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The Vernacular in Early Twentieth-Century Canadian Poetry: Arthur Stringer and A. M. Stephen

Long before Charles Olson and the Black Mountain poets penetrated Canadian poetics through the *Tish* poets of Vancouver, Canadian poets were deeply concerned with the living, propulsive breath-measure of the speaking voice as an underlying principle of poetic organization. Tom MacInnes and Wilson MacDonald, like Pound, had made their poetic pacts with Whitman in the first decades of the century.[1] In 1927 and 1930, Ryerson published a sort of Torontonian "Maximus Poem," Nathaniel Benson's *Twenty and After* and its sequel *The Wanderer*. Despite the work of Layton, Dudek and Souster at mid-century, the struggle to bring a recognizable speaking voice to Canadian poetry waned in the 1960s, when the myth-formalism of Reaney and Hine and the oracular or quasi-sibylline tones of Cohen and Atwood were strong. Today, poetry in Canada sports a plenitude of uniquely personal voices — what Dennis Lee has recently called the vernacular, "a sturdy, flexible tone, which draws on the resources of daily speech in Canadian English."[2] This contemporary situation, which must be considered a net gain, has not been attained, however, without decades of struggle, the beginnings of which are re-assessed in this essay on two minor poets of the '20s, Arthur Stringer and A. M. Stephen.

Olson's "Projective Verse" is an appropriate place to begin because of the essay's metaphysics of place.[3] Dating the "revolution of the ear" in 1910, Olson argues that the "place where breath comes from" is a moment of contact between man and nature in which man "achieves an humilitas sufficient to make him of use." What makes Canadian vernacular verse of use to the locality from which it springs is the promise that it will reveal secrets that have gone unheard or that have not been heard often enough in our literature. In his CBC radio-talks on "The First Person in Literature," Louis Dudek explained that since Whitman such secret knowledge has taken the form of a "tense mo-

ment of expectation" in which the " 'I' and the universal Cosmos may meet and fuse as One." This tension reifies the presupposition that knowledge will be invalid lest spoken, so that the natural universe may be said to "speak" though a fusion of self and place. For Dudek, however, this metaphysics of place had become unstuck in such a way that Canadian poets in 1966 were writing either as wielders of mythical patterns or as narcissistic anarchists. This led to a poetry without voice, a dissolution of the contract between literature and audience. Both James Reaney and the *Tish* poets had become "cut off from all public and common ground," Dudek thought, unable "to face alone the great issue of existence" and be of use: "working always for this time and this place, this self, to find the hidden meaning of all things."[4]

Dudek fails to see that the *Tish* poets' concentration on language was their way of avoiding the solipsism that can overwhelm a poet's desire to forge an identity of self and place on the anvil of the voice. He is less than fair also to suggest that it was with the appearance of Raymond Souster, Irving Layton, Miriam Waddington, and himself that poetry in Canada first became capable of "convincing personal declaration." True, a secret-saying, truth-telling voice in poetry would be alien to the autonomous narcissism and verbal icons of either an 'anarchic' or a 'closed' verse. But 'voiced' poetry does not admit easily of the sort of periodization that Dudek implies, for this sort of voice in poetry belongs to an immemorial "world of sound." This is what Walter J. Ong calls "the I-thou world where, through the mysterious interior resonance which sound best of all provides, persons commune with persons, reaching one another's interiors in a way in which one can never reach the interior of an 'object'."[5] In voiced poetry, words are not reduced to the status of objects; they are utterances, basic elements of what Ong calls "the cry.' This cry exists in the contemporary Canadian poetry that Lee calls vernacular, it existed in the work that came out of Dudek's milieu, and it existed in Stringer's vernacular poetry of the '20s.

