

Douglas Barbour. *Transformations of Contemporary Canadian Poetry In English.* Torun, Poland, Adam Marszalek Publishers, 2005, 113 pages. ISBN: 0-808-8-8-8-820X

For more than three decades, poet/critic Douglas Barbour has played a vital and influential role in the evaluation and explication of—while contributing to—the eclectic world of Canadian literature. In this lean and insightful collection of “glancing notes” and essays, the inaugural volume in the CANADIANA series, edited by Mira Buchholtz and published by Adam Marszalek, in Torun, Poland, Douglas Barbour aims to “provide an entertaining and useful introduction” to what’s being written and published in today’s Canada. That modest intention, and more, he has clearly fulfilled. I found his overview both useful and entertaining. And if this book is any indication of the future of the CANADIANA series, then those of us situated in Central Europe can expect to enjoy some of the best literature available anywhere in the world. Of course, the point underlined in this volume is that it’s being written in Canada, and Douglas Barbour has the responsibility (and privilege) of introducing it to us.

In the preface to the first of his two essays, which he provocatively entitles: “In Through The Out Doors: Contemporary Canadian Poetry,” Barbour states that he’ll be proceeding as a “poet first... then... as a critic,” which I understand to mean as a reader reading for the joy of experiencing poetry before applying his considerable critical apparatus to the question of the effects of form. He goes on to characterize himself as one who observes and writes from the margin—perhaps emblematic of Canadian literature as a whole. His main approach in the present volume consists of “wandering through” a vast Canadian lit-scape, with a caveat to his readers that his remarks might lack any “significant accuracy.” Despite that disclaimer, Barbour applies his highly refined critical skills to several poetic tracks with such insightful eloquence, one gets the impression that his “glancing notes” are more than adequate to ferret out the meaningful and influential in so broadly complex a world as contemporary Canadian literature.

He begins with an enduring question: why are there so few readers of poetry today? Besides the more complex issues of education and the role of literature generally in postcolonial cultures, the answer has a lot to do with the mercenary character of the publishing business and the media, which turned *Birthday Letters* by Ted Hughes into an international bestseller at the expense of other, more important collections of national poetry. By cashing in on the world of literary gossip, not in addition to but in lieu of homegrown writers, publishers and the Canadian media helped to suppress their own nation’s literary achievement. Added to that is the problem of book distribution in a country as vast as Canada, and the difficulty of keeping track of what’s being written and published between the oceans. Despite these observations, he goes on to give a rather impressive, robust list of small presses that do in fact publish contemporary poetry, even if it appears beneath the surface to be less than encouraging, given the state of poetry’s role in contemporary cultural life. He points

to the lack of any significant anthologies of Canadian literature—a vital component in the establishment of any “canon”—and the reluctance of those which are published to include innovative writing, opting instead for the mainstream, reader-friendly “lyric voice” of tradition. Where he sees fragmentation in places like the US and Britain, antagonistic camps of writers who, to paraphrase Pound, “throw their own books at each other,” he praises Canadian poets and writers for fostering a sense of “community” across aesthetic borders, and for embracing, in spite of the problems stated above, their own eclecticism which he sees as reflective of the Canadian national character, and for paying due attention to their own traditions by honoring poets like bp Nichols and Phyllis Webb. His own aesthetic sympathies, which he’s always up front about, lie with those writers who work under the imperative to “make it new.”

In quick-paced summaries ranging from a few paragraphs to a few pages in length, Barbour covers a lot of territory, pointing out various contemporary “schools” such as “working poems,” which make use of the “plainest of poetic voices,” to feminist poems that aim for the de(con)struction of genre and gender, to those who utilize a “prairie vernacular,” or who interrogate cozy multiculturalism. From traditional lyrics to “anti-lyrics,” Barbour names the most well-known and influential practitioners of each poetic stance, providing sharp descriptions of the techniques used and the philosophical implications of the work they produce. He notes with pleasure those women writers with strong cross-border followings among women in both England and the United States, whose poems “de-masculinize” the language and reflect the most recent advances in feminist theory. In the final ten pages of his first essay, he provides close analysis of some of the most exciting poetry recently published in the English-speaking world. One such noteworthy collection, *Eunoia*, by Christian Bök, winner of the Griffin Prize in 1997, is a provocative and entertaining volume of poems built according to its own eccentric rules of composition, the main one being to use words with a single vowel, such as “bit,” “illicit,” “might,” “mirth,” “I,” “id,” etc., as a demonstration, among other things, of the mysterious power of language to make beauty and meaning, even as it tends toward abstraction and the absurd.

In the second essay, entitled “Transformations Of (The Language Of) The Ordinary: Some Modes of Experimental Poetry in Recent Canadian Writing,” Barbour settles into territory more befitting his own poetic sensibility. He begins by stating that the most “radical basis of the most exciting writing in Canada today is speech: poetry. . .always the heard *word*.” He then cites Bakhtin’s notion of “heteroglossia” as the proper theoretical frame through which to read and assess that poetry. His deepest sympathies lie with those poets who challenge the phallogocentrism of Western culture, in poems that make space for “clashing languages,” poems that reflect the value of their own processes over the resulting product we call a “poem.”

In twenty pages of concise and precise analysis, Barbour highlights several important poets writing in experimental, innovative modes. He begins with a discussion of “open lyrics” or “anti-lyrics”, work which aims to undermine the “monologically

sealed-off utterance” of the traditional lyric stance in favor of an aesthetic that refuses the conventions of poetic “voice.” The poets he most identifies with range from those who proceed as “alchemists,” mixing together non-poetic languages to create a new notion of the “poetic,” to “homolinguistic translators” who “transfer language from one code to another,” thereby raising issues of “legitimacy” and “decorum.” In the poets of the concrete, both of the visual and aural type (or “Sound” poetry), we find writers who rely on improvisation to reach a poetic spontaneity that strives for abstraction, turning the word into an object and freeing it from its inherited context. Lastly, Barbour focuses his attention on the poetry of “Extended Forms” and “Continuous Poems” which, by insisting on the process of poetry-making, attempt to resist the tyranny of closure.

By any estimate, Barbour’s “provisional notes” paint a comprehensive picture of contemporary Canadian literature, rich in its own traditions and teeming with young, talented writers who reject traditional forms, or appropriate them for the purpose of exposing their limitations, and as sources for the invention of new types of poetry. Succinct and thorough, despite its brevity, this volume of essays should prove to have been the correct choice to launch the CANADIANA series in Central Europe. Douglas Barbour’s lucid assessment of the state of his nation’s poetry will remain an important reference for those of us interested in the state of Canadian literature today as it looks to establish itself as a leading literary force in the world. As far as this fan of Canadian literature is concerned, I’m looking forward with excited anticipation to the next volume in the series.

Richard Chetwynd, Debowa Laka

