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Demythologizing the Nineteen Forties

Brian Trehearne. *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. x + 382 pp.

In this self-consciously provocative study, Brian Trehearne argues not only that anglophone Montreal of the forties was the site of crucial crises and questionings in Canadian poetry, but that the period has been inaccurately represented by its participants and critics, most of whom have preferred to characterize it as dramatic and conflictual. Trehearne sets out to demonstrate that the legendary conflict between the two Montreal literary magazines of the period, Patrick Anderson's *Preview* and John Sutherland's *First Statement*, was much less clear-cut than reported, and that the questions addressed by the major poets associated with them—A.M. Klein, P.K. Page, Irving Layton, and Louis Dudek—were startlingly similar, even though their responses to them often differed. In place of a critical history of the period founded on what he believes has been a Manichaean misreading of these magazines, he offers a narrative based on the dissatisfactions within international modernism, dissatisfactions which he suggests all four Canadian poets attempted conscientiously, and with vastly different degrees of success, to resolve.

Trehearne takes a mostly traditional historical approach, re-reading well-known texts, re-examining letters, interviews, and memoirs, and regarding with skepticism the narratives and interpretations constructed by those who were directly or indirectly involved in the rivalries and grievances of the period. As well, he widens the usual historical view of this period in Canadian poetry to include the international poetries known to his poets, and the theoretical questions those poetries attempted to address. However, he also foregrounds a strong sense of subjectivity in his discussions, as if attempting to emulate in his criticism the factually-grounded subjectivity he argues that Layton and Dudek achieved in their later poetry. I will have more to say about this aspect of the book later.

Trehearne accepts as fundamental to modernism—and to twentieth-century Western civilization—the cultural fragmentation and mass-culture barbarities recounted and responded to by such texts as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Pound's *Cantos*. From World War I onward, the dilemma of modernism, in Trehearne's view, has been how to combine credible witness—through imagism, objectivism, or the 'objective correlative'—with

a position of personal or poetic wholeness that could counter the fragmentations of an increasingly mechanized, violent, and impersonal public culture. Accumulating and shoring fragments against various ruins may offer the trustworthiness of documentary, but it has not been, he suggests, effective as socially responsible intervention. All four of Klein, Page, Layton, and Dudek, he argues, had an ambiguous relationship to the modernist doctrine of impersonality: while it could offer their writing authenticity and diminish sentimentality, it held them back from taking social positions, or declaring passionate commitments, and at worst could reduce their texts to eccentric catalogues of accumulated images.

Trehearne's most interesting chapters are on Klein and Dudek. He suggests an imprecise but necessary parallel between Klein's mental illness in the 1950s and his increasing difficulty in his poetry to encompass and respond to the destructiveness of the century. He notes how Klein abruptly followed the failure of his attempts to write an epic poem about the Holocaust (*The Hitleriad*, 1944) with short poems (*The Rocking Chair*, 1948), from which nearly all Jewish reference was excluded and which embraced, to an extent Klein's writing had never done before, modernist impersonality. Trehearne reads the narrowly defined focus and poetics of *The Rocking Chair* as Klein's last desperate attempt to stabilize a poetic calling beseiged by world-wide horror, and as being ironically connected to his paranoia, reclusiveness and inarticulateness of a few years later.

His chapter on Dudek implies that his may be the major accomplishment of the Montreal forties generation—that his long poems *Atlantis* and *Continuation* offer "the fullest theoretical answer offered by anyone to the problems of forties poetics." This answer is a poetics that pushes "fragmentation, extension, and structural incoherence farther than any other Canadian poet" while using an ironized subjective consciousness to construct a social position that offers "*integritas*" to an otherwise sprawling text (304). For Trehearne the problem of achieving "*integritas*"—a sense of wholeness of purpose—without appearing arrogantly subjective is the necessary achievement of the generation, one at which Klein ultimately failed, Page partly succeeded, and Layton and Dudek succeeded through their creating of ironized public personae.

Part of Treahearne's purpose in this book seems to be to alter canonical rankings of the period by bringing Page to attention as a significant modernist poet and theorist rather than as merely an early and somewhat muffled feminist (he claims at one point that recent feminist recuperations of her work have been deficient in being "inattentive to her historical centrality" [105]) and by arguing Dudek's poetry to be a more sustained and com-

plex solution to modernist questions than the mid-career "masterpieces" (314) of Layton. His analysis of Page's poetry does her little service, however. He suggests that her most celebrated 1940s poems—"The Stenographers" and "Photos of a Salt Mine"—are atypical of her writing in this period, which he argues persuasively was most often decorative, private, technically self-indulgent, coldly impersonal, and disunified. Moreover, he argues that this impasse may have been one forced upon her by the social and aesthetic practices of the time, which—through the doctrine of impersonality—denied the articulation of gender difference just as strongly as it forbade the articulation of sexual difference in the case of poet and *Preview*-editor Patrick Anderson. His implication is that she, and other woman poets, could not have written 'successfully' without refusing modernism, but that paradoxically within this period 'success' was defined in modernist terms.

