

Carmine Starnino

Six Young Canadian Poets: A Selection

IF THE HEALTH OF A POET'S MARRIAGE TO the tradition defines his or her creative equilibrium, then Canadian poetry follows an unmistakable arc: courtship, honeymoon, vigorous cohabitation, then growing disaffection and estrangement; separate beds, then separate rooms.

The specifics are obviously more complicated than a metaphor like that can admit—it didn't help to have Canadian poets and critics cite the 'colonial oppression' of such nuptials—but suffice it to say that after a long line of poets working arrestingly and brilliantly in poetic form (Margaret Avison, P.K. Page, A.M. Klein, George Johnston) the sixties and seventies witnessed the rise of poets who banned prosody as a dangerous import. Full rhyme, half rhyme, internal rhyme, syllabics, alliteration, meter, as well as sonnets and villanelles—these devices and forms went underground for nearly two generations. This isn't entirely true, of course, as the English tradition continued to provide an alternate, and in some cases adversarial, route for poets like David Solway and Peter Van Toorn with their fluent line-making and sparkling rhythms. But the day belonged to the plain-style. Hair-raising examples can still be found, with poets writing in what sounds like Basic English, without texture or verbal relish, as though they were channeling a Berlitz phrase book. One can hardly overstate how aesthetically destitute this writing was—this loosely organized, free-verse, DIY period poem. Or how it dominated practically unchallenged. Steven Heighton provides an excellent thumbnail sketch of our drift towards poetic slovenliness in his essay 'The Electrocution of the World':

During the six years I spent reading manuscripts for *Quarry* magazine I saw several literary fashions rise and fall and various issues vise-grip the public imagination then slacken their hold, but underlying these theme-oriented trends was a general 'evolution' towards sectional fragmentation, increasing brevity, increasing simplicity and sameness of vocabulary, punctuation, and syntax, and a growing absence of concrete sensuous detail.

All impulses, Yeats argued, exhaust themselves and give way to counter-impulses. One doesn't want to be rash in reading the signs, but I think it's safe to say the vocal verve has begun to hurry back, that freshets of extravagance are reviving much of what had been torpid. History, in fact, has never traveled in Canadian poetry as fast as it has during the last decade. In a country where time

seemed to have stopped, we have, effectively, restarted the clock. When I began writing poetry in the early nineties, formal poets were hardly more than rumors; if sighted, they were treated as establishment off-cuts, figures treading water or who had lost their way. A young poet writing today, however, inhabits a very different context. Everywhere one looks, lines are again heating up with verbs and adjectives, phrase-making has rediscovered its poise, syntax its fluidity and flow. ('Begin with sounds,' urges Solway in *Bedrock*, 'with stubborn, ample, undiminishing sounds.')

The six poets I've selected here are part of a regime-change that has mapped a new topography of eloquence. This is a group adventurously international in outlook (they've had the poems of Heaney, Longley, Muldoon, Moore, Bishop, O'Hara and Merrill whispering over their desks) but rooted in their local environments. Formalist or experimental as the mood takes them, their sensuousness, seriousness and playfulness are markers of a cosmopolitan nurturing. They've not only trained their eye, like Asa Boxer, to accurately register the texture of things, but, like Linda Besner, they keep an ear open for the skiddings and veerings of conversational speech, the wit of colloquial English. A larger vocabulary distinguishes them as well. Like Amanda Jernigan, they are exquisitely sensitive to the words they use: their historical associations, multiple personalities and social habits. Like Karen Solie and Jason Guriel, they draw on contemporary information. Like Mark Callanan, their poems are written by the nervous system and icily controlled.

Best of all, by quickening an artisanal pride still latent in Canadian verse, this youthquake is poised to reclaim a strain of formally intelligent, sonorous poetry—reclaim it, steady it and forward it on to the future. Send word to Chaucer, Shakespeare, Hopkins: we're ready to make up.

Carmine Starnino has published four critically acclaimed volumes of poetry, including *This Way Out* (2009), which was nominated for the Governor General's Award. His other books include *A Lover's Quarrel* (2004), a collection of poetry criticism, and *The New Canon: An Anthology of Canadian Poetry* (2005), which he edited. His most recent book is *Lazy Bastardism: Essays and Reviews on Contemporary Poetry* (2012). Starnino lives in Montreal.