
UNIT 5 THE GROWTH OF CANADIAN POETRY

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Poetry of Early and Mid Twentieth Century: (General)
- 5.2 The Twentieth Century's First Half (1900-1950)
- 5.3 Contemporary Poetry and its characteristics
- 5.4 The Canadian 'Long Poem'
- Questions

5.0 OBJECTIVES

Here we shall concentrate on the general directions taken by Canadian poetry in the last 70-80 years. Poetry's beginnings in Canada have already been touched upon in Block-1.

5.1 POETRY OF EARLY AND MID TWENTIETH CENTURY : (GENERAL)

With the mental acceptance of the things as they are, a new group of poets appeared suddenly, who took the responsibility of "regrouping the elements of reality". In his book *Paradise: Essays of Myth, Art and Reality*, Louis Dudek states that Canadian poetry emerged out of "inner necessity" and is a "proof rather of a predicament than a solution of the great questions in this or any other time". Poets like G.D. Roberts, A.J.M. Smith and Earl Birney took the responsibility of searching into the meaning of life in the Canadian environment. Their poetry reveals a special kind of "cultural anxiety" which becomes a medium to handle the universal issues and cross-issues, and encourages other poets of their generation to develop.

To have a proper understanding of Canadian poetry, it is essential to study closely its nature poetry which should not be mistaken for the poetry of natural landscape only. Rather it stands for "the exploration of landscape, map making, and naming of the country and the rediscovering of history". Consequently a very different concept of the relation of man and nature appears in Canadian poetry. Though the poets have sometimes recognised the beauty and lavishness of nature, they have not hesitated to project their unexplained rejection of "moss-crowned monsters" where "cruelty" seems to be the law of nature. It appears that the poets have a split attitude of acceptance and rejection.

In Canada, as it is commonly known, the only season is 'winter' and its landscape is either 'dead' or 'actively hostile' to man. "Spring is distrusted here" as Alden Nowlan stated in his poem "April in New Brunswick". Awfully destructive moods of nature dominate the long poems like Pratt's "The Titanic" or Birney's "David" and "Bushed" which present another variety of death by nature. The attitude of the poets towards nature underwent a noticeable change later on but it is the poets of the early decades of the twentieth who made the initial efforts to feel nature as the spiritual substance.

Poets like A.J.M. Smith and Archibald Lampman collectively seek the significance of life in the new environment. Between 1910 and 1935 the poetic tradition and culture created by the pioneers had undergone a lot of modifications. The war of 1914-1918 put a serious question mark on the political and economic security of the nation. The depression of the thirties and the war of 1939-1945 led to the collapse of the whole

system of thought and belief. There was a weakening of the original impulse which generated new tendencies in the creative fields as well as in man's nature and goals pertaining to changing response to life, but it is a natural phenomena that one can neither wish to isolate nor escape from the human experience for long. Poets like Dorothy Livesay and E.J. Pratt grew anxious to cultivate a new poetic style which could capture the new substance of life and at the same time make a direct appeal to its readers. Their poetry is man-centered psychologically and intellectually. Like the role of nature, the significance of poetic devices like imagery and symbol is also redefined. Though the earliest Canadian anthology of any importance was E.H. Dewart's *Selection from Canadian Poets* which was published in 1864, it is A.J.M. Smith's *The Book of Canadian Poetry* which appeared in 1943 that presented the changes of taste and quality in poetry written between 1948 and 1957. Many subsequent anthologies like Smith's *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* (1960) and *Modern Canadian Verse* (1967) include the representative works in both English and French.

To understand Canadian Poetry of the mid-twentieth century one of the fundamental approaches is to look at a historical and insightful critical process, which A.J.M. Smith and E.K. Brown encouraged. It helped in two ways. It established a canon of Canadian poetry and assessed the achievements of individual poets, and it opened up vistas for endless possibilities of having Canadian Criticism with its own traditions and vision of Canadian poetry which means "a poetry appropriate to Canadian experience" to use the words of George Woodcock. If the poetry of early decades, i.e., of Charles Sangster, E.J. Pratt, Archibald Lampman, Charles G.D. Roberts, D.C. Scott and Isabella Valancy Crawford makes a very special use of the Canadian scene and the world of nature, the poetry of the later decades has added a peculiar quality of imagism which is visual and translates the landscape into words. Various traditions of earlier English poetry like that of T.E. Hulme or English Jacobeans and even Jewish tradition co-mingled and created extra-ordinary effects as in the poetry of A.M. Klein. There exists in Canadian poetry a new sense of sharing the vision or voices at the global level without losing the intensity of the personal vision about the immediate world. Another characteristic quality of Canadian poetry is that it attempts to assimilate and at the same time rebel against the conventional poetics – an effort that gave Canadian poets an idiom that perfectly suited their private visions as well as the moods of the period. That does not mean that they were a homogeneous group. On the contrary, they were distinctly different voices, interlocked groups who shared the common predicament, a common cause of promoting cultural nationalism through poetry. In an attempt to find their own voices self-consciously they happened to discover their collective national identity through poetry. Briefly, the poets realised that if they gave expression to the experiences they knew within their own place and time, they may emerge as distinctively Canadian poets. Their social conversational rhythm and sharp visual images add a new dimension to their poetry. For illustration, take the works of Dorothy Livesay whose intense feminism and personal experiences, combined with political concerns make her a truly liberated, vigorous poet. Similarly, in P.K. Page's poetry, there is remarkable verbal economy and intensity. Poets like Irving Layton, Mirium Waddington and Margaret Avison reveal a world of perception rich in perplexities of faith and doubt.

5.2 THE TWENTIETH CENTURY'S FIRST HALF (1900-1950)

This half will serve as a context for the second half. In this half the romantic and Victorian heritage dominated the scene. There was a phase of neo-colonial modernism. Among the transitional figures was E.J. Pratt. Then come followers of Anglo-American Free Versists and Imagists. Here W.W.E. Ross was a notable figure. Then came 'the Montreal Group'.

First Statement was an influential magazine in the forties. John Sutherland, Irving Layton and Louis Dudek figured here. Dudek's poems of urban experience are especially important.

Earle Birney and Raymond Souster are important figures in the forties.

5.2 CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

Canadian poetry shows an extra-ordinary continuity throughout the twentieth century. If some poets of the early decades had a feeble voice, others like A.J.M. Smith and E.J. Pratt assured the flow of vital current. The unbroken continuity and brilliance of Canadian Poetry was sustained by Earle Birney, Dorothy Livesay, P.K. Page, Irving Layton and others who first began in the 1930s and 1940s but produced their best known works in 1960s and 1970s. The striking characteristics of the later part of the twentieth century Canadian poetry are as follows:

- (i) There is a remarkable poetic upsurge which carried many trends of the Modernist movement including its tendency to be "self-consciously anti-popular" as George Woodcock put it.
- (ii) An extraordinary outburst of poetry yielded amazing results. Between 1960 and 1973 not less than 590 poets published over 100 books of verse leave aside the works which appeared in the anthologies and the magazines. Thus, poetry in Canada became the most significant form of artistic activity, "the fashionable movement society", and poets became "cultural heroes".
- (iii) Canadian poetry being preoccupied with the "happenings" of the time, its culture and counter-culture, showed a deep involvement with the Canadian national identity which should not be mistaken for the political issues. Liberation from the traditional, colonial goals also led to visualising the realities of Canadian experience.