But who was Arthur Stringer? Not many reading lists in cinema, the novel, or poetry include today "The Perils of Pauline," *The Prairie Wife*, and *Open Water*. Arthur John Arbuthnot Stringer (1874-1950) was encouraged in literary pursuits as a boy by his paternal grandmother, Margaret Arbuthnot. He was fortunate to have been befriended at the age of twenty by T. H. Warren, a printer in London, Ontario, who published Stringer's first three collections of verse. After graduating from the University of Toronto, Stringer spent a year at Oxford during which he found time to travel extensively in Europe. Returning to Canada, he worked for a time at Saginaw as a clerk for the Père Marquette Railway. Occasional newspaper articles led to a

position on the staff of the Montréal *Herald*, which he left to write for the American Press Association. He moved to New York. His first novel, *The Silver Poppy* (1903), made him a literary star at the age of twenty-nine. He married Jobyna Howland, "the original Gibson girl," and settled down as a writer and fruit-farmer on the north shore of Lake Erie. He later divorced his first wife, tried his hand at ranching in Alberta and returned to his birthplace, Chatham, Ontario, to marry his cousin, Margaret Arbuthnot. The second marriage coincided with the writing of his most "spontaneously popular" novel, *The Prairie Wife* (1915). Stringer was successful as a writer of serialized adventure novels, short stories, and journalism. In 1921, he bought land in New Jersey where he settled down, lived and wrote until his death. Like Service, he worked for a time in Hollywood (on "The Perils of Pauline"). His mature poetry begins with *Hephaestus and Other Poems* (1903) and continues through over a dozen books. *The Woman in the Rain,* his best book, appeared in '07 and was republished, revised and expanded, simultaneously in Toronto and Boston forty years later.[6]

Stringer is remembered for his 1914 volume, *Open Water*, which Munro Beattie described in the *Literary History of Canada* as "almost wholly unmarred by 'poetic diction,'" displaying economy and directness, and wider in scope "than other Canadian books of the period." Beattie acknowledged the attempt in this book to emulate the verse beginning to appear in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* in the '20s, but he felt the poems lacked the "unity that good free verse can attain to," being "mostly gatherings of prose sentences arbitrarily divided into lines."[7] The unity that Beattie misses here is the formal quality that does not permit what Cleanth Brooks called "The Heresy of Paraphrase," an inseparable unity of form and content in which the poet intuits whatever statement the work may make through its formal structure. This question of unity is irrelevant in discussing vernacular verse.

Stringer's poetic *oeuvre* includes legendary verse-plays and sentimental 'Irish poems' aimed at the popular market, the "un-Canadian" free verse of *Open Water*, and much voiced poetry. The work may be said to be characterized by an uneasy, often self-defeating disequilibrium between what he thought his readers' expectations were and a strong desire to rise above that sort of conditioning. This tension is mediated, moreover, by a third factor, his sensitivity to language as sensuous speech.

The Woman in the Rain (1907; 1949) contains several poems organized around a relationship between self and speech. "The Modern Speaks," for example, declares that death cannot destroy self though it takes everything else,

> When I, who have joyed in my work,
> Who have loved, have taken my fling,
> Have hungered, forgotten, been glad,
> Have hated the hand that would shirk
> The honey of life for the sting,
> Have housed with the good and the bad.[8]

These aspirated rhythms communicate the speaker's determination to have all life has to offer and face its loss in death armed with speech, the "might of a man" and a "strength that is mine as yet,"

> In the core of me, conquering still,
> This man's good might shall remain,
> And none of me, *me* shall you break.

The optimism projected here does not rely on some variety of muscular Christianity or a version of the Romantic *vates*, but rather his sense of himself and his voice as a fit measure of poetic value. In poems such as "*Non Omnis Moriar,*" "The Wanderers," "The Man Who Killed," and others in *The Woman in the Rain,* Stringer's emphatic ego sounds a personal note wholly characteristic of his time and his place. "Morning in the North-West" is another example:

> What care I here for all Earth's creeds outworn,
> The dreams outlived, the hopes to ashes turned,
> In that old East so dark with rain and doubt?
> Here life swings glad and free and rude, and I
> Shall drink it to the full, and go content.[9]

In "Gifts" and "Northern Pines," he pays homage to his friend and fellow expatriate Bliss Carman. Stringer admired the openness to life that he saw in Carman's verse.

Stringer's preference for *parole* as opposed to *langue*, prose sentences chopped into lines as opposed to "poetic diction" in Beattie's sense, is clear throughout *The Woman in the Rain*. A number of epigrams (often difficult to fault for their wit or execution) and longer non-mythological blank verse poems reflect a desire to reconcile trust in speech to the strictures of prosody. The epigram "Philosophies" records his disdain for writing that is intellectually speechless, not infused by living breath:

> We know not what doth lie beyond the Door,
> But in captivity behold us grown
> Enamored of our cell, in scrolling o'er
> With signs and legends strange each mural stone![10]

Poems like "A Woman Sang," "The Final Lesson," "Keats," and "When Closing Swinburne" deal explicitly with Stringer's ultimately

confused ideas of what poetic beauty should be. The title poem, however, turns from this preoccupation to a curious and troubling analysis of the predicament of modern urban life.

