Poetry, Audience, Politics and Region

by Frank Davey

1.

In the past few years articles expressing fear of an incipient crisis within Canadian poetry have almost become a subgenre of Canadian literary journalism. Poets have variously envied the legendary importance of poetry in politically oppressed Eastern European and South American countries, lamented a diminishing readership within Canada, or deplored the directions their fellow writers have taken. David Solway has announced in *Canadian Literature* the "end of poetry," arguing that contemporary poets have chosen to abandon imitation of form for imitation of nature, and have thereby entered into a direct and suicidal competition with prose fiction: the poet now "goes on multiplying narrative upon description in odd linguistic constructs called poems that scarcely anyone bothers to read except other poets and an entrenched minority of academic critics" (132). Judith Fitzgerald in an article printed in both *The Toronto Star* and *The Canadian Author and Bookman* has told us that "poetry in the late 20th century has ended up in the cultural morgue" (14), and Susan Ioannou, writing in *Cross-Canada Writers' Quarterly,* has forecast that if poetry is to survive it will have to abandon the written word for the oral (32). Patrick Lane, also in *Cross-Canada Writers' Quarterly,* has commented that "people rarely, if ever, read. . poems," but urged poets nevertheless to continue writing in search of the extra-social rewards of "Yeats' Bysantium [sic]" (4).

In recent months similar concerns about the lack of a siguificant audience for contemporary poetry have been expressed in the general media. One of the most sustained discussions of this kind has taken place in a chain of four articles that appeared in the *Globe and Mail* and *Books in Canada.* The discussion was begun in the *Globe* by poet Kristjana Gunnars who, despite noting that poetry presently faced an "uninterested community," romantically proclaimed that there was an irreducible "human craving" for poetry "as strong as hunger, thirst and relief from pain," a craving that would lead to poetry being called upon to heal Canada's current constitutional wounds. Cary Fagan's prompt response to Gunnars, in the October *Books in Canada,* attracted notice in the daily "best home entertainment" endorsements of the *Globe.* Ignoring the implications of Gunnars' move to biologize poetry, Fagan focussed on the success of recent specialized poetries — his examples were poetries "of feminism" and "of anticolonialism" — in finding "discerning if small audiences." He argued that the recent experiences of publishers indicated that no poet "was able to speak to the whole country" but that many could find readers in "political interest groups." Fagan's article was in its turn taken to task in the *Globe* on December 12 by playwright Richard Sanger, who pointed to the example of popular music in suggesting that a metrical poetry that avoided political issues and was "escapist, frivolous, pleasurable or even untrue" could find a large audience, and that

politically engaged poems "catering to specialized groups" were precisely what was making poetry "socially insignificant." An escapist, frivolous poetry, he implied, could return poetry to social siguificance. On January 2nd, Sanger was himself taken on by *Globe* columnist John Cruickshank. Writing that "Sanger claims no one reads poetry in this country because our poets are humourless ideologues and their poems are prosy political screeds," Cruickshank argued that it is 'clumsy' writing rather than political commitment that creates "bad verse" and suggested that the readers who shun contemporary poetry shun equally the escapist rhymes of "high school yearbooks" and the metrical texts of "Wordworth, Chaucer, Dante, Virgil, Homer and King David."

Throughout the conflicting representations of these articles and their various struggles with 'badness' and readership, a common element persisted: a yearning for a transcendent poetry. Solway wrote nostalgically of a poetry that once honoured "degree and precedence." Lane described poetry as a "rare gift" and invoked Yeats' golden bough, Ioannou called for "intense melodies" that could "dare to interpret the future." Gunnars presented a poetry that "sees life" and transcends ethnic barriers by showing "what kind of blood flows in our neighbour's veins." Fagan's nationalist note of calling for a poetry "spacious enough to embrace us all" invoked the related notion of a transcendent humanity.

2.

