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STUDIES

A Preference for the Classical: Notes on the Art of Don Coles

by W. J. Keith

I

Don Coles has now published eight volumes of verse (nine, if one counts *Someone has stayed in Stockholm*, his selected poems published in England) that extend over a quarter of a century from *Sometimes All Over* (1975) to *Kurgan* (2000). The time is clearly ripe for a detailed consideration of this oeuvre, which has not received the critical attention it deserves. The reason for this neglect is not, however, difficult to discover. Coles is a poet of obvious quality, but one who does not fit easily into the accepted patterns of Canadian literary history. He is, in many respects, a loner. As Cary Fagan has pointed out in a useful article-cum-interview: "Unlike some of the poets of his generation, he has not become a performer or a public character, nor has he waved the banners of liberation or Canadian nationalism to win our attention. Instead, he has simply written his poems and published them without fanfare" (22).

But precisely who are "the poets of his generation"? Coles was born in 1928, but did not publish his first volume until 1975, when he was forty-seven. After completing his university education (B.A. and M.A. Toronto, M.A. Cambridge) by 1955, at a time when most of his writer-contemporaries would be beginning to publish their early work, Coles, who had already spent two years in England, spent another ten years wandering around continental Europe, not returning to Canada until 1965. True, he had begun writing in Europe, but this involved the production of several unsuccessful plays and two abortive novels; he realized extraordinarily late that, if he had any talent at all for writing, it was as a poet. By his own testimony, he didn't begin to write poetry until "around 1966 or '67" (Carbert 118), and it was another eight years or so before *Sometimes*

All Over eventually appeared. His, then, is an unusual case, and, given the historical period in which it occurred, it had unusual repercussions. The point is best made, perhaps, by observing that, while technically a poet of the generation of James Reaney, D. G. Jones, and Jay Macpherson, and while the new Canadian poets when he began to write were Margaret Atwood, Pat Lane, and Michael Ondaatje, he made his poetic début in the company of Robert Kroetsch (as a poet), Daphne Marlatt, and Christopher Dewdney.

I suggest that a main reason for Coles' somewhat ambiguous position as a Canadian poet is to be explained by these biographical circumstances and their subsequent effects. First, he began working out his creative destiny in Europe rather than in North America, and within a curious hiatus between two literary-historical periods and two poetic modes. Thus he is old enough to have lived his formative years in a cultural atmosphere in which high modernism (Pound, Eliot, etc.) was still in place but showing signs of decline. Although he may have derived from these writers his deep-seated respect for the cultural monuments of the past, he did not find them poetically congenial. "I can feel the odd fondness for Pound," he has remarked, "but Eliot was someone I was over-exposed to in university and never have felt any warmth for" (Carbert 120).[1] In addition, the poets he was reading at this time had begun reacting not only against the modernists but against "the inflated Dylan Thomas-ish sort of Fifties poetry" (120), while Coles' own instinct took him elsewhere to modes of writing that were, in some respects, more traditional. These included what he has called, when reviewing a book of poems by Christopher Wiseman back in Canada in 1982, "the Hardy-Larkin line of descent, not much acknowledged in these parts, yet one which I commend" ("Hardy-Larkin" 36).

Moreover, there were other complicating factors. Inspiring and crucial as his "wander-years" (*Little Bird* 10) may have been, the period from the mid-fifties to the mid-sixties was, one might think, a little late for such Hemingwayesque ventures, and he returned to a very different Canada: the Canada of Expo and the beginnings of an aggressive nationalism. For good or ill, the cultural lure of Europe had faded: rightly or wrongly, the younger poets, if they looked abroad at all (many of them felt the urgent need to concentrate on Canada and their own roots), turned their sights south of

the border rather than east across the Atlantic. It was, as they say, a different ball-game.

As a result, Coles found himself in a unique but anomalous position. Many attitudes and approaches that might have seemed fresh and challenging in the fifties and even the early sixties, were tame, even quaintly old-fashioned by the 1970s. This was nowhere more evident than in the areas of sexual mores and literary explicitness, and the changes can be illustrated readily enough by reference to the numerous love-poems that make up a considerable percentage of the contents of *Sometimes All Over*. The nature of this material might well lead us to forget that the volume was written by a man in his late forties, but its tone and language are different matters. Unimaginable as it may seem today, even a title like "Your Body Before Winter" could in some quarters have produced a *frisson* of excitement if it had been written and published when Coles was in his mid-twenties. It is instructive at this point to recall the opening lines of what is probably the best-known of these love-poems:

> It is a more than common privilege
> to be allowed to enter
> your body
>
> which is so unarguably
> whiter & warmer & softer
> than mine
> (*Something* 87, *Landslides* 46)[2]

A reader of these lines in 1975 would, I think, have noticed first a seemingly outmoded dignity and reticence—shades of a romantic courtliness that poets like Irving Layton and his followers had long since labelled, damningly though not necessarily justly, as prissy and "genteel."

Coles' poetic world, then, is one of divided allegiances, and it is in the attempted reconciling of various dichotomies—both in his age and in himself—that so much of the tension and effectiveness of his art resides. Here, for instance, is a remark he made to Cary Fagan in 1992: "What I want poetry to be about has to do with the kinds of things that Henry James and Flaubert talk about—the need for impersonality" (22).[3] And two years later, to Michael Carbert, he spoke of a move in his own poetry "from a more personal to a less personal stance" (124). The relation of the personal and the imper-

sonal is certainly important for Coles, and it is a topic that will preoccupy him throughout his work. In the early poems about marriage, parents, and children (several of which I shall be examining in the next section), the personal is decidedly prominent, but it is almost invariably offered as representative, not uniquely private. The particular instance is so treated that it will be recognized by readers as universal in its application. This applies also to a fine poem like "Landslides," which first appeared in *The Prinzhorn Collection* and concerns the poet's visits to his mother in a geriatric ward.[4] Deeply personal emotion, though undoubtedly present, is reduced by a concentration on the mother rather than the speaker-son, the whole experience offered to those who have experienced, or will experience, similar situations. Later, however, the relation between personal and impersonal becomes increasingly more complex, as the connections between art and the personal are explored in depth. As we shall see, Joseph Grebing's horrendous private predicament in "The Prinzhorn Collection" is itself presented, disturbingly, as an art-object; in *K. in Love*, the personality of Franz Kafka and that of the poet become subtly interwoven, while in "Forests of the Medieval World" a personal love-affair is juxtaposed—even enveloped—by the impersonality of the great forests.

