

Drinking with Sir John A.: Stephen Cain's *New History of Canada*

by Owen Percy

I

In her review of Stephen Cain's *American Standard/Canada Dry*, Kim Minkus inadvertently highlights the often-perceived fissure between the avant-garde and Canada's more mainstream poetry. Discussing the closing lines of "Canada Dry," the last poem in Cain's 2005 collection, Minkus suggests that

[m]ore so than other poems in this collection..., 'Canada Dry' would appear to be a nonsense poem, a jumble of found language except for the last two sentences:

For whatever else, poetry is free and dumb
And we have acquired the ways of strangers

The final line of this poem is the final sentence of the book, and it resonates with the question, 'what are we and who are we?' (par.11, my ellipses)

While Minkus pursues this question to a reasonable conclusion about Canada-US relations, her failure to recognize (or at least acknowledge) the poet's overt allusions to canonical Canadian verse undermines her otherwise engaged reading of the book. Cain's borrowing from Irving Layton's "Whatever Else Poetry Is Freedom" and from the last lines of Al Purdy's "The Country North of Belleville" ("we may go back there / to the country of our defeat...But it's been a long time since / and we must enquire the way / of strangers" (80-81) is indeed found language and structure, and although personal opinions may differ, it is just as nonsensical as the rest of the poem. I employ the term "nonsensical" here not to further trouble Minkus's review but to draw attention to the fact that the poem is made up almost entirely of appropriated material (Leonard Cohen lines, company names, place names, an array of popular expressions) and that to label it a nonsense poem is to ignore the possibilities that Cain has suggestively fostered therein. The particular problem here is, as always, that of a subjective reading, but it is indicative of a larger seeming incommensurability

between the avant-garde and what I will call the Canadian mainstream (Purdy, Atwood, Ondaatje, McKay, Brand, and other recognizable figures). The very nature of the avant-garde, to be “out in front,” suggests futurity (if not feverish contemporaneity), though in order to work into the future, a past—a tradition even—must be acknowledged.

I do not mean to suggest that the Canadian avant-garde has been negligent in this acknowledgement, but that the form of the acknowledgement has generally gone unrecognized by most readers of mainstream poetry just as Cain’s allusions go unrecognized by Minkus. The divide between the poetries, perhaps what earns the avant-garde its title, can be usefully—if reductively—approached through Roland Barthes’ distinction between readerly and writerly text. According to Canada’s living pillar of progressive poetics, Steve McCaffery, here quoting Barthes directly, the readerly text is that which we recognize as narratively coherent in the traditional sense, though “[t]he writerly text by contrast is resistant to habitual reading; it is ‘the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem...production without product’ making the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text. The writerly proposes the *unreadable* as the ideological site of departure from consumption to production” (143, his emphasis, my ellipses). Simply put, the writerly lacks the immediate narrative and logical coherence of the readerly, and demands creativity within the act of reading towards meaning. Ron Perelman elaborates that, in language-centered writing, “the conventional positions of (modernist) literary competence are reversed; instead of the writer being powerful and the reader struggling to catch up,...the reader...is the active one and the writer...is second in the chain of command” (33, my ellipses). Such poetry, often associated with the LANGUAGE movement, and later the Kootenay School of Writing in Canada, provides the foundation for a significant portion of what has come to be known as the Canadian avant-garde. Today’s incarnation of this group could be—again, reductively—metonymically represented by the “Coach House Coterie” whose members include Christian Bök, Darren Wershler-Henry, Jay MillAr, Susan Zelazo, Jeff Derksen and Cain, among notable others. Bök’s editorial effort alongside Margaret Atwood’s Introduction to *Ground Works: Avant-Garde For Thee*, an anthology of Canadian experimental writing published in 2002, as well as his receipt of the Griffin Poetry Prize that same year has certainly contributed to the mainstream credibility of the movement. Also, Canadian-born experimental writer Lisa Robertson’s nomination for a Governor General’s Award in 1998 worked towards popularizing new verse by presenting experimental writing to the Canadian reading public through the appar-

ently trustworthy office of government. The significant critical attention paid to Erin Mouré's work within the academy in recent years is also suggestive of a readership—again, perhaps largely academic—in the active process of maintaining or recuperating a poet who has become increasingly more writerly since the beginning of her career¹. Change and newness, however, are things that Canadian readers have historically resisted, at least in their “R”evolutionary incarnations. Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, now an identifiably canonical text, faced remarkable censure and criticism for its *unreadability* and overt sexuality upon its release in 1966², and was recently nominated as a CBC *Canada Reads* selection under a remarkably enduring cloud of controversy. It was, of course, eliminated in the early selection rounds. It seems that the “Father of Canadian Poetry,” Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, may have been just as prophetic as he was reflective when, in 1933, he noted that “Modernism, so called, came without violence to Canada. It was with us not revolution but evolution” (84). If the eventual recuperation of an immediately unreadable text leads to this kind of larger evolution (by way of learning—over a period of time—to incorporate the revolutionary for a wider readership in a more palatable way,) what then becomes possible when this dialectic occurs concurrently and immediately, not only within the space of an entire book, but within groups of poems or even single poems themselves?

