

Literary History of Canada

New, W.H., general ed.; Carl Berger, Alan Cairns, Francess G. Halpenny, Henry Kreisel, Douglas Lochhead, Philip Stratford, Clara Thomas, eds. *The Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, Second Edition Volume Four. University of Toronto Press, 1990, xxxii + 492 pp.

With notes and index, Volume Four of the second edition of *The Literary History of Canada* runs to almost 500 pages. This means that coverage of twelve years of Canadian literature, between 1972 and 1984, requires a book just over half the size of the original 1965 *Literary History* which covered everything from the beginnings to 1960. And yet much of the writing done during the twelve years could not even be mentioned. Here is Laurie Ricou on some of the omissions from his chapter on poetry: "For each poet whom I have discussed as a surrealist or prose lyricist, several hundred — many of them very competent and readable poets — have had to be left out" (25). In the chapter on life-writing, Shirley Neuman speaks of "dozens upon dozens of hagiographies" (341), by which she means political biographies written by worshipful hacks, mentioning none of them by title. One remembers Northrop Frye, in the conclusion to the three volume 1976 second edition of the *Literary History*, remarking on the "colossal verbal explosion that has taken place in Canada since 1960. Such a quantitative increase eventually makes for a qualitative change" (318). That polite "eventually" shouldn't obscure Frye's statement, in the same essay, that "Canadian literature is here, perhaps still a minor but certainly no longer a gleam in a paternal critic's eye" (319). Would the "eventually" and the "perhaps" have been dropped if Frye had written a conclusion to Volume Four? Would he have pronounced us mature in 1990?

To do so, he would have had to disagree with many of the writers of individual chapters. Ricou looks in vain for belligerent new poets; Rajan pronounces Canadian criticism (on other than Canadian literature) extremely conservative; Parker and Zimmerman say that drama, despite its many gains in the period reviewed, still rests on a fragile infrastructure; Neuman finds certain kinds of life writing in a sorry state. Robert Fothergill is fascinating on radio drama because his treatment of this often experimental genre uncovers some Canadian classics for which there is no published text. We have hitherto almost completely ignored writers, by the sound of what Fothergill says, who ought to be recognized alongside our best-known poets, dramatists and novelists. Taking Volume Four whole, then, a reader cannot but see the contemporary literary picture as spotty. This would somewhat contradict the general impression many of us has formed, looking only at the core genres of poetry, short story, fiction and drama, that Canadian literature has not only arrived but has much to offer the world at large.

We don't know what Frye thought of Canadian literature in 1990, because the conception of Volume Four rules out conclusion. The last piece in Volume Four is Francess G. Halpenny's "From Author to Reader," a valuable account of the book trade in Canada, "the linked process by which writing, of all kinds, is created, published, printed, sold, distributed, and read" (385). We no longer have closure; new notions of indeterminacy paradoxically dictate open-endedness. So Volume Four is heavier up front; it opens with W.H. New's Introduction, an excellent summary not only of the contents of the volume and the medley of approaches taken by each writer, but of the period under review.

New naturally doesn't pick up where Frye left off (as Frye himself does in his second Conclusion), but inadvertently or not he does suggest that Frye's call for Canadian writers of comic vision, for a literature of play, has now been realized. The 1970s, he says, "were years of literary protest and literary play, sometimes in the same work" (xix). And I think he's right about the growing independence of

Canadian writers from the national obsession about identity: "less and less was it seen to be the role of art of validate the culture" (xix). Canadian experience, the land and all the rest, has not ceased to be compelling for many of our writers, but a certain release from the nativist imperative to render it is implied by how seriously we have come to take writers like Mavis Gallant, most of whose work is beside that point. The road to Michael Ondaatje's "Canadian" novel *In the Skin of a Lion* — leaving his poetry aside — ran through Texas-New Mexico (*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*), Sri Lanka (*Running in the Family*), and New Orleans (*Coming Through Slaughter*), but he was "canonized" long before he arrived there. We are now in the era of Volume Five of Canadian literary history, and one exciting trend that is already clear is an extension of the liberation from Canadian themes into the sure, if sometimes painful, naturalization of first-generation Canadian writers like Dionne Brand, Rohinton Mistry, and MG. Vassanji and the parallel arrival of native Canadian writers (Maria Campbell, Thomas King, Ruby Slipperjack, Daniel David Moses, Tomson Highway and others).