Coles' views on poetry are conveniently summarized in an unusually polemical press-release produced by his publisher, Macmillan, when *The Prinzhorn Collection* appeared in 1982. In it Coles is quoted as making statements that constitute a poetic manifesto. Since this document is not readily accessible, I shall quote it at some length. Coles begins:

> It's my hope that my book will be one that can be read by a good many people who normally don't find poetry welcoming. Not that I picture my poetry as welcoming, exactly!—but I think it is accessible to serious readers, I think there is something like a transferable content to it.

This is a subject that Coles returns to more than once. In the interview with Michael Carbert, he laments "the gap between poetry and the average reader" (120-121), a situation for which he lays much of the blame on Eliot. As a practising poet he is naturally concerned about the decline of poetry-reading—and poetry-buying—in the last twenty years or so. (Significantly, shortly after *The Prinzhorn Collection* appeared, Macmillan abandoned its poetry list.) It

is tempting, of course, to point out that, while lamenting this development, Coles was writing more and more poems that drew heavily on literary and artistic allusions and references that were by no means familiar to general readers. But he would not recognize this as an inconsistency. "[A] poem that's accessible," he asserts, "does not *have* to be shallow or superficial or simpleminded" (Carbert 121).

The 1982 press-release continues as follows:

> I have no respect or admiration for art that insists primarily on its "otherness," its remoteness from a recognizable human place, e.g. through an esoteric vocabulary, structural self-indulgence, or, as is now commonplace in Canadian poetry, a contorted straining after extreme images—mutilations in every stanza, suicides and fetuses on facing pages; a posture which is, in these decades, embarrassingly derivative, so many Sylvia Plaths writ tiny, these homunculi Ted Hugheses.

This is a subject that still worries him ten years later. "I'm not interested in the huge spate of confessional poems that we've been inundated with," he told Fagan (22), though he is somewhat troubled by the confessional element in the just-published *Little Bird*, a matter to which I shall return. Here again we are confronted with tensions in Coles that seem to pull him in two directions, and more are to be found in the *Prinzhorn* press-release. After taking his stand against the "embarrassingly derivative," and rejecting "open-field poetry" *en passant*, he goes on to complain about "innovation for its own sake in poetry, since it usually represents an attempt to disguise the fact that one has not been able to think of anything substantial to say." The same point is implied in the later Carbert interview when he criticizes some of his early published poems that he did not collect into his first volume: "These poems have some verbal interest perhaps but they didn't investigate much of anything" (18).

At this point we might legitimately ask: what does Coles himself offer that could be described as something "substantial to say"? Clearly, he is concerned about "transferable content" or what he calls, again in the *Prinzhorn* press-release, "a comprehensive and usable piece of content, maybe even a 'dark morsel of contemplation'." Reviewers and commentators have not, in fact, found much difficulty in identifying his major themes—at least, those most prominent in his early verse. His most characteristic poems may be

described as "temporal meditations" (in Susan Glickman's useful phrase [156]), and they tend to visit and revisit a narrow but rich range of subject-matter dominated by continual explorations of the relentless effects of time and the inevitable dislocations that these bring. This leads naturally to a focus on the relationships between parents and children—parents who have once been children, children who will eventually grow up to become parents themselves. It also leads to a fascination with photography, the art that has the capacity to freeze time and so to cross the awesome divide between "then" and "now." In addition, of course, there are the poems, more common in his later work, stimulated by works of art and literature that act as eloquent mediations between past and present. In brief, Coles is concerned with the human ramifications of the strange experience of living in time.

These are important but traditional topics that have been the subjects of countless poems through the ages. His choice of "transferable content" is certainly in no danger of leading to "innovation for its own sake," but how, one may be tempted to wonder, can Coles produce anything that is not pallidly conventional? The answer, of course, is that innovation, if fraught with danger so far as subject-matter is concerned, is essential in terms of treatment. In this respect, phrases like "transferable content" and "usable piece of content" can be misleading in that they suggest an excessive emphasis on thematic issues. Coles is, however, too good a poet not to know that content and treatment are inseparable, that the intellectual content of any poem can only become meaningful if embodied in appropriate words and rhythms. Coles' poetry, like all legitimate poetry, depends for its effect on his command of all those literary devices that are subsumed under the term "style"; his capacity for poetic thought can only exist within a vibrant language. I now wish to focus on those stylistic qualities, as manifest in some of his most successful poems from his first two volumes, that make even Coles' early work so remarkable.

II

The relation between poetry, educated speech, and the contemporary vernacular has been a matter of controversy for centuries. One thinks immediately of Thomas Gray's "The language of the age is never the language of poetry" (192) and of William Wordsworth's

"language really used by men" (115), or the uneasy friendship, strained by fundamentally opposed poetic assumptions and prosodic principles, between Robert Bridges (author of *The Testament of Beauty*) and Gerard Manley Hopkins. In Canadian poetry, we remember Raymond Souster and Irving Layton rebelling against the refined gentility of their poetic forebears, and the extraordinary way in which Al Purdy developed from his Carman-influenced early years into his mature and compelling demotic style—which, it should be acknowledged immediately, though suggesting an aggressive vernacular, itself constitutes a carefully wrought poetic diction.

Because he spent a number of impressionable early years in Europe, Coles became conscious, more than most of his Canadian contemporaries, of the importance of an established cultural tradition, and his mature verse is peppered with references drawing upon the art and writings of the past and the biographies of those who produced them. At the same time, he is acutely aware of the need to reflect current linguistic patterns and to reproduce the cadences of modern, living speech. His practical challenge has been twofold: to forge a poetic language that can contain his learned (though not "academic") attitudes within an acceptable colloquial tone, and to find a way of communicating subject-matter that draws upon the cultural experience and achievement of the past to a contemporary readership in the process, so it seems, of losing both its awareness of history and its ear for poetry.