The result of these changes made poetry enjoy an unprecedented status in 1980 and it attained an international reputation because, as Frye put it". Such a quantitative increase eventually makes for a qualitative change". It actually happened. If poets like Al Purdy wrote directly from their own experience, (so much so his poems read like pages from his autobiography displaying a wide range of his moods), the Marxist – Leninist politics influenced poets like Milton Acron and Parick Lane. Northrop Frye's critical theories promoted the use of mythology and new myths as in James Reaney, Jay Macpherson, Phyllis Webb and Eli Mandel's poetry. There is a keen "sense of locality" as in Robert Kroetsch. All that happened to the land and its people shaped the world-view of the poets. To translate their ideas and vision of life they innovated myths, symbols and images over-interpreted the old ones. Nichol, among other innovatory poets, succeeded in creating resemblance between the content and form of a poem. He says: "The poem begins and ends nowhere being part of the flow you live with". Nichol is a true surrealist poet of Canada while Michael Ondaatje makes his poetry out of the absurd representation of actuality. George Bowering and Daphne Marlett are deeply influenced by Charles Olson's theories of "Projectivist Verse" which consider poetry to be a structure of syllable and breath. There are poets who are so individualistic that they prefer to choose their own manner and style mingling the traditions with innovations, for instance, take Leonard Cohen and Gwendolynn MacEwen. As many critics aptly observe, Canadian poets like Newlove achieve their brilliance being romantic in temperament but diverse in their approaches and styles. They create harmonious verse-structures to convey their emotional diversities which grow out of "a compelling intermediary world of magic and dream". If Dennis Lee rejects Canadian society because of its prevailing ills and

becomes a political poet, Atwood, being an experimental poet, is fastidious in form and psychological and historical in thought.

Canadian poetry tends to believe in William James' notion that reality keeps changing. It grows out of Canada's pluralistic society, mosaic culture and enduring domestic values in the face of hostile nature; it adheres to an authentic indigenous system in the face of mobile appearances of multiple realities of here and now. In his famous essay in "The Canadian Imagination" David Stouck has succinctly observed that "at the centre of every imaginative response, buried however deeply, is a vision of human existence" but Canadian imagination is different as it is "obsessed with the limitations rather than the possibilities of human existence". It happens to be so for two specific reasons: (a) survival rather than freedom is the great fact of Canadian life; and (b) holding on to what is known or safe, i.e., to preserve the values, however humble they may be, is at its centre. If the former lends Canadian poetry the image of bleak landscape, which is turbulent and destructive, the latter gives it the images of small and humble abode which, no doubt, promise a domestic security. Consequently, the Canadian poets have the "capacity to 'sing' with social content and criticism" to use Munro Beattie's words. They are sincere in thought and emotion and contemporary in technique and expression. Canadian poets try to find through poetry different ways of measuring the problems and its related feelings, saving it, on the one hand, "intellectualism" and on the other from sheer "inauthenticity". Louis Dudek sums up the characteristics of Canadian poetry stating that "Canadian poetry is written out of inner necessity and is the proof rather of a predicament than a solution of the great questions in this or any other time". ("Beyond Autobiography", *Paradise: Essays on Myth, Art and Reality*, 1920. Margaret Atwood states that poetry is a 'lens' that magnifies and highlights the qualities of Canadian creative impulse and offers a pathway to an effective understanding of its life and surroundings. Truly so, rarely does a nation reveals itself as much through poetry as Canada does. As stated earlier, Canadian poets, being associated with several currently fashionable movements in society, have become its cultural heroes and counter-cultural leaders. On the one hand, they are the caretakers of "collective truths" – something that would resist the oppression of race, gender and class, and on the other they are the source of strong intellectual and emotional content – something which enables them to be a "civilizing influence on the people". Thus, the poets become a means of regeneration in the ever-changing society. They make poetry carry the same aim as religion, myth and science.

In the twentieth century there is a general shift from mere consciousness of a past to what is valuable in the present. Besides, the contemporary poets attempt to be mythical as poetry offers them possibilities to be new by making them take an excursion into the world of ideas. There is an attempt to create such poems in which ideas and arrangement of words on the page are meant to show a tendency to present and preserve the essence of the new world in which the physical is endowed with the spiritual substance. Hence, the Canadian poets, who are over-powered by the 'fear' of the unknown world and are haunted by the 'loneliness', chisel out their experiences into "the bone essential statements": they share a curious kind of "cultural anxiety".

Later Canadian poetry in general and nature poetry in particular show a change in attitude that is of 'mutualness' and it has added three important characteristics to Canadian nature poetry:

- (i) It shows a clear-sighted view of man's relation to nature and animals leading to an all pervading 'sense of mythic and historic unity with mankind' to borrow the expression of Woodcock.
- (ii) There is a haunting sense of love for nation in the best form of nationalistic sentiments, for example take the poem of Milton Acron where he is carried away by the love for land and states that "Canada is the scent of pines", or Gwendolyn MacEwen's poem which reveals a her complete identification

with her country. so much so are hardly knows, "which is your body, which is the land". It is all one.

The Growth of Canadian Poetry

- (iii) There exists a direct knowledge of life gained through shrewd observations which makes poets like Alden Nowlan Patrick Lane and Robert Kroetsch take a vow not "to sing other than our lives." These poets have such a strong sense of "locality" that they are called "the urban regionalists" or "the localists".

Three important changes that have occurred over the decades in the contemporary Canadian poetry: (a) Language of the poems is the natural speech of the living people. (b) The identity and occupations of the poets themselves have changed; they don't have to belong to some form of intellectual aristocracy. "Whosoever happens to write good poems" is a poet as A.W. Purdy put it in his anthology entitled *Fifteen Winds*. (c) The aim and intent of Canadian poetry itself has changed. Today poetry talks about today's world as well as of the things that are timeless like love, death and birth. Whatever may be the topic "human emotions have reference to all things contained in human world, whether a door knob or a kitchen faucet...." The inter-relations of human emotions are something else: many of those are still a mystery", as Purdy asserts.

The main trends briefly are:

- i) Search for roots;
- ii) Interaction between mindscape and landscape
- iii) A look inward for interior landscapes
- iv) The personal becoming political and a political becoming personal;
- v) Nationalistic concerns
- vii) Native concerns and poetry by women
- vii) The fate of selfhood, the need for personal mythologies, the life in the prairies, landscape as a menacing presence, and the sense of wilderness all form part of thematic strands in recent Canadian poetry.

If we go by the individual directions taken by the work of poets then in the sixties and the seventies, the major talents are Al Purdy, Margaret Atwood, George Bowering, Michael Ondaatje and Robert Kroetsch. As for Earle Birney, his book *David and other Poems* is important. Among individual poems *Vancouver* and *November Walk Near False Creek Mouth* are very important. Al Purdy's *The Cariboo Horses* is extremely significant too. There is also Eli Mandel. Then there is Dennis Lee's *Civil Elegies* (1968) which is a complex elegiac meditation on contemporary North American politics. The work of the 'Tish' group is very significant. Frank Davey and George Bowering were significant poets around this time. Then there is Robert Kroetsch who gave us *Stone Hammer poem* (1973), *The Ledger* (1975) and *Field Notes* (1981). The last one contains *Seed Catalogue*, one and of the best groups of poems in recent Canadian poetry. Daphne Marlatt's work is important. Her *Steveston* (1974) is based on an oral history of the town of Steveston in British Columbia.

Native voices and expatriate voices add a new dimension to Canadian poetry of recent decades.

Atwood, Ondaatje and Kroetsch are three novelist-poets whose poetry has made a great impact. The first two figure in a subsequent unit but their quintessential achievement in general can be touched upon here. A fourth important novelist-poet is the Native writer Thomas King, one of whose poems is included in Unit 8 of this Block.

Atwood began with *The Circle Game* (1968). Then came *The Animals in That Country* (1968) and *Power Politics* (1970). Atwood's powerful images, her evocations of physical disgust and her gothic consciousness are controlled by a flat, authoritative voice. It is poetry of statement with an epigrammatic edge.

In Ondaatje's case three books came in quick succession. The first was *The Dainty Monsters* (1967). The second was *The Man with Seven Toes* (1969). The latter tells the story of an escaped convict and his female hostage in the interior of Australia. Then came *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970). It mixes poetry and prose, dramatic monologue and quick shifts of narrative perspective. The story is at once a meditation on the relationship between violence and creativity and an adventure. It is also a recreation of a popular hero. In 1979 came *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning To Do*.

Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue*, as was stated earlier, is a most remarkable collection. Here prairies are seen as the region whose cultural growth is linked to the fertility myth of seeding, fruition, decay and renewal. This is extremely representative long poem. Section 4 of this poem has the following lines:

It arrived in winter, the seed catalogue, on a January
day. It came into town on the afternoon train.

Mary Hauck, when she came west from Bruce County, Ontario,
arrived in town on a January day. She brought along
her hope chest.