New's Introductory summary is not narrowly literary. Given the contents of the volume (which deals with translation — chiefly between Quebec and English Canada — folklore, children's literature, anthropology, political science, Canadian history and psychology, as well as the genres already mentioned), it couldn't be. But in that New is not simply raking up leaves scattered from his colleagues' trees, but rather attempting something of a synthesis, he is doing what he can to answer an observation about the plight of literary history, of *any* discipline in the current era of texts that proliferate in seldom overlapping compartments, that recurs in the volume. The problem faced the first editorial committee, in fact, and is articulated in Carl Klinck's Introduction to Volumes One and Two of the 1976 *Literary History*: "From the beginning," he says, "the task of survey and assessment was seen to be beyond the scope of any one man . . ." (vii). Much the same observation is made by Balachandra Rajan, though with elegance and more bite, in his Volume Four chapter on "Scholarship and Criticism," of English literary history:

The single book history by the single mind is now beyond attainment and the multi-volume enterprise consents to a stratification by which it is thereafter constrained. The time may have come for the format to be reconsidered. Its main defect is that it makes it difficult to examine the nature of literary history within a work that is frustratingly a history of literature (144).

The multi-chapter enterprise, when the author of each chapter is a different person, is similarly constrained. While he resists stratification, New also does his best to see multiplicity as a virtue: "As far as the 1970s and 1980s are concerned, historians essentially gave up any fixed notion of the 'whole' society; the whole was inapprehensible, in flux" (xxxii). The tension between admitting this (and going with it), and resisting it is one of the defining stresses of Volume Four. It comes up regularly in the most self-reflexive of the chapters, those whose writers acknowledge the fact that literary history is not the stable genre it once was thought to be.

When our literature was smaller in scope, literary historians had, or at least felt they had, a luxury that has disappeared. "Authors and books of slight importance could not be set aside without investigation," says Carl Klinck in his 1965 Introduction, in connection with the fact that the word "literary" had, back then, to be interpreted in a generic rather than a qualitative sense. "These volumes may give some names their first and last mention in a discussion of Canadian literature" (ix). In consequence, some chapters of the first *Literary History* read like annotated bibliographies. But there was a sense that everyone who had written anything had been given a sentence or clause. Volume Four has intentionally deviated from that model of completeness, so that the two hundred-plus poets unmentioned in Ricou's article have their equivalents, not only in Shirley Neuman's chapter but in several others as well. Volume Four's writers, New says, "felt constrained by the restricted amount of space available [and] have variously addressed changes in methodologies, devised systems of classification, and exercised

judgement both by direct statement and through their criteria of selection . . ." (xii). Occasionally one still feels a certain democracy of approach at work, as in certain formulations of Linda Hutcheon. She mentions the Iowa Writer's Workshop as having had a considerable "impact on the Canadian novel, through such writers as Clark Blaise and W.P. Kinsella" (76), and she links in the same sentence WO. Mitchell's *The Vanishing Point* and Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear*, as fictions which focus directly "on the often disastrous interaction between native and white cultures" (77). These associations don't seem to me to be based on considerations of literary quality, there being one weaker writer in each pair. Of course Hutcheon intends to be descriptive rather than evaluative, within parameters not of her own choosing — an "obligatory" selection out of "the great number of novels written during this period," the criterion being "adherence to the dominant modes of writing that appeared in these years" (73).

There is no point in being nostalgic for a model of inclusiveness that worked for an earlier and simpler period of our literature, though I confess to an ambivalence also felt by the historian Carl Berger. Like New, he can see advantages in the contemporary fragmentation of approach in his discipline. At one point he writes that the "chief virtue" of the "studies in the history of the Maritime and prairie regions" written in the period under review "was that they focused on the pluralism of experience and applied a multiplicity of viewpoints to the relations of parts of the country to other parts and to the national government. Yet they displayed no unanimity about the basic unit of analysis, the region . . ." (309). This sounds almost paradigmatic of Volume Four as a whole, as writer after writer records a shift away from the monolithic, the linear, the centralist, the canonical, the agreed-upon. The movement is made to feel like again, and it is a gain. But there is also a sense that the canonization of pluralism has its casualties. Berger says of the historians whose work he surveys that they "no longer regarded the art of narrative as a model for their work, and they outgrew — or abdicated — the role of interpreters of the national character" (296). And he ends his chapter this way, speaking for his discipline rather than for himself: "To regret the loss of coherence . . . was perhaps to judge history by standards that most historians in Canada and elsewhere have abandoned" (332).

