, appeared in 1970. As we move through the nineties towards the millennium, the basic division between the more or less traditional poetics of mainstream poetry and the radical poetics of ‘language’ oriented writers continues to widen. Even those poets not given to joining groups nevertheless find themselves partially associated with one or the other of these two major forces. Such simple partitioning occurs in the United States, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, as well as in Canada. Anthologizing tends, by its very nature, to be a conservative act; the anthologist looks backward, and seeks to cement in place an already ‘given’ sense of the canon (although one might ask just how much the anthologists’ conservatism creates that canonizing ‘given’). It should come as no surprise, then, that, for some time now, the major anthologies in Canada have tended to weigh in on the side of the traditional (and that they do so even to the extent of almost completely erasing the signs of more innovative poetics in the writings of those poets they choose — say George Bowering, Phyllis Webb, or Robert Kroetsch, to take just three examples from Fifteen Canadian Poets x 2 — and of tending to include younger poets whose work falls within conventional lyric expectations). This is especially true of Fifteen Canadian Poets x 2. The need for a new comprehensive anthology is great, but there is no sign that one will soon appear. Thus a Canuck looks with envy at the recent anthologies of New Zealand and Australian poetry published by Penguin Books in both countries.

Elders of the tribe, etc.
The vexed question of influence will always remain vexed, but it is interesting to see how aspects of it are addressed by those who might say they have been influenced. Perhaps I am simply talking about a generous outpouring of respect for certain writers who have made a difference by their examples, but the poets I am going to mention here made deep and personal impressions on many other writers, and that’s one good way of defining ‘influence.’
BpNichol died ten years ago but his spirit lives on, and he remains one of the most deeply missed writers of his generation. Nichol’s personal impact on his many friends was inestimable, but as well his never-ceasing explorations of the possibilities of writing, and especially his life-long work, the *martyrology*, continue to galvanize other, and new, writers in their own attempts to push the envelope of poetic discourse and form. Concrete poetry, which had lain fallow for quite awhile, has made a major comeback, with most of its young practitioners demonstrating an allegiance to Nichol’s pioneering work (see, for example, Darren Wershler-Henry’s *Nicholodeon: a book of lowerglyphs* [1997]). This fall there will be a conference, with international attendance, celebrating the writer and his work (his last notebook is reproduced in *West Coast Line* 25 [Spring/Summer 1998]).

In the past few years such conferences, as much celebrations as scholarly examinations, have been held to honour Robin Blaser, whose impact on the writing scene on the West Coast cannot be overstated, on the publication of his long awaited collected poems *The Holy Forest*; and Robert Kroetsch, novelist, critical theorist, and poet of restless formal possibilities, who has profoundly influenced the development of various kinds of writing on the prairies. This practice, of honouring writers before they die and can no longer appreciate that they are appreciated, actually began with a celebration for bpNichol in 1986. In 1992, a similar celebration was held for Phyllis Webb, whose poetry has enchanted and amazed her readers for over four decades, and whose *Naked Poems* (1966) influenced every long poem to follow. Webb has since stopped writing poetry, turning her eye to visual art, but her work continues to find new readers and to teach various possibilities. Many young women, especially, discover ways to write for themselves in her poetry, a poetry of terrible lyric grace that nevertheless refuses any of the easy outs of lyric. As well, it is always strikingly intelligent while never losing its emotional edge.

In the case of all four of these writers, their work has met with useful and various criticism. In Nichol’s case, there are two collections of essays on the *martyrology*, as well as a festschrift published for the 1986 celebration, plus two monographs. A similar festschrift appeared more or less in conjunction with the Webb conference. Many of the papers presented at the Blaser conference have been published in journals in the US and Canada, while Kroetsch remains one of the most critically appreciated writers in Canada.

