

Exhibition Review

“Let Us Compare Mythologies”: Half a Century of Canadian Poetry in English/ “Comparons nos mythologies”: un demi-siècle de poésie canadienne en anglais. NATIONAL LIBRARY OF CANADA. Mounted at the National Library of Canada, Ottawa. 27 October 1989 — 25 March 1990. 102 p. catalogue.

This exhibition traces the growth of modernism in twentieth-century Canadian poetry from the 1920s to the present time, focusing on the last fifty years. Modernism developed in Europe, where writers who recognized that the values of the nineteenth century were bankrupt sought to find new ideas to give order to literature and art. The catalogue mentions some of the techniques which Canadian modernists used — metaphysical, imagist and satirical — and suggests that they were in opposition to “the bulk of Canadian verse, romantic in conception and conventional in form.” Unfortunately, the exhibition does not include enough examples of either type of poetry to establish a good foundation from which the viewer can evaluate what happened in the forties and subsequent decades.

The excitement of the debate between literary factions in the forties is very well set out in the catalogue. The material shown, however, fails to convey the spirit of the decade, because the graphics used by small publishers of the period were dull, and also because the fragility of the publications necessitated that the exhibition be dimly lighted. Perhaps more photographs, manuscript poetry, and reviews by writers outside the “Native vs Cosmopolitan” debate would have strengthened this section of the exhibition.

The visual presentation improves with the 1950s, whose theme is “In Search of a Public.” It is not surprising that printed material, such as broadsides, journals, and books, dominates this section, while the catalogue charts the literary revival which brought the American Beats and Poet-as-Celebrity to the Canadian scene. There are very good photographs of several poets attending the Canadian Writers’ Conference at Queen’s University in 1955, as well as copies of the Massey Report and the first annual report of the Canada Council.

The exhibition sums up the sixties as a period of “Experiment and Revolt.” The graphics are more interesting, the variety of material is greater, and the lighting is better. The “Native vs Cosmopolitan” debate continues, and the West Coast is now strongly challenging the Montreal/Toronto axis which dominated the scene in the fifties. The rebellious aspects of the period are well documented. Examples of concrete poetry,

found poetry, and pictorial poetry are given, as well as poetry in *Comix* and on broadsides and records.

Much of this kind of work slides over into the 1970s, a period which saw the firm establishment of an audience for poetry. The exhibition documents such events as readings at the Bohemian Embassy in Toronto and performances at the Banana Factory, displays articles on poets in the popular press, and reveals that films are being made about poets for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

The eighties, presented under the title "Decadence and Respectability," is the liveliest section. Women poets are once more given well-deserved recognition, and the *Avant Guard* is illustrated with cassettes of Dub/Reggae/Poetry readings, as well as floppy disc work by Marco Fraticelli and bp Nichol. Viewed on a computer, Nichol is truly entertaining. This section also includes videos of readings, the most astonishing and delightful of which is Bill Bissett chanting and cooing "Canada Gees Mate for Life."

It is unfortunate that the exhibition does not display more poetry in manuscript form. The downplaying of the process of creation in favour of the processes of dissemination begs questions about the nature of the National Library's poetry holdings. The collections must be full of manuscripts which would enable viewers to see how poems are made. Furthermore, because individual collections are not identified unless the material is borrowed, one leaves without a clear picture of whose papers the National Library actually holds. Happily, the exhibition includes several guides to collections, and Lorna Knight's catalogue, which includes a detailed chronology, is a very useful guide to the poetry of this period. One has the impression that the exhibition would have been stronger had it appeared in a better-designed space which would have permitted the showing of more material; as a result, "Let Us Compare Mythologies" leaves viewers with as many questions as answers about the five decades of poetry which are its subject.

Dianne Reid
Ottawa