



Geopoetics and More: Canadianism in Canadian Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The term 'Geopoetics', though travelled miles away from Kenneth White's original underpinnings, is still a useful tool to study how the geography, more narrowly, the topography of a country, with humans at its centre, shapes the poetry of a nation. But geopoetics alone, without corresponding historical and socio-political catalysts, cannot contain all the trajectories poetry is supposed to have. Canadian poetry exhibits a rare contextualization of geopoetics in modern times. This article interrogates geopoetics through the lens of emerging Canadianist discourse within the framework of Canadian poetry, and examines its thematic concerns alongside its historical trajectories. It ultimately posits that the intersection of land and language is constitutive of the essence of Canadian poetry

Keywords: Geopoetics, Canadian poetry, Kenneth White, historical trajectories and Canadianist discourse

GEOPOETICS

Since the first coinage of the compound ‘geopoetics’ (ge’opoe’tique) in 1979 by French-Scottish poet and thinker Kenneth White (White, 2015, p.1), its etymological underpinnings have travelled far beyond their perceived borders in the last forty-five years. The prefixoid ‘Geo’, like its cousins in Geopolitics, Geohistoire, Geosyche, and Geophilosophy, now refers to more things than White intended initially, having added to more nuances and more overlaps in the course of time. It is more than geography or mere landscape, (Italiano, 2008) for its free lexical equivalence and “metaphorical extensions” (Sari, 2024). ‘Geo’, therefore, refers to the Earth, or physical geography and geology of a particular country, its landscapes, places and territories where man is centrally postulated, and human experience is creatively and emotionally engaged with environment and ecology. The transition from the root word ‘poet’, through its adjectival form ‘poetic’ to its (-s)-suffixed denomination, ‘poetics’ has undergone a whole gamut of evolution before it came to its baptised classification as “the study or theory of poetry, specifically the study or theory of device, structure, form, type and effect with regard to poetry” (Princeton, 1993). As a way of deduction, geopoetics is then an intended intersection where all the trajectories of ‘geo’ meet those of ‘poetics’ to explore how poetry of a certain nation or land grows/has grown in symbiosis with its physical structures and humans. Geopoetics, as it has evolved academically, remains both country-specific and global, with more emphasis on globality; but here we propose to zero in on the specificity of geopoetics in the light of the emerging discourse of Canadianism within the framework of Canadian poetry. By extension, this article also aims at exploring how the notions of geopoetics intersect with Canadianism as manifested in the poets’ characteristic approach to core themes like landscape, environment, ecology, isolation, identity with the place, temporality, colonial legacy, garrison mentality, aboriginal angst, postcolonial repercussions, multicultural aspirations, and tensions between regional/ national, national/postnational preferences etc. which, as a whole, make what we call now the discourse of Canadian geopoetics.

Poetics of Geography:

Geographically speaking, Canada is a huge country, the second largest in the world, in landmass and waterbodies. Divided into ten provinces and three territories it covers an area of 3,511,023 sq miles of diverse landscapes including mountainous regions, forests, and tundra bordered by the Pacific, Atlantic, and Arctic, besides its longest border with the USA. The

diversity and depth of its puzzling beauty can be gauged by its geographical map that accommodates wonders like the Canadian Shield of eastern and central Canada, the western Cordillera, interior Plains known as prairies, great lakes, the Appalachian region, Hudson Bay lowlands, and the Arctic Archipelago. Considering such an incredible chunk of Earth – a wonderland of flora and fauna, Canada should have produced hundreds of poets, the likes of Wordsworths or Emersons. Unsurprisingly, it did, and proved to be a land of poesis and poets– a land of maple, spruce, pine and snow – strewn with aching human hearts.

