

AN APPROACH TO MODERN CANADIAN PRAIRIE POETRY

Nela BUREU

Lérida

The first thought that came to my mind when I began to write this paper was that the term «modern» would perhaps sound redundant since there has never been any «ancient» prairie poetry in Canada (I mean prairie poetry written in English). Then I realised that a quick glance at Canadian history would be useful to understand why all poetry produced in the Canadian West must be necessarily considered modern.

The Canadian nation, or more specifically, the Dominion of Canada, as it was originally called, was born in 1867 when the British Parliament passed an act creating a federal union out of the colonies of the two Canadas (today Ontario and Quebec), Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. In 1871, with the promise of a railway to the east, British Columbia became part of the Dominion and in 1873 Prince Edward Island was also admitted to the Confederation. The three prairie provinces, namely, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta were formed out of the Northwest Territories that the Canadian Government acquired from the Hudson's Bay Company. Manitoba was created in 1870 and Saskatchewan and Alberta in 1905. However, the process of formation of modern Canada was not completed until 1949 when, following a popular referendum, Newfoundland finally joined the federal union.

This period of formation and unification of the different Canadian provinces saw the emergence and development of a literature which, although not distinctively Canadian at first, due to British and European influences, eventually evolved towards a more recognizably autochthonous idiom as writers became increasingly aware of the fact that the sheer size of their country, its wilderness and its extremes of temperature demanded new forms of expression. As may be expected this budding literature did not begin in all the provinces at the same time nor did it grow at the same pace in the different regions. The first lands that were settled, those around the St. Lawrence river and on the Atlantic coast were, of course, the first to

produce a literary harvest. Thus, the Confederation poets Wilfred Campbell and Archibald Lampman were native to Ontario. Charles G. D. Roberts and Bliss Carman grew up in New Brunswick and Duncan Campbell Scott was born in Ottawa and raised in Ontario. The first important voices from the prairies were heard much later, not only because those provinces were settled later than eastern and central Canada as we have just seen, but also for the reasons explained by the critic Dennis Cooley when he writes,

Though the Western Provinces founded colleges soon after joining the Confederation (Manitoba in 1877, Saskatchewan in 1907 and Alberta in 1908), they operated primarily as agricultural and theological institutions for years, there being little concern in them for Modern, much less Canadian, literature until well into the twentieth century¹.

Besides, Cooley adds that,

Prairie people were forever moving away. In turn, that mobility reduced the permanence and intimacy with place which would have improved the prospects for local writing².

The adjective «modern» is therefore implicit in the phrase «Canadian prairie poetry». You may now rightly ask why I have kept this word in my title after all. The answer is that since I always have my students in mind when I write a paper, I never take things for granted. This time I didn't assume that everybody should be aware of the youth of Canadian prairie poetry. Another reason for keeping this term in the title is that I think Canadian prairie poetry sounds refreshingly modern compared to the Elizabethans, the Metaphysicals, the Augustans, the Romantics or the Victorians, some of the poets my students and I read during the academic year. When I say that prairie poetry sounds modern I mean that it is deliciously simple, direct and unsophisticated (I am well aware that with this precision I am giving a very personal meaning to the word «modern»). Apart from the qualities I have just mentioned, prairie poetry also offers a variety of themes which surprises the reader who, like myself, I blushing confess, has been tempted to think that a dull, uniform landscape must elicit a dull, uniform response. I had this wrong idea in my mind when I was driving across the prairie last summer. I couldn't help thinking that unlike her counterpart in Lake District, the prairie muse must have found her task a hard grind. I wondered how she could manage to make artists articulate what, more than any other landscape, except the desert perhaps, denies language. How could she forge a meaningful world out of nothing without producing stale clichés? Commonplaces such as «solitary», «scary» or

¹ Dennis COOLEY «RePlacing» in *Essays on Canadian Writing* numbers 18/19 Summer/Fall 1980 p. 13.

² *Ibid.* p. 14.

«flat» were precisely the only words that occurred to me at that time. Then, I remembered having read somewhere that the muse of a place speaks only to her fellow countrymen, therefore, as I was curious to know about her confidences, once back in Toronto I bought all the anthologies on prairie poetry I could find. The aim of this paper is to share with you what I have found in them.

I have already mentioned my first impression of Canadian prairie poetry. Most of the poems are simple and direct. However, within this frame of simplicity and directness other characteristics come immediately to the fore. For example, there are quite a few poems full of family rhythms intended, perhaps, as a prophylaxis for preventing prairie diseases, loneliness being one of the most common. Elizabeth Brewster, one of the first poets I read, gives an interesting recipe to exorcise the negative effects that the vacancy and stillness of the prairie are thought to produce on the mind of its dwellers. For a start, she minimizes these effects and suggests that the prairie is not as scary as it may appear at first sight. After all, as she puts it in one of her poems,

The chief difference in the land
is that there is more of it³.

