

Re-Imagining Can Lit:

Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy's *Writing in Our Time: Canada's Radical Poetries in English (1957-2003)*

Reviewed by Meredith Quartermain

This book is long overdue. To see why and how it is overdue we must look back a bit at earlier maps of Canadian writing. In 1971, writing *Bush Garden*, at what he saw as the dawn of Canadian cultural history, Northrop Frye found no Canadian authors of classic proportions. To be classic, a writer had to pull away from the Canadian context to the "centre of literary experience itself." His guide to Can Lit, he thought, importantly documented Canada's social imagination – its rhythms and styles. "Where's here," he said, was a central concern of our writers. Canadians, preoccupied with a soul-chilling vision of nature's "vast unconsciousness" tended to write out of a garrison mentality, longing for a peaceful kingdom in harmony with bears and Indians.

Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (1972) provided thematic "field markings" for such birds in the literary wilderness as Nature the Monster, Animal Victims, Ancestral Totems, Ice Women vs Earth Mothers, and Failed Sacrifices. Written at a time of rising Canadian nationalism pressured by the US, *Survival* is also a plea for the survival of Canadian culture. Can Lit, she thought, was a geography of the mind we desperately needed. The US had its frontier; the UK had its island, but for Canadians, who tend toward a gloomy outlook, the key cultural symbol was survival. Whether Canadians view themselves as exploited colony or oppressed minority, Can Lit was a literature of victimhood.

On the other hand, poet Doug Jones's fascinating thematic guide *Butterfly on Rock* (1970) suggested exiled, irresolute Canadian voices, like Old Testament prophets, were harbingers of greater consciousness of something beyond western culture's utopian attack on death, darkness and evil. "I brought my hand down on the butterfly/ And felt the rock move beneath my hand," Irving Layton wrote. Canadian writers, Jones said, saw life as essentially sacrificial; they were telling us to embrace suffering and death as human conditions that ground our greatest insights. Highly perceptive of what was to unfold, Jones stated the influence of US writers like William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson was "not merely a fad, but stems from a common . . . distrust of conventional forms, rhythms, diction, and imagery." Canadian writers were embracing the wilderness outside the garrison – "the wilderness of experience that does not conform to the cultural maps of the history books, sermons, political speeches, slick magazines and ads." Radical poetries re-emerged, although, as Butling notes, Canadians had participated in the international avant garde since 1925.

Thirty-two years passed before Atwood (and co-editor Christian Bök) recognized that radicalism in *Ground Works: Avant-Garde for Thee* (2002), a collection of 60s and 70s work by writers born in the 30s and 40s. *Survival* had been reissued in 1996 with no changes to its themes or its lists of key Canadian literary works. In 1985, Gary Geddes had removed the Canadian radical poets from his widely used international anthology.

Meanwhile, the notion of a national Canadian culture was being thoroughly undermined by Quebec sovereignty and by a plurality of other Canadian voices. Observing the lack of Chinese, Japanese, Greek, Finnish and Ukrainian Canadian writing in the literary geography, Robert Kroetsch's *Ethnicity and Canadian Literature* (1982) tentatively offered "impressions of Canada in English as seen by a few contemporary immigrants" and sought to connect their concerns with universal concepts of class, modern alienation and the existential quest for identity. Butling notes the first major anthology of Chinese-Canadian writing, *Many-Mouthed Birds*, did not appear until 1991.

The *Multiculturalism Act* (1987) endorsed Canadian culture as diverse and polyvalent. Official recognition of this in the Canadian literary canon has come only recently with anthologies like Smaro Kamboureli's *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature* (1996). Dissolving the centre/margin syndrome and questioning the white homogenized notion of Canadian identity, Kamboureli avoids labeling these writers as "others" or as minority representatives. Rather, she suggests, they make a difference (note the pun) because their works situate Canadian culture in its historical moment, making the political machinery of culture (with its biases and power imbalances) visible for all. Ted Blodgett, in *Five-Part Invention: a History of Literary History in Canada* (2003), notes "a history of Canadian culture is perforce a history of many solitudes," one of discontinuity and diaspora that must be understood in multi-branching, not linear, terms.

