W. H. DRUMMOND AND THE DILEMMA OF STYLE

R. E. Rashley*

THE immediately striking feature of W. H. Drummond's work and the one that accounts for most notice of him, favourable and unfavourable, is his use of the Habitant patois, a kind of compromise on the borders of English and French. The speech is not in any way unique. The North American continent has absorbed many large groups of people and each has passed through its period of malaise with language and produced, for a time, a half-foreign variant. There have been many who have found literary material in these tongues. Arthur Stringer has written extensively in an Irish variant, and south of the border there have been many; Lowell's Yankee, Leland's German-English, Dooley's Irish, Milt Gross's Yiddish, and others. Apart from these there was always the example of Robert Burns and his numerous Canadian progeny. Time has not been kind to most of these writers. A partial language necessarily represents a loss in communication, both because its use is limited and because that limitation is proof of weakness in the language. One can only think as the language will permit, and this language is servant to the very ordinary needs of living, and only for unintellectual people. It is only the overlapping of the lives of the two peoples that requires expression. This is all the more true of Drummond's patois because both languages continued to flourish and the marginal area tended to die out rather than either of the true tongues. It seems almost certain, then, that Drummond will receive less and less notice. This may not be all to our advantage. It is not likely that a poet who is prepared to write several volumes of verse will choose an unconventional style without realizing some gains to compensate for his loss, or that nothing is to be learned from his adventure.

Since Drummond wrote verses in other manners and settled on the Habitant patois for the greater part of his work it is apparent that the patois satisfied a felt need, that its use was deliberate. That it brought gains is also evident. In his best work in "poetic" English Drummond appears as a dignified versifier roughly equivalent to most of the writers of the preceding period.

*Of Saskatoon, Sask.

O Spirit of the mountain that speaks to us tonight,
Your voice is sad, but still recalls past visions of delight,
When 'mid the grand old Laurentides, old when the earth was new
With flying feet we followed the moose and caribou.[1]

The movement is pedestrian and the language hackneyed with its "past visions of delight" and "flying feet", the caesuras fall patly, the metrical form is obvious, and the poetic background suggested by "mid" is wearisome. There is an improvement in the use of the couplet over some predecessors, perhaps, but it is still undistinguished verse, without colour or life. It lacks freshness, vigour, clarity, impact. It is part of a large body of early Canadian writing in a manner so ineffectual that one reads it unrememberingly. The erosion of many hands has rubbed down the distinguishing differences. It is a mode as common and fully formed as a dress suit and similarly donned for the occasion. It is practised very much as women crochet; there are a number of stock patterns available, the product is decorative, and there is a certain skill in the evenness and competence of the craftsmanship. The result is recognizable as poetry, not by the individual's contribution to it but by his relative success in reaching the convention. There is an occasional feeling of restriction, a suggestion of impatience as in Sangster and Mair, but the poems that win to freedom are rare. The style is a web that binds its victims under veiling folds and robs them of individuality and strength. This was the dilemma that faced Canadian poets. The material of the verse was adequate to life, and to a vigorous life, but it was not adequate to poetry. It was the style that was at fault.

It was just this inadequacy that was forcing the poets of 1860 to experiment in new uses of language, and in an unusually well-educated pioneer community it was inevitable that the direction should be along respectable lines of scholarship. We do not find an effort to translate the rude life into an equally rude verse with a possibility of equal vigour, but a longing for the polish and perfection of civilization. Lampman, through Keats, arrived at a brocaded decoration that is as much a defence against life as a transcription of life. Through it he was enabled to transmute a certain part of his sensibilities into a permanent and lovely form, like insects suspended in amber. Carman, won by the musical content of words, developed an enviable facility in running harmonies and lost that part of

1. "Memories." All quotations of Drummond's work are from *Complete Poems*, by permission of McClelland and Stewart, Limited, publishers and owners of the copyright.

life which cannot be approached in terms of melodies. Duncan Campbell Scott's intellectual approach froze the sensibilities into a delicate hoar frost. These poets found adequacy of style in a rigorous winnowing of language. One feels in them that the eye is on the word rather than what the word stands for; the sort of thing apparent in Lampman's fondness for the word "creamy",[1] or in Scott's "Opal fires weave over all the oval of the lake,"[2] and its repetition in "With oval spots of opal over all",[3] or Carman's whippoorwill:

> night long
> Threshing the summer dark
> With his dim flail of song.[4]

The attack on conventionality is an attack on the language itself, the persistent, and almost painfully persistent, effort to find in the varied ores of language some pure vein and free it from the taint of too common usage. It was true of Lampman, and must have been true of Duncan Campbell Scott, though probably much less true of Carman, that composition was very arduous and the pleasure of achievement rarely complete. The intention was so limited and the resources so scant! Each achieved, in his own way, individuality and control of certain effects, but style is a master as well as a servant; it necessarily involves exclusions. Because they wrote as they did these poets were denied humanized substance. They did find release from the flowers-under-glass contemporary falsity, but at some cost. The persistent effort toward individual style brought them, through a change of direction, back to the dilemma, for an individual style, though it seems to give freedom, only reimposes its own limitations and denials. The more distinctive the style the more rigorous the selection and the narrower the possibilities.