My goal here is to frame an extended close reading of Cain's suite of poems “A History of Canada” (95-105) from *American Standard/Canada Dry* with a discussion of the contemporary avant-garde in Canada and the nature of textual/canonical recuperation, and to suggest that this suite performs a simultaneous readerly and writerly act. As a concurrent invitation to and alienation of the reader, I suggest that this suite of poems in fact proposes its own recuperative approach to experimental writing in Canada. My reading here owes its primary debt to Andy Weaver's 2005 article “Synchronous Foreignicity: Fred Wah's Poetry and the Recuperation of Experimental Texts,” in which Weaver proposes a valuable dissolution of binary thinking about the recuperation of the avant-garde by Jean-François Lyotard and Paul Mann through Wah's poetry. Weaver suggests that the very idea of recuperation is “a notion that plagues formally experimental writing by implying that any formally experimental text that has been canonized must have been complicit with the dominant system all along” (309). This is especially pertinent to my reading of Cain here as “the dominant system” of CanLit history—the master-narrative, if you will—is precisely from where “A History of Canada” auspiciously draws its satirical and literary power. I will take for granted that, with respect to Canadian

avant-garde writing, “there is a period of time when an experimental text exists outside of the mainstream, in a marginal zone from which the text is eventually grabbed, pulled, or pushed into the center” (Weaver 310)—as with *Beautiful Losers*—but will suggest that Cain’s text eliminates this wait-time by thrusting its content at once into the center and dragging its form along with it. Breaking down the binaries between the alienating experimental text and the naturalized reified text (the text which has had enough staying power to stick around long enough for “the codes it introduces [to] become [presumably through direct or indirect public education] naturalized and realistic” [Weaver 312]), “A History of Canada” *is*—simply and immediately—both.

It must have seemed (and still seems, since no work of definitively experimental poetry has won a GG since³) a significant (if not ultimately antithetical) consecration in the eyes of the literati when Canada’s original bridge-builder between the readerly and the writerly, bpNichol, was co-awarded a Governor General’s award with Michael Ondaatje in 1970. What allows Nichol to survive on the margins of mainstream Canadian poetry to this day is his manipulative combination of experimental, visual, and sound poetry with the lyric. His most canonical work, *The Martyrology*, navigates this liminal space with remarkable originality through its formulaic ambiguity; the style is mostly *readable*, though drawings, concrete poems, and comics imbricate the text, blurring possible lines of traditional classification. It is no surprise then that Cain’s second book of poems, *Torontology* (2001), borrows heavily from the structure and style of Nichol’s epic long poem, though most notable to my present argument is his return to the quiet alchemy mastered by Nichol between the traditional and the experimental—the readerly and the writerly. Like *American Standard/Canada Dry*, both *Torontology* and Cain’s first book *dyslexicon* (1999) locate themselves in what we might call the poetics of pop. *dyslexicon*’s focus on contemporary music allows Cain to riff on song titles and lyrics from artists like R.E.M., Joni Mitchell, Rheostatics, and The Replacements. The book also contains a section called “Dix Mots Pour Rien” which consists of ten imagined ten-line conversations (all seemingly banal or even phatic exchanges) between such revered figures as Sartre and de Beauvoir, Plato and Socrates, Stein and Toklas, Jesus and Judas, John and Yoko, and Nichol and McCaffery. In the poem “Centre Island Ferry” from *dyslexicon*, Cain reveals the avant-garde leanings which will come to typify his proceeding books by suggesting that readers might “[f]ind that narrative is a poor substitute for reading” (http://www.chbooks.com/archives/online_books/dyslexicon/ 4) and that refer-

entiality should always remain an open concept. In *Torontology* Cain's poetic pop culture muse shifts from music to film and poems take on titles such as "Star Wars," "Apocalypse Now," and, of course, "Citizen Kane." As in *dyslexicon*, there is a section which imagines the possible poetry extant in the culturally loaded nexuses between Cohen's I. and F., Conrad's Marlowe and Kurtz, and Homer's Odysseus and Penelope. In a 2002 interview with rob mcLennan, Cain explicitly emphasizes his "desire to unite 'high' literary genres with 'popular' forms—the academy with the street, the pop with the canon, and so on" ("STOP" par.14). His particular intolerance for cultural snobbery in poetry, while common among the avant-garde, points to the catalyst behind his entire project of poetically engaging with his, and our, specific moment in time. *American Standard/Canada Dry's* "Arcadian Suite" (which draws its inspiration and poem titles from arcade games such as Pac-Man, Donkey Kong, and Frogger), clearly suggests that while not many people still read Virgil, most people have played Pac-Man⁴. It might be time, Cain suggests, to investigate the unacknowledged poetry inherent in the pop-infused world that surrounds his contemporary readers *alongside* the canon.

In *American Standard/Canada Dry*, the loaded relationship being re-written is, as its title suggests, national rather than personal, and the pop culture catalyst becomes the nebulous institution known as Canadian History. In the Introduction to *Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology*, Andrew Klobucar and Michael Barnholden posit Canadian experimental writing as "[r]esistance to an established canon, therefore, implied resistance to the social order that constructed it... To yield in one's writing to the master themes, tropes and voices of mainstream (Canadian) aesthetics was tantamount to relinquishing all control over the process of one's work" (3, my ellipses, authors' brackets). Cain, however, with "A History of Canada," reaches out to the mainstream reader, as Cohen and Nichol did, by making a literary playground out of the most ubiquitous of Canadian cultural discussions in a book that is otherwise heavily—dangerously, we might say—experimental. Specifically, this suite of ten prose poems of ten lines each (with the exception of the nine-lined "The Last Spike," which is missing its own last spike) takes up a project familiar and indeed comfortable to most contemporary readers of Canadian poetry and fiction: the re-writing of an imaginarily collective and narrative past. Not surprisingly, Cain's reading of history is very much a literary one, with poets and writers standing in for politicians and public figures, and notions of linear or coherent time falling away alongside the detritus of historical authority, humourlessness, and national sanctification. This is a project in

the general vein of what Linda Hutcheon, in 1988, called “historiographic metafiction” (61), though the suite is not a recovery of lost voices or narratives, but a re-creation and re-placement of the historical events which we tend to rely upon for our institutional national identity. Perhaps more appropriately we might read this suite in the context of the radical poetic tradition in Canada which—according to Pauline Butling—“is more accurately characterized...as a wide-ranging, historiographic project to reconfigure existing domains, reterritorialize colonized spaces, and recuperate suppressed histories. In military terms, it’s more like a guerilla action” (19, my ellipses). The revisitation of the past is nothing new to CanLit of course, but the guerilla action—the revolutionary—has certainly not been as immediately embraced or even embraceable. And as such, Cain, I will argue, looks for ways of tricking his readers into it.