In terms of what might be called the mainstream, another poet of some influence, Robin Skelton, died recently. A festschrift in his honour appeared in the late 80s. Skelton was something of a magister, a master of inherited forms, a teacher who helped found the Creative Writing Department at the University of Victoria, and a deliberate eccentric who took great pleasure in being a warlock. His work could be seen as a bulwark of the New Formalism in Canada, which has attracted many younger poets, as it also has in the US. As well, many fellow poets gathered to celebrate Pat Lane’s 60th birthday a few years ago. Lane is a fine lyricist, of working class background, now well established in the contemporary canon. There have also been celebrations of
the works and lives of two elders of the tribe: Al Purdy, whom many think of as 'the' Canadian poet; and Irving Layton, whose influence is more for the energy and sexual freedom of his early work than for any formal innovation. Now Purdy is formally interesting, yet his poetry is so specifically in his own singular voice that it seems he too has been influential mostly for his defiant insistence on writing about all aspects of Canadian life, although his ability to utilize a purely Canadian vernacular has certainly given other poets direction. Both can be parodied, but to try to imitate them is to court disaster.

Of course, the writers mentioned above are all in their seventies or older (except for Nichol who died far too young, and Lane). Among the generation of the 60s, poets now in their late 50s or early 60s, a number are now seen as mentors and influences, including most obviously Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje. But I would also point to such innovative writers as Daphne Marlatt, who has become more and more important in recent years as a feminist writer, whose interest in a feminist poetics has had a great influence. But there are far too many writers of that generation who continue to publish and whose influence will continue to be felt in the new millennium.

That huge geography divided
Another aspect of Canadian poetry that cannot be overlooked is the way the size of the country almost mandates regional sensibilities. Because so many of the major publishers in Canada are to be found in Toronto and environs, those who live outside Ontario often feel they are in a colonial relationship with central Canadian power. Yet there are many regions within Ontario too. Nevertheless, there is a sense, whether fair or not, that Ontario sees the rest of the country as a kind of adjunct, and does not recognize the legitimate concerns of its varied regions. I am sliding into politics here but they certainly do play their part in culture in Canada.

For one thing, it's very hard for someone on the prairies to know what's happening in the Maritimes and vice-versa, not least because distribution of books from one end of the country to the other is so poor, and seems to be filtered through Toronto as a (failing) distribution centre. That there is an active poetry scene in the Maritimes is clear, and at least one of our major literary magazines, The Fiddlehead, is published in New Brunswick, and there are a few others, but it's hard to keep up with developments there if, like me, you are on the other side of the continent.

There has long been talk about a 'prairie vernacular' poetic, and it certainly exists. But, due in part to Kroetsch's presence, there are also a number of innovative poetics to be found on the prairies. In Manitoba, where he taught during the 80s, Dennis Cooley, whose ability to mix and match vernacular speech and innovative form has led to a number of wildly comic poems, has also been an energetic mentor. Saskatchewan is perhaps the busiest literary scene in Canada. Anne Szumigalski has long been a moving force there. Prairie Fire has published issues dedicated to these two
writers in the past few years. Now that Fred Wah is teaching at the University of Calgary (which recently graduated the first Ph.D. in its Writing Program, Nicole Markotic, whose poetry is definitely in the innovative camp), a number of younger innovative poets have gathered there. Such interesting magazines as *Filling Station* and *absinthe* (the latter continually bringing out special issues of gay or ethnic writing) are now part of that exciting scene.

The West Coast has long been a hotbed of competing poetics, and it continues to be so. There are a number of important small presses in British Columbia, and writers as different as bill bissett and Pat Lane, Daphne Marlatt and Lorna Crozier (a prairie writer now teaching in Victoria), or Phyllis Webb and P.K. Page share that 'northern Californian' space (as one witty columnist has dubbed it).

