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Tradition and the Individual Talent of Charles Bruce

Today's popular imagination is obsessed with superstars and superheroes, and apparently we students of Canadian letters share some of this same fascination. In the periodic surges to discover that unsung visionary who, like a modern-day Pound or Eliot, will lead Canadian poets toward unprecedented forms of self-expression and imaginative brilliance, we celebrate a never-ending procession of new versifiers, promising through each an escape from the doldrums of second-rate, imitative verse. The promise has not been empty, but it has been slim. Some impressive innovators—even geniuses—have come to light as clamorous recognition and sensational reviews greet today's chosen cynosure, the next in line. But in our impatience we have grown fickle. All too soon some other poet is in the ascendent, and last year's darling recedes into anonymity.

A case in point is Charles Bruce. His best volume, *The Mulgrave Road*, won the Governor General's Award in 1951, yet the Canadian Periodical Index for the past twenty years does not list a single article about his verse. Do not misunderstand me, Bruce is certainly not that long awaited hero. He is not even a major poet, for however successfully *The Mulgrave Road* realizes Bruce's poetic ambitions, his aspirations are at best those of a minor poet. My point is that if this capriciously celebrated writer were given the less fleeting attention he deserved, an environment would be cultivated that might be more likely to generate that much sought after figure. But with the whisper of some fresh promise, we have hastily consigned Bruce to the growing list of once-hopefuls. Over fifty years have passed since Eliot taught that individual talent can bear fruit only in the nurturing soil of tradition, yet we continue to burn up our critical energies in anticipation of some prize-winning harvest. Our efforts would be better spent tending to our soil, for although criticism alone cannot establish tradition, it can increase awareness of those which presently exist as embryos. This reconsideration of Bruce's poetic contribution

both illustrates the genius of his individual talent and points to the poetic tradition that enables that talent to bear fruit.

Bruce wrote only a handful of first-rate poems. Although he published six collections of verse, *The Mulgrave Road* alone must bear his reputation as a poet. In fact, his best verse appears in the first section of the volume. Consisting of nineteen of the book's twenty-eight poems, this unit includes poems that are primarily descriptive, focusing on specific images. As in the two remaining sections, the central theme here is time, but unlike "Planes of Space and Time" and "Lake Superior Coast: Train Window" (appearing in Section III), Bruce creates tangible images of time as if it were an object that could be grasped by the senses. In the subsequent units the reader is merely told about Time the Abstraction, but the choice poems of Section I provide a specific concrete image that embodies time, either freezing its fluidity into an exact moment, or seeing it as a continuous image that merges past, present, and future. "Lambs at Evening," "Country Sunday," "Fall Grass," "Early Morning Landing," "March Day: Windy", all capture the image of a precise instant of the day or week or year, suspending, as if in a snapshot, an isolated moment.

However, it is time's flowing continuity that Bruce captures most winningly. When he looks at the present, he is immensely aware of the past; this consciousness of history arises frequently in his verse as well as in the mainstream of modern Maritime poetry.¹ "Girls in the Parlor" creates an image of past time frozen in the present:

This is the room they held against the claims
Of earth and sea and time—the touch of grace.²

"Wool" evokes another such picture of the continuous nature of time. The spinner lives in the immediate present; we are told that as the wheel turns her eyes are "fixed on the moment's thought"³ and that "she lives for a moment now/In a room bright with sun" (ll. 9-10). But the final image is of the continuity of all these instants:

Matching the carded rolls
To the wheel's droning rhyme
With her grey eyes amused
At the long skein of time. (ll. 21-24)

The relationship of past to present is a concrete linear image made palpable in the isolated revolutions of the spinner's wheel that connect to produce the long woolen thread.

“Nova Scotia Fish Hut” and “Eastern Shore” encompass not only past in present, but eternity in the instant. Embodying this sense of all-time—past, present, and future—Bruce’s subjects transcend temporal realities, becoming timeless in their capacities to include an eternity. It is the sea that lends this quality to both poems, although each one conveys it through a distinctly individual image.

“Eastern Shore” is more explicit in its theme and method, but the process is essentially the same as in “Nova Scotia Fish Hut.” A series of similes connects the fisherman and the sea:

He stands and walks as if his knees were tensed
 To a pitching dory. When he looks far off
 You think of trawl-kegs rolling in the trough
 Of swaying waves. He wears a cap against
 The sun on water, but his face is brown
 As an old mainsail. . . .⁴

The immemorial features of the fisherman are described in the final couplet of the next stanza:

But youth lurks in the squinting eyes, and in
 The laughter wrinkles in the tanbark skin. (ll. 11-12)

Similarly, the relationship between past and present is suggested in the sentence “You know that age can be/A hill for looking” (ll. 14-15), and the connection of the sea with the all-encompassing universe of time is explicit in the last stanza:

. . . the swaying sea
 A lifetime marching with the waves of time.
 Listen—the ceaseless cadence, deep and slow.
 Tomorrow. Now. And years and years ago. (ll. 15-18)

Through this intimate association with the sea, the fisherman takes on the dominant characteristic of timelessness that is expressed by the “ceaseless cadence” of the sea.

