

Where East Meets West: Theosophy and the Vancouver Poetry Society

by Thomas Hodd

I

By the latter half of the nineteenth-century, a growing philosophical rift had developed in Canada, as it had in other parts of the Western world, between science and religion. Advances in the astronomy, medicine and other material sciences, coupled with the publication of Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1861), as well as the recent application of historical criticism to the Bible, increased existing doubts about the infallibility of Christian orthodoxy. Alternatives to traditional denominational forms of the Christian religion soon emerged. Some of these movements, such as Spiritualism, attempted to reconcile science and faith by suggesting that psychic investigations are empirical in nature. But when Spiritualism's popularity began to wane in the 1870s as a result of mediums being publicly revealed as frauds, many people started to look for other forms of contemplation that could resolve the seemingly irreconcilable chasm between evolution and modern spirituality. One response was Theosophy, a heterodox system begun by Helena Petrova Blavatsky in 1875 that posited, among other things, karma and reincarnation, and whose central tenet is the notion that humans evolve through higher planes of existence towards spiritual perfection. In its early days, Theosophy was particularly attractive to intellectuals because it focused on cerebral and elitist notions of spirituality that enabled them to "transcend the cleavage between science and religion by a return to the concern of an ancient wisdom-tradition, long forgotten" (Campbell 29). In Canadian historical and literary terms, Theosophy traces its beginnings to 1891, when a group of middle-class professionals—including the poet/journalist, Albert Ernest Stafford Smythe; Canada's first woman doctor, Dr. Emily Stowe; and the novelist Algernon Blackwood—founded the Toronto Theosophical Society.

In her landmark survey, "Theosophy and the Canadian Idealist Tradition: A Preliminary Exploration" (1982), Michèle Lacombe argues that Theosophy had its heyday in Canada during the 1920s and 1930s and that poets in particular were drawn to its teachings. Her thesis, though, is

largely central Canadian in scope. Although she mentions in passing people such as Annie Charlotte Dalton and Ernest Fewster, both of whom spent their poetic careers on the West Coast, she does not explore whether a strong theosophical presence was being felt among poets in Western Canada. Instead, she forms her thesis around a group of mostly Ontario writers, including Smythe, Wilson MacDonald, Katherine Hale, William Lighthall, and the poet-physician, Albert Durrant Watson.¹ This is not to say Lacombe's list of writers is inaccurate. On the contrary, in his "Preface" to a special issue in *Canadian Poetry* devoted to Ontario, D.M.R. Bentley (1986) suggests that a "special relationship" exists between Ontario and New York and that this is nowhere "more evident and, in terms of Ontario poetry, more significant than in the realm of the more-or-less heterodox religious ideas that are usually subsumed under such blanket terms as mysticism, hermeticism or, simply, the occult" (ix). But Lacombe's decision to ignore the West is somewhat surprising given that the first Theosophical Lodge in British Columbia was chartered in Victoria in 1892, just one year after the original Toronto Lodge; or that Barkerville, in the northern part of the province chartered its Lodge in 1896, followed by Vancouver in 1897 and Edmonton in 1911. Moreover, had she looked a bit further into the background of Fewster and Dalton, she would have noticed that both writers not only shared Theosophy as a common interest; they were also on the executive of a seldom discussed literary association that produced an original body of West Coast writing, the Vancouver Poetry Society (V.P.S.).²

Pre-dating the formation of the Canadian Authors Association by five years, the V.P.S. is the oldest and perhaps most influential literary society on the West Coast. Founded in 1916, the society held regular meetings, published member chapbooks, and for thirty years, from 1936 to 1966, produced the tri-yearly magazine, *Full Tide*, one of British Columbia's first literary magazines. During its fifty-eight year history, the V.P.S. served as the training ground for such poets as A.M. Stephen, Pat Lowther, and Dorothy Livesay; it also ran a weekly radio program on Vancouver's CKMO called "The Lyric West" from 1944-45. As a testament to the society's commitment to West Coast literature, in 1946 Ryerson Press published a history of the V.P.S., *The Vancouver Poetry Society, 1916-1946: A Book of Days*. Significantly, this history appeared almost forty years before that of its eastern counterpart, *Syllables of Recorded Time, the Story of the Canadian Authors Association* (1981).³

The V.P.S. held its first meeting in the fall of 1916, and proclaimed itself to be a progressive association whose focus would be on bringing together "men and women writers" as well as those who "loved poetry, though

unable to write it" (*A Book of Days* 3). According to Fewster, the society's longest sitting President, the V.P.S. was founded on four pillars:

1. The study of poetry and poetic criticism;
2. The development of a distinctive Canadian culture capable of appreciating poetry;
3. The encouragement of native poetic talent in Canada;
4. The development of public interest in the work of contemporary poets. (v)

Fewster also mentions that these pillars are "keystoned" by a fifth statement put forward by Stephen, who was one of the charter members: "Art must necessarily be the symbol of a spiritual experience" (v).⁴ In short, not only was the V.P.S. established to promote, celebrate and cultivate a nationalist environment for poetry; it was equally informed and driven by a belief in the intersection between art and spirituality.