**Writing women**

Although I've already alluded to it, the immense importance of feminist poetry and poetics in Canada continues, despite whatever 'post-feminist' discourses there may be out there. As Margaret Atwood pointed out some time ago, in her Introduction to *The New Oxford Book of English Verse* (1982), women, for whatever reason, have always had a larger place in Canadian writing than in that of most cultures. But their voices have never been so loud nor so wide-ranging. I'd hazard that at least half the poetry being published in Canada today is by women. As well, some of our most intriguing innovators are women, many with connections to various avant-gardes in other countries, especially the US. Karen Mac Cormack publishes widely in the US, and her *The Tongue Moves Talk* (1997) was co-published by Chax Press in Arizona and West House Books in Hereford, UK. It boasts back cover commendations from both Charles Bernstein and Maggie O'Sullivan. Among other recent books of note by younger writers, I would mention Lisa Robertson's *Debbie: An Epic* (1997), which wears both its 'language poetry' and 'feminist' banners proudly. It's a rich, ripe, and very funny dismantling of various aspects of an inherited patriarchal genre. Nicole Markotic's *minotaurs and other alphabets* (1998) takes on the prose poem ('a mythical beast') to deliver an erotic and exotic swerve from the referential. Among older feminist writers, both Daphne Marlatt and Lola Lemire Tostevin have recently published collections of critical prose (*Readings from the Labyrinth* [1998]; *Subject to Criticism* [1995]) as well as novels, but their poetry continues to be central to many of their readers, even as they take their place with other poet-novelists in a growing Canadian tradition. Marlatt published two collections of earlier work in the 90s, *Salvage* and *Ghost Works*; Tostevin’s latest collection is *Cartouches*, a memorial to her father and bpNichol. Erin Mouré is another important figure, writing deliberately difficult poems undermining the 'natural' assumptions of a 'neutral' language; she continues to publish a book every two or three years, the most recent of which is *Search Procedures.*
Another figure has gained a very strong presence outside the country. Anne Carson has published only one book in Canada, while both *Plainwater* (1995) and *Glass, Irony and God* (1995) appeared in the US (as did her groundbreaking study of Sappho, *Eros, the Bittersweet*, a beautiful prose poem in itself), and from major presses to boot. She’s an interesting figure, as her complex, scholarly, and challenging writing is admired equally by members of both the camps alluded to above. Although she does not have a very high profile in Canadian letters as yet, she might very well be remembered as one of the major writers of this period.

Atwood, of course, writes mostly novels now, yet her *Morning in the Burned House* (1995) was seen as one of her finest and most personal collections of poetry. Webb’s last book, *Hanging Fire*, appeared in 1990, but younger writers and readers continue to seek out her work, and *The Vision Tree: Selected Poems* (1982) remains in print. P.K. Page, another venerated writer, whose visionary lyricism has long been admired, published her latest collected poems in 1997, while *The Malahat Review* published a special issue honouring her in 1996. There are many other poets of note who should be mentioned here, but even this short list suggests the continuing vitality of feminine/feminist writing in Canada today.

**Working**

Although it’s not unique to Canada, certainly, under the editorial guidance of Tom Wayman, the ‘work poem’ has become a legitimate and politically important form. Work poetry is often connected with populist poetry (insofar as that can be said to exist in our culture). Every year, the Milton Acorn Prize is awarded to a book of poetry that the judges feel most fulfills the ideals Acorn is said to have stood for as a ‘people’s poet.’ Several of the poets who first appeared in Wayman’s various anthologies of work poetry have gone on to publish books of their own, some of which have won this prize. The definition of work poetry is pretty permeable, actually, ranging from the often disruptive anti-lyric poems of Mouré to some rather intriguing and highly political rhetoric in such poets as Phil Hall and Wayman himself, to what can only be called a poetry of the plainest voice (which I confess I don’t find very interesting, but which many readers seem to like a lot). Certainly, although many writers who begin as work poets soon expand their literary horizons, work poetry has had an undeniable impact on contemporary poetry in Canada.

**Other voices, or whose cult is multicult?**

One of the most important and hotly debated political acts in recent Canadian history is the turn to a policy of official multiculturalism, which began with Pierre Trudeau in 1971 and passed into law in 1988. However much this policy can be criticized for its omissions and failures, it has changed the political maps of this country. And even if many of them write from a position of ambivalent animosity to the ways in which the policy has played out in the political arena, there are now a large number of writers
who are (and here Miki’s point about continued ‘racialization’ hits home) recognized as multicultural, more with each generation. Indeed, the 90s has seen an ever-increasing number of books and anthologies concerned with writing from various multicultural sites. Roy Miki, in his position as editor of West Coast Line, has done much to promote such writing, always aligning it with the formal innovations of the writers he first admired - Nichol, the many West Coast poets who emerged in the 60s, Blaser, etc. – with issues devoted to Colour: An Issue (1994), Transporting the Emporium: Hong Kong Art and Writing Through the Ends of Time (1996-7), North: New African Canadian Writing (1997), and an Asian Heritage Month Sampler (1997), as well as continual support for new writing from all areas in every issue. absinthe has also had special issues, including one on writing by aboriginals and people of colour, and it regularly highlights other forms of minority writing.

