

# The Economy of Contemporary, Canadian Poetry: Gender in perspective?

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*Resumo:* Este artigo assinala a principal tendência seguida na poesia contemporânea canadense escrita por mulheres, a partir da obra *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, de Margaret Atwood, e aponta considerações a serem revisitadas nos estudos da poesia, particularmente nos relativos àquela produzida na transculturalidade canadense de um mundo globalizado, dos anos 1970 em diante.

*Palavras-chave:* poesia canadense contemporânea; poesia canadense de expressão feminina; poesia transcultural.

*Abstract:* This article points out to the main tendency followed in contemporary, Canadian poetry written by women, from the publication of Margaret Atwood's work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* and brings up some considerations to be revisited in the studies of poetry, particularly related to that produced in the Canadian transcultural atmosphere of the global world from the 1970's on.

*Key words:* contemporary Canadian poetry; women's poetry; transcultural poetry.

*Résumé:* Cet article signale la principale tendance suivie par la poésie canadienne contemporaine, écrite par des femmes, à partir de l'œuvre de Margaret Atwood *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* et suggère quelques considérations à revisiter dans les études de poésie, particulièrement dans celles qui ont trait à la poésie produite dans l'atmosphère transculturelle du monde globalisé à partir de 1970.

*Mots-clés:* poésie canadienne; voix féminines; monde globalisé.

This is the place you would rather not know  
about,  
This is the place that will inhabit you  
This is the place you cannot image  
[...]  
This is famine.

The above quotation, from the poem "Notes Toward A Poem That Can Never Be Written" by Margaret Atwood, pictures quite precisely (as ironic as it may sound) the space of

creation and, more particularly, the locale of poetic creation: the discursive famine out of which words are infinitely (un)arranged and (dis)ordered, so as to convey human existence's complexity.

The idea that there is a space within ourselves and which surrounds us that we would rather avoid does not seem to be great news, except for the fact that the one to remind us of it is a contemporary, Canadian, woman poet. Born in 1939, in Canada, Atwood is also a fiction and essay writer with world recognition. But what matters for us here is the fact that she speaks as a woman, from Canada – being both Canada and the woman “spaces” of fragmentation, disintegration. Or, maybe, it has never mattered – as we articulate such ideas from a postmodern, postcolonial world, meaning, the West after poststructuralism, which entails everlasting searches for identity, as well as processes of *writing back* to the canon and to the metropolitan locales of enunciation.

At this point, it is relevant to mention that some of the great contributions of poststructuralism have been the appearance and the development of trends of thought that have allowed us to decentre paradigms and look beyond what conventional history (History) has always dictated. Such trends include postcolonialism – meaning, principally, different ways of reading/writing the world's history and feminism, a constant reviewing of women's positions and positionality. These trends imply concepts of nationalism and subjectivity that are key to reading poetry in contemporaneity and about Canada, for the country's national past, not only with its two European backgrounds, but also with a multicultural spectrum of human contingency. As a consequence, it may be possible to say that writers in Canada, perhaps more than in other geographies, feel tradition and belonging as an inevitable issue in their writing craft. So much so that the marginality of the poetic form (for poetry has greatly been “a minor genre” in the literary history) is probably lessened by the matter of being a woman writer and speaking from Canada. Similar to the Irish case of the nation being constantly associated to the figure of the woman, the Canadian instance seems to find its way out of the patriarchal

paradigm of poetic founding figures (with the excuse of the allusion to its neighbor's own history of colonization) by the publication of critical essays and fictional prose, as well as poetry that reinscribe the female figure in the social realm of existence as the display of sexual roles, expectations and inscriptions are narrated within the political order of society along time: the image of the beaver as recurrent in Atwood's *Surfacing*, with its double meaning (the animal and female genitalia), the assumption of a whole territory as the land of prostitution, due to its colonial dimension are only a couple of examples to quote one of the several *writing back* instances, that find resonance in the poetry written by women in Canada nowadays.

