

ENGLISH-CANADIAN POETRY, 1935-1955: A THEMATIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

That period in Canada, between 1935 and 1955, which encompasses a pre-war depression, a world war, a post-war period of disillusionment, and the beginning of a time of affluence and intellectual expansion, has left an impressive fund of poetry recording the emotional response of Canadians to the turbulence of these years. At the beginning of this period, the poetry is asserting its independence from the derivative poetry of the earlier Canadian poets, and the end of the period, has already introduced the new mythopoeic mode which dominates the recent literary scene.

The major themes of the poetry of this period are directly related to the historical events of the time. In Chapter I, the poetry of social protest is examined in detail. A group of exclusively critical poems, unexperimental in technique, is balanced by a group of more sympathetic ones, employing more of the characteristics of the new poetry. Many poems of social protest indicate an enduring hope for a better future, but those poems dominate this tradition, which incorporate a decidedly revolutionary program. The ultimate solution, however varying the degrees of action may be, is man's own responsibility.

Chapter II presents poems inspired by World War II. The initial distrust of the war is replaced by despair. The loss of love, life, security, and meaning is explored in introspective, sensitive poems, as concerned with the emotions on the

battlefield, as those in the empty home. The hope for a better future is found in love, courage, or endurance, and the final victory evokes both faith and distrust in its reality.

The psychological interest in the individual in a post-war world has produced a number of poems examined in Chapter III. By this time, the poets are already employing new forms with comparative freedom, and this poetry reflects the flexibility demanded by an interest in the complexities of human psychology. The tensions between the need for people, and the need to be alone are as convincingly presented as those between the desire to be loved, and the desire to be independent. The tedium of daily existence creates its peculiar cyclic metaphor, manipulated by many of the poets in a variety of ways. The psychology of abnormality preoccupies a few poems, but a fairly general statement of faith in humanity is characteristic of all of this work. In this chapter, the psychological responses in several of Pratt's poems are examined, along with a brief discussion of his relationship to the rest of the Canadian poetry.

Chapter IV examines the poetry which very definitely uses myth as structure, and discusses, very briefly, the mythopoeic poetry after 1955. The favourite structural myth, the fertility cycle, is accompanied by the various aspects of the quest myth. A curiously ironical inversion of the apocalyptic vision indicates that the Canadian mythopoeic poets cannot be

INTRODUCTION

Man is universally conscious of the dichotomy between the idealism of his aspirations and the realism of his immediate environment. For brief, exultant periods of history, he has felt the surge of power, unencumbered by economic, political, social, and ideological problems. At other times, however, quite often those associated with the arduous task of preparing a new land for habitation, his creative energy has seemed stultified. And yet, because of his essentially indomitable nature, he has continued to aspire, struggling between the polarities of his existence with courage and pride.

Canadians have been unusually encumbered by the tension between their mental attitudes and their environmental necessity. Emigrating from highly cultivated countries, they have had to proceed painstakingly to a commendable level of recognition in Canada. The result has not been a schizophrenic personality, as W.P.Wilgar would indicate, torn between emotional sympathy with England and intellectual sympathy with America.¹ The mind reflects, instead, the constant interaction of sophisticated, cosmopolitan ideals, and an undefined, still crude culture. Until the middle of the present century,

1. W.P.Wilgar, "Poetry and the Divided Mind in Canada", Dalhousie Review:XXIV, No. 3 (Oct., 1944), p.270.

necessity has perforce dominated Canadian life, and has led to such statements as:

We are a conservative and steady people, hardly daring to believe in our own capacity in the more complex affairs of statecraft, afraid to test that capacity too far with new systems and experiments;²

or:

We are more aware than others of the central physical fact of the earth, of growth, of harvest and decay....This and our concentration on the mere task of survival, must be one of the things that makes us an unimaginative people, prosaic, pitifully inarticulate and singularly lacking in humour....It may turn out that we are really filled with fire, poetry and laughter, which we have repressed, thinking it inferior to other peoples' and perhaps these things will erupt some day, with shattering violence.³

The concrete hope that 'we are really filled with fire, poetry and laughter' has sustained the ever increasing number of Canadian men of letters through the lean years when it was becoming painfully obvious that the twentieth century Canadian literature would never boast a rich two hundred, or even one hundred year old, tradition. Fully conscious, as late as 1943, that "our poetry has circulated within a national wall, and American as well as English readers have not cared to know what was going on inside", literary critics have faced

2. Bruce Hutchison, "The Canadian Personality", Man and His World, ed. Ross and Stevens, (Toronto, 1962), p.189.

3. Ibid., p.189.

4. E.K.Brown, "Poetry", Letters in Canada:1942, p.311.

the urgent responsibility of establishing critical criteria suitable for the evaluation of the emerging literature. For the critics of poetry, the task has not been easy. Against the intellectual backdrop of the Romantic and Victorian poets, the major Canadian poets of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Lampman, Scott, Roberts, and Carman, are at best imitative, and at worst decidedly inferior. It has been tempting to concentrate upon "what is genuine in a poem, what is notable, what is there, rather than ... [on] what is spurious, what is negligible, what is not there",⁵ and individual taste, rather than more useful thematic or historical perspectives, have dominated poetic evaluation. The nebulous term, 'Canadianism', has often been established as a desirable poetic quality per se, and a poem's value is then directly related to the degree of observable Canadian qualities to be detected or projected into it. Northrop Frye reminds critics in 1958:

The Canadianism of Canadian poetry is of course not a merit in it, but only a quality in it; it may be revealed as clearly in false notes as in true ones, and may be a source of bad taste as well as of inspiration.⁶

The genuine desire to establish a valid Canadian criticism has produced some excellent literary periodicals, such as Canadian Literature, Tamarack Review, and Northern Review,

5. E.K.Brown, "Poetry", Letters in Canada:1948, p.255.

6. Northrop Frye, "Poetry", The Arts in Canada, ed. Ross, (Toronto, 1958), pp.84-5.

to mention only a few.

The critical problem, though genuine, is but a reflection of the more fundamental creative process of the poet himself. Here too, the strain between the excellent ideal and the faltering, real presentation becomes evident. A 1965 evaluation of Raymond Souster by Louis Dudek offers a graphic parallel:

If the figure for Souster the man is the groundhog, then the figure for the poet is that of butterfly or bird.⁷

Leonard Cohen's recent "A Kite is a Victim"⁸ is the poetic statement of the same reality:

A kite is a victim you are sure of.
You love it because it pulls
gentle enough to call you master
strong enough to call you fool;
because it lives
like a desperate trained falcon
in the high sweet air,
and you can always haul it down
to tame it in your drawer....

A kite is a contract of glory
that must be made with the sun,
so you make friends with the field
the river and the wind,
then you pray the whole cold night before,
under the travelling cordless moon,
to make you worthy and lyric and pure.

While the poetic mind labours in the realm of inspiration, the poetic man must face the reality of living in a half frozen slice of continent.

7. Louis Dudek, "Groundhog Among the Stars", Canadian Literature:22, p.48.

8. Leonard Cohen, The Spice-Box of Earth, (Toronto, 1961), p.1.

Unfortunately, this 'reality of living' often demands isolation from other poets in exciting centres of poetry, hundreds or thousands of impractical miles away. The accompanying lack of easy communication has affected the poetry, for as Louis Dudek contends:

What makes a literature is the contact between one poet and another, between one generation and another. Poets breed by scission. Even when they disagree, they learn, and stimulate one another.⁹

Recent poets may remember with envy, that brief, unique period in Canadian poetry, with its Montreal setting in the 'forties, when most of the major Canadian poets lived within walking distance of each other. The bitter dispute between Patrick Anderson, F.R.Scott, A.J.M.Smith, A.M.Klein and P.K.Page of Preview, and John Sutherland, Irving Layton, Louis Dudek, Raymond Souster and Miriam Waddington of First Statement, is, perhaps, embarrassing to recall, but poetry poured prolifically from their presses during these years, in a significant contribution to the growth of indigenous Canadian poetry.

Obviously, this poetry has been shaped by the complex forces playing upon those writing and evaluating it. While the actual problems do not make the poems, they do create a necessary framework of thought in which the poetry either flourishes, or "is enclosed in a prison of limitation and

9. Louis Dudek, "The Montreal Poets", Culture:18, p.153.

denial".¹⁰ It is no wonder then, that the poetry of 1935 - 1955, written during a period of incredible world flux, provides such rich material for a thematic and historical study. The disruptive nature of the world is paralleled by the disruptive, fragmentary nature of the poetry itself. Cause gives way to cause, and no one mood, form, or subject integrates the publications of these years. In a society which had just experienced the disillusionment of a post-war economic failure, and was struggling in the net of a national depression, practical confrontation with the problems of the moment was necessary:

The salvage of modern society is to be accomplished by a practical facing of human nature and the assumption of personal responsibility for standards of good based on love and understanding.¹¹

Nature could no longer be the scapegoat for the staggering difficulties in which man found himself involved:

To generalize is always perilous, but it seems right enough to say that the theme was changing from nature to man, to individual man and to man-in-society too, indeed, but to man and away from the birds and the flowers and the brooks.¹²

This new subject matter, as elusive as life itself, demanded an entirely new metaphor and form of expression, and the poets

10. Louis Dudek, "The Transition in Canadian Poetry", Culture: 20, p.295.

11. R.E.Rashley, Poetry in Canada, (Toronto, 1958), p.108.

12. Charles R. Dehler, "Canada's English Poetry Since Thirty-nine", Culture:14, p.248.

of this period, "erudite, intellectual, complex, impassioned, ironic and anxiously contemporary",¹³ are equal to the challenge.

The annual survey of Canadian poetry in Letters in Canada, first published in April, 1936, opens with the blunt statement:

At the outset it should be admitted that 1935 has not been a decisive year for Canadian poetry.... A number of our best poets have published new works during 1935; in none of their volumes is there a marked lapse from their best previous achievements.¹⁴

These 'best poets' are Arthur Bourinot, Ralph Gustafson, Wilson MacDonald, E.J.Pratt, and D.C.Scott. Only Pratt continues to be important as a poet in the future. The McGill Fortnightly had already introduced A.J.M. Smith, F.R.Scott and A.M.Klein, but of the many poets who come to the forefront in the next twenty years, only Leo Kennedy, Dorothy Livesay, and E.J.Pratt had published an independent volume of poetry. In less than a year, however, Brown's pessimistic announcement was mocked by the explosive publication of new poetry, New Provinces, a collection of the work of Robert Finch, Leo Kennedy, A.M.Klein, E.J.Pratt, F.R.Scott, and A.J.M.Smith.

When New Provinces was being prepared for publication in 1936, Canada was in the throes of a depression, and was already listening to the rumblings of the great war which would demand some sort of involvement, even though it was being fought

13. Desmond Pacey, "English-Canadian Poetry, 1944-1954", Culture:15, p.261.

14. E.K.Brown, "Poetry", Letters in Canada:1935, p.362.

on foreign soil. The preface to this volume of poetry points to some of the problems which the poets were facing at that time:

Equipped with a freer diction and more elastic forms, the modernists sought a content which would more vividly express the world about them.¹⁵

This content becomes a bitter protest against the existing social scheme in Canada, a theme reworked passionately by the major poets of the 'thirties and 'forties. The poets of social protest at first produced angry poetry, frustrated by their Utopian idealism, and filled with pity for the oppressed and the unemployed.¹⁶ In the 'fifties, social anger and pity was replaced by negative gloominess:

The frame of the new poetry is tragedy, the tragedy of life itself, of humanity, suffering an incurable condition.¹⁷

Problems of technique accompanied the problems of content:

The poems in this collection were written for the most part when new techniques were on trial, and when the need for a new direction was more apparent than [sic] the knowledge of what that direction would be.¹⁸

The search for this direction was thwarted by the economic depression which limited the quantity of material published.

15. "Preface", New Provinces, (Toronto, 1936), p.v.

16. Louis Dudek, "Patterns of Recent Canadian Poetry", Culture: 19, p.412.

17. Ibid., p.412.

18. "Preface", New Provinces, p.v.

Although each of the contributors to New Provinces had written enough good poetry to have filled independent volumes, they had to be contented with a joint publication. This financial factor, as well as the pre-war political uncertainty, accounts for the fact that only two publications of note appeared in 1938, New Harvesting and A New Canadian Anthology. It is little wonder that E.K. Brown writes of that year:

The poetry of 1938 was markedly less interesting and valuable than that of any other year since the survey of poetry in "Letters in Canada" began [1935].¹⁹

Canadians remember 1939 more for the declaration of war than for any poetic declaration. At the beginning of the war, the poetic reaction was a social one:

In 1939, more than any other year, Canadian poets have been preoccupied with the stresses and blockages in the national society....From undistinguished scribbling up to the authentic poetry of Mr. Pratt, there has been new vigour and clearness in the presentation of social life.²⁰

The quantitative publication of poetry increased visibly. Pratt's Brébeuf and His Brethren and Klein's Hath Not a Jew are accompanied by many volumes of poetry by less important, but, nonetheless, noteworthy poets, such as Kirkonell, Bourinot, Gustafson, Macleish and Service, in 1940. In this same year, Patrick Anderson, who was to become so influential in the writing and promoting of Canadian poetry, came

19. E.K.Brown, "Poetry", Letters in Canada:1938, p.293.

20. E.K.Brown, "Poetry", Letters in Canada:1939, p.283.

to Canada from England "with his head full of the social philosophy of Karl Marx and the verse rhythms of Dylan Thomas".²¹ He set about immediately to prepare for the establishing of Preview, a Montreal periodical rivalling Sutherland's First Statement for the next fourteen years.

