

**Northern
Voices:
Modernism**



A Copse, Evening, A. Y. Jackson, 1918

This painting illustrates the devastation brought about in the Great War. The ground is blown apart, the trees are stripped of any life, searchlights scan a sky full of smoke. Both Britain and Canada had “war artists” who made a record of what was happening. Unfortunately, they did not show the public what the governments wanted to see.

In 1916 the centre block of the parliament buildings burned down. For the rebuilt senate chamber Canada commissioned eight large oil paintings (1916-1920) to commemorate Canada’s war effort. None were by Canadian painters. None showed active warfare.



**Frank Prewett
(1893-1962)**

Invalidated out of the Canadian Army in 1917, he met Siegfried Sassoon, who introduced him to Lady Ottoline Morell. For a while he was a favourite of the Gasington circle, where he went by the name of ‘Toronto.’ His claim of Indian ancestry added to his allure.

Portrait by
Dorothy Brett 1923

Prewett left the University of Toronto and enlisted in the Canadian army in 1915. Like his contemporary English poets, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, he did not glorify the war but attempted to describe its reality.



Frederick Varley's painting *For What?* illustrates the horror and futility of war. Prewett's poem *Card Game* shows how the soldiers became inured to any emotional involvement.

Hearing the whine and crash
We hastened out
And found a few poor men
Lying about.

I put my hand in the breast
Of the first met.
His heart thumped, stopped, and I drew
My hand out wet.

Another, he seemed a boy,
Rolled in the mud
Screaming, "my legs, my legs,"
And he poured out his blood.

We bandaged the rest
And went in,
And started again at our cards
Where we had been.

The sheer bluntness, the short emphatic lines, the simple rhymes all play against the content. The poem is like a nursery rhyme of war. The rhythm of the poem is mainly the alternating three-stress two-stress lines of ancient ballads. In the last verse this finally breaks down.



Courcellette from the Cemetery, David Milne, 1919

In the Milne painting the ground is blue; in the Prewitt poem the sky is blue. The feelings are similar.

The blue sky arches wide
From hill to hill;
The little grasses stand
Upright and still.

Only these stones to tell
The deadly strife,
The all-important schemes,
The greed for life.

For they are gone, who fought;
But still the skies
Stretch blue, aloof, unchanged,
From rise to rise.



The photograph shows the barbed wire and mud in the environs of the Beaumont Hamel. This was the location where the Newfoundland Regiment saw action on the first day of the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

The Battle was a disaster. It began with the explosion of a huge mine just in front of the German lines. This only served to warn the Germans that an attack was imminent and gave them time to set up their machine guns. The artillery that was supposed to destroy the barbed wire near the German trenches was completely ineffective. The advancing troops were held up in the mud and barbed wire and torn to shreds by the machine guns. On that day 20,000 British troops died and another 37,000 were wounded. 780 Newfoundlanders attacked the German lines. 324 were killed and 386 were wounded.

Sir Henry de Beauvoir De Lisle, one of the British generals in command at the Somme, said of the Newfoundland Regiment:

It was a magnificent display of trained and disciplined valour, and its assault only failed of success because dead men can advance no further.

Pratt's poem records the effect of Beaumont Hamel at home in Newfoundland. He describes the reading of the names of the **killed** and **missing** on the bulletin board.

God! How should letters change their colours so?
A little *k* or *m* stab like a sword;
How dry, black ink should turn to red and flow,
And figures leap like hydrae on the board?

A woman raised her voice, and she was told
That strange things happen at the will of God;
Thus, dawn from midnight; thus, from fire the gold;
Thus did a rose once blossom from a rod.

But stranger things today, than that the rod
Should flower, or the cross become a crown—
Stranger than gold from fire; else how should God
Bring on the night before the sun go down.

Pratt describes how the only comfort was to be told that the deaths were the will of God. Perhaps God was testing his people like refining gold, bringing light out of the darkness:

And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The Lord is my God. (*Zechariah* 13:9)

The Bible tells of other inexplicable events, such as the flowering of Aaron's rod (*Numbers* 17:8), or how the Christ was crowned during his crucifixion. However these stories do not help – and the night of despair comes on.