II

While the avant-garde must be seen as a progressive movement simply by nature of its loyalty to experimental methodologies, its then-inevitable animosity towards the mainstream is not (and has never been) unreciprocated. Irving Layton, in discussing the avant-garde of the late 1970s, picks up on a perceived commonality among the day’s emerging poets: “Reading their poems, it strikes me that there’s no large emotion. Everything is reduced to playing with words. Also, there’s a general lack of satire. Again, take the Black Mountain school. Their writers are devoid of wit, satire or humour” (“An Interview” 13). Even in 2005, and despite Nichol’s legacy of ebullient playfulness, Christian Bök noted that “the avant-garde suffers from a lethal dose of seriousness” (Lecture). Cain, then, is obviously working against the grain of his own classification (as are Wershler-Henry, Derksen, Bök and others) with both “A History of Canada” as a suite and *American Standard/Canada Dry* as a whole. The first poem of the suite, “Wolfe and Montcalm” (96), opens with a familiar scene to any student who has (successfully) passed through a secondary school history classroom. The speaker is suddenly on the smoking and rubble-strewn Plains of Abraham nonchalantly reassuring the French General “It’s okay Montcalm, you’re only bleeding. But so is Wolfe so it’s just like playing Risk.” Though the subjects and titles of the poems in “A History of Canada” are presented chronologically, historical linearity does not otherwise exist within the poems themselves, as evidenced by the reduction of this battle to a contemporary board game. The irony here lies in the fact that both Wolfe and Montcalm were mortally wounded during this 1759 battle—our historical

moment allows for this humour, as we know that both of the Generals are in fact not okay, and that their strategic battle methods (attempting, as in Risk, to conquer *foreign* territory) have led to their impending deaths. Cain then references Benjamin West's famous 1770 painting *The Death of General Wolfe* by questioning the scene's "Canadian-ness," as it were. Alongside the wounded Wolfe "[t]here's an Indian squatting nearby for some reason / in West's painting although neither is Canadian. You can see it when / you visit Ottawa although that won't be the capital for another / hundred years" (96). Read within the larger context of *American Standard/Canada Dry*, this poem begins to problematize national mythologies and assumptions in what Gregory Betts calls a "provocative re-engagement with the cultural politics of place" (8). In this most pivotal scene in the national narrative there are no "Canadians" on the canvas. That the painting now hangs in the nation's capital as a reminder of an imaginarily coherent national history speaks to the patchwork identity that Cain is criticizing—that of a still-young pastiche of a country with a history rooted in those of other nations. Ironically (and historically), during his conquests "Wolfe considered the Canadians worth less than dirt" (Keffer par.7) and throughout the "seven years of interchangeable / imperialism" (Cain 96) of the Seven Years' War, Wolfe burned over 1400 "Canadian" farms to ensure famine and subsequent dependence on the British (Keffer par.7). If, as Cain suggests, the Generals died because of "the Plans of Abraham"—presumably Abraham Martin, a contemporary of Champlain for whom the Plains are named—then the heart of the struggle, the battle between England and France, spawned this definitive conflict. It had nothing to do, according to Cain, with the creation of a "Canadian" space. The nation was perhaps a lucky imperialist afterthought. The trivialization of the deaths of the Generals through metaphorical interpretations as a board or chess game also recalls the contemporary Canadian identity crisis examined through the rest of the book: the Canadian relationship with America, and how Canadians react when the US treats the globe like a Risk board in the present day and age. In the closing lines of "Wolfe and Montcalm" Cain points the reader (in a most readerly way) to the next poem in the series by alluding to Brock's victory at Queenston in the battle of 1812, but he also aligns these moments of conflict with the biblical tale of Abraham preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac. A military genealogy then sprouts from the Pla(i)ns of Abraham: the violence of the war for soon-to-be Canada eventually *does* spawn Canadians who then have to defend what little history they have against invaders. Cain writes "Isaac / won't be pointing his pecker at Uncle Sam at Queenston for another / fifty years" (96). The

beginning of Canadian history, or at least its cobbled-together continuation, must wait a little longer.

When “The War of 1812” (97) finally comes, Cain resumes his active dissolution of chronology and order and continues chipping away at the volatile subject of historical nationalism. He begins: “It’s the one we won” thus ironically revealing his own “Canadian-ness” by claiming a victory that exists in both Canadian and American national mythologies. Cain unites his Canadian readers with a pronoun, even though Confederation is fifty years away and it was officially the British who were fighting the Americans. If it can be said that Canadians identify themselves through negation, then it might begin here. If, in turn, it can be said that Canadian poetics defines itself through negation, it might also begin during “The War of 1812.” With an allusion to Pierre Berton’s 1981 tome, *Flames Across the Border, 1813-1814*, Cain suggests that it is “cows versus cowboys and the Flames want to / merely march across the border” (97), and immediately recalls Calgary’s NHL team, and the bovine companion with whom Laura Secord allegedly marched across the border to warn the British of the impending American attack. Secord becomes the marker of victory at the conclusion of “The War of 1812” as Cain assures us, tongue firmly in cheek, that the war “was important—without it we’d have no army, no / autonomy, no chocolate.” The actual battle becomes a literary one for Cain, as 1812 and the new millennium again become indistinguishable from each other and the armies become schools of poetry and poetics. Just as the British set fire to the village of Buffalo, Cain and his militia have started “a five-alarm at SUNY and Bernstein can’t absorb Tecumseh’s techne,” playfully pitting the renowned North American Center for Interdisciplinary Poetics and Charles Bernstein across the battlefield/border from the Canadian avant-garde. Indeed, Americans Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Jack Spicer “move onto the Western Front” but English-born David Bromige (who completed his BA with the Tish group at UBC before settling in California in 1962) and Robin Blaser (who moves to Canada from the U.S. in 1966) are already there, negotiating with the head of American forces, Warren Tallman, towards some kind of recognition of difference. The invasion of an American poetic onto the Canadian poetic consciousness is, and has been, staunchly defended by these patriots, and “now it’s up to Tish to tamper / with Olson and lead the charge to Kootenay.” This move to what Cain re-creates as “the Western Front” allowed (and allows) George Bowering, Frank Davey et al. to build upon the poetics of Charles Olson, Creeley and Duncan, after the three American poets lectured at UBC and participated in the now-famous 1963 Van-