It is my belief that Coles committed himself to a rigorously disciplined apprenticeship in the art of verse that can be discerned in his early poetry and leads ultimately to the assured rhythms and cadences of his mature writing. The following discussion will therefore place a heavy though not exclusive emphasis on technical matters (and I have to admit that readers may find themselves in difficulties unless they have copies of Coles' work open in front of them), but it is important to insist at the outset that I am well aware that such matters should not be separated from what is being expressed. Like Coles, I know that any poetry worth writing (and writing about) ought to be, in the words of F. R. Leavis, both "the agent and vehicle of thought" (97). But technical poetic dexterity needs to be emphasized at this time. A poet's vision of life can only be conveyed in a distinctive and appropriate language, and in an age of countless specialized languages—those of computers, the

sciences, the professions, etc.—poets must create their own means of expression if they are to communicate their individual vision. Coles, I argue, has paid profound attention to the rhetorical resources of verse, and this is reflected in the unique flavour of his inimitable poetic style.

It is convenient to begin with "Photograph" (*Sometimes* 14-16), a poem Coles has chosen to reprint twice in subsequent volumes (including *Landslides* 39-41). Its opening lines read as follows:

> This photograph shows a man
> who is smiling
> standing beside a woman whose smile
> may in this moment be just coming
> or just going
> in a path between a cedar tree
> on their right
> and unidentifiable bushes on their left
> in bright sunlight

Coles has his eye firmly on the photographic object, which he appears to be describing in impersonal, almost clinical terms. Yet this is assuredly not mere "sliced prose," and although it may qualify as irregular verse it is certainly not "free." We notice first the careful balancing of phrases—"a man . . . a woman," "just coming / or just going," "on their right . . . on their left"; we may also note traces of alliteration ("smiling / standing," "bushes . . . bright"), assonance ("beside . . . smile," "between . . . tree"), occasional regular rhyme, both internal and external ("right . . . bright sunlight"), and what is sometimes described as "concept-rhyme" ("coming . . . going" and "right . . . left" at the ends of lines). Such effects continue throughout the poem, and several of the dominant images in the opening lines duly reappear at the end to create a formally structured close.

"Photograph" is especially significant because it raises themes and issues that are going to preoccupy Coles throughout his career. Since, after the formal opening, he reveals that the couple in the photograph are his "30-year-old unencountered / grandparents" on his mother's side, the poem represents an early instance of the subtle blending of the personal and the impersonal. Moreover, it is, by Coles' standards at this time, a relatively long poem (74 lines), yet it contains only four sentences. The poem thus reproduces the sense

of an exploratory mind in the very process of thought, piling up details and qualifications, and constantly moving ahead towards fresh insights. In addition, the poem draws attention to Coles' remarkable capacity (frequently evident in his subsequent verse) to make the simplest of words appear meaningful. The photograph recovers "a space in time" which that long-past summer would

> continue to offer so that
> it might one day be acknowledged,
> as I would acknowledge it now,
> so that they are still there,
> or here,
> and may be encountered now

If one has not yet become accustomed to Coles' idiosyncratic style, such lines may appear loose, drifting, undisciplined—until one notices the careful placing of space-time words (there, here, now) at the end of the last four lines quoted: basic words that, by their juxtaposition, skillfully embody the emphasis on "a space in time."

The inevitable separation of parent and child is the subject of two resonantly personal poems in *Sometimes All Over*. In "For My Daughter, Now Seven Years Old" (*Sometimes* 30-31, *Landslides* 43), the child unthinkingly exclaims, "'Someday I will fly away—like Peter'. . . / meaning Peter Pan," and the remark elicits in the father a moving awareness of the pathos and relentlessness of time. It is built appropriately around the importance in childhood of repetition, implying continuity: a continuity ultimately doomed to be broken. Certain words and phrases—"Daddy," "you said," "like Peter," "space," "then," "I wonder," "you will go," "thirty years ago"—recur like the patterns in a child's kaleidoscope; again we encounter unostentatious internal rhymes—"Someday I will fly away," "flight somehow, in bed at night"—and the creative employment and placing of "now," "then," and "once," subtly reinforced by the repetitions of "time" and "space" throughout the poem.

Not all the poems are as artfully crafted as these, but the experience of writing them made other less formal but no less eloquent poems possible. "Divorced Child" (*Sometimes* 48-9, *Landslides* 37), for example, is more relaxed and free-flowing. A father is again thinking about a daughter, who this time has experienced a potentially traumatic severance because of the parents' divorce. Here the effectiveness depends upon the contrast between the father's sense

of loss and the parallel awareness, through imagination, of the daughter's resilience and capacity to make a new start. The child is presented as

> surely happy often
>
> at most sometimes
> indirectly watchful
> of friends' unaltering homes
>
> or still, aloof a minute
> from little-kid storyhours that
> mention permanence

Here may be noted such inconspicuous yet meaningful words as "often . . . sometimes," "a minute . . . permanence," which attain added importance by being placed at the ends of lines. Even more effective, elsewhere in the poem, are the common but, in context, peculiarly effective adjectives ("*warm* meals," "*crisp* dresses," and, in the *Landslides* revision, replacing the "unaltering homes" just quoted, "*reliable* addresses" [my emphases]) and the skillful manipulation of line-breaks to point important words ("a better / new grown-up," "hands holding on / both sides," "sometimes / indirectly watchful").