In keeping with its first pillar, "the study of poetry and poetry criticism," members of the V.P.S. gave lectures on a variety of topics, including the Romantic poets, Greek literature, and "The Aesthetics of Music and Poetry"; one of the charter members, Maud M. Naismith, "gave a number of lectures on the leading Canadian poets" (58); another charter member, Lionel Haweis, gave a talk in June 1917 on the subject of contemporary poetics. But the V.P.S. did not limit its choice of lecturer to society members. There were a number of guest speakers over the years, including the poet Isabel Ecclestone Mackay, the University of British Columbia English professor G.G. Sedgwick, Theodore Goodridge Roberts, and Duncan Campbell Scott. According to the V.P.S. history, though, the society's "first guest from the East" was Charles Lazenby (10). Lazenby was not a creative writer, however; he was a prominent Canadian theosophist, who came to Vancouver in April 1918 and gave two lectures at the V.P.S., most likely related to his recent theosophical tract, *The Work of the Masters*, which he had published the previous fall.

The invitation of a respected member of the Toronto Theosophical Society to a poetry society meeting in Vancouver might seem an odd choice for a lecturer, except that many key members of the V.P.S. were either practitioners in the movement or enthusiasts: Fewster and his wife Grace, for instance, were "ardent theosophists" (Boone 1989, 351), as was Stephen, who was a member of the Julian Lodge of the Theosophical Society. Dalton, whom Lacombe does mention, served as Honorary Vice-President and for seven years Honorary President. Also heavily involved in the V.P.S. was Lionel Stevenson, an English professor and the author of *Appraisals of Canadian Literature* (1926), who recalls in the V.P.S. history

that his first meeting in 1920 was held in the Julian Lodge. Equally significant was the presence of Wilson MacDonald who, although not an official member, frequently visited the society and gave readings. The V.P.S., then, was a haven for those who followed the teachings of the Theosophical movement as well as a centre for celebrating Canadian poetry. More important, the result of this esoteric and literary ferment was a significant body of West Coast writing that embodied the principles of Theosophy. What follows is an examination of the ways in which three key figures in the early days of the society—Fewster, Dalton, and Stephen—incorporated theosophical concepts into their writing, thereby sounding a new chord in Canadian poetry that looked beyond Victorian Canadian notions of Romanticism towards a more sophisticated and spiritualized expression of the Canadian landscape.

II

Although Fewster's biography in the V.P.S. history notes that "many of his long poems on philosophical and mystical subjects remain unpublished" (56), two of his early works reveal a mind continually reflecting on the esoteric nature of the landscape. The more experimental of these two publications is *My Garden Dreams* (1926), a collection of essays in which he contemplates the flowers in his garden. Each chapter is a stand-alone piece that encompasses an eclectic medley of physical observation, practical gardening advice, and anti-modern description. Yet the concrete aspects of landscape are increasingly overtaken by a spiritualizing element through which the speaker becomes aware that he is not among flowers, but instead is surrounded by a host of catalysts that will lead him to the doors of forgotten wisdom. In the opening pages of the book, for example, the speaker delights in the beauty of his Chaldeans—that is, his crocuses—for only a moment before musing on their mystical power:

Chaldeans, I wonder do you recollect those ancient plains? Are you a link between ourselves and a long-lost civilization, of cities blown about the desert dust ere Babylon was thought of?...Was it among you that some great observer of a forgotten race, some priest-philosopher, drove the first Gnomon and measured the sun shadow? (4-5)

This idea of the crocuses as a link between "ourselves" and a "long-lost civilization" echoes the theosophical notion of spiritual evolution, a concept reinforced later in the chapter when the speaker suggests that the snowdrops in his garden "knew much, for history was theirs a thousand

years before the wings of the Roman Eagles clouded the land. Under the great Oak where they grew, they saw the Druids in their secret rites...heard [the high-priest] read the slabs graven in Greek letters, telling the wonder of the soul and that greatest secret of all, the Truth which in their most holy initiation smote on the mind like thunder" (5-6). The flowers are more than objects of aesthetic beauty: they possess a mystical form of knowledge passed down through the ages by their ancient floral ancestors, who thousands of years ago witnessed "Druids in their secret rites" and heard "the Truth...in their most holy initiation."

The evocation of occult phenomena continues throughout the collection. When contemplating his "Erysimum" (Rockets) in Chapter IV, for example, the speaker becomes conscious of how the flowers are "listening in our gardens and at the gate of our hearts for the sound of our footsteps coming back to the glory of our lost divinity.... It may be that I am just fanciful...or it may be that they have given me of their consciousness and knowledge" (50). Once again, the speaker believes that the flowers in his garden possess a kind of ancient knowledge which, if discovered, will lead the speaker to a regaining of "lost divinity." Similarly, in the chapter on Tulips, the speaker suggests that his maid, who goes out and sings songs to the flowers, is

a little human blossom and her song is to her as fragrance is to a flower. It is part of the great oratorio of the Universe. It belongs to the same music as the hum of bees, the mating call of birds and crickets, the lisping of the leaves, the rush of wind in the trees, the thunder of sea in storm, the whisper of little waves on moon-lit beaches, the prattle and gurgle of the forest brook. The stars are its choristers and the Morning and Evening stars its soloists. (38-39)

Far from being merely derivative of Romanticism, this description exemplifies the notion of correspondence, a concept often employed by occultists, in which the song of the maid is reflected not only in all earthly things but in the heavens as well.