couver poetry conference. In fact (if facts are possible in “A History of Canada”), “*Tish* was an outgrowth of Black Mountain. The poetics of Black Mountain and *Tish* writers stem mainly from Olson’s essays, “Projective Verse” and “Human Universe,” and from *Tish*, the newsletter that was printed at UBC in the 60s” (Quigley par.1). The evolution from Black Mountain to the Kootenay School of Writing *via* *Tish* then, follows a trajectory not of complete conflict (though “no matter what [Harry] Mathews mitigates it’s / a stalemate” [Cain 97, my brackets]), but of building-upon and borrowing-from. Still, the definitive “victories” in both the actual war of 1812, and the reactionary Canadian poetics movements are simultaneously questioned by Cain, who sees them as less-than-successful in establishing an autonomous Canadian identity/poetic: “The project is *blackened* / before it can be *mounted*” (my emphasis) much like the White-house being scorched by British troops then painted white, leaving no trace of “Canadian” military temerity on the States-side synecdoche.

The themes and national motifs that course throughout the remaining poems in “A History of Canada” treat the historical master-narrative and identity with similar inquisitive irreverence. The following four poems take up the storied stories of revered Canadian heroes and events in a similarly satirical fashion. “The 1837-38 Rebellions” (98) portrays the revolts in both Upper and Lower Canada in somewhat absurd terms compared to the textbook accounts upon which popular understandings of the events generally rely. Again, the Torontos of 1837 and of today become conflated within the language of American advertising: the rebels are marching from Montgomery’s tavern (now the corner of Yonge and Eglinton) to the modern Horseshoe tavern on Queen St. in search—not of unguarded weapons to be used in a coup—but of “a microbrew that speaks for them, one that tastes great and / that’s less filling. They want bullfrogs to boast about their beer. They / want the Bud girls to bind them and give them Head.” After a quick cameo by bpNichol holding a placard for the audience championing his posthumous collected critical writings, *Meanwhile*, this parched situation in Upper Canada is juxtaposed by the conflict in what was to become the province of Quebec. With Cain’s Papineau delivering effectively passionate nationalist speeches outside the Château Frontenac that urge the *Patriotes Canadiens* to “[f]ly like a Frenchman, sing / like Celine” (and to which, historian Desmond Morton claims of the real Papineau, “virtually every Canadien responded emotionally” [73]), Cain points instantaneously to the beginnings of Quebec’s sovereignty struggle and its famed/feared twenty-first-century songstress. Again, the poet’s ambiguous vocabulary, in its negotiation of McCaffery’s claim that “in LANGUAGE writing it is

the sign rather than the word that is the critical unit of inscription" (145), blurs possible referents, leading to a multiplicity of readings. When he suggests that "the Habs have no place to call home" (Cain 98), the contemporary reader might think of Montreal's fabled hockey team (having controversially lost their storied home arena known as The Forum on March 1, 1996), and perhaps eventually the etymology of the nickname "Habs," stemming from "Habitants" and signifying, generally, French-Canadian Québécois(es). Thus, Cain's preference to be classified as a post-LANGUAGE writer is illustrated "since he is not as extreme in his rejection of conventional syntax or subject matter" (Minkus par.3). It is this multiple referentiality and postmodern approach to history that make definitive narrative readings impossible and that tie him inextricably to the avant-garde.

In "Sir John A. Macdonald" (99), Cain performs his most overt and humorous re-contextualization, as he pulls Canada's first prime minister out of the nineteenth century and sits him down at a popular Toronto watering-hole with late local writer Daniel Jones. Borrowing from an apocryphal story about Macdonald's drinking habits (wherein, just prior to responding to his opponent's—probably George Brown—opening remarks at a public debate, the too-well-lubricated Macdonald vomited off-stage but in full view of the audience, collected himself, and began: "Every time I hear that man speak he turns my stomach"), Cain has the PM throw up after each shot of Canadian Club whiskey and then accost Jones: "'That's what / I think of your writing,' Macdonald growls. 'You're a coward and you/ won't stop writing poetry'." Jones, who committed suicide in 1994, then receives an order from Canada's first PM stating officially that "'This country can't / afford to mythologize two drunks. You've got to give it up'." Cain's conflation of politicians and writers points clearly and immediately to Percy Bysshe Shelley's description of poets as unacknowledged legislators of the world (159) though Cain's design is surely not so constrictively narrow, as suggested by this appropriation of such a tipsy historical giant. Macdonald's comments to Jones allude to the writer's 1985 Coach House publication *The Brave Never Write Poetry*. Finally, Macdonald grabs Jones by the t-shirt and slurs "'I like you. / You're a good man. I know you would rather have John A. drunk than / E.K. Brown sober.' Jones can't help but agree." Here Cain is able to take another shot at Canadian literary tradition: that the embarrassingly drunk Father of Confederation is better company than the conservatively (no pun intended) sober Father of Canadian literary criticism speaks volumes towards Cain's

historically chaotic point: Why do we celebrate (historically, politically, culturally, literarily) what we celebrate?