One more related poem demands some brief attention here. "Sampling from a Dialogue" (*Anniversaries* 27, *Landslides* 63) is another poem about the break-up of a marriage, and at a first reading it may well seem rambling and irregular. Closer inspection, however, reveals that, although the line-lengths vary drastically, and despite the violent vernacular language and rhythms ("God / Damn it Marge"), the poem begins by following the traditional pattern not merely of a sonnet but of a Petrarchan sonnet, as the rhyme-scheme indicates. (We may be assisted in realizing this by the medieval references to "Roland, at Roncesvalles," and "Horsemen, bright lances," where the suggestion of romance and ancient chivalry contrasts so dramatically with the modern and colloquial tone of the rest.) Yet at what should be the final line, the traditional structure collapses, and the poem spills over, "Breaking the rhyme," and continues beyond the sanctioned fourteen lines. Moreover, the poem eventually ends, with one of Coles' hallmark phrases, "The catastrophe of time," on a rhyme with "rhyme" itself. "Sampling from a

Dialogue" is an astonishing achievement with its ever-shifting moods and cadences, its staccato rhythms playing against the expected iambic pentameter, and the wit of the combined pun and line-break in the phrase "let's have a new / Line." Only a poet who has served an intensive technical apprenticeship could have produced it.[5]

Before proceeding to some of Coles' later and maturer poems, I would like to end this section by drawing attention to another, less conspicuous feature of his style. "Photograph" is lightly punctuated, with commas and periods where necessary, but it ends without any final punctuation, as if the poem is left syntactically—and, perhaps, intellectually—open. In the case of "For My Daughter, Now Seven years Old," the only punctuation-marks are commas, the beginnings of sentences indicated only by capital letters. Each stanza contains three lines, all sentence-units, half of which open with the simplest of connectives: "And . . .". In "Divorced Child," even the capital letters are dropped, so that, although "and" occurs three times at the beginnings of stanzas, there is no means of telling whether it indicates a new sentence or the continuing of a seemingly endless free-association interior monologue. This is a feature of many of these early poems; as a result, the narrator emerges not as a pontificating bard speaking *ex cathedra*, with the end of the poem established before the opening lines are written down, but as a sensitive, thoughtful, and often puzzled human being attempting to work things out. A rapport is established between poet and reader. Coles' divided allegiances remain here in the sophisticated use of art to achieve a naturalness that seems the reverse of sophisticated, but he has succeeded in moulding a style of remarkable range and flexibility which will enable him to find the perfect medium in which to convey the more complex "transferable content" of his later work.

III

Having evolved a flexible and appropriate poetic style, Coles now found himself ready for more ambitious creative projects. It is doubtless not coincidental that the phrases "transferable content" and "usable piece of content" emerge at this point. These phrases are, as I have already suggested, open to misunderstanding, and I have perhaps performed a disservice to Coles in resurrecting them

here. They help, however, to define his new emphases. Subsequently his energies are devoted to creating situations that embody and enact what he has to say and prevent the "content" from being abstracted from its essential context.

"I have a very strong feeling of preference for, if you like, the classical, I think art of any sort has to subject personal experience to certain transformations before it appears in art" (Coles in Carbert 124). This remark made in the 1994 interview provides an ideal bridge from Coles' earlier work to the more mature phase that began with *The Prinzhorn Collection*. When this book appeared in 1982, discerning readers knew that they were in the presence of an impressive and fully developed artist. Traces of the old style remain; as Glickman wrote, "'No One There' . . . reincarnates the Coles of *Sometimes All Over*" (158), though one can detect an increased impersonality even here. "Natalya Nikolayevna Goncharov" (Pushkin's fiancée), "Three Tolstoy Poems," and "Ibsen Stanzas," which either explore and interpret the "personal" of historical figures or grapple with the relationship between artists and their art, all reach towards his ideal of "impersonality." Yet even when these poems are firmly set in the past, their tone and sentence-structure represent a determination on Coles' part to catch the rhythms of late twentieth-century speech—educated speech, to be sure, but still contemporary. The past invariably becomes a subject for meditation in the present.

"The Prinzhorn Collection" itself (*Prinzhorn* 11-23, *Landslides* 100-108) is a significant development in Coles' art. The most obvious and substantial product of his European "wander-years," it is unusual for Coles in being, albeit obliquely, a politically committed poem. It is also remarkable, like its successors *K. in Love* and *Little Bird*, for its use of the letter as a literary form. Letters may be regarded as equivalents in the world of writing to photographs in the world of art. Like photographs, they isolate a particular moment in time, yet survive within time to be re-read and re-experienced under totally different conditions. They are objects that have come down to us from the past, are fixed in time, yet preserve an illusion of fluidity and immediacy; in many instances, though intensely personal documents, they even qualify as works of art themselves.

Here Coles produces a complicated "Chinese box" effect. The actual objects making up the collection (authentic historical documents, as a note explains, exhibited at a Munich art-gallery) are filtered to us verbally through an unnamed German curator/narrator

from Dr. Prinzhorn, the medical director of an asylum (who took the trouble to preserve it, perhaps as an anti-Fascist gesture); Prinzhorn in turn inherited the collection from a possibly mad—or sick—predecessor who hoarded the materials inhumanely and from dubious psychological motives. These objects are described by the curator in a fabricated verse-letter written in a conspicuously self-conscious English. They consist of "drawings, letters and / Journals by the inmates of a 19th / Century *Irrenanstalt* (madhouse)," psychological documents transformed into art by the very act of displaying them in a public gallery. Most of the drawings illustrate sexual fantasies or, more likely, abuses, with implications for the political situation of their time: they date from the Bismarck years, were preserved during the Nazi era when they would have been stigmatized as *Entartate Kunst* or decadent art, and are now displayed in a late-twentieth-century ambience of arguable maturity. All this is significant in itself; even more interesting are the letters, including those of one inmate, Joseph Grebing, who writes to his father in a desperate but vain attempt to procure his release. These are, then, letters quoted within a letter; moreover (since they were never delivered but docketed instead in the director's files), they are written into an echoless void—which, for all the curator knows, may be the fate of his own letter. Yet ironically, *because* they were never delivered, Grebing's letters have been preserved in art. The curator's private missive, of course, is imagined to be preserved in just the same way, within Coles' art.

