

New Bearings in Canadian Poetry

Brian Trehearne. *Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists: Aspects of a Poetic Influence*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989. x + 370 pp.

This is, in my view, the finest book yet written about Canadian poetry in English.

Such a judgment may sound extreme, especially in view of the title, which suggests a highly specialized and probably dry academic treatise. In fact, Trehearne has produced a closely argued but decidedly readable study that not only throws fascinating light on the English-Canadian poets of the 1920s, but also challenges most of our standard assumptions about the Canadian poetic tradition. No student of Canadian poetry of any period — indeed, no serious student of Canadian literature as a whole — can afford to ignore this book.

Trehearne begins with a defence of influence-studies that will seem obvious to many readers but is probably necessary in a critical climate where much nonsense is talked about artistic autonomy and the release of texts from any historical or temporal constraints. He insists, however, that we must take into consideration a much broader and more detailed cultural context or sphere of influence than we are generally accustomed to assume when "Canadian poetry" is concerned. In drawing attention to the significance of European Aestheticism he proposes "an entirely new context" for the criticism of what he calls — provocatively but, I think, fairly — "our minor moderns" (4). In addition, he issues a salutary warning against studying these poets "by analysing the canon largely *as they have passed it on to us*" (5; Trehearne's emphases).

He begins with W.W.E. Ross and Raymond Knister. Ross is an especially interesting case, since Trehearne insists on drawing attention to an awkward fact which most commentators pass over: not merely that his characteristic and much admired semi-imagistic poems are balanced by some highly traditional and ignored "aesthetic" sonnets, but that the latter were published after the writing of many of the former. They cannot, then, be explained away as early experiments in a late-nineteenth-century mode before being superseded by an enlightened modernism. The case of Knister is more complex, but Trehearne emphasizes what can hardly be denied — that every down-to-earth farm poem can be countered by one with an emphasis on abstract beauty and what Trehearne calls "Aesthetic arrest" (24). Vague assignments to an "Imagism" category (but which Imagism?) are not enough. We are tempted to simplify in order to avoid the complicating truth: that, in almost all our "modernist" poets, modernism and aestheticism go hand in hand, even if the modernist hand frequently does not know (or refuses to recognize) what the aesthetic hand doeth.

Trehearne can produce many complementary examples to bolster his thesis. Some of them are decidedly minor, like F.O. Call's significant combination that he stressed in the title of his collection *Acanthus and Wild Grape* (aesthetic acanthus, modernist grape), or Frederick Philip Grove's curious mixture in his verse of *fin-de-siècle* Decadence à la Wilde with the austere moralism more characteristic of his fiction. Trehearne also discusses lesser figures like L.A. Mackay and Neil Tracy, and includes an interesting section on Robert Finch's combination of "dandyism" with a similar modernist attitude.

A more complicated case is that of John Glassco. Trehearne asks the obviously apt but awkward question: how can we reconcile his quiet, meditative poetry set in the eastern townships, poetry often designated "Wordsworthian," with the celebration of decadence and

aestheticism to be found in his prose, both *Memoirs of Montparnasse* and his forays into erotic and pornographic fiction? Not being prepared to posit an acute literary schizophrenia, Trehearne takes a closer look at the evidence and comes to reject this "spurious discontinuity between Glassco's poetry and his prose" (190). He reveals that the regret for the past in Glassco's verse involves "a past modelled, not upon Wordsworth's Westmorland and Cumberland, but upon the London of Dorian Gray, the Paris of Verlaine and Baudelaire" (184). Glassco's "post-Decadent" poetry "manifests the themes of Decadent poetry: decay, the passing of beauty, the inevitability of process, the pursuit of intensity" (191). Armed with this refreshing and promising hypothesis, we follow Trehearne through a rereading of Glassco's poetic work, encounter a wealth of new insights, and are forced into a radical revision of his achievement as a writer.

But it is in the chapters on F.R. Scott and A.J.M. Smith that Trehearne upsets the most substantial literary-critical apple-carts. The former is discussed under the title "The Early Decadent Scott," and here Trehearne looks up the poetry Scott published in the *McGill Fortnightly Review* under the pseudonym of "Brian Tuke." These poems, including one entitled "To Beauty" and several sonnets filled with aesthetic sentiments and diction, are very different from the witty, satiric, and politically oriented poems that we are used to — and, of course, this side of Scott was rigorously excluded from the 1981 *Collected Poems*. The case of A.J.M. Smith is similar. Here we have long been aware of the strange intermingling of classic and romantic in his poems, but Trehearne has once again gone back to the complete files of the *McGill Fortnightly Review*, and to the Literary Supplement of the *McGill Daily*, to explode a dominant Canadian literary myth. He reveals — as we ought to have suspected — that these were typical undergraduate literary magazines in their high spirits, unevenness, experimentation, eclecticism, and variety. They were *not* deliberately-created conduits for the introduction of the "new" poetry into Canada; indeed, much of the poetry published there is consonant with the tradition of the English 1890s. With a careful examination of Smith's suppressed early verse, also often published under pseudonyms, Trehearne is able to justify his otherwise startling title: "A.J.M. Smith: Aesthetic Master of Canadian Poetry."