She was cooking in the Heisler Hotel. The Heisler Hotel
burned down on the night of June 21, 1919. Everything
in between: lost. Everything: an absence
of satin sheets
of embroidered pillow cases
of tea towels and English china
of silver serving spoons.

A little later in the same section, Kroetsch catalogues's various kinds of absences. It goes like this:

the absence of silkworms
the absence of clay and wattles (whatever the hell
they are)
the absence of Lord Nelson
the absence of kings and queens
the absence of a bottle opener, and me with a vicious
attack of the 26-ounce flu
the absence of both Sartre and Heidegger
the absence of pyramids
the absence of lions
the absence of lutes, violas and xylophones
the absence of condom dispenser in the Lethbridge Hotel and
me about to screw an old Blood whore. I was
in love.
the absence of the Parthenon, not to mention the Cathedrale de
Chartres
the absence of psychiatrists
the absence of sailing ships
the absence of books, journals, daily newspapers and everything
else but the *Free Press Prairie Farmer* and *The
Western Producer*
the absence of gallows (with apologies of Louis Riel)
the absence of goldsmiths
the absence of the girl who said that if the Edmonton Eskimos
won the Grey Cup she'd let me kiss her
nipples in the foyer of the Palliser Hotel.
I don't know where she got to.
the absence of Herclitus

the absence of the Seine, the Rhine, the Danube, the Tiber and
the Thames. Shit, the Battle River ran dry
one fall. The Strauss boy could piss across it.
He could piss higher on a barn wall than any
of us. He could piss right clean across the
principal's new car.

the absence of ballet and opera
the absence of Aeneas

This kind of cataloguing goes well both with modernism and postmodernism. So we can say that the strength of Kroetsch's poetry comes from its hard core of details of encyclopaedic range.

At the level of single poems sequences, Kroetsch's poem called 'Stone Hammer' is really remarkable. Its first two sections read:

1

This stone
Become a hammer
of stone, this maul

is the colour
of bone (no,
bone is the colour
of this stone maul).

The rawhide loops
are gone, the
hand is gone, the
buffalo's skull
is gone;

the stone is
shaped like the skull
of a child.

2

This paperweight on my desk

where I begin
this poem was
found in a wheatfield
lost (this hammer,
this poem).

Cut to a function,
This stone was
(the hand is gone -

When it comes to the overall poetic achievement of some of the other poets, a single poem from each of whom has been included for analysis in the last unit of this Block, we can see that Eli Mandel's 1977 volume *Out of Place* is important. Here pictures of Estevan and the other scene of his childhood are superimposed on those places as he sees them now.

5.5 THE CANADIAN 'LONG POEM'

Canada's most distinctive achievement in recent times has been in the domain of the genre known as 'the contemporary long poem'. Here we shall talk largely about two or three major critics view of this genre.

In the 1980s the form most favoured by Canadian poets has been the 'long poem'. One can say that E.J.Pratt's *Towards the Last Spike* (1952) set the trend in modern times. Then there was Dennis Lee's *Civil Elegies* (1968). In the mid 1960s the strain was reinforced by the personal narrative poems of Earle Birney, Al Purdy and others. In the former's case *Never False Greek Mouth* (1964) is a fine poem.

In the sequence just named (*November Walk Near False Greek Mouth*) the poet begins with a walk along Vancouver's English Bay. Then it comes to be a meditation on life, death, evolution etc. The despair come through in the reference to 'the unreachd unreachable nothing / whose winds wash down to the human shores / and slip showing'. Al Purdy's most remarkable long poem is *The Cariboo Horses* (1965).

In the 1980 Phyllis Webb's *Letters to Margaret Atwood* is significant and so is Daphne Marlatt's work in the long poem genre.

An extremely remarkable work is George Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies* (1984). Kerrisdale is the name of Bowering's Vancouver neighboured, Rilke is a presence in Bowering's text. A background text is bp Nicol's *The Martyrology*. The treatment of a problematic self keeps both the poems going. Nichol works with layers of genre like chronicle, genealogy, liturgy, epigraph, journal etc.

One of the best book of Canadian Long Poem is Smaro Kamboureli's 1991 *On The Edge of the Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem*. In her 'Preface' to the book Kamboureli states:

A number of critics, such as Eli Mandel, Frank Davey, Robert Kroetsch, Michael Bernstein, and Joseph Riddel, to mention only a few, have already addressed the difficulty of describing the long poem from a generic point of view. What I have attempted to do here is to show that it is precisely this difficulty, this resistance to generic definition, that characterizes the long poem as a 'new' genre. At the same time that it tempts us with a lyric, epic, or documentary reading, it breaks free from their specifications; it lies within and beyond the grammar of the various genres it includes. The 'law' of the long poem as a 'new' genre is its lawlessness. Its ungrammaticality results in the thematization of its formal elements and in its treatment as formal elements of its major themes, namely locality, the self, and the idea of discourse. This series of reversals is accomplished in the present tense, a marker of the long poem's desire to reside on the edge of things, within the limits of genres, between the reflexivity of its language and the referentiality of its ideology. The long poem, then, makes itself felt through its discontinuities, its absences, and its deferrals by foregrounding both its writing process and our reading act. While it is interested in the materiality of language, it is also concerned with the unreadability of the world's textuality.

Apart from Kamboureli, a major theoriser about 'the Canadian long poem' is Frank Davey. Kamboureli tells us about Davey that:

In outlining the major features of the contemporary long poem, Frank Davey stresses 'the impulse not to delay but to prolong, to have the poem not be about time but in it, not to be about the life but within it' (1983, 188). The shift in emphasis from delay to prolongation, though significant, is one that cannot be easily resolved, because it is not a question of either/or. The length of the long poem, a matter also of 'depth or breadth, as Davey remarks (183), is inextricably related to its temporality; 'length', Davey argues, 'also speaks about time – that the writer will take his time, engage time, encompass its passage' (183). The temporal movement of the long poem measures the distance that separates it from the centre of experience. Yet Davey's emphasis on anticipation – the long poem 'anticipates more rather than

postpones' – is operational only if understood in the context of having no conditions or knowable object attached to it.

Robert Kroetsch's view of the 'long poem' is that the problem for the writer of the contemporary long poem is to honour our disbelief in belief – that is, to recognize and explore our distrust of system, of grid, of monisms, of cosmologies perhaps, certainly of inherited story – and at the same time write a long work that has some kind of (under erasure) unity. And yet the long poem, by its very length, allows the exploration of the failure of system and grid.

In the concluding chapter of her book *On The Edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem* Kambourelli tells us about 'the long poem':

By questioning its legacies of epic, lyric and narrative forms, it resides both inside and outside these inherited conditions. Its *generic*, the complex ways in which it relates to past traditions and to its present circumstances. It is the outcome of what I earlier referred to as a negative dialectics, an unfinished process of binary constructs. Inside and outside, within and beyond the limits of the genres in both employs and resists, the contemporary long poem offers us a 'long view' of the past it never inhabited and of the future it will never reach. This 'view' resolutely situates the long poem in the present; at the same time, and because of this, it endows it with the ability to deconstruct the normative values of the themes and forms that comprise it.

The long poem's aesthetic and ideological complicity is meant to engage the reader in its politicised and therefore political poetics. Its function is diacritical: we are invited to differentiate among the world-views and forms, more often than not contradictory, that constitute it as a 'new' genre. Moving away from the givenness of facticity through its self-reflexive gestures, disclosing the problematics of mastery hidden behind any sovereign genre, the long poem avoids reconciliation, shuns synthesis. In this respect, it does not embrace the Habermasian politics of consensus. Its contradictions and paradoxes do not swerve away from one master narrative in order to create another. Rather, it is produced within – we might even argue, intrudes upon – the very generic and cultural fissures it observes between the epic and the lyric, between its colonial predecessors and postcolonial instances, between referentiality and self-reflexivity. (p.204)

QUESTIONS

1. What are the chief characteristics of 20th century Canadian poetry?
2. Give a brief account of the major themes of Canadian poetry?
3. Write a short note on Canadian nature poetry.