The image of the madhouse, and confinement within a madhouse, has profound political and artistic implications. "An entire human-condition is here," we are told, conveyed in eloquent messages "from / The borders of despair." The poem is contained within its own claustrophobic form, its meaning imprisoned within the curator's letter just as the inmates are imprisoned within the asylum. Commentators have, perhaps significantly, interpreted the curator/narrator in different ways, some stressing his "sympathy" (Fagan 22), others his "fascination with the sexually perverse" (Djwa and Hatch 347). Glickman is more cautious—and, I suspect, closer to the mark—in emphasizing the way in which he is unwillingly "driven into 'amateur metaphysics' by the implications of what he has seen" (167). I would suggest that Coles, who is once more struggling with his own dichotomies, deliberately creates a situation in which the acutely personal (Grebing's *cri de coeur*) is

doubly transformed—or hijacked—into art, once by the organizers of the art exhibition, once by Coles himself. The curator is forced to address the personal when, as Glickman notes, he would prefer to "confine his responses to his 'competency, / The visible'" (167). He is as puzzled—and as troubled—as we are; just as he struggles to interpret the documents he is displaying, so we have to interpret the nuances of the meanings expressed in what is for him a foreign language. And Coles, with amazing skill and an even more amazing economy, succeeds in creating for him an individual style or idiolect which is totally distinct from his own. He draws here upon all the rhetorical devices I examined in the early poems (except rhyme), but they are absorbed into a seamless language that fits the curator perfectly and is like nothing else that Coles has written.

If we omit *Landslides*, most of which consisted of previously published poems, Coles' next two books, *K. in Love* (1987) and *Little Bird* (1991), both offer themselves as letters, though both use the epistolary form as little more than a springboard for more elaborate literary constructs. Ostensibly, according to the "Note" at the back of the book, *K. in Love* consists of a series of "poem-letters" that "owe their coming-into-being to a concentrated several weeks' reading of the letters and journals of Franz Kafka" (71). But this is a trifle deceptive. Coles has since revealed (one is tempted to write "confessed"!) that they derive in the main from "notes that I'd been making to myself over a number of years" (Carbert 125), about half of them written before he encountered Kafka's love-letters.[6]

From the literary-critical viewpoint, this explanation enables us to locate the volume in the very centre of Coles' preoccupations. First, it is germane to his attempt to make his poetry "welcoming" to readers who don't habitually read verse. He sees the poems as "a series of very, I think, accessible little lyrics," and insists that, despite the Kafka frame, the book as a whole, in excluding "any intellectual academic references," is "as simple and transparent" as he could make it (Carbert 125, 126). Moreover, though Coles claims in the "Note," somewhat ingenuously, that, while he was composing the poem-letters, "the personality . . . of their narrator-writer moved gradually further and further away from me, closer to Kafka," the reverse may in fact be nearer the truth. One suspects, indeed, that the "intense, gentle, . . . remarkably nice man" who "almost shows through here" (71) is a happy amalgam of the best aspects of both Kafka and Coles.[7] What has happened is that Coles

is once again moving away from the "personal" by placing his own love-lyrics at a temporal and spatial remove in the mouth of a fellow-artist and presented as if they existed as distanced historical documents.

Little Bird purports to be a verse-letter ("this interminable letter" [72]) written by Coles to his father after the latter's death. Tonally, it could not be further removed from *K. in Love*, yet an intriguing possible connection exists: while reading Kafka, Coles almost certainly encountered a prose-letter written by Kafka to his still-living father (this has been published separately as *Letter to His Father*), in which he offers his own firm and devastating account of their unhappy relationship. The parallels are considerable. In both cases, the clash involves the age-old generation-gap between materialist father and artistically minded son. Each writer tended to flaunt his literary and "Bohemian" interests in the face of his practical, no-nonsense, non-literary progenitor, and each attempts to make peace while simultaneously producing an unrepentant *apologia pro vita sua*. Otherwise, however, the works are radically different. Kafka offers a desperate justification of his position in clearly-argued prose that poignantly conveys the uncomfortable realities of lived life. Coles at first appears to be doing the same thing, yet, because his response takes the form of an extended poem—two hundred and ninety-four four-line stanzas—and because the argument turns on language (and silence), the result is a stylistic *tour de force* full of exhilarating shifts of tone and reference, a triumph of rhetorical and poetic wit that ultimately takes precedence over the biographical nature of the subject-matter.

Yet although the poetic style is a dramatic departure for Coles, other aspects of *Little Bird* are decidedly familiar. Again we are confronted with a parent-child relationship. Moreover, the relentless passing of time accounts for the poem's very existence, since it is offered as a substitute for the "longed-for / heart-to-heart" (22) that never took place in the father's lifetime. The poem is an attempt, belatedly, to "build some kind / of bridge towards you" (21), but the father's death constitutes an inexorable boundary between "then" and "now," words that once again recur continually.

A crucial moment in the postulated dialogue between son and father occurs when Coles asserts, "*Making us / whole, father, is what / all this seems to be about*," and immediately imagines the father's probably gruff and deflating reply: "'Sounds very grand'" (23). This

creates a climax at what is, in fact, the central core of the poem. Earlier, we are told that the father "took little pleasure in such /[verbal] flamboyancies, and not overmuch / in language either" (6-7), and this aggravates the son's romantic yearning towards the world of poetry and art. Yet the poem's colloquial, even slangy style itself eschews "flamboyancies," and this signals the extent to which he is prepared to move towards the father. Looking back, he recognizes his earlier verbal pyrotechnics as "ornate stuff" (16), "antic stuff" (26). He is even able to acknowledge his young self as "an anointed / asshole" (7). Poets and artists eventually become "that babbling tribe / I joined so early / and love so little now" (59).