In "The Woman in the Rain," a bag-lady epitomizes a lost continuity between past and present.[11] A huddled heap of rags, a "timeless thing of mumbling unconcern" with burned-out eyes, breasts fallen in, she is a woman-city who contains the embittered lives and ghostly loves of contemporary society "coffined in its agued bones." She whines and wheezes before the young, the gay, and the rich lamenting how beautiful she once was, how wild she used to be. Stringer changes tack vigorously and often in the poem, alternating between a *carpe diem* format, in which the bag-lady is a "she," and a more philosophical vein in which the woman in her decrepitude is referred to as "it." More importantly, however, she is a sphinx-like embodiment of speech. Beauty speaks and will always speak "through many-teared/ Dark cities tongued with records like to her!" Her "mumbling unconcern" (the phrase is repeated in the close) symbolizes a modern loss of graceful speech. The poem's energetic voice, as opposed to prosody or thematic patterning, embodies a desire to retrieve the "breathing music of lost Nineveh" in which "through her velvet veins once musically/ The mad life sang."

The bag-lady is the antithesis of the machismo self-image in "The Modern Speaks," that is, the optimism, enthusiasm, and sensuality of Stringer's particular species of *brio*. Her whimpering, in which the high world of poetic beauty ends, will never swell into a resonance capable of reaching the interiors of the young and the rich to whom she speaks unheard. Under the "April thrill/ imperative" of a spring rain, she is "desolately sterile." As Stringer suggests in "The Wordless Touch," true communication between the inner lives of men and women requires more than language alone. It needs the body, and as speech is language in the body, the voice penetrates to a place "beyond the bourne of words."

Stringer was cosmopolitan enough to be aware of the situation of poetry abroad, yet he resisted the changes in attitude that in the '30s would make ironic and closed forms so important to Canadian poets like Leo Kennedy or A. J. M. Smith. He never let go, entirely, of the decadent concept of beauty loosely assembled in the eighteen-nineties by the initiates of Mallarmé's Tuesdays. In this "gospel of 'correspondences,' the importance of music, the use of free verse, a constant concern with technical detail, philosophical idealism, a predilection for the world of dream and legends," an idea of transcendence in which artifice reveals nature's inherent rationality, and various forms of occultism all played a part.[12] Hence it is not surprising that he would

try his hand at free verse and write the manifesto in *Open Water* for which he is chiefly remembered today.

On the basis that man habitually worships "beauty only as he has known it in the past," Stringer's "Forward" to *Open Water* passionately defends the vernacular in poetry as opposed to outmoded prosodic conventions.[13] In order to revive a poetry of emotional expression, intimate moods, and subjective experiences that are "characteristically modern," poetry must shake off the immuring traditions of rhyme and metre. Intellectual timidity by which poets view the world "mathematically" imprisons poetry in a "geometrically designed mould" that leads to "an instinctive abhorrence for anything beyond the control of what he calls common sense." Stringer insists that the poet must return to the "more open movement of the chant, which is man's most natural and rudimentary form of song." The biography suggests, moreover, that his conception of the chant-line was helped along by a need to vent violent emotions surrounding the failure of his first marriage. As such, a crisis in which Stringer strove to make the private self public in his poetry bonded to his transitional modernism, and resulted in a "first step towards freedom" for open or vernacular verse in early twentieth-century Canada.

This first step, however, is a stumbling one. Stringer's desire to use his sense of voice as a principle for poetic organization is thwarted in *Open Water* by another desire to make his verse as widely read as his prose. "The Revolt" begins with the strong, chant-like rhythm characteristic of his verse in general.[14] Yet the poem, by falling into two parts, one self-assertive and the other self-deprecating, expresses his ambivalence toward poetic self-discovery and literary popularity. He says that he has tinkled and jangled and piped, and is now "sick of the game." The words "I want" are repeated in a catalogue of desires that concludes,

> I want to sit down with my soul and talk straight out,
> I want to make peace with myself,
> And say what I have to say,
> While there is still time!

