

The Future of *Canadian Poetry*, 2

As few teachers and scholars of Canadian literature can now be unaware, the selection committee that reviewed the application of *Canadian Poetry* in the last SSHRCC did not recommend support for the journal. The reasons given were: (1) that the "international outreach" of *Canadian Poetry* was "unnecessarily limited ... given the strong international interest in Canadian studies ... particularly Canadian poetry in English"; (2) that "only 1/4 of the contributors were women and that there were virtually no articles on the many women poets writing in Canada, with the exception of Crawford"; and (3) that there was "little evidence in the articles of contemporary critical debates or theoretical issues." The committee's decision was greeted with dismay and outrage throughout the the Canadian academic community and prompted much public comment, numerous letters to the SSHRCC, and even two petitions in support of the journal. I cannot begin to name or thank here all those who took the time and trouble to speak and write on behalf of *Canadian Poetry*, but I would like to express my gratitude to Shirley Neuman for bringing the significance and plight of the journal to the attention of the members of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English in an editorial in the ACCUTE Newsletter (March, 1992) and to Betty Bednarski for printing the bulk of my previous editorial on "The Future of *Canadian Poetry*" in the *Bulletin/Newsletter* of the Association of Canadian and Quebec Literatures (printemps/Spring, 1992). I feel sure that as the SSHRCC undertakes its promised review of the Program of Aid to Learned Journals the eloquent arguments made on behalf of *Canadian Poetry* and several other periodicals which were denied funding in the recent competition will have a telling effect.

In the meantime, they have prompted a response from Gail Larose, the Director of the Research Communication and International Relations Division of SSHRCC. In a lengthy, courteous, and clarifying letter of May 6, 1992, Mrs. Larose confirms that my editorial and letters, "as well as the other letters received in support of *Canadian Poetry*," will indeed be taken into account in the forthcoming evaluation of the Aid to Learned Journals Program. While emphasizing that, as a Council Officer, she "cannot add to the ... comments" of the selection committee, she does provide a useful clarification on their decision:

Although the lack of contributions from women scholars and of articles pertaining to women poets was mentioned by the committee in their comments, this should not be construed as the main reason for their negative recommendation. The comments on the limited outreach of the journal and the lack of evidence of contemporary critical debates or theoretical perspectives are certainly serious enough to explain the relatively low rank obtained by the journal. I should also note that the committee's evaluation of *Canadian Poetry's* international outreach was not based on any assumption that "a national audience is inadequate for a journal devoted to [Canadian] poetry," as you mention in your article. Committees must first consider the national subscription levels of journals when making their recommendations but the

program criteria takes both the national and international distribution into consideration.

The effect of these clarifications is to remove emphasis from the second of the three reasons given by the selection committee---the putative lack of contributions by and about women in *Canadian Poetry*--and to place the burden instead on the journal's lack of "international outreach" and its supposed failure to register "contemporary critical debates or theoretical issues."

I would like to think that my own refutation of the selection committee's charge of sexism played some part in this re-emphasis, but probably the bulk of the credit should go to such comments as the following from Lorraine McMullen of the University of Ottawa: "[t]he committee would seem to be implying that a gender-based bias is the reason for *Canadian Poetry's* publication of fewer essays by and about women than by and about men. As a scholar and feminist, as well as a member of the Editorial Advisory Board, I find such an implication insulting and demeaning. How does the committee want the journal to rectify the situation, if one exists, in which more men's articles are being published than women's, when the simple fact is that, if there are more articles by men than by women being published in this journal, then more men than women are submitting publishable articles about poetry? What happens to standards of excellence if we try to manipulate what now is a fair system of evaluation of submitted manuscripts? Is political correctness now considered more important than scholarly excellence?"