The astonishing stylistic fact about *Little Bird* is that the poem which began with an ornate and literary formality—"You will not need / Achilles' ghost, / nor Aeneas'; nor greet / others from that host . . ." (6)—can also contain lines like the following: ". . . well, like I say, / when it works it's great / but so often there's just / no way, / know what I mean?" (53). This is possibly the greatest concentration of cliché—deliberate cliché, of course—ever assembled in a verse! The poem, while ostensibly trying to establish some imagined rapport with the father, is actually a triumphant justification of the anointed asshole's determination to be a poet. Like all Coles' work, it is finely crafted, but nowhere else are the traditional features of poetry (rhyme, quatrains, etc.) so boldly combined with vernacular, slang, fashionable discontinuities—and, above all, Coles' characteristic extended sentences, revived from his earlier style, that suggest so artfully the rambling prolixities of ordinary speech. The poem that reproduces the uneasy relationship with the father's "then" becomes a vivid evocation of the son's and poet's "now."

Coles was himself somewhat puzzled by *Little Bird*. When, in this context, Fagan mentioned Coles' strictures concerning "confessional poetry," the poet admitted that "*Little Bird* . . . goes against what I have most begun to feel that I want poetry to be about" (22). I would argue, however, that the poem is saved from confessional excess by its (for Coles) unusually conspicuous artifice. In the Carbert interview he recalled how the "mechanical need to find a rhyme" led *away* from the personal or self-indulgent (126). The content is indeed "transferable"—because father-son hostilities are common, the poem, as Coles remarked, "can mean something to persons other than one's cousins or one's aunts" (Carbert 126)—

but, thanks to the stylistic pyrotechnics and the fascination of the rhymes, both Don Coles and Jack Coles have become transformed or, we might say, impersonalized, into created larger-than-life figures in a vast and absorbing human drama.

IV

In Coles' most recent volumes, *Forests of the Medieval World* (1993)—which won him a richly deserved Governor General's award—and *Kurgan* (2000), we find him returning to the dichotomies of his early verse, but, as we might have expected, with a difference. The same preoccupations recur, some poems, indeed, offering themselves as conscious variations on old themes. Thus "My Son at the Seashore, Age Two" (*Forests* 17) echoes, even in the rhythms of its title, "For My Daughter, Now Seven Years Old," and the poem is built upon a similar principle of childlike repetition, while "These Photos of the Children" (*Kurgan* 14-17) manages to combine the traditional photographic point of departure with yet another presentation of parents and children, and the inevitable brooding on what he calls in this poem "time's preposterous / gulf." Coles also revisits the subjects of his middle work, with two more poems focused on his own parents ("Basketball Player and Friends" [*Forests* 32-4] and "Rhymes from the Nursing Home" [*Kurgan* 21-22]), and another exploration of the interconnections of poet and artist-subject, comparable with that in *K. in Love*, in "The Edvard Munch Poems" (*Forests* 39-56).

But the old themes recur in a new guise; almost invariably, their implications are pressed further. For instance, when scenes from the past are recalled, in addition to the contrast between then and now we find imaginative constructs of what might have happened if a different action had been taken in the past. This provides the prime subject of "Someone has stayed in Stockholm" (*Forests* 14-16), where the someone is in fact a hypothetical Coles who did *not* return to North America. Other less prominent examples are found in "The Artist's Brother" *(Forests* 45), "Marie Kemp," and "There Are No Words to Remember . . ." (*Kurgan* 45, 49). Similarly, "Basketball Player and Friends," though taking its origin from a photograph, is ultimately more interested in what the photo "does *not* show."

It would be possible, though somewhat more difficult, to demonstrate the same technical dexterity here that I examined in the early verse: more difficult because it occurs more sparingly and

rarely draws attention to itself, with the result that the emphasis falls on a greater subtlety of thought rather than mere verbal skill. Some experimentation—notably the less conventional (or absent) punctuation—has been discarded. Coles has long since learnt which stylistic devices are appropriate to his poetic concerns and which are not. He can now, effortlessly, achieve whatever effect he needs in any given situation, through impeccably controlled rhythm, a carefully modulated accentual beat, and the canny placing of words within the lines. He is able to probe more deeply, in part because he is interested in exploring "somewhere below memory" (*Forests* 19), and has developed not only a maturity but an accompanying technique that enables him to venture into "places deeper than language" (*Forests* 16). I intend, by way of conclusion, to examine a small selection of poems from these volumes in an endeavour to illustrate this new phase in which intellectual content and stylistic presentation become indistinguishable.

"Remembering Henty" (*Forests* 27-30) is a major departure for Coles, and I should state at the outset that I consider it a masterpiece, one of the major poetic achievements in English of its kind in the late twentieth century. Once again, a first reading is likely to highlight what we expect to find in Coles: the secondhand book from 1902 propelling him back to an all-but-unimaginable past, and the subsequent recalling of familial experiences (Coles reading Henty's books at the age of ten or eleven, his father and uncles reading them a generation before that). A little earlier in Coles' career, this would have been the main point of the poem; now it is only the beginning, the springboard for deeper cultural inquiry. For "Remembering Henty," though it may seem odd to argue in this way about a rich and successful *poem*, is in part a piece of profound sociopolitical, literary, and cultural criticism.

Because it is skillfully integrated and achieves a seamless unity of tone, any attempt to separate strands in the poem does damage to the overall effect, but it is helpful to begin by highlighting the sociopolitical aspects. Nowadays G. A. Henty, the author of innumerable boys' adventure-books, is usually regarded as a mere cog in an imperial machine, producing covert propaganda preparing young British males for lives of action and service in the colonial outposts. In this poem, while the imperial context is decisively "placed" ("oh, world-girdling smugnesses, appalling / certainties"), it is not dismissively parodied. There is no simplistic and

righteous judgment from the dubious benefit of hindsight, certainly no knee-jerk politically-correct condemnation. Coles focuses on more subtle aspects—the sense of being part of a larger group that assumes loyalty, and especially the paradoxical sense of safety despite the tales of adventure that always imply danger. He is also fascinated by the difference between an adult's and a young boy's response to Henty's fiction. Coles' emphasis, then, is primarily psychological—"It's inside, of course," as he remarks towards the close of the poem.

The sociopolitical and the literary are beautifully fused in the lines acknowledging the unchallenged racial component within Henty's material:

> although we'll worry later about
> the brownskinned and salaaming nameless ones, meanwhile
> we browse and prickle pleasurably.