If Trehearne's arguments are accepted — as, it seems to me, they must be — a radical reevaluation of the history of Canadian poetry in English will have to be undertaken. He has knocked away too many of the accepted supports for the traditional historical version to be regarded as adequate any longer. Furthermore, he sets new scholarly standards which investigations of other periods — that of the Poets of Confederation, for instance, and the *Preview* and *First Statement* movements of the 1940s — will eventually have to emulate. At this point, however, it is important to stress that *Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists* does not read in any way like a hatchet-job on older and less rigorous scholarship. Trehearne is firm and revealing in his accounts of the unsatisfactory nature of earlier Canadian literary criticism about these writers of the 1920s, but he is never carping. He realizes the difficulty in coming to terms with the various balancing acts that these poets performed in their efforts to integrate their aesthetic predilections with their modernist principles. But he has stepped into the breach at a time when the activity and energy of scholars and critics of Canadian poetry over the last twenty years or so have made a more searching analysis — and a more comprehensive overview — possible. Trehearne's work must have been greatly facilitated by such reference works as Michael Darling's bibliography of A.J.M. Smith and the appropriate listings in ECW's *Annotated Bibliography of Major Canadian Authors*, as well as by materials published in this journal and in many books and periodicals over recent years. In mentioning this, I am in no way detracting from Trehearne's achievement; I am merely showing that the time was ripe in this particular discipline for a challenging reassessment of the now available evidence, and that Trehearne has provided this with dazzling dexterity.

The necessary consequences of Trehearne's work, then, are far-reaching. Indeed, there

is a very real danger that this book may encounter resistance, since entrenched academics are seldom eager to reconsider the bases of their subjects. In addition, most of us are limited in our skills and energies, and are content to classify ourselves either as scholars rooting about in the midden-heaps of rare-book libraries and public archives for new information, as practising and interpreting critics concentrating on the words on the page, or as theorists fitting (or forcing) particular literary examples into general intellectual formulations. Trehearne is important because he has shown how, ideally, we need to be all three at once.

Perhaps his most notable contribution is his insistence on aspects of these poets that most critics — and especially unabashedly evaluative critics like myself — have tended to neglect. In terms of cultural history, a writer's lesser work (even the failures) are of interest because they show only too clearly what the finer work transcends, and frequently reveal significant traces of otherwise disguised interests and enthusiasms. Trehearne is not trying to persuade us that such apparent anomalies as Ross's *Sonnets* are unrecognized masterpieces deserving as much attention as his better-known work; but he *does* insist that, in order to understand the better-known work in its fullness, we must appreciate why Ross felt impelled to write (and publish) the others. What in a lesser critic or scholar might seem dryasdust pedantry becomes a dramatic revelation of significant undercurrents. At the same time, although he draws attention to the importance of material that most evaluative critics ignore, he proves himself to be a firmly evaluative critic in the best sense of the term, as in the fine and necessary discriminations he makes between the successes and failures in Knister's verse (see, for example, his analysis of "Change" on pp. 38-39).

Another of Trehearne's challenges is his insistence that Canadian poetry cannot be adequately considered on its own (whatever the more extreme nationalists may say). He sets an example by providing us with discreet but pointed information about the achievements of British poets and writers from Wordsworth to Pater, Wilde, and Dowson — authors that Canadian critics ought to be familiar with but too often are not. What sometimes seems puzzling within a Canadian context may be readily understandable when we see a body of verse in relation to profound changes in literary attitudes in England and Europe. (Not the least of Trehearne's achievements, incidentally, is the way in which he shows how, even outside Canada, the aesthetic contribution to modernism has been generally underplayed.) Sometimes, too, a Canadian poet's experiments in an unfamiliar style can be seriously misinterpreted if the clue being followed has no clear Canadian precedents; one of the many matters that Trehearne persuades me I must reconsider is Robert Finch's early poetry, since it had never occurred to me to place it and read it, as he does, within the context of the literature of dandyism.

I recommend this book, then, in the strongest terms to all readers of *Canadian Poetry*. Of course, a few niggling criticisms could be offered. Occasionally, for instance, I thought that Trehearne provided more arguments than I needed to persuade me of the rightness of his position; again, the discussion of Imagism and literary Impressionism might have been more sharply focused if he had cited fewer authorities and laid out the main distinctions in his own formulation. But these are tiny points, and all readers would not agree. The truly astonishing thing about this volume is the fact that it is a first book by a young writer in his early thirties; it has all the distinguishing marks of a mature scholar consolidating the wisdom of a lifetime. I can think of no similar achievement in recent times — never, certainly, in the area of Canadian poetry.

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