Perhaps because this *is* Canada we're talking about, the land of the double hook (Sheila Watson's image, iconized by Robert Kroetsch into a figure of opposites evenly balanced almost unto stasis 215), coherence is occasionally asserted even by Volume Four writers who, in theory, have let it go. As I have said, New celebrates indeterminacy and pluralism, perhaps making a virtue of necessity. "Yet," he also says, "there is a pattern. As this is a book of reference, not all readers will read it from cover to cover — but the sequence of chapters constructs a kind of 'narrative' of the years under review, which in turn suggests some of the editorial principles that governed the selection of subjects in the first place" (xiv). Later he refers to the "handful of concerns — women's rights, region, native peoples, ethnicity, economics, the politics of language — [that] constitute the main motifs of this volume. . ." (xxiv). Here we are again with the Canadian vice/virtue of having things both ways. I seem to see a little of this having the cake and also eating it, if more subtly, in Shirley Neuman's fine chapter on life-writing.

This "generic" designation is one of the most interesting in the volume, encompassing "Biography, autobiography, memoirs, diaries, letters, travel-writing," and also involving the full range of representation, from fiction to document, of reality. Neuman negotiates this territory beautifully, knowing the latest ways of thinking about the questions that arise from the books she surveys. "Writing a chapter such as this," she says, "the literary historian confronts not only the biotext's blurring of generic distinctions and the formal experimentation of documentary and collective biographies, but the term 'literary,' which traditionally values text over context" (341). And later: "Certainly the position that all writing is autobiographical has found justification in and has also partly been impelled by post-structuralist theories which call into question the unity of the speaking/writing subject as well as the referentiality of language" (335). Neuman is not daunted by new experiments in the 'borderblur' area

where life-writing meets fiction and poetry, but she too is occasionally drawn to old assumptions ("the biographer's mandate [is] to account for the shape of the whole life and its relation to its historical and cultural context" 359; the Lennox and Thomas biography of William Arthur Deacon is plagued by details which "do not always pull together into a meaningful pattern" 363). And, using the historian Donald Creighton as her model, she actively recommends an infusion of narrative, or at least literary art, into the writing of biography. This is not inconsistent with the thrust of the chapter as a whole, of course. Her problem with Canadian political biography is that "most auto/biographers still view life writing *about Canadians* as primarily an historical genre and so direct their attentions to the life (*bio*) at the expense of the writing *graph* " (361).

I have no wish to catch anyone in contradiction; the idea is merely to point out that one aspect of the pluralism of Volume Four is a sometimes uneasy tension between the needs of shaping the material and the impossibility of doing so objectively. The most up-to-date writers, at least in terms of theory, investigate the problem before or while they proceed, interrogating the genre of literary history. Theoretical considerations akin to those spelled out by Barry Cameron, whose "chapter on the theory and practice of criticism . . . is ideological, self-reflexive, and post-Saussurean" (108), are acknowledged, in one way or another, by W.H. New, Linda Hutcheon, Shirley Neuman, and Balachandra Rajan. Carl Berger and Bruce Trigger probe their own fields and their own work in parallel ways. Few of the other chapters are vitiated by a lack of theoretical approach, though David Jackel on the short story and Raymond S. Corteen on psychology do seem somewhat out of phase, being neither pluralistic nor self-reflexive. And Alan C. Cairns and Douglas Williams, writing on Political Science, make no concession whatever to the context in which they write. Their chapter might have appeared in any sort of survey of the recent writing in their field.

