# REVIEWS

# Calm, Cool, and Selected: the New Life of Johnson's Work

Carole Gerson and Veronica Strong-Boag, eds. and intro. *E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahionwake: Collected Poems and Selected Prose*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002.

After the poem "A Cry From an Indian Wife" in eminent Canadian scholar Carl F. Klinck's copy of Pauline Johnson's *Flint and Feather*, there appears the following handwritten note: "This is the poem which swept the audience off its feet at the Canadian Author's [sic] Night in Toronto, 1892. This was the beginning of Pauline Johnson's platform career."[1] The brief gloss has the distinction of being the only piece of marginal commentary in Klinck's copy of the book. The story that it tells is familiar enough, the night in question having been enshrined in Johnson's life story as the moment of her formal introduction to the Canadian literary scene, a moment that simultaneously marked her debut as a performer and as a Canadian poet of distinction. The story of that night has been recorded several times, in works from John Garvin's 1916 anthology *Canadian Poets* to Marcus Van Steen's *Pauline Johnson: Her Life and Work* (1965). As Klinck's solitary note suggests, it has come to be identified with the poet. The closest that Klinck gets to any other direct comment on Johnson's work during his long career as an authority on Canadian literature are the sporadic, marginalizing references that other Canadian critics make on Johnson's place in Canadian literature in *the Literary History of Canada*, which he edited.

This identification of the writer with her performance career has arguably functioned as something of a silent editor of Johnson's work, since the poems for which she is best known are also ones that she performed. Her performance pieces may very well be her best poems, and the repeated anthologization of one of them, "The Song My Paddle Sings," as the most fitting representative of Johnson's work may be justified solely on the grounds that it has the added dimension of having once been a performance piece. Yet, in the absence of an edition of Johnson's complete poems—the only claimant to the title has been *Flint and Feather*, which first appeared in 1912 and is not a complete edition of Johnson's poetry—it is difficult to

place the few frequently anthologized pieces into the context of Johnson's work. *E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahionwake: Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, edited by Carole Gerson and Veronica Strong-Boag, thus addresses itself to a real need in Johnson studies.

The *Collected Poems and Selected Prose* is the second volume on Johnson put forward by Gerson and Strong-Boag, who in 2000 published *Paddling Her Own Canoe: the Times and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson-Tekahionwake*, an extended literary-historical study of Johnson's work that resulted in part from the authors' effort "to envision a world in which the First Nations and newcomers, women and men, can live together in equality and community" (*Paddling* 15). In this first publication, Gerson and Strong-Boag alluded to the imminent appearance of an edition of Johnson's collected poems and selected prose (7). But while the second volume complements the thorough critical work of the first with a thorough coverage of the author's work, this new text also presents an addition to Johnson criticism in its own right.

As the title implies, the *Collected Poems and Selected Prose* unites two parts of Johnson's work in a single volume. The combination is notable less for the amalgamation of the two kinds of writing (they do not, in fact, amalgamate but coexist in two distinct sections) than for the editorial decisions that such a combination involves when the comprehensive coverage of a "collected" edition is joined with the excisions that a "selected" edition entails. As contradictory as the reasoning behind the two sections of this book may appear at first, both speak to the same problem faced by those who would recuperate Johnson's work for a present-day readership: How does one underline Pauline Johnson's role as an interpreter of her contemporary world, and the positions of women and Native peoples in it, without turning the poet, performer, and fiction-writer's substantial work into a mere component of her life story? In their editorial choices, Gerson and Strong-Boag present a way of doing so that neither suppresses their own critical values nor uses those values inordinately to control the presentation of Johnson's writing.

The publication of Johnson's poetry since her death in 1913 has been fairly consistent in two respects: the choice by her various biographers and editors to publish very limited selections rather than a complete collection of her work, and the combination of the poems with a biography, or at least a biographical sketch of some kind. Unavoidably, such texts seem influenced by the life that the editor or biographer imagines that Johnson lived. Publications of this kind have been numerous in the last ninety years, testifying to a continuing interest in Johnson's work. But blending that work