In taking on Macdonald's historical nemesis in "Louis Riel" (100), Cain enacts similar temporal terrorism. Riel, in his capitalistic and personal quest, eats "Macdonald's / hamburgers, dr[inks] Lake Michigan soda" and rallies the "frogs, fish, and ducks" to the Métis quest for official governmental recognition. The derogatory punning denoting French heritage becomes more pertinent when Cain notes that "[s]omething happened at Fort What's-His-Name but Batoche's no / Baton Rouge." The English translation of Fort Qu'Appelle, alongside the reference to the insignificance of the battle of Batoche in comparison to the Creole struggle south of the border works to further displace not only the Métis within Canada, but Canada within North America. Again, even in the story of Canada's *original* avant-garde rebellion, our history and struggles are laughingly placed against the measuring stick of the US. A further CanLit allusion also contributes to Cain's re-examination of the reverence attached to canonical writers and governmental organizations: wanting to cling to his own historical berth opposite John A., "Riel asked Rudy to set / the record straight. Bugger Big Bear, it wasn't about boundaries, it was / all about the Governor General's rewards that Gabriel didn't garner." The suggestion that Wiebe's *The Scorched-Wood People* was commissioned by Riel, and that it was designed not to record a history but rather to garner another GG for Wiebe acts as a direct attack on the Canadian mainstream, and perhaps even on prose's privileged position over poetry. After all, "Riel wasn't hung for treason. He was executed for being a poet and / D'Arcy McGee was jealous" (Cain 101). Cain's ironic and self-conscious jab at Wiebe for his re-writing of history leaves the door from the mainstream to the avant-garde ajar: simultaneously a reflection of, and a reaction against the canon, Cain's Riel pulls Wiebe's Riel a little closer to himself as he nestles uncomfortably back into "A History of Canada."

Cain's particular version of the famed "Last Spike" photograph of Donald A. Smith officially completing the Canadian Pacific Railroad at Craigellachie, BC, provides an arena in which time, politics, and literature collapse together completely. In "The Last Spike" (100) the stalwart poets and writers of introductory Canadian Literature courses collude to hammer the final "gold-plated university pen" into the literary tradition that will unite the country. Just as Smith and his compatriots believe themselves to be definitively uniting the East with the West with the completion of the CPR, the doddering poet-professors who are standing in for Cain's photograph believe their work to be a synecdoche for the comprehensive literary

consciousness of the nation. The criticism here is leveled unmistakably at the academic poet who has lost touch with modernity. The irony of this critique set against Cain's own recent hiring at York University is not lost on him. During a reading at sponsored by York's "Canadian Writers in Person" series shortly after joining the faculty, he found himself confronted by an audience made uneasy by his historical gymnastics:

When asked why he ridicules some of our Canadian heroes, he replied that it is the default opposite of the US treatment of history. Whereas the US mythologizes its heroes, Cain chooses to be satirical and critical, traits he'd rather claim as Canadian. As well "by making it funny, people will get interested and want to find out the real story of Canadian history." (Cornish par.4)

Within the poem, audible voices of social dissent work to undermine "Ned" Pratt, who is "filled with oatmeal and nodding off by the faculty / lounge fire" (100). The allusion to Pratt's epic *Towards the Last Spike* is tempered with an immediate image of F.R. Scott "at his ear muttering 'Coolie, navvy, / where's the Alberta beef?'" This protest echoes the opening lines to Scott's response to Pratt, "All the Spikes But the Last," which reads "Where are the coolies in your poem, Ned? / Where are the thousands from China who swung their picks with / bare hands at forty below?" (Scott 98). Northrop Frye and Robertson Davies from the University of Toronto collective largely responsible for solidifying a Canadian canon in the 1960s are also present in the group alongside their colleague Marshall McLuhan, with Pierre Berton playing the role of photographer. This is symbolic because of Berton's seemingly endless list of mass-market books which trumpet the popular narratives of Canadian history, but also because, like Frank Scott, Earle Birney is present to declare the entire process "bullshit." That voices of dissent are beginning to surface within a Canadian tradition is significant—just as Birney and Scott question this construction of a literature, so Cain does, though his critique extends to the pomp of the actual historical moment being satirized.

In "The King-Byng Affair" (102) Cain aims his ire more intently at the subversion of literary canonicity and identity. Used here again to emphasize the hierarchical power of the Governor General's Literary Awards over mainstream readership and canonicity, the actual historical event alludes to Lord Byng of Vimy and his decision as Governor General to not dissolve parliament at Mackenzie King's request in 1925. Again, the collapse of politics into literature and vice versa speaks to Cain's avant-garde aesthetics and sensibilities while simultaneously engaging in a popular form of satirical historical discourse. Cain muses that "[n]obody has con-

fidence in the system anymore. M.T. Kelly is better / than Ondaatje? MacLennan trumps Watson? Somebody has to speak / for the people and overthrow the tyranny of the Governor General.” The rage of the poet here has perhaps more to do with the subjective selections made than with the supposed tyranny—Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*, like Sheila Watson’s *The Double Hook*, incorporates more experimental techniques of fiction than the 1987 and 1959 winners respectively mentioned⁵. Yet again, temporality is confused, and Grossman’s pub on Toronto’s Spadina Avenue is the site for the new revolt. Canada’s Governor General from 1969-74, Roland Michener, is asked by Quebec writer Naïm Kattan to reverse the controversial 1969 decision to award both George Bowering and Gwendolyn MacEwen the GG over the popularly favoured Milton Acorn. Cain takes a sarcastic swipe at the seemingly arbitrary choices of GG recipients when he notes that the juries making the Governor General’s selections have “enshrined such luminaries as Gwethalyn Graham and Igor / Gouzenko into the national consciousness since Bertram Booker first / took the crown” (102).⁶ The criticism of the ‘mediocre’ books and writers (though with respect to Graham, *Earth and High Heaven* and *Swiss Sonata* have recently been reprinted by Cormorant) lies not in the fact that they won awards, but that even such national recognition—designed to promote the literature of the supposed collective consciousness—has been unable to save them from obscurity. Cain’s social critique in “The King-Byng Affair” is his most *readable* and historically reinforced, as Acorn eventually was awarded the title of “The People’s Poet” by a social collective headed up by Acorn’s good friend (and *I’ve Tasted My Blood’s* editor) Al Purdy and Eli Mandel in response to this apparent debacle. At last, it seems Canadian history and literature are outrageous enough without the interpretation/interpellation of the avant-garde.