Much later in the collection Fewster describes how his garden is left to the "brooding silence and the presence of a Peace that passeth all Understanding" (161).⁵ Given that Fewster was a long-time member of the Julian Lodge, it is unlikely this quotation came from Philippians and was meant to be read just for its Christian overtones. Instead, it was probably meant to evoke the translated phrase as it appears in the *Upanishads*, often evoked by theosophists to describe moments of spiritual enlightenment. The speaker's hope that he will also experience such peace is reinforced in the book's concluding lines when he declares: "It may be that some day a

deep initiation shall give vision to my eyes, and hearing to my ears—then with a rush of fragrance I shall see not only the living soul of every flower, but that Spirit whose radiant Presence is what I now sense as the intangible grace and beauty of my garden” (175). D.M.R. Bentley (1985) notes that alchemists associated “floral fragrances” with “the precious essence” of life (9) and that Duncan Campbell Scott drew on such ideas for several of his poems. Likewise, for Fewster a garden is more than a physical landscape: it is a potent vehicle for understanding the “living soul of every flower” and a catalyst for receiving ancient spiritual wisdom.

A similar occult treatment of the landscape appears in Fewster’s first volume of poetry, *White Desire* (1930). In “The Canyon Path,” for instance, the speaker acknowledges both the physical beauty of the area as well as the mystery that lies beyond, and that “Only my blindness checks the gift / Of these great silences— / How shall my wandered soul regain / Its lost white knowledges?” (44). The notion of “silence” is forcibly linked here to the idea that the speaker will “regain” some form of “knowledge” that will initiate him into a truer understanding of the landscape. Similarly, in “Seeking” the speaker wishes to “seek those vast horizons filled / With richer substance than Earth’s vaunted wealth, / Where the so restless heart at last is stilled / From the blind passions of the lesser self” (18). Here the speaker wishes to transcend material life and experience a moment of “stillness” in which his “lesser self” is replaced by a higher state of consciousness—a description that echoes the type of occult language often used to describe an individual’s initiation into a higher form of spiritual awareness. In fact, Fewster is very likely drawing on ideas from *The Key to Theosophy* (1889), in which Blavatsky differentiates between the “lower self, i.e., animal instincts, passions, desires” and the “Higher Self”, which she describes as “the inseparable ray of the Universal and the One Self” (118). Moreover, upon reaching this higher state in “Seeking” the speaker’s “Self shall rise to all its ancient powers / And find again that loveliness it lost” (18). As with “The Canyon Path,” what the speaker in this poem wishes is to regain a form of divine wisdom long lost to humanity.

A third example from *White Desire* is “A Spring Morning.” Here the speaker’s outside stroll quickly progresses from a sensual experience to a form of spiritual elation:

The clean splendour of the day has entered into me—
My life is drunken with its greatness;
With its ecstasy I am filled;
My soul brims over;

I am redeemed from clay!
I am become a god again!
(25)

Echoing the concept of spiritual evolution described in *My Garden Dreams*, the “clean splendour” of the countryside does not simply fill the speaker with joy: it also operates as a catalyst to spiritual regeneration. More powerful are the poem’s final two lines in which the speaker’s being “redeemed from clay” is an implicit reference to Adam and the Fall from the Garden of Eden. But this acknowledgement of Genesis and Judeo-Christianity is quickly passed over in favour of a form of transcendentalism in which the speaker “become[s] a god again.” Equally important is the modifier “again,” which functions as the literal and metaphorical final word of the poem; it suggests that the speaker’s divinity is something he regains rather than achieves for the first time—a notion which cannot be explained in Christian religious terms. Read in a theosophical context, however, the final line suggests that the speaker’s communion with nature enables him to return to a plane of existence in which humanity, not God, is divine.

Complementing Fewster’s theosophical garden is Dalton’s poetic depictions of evolution. In his Ph.D. dissertation, *Idealism, Theosophy and Social Passion in Canadian Poetry, 1920-1940*, Alan Ricketts (1979) suggests that her second collection, *Flame and Adventure* (1924), is a “specific attempt to present a spiritual concept of evolution” (103), and there are several points at which her poetry appears influenced by occult concepts. The first section of the book, which consciously echoes in content and theme Charles G.D. Roberts’s 1919 pre-history novel *In the Morning of Time*, is a long narrative poem consisting of seventy-seven sections that begins in *medias res* when the speaker “wander[s] through the marketplace” and hears a street-preacher decrying “The fall of man, the potency of hell” (1). Although the people listening to the preacher are moved to tears and become fearful of their apocalyptic fate, the speaker philosophically muses “Why should they choose [between God or Hades]. What means this threat of hell / To us, who groped from primal ooze?” (2). With this reference to evolution Dalton’s narrative takes a heterodox turn in which the progress of humankind is linked to the evolution of religion. She begins with the Age of Dinosaurs, a time filled with “monstrous god[s],” when “ne’er a scribe / To limn for coming generations how / We followed ape and bear into the slough” (6-7). Out of these pagan origins, however, comes humankind’s first real spiritual gift: “the Entrancing One, the Holy Fire; / Solaced and awed, we knelt upon the sod, / And there, and thus, with

