

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

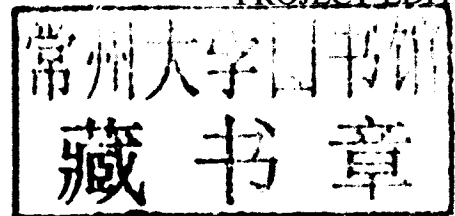
CLC 292

Volume 298

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

Jeffrey W. Hunter
PROJECT EDITOR



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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

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- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
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- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Canadian Poetry in English

The following entry presents a discussion of Canadian poetry written in English produced since the 1970s.

INTRODUCTION

Writers and critics sometimes use the term *postnational* to describe contemporary Canadian literature. The designation recognizes the multiethnic composition of modern Canadian society in a globalized world. But it also records an earlier tradition, which last asserted itself measurably in 1967 in conjunction with the centennial of the Canadian Confederation. The centennial celebration was marked by a resurgence of national pride that carried over into the arts, and it was accompanied by the establishment of a number of small presses meant to accommodate what Margaret Atwood described as the “yeast-like growth of poetry” in Canada in the 1960s. The origins of the poetry renaissance corresponded with the last great wave of Canadian cultural nationalism. By the 1970s, the emphasis had shifted to regional poetics, replacing Toronto as the seat of culture. The regional shift started on the west coast in Vancouver, which remains a hotbed of progressive literary activity, home of the TISH Poetry movement and the Kootenay School for Writing. Critic Andrew Stubbs notes that the regional consciousness traveled geographically backwards from the national consciousness, which began, post-Confederation, on the east coast, made its way to Montreal in the 1920s, and then landed in Toronto a decade later. Canada’s regional poetics encompasses the Québec sovereignty movement, which was also instrumental in undermining the idea of a national Canadian culture. Begun in earnest in the 1960s, the campaign for Québécois nationalism has been characterized by political and feminist agitation and a valorization of Québécois French.

In a 2008 essay devoted to the poetry of Asian immigrants in Canada, critic Benzi Zhang contrasted an older generation of diasporas interested in preserving their original identities with a younger generation concerned with articulating a fluid identity representative of both homelands. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988 has been faulted by some literary critics for frustrating the urge toward the second type of “postnational” multiethnicity by fostering an idea of ethnic difference that not only perpetuates stereotypes

but also posits a culturally composite ethnic “Other” excluded from the mainstream. Critic David Bateman registers this negative impact of the Multiculturalism Act on the production of recent anthologies of First Nations poetry. Bateman complains of the “problematic racialised tendency to over-unify identity, thus reducing complex multiculturalism to simplistic categorization.” In fact, the anthologizing of Canadian poetry along ethnic and racial lines has elicited a storm of controversy. Critics have in general become polarized in two camps, those who argue the anthologies relegate minorities to contingent status and those who maintain such categorizations aid in the production of a transnational set of common social causes that avoids the totalizing effects of the Multiculturalism Act.

Race and ethnicity aside, regional identifications remain strong among Canadian poets—witness the proliferation of poetry anthologies devoted to individual provinces and coastlines—but Canadian literary critic Kit Dobson spoke in 2008 of an even stronger impulse that transcends physical borders: “an abiding focus upon ecology, upon the earth, and upon the immanence of environmental collapse.” This preoccupation with the natural world and the landscape is one that dates back to Canada’s literary beginnings, when writers first confronted Canada’s vast spaces, its rugged terrain, and its harsh climate. Dobson and others, including Travis V. Mason, link the resurgence of interest in the environment with a reawakening of public consciousness on the part of the poet. Though often highly experimental, these “eco-poetic” works avoid the individualism characteristic of some of the more aesthetically focused avant-garde poetry now being produced. Mason also documents a trend toward incorporating decaying urban spaces into the ecosystem, as evidenced in the work of the community of writers associated with the *Fiddlehead* magazine and the Anansi Press.

Discussions of contemporary Canadian poetry often use the phrase “the new Canadian poetry” to refer to the mass of experimental verse that has been produced in Canada during the last several decades. Above all, the new poetry resists conventional literary forms and attempts to subvert the authority of inherited classification systems. Thus, the same ideas that dominate in discussions of identity politics are those that currently inform the approach to language and structure. Poet Meredith Quartermain describes the new ideology as a postmodern strategy that desires “to fuse and

celebrate material considered opposite or divided by fixed boundaries." Some of the more obvious attempts to confuse language, structure, and genre are the poetic send-ups of the reference book written by Susan Clark, Lisa Robertson, and Christine Stewart. More subtle, though no less self-conscious, are the modifications to the elegy form documented by Priscila Uppal in her 2009 book *We Are What We Mourn: The Contemporary English-Canadian Elegy*. Susan Rudy's commentary on the poetry of Erin Mouré reflects some of the techniques of Canada's avant-garde poets: "She writes in excess of signification; refuses conventional word order and usage; redeploys grammar, punctuation, syntax, and spelling; juxtaposes as many as ten versions of a poem; and ignores the conventions of pronominal and prepositional reference."