Then, as if to prove that the prairie is neither empty nor frightening, she gives us slices of family life that sound reassuringly familiar to anyone acquainted with the quiet existence of country people. In Brewster's poems, uncles, aunts, grandparents, relatives and friends meet in their warm and cosy homes «over a good hot cup of tea»⁴ to talk about the weather and the crops, or to comply dutifully with the social task of mourning the death of one of their elders. Though these people do not lead a very exciting life yet they go out from time to time to attend the most important social events «in spite of the blizzards»⁵. Thus, although well aware of the harsh living conditions the prairie imposes upon them, Brewster's characters do not seem to feel overwhelmed or oppressed by their physical environment. Life in the prairie flows gently and, as the poet reminds us, there is «no trouble at all»⁶. Apart from Elizabeth Brewster, other poets such as Dale Zieroth and Douglas Barbour have also depicted the prairie as the homeland of people who feel happy and at ease in their country. It is important to point out that these poets often include the figure of the grandfather in their poems. The reason for the frequent appearance of this character in prairie

³ Elizabeth BREWSTER «Road Between Saskatoon Edmonton» in *A Sudden Radiance* (ed) Lorna Crozier & Gary Hyland, Coteau, 1987, p. 2.

⁴ Elizabeth BREWSTER «The Night Grandma Died», *ibid.* p. 9.

⁵ Elizabeth BREWSTER «The Future of Poetry in Canada», *ibid.* p. 20.

⁶ Elizabeth BREWSTER «In Wellington, For Catherine Mansfield» *ibid.* p. 16.

poetry is that the portrayal of old people who are full of memories of things past is extremely useful to create the sense of history so cherished by young communities which, like the prairie one, are engaged in building up a local tradition. The grandfather in Dale Zieroth's «120 Miles North of Winnipeg», for example, was clearly at home in northern Manitoba in spite of the fact that,

In winter everything
went white as buffalo bones and
the underwear froze on the line
like corpses. Often the youngest
was sick. Still he never thought
of leaving⁷.

These lines also make us realise that the things remembered do not have to be necessarily positive. It is precisely through suffering and death that spiritual communion with a place is best established. As Terence Heath says in one of his poems,

The graves you dig for your parents
will always be the only beginning⁸.

Like Dale Zieroth, Douglas Barbour also refers to his grandfather from whom he inherited his love for the land. This allusion to the old man is a way of telling us that he has roots in the prairie, that it is a land at heart. Barbour writes,

i recognize you grandfather your great love for the land shines thru you
knew it i know & i do it i look at it too with new eyes because of you⁹.

I do not want to finish this section on poets who have humanized the prairie by presenting sketches of local domesticity without referring to an amusing poem by Don Kerr whose humorous approach to the landscape is no doubt the best antidote against the anxieties caused by the prairie. Don Kerr's poem «Editing Prairie» is the editor's answer to someone who has sent a piece of work in the hope of seeing it published. The letter-poem reads as follows,

⁷ Dale ZIEROTH «120 Miles North of Winnipeg» in *Twelve Prairie Poets* (ed) Lawrence Ricou, Oberon press 1976, p. 187.

⁸ Terrence HEATH «There is a Place...» in *A Sudden Radiance*, *op. cit.* p. 68.

⁹ Douglas BARBOUR «Visions of my Grandfather» in *Twelve Prairie Poets*, *op.cit.* p. 35.

Well, it's too long for one thing
and very repetitive.
Remove half the fields.
Then there are far too many fences
interrupting the narrative flow.
Get some cattlemen to cut down those fences.
There is not enough incident either,
this story is very flat.
Can't you write in a mountain
or at least a decent-sized hill?
And why set it in winter
as if the prairie can grow nothing
but snow. I like the pubic bush
but there is too much even of that,
and the empty sky filling all the silences
between paragraphs is really boring.
I think on due consideration
we'll have to return your prairie.
Try us again in a year
with a mountain or a sea or a city¹⁰.

Apart from the irony that pervades the poem, we realize that in «Editing Prairie» there are more references to landscape than in any of the poems we have seen so far. There are clear allusions to the apparently monotonous and unattractive flatness of the prairie and to the feelings of boredom and apathy it is likely to inspire. When reading these lines one has the impression that nothing ever happens in the prairie and that it is unable to arouse its dwellers from their lethargy. This is not quite true. Perhaps prairie people do not fall passionately in love with their land, at least I have not come across this theme, but they are certainly subject to strong feelings which, incidentally, have nothing to do with love. Indeed, I have found a lot of cruelty and violence in Canadian prairie poetry. Some poems make you wince at the sight of images you are forced to visualize. As it is true with most prairie poems this kind of compositions are clear and direct, however, these characteristics are less welcome here since they are used to make violent and cruel actions appear more real and vivid. The reasons for the recurrence of the theme of violence in prairie literature is explained by Henry Kreisel in his article «The Prairie: A State of Mind». Kreisel sees the outburst of violent feelings as a direct consequence of the repressive puritan moral code that governs prairie life. Against this Kreisel thinks that,

¹⁰ Don KERR «Editing Prairie» in *A Sudden Radiance op. cit.* p. 94.