Among the many writers who are doing interesting work I can mention only a few. Among the Asian-Canadians (so long as I or anyone continue to use such hyphenated terms there’s something wrong, but at the same time, in the writing that dissects, undermines, interrogates, and disassembles such constructions there is much that is right), there are: Miki and Wah, Hiromi Goto (best known as a novelist for her Commonwealth Prize-winning A Chorus of Mushrooms but she has also published some intriguing poems deconstructing conventions of ‘race’), the late Roy Kiyooka, whose massive and brilliant Pacific Windows: Collected Poems appeared in 1998, Gerry Shikatani (who edited the first anthology of Japanese-Canadian poetry, Paper Doors [1981]), Yasmin Ladha, and Lakshmi Gill. African-Canadian poets of interest include Dionne Brand (the title of whose No Language Is Neutral clearly sets the terms of engagement), George Elliott Clarke (who, as an anthologist and academic, is doing much to promote such writing), Claire Harris, Suzette Mayr, M. Norbese Philip, and Carribean-Canadian Olive Senior. First Nations Canadian poets include Jeanette Armstrong, Joanne Arnott, Marie Annharte Baker, Beth Brant, Marilyn Dumont, Wayne Keon, and Daniel David Moses (who co-edited an anthology of Native writing for the prestigious Oxford University Press). That I am undoubtedly leaving out some important names is a given here.

Publishing, a short note
Since 1967, a number of small presses and magazines have appeared, with the help of the Canada Council to keep them going. I will list just some of the major magazines and presses here, but their continuing presence, and the recent explosion of new ones run by young writers in the past few years, bodes well for the continuing health of writing, even poetry, in Canada.

Major magazines that have been around for awhile, and which run the gamut from eclectic and essentially mainstream to those mostly interested in formal or political innovation, include: The Fiddlehead, The Antigonish Review (New Brunswick), Matrix (Québec), Arc, Descant, Quarry (Ontario), Prairie Fire (Manitoba), Grain, The Wascana Review (Saskatchewan),
Dandelion, Other Voices (Alberta), The Capilano Review, Event, The Malahat Review, Prism International, West Coast Line (British Columbia). Newer magazines include Stanzas (Ontario), absinthe, Filling Station (Alberta). There are many others, as a whole younger generation is insistently finding ways to get published, and happily ignoring many of the older, and perhaps more conservative venues. Damian Lopes, one of the people behind the recent return of concrete poetry (although he would argue that it never went away, merely underground), publishes Prose & Contexts in Toronto; it is not a magazine but a collection of small items available by subscription. And of course, there are already a number of Canadian edited web-sites, but of these I know little.

Small presses carry the main burden in Canada when it comes to publishing poetry. Of the various ‘big’ publishers, only McClelland & Stewart still have any program of publishing poetry, and they publish, at most, four books per year (Oxford has pretty well given up their program, although they still carry their Atwood titles; other big publishers have either never had or dropped their poetry programs). M & S published a new book of Michael Ondaatje’s poetry Handwriting in the fall of 1998, and they are still the publishers of Purdy, Layton, Cohen, and some less well known names. Still, and despite the terrible effect of government cuts in recent years, it is the small presses that do the job – such publishers as Goose Lane Editions, Véhicule Press, Brick Books, Coach House Books (the whole terrible story of the destruction of Coach House Publishing in the early 90s may never be fully known, but it was Canada’s leading publisher of innovative writing [all of the martyrology, for example] and the phoenix that arose from its ashes keeps up that tradition but in a much more limited fashion, re-‘printing’ books on the web and making new, and expensive limited editions), House of Anansi Press, ECW Press, The Mercury Press, Oberon Press, The Porcupine’s Quill, Quarry Press, TSAR Books, Wolsak & Wynn, Turnstone Press, Coteau Books, Thistledown Press, rdc press, NeWest Press, Ekstasis Editions, Harbour Publishing, New Star Books, Nightwood Editions, Polestar Press, Pulp Press, Sono Nis Press, Talonbooks. That I have left some out is a given, but even so this list suggests how complex and rich a small press tradition there is in Canada.