Mouré's own commentary is at once suggestive of the aims of the new poetry, and of the upswing in feminist poetry and poetics (spearheaded by Dionne Brand in English and Nicole Brossard in French). Mouré writes in *Furious* (1988) of the desire to "move the force in any language, create a slippage, even for a moment . . . to decentre the 'thing,' unmask the relation." The "slippage" is everywhere apparent in the new poetry, even influencing what was once regarded as the staple of Canadian verse, the long poem, which has now been redefined by such important poets as Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, and bpNichol.

Thematic crossovers are also abundant, as in the conflation of city and country in works of eco-poetry; according to critic Mason, "More and more critics and scholars are . . . making connections between poetry and science, between nature and culture." Not surprisingly, the thematic overlap is apparent in the poetry of Canadian immigrants, which often proceeds from the integral relationship between private memory and collective consciousness, birth heritage and diaspora identity.

With respect to genre bending, one of the most obvious examples is the "sound poetry" that emerged in the 1970s, forming a bridge between literary and musical composition. The sound poetry preceded the appearance of "spoken-word" artists in the early 1990s, many of whom were forced to rely on the music industry to broadcast their work. The omnipresence of the laptop computer has today given rise to a proliferation of independently produced spoken-word poetry recordings. Not only have sound and spoken-word poetry blurred genre distinctions, they have helped to redefine the nature of the poet's audience, reaffirming the idea of community so important to the coffeehouse readings of Leonard Cohen in the 1960s and currently essential to the ideals of the eco-poets. The resurgence of the coffeehouse scene since the 1990s has further

added to the dimensions of the new poetry as a performance art.

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

Anthologies

- The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* [edited by Margaret Atwood] 1982
Breathing Fire: Canada's New Poets [edited by Lorna Crozier and Patrick Lane] 1995
Another Way to Dance: Contemporary Asian Poetry from Canada and the United States [edited by Cyril Dabydeen] 1996
Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology [edited by Andrew Klobucar and Michael Barnholden] 1999
Native Poetry in Canada: A Contemporary Anthology [edited by Jeanette C. Armstrong and Lally Grauer] 2001
Coastlines: The Poetry of Atlantic Canada [edited by Anne Compton, Laurence Hutchman, and Ross Leckie] 2002
Ground Works: Avant-Garde for Thee [edited by Christian Bök and Margaret Atwood] 2002
Swallowing Clouds: An Anthology of Chinese-Canadian Poetry [edited by Jim Wong-Chu and Andy Quan] 2002
Pissing Ice: An Anthology of New Canadian Poets [edited by Jay Millar and Jon Paul Fiorentino] 2004
The New Canon: An Anthology of Canadian Poetry [edited by Carmine Starnino] 2006
Rocksalt: An Anthology of Contemporary BC Poetry [edited by Mona Fertig and Harold Rhenisch] 2008

Poetry

- Forner Anderson
Silk Purse [recording] 2005
- Margaret Atwood
Double Persephone 1961
The Journals of Susanna Moodie 1970
Two-Headed Poems 1978
Selected Poems II: Poems Selected and New, 1976-1986 1987
Poems, 1965-1975 1991
Morning in the Burned House 1995
- Margaret Avison
Winter Sun/The Dumbfounding: Poems 1940-1966 1982
No Time 1989
Selected Poems 1992

