

# Canadian Poetry: A Long Way Down a Very Short Street

by [David Solway](#) (April 2019)



*The Poetry Reading*, Ilya Volykhine, 2015

*And the measure never blended with their thinking*

*Not even a footprint of a god left a mark on  
their soul*

*Axion Esti*

—Odysseus Elytis, *To*

**One of the main problems** in assessing the work of the vast majority of our poets is that it is almost impossible to avoid pejorative exaggeration. To say that they are quite likely among the worst poets in the world today is only to speak candidly—but it comes out sounding like splenetic nonsense or negative hyperbole. The work is generally so bad, so palpably trite and verbally undistinguished, that one has no apparent option but to praise or remain silent, since a reasonably accurate accounting can only estrange readers and critics who pride themselves on good will or good sense. Much better to appeal than to appall, to pander and accommodate than to earn the unenviable reputation of the professional sourpuss—as well as to scuttle one's own career prospects. Nevertheless, I believe that what I have to say in the ensuing needs more than ever to be said, bluntly and uncompromisingly, to try and counter what has come to seem like an inexorable drift toward terminal mediocrity.

With only a few notable exceptions, our scribbling classes favor talking over singing, replication rather than ceremony, kenosis in lieu of kerygma, mere dabbling over real innovation. Mirroring ordinary experience in commonplace diction, such work enacts a precise reversal of Stéphane Mallarmé's celebrated quest for the crystallization of essence and nonreferential transcendence—his "*l'absence de tous bouquets*"—but it is too poorly armed to justify even in theory the mere reproduction of fact and the lexical trek to ostensible significance which it proposes. Moreover, whatever theory it draws on to justify its practice is invariably borrowed, from the Surrealists, Oulipo and the Imagists, from the New York School, from Black Mountain, from the Language School of the 1970s and Charles Bernstein's *A Poetics*, or simply from the airy proclamations of the belletristic *Zeitgeist*. This derivativeness is the moving force and

principle even among the putative avant-garde who profess to renew the idiom and renovate perception.

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Relying on prosodic experiments that date from the first part of the century, the “revolutionary” cartel of poets proceeds to duplicate not only the obsolete but the quotidian, camouflaging the ordinariness of its representations with abstract terminology, empty word games or procrustean obscurities. In the end, the difference between the imitators of life and emulators of hip is moot and, indeed, dissolves into a sludge of fundamental sameness. Neither seems capable of deliteralizing experience. Neither seems capable of verbal salt or aniline wit. As a result, we now find ourselves with a poetry that is basically rudderless, insipid and ultimately pointless, something that is going nowhere and, for the most part, need never have been brought into existence in the first place.

Let us take a brief overview of current standard production to see if my thesis is defensible. I will obviously have to restrict myself to a limited number of exemplary citations, but if I say that I have barely begun to scratch the surface, I would be guilty of cutaneous exaggeration.

We might begin by considering whether it is *really* of any

significance to us that George Bowering's reverend ancestor "married/a sick girl scout who bore him three live child brides and died"—although some may complaisantly feel that our first Laureate's pedigree is a matter of serious public concern ("Grand Fir"). Or that Tom Wayman decides to praise his fence in order "To testify/Compel acquiescence/ Celebrate" ("Rural Fence"). Or that Christopher Dewdney sometimes rises to the clarity and power of such memorable lines as "And touching you were that my claims by dreaming but illusions that lay waste the foliage of your nervous system," thereby illuminating our lives (*The Natural History*). Or that Zoë Landale waits for her departed lover to return, reporting that he had already done so "twice, for things you had forgotten:/your shaving kit, to drop off dirty laundry/in a plastic garbage bag" ("When You Left"). Or that John Donlan, discovering mortality somewhat late in life, "hate[s] feeling/that ephemeral/but it's/true:/you flicker/for a life-span like a/speeded-up film,you/leave a few old/friends and/books, then/they're gone." So? ("So"). Or that Paul Vermeersch, commenting on a cradled infant luxuriating in the cheeriness of the Nativity season, discloses "This won't be the only Christmas he shits himself" ("Nativity with Pound Cake"). Or that Alison Pick registers the cold pathos of all vanishing things as she watches the Fall depart but compensates for loss by riding "the John Deere/to the centre of the field where the cow's breath will warm/your chilled hands"—had she read some of Confederation poet Charles G.D. Roberts' sonnets in *Divers Tones* (1886), in particular "The Winter Fields" where we find "the germ of ecstasy" lurking beneath the loneliness and cold, she might have spared herself the labor of this poem ("Winter: Leaving the Farm").