Foregrounding Poetry in Canadian History:

Nearly five hundred years before Columbus reached the Americas, the Vikings were the first to arrive in Canada in 1021 CE (Sullivan, 2021). John Cabot and his gang of colonizers first landed on the Atlantic coast in 1497, but the first British colony was founded much later, in 1610. On the other hand, the French arrival took place in 1534, and the first French permanent settlement was established in 1604. The beginning of the colonial era marked the deracination of the native population through epidemics, war and systematic killings until they were reduced to a harmless size, and their material resources were substantially drained out. The British and French colonization of Canada did not take place simultaneously; the British colonial period was extended from 1763 to 1867 while the French occupation continued from 1534 to 1763. The long years of colonization left an indelible imprint on the making of the Canadian psyche linguistically and culturally, not to speak of other ramifications. The emergence of Canada as a self-governing dominion (under the British-North America Pact) on 1st July 1867 marked its final legal separation from Britain, but the country had to wait until 1982 for a meaningful postcolonial journey. As it is always seen, literature, parallel to the discipline we call history, records the history of a nation in its own way through poetry, fiction and other literary genres. The poets of the pre-confederation, post-confederation upto the present times are chroniclers of Canadian history. In their ‘Preface’ to *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* Donna Bennett and Russell Brown (2019) critiqued the ‘postnational’ notion of Canada, claimed by prime minister Justin Trudeau in 2015 (note1), on the premises that “[n]ationalism may sometimes be toxic, but nation remains a necessary construct and borders continue to be meaningful” (Bennett & Brown, 2019, p. 13). They further argued that a nation's being is “becoming”, and remaining “in process”: “Even as [a] literature changes over time, it teaches us who we were, who we are now, and what we are capable of becoming.” (ibid, xiii) Debate apart, this urge for a national identity through a national literature implies that Canadian poetry has

become mature enough to represent itself on its own, respectful to its borders and beyond. Any study of Canadian poetry can hardly ignore this dimension of historicity.

Search for identity: The poetics of experience

Like all traditions of poetry, Canadian poetry had a native oral origin. English-Canadian poetry was the byproduct of a colonial contact, or more unambiguously, result of European colonization, written mainly by European colonizers for a limited European audience. *Quodibets* (1628) by Robert Hayman, the British governor of Newfoundland, was one of the early works of poetry. The first book of French-Canadian verse was written by Michel Bibaud in 1830. The early colonial and pre-confederation poetry, heavily influenced by British romanticism and Victorianism, centred on the geography of the new world, its wilderness, and perils of the settlement life etc. It was also characterized by a search for a distinct Canadian identity which later on came out to be lauded as Canadianism. The major poets of this period include Oliver Goldsmith, Charles Sangster, Susana Moodie, Joseph Howe, Isabella Valency Crawford and others. Post-Confederation Canadian Poetry (1867-1900) marked a departure from its previous pro-colonial preoccupations, and diverted its attention to a more nationalistic and patriotic Canadian identity, and began to voice its social and cultural realities while always remaining loyal to the core component of its hubris: an enchanting geography. The major poets of this period, to name a few, were Charles G.D. Roberts (often called the Father of Canadian poetry), Archibald Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott, Bliss Carman and William Wilfred Campbell. The first world war, as it did to European literary bastions, shattered the 19th century complacent happy-go-lucky attitude to life, and accelerated the rise to modernism in Canadian poetry. E. J. Pratt, A.M. Klein, Dorothy Livesay F. R. Scott are some of the representatives of this modernist trend. The trend was further accentuated by the post-WWII poets like Irving Layton, Louis Dudek, Raymond Souster and others. The period from the 1960s to 1980s witnessed a new cultural and nationalistic reawakening, and the rising presence of female, indigenous and immigrant voices. There came a host of luminaries like Margaret Atwood, Leonard Cohen, Al Purdy, Earlie Birney, Phyllis Webb, Daphne Marlatt, bpNichol, George

Bowering, Michael Ondaatje and Patrick Lane. The period from 1980s to 2000s was characterized by the emergence of postcolonial, multicultural and diasporic voices led by poets like Dionne Brand, Loma Goodison, Michael Ondaatje, George Eliott Clarke from Caribbean, South Asian and African lineages. Canadian poets like Earlie Birney, Bill Bisset, bpNichol, David Kearns, Judith Copithorne pioneered a significant

movement of experimental concrete and visual poetry moving beyond commonplace written text, reshaping words and typography to render visual effect.