joy created God!” (7). After the cataclysmic geological events that destroyed the dinosaurs, humans reject Fire as their god in favour of god-myths, such as those of the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and Persians. This is followed by the advent of Christianity, in which Jesus “lived and died for Love” (18). The speaker, though, is quick to suggest that there will be a future age more spiritual than the present: “Shall we not prophesy? Shall we not rise / In some great age, exulting, to the skies? / We have come far—have we not far to go? / Wonder shall yet out-wonder All we know” (29). Christianity for Dalton is a historical, not final, moment in the upward march of spiritual fulfillment.

Although the subject matter in the second section, “God’s Spies” is chiefly Judeo-Christian, there are still suggestions of religious questioning on the part of Dalton as well as the implication that spirituality is chiefly an evolutionary process. In section IV, for instance, the speaker describes the passing night in which “Our great fore-fathers slept” (37) and that after death “Like suns returned, they crept” (38). In a short few lines, Dalton uses the metaphor of night and day to describe the evolutionary and generational passing of her biological predecessors over centuries. Moreover, their return is not described in classic Judeo-Christian terms as a matter of resurrection, but, rather, of the more heterodox position of reincarnation: “So may we live again, and yet again, / And who shall say how many times/ we come like summer rain, / To bless?” (38). Similarly, in section V, the speaker notes there are older, more pagan means through which humans can gain an understanding of the otherworldly: “We seek for oracles, and ask / Wisdom from a dead man’s mask; / We solve the riddle of the rocks” (38). And in section XV Dalton declares her belief in the idea of spiritual evolution: “We go with Thee... / True heirs of primal, long-forgotten/lives, / Of soul-defeat, soul-triumph long ago” (50). Although the speaker appears to celebrate the idea of harmony with a Judeo-Christian God, the relationship she describes is in fact an enduring spiritual knowledge that has been passed down through the centuries—a distinctly theosophical notion.

The third section, entitled “In a Garden,” consists of poetic meditations on aspects of the speaker’s garden. Here she focuses her spiritualizing gaze on honey bees and butterflies, as well as on flora such as roses and wild larkspur. In “Communion,” for example, the spiritual impinges on the physical landscape through images of “the garden seas,” which send out “mournful threnodies” to the garden plants as a lament for the geological rupture that has occurred between the vegetation and its watery origins. Dalton then weds pantheism to Christianity by suggesting that to assuage

their loss, the seas offer the land “their sacrament of / common bread and wine” (58). As is the case with Fewster, it is not so much the landscape itself that captivates Dalton but the way in which the natural world becomes a window to the Infinite: “I look into the face / Of this wild larkspur, / And see a vision / A holy place” (“Wild Larkspur” 69). Equally significant is the closing poem of the collection, “The Bird-House,” a short lyric in which Dalton asserts her preceding poetic rejection of dogmatic Christianity by presenting an apostrophe to the figure called the “Unknown.” The speaker recognizes that, despite its mystery, there is something “sweetly known” (73) about this force, and that it has the ability to reveal to her a kind of special, secret knowledge: “For what I cannot see Thou mak’st me feel, / And what I cannot hear Thou makest me to know” (73). It is the liberating energy of a force that exists outside both time and space, and it compels the speaker, portrayed as a metaphorical bird, to ultimately find solace in its spiritualizing presence. Ricketts is careful to point out that Dalton was “sympathetic to the theosophical outlook [but] she never actually joined the movement” (101). Yet in the context of her long-standing relationship to the V.P.S., it becomes clear that her evocation of heterodox spirituality in the final lines of *Flame and Adventure* is intentional, and that her sympathies with Theosophy’s teachings invariably led to its influence on the collection as a whole. For Dalton, poetry is as much a process of spiritual exploration as it a mode of creative expression.

Stephen is perhaps the most overtly theosophically influenced poet of the V.P.S. Born near Hanover, Ontario, in 1882, he spent his first six years in central Canada before the family relocated in 1898 to British Columbia, where he eventually articulated in his father’s law firm, but did not pursue a career in law. Instead, he spent the early years of the twentieth century in a variety of jobs, including teaching and working as a guide in the Rockies. When Canada entered the First World War, he was already in his thirties, but like most men his age he still felt compelled to enlist. He was wounded in his first campaign, and returned shortly thereafter to B.C. and began to write. He would eventually go on to publish several collections of verse, two novels, and serve as the editor for two anthologies: *The Voice of Canada* (1926) and *The Golden Treasury of Canadian Verse* (1928). According to his biography in the V.P.S. history, soon after his return to Canada Stephen also “became an ardent student of Theosophy” (71).