Statistical evidence that might confirm whether or not there has been a decline in Canada in the number of volumes of poetry sold, or a decline in average sales per title, is difficult to obtain. Neither the Applebaurn-Hebert Commission nor the Ontario Royal Commission on Book Publishing distinguished poetry titles; the recent Canada Council studies of sales patterns among publishers supported by the Council's 'Block Grant' program distinguish poetry but are not able to include the numerous 'desktop' publishers that may not qualify for the program but nevertheless appear, on such evidence as book reviews and the offerings of Toronto's annual Small Press Book Fair, to publish more than half of Canadian poetry titles.[1] The Council studies indicate that the 70 English-language presses supported by the programme published a total of approximately 65 poetry titles annually during 1983-86. In 1985 the average press run was 935 copies, the average first-year sales 365 copies, and the average sales after two years 459 copies (49% of the press run). In 1986 the average press run was 880 copies, the average first- year sales 397 copies, and the average sales after two years 468 copies (of 53% of the press run). The Block Grant regulation that requires participating presses to print a minimum of 500 copies suggests that the range between the smallest and largest print runs was likely narrow. The publishers I have spoken with[2] indicate that library sales per poetry title are now as low as 50 copies, and that by far the majority of their sales occur through trade book stores. These sales often are highest in the press's home region. Gordon Platt, the Canada Council officer who administers the Block Grant Program, estimates that most of the participating publishers make the majority of their sales in their home region.[3]

There are no comparable figures available for the 1970s. However, the minimum press run of 500 copies has been a part of the

Block Grant programme since its founding in 1973. In an article published that year, Dave Godfrey estimated that there were then 217 Canadian publishers of all kinds in both languages; the Canada Council currently supports 113 French and English-language literary publishers. Colophon statements in various 1970s poetry books suggest that print runs were no less than they are presently. The first edition of Michael Ondaatje's first book, *The Dainty Monsters,* from Coach House Press in 1967, notes a print run of 500 copies; its 1973 "third edition" indicates a printing of 1000. My own *The Clallam,* from Talonbooks in 1973, records an edition of 750 copies. The first printing of Ondaatje's *Rat Jelly* in 1973 states a printing of 2000 copies; Daphne Marlatt's *Vancouver Poems* (1972) a printing of 1000; Judith Fitzgerald's *Lacerating Heartwood* (1977) a printing of 1000; bpNichol and Steve McCaffery's *In England Now That Spring* (1979) a printing of 733, and Phyllis Webb's *Wilson's Bowl* (1980) a printing of 1500 copies. The colophons and printer's records of bpNichol's *The Martyrology,* a continuing poem published in 8 books throughout the two decades, and which received increasing critical attention in the 1980s, suggests that its overall readership has diminished. Book 1 and Book 2 were both published in 1972 in editions of 1000, and were reprinted in a combined edition of 1000 in 1977. Books 3 & 4 were printed in an edition of 1500 in 1976. All are currently out of print. The printer's records indicate that Book 5 (1982) and Book 6 (1987) were printed in editions of 750 copies; Book 6 recently went out of print, and approximately 200 of Book 5 remain unsold. Book '7&', published as *Gifts* in an edition of 1000 copies in fall 1990, had by the end of the year sold 390.

3.

What is much easier to confirm about the past decade is that major ownership and policy changes occurred within Canadian publishing — changes that affected editorial selection and distribution in all genres, and particularly poetry. What occurred was the defeat of early 1970s dreams of expanding Canadian-owned capitalist book production and the retreat of many of the most ambitious new would-be 'national' publishers either back into petty commodity publishing or, in a very few cases, into mergers with large corporations. One of the major causes of this defeat was a distribution system glutted with the low-priced books of American-based multinational publishers. At the beginning of the 1970s most of significant Canadian publishers of poetry were located in Ontario and either enjoyed or aspired to a national profile. McClelland and Stewart, Macmillan of Canada and Oxford University Press had regular seasonal poetry lists, as did smaller Ontario presses like Oberon, House of Anansi, Press Porcepic, Coach House Press, NC Press. The national aspirations of the latter were marked by their frequent publishing of nationally framed titles — Oberon's *New Canadian Stories,* Coach House's *The Story so Far* and *The Long Poem Anthology,* Anansi's *Survival* and *Lament for a Nation,* Porcepic's *Our Nature, Our Voices,* NC Press's *The Trade Union Movement of Canada.*

By the end of the 1980s, among the large publishers only McClelland and Stewart regularly published poetry; among the smaller nationalist presses House of Anansi had become the literary division of General Publishing, and Press Porcepic had discontinued poetry publication. Although the largest concentration of publishers was still in Ontario (the Canada Council reports its 1986 English-language