As a shrewd adult revisiting his boyhood experience of "innocent" reading, he registers our modern sensitivity to race-issues but is more interested in understanding than in judging. Technically, this is achieved not only by the marvellously evocative selection of adjectives ("brownskinned," "salaaming," "nameless") but also by the combined alliteration and assonance in "brownskinned . . . browse," and the precisely *right* choice of "prickle," skillfully balanced, again through alliteration, by the complicating (because challengeable) "pleasurably."

This leads in turn to the carefully chosen phrases, occurring throughout the poem, that evoke a vivid sense of period: "out of the desert / heat-haze the Mahdi's silken pennants / will tinily ripple," "subalterns and aides-de-camp and / the squirearchy's disinherited sons," "the lawns and tennis courts / and broad meadows of our inheritances." Yet the effects are more than just evocatively descriptive. At the opening, for instance, the simple phrase "Michaelmas term 1902" implies that the boy has received the book at boarding school, with all this implies in terms of class and social position; "moored childhood," a little later, is not only part of a complex literary effect (cf. the anagrammatic "room" earlier in the line) but contrasts with the earlier glimpse of a P. & O. liner and the perpetual sense of Henty's heroes always moving, "en route"; later still, "how sporting" and "a terrific girl" accurately reproduce the favoured clichés of the period. And the poem ends when the repe-

tition of the word "lookout," picked up from one of Henty's previously-quoted opening sentences, is transformed into a look in, as the "darkly garrisoned . . . redoubts and drawbridged citadels" are internalized, yet also, I think, enigmatically suggest approaching death.

"The Edvard Munch Poems" (*Forests* 39-56) are the culmination of all the poems about other artists (Tolstoy, Ibsen, Kafka, etc.) that Coles has written earlier. Munch is an artist who, as the introductory note indicates, Coles has known and admired for some thirty years before writing these poems.[8] Given his observation in the same note that Munch "*returned obsessively throughout his long working life to a very few themes from childhood or early manhood*" (39), it seems likely that Coles was attracted to the painter not just because of the quality of his work but because he recognized some shared artistic characteristics.

Like "Remembering Henty," these poems possess a critical dimension in that they offer in verse a shrewd interpretation of Munch's art. Coles produces a multifaceted effect here, achieved in part by the way some of the poems reproduce Munch's viewpoint, some that of Coles himself. But Coles also juxtaposes different kinds of poem within the sequence. "Death of Marat," for example, is a fairly straightforward poem describing and explaining an individual painting, while "The Artist's Brother" and "Puberty" introduce a conspicuous personal commentary into the account of the two pictures involved. In this connection, it is noteworthy that the sequence begins with two poems spoken by Munch where the comment is almost exclusively autobiographical, and ends with one that is not spoken by Munch and is totally impersonal.

The creative blurring of poet and subject initiated by *K. in Love* is, following the trend of the later poems, carried further here. Coles endeavours to understand Munch and his art (as well, one suspects, as its relation to his own) by providing glosses and explanations purporting to come sometimes from Munch, sometimes from himself. Moreover, Coles is able to take advantage of the fact that the sources upon which he draws, Munch's diaries, have for the most part not been translated; as a result, we can never be sure when Coles is drawing upon Munch's authentic remarks or when he is imagining them or extrapolating them from his own responses. A nice example occurs at the end of "What They Didn't Like." The poem, spoken by Munch, ends:

> You're not supposed to admit
> that this happens—especially
> if you do what I do, if you make things.
> But it does, you know.
>
> (55)

The remark could have been made equally well by Coles.

Kurgan contains eighteen new poems and revised versions of fifteen old ones, and is thus an ideal text by which to assess his latest work. As we have come to expect, the new poems return to earlier preoccupations but ring interesting changes upon them. Most remarkable are the range of tone that is revealed, and the accompanying relaxation of style that favours what one would expect to result in a more prosaic effect but in fact contributes to a highly successful poetic language. This is partly achieved by the increased use of colloquially truncated sentences, a feature common to a number of the poems here. Examples include "Around six, six-thirty these late winter days / I'm usually walking home across Lawrence fields, / couple of blocks from here" (9); "My head swells with—with what?— / envy, not much but some" (10); "Shouldn't go on with this, / now that women have shown up" (33); "No idea where this one's from" (42). It is instructive to contrast the style here with its equivalent in *Sometimes All Over*, which for all its vernacular effects now seems so much stiffer and more formal. One of the pleasures of the present text is to see how Coles can accommodate so many varied moods between poems, and even within individual poems.

"Kurgan No. 10" (11-13), the most ambitious and original poem in the collection, takes its origin, as Coles indicates in his "Acknowledgments," from an anecdote recorded in Neal Ascherson's *Black Sea*. It is unusual not because it derives from a book but because it derives at second-hand so that Coles is interpreting what is already an interpretation. Coles in fact takes over Ascherson's prose account of the story of Volodya Guguev, brought up at Rostov, who later returns as a trained archaeologist to excavate a *kurgan* or burial mound on which he had played as a child. He discovers an unrobbed tomb full of valuable gold artefacts, but the story of discovered treasure takes second place to the curious affection that Guguev begins to feel for the young (but now eighteen-hundred-years-old) Sarmatian princess buried there. Coles' poetic retelling clearly fascinates him (and should fascinate us) on account of the

different emphases that an artistic presentation is able to provide. Thus he ignores Ascherson's economic details about the parlous state of Russian archaeologists (Guguev cannot live by archaeology alone, yet he could have become rich if he had not been scrupulously honest about his discovery). He is interested in the tenderness of Guguev's sentimental attachment for "the poor princess," an interest very different from Ascherson's impersonal "Archaeologists are not immune to unscientific feelings about the dead" (123). Moreover, although he ends, like Ascherson, with a grisly story about the disappearance of certain small bones that were probably carried off by mice, the simple device of having Guguev comment on the matter adds a pathetic poignancy to the grisliness.