The actual theme of the war, however, dominated the poetry of 1941 and that of subsequent years. The first independent publications of P.K.Page, Louis Dudek, Raymond Souster, Patrick Anderson, Miriam Waddington, and Ronald Hambleton appeared in the 'forties. These poets no longer had to face the nervous advent of war - they were already in its fearful grip. While their work makes a social comment, their real preoccupation is with man's responses to the current war, and later with an exploratory probing into the psychological responses to the insecure world which is their heritage. Freud enters into their thinking as easily as does Marx. A volume of verse, presumably inspired by the kind of false patriotism generally attributed to ladies' groups, appeared in 1941 as well:

The volume [Voices of Victory] contains poems unaware of the war, poems opposed to war, poems gloating over war, and poems - a very few - responding with power and insight to the development of the war.²²

21. Desmond Pacey, "English-Canadian Poetry, 1944-1954", Culture:15, p.262.

22. E.K.Brown, "Poetry", Letters in Canada:1941, p.291.

But whether the results are weak or strong, each poet was fighting the war in his own way. Pratt's Collected Poems of 1944 echoes all the themes found in modern Canadian poetry, and in "Dunkirk", the idealisms and horrors of war are mingled and poetically examined. Klein published two volumes of poetry, anti-nazi and introspectively Jewish at once. Patrick Anderson spoke for many of his genuine poetic contemporaries when he said:

Our task is clear; not only to help in the winning of the war by our literary work...but also to supply something of the personal, the graceful and the heroic to the atmosphere of this half empty dominion.²³

Unit of Five, of 1944, is as dramatic a contribution to Canadian poetry as New Provinces had been eight years earlier. This collection contains the first cloth-covered publication of P.K. Page, Souster, Dudek, Wreford and Hambleton, poets who echo the themes of social protest and the world war already prevalent in Canadian poetry, and who later become the chief exponents of a new poetic approach to the psychology of the individual in his society. Within the next two years, Page, Souster and Dudek established their identity as Canadian poets in independent publications of considerable merit.

This psychological theme in Canadian poetry reflects the fluctuating emotional texture of the world of the late

23. Quoted by Dorothy Livesay, "This Canadian Poetry", Canadian Forum:24, (April, 1943), p.20.

'forties. Joyous reaction to the end of the war was mingled with pity and fear as society adjusted itself to a normal routine again. By 1947, the exultant dream of a permanent world peace had evaporated. Inflation had set in in Canada; vicious cold war was fraying the nerves of citizens; brothers and sons would soon be going off to war, this time to Korea or Indo-China. A collective solution to the ills of their time appeared illusory, and the poets were forced to study individual responses, which alone seemed to give a meaningful perspective to their poetry. Their poems are motivated by a sense of universal despair, rather than by bitterness against any specific class or system. The important poets, Klein, Livesay, Pratt, Souster, Birney, Daniells, Finch, LePan, and Layton, all published between the end of the war and 1950, and all of them are concerned with the problems of the individual in his society.

The poetry of the early 'fifties presents a particular challenge to the critic, because it has taken all the subsequent years to begin to evaluate the tendencies which were introducing what may possibly become the most intellectually satisfying and, indeed, fruitful phase in Canadian poetry. For the first time in the history of Canadian literature, a genuinely universal quality is becoming apparent:

It is the fusion of the modern world with the archetypal patterns of myth and psychology rather than with Christianity or patriotism that gives a characteristic cosmopolitan flavour to much of the poetry of the fifties in Canada.²⁴

The poets most closely associated with the mythopoeic tradition in Canadian poetry, Margaret Avison, Jay Macpherson, James Reaney, Anne Wilkinson, and Wilfred Watson, are all Toronto poets, and except for Reaney, who published in 1948, they all publish a first volume between 1950 and 1955.

The major poets of the 'thirties and 'forties, Pratt, Birney, Dudek, Anderson, and Page, keep publishing between 1950 and 1955, along with their more mythopoeically inclined counterparts. Their poetry presents newer attitudes towards some of the themes which preoccupied them as younger poets. Irving Layton emerges strongly during this period, and creates an interesting tension for the cultivated imagery of the mythopoeic creations with his earthy diction and metaphor. As late as 1955, Mr. Woodcock referred to him as being "negligible as a poet", but "worth considering as a portent",²⁵ and he is certainly related to his Canadian predecessors:

24. A.J.M. Smith, "Introduction", The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse, (Toronto, 1961), p.1.

25. George Woodcock, "Recent Canadian Poetry", Queen's Quarterly:62, p.110.

the difference was that he illustrated, affirmed, and practiced in poetry what they had only feared. He assumed the role of a Canadian Nietzsche, the Promethean liberator from outworn values, the author of new tables.²⁶

It is unfortunate that his affirmations do not always result in poetry of any value.

By 1954, Desmond Pacey is able to say of Canadian poetry:

We no longer debate the futile question of the distinctiveness of our poetry; the Canadian poet worthy of the title cannot avoid introducing his environment into his poetry - it is simply there, in the idioms, the images, the rhythms if not in more obvious forms. We no longer argue the merits of cosmopolitanism as against nationalism: we recognize that the poet must be aware of both his place and his time. We no longer feud over the respective claims of free verse and regular metres; the poet is free to choose the medium which suits him best. We need no longer defend the poet's right to treat any subject that pleases him, for this right is now almost universally conceded.²⁷

The dominant subjects that please the poets of the period between 1935 and 1955, social injustice, the world war, psychology and mythology, work in disharmony at times, and in harmony at other times, with no logical pattern to predict when they will do either. A thematic examination of this poetry is, therefore, not an attempt to search for a unifying force, but is rather inspired by the exciting, albeit very conscious knowledge, that each theme is but a

26. Louis Dudek, "The Transition in Canadian Poetry", Culture:20, p.294.

27. Desmond Pacey, "English-Canadian Poetry, 1944-1954", Culture:15, p.265.

fragmentary part of an aggregate of words, written by people living in Canada, printed on Canadian presses, and accompanied by at least as many mischievous muses as serious ones.

CHAPTER I

POETRY OF SOCIAL PROTEST

The poetry with an impassioned social message which emerges strongly in Canada during the late 'thirties and 'forties is no accident. Inspired by American and English predecessors and contemporaries, the poetic statement of social protest is enlivened by the crass reality of the tensions evident in Canadian society during these years. Masses of people were being caught in the wake of a frantic urbanization and industrialization scheme, which was pouring money and power into the hands of a minority, but was threatening the human dignity of the majority. Concerned with revealing the autrocities and their causes, as well as defining a solution, the poetry of this time:

was attached to a number of powerful supports: it had a philosophy in Marxism, a programme of action in the proletarian revolution, and a reading public among bourgeois intellectuals.¹

The introduction to Cerberus, the joint publication of Dudek, Layton and Souster, defines the poets' own belief in their ability to liberate humanity:

The way to freedom and order in the future will lie through art and poetry. Only imagination,

1. Northrop Frye, "Poetry", Letters in Canada:1951, pp.254-5.

discovering man's self and his relation to the world and to other men, can save him from complete enslavement to the state, to machinery, the base dehumanized life which is already spreading around us....Poetry cannot change the world in a day, the world of wars, oppressions, and mob-suicide which men have prepared for themselves. But in the end, only poetry, imagination can do so.²

These themes, 'enslavement to the state, to machinery', the 'dehumanized life', and the discovery of man's 'relation to the world and to other men', are prominent in the poetry of the turbulent years of Canada's social and economic history.

The poems of social protest which concentrate upon the criticism of present society, but are reluctant to suggest a remedy for its social ills, are hesitant to employ bold, new poetic forms as well. "The Improved Binoculars"³, by Irving Layton, condemns every strata of society. "The firemen were the first to save/ themselves", the agents survey the ruins of an orphanage only for "a future speculation", love fails "short of the final spasm", the dignitaries plan future punishment for those who escape the holocaust before they do, and the populace glories in their "neighbours' destruction". The improved binoculars serve only to expose what is already too painfully obvious. There is no apocalyptic vision, and no one is left to experiment with a new ideal or a new society. The flames consume everything except the

2. Dudek, Layton, Souster, Cerberus, (Toronto, 1952), p.13.

3. Irving Layton, The Improved Binoculars, (U.S.A., 1956), p.139.

basic human condition which will perpetuate itself into deeper degrees of meaninglessness. The total absence of conviction and hope, indeed, of poetic vision, is reflected in the prosaic form of expression. Tidy, three-versed stanzas, of one careful sentence each, present a picture of death and destruction with ineffectual diction, never more vivid than "charred", "angrily", and "ravaging ally". The rhythmic anvils which hammer out messages of encouragement to the oppressed are entirely silent here. Only impotent bitterness remains.

Even when one segment of society, if only the victimized populace, is considered worthy of poetic support in this harshly critical scheme, the resulting poetry employs bolder diction and imagery, although the radically experimental forms are still absent. In Souster's "Five O'Clock:King and Bay",⁴ the common man, enslaved as he is by an economic society, elicits distinct sympathy. The machinery of the "companies, trusts, corporations" releases the slaves for a few hours of rest, "leaving the death smell of dollars and cents and profit and loss and credit and margin like poison gas,/ To seek out the rats in their holes and kill them one by one". Urgency, stifling air, and foul economic profit present themselves powerfully in loose lines, reflecting the "endless corridors" of the slaves.

4. Ronald Hambleton, ed., Unit of Five, (Toronto, 1944), p.57.

A similar response to the plight of the common man is expressed in Dudek's "A Factory on Sunday",⁵ where the slavery is to the blackened, yellow chimneys of industry. The controlling metaphor and imagery is bold and dramatic. The "bossed bludgeon/ Of the ape-man and barbarian" has the spiritual power to send "incense down to the people,/ Making them bow down, and pray". The factory as an altar to a "strange god" is particularly appropriate for the "cowed and beaten" society which is unwillingly committed to the perpetual sacrifice of itself. Although the imagery and diction is consistent with the theme of bitter protest, the unexperimental stanzaic form of the poem recalls similar social poems which criticize convincingly, but do not dare to call for alleviating action.

The group of social poems which adds the dimension of hope for the future to the sharply critical eye of the present, assumes a context of wholeness impossible for the merely critical poetry. Even when this hope has no articulated plan for its realization, the poems such as Douglas LePan's "Tuscan Villa",⁶ Earle Birney's "Anglo-Saxon Street",⁷ and Bertram Warr's "Working Class",⁸ display a clearly focussed

5. Hambleton, Unit of Five, p.10.

6. Douglas LePan, The Net and the Sword, (Toronto, 1953), p.7.

7. Earle Birney, Now is Time, (Toronto, 1945), p.19.

8. Smith, The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse, p.338.

vision, and are rich in new forms of expression.

In "Tuscan Villa", LePan, like Layton, sees the present social evils in terms of internal decay which affects everyone. Unlike Layton, however, he presents a more exploited, less inherently vicious, common people, who are the result of an:

Unfortunate order; the architecture of a flower
That drew from the rooted peasants oil and wine
To be involved in the whorled extravagance
Of gallery, chapel, chamber, tower and orchard,
Folding their deep splendours privily
To hide a few in vivid leaves of light.

Although the image of society as an infected plant is not new, LePan sustains it with artistic exactitude and freshness. Concerned rather with a description of the present state than with an analysis of its causes, he says:

...with a level voice, that the corpse
Of a dying house like the corpse of a man is vile;
And many a cause of death remains obscure.
But dying it is. Death in its brains and loins.

Lacking both creativity and intelligence, the men of the present must, nevertheless, ride hopefully "on history's monstrous back", with "their instruments set up to scan the future/ And plot the guns in parallel". Hope is further implied in six imagistic interjections which repeat the picture of a weathervane on a lofty belfry. As the wind causes the weathervane to veer with it, the final vision is "that far-off day/ When other towers are circled by mild birds". The sprung rhythm of the highly allusive, unrhymed verses creates a smooth sense of movement, merging the past and the present

easily into a vision of the future.

The 'mild birds' are silent in Warr's "Working Class". Adopting a free verse pattern determined entirely by the content, the poem contrasts the urbanized, sick society, usually expressed in short, compact statements, with a pastoral past described in long, flowing verses. This idyllic past, however, is seen only negatively. "We have heard no nightingales", and "we have felt no willow leaves pluck us timidly", because the "cool, dim lanes" have been replaced by pavement, and the cities "straddle the land like giants". The diction is most powerful in those transferred epithets, "angry steel", and "stern rows of stone", in which the emotions of the working class are fused with the overpowering machines.

The optimism of the final vision is the organizing principle for the entire poem: "we know they will topple some day.../ and on the bleached bones, when the sun shines, we shall begin to build". Everything in the poem has made such a conclusion possible. The depressing conditions are the involuntary result of an order which had better plans, but failed, and not because of inherent viciousness in human nature. The politicians:

stand back with chaos in their pale old eyes
whimpering, "That is not what we wanted. No.
it was not to have gone that way".

The memory of past beauty has not completely disappeared; the present distress is tempered with beauty which has "crept

into the shelves of squat buildings" in the form of literature. Where the matters of importance, love, ideals, and dreams, still have some room in society, improvement is inevitable.

With a radically different technique, Birney parallels the diseased, dying world of "Tuscan Villa" and the "Working Class" with the faded, bleached world of "Anglo-Saxon Street". Like LePan and Warr, Birney sees hope in a nebulously distant future, a "worldrise", but even this mere hint of a new future gives power to his description of the present. The horror of slum existence is intensified by the consistent reminder of decay. The housepatterns are "faded", the matrons are "bleached", the ghetto is "denuded", the lanes are "leprous", the men are "soaking bleakly in beer", and even the lovemaking is done "sleepily". The stench of "cellarrot", "catcorpse", and "cookinggrease" pervades the air of a society in which nothing occurs to alter the usual pattern of a squalid day.

The conscious, Anglo-Saxon caesura in each verse helps to create the unmistakable atmosphere of a fragmentary, meaningless existence, while paradoxically, Birney's unconventional combinations of words within the fragments destroy the individual identity of each of the words used. The resulting mood of tedious monotony is arrested three times by almost inarticulate outbursts, "Ho!", "Hoy!", "What!", indicating that the present status will not be accepted without

some struggle. Free of conventional syntax and form, the experimental boldness of this poem heralds the experimental boldness of the society which will assume the responsibility for alleviating the existing horrors.