Since vast chunks of writing are not mentioned in Volume Four, it would seem all the more important, at least assuming the centrality of the literary in a project like this, that the subjects of the more peripheral chapters be addressed in ways that illuminate the literary. "Enquiries in a subject like psychology," New says hopefully, "will not only serve their immediate disciplinary purpose, but also, over time, affect how readers and critics understand literary processes and the nature of their own connections with art and writing" (xxvi xxvii). The idea of setting the literary in the wider context is sound, as it was in 1976 when Carl Klinck introduced it, and nowhere better demonstrated than in Bruce Trigger's chapter, but it gets little support from Raymond S. Corteen. Among his criteria of selection are that "the book is general enough to be of interest to an educated audience of non-psychologists. No attempt was made to choose on the basis of literary merit" (371). Corteen's chapter is not uninteresting to literary sorts, even so, but it fits the "pattern" of Canadian literary history less well than any other. "There is obviously no unifying theme or themes in Canadian psychology," he concludes, going on to say that "there is no 'Canadian Psychology' just as there is no 'Canadian Chemistry' or 'Canadian Biology'" (384). Is this really so, or is it the conclusion to which "an academic psychologist with a strong bias towards experimental cognitive psychology" (371) — Corteen's self-description — would inevitably be drawn? Corteen represents his discipline, after all, as constituting no "unitary body of knowledge. It is divided into several sub-disciplines which interact, but sometimes to a very limited degree (370).

If the psychologists don't talk to each other, how are they going to talk to the rest of us? The more one broods on such centripetal diversities in a single discipline, the more it comes home that the problem of writing literary history is an aspect of the impossibility of synthesizing knowledge after Babel. Still, one wishes that Corteen had reached his conclusion in the spirit that Bruce Trigger did his. Trigger, too, feels "uncertain whether Canadian anthropology can properly be distinguished from that found elsewhere," but, asking himself about it, noting that "Canadian anthropologists have generally avoided extremely deterministic interpretations of human behaviour," he speculates that "There is perhaps little sympathy for any form of deterministic social science in a nation that has so long been told by foreign

scholars that it is an historical absurdity" (261). Probing the Canadianness of his discipline, Trigger tentatively finds not only some interesting things to say about that; he also discovers a variation on the pluralism of other chapters and even a practical function for it as a foundation for tolerance. His chapter therefore speaks to those others as Corteen's does not. Some of the writers reveal that they have read other chapters. Much more dialogue would surely have been created had each writer been required to read every other. An impractical idea, no doubt, but one that might have stimulated extra - compartmental thinking, and might have produced a fabric of cross-referencing valuable in the absence of the overview that so many of these writers of literary history consign, with or without reluctance, to the past.

I found David Jackel's chapter on the Canadian short story the least satisfying of all those on the "core" literary genres. I suppose there should be room in a pluralist text for an extremely conservative chapter or two, but it's hard not to see Jackel's as an example of what Barry Cameron calls "residual criticism," "the dominant descriptive-historical mode against which post Saussurean practice reacted" (109). It isn't necessary to locate oneself within any particular theoretical tradition to feel something missing, nowadays, in a chapter which uncritically follows an author-centred approach, and which asserts the primacy of realism in fiction (with its local function of reflecting life in Canada), the stability of the short-story genre, and the function of art as chaos-correction and moral guide.

Not all is lost in Jackel's chapter, despite his unexamined critical presuppositions, because Canada is extremely strong in realist writing, and Jackel is a satisfactory guide to that aspect of the Canadian story. But he doesn't see subtext in the stories of Munro or Thomas or Gallant — the metafictional element, the slippage of genre, and the probings of language that, among other things, make them *part* of so-called postmodernist writing, and not mere realist buttresses against opening the floodgates to experiment. Jackel shows no interest in any prose experiments beyond those of Leon Rooke. "In what larger vision all of this coheres remains to be shown" (60), he says of Rooke's work. He names none of the writers who are troubling the waters of the short story — why should it *not* be a battleground? — as though aberrations from the norm were better suppressed. So we get no report on the questioning work in short fiction by George Bowering, David McFadden and others, no inquiry into short fiction as a confluence of other genres. There are missed opportunities for some provocative cross-referencing here. Daphne Marlatt appears in the life writing chapter; Christopher Dewdney in the poetry chapter. Both are, in a sense, important writers of short fiction. In Margaret Atwood's *Murder in the Dark* story meets poetry (prose poem?) and essay. Addressing this fascinating uncategorizable book by a mainstream writer would not have had to be an endorsement of literary subversion. As it is, the book falls between the cracks of Volume Four. But the problem is not so much that particular writers and books are missing in Jackel's account; the problem is that he unnecessarily underrates certain sources of vitality in Canadian fiction, apparently because of a perception that they threaten the status quo. I wouldn't have thought it the mandate of a literary historian to take sides in that way.