Drummond's approach to the problem was also through style but with a difference. His affectionate understanding of the Habitant suggested concrete expression, but the conventional terms at his disposal were not capable of creating the Habitant either concretely or affectionately. He decided to let the Habitant speak an approximation to his own tongue and

1. See Norman Gregor Guthrie, *Archibald Lampman.*
2. "Spring on Mattagami." All quotations from D. C. Scott are from *The Poems of Duncan Campbell Scott*, by permission of McClelland and Stewart, publisher and owners of the copyright.
3. "In the House of Dreams."
4. "At the Granite Gate." All quotations from Carman are from *Bliss Carman's Poems*, by permission of McClelland and Stewart, publishers and owner of the copyright.

was immediately freed to use the most commonplace terms as material for verse. Phrases worn down by repetition were renewed, cliches stopped being cliches, hackneyed rhythms borrowed a little freshness from the language, and even prepositions, conjunctions and words of one syllable won a small new individuality from the change. Even a term as commonplace as "the wild and stormy weather" gained some small freshness from the change to:

"T'roo de wil' an' stormy wedder from St. Pierre de Miquelon."[1]

The convention is broken not by control of certain elements of language but by a refurbishing of the language through which words which had slipped too familiarly over the tongue reacquired flavour and substance by slight alteration of pronunciation and form. This was not done without the application of some intelligence on Drummond's part. He did not, as his Preface suggests, simply let his friends "tell their own stories in their own way." There was, of course, no "way"; the overlappings of the two tongues varied even in the individual from time to time and from subject to subject. Drummond found in the patois as it was spoken a new emphasis in words, an increment of sentiment, perhaps, or of humour, an animation that was attractive, and in working for these effects he took the patois as a guide but followed his own needs in creating his speech. Spellings and pronunciations, the percentage of French, and the degree of distortion vary from poem to poem and within poems. There is evidence of control. Arthur Stringer, in an early experiment with the French Canadian's English writes: "Wail, m'sieu, you hax me w'ere I got dat leetle gold compass wit' de diamon' an' de' pearl on heem!"[2] The style is harsh and difficult. It requires something of an effort to read far into the story. This is not true of Drummond. With him the accent is softened, the explosive and emphatic elements of French are reduced, and what is retained is usually the slurred or broken consonants and the changed vowels; and, in his best poems, not in large proportion. He is the child of his time in that his tendency is toward softness. He has usually the simple statement in simple words, freshened and given a certain amount of impact by the change into patois. There is nothing comparable to Duncan Campbell Scott's:

1. "The Rose Delima."
2. Arthur Stringer: "The Woman in the Snow:" *Canadian Magazine*, April, 1901, p. 513.

> His eyes were jewels of content
> Set in circles of peace.[1]

Instead we have:

> Beeg feller, always watchin' on hees leetle weasel eye.[2]

His language is incapable of Scott's kind of excellence, but it is also incapable of his kind of absurdity. He is not permitted effects which in Scott demand the use of "plangent", "brangle", "pulvil" and "alular" simply because in his patois the words do not exist, nor the need for them. His needs are certainly restricted, but he gains a style very adequate to those needs, and, indeed, much more adequate than his own English style. It is a freshened, renewed language, a genuine discovery and a successful escape from a predicament. It denied Drummond exactly what was achieved by the other poets of the period, grace, elegance, polish; but it gave him humanized substance, exactly what they were denied. It is a style just as legitimate as theirs and in just the same sense that theirs is a style. When Drummond writes:

> But her sail's not blowin' out wit de warm breeze of de sout'
> An' its not too easy tellin' w'ere de snowflake meet de foam
> Stretchin' out on ev'ry side, all across de Gulf so wide
> W'en de nor' eas' win' is chasin' de "Rose Delima" home.[3]

he is not making any greater distortion of language than Duncan Campbell Scott when he writes:

> How shall we transmit in tendril-like images,
> The tenuous tremor in the tissues of ether.[4]

or than Carman writing:

> Golden Rowan of Menalowan.[5]

He is doing no more and no less than they are doing, manipulating the language to obtain certain effects in accordance with an artistic design. The motive in each case is the same, escape from a damaging conventionality of language that had reduced poetry to insignificance.