Jill Battson

Word Up [recording] 1995

Ashes Are Bone and Dust 2001

Bill Bissett

The Gossamer Bedpan 1967; rev. ed., 1974

dragon fly 1971

image being 1975

Selected Poems: Beyond Even Faithful Legends 1980

Animal Uproar 1987

The Last Photo Uv the Human Soul 1993

Christian Bök

Eunoia 2001

Roo Borson

Water Memory 1996

George Bowering

Particular Accidents: Selected Poems 1979

Kerrisdale Elegies 1984

Dionne Brand

No Language Is Neutral 1990

In Another Place, Not Here 1997

Thirsty 2002

Elizabeth Brewster

Selected Poems of Elizabeth Brewster: 1977-1984 1985

Nicole Brossard

Au présent des veines 1999

Musée de l'os et de l'eau 1999

Anne Carson

Men in the Off Hours 2000

Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera 2005

"Possessive Used As Drink (Me)" 2007

George Elliott Clarke

Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues 1983

Whylah Falls 1991

Execution Poems 2001

Trudeau: Long March/Shining Path 2007

Leonard Cohen

The Spice-Box of Earth 1961

Death of a Lady's Man 1978

Book of Mercy 1984

Book of Longing 2006

Dennis Cooley

The Bentley Poems 2000

Irene 2000

Country Music: New Poems 2004

the bentleys 2006

Robert Creeley

The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley: 1945-1975 1983

The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley: 1975-2005 2006

Lorna Crozier

Bones in Their Wings 2003

Before the First Word 2005

The Blue Hour of the Day 2007

Frank Davey

King of Swords 1972

The Clallam 1973

The Louis Riel Organ & Piano Company 1985

Jeff Derksen

Transnational Muscle Cars 2003

Roy Kiyooka

Pacific Windows: Collected Poems of Roy Kiyooka 1974

Pear Tree Poems 1988

Joy Kogawa

A Song of Lilith [paintings by Lilian Broca] 2000

A Garden of Anchors 2003

Robert Kroetsch

Field Notes 1981

The Complete Field Notes: The Long Poems of Robert Kroetsch 1989

M. Travis Lane

Homecomings: Narrative Poems 1977

Divinations, and Shorter Poems, 1973-1978 1980

The Crisp Day Closing on My Hand: The Poetry of M. Travis Lane 2007

Patrick Lane

Poems New & Selected 1978

A Caftan Magpie 1985

Mortal Remains 1992

Irving Layton

Final Reckoning: Poems 1982-1986 1987

Fortunate Exile 1987

Raging Like a Fire 1993

Dennis Lee

Civil Elegies and Other Poems 1972

Jeanette Lyles

A Woman Alone on the Alaskan Highway 1999

Left Fields 2003

It's Hard Being Queen: The Dusty Springfield Poems 2008

Eli Mandel

An Idiot Joy 1967

Out of Place 1977

Daphne Marlatt

Steveston 1974

Touch to My Tongue 1984

Ghost Works 1993

Steve McCaffery

Seven Pages Missing: Selected Texts. 2 vols. 2001-2002

Don McKay

Birding, or desire 1983

Camber: Selected Poems, 1983-2003 2004

Strike/Slip 2006

Erin Mouré

Furious 1988

Pillage Laud: Cauterizations, Vocabularies, Cantigas, Topiary, Prose: Poems 1999

O Ciudadán 2002

bpNichol

The Martyrology. 6 vols. 1972-87

Michael Ondaatje

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems 1970

There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do: Poems, 1963-1978 1979

Handwriting: Poems 1999

Hilary Peach

Poems Only Dogs Can Hear [recording] 2003

Al Purdy

Poems for All the Annettes 1962

The Cariboo Horses 1965

The Collected Poems of Al Purdy 1986

Beyond Remembering: The Collected Poems of Al Purdy 2000

Meredith Quartermain

Matter 2008

Lisa Robertson

Debbie: An Epic 1997

The Apothecary 2006

Stuart Ross

I Cut My Finger 2007

Dead Cars in Managua 2008

Christine Stewart

Taxonomy 2003

Andrew Suknaski

The Land They Gave Away: New and Selected Poems 1982

Silk Trail 1985

Fred Wah

Waiting for Saskatchewan 1985

Jan Zwicky

Songs for Relinquishing the Earth 1998

Robinson's Crossing 2004

Thirty-Seven Small Songs and Thirteen Silences 2005

OVERVIEWS

Andrew Stubbs (review date winter 2004)

SOURCE: Stubbs, Andrew. Review of *Coastlines: The Poetry of Atlantic Canada*, edited by Anne Compton, et al. *Antigonish Review*, no. 136 (winter 2004): 51-8.

[In the review below, Stubbs discusses themes of public and private space in the regional anthology *Coastlines: The Poetry of Atlantic Canada*.]

Coastlines: The Poetry of Atlantic Canada presents work by sixty Atlantic Canada poets whose reputations have been built over the last half-century, i.e., within the lifetime—more or less—of *The Fiddlehead* (established at UNB in 1945). Divided according to province (New Brunswick and Nova Scotia contribute 19 poets each, Prince Edward Island 10, Newfoundland 12), this collection offers a generous mix of established and emerging writers, marking the major patterns of tradition and innovation in terms of form, voice, and subject matter over this period. Like all well-timed anthologies, this one is both representative as well as polemical—revisionary (in the sense of re-shaping our awareness and estimation of earlier East Coast writing in light of various pathways being explored by newer writers, some of whom are drawing important Canadian and international attention to the region). At the same time, it problematizes the idea of region, spotlighting many writers who, though not originally from the area, claim identity—however provisionally, experimentally—with it.