Satisfied or not one with Volume Four, we're stuck with it. Perhaps the inadequacies built into the enterprise should be regarded, in a certain way, as an advantage. At least they're obvious. At least there's none of the aura of the authoritative and fixed that once radiated from the first edition, and even from the first three volumes of the second edition. Clearly, the entire literary history of Canada between 1972 and 1984 just can't be contained between the covers of a book. It means that one function of reviewers must be to extend, to supplement, to enter into dialogue with Volume Four. This is the spirit — participatory rather than confrontational — in which I consider Laurie Ricou's chapter on poetry in a little more detail.

I would not have wanted Ricou's job. Having spent nearly ten years as editor of *Brick, a journal of reviews*, I know all too well what he means by those hundreds of "very competent and readable poets" that he felt obliged to omit. I do have a perverse wish that every last one of these could have been

named and in some way placed, but I know that's not practical. Selections had to be made, and the process could hardly have been as intuitive as it was with *Brick*. What makes me uncomfortable with Ricou's omissions is that some of his unmentioned competent readables are on my list of indispensable poets. I also resist his categories, at least given the way he employs them. But I have no feeling that, in essentials, Ricou's coverage is incomplete. I find him open to poets right across the spectrum. In most cases his descriptions of the books he does include seem accurate. There is a general impression of dependability; the reader with wits intact is in good enough hands with this critic.

Ricou divides the types of contemporary Canadian poetry thus: prose lyric (a term borrowed from Stanley Plumley for poems showing "the intersection of the free verse rhythm with the strategy of storytelling" 8), neo-surrealist poem (featuring "the flatness of a voice apparently unaffected by the most bizarre collisions of imagery" 14), metaphysical lyric (a form "whose most distinguishing features are a sense of closure, and its variations on the conceit — the sustained, intellectual, witty manipulation of a figure, which appears to exhaust the possibilities of a metaphor" 20), long poem (the extended, typically discontinuous confluence of narrative, dramatic, lyric and documentary impulses, including — in Ricou's classification, serial long poem, process-poem, documentary long poem) and fringe forms (a catch-all for what's left: "the poetics of science, the forms of translation, and the poem as public performance" 39). Ricou is aware of overlaps in his categories, as between the prose lyric and the neo-surrealist poem. He is also aware that there are "large varieties in method" inside his categories. Why, then, do I get a sense that the compartments of the necessary taxonomy are too tight? There are a couple of reasons. One is Ricou's tendency to work with representative figures.

He could do worse than focusing his introduction with the help of Robert Kroetsch's poetry, but I can't follow his finding of Kroetsch's influence everywhere. The same is true of Purdy (prose lyric) and Atwood (neo surrealist lyric). Purdy's *Cariboo Horses* "established" the "dominance" of the prose lyric form, for example, and apparently no one who practices it after that time is free of Purdy's influence. Ricou's idea is clearly to use Purdy as a benchmark for organizing the prose lyric section, but the result is to make this wonderful poet seem a ubiquitous influence, and all his "imitators" less independent than many of them seem to me. The assumption of continuity needs challenging. Here it is, attached to that highly problematical word "tradition": "Purdy and Lane are the most memorable of the poets working in the tradition established and developed by William Carlos Williams' principal representative in Canada, Raymond Souster" (10). Apart from the fact that this makes Souster sound like the Canadian representative of a multi-national company, it links too glibly four quite different poets. The generalization isn't exactly wrong, but it needs so much qualification as to threaten to fly apart on its own. When Souster assembled *New Wave Canada*, for instance, he certainly wasn't looking for Purdy clones. Williams the imagist seems an obvious influence on some of Souster, but there's much more to Williams than that, more to Souster. Some of Patrick Lane's poetry is quite formal, some of it quite mythic; his career and that of Purdy seem in certain ways almost to have crossed trajectories.

Ricou also says that "The writer of the metaphysical lyric will value Wallace Stevens over William Carlos Williams, Emily Dickinson over Walt Whitman" (20). This too is obviously Ricou's attempt to flesh out his category by spelling out affinities, but it's a mistake to state resemblances between poetries in terms of unknowables such as matters of personal literary taste. Once again, there is too much assumption of continuity, of uniformity. Poets only value other poets like themselves? The spirit of poetry would choke on the monotony. One of the things that makes a taxonomy feel airless is failure to accommodate anomalies, cross-fertilizations, oddities, peculiarities: life. It's not only the categories themselves, but a few bothersome generalizations like those quoted that make me feel there must have come a point in Ricou's sorting when he lost sight of what Margaret Avison expresses so well in "Butterfly Bones, or Sonnet Against Sonnets": "The cyanide jar seals life, as sonnets move / towards final stiffness" (19).