Although this article is highly subjective, certainly biased, and no more than a glance at the whole, vast territory, I have tried to suggest something of the range of poetry being written and published in Canada today. The great strength of Canadian poetry is its eclecticism, and the way poets from different fields of endeavour manage to get along. This too brief overview has hinted at the variety of contemporary Canadian poetry but failed to give examples of every kind of work. Whom have I left out? Far too many poets I admire, and had I only made a list of titles that I find exciting, it would have taken all the space available here. Even if poetry is essentially hidden, certainly ignored in the general public cultural forums, it still has a function. It may no longer be clear exactly what that function is, but given the number of young writers willing to sacrifice in order to publish their and their
fellows’ work, given the increased use of the Web for publishing, given the continuing popularity of readings and slams, it seems that poetry, in one form or other, will be a going concern well into the new millennium.

NOTES

1. In the recently published American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators & Outsiders, editor Eliot Weinberger makes the same point about American poetry, and offers an insight into the division: “On one side is a ruling party that insists there is no ruling party, and thus no opposition; that there are only good or bad poets, publishers, literary magazines; that the others are simply those who failed to make the grade. Yet it is a party that clearly exists in the minds of those outside it, who have derided it with adjectives like conventional, establishment, official, academic; and have pitched their own poetics as alternatives to the prevailing humdrum. On the other side is an opposition still intensely aware of its outsider status, yet now increasingly dissatisfied with the banners under which it once rallied: avant-garde, experimental, non-academic, radical.” When he adds that, although “[t]he distinction between the two parties has always been blurred at the edges and, over the decades, the issues of debate have changed,” nevertheless “[t]he channels of recognition, however slight for poets ..., have always been controlled by the ruling party” (p. xi), he is pointing to an aspect of the major anthologies’ canon-making process which Fifteen Canadian Poets x 2 clearly reflects.

2. Throughout this essay I am speaking of English Canada only, of course.

3. I should add here that although many of their younger adherents seem to feel that you have to be ‘for’ either Webb or Page, they appear to admire each other’s work – as they should, for both are exemplary poets.

4. Jeff Derksen’s article, ‘Unrecognizable Texts: From Multicultural to Antisystemic Writing’, West Coast Line, 24 (Winter 1997-98), pp. 59-71), provides a useful overview of the Act’s history and its effects, and then addresses the ways in which various ‘multicultural’ writers have responded to the concept. Fred Wah’s ‘Speak My Language: Racing the Lyric’ (72-84) explores certain formal questions concerning how best to write (against) the givens of the concept, while Roy Miki’s ‘Can I See Your ID? Writing in the “Race” Codes That Bind’ (85-94) picks apart certain ‘liberal’ assumptions to suggest both why and how a writing against the given has arisen. Miki: ‘The Canadian take on “multiculturism” needs to be read as a contradictory zone of vested interests, made more so by the engineering role played by the federal administration. While its more benign public face had supported cultural “diversity” and “pluralism,” the company it keeps with hierarchically structured relations of “differences” exposes a subtext of racialization. // In other words, as a top down term “multiculturism” has been deployed strategically by policy makers to project a political and cultural history built on “tolerance” and “inclusiveness.” For those who have internalized the networks of racialization, this narrative remains a fantasy that deflects the colonial history of white supremacist power. Critical theorist and activist Himanin Bannerji has commented that “... there is a state within a state in Canada. The liberal democratic Canadian state enshrines within itself a colonial state.” This condition is concretized both in Canada’s continuing failure to settle its colonial debts to First Nations people and in its “multiculturism” policy which Bannerji describes as “management through racialization”, (p. 90).
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