A group of poems, closely related to Pratt's "Silences",⁹ describes the slow, simmering hatred which results from an oppressive world order. This poetry assumes the negative conditions which are the chief themes of the more critical poems, and discusses instead, the underlying forces which are building up a dangerous emotional reservoir. The silent power lurking beneath the surface of the sea orders the imagery of "Silences". With "no cries announcing birth,/ No sounds declaring death", the silent drama of perpetual destruction is being performed. The powerful image of a sea enclosing swift and final action is sustained throughout the poem. There is nothing human about this drama, and yet, with poetic ease Pratt transfers the image of the pre-reptilian, silent power of the sea to the silent hate in the hearts of oppressed men. He establishes a contrast between the snarls and growls of the animal world, which are but the "tokens of spendthrifts who know not the ultimate economy of rage", and the cold blood of the life under the sea. The snarling and growling becomes identified with the "hail of

9. Northrop Frye, ed., The Collected Poems of E.J. Pratt, (Toronto, 1958), p.77.

gutturals and sibilants" of human expression, and the two workers are finally just two pairs of eyes, thinking of their superiors as cats and curs. The danger does not lie in their identification with the animal world, but rather in the wordless anger of their hearts. If a word, or a "hiss or a murmur" would have been spoken, the "exquisite edge of the feeling" would surely have been dulled; "but no words were spoken", and without an oath, the crystallized hate remains unflawed, while the silent hate goes:

Away back before the emergence of fur or feather,
back to the unvocal sea and down deep where
the darkness spills its wash on the threshold
of light, where the lids never close upon the
eyes, where the inhabitants slay in silence
and are as silently slain.

The unmistakably Biblical tone of the poem adds to the seriousness of its message. "But let silent hate be put away for it feeds upon the heart of the hater" is not unlike similar warnings in the Bible, and the replacing of "is" with "may be" adds an interesting dimension to the Biblical allusion, "of such may be the Kingdom of Heaven". Even the extreme variety in the form adds a feeling of uneasiness. The verses vary from three words to thirty-three in length, and the stanzas from one verse to eighteen. The burning hatred, like the poetic demands, is not conventional, and new solutions must, somehow, be discovered.

Employing a form similar to that of "Silences", Raymond

Souster, in "Hunger",¹⁰ identifies the silent hatred with the very physical sensation of hunger which causes "a pain in your belly like a thousand needles jabbing". Long verses build up a fund of reasons for an ultimate eruption of hatred, and Biblical intonations are echoed in the repetition of "how long". The same silence prevails, but the reason for it is presented more concretely than in Pratt's poem. The metaphor of hunger expresses the "it" which cannot be endured for very long "before you steal/ before you attack, before you kill". The present condition can be mitigated for a brief moment by a twenty-five cent meal, but the gnawing hunger of dissatisfaction cannot be cured with such ineffectual means.

The silent brooding of the farmer in Birney's "Man on a Tractor"¹¹ assumes dangerous proportions when it is quietly shared by:

...some of his troop, who now
are boring again with agued drills in the damp of
or leaping to couple treacherous freightcars, or
bolts on other tractors for other farmers,

but is entirely odd to "some of the cool tourists/ moving on hired ponies under the poised avalanche". The veteran recognizes the advantage of his present position over the days be-

10. Hambleton, Unit of Five, p.59.

11. Birney, Now is Time, p.7.

fore the war when he was a "harnessed farmhand", eating paltry doles of old ham and custard at the oilcloth-covered table of the "draggletailed farmwife", and yet he knows that something is still basically wrong with a system which gives him no assurance that "it won't happen all over again". Birney's gift of appropriate imagery aids in the creation of a poetic content for an undercurrent of problems in an ostensibly unproblematic, rural situation. The plowman thinks deeply, "while rhythmic spirals/ of dust whirl to his throat". As he works, "he eats old words in the dust", and the oil trucker, too, sends up swirls of dust on the road.

The cool, privileged tourists are, by contrast, out of contact with the experiences of the veteran plowman. They are not accused of being the cause of the problem, but are presented as symbols of the improper structure of society:

...their lives are consistent to all that has been.
They live by the throb of this iron in his chest,
by the alternation of tractor, boxcar and tank,
that the others ride and sweat and hunger and die in,
while the sleek and their children paddle the glit-
tering rivers
and fish by the friendly fir through a summer's glo-
ry,
then wing as easy as birds to the soft south
when poplars blazon the winter's relentless assault.

When one part of society lives so completely unaware of the common man, the "poised avalanche" under which it moves must be but moments away from precipitation.

All of these themes, criticism of a corrupt society, a vague hope for a better future, and the seething, silent

anger of man, are, however, peripheral to the real social issue of the violent, revolutionary program of action dominating much of the poetry of this period. Extremely dangerous because of its compulsive emotional, rather than logical appeal, this revolutionary poetry employs exciting, sensual forms of expression.

The first Canadian poem demanding open revolution is Dorothy Livesay's "Day and Night".¹² The kind of vision which makes this poem possible can best be seen in a briefer poem, "A Shell Burst".¹³ In this poem, presented in rhymed quatrains of irregular rhythm, the central belief of Miss Livesay's social poetry is stated clearly:

I build on no man's land
A city not my own, with others planned
By others dreamed
And with a new race forged and manned!

The program for achieving this new city is the central theme of much of her energetic social poetry. In "Day and Night", for example, the working men are the puppets of a controlling force which commands with an impersonal, "giant arm", and cracks a whip of steel. With a complete loss of identity, they are churned in "a moving human belt" until they are but bolts moving into an ordered socket. Silently, however, they are "piling up hatred", with:

12. Dorothy Livesay, Day and Night, (Toronto, 1944), p.16.

13. Ibid., p.1.

...ears
Alert to seize
A weakness
In the foreman's ease.

...eyes
To look across
The bosses' profit
At our loss.

They wait, ready to seize the appropriate moment to turn life "the other way".

Organic unity between the development of the thought and the poetic expression intensifies the terrifying, vivid diction and imagery which introduces the poem. An angry, red dawn is pierced with whistles and "scream after scream", the appropriate harbingers of a day in which the machine will once again dominate the "men in a stream". The powerful, free verse of the introductory stanza is followed by the compulsive, pulsating rhythm of rhymed quatrains, serving both to imitate the tedium of the factory workers' existence, and to build up a tremendous force which will eventually erupt into revolution. In the second section, the rhythm quickens noticeably. The words fall breathlessly over each other as the record of evil is relentlessly piled up. The shorter stanzas in this section are smooth and reflective, calling upon the ideal of love to aid mankind. The allusion to Shadrach, Michak and Abednego adds irony to the plight of the workers who are not being protected in their fiery furnace. The lyric quality of the nego-spiritual-like stanzas demands a moral judgment of the

present wrongs. In the last stanza, the emotions building up since the beginning of the poem become powerfully controlled. The unbroken rhythm and established rhyme imply an ordered movement towards victory, when "crumpled men/pour down the hill".

In another of Dorothy Livesay's social poems, "The Outrider",¹⁴ the theme of man so dehumanized that he is but a cog in a wheel is used in such a way that the individual feelings become important:

A thousand men go home
and I a thousandth part
Wedged in a work more sinister
Than hitching horse and cart.

The sustaining image of the crow unifies the ostensibly unrelated narrative and lyric sections of the poem. In the Prologue, the "crows' charivari chattering" establishes a connection between man and nature. Later the crow is contrasted with humans, who must be "driven to feed our own ones, but [are] friendly to neighbours", and then it becomes a symbol of torture, caught by malicious brothers and loosened to frighten a child. Finally the crow is understood, "and suddenly his urgent social bent/ Was answer to my inwardness". This inwardness resolves into a clear plan of action, and a sense of immediacy is created by the conversation between two workers, who are urgently distributing leaf-

14. Livesay, Day and Night, p.7.

lets as quickly as possible, "not veering with the crow/
But throbbing, conscious, knowing where to go".

The formal variety within the poem adds a remarkable depth to the ideas. The languid free verse of the Prologue is followed by shorter, more irregular verses implying the quickening process of impending maturity. In the second section, the unrhymed quatrains of short verses are characterized by a light, tripping rhythm, followed by stanzas of heavier, regular, throbbing rhythms, surging with strike activities. The return to the longer quatrains leads to the third section which is in sonnet form of fairly regular rhyme, bristling with the crackling diction of "crumbling roots", "snapping thistle" and "stubborn sloe". The Epilogue, often appearing independently in anthologies, expresses the conventional solution, prayer for help from the outside, in regular, rhymed stanzas. The answer to the prayer, however, is unique. Man realizes that he, and not an outside miracle, must provide the power to free himself, and his exultation surges forth in a hymn of joy at the end of the poem:

O new found land! Sudden release of lungs,
Our own breath blows the world! Our veins, unbound
Set free the fighting heart. We speak with tongues--
This struggle is our miracle new found.

The vivid climax of this poem is not achieved in Dudek's social poetry, but in the smooth, rhythmical free verse of

his "East of the City",¹⁵ many of the same insights are gained. The steam of the factories does not scream angrily, as in "Day and Night", but it is equally vicious as its:

...hiss tells how earnest,
Industry's effort is, as it impersonalizes
And soon hisses you out of the way.

The factory is a green dragon "whose ogre eyes gleam in the sooty night", and men are but impotent rats in cages, or dwarfs, who continue to labour even though they cannot "fight off the enemies of their forehead". In these 'enemies of their forehead' lies their salvation, the one hope for the future:

But look, how forceful with facts, the sullen slaves
Here powerful and proud, stand up as leaders
No thread runs in the rounded wheel without them.
The wheel of society, steel-bright with the future
Is wrought by the people, its only revolutionists,
For here at last will break, brilliantly, scrolled
in the stars.

The searing bolts of cloud-biting thunder
So that some day we may go, and see the sun rise
Outside this world of rubble...
For this, take
Walk out to-morrow, talk to the world and people.

The poem asserts the need for collective revolution, but demands individual assumption of the responsibility.

In a few specific poems, the sober responsibility of man to provide his own solution to the social problems is clearly delineated. In "Calling Eagles",¹⁶ Leo Kennedy

15. Louis Dudek, East of the City, (Toronto, 1946), p.45.

16. Ethel H. Bennett, ed., New Harvesting, (Toronto, 1939), p.56.

○
presents the challenge of involvement to the intelligentsia.

He reminds them:

You are a part of this turmoil, Eagles, knit to its
glory.
There is work for your strong beaks and the thun-
dering wings,
For the clean flight of the mind and the sharp per-
ception:
There is only the glacial death on the lonely crags.

The sarcastic description of the eagles, isolated in their own problems which have no direct relevance to the situation of their fellow men, makes their descent from the "ragged peaks of the mind", into the world of strangling screams, "fascist madmen" and grinding bone, imperative. The diction implying violent motion, "hurl", "splitting", "scattering" and "plunge", indicates the forceful impact the eagles could have on the social situation. The mood is not one of despair, but rather of urgency, realism, and power.

But even this is an answer from the outside. In "Landscape",¹⁷ Patrick Anderson clearly presents the seriousness of man's individual responsibility, both poetically and philosophically. In free verse which employs no poetic strategies, the fact that the individual must speak is convincingly stated. "The lovely is empty", but the solution is simple and straightforward:

...you, the one, the walker who talks to himself
move through the fields the forests and fully declare:

17. Patrick Anderson, The White Centre, (Toronto, 1946), p.1.

I am the man, the owner, the one who cares,
I am the answer.

Man, himself, is invariably at the centre of Canada's social poetry, and indeed, presents the only unifying factor in its multi-faceted expression. At times he is the cause of his desperate condition, and at other times he alone is the solution; his dissatisfaction may be stifled in wordless anger, or it may explode into bitter invective and accusation; he may be considered collectively or individually; he may be consumed with despair or hope; he may choose endurance or revolutionary action, but he is always concretely connected with the tragedy of his particular moment in history.

As man's plight is radical, so also the social poetry of Canada is radical in every way. The poets are persuaded that their task is necessary and honourable, and they present their observations with the bold freedom of true reformers. Without hesitation, they condemn every quarter in need of condemnation, and outline shocking programs of action for the implementation of an improved society. With the intensity of religious persuasion, they are committed to a careful study of their immediate environment, and as a result their poetry is concrete, lucid, and extremely varied. The imagery is self-consciously graphic, the forms are deliberately experimental, and the message is unmistakably revolutionary. Although much of the poetry is by now chiefly interesting for historical reasons, much of it has outlived its exclusively

political importance, and can, as is the case with the majority of poems cited in this chapter, be considered genuine, convincing, interesting poetry.

CHAPTER II

POETRY OF WORLD WAR II

Historical surveys, however liberally documented with statistics and possible points of view, can never hope to measure the pulse of a generation committed to the ruthlessness of war. What have they to do with the utter despair of the lonely women, the turbulent emotions of the soldiers as they vacillate between a recognition of the slender thread of human life and the desire to contribute to a heroic salvation, the hope which unites all of mankind, and the fear of believing in victory when it finally does come? And when the historical surveys have no bombed cities and sacrificed innocents to tabulate, the task of connecting the facts with the human reality of emotion is even more impossible. The poetic imagination alone can translate the horrors and triumphs of war into a language suitable for the description of man's constant, intimate relationship with mortality in times of war.

Canadians were well aware of the uniqueness of their position in the war of 1939-1945. Unlike the Europeans, who were necessarily motivated by the desire for self-preservation, Canadians were fighting more idealistically for freedom and peace. Many Canadian poets, such as Birney, LePan, Layton, and Souster, chose to become actively involved

in the terrors and ugliness of the war front. They, like the poets at home, continued to explore the depths of human feeling and involvement, leaving a considerable literary monument to the funeral pyre which smouldered for six, agonizing years.

The geographic separation between Canada and the battlefield caused a temporary distrust in the seriousness of the war, reflected in Klein's satiric poem, "Political Meeting".¹ Metaphorically French-Canadian, the poem expresses in both form and content, the public confusion which ensues when the political situation, which has been no more concrete than a dark cloud hovering over newscasts and gossip, breeds a friendly politician who suddenly demands with "his other voice: Where are your sons?". Instead of containing neat parcels of thought, the three-versed stanzas are characterized by constant enjambement, in which undisciplined thoughts move through the confusion to the ultimate realization of the nature of the political meeting. United in a final sense of irreparable loss of innocence:

...The whole street wears one face,
shadowed and grim: and in the darkness rises
the body-odour of race.