Analysing Canadian Poets and their Canadianism

What pearl does the metaphorical oyster contain? In her 'Introduction' to Dearly Margaret Atwood observed, "Poetry deals with the core of human existence: life, death, renewal, change; as well as fairness and unfairness, injustice and sometimes justice. The world in all its variety. The weather. Time. Sadness. Joy. And birds" (Atwood, 2020, p.11). Even when decontextualized from the immediate motif of loss of Dearly, her definition perfectly covers the universal essence of poetry as much as that of Canadian poetry. A close textual look at some pertinent poems may help us understand what Canadian poetry has to say, and how it does so. E. J. Pratt's much anthologized poem 'From Stone to Steel' (Pratt, 1969, p. 57) can be a testing stone to begin with. The poem embarks upon a civilizational journey from the stone age to the bronze age, then to the steel age, metaphorically from darkness to enlightenment. The poem begins:

*From stone to bronze, from bronze to steel
Along the road-dust of the sun,
Two revolutions of the wheel
From Java to Geneva run.*

Two revolutions- invention of the wheel and the industrial revolution suggest an all-encompassing spatial advancement of civilization. However, it belies a homogenous one. The cosmic sweep "from Java to Geneva" reinforces the notion of materialistic progress from one corner of the earth to the other, Java representing the distant East (dawn of humanity) and Geneva (League of Nations), the West. If we remain content with Java-Geneva's alliterative beauty and not fuss over the East-West dialectics, we would perhaps reach where Pratt leads us to. The second stanza juxtaposes "the snarl Neanderthal" with "the smiling Aryan lips" and "the civil polish of the horn" with "our praying finger tips". The passage from prehistory to history appears to be more a cycle of transgression than a transformation. As R.G. Moyles observes, Pratt "reduces history to a parable of technological acceleration and ethical inertia" (Moyles, 1969, p.57). Disenchantment is evident in the next stanza:

*The evolution of desire
Has but matured a toxic wine,
Drunk long before its heady fire
Reddened Euphrates or the Rhine.*

“Desire” is a miasmic word. It is “the evolution of desire” that derailed history time and again to the path of blood. The Euphrates is metonymical with Mesopotamia, the birthplace of the Mesopotamian Civilization. Ancient empires like Sumer, Akkad, Babylon, and Assyria fought bloody wars on the banks of the Euphrates. The phrase “reddened Euphrates” metaphorically suggests that human blood has stained this river since prehistoric times. The Rhine that flows through Central and Western Europe has been the boundary and battlegrounds of the Roman, German and French empires. “Reddened ... Rhine” is reminiscent of the bloodbath of the First World War. Composed in 1932, the poem questions the veracity of progress; the distance between “the temple and the cave” grows thin; altars still crave for sacrifices. Thus, the process of expiation of our cardinal sin goes on and on. The poem reaches its aesthetic and philosophical climax in the last stanza:

*The road goes up, the road goes down -
Let Java or Geneva be -
But whether to the cross or crown,
The path lies through Gethsemane.*

Against the backdrop of contemporary disillusionment and chaos, E.J. Pratt chooses “the cross”, not the bloody alternative “crown”. “Gethsemane”, the olive garden, significantly posits a way-out. Despite a tilt to moral innuendo in the final line, the poet's use of a minimalist approach restricting himself within compact imagery, metaphor, symbol etc. make the poem a representative text of artistic maturity of Canadian poetry in the 1930s. In one quick brush Pratt makes a symbiosis of history, anthropology, sociology, technology, and theology in this poem.