What about Ricou's selection? The question ought to be addressed by many poetry readers. Ricou couldn't represent everything, and I can't see another single commentator doing much better with the *amount* of coverage, but versions of who should have been mentioned will differ. What is the view from where I'm situated in London, Ontario, for instance? Because one way to assess the adequacy of representation is regionally — not in terms of *regionalism*, but simply recognizing that a literary locale in this large country looks different from within than it does from without. Living in London, I've inevitably been a reader of the poetry of Don McKay and Colleen Thibaudeau. These are the two "local" poets (though McKay has recently moved to Fredericton) who should certainly not have been left out of the *Literary History*. Given space for only two, would I want to insert them in place of James Reaney and Don Gutteridge, London poets who *are* included? I guess I would, if the choice were put to me that way, though I might prefer to do my cutting elsewhere. I'm not on my own here, by the way; Dennis Lee, in *The New Canadian Poets, 1970 -1985*, and also Margaret Atwood, in the new *Oxford Book of Canadian Poetry*, have picked up on Thibaudeau and McKay.

Colleen Thibaudeau is more obscure than Don McKay, so her omission from Volume Four is the easier to understand. In the period under review she produced two significant volumes, *My granddaughters are combing out their long hair* (1977) and *The Martha Landscapes* (1984). The former was the more important of the two, being a Selected assembled from forty years of fugitive publication in magazines and tiny press books. *My granddaughters* is a wonderful book of . . . what? Prose lyrics? I find myself back on the question of taxonomy when I ask where Thibaudeau is going to fit. Most of her poems are accessible, one of the most important criteria for the prose lyric group, but many of them are as tightly crafted, sometimes in highly demanding stanzaic forms, as those of the metaphysical lyric, without having the philosophical content apparently necessary to qualify for that category. Thibaudeau is as pure a lyricist as I know, in that she makes the language sing as if by magic in words that are too simple, on the face of it, to produce such meaning music. Her voice, like her subject matter, is often derived from childhood, but it's as far from being childish as Blake's was. It's interesting that one of Al Purdy's most hauntingly lyrical poems, "Spinning," is dedicated to Colleen Thibaudeau, and manages to merge her poetic manner with his own. Of course the "prose" in "prose lyric" makes the category problematical for the most musical of even Purdy's poems. How to represent Colleen Thibaudeau's poems to those unaware of her work? Try *The Glass Cupboard*

Lights from the Highway sparser, softer now
and the Gorst lights gone and their house gone
away, just lost rib to new life in dark seas,
just dark seven sleepers gone seasabout the foot of our hill,
just the foot of the hill and a great cave opening up.

Lights from the glass cupboard !spark! the house dark;
And it's up to the glass cupboard now! It looms
at James' headheight, three paces from kitchen sink,
one from table, length approximately my armspan, crafted
by an Albertan who loved the bush, the hills.

The Bay Highway kindles to blue Italian grotto glasses;
and green glasses, safe-and-wide as Sweden; and cheap
little ruby liqueurs sing; and cocktail Libbys supermart
violent and fresh from fists that swung axes, pounded down a territory
and rolled Malcom Lowry into the soundmad surf dazzling no warning . . .

By an Albertan who loved the bush, the hills,
who made this cupboard ark that tends the tides

If only to illustrate my restraint, I might as well introduce myself as an editor and publisher of Brick Books who is conscious, without rancour, that only one Brick Books title (Don Gutteridge's *God's Geography*) made it into Volume Four. Perhaps these Brick books, assuming that he saw them, struck Ricou as products of "the myriad small, regional publishers, which could have been subversive, [but] seemed generally conservative." "Where are the belligerent innovators a literary culture depends on" (45)? he asks, and an academic (not, as far as I know, a "creative" writer) who asks that question is no stick-in-the-mud. Reading the feminist journal *Tessera* or the anthology *Language in Her Eye*, watching native and immigrant writers find their voices and their places in the literature of this country, often driven by anger, even desperation, I think I could supply a few answers to Ricou's question. But answering it seems to me beside the point, because I feel I could equally well turn back into many of the poets Ricou does mention and show how their work explodes his categories. Sorting these often fabulous poets, that is to say, is no way of finishing them off; it doesn't begin to tame them. bp Nichol was one of the most innovative writers in the country in all sorts of forms; he was also one of the nicest guys in the country. The evidence for both facts is now on record in all the literary magazines, right across the literary and geographical spectrum, that marked his death with memorial issues, dedications, loving obituaries, thanks. In this country the innovators are often out there selflessly helping others. Steve McCaffery (included, like bp Nichol, in Ricou's "fringe"), is a mild-mannered and cooperative individual too, but there is an obtuseness capable of making him peel down to the belligerent suit. The acceptance of pluralism that seems second nature to many of the writers in Volume Four of *The Literary History* has often to be fought for in the literary trenches. Why wasn't *Books in Canada's* Bruce Serafin the right reviewer for McCaffery's book of essays, *North of Intention*? His

