

REVIEWS**Fresh Woods and False Surmise**

Priscila Uppal. *We Are What We Mourn: The Contemporary English-Canadian Elegy*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. viii + 312 pp.

According to Charles G.D. Roberts, "The chord of pastoral elegy, first struck by Bion in his 'Lament for Adonis,' is one which, through varying expansion and modification, has kept its resonance down to the present day" (283). As his own practice indicates, the tradition extends to contemporary Canada, though consolations were becoming harder to achieve. Roberts argues that the "modern temper" of Arnold's "Thyrsis" "is manifested in its undertone of skepticism, in its profound consciousness of the weariness and the meagre rewards of effort," and, more surprisingly, in what he calls (borrowing a phrase from Richard Holt Hutton) "the magic of nature": "The keen and ever present perception of this magic of nature is the source of what constitutes perhaps the crowning excellence of the work—its faithful and yet not slavish realism—interpretive, selective, imaginative—which forms the basis of all the most enduring and satisfying poetry" (292). The same qualities appear in Swinburne's "Ave atque Vale," in which "we find a remarkable return to the spirit of Bion and Moschus. To the sorrow of this elegy there is no mitigation suggested" (295). Roberts prefers the consolations in Milton's "Lycidas" and Shelley's "Adonais," but he realizes that such comforts are not always available to this "adaptable and expansive" form (283). The following qualities are essential: "A rapid inter-transition between subjective and objective treatment, a breadth of appeal, a reliance upon general sympathy, these are characteristics which endow this species of verse with its wonderful flexibility and freshness" (283). In her fine book on contemporary English-Canadian elegies, Priscila Uppal rejects the pastoral conventions that Roberts admires, but she argues that the elegy itself is flexible and fresh in ways that would have surprised him. Consolations are harder than ever to achieve, but she finds something like the "magic of nature" in the dream landscapes that distinguish many of the poems that she examines.

While Roberts is interested in Classical and English literatures, Uppal is more narrowly focussed: "While allusion to poems from the elegiac tradition outside Canada or before 1967 is necessary at times," she concedes, "the study focuses nearly exclusively on the contemporary English-Can-

dian elegy” (34). She admits that “some powerful and moving elegies” were written by earlier Canadian poets, including “Susanna Moodie, Archibald Lampman and other Confederation poets, Dorothy Livesay, P.K. Page, A.M. Klein, A.J.M. Smith, and Irving Layton, among others,” but “none of these significantly challenged the British and American elegy genre traditions or signalled a drastic and noticeable shift in mourning practices or the expression of grief” (23). Both the strength and the weakness of this book is that her sense of a Postmodernist breakthrough enables Uppal to collapse aesthetic and political concerns:

it can be legitimately argued that the centennial of Canadian nationhood, which coincided with a concentrated effort to produce a Canadian nationalist literature, resulted in many unique offerings in various genres, as opposed to mediocre or even excellent imitations of those inherited from British and American traditions, since English-Canadian poets were now actively seeking a distinctiveness and innovation that would insert new subjects, poetic approaches, and sensibilities, into Canadian verse. (24)

Notice that earlier poets are consigned to a realm of passive (if not colonial) inheritance and imitation in contrast to the active “distinctiveness and innovation” of the contemporary. Uppal does to Smith and Layton what they did to the Confederation poets. It seems ungenerous in a book on the importance of inheritance and memory. Roberts’ sense of the legacy of Classical literature marks both his difference from Postmodernism (though not Anne Carson) and one of many discontinuities in Canadian literary history. Uppal is less interested in historical or even ideological diversity than in the diversity of Postmodernism, and so she studies twenty contemporary poets “with varying regional, cultural, gender, sexual, religious, and ethnic backgrounds” (26). Sceptical of what she calls “the tired tropes and metaphors of the pastoral elegiac tradition” (56), Uppal begins, not with *Lycidas*, but with Dr. Johnson’s critique of that poem. She shows little scepticism towards the poets that she admires, and little of Milton’s awareness that, regardless of gender or ethnicity, any elegist to some extent exploits another’s death in the act of writing her poem, for “*Fame* is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise / (That last infirmity of Noble mind) / To scorn delights, and live laborious days” (70-72). The problem is not that she focuses on the contemporary, but that her assumptions reflect a presentist conventional wisdom. The trouble with diversity, as Walter Benn Michaels might say, is that it leads you to imagine that all problems are matters of race and gender. Any good elegist knows better.

Uppal has a keen and sympathetic understanding of these contemporary poets. She writes a full and wide-ranging chapter on each of three kinds of elegy: “elegies for parents, elegies for places, and elegies for cultural losses and displacements” (26). When she applies the insights of such critics as Peter M. Sacks, Jahan Ramazani, and Melissa Zeiger to the Canadian poems that they rarely discuss, Uppal reveals that her subject is less national than contemporary, for the Canadian “elegists are active participants in the reorientation of the English elegy tradition and of the process of mourning to which the literary elegy corresponds” (9). She follows Sacks in adapting Freud’s influential model of the “work of mourning,” but she argues for a distinctively Canadian pattern:

As in English and American elegies, in the Canadian elegies...the living are not replacements for the dead. In contrast to their English and American counterparts, however, the living refuse to accept separation from the dead. The work of mourning is, instead, performed with the goal of recovering the dead, a ritual enacted to continue dialogue and engagement with the dead loved one. The elegy, as a site for the work of mourning, plays a crucial role in this process. (13)

Not only is it easy to think of English and American elegies that do something similar (when did John Berryman accept separation from the dead?), but it is also possible that elegies from other Post-colonial countries resemble Canada’s. Uppal admits as much when she cites Dennis Haskell, who asks if Australian elegies “reflect a culture of noble failure rather than success?” (Haskell 138; qtd. in Uppal 129). Her willingness to quote Haskell indicates her open-mindedness, and open-minded readers will accept Uppal’s compelling argument that the “primary conceits...in the contemporary English-Canadian elegy are language and landscape, both of which are envisioned as consolatory, as active sites for reconnection with the dead” (13). Whether these conceits are also nationally distinctive is not something that any book can prove.