And what of the principal reasons for the denial of funding to *Canadian Poetry*? With regard to the journal's lack of "international outreach," W.J. Keith of the University of Toronto writes: "[t]he logic here seems bizarre. Poetry is an important but currently unfashionable genre so far as public interest is concerned, and Canada is, in terms of population, a small country among the English speaking peoples. Surely a national agency ought to support a good national journal in this area for the very reason that it is unlikely to have great international appeal." On the same issue, Andrew Wainwright of Dalhousie University writes: "[a]s for the journal's international reputation: I have attended conferences in the UK which have been devoted to Canadian Studies. When I have spoken to academics from various disciplines about Canadian literary journals, I mention *Canadian Poetry* in the same breath as *Canadian Literature* and *Essays on Canadian Writing*. No one raises an eyebrow or asks for further information. These literary scholars from different countries are well aware of the existence and significance of *Canadian Poetry*. Later this month, I will be addressing faculty and students at Canadian studies centres in Madrid, Salamanca, and Edinburgh, and I will tell them of this SSHRCC decision that they will *not* comprehend." In the estimation of Donald Precosky of the College of New Caledonia, the charges that *Canadian Poetry* is deficient in "international outreach" and critical theory are "examples of the colonial attitudes that have plagued Canadian criticism from its beginnings. The `real' intellectual activities are always somewhere else and the `real' critical methods are always those developed elsewhere for other literary situations. Canadian literary activity, it seems, is always to be judged on the basis of its ability to mimic the discourse of those at the supposed `centre' of things. It is unfortunate that the selection committee has chosen to adopt and perpetuate such a colonial stance."

Addressing himself to the "unsubstantiated claim" that *Canadian Poetry* demonstrates "little evidence" of interest in "contemporary critical debates or theoretical issues," David Clark of McMaster University raises "two problems":

1) The committee ignores the fact that Canadian Poetry is crucially mandated to provide a place for the editorial and scholarly recovery of archival materials making up this country's poetic heritage. As the title of the journal clearly indicates, a significant portion of the published material is documentary---which is to say, not "critical," in the strictest sense of the term. In any case, for "contemporary critical debates" of any kind to occur, there must first be a scrupulously edited body of material available about which to debate: Canadian Poetry has served that fundamental need from the start, by preparing the necessary ground for the future of "critical debates and theoretical perspectives."

2) To be sure, the committee's claim about the lack of "evidence" of "theory" itself begs many theoretical questions. For instance, it is entirely unclear what constitutes, for the committee, the "contemporary" or the "theoretical." My field is precisely to teach and write what is conveniently called "theory," and I can find no discernible absence of it in this journal. It strikes me that the committee's tacit definition of "contemporary critical debates" must therefore be extraordinarily limited, not to say philosophically naive. If by "theoretical perspectives" the committee means (as I think it does) specifically "post-modernist" perspectives, it is working with a far too narrow, self-serving, and faddish definition of what constitutes "theory," certainly not a notion of the "theoretical" that would pass muster in, say, my undergraduate classes on the same subject. "Contemporary critical debates" do not occur in a historical vacuum, even if the post-modernist fetishization of the present sometimes makes it seem so. "Theory" itself is hardly confined to a restricted number of critical positions articulated by a handful of Canadian academics writing about contemporary literature: it could easily be demonstrated that nineteenth-century poetry and poetics, as well as contemporary critical work on that material, is neither more nor less "theoretical" than the latest "perspective" of the latest poet in Canada. This is not the place to engage in a critique of the committee's unreflected assumptions, except to ask: at what point, exactly, would Canadian Poetry be "contemporary" enough? How many and what kinds of "theoretical perspectives" would need to appear in the journal for it to meet the unspecified standard of the ALJP committee? Why would some theoretical perspectives, say, the dozens of contemporary perspectives not currently considered to be under the aegis of "post-modernism," be "less" theoretical than others? When is being "theoretical" theoretical enough?

What has struck me and many others over the years is the

fact that Canadian Poetry has welcomed an impressively wide range of theories, and has from its inception accurately reflected the complex confrontations and negotiations that make up what the committee too glibly calls the "contemporary." True to its humane and fair-minded editorial policy, the journal has for fifteen years fully represented the true nature of "contemporary critical debates," a scene, as the committee members need to be reminded, which is a productive mixture of evolving "older" and emerging "newer" critical methods, all of them---it should be stressed---equally contemporary. For reasons which would themselves need to be explored, the same thing cannot always be said of many other Canadian journals, journals with a much narrower agenda and dominated by a much less reflective conception of the "theoretical" and the "contemporary."

These considerations aside, anyone reading the articles published in Canadian Poetry will immediately see the degree to which the contributors are actively engaged in critical debates. I might add that I myself have had the honour of publishing several times in this journal, each time pressing home the same point: that the Canadian sense of what constitutes "contemporary critical debate" and "theoretical perspectives" is, precisely, not critical or theoretical enough, when you compare it to what is happening in America or Europe. The irony here is hard to escape: how can Canadian Poetry be criticized for being insufficiently "theoretical" or "contemporary" when it has itself repeatedly called for a general improvement in the theoretical quality of what passes for the contemporary critical scene?