The last two of the new poems, "Reading a Biography of Samuel Beckett" (51-2) and "Botanical Gardens" (53-4), while different in tone, are alike in the apparent ease with which the poet chats freely and casually with his reader. In the course of the Beckett poem, he makes the usual contrast between his younger self and his present state ("not young"), but time is no longer a predominant theme. Indeed, the poem exists as a play of the mind, a seemingly unstructured celebration of the enjoyment of "wonderfully nuanced language." And it ends with Coles establishing an endearing contact with Beckett in the mysterious third realm of poetry, through their admiration for a phrase from Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale." It is a poem where humour and sensitivity blend perfectly. In contrast, "Botanical Gardens" describes an encounter with Otherness. Like the personal dwarfed by the impersonal in "Forests of the Medieval World," the vegetable world of the poem is presented as filled with "Unself." For Coles, this is both disturbing and satisfying. But again (and this is what links it with the Beckett poem) it would be absurd to say that the poem is "about" Otherness or the relative time-scales of forests and humankind. The poem exists as a movement within the mind, what Leavis calls "a heuristic discovery" (12). Coles has come a long way from discussion of "transferable content," a phrase which now seems crude in the presence of poems as delicately and unostentatiously profound as these.

In conclusion, no essay on the poetic art of Don Coles would be complete without some discussion of his continual revisions. In the interview with Michael Carbert, he remarked: "As for rewriting, I rewrite and rewrite. I guess I enjoy that more than anything" (121). Much of this happens, of course, before the poem appears in print

for the first time, but in Coles' case it also occurs whenever he gets a chance to reprint. It is not uncommon for a Coles poem to exist in print in three slightly different versions. For instance, "Major Hoople," first appearing in *The Prinzhorn Collection* (46-7), is slightly revised when reprinted in *Landslides* (96-7) and *Someone has stayed in Stockholm* (27-8), and altered even more when revived in *Kurgan* (63-4). For the most part, one word may be substituted for another, or, more often, line-breaks are altered and lines therefore rearranged on the page. The effect in most individual instances is minimal yet palpable, and this bears witness to Coles' fine ear for the subtle nuances that such minute changes create. He is not satisfied until he has found the closest possible approximation to perfection in meaning, sound, and cadence.

More dramatic, in general, are the revisions between a poem's first appearance and its collection into a volume. A convenient instance here is "Remembering Henty," just discussed, which was first printed in *The Third Macmillan Anthology*, edited by John Metcalf and Kent Thompson. Several examples of remarkable stylistic effect that I quoted did not appear in the first printing. Thus the natives were "nameless" and "salaaming" but not "brownskinned," the revision strengthening the intellectual impact as well as the euphony of the lines; similarly, "a terrific girl" is obviously more forceful and rhythmically more subtle than "a splendid girl" in the first version. In addition, the final lines are revised to convey a more ambiguous sense of doom in the version that appeared in *Forests of the Medieval World*. A more complicated example may be found in "These Photos of the Children," originally in the same anthology and radically revised within three years to reappear in *Arc* in 1993 before being collected in *Kurgan* (14-17). The early version, "Our Photos of the Children," if read side by side with the revised version, appears awkward and unpolished. It was originally written in double-rhyming quatrains (*abab*), a form which proved too constraining for the purpose. Not only did the rhyme-scheme tend to break down, but the stanzas sometimes insisted on spilling over to a fifth line. By dropping the rhymes in the odd-numbered lines, Coles allows himself more flexibility and room to manoeuvre. As a result, the poem is not so much revised as totally rewritten; the version we now read in *Kurgan* is effectively a new poem and a far superior achievement.

I began by drawing attention to the need for a detailed examination of Coles' now substantial body of poetic work. All that this essay has been able to do is to scratch the surface—hence the subtitle, "Notes on the Art of Don Coles." I hope, however, to have laid the foundation upon which others may be able to build. The first task, in my view, was to show that he served an exacting, self-imposed apprenticeship that has enabled him to embark on a long and rewarding voyage of poetic discovery. I have been content to indicate the broad lines of that achievement; it is, I am convinced, a major one.

Notes

1 I have noticed only one clear verbal echo of Eliot in Coles' work: the appositional phrase "linger in / those chambers" in "Hector Alone" (*Kurgan* 39), an obvious allusion to the close of "The Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

2 For convenience I shall give page-references to the first appearance of a poem in volume-form and, whenever applicable, to its inclusion in any subsequent North American volume—i.e., *Landslides* or *Kurgan.*

3 This, too, may represent a covert, perhaps even unconscious debt to Eliot's modernism, also well-known for its "impersonality."

4 In the present critical climate, it is perhaps proper to point out here that I am aware that the poet and the "I" of the poem need not be identical, and are often separate. In this poem, however, and in a number of others discussed in the course of this essay, the distinction does not apply.

5 It is probably a significant indication of the decline in the skills of close reading that, when I set this poem for commentary in a senior undergraduate class a few years ago, no student noticed the Petrarchan substructure.

6 The diligent researcher will therefore find little of use in either Kafka's *Letters to Felice* (Felice Bauer) or the *Letters to Milena* (Milena Jesenská). At best, some of Coles' lyrics represent a distillation of some of Kafka's tone, attitudes, and somewhat quirky though endearing fantasies. The more troublesome qualities in Kafka's actual letters—his self-conscious references to his Jewish ancestry, his interminable complaints about not receiving letters and the vagaries of the postal service, and his general sense of anguish and desperation—are all absent.

7 In particular, one curious detail bears out this conclusion, and may even be intended to do so. In one poem the narrator quotes several lines from Edward Thomas's poem "The Owl" (52). It is not absolutely impossible that Kafka had ever encountered this poem, but it is highly improbable. Yet Thomas belongs in the "Hardy-Larkin line," and is just the kind of poet likely to appeal to Coles himself, who is surely the speaker here.

8 An intriguing and relevant comment on Munch appears in "The Prinzhorn Collection" (*Prinzhorn* 12, *Landslides* 101).

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