Coastlines is, unabashedly, a “celebration” of what the introduction calls an Atlantic poetry “renaissance,” imagined as getting underway in the mid-90s, signs of which are George Elliott Clarke’s 2001 Governor General’s Award (for *Execution Poems*); the GG

Award consideration given to Don Domanski, Lynn Davies, Sue Goyette, and Carole Langille; the appearance of major works by such established writers as Elisabeth Harvor, Brian Bartlett, Douglas Burnet Smith, Harry Thurston, Richard Lemm, John Steffler, and others; and positive receptions accorded a number of first- (Tammy Armstrong, Brent MacLaine, Thomas O'Grady, matt robinson, Sue Sinclair, Patrick Warner) and second-time (Michael Crummey, Carmelita McGrath, Anne Simpson) authors.

It's not a surprise, given the spirited rhetoric, that all four editors are poets themselves, which maybe explains the volume's feeling of kinship, even identity with the unique creative stresses and challenges of re-articulating space, locality, and history (both personal and communal) within a global framework. This, as noted in the introduction, underscores Atlantic Canada's links with other regions and, specifically, other "island" cultures. Overall, the critical-creative overlap translates into sensitivity to the complexity and versatility of the work selected, each writer getting, within fairly severe limits of space, quality representation. One pleasure of this text is the links it establishes between speech and ground, which suggests voice is tactile, material—a movement of inscription within setting itself. Not unexpectedly, the energy of the poetry shows many times—overtly or tacitly—in its self-reflexivity, as if the action of writing, the motive or impulse to speak, is part of the subject. Accepting the requirement to speak, making a conscious decision to speak—resisting while accepting silence—makes the choice to write a crucial element of the drama: *this* writing in *this* site at *this* time records fragments of dialogues (Odysseus hearing the sirens' music) place is having with itself.

Meaning "travels" from the setting of utterance to the process of giving it form, so vast time-spans get shrunk, safe-harboured, inside the time-span of writing: communal and personal histories collapse into stories, figures of speech. Notice recurring images of speech/sound as body, which calls up, synesthetically, words as shape: the visual and tactile—sculpted—aspects of sound. Voice becomes artifact, gets "written" down, becomes—phenomenologically—contour, gesture (Nova Scotia poet Brian Bartlett's "open-mouthed ghost trapped in an iceberg emblemizes speech as silence). In fact, to take a lead from Bartlett's "A Basement Tale": writing may readily be "housed" under (within) ground, as poetry carves outer worlds into interiors:

Upstairs the next day they read each other's words,
Baffled. Baffled, curled in back-to-back chairs,
They knit their brows into mazes without threads.

That midnight, back on their hands and knees
They crawled down a trail toward each other's dream
From the crossroads inside the blazing mouth.

But accompanying the inward pull is another force, one that shifts the poem's gaze out, away from the writer, puts speech (back) in place, *there*: however often a world crosses over into words, it can't be embodied as simply or purely language. Something—some possibility, hope of contact, of mediation or balanced exchange of meaning between persons (the twin brothers in Bartlett's poem)—resists conveyance: "baffled." So arrivals become dispersals: "A Basement Tale" ends by opening/into another journey, through "mazes," leading to "dream" via the birth/place of "the blazing mouth." Points of (failed) exchange and/or departure are named painstakingly here: midnights and crossroads, back-to-back chairs—mirror interfaces that recycle and reverse each other.

Voyages, as dramatizations of writing and reading then, are uncertain in the sense that they stretch relentlessly, if indefinitely, outward, though also—at the same time—back (recursively) into memory through gaps in memory, pointing up how intervals between there and here become increasingly enigmatic. This doesn't mean they are cruel or tragic, despite the imprint in earlier poets (Alfred Bailey, Fred Cogswell) of isolation and exile—solitary, epiphanic images, near-empty landscapes. In fact, counter to this is the ulterior, communal, narrative thrust of the new poetics (evolving from women poets like Elizabeth Bishop, Elizabeth Brewster, M. Travis Lane). This arrives at an opulent and refined comic vision indelibly seen in the work of Nova Scotia poet Jeanette Lynes, with her fascination for on-the-road anecdotes of angst and awkwardness. Otherwise they become signposts, potential energy, underscoring a main feature of this writing—its concern with migration, the unsettledness of place. What remains, many times, is a commitment to bearing witness, to being *in* the scene in which these words are happening, permitting the anthologist's work of retrieval to be replicated—carried over/into—the archival work of the poet speaking in, of, and to a specific locality.

This in turn may suggest the capturing of place (however momentary) is really an expression/expulsion of desire, something more than (re)collection—call it a will to intimacy: desire/hope become value added sentiments. These are items writing brings to the scene (as a design principle) and leaves behind—they are the lens writing uses to view, and stage, its scene. In short, there's an overlap between poetic intuition, which isn't necessarily a carrier of language, and the more public, rhetorical work of constructing taxonomies. The opening lines of New Brunswick poet