Block Grant recipients to be almost half in Ontario, a fifth each in the Atlantic and Prairie provinces, and 14 per cent in B.C.), these had more and more become regional presses that, according to Council records, made most of their sales in their home provinces. Some of the most active presses in poetry publication were now ones whose regional focuses were often evident in their names — Newfoundland's Breakwater Books, Winnipeg's Turnstone Press, Edmonton's NeWest Press, Vancouver's Harbour Press and Pulp Press, Saskatoon's Thistledown Press. Of 65 English-language poetry titles published by Canada Council publishers in 1986-87, 37 were published in B.C. or in the Atlantic or Prairie regions. Other presses focussed much of their programmes on ethnic or gender constituencies: Women's Press and Ragweed Press on women's writing, Sister Vision Press on writing by 'women of colour', Pemmican Press and Theytus books on native indian writing, Williams Wallace on black writing. Perhaps an even more significant change has been the way in which many of these presses have undertaken the legitimating tasks of criticism and canon formation previously the nearly exclusive functions of Ontario presses. The conception of canonicity they have employed has not been the national one of the 1970s; it has been plural and linked directly to the presses' special constituencies. In the last few years Turnstone Press has published anthologies of prairie long poems and of Manitoba short stories, a collection of critical studies, *Contemporary Manitoba Writers.*, and Dennis Cooley's *The Vernacular Muse;* Pulp Press anthologies of Vancouver poetry, East Vancouver poetry and of 'work' writing, Women's Press the anthologies *Baker's Dozen: Stories by Women*, *Dykeversions: Lesbian Short Fiction*, and *Dykewords: Lesbian Writing;* NeWest Press the fiction anthologies *Alberta Bound* and *Alberta ReBound*, the anthology of writing by Western Canadian native women *Writing the Circle*, and a series of casebooks on western writers; Regina's Coteau Books anthologies of new Saskatchewan poets and of stories from Saskatchewan. The success of these special-audience presses has complicated any attempt to understand of poetry's readership; if 2000 copies of a nationally distributed book are sold in 1975, and a decade later 500 copies each of four 'regional' titles are sold in four different constituencies, has the circulation of poetry increased or decreased?

4.

Precisely why so many special constituencies became active in Canada during the 1980s, and why their power to interpellate individual subjects eclipsed that of national and transnational ideologies, is much too complex a question to consider at any length here, although it is a question that will ultimately be necessary to any large understanding of the recent history of Canadian publishing. Certainly the new special-constituency focus of Canadian publishers was both enabled by the growth of these constituencies and enabling of such growth; the publishers often worked to record, define, reify and construct these constituencies' beliefs about themselves. This regional activity occurred against a backdrop of enormous growth of the multi-national economy, visible in the malls and storefronts even of small-town Canada, and of this economy's defeat of national economic planning, visible in evolution of the European Economic Community or in Canada-US Free Trade Agreement. The triumph of multinational capitalism appears both to have discredited national restraints on regional and other special-interest values, and to have created what one might call a 'resistance-vacuum' in the space in

which nationalist ideologies had previously resisted external hegemonies — a vacuum which, if we follow Richard Terdiman's theorizing of resistance, the multinational may have indirectly 'called forth' resisting minority ideologies to fill. The clearly visible economic nature of the new multinationalism, uncloaked by the kinds of 'rationalizing' mythologies and ideologies that had concealed the economic and instrumental emphases of a nation-state, may also have operated to the general discredit of what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls metanarrative, and have opened the way for cultural assertions of difference even as the new multinational economic order burgeoned.

These are indeed complex questions. Back in Canadian publishing what one finds in the 1980s is the national configuration being squeezed from two sides — from the multinational, where the Canadian publisher is bought out by international-scale diversified companies like Brascan or Torstar, or increasingly allied through agency agreements with international publishers, and from the regional, where the Canadian publisher's national market is re-made into a collage of special interest markets each dominated by two or three petty-commodity publishers.

5.