His first collection of poetry, *The Rosary of Pan* (1923) was published the same year as E.J. Pratt’s *Newfoundland Verse* but, whereas Pratt’s collection employs regional speech and experimental rhythms, Stephen’s poems demonstrate an affinity with previous generations of Canadian writ-

ers, especially Bliss Carman, who had also engaged in occult activities near the beginning of his poetic career and again during the 1920s. The title is most certainly an echo of Carman's *Pipes of Pan* series; Stephen also includes in his collection the poem "To Bliss Carman" in which he praises his literary mentor for "bearing your gift of songs / To light on these great, pagan altars of the West, / The ancient flame of passionate love for beauty"(77). But unlike Carman's mythical title, Stephen's juxtaposition of an overtly Christian symbol with an image of pagan nature worship suggests that his collection is more than derivative Canadian Romantic verse. In fact, Stephen's verse displays a kind of Aestheticism that belies the collection's anti-modern overtones and is in keeping with the poetic experiments of several of his contemporaries on the east coast.

Although *The Rosary of Pan* reflects little of the formalist qualities associated with the McGill Group, Stephen's Aestheticism is consistent with that of early Modernists such as W.W.E. Ross and Raymond Knister. In *Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists* (1989), Brian Trehearne notes that Knister and Ross desired "to create, to capture, or to theorize about highly conventional beauty and ecstasy" in their early experiments (23). Yet a similar philosophy may be found in Stephen's "Spirit of Beauty," in which

The ray that fell from darkness
Through the primal void, kindling the morning stars,
Was one with Thee. The pure, cold flame
Of deathless will glows in thy wondrous eyes.
He who has gazed into their depths will go
Forth strong to conquer.

(29)

Beauty is not simply a metaphor for woman but a catalyst to spiritual ecstasy, a universal force of "deathless will" through which the initiated speaker may conquer both death and fear. Ross's verse in particular is a significant comparison point when reading Stephen's work, since he too was a student of the occult. In his Ph.D. dissertation, "*This Land, Too Has Its Own Springs*": *The Northern Spiritual Vision in W.W.E. Ross's Poetry* (1990), Gavin Matthews argues that "spiritualism and occultism were essential to Ross's thought from very early in his poetic career" (iii). Similarly, John Sutherland points out in his "Unpublished Introduction to the Poetry of W.W.E. Ross" that "the work of this poet is based on the conventional belief—until recently considered quite outmoded—that poetic inspiration is of supernatural origin" (Waddington 163). Ross himself admits in

a letter to A.J.M. Smith that his “Largo pieces...like so much of my stuff...are thoroughly saturated with spiritism” (7 October 1948; Darling 82), a sentiment that he would reiterate two years later: “my fundamental beliefs and experience spiritualism etc. are naturally prominent in all my work for many years” (29 April 1950; Darling 95).

Other poems in Stephen’s collection, such as “Man—The Creator,” are more overtly heterodox in their views. In this apostrophe, the speaker offers a series of arguments in which he admonishes the human race for its ignorance towards the divine. He points out that those who fashioned idols and built temples to the idea of a creator “have been deaf to the footfalls / Of the ages which guarded his growth” (117). He also notes how humans failed to recognize when gods were among them, such as Jesus Christ, “the form which ye draped with derision / And smirched with the kiss which betrayed” (117). For the speaker, all these attempts to worship an externalized god are misguided, because to him there is no creator – it is a concept created by humankind. And since humans are capable of imagining the concept of god, it is humans who possess divinity—not Christ:

In *your* hands are the prints of the nails
 And the thorns have encircled *your* head.
 Not marble but flesh is the temple – the crown
 Of the kingdom is yours – nay – bow not down
 For *Man* – the *Creator* – is *God*!

(118)

With these lines, Stephens turns the argument of the poem on its rhetorical head. Before this point, the piece seemed to be a poetic rebuke towards those who were ignorant of the divinity of Christ. The final lines, though, are a re-reading of Doubting Thomas’s disbelief in the risen Christ, for it is not the risen Christ who possesses such wounds, but human beings. Thus, the point of the poem is not to berate humanity for failing to recognize an external God, but to chastise it for not realizing that they possess the same divinity as the gods they are attempting to worship.

Another illustration of Stephen’s wedding his poetics to Theosophy is “The Torch Bearers.” In the opening stanzas, the speaker acknowledges how his ancient beliefs had disappeared from the world in favour of a Judeo-Christian God: “our light was hidden / From all men’s eyes but still unbidden / ...Conquered they called us and our words were treasons. / God was to witness that our day was done” (56). The allusion to the historical ill-treatment of paganism at the hands of Christianity is not forced, though. In fact, there is a sense of sarcasm in those lines since the presence of the

speaker disproves the belief by the Church that “God was to witness that our day was done” (56). In fact, he is quick to point out that “curses veiled as prayers prevailed not” (56) and remains confident that their vision of the universe will prevail:

When soul shall wed the sense of things and leaven
Earth with the essence of the flame divine,
Life’s harmony complete – the mystic seven
Full throated strings, with chant sublime,
Shall build another tower on Shinar founded,
Eternal, on the square deific, grounded,
Secure, inviolate on that ancient sign.