It goes on. rob mclennan, operating on the doctrine of slavish transcription to raise the ambience of his experience to apparent momentousness, commemorates the "popcorn between my

teeth/from last night's flick" ("voice-over"). Roo Borson, Andy Patton and Kim Maltman, who generated poetry by committee in the guise of the bizarrely macaronic ensemble Pain Not Bread, see fit to inform us, as if Shelley had never written, of the disappearance of "All that was once so mighty, seemingly invincible./Vast monuments to public greatness that flowered once, littering the cities" ("Another Universe"). Joy Kogawa in a pedal point of patriotic sentiment pleonastically affirms that "we will love this beautiful/Beautiful country./Throughout my life/I have steadfastly and unashamedly/Loved Canada" ("For a citizenship swearing-in ceremony"). Phil Hall, who writes books with titles like *Hearthedral*, enjoys rural Ontario with its fields "appropriated by rabbits/& a sinking loghusk/of mildewed quilts" along with many other sylvan bibelots (untitled). Steve McCaffery, despite a lifelong difficulty with grammar, certifies with his customary impenitence that "ruin instance interruption involved an ear alive//China throughout the world say great numbers" ("Max Ernst around 1950"). Barry Dempster is sufficiently Solomonic to understand the voice of an apple saying, like one of Al Capp's Shmoos, "*It's finally time/to eat me, go right ahead*" ("Man Praying").

And still it goes right ahead. Roy Miki, whose poetry is so frightfully weak that he has won a Governor General's Award, "disengages//where one/begins/innumerable non-descriptive/unquotable pockets of words," leaving the reader equally disengaged and unable to quote ("I've been now"). Bert Almon, on whose indefatigableness a moratorium would earn the gratitude of many, reminisces that "Bing Crosby used to come to Endiang,/for the duck season, but hardly anyone/remembers him..." ("Armageddon at Endiang, Alberta"). Christian Bök gambles seven years of thesaurus-grinding, shuffling and dealing an endless stream of lipograms like: "The card shark, smart at canasta, has a scam; mark a pack, palm a jack."

Q.E.D. The substance is nonsense but the gamble paid off. (*Eunoia*). Judith Fitzgerald, sacrificing her poems Iphigenia-like on the altar of the page to no favonian avail, feels “bound/by duty and pride to become the granite example,/spirit noblesse, until it kicks you in the head” (“Epilogue–Iphigenia’s Song”). Michael Ondaatje, who can only be trading on his reputation, recounts, no doubt for our edification, that “Monks from the north came/down our streams floating that was/the year no one ate river fish” (“The Distance of a Shout”). Harold Heft seeks to clarify the relation between art and life with cliché-driven effusions like “The shape of this dying is simple./Still I hope/someone thinks to buy my latest still life” (*The Shape of this Dying*). Lorna Crozier pantoums a premonitory angst, gloomily lamenting that “dreamers drown gently without a sound” and going on to fiddle with trochanter rhymes like “ground” and “sound,” “lonely” and “only” (“A New Sound for Lonely”).