One fascinating effect of regionalization on Canadian poetry, and further symptom of how suddenly the power relationships within Canadian literature have changed, has been the extraordinary disarray of the contemporary poetry canon as constructed by the 1980s' national anthologies. In the 1970s there were three academic anthologies of contemporary Canadian poetry available for general use — Gary Geddes and Phyllis Bruce's *15 Canadian Poets* (1970), Eli Mandel's *Poets of Contemporary Canada* (1972) and John Newlove's *Canadian Poetry: The Modern Era* (1977). All were edited by writers who had some association with Canadian nationalism: Geddes was editor of Copp Clark's monograph series Studies in Canadian Literature, Mandel was concurrently editing two other collections of Canadian poetry and the anthology *Contexts of Canadian Criticism,* Newlove was senior literary editor for his anthology's publisher, McClelland and Stewart. Although these anthologies covered slightly different periods, the Newlove collecting 30 poets who mostly began publishing after 1940, the Geddes and Bruce 15 from a similar period, and the Mandel focussing on ten who began publishing after 1955, they showed considerable agreement about which poets should be represented. Of the fifteen poets in the Geddes and Bruce, all but two appeared in Newlove; of the ten in Mandel all but two appeared in Newlove and all but three in the Geddes and Bruce. Although the disagreements concerned, as one might expect, mostly poets who were relatively young in the 1970s (Rosenblatt, b. 1933, Bissett, b. 1939, Coleman and Nichol, b. 1944) the editors were unanimous about Ondaatje (b. 1943), McEwen (b. 1941), Atwood (b. 1939) and Newlove (b. 1938). The dimensions of this consensus were underlined by a prefatory note in the Newlove that its selection was "based on a survey of . . . Canadian literature instructors in universities across the country." The consensus was also confirmed by the most widely used comprehensive academic anthology of the period: Klinck and Watters' *Canadian Anthology.* Fourteen of Geddes and Bruce's fifteen, eight of Mandel's ten, and twenty-six of Newlove's thirty were included within its 1974 third edition.

The late 1970s and early 80s brought three further anthologies of

contem porary poetry: Geddes and Bruce's *15 Canadian Poets Plus Five* (a 1978 revision of their 1970 collection), volume 2 of David and Lecker's two-volume historical anthology *Canadian Poetry* (1982), offering 22 poets born 1918 and after, and Bowering's *The Contemporary Canadian Poem Anthology* (1984) also with 20 poets, most of whom began publishing after 1960. The editors of the new collections again had nationalist affiliations. Bowering was the author of the satirical *At War with the U.S.* and of two novels, *A Short Sad Rook* and *Burning Water,* that interrogated various national myths. David and Lecker were the owners of ECW Press, whose principle publications have been series of bibliographies and critical paraphrases for Canadian literature teaching. However, the 1970 consensus began to vanish. Of the 'Plus 5' poets added by Geddes and Bruce, none had appeared in the Mandel anthology and only those more than 50 years old (Livesay, Page and Webb) in the Newlove. Only 6 poets appeared in all three of the new anthologies: Ondaatje, Bowering, MacEwen and Atwood, who had also been unanimous selections in the 1970s, plus the somewhat older Webb and D.C. Jones. Of Bowering's 20 writers, only 10 appeared in David and Lecker and 7 in Geddes and Bruce. Although the Geddes/Bruce and David/Lecker agreed on almost all of their older poets, they disagreed on most of the younger — on Nichol and Coleman (b. 1944), Marlatt (b. 1943), Lee and Bissett (b. 1939). More interestingly, even though a decade had gone by, the youngest writer either included was still Coleman, b. 1944. Even Bowering, who offered the largest proportion of writers born after 1940, could offer only one writer born later than 1944, Christopher Dewdney, b. 1951.

Near the end of the 1980s Geddes presented a third revision of *15 Canadian Poets,* now titled *15 Canadian Poets x 2.* Coleman was dropped from the anthology and eleven new poets added. Most of these, however, were born before 1930, as Geddes acted to transform what had been in 1970 a contemporary anthology into a historical one. The new 'younger poets' included Geddes himself (b. 1940), Robert Bringhurst (b. 1946) and Bronwen Wallace (b. 1949). In eighteen years, despite a doubling of the number of poets, the age of the youngest poet in the anthology had risen from 26 to 39 years.