The first and third chapters are particularly successful. In “The Burned House: Parental Elegies and the Reconstruction of Family After Death,” Uppal begins with Margaret Atwood, who “simultaneously claims the canonical male tradition of the elegy for herself, and reveals the shortcomings in its articulation of grief and its construction of consolation” (46). Although Atwood’s sequence of elegies for her father ends with a consoling vision in “The Ottawa River at Night,” Uppal notes that “Morning in the Burned House” “is placed at the end of the book, at a distance from the other elegies for the father, once again disrupting the conventions of ele-

giac verse” (54). In this poem, “the two forms of elegy and idyll are inseparable from each other; all mornings are rife with grief and all grief has the possibility to shine” (41). She then discusses elegies by Dennis Cooley, Patrick Lane, Libby Scheier, Daphne Marlatt, Anne Carson, and Roo Borson that show “a variety of gender dynamics and reflect a number of possible mourning arrangements, moving from elegies for fathers to elegies for mothers and ending with an elegy for both parental figures” (45). In “Method for Calling Up Ghosts: Elegies for Places and the Creation of Local, Regional, and National Identities,” Uppal discusses poems by Dennis Lee, Robert Kroetsch, Milton Acorn, Aritha van Herk, George Bowering, and Al Purdy. Perhaps because she was “disheartened” at their “striking lack of diversity...in terms of gender and ethnicity” (29), Uppal is not as engaged by some of these poems. She writes that “in a few instances Acorn perhaps verges on paranoia” (146), and she keeps her distance from “Purdy’s bold (albeit sometimes even arrogant) claiming of the Canadian landscape and its past, present, and future peoples as his own, and his insistence on being a native in every place he encounters” (175). More alarmingly, the concluding paragraph on Kroetsch (143-44) contains eight quotations from five of Kroetsch’s critics as well as five from Kroetsch himself. Anyone who believes that the concept of intertextuality justifies such writing should be forced to read my thesis. Uppal recovers in her next chapter, “What We Save Saves Us: Elegies for Cultural Losses and Displacements.” In poems by Anne Michaels, Miriam Waddington, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Dionne Brand, Fred Wah, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, and Jeannette Armstrong, she finds mourning and memory at their most urgent.

Try as she might, Uppal is unable to dispense with the pastoral tradition. On the one hand are the many references to “the cold pastoral’s ineffective elegiac tropes” (66) or the “tired rituals and tropes of the conventional English elegy” (72) which, like a “single consolatory image or approach to loss,” are “no longer adequate to represent the complexity of contemporary mourning” (105). On the other hand, Uppal seems fitfully aware that, since it persists, there must be more to the pastoral tradition. One of the first poems that she discusses, Lane’s “Fathers and Sons,” presents a landscape that “is recognizably pastoral...where resurrection and regeneration take place” (70). Other poets follow suit: Scheier depicts her father in “a conventionally pastoral landscape” (80), Marlatt adds a snake to “what might otherwise prove to be a genuinely English pastoral landscape” (90), and Purdy’s work is summarized as what D.G. Jones calls “contemporary versions of pastoral” (Jones 35; qtd. in Uppal 181). What is at stake, then, is not an exhausted tradition, but one that needs the kind of renewal it gets

when Borson “reconfigures the pastoral imagery by simply displaying her mother’s maturing interaction with living nature, her knowledge of the varieties of flowers, the unique qualities of each kind” (106). At that point, if not before, we might remember that Milton was also sceptical of tired conventions and facile consolations. So the catalog of flowers in *Lycidas* cannot console because “our frail thoughts dally with false surmise” while the drowned Lycidas lies “far away” (152-55). When Atwood is not consoled by Christmas wreaths, she responds: “Look, they are everywhere: Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh. / What else can be said?” (101). As Sara Jamieson argues, “her failure to carry out an address is not an admission of defeat by a genre which denies her subjectivity, but rather it is the point at which she engages most closely with the conventions of that genre...her response to the wreaths as emblems of poethood reduplicates and intensifies the kind of self-doubt which Milton displays, and which is built into the elegiac address” (56-57). Uppal’s belief that “the very notion of an individual elegiac voice may be outdated and obsolete” (194) loses none of its cogency but much of its Postmodernist flourish if we remember that the voices in “Lycidas” include Hippotades, Triton, Neptune, Cambridge, Michael, Apollo, Peter, and the “uncouth swain.” As Stanley Fish writes, while the speaker “has been busily exposing the false surmises of pastoral consolation, the poem has been even more insistently exposing the surmise that enables him (or so he thinks) to do so—the surmise that his vision is both inclusive and conclusive, that he sees what there is to see and knows what there is to know” (275). Why mock conventions that were already tired by Milton’s time?

What will never tire is the surmise itself, and I will end with a contemporary Canadian example. In a sonnet called “The Death of Milton Acorn,” Thomas O’ Grady relates in the octave the legend of Jack Dale, a whistler who “could charm trilling birds right out of the trees,” until they stopped at his death. Here is the sestet:

What other way might feathered flocks mark death?

They say Milton Acorn would talk to crows
from a weathered bench in Victoria Park.

I swear that since he exhaled his last breath,
each summer evening the harbor air grows
thick with rasping gasps & the heavens turn dark.

(30)

That’s both the traditional lament of nature and a false surmise; the mixture of the two is the oldest convention of them all.

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