“Nova Scotia Fish Hut” voices an almost identical theme, but its superiority results from detailed descriptions that imply, rather than state. Descriptive in technique, the poem evokes an image of time that is readily accessible to the senses. The fishing shack is not merely a physical shelter. It is a vehicle by which Bruce conveys an atmosphere of feeling enshrined within the building. As it is deserving of close attention, I quote the poem in its entirety.

Rain, and blown sand, and southwest wind
 Have rubbed these shingles crisp and paper-thin.

Come in:

Something has stripped these studding-posts and pinned
 Time to the rafters. Where the woodworm ticked

Shick shick shick shick

Steady and secretive, his track is plain:

The fallen bark is dust; the beams are bare.

Bare as the bare stone of this open shore,
 This building grey as stone. The filtered sun
 Leaks cold and quiet through it. And the rain,
 The wind, the whispering sand, return to finger
 Its creaking wall, and creak its thuttering door.

Old, as the shore is. But they use the place.
 Wait if you like: someone will come to find
 A handline or a gutting-knife, or stow
 A coiled net in the loft. Or just to smoke
 And loaf; and swap tomorrow in slow talk;
 And knock his pipe out on a killick-rock
 Someone left lying sixty years ago.⁵

The opening lines show the exterior of the hut as it is caressed by the natural elements of rain, sand and wind. We are invited inside by the direct and colloquial "Come in." The alliteration of the 's' sound in the fourth line creates a silenced hush that suggests the interior atmosphere. The focus moves to the framing structure of rafters and studding-posts, reinforcing the bare, austere character of the inside. Time, we are told, has been pinned to the rafters, implying that it has been immobilized within the shelter. The track of the woodworm provides, as does the yarn in "Wool," a tangible image of continuous time. The repetition of the worm's sound—"Shick shick shick shick"—calls to mind the steady, patient feeling associated with the fish hut. There is no haste inside, and Bruce's indulgent reiteration of the faint scratching noise allows for a similar lack of hurry in the poem.

The second verse paragraph connects the hut with the seashore, as "Eastern Shore" bonds the fisherman to the sea. The parallel is made with grace and concision in the first two lines. The building is "bare" as the "bare stones" of the shore. It is also as "grey as stone." We not only comprehend this comparison; we hear it by the repetition of "bare" and "stone" in reference to both shore and hut. The adjectives also strengthen the austerity painted in the first verse paragraph, as all of the remaining lines in this unit reinforce the sensory impres-

language simple and direct. These two poets, brought up in the neighboring provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, display similar tastes for traditional poetic forms and styles, and it is only when he keeps his eye trained on the physical object described that either poet soars to his ultimate heights. Even the painter-like technique that Desmond Pacey points to in Roberts's "The Sower" and "The Potato Harvest"⁶ appears in Bruce's "Country Sunday," allowing for a visual perspective of depth within the poem:

Far up the pasture at the edge of sky
 Toy cattle, red and black and brindle brown,
 Doze under kneehigh maples. Nearer by
 The colt-size gelding at the fence puts down
 A tentative hoof, and idly, switching flies,
 Snorts and is still. Along the stable wall
 The garrulous hens, drowsing with lidded eyes,
 Forget to peck and chirp.⁷

Not only do Roberts and Bruce write on the same subjects, but Bruce literally echoes the words of his predecessor on several occasions. In "North Shore" Bruce asks us to "[t]hink now of common things,"⁸ recalling Roberts's prologue to *Songs of the Common Day*:

Make thou my vision sane and clear
 That I may see what beauty clings
 In common forms, and find the soul
 Of unregarded things!⁹

And Roberts's phrase "the hands of chance and change" in "The Tantramar Revisited"¹⁰ drifts back through Bruce's "The Mulgrave Road":

It was just that he knew, in his tranquil mind,
 He was done with the habit of chance and change.¹¹

To judge by these parallels, Roberts's verse made a profound impression on Bruce, an influence that gave him a basis upon which to construct his own imaginative patterns; through this sensitivity to tradition, Bruce's verse ultimately surpasses that of Roberts. It is in his sonnets of *Songs of the Common Day* that Roberts lays down the groundwork upon which Bruce will build, yet these descriptive celebrations of rural life in the Maritimes shy away from the actual countryman. Characteristic titles are "Burnt Lands," "The Winter

Fields," "The Pumpkins in the Corn," "The Pea-fields," and "Mid-winter Thaw," the emphasis clearly falling upon the land and its wealth, not upon the man who works it. "The Mowing" and "In an Old Barn," perhaps promising a more central role for human subjects, focus instead on the herd's "pasture memories"¹² and cattle that "dream of summer, well content/In day-long contemplation of their dreams."¹³ Human forms appear briefly in "The Potato Harvest," but Roberts's glance passes them over within the half-line as if grudgingly forced to admit the presence of the "day-worn harvest folk."¹⁴ Similarly, although the title of "The Sower" seems to announce the poem's central figure, the impersonal form spreading seed remains vague and abstract against a richly evoked background of concrete images.