The three comprehensive academic anthologies of the 1980s also had editors with strong links to Ontario and to the institutional structures of Canadian literature. These, Daymond and Monkman's *Literature in Canada* (1978), Bennett and Brown's *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* (1983) and David and Lecker's *The New Canadian Anthology* (1988) showed both a similar lack of consensus and a similar aversion to selecting younger poets. Of 30 poets born since 1926, the anthologies agreed on 10. Of 21 born since 1935, they agreed on 5. Out of seven poets born after 1944, they agreed on none. Combining these with the 1980s poetry anthologies, one finds that of the 42 poets they collected with birth dates in 1926 or later, they showed fifty per cent agreement on fifteen, and full agreement on only 5.

There were also three major trade anthologies of Canadian poetry published in the 1980s, two of these edited by prominent nationalists. Margaret Atwood's *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*, Ralph Gustafson's fourth edition of *The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse* (1984) and Dennis Lee's *The New Canadian Poets, 1970-1985* (1986) together collected 86 poets born 1926 or later. Of these Lee collected 27 poets born 1944 or later. Atwood concurred with 14 of

these, not sur prisingly given her acknowledgement of having herself enjoyed Lee's "advice . . . about the most recent poetry" (xl). Gustafson, however, concurred with only 3 — the only 3 of his poets born later than 1944. The three anthologies suggest no shortage of poets or poetry, and again some lack of editorial agreement. A comparison of Lee's *The New Canadian Poets* and Geddes and Bruce's *15 Canadian Poets* of 1970, suggests that a large gap was opening in the canon-forming process. A choice of 15 poets largely confirmed by rival academic anthologies had become by 1986 a choice of 44 of whom only 13 were agreed upon by at least one academic anthologist and only 3 by more than one.

One general implication of these anthologies is that the national canon of Canadian poetry has been very little changed since 1970. Nearly all of the academic anthologists have been timid about representing writers born after the second world war. Most of the changes that have occurred have involved older writers, and usually women writers. The three Geddes anthologies illustrate this change fairly clearly. To the original 12 men and 3 women of *15 Canadian Poets,* whose birthdates ran from 1904-1944, the 1978 edition added one man, Patrick Lane (b. 1939) and four women, Dorothy Livesay (b. 1909), P.K. Page (b. 1917), Phyllis Webb (b. 1927), and Pat Lowther (b. 1935). The addition of Livesay, Page and Webb, writers already acknowledged as canonical in 1970s comprehensive anthologies such as Klinck and Watters, helped Geddes and Bruce address an absence of women in their collection that was becoming increasingly damaging as the strength of feminism grew in universities. At the same time this addition appears to have helped them avoid dealing with active younger women writers. The one younger woman they added, Pat Lowther, had died three years earlier. The five additions were also all from western Canada, and radically altered the 1970 editions regional representation of 3 poets from the west, 11 from Ontario and Quebec, and one from the maritimes.

Geddes' 1988 edition continued this tendency to turn to the past in order to respond to the political contentions of the present. It dropped one male poet (Coleman, the youngest of the 1970 edition writers) and added seven men and four women. Two of the men, Pratt (b. 1883) and Scott (b. 1899) moved the period of the anthology back into the 1920s and buttressed its national authority. Two others, Gustafson (b. 1909) and Klein (b. 1909), along with Waddington (b. 1917) revised and expanded its representation of modernism. The youngest of the additions, Kroetsch (b. 1926), Szumigalski (b. 1926), Geddes (b. 1940), Wallace (b. 1945), Bringhurst (b. 1946) and Sarah (b. 1949) were, apart from Kroetsch, con servative choices of poets yet undistinguished by critical attention. Kroestch, Klein and Waddington expanded the collection's ethnic representation without acknowledgement of any of the younger writers who mark their work with minority ethnicity. Szumigalski was from the prairies, but did not represent the radical prairie poetics of Gunnars, Suknaski, Friesen or Cooley. Wallace and Sarah offered feminist themes but not the unsetting epistemological challenges of Marlatt, Tostevin, Fitzgerald or di Michele. Among male poets, Geddes shied noticeably away from many of those whose work most threatens the liberal humanist assumptions of the lyric: bissett, Nichol, Dewdney, McCaffey, Scobie or Lush. In general, his revisions worked to save the canon while responding only minimally to potentially disruptive social change. This minimal response was mostly to how such change has altered the

way poetries in circulation before 1970 are read; his response to new writing radically marked by ethnicity, feminism, regionalism or by other challenges to totality, was to represent it through its less extreme manifestations.