UNIT 6 RECENT COMMONWEALTH POETRY AND CANADA'S PLACE IN IT

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Derek Walcott
- 6.2 Seamus Heaney
- 6.3 A.K. Ramanujan and Others
- 6.4 Conclusion
Questions

6.0 OBJECTIVES

In this very short unit we shall briefly introduce you to the quintessential achievement of recent Commonwealth poetry through some of its major figures. This will help to put in a slightly better perspective the overall Canadian poetic achievement in recent years.

6.1 DEREK WALCOTT

Derek Walcott was born in 1930. He was the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992. He is a Caribbean poet from the island of St. Lucia. He does a lot of teaching and is quite mobile. The major influences on him are the American poet Robert Lowell and the Irish poet Seamus Heaney.

Works

Dream on Monkey Mountain (1967)
O Babylon! (1976)
Viva Detroit (1992)
In a Green Night: Poems 1948-60 (1962)
The Castaway (1965)
The Gulf (1970)
Another Life (1973)
Omeros (1981)
The Fortunate Traveller (1982)

Walcott founded the Trinidad Theatre Workshop in 1959, where many of his own plays, among others, were first performed. His theatre mingles prose and verse, Creole vocabulary and calypso rhythms, and it is often preoccupied with national identity, with 'the choice of home or exile, self-realization or spiritual betrayal of one's country'.

Walcott's poetry is deeply concerned with the conflict between the heritage of European and West Indian culture.

Walcott's most formidable poem is 'Omeros' (1990). Here he imaginatively uses the Homeric narratives as the basis of a modernist long poem.

Widespread recognition came with *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-60* (1962), *The Castaway* (1965), *The Gulf* (1970), *Another Life* (1973)- ironic, antithetical poetry of personal and artistic discovery. Detached and sceptical poetry, simultaneously 'religious' in drift, has followed in *Sea Grapes* (1976).

One major theme of Walcott's writing is the dichotomy between black and white, subject and ruler, and the elements of both Caribbean and Western civilization present in his culture and ancestry. One well-known poem 'A Far Cry from Africa', from *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-60*, deals directly with Walcott's sense of cultural confusion:

Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?

In another poem, 'The Schooner Flight', from his collection *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, the poet uses a Trinidadian sailor named Shabine to appraise his own place as a person of mixed blood in a world divided into whites and blacks. According to the mariner:

The first chain my hands and apologize, 'History':
the next said I wasn't black enough for their pride.

Not white enough for whites, not black enough for blacks, Shabine sums up the complexity of his situation near the beginning of the poem, saying:

I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger and English in me,
and either I'm nobody or I'm a nation.

The poems in *The Bounty* (1997) addressed many of Walcott's chief concerns, including the problems of language colonialism, and history. But a more pronounced fixation on aging, death, and loss emerges as well. Critics have praised Walcott for his mastery of language and poetic technique. Images keep recurring, crisscrossing, gaining new associations in verses that have the noble radiance of stained glass, grave but full of light.

In other poems, such as 'The Spoiler's Return', he explores more direct, orthodox Creole forms but also, in a technique used by many other writers, gives Standard English a distinctive note by the subtle intrusion of a Caribbean lexicon, syntax, and rhythm. In a deliberate mingling of the Greek and Yoruba pantheons, for example, Walcott, as in fold cosmology, turns an island hurricane into a vision of the gods having a wild party:

the abrupt shango drums
made Neptune rock in the caves. Fete start! Erzulie
rattling her ra-ra; Ogune, the blacksmith, feeling
no pain; Dambala winding like a zandoli
lizard, as their feet thudded on the ceiling,
as the sea-god, drunk, lurched from wall to wall, saying:
'Mama, this music so loud, I going in seine'
.... What brings the gods close is this thunderous weather,
where Ogun can fire one with his partner Zeus.

Walcott's short poem 'Tomorrow, Tomorrow' is interesting. Two of its verse paragraphs read:

I remember the cities I have never seen
exactly. Silver-venic, Leningrad
with its toffee-twisted minarets. Paris. Soon
the Impressionists will be making sunshine out of shade.
Oh! And the uncoiling cobra alleys of Hyderabad.

....

A world's outside the door, but how upsetting
to stand by your bags on a cold step at dawn
roses the brickwork and before you start regretting,
your taxi's coming with one beep of its horn,
sidling to the curb like a hearse – so you get in.

This shows the greater cosmopolitanism of Walcott as compared to many Canadian poets. Ondaatje also has a lot of cosmopolitanism too but that goes more into novels like *The English Patient*.

Lowell, as stated earlier, was a major influence on Walcott. Lowell's sense of history was congenial to Walcott's own because it had classical, European, colonial and postcolonial all fused in it. Walcott's is a hybrid sensibility and often his language has a healthy hybridity too. Canadian poetry as a whole has less hybridity in it.

Walcott has a wonderful collection called *Midsummer*. Poem 26 from there reads:

Certain things here are quietly American-
that chain-link fence dividing the absent roars
of the beach from the empty ball park, its holes
muttering the word umpire instead of empire;
the grey, metal light where an early pelican
coasts, with its engine off, over the pink fire
of a sea whose surface is as cold as Maine's.
The light warms up the sides of white, eager Cessnas
parked at the airstrip under the freckling hills
of St. Thomas. The sheds, the brown, functional hanger,
are like those of the Occupation in the last war.
The night left a rank smell under the casuarinas,
the villas have fenced-off beaches where the natives walk,
illegal immigrants from unlucky islands
who envy the smallest polyp its right to work.
Here the wetback crab and the mollusc are citizens,
and the leaves have green cards. Bulldozers jerk
and gouge out a hill, but we all know that the dust
is industrial and must be suffered. Soon -
the sea's corrugations are sheets of zinc
soldered by the sun's steady acetylene. This
drizzle that falls now is American rain,
stitching stars in the sand. My own corpuscles
are changing as fast. I fear what the migrant envies:
the starry pattern they make-the flag on the post office-
the quality of the dirt, the fealty changing under my foot.

This poem is remarkable for its dense texture, its complex and contemporaneity imagery and for the tempo of its versification. Here Walcott is in the Lowell vein (especially Lowell of the sonnet – sequence *Notebook*). Such complex clusters of images that form a nexus are rare in Canadian poetry.

6.2 SEAMUS HEANEY

Seamus Heaney won the 1995 Nobel Prize for Literature and was born in 1939 in Northern Ireland. In 1970 he moved to the Republic of Ireland. He has done extensive teaching and has written on other poets. One of his books on prose is *The Government of The Tongue* (1988). *Station Island* (1984) is a remarkable volume of poems.

Other Works

Elevens Poem (1965)
Death of Naturalist (1966)
Door into the Dark (1969)
The Haw Lantern (1987)

Recent Commonwealth
Poetry and Canada's
Place in it

Heaney's main strength is the imaginative richness and intellectual depth of his rendering of the Ireland of the sixties through the nineties. He has remarkable dept of feeling about both geographical terrain and human suffering. W.H.Auden is an influence on him and so is Robert Lowell.

Parts of Heaney's remarkable poem 'Bogland' read:

We have no prairies
To slice a big sun at evening –
Everywhere the sun concedes to
Encroaching horizon,

Is wooed into the cyclops' eye
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country
Is bog that keeps crustling
Between the sights of the sun.

....
Only gthe waterlogged trunks
Of great firs, soft as pulp.
Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards.

The geographical sense of Ireland comes through unmistakably in the poem. Another poem 'From the Frontier of Writing' gives a sense of the civil conflict in Northern Ireland. Parts of this poem read:

The tightness and the nilness round that space
when the car stops in the road, the troops inspect
its make and number and, as one bends his face
towards your window, you catch sight of more
on a hill beyond, eyeing with intent
down cradled guns that hold you under cover
....
past armour-plated vehicles, out between
the posted soldiers flowing and receding
like tree shadows into the polished windscreen.

The menace that lurks in Northern Ireland's conflict is strongly present in this poem. It comes through in telling images which also are remarkable for their complexity.

Canada, in recent times, hasn't had that kind of menacing conflict and that has a correlate in poetry also.

6.4 A.K. RAMANUJAN AND OTHERS

A.K. Ramanujan (1929-1993) was born in Mysore (India) and died in the United States where he was a university professor. He was a remarkable linguist and translator too. He writes about living and writing between two cultures. His poems are highly particular and often personal but what comes through strongly is a sense of relationship of self to one's body and to history, to his traditional Hindu upbringing and to is modern American environment.