(57)

The linking of the “leaven[ed] earth” with the “flame divine” echoes the occult notion of correspondence “as above, so below.” More important, the speaker’s reference to the “mystic seven / Full throated strings” refers to the trope of “spiritual harmony” in the universe proclaimed by theosophists and other occult groups. In Volume 3 of *The Secret Doctrine* (1897), for example, Blavatsky describes how “when Orpheus, the son of Apollo or Helios, received from his father the phorminx—the seven-stringed lyre, symbolical of the sevenfold mystery of Initiation” (277). Similarly, the phrase “mystic seven” is commonly employed by alchemists as well as theosophists, because the number “seven” figures prominently in their teachings: in *The Key to Theosophy* Blavatsky describes the “septenary constitution of our planet” as well as “the septenary nature of man” (88-93); she also writes about “cosmic planes of existence” which were later clarified by C.W. Leadbeater and others as seven specific planes of existence that corresponded to her principles.⁶ Moreover, Stephen’s reference to “another tower on Shinar founded” alludes to the plain on which the Tower of Babel was built in 1250 B.C., an image often cited by occultists. Stephen’s description is also strikingly similar to a passage found in Blavatsky’s 1886 essay, “Occult or Exact Science” which appeared in *The Theosophist*: “Soon the world will behold it soaring in the clouds of self-sufficiency like a new tower of Babel, to share, perchance, the fate of the Biblical monument” (422). For Stephen, then, the new tower will serve as a symbol of the second coming, a physical and spiritual link to ancient sources of spiritual harmony.

The resulting spiritual strain of aestheticism in Stephen’s sounds an original chord in West Coast poetry. In fact, Stephen expressly argues in “The Western Movement in Canadian Poetry” (1925) that this blend of

Western poetics and Eastern mysticism is characteristic, not only of his own verse, but also of that of his fellow provincial practitioners. Moreover, he suggests in the essay that Canada is entering a new age, spurred on by a renewed sense of nationalism, recent achievements in science and technology, and “the explorations of psychologists and philosophers into the unexplored realms of man and Nature” (211). For some provinces, such as Ontario and Quebec, the opportunities for artists to utilize this creative energy have been largely suppressed because of long-held traditions which “[stifle] their secret desire for a wider intellectual freedom” (212). However, because cities such as Vancouver and Victoria possess large Asian populations and are more welcoming of less conservative religious views, they have been better able to embrace the spirit of the New Age. Thus, the West Coast has become a creative space “where East meets West, [in which] the spiritual ideals of the Oriental philosophies are modified solely by the virile, red-blooded healthiness natural to a pioneer community” (213). Coincidentally, Stephen’s article reads like a Who’s Who of the V.P.S. since the examples he cites include Fewster, Dalton, Stevenson, and Tom MacInnes. Whether this makes the West Coast writers a “unique” movement will require further investigation, but Stephen is certainly accurate on one front: they all share Theosophy as a common spiritual interest.

Although seldom mentioned by scholars, the activities of the V.P.S. attracted the attention of two prominent Eastern Canadian poets: Bliss Carman and Charles G.D. Roberts. Carman began a friendship with Fewster in 1920, and frequently stayed with him and his wife at their home in Vancouver. Less than two years later, Carman was appointed Honorary President of the Society. Coincidentally, his poetry during this period reveals a penchant for theosophical ideas. While working on the poem “Shamballah,” he notes in a letter he sent to Grace from Los Angeles how he “spent some time in the very pleasant reading room of the United Theosophists near here in connection with these shambling Shamballistics” (circa Christmas, 1922; Carman, *Letters* 299). The finished poem was included in his 1925 collection, *Far Horizons*, and the first stanza sets the tone for what is an overtly theosophical narrative:

Have you heard of the city Shamballah,
That marvelous place in the North,
The home of the Masters of Wisdom,
Whence the Sons of the Word are sent forth?
In moments of vision we see it,
For a moment we understand,

Then it passes from sense, unsubstantial
As the shadows of gulls o'er the sand.

(79)

In this considerable lyric of 137 lines, Carman attempts to articulate the myth of the fabled city from a theosophical vantage point, proposing that the teachings of great men throughout the ages, "From Krishna, Gautama, and Jesus / To Swedenborg, Blake, and Delsarte" (81) form part of a mystical brotherhood that flows from a single cosmic tradition.⁷ Shamballah is a mythical city hidden beyond the Himalayas, a place where all inhabitants are spiritually enlightened.⁸ More important, it is the "home of the Masters of Wisdom," a place that can be only comprehended in fleeting "moments of vision" when practitioners engage in acts of spiritual meditation. Carman links Shamballah to notions of a wisdom tradition, an ancient city where "the keys of all mystery are, whose secrets are brought forth by "the Bringers of Knowledge" (79-80).⁹