with narratives of the writer's life has problematic implications for studies of her writing. During this same period, Johnson's work did not find its way into the many polemical Modernist anthologies of Canadian writing that served to redefine the canon of Canadian literature, the consequence of the omission being that Canadians do not even have a *selection*, much less a collection, of Johnson's poems independent of a biographical framework. At its least supportable, the combination underpins a biographical interpretation of the poetry that is founded on a circular reasoning in which Johnson's life supposedly supplies the material for her poems, and Johnson's poems supposedly reveal information about her life.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the cross-pollination of women writers' lives and their work received more compelling theoretical support with the emergence of a feminist and sociological criticism that suggested that academic research pursued a knowledge that did not include women's lived experiences. As Jenny Morris summarizes in "Personal and Political: A Feminist Perspective on Researching Physical Disability," this new generation of feminist critics "not only asserted that the personal, subjective experience of women was a legitimate area of research but that how this research was done had to be revolutionized" (265). Their new approaches sought ways of "ground[ing]" the inquiry in the lives of the individual women who were its focus (265), and they also foregrounded the identities of the researchers themselves in an effort to challenge methodologies that left the material details of women's lives out of the research equation. In the field of literary criticism, this determination to cross-reference the individual life with the products of the individual's labour has shaped the contemporary reception of much women's writing; a version of it occasionally features in the editors' interpretations of Johnson's work.

The editors' introduction to the collection, "'The Firm Handiwork of Will'," offers a concise history of the poet, outlining Johnson's historical moment and her place in it as a performer and as a part-Native writer. The rationale for their edition—the absence of a comparably complete volume of Johnson's poetry and a growing scholarly interest in her prose—is succeeded by a strictly chronological organization of Johnson's writing in both sections. For the poetry section especially, this choice of chronology as the organizing principle of the text allows the editors to distinguish carefully between the writer's material and their own theories about her creative development. Just as importantly, it lets them avoid the pitfalls of the biographical interpretations of Johnson poems that characterize publications such as Walter McRaye's *Pauline Johnson and Her Friends* and Sheila M.F. Johnston *Buckskin and Broadcloth*, interpretations that de-

emphasize the distance between the contemporary editor and the early twentieth-century writer's work and that shape the presentation of that work in a way that supports the editor's notions of the poet. In this volume, attention is *not* drawn to any particular theme in the poems. A collected poems arranged according to the order of publication affords readers the chance to appreciate a writer's interests and themes in their full variety, and this is the service, unique and most welcome in the field of Johnson studies, that this edition provides.

Gerson and Strong-Boag argue that Johnson's development as a writer is reflected in two features of her work: the influence of oral culture on her writing, and her movement, over the course of her career, from writing poetry to writing more prose. They attribute the former in part to the importance of the storytelling tradition in her own background and to her life on the stage, noting that "from the beginning she developed a writing style that both echoed and suited oral performance" (xxx). Both features of Johnson's work undergird the editors' emphasis on the narrative elements in it, and on Johnson's new thematic explorations "of romantic love, Natives, and nature" once she gained greater independence from the poetic conventions of her day (xxxiii). That Johnson moved away from poetry and toward prose in the latter years of her writing life is also one of the reasons that Gerson and Strong-Boag cite for their decision to include a "selected prose" along with the collected poems—the attention that Johnson's poetry has received over the years has, they believe, obscured the value of her prose to her body of work.

It may well be that the examination of Johnson's poetry is not served by associating her too quickly with more canonical writers like the Confederation Poets, a group that consists of mostly male authors (with the exception of Isabella Valancy Crawford) who had different interests and backgrounds from hers. Yet the idea of a thematic content that develops independently of the poetic conventions contemporary with the poet brings with it a new set of issues. For one thing, there has as yet been no extended study of the operation of literary conventions in Johnson's poetry, as there has been for many of her Canadian contemporaries. A collected edition of the poems puts these conventions on view, inviting a comparison of them with those present in the work of other turn-of-the-century Canadian poets. For another (and as the editors acknowledge), the "growth" that may be suggested by Johnson's new thematic explorations is not registered in a chronological analysis of her poems on Native subjects. At the end of Johnson's writing life as at the beginning, these poems "seem to reincorporate First Nations into normalizing, Euro-Canadian conventions, albeit

with subtle reminders of difference" (xxxiv). Poetic conventions need not be controlling, confining, or silencing to the poet who uses them. Other early twentieth-century women poets in Canada (Crawford and Marjorie Pickthall come to mind) demonstrated that, on the contrary, they could provide a useful ground in which to embed unconventional ideas about colonial life and gender roles. Pickthall's dramatic monologues often reveal an increasing uncertainty in their speakers' once-confident visions of the New World, and it is odd that Johnson's dramatic monologues—some of her best-known work—have never been situated in the genre by an article-length study. Gerson suggests one reason for this absence in an earlier article, "'The Most Canadian of all Canadian Poets': Pauline Johnson and the Construction of a National Literature," when she writes that "[t]o the mind of the academic modernist, poetry presented in costumed performances aimed at audiences of the semi-washed could not possibly inhabit the same realm as poetry published in small university-based magazines" (96), so that what Johnson did on stage was never graced with the description "dramatic monologue," at least not during much of the twentieth century. This is all the more reason to examine her poetry more closely. As frequently as some of the poems may be associated with her performance of them, the two remain distinct entities.