His poem 'Pleasure' reads in parts:

A naked Jaina monk
ravaged by spring
fever, the vigor

of long celibacy
lusting now as never before
for the reek and sight

....
by its own saliva.
cool Ganges turning
sensual on him

This poem is full of sensuous particularity and Ramanujan's range of themes and styles is breathtaking. His images are very lively and there is in her poetry a sense of rootedness. This often exists in tension with an anxious sense of cultural displacement. Most of the time Ramanujan's work straddles the two worlds of his Indian and American experiences.

Les Murray

Les Murray, born in 1938, is a powerful Australian poet. 'The Powerline Incantation' and 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow' typify his adventurous and commanding poetry. 'Noonday Axeman' epitomizes his role as sage and as mythologizer of Australian landscape and culture. The best of his poetry is to be found in *The Vernacular Republic: Poems 1961-1981*.

Other Works

The Ilex Tree (with Geoffrey Lehmann; 1965)
The Weatherboard Cathedral (1969)
Poems against Economics (1972)
Lunch and Counter Lunch (1974)
Ethnic Radio (1977)
Daylight Moon (1980)
Dog Fox Field (1990)
The Boy Who Stole the Funeral (novel, 1979)

Murray lacks cosmopolitanism but makes up for that life with his virtualsity and caving.

6.4 CONCLUSION

The point of these brief references to these non-Canadian English language poets is that there is a lot that Canadian and non-Canadian Commonwealth English-language poetry have to offer each other. If the poets treated here (except perhaps Les Murray) are more cosmopolitan, the Canadians are better with the 'long poem'. Canadians should not shut themselves off from Anglo-American and Commonwealth poetry in English. In the same way a greater reliance on modernist methods and less of a distrust of Yeats, Eliot, Auden and Lowell as influences is capable of being helpful in the long run. The long poem is the main strength of Canadian poetry as a whole but shorter poems in metaphysical strain should also find greater representation in Canadian literary output.

In the field of poems by women writers, Canada is quite well-placed and has a lot of offer to other English-language Commonwealth poets. Poetry by expatriate women also is a strong body of writing in Canada.

On the whole, Canadian poetry compares quite favourably with poetry from other Commonwealth countries. Voices from the margins are also being accommodated quite well these days.

**Recent Commonwealth
Poetry and Canada's
Place in it**

QUESTIONS

1. What makes Walcott's poetry a little more complex and hybridized than the poetry of most Canadian poets?
2. How does Heaney show an acute awareness of the political situation in Northern Ireland?
3. What is distinctive about the poetic style of A.K. Ramanujan?

UNIT 7 TWO MAJOR NOVELISTS AS POETS

Structure

- 7.0 Objectives
 - 7.1 Margaret Atwood as Poet : '*A Sibyl*'
 - 7.2 Michael Ondaatje as Poet : '*Letters and Other Worlds*'
 - 7.3 The Collective Impact of Atwood and Ondaatje as Poets
- Questions

7.0 OBJECTIVES

Here we shall concentrate on two major novelist-poets Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje. We shall take up two poems – '*A Sibyl*' (Atwood) and *Letters and Other Worlds* (Ondaatje). From there we shall generalize about their respective poetic contributions. We shall very briefly touch upon their lives as well. First we shall take up Atwood.

7.1 MARGARET ATWOOD AS POET : '*A SIBYL*'

Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa on 18 November, 1939. Atwood is one of Canada's best known writers. She is the author of a number of novels also of which *Surfacing* is one of the better-known ones. Recently she won the Booker's prize for her novel *The Blind Assassin*. She studied in Victoria College, University of Toronto and had her Master's degree from Harvard. Starting with the University of British Columbia Vancouver, Canada in 1964, she has taught at many places. She later became a full-time writer.

Atwood is as good a poet as she is a writer of novels. Her books of poetry include :

The Animals in that Country (1968)
Procedures from Underground (1970)
Power Politics (1971)
Two Headed Poems (1978)

and a few others. *Selected Poems* appeared in 1976. She has edited *The Oxford Book of Canadian Poetry*. Her well-known novel is *Surfacing*. She writes in a stark style. The point-of-view is often that of an alienated individual. There is often a disturbance of the everyday world. She finds it a place of deceptive appearances.

The remarkable thing about her poetry is the power of her imagery and the vivid precision of her language. Some short poems offer very good examples of it. Her lyrics are short and laconic and on them she provides sharp insights in the consciousness of the speaker. In her 'longer' poems (which are often series of connected poem) she develops symbolic and visionary explanations of the ironic dualities of existence.

'*A Sibyl*' by Margaret Atwood

Atwood's poem '*A Sibyl*' has 11 verse paragraphs. The first five verse paragraphs read:

Below my window
in the darkening
backyard the children
play at war

among the flowerbeds

**Two Major
Novelists as Poets**

on my shelves the bottles
accumulate

my sibyl (every woman
should have one) has chosen
to live there

thin green wine bottles
emptied of small dinners
oveltine jars, orange-brown
emptied of easy sleep

my sibyl crouches
in one of them
wrinkled as a pickled
baby, twoheaded prodigy
at a freakfair
hairless, her sightless
eyes like eggwhites

over the fading city
she calls to me with the many
voices of the children
not I want to die
but You must die
later or sooner alas
you were born weren't you
the minutes thunder like guns
coupling won't help you
or plurality
I see it
I prophesy

In the first two verse paragraphs the speaker gives the location of her sibyl. The location is in one of the bottles on the shelves in her house. Below the speaker's window on the darkening background children play at warring the flowerbeds. She adds parenthetically that every woman should have one (a sibyl). On the shelves are thin green wine bottles emptied of small dinners and there are also oveltine jars (of orange-brown colour) that have been emptied of easy sleep. In one of them is the poet's sibyl. The crouched sibyl is wrinkled as a pickled baby. She is like a two-headed prodigy at a freakfair. She is hairless and her sightless eyes are like whites of eggs.

The speaker starts looking over the fading city and the sibyl calls to her with the many voices of the children. She reminds her of the inevitability of death. She tells the poetess that coupling or plurality won't help her (the poet). Time passes.

The next three verse paragraphs read:

but she doesn't reach me.
Older spider
sibyl, I'll
uncork you
let in a little air
or I'll ignore you.

Right now
my skin is a sack of
clever tricks, five

senses ribboned like birth-
day presents unravel
in a torn web around me

and a man dances
in my kitchen, moving
like a metronome
with hopes of staying
for breakfast in the half-empty
bottle in his pocket

In these verse-paragraphs, the poetess talks of her present predicament. The sibyl doesn't reach the poetess. The poetess calls the sibyl 'old spider sibyl' and tells her that she would either uncork her to let in a little air or she would ignore her. Her skin is a sack of clever tricks. Her five senses ribboned like birthday presents unravel around her in a torn web. A man dances in her kitchen. He moves like a metronome with hopes of staying for breakfast. The bottle in his pocket is half-empty.

The last three verse paragraphs read:

There are omens of
Rockets among the tricycles
I know it
time runs out
in the ticking hips of the
man whose twitching skull
jerks on loose
vertebrae in my kitchen
flower
beds predict it

the city burns with an
afterglow of explosions as the
streetlights all come on

The thing that calls itself
I
right now
doesn't care
I don't care

I leave that to my
necessary sibyl
(that's what she's for)
with her safely bottled
anguish and her glass
despair

The last 3 verse paragraphs brings the focus back to the poetess and her sibyl (a necessary sibyl). There are omens of rockets. The poetess knows it. Time runs out to the ticking hips of the man. His twitching skull jerks on loose vertebrae in the poetess's kitchen. Flowerbeds predict it. The poetess says that the city burns with an afterglow of explosions as the streetlights all come on. The thing that calls itself 'she' right now doesn't care. She leaves that to her necessary sibyl (that's what she's for) with her safely bottled anguish and her glass despair.

7.2 MICHAEL ONDAATJE AS POET: 'LETTERS AND OTHER WORLDS'

Michael Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka in 1943. He studied in England and then moved to Canada in 1962.