Will it ever stop? Dennis Lee, writing self-confessedly “dense and jagged little pieces,” has to resort to freshman drolleries like “last throe of the dice” to lighten his otherwise clotted English and portentous theorizing (*UN*). Sylvia Legris trots down the road to poetic perdition, barking “WOOF WOOF WOOF...Irritable, irascible, rickety with alliteration going to Hell–/definitely GOING TO HELL.” Yes, DEFINITELY (*Nerve Squall*). Anne Carson in “Deer (not a play),” giving us among other delectables a ruminant endlessly stammering “hum hum,” did not realize that what she was writing was (not a poem). Fraser Sutherland in a poem whose title escapes me, as does most of his work, strains to persuade the converted that he is not Napoleon. Wayne Clifford’s bizarrely homonymic “shuffling, snuffling, shifting bear” that “*bear’s* the verb nose-rung with feeling” in *The Book of Were* collapses in comparison with the sleuth of dancing bears in Angelos Sikelianos’ “The Sacred Way,” Earle

Birney's "The Bear on the Delhi Road," and David Barber's "The Dark Ages." He should have left it alone. Shane Neilson clumsily titles his recent volume *On Shaving Off His Face*—one might wish the verbal stubble between its covers had also felt the razor. One would yearn for a tad of white space in Joshua Trotter's approximately 100-page paragraph in *Mission Creep*, a pun-filled foray into pure unintelligibility in a language he calls Deng. Souvankham Thammavongsa is a poet so fey-like and innocuous I will spare the reader from quoting from her Trillium Book Award volume, *Light*, lest I be met with utter disbelief—though, unlike Trotter's work, her white spaces are virtually Arctic in extent. Pearl Pirie's line from "Stress Signals and Space Time Signatures" in *Call Down The Walls*, "emergency evacuation is not in the script," collectively mimes the reader's condition.

OK, enough. These are poets whose lack of virtuosity is so catholic that it would appear to transcend language altogether or who somehow contrive to give the rather unsettling impression that although they write in one particular language, they would fail with equal facility in any other. These are, in effect, the lines of poets who remind me of Little Kay in the Snow Queen's hall assembling his Ice Puzzles of Reason, patterns of ice fragments forming words, but he could never find the right way to place them for the word he wanted, "Eternity." Andersen writes, "The Snow Queen had said to him that if he could find out this word he should be his own master, and she would give him the whole world and a new pair of skates." But "this word" and the quality it evinces continue to elude our verbal seekers at the cost not only of mastery and largeness but—a serious deprivation in a Hockey-mad country—of a new pair of skates.

Of course, selective quotation can be misleading and

tendentious but my point is that, in the cases I have isolated, *context only amplifies the broad stamp and pattern* I have been at some trouble to convey. It is true that most of us are pretty commonplace beings to begin with but one may legitimately hope that the ratio of the commonplace to the original is not universally fixed to the bardic disadvantage of the latter. It is also true that such neutral, prosaic or innocuous phrases as I have targeted may be detected in almost any poem as narrative connectors or thematic bridges, but this is not the same thing as building a poem almost entirely out of Polyfilla. Regrettably, the excerpted lines function only as indices of the whole in which they are embedded.

There is a strong possibility that the dilemma I am addressing here may be not so much poetic as cultural in origin. Perhaps language is the reflex and measure of the genuine self and as that self becomes progressively mediated by the images of promotional culture, language tends to grow thin, empty, spurious and one-dimensional. Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo speculates in *The Transparent Society* that such non-locative language enables the poet to defuse metaphysical nostalgia for continuity and to redefine the category of the aesthetic. On the contrary, I would suggest that this does not represent a postmodern opportunity but a historical misfortune. It is precisely at this point, to quote Arthur Golding's marvellous translation of Ovid, that *orpid buggs sty awkly in the queach and flackering pookes ensue*. Poetic language is like the kerf of a saw: without the blade-bite of just and calibrated words the poem just doesn't cut it. And the degraded language of the poetry we have been assaying, especially in Canada, is perhaps the most concentrated reflection we have of a culture founded on evasion, intensive self-aggrandizement, the idolatry of celebrity and the repudiation of a larger, sustaining past.