methodology [McCaffery says] is easy to describe: it is a practice in which all difference and plurality is reduced to a false unity by means of a vacuous word or phrase calculated to incite a collective, hysterical investment. To appeal, as he does, to "the common reader" is to appeal to nothing but a judgemental and falsifying term that involves the promotion of a pseudo consensual essence that does not exist in reality. In a blunter phrase, it is a hollow slogan that insults the heterogeneity of individuals (25).

McCaffery is making an appeal for true catholicity of taste and tolerance of experiment. So is Erin Mour in *Language in Her Eye*. Her essay on women's poetry, "Poetry, Memory and the Polis," is tightly argued and difficult to excerpt from, but let this serve as an invitation to seek out the rest:

The forced sense of congruity, then, is the Law speaking. The desire to close or diminish anxiety. What holds 'community' together has to be some other notion, rather than a notion of the same-difference. A sense of the elemental non-congruity of things, and the beauty of that. *The sense of 'with'-ness, 'joint'-ness that conveys no hierarchy-of-terms.* Which is now our community as women can / must exist. As an 'among-many.' Not reproducing those hierarchies. Of the 'same' (i.e. hegemony of the correct lesbian) or many 'sames' (fragmentation into groups).

It's not easy. And it's anxious. And it takes attentiveness (203).

The innovators in this country, themselves subject to marginalizing, are often sponsors of diversity rather than coterie. When Irving Layton's reputation has settled in the centrifuge of posterity, surely his early career will look extraordinarily important. There's the belligerent poet as blast of fresh air. I won't say that Erin Mour has no belligerent side (catch *her* reviewing in *Books in Canada*), but there are other ways of making a lasting mark.

I'm back near where I started, not really needing Frye to tell me where Canadian poetry has got to, interesting though his word on the subject would have been. Speaking as both critic and reader for fun

(a word I liked seeing Frye use in his second conclusion), I could find in contemporary Canadian poetry scope enough for all my reading activity. I have no wish to limit myself so, but if I had to, if Canada were somehow to become the proverbial desert island, I wouldn't feel too badly deprived. But there's certainly no need to be protectionist any more. I'd be willing to take my boast abroad, and back it up with this proof: Wilfred Watson's *The Sorrowful Canadians*, Michael Ondaatje's *Rat Jelly*, Robert Kroetsch's *Advice to My Friends*, Daphne Marlatt's *How Hug a Stone*, David McFadden's *The Poet's Progress*, Phyllis Webb's *Naked Poems*, Robert Bringhurst's *Bergshrund* . . . These are Cleopatra poems: age cannot wither them nor custom stale their infinite variety. They don't box at all well.

"Anyone who goes at American poetry with his bare hands, free of existing opinions about its virtues, flaws and limits, will be astonished at its numerous 'unrepresented selves'" (xxxiii). So say Jerome Rothenberg and George Quasha in the Introduction to *America, a Prophecy: a New Reading of American Poetry from Pre-Columbian Times to the Present*. For many years, bp Nichol informally lobbied his friends and acquaintances about the need for some sort of Canadian equivalent of the Rothenberg and Quasha anthology: a new independent reading, unsponsored (I think he would have said) by the academy, unfettered by any hierarchical presuppositions not only about genre and gender but about any of the forms of expression, casting the widest possible net to gather in unrepresented vitalities. He spoke urgently about the importance of fostering native Canadian writing a couple of days before his untimely death. When he first mentioned the anthology idea, sometime in the mid-seventies, I felt that the Canadian literary mainstream was — or should be — capable of widening enough to