6.

In introducing *The New Canadian Poets, 1970-85* Dennis Lee expressed astonishment "that many of the best were unfamiliar with one another's work. Not only that: often they were unaware of each other's *names*." Lee attributed this situation in part to the expansion of poetry publishing in the 1970s and to the "rise of regional presses" many of whose "titles were never seen outside their home province" (xvii-xviii). He did not consider the possibility that his writers might not have wished to know each other's names.[4] Despite various 'poetry wars' — the McGill Group and the Maple Leaf poets, *Preview* and *First Statement,* Sutherland's attack on Robert Finch, Birney's resignation from editorship of *Canadian Poetry Magazine,* Robin Mathews' attacks on *Tish* — there have been until recently only two underlying ideologies in Canadian modern poetry. One is the aesthetic/humanist ideology that assumes that the writing of poetry reveals and celebrates human creativity and the spiritual dimensions of a common humanity, and that the reading of it is morally beneficial through its enlarging of one's understanding of humanity. This was the view of the many of the initiators of the institutionalized study Canadian literature — Smith, Woodcock and Frye in particular. The second is a nationalist ideology in which it is not merely a shared humanity that joins Canadian writers but a common humanity *as Canadians.*[5] This Canadianness signifies *difference,* a difference from other nationalities (together with a potential to be oppressed by them), *homogeneity,* an identity with other Canadians, and *universality,* an impulse to national identification that the Canadian also shares with other humans. Thus while the nationalist is critical of the aesthetic/humanist ideology for being apolitical, it reinstalls many of its attributes — its valuing of cultural recurrence, its belief that art is morally and spiritually instructive — within national parameters. It is these values that those who now lament the apparent passing of poetry appeal to: Lane for the "fabled markets" of a Yeatsian Byzantium, Soiway for a poetry "which honours the canons and attitudes of its masonic past" (130), the nationalist Lee for a time when Canadian poets all read one another, the similarly nationalist Fagan for a poetry "spacious enough to embrace us."

But, as Lee found, there now appear to be many poets who don't wish to be categorically embraced. Like nationalists, these poets are constructing difference and identity, perceiving conflict and oppression, but doing so within metaphors and grids other than national ones. One striking feature of the current national Canadian literature anthologies is that they have continued to be edited by poets and scholars of the nationalist generation. The succeeding generation has constructed Canadian writing in terms of other tensions, identities and audiences. This generation has produced numerous compilers of regional anthologies — Ken Norris, Alan Safarik, Lorna Crozier, Antonio d'Alfonso, Mark Duncan, Andre Farkas, of feminist anthologies — Rosemary Sullivan, Mary di Michele, Judith Fitzgerald, Smaro Kamboureli, and of racial or ethnic anthologies — Gerry Shikatani, Joseph Pivato, Pier Giorgio di Cicco — but as yet

almost none for a national anthology.[6] It has constructed strong writers within the perspectives of those constituencies — Daphne Marlatt, Betsy Warland, Bronwen Wallace within differing feminist communities, Tom Wayman, Jeff Derksen, Steve McCaffery within certain left political communities, Dennis Cooley, Andrew Suknaski, Kristjana Gunnars within a prairie context, Dionne Brand, Marlene Nourbese Philip and Lillian Allen within the Toronto black community — but none as national writers. When Dionne Brand writes 'no language is neutral' she is writing of a Canada configured much differently from that envisioned thirty years earlier by Michele Lalonde when writing 'speak white' or Margaret Atwood when she is writing "This is my country under glass." She is also imagining a much different audience.

With what appears to be at least the temporary suspension of a national culture and a national literary audience, it has been extremely difficult for any Canadian poet not discursively affiliated with some regional, feminist, ethnic, racial or otherwise ideological community to find audience, recognition or identity. Affiliations with humanism that tied writer and reader throughout much of Earle Birney's and P.K. Page's writing lives, or with a nationalist humanism in the case of Pratt, no longer seem to have the power to interpellate readers for writers whose fellow citizens are as preoccupied with difference as with identity, or who envision difference within more complex systems of conflict than such binaries as liberality-cupidity, French-English, female-male, colony-empire, or black- white. The one 'new' poet to rise to undisputed national prominence since 1970 has been Robert Kroetsch, who interestingly already had a national presence before 1970 as a novelist, and who has also positioned himself as a poet in terms of both a regional 'prairie' identity and a transnational poststructuralist one.