His poetic works include

Dainty Monsters (1967)

Rat Jelly (1973)

The Cinnamon Peeler (1990)

Two Major Novelists as Poets

His style is surreal, chaotic and dynamic and he has a sense of 'the other' which often leads to a poetry of vivid gestures.

Ondaatje also, like Atwood, has been a model and an inspiration for the development of the neo-surrealist method in Canadian poetry. One difference is that whereas the woman novelist sticks to a monotone to underline a bizarre shift in image, Ondaatje brings together a shifting voice and unpredictable juxtapositions. His well-known hybrid work *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*.

'Letters and Other Worlds' by Michael Ondaatje

The poem has 7 verse paragraphs in all. What roughly constitutes the first half of the poem reads:

My father's body was a globe of fear
His body was a town we never knew
He hid that he had been where we were going
His letters were a room he seldom lived in
In them the logic of his love could grow
My father's body was a town of fear
He was the only witness to its fear dance
He hid where he had been that we might lose him
His letters were a room his body scared

He came to death with his mind drowning.
On the last day he enclosed himself
in a room with two bottles of gin, later
fell the length of his body
so that brain blood moved
to new compartments
that never knew the wash of fluid
and he died in minutes of a new equilibrium.

His early life was a terrifying comedy
and my mother divorced him again and again.
He would rush into tunnels magnetized
by the white eye of trains
and once, gaining instant fame,
managed to stop a Perahar in Ceylon
- the whole procession of elephants dancers
local dignitaries - by falling
dead drunk onto the street.
As a semi-official, and semi-white at that,
the act was seen as a crucial
turning point in the Home Rule Movement
and led to Ceylon's independence in 1948.

(My mother had done her share too -
her driving so bad
she was stoned by villagers
whenever her car was recognized)

The poem is a kind of elegy for the poet's father. In the first verse paragraph the poet sees his father's body (metaphorically) as 'a town of fear' and a town they (his family) never knew. His letters are seen (metaphorically) as a room he seldom lived in. In the letters the logic of his love could grow. His letters (figuratively) were a room his body scared.

In the second verse paragraph we are told that he came to his death by first drowning his mind (in drink). He shut himself in a room with two bottles of gin. He died possibly of a haemorrhage.

In the third verse paragraph we are told that the poet's father's early life was a terrifying comedy. The poet's mother divorced the poet's father time and again. He once stopped a procession by falling dead drunk in the street. He was a semi official and a semi white. This act made news and was seen as a crucial turning – point in the Home Rule Movement that led to Ceylon's (Sri Lanka's) Independence in 1948.

The poet's mother was newsy too in her own way. Whenever her car was recognized she was stoned by villagers because her driving was extremely bad.

The remaining verse paragraphs read:

For 14 years of marriage
each of them claimed he or she
was the injured party.
Once on the Colombo docks
saying goodbye to a recently married couple
my father, jealous
at my mother's articulate emotion,
dove into the waters of the harbour
and swam after the ship waving farewell.
My mother pretending no affiliation
mingled with the crowd back to the hotel.

Once again he made the papers
though this time my mother
with a note to the editor
corrected the report – saying he was drunk
rather than broken hearted at the parting of friends.
The married couple received both editions
Of *The Ceylon Times* when their ship reached Aden.
And then in his last years
he was the silent drinker
the man who once a week
disappeared into his room with bottles
and stayed there until he was drunk
and until he was sober.

There speeches, head dreams, apologies,
the gentle letters, were composed.
With the clarity of architects
he would write of the row of blue flowers
his new wife had planted,
the plans for electricity on the house,
how my half-sister fell near a snake
and it had awakened and not touched her.
Letters in a clear hand of the most complete empathy
His heart widening and widening and widening
to all manner of change in his children and friends
while he himself edged
into the terrible acute hatred

of his own privacy
till he balanced and fell
the length of his body
the blood screaming in
the empty reservoir of bones
the blood searching in his head without metaphor

In these concluding three verse paragraphs the poet first talks of the 14 years of marriage of his parents and finally comes back to his father's letters. First we are told that both parents claimed to be the injured party in their years of marriage. With his penchant for doing odd things the father had dived into the waters of the harbour at Colombo docks. This was when the poet's parents were saying goodbye to a recently married couple. The mother, pretending no affiliation, mingled with the crowd on the way back to the hotel.

This act of his made news The mother sent a note to the editor of *The Ceylon Times* saying that the poet's father was drunk rather than broken hearted when he committed that act. In his last years the father became the silent drinker. Once a week he would disappear into his room with bottles and staged this pill getting first drunk and then sober.

The final verse paragraphs returns us to the father's letter writing. There (in the rooms, into which he used to disappear with bottles) speeches head dreams, apologies were all composed. Gentle letters were composed with the clarity of architects.

7.3 THE COLLECTIVE IMPACT OF ATWOOD AND ONDAATJE AS POETS

The two novelist-poets just discussed have put Canada on the world map in poetry as well as fiction. Both use a number of modernist and postmodernist elements in their poems. The imagery is many times surrealistic and always arresting. Ondaatje as poet is more a mixer of genres and Atwood less so. Ondaatje's mastery of the 'long-poem' form is also quite striking. He is much more cinematic than Atwood. In the case of both, a lot of their personality comes into play in the poems. Both use considerable figurality also. All told, their overall impact has been quite impressive. The poetry-books of both have won a number of prestigious awards. Often, their novels are poetic in their use of language.

In her poetry, Atwood continually startles the reader with her imagery, which unfolds in a terse, elliptical style. From the time of her first publication (1961) Atwood has demonstrated remarkable artistic control of her poetic material. Each book has a thematic unity and can be seen to elaborate a central preoccupation of her work: the role of mythology, both personal and cultural, in the individual life. She is fascinated by the conventions that lie behind everyday reality, by the mythological substructures of modern culture. In his 'Introduction' this Jack David and Robert Lecker (edited) book *'Canadian Poetry'* (Volume Two) George Woodcock says about this Atwood:

Margaret Atwood's role has been confused by the fame she has acquired in other fields, as a novelist, as an innovatory critic of Canadian writing, as a public personality. Her reputation in other fields of writing is not underserved, but it has tended to obscure the excellence of her verse, read by a much smaller and largely a different audience from her fiction. Over the years since *The Circle Game* won the Governor-General's Award in 1966, her poetry has sustained an extraordinary level of sparse discipline. It is unobtrusively experimental in the manner of a poet seeking always the appropriate form for the myth or the thoughts she is concerned with. This fastidious formalism is combined with a certain didacticism; the tough and resilient phrasing combines with psychological realism and a considerable

visual sensibility to present a clear-sighted view of human relations, astringent yet compassionate. Atwood's poems are pervaded by a sense of mythic and historic unity with mankind, often unknown yet understood through feeling.

George Woodcock quotes a few lines from Atwood:

This forest is alien
to me, closer than skin,
unknown, something early
as caves and buried, hard

a chipped stone knife, the
long bone lying in darkness
inside my right arm: not
innocent but latent.

And then comments on the lines thus:

The laconic tone, the sufficiency of statement, the truth so slightly and yet so powerfully stated, mark Atwood as one of Canada's best poets and one of the best poets writing anywhere in English today.

In stature and in achievement Ondaatje is in every respect at par with Atwood and both have enriched Canada's poetry in a most spectacular way.

QUESTIONS

1. Comment on the collective contribution of Atwood and Ondaatje to recent Canadian poetry.
2. In what ways does Atwood use 'A Sibyl' to talk about the speaker's own predicament?
3. What picture of Ondaatje's father emerges from his poem 'Letters and Other Worlds'?

UNIT 8 FIVE OTHER IMPORTANT POETS

Structure

- 8.0 Objectives
- 8.1 Earle Birney
- 8.2 Al Purdy
- 8.3 Eli Mandel
- 8.4 Thomas King
- 8.5 Dorothy Livesay
- 8.6 Conclusion
- Questions

8.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit analyses five important representative poems one each by Earle Birney, Al Purdy, Eli Mandel, Thomas King and Dorothy Livesay. The poems are :

- 'The Bear on the Delhi Road' by Earle Birney
- 'Elegy for a Grandfather' by Al Purdy
- 'Envoi' by Eli Mandel
- 'Coyote Sees the Prime Minister' by Thomas King
- 'The Green Rain' by Dorothy Livesay

Of these Thomas King is a Native poet and Dorothy Livesay a woman poet.