Stringer wants to be free from the "chains of song," "Rough and unruly and open and turbulent-throated!" He has been too long in the dungeons of Mallarmèan song. Yet, "after my moment of light," he admits, he will choose "to go back to the Dark,/ Since the Open still makes me afraid."

This strategy of derring-do followed by an admission of one's limitations is the same sort of thing a politician does when he attempts to win over an audience by holding forth on the issues while at the same time

admitting that he is 'only human.' Audiences know what political promises really are and vote for the man behind them anyway, because of the unstated contract binding audiences to rhetorical promises of significant truths. Under the conditions of such contracts, once an audience begins to feel that the speaker 'is one of us,' they are hooked. Thus, in terms of rhetorical strategy, "The Revolt" is a convincing personal declaration, yet as a cry that communicates secrets objects share, the poem would seem not to have probed the issue of the self deeply enough.

In "Sappho's Tomb," an aesthete study in concupiscence employing a classical décor and decadent cosmetics, the vernacular is overwhelmed by the stereotypes of artifice, that is, legendary motif-patterning, images of women's cosmetics, precious stones and metals, moonlight and water and the plant-life of dreams. (The poem is actually a choral epilogue to what he himself regarded as his *magnum opus,* the verse-play *Sappho in Leucadia,* published in 1903 and extensively rewritten for the 1949 edition.) In this sort of thing, Stringer fails to assimilate a basic presupposition of modern free verse, that underlying acceptance of the "whatness" of things, the red wheelbarrows and cool plums of everyday existence. When poems in *Open Water* manage to communicate an openness, however, the aesthete conventions are rendered in an entirely personal way. "Autumn," "Faces," "There is Strength in the Soil," and to a lesser extent the poems "The Life on the Table" and "At Charing-Cross," demonstrate how much clearer and stronger the breath-line can be when the back door of his poetic, so to speak, is open to place instead of the literary context he believed his audience demanded.

Other poems in *Open Water* are sentimental longings for home or expressions of love, loss and regret in which the verve of Stringer's breath-line degenerates in nursery-rhyme rhythms. "Milkweed" is an exception. Here the voice is strongly personal, infusing a lyrical and imagistic chant on homesickness among the foothills of Alberta with a real sense of a person communing with persons. The same is true of "Chains" and "The Steel Worker," which identify industrial technology as a corrosive evil in modern life. The chant-line seems strongest in two substantial poems cathartic of violent emotion, the passionate, visceral "Ultimata" and "Atavism," as well as a number of shorter poems exploring the relationship between love and hate.

Stringer's poetic is well represented in *Open Water.* Its cardinal points are aesthete beauty, the effects of a self-conscious desire to be popular, the consequent importance of personality, and the conception of a modern poetic language as sensuous speech. This is an unstable combination, and in "The Echo" he declares that poetry is an

eternal failure, "a note in the chorus. . . a wave on the deep." Every-
thing a poet struggles to utter has been uttered before, he says, failing
to realize that his sensitivity to voice in poetry would be of use in
moving poetry beyond the limitations of words. In "The Surrender" he
turns away from self and reality, having convinced himself that true
poetry will be known only once "the soul falls broken" and drowns in
the flood of time and death. The book closes with a series of poems on
dreams in which he insists that he loves the soul and that God is with
him even though he seeks the soul through flesh. In the "Afterword" to
Dark Soil, twenty years later, Stringer recanted his challenge to con-
vention, saying that "Time teaches us that this shifted fetter known as
Freedom is not always the final solution of the artist's problem."[15]

Another approach to this problem appears in the work of Alexander
Maitland Stephen (1882-1942). Raymond Knister once apologised in a
letter to a lady-friend that he could not see Stephen's *The Rosary of
Pan* as a whole because flawed craftmanship "spoils any piece of
writing for me, and it is only after the mind assents to the technical
mastery that the emotion is allowed to reach me." This "intellectual
assent," he says, is necessary for genuine literature, and any ideas will
do as long as some structure has been effective. Knister's demand for
formal correctness from "free versers" forced him to view Stephen only
as a man, and not a Writer.[16] What Knister misses is the fact that
Stephen's poems are not conceived as self-contained texts — "genuine
literature" — but rather as moments of genuine poetic utterance. Like
Munro Beattie in the '60s, Knister's criticism of Stephen in the '20s
points out how difficult it has been for Canadian vernacular poetry to
gain a foothold in the face of essentially New Critical attitudes.