The same mute acceptance of loss occasioned by war provides the experience for Dorothy Livesay's "Sonnets for a

1. A.M.Klein, The Rocking Chair and Other Poems, (Toronto, 1948), p.15.

Soldier"² and "Railway Station".³ In the first sonnet, the conventional form contains an unconventional, new emotion, total insecurity. The vocabulary for expressing the involvement in the war has not yet evolved, and the mood of the poem is determined by "wordless", "solitude", and "bald Good-bye". The only sound is the ominously final clang of the iron gate which "shattered a world". The only certain knowledge is that nothing will ever be the same again, even if the war does not claim the soldier's life. Nature will never more provide solace, because hearts will have grown "too proud". The retrospective, pastoral quatrains of "Railway Station" render all the more hideous the railway station itself, where the soldiers wait in the "confused, embedded, over-turbulent world/ Whirling and swarming on out-bound passage". Like the woman wishing her lover a silent farewell in "Sonnets for a Soldier", and the French-Canadians finally realizing that the war will demand their sons in "Political Meeting", the soldier in this poem recognizes the loss of all that has been good:

And eyes failing, ears dim
Voluptuous the quiet came.
Tensed on the nerves of silence, he:
That soldier standing quietly.

The loss which is becoming identified with the actual

2. Dorothy Livesay, Poems for People, (Toronto, 1947), p.20.

3. Ibid., p.21.

death of a son or a husband is met with much the same emotion as the initial parting. In Warr's "War Widow",⁴ the knowledge of death produces emptiness and timelessness which causes "no pain", but a "quiet, quiet while of aloneness", and draws tears from already "torn places". The formlessness of the five-versed stanzas helps to express the illogic of the loss which the war, and not merely death, occasions. The bereaved mother in Anderson's "War Dead",⁵ who silently adds another arch to her church when her son dies, loses all personal interest in a possible victory, which will be "something bright, but secular". The flight to the centre of light which could reveal some meaning, illuminates a head with a hole in it. Finally, even the loss begins to disappear, and the earth "begins to remove all traces/ of those in whom we might have been justified".

The loss of the solace of nature, recognized by Dorothy Livesay in her war poetry, is developed further by Earle Birney in "Dusk on the the Bay".⁶ Both the city and the surrounding nature dissolve into battlefield imagery as the actual war begins to dominate the thoughts of everyone alive. The natural phenomena are presented with diction which sharply

4. A.J.M. Smith, ed., The Book of Canadian Poetry, (Toronto, 1957), p.467.

5. A.J.M. Smith, ed., The Book of Canadian Poetry, (Chicago, 1943), p.417.

6. Birney, Now is Time, p.17.

focusses the attention on the war scene. The lamps are "regimented"; the evening star detaches itself and becomes "an arrested rocket"; the rising moon's upward journey is suddenly sinister; to-morrow's sun:

...is clean escaped
and rushes down through Asian skies, garish
with burst of shell and unarrested rocket,
and burns the Libyan sands, by bombs
cratered and red with libations poured to the guns.

The rain which falls as a "quiet coolness on the flesh" becomes "the rain of iron/ cooling the flesh", and the smell of death pervades the ending of the poem. The thought moves powerfully through the free verse lines which, like Klein's "Political Meeting", constantly run into each other and form an intricately connected unity in which all existence is completely identified with the destructiveness of war, and any possibility for independent existence is lost.

The interpretation of war in terms of loss alone is unsatisfying for the inquiring human mind. After the numbed recognition of the facts, an attempt at their interpretation will inevitably follow. The Canadian poets have left a considerable quantity of probing, introspective poetry which, like Pratt's "Dunkirk",⁷ voices the:

feeling of desperate men pitted against the
panzers, a feeling in which awe and infinite
fatigue blend with an inarticulate questioning
of the essential nature of things.⁸

7. Frye, E.J.Pratt, p.300.

8. E.K.Brown, "Poetry", Letters in Canada:1941, p.288.

In these poems, the questioning nature of the soldier and civilian alike is dramatically portrayed. In a significant number of these introspective poems, hope is submerged in intellectual disillusionment.

In Pratt's narrative poem, "Dunkirk", for example, several thematic responses at once are focussed upon the slaughter which shattered the lives and nerves of thousands of soldiers. The dehumanization of the whole scheme of war is exploited as the soldiers and the war machinery become one, "born in blueprints", fed by "fire", with hearts of "engines", and blood of "petrol" and nerves of "wire". If the dehumanization process were ultimate, perhaps the indignity could be forgotten, but the need for "space, time, water, bread, sleep" still remains as a gnawing reminder of the human condition. The cramped deck which reduces the men to the status of human termites, increases the desire for space, for freedom. Time loses all relativity: "days, weeks of the balance of life/ Offered in exchange for minutes now". The seventh day becomes the eighth, and the eighth becomes the ninth, with no positive identification of any specific day. The hours become units of time, "when heads and legs were blown from trunks".

The absolute need for something tangible with which to identify in the terrifying retreat finds an objective correlative in the physical attributes of the boat:

it was then that the feel of a deck
The touch of a spar or a halyard
Was like a hold on the latch of the heart of God.

Deeds of heroism in trying to reach the boat are mingled with the pathetic knowledge that what is returning may be far less than human. The pity and terror of true tragedy is communicated as the soldiers recognize the helplessness of those attempting to achieve a goal identical to the one set for themselves. The hope for salvation is pervaded by constant terror of the immediate present. The pity of the possible meaninglessness of it all darkens the already gloomy background.

The same failure to find a sense of purpose for the weariness of the battle is the occasion of Souster's poem, "Air Raid".⁹ Utter horror resolves into negative dullness with the realization that the vultures alone benefit from the constant human sacrifice, as "droppings of murder fall from their stinking bowels". In place of a world where "once life sparkled and love welled", there remains only a vacuum, with "no fear...no interest, nothing but blackness". The six long free-verse lines which encompass the vacuum emphasize the meaninglessness of life by their very lack of formal rigidity.

In three regularly rhymed quatrains, Dudek tries to analyze the meaning of the unremitting sacrifice in "I Have Seen the Robins Fall".¹⁰ The atmosphere of an arid, Eliotian wasteland pervades the poem, as the imagery recalls

9. Hambleton, Unit of Five, p.64.

10. John Sutherland, ed., Other Canadians, (Montreal, 1947), p.38.

the 'cactus land' of Eliot; throats are "dry" in the dry air, the trees are "high" and "stark", and the vegetation is "split to sharp forks". As the robins fall, Dudek is reminded of the "crushed powder of pure, white bones". As a result, art, like life, must become dry and meaningless: "and all the poems that sang in my heart/ Turned to the same white, bitter salt". The imagery is obviously Eliot's, but the simplicity and beauty of the statement is characteristic of Dudek's poetry.

As may be predicted, Layton's introspective war poems culminate in complete disillusionment as well. In "Veteran",¹¹ the perversion of the human form is emphasized by the imagistic representation of a "cripple" with a "green face" and a "wrecked torso", who crawls along the street with one foot lengthening hideously behind the other. The short, jerky verses imitate the abnormal movements of the wounded soldier, but the ultimate interpretation of the poem demands the involvement of the reader. In "Returning With an Annual Passion",¹² Layton extends his inditement of the present war into the worlds of nature and religion. The irregular, unrhymed stanzas defy the formal concept of the cyclic rebirth of nature. In a world where ideologies are "carried out in bedpans", the resurrection of Christ, and the

11. Irving Layton, A Red Carpet For the Sun, (Toronto, 1959), p.73.

12. Sutherland, Other Canadians, p.56.

return of spring do not mean the return of life in this poem. The only recurring event will be the continued, senseless sacrifice of the soldiers, which "cannot save my soul".

The stony responses of the people watching the monuments to fallen soldiers rise on memorial squares are as cheerless in "Capital Square".¹³ The most positive term which Anderson can find for describing the value of the war is that it is an "abstract good". Human identification with a sense of purpose is quite impossible. Worse than being the victim of a cruel machine, man is now a "pigmy held in a stone hand". Imagery of stone, and an atmosphere of coldness pervades the poem; the monument is a "brute of stone", the square is "bloodless", and the statues are "stiffened". Even the sound is a "stone noise", and the statue's voice produces an echo, perhaps of a forgotten life. The men who are being commemorated are metamorphosized into four walls which "swing into symmetry". This symmetrical superimposition of order upon the chaos of disillusionment finds consistent expression in the form of the poem, three six-versed stanzas in which only the last two verses of each stanza rhyme. The artificial order is an intrusion, rather than a meaningful interpretation of what is happening. Ultimate negativism is emphasized in the negative response to a ceremony in which the statues have "No upon their lips and the heart at zero",

13. Smith, The Book of Canadian Poetry, (1957), p.435.

and the onlookers know that "no warmth is here". The final result of war then, is the hardening of all humanity, whether alive or dead, into stone.

This cold response to the uncertainty of war is reflected in Bertram Warr's "There are Children in the Dusk".¹⁴ The tone of this short poem is deliberately monotonous, with no distinctive rhythm and no cadences which might indicate the existence of a remnant of human emotion. Response can only be negative in a negative situation. Non-heroic deeds are "not glorious", "no sites" exist, perfectly suitable for monuments, and even tears are too positive an assertion, and mourners must, therefore, "not weep at unveilings". Since the "tenderness only confuses/ The children who wait in the dusk", the sacrifices of the past must be forgotten, and the future must not be hoped for with any enthusiasm. All that is left is a meaningless present.

Pessimism and nihilism, however, are not the dominant poetic responses to World War II in Canada. The majority of poems present hope which surpasses the admitted loss and, otherwise meaningless, despair. For Birney, the hope is in unselfishness and love, for LePan, in constancy and courage, for Livesay, Warr, Dudek, and Souster, in a vigorous belief in a better future. This hope is never expressed in purely realistic terms, but always finds its ultimate roots in

14. Ralph Gustafson, ed., The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse, (London, 1958), p.205.

concrete, personal contribution. Like the best social protest poetry, which had to come to the realization that individual man was the answer, the poetry of the War makes a similar discovery:

For flying's easy, if you do it diving
And diving is the self unmoored
Ranging and roving - man alone.¹⁵

All the negativism of the poems of despair stands in sharp contrast with the kinds of ideas presented in Birney's "Lines For a Peace".¹⁶ Positive diction establishes the tone of the poem, and in spite of the seeming endlessness of the physical present, the mind asserts the hope for a future; "The mind says yes, and yes and Be/ and beautiful the fisted light". Intellectual assent, existence, and aesthetic beauty must continue to dominate the blackness of reality. Although the elements of time and space lose all perspective, as in "Dunkirk", the loss here is for a positive reason. "Space is now and now is time", and the merging of space and time is for strength, and not for a loss of identity. With the power of both elements, man can perhaps:

...with the pain
of love shock him to the brain--
then certify the future sane.

15. Livesay, Day and Night, p.37.

16. Birney, Now is Time, p.5.

The theme of love as hope is repeated in Birney's poem, "Death of a War",¹⁷ in spite of the depressing atmosphere of "grime", "reeking smoke", "soot", and "dust". When the bitterness and anger of the "smutted" world dominates the hearts of individuals, they are "the blackened and the broken cables/ the flash of life leaps over". What must replace the "thinning hate" is, in fact, love, which is a "metal vibrant" to the heart, dominating the will, and helping man to realize his responsibility "to rise from our dirt and fulfil/ the architect's message".

Redeeming love is more specifically defined as unselfishness in Birney's elegy, "For Steve".¹⁸ Sadness, rather than bitterness or terror surrounds the memory of Steve:

For when your life seeped out like smoke there vanished
a fragment of the bounty of our kind, a piece of
of laughter, grace, and ripening humanity.

The nine-versed stanzas, unusually regular and prosaic for Birney, lead through the mutual experiences of the two friends, set Steve against the background of the past, and come to the ultimate conclusion that his sacrifice has not been in vain. Somehow a better future will be the result:

...Since you who walked in freedom
and the ways of reason fought on our front, we

17. Birney, Now is Time, p.53.

18. Ibid., p.29.

foresee the plot is solvable, the duel worthy.
Meantime our stage will pile with poisoned years
until we tell aright the prince's words,
and blood as proud as yours has built a prouder
world.

This is not sentimental patriotism, but rather a powerful answer to the accusation that the participation in the war is a meaningless absurdity. The form of the poem is admittedly weak, but the message is powerful.

While Birney expresses the thought that salvation will come through love and unselfishness, LePan places his hope in the courage of brave warriors who choose, immediate, personal involvement with danger. In "The Net and the Sword",¹⁹ he builds up the metaphor of a world caught helplessly in the web of a horrible war. The net of the Roman arena becomes the organizing metaphor, and all of the actions in the poem emphasize its restraint. The voices are "strangled"; the telephone wires are "looped" and "twining"; hypotheses are "enmeshed", and orders are sent on "crossed frequencies"; rumours are "smoke-latticed", and even the clouds are "knotted". All of this draws together the "embittered/ Debris of history". In spite of the confusion implied in the metaphor, the medium of formally rhyming stanzas makes the vision of an orderly, "short, straight sword" possible. The heroic soldier forces himself to choose physical involvement, rather than the "untangling word", and with realistic courage he

19. LePan, The Net and the Sword, p.20.

performs his deeds. He does not delude himself into believing that the actions of a single man will "strike the vitals" of the entangling situation, but he knows that he can "at least let in the sun". He reasserts this belief in "Meditation After an Engagement",²⁰ when he learns from "the woman who is my wisdom", "that every age has been faint-hearted, redeemed/ By daring horsemen". This courage, free from illusion, but full of individual greatness, will lead to the eventual redemption of the world.

The same awareness of the present catastrophe, illuminated by an unquenchable hope, dominates LePan's "Elegy in the Romagna".²¹ The poet is "sticky with sweat and with human-kind", but he is convinced that the war is but a temporary disruption in the unity of the cosmos. His one desire is to "find/ An emblem of order". He finds it in the spider, in Section V, and the poem builds up to a tension of hope as the spider builds his web. As the periphery of the spider web increases, the individual thoughts find their expression in longer verses, and extend through as many as four of them without a comma. The description of the mounting thought, as it corresponds to the endless spinning of the web, is heightened by the absence of connective words:

20. LePan, The Net and the Sword, p.37.

21. Ibid., p.47.

"mounting, mounting, breaking, respun, as thin/ as starlight", explodes until it "clasp[s] the upper air/ and there restore[s] relation and identity". The constant activity culminates in the same sunlight which the gladiator with the short, straight sword makes possible. All the impotence and silence of the former passages gives way to the new sense of order created by bravery and patience. Reassembling the rose, in "Field of Battle"²², requires the same, patient re-ordering of the universe, and results in the same optimistic hope for mankind.