It is not surprising that there should be sudden eruptions and that the passions, long suppressed, should burst violently into the open and threaten the framework that was meant to contain them¹¹.

Kreisel goes on to say that such eruptions of violence are generally exploited by novelists who find in illicit love affairs and their dramatic consequences a frame to sustain their plots. However, in prairie poetry, violence often takes the form of sadism. Some poems are mini-stories that narrate with all sorts of details how an individual, who might be a child, takes delight in inflicting pain and suffering on some other living creature, generally an animal. In her well-known book *Survival* Margaret Atwood puts forth her theory that when the English Canadian describes the killing of animals,

he projects himself through his animal images as a threatened victim, confronted by a superior alien technology against which he feels powerless, unable to take any positive defensive action, and, survive each crisis as he may ultimately doomed¹².

If Margaret Atwood is right when she says that the killing of animals in Canadian literature symbolizes the victim complex of the English Canadian, one cannot help thinking that such a complex must be the source of unimaginable tension considering the virulence of the actions with which the artist chooses to convey this psychological problem. I have selected a few excerpts of poems to illustrate the vein of sadism that runs through the body of prairie poetry disrupting the steady beat of its pulse. The first extract is taken from a poem by Lorna Crozier entitled «Fear of Snakes». It relates the story of a boy with a strong aversion to snakes who enjoys watching how a friend sacrifices one of those animals. The most harrowing thing about the poem is not that the boy likes the sight of the killing but that he really loves to imagine the agony of the snake as he himself admits,

I crouched behind the caraganas
watched Larry nail the snake to a telephone pole.
It twisted on twin points of light, unable to crawl
out of its pain, its mouth opening, the red
tongue tasting its own terror, I loved it then,
that snake¹³.

I almost feel obliged to apologize for reproducing such horrible lines. However I better leave any apologies till the end since the following

¹¹ Henry KREISEL «The Prairie: A State of Mind» in *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* vol.2 (ed) Donna Bennet & Russell Brown, OUP, Toronto, 1985 p. 112.

¹² Margaret ATWOOD *Survival* Anansi, Toronto 1972, p. 80.

¹³ Lorna CROZIER «Fear of Snakes» in *A Sudden Radiance op.cit.* p. 50.

extracts are not less disturbing. Patrick Lane's «A Murder of Crows» needs no introduction because the title indicates the theme of the poem very clearly. The murderer says,

My knife slid up and steaming ribbons of gut
fell to the ground. I broke the legs
and cut the anus out, stripped off the skin
and chopped the head away; maggots of fat
clinging to the pale red flesh. The death?¹⁴

The crow in Terrence Heath's poem «The Tongue» is only a little bit luckier. The poet describes how a man split the tongue of a crow with a razor blade in order to make it speak. After immobilizing the bird he,

placed one corner of the razor blade about a quarter
of an inch in front of the tip of the crow's tongue
and pressed down. The blade went through the tongue.
The tongue then had two points. The man put the
razor in his vest pocket, opened the door of the
cage and put the crow inside, the crow hopped over
to the far corner. he blinked his eyes. the man
closed the door of the cage and fastened it with a
bent nail.
now he'll talk¹⁵.

Although I had selected other similar extracts, I think it is now high time to turn to a less bloody theme, a subject that will probably bring us some relief after so much torture and death. In fact it is more than just another prairie subject for if we look for a distinctive prairie topic and one that holds all prairie poetry together we shall find it in the artist's attempt to convey the silent emptiness of the landscape and its effect on the human mind. As I have already pointed out at the beginning of this paper, the prairie refuses to be articulated. One has the impression that in the Canadian prairie nature has lain down to rest after the strenuous effort of giving birth to the impressive Rockies, the immense forests and the innumerable lakes scattered all over the land. Perhaps this is the the reason why most prairie poems, like prairie villages, avoid stridency. They seem to be afraid of disturbing nature's sleep. Thus, prairie settlements spread timidly, almost unseen until you are very near them because no tall building defies the intimidating horizontality of the place. Similarly, a lot of prairie poems look

¹⁴ Patrick LANE «A Murder of Crows», *ibid.* p. 114.