8.1 EARLE BIRNEY

Earle Birney was born in Calgary, Alberta in 1904. He grew up in Calgary and on a farm in Erickson, British Columbia. His 1981 memoir *Child Addict in Alberta* tells of the influence of Calvinism and of his early infatuation with words. An Honours student at the University of British Columbia, he went on to doctoral study in Old and Middle English at the University of Toronto, after which he taught at the University of Utah. His involvement in Trotskyite causes during the 1930s, however, led to his leaving the USA. After servicing his left-wing political connections, he served actively with the Canadian Army to 1945. From 1946 to 1965 he taught at the University of British Columbia, in later years setting up Canada's first Creative Writing programme. In 1965 he moved East, took up various writer-in-residence positions, and performed with the sound poetry and jazz group 'Nexus'. Until disabled by a severe heart attack in the mid 1980s, he published regularly. He died in 1995.

'*David and other Poems*' (1942) and '*Near False Creek Mouth*' (1964) are two of his better-known books of poetry.

'The Bear on the Delhi Road' by Earle Birney

'The Bear on the Delhi Road' has five uneven verse paragraphs. The first verse paragraph reads :

Unreal tall as a myth
By the road the Himalayan bear
is beating the brilliant air
with his crooked arms
About him to men bare
spindly as locusts leap

Here we see Birney talking about a Himalayan bear on a Delhi Road. He is unreal i.e. away from his natural habitat. He is very tall. Two bare thin men accompany him on the road. He beats the air with his crooked arms.

The rest of the poem reads:

One pulls on a ring
in the great soft nose His mate
flicks flicks with a stick
up at the rolling eyes

They have not led him here
down from the fabulous hills
to this bald alien plain
and the clamorous world to kill
But simply to teach him to dance.

They are peaceful both these spare
men of Kashmir and the bear
alive is their living too
If far on the Delhi way
around him galvanic they dance
it is merely to wear wear
from his shaggy body the tranced
wishing forever to stay
only an ambling bear
four-footed in berries

It is no more joyous for them
in this hot dust to prance
out of reach of the praying claws
sharpened to paw for ants
in the shadows of deodars
is not easy to free
myth from reality
or rear this fellow up
to lurch lurch with them
in the tranced dancing of them

The second verse paragraph talks about the two men. The first man pulls on a ring in the soft great nose of the bear. The second one, his companion, flicks with a stick up at the rolling eyes of the bear.

In the third verse paragraph we are told that the purpose of the two men is to teach the bear to dance. That is why they have led him here down from the fabulous Himalayan hills to the bald alien plain and the clamorous world of Delhi. They do not want to kill him but to help them earn their living.

In the fourth verse paragraph, we are told that both these two men from Kashmir are peaceful. All they want is a living. They want the bear to stay alive. They dance around him on the Delhi road in a galvanic way. They want to wear out from his shaggy body the wish to stay forever on four legs amidst berries. They want him to be like them (on two legs) and dance.

In the fifth verse paragraphs we are told that what they are doing does not give them much joy. They are also away from Kashmir's cool air in the hot dust of Delhi.

Al Purdy was born at Wooler, Ontario, a hamlet near Lake Ontario in 1918. His father, a farmer of United Empire Loyalist stock, died when Purdy was two. The boy was then raised by his religious mother in the nearby city of Trenton. After leaving school, Purdy worked at a variety of jobs in Trenton, Belleville, Vancouver, and Montreal. He also served in the Royal Canadian Air Force from 1940 to 1944. Although he brought out his first book of poems in 1944, his reputation as a poet was not securely established until the publication of *The Cariboo Horses* (1965). He has been the recipient of several Canada Council grants and has been a writer-in-residence at a number of Canadian universities.

Works

The Cariboo Horses (1965)
The Collected Poems of Al Purdy (1986)
The Woman on the Shore (1990)
The New Romans (1968)
No Other Country (1977)
A Splinter in the Heart (1990)

'Elegy for a Grandfather' by Al Purdy

Al Purdy's poem 'Elegy for a Grandfather' consists of four verse paragraphs of uneven length. The first verse paragraph reads:

Well, he died I guess. They said he did.
 His wide whalebone hips will make a prehistoric barrow
 men of the future may find and perhaps may not:
 where this man's relatives ducked their heads
 in real and pretended sorrow
 for the dearly beloved gone thank Christ to God,
 after a bad century: a tough big-bellied Pharaoh,
 with a deck of cards in his pocket and a Presbyterian grin -

Here Purdy uses some figures of speech to characterise his dead grand-father and also gives his reaction to the real or pretended sorrow shown by his relatives. The grandfather was a big man and had wide hips. He had a big belly and was like a Pharaoh. He had a Presbyterian grin and carried a deck of cards in his pocket.

The second verse paragraph reads:

Maybe he did die, but the boy didn't understand it,
 the man knows now and the scandal never grows old
 of a happy lumberjack who lived on rotten whiskey,
 and died of sin and Quaker oats age 90 or so.
 But all he was was too much for any man to be,
 a life so full he couldn't include one more thing,
 nor tell the same story twice if he'd wanted to,
 and didn't and didn't -

In the second verse paragraph Purdy states that all that his grand-father was was too much for any man to be. His life was too full and eventful. The scandal about him was that he lived on rotten whiskey and died on Quaker oats at the age of 90 or so.

The next verse-paragraph reads:

just the same he's dead. A sticky religious voice
 folded his century sideways to get it out of sight,
 and lowered him into the ground like someone still alive
 who made other people uncomfortable:

In the final verse-paragraph Purdy calls his grand-father 'unbeautiful':

in the final verse-paragraph Purdy calls his grand-father ‘decidedly unbeautiful’ and says that he was 250 pounds of scarred slag. About himself Purdy says that he has somehow become his grand-father’s memory. This memory has the capacity to survive and outline even works of art. On the whole Purdy’s elegy his grand-father is a down-to-earth tribute.

Eli Mandel (1922-1992) was born in Estevan, Saskatchewan in 1922. His father was a Russian Jewish immigrant. During the Second World War he served with the Canadian Army Medical Corps. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Toronto in 1975 with a dissertation on Christopher Smart. For many years he was Professor of English Literature at the University of York, Toronto.

Dreaming Backwards (1981)
Another Time (1977)
The Family Romance (1986)

Mandel's poem 'Envoi' reads:

30

politics pierce my heart
on a floor littered with history
I shiver while wardens shovel in
lunatic sentences, rag upon rag

it must be cold in prison, in quebec

and your heart hurt singer
what do you see through its pane

icy slaves circle the river
montreal tense against the steel of its manacles
your words drifting like frozen wounds
blessing

a sick bride
a murderous bridegroom
that wedding
whose children will be colder killers
than the words of this or any other song

The title 'Envoi' is a French word meaning despatch. The poet says that country is not a country but winter rivers of ice. Though the whiteness of his veins run terrible knives from St. Hubert.

The poet says that politics pierces his heart on a floor littered with history. He says that he shivers while wardens shovel in lunatic sentences, rag upon rag. He says of Quebec that there must be cold in prison.

He then asks the hurt singer as to what he sees through the pain of his heart.

In the next verse paragraph Mandel offers an image of icy-slave circling the river and the city of Montreal tense against the steel of its chain.

In the last line and in the closing paragraph Mandel tells the singer that his words which drift like frozen wounds bless a sick bride. The bridegroom is murderous and the wedding in question is one whose children are likely to be colder killer than what this or any other song suggests.

Through this short poem, Eli Mandel forcefully captures the coldness and cold-blooded quality which has seeped into Canadian life.

8.4 THOMAS KING

Thomas King was born on 24 April 1943 in Sacramento Canada. He did his Ph.d. from the University of Utah (USA) in 1986. He has taught at many places. Currently he is a Professor in Creative Writing at the University of Guelph, Canada. Thomas King is major figure in contemporary native Canadian writing. He is a very versatile writer.