As for Roberts, shortly after his return to Canada in 1925 he went on a cross-country speaking tour, including time in Vancouver where he was, in John Coldwell Adams' words, "adopted by the Vancouver Poetry Society" (133). He returned the following winter to give a series of lectures at the University of British Columbia, then in February 1927 he participated in a special evening for the V.P.S. to celebrate the publication of Fewster's *My Garden Dreams*, along with Carman, the Executive of the V.P.S., and Lorne Pierce. More important, the year after Roberts' initial visit to Vancouver, he published an article in the *Manitoba Free Press* entitled "My Religion" in which he speaks of an "ancient hypothesis" that "colors my religion," a hypothesis that he describes as "spiritual evolution" (27) and which he finds compatible with his beliefs: "I prefer to think that I might have a few more lives, a few more ages, in which to develop, in which to fit myself for the society of the just made perfect. And even then I should hope that there were planes of perfection further on towards which I might continue to aspire" (27). His affiliation with the V.P.S. may help to explain both the writing of this article as well as why some of his later verse contains theosophical tropes.

Four months after publishing "My Religion," Roberts wrote a poem later entitled "Hath Hope Kept Vigil," which appears in *The Vagrant of Time* (1927). This short twelve-line lyric compares lilies in winter, a traditional symbol of death, to the death and burial of the speaker. The first two stanzas describe the lilies in bereavement terms, as if they are bodies in a coffin already underground: "Frail lilies that beneath the dust so long / Have lain in cerements of musk and slumber, / While over you hath fled

the viewless throng / Of hours and winds and voices out of number” (6). This comparison is reinforced at the beginning of the second stanza, when the speaker rhetorically asks: “Pulseless and dead in that enswathing dark / Hath hope kept vigil at your core of being?” (6). The last stanza, though, offers a firm comparison between the lilies and the speaker’s fate. His musing upon the life and death struggle of the flowers, as well as the “unextinguished spark” that dwells within them, prompts him to reflect on his own mortality: “Once more into the dark I go down, / And deep and deaf the black clay seals my prison, / Will the numbed soul foreknow how light shall crown / With strong young ecstasy its life new risen?” (6). Although the question is a rhetorical one, the phrase “Once more when I go down” refers to the fact that the speaker has died before and that his experience will be a form of reincarnation—a considerably more heterodox position than the early Romantic Roberts would have taken.

A more poignant articulation of theosophical concepts may be found in Roberts’s “Re-birth,” which appears in his last collection, *The Iceberg and Other Poems* (1934). In a letter to Frederick George Scott, Roberts includes a copy of the poem with the caveat: “It may strike you as a bit heterodox! But I do not think one life is quite enough for us, in which to fit ourselves for eternity” (May 1, 1933; *Letters* 446). His use of the phrase “I do not think one life is quite enough for us” echoes the sentiments he expressed in “My Religion” seven years earlier and is in keeping with the reincarnation/cosmic evolution concepts taught by theosophists. The poem itself demonstrates through its reincarnation narrative how far Roberts had come from his early lyrics such as the Romantic return poem “Tantramar Revisited” (1884). The poem begins with a disembodied voice proclaiming that “I had stumbled up thro’ Time from the slime to the heights, / Then fallen into the stillness of the tomb. / For an age I had lain in the pulseless, senseless dark” (21). But the speaker hears a voice and enters a spiritual state: “A naked soul, I bathed in the light ineffable, / I floated in the ecstasy of light” (21). The ethereal experience is a brief one, however, for he is soon called back to the birth canal: “Once again was I snared in the kindly flesh of man. / The kind flesh closed away my sight. / But before the mists of temporal forgetting shut me in / I had seen, far off, the Vision and the Height” (21). The phrase “the Vision and the Height” alludes to an emanating spirit, thus linking the speaker’s rebirth to a moment of spiritual awakening. In Vancouver, Roberts had finally found a place of poetic solace, a group in which he could engage with the kind of spiritual poetics he had been struggling to express for decades.

Stevenson argues that through its publishing of member books and visiting authors, “the V.P.S. was carrying out its intention of bridging the literary chasm between East and West” (*A Book of Days* 30). This description has a triple-meaning since the poetry of members of the V.P.S. is also a blending of “East and West,” as demonstrated by the infusion of elements of Eastern mysticism into their West Coast poetics. A third aspect to Stevenson’s statement comes in the form of Carman and Roberts, two Eastern poets who in their later years came to embrace the literary energy of the West Coast. Munro Beattie (1965) has charged that “the versifiers of this arid period, having nothing to say, kept up a constant jejune chatter about infinity, licit love, devotion to the Empire, death, Beauty, God and Nature. Sweet singers of the Canadian out-of-doors, they peered into flowers, reported on the flittings of the birds [and] discerned mystic voices in the wind” (234). These Vancouver poets, however, were not simply imitators of their Romantic predecessors: the conflation of influences between their theosophical interests and Canadian poetics suggests that they engaged in a new way of looking at the past instead of resorting to outdated aesthetic modes of artistic conceptualization. Moreover, their West Coast poetry may have links to Eastern counterparts such as Albert Durrant Watson and Wilson MacDonald, who also looked to Theosophy as a source for poetic inspiration. But only a broad study of the role Theosophy played in the shaping of Canadian poetics in the early part of the twentieth century can help us better understand the value of such occluded traditions within the spectrum of the nation’s literature.