With the literary world in such crisis, it seems suitable for the social world to follow—by Cain’s logic at least. Thus, “The October Crisis” (103) sees Trudeau “cracking peanuts” of revolt “with a sledgehammer” of martial law. The FLQ’s idolatry of Cuban revolutionaries Fidel Castro and Che Guevara mingle ironically with their targeted “cigar smokers” (*Manifesto* par.27), and despite the anarchy, our own original anarchist “George Woodcock says remain calm” (Cain 103). After the uproar caused by Bowering’s and MacEwen’s win over Acorn, there is suddenly “crisis in CanLit / before it’s even been christened and Peggy’s just published Susie’s / journals while singing Gloria Gaynor’s song.” This criticism of Atwood’s appropriation of Moodie’s voice in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, highlighted by the refrain “I will survive,” points (within itself) to the apparent

Canadian literary obsession with historical re-writing so keenly articulated by Hutcheon in 1988. Also implicit in Cain's poke at Atwood is the criticism that sits at the very core of the avant-garde: that the Canadian mainstream is too obsessed in reviving the past to look to the future. Another reference to Bowering (who is, it should be noted in this instance, himself alluding to Gilles Vigneault's 1964 song "Mon Pays" which opens with the lines "Mon pays, ce n'est pas un pays, c'est l'hiver"—a song commissioned by the NFB which was immediately unofficially adopted as an anthem for Quebec nationalism) surfaces when Cain asks, "Why isn't Quebec / happy? Their country is not a country, it's winter. And it comes too / early, in October" (103). When Bowering's Evangeline asks John A. Macdonald "Is winter my country?" (64), in *A Short Sad Book* (to which Cain points in his endnotes to "A History of Canada"), she articulates the disease that imbricates not only Cain's poetry here, but mainstream Canadian literature as a whole. The questions are those of national authenticity, identity, and relationships: *American Standard/Canada Dry* may not "want the seasons / to change" (Cain 103) as Quebec does, but it does invite further disruption and investigation of beliefs upon which much popular Canadian literature is based.

A mainstream poetic pop-portrait of Canada would certainly not be complete without a glance towards the hockey rink, or a moment on the shores of Georgian Bay with the Group of Seven: the final poems of the suite are entitled "Paul Henderson and the 1972 Canada-Soviet Series" (104) and "Tom Thomson" (105). The former poem lacks the literary allusions of the prior installments, though it begins by paraphrasing Canada's archetypal rock band, The Tragically Hip and their song "Fireworks," (which is about a romance derailed by a female lover's lack of interest in Canada's 'national' sport): in Cain's poem lead singer "Gord [Downie] says she never gave a fuck about hockey and neither did I" (104).⁷ Here, the history of Canada is translated into the personal history of the speaker. There is mention of some media-fuelled stories about hockey then-phenom Eric Lindros' brush with the law for allegedly spitting beer on a female patron at an Oshawa, Ontario bar called Koo-Koo Bananas, as well as a darker allusion to alleged date-rapes committed by members of the Oshawa Generals hockey team. The mythologizing and idolatry taking place in this poem facilitates Cain's commentary on Canada's hockey obsession. Instead of the reanimated political or literary leaders of the earlier pages, here we have born-again Christian Paul Henderson who "kicked the Godless / Soviets' asses and now he wants to do the same for Canada" (Cain 104). Henderson is then quickly forgotten when legendary hockey

personality Eddie Shack who “told us to stay in school” is introduced by the poet, who self-deprecatingly adds “and I’ve never left.” In Canada the clichéd advice of a flamboyant hockey player—known more for his off-ice antics and on-ice showmanship than for his skill—is followed (almost religiously) seemingly above all else. For Cain, hockey is a marker of Canadian pride—a system by which to mark the passage of time. For a poet who calls himself a “cultural recombinator” (qtd. in Minkus par. 1) as he mixes and (mis)matches cultural, spiritual, political, and pop allusions, the institution of hockey proves to be a fertile and dexterous arena in which to work when taking aim at national stereotype and mythology.

In the final poem, “Tom Thomson,” Canada’s famed Group of Seven is predictably re-placed by Cain. Thomson becomes Pablo Picasso, and Emily Carr is his Gertrude Stein. Thomson’s portrait of Carr, then, is the “bridge from his early / Impressionist work to *Les Demoiselles D’Orillia*” (Cain 105), meanwhile Carr can think only of literary cubism. “She would go on to write anyone’s autobiography” alludes of course to Stein’s Alice Toklas. The effect of blurring the identities of these artists is contradictory: Cain is paying homage to what is commonly valued as artistic greatness by making the comparison, though he denigrates the identity and autonomy of the Canadian artists at the same time. They cannot stand alone as “Canadians” without other qualifying international referents. This is not only the effect of this poem, but of “A History of Canada” as a suite. It deepens these staid literary and artistic mythologies through criticism. By acknowledging them as worthy of terse poetic address, he re-casts them in a new light, in a new space between the shadow of the Canadian mainstream from which they came, and the vague memory of the avant-garde just up ahead. Cain’s engagement with the legend of Thomson does not come without his usual wit and humour. Playing on the mystery surrounding Thomson’s death in a canoe accident in Algonquin Park (as well as his artistic vocation), Cain then describes a Thomson who cannot concentrate on Carr as she poses for him. Rather, “He was thinking about taking canoe lessons to improve his J-stroke.” As Thomson’s death approaches, “the lake turned as murky as a Milne, as hard as / a Harris” and his frustration at not being recognized in his lifetime emerges: “Anger was in his mind as the liquid filled his lungs: ‘Those / fuckers will never get it right. There’s no P in my name. I was never one of the seven’.” Of the multiple possible readings of this ending, the most obvious perhaps harkens back to his dismissal as Picasso. This is explicitly *not* Picasso—this is an original Canadian creator, standing on his own, standing up in a canoe to take a p(ee), and immediately slipping from this obscurity to his death. Thomson’s

death cry, imploring us to recall that indeed he was not a Thompson, nor a member of the Group of Seven, further speaks to Cain's regard of him as the doomed "Canadian." Originality and autonomy, such as ideally lauded by the avant-garde, can only build a bridge to the mainstream though popular mythology and mystery. "Tom Thomson" and "A History of Canada" reinvest in this hope, and reach simultaneously backward and forward in an attempt at perpetual literary motion.