Similarly, in *Canadian Literary Power* (1994), Frank Davey suggested notions of national identity have been displaced by a "transnational textuality" organizing human culture along ethnic, feminist, racial, sexual, class and numerous other axes making common social causes in many western countries. Maybe because our red-coated Mounties wouldn't amount to a light brigade of ants galloping full tilt at our southern neighbour, Canadians are acutely aware of the ironies in attempts at self-importance. We're specialists in self-mocking jokes, says Linda Hutcheon (*Splitting Images* (1991)), arguing that instead of developing a "cultural inferiority complex" (victimhood?), Canadian writers are consummate ironists – debunking, oppositional, evasive, corrective and corrosive. "Irony in Canada has been mapped out over more than a century of negotiating the many dualities and multiplicities that have come to define this nation" – "the doubleness of being Canadian yet North American, of being Canadian yet part of a multinational, global political economy."

In *Silence, the Word and the Sacred* (1989) Blodgett and Harold Coward returned to Jones's notion of the sacrificial, arguing that putting the world into words involves a sacrificial act (fragmenting the whole); world and literature are each balanced by primordial silence, and each must give itself up to the other sacrificially. *Reflections on Cultural Policy* (1993) called for a postmodernism that recovers the pre-modern experience of reality, that is, experience meaningfully shared across large social groups. Warning that we cannot replace the view from nowhere with the view from a fantastic polyvalent everywhere, Evan Alderson, Robin Blaser and Coward set out to map a cultural policy which understands "how the artistic imagination both becomes worldly

action and is entailed by it.” Blaser’s “Recovery of the Public World,” the keynote text in the collection, grounds cultural activity in all the great literatures and teachings across the globe; historically informed and politically engaged artistic work then preserves and evokes the highest human qualities. Without such knowledge, our culture is subsumed in mindless consumerism that strangles what is meaningfully public and common.

Even now, there is scant recognition among official canonizers that Canadian writers have thoroughly resisted conventional literary forms inherited during colonial times – little acknowledgement that the new forms Jones observed emerging in the 60s are a major current in Canadian letters. In 1989 Caroline Bayard’s *New Poetics in Canada and Quebec: From Concretism to Postmodernism* began to address this. Examining Canadian and Québécois alternative poetics of the 60s, 70s and 80s, Bayard places Canadian writing on a spectrum from defiant social radicalism (à la European dada and surrealism) to postmodernist strategies which seek to fuse and celebrate material considered opposite or divided by fixed boundaries. However, much remains to be done to give Canada’s postcolonial, revolutionary voices and literary invention their rightful place in anthologies, classrooms and popular imagination.

Writing in Our Time is an important, timely and highly readable recognition of these voices, valuable both for its re-imagining of Can Lit as a place where such voices belong and for its rethinking of the avant garde. Including nine essays by Butling and seven by Rudy, the book thoroughly documents the history of radical writing in English Canada and provides excellent, introductions to the poetry of outstanding writers in that tradition, such as bp Nichol, Nicole Brossard, Daphne Marlatt, Robin Blaser, Fred Wah, Claire Harris, Erin Mouré, Jeff Derksen, Lisa Robertson, and Rita Wong. Essays on individual writers are arranged historically to coordinate with definitions and history of the avant garde and the history of literary activism in Canada. Butling and Rudy also provide detailed chronologies of two key periods (1957 to 1979; and 1980 to 2003) of “little magazines, small presses, conferences, festivals and other discursive/material sites that supported poetic experimentation in Canada.” The text is engagingly illustrated with photos of writers, book and magazine covers, and experimental texts.

Historically, avant garde writers and painters are seen as challengers of political, social and art establishments, using a wide range of formal techniques. Or they may be seen as simply cutting-edge inventors of the latest artistic method in a modernist, capitalist drive to recreate the new. In the 60s, Butling notes “countercultural social movements . . . with the new poetics from the USA and Britain (Beat poetry, projective verse, sound poetry, deep image poetry)” enlivened the Canadian avant garde, spawning many small magazines and presses. Since then, to be avant garde has suggested being “ahead of the mainstream” or an “adventurous, forward-looking individual,” implying an elite group of literary advanced troops whose work defines to the exclusion of all others the most superior of new aesthetic practices. In a feisty attack on this definition, Butling argues that Canadian radicality is more like “guerilla action” by a diversity of politicized writers reclaiming colonized spaces, reconfiguring public domains, and recuperating suppressed histories. To be radical is to challenge the power structure (the law and authority) that says your voice doesn’t count.

She is highly critical of Richard Kostelanetz's definition (*Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes*) whose criteria for inclusion are "esthetic innovation and initial unacceptability." Such apparently neutral terms mask the bias in favor of rebellious young white males and ensure that radicality will be defined in oedipal terms: young bucks toppling their avant-garde fathers. "Literary radicality in the second half of the twentieth century," she states, "is best characterized as multiple 'nodes in an alternative poetics network,' rather than as a single line with one group out in front." Indeed the series of readings and panel discussions given in 1979 by Canada's pre-eminent avant-gardists (called *Writing in Our Time*) marks for Butling "both a high point and also the beginning of the end of a unified avant-garde in English-speaking Canada." Two major conferences since then, *Women and Words/les femmes et les mots* (1983); and *Writing Thru Race* (1994), have changed forever the definition of literary innovation and activism in Canada.