The shift away from humanism and nationalism has also been difficult for lyric poetry. The lyric's assumptions of transcendent inspiration run emphatically counter to the assumptions of historical and material par ticularity on which the new special constituency literatures rest. The lyric poet's reliance on humanism, on the belief that an individual voice can be accessible and valuable to others across all class, gender and culture lines because poet and reader participate in a common humanity, appears to be colliding with a view of poetry in which it is co-authored by writer and constituency, and in which its value lies in the meanings it can produce for that constituency, or in the way in which it alters language so that it is more responsive to that constitutency. The cry that 'poetry is dead,' in the case of Solway, Sanger or Fitzgerald, may be more a cry that the lyric poem is in difficulty than the categorical declaration it appears to be. Again it is notable that among the younger Canadian poets who have found any recognition in the last twenty years, so few of them are lyric poets and so many have addressed their work to particular discursive communities (Wayman, Howard White, Marlatt, Warland, Gunnars, Cooley, Friesen, Arnason, McCaffery, Brand, Wallace, Suknaski, Dewdney) and have received their recognition within these communities. It is also notable that the theorists among this generation — Cooley, Godard, Neuman, Kamboureli, Scott, Wayman — have by and large viewed language as a social construct historically shaped to favor particular classes, groups, ethnicities and regions, and not as the transcultural instrument of Smith, Frye or even Louis Dudek.

Is Canadian poetry in crisis? The answer depends on whether one under stands 'Canadian poetry' to designate a national paradigm or merely poetry written in Canada. The latter appears in many ways to be as productive and disputed a thing as it ever has been. Although Canadian poetry may have lost its long-standing cultural utility as a delineator of national character, of what Alan R. Knight, in surveying Canadian poetry anthologies from Dewart to Atwood, has called "true and harmonious secular emotions" [148]), it seems to have found new use-value in elaborating or reifying the self-constructions of special-interest constituencies. That is, Canadian poetry may only be in crisis to the extent that the national federation is in crisis. From Toronto, or from Ontario, where most Canadian poetry in other years was written, published or at least legitimated, it may well seem that poetry is in confusion or decline, or is extremely difficult to circulate nationally. But from within women's writing, or from Edmonton, or from one of the First Nations' presses, it may seem to be flourishing. The great problem at the moment may not be the writing of poetry, but the discovering of ways to get any kind of text to circulate between the constituent parts of the nation. Much like the currently faltering 'anthology' of Canadian provinces, the Canadian poetry institution as we have known it — an institution which has assumed individual poets rather than poets radically embricated in asymmetrical groups, discourses, or regions — may be incapable of facilitating the kinds of collisions and exchanges which will be needed to bring together a new 'national' gathering.

Notes

1. In the overall structure of Canadian poetry publishing, the presses that receive Block Grants are a highly significant group. They are Canadian-owned publishers with resources to publish at least 6 titles a year, in editions of at least 48 pages, and in print runs of at least 500 copies. In the last decade they have published nearly all of the prize-winning poetry titles. Although they range in size from McClelland and Stewart to presses that operate out of a postal box and publish the minimum required by the program, most would have gross sales of less than $100,000. The only poetry publishing presses that fall outside this group are the few branch plant publishers that publish Canadian poetry, and the numerous very small presses — 'desktop publishers' — that publish chapbooks in relatively short print runs. Although the latter may distribute only within a single city, or sell mainly at cultural events or through a postal box, their persistence and ubiquity in Canada are also indicators that poetry in Canada is far from moribund. [back]

2. Karl Siegler of Talonbooks, Rev Daurio of Mercury Press, Margaret McClintock of Coach House Press and Paul Dutton of Underwhich Editions. [back]

3. Telephone interview, 1 March, 1991. [back]

4. Writing of the feminist essays of Gail Scott, Gary Edwards comments that "to theorize and address difference is to recognize its particularity at the level of individual production against the homogenising zeal of tourist guides to the territory" ("Deconstructing Canadian Literature," *West Coast Line* 3 [Winter 1990], p. 154). The current preoccupation with difference within Canadian poetry, among writers, publishers and readers, makes it extremely difficult to construct tourist guides to it, or even to construct a knowledge of it that could be construed as 'Canadian poetry.' [back]