Stephen grew up on a small Ontario farm. Thanks to his father's
tutoring and large library — his father was a school-teacher before he
took up farming — Stephen passed his high school entrance examina-
tions at the age of ten. At high school, Stephen and a group of students
read Darwin and Huxley and discussed the prospect of a world
founded upon reason. Stephen finished high school at fourteen and,
unable to afford university, tried to study law under an uncle in
Kamloops, British Columbia. On the news of his father's death, Ste-
phen abandoned his studies and spent several years in Seattle, then a
goldrush boomtown. He worked in restaurants, lumber-yards, dock-
yards, on the stage and as a volunteer in a missionary clinic for
derelicts. He taught school briefly in British Columbia and at this time
became involved with the labour movement in the West. By the time
Stephen enlisted in an Imperial regiment when World War I was
declared, he had been a miner, a logger, and a cowboy in Canada, a
farm-hand and an office clerk in the United States. He married the

daughter of the farmer he worked for in Oregon. Wounded in France in his first action, he lost the use of his right arm.

After his discharge, Stephen returned to teaching in Vancouver and became a prolific poet, playwright, novelist, public speaker and recitalist of the '20s and '30s.[17] He launched himself into politics at the same time. In his reckless and energetic way he joined the C. C. F. party, delivered indignant polemics on the radio and in the meeting-hall, campaigned successfully for financial aid to China and Spain, and ran for office on an independent ticket in a provincial election.[18] These years produced Stephen's best book of verse, *Brown Earth and Bunch Grass* (1931), but he was over-worked and never fully recovered from the pneumonia that contributed to his defeat in his Vancouver Island riding.

As a man, Stephen survived the Depression, the Great War, and his own nomadic youth to be broken by an excess of humanitarian resolve to hasten society's progress toward a better and more egalitarian world. As a poet, he abandoned the free verse and declamatory power of *Brown Earth and Bunch Grass* to write, in 1935, *Verendrye,* an explicitly Victorian-romantic, self-consciously conventional epic. He also lost his politics and his millennial outlook. He rallied his creative energies with the onset of World War II, however, and the poems collected in the posthumous volume *Songs For a New Nation* contain a number of prophetic rhapsodies. Stephen had submitted his third novel to a Ryerson Press writing contest, winning honourable mention, when he suffered a second, fatal attack of pneumonia at the age of fifty-three.

Though much of Stephen's first book, *The Rosary of Pan,* is conventional for its time, it contains the seeds of a vernacular socialist poetic which will later reappear without his religious and philosophical underpinnings in Livesay, Acorn and Wayman. "Superman" and "Man the Creator" are poetic re-readings of Stephen's chosen philosopher, Nietzsche, which combine Nietzsche's will to power with notions of spiritual love in order to articulate his vision of the relations between self, place, and language. In "The Wanderer," the Word as Flesh usurped by Man utters a Dionysian declaration of man's evolutionary quest toward divine self-perfection, "twice ten million human years to seek/ That which is I. From mine own self divorced." Other poems like "The Spirit of Beauty," "Arcady," "The Sanctuary" and "The Troubadour" attempt to emulate the musicality and historical-exotic pastiche of his contemporaries Wilson MacDonald and Marjorie Pickthall. Stephen served his apprenticeship under Canadian poets, which is remarkable in itself. His personal rhythm is, however,

the declamatory rise and fall of the King James Bible and the street-corner orator.

In "To Bliss Carman," Stephen focuses not on the notion of the freedom on the open road — he knew too much about the road to take that seriously — but on Carman's "voice, resonant with joy." "Voices" records the moment in which the Word entered into his life, creeping "from out the shadows of the great ravines." Hearing this, Stephen received a vision of "prisoned life," an eerie murmuring within "the city's heart," and knew that "Life is One," a spiritual force ascending toward "a radiant god / Born from a chrysalis of sod."[19]