Notes

- 1 Of this group, Smythe, MacDonald and Watson are perhaps best known for their interest in Theosophy. MacDonald, for instance, has been described as the “poet laureate of Theosophy in Canada” (Lacombe 108), while Smythe, in addition to being a co-founder of the Toronto Theosophical Society, was editor of the long-running journal, *The Canadian Theosophist*; Smythe also wrote the Introduction to MacDonald’s first book, *Song of the Prairie Land and Other Poems* (1918). As for Watson, Robert Lecker (1996) points out that his introduction to the poetry section of *Our Canadian Literature* (1922), which he co-edited with Lorne Pierce, is “a profound expression of his theosophical leanings,” and that Watson’s choice of poems to include in the anthology firmly reflect his belief in the movement (65).
- 2 Recent scholarly contributions include only brief mentions of the society – as in Dean Irvine’s *Editing Modernity: Women and Little-Magazine Cultures in Canada, 1916-1965* (2008) and in Chris Wiesenthal’s *The Half-Lives of Pat Lowther* (2005). The only real contribution to appear in decades is a two page article by Victoria Barker that appeared in the 2006 volume of *British Columbia: The Journal of the British Columbian*

Historical Federation.

- 3 Commissioned by Lorne Pierce, the editor-in-chief of The Ryerson Press and long-time supporter of the V.P.S., the history is arranged in three sections: the first includes a history of the society, containing mostly reminiscences and quotes from former members; the second offers short biographies of charter and author members; the third is an "Anthology" of selected work by society members. As a further testament to the group's sense of community, no one writer is credited as author of the book, although Lionel Stevenson is thanked in the Acknowledgements for choosing the poems that appear in the "Anthology."
- 4 Not surprisingly, Fewster is remembered in the Society historical records as "gently and earnestly discoursing on the spiritual essence of poetry" (Wiesenthal 146).
- 5 Although Fewster is employing this phrase for its occult meaning, it is also used in the Anglican and other Christian traditions, and appears in Philippians 4:7—"And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." Fewster may have also been familiar with the final line of T.S. Eliot's High Modernist poem, *The Waste Land* (1922), "Shantih Shantih Shantih," which Eliot translated in his Notes as "The Peace which passeth understanding." Coincidentally, Eliot draws on the figure of Madame Blavatsky in Section I of *The Waste Land* in his depiction of Madame Sosostri. It has also been argued that Eliot includes a number of occult topoi in his major early work. See, for instance, Leon Surette's chapter on Eliot in *The Birth of Modernism* (1994).
- 6 Blavatsky also discusses the number seven in her other major essays, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) and *Isis Unveiled* (1877).
- 7 While the other men mentioned by Carman are better known historically for their teachings on mysticism, Francois Delsarte (1811-1871) developed a group of aesthetics linked to gestures that developed into a system of exercises that promoted physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. Carman was first introduced to the ideas of Delsarte in 1891 through his friend Richard Hovey and Hovey's future wife, Henrietta Russell, who was trained in Delsartean techniques. For an illuminating explanation of Delsarte's influence on Carman's life, see Laurel Boone's "Bliss Carman's Pageants, Masques and Essays and the Genesis of Modern Dance" (1990).
- 8 The myth of Shamballah is also alluded to in Volume 2 of *The Secret Doctrine*: "[The water of life] flows around and animates her (mother earth's) body. Its one end issues from her head; it becomes foul at her feet (the Southern Pole). It gets purified (on its return) to her heart – which beats under the foot of the sacred Sambhala, which then (in the beginnings) was not yet born" (400).
- 9 H. Pearson Gundy suggests that Carman's interest in the occult in his later years is in many ways a return rather than a beginning: indeed, in the introduction of Chapter 14 of *Letters of Bliss Carman*, Gundy notes that "Carman attributed his ability to stand up to the grueling pace he had set himself, to new friendships and to his new (or renewed) interest in the 'mystic truth' of theosophy" (316). Certainly Carman's most important friendships at the end of his life appear to be those who embraced Theosophy: the last poetry collection he published before he died, *Wild Garden* (1929) is dedicated to Fewster. Coincidentally, in his review of *Wild Garden*, Smythe suggests that "a spirit of a true Theosophy underlies [Carman's] best work." But it is equally possible that Carman's affection for the V.P.S. resulted in part because of a mutual interest in Theosophy rather than a one-way introduction on the part of the Fewsters. Carman was exposed to occult ideas and likely Theosophy as early as the 1890s when he and Roberts spent some time with the Celtic mystic writer, William Sharp (see my own "The Celtic Twilight in Canada"). Moreover, Carman's 1900 collaboration with Richard Hovey, *Last Songs from Vagabondia*, includes a reference to "Theosophy" near the end of the poem "Romany Signs":

I'll warrant here's a road to Arcady
 With goodly cheer and merry company,
 Skirting the pleasant foot-hills of Philosophy,
 Far from the quaggy marshes of Theosophy.
 O for the trail, wherever it may lead,
 From small credulity to larger creed,
 Till we behold this world without detraction
 As God did seven times with satisfaction!
 (37-44)

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