Can Lit is no longer, if it ever was, a homogeneous literary family of fathers, mothers, rebellious sons and dutiful daughters. "The radical poetics field since 1960 has increasingly become a network of multiple, asymmetrical, interconnected nodes," argues Butling; "think of potatoes, peanuts, buttercups or crab grass." On the other hand, this is not "an ahistorical pluralism implied in liberalism and/or multiculturalism," but rather a "dynamic interconnectivity," and "the nodes are where the action is," the nodes being the writerly communities running readings, conferences, festivals, and locally oriented publishers, who provide the "working ground" for emerging voices and points of view. The shift away from nationalist, centrist cultural visions (*Bush Garden; Survival*) was stimulated by the reorganization in the 70s of Canadian publishing to a "countrywide network of regional presses and grassroots magazines."

Crucial for the active nodes in this new interconnectivity is what Butling calls the "research site" (from bp Nichol's three areas of literary activity: "popularizing, synthesizing, and researching"). Just as a scientist needs a laboratory in which to conduct experiments, so also a healthy literary culture needs presses and magazines publishing something besides polished, show-piece literature, publications where writers develop new forms and alternative histories and viewpoints by publishing work in progress rather than just what has "already received a stamp of approval." Butling offers an interesting critique of the large number of Canadian magazines who do *not* provide such community-building research sites, as well as some of the Canada Council policies which leave small presses and magazines out in the cold.

Butling makes a case study of marginal writers in the TISH group (George Bowering, Frank Davey and others). Following Pierre Bourdieu's *Field of Cultural Production*, she notes that literary activities are polarized by a dominant aesthetic strategy (which has significant "cultural capital"). According to their socialization, new writers will gravitate toward established positions, toward newly emerged poetics, or toward possibilities they must create themselves. The TISH writers were marginalized from the dominant pole by their working class and by their provincial (west coast as opposed to Toronto) roots. They therefore gravitated toward newly emerged poetic strategies learned from US writers like Charles Olson, William Carlos Williams, and Robert Duncan, which they

then used to challenge the western humanist tradition represented in central Canada's literary dominance. However, the TISH writers were mostly male, endowing them with social capital that placed them very close to the dominant pole. They quickly accumulated plenty of cultural capital of their own and during the 70s headed into establishment jobs in universities. "In the case of young white men," Butling notes, "gender trumps social and economic position. Their lack of money and power is temporary. They are the inheritors of the patrimony and thus will 'naturally' move quickly into positions of power and influence." The TISH writers, like their US counterparts, developed their poetics in a culture of male solidarity; their rebellion left patriarchy unchanged.

The nexus around Bill Bissett and bp Nichol forms another interesting case study. Condemned by the establishment as writing obscenity, Nichol and Bissett remained outside the university. But their wacky performances, sound poetry, concrete poetry, and playful deconstruction of letters, words, history and ideas gave permission to experiment and play to other writers such as Marlatt, Marie Annharte Baker and Ashok Mathur.

Concluding with a history of literary activism (linked to formal experimentation) in the 90s, Butling notes its roots in social injustice such as the lack of voting rights for Chinese, South Asian, Japanese and Aboriginal Canadians (franchise was granted in 1947, 1948, and 1960 respectively). The 90s saw heated arguments over the right of Writers' Union members to conduct the 1994 Writing Thru Race conference open only to writers of colour and First Nations writers: "the discourse of liberalism and *individual* rights was pitted against an increasingly articulate counter-discourse about structural discrimination and minority *group* rights." Funding was withdrawn but the conference went ahead and was successful: "it emphatically inserted First Nations writers and writers of colour into the cultural and discursive spaces of the 1990s." Similarly, the landmark issue of West Coast Line, *Colour. An Issue* (1994), re-imagined Canadian literary culture as provisional, heterogeneous and contingent – a space for race-identified writing but also a space that might someday be free of oppressively dominant poles.

Writing in Our Time is required reading for Can Lit students, be they in or out of school.

Meredith Quartermain's most recent books are *Nightmarker* (NeWest 2008) and *Matter* (Bookthug 2008). In 2005 *Vancouver Walking* won the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize. She co-edits Nomados Press in Vancouver with her husband Peter Quartermain.