There is, of course, a great difference in result. If you open one door you will not likely get into the same room as if

1. "On the Way to the Mission."
2. "The Windigo."
3. "The 'Rose Delima'."
4. "Lines in Memory of Edmund Morris."
5. "Golden Rowan."

you had opened another, and Drummond's style led him away from the members of the group of 1860 into its own freedom and its own confinements. If we compare "Little Lac Grenier" with "The Unnamed Lake" it is clear that the patois is not adequate to the possibilities of the situation. In F. G. Scott's poem, in spite of artificialities, the style is adequate to the splendour and isolation of the object and the sense the observer has of being an intruder, alien to a self-contained and sufficient world:

> Along the shore a heron flew,
> And from a speck on high,
> That hovered in the deepening blue,
> We heard the fish-hawk's cry.
>
> Among the cloud-capt solitudes,
> No sound the silence broke,
> Save when, in whispers down the woods,
> The guardian mountains spoke.[1]

If there is a failure here it is a failure of the individual. Compare this with Drummond's:

> Leetle Lac Grenier, she's all alone,
> Up on de mountain high
> But she never feel lonesome, 'cos for why?
> So soon as de winter was gone away
> De bird come an' sing to her ev'ry day,
>
> Leetle Lac Grenier, she's all alone
> Back on de mountain dere,
> But de pine tree an' spruce stan' ev'ry where
> Along by de shore, an' mak' her warm
> For dey kip off de win' an' de winter storm.[2]

The diminutive "leetle", the shortening of the words and alterations of pronunciation reduce and limit too severely the sensitiveness of the reaction. It is a kind of experience that the language cannot achieve. The refinements and subtleties of the individual making over his reactions to the natural world into a realizable pattern are simply not permitted. In a partially similar poem, "The Wind that Lifts the Fog", there is a much more successful effort:

1. "The Unnamed Lake," F. G. Scott, *The Unnamed Lake and Other Poems.*
2. "Little Lac Grenier."

Star of de Sout'—did you see de light
Steamin' along dat foggy night?
Poor leetle bird! anoder star
Shinin' above so high an' far
Dazzle you den, an' blin' de eye,
W'ile down below on de sea you lie
Anchor dere—wit' your broken wing
How could you fly w'en de sailor sing.

Both poems are in similar ways a reaching out from Drummond's usual material toward something more personal, but "The Wind that Lifts the Fog" is the individual's reflection on a group activity, or, better, the reflection of an individual who is part of a group and only partly an individual and only for a moment, a sailor at the wheel for example. Hence, one is led to speculate that it is only in communal material, in situations where the group spirit is alive, where man is in contact with man or with nature through the group senses, that this style takes on life and becomes something more than broken English. This is in keeping with Drummond's usual practice. The restriction imposed is that Drummond can approach his material only through a generalized concept, through the group consent. When he describes a man he gives those characteristics that are obvious to others, the best common observation of the group. It is the individual differences that are sifted out and the resemblances that remain. When he describes a people he gives those aspects that are perceptible characteristics of the group; there is much in common with the Kipling of the *Barrack Room Ballads*. In return, the authority of group consent is given his observations. His people are real in the sense that any man is real to the group of his friends; the overlappings make the picture. There is a loss in the limitation to moods and thoughts available to the group, but the gain is simplicity and concreteness. He is easily accessible, and, within his limits, authentic. The transcription of life is accurate, at least in so far as one is able to compare with other transcriptions. For example, a large part of the significant content of *Maria Chapdelaine* is already in Drummond. By selecting poems one could block out most of the plot and wash on much of the character and local colour. In fact, there is nothing in *Maria Chapdelaine* that could not have been clear to a person fresh from a reading of Drummond's poems. There is, however, an element that could not have been expressed in Drummond's style. His problem—the discovery of a freshened, objective means to comment of humanity—is solved, but, as with the others, he

is returned to the dilemma, for the very means that give him his escape limit him to material that is accessible only to the group.