The *Rosary* contains elements of a simple allegorical system based on the trinity, which "Wind, Rain and Sun" and "The Trinity" make explicit. In this system, which somewhat resembles the mystic Jacob Boehme's theosophy, the Word emanates from darkness and silence in "mad desire" for union with "Life Divine."[20] The rose symbolizes the beloved, and "The Rose of Heaven" treats the perfection of evolutionary life. Like a 1960s' beaded hippy, Stephen is convinced that God is Love. Once the Word has entered time, it participates in the "labyrinth" of the many ways of love. Body, soul and spirit are fellow-travellers along an Ariadne's thread stretched in tangles between Thou and I, Word and voice. The book is a struggle, however, between this personal but erudite vision and poetic forms naively accepted as definitively poetic. Scattered lines and phrases continually break into a narrative strain in which convictions of a religious and socialist nature confront the harshness Stephen knew as a young wanderer. In "The Broken Rood" the paradisal fantasy of his mentors' poetry becomes a stark and brutal Gethsemane, in which the agon of a young nun leads to an affirmation of life and love that is at the same time a denial of her Christ, "Of Christ? Nay — of this gaunt god impaled / on a dead tree." "Drunk and Disorderly" is a parable of ungratified love as every man's crucifixion.

Stephen was more sure of his craft in his second volume, *The Land of Singing Waters,* published in London and Toronto in 1927. In this book, Stephen makes his peace with the poets to whom he had apprenticed himself in the sonnets dedicated to Charles G. D. Roberts, Carman and Pickthall, the rondels and MacInnes-like ballades that close the first half of the book. *Rosary's* themes are carried forward in such poems as "Gethsemane," "I Would Be Your Voice, O Hills" and "The Romaunt of the Rose." "Apotheosis," a strange poem on Nietzsche's madness, reprises "Drunk and Disorderly." The second half of the book is devoted to a collection of narrative poems in which the Word speaks through both legend and the local history of the Pacific coast. "Tiger-Lily," "The Death of Julian" and "Apotheosis"

ring with a powerful, individual poetic voice chafing against unresilient formal constraints.

In a final, violent drive to find a personal voice of his own in poetry, Stephen broke his fetters to produce *Brown Earth and Bunch Grass* —not by experiment or foreign example, but by luck. This book divides into two parts, a longer first section containing poems on history and place in free verse and a shorter second part on the power of love to effect spiritual regeneration. The first part begins with a "Prelude" in which Stephen asks how art can reveal "the eternal Now," when the "imminent Past,/ looms like a spectre/ on the brink of dreams?" Wrapped in prophetic mantle, he answers: "I have drawn apart./ I have paid the price./ Freedom is mine." In true Old Testament fashion, Stephen declares that he sings "of a nation yet unborn." His words of revelation will dwell with the children who "inhabit/ the house which I have builded." This prophetic cry derives figuratively from the Word, a spiritual life-force seeking embodiment in a poet's present voice. The function of this voice, or the cry in Ong's terms, is to share the truth with his audience, that their perception of reality be cleansed and reified as proper receptacles of the Word. In the close of the second part of the book, "The Fourth Dimension," "Marriage," and "Fidelis," insist that the distance and mystery "between two worlds" is dissolved in the "high dimension of love," and that "the impurity of a virginal mind" cannot conceive of beauty, "Before a poem is born" and a marriage consummated, since "By a man and a woman/ are all things created." "Fidelis" explains that the Word cannot redeem unless its vehicle, love, is unsullied by infidelity.

The Word travels across the distance between spiritual vision and the reality that is its sign by means of love, but the poet's voice is its way. "Impressions" tells us that "Voices are the keys" to the other world within persons, symbolized here by "dreams" and "the indices of the soul." Between voices there is only an abyss. "Stampede" is a rollicking cowboy poem that uses speech rhythms to affirm locality's voice, and in "Rivers of Gold," the voices of the past speak across the abyss in rhythms flowing from the heart of the prairie. In "A Prairie Wind," the poet listens to the wind and dreams paradisally, but the wind passes through and beyond the poet to infuse the native hospitality and plain speech of the region. And Stephen declaims that this wind and this breath, this voice, emerges from eternity on "the tide of the soul/ seeking the honey heart of truth." "Travel with the Wind" encourages the reader to "come out with me!" in a visionary flight across Canada on the wings of "the breath/ that wonders, in its monotone,/ of what is hidden, unrevealed/ within the silence." In this poem, the rhythms of speech itself create a sensation of dipping and

soaring above "the prairie Mother, gypsy Earth," who sings "songs as old as Eden."[21]

"The Earth is Ours" declares that the speaker brings "a message,/ masterful and strange," for

> I am the Voice
> of the Beauty you have rejected,
> of the Love you have crucified,
> of the Humanity you have dethroned.[22]

"Out of the North" indulges in a socialist-devout dream of Canada, where the Word kindles in "white stillness" a forge for "the Will to Redemption." In "Poems," voice transmutes verse into "weapons of sound/ made to pierce the separateness" between souls.