III

American Standard/Canada Dry as a whole is not directly or specifically concerned with history. True to its experimental source and situation, however, it occasionally pulls the past into itself in an effort to exert an acceptable newness onto the readable Canadian canon. Actually, it is more focused on the present and future than anything at all. In a book that contains mesotics about George W. Bush read through excerpts from Bret Easton Ellis's 1991 novel *American Psycho*, found poems mined from industrial machinery manuals, and visual poems which map the experience of actually crossing the border from the US into Canada, "A History of Canada" seems at once incongruous. It is a constrained suite, an Oulipo-inspired 'Canada Dry' poem (giving the appearance of being constrained though following no hard fast or consistent rules), but its appeal to more traditional readers is its immediate *readability*. This is a resistance to the canon above all else, but it is one that necessarily pays homage as well. Cain himself realizes that his style and content "reveal his complicity in the cultural dilemma" (Betts 8) of the Canadian social experience—and to this I would now add the historical one as well—in writing what reviewer Sharon Harris generously called "a Canadian 'Howl'" (par.4). Cain makes it an easy enough lesson though; as if answering Layton's gripe directly, he asserts that "experimental poetry without the humour is not worth the exertion" (qtd. in mclennan, *Side/lines* 54). *American Standard/Canada Dry* reminds readers—between and within its moments of playfulness—that nationalism is ambiguous: it is as dangerous as it is desirable, and that it is as desirable as it is detrimental, even today. "A History of Canada" suggests much the same of history itself, as illustrated by the constant need to reevaluate or re-tell our own history in hopes of perhaps making it real. With Cain, there can be no such finality: "The ambiguity that has led generation upon generation of Canadian nationalists to despair becomes, in the hands of Cain, a source of gleeful (and ironic) creative humour. However frail, ambiguous and tenuous, it is a unique and delightful accommodation:

‘a needle or a monument to the north.’ Perhaps both, and at the same time. An emblem to the particularities of here” (Betts 9). The north-reaching bridge that Cain builds here, however questionable in its structure and soundness (pun intended), attempts to reconcile two ultimately irreconcilable poles.

Like Weaver in his discussion of Wah, Pauline Butling realizes that “even as the nation supports oppositional culture, it also co-opts (and thereby normalizes) the work of radical writers to its nationalist goals” (42). This is especially true in Canada through institutions like the Canada Council and provincial arts groups, both of whom are of course thanked in the front matter of *American Standard/Canada Dry*. What is remarkable about “A History of Canada,” however, is that it seems aware of this impending reification and in fact works hard to meet it halfway. The multiplicity and obscurity of the cultural references in the suite make a quick and readerly reading virtually impossible. In forcing its readers into a little unalienated labour of their own in becoming pop-culture savvy, “A History of Canada” is ostensibly tricking readers into a writerly act. It is, as Weaver paraphrases Paul Mann, exploiting the notion that “any attempt at oppositionality—any attempt to create a text that challenges the accepted codes of reality—is itself always already recuperated” (313) by emphasizing its institutional (modernist, nationalist) CanLit credit while relying on its pop-culture ephemera to revitalize the content of its form. “A History of Canada” invites and resists—(binarily)—binary-reliant readers both experimental and traditional, and requires concession from each group. They are poems which are living in the *and*, not in the *or* (Weaver 314); poems which require energetic and playful readings but which remain accessible and spectrally familiar, if not inviting, to readers from all imaginary CanLit garrisons.

Notes

- 1 This is perhaps due to the fact that her early more readable work like *Empire, York Street* (1979) and *Domestic Fuel* (1985) marked her as an accessible lyric poet and garnered her a particular readership whose sustained interest in her work has surely contributed to her present notoriety; it has perhaps fostered a willingness on behalf of fans of her more readerly work to attempt to recuperate her more recent and writerly *translations* like *Sheep’s Vigil by a Fervent Person* (2001) and *Little Theatres* (2005) or her commentary on citizenship in *O Ciudadán* (2002). Thanks to this latter collection, Mouré is the only creative writer critically addressed at length in the recent landmark collection of essays *Trans.Can.Lit.: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature*. Additionally, she was recently deemed worthy of a national newspaper article for having

translated a book that was then nominated for the 2008 Griffin Prize. In the article, her co-translator Robert Majzels and the original author of *The Notebook of Roses and Civilization*, Nicole Brossard, are given little more than a passing reference, while the article chooses to exult Mouré in particular as “an athlete in the extreme sport of poetry” (Adams R1). Interestingly enough, the book that earned Mouré her only Governor General’s Literary Award to date, *Furious* (1988), acts in many ways as a hinge between her early readerly verse, and her subsequent more writerly work, as it contains inextricable elements of both; it would provide an interesting comparison to Cain’s suite of poems discussed above. In a recent unpublished interview, George Bowering—another writer who has straddled these two seemingly divided communities effectively over the course of his career—wondered aloud about *Furious* “How many people read that book, and how many people can understand what the hell she’s doing there? It’s wonderful!...she’s just gotten more difficult [since winning the GG]!” (“Of Prizes,” my ellipses). Not surprisingly, the academy has been the main site of Mouré’s consecration as a CanLit mainstay, so the process of recuperating this increasingly avant-garde writer has occurred institutionally and can be generally understood (in accordance with my argument,) through John Guillory’s work in *Cultural Capital*. Therein, he argues that the institution—in this case the academy—is constantly reproducing itself by doling out in its classrooms the necessary cultural capital that academics have themselves accrued, even with regard to approaching the new or radical: “Literary curricula, historically the substance of most educational programs, are capable of assimilating the otherwise dangerous heterodoxies expressed in some works by means of homogenizing methods of textual appropriation exercised within institutional structures of symbolic violence” (63). Simply put, as academics learn to read the writerly, they disseminate their knowledge to their students who will go on to comprise a large part of any contemporary poet’s popular readership. “[T]he knowledge required to decipher [writerly texts] is the cultural capital of the school” (Guillory 330).