His main novels are *Medicine River* (1989), and *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993). He also has book of stories called *One Good Story That One* (1993). He has edited an anthology called *All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Native Fiction* (1990).

'Coyote Sees the Prime Minister' by Thomas King

One of Thomas King's most famous poems is 'Coyote Sees the Prime Minister'. It is a short pithy poem. We discuss it here. It reads :

Coyote went east to see the
PRIME Minister.

I wouldn't make this up.

And the PRIME Minister was so HAPPY
to see Coyote
that he made HIM a member of
cabinet.

Maybe you can HELP us solve the
Indian problem.

Sure, says that Coyote,
WHAT's the problem?

When Elwood tells this story, he
always LAUGHS and spoils
the ending.

This one is one of the most remarkable poems to come from Canada in recent times. It has layerings of irony and the irony is devastating. But first we need to know a little about 'Coyote'. 'Coyote' is a trickster figure in Canadian oral literature. The whole history of exploitation and extermination of Natives gets telescoped here. What is also attacked is the white tendency to treat everything in terms of 'solutions' and 'problems'. It is a grim story whose ending gets spoilt by Elwood's laughing when telling the story. The problem has been 'solved'. So what's the problem! Here typography is very important. When King wants to put extra emphasis on a word he capitalizes it.

The poem foregrounds a number of things by capitalizing words like 'HAPPY', 'HELP', 'WHAT' and 'LAUGHS'. This typographical device foregrounds (gives a sharper edge) to the irony deployed by King. This irony is strongly reinforced by references to 'making things up' to 'telling a story' and to 'spoiling' and 'ending'. Elwood's laughing when telling the story is quite significant because that points to the Natives' constant awareness that though things are terrible, they are 'funny' too. The reference to the spoilt ending takes a dig at the way most such stories are expected to end.

At the core of King's poem is Coyote's saying 'Sure....What's the problem?' in response to the Prime Minister's statement: 'Maybe you can help us solve the Indian problem.' The irony is in 'maybe' as well as in the approach that is always 'solving' 'problems' of various kinds. 'What's the problem?' in this context works at many levels. Then there is the poet's own statement: 'I wouldn't make this up'. The interposing of 'this' between 'make' and 'up' is a very effective move because it touches upon the traditional image of natives as those who 'make things up'. The play on 'happy' and 'laughs' helped by the capitalization adds to the richness and the edge of the irony which the poem uses in a structure of remarkable economy and tautness. There is also a meta-narrative impulse at work here as also remarkable self-reflexivity about what the poet narrates.

Another notable Thomas King piece that is significant here is 'One Good Story, That One' which was singled out by Margaret Atwood as an example of the creative use of subversive laughter. Here we are told a story about telling a story and about the kinds of stories that are expected to the author. Like the archetypal figure, the trickbesten, native writer, easily adopt a multiplicity of styles and form to such their purposes, and in so doing are giving birth to a new literature: a written literature that is finally and gratefully being given to us by the first people of our country – enable us

to hear voices most of us have not heard before, bringing to life people, places, experiences, and problems.

8.5 DOROTHY LIVESAY

Dorothy Livesay was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba (Canada). She was educated at Glen Mawr Private School for Girls and, with interruptions, at the University of Toronto and the Sorbonne. Strongly influenced by a free-thinking father and left-wing ideas and personalities – Engels, Marx, Emma Goldman, and G.B. Shaw – Livesay embarked on a career in social work and joined the Communist Party. Her first book of poems *Green Pitcher* (1928) was a precocious effort showing considerable craft and a developing social conscience. In 1932 she published *Signpost*, in which a demonstrated technical skill is matched by a growing sense of her own persona. The 1930s saw Livesay working actively for leftist causes as a social worker, organizer and contributor to left-wing periodicals. Committed to the ideal of the working class and its contribution to the War effort, Livesay published *Day and Night* (1944) and the appropriately named *Poems for People* (1947). Much of her literary effort of the Thirties and Forties is marked by the stereotypical language of leftist rhetoric. She died in 1998.

Works

Livesay's works include:

Green Pitcher (1928)
Signpost, Day and Nights (1944)
Poems for People (1947)
The Unquiet Bed (1967)
Plainsongs (1969)
Collected Poems: The Two Seasons (1972)
Beginnings: A Winnipeg Childhood (1973)
The Raw Edges: Voice from our Time (1983)
Journey with my Selves (1991)

'The Green Rain' by Dorothy Livesay

The poem 'The Green Rain' reads :

I remember long veils of green rain
Feathered like the shawl of my grandmother -
Green from the half-green of the spring trees
Waving in the valley.

I remember the road
Like the one which leads to my grandmother's house,
A warm house, with green carpets,
Geraniums, a trilling canary
And shining horse-hair chairs;
And the silence, full of the rain's falling
Was like my grandmother's parlour
Alive with herself and her voice, rising and falling –
Rain and wind intermingled.

I remember on that day
I was thinking only of my love
And of my love's house.
But now I remember the day
As I remember my grandmother.
I remember the rain as the feathery fringe of her shawl.

This is a poem about memory or remembering. The memory is of rain and of the speaker's beloved one. There is also the memory of her (the speaker's) grandmother. She remembers the grandmother's shawl, her house and the parlour in that house. The rain is remembered as 'the feathery fringe of her shawl' (the last line of the poem).

In the poem, there are three verse paragraphs. The first one talks of veils of green rain. An analogy is established between those veils and the shawl of the speaker's grandmother. Rain is green from the half-green of the spring trees waving in the valley. All this the speaker remembers.

The second verse paragraph talks of the road which she (the speaker) remembers. This is like the road that leads to her grandmother's house. Details of the house are then given. It is a warm house, with green carpets. There is geraniums, a singing canary and shining chairs. There is silence. What fills the silence is the rains falling. Her (the grandmother) parlour was alive with herself and her rising and falling voice. Rain and wind intermingled there and on that road.

In the last paragraph, the speaker brings in her love and his house. She says that she remembers that on that day she was thinking only of her love and his house. Now, she remembers the day as she remembers her grandmother. The sum total is that she remembers the rain as the feathery (soft) fringe of her (the grandmother's) shawl.

8.6 CONCLUSION

These five poems by five representative poets cannot adequately give us an idea of the range of themes and style which Canadian poetry has to offer. Still one does get a feel of the whole domain. Poems chosen are relatively short. (there are practical problems in going for the longer ones.) Analysis of the poems has also been not quite extensive in that the idea is to familiarise the students with a thematic range. We have not gone too much into stylistic niceties. These self-imposed limitations are partly in keeping with the demands of a course which is essentially a survey course.

QUESTIONS

1. How does Birney react to the sight of a bear on a Delhi road?
2. Is the tone of Purdy's tribute to his grand-father purely reverential or is there an ironic touch in it?
3. What aspect of Canada's weather does Mandel stress in 'Envoi'?
4. How does Thomas King deploy irony in 'Coyote Sees the Prime Minister'?
5. What is Dorothy Livesay's 'The Green Rain' mainly about?

FURTHER READING

Carl F. Klinck (ed.), *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, 3 vols, Toronto: University of Toronto Press (1965).

E.K. Brown, *On Canadian Poetry*, Ottawa: Tecumseh (Rev. ed. 1973).

Eli Mandel (ed.), *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1971).

Frank Davey, *From Here to There: A Guide to Canadian English Literature Since 1960*, Ontario: Press Porcupic Ltd. (1974).

Jack David and Robert Lecker, "Introduction", *Canadian Poetry* Vol. II, Toronto, Stoddart, 1994.

Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski (ed.), *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada: Essential Articles on Contemporary Canadian Poetry in English*. Toronto: Ryerson (1970).

Manorama Trikha (ed.), *Twentieth Century Canadian Poetry*, Delhi: Pencraft International (2001).

Margaret Atwood, Introduction, *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*, Don Mills: Oxford University Press (1982).

Smaro Kamboureli, *On the Edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem*, Toronto: Toronto University Press (1991).

W.J. Keith, *Canadian Literature in English*. New York: Longman (1985).

William Toye (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1988).

William H. New, *Literary History of Canada*, Vol.4, Toronto: University of Toronto Press (1990).