Hope for a meaningful future is not always defined in terms of love and courage. Often the mere assertion that there is hope makes continuation possible. In her sensitive poem, "VJ Day",²³ Dorothy Livesay exploits the necessity of a simple, but firm belief in hope. In this poem, the belief is not even immediate, and yet it is effective:

But you said: "Have faith."
You said, Only Hitler was in a hurry and his haste
Would one day be spent. So you said. And we wed.

Here the faith of one person directly inspires the faith of another, starting a chain reaction of positive activity. When victory comes, the quiet response to the proof of faith is reflected in the child-like acceptance of the knowledge that the "wrath has devoured itself and the fire eaten the

22. LePan, The Net and the Sword, p.31.

23. Livesay, Poems for People, p.viii.

fire". Perseverence and faith result in the reordering of life, and the "Yangtse flows again".

Just as the two lovers communicate the reality of faith, the two people on opposing sides of the battle provide the same kind of encouragement in "Communication to the Enemy",²⁴ by Souster. Identification with the enemy's marred youth and strength makes it possible for the enemies to be spiritual comrades, and together they can hope with a "secret, ardent flame", confident in the knowledge that there is "always, comrades, hope, beyond the border". In the simple act of faith, mankind is united, instead of divided. The freedom from formal enmity is reflected in the freedom and irregularity of the rhythm in the three short stanzas.

The existence of hope, however pale, in Dorothy Livesay's "After Hiroshima",²⁵ illuminates the future. The sinister fact that the heart dare not evaluate the knowledge that the right hand is "stirring the pot of evil/ The hydrogen brew", requires a "child's belief, rocked in a cradle of doubt", but does, nevertheless, "prophecy our safety" and "illuminate our hope". The negative use of religious imagery indicates that the hope does not reside in religious miracles, but in the simple, constant reaffirmation that hope has not, in fact, disappeared. "Not any more" do the aspects of Christ's

24. Hambleton, Unit of Five, p.66.

25. Dorothy Livesay, New Poems, (Toronto, 1955), unpagged.

resurrection and transfiguration present themselves. The mysteries of life are rejected, and the hydrogen bomb preoccupies the mind. Nevertheless, hope, however immature, can still abide.

In "The Sea",²⁶ Dudek states firmly that man will eventually triumph. Although one generation may be lost, mankind will live on. The Biblical image of Job, suffering innocently "in a long sorrow" is an encouragement, rather than a source of bitterness:

Death itself is curable
In the human body,
Though one generation find
No near recovery.

The belief is rather in the essential nature of mankind, than in the power of any one scheme to provide a better world. The answer to the problem of meaning does not necessarily lie in positive action, but rather in endurance and unfailing knowledge that negative action cannot annihilate humanity.

The absolute lack of restraint from the bonds of war, by the assertion of mental power, is expressed in "The End of the World",²⁷ by Warr, a poem with obvious overtones of Hopkins. In ten irregular verses, the very diction of the poem demands an active abandonment of the mundane world, and an assumption of spiritual power and fortitude. The repeti-

26. Hambleton, Unit of Five, p.13.

27. Smith, The Book of Canadian Poetry, (1957), p.470.

tion of "rise up" lifts the participant out of the squalor of the world, and raises him to the "light arch across the sky", spanning the world, but far above it. The surging action of leaping, breaking, striding, and crying, erupts into a "joy", and mankind can "sing now, at last, of the self found, freed, God-high shining". Only powerful, unflinching hope can make this freedom possible, when the real world is claiming sons and lovers in constant death.

When victory finally came in 1945, the poets had less to say than they had had during the war. An ambivalence as to the enduring quality of the victory characterizes the poetry which celebrates it. In an ironical comment in "May 8th. 1945",²⁸ by Roy Daniells, the victory actually becomes no victory at all. Sheer gossip, conveyed at second hand, communicates the good news: "they tell me", "they say", that the war is over. Instead of the anticipated elation, a deliberate, monotonous dullness accompanies the victory. Nature will continue as it always has been, and the activities of mankind will continue after the brief, unfortunate interruption. The feeling that nothing has been learned, and nothing very important either lost or gained, provides a subtle undercurrent, conveying the thought that it could very easily happen again.

28. Roy Daniells, Deeper Into the Forest, (Toronto, 1948), p.39.

In two very different poems, Birney presents the attitudes of both faith and distrust in the victory. In "On a Diary: 1945",²⁹ the victory is very definitely a "magic year of ends and of beginnings". The war is over, and a new epoch has begun. "The world has fixed/ a parting wider than the width of seas". The absolute comment of "fixed" leaves no ambiguity as to the message of this poem. In "Letter to a Possible Grandson",³⁰ however, the very title suggests an uneasiness about the present, newly found security. He presents the attitudes of "some folk", who are so thoroughly disgusted with humanity that they envy the moon which "has no man to scab her", and yet, there are the others, who believe that "each star/ will set from a more meaningful parabola". He, himself, cannot choose between the two, and gives advice to a "possible" offspring, who may, or may not, have a world in which to live.

From the beginning to the end of the war, the Canadian poets remain true to their literary task of playing an active part in 'the winning of the war'. Most often deeply introspective, but sometimes impressionistic, they succeed in giving a comprehensive Canadian view of the emotional and physical involvement in the world situation. By 1939, the new poetry has influenced the style of all of the better

29. Birney, Now is Time, p.49.

30. "Saturday Night", Poems for the Interim, (Toronto, 1946), unpagged.

poets, and the war poetry is free from the strain of restrictive form and self-conscious experimentation. The impressive variety of the poetic responses is most profitably discussed in terms of the ideas, rather than the forms.

The civilian response to the disruption of home and happiness is presented in sober poems, free from sentimentalism and false patriotism. Loss of concrete and abstract values is sometimes accepted with stoicism and courage, and often is not really accepted at all. The war poetry records the reactions of human nature to an essentially inhuman situation, without imposing romantic illusions upon it. The really dramatic war poems are those with a war-front setting. With a newly acquired sophistication of technique, the poetry displays well chosen imagery and diction which captures the urgency, anxiety, despair and loneliness of the battles fought in airplanes, battleships, or on the battlefields. Physical and mental tortures are freely intermingled in the total picture of the war.

The ultimate statement of the war poetry is positive. Realistic acceptance of the sorrows of the war years does not preclude an essential optimism. The statement of faith in man's ability to reconstruct his universe after a time of utter chaos is rendered all the more clear by the increasing excellence of the poetry. Rhyme is consistent with the thought, rather than ornamental, rhythms adapt themselves

freely to the complexity of the martial situation, diction and imagery is descriptive, rather than defensive, and the total artistic effect is less uneven than that of the poetry of social protest.

CHAPTER III

PSYCHOLOGICAL POETRY

In the early stages of Canadian literature, the poets were overwhelmed by the relative insignificance of man's attempt to gain any kind of control over the powerful elements of nature, and the poetry of that period was often a ritualistic worship of nature, with vague allusions to man's position in the scheme of things. In the present century, however, with its deplorable social conditions and catastrophic world wars, the poets are forced into an awareness of man's responsibility to his social environment, rather than to his strictly natural one. Where the focal point in this newer poetry is the specific tragedy of exploitation or war, a very definite interest in individual, as well as social responses, is evident, although subordinated. This psychological theme becomes dominant in a large group of poems which probe into the diversity of human reactions to life. The dichotomy between man's intense need for both community and privacy, for love and independence, for acceptance and individuality, provides the material for poetry which demands absolute flexibility in order to capture its subtleties.

Every man finds himself vacillating between the desire to find a place in the stream of activity, and the desire to withdraw and meditate. The loneliness which is born of the

failure to make contact with this stream of life, and the powerful need for society when privacy becomes unbearable, is the subject of several of the psychological poems. This loneliness can be caused by a proximity to the impersonal masses as easily as by a separation from them, and Patrick Anderson detects a deep loneliness in the centre of the most colourful of Canadian cities, Montreal. In "Montreal Mountain",¹ this gay city encloses at its very heart "loneliness and mystery". The endless carrousel motion implied by "giddy crown", "men curved on horses", "riding round and round", "wheeling city", "whirl of plains", is dramatically juxtaposed with the "lonely", "empty...mindlessness of the volcanic mound", in which the "strangers are you and you". The tragic failure to communicate with the imminent life of the city causes a loneliness as acute as that caused by isolation.

The sad mystery of the collective loneliness at the centre of the city turns into ugliness and despair in Souster's "Bridge over the Don",² as the individual sees his personal loneliness reflected in the fetid river flowing beneath the bridge. The loneliness comes from a surfeit of life, rather than from its inaccessability. The "three hotels" and the "jitterbug dancehalls", "where beauty and truth have been burned out, slugged out/ given the gate forever", cannot

1. Patrick Anderson, A Tent for April, (Montreal, 1945), unpagued.

2. Raymond Souster, The Selected Poems, (Toronto, 1956), p.73.

offer a solution for the human need. The river flows on, but unhappiness remains. The irregular approximation of the sonnet form creates a suitable framework for a response which can be expressed, but need not be exploited to be meaningful.

Loneliness caused by isolation finds a particularly meaningful metaphor in Canada's isolation from Europe. Earle Birney captures the "simple inhuman truth of this emptiness" in "Pacific Door",³ a poem uncharacteristically free of the enjambement usually employed by him to achieve a sense of continuity. Here, instead, the isolation, rather than the unity, dominates the formal organization of the poem. Reminiscent of the sea crashing on the shores of Canada with rhythmic regularity, the length of the verses alternates regularly, intensifying the metaphor. The poem finds no comfort in the universal fact that all men are geographically isled; man still yearns for community:

the problem that is ours and yours,
that there is no clear Strait of Anian
to lead us easy back to Europe,
that men are isled in ocean or in ice
and only joined by long endeavour to be joined.

The enforced loneliness of old age, and the self-imposed loneliness of the man afraid to become involved with life, are examined in two separate poems from which a very exciting parallelism emerges. In Souster's "When I See Old Men",⁴ the

3. Earle Birney, The Strait of Anian, (Toronto, 1948), p.37.

4. Raymond Souster, City Hall Street, (Toronto, 1951), p.1

old men sit in "dead corners/ Of lonely rooms", while the isolationist in P.K.Page's "Isolation"⁵ sits equally remote, with "gloved hands in a buttoned confusion". Since the present is so faded, both find it necessary to regress into the past for meaning. The old men revel in the memories of past exploits, but the isolationist, who "finds himself a leper" now, knows that at least in the past he has been like a saint. The old men look at the young girls of the present, and sigh, relinquishing with reluctance the pleasures of love. The isolationist, however, looks at the lovers and finds self-righteous pleasure in not being like the others. Both the old men and the isolationist are pitiable, and Souster calls for a violent, brief old age, as "brief as the fluke Matador's/ One golden season". Page can do little more for the self-determined isolationist than comment on his ultimate confusion.

In "David",⁶ Birney has captured the other force in the dichotomy, the need for freedom from society. Very specifically, the two friends climb the mountains to get "from the ruck of the camp, the surly/ Poker, the wrangling, the snoring under the fetid/ Tents". With perfect formal control of the free verse form, the poet follows the ramblings of the young men up the mountainside to the tragic misstep,

5. P.K.Page, As Ten, As Twenty, (Toronto, 1946), p.26.

6. Earle Birney, David and Other Poems, (Toronto, 1942), p.1.

and through to the recognition of their ultimate individuality as they confront death with maturity. The need for separation from the society of the lumber camp assumes universal proportions in the metaphor of the mountain climb itself. Even the mountains, with their imposing permanence, are a barrier to freedom, and the men climb because "mountains for David were meant to see over". The sacrifice of one man's life and another's youth for the ideal of individual freedom seems great indeed, and the ultimate irony in the poem is contained in the breathless journey back into the lumber camp and away from the freedom of youth and mountain climbing.

Just as living in society creates a constant tension between the need to belong, and the need to be individual and separate, the involvement of love has its peculiar tensions. The desire to love has its deliberate counterpart in the desire to be independent of the loved ones. Man's need for love is all the more poignant in Dorothy Livesay's "Alienation",⁷ because he has just been deprived of it. The formalism of the rhymed quatrains creates a cool, sophisticated, context, in which total frustration, nevertheless, struggles to gain control. Because love has failed, the questions have no answers; the only known fact is that the garden lends "you such a radiance,/ Leaving me out". This garden is golden, exquisitely beautiful, but artificial,

7. Dorothy Livesay, Selected Poems, (Toronto, 1957), p.9.

because the loss of love has caused a separation to be bridged by neither mind, nor magic. The alienated one stands, "shivering like a tree/ Blind", where the beloved alone can see. Only love can again evoke a mutual response to the garden.

In direct contrast, love creates the prison of annihilation in Ronald Hambleton's "In Bed".⁸ Freed for a moment by the sleep of his beloved, the lover feels "as if our duality/ Had eclipsed my self". A solution for the problem is complicated. Since love is a reality, the only attractive prospect is "in the perspective/ Of our two eyes' vision", and the decision to continue in the duality of love, at the expense of the loss of self, is made consciously. The final comment is an enlightened acceptance of "the excellent/ Journey travelled/ To a fertile island". The ambivalence is clearly delineated, and the choice demands sacrifice.

The adolescent, in his own awkward way, is as aware of the tension between love and freedom as is the lover. In "Boys and Girls",⁹ Anne Wilkinson creates a charming picture of crowing boys who "push/ Into the quivering lake/ The girls they'll kiss next year". As the boys are aware of the "phoenix, fire and ash/ And new-found agony of the groin, so the girls wear their new plumpness as "awkwardly

8. Ronald Hambleton, Object and Event, (Toronto, 1953), p.45.

9. Anne Wilkinson, The Hangman Ties the Holly, (Toronto, 1955), p.45.

as the farmer's boy/ His Sunday suit". The real tension is presented with amused simplicity. The boys "boast", "insult", and "hate" the girls whose bodies, nevertheless, "swim in their veins", while the girls "jeer", "but out of the corners of their eyes/ They look at them incessantly".