In contrast, Bruce's gaze never turns away from the individual. The men who fish his waters or plow his fields and the women who share in this elemental life are an integral part of the scene, shaped by the land and sea as they in turn give form to the landscape. "Biography," "Disapproving Woman," and "Tidewater Morning" are concise character sketches of countrymen so formed by the land that they are barely distinguishable from it. The woman of "Tidewater Morning," knowing her husband's time were more profitably spent farming than fishing, casts off the urgings of her common sense when she sees him climbing home from the wharf,

Meeting again the strength that never took
Its grace from gardens, and the long clear look
That never learned its blue behind a harrow.¹⁵

The associated plurality of Bruce's images of man, field, hut, wind, and water imparts a lucid regional picture, and because Bruce's survey recognizes the human forms that are a part of the rural landscape, his settings seem more tangibly real than do the Confederation poet's.

By creating this heightened sense of a tactile reality, Bruce's intense visual scrutiny at times thrusts his descriptions of material objects upward into the realm of transcendental vision, an image's very concreteness enabling it to achieve an abstract significance. Roberts also has been linked with transcendentalism. Although his descriptions effectively convey mood and atmosphere, and such poems as "The Sower" and "The Potato Harvest" make it possible to see the landscape with clarity and improved appreciation, his verse never rises to the vision one feels in a poem like "Nova Scotia Fish Hut." Here, as

elsewhere, the image reverberates with significance. It threatens to explode, to metamorphose from Image to Idea, to exchange Being for Meaning. But it remains unchanged, ageless, vital. As if entering the hut itself, we read the lines and sense the powerful suggestion of suspended time: of the past, of the moment, of what is yet to be. The worn shingles, the stripped studding-posts, and the woodworm's track do not mean anything; they are not metaphors, yet one cannot help but feel the resonance of their being. In this respect, Bruce's descriptions extend into a realm untouched by Roberts's *Songs of the Common Day*.

Individual genius alone has not won Bruce this achievement. His success has grown out of something far more expansive than one man's sensibility. By continuing to build on the foundation laid down by Roberts—one of concise and direct rural descriptions—Bruce's own aesthetic potential bears fruit, and by adapting Roberts's poetic method to suit his own imagination, Bruce simultaneously participates in and contributes to a Canadian literary tradition. This appears to be a regional tradition, and regionalism is certainly a tendency evident in other facets of Canadian letters. Our celebrations must be tempered by an awareness of the handful of truly fine poems Bruce wrote, but whatever the scope of his success it has been made possible through the tradition within which he works.

Why Bruce has been ignored over the past two decades cannot be answered. But it is clear that his verse warrants a reconsideration; not merely for Bruce's sake, but in the interest of poetry to come. Once we see the quality of his work, we can only wish that he had written more. And once we see the tradition he nurtured and that in turn nurtured him, we can only look around to see what other half-formed traditions have been allowed to die off in our rush forward.

NOTES

1. See the poetry of Alfred G. Bailey, Elizabeth Brewster, Robert Cockburn, Fred Cogswell, and Alden Nowlan for a few examples of the attention that is given to past time—both public and private—in modern Maritime verse.
2. Charles Bruce, *The Mulgrave Road* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1951), p. 17, ll. 9-10.
3. Charles Bruce, *The Mulgrave Road*, p. 11, l. 3.
4. Charles Bruce, *The Mulgrave Road*, p. 14, ll. 1-6.
5. Charles Bruce, *The Mulgrave Road*, p. 1.
6. Desmond Pacey, *Essays in Canadian Criticism 1938-1968* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1969), p. 194.

7. Charles Bruce, *The Mulgrave Road*, p. 8, ll. 1-8.
8. Charles Bruce, *The Mulgrave Road*, p. 19, l. 5.
9. Charles G.D. Roberts, *Songs of the Common Day and Ave! An Ode for the Shelley Centenary* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1893), p. 1.
10. "Tantramar Revisited" in *Selected Poetry and Critical Prose of Charles G.D. Roberts*, ed. by W. J. Keith (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), p. 51, l. 5.
11. Charles Bruce, *The Mulgrave Road*, p. 20-21, ll. 33-34.
12. "The Mowing" in *Selected Poetry and Critical Prose*, p. 100, l. 14.
13. "In an Old Barn" in *Selected Poetry and Critical Prose*, pp. 105-106, ll. 13-14.
14. "The Potato Harvest" in *Selected Poetry and Critical Prose*, p. 58, l. 11.
15. Charles Bruce, *The Mulgrave Road*, p. 4, ll. 12-14.