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For poetry in its essence is the custodian of language and the lover of time and the poetry a culture writes is the test of its viability, like Ted Hughes' wild fox-cub in "Epiphany" which is "what tests a marriage." But today, as Jacques Barzun argues in his pansophic volume, *From Dawn to Decadence*, the intelligentsia are prepared to accept almost anything that passes itself off as art, no matter how tawdry, which accounts for the current inability or even unwillingness to distinguish between the lasting and the volatile, craftsmanship and subterfuge. Discriminations falter in a hazy *schwärmerei* of prior allegiances either to a poetic school or an individual writer.

Given the greater context that subsumes our discussion, there is no reason for surprise over the local disasters I've been anatomizing. And while the same strictures and conditions will clearly apply to most national poetries, at any rate in the intellectually degenerate West—the Brits and the Yanks tend to write a better bad poetry—the Canadian contribution to the debacle is conspicuous for its mainly unrelieved and frankly *infusorial* badness, its pharisaic priding of itself on its utter lack of flair and substance, and the *haut-goût* of second-handedness it exudes. In any event, almost none of the poetry in question serves any discernible purpose and certainly its absence would have left no void whatsoever in the cultural landscape. It could just as well have been written in ogham, quipu, gumbo or Meroitic.

Admittedly, some of the lines reproduced above are not particularly awful as morsels of conversation or snatches of *causerie* or bits of broken telephone but the real question is: how do most of these utterances differ from what any one of us could handily formulate in our own reveries or daily exchanges or playful collocations had we a mind to? How do these poems restore our flagging sense of verbal deportment and revive the insights and discriminations that, in Coleridge's phrase, "the best words in the best order" stimulate and underwrite? And where, finally, is the justification for a poetry whose central feature of plainspeech—the above samples of presumably "innovative" jargon form little more than plainspeech whose syntax has been systematically butchered—comes with no attendant vice to redeem it, nothing in the way of risk and wager, of willingness to gamble on greatness, of striving for genuine distinction in word and thought and supervening purpose even at the cost of critical unpopularity, scorn or neglect? Have these poets, one is tempted to ask, tempered the viol's wood to enforce both the grave and the acute? Have they curved us the bowl of the lute? Do they, with their word, light the star's lamp in our hand? "After all, what is it that makes a poet?" asks Michael Hoffman, and answers: "Interest, distinctiveness, trustworthiness"—precisely the qualities that have gone missing in the poets I am appraising. As Roger Kimball writes in his study of cultural dereliction, *The Long March*, "vanguard opinion...undermines the realities that make artistic achievement possible: technique, a commitment to beauty, a grounding in tradition."

In the light of such remarks, the items we are considering here must strike us as very parochial efforts indeed, devoid of rutters to negotiate the exotic ports of the mind and spirit. Worse, it is even harder to avoid the impression that what is really going on when you get right down to it is nothing less than a literary con of gigantic proportions,

poets smuckered into sweet compliance with a cooperatively set agenda: the self-adjudicating granting bodies, the suspect but ever proliferating swarms of enthusiastic blurbs and columns produced for one another by the stakeholders themselves, the business-oriented leagues and gatekeeper cenacles which continue to supply and reinforce the collective ineptitude that goes by the name of Canadian poetry. The “great line” we are looking for turns out in too many instances to be the bottom line. As John Steinbeck says in *The Moon Is Down*, “the flies have conquered the flypaper.”

In the last analysis, our poets—absenting a handful of exceptions—are really writing to and for themselves. The process they have adopted to further their work is a simple one: first they stack the deck, and then they line up the ducks. The stuff gets churned out indiscriminately without anything like quality control or disciplined self-monitoring. As in our politics, so in our poetry: various forms of corruption coupled with a pervasive incompetence take root and ramify wholesale, and the country is the less for it. For the most part, our elites have let us down. And this may go some way toward explaining why, apart from the partisan response of a specialized group of practitioners and cognoscenti, our poetry generates so little interest or respect in the wider community. As Michael Schmidt, owner and editor of the publishing house Carcanet in Manchester, wrote, “Canadian poetry is a very short street.” Unfortunately, it can be a long way down a very short street.

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