For an understanding of ‘geopoetical’ trajectories of Canadian poetry it is useful to examine how the poets themselves have engaged with the geography of the land – how places have been portrayed and with what felicity. Places and objects matter here as much as people. Let us consider a sequence of poems beginning with Elizabeth Brewster's poem ‘Return of the Native’ (Brewster, 1985, p.23). The place referred to here is Chipman, New Brunswick, “the true land of fairy tales”. As she begins:

*This is the true land of fairy tales,
this countryside of sullen beauty
heavy beneath dark trees.
The brown smell of wood
lingers about it.
Sawdust penetrates every corner.
You smell it...*

The poet's deep attachment to the place depicted raises its "sullen beauty" to a level of fairy-tale-like beauty. Its "dark trees", "brown smell of wood", sawdust mixed-with-manure smell, "little movie house", "restaurant", "short street", "fog-filled river", "pasture" and "woods" transform an otherwise ordinary place into a place of all places, a land of heart. "No Eden this" – "This is a land / not settled by its generations of settlers" where "[w]ilderness still lingers". This is a rural microscopic Canada, be it New Brunswick or Nova Scotia or any other place, that goes back and forth through the memory lane. Poetically, this is pure and simple positive geotropism – roots going deep into the soil.

Canada is celebrated as a country of maple, spruce, pine, rain, snow and lakes. Poetry returns to them at every opportune moment. As Bliss Carman says in his poem 'A vagabond song':

*There is something in the autumn that is native to my blood—
Touch of manner, hint of mood;
And my heart is like a rhyme,
With the yellow and the purple and the crimson keeping time.
(Carman & Hovey, 1896)*

This chemistry of the poet's mind and the physical landscape set the tone of a large segment of Canadian poetry. In Carman's poem "[t]he scarlet of the maples... shakes him like a cry". He dotes "[t]he frosty asters"; and October sets his "gypsy blood astir". Canada's former national anthem "The Maple Leaf Forever", written by Alexander Muir in the year of confederation 1867, is perhaps the best-known tribute to maple. Here we see how the maple leaf turns into a national emblem: "The Maple Leaf, our emblem dear, / The Maple Leaf forever" (Muir, 1890, p. 3). Like the varied colors of maples, Canadian rain is also colorful, in Dorothy Livesay's choice, "green" in the poem 'Green Rain':

*I remember long veils of green rain
Feathered like the shawl of my grandmother –
Green from the half-green of the spring trees
Waving in the valley. (Livesay, 1932, p.14)*

The rain itself is not green; half-green spring leaves make it green; and the rest is done by the poet. A relatively new voice, Kimberly Peterson views rain from an altogether different angle:

*Tiptoe to the thin edge of a lake.
Stare across to the opposite shore.
Watch pregnant clouds
until their water breaks...
Stay to watch infant drops overtake ancient waves.*

(Peterson, 2024, p. 6)

A spectacular view of a lake under the drizzling sky is part of Canada's topographical beauty. Even in chamber opera, for example, poet George Elliott Clarke's Beatrice Chancy, rain makes its presence felt. Beatrice says,

*Rain and autumn comingle,
Bejewel trees and me,
Wind in the beautiful*

Ruined trees awaiting new beauty. (Clarke, 1999, p. 21)

"White witness of blossom", lily-saturated rain", "succulent cascades of rain" etc. are candid shots of picturesque Canada. The country of the Blue Mountains can hardly be imagined without snow and ice, so cannot be its poetry. When "[t]he evening deepens, and the grey / folds closer earth and sky; The world seems shrouded far away", snow descends:

*White are the far-off plains, and white
The fading forests grow;
The wind dies out along the height,
And denser still the snow,
A gathering weight on roof and tree,
Falls down scarce audibly. (Lampman, 1893, p. 24)*

Or as we see the transformative power of snow to turn the earth into a "spotless down", "ermine white", and "fairy hall" as depicted by Rosanna Eleanor Leprohon in her poem "A Canadian Snow Fall:"

*See, as it falls o'er the landscape wide,
How kindly it seeks all blots to hide,
Shrouding each black,
unsightly nook,
The miry banks of the little brook,
Robing bare branches in ermine white,
Making all lovely,
spotless and bright. (Leprohon, 1881, p.30-31)*

The "elements" of nature are beautiful not because they are beautiful, but because they are intricately related and relevant to the people's collective psyche. We see, as in W.W.E. Ross's poem "If Ice," ice melts to "fresh cold water" and thin stream runs "in the sides of the ice" only to reach the terminal truth:

*if life return
after death
or not depart at death,
then shall buds*

*burst into May - leafing, t
he blooms of May appear like stars
on the brown dry
forest-bed.* (Ross, 1930, p. 29)

This reinforces the notion of a more localized intertwinement between the elements of nature and humans as Ross philosophically suggested through the cycle of life and death. It is important not to overlook the inference the poet reached through the return of life which, to him, does not "depart at death". Against these frosty scenes, a sizable chunk of Canadian poetry reflects on dry desert-like places like Osoyoos, Ashcroft, South Okanagan Grasslands, Yukon and Saskatchewan and the way of life of the people who thrived there for centuries. Let us have one excerpt from "My Chosen Landscape" by P.K. Page:

Sand dunes, interminable deserts, burning winds,
the night temperatures bitter, a land of grit;
and floating above me stars as violent as fire balloons,
tactile and brilliant, the all-enveloping sky,
a cloak of soot.

This is my story, my biography.

The sum total of my experience...

I am a continent, a violated geography. (Page, 1946, p.18)

Man standing, isolated and, / or clustered, one with the environment, inhaling and exhaling together: This is what we may call textualization of eco-conscious geopoetic inheritance of Canadian poetry.

Animals, birds, even insects are not overlooked in Canadian poetry; they are central to a larger scheme of geopoetical Canadianism. Cat, dog, owl, fox, ox, deer, bear, peacock, porcupine, beetle, butterfly, dragon-fly, eagle, hawk, seagull, shark, and many more are equally important protagonists. This is a country "where the animals have the faces of people" as suggested by Margaret Atwood in her poem "The Animals in that Country:"

*the ceremonial
cats possessing the streets
the fox run
politely to earth, the huntsmen standing around him, fixed
in their tapestry of manners.* (Atwood, 1968, p. 2)

Irving Layton's butterfly is "black-fringed", and has "large yellow wings"; it is "the rock's grace". Porcupines die "in the bleak forest", but in that surreal world "Pain is unreal; death an illusion" (Layton, 1963, p. 68). E.J.Pratt, in his poem "Sea-Gulls", depicts a flock of gulls against the azure sky forming an unchallenging frieze:

*Etched upon the horizon blue
The frieze must go unchallenged,
For the lift and carriage of the wings
Would stain the drift of stars
Against a tropic indigo
Or dull the parable of snow.* (Pratt, 1930, p. 43)

Based on the nucleus metaphor of “white orchids of the sea”, the poet draws a cluster of photographic images hinting at the eternal tentacles of beauty, temporality, and temporariness. We intend to conclude this trajectory with a reference to the eagle of Earle Birney in his oft-quoted poem “Can. Lit”. He begins the poem:

*since we'd always sky about when
we had eagles they flew out
leaving no shadow bigger than wren's to
trouble even our broodiest hens
too busy bridging loneliness
to be alone.* (Birney, 1962, p. 21)

The epitaph of the poem is etched in the concluding two lines: “it's only by our lack of ghosts / we're haunted.” For critiquing the brutal effort of carving civilization into the wilderness, as poignantly addressed in “we hacked in railway ties”, it becomes a robust piece of ecocritical poetry.

Postcolonial Angst

When the old empires are post colonially writing back, it is a valid question, to what extent Canadian poetry has been able to process and externalize its postcolonial angst. Despite the debate on the nature of Canada's postcoloniality, whether it is both quintessentially national and paradigmatically postcolonial or not (Moss, 2003), its aboriginal and non-aboriginal poetry has not forgotten the scars of history. Margaret Atwood (1995), one of Canada's finest living poets, reenacts the first arrival of the colonizer in her poem “The Moment”:

*The moment when, after many years of
hard work and a long voyage
you stand in the centre of your room,
house, half-acre, square mile, island, country,
knowing at last how you got there,
and say, I own this,*

Preceded by a daunting voyage, this unnamed prototype colonizer landed on the shore, commanded a progressive usurpation from a room to house to half an acre to island, then to the country, and finally, Cowper writing

about Alexander Selkirk's "I am the monarch of all I survey" (2025) declared: "I own this". First symbolic resistance came from the plant and tropospheric world:

*in the same moment when the trees unloose their
soft arms from around you,
the birds take back their language,
the cliffs fissure and collapse,
the air moves back from you like a wave
and you can't breathe.*

This was also the moment of collective rejection. They whispered,

*You own nothing.
you were a visitor,
time after time climbing the hill,
planting the flag,
proclaiming. (Atwood, 1995, p. 80)*

When the process of colonization is thus synoptically sketched, we hear the chorus of denouncement:

*We never belonged to you.
You never found us.
It was always the other way round. (Atwood, 1995, p. 80)*

The poem, with its denial of the myth of discovery and denouncement of forced occupation, dramatically resurfaces the embryonic moments of European colonization of Canada. Native American (Okanagan) poet Jeannette C. Armstrong's poem "History Lesson" is more scathing and brutal in portraying the European arrival and the aftermath. The poem pries open the old terrains of history:

*Out of the belly of Christopher's ship
a mob bursts
Running in all directions
Pulling furs off animals
Shooting buffalo
Shooting each other
left and right (Armstrong, 1991, p.38)*

Historically, the colonial contact in Canada initiated a systematic mayhem involving violence, diseases, and dispossession of land resources. Canada is estimated to have an indigenous population between 200,000 and two million (Haines & Steckel, 2000). In the post-contact period, it was reduced twenty-five percent to eighty percent as a result of European infectious diseases like influenza, measles and smallpox (Dean & Matthews, 1998). The poem sarcastically refers to this:

*Pioneers and traders
bring gifts
Smallpox, Seagrams
and rice krispies
Civilization has reached
the promised land (Armstrong, 1991, p.38)*

We are further told how concrete and steel structures, so-called monuments of civilization, devastated “forests and fields”, and farmers were left with “skulls and bones” to sow. Thus the primitive Eden, as the poet calls it “the garden”, is “forever closed / forever lost”. The postcolonial angst, particularly in Canadian native poetry, has been codified through the themes of intergenerational trauma of material and cultural loss, struggle for identity, linguistic erasure, silenced narratives, and critique of colonizer-centric history.

Regionalism and Canadianism:

“Regionalism”, according to geographer R. Cole Harris, “refers to the distinctive local character of a geographic area, or to a people's perception of and identification with such places.” His contextualization of Canadian regionalism goes thus: “In Canada, regional identities were formed after Europeans settled across the continent among distinct First Nations tribes.” (2006). Regionalism in poetry is an offshoot of Canada's socio-political and geographical realities. There have been diehard proponents of regionalism as well as anti-regional and pro-national proponents of Canadian poetry. For instance, Northrop Frye argued, “What affects the writer's imagination...is an environment rather than a nation. Regionalism and literary maturity seem to grow together” (Ricou, 2006). On the other hand, E.K. Brown in his book *On Canadian Poetry* alleged that regionalism is a threat to the growth of Canadian literature (1943). Hard facts tell us that since the colonial times it is the regional poets who had to navigate through the imperial linguistic barriers in order to find a voice of their own, in language and style, very much distant from London and Paris. In the course of time, what was / is regional turns out to be national / international. What is local is eventually national, and what is national is rooted to the local. We know, Hardy's Wessex or Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha metonymically goes beyond names, and stands for a larger and more important literary landscape. Only the undivided and cohesive poetic strengths of all the sub streams can bolster the concept of canonical Canadian poetry. By and large, this is what Canadianism is, as one native Chippewa poet, Duke Redbird, once envisioned in “I am a Canadian”:

I'm an Easterner I'm

a Westerner I'm
 from the North
 And I'm from the South...
 I'm the prairies,
 I'm the great lakes
 I'm the Rockies, I'm the Laurentians,
 ... But more than this
 Above all this
 I am a Canadian and proud to be free. (Redbird, 1971, p. 24)

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- Note 1.** Justin Trudeau articulated the postnational state theory in his interview with The New York Times in October 2015. He emphasized, “There is no core identity, no mainstream in Canada.” See also Charles Foran, ‘The Canada experiment: is this the world’s first ‘postnational’ state?’ www.theguardian.com

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