Long poems in free verse like "Steel Cliffs," "Vancouver" and "On the Air," describe the fragmented quality of modern city life. In these poems, Stephen's metaphysics of place and his humanity serve to help make his poetic voice of use. The separation of souls — the abyss of life divorced from the communing network of human intercourse in "the I-thou world" — is the result of past mis-readings of the written word and the established belief-systems of western culture. "That Which A Man Bequeaths" reminds us that man's gods are but "shadows cast/ by his own ego in space and time." The winds "talk together," and because man has forgotten how to listen for the truth,

> He hides himself from the greater Self,
> concealing the charnel-house of his heart.
> Embracing the myth he has created,
> he weeps when he touches reality.[23]

Neither Olson, Dudek, nor Ong would, I think, disagree with Stephen on this point.

"Peach Davis" and most of the remaining poems in the first section are devoted to representing an interior reality in terms of the everyday lives of ordinary rural and urban characters. Peach Davis is a retired wilderness mountie working as a janitor in Calgary, "city of beef barons and oil magnates." The poem upbraids Canadians for over-looking the stories of simple men in their search for cultural myths. "The Children Are Dreaming" criticizes the materialism and elitism of the tribesman of Judas, smug "in the swivel-chairs of authority." The poem speaks to us directly,

> You, Madam.
> and you, Sir,
> may, if you care to listen,
> hear the word of the Dawn.
> It contains a message to Judas.

The Voice is one you have heard before.
Masterful and strange, it resounds
through the Age of Iron.[24]

The message for us, the prophet's children, is that we shall be "Clean as
the morning wind,/ fearless of opinion,/ unashamed of sex" and
proud of the Word, the voice and its poet, which tells the plain truth
about our locality and our lives.

Finally, the posthumous volume *Songs for a New Nation,* published
in the United States in 1963 (Stephen was already forgotten in Canada
by then), vacillates between slight though technically sound lyrics and
poems that seem to be moving toward a long, sonorous line similar to
that employed by Blake in the prophetic books. A number are entitled
simply "Fragment." The final verse of the first part of *Brown Earth
and Bunch Grass,* "So Long," said farewell to the Victorian "oil of
conventionality," and Stephen decided that "I am glad that I live/ in
the year 1930, A. D." Stephen's illness, however, impeded his catch-as-
catch-can liberation from inherited notions of poetic beauty, so that in
his last poems he hovers between poems that aspire to be objects of
beauty on the one hand, and representations of a secret-sharing cry on
the other. These two values had been entangled from the beginning in
his work, and *Songs of a New Nation* is interesting in the way the
poems alternate their expression in rhymed and free verse. At its best,
Stephen's work retains a sense of genuine mysticism, intelligence,
learning, and the qualities of an informal, virile and personal Marxist
art based upon voice as a principle of poetic organization.

Despite their differences, Stringer's and Stephen's verse is 'open' in
the sense that inherited meter and stanza disintegrate before the force
of an everyday manner of speech. Their contribution to the genre of
voiced verse derives from patterns of sound and rhythm rarely found
in Canadian books in their time. Their meaning is not the product of
an intellectual and prosodic encapsulation, but rather a quality of
response built up in readers' aesthetic perceptions of a voice public and
rhetorical as a politician's speech. Audiences will assemble an image of
the personality behind the voice represented by such verse, and their
response depends contractually on how interesting, serious, compe-
tent, personable and trustworthy that personality seems to be. Ste-
phen's and Stringer's poetry aspires to evoke an individuality of mind
and heart, a high-energy construct and discharge of logopoeia through
the breath, in Olson's terms, which promises two things.[25] The first is
that the poet will share with his audience "secrets objects share." The
second is that the poet has learned this truth by listening "down
through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath
comes from."