It is unlikely that Drummond foresaw the most unfortunate results of his choice of style: his being considered a cheap humourist, and the loss of effect through incongruity. He has always a genial manner and was often simply the humourist but certainly did not expect that the patois would be treated as a humourous device even when the intention was serious. The simplicity with which he obtains his effects is a witness of the sincerity with which he uses the patois. He has humour, certainly, but at its general level it is humour of character and it springs from affectionate understanding. The humour that seems to spring from language alone is as much a defect of the reader as of the style. However, there was the other risk involved, and the flaw remains. E. K. Brown calls attention to the "inescapable incongruity between the medium and the substance."[1] The charge is unanswerable to any who agree with it, and there must be many who do. A poem exists only as a reaction to a group of words on a page. If an unforeseen reaction occurs there may be simply a bad poem. If the patois can be accepted as a live speech the pathos of "The Hill of St. Sebastien" and "The Bell of Saint Michel" is real enough and the language satisfyingly adequate. The tone of affectionate good humour that enriches "Johnnie Courteau" and "Leetle Bateese" seems to spring quite naturally from the language used. The poignancy of the longing of old Captinne Baribeau for the sea, so excellent in its kind ,is native to the tongue:

> An now he's lyin' 'dere, w'er de breeze is blow hees hair,
> An' he's hearin' ev'ry morning de "Rose Delima" call,
> Sayin', "Come along wit' me, an' we'll off across de sea,
> For I'm lonesome waitin' for you, Captinne Paul.[1]

The mood is at least as sensitively expressed as in Masefield's "Sea Fever" and the sensitiveness is not there in spite of the language; it is a freshness, a spring air that drifts in occasionally on the words. A good test of the flaw of style would be "Bateese de Lucky Man". If the incongruity between the medium and the substance is to appear, it will surely be pronounced in this poem. If it does not intrude, then the poem stands as an affectonate, artless tribute, a bit violently expressed, perhaps, but deliberately so, and achieving, even because of its contrast

1. E. K. Brown, *On Canadian Poetry*, p. 60.
1. "The 'Rose Delima'."

and exaggeration, a very human comment on death and love. In fact, the sense of incongruity does not need to intrude. If "Bateese de Lucky Man" is read together with O'Hagan's "The Freckled Boy at School",[1] where the subject is idential, it will be obvious that Drummond's is the better poem. A similar comparison with Duncan Campbell Scott might be more effective. "The Wreck of the Julie Plante" and "After a Night of Storm" resemble each other in subject. It is difficult to believe that "The Wreck of the Julie Plante" is not the better poem.

Five groupings of Drummond's work are possible: his interpretations of the spirit of the Habitant, his essays in character, his handful of ballads, his purely humourous poems, and his poems in other styles. Of these the first three are significant, and in each of them the poet achieves success. His skill in discovering and recording the cohesions, the points of contact in the Habitant group has already received comment. "Le Vieux Temps" and "De Bell of Saint Michel" are specimens in this field. "Johnny Courteau", "Leetle Bateese" and "Bateese de Lucky Man" are similar successes in the second grouping. "The Wind that Lifts the Fog" is very nearly a success of a different kind. In it are a checked, controlled movement, and a feeling of strain and incompleteness that suggest that Drummond was trying to break from the limitations of his style but was defeated by them. The ballads are the most poetic achievement. "The Wreck of the Julie Plante" is well enough known. Three ballads might be grouped with it; "The Windigo", which is the best of them, "Phil-O-Rum Juneau", the most imperfect, and "The 'Rose Delima'." In these four poems Drummond approaches a little toward the old English ballads. There are a terse introduction, which sets the mood, a rapid dramatic narrative, told plainly but skillfully, rapid transitions from speaker to speaker, and certain phrases that are reduced to conventions. In "The 'Rose Delima' " there are stanzas that seem carelessly worked up, but the two love stories, that of Pierre and Virginie and that of Captinne Baribeau and his ship, are charming. The nostalgia of the old sailor for the sea is sensitively expressed and there are one or two bits of suggestive description. "The Windigo" is a longer ballad, concise and complete in structure, admirably developed in form, controlling its narrative devices with confidence and ease. It is a presentation of the pressure of the unknown upon human life.

1. Thomas O'Hagan, *The Collected Poems of Thomas O Hagan.*

E. J. Pratt at his best has a more sustained, but never a better, narrative skill. As in all Drummond's work, there are no quotable lines. The effect is in the whole, and it is one of artistry. It is odd that the poem has not found its way into more than one anthology.

These poems are the achievement of a man whose artistic tenets were sound, however limited their scope. He is one with Carman, Lampman and Duncan Campbell Scott in his perception of the problem of style, and his need for escape. His escape into the patois and the conventionalized group-reaction is just as legitimate, artistically, as Lampman's escape into a formal style, or Carman's into music, or Duncan Campbell Scott's into austerity. There is a division in Canadian poetry about the time of Confederation. The "respectable" poets digress into styles that lead them further and further away from the needs of a flesh-and-blood world to the borders of humanity. Drummond is somewhere nearer the centre, and his success constitutes a useful criticism of theirs. A poetry of power should have wider inclusions than either. The two are divergences, complementary as well as contemporary, and are each equally a demonstration of the dilemma of style.