- 2 As the follow-up to his moderately successful first novel *The Favourite Game* (1963), *Beautiful Losers* (1966) not only experienced “disappointing sales” but its “sexual candour, surreal treatment of Canadian history, and extended cinematic metaphors...left some readers dazed and the public confused” (Nadel, “Cohen” 218, my ellipses). More than this, however, the “sexual candour” of its content was analogous to the outrageousness of the book’s form. Ira B. Nadel understates that “The unorthodox nature of the novel made for some difficulties. Viking required eight readings of *Beautiful Losers* before deciding finally to publish it. Even then, they were not sure of what they had approved” (*Various* 135). One Viking reader stated that it was “rich and raunchy, terrifying and funny. It is a truly experimental novel” (qtd. in Nadel, *Various* 135), while Jack McClelland himself praised it but suggested that it was “appalling, shocking, revolting, disgusting, sick, and just maybe it’s a great novel. I’m damned if I know” (qtd. in Nadel, *Various* 135). McClelland expected the book to be banned by censors in Canada (though it never was) because “replies from advance readers were too cautious or negative to use” (*Various* 138) for promotion. And to no one’s surprise—least of all Cohen and McClelland—reviewers and readers alike indeed lambasted its experimentalism and sexuality upon its release; Robert Fulford called it “the most revolting book ever written in Canada” (but also “probably the most interesting Canadian book of the year” [qtd. in Nadel, *Various* 138]) and a nod from one of Canada’s leading experimental writers did much to solidify the book’s experimental ballast when bill bissett gave it what he himself called “a good review, a great review, easily a million stars” (qtd. in Nadel, *Various* 139).
- 3 Certain writers who are often associated with the experimental writing community in Canada have in fact won Governor General’s Awards. Most notably, Bowering—famously—in 1969 (with MacEwen and over Acorn) for *Rocky Mountain Foot* and *The Gangs of the Kosmos*, Wah in 1985 for *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, and Mouré in 1988

for *Furious*. Considering the pantheon and creative trajectories of all three poets, though, we might surmise, as Christian Bök does, that “the[se] writers... George or Fred or Erin—won for books which, by most contemporary, experimental standards, are far more lyrical than they are radical. They represent a more readerly practice in their own oeuvres” (“Politics” 116-117, his ellipses). Bök notes that several avant-garde writers have been *nominated* for more experimental works but none have been selected as winners by GG juries. Worth mentioning are the nominations of Christopher Dewdney (for *Predators of the Adoration* in 1983, *The Immaculate Perception* in 1986, and *Radiant Inventory* in 1988), Robin Blaser (for *The Holy Forest* in 1994), Steve McCaffery (for *Theory of Sediment* in 1992 and *Seven Pages Missing* in 2001), Mouré again (for *Search Procedures* in 1996) and Lisa Robertson (for *Debbie: An Epic* in 1998). Other prizes have been more receptive to recognizing experimental writing—the now-more-illustrious and financially rewarding Griffin Prize awarded to Bök in 2002 and recently won by Blaser in the 2008 competition chief among them—but none carry with them the symbolic capital associated with a government-funded award with a supposedly national scope.

- 4 Referring to Virgil’s imagined Arcadia as well as Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Projects*, “Arcadian Suite” uses the titles and vocabulary of popular early arcade games to critique Modernist notions of high and low culture disconnect. It also poses many questions about the pastoral and technology, wondering if in fact—in an allusion to the profession of the characters in the game Super Mario Brothers—if “a carpenter, not a plumber, is our Christ” (32).
- 5 Hugh MacLennan’s *The Watch That Ends The Night* was chosen over Watson’s now-hyper-canonical Modernist novel for the 1959 award, while in 1987, M.T. Kelly’s *A Dream Like Mine* was chosen over Ondaatje’s similarly now-ubiquitous book.
- 6 Bertram Brooker was awarded the first ever Governor General’s Award for Literature by Lord Tweedsmuir himself (John Buchan) in 1936, yet preliminary research suggests that his winning novel *Think of the Earth* does not often—if ever—appear on CanLit teaching syllabi, Canadian book club reading lists, or in contemporary scholarly articles or essays. (The novel was, however, reprinted by Brown Bear Press [ed. by Glen Willmott] in 2000.) Gwethalyn Graham, who won a GG in 1944 for *Earth and High Heaven* has—aside from the recent Cormorant reprintings mentioned above and a 1969 NCL reprint—similarly faded from the collective CanLit memory. Igor Gouzenko, who helped trigger the Cold War with his defection from the USSR to Canada in 1945 (bringing with him 109 top secret Soviet espionage files) was controversially awarded the GG in 1954 for his novel *The Fall of a Titan*. James Doyle writes that “[i]t is difficult to believe that the award judges were motivated primarily by literary considerations, especially in view of the fact that they chose Gouzenko’s work over a novel that posterity has established as one of the finest in English-language Canadian fiction, Ethel Wilson’s *Swamp Angel*” (445-6). Much popular opinion of the day suggested that the book had been ghost-written by interpreter Mervyn Black, and many were suspicious that “far from a convincing critique of the USSR under Stalin, it [was] a simplistic anti-communist sermon to the converted” (Doyle 446). Undermining not only the perceived artistic merit required to win a GG but also the process and extra-literary motivations behind such an act of state-sanctioned consecration itself (through the Canadian Authors Association), it is not surprising that Cain invokes the Gouzenko Affair here, since it “led to the take over of [the] awards by the Canada Council in 1959” (Doyle 446).
- 7 It should be noted that although Downie did release a book of poetry called *Coke Machine Glow* in 2001, he is still not often considered to be among the pantheon of capable Canadian poets.

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