The problems of adolescence are not always so uncomplicated. P.K. Page presents a disturbing picture of a son's growing need to assert himself, in "Only Child".¹⁰ At first the formal freedom of the poem serves as a contrast to the dutiful identification of the son with the mother, but later it underwrites his final, vicious rejection of her influence over him. With a slight suggestion of psychological perversion, the mother and son are referred to impersonally as "he" and "she" throughout the poem, and the dominance which "she" exercise over him is terrifying. His future is determined by her conception of it, and consequently is as sterile as a photograph "within the frames of her eyes". He rejects his own ambitions in order to become the "noted naturalist of her dreams", and serves his apprenticeship as the puppet of her aspirations, waiting patiently for the fulfillment of himself. The final self-assertion is essentially ugly. He catches the birds that she has taught him to name so carefully, wrings "their necks/ brittle as little sticks", and places them uncereemoniously in her "wide, ma-

10. Page, As Ten, As Twenty, p.40.

ternal lap". The act establishes his independence unquestionably, but completely negates all vestiges of maternal or filial love in the process.

The Canadian poets working in the psychological tradition display a special talent for describing the reactions to the stultifying tedium to which ordinary working people must subject themselves. The "forced march of Monday to Saturday", repeated continuously after the "brief bivouac of Sunday", of P.K. Page's "Stenographers"¹¹, establishes the metaphor of the endless circle of activity which keeps people moving through a routine with superb efficiency, but without adequate reason:

... ...In their eyes I have seen
the pin men of madness in marathon trim
race round the track of the stadium pupil.

Often "taut as net curtains stretched upon frames", they, nevertheless, move like automatons at the sound of a bell, and their tears must find their outlet in the gloom of the vault. The hopelessness of their never-ending tasks dominates the poetic statement.

Similarly preoccupied with the clerks' loss of personal identity, Margaret Avison attempts to find some meaning in "Neverness".¹² Since "the tissue of our metaphysic cells/
No magic window has yet dared reveal", perhaps poetry can

11. Page, As Ten, As Twenty, p.12.

12. Smith, The Book of Canadian Poetry, (1957), p.471.

provide the necessary insight into the human responses to automation. Like Page's stenographers who are as "efficient as their adding machines", the "thousands merging" in Avison's poem, "snug" in their stereotyped jobs, are little more than "human pencils wearing blunt". They take their place in one of "many varnished offices", and eat their lunch "along a thousands counters". The result is only "dry confusion", chosen by weaklings who are so afraid of their individuality that "privacy is unadmitted prison". The world is "lonely" and "unshut" at the same time, and until man recognizes his primitive nature, his "Old Adam", as the centre of meaning, this meaningless repetition will continue.

The impossibility of escaping from the race of life "round the track" is reflected in other poems in which either careful form or metaphor creates a repetitive cycle with the end and the beginning merging on a single plane, instead of in a more optimistic spiral. In "Waking",¹³ by P.K. Page, the daily cycle of sleep and wakefulness organizes the poem. The roles of night and day are ironically reversed; sleep gives rise to dreams of love and travel, the products of "sleep's illness", while the monotonous routine generally associated with the lull of sleep preoccupies the hours of day. The cycle repeats itself endlessly, and the utter

13. Page, As Ten, as Twenty, p.20.

monotony is rendered even more tragic by the recognition that the cycle will never be replaced by another, more exciting one.

Using the cyclic metaphor of the life process of the caterpillar, so consciously chosen from the world of nature, Earle Birney includes the people of the farms in this concept of man, caught in a circle from which there is no escape, in "Winter Saturday".¹⁴ Unusually short verses strain the movement through the inevitable process from the beginning to the end of the lifecycle, and the Saturday night activities of the farmers are rendered without humour or passion. All of the movements are identified with those of the caterpillar. They "emerge" from their snug homes, "hatch" from their cars, "flutter" to a movie, and in due time "throb" through the dance. Ironically, however, the butterfly can emerge from his cocoon when the cycle is complete, but the round of human activity does not afford an escape. The country people:

...must go lonely
drowsy back through ghosts
the wind starts from the waiting snow.

They admit that the town is "less than its glow", and this disappointment is but part of the human process from which there is, apparently, no escape.

Choosing the disciplines of both form and metaphor,

14. Birney, The Strait of Anian, p.16.

ordinary experiences of sickness, deformity, catastrophe, and perversion have produced the startling, brief poems of P.K.Page and Phyllis Webb, and some of the best narrative poetry of E.J.Pratt. In all of these poems, the perversion or the catastrophe is secondary, and the individual human responses to the occasion form the meaningful centre. None of them are merely sensational, although they do not avoid the serious problems of hypochondria or sadism.

Miss Page's observation of the reaction to sickness in "The Sick"¹⁶ is expressed in concrete metaphors, chosen eclectically, but dominated by the imagery of nature which must preoccupy the thoughts of the sick who are so cruelly subjected to an unnatural existence. Their eyes float "like water flowers on a stagnant river", they are "emptied out as hoof-prints where the cattle go", with "heads like dandelions", "fresh as roses' stems", and as "pale as oysters". They feel an unwanted sense of individuality in the sickness of their bodies which are "single as a dart". At the same time, their individuality cannot be expressed, for it is "yet...multiple". The ordered hospital world is reflected in the careful organization of the poem; each stanza presents one image in one complete sentence, and then moves on to the next one without an obvious link. In the "coal hold dark" of the walls of stone, the sick are

16. Page, As Ten, As Twenty, p.33.

forced to live myths, and they never come to the positive understanding of pain expressed by Phyllis Webb in several poems.

In one of Miss Webb's later poems, "Breaking",¹⁷ the reason for being "whole or beautiful or good" is "to be absolutely broken", like Christ. Similarly, in "Pain",¹⁸ the needle-edged dart of Page's metaphor "throws a bridge of value to belief". Through the experience of pain, "simple as razors:", symbolized by the "bird of death", meaning is made possible. The bridge of value connects the pain from which all beautiful things are born, and the "contemporary pain", causing the eyes to focus to "cubes and lights", makes possible a valid reconstruction of experience.

In Pratt's poetry, some kind of mammoth upheaval often results in a total reorganization of values which demands of the individual complete, decisive involvement. Because the scope of Pratt's poetry is so much more comprehensive than that of any other Canadian poet, the attempt to compare his poetry with that of his contemporaries is very difficult. Indeed, as Northrop Frye says: "he has to be read by himself or not at all".¹⁹ His themes encompass

17. Phyllis Webb, The Sea is Also a Garden, (Toronto, 1962), p.4.

18. E.W.Mandel, Gael Turnbull, Phyllis Webb, Trio, (Montreal, 1954), unpagged.

19. Frye, "Poetry", The Arts in Canada, p.85.

most of the themes of the social and war poets, and are certainly filled with the psychological complexities of his time. His vision encompasses all of humanity as it struggles against the relentless forces of nature. Although a brief examination of the psychological responses in two narrative poems, "The Titanic"²⁰ and "Brébeuf and His Brethren",²¹ does not presume to approximate a thorough study, the ambiguities of the heroic in man which appear when he is confronted by the extremes of destiny may be seen more clearly.

In "The Titanic", Pratt gives full expression to the raging conflict which results either in acts of odious cowardice or astounding courage, when individuals are confronted with necessity:

Out on the water was the same display
Of fear and self-control as on the deck--
Challenge and hesitation and delay,
The quick return, the will to save, the race
Of snapping oars to put the realm of space
Between the half-filled lifeboats and the wreck.

The acts of cowardice are expressed with diction implying their mindless motivation. The stoker springs, beastlike, "to tear" the life jacket from another man's back, and the woman's "jewelled fist" strikes wildly at the man whose presence in the lifeboat may threaten her own safety. The man, himself, beyond reason, clutches at the rim of the boat

20. Frye, E.J.Pratt, p.212.

21. Ibid., p.244.

with no thought but the terror of possible death.

When the passengers and crew confront the problem rationally, however, they prove to be truly heroic. As irrationality motivates "those scenes where order fails", and men are cowards, calmness in the face of disaster accompanies the heroic acts. A woman "wrapped her coat/ around her maid and placed her in the boat", and stands firmly beside her husband, to be with him in death as she has been in life. "A boy of ten/.../piled/ The inches on his stature", as he gives his place to a Magyar woman and her child, and faces his doom squarely. After the new bridegroom places his bride into a lifeboat and waves good-bye, men come, "this time to borrow/ Nothing but courage from his calm, cool face". The same reason which has invented a fallible machine can expand to heroic proportions when it combines with the "hazards of the heart" in the presence of super-human opposition.

The abnormality of sadism, and the possibility for human courage in its presence, supply the material for "Brébeuf and His Brethren". The sadism of the Canadian Indians, as they torture their victims, is far more sordid than the behaviour of beasts:

...He knew that when
A winter pack of wolves brought down a stag
There was no waste of time between the leap
And the business click upon the jugular.
Such was the forthright honesty in death
Among the brutes.

When Brébeuf and his brethren become the victims of the indignities of torture, they find the source of their courage in the human will: "pain brimmed over the cup and the will was called/ To stand the test of the coals". But passivity and calmness are not identical in Pratt's view of the heroic. Brébeuf endures, half rebuking the Indians' autrocities, and half defying them, giving them, finally, "roar for roar". Metaphorically he becomes a "lion at bay", and it seems as "if the might of a Roman were joined to the cause/ of Judea". By now his behaviour has become that of an epic hero, and, once again, the greatest heroism is produced by the greatest test. This poem, like "The Titanic", ends in ultimate victory, in spite of the physical defeat.

The Canadian poetry inspired by an interest in the psychological subtleties of human responses to life is much more universal than that which is concerned with the specific social and political problems of Canada. Although the poetic setting is often determinedly Canadian, the statement expands far beyond the provincialism of city or nation when the inner heart is actually exposed. The fearful awareness that life is at once too absorbing and too elusive to allow the fullest development of individuality is surely the experience of anyone alive in an enlightened age. The dreadful knowledge that there is no escape from the perpetual ebb and flow remains in constant conflict with the equally dreadful fate of accepting a position in the stream without a struggle.

The mythic overtones of the cyclic metaphors of the poetry concerned with the specific problem of flux extend it radically beyond the immediate situation and into the more satisfying universal realms.

Although the poetry concerned with the psychology of the human mind is not exclusively optimistic, it rarely creates a world which merely ends with a whimper. The courageous reaction to both the acceptance and the defiance of life's challenges would indicate that Canadians are not, in fact, 'hollow men', with 'headpieces filled with straw'. The poetry abounds with the imagery of nature, but nature wielded exclusively by man, even when he is lying on a sick bed. Life may force him into a pattern, but it cannot ultimately conquer his humanity. If the poets react negatively to life, they react positively to the individual man attempting to cope with it.

The forms chosen to express the psychological poetry are new. Except where ironic contrast with the undisciplined ramblings of the mind is intended, the verse is free, and the stanza form is determined by the organic statement, rather than by external formalism. Subtle suggestions, typical of the introspective approach, rather than bold condemnations or affirmations, are characteristic of all of the poets. Self-consciously aware that they are presenting the mental processes of modern they, they are also, by very definition, including their own. The result is comprehensive, yet highly personal poetry.

CHAPTER IV

MYTHOPOEIC POETRY

Mythology has provided a fascinating source of material for poets in any age. Even when gods and heroes have wandered ornamentally in and out of poems, they have added their element of charm, but when their activities have provided the fundamental structure for a poetic statement, the result has been an interpretation of the contemporary society in terms of archetypal structures which organize the imagery and diction. The use of myth as structure in Canadian poetry asserts itself firmly by the middle of this century, but is not controlled with precision and confidence until after 1955, when poets like Jay Macpherson, James Reaney, and Margaret Avison begin to display a concrete understanding of the possibilities of mythology for their creative endeavours.

The poetry which can be called mythopoeic before this time experiments with archetypes, consciously attempting to avoid ornamental myth. In this poetry the seasons play their part in the fertility cycle of nature, as the larger context for an annual dying and reviving god; the labyrinths and monsters, traditionally associated with the hero quest, often become the structural metaphors; the total identification of all things with each other, leading eventually to an enlightened rebirth into a glorified existence, is suggested in many

poems of the 'forties and early 'fifties. This experimental process is a necessary preparation for the conscious application of myth to the concept of modern man which preoccupies so much of the most recent Canadian poetry.

The mythos of spring, as the symbol of rebirth in a constantly renewing cycle, is consistently optimistic and attractive. In "Poem for Spring",¹ Dudek focuses upon the sudden surge of life experienced in the spring, but maintains the context of a definite and eternal cycle. Winter is but sleeping, "hungry and dreamful/ of unforgotten spring", making spring the focal point of past and future, as well as the promise of continuity. In verses which alternate rhythmically between extreme opposites in length, a new birth into a fertile year emerges from the broken belly of "Mother Earth". As 'Mother Earth' promises the rebirth of life, so the archetypal problem of plucking the perfect apples before they "fall to the ground/ wrinkled", symbolizes the problem of capturing that life at its peak.

P.K. Page, whose early poetry is generally not overtly mythopoeic, writes a poem of spring in which myth structures a personification of spring in terms of a male figure. In "Spring",² the end of winter and the beginning of spring

1. Louis Dudek, Irving Layton, Raymond Souster, Cerberus, (Toronto, 1952), p.15.

2. Page, As Ten, As Twenty, p.23.

are represented as a cold man, gradually warming to the newness of life. In the third stanza, spring can finally come, because all that he "had clutched, held tightly locked/ behind the fossil frame/ dissolves". The self-adoration, implied by his action of "kneeling in welters of narcissus" at the beginning of the poem, becomes a total identification of himself with everything around him as the poem progresses "until he is the garden--heart, the sun/ and all his body soil". The poem delves into the problems of depth psychology when, after this total identification with the sun and the soil, the conscious experience of spring is still "something rare and perfect, yet unknown". The totality resides in the unconscious, and can only be understood through actual experience.

For James Reaney's "The Red Heart",³ the annual cycle of the seasons provides an ironic contrast with the cycle of human life which might be "(Sixty winters, and fifty-nine falls,/ Fifty-eight summers, and fifty-seven springs)", and will then end in the grave, while other lives and "still-living suns and stars" trample the last remains of his existence. The sun combines the cycles of time and eternity as it hangs from a "branch of Time" on the "tree of Eternity". The human heart, however, is the "only leaf upon its tree

3. James Reaney, The Red Heart, (Toronto, 1949), p.14.

of blood", subject to individual decay and ultimate destruction at the hands of the sun which will drag him, along with "gods, goddesses and parliament buildings/ Time, Fate, gramophones and Man/ To a gray grave". The vision has little hope for his own life, but establishes a firm belief in a continuing existence for the universe.