In any case, this collected edition of the poems gives readers the chance to dispute the editors' argument and to suggest different ones precisely because it enables a scrutiny of Johnson's use of conventions that no single volume has made possible before. The appearance, in "The Mariner," of the stereotyped image of the sailor returning "home" to the sea turns unexpectedly into an image of a miserable return to a former way of life that the speaker longs to escape, a subversion of the hackneyed figure that resembles Thomas Hardy's overturning of oft-used tropes in such poems as "Heredity." Anyone interested in late nineteenth-century modulations of Idealism will want to read "Our Brotherhood" and "The Prairie." Vignettes such as "The Snowshoer" delight in the familiar juxtaposition of harsh winter elements with a vibrant humanity ("Robust his form, and his heart as warm/As lights from a ruby thrown").

The prose section of the book is a selected rather than a collected edition of Johnson's prose, included because the editors believe that re-issuing some of the writer's stories and articles in a contemporary edition is important at a time when those works are attracting more and more attention. Among their several choices, which span Johnson's writing career, they include some of her best-known pieces ("A Strong Race Opinion: On the Indian Girl in Modern Fiction," "A Red Girl's Reasoning") as well as

one previously-unpublished essay, "The Stings of Civilization." In deciding to include only a few of Johnson's prose writings, the editors face the inevitable problem of what kind of selection to make. Gerson and Strong-Boag's rationale is not to pick pieces that would offer a literally representative range of Johnson's prose. It is, instead, to "[aim] at a balance of the obviously excellent and the clearly representative, while reflecting our own sensibilities as feminists, one of us a literary critic and the other a historian," and "to highlight selections from Pauline Johnson's fiction and non-fiction which take up questions about the survival of Native and Mixed-race peoples in an imperial world, and the role of women in patriarchy" (xxix). Obviously, this principle differs from the one that organizes the collected poems, since it involves a specific position about what is most significant in Johnson's prose. But it is also here where the editing of Johnson, the collected followed by the selected, seems especially adroit. Although the "collected" section is bracketed on one side by the Introduction and on the other by the "selected" prose, both of which place the editors' critical interests on view, it stands independent of the particular interpretive directions that might have been brought to bear on the poems that it contains through processes of arrangement and omission. It is independent, and yet it is not completely cut off from the editors' arguments and perspectives. And in spite of the conspicuous differences between the two sections of Johnson's work, the poetry section of the text may be said to resemble the prose one in the sense that both perform the same service where Johnson is concerned—they aim to render something formerly invisible visible once more.

*E. Pauline Johnson-Tekahionwake: Collected Poems and Selected Prose* arrives at a time when Johnson's work is enjoying a growing profile. Some teachers of Canadian literature believe that undergraduates, who are not especially known for their affection towards pre-World War I Canadian literature, find her work fascinating where other writers of the Confederation period leave them underwhelmed. Intriguing as the possibility is, I do not find the anecdotal evidence convincing (yet), perhaps because my own teaching experience suggests to me that an instructor can generate students' interest in a handful of poems from any late nineteenth-century Canadian poet. This said, there is much in this volume that many different kinds of instructors will find apposite. A good edition of a writer's work resists the development of restrictive critical orthodoxies where that writer is concerned. In Johnson's case, the sheer number of poems that she wrote rebuts the assumption of direct writer-writing correspondences that sees her writing as something like a record of her life, the assumption that has

so often characterized the critical response to her contribution to Canadian letters. This edition confidently presents an argument without anxiously casting that argument through the work, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions about it.

## Note

1 Copy held in the D.B. Weldon Library at the University of Western Ontario.

## Works Cited

Gerson, Carole. 'The Most Canadian of all Canadian Poets': Pauline Johnson and the Construction of a National Literature." *Canadian Literature* 158 (Autumn 1998): 90-107.

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