Page also suffers from some unfortunate asymmetries in this four-poet study. While titling his book "the Montreal Forties," Trehearne does not consistently respect the 1942-54 boundaries (39) which he gives to his decade. He recurrently links Klein, who fell terminally silent in 1953, with Page, who began a 12-year silence in 1954, as poets who abandoned "the field" (177), and who could not manage the potentially unifying idiom of "the expressive subject" (310) that both Layton and Dudek were to achieve. Trehearne solidifies this link by for the most part excluding her post-1967 poetry from his considerations, and thus implying that for the purposes of his study, her writing ends at the same time as Klein's. In his chapter on Layton, however, he devotes extensive attention to Layton's poems of 1957-58 such as "Cain" and "Whatever Else Poetry is Freedom" and suggests that in such poems Layton so throughly resolved the modernist dilemmas that had stymied Page and Klein that in the following decades such dilemmas "ceased to press in vitally on his structural imagination" (229). Significantly, Trehearne titles his Page chapter "Page's Early Poetry" but his Layton chapter "Layton's Lyric Progress." And while the latter implicitly considers Layton's overall career, Trehearne's chapter on Dudek explicitly considers all of Dudek's writing, with special emphasis on *Atlantis* (1967), and *Continuation I* (1981). These unbalanced comparisons that wink at the period boundaries announced by the book not surprisingly construct a Page whose modernist work seems to die at about the same time as Klein's; a Layton who created "a fully developed subjectivist poetics" (314) in the late 1950s, "surrendered" it for the role of "poet-prophet" (315) in the 1960s, and whose career was an "obverse" of Klein's (234); and a Dudek who exceeded them all:

> . . . it was Dudek, not Layton, who would radicalize and sustain the Kleinian instability of poetic selfhood . . . for a poetics in which the forties techniques of Imagist rendering, accumulative aesthetics, and sublimations of the poet's mind into the energies of the text are melded most fully with the more openly subjectivist modes of the 1950s—and in which that melding could be sustained into the 1980s and beyond—I find it more rigourously achieved in Dudek's experimental long poems than elsewhere. (315)

A seductive aspect of Trehearne's study is his own attempt to combine objectivity and engagement under the cover of an ironized persona. *The Montreal Forties* is simultaneously one of the most self-confident and self-effacing books in Canadian criticism. Trehearne foregrounds his subjectivity throughout, with references to his earlier publications and statements that begin "I perceive," "I think," "I am happy," "I will contend," or "I show." He begins his concluding chapter by invoking the modernist poet's struggle to achieve "*integritas*" while witnessing fragments:

> I am left with the problem of *integritas*: how to present a strong and whole image of four major Canadian poets without suppressing significant differences among them. If anything, I have erred on the side of too much unity, although my four chapters' relative avoidance of narration in literary-historical time may lead some to disagree. It may be that I have asked the same Imagist abilities of my readers as the poets I have considered asked of theirs. (308)

He also foregrounds what he believes to be the ground-breaking nature of his arguments, asserting that he is about to offer "new, broad and reliable truths" (3), that these will remedy "disciplinary slackness" (7), that his work encourages "a substantial redrafting of the lines of debate about Canadian forties poetry" (178) Yet he also repeatedly stresses the hypothetical nature of many of this observations, that they are "suggestive but improvable" (303) that they are over-stated and quite possibly "errors" (144), and that many are not are not new at all but "of a traditional nature": "there is nothing radical in the paradigms of critical research that subtend this study" (14). These oscillations in viewpoint lend special irony to his observation in the course of discussing Dudek that "self-effacement *is* self-affirmation."

Given the decline in interest in the Canadian modernist poetry—a decline which Trehearne documents early in this study, and the relevance which he demonstrates modernist poetry to have to the epistemological questions posed by more recent writing, this is an important book. By dis-

crediting as myths many of the critical and historical assumptions that have come to be taken for granted about this poetry, Trehearne opens the way for other reappraisals. By positively re-assessing Dudek's work, and implicitly endorsing and explaining the recent decline in Layton's reputation, he not only moves toward a revision of the modernist canon but also begins the process of explaining the transition from the modernist period to our own.

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