This theme is repeated in a very different kind of cyclic poem, "A Child Can Clock",⁴ by Anne Wilkinson. Instead of envisioning man as having a heart which merely grows heavy with age, like Reaney's, she presents the whole cycle of a man's life from childhood to boyhood, through adolescence, and on to maturity, where it is his responsibility to grapple with the "sleeping dragons" of life. At the end of the poem he is old, and "counterclockwise into clown/ he tumbles on" to a determinedly final death. The clockwise motion of the cycle is disturbed for a human who, unlike the "flighty seed" which soars, "then falls to birth", soars and then falls to death. Unlike man's cycle, which ends with his death, the puff of dandelion is blown into life by man's dying breath and achieves its potential rebirth. The movement of nature corresponds to the pattern of a gyre. The words "clock", "arc", "counterclockwise", and "dial" suggest curves and circles, while suggestions of ascension, "climbing", "high as noon", "soars", combine with these to establish the gyra-

4. Wilkinson, The Hangman Ties the Holly, p.21.

ting movements consistently throughout the poem. The nine unrhymed triplets, with a general rhythmic pattern of three irregular feet in each verse, create an unmistakable unity of circular construction, providing an artistic framework for the seasonal myth.

Eli Mandel displays a comprehensive understanding of the archetypes which are useful for modern poetry. The fertility rite of autumn, in preparation for winter and the forthcoming spring, is the subject matter of the third of his "Minotaur Poems".⁵ The mystery of the "fierce masks", the "voices", and the "signs" of the ritual is constantly undermined by the "young ones", who sneer at talk "of a dying god", and, snickering, wait "for the time/ when the women undressed". The overwhelming awe of an initiation into something huge and mysterious is never mitigated by a hint of reassurance in the poem. The visionary birds live in "rocks and screams", startling the poem with the unexpected use of "screams" instead of the expected streams. As the poem proceeds, however, an understanding of the meaning of the myth emerges. Through the persuasions of "the one who brought me here", his partner in the ritual, he learns the difference between procreation and the revelation of life, as well as that between belief and a conscious involvement with the risk of believing. For him, at least, the

5. Mandel, Trio, unpagged.

dying and reviving god of the seasons is a believable entity, if a demanding one, and although the lesson has been learned, "it is hard to feel free of accusation".

While the poems structured around the cyclic myths of nature follow a fairly consistent pattern of undisturbed optimism for humanity, if not for individual man, those incorporating the more intricate vision of the quest myth cannot be compared with each other as readily. The labyrinthine obstacles, the monsters to conquer, the leviathans to experience, and the ultimate apocalyptic goal where the exalted human mind is at the circumference of all existence, together provide a fertile poetic reservoir of moods and symbols to be selected and combined in a variety of ways within the general, implied context of this mythic pattern. The psychological and literary theories of modern myth critics can be applied to these poems, establishing their relationship to the total myth more easily than to each other.

Participation in the kind of collective unconscious presupposed by Carl Jung in his literary criticism involving archetypes, orders the poem by Anne Wilkinson, entitled somewhat extravagantly, " ' I was born a boy, and a maiden, a plant and a bird, and a darting fish in the sea' - Empedocles".⁶ The poet lives "in only one of innumerable

6. Wilkinson, The Hangman Ties the Holly, p.2.

rooms" to which he has the right of access, "for mine is a commonwealth of blood, red/ And sluiced with recollection". The voyage from a general identification with all things, to peerage with the "Olympic Sire", is not fraught with mythical dragons to be conquered, but is rather an evolutionary journey from the "gills/ of my youth", through time, to the point where he stands beside God as a man, "knowing he swam in mud". The quest for the "supersonic moment" is still "pitched an octave higher than the heart's belief", and is therefore not complete, but the regularity of the four-versed stanzas emphasizes the constancy of the quest through the process of life to the ultimate revelation of meaning.

The 'innumerable rooms', which comprise the evolutionary labyrinth of Miss Wilkinson's poem, provide the imagery for the labyrinth in the first of Eli Mandel's "Minotaur Poems".⁷ He has lost the "door or sash" to these rooms, and wanders endlessly, finding janitors sweeping up brains, empty clothes crawling away like cowards, and shining bones in wastebaskets, all symbols of a decadent civilization. But the true hero must make his own way out of the labyrinth, and after significantly ascending "several stories/ in the staired and eyed hall", he finally meets the monster who must be eliminated before the quest can continue. The

7. Mandel, Trio, unpagcd.

poem ends before the resolution of the meeting of the hero and the "man with the face of a bull" is made clear, but the mythic structure of the poem's twelve verses is unmistakable. Labyrinths and dragons are all part of the archetypal hero's experience, and must be dealt with personally and effectively before he can be considered a hero.

In his tribute to "Emily Carr",⁸ Wilfred Watson, in a brief lyric poem, presupposes a time of trial which the artist herself has spent in the archetypal leviathan. Unable to hold her, however, the leviathan "spewed" her "forth/ In a great vomit on the coasts of eternity". With her entry into the universe, the wilderness becomes ordered, as the apocalyptic universe must necessarily be ordered. No unruly sea, but an emerald "river of life" accompanies her steps as she brings nature to its fulfillment in her art. Perhaps the praise is somewhat exaggerated as "every bush" is rendered "an apocalypse of leaf", but the mythic intent of the poem is clear. The quest is for beauty in art, and the artist is subjected to the usual heroic trials.

Reconciling all things in a final, satisfying experience is as integral a part of the quest myth as the labyrinthine obstacles and leviathans. In "Poem in Three Parts",⁹ Anne Wilkinson creates an atmosphere of constant, mutual involve-

8. Wilfred Watson, Friday's Child, (London, 1955), p.55.

9. Wilkinson, The Hangman Ties the Holly, p.52.

ment which makes the final identification of all things, and all time, possible in the third part of the poem. In the first part, the crowds are "behind", "about", "crowding", and "together we consider/ The merit of stone". In the second section, the "few quiet men" are "above-below the din", and, finally, "the stone in my hand/ IS my hand". Measured against the endurance of the stone, "the little span/ A miser's rule/ inched out for man" causes nothing but resentment, and from this tension mythology is created. Because man wants to be unique and claim for "human seed/ A special dispensation", various religions with their accompanying symbols are invented. In this way, man can be placed within a continuity which can give meaning to his existence. The "few quiet men", unable to cope with a superimposed mythology, reveal a truer myth in the total identification of man with the universe, rather than in separating him from it in some way. "Monday's child" goes through the vegetable and mineral cycles, rising higher up the mandalic ladder until he becomes involved with the most elevated imagery of the heavenly bodies. This experience will culminate in an apocalypse, as "Sunday's elements disperse/ And rise in air". The stone and the hand, separate in the first section, are, in fact, the same thing at the conclusion of the poem, and indeed, include by then "tracings of/ A once greenblooded frond", as well as the elements of time and space. The statement of identification is made possible through a mytholo -

gizing of the evolutionary process of life, until everything is seen as the same process, not merely distinctive parts of a vaguely related universe.

The union of all things within a single framework, whether it be an ark, or a leviathan, in preparation for the destined apocalypse, is an archetypal concept expressed in various mythical modes. LePan chooses the Canadian blue heron as his symbol of the anagogic figure in "Image of Silenus".¹⁰ The heron is:

...like one of the images of Silenus.
They are made to open in the middle, and
Inside them are figures of the gods.

When the heron arrives, he is significantly at home in the "brown shadows of evening", in the "moss-soft shadowy trees", and in the "fish-haunted weeds and the lily-pads". When he leaves, he finds, like the ark, a resting place which "quietly floats", and again, like the ark, is "everywhere perfectly sealed and secret". Although the world wears a mask with "the air of having seen it all before", in the real and suffering world of LePan's poem, the figures are not really the majestic figures of gods and men in "roles that men have pictured for themselves", but rather the "shrunk figures of desire". They have not been changed from their original appearance in time and space, and are,

10. LePan, The Wounded Prince, p.36.

therefore, "not heroic, filling all the sky,/ Miniatures rather, toys in a toy shop window". All the heroic and noble deeds of history are reduced to a brief moment of modern revelation, limited by the "invisible barrier" of glass. They themselves, "the puppets, have looked out/ Like sick children with their faces pressed to the window", and their voices crying for the apocalyptic transfiguration which they know should be theirs, are faint and "far off", "dissonant, confused".

The flexible, free verse of the descriptive introduction to the "Image of Silenus" shifts to consciously rhythmic stanzas in rhymed couplets, as the "ill-assorted choir", actually the history of humanity, raises its voice in a hymn of complaint against their present state. The bird, unifying them in a conscious, formal manner, may even be a "blue mirage,/ To waken desire and helpless rage", and the compactness of the form scatters into free verse as the "song scatters" at the end. The answer to the song is inarticulate, but surges like a "ground swell", "gathering everywhere a vagrant strength". The answer never arrives at the "shores of speech", but dies away like a sigh. The heron, "with wings stretched wide as love", disappears in order to prepare in secret for its destiny, the re-entry into the "realm of promised good". The vague disappointment of the final section is reflected in the short, uneven verse structure, presenting a shadowy future when the grinning mask of unreality

will be permanently removed. Until then, the world must be content with but a little portion of the mythic scheme for the universe.

An ironic inversion of the apocalyptic vision appears in "The Coffins",¹¹ by James Reaney, and the second of Eli Mandel's "Minotaur Poems".¹² The archetypal leviathan becomes a "coffin", or a "submarine", in Reaney's poem, and the journey of the quest is undertaken "without periscope or compass", and with only the dim knowledge that "someday they must flow/ Into the final harbour". What awaits them there, however, is not the transformed world or the exalted reward of the usual apocalypse, but rather the "gray shore/ Where the Lord shall weigh/ Men's wicked souls on Doomsday". The rhymed couplets of this brief poem are filled with gloomy imagery and symbolism. The leviathan sails beneath "gray-green old graveyards", and navigates the "wormy seas of the earth" with but one "lone sailor", uniformed in a shroud, to navigate with dim knowledge.

In Mandel's poem as well, the apocalypse, like the final perspective of the poem, is inverted. Everything in the poem is deliberately distorted. The birds "fall like rocks", instead of soaring "along the edge of blue air", and the only

11. Reaney, The Red Heart, p.60.

12. Mandel, Trio, unpagued.

sunlight is inside the workshop, while outside is nothing but "cold air". The "framed and engined mind" of the father is not above the dream of Daedalus as he spends his time "building a shining wing", and as Daedalus succeeded in flying, so the father succeeds. Within the curious, inverted context of the poem, however, he falls into the sun, achieving with a downward motion that which should necessarily elevate him. The conclusion is a dubious one, and remains totally within the realm of the imagination. The ironies within both poems are obvious because of their deviation from the archetypal patterns which give the poems their actual structure.

If myth in Canadian poetry is somewhat unsophisticated and awkward, the reason may be contained in LePan's "A Country Without a Mythology".¹³ The cycles of myth are not merely endless cycles of repetition, but are rather conscious movements through time to a grand conclusion. In Canada, however, "time is worth nothing", for on a journey:

...nothing alters.
Mile after mile of tangled struggling roots,
Wild-rice, stumps, weeds, that clutch at the canoe,
Wild birds hysterical in tangled trees.

He examines the possibility for finding the primitive myth in Canadian history, but the natives are "savage people", "clumsily constructed", and as yet recognize no "monuments

13. LePan, The Wounded Prince, p.11.

or landmarks" which could be incorporated into authentic, personal myth. Because this country has "no law - even no atmosphere", art of any kind is incredibly difficult to produce, and LePan may be coming very close to the problem of distinctiveness in Canadian literature in this poem.

A vague hint of hope does creep in:

Sometimes - perhaps at the tentative fall of twi-
light--
A belief will settle that waiting around the bend
Are sanctities of childhood, that melting birds
Will sing him into a limpid gracious Presence.

This hope is, however, not inspired by vitality and certainty, and the poem ends with "not a sign, no emblem in the sky".

In LePan's view then, myth must be imported into Canada, since it cannot be derived from it, and an ensuing abstraction is inevitable. His own mythopoeic poetry, far superior to that of any of his immediate contemporaries, employs a few consciously chosen Canadian images, but depends upon the mythology of Europe.

Because literary criticism in this century is so very myth-conscious, the imaginative leap from the study of poetry to the study of poetry as myth can be made without any apparent critical incongruity. Once the common archetypes of cycles and journeys, obstacles and trial periods, and other mythical and quasi-mythical phenomena have been codified by prominent critics such as Northrop Frye,¹⁴ as essential parts of the

14. Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, (Princeton, 1957).

total structure of myth, almost any poem can be considered part of the pattern:

Once you expose yourself to these designs or images, you soon find that anything you read arranges itself around them as -- iron filings around a magnet.¹⁵

In this sense, then, isolating fifteen or twenty poems for a study of myth in any particular period, because they have an obvious mythic structure, appears to be a gross oversimplification. The social poems of Page and LePan, with their endless circles of monotony, can be considered a kind of ironic inversion of myth. The psychological problem of individual identity in Birney, Avison and others, where the activity directed towards a specific goal is constantly thwarted by life itself, can readily be fitted into the quest pattern. Perhaps the war itself is just a mythical monster which humanity encounters in the labyrinth of life, after having undergone appropriate ritual preparation for the battle. Only LePan's war poems are actually structured on this conception, however. At the same time, the multitudinous references to classical mythology in Birney's poems, and to Christian myth in Daniells', are often less ornamental than structural, even when they do not correspond to established patterns.

Because the Canadian poets after 1955 are more conscious of 'these designs and images', the mythic structures of their

15. James Reaney, "Frye's Magnet", Tamarack Review, No. 33, p.73.

poetry can be more clearly described than those of their predecessors. Jay Macpherson's The Boatman,¹⁶ for example, is a dramatic reorganization of her random poems into a clear approximation of the total vision of Frye. The seventy-nine poems in this volume are arranged in such a manner that they move from innocence through hamartia to catastrophe and up again to a "general assumption of post-dated innocence in which everyone lives happily ever after".¹⁷ James Reaney's A Suit of Nettles¹⁸ is a brilliant poetic satire whose organizing principle is the revolution of the twelve months of the year, with its appropriate imagery and mythopoeic implications. In The Kildeer and Other Plays,¹⁹ he produces dramatic verse which moves very definitely to an apocalypse, although slavish identification with established critical concepts is outdistanced by originality and wit. Margaret Avison's Winter Sun²⁰ works within the realms of cycles and ultimate visions with a freedom which dares to question life as seen in this perspective.