5. Although Canadian literary nationalists, through their arguing of the particularity of human social forms within specific national boundaries, have usually presented themselves as contending against the generalities of humanism, they have for the most part also been careful to maintain the compatibility of a Canadian national literature with humanism. Thus D.C. Jones argued that the Canadian imagination participates in "themes common to western literature" (*Butterfly on Rock,* Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1970], p. 6), and John Moss that it shares "objectives of art" that are "universal" (*Patterns of Isolation* [Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974], p. 8). [back]

6. The only recent example of a national anthology edited by a younger writer is Sharon Thesen's *The New Long Poem Anthology*, from Coach House Press, 1991. [back]

Texts Cited

Atwood, Margaret, ed. *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English.* Toronto: Oxford UP, 1982.

Brown, Russell, and Donna Bennett. *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English.* 2 vols. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1982.

Bowering, George, ed. *The Contemporary Canadian Poem Anthology.* Toronto: Coach House Press, 1984.

Brand, Dionne. *No Language Is Neutral.* Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990.

The Canada Council. *Block Grant Program Book Publishing Statistics for 1982 and 1983 Titles.* Ottawa: The Canada Council, 1986.

_____ . *Block Grant Program Book Publishing Statistics, 1985 Titles.* Ottawa: The Canada Council, 1988.

_____ . *Block Grant Program Book Publishing Statistics, 1986 Titles.* Ottawa: The Canada Council, 1990.

Cruickshank, John. "Canada's poets need no apology," *The Globe and Mail*, January 2, 1991, Cl.

David, Jack, and Robert Lecker, ed. *Canadian Poetry.* 2 vols. Toronto: General Publishing and Downsview: ECW Press, 1982.

David, Jack, and Robert Lecker, ed. *The New Canadian Anthology.* Scarborough, Ont.: Nelson Canada, 1988.

Daymond, Douglas, and Leslie Monkman, ed. *Literature in Canada.* 2 vols. Toronto: Gage, 1978.

Fagan, Cary. "Aversion to Verse," *Books in Canada*, October 1990, 9-10.

Fitzgerald, Judith. "Poetry Is Dead," *Canadian Author and Bookman*, 64:1, 14.

Geddes, Gary, and Phyllis Bruce, ed. *15 Canadian Poets.* Toronto: Oxford UP, 1970.

Geddes, Gary, and Phyllis Bruce, ed. *15 Canadian Poets Plus 5.* Toronto: Oxford UP, 1978.

Geddes, Gary, ed. *15 Canadian Poets X 2.* Toronto: Oxford UP 1988.

Gunnars, Kristjana. "The Search for our Passion," *The Globe and Mail*, August 18, 1990, p. C15.

Gustafson, Ralph, ed. *The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse.* Revised Edition. Markham, Ont.: Penguin, 1984.

Ioannu, Susan. "The Future of Poetry," *Cross-Canada Writers' Quarterly*, 10:1, 9, 32.

Klinck, Carl F., and Reginald E. Watters, ed. *Canadian Anthology* (third edition). Toronto: Gage, 1974.

Knight, Alan. "Growing Hegemonies: Preparing the Ground for Official Anthologies of Canadian Poetry," in E.D. Blodgett and A.G. Purdy, ed., *Prefaces and Literary Manifestoes.* Edmonton: Research Institute for Comparative Literature, 1990: 146-57.

Lane, Patrick. "The Fabled Poets' Market," *Cross-Canada Writers' Quarterly* 12:1, 3-4.

Lee, Dennis, ed. *The New Canadian Poets, 1970 -1985.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge.* Tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984 [1979].

Mandel, Eli, ed. *Poets of Contemporary Canada.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972.

Newlove, John, ed. *Canadian Poetry: The Modern Era.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977.

Sanger, Richard. "Poetry could use a bit more Beauty, a bit less Truth," *The Globe and Mail*, December 12, 1990, CI.

Solway, David. "The End of Poetry," *Canadian Literature* 115 (Winter 1987), 127-34. Terdiman, Richard. *Discourse / Counter-Discourse.* Ithaca: Coruell UP, 1985.