According to Ralph Gustafson in his "Introduction" to the *Penguin Poets. Canadian Verse* (1967), it was in the 1940's that Canadian poetry made public its actual invigoration in the form of social, environmental, personal and economic protest, as well as in the 1960's, when "a Canadian literature was being created" (1967: 23), which meant that "a less innocent national awareness and a united dedication to the art of poetry" (op. cit.: 24) were observed.

This leads us to question how much of women's poetry is included there. How much of it has been published? Does women's poetry mean poetry written by women or poetry that holds on to more specific terms, such as the body, violence, domesticity? Gustafson believes that "the poet cannot be asked to find his national identity before the factors that present to him exist." (1967: 22). On the other hand, it is expected of writers that they position themselves politically and in their writing, which means dealing with problems of gender, nationality, and identity, as is the case of the worldly acknowledged author Margaret Atwood.

The poet and critic Gary Geddes in her "Preface" to *15 Canadian Poets x 3* (2001) reminds us of the negligence towards Canadian poetry, present in the official space for national legitimation, the school, pointing out to the fact that there were no Canadian poets in the classroom, but poets from "the centre". In this sense, there seems to appear a growing

need to voice poetry and women, that is, allow these to speak and, therefore, occupy more of a dignified space. In fact, the poetic discourse does advertise, expose and point to the place from where it speaks and, also, to the self, the individual ego and its potential to interfere with the quest for truth. In the case of contemporary, Canadian poetry, the truth relates to a series of images that talk of subversion, of submerged, familiar stories that get distorted in the space of rupture, which is the poetic discourse. Indeed, language is *par excellence* the place of exile and fragmentation and becomes, in the case of contemporary Canadian poets, that (place) for exile and fragmentation in its capacity to reappropriate the transnational colonized body of womanhood and belonging. Making sense of Homi Bhabha's concept of transnationality and transhistoricity (1984), women poets in Canada these days (meaning from Atwood's 1972 publication of *Survival: A Thematic Guide To Canadian Literature*) dedicate themselves to the task of translating the experience of the subjugated into that of the subject of history, so as to constitute both social and individual identities in a common, yet, multicultural geography.

As we reflect upon the case of identity represented in and formed by contemporary, Canadian women's poetry, there is still a question left (among so many others) that must be remembered here: does (re)inventing being (*Canadian* and *woman*) become more effective as authors assert their conditions within their writing or "simply" include them in the traditionally male-dominated business of writing?

Apparently, the most recognized women poets are those that get over the need to declare gender as a key purpose for their writing; rather, they are poets able to talk about anything and their poems refer to any aspect of human life, regardless of gender and, space. It is certainly the case that we question whether these authors, such as Roo Borson, Bronwell Wallace, Anne Carson and Margaret Atwood make use of stylistically specific devices in their writing that could be considered "proper to women" as a way of *writing back* to the Anglophone canon, namely, the male-oriented English romantic and North-american transcendentalist poets and all the others who followed these (up

to the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E group, more present in the United States of America, but wordly widespread).

Therefore, the empowerment of women's voices in poetry has to do with the display of "ways of talking" (style) about all themes and, also, with men's and women's coexistence in the literary world. Margaret Atwood claims that "poetry is where the language is renewed. It's true that poetry doesn't make Money. But it's the heart of the language". We can think of poetry then, as the hidden space of ourselves: *the song of ourselves* – to approximate Walt Whitman's epiphanic "Song of Myself" to Roo Borson's "Talk":

The rain quits and starts again.  
[...]  
We can go up casually to a piano  
and sit down and start playing  
The way the rain felt in someone else's bonés  
a hundred years ago  
before we were born  
[...]  
when the world was clean.

However, language is never free of ideology and identity is embedded in it. So, what contemporary Canadian women poets do as they offer us a hint on multiple identities under specific labels or traditionally specific labels ("women's poetry", "poetry written by women" x "the canon" or not necessarily any of these) being revisited is signalling to ways of revisiting the past and the fluid, circular channels that lead us into the future: transformative negotiation, practical tolerance and reflection upon metalinguistic writing.

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