

Pith & Wry: Canadian Poetry

edited by Susan McMaster

Sudbury, ON: Scrivener, 2010, ISBN 978-1-896350-41-7, 160 pp., \$19.00 paper.

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

In the preface to the poetry anthology *Pith & Wry*, Susan McMaster talks about her role as editor and describes her selection process as being determined by her “sense of the strange”: “Poems that cut straight to the pith – while at the same time casting a wry eye of mature understanding on human passion and despairs.” In the acknowledgements, we learn that most of poems in this anthology were first collected at the request of M.L. (Marc) Weber, literary editor for *Sugar Mule*, an e-zine from the United States for a Canadian issue he had asked McMaster to compile as guest editor. Certainly the poets represented in *Pith & Wry* are widespread across Canada, ranging from Toronto’s Atwood and Victoria’s Crozier and St. John’s’ Don McKay, to less known but equally inspiring poets such as Iqaluit’s Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory. Shared among these poets is an ability to inveigle their way into the reader’s consciousness through startling images presented in unique and often poignant ways.

The first section, “Entry Points,” opens with Dave Margoshes’s “Hire wire act,” with the stage-setting irony of an age that no longer worships the thrill of dangerous exploits:

See this high wire, this tight rope?
They string it between then and now, grease
it good, dare you
to step out, shred the net, set up
wind machines, start the lions roaring, spread
shattered glass below, and that’s all just
for openers. (14)

That “they” – referring to society and its enforcers, as echoed through the little-world voice of the carnie – “tell ya stay home, / you got nuthin’ to prove” reflects a new age and way of regarding the world in deflated terms of common sense and caution. This uniquely applied and extended metaphor, together with the dramatically staggered lines, brings home this point as if we, the readers, were the thrill-seekers who had been sent home with this dampening admonishment.

For unique imagery that delights in its freshness, consider Don McKay’s “Slow Spring on Vancouver Island.” Here a Hopkins-like enamouring of word textures and sounds brings alive the charm of spring when it finally warms the frozen turf in the northern hemisphere. After setting up a metaphor for a choir in which the “understudy” Junco begins in “*sotto voce*” and is followed by “Varied thrush’s/ clearing of [its] throat,” the poem builds up to the orchestral sounds and magic of spring. “One day soon – so goes the tale–”:

. . . – Junco’s voice
will quicken into trill, its quick lusts
gargling. Varied thrush will thrust its whistle-hum
frankly into the mix, and that last leaf –

like an icon suddenly
relaxing to cliché –
uncling. (17)

And then the excited speaker, with mounting enthusiasm, remarks, “by/ the Jesus we’ll be on our way.” The colloquial style using “you” and expletives applied to a Hopkins-like piling of epithets and word coinages makes this poem unique and as appealing as the speaker’s exuberance.

In the section, “Beware,” Crozier’s “Angel of Grief” introduces a metaphysical bent through her personification of grief as an angel whose elusiveness suggests the initial numbing qualities that follow the loss of a loved one:

The angel doesn’t speak, at least not here,
not to me, but there’s a susurration
in the room as if he’s brought the wind with him
to keep alive his wings. He won’t be trapped.
I have yet to see his face. I don’t know if
he is weeping. His head is bowed, white
hair falling over ears and forehead (29)

“Enough of him,” the angel of grief, the speaker then decides, while continuing with the practical task of sorting her mother’s “last things.” Just as Margoshes’s extended high-wire metaphor provides so fitting an analogy, Crozier’s angel of grief metaphor dramatizes that often effaced emotion.

Among the “Story tellers,” few can match Ronnie Brown’s narrative sequel (or “micro-fiction,” as the current term becomes), “Heat Exhaustion.” Here the poet, through an initial unexplained irony, sets up the tension for the poem as a whole:

When they bring her the news
she tries to be sad
just as she did
those times she’d lose a baby –
blood snaking down her legs
cramps coming way too soon. But
all she feels is relief (57)

From the apparent sincerity of her attempt to feign grief, we wonder why it isn’t genuine and discover that the “she” of the poem, after too many children, comes also to find miscarriages a relief, and so all conventional expectations in the poem are ironically undercut. Rather than incomprehension or even repulsion at her seemingly embittered response to her husband’s death, we are briefly led down her difficult road towards understanding.

In the title section, “Pith & Wry,” Margaret Atwood’s poem “Chaos” (first published in 1974) carries the banner for postmodern ironies and dislocations. Defying the speaker’s assumption that her husband expects him to miss him in his absence, she washes her hair, which creates for herself the illusion of security, before coming to terms with herself on these more disturbing existential terms:

I stay awake, listening
the right half of my skull, spinning
its threads of blood.

I have started
to forget, at night I can hear
death growing in me like a baby with no head. (111)

Accordingly, an uncanny (almost demonic) self-possession takes hold of the speaker, and this Dadaesque tableau of an encephalic baby's development plays no small role in communicating this detachment from self and identity.

In contrast to Atwood's rendering of a psychological state in terms of a pregnancy with a malformed fetus, Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory in the final section "A-new," writes about natural childbirth in "How Akutaq came to be." With poetic accuracy of impression and sensation, Bathory choreographs the birth of her child:

Bones creak open to make room
flesh begins to split and
all...breath...now...owned by...muscle...alone...
body and mind snap back together.
Every particle of existence pours into the PUSH (136)

The three-page narrative poem presents the experience of childbirth first-hand, from a woman's experience, with love and wonder, that is refreshing to read in all its detail, at once visceral and poetically rendered. As throughout this last section, here is a new poetic voice that may in its own way come to shape our Canadian literary scene.

Susan McMaster's selection of poems in *Pith & Wry* is characterized by unexpected ironies and freshness of inspiration of many kinds, from the niftiness of Margoshes's "high wire" metaphor to Don McKay's uniquely applied and derived spring chorus to the sense of metaphysical inquiry and human recognition of its elusiveness in Crozier, to the psychological perversities we encounter in Brown and Atwood. Although I do not detect irony in Bathory's poem, its freshness after so many ironies makes for an unexpected reversal in itself, and even *Pith & Wry* must make exceptions to its own rule. Or is that the "pith" and fibre of reality sans the "wry" or irony? By the way, I love the cover – depicting tangled trees in winter, with spots of hoar frost – which in itself provides a metaphor for these gnarled and forked genders of irony. ❧

Gillian Harding-Russell has published three poetry collections, most recently *I forgot to tell you* (Thistledown, 2007). A chapbook, *Poems for the Summer Solstice* (Leaf Press) and a "holm," *Stories of Snow* (Alfred Gustav) will appear in 2011 and 2012. Poems are forthcoming in two anthologies, one with the theme "Poets on Poets" (Guernica Press) and the other "The Not Forgotten North" (Hidden Brook Press), both to be published in spring 2012.

Buy *Pith & Wry* at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):
<http://www.mcnallyrobinson.com/9781896350417/susan-mcmaster/pith-wry?bInBKM=1>