NOTES

1. MacInnes, "To Walt Whitman," *Complete Poems of Tom MacInnes* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1923), pp. 131-33. MacDonald, "A Flagon of Beauty," *A Flagon of Beauty* (Toronto: Pine Tree, 1931). pp. 13-14.
2. Dennis Lee. "Introduction," *The New Canadian Poets 1970-1985* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1935), p. xxviii.
3. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *Human Universe and Other Essays,* ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 51-63.
4. Louis Dudek, *The First Person in Literature* (Toronto: CBC Publications, 1967), pp. 29 and 66-68.
5. Walter J. Ong, "A Dialectic of Aural and Objective Correlatives," in his *The Barbarian Within And Other Fugitive Essays and Studies* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 28.
6. Victor Lauriston, *Arthur Stringer, Son of the North: A Biography and Anthology* (Chatham, Ontario: Tiny Tree Club, 1941); "Arthur Stringer," in W.P. Percival, *Leading Canadian Poets,* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1948), pp. 255-64; *Postscript to a Poet: Off the Record Tales about Arthur Stringer* (Tiny Tree, 1941). Warren handled *Watchers of Twilight and Other Poems* (1894), *Pauline and Other Poems* (1895) and *Epigrams* (1896). *The Woman in the Rain, and Other Poems* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1907; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1949); *Open Water* (New York: John Lane, 1914). The 1949 edition of *Woman in the Rain* contains much-revised versions of *Hephaestus, Persephone at Enna,* and *Sappho in Leucadie* (Toronto: Methodist Book and Pub. Co., 1903) and *Sappho in Leucadia* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1907). The Irish poems: *Irish Poems* (New York: Kennerly, 1911), republished as *Out of Erin (Song of Exile)* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1930), *The Woman Remembers, and Other Irish Poems* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1938) and *The King Who Loved Old Clothes, and Other Irish Poems* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941). Bobbs-Merrill also published *Dark Soil* (1933). In 1948 Ryerson brought out a chapbook entitled *New York Nocturnes.*
7. Munro Beattie, "Poetry 1920-1935," *Literary History of Canada,* ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1965) p. 725.
8. "The Modern Speaks," *Woman in the Rain,* pp. 9-10.
9. "Morning in the North-West," *Woman in the Rain,* pp. 42-43.
10. "Philosophies," *Woman in the Rain,* p. 27.
11. "The Woman in the Rain," "The Wordless Touch," *Woman in the Rain,* pp. 29-35, 38.
12. Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination 1880-1900* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press. 1981). pp. 5-6.
13. Stringer, "Foreword," in *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada: Essential Articles on Contemporary Canadian Poetry in English,* ed. Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski (Toronto: Ryerson, 1970), pp. 5-9.
14. "The Revolt," *Open Water,* pp. 94-96.
15. "The Echo," "The Surrender," *Open Water,* pp. 101-02, 127. The *Dark Soil* remark is quoted by Lauriston, *Leading,* p. 262.
16. Knister, "Letter to Miss Frankfurth," *First Day of Spring: Stories and Other Prose,* ed. Peter Stevens (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), pp. 404-06.
17. *The Rosary of Pan* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1923). *The Land of Singing Waters* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1927). *Brown Earth and Bunch Grass* (Vancouver: Wrigley Printers, 1931) has the dual distinction of being Stephen's best book and the least read, having been published by a vanity press. *Verendrye: A Poem of the New World* (Toronto: Dent, 1935). The poems in the chapbook *Lords of the Air: Poems of the Present War,* published by the author in Vancouver in 1940, are in *Songs for a New Nation* (New York: Vantage Press, 1963).
18. W. Gordon Stephen, "A. M. Stephen," *Leading Canadian Poets,* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1948), pp. 245-254.
19. "The Wanderer," "Voices," *Rosary,* pp. 21-23, 77.
20. Boehme's seventeenth-century mysticism anticipates Freud's conceptual structure for the unconscious. See Nicholas Berdyaev's "Unground and Freedom," the introduction to Jacob Boehme, *Six Theosophic Points And Other Writings* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1971). pp. v-xxxvii.
21. "Prairie Wird," "Travel With the Wind," *Brown Earth,* pp. 28-29, 30-32.
22. "The Earth is Ours," *Brown Earth.* pp. 68-70.
23. "That Which A Man Bequeathes," *Brown Earth,* p. 84.
24. "The Children Are Dreaming," *Brown Earth,* pp. 92-94.
25. Olson, "Projective Verse," pp. 60-61.