Professor Clark has not been alone in recognizing the openness of *Canadian Poetry* to differing critical and theoretical approaches. In a paper on "English-Canadian Literature Periodicals, Text, Personality, and Dissent" delivered at the University of Calgary in April 1991 (before the SSHRCC decision was made), Frank Davey of the University of Western Ontario examines *Canadian Poetry* in the context of seven other journals "that focus principally on the theorization of English-Canadian writing." While observing that *Canadian Poetry* is directed primarily towards a scholarly 聞ite and tends "to focus on a single author or text," Professor Davey remarks that the journal's "editorials and reviews suggest . . . that its editors [are] more open to investigations of ideology than its articles impl[y]. Its overall coverage tend[s] to be as wide as the larger *Canadian Literature*; including the twentieth-century and pre-twentieth century texts almost equally. . . . Canadian literature here [is] visibly a field of scholarly and political construction. . . ." Nathalie Cooke of McGill University observes that, contrary to the opinion of the SSHRCC selection committee, *Canadian Poetry* "publishes a wide range of critical approaches while maintaining a primary interest in the rigours of responsible textual interpretation."

It seems to me that these and similar arguments go a long way towards refuting the primary reasons given for the denial of funding to *Canadian Poetry*. Nonetheless, to ensure the future of the journal, I have embarked on a campaign to increase the number of subscribers both nationally and internationally. In this I have been greatly

helped by W.H. New and Beverly Westbrook, the editor and Business Manager of *Canadian Literature*, who have furnished *Canadian Poetry's* Circulation Manager with their journal's subscription list. I have also contemplated fresh ways of affirming the commitment of *Canadian Poetry* to publishing "scholarly and critical" material on "poetry from all periods in Canada." Not only must the journal remain as it has always been---open to "contemporary debates or theoretical issues" of every sort---but, clearly, it must be seen to be so. In order to effect this convergence of reality and appearance, I have decided after much thought and extensive consultation to reconstitute and expand the journal's Editorial Advisory Board. The majority of board members will continue, augmented by several new appointments who have been selected for their expertise in a variety of areas such as textual scholarship and contemporary poetry. To those who are leaving the Board after long, expert and dedicated service to *Canadian Poetry*, I offer here in public, as I have already done in private, profound and heartfelt thanks. Over the past fifteen years, the journal has benefitted immeasurably from their unstinting devotion and astute advice. Those who continue on their path and follow in their footsteps can only be fiercely proud of their example and legacy.

Finally, it perhaps needs to be stressed that the "pool" of referees for articles and documents submitted for publication in *Canadian Poetry* extends well beyond the Editorial Advisory Board in order to ensure that the journal is as responsive as possible to the diversity of interests and approaches implied by its commitment to the "scholarly and critical . . . study of poetry from all periods in Canada." These are, indeed, "unsettled times of warring factions" as Malcolm Ross observes in his letter of support to SSHRCC---times when, more than ever, it is essential to balance change and continuity, to build on the accomplishments of the past while fostering developments that are genuinely creative and enlightening. Now, as at its inception, *Canadian Poetry* exists to sustain and encourage scholarship and dialogue in Canadian literary studies. So long as these things are valued the journal will continue.

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As will already have been observed, the appearance of *Canadian Poetry* has altered slightly with the present issue. The reason for this is that, in the absence of SSHRCC support, the production of the journal has been transferred from the Alger Press in Oshawa to the Canadian Poetry Project at the University of Western Ontario. This has necessitated a change in header and title fonts and provided the opportunity to use slightly larger and more legible typefaces for the body of the journal. My thanks to Gerard Stafleu for his sensitive reworking of the design of *Canadian Poetry*, to Eleanor Surridge and Amanda St. Jean for their painstaking work on the present issue, and to the contributors who have borne patiently with us through the transition.

Changes wrought by necessity seldom come without regret and sadness. For many years *Canadian Poetry* has been very well served by the Alger Press, particularly by Ernie St. Amour, who took the journal to his heart, gave it the benefit of his expertise, and became a valued friend. To Ernie, and everyone at Alger, many, many thanks.