Nevertheless, the poetry of the early 'fifties can be

16. Jay Macpherson, The Boatman, (Toronto, 1957).

17. Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p.162.

18. James Reaney, A Suit of Nettles, (Toronto, 1958).

19. James Reaney, The Kildeer and Other Plays, (Toronto, 1962).

20. Margaret Avison, Winter Sun, (Toronto, 1960).

significantly isolated for a discussion of its mythopoeic structures, because a select group of poets and critics in Canada consciously turn to a constantly expanding mythology for the form and content of their creative work. Because this poetry occurs at the beginning of an experimental phase, the themes are often repetitive and stereotyped, the imagery does not quite achieve a perfect harmony between its classical sources and its Canadian setting, and the diction occasionally falters. The fact that it is attempting a mythic process, however, places the poetry into the stream of contemporary English literary development, aspiring to universal themes, drawing on a vast resource of imagery, and employing an accompanying freshness of diction. Because an understanding of the underlying structure demands a highly developed intellect, the mythopoeic poetry is constantly threatened by complicated, allusive obscurity. In spite of these problems, the poetry of this period attains a higher level of artistic expression than that of any preceding Canadian poetry.

CONCLUSION

The deliberate selection of the themes of social protest, reaction to the war, interest in human psychology, and myth, has been determined by the total poetry written in Canada during the years 1935 - 1955, and the division of the themes into relevant categories has been dictated by the poems themselves. The startling parallelism between these main themes and the chief aspects of contemporary Canadian life demands the unequivocal evaluation that this poetry is singularly conscious of its immediate environment. Without exception, the poets share Wordsworth's 'heightened awareness' of the world around them, and translate their observations with faithful consistency. The result does not furnish an historical account of the events of the period, as much as it leaves a record of the actual reactions of Canadians to the turbulence of this twenty year period.

Very definitely conditioned by the historical context, the major themes of the poetry bear no more resemblance to each other than do the events of this segment of time, fraught by the extremes of poverty and affluence, war and peace, tension and security, mass industrialization and mass intellectualism. The sequence of the poetic themes follows the chronology of the historical events, growing not out of itself,

but rather out of the response to the moment. The protest poetry of the late 'thirties explores the deplorable social conditions of that time, but weakens to somewhat plaintive whimpers in later pursuits of the theme, when the society is no longer as dramatically in need of reorganization. Later, the reactions to the war grow out of the war itself, and not out of the preceding passion for social order. The vivid descriptions and passionate entreaties of Livesay, Souster, Birney, Dudek, Anderson, and the other social poets, turn to tenderness and reassurance in their war poetry. In the same way, the work of poets like Page, Webb, and Birney, concerned with the complexities of human psychology, is descriptive of the individuals living in a disillusioned post-war world, and is not merely a late development of those poems which so poignantly record the collective reaction to a terrifying, sometimes meaningless, sometimes idealistic war. Its chief psychological preoccupation with the ordinary trials of life makes only a chronological connection with the war poetry possible. In the same way, the myth poetry of Wilkinson, Watson, Webb, LePan, Macpherson, and Reaney is very definitely a product of its own time. Although the mythopoeic concern with human endeavour and its cycles of sin and redemption incorporates, and in fact, unifies all of the themes which preceded it, this poetry is more characteristic of its environment than of the poetry preceding it.

All of these poets are young, and the horrors of war and economic insecurity are chiefly historical facts to them. Their world has its peculiar aura of intellectual and economic security, while yet conditioned by the context of scientific experimentation which is stretching the human imagination to the wildest possible limits. The turn to mythology for meaning in the 'fifties is as natural as is the turn to Marx in the 'thirties.

The uneven quality of the total work of each poet, and the extreme variety of excellence among the poets dealing with the same themes, contributes to the general fact that the poetry of this twenty year period is a loosely connected group of fragments, rather than inevitable parts of a stream of poetry. E.J.Pratt, the one poet of this period who distinguishes himself from all of his contemporaries in the total statement of his poetry, does not provide a focal point for the general discussion of the poetry of his time. Although he is not as clearly superior, nor separate, as Northrop Frye would have readers believe, Pratt's ability to universalize a very particular historical moment, whether it be concerned with the founding of a country, the failure of man's inventions, the description of a simple natural phenomenon, or life, or death, is more consistently excellent than that of any other Canadian poet. His failure to manipulate the varieties and subtleties of verse forms convincingly,

however, limits the amount of unqualified praise which may be lavished upon his total work. Pratt's poems, once read, are difficult to forget. They combine a sharp eye, a learned mind, and a highly developed sensibility, with wit and confidence. In his exploration of a unique vision of the struggle between the forces symbolized by humanity and nature, the popular themes of the other Canadian poets find a subordinate place. For Pratt, these important themes are but fragmentary parts of a unified vision, not shared by the other poets.

Earle Birney, whose poetry, like Pratt's, extends through this literary period, expresses all of the major themes, but with an inconsistency which mars his total achievement. His social and war poetry combines the emotional responses of the people actually involved, with deftly chosen imagery and diction, creating an intensely involved vision, usually conveying a firm belief that man will eventually triumph over opposition. At times the reader's emotions are carefully manipulated until he becomes involved in the universal responsibilities of choice, and at other times, the same technique is comparatively ineffectual. His technical experimentation often results in a complexity which sometimes proves to be intellectually stimulating, and sometimes trivial. Prolific, versatile, and sensitive, Birney cannot, however, be depended upon to produce poetry consistently superior to that of other poets who could not approximate his

best work.

The most important poets of the 'Montreal Group', Dudek, Klein, Layton, and Anderson, display this quality of uneven variety, so characteristic of the period. Their relationship with each other has fluctuated between friendship and antagonism, as freely as their poetry has wavered between excellence and mediocrity. No single attitude towards Canadian life has proceeded from this unique, isolated, excitingly varied city, and although most of the poets are identified with a university, their standards of excellence are based on varying criteria.

Dudek has been more useful as a critic of Canadian poetry than as an actual creator. His clear understanding of the problems involved in being a Canadian poet has made his evaluations perceptive and authoritative. More than any of the other Montreal poets, he has followed, rather than led, in new expressions of poetic insight. His publications are pervaded by a keen awareness of his surroundings and the work of his contemporaries. The poems are a sensitive combination of the earthy realism of the Montreal poets, and the controlled emotion of the academic poets of Canada. The observations of his social statements are conveyed in vivid, sometimes vulgar, imagery and diction. The intellectual content is not reflected in complicated techniques, as in Birney's poetry, but rather in a deep comprehension of the prob-

lems of life. As with most academic poets, his creative efforts are peripheral to his scholarly preoccupations, but the products, though few, are worthy of intellectual consideration.

Klein stands mid-way between the controlled vision of Dudek's, and the reckless abandon of Layton's poetry. His intensely personal involvement with the philosophical and psychological implications of belonging to a minority group makes him unusually well equipped to express the problem of individual adjustment to the world. Historical events serve rather as a context for his poetry than as a reason for its creation, and help in expressing his profound awareness of the struggle between idealism and reality. Although Klein, too, is an academic poet, the controlling force behind his poetry is religious and emotional, rather than intellectual.

Equally aware of his Jewish tradition, Layton fails to communicate any of the sympathy so characteristic of Klein's poetry. He uses his Jewish tradition aggressively, and the poems with theme seem intended for a deliberately exclusive coterie. Fully capable of controlling the technical subtleties of modern poetry, he, nevertheless, deliberately limits the versatility of his statement by a stubborn refusal to extend his ultimate values beyond the physical world. He makes his comment on the social and psychological problems

around him, but the observable world consistently dominates any possible idealism working towards its redemption. As a result, his conclusions are often predictable and monotonous, and very few of his many poems are worth extended consideration.

When critics claim Patrick Anderson as a Canadian poet, they must overlook the fact that his stay in Canada has been somewhat sporadic. Instead, they concentrate upon his outstanding contribution to that poetry which is consciously Canadian in setting in theme. A disarming simplicity of style and statement is characteristic of all of his poetry. Unlike many of the other Montreal poets, the chief personal passion which motivates his poetry is that of being a Canadian, in spite of his non-Canadian background. As a result, his writing indicates astonishing insight into the complexities of Canadian life.

If variance is characteristic of a group of poets consciously identified with each other, the other poets, already separated geographically, cannot be expected to work within a unified tradition. Raymond Souster's voice is as often identified with Toronto as it is with Montreal, but his chief characteristic is his individuality. His poetry is pervaded by a sense of personal loneliness which instinctively understands the loneliness of others. His poems explain, rather than complain, and their limitation resides in

the narrow range of his vision, and not in any lack of depth.

The women poets all display an unevenness which results in a few outstanding poems, and an indeterminate number of less interesting ones. The most important of these poets, Dorothy Livesay, excels in her poetry of social protest, but lapses into triviality in some of her psychological comments. With an astonishing unity of form and content, she measures the temper of a socially distraught society more convincingly than any other Canadian poet. When her poetry is bold and passionate, the power of her statement is supported by carefully chosen rhythms and imagery. Her more tender, psychological poetry, exploring the relationships between individuals, affords many remarkable flashes of insight, but does not approximate the few best poems of P.K. Page. Miss Livesay's decided disinterest in mythopoeic experimentation limits the comprehensiveness of her importance for Canadian poetry, although her extensive travels furnish new material for each phase of her literary development.

The mythopoeic poets do not form a school of thought until after 1955. Since most of them are too young to have written when the other themes were popular, only a few of them, like LePan, and Wilkinson, have been successful in writing other kinds of poetry. LePan's scholarly approach to the social problems of his day needs little alteration

in order to become mythic. His poetic scheme has always depended upon his ability to reorganize time and space into a unique pattern, thereby creating a suitable context for his ideas. The desire for order in his social and psychological poems is met in mythology, and his myth poems are an attempt to interpret the single actions of man into the larger scheme of an archetypal order. Since most of the mythopoeic poets are academics, the same kind of scintillating variety, characteristic of the educated imagination, is able to operate in the creation of their poetry.

Although the extreme variety among the poets combines with the flux of the time during which they were writing, to produce a disparate body of poetry, certain similarities between the treatment of each of the themes therein establish it, nonetheless, as a related body of material. Each of the four major themes is presented with the same degree of flexibility. The social poetry runs the gamut from impotent, critical invective, through a barely articulated hope, to a clear plan for revolutionary action, and ends with the final belief that man is capable of shaping his destiny. The war poets explore the meaningless, dumb despair of the civilian and soldier alike, but include, in many of their poems, the firm belief that victory will come, and that man is capable of determining the course of that victory. The psychological poets are preoccupied with the endless tedium

of a humdrum existence, whether it be in sickness or in health, but the hope that man will endure and find a better sense of order gives rise to several powerful poetic statements. The archetypal obstacles to human existence, to be discovered in mythology, lead as often to an apocalyptic fulfillment as to ironic despair and emptiness. In every mode, the possibility for love and the continuation of life are made real and tangible, while the equally valid aspects of total nihilism and despair create a constant tension with the rest of the poetry. No single, determined point of view dominates the treatment of any aspect of life, and the total picture is commendably inclusive and realistic.

The definite growth of technique from old forms to new, experimental ones, moves through the themes as well. As the social poets experiment with radical ideas, radical new verse forms are required to express them. Their increasing freedom with new ideas is directly related to the increasing competence of their poetic expression. The psychological poets use new forms less and less experimentally, and the mythopoeic poets work with an already inherited tradition of formal variety, allowing themselves the freedom of attempting a new kind of content which incorporates the universal elements of time and space.

These developments provide an interesting foundation upon which the most recent Canadian poetry can build. The

possibility of finding metaphors as easily in the imagination as in reality, in oppression as in triumph, has been explored, and the newest poetry is free of any restrictive attitudes towards either its form or its content. When Jay Macpherson, for example, freely combines the classical myth of Philomela and Procne, with the mythology of the Bible, and chooses her imagery eclectically from Blake, Keats, and the Elizabethans, her collection of poems distinguishes itself from any single, previous collection of Canadian poetry. The delightful inversion of the poems dealing seriously with the fallen women of history at first, and then justifying their past exploits wittily in another section of the book, introduces a decidedly modern note to an archetypal concept, and sets the tone for a group of poems with a fixed world view which allows for maximum flexibility of the materials with which it deals. Into this total vision, the comments on the society and the individual, so aptly pioneered by the poets of the 'thirties and 'forties, merge into a greater concept of humanity.

The intellectual, mythopoeic poetry after 1955 is rivalled by poems committed to a more concrete expression of social experience. The themes, however, are not significantly different from each other. Man's battle with external and internal forces of opposition or indifference is not altered by limiting the choice of imagery to that found on a walk

through the city slums instead of through the library. Depth of insight alone can alter the battle, and this insight does not reside in simplicity any more than in complexity of expression. Imaginative comprehension must combine with artistic skill in order to produce excellent poetry, and the Canadian poets of the last thirty years have proved that this combination is as often inspired in the academic community as on the city pavement.

Bounded at one extreme by derivative poetry, and at the other by sophisticated experimentation, the poetry of 1935 - 1955 can be thought of as beads upon a string. The isolated units bear a distinct resemblance to each other, and yet the slim thread of time which connects them is not sufficient to provide a structure to which the Canadian poets can contribute at random. Their desire to create unaffected poetry, faithful to the Canadian scene, is handicapped by the lack of a central figure to unify their individual perceptions, as Whitman unified the early American poets and Pound the later ones. Their desire to create indigenous poetry, worthy of consideration in the literary world, is impeded by the necessity of employing a language which is identified with an astounding tradition of great depth and variety, while yet recording the pulse of a country without a firmly established tradition to which the physical and spiritual aspects of living can orientate themselves.

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APPENDIX

The collections of poetry which appear in this appendix are selected from those published by Canadian poets during the period, 1935 - 1955. The independent collections of all poets who appear in major anthologies are represented here, along with those of a limited number of other poets who are not anthologized, but are, nonetheless, of interest. Where the collections are neither in the Vancouver Public Library nor the library of the University of British Columbia, the publication details have been taken from A Check List of Canadian Literature (R.E. Watters), and the lists in Canadiana and Letters in Canada.

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