¹⁵ Terrence HEATH «The Tongue», *ibid.* p. 73.

like tiny inky dots on the whiteness of the page. Prairie poetry is, above all, visual. Here and there you see margins that resist justification in order to portray the openness of the land, you notice wide spaces between words which the poet uses to draw silence, and you become aware of the almost total absence of capital letters, a device that suggests plainness and uniformity. Then as you start reading, simplicity of language and syntax is the first thing that comes to the fore. You wonder how much awareness and calculation is involved in this bareness which sometimes makes poetry appear as a mere skeleton. Eli Mandel's «Narrative Poem», for example, is made up of twenty nine lines with only two finite verbs in simple forms and no more than three words per line. Of the two verbs that appear at the beginning of the poem, one is the simple present of the verb to be, the most elemental of all verbs and one that helps the poet reduce narrative to its bare essentials. At first, Mandel tries to tell us about the prairie. He says,

the point is
the story
that
one no-one
told

However, at the end of the poem we realize that language has failed him. The prairie has imposed its own voice and the artist is simply allowed to be its echo,

land
and long
land
and
land¹⁶.

Paradoxically, what seems to be a failure turns out to be a success. We realize that through the emptying out of language and of space, Mandel draws the bareness of the prairie, records its silence, and gives a picture of the baffled spectator who stands embarrassed by his own verticality. But, above all, what Eli Mandel does is to venture into the prairie self to discover its essence because, as John Ower remarks, Mandel «believes that man can descend spiritually down the scale of being even as far as the inanimate»¹⁷. This is a dangerous journey that not all artists are willing to undertake. The

¹⁶ Eli MANDEL «Narrative Poem» in *Twelve Prairie Poets op.cit.*p. 105.

¹⁷ John OWER «Black and Secret Poet» in *Canadian Literature* n.º 42 Autumn 1969 (ed) D. Stephens & Wilt New p. 20.

prairie suggests nothingness, an idea the individual cannot sustain for too long without feeling deeply disturbed. Consequently, when attempting to describe this kind of landscape it is safer and easier to say what the prairie is not than to try to explain what it is. In his poem «Prairie: Time and Place» Peter Stevens recognizes that «We can't comprehend the prairie»¹⁸ which amounts to saying that we can't tell it, so in «Prairie Negative»¹⁹ this poet uses negation to describe the land. Through negatives he avoids the problem of being stuck for lack of words. There are lots of things to name which do not exist in the prairie. For example, there is «no shore», there are «no gulls», «no pines» and «no slopes» in «Prairie Negative». Besides, by filling the poem with concrete images, the poet distracts our mind from the idea of emptiness he wants to convey. Therefore the effect is not as perturbing as that achieved by Mandel. Still less upsetting is Lorna Crozier's «Poem About Nothing», in spite of the title. Crozier gives a series of original definitions of the word zero and finally identifies it with the prairie because neither of them have a beginning or an end. She writes,

Zero is the one we didn't understand
at school. Multiplied by anything
it remains nothing.
Zero worms its way
 between one and one
and changes everything.
If you roll a zero down a hill
it will grow,
swallow the towns, the farms,
the people at their tables
playing tic.tac.toe.
Zero starts and ends
at the same place. Some compare it
to driving across the Prairies all day
and feeling you've gone nowhere.
In the beginning God made zero²⁰.

One feels comfortable reading Canadian prairie poetry. It has the flavour of things that are spontaneous and unaffected. I could continue to share with you the charm of other prairie poems that speak about winter «that hangs like icicles in the mind»²¹ and «makes you want / to smash your

¹⁸ Peter STEVENS «Prairie:Time and Place» in *Twelve Prairie Poets op.cit.* p.139.

¹⁹ Peter STEVENS «Prairie Negative» *ibid.* p. 151.

²⁰ Lorna CROZIER «Poem About Nothing» in *A Sudden Radiance op.cit.*p. 45.

²¹ Gary GEDDES «Winter» in *Essays on Canadian Writing op.cit.* p. 184.

fists against the sky»,²² or about the wind «that sounds colder than any other wind»²³ and is as congenial to the prairie as silence or the horizon. I could have told you about prairie sunsets that «spread softly in the colours you don't expect in the sky»²⁴ and about the spiritual blooming that poets like Lorna Uher experience when they are in contact with the immensity and stillness of the prairie. «My spaces are vast and blue», says the poet who appears as an imaginative extension of the land, «i look small/and earth bound/ but inside / is the sky»²⁵ All these poems would have demanded more time and more pages. This paper was only intended as a bite at Canadian prairie poetry but I hope you like the taste of it and want to try it further.

²² Elizabeth ALLEN «uncle bill» in *A Sudden Radiance op.cit.* p. 4.

²³ Elizabeth BREWSTER «Thirty Below», *ibid.* p. 19.

²⁴ Douglas BARBOUR «Visions of My Grandfather» in *Twelve Prairie Poets op.cit.* p. 35.

²⁵ Lorna UHER «Inner Space» *ibid.* p. 47.