Edwin J. Pratt (1882-1964)

Pratt was born in Western Bay, Newfoundland, and studied for the ministry at Victoria College in Toronto. After spending some time as an itinerant preacher, he began writing poetry and became a popular professor at Victoria College at the University of Toronto. His poetry was modern but always understandable. He wrote some of the best short lyric poems of Canadian poetry as well as impressive modern epics such as *The Titanic* and *Brébeuf and His Brethren*.

Portrait by Grant MacDonald, 1947



The following website has the texts of many different poems by Pratt, together with audio recordings of his readings:

<https://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/recordings/recording04/recording04.html>



This is Pratt's gentle elegy to those who died in the Great War. The poem recounts the passing of the seasons in Newfoundland, but the first line states that for the dead and for the bereaved the seasons no longer have any effect.

Comes not the springtime here,
Though the snowdrop came,
And the time of the cowslip is near,
For a yellow flame
Was found in a tuft of green;
And the joyous shout
Of a child rang out
That a cuckoo's eggs were seen.

Comes not the summer here,
Though the cowslip be gone,
Though the wild rose blow as the year
Draws faithfully on;
Though the face of the poppy be red
In the morning light,
And the ground be white
With the bloom of the locust shed.

In the first lines of these verses, Pratt inverts the order of the subject and verb. Over time English language lost its inflexions and began to use word order to delineate what was subject verb and object. In certain conditions the inversion of the subject and verb is grammatically correct:

- (i) questions (but here the normal format often uses auxiliary verbs – “Does he fight?” rather than “Fights he?”)
- (ii) sentences beginning with locational or directional information – “Into the valley of Death rode the six hundred.”

- (iii) sentences beginning with negative information - “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few”
- (iv) sentences beginning with temporal – “Now sleeps the crimson petal”
- (v) conditional structures – “Had we arrived earlier, the tragedy would have been prevented.”
- (vi) some comparative structures – “So delicious was the food that we ate every last bite. “
- (vii) volitional structures – “May you find the answer!”

Poets often break the general rules of English prose and put their verbs before their subjects. This is one form of *anastrophe* (turning backward - incorrect word order). This can be done for rhetorical effect – to accentuate part of the statement that otherwise would not be so obvious. A common version of this is to place an adjective describing the subject first rather than last – “Peaceful was the night”

Anastrophe can also be used to maintain the rhythmic structure of the verse. This is often done in subordinate phrases – “Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough / gleams that untraveled world. “

I think Pratt’s purpose is rhetorical – he wishes to accentuate the way the seasons do not change for those that are dead.

Yoda in Star Wars was the master of anastrophe – “Powerful you have become, the dark side I sense in you”

Another intriguing aspect of the poem is the fluctuation between indicative and subjunctive moods.

Nor shall the winter come,
Though the elm be bare,
And every voice be dumb
On the frozen air;

and the fluctuation of tenses – past, present and future.




The Shark



He seemed to know the harbour,
So leisurely he swam;
His fin,
Like a piece of sheet-iron,
Three-cornered,
And with knife-edge,

The Shark is among the finest poems that Pratt wrote. Through his career Pratt wrote both formal and free verse. This poem is in free verse. The sound is natural but the slow rhythm to the words fits the swimming of the shark, and the simplicity of expression underlines its primeval mindless power.



Sea-Gulls

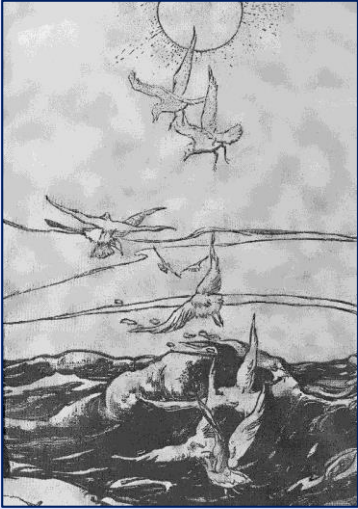
For one carved instant as they flew,
 The language had no simile –
 Silver, crystal, ivory
 Were tarnished. Etched upon the horizon blue,
 The frieze must go unchallenged, for the lift
 And carriage of the wings would stain the drift
 Of stars against a tropic indigo
 Or dull the parable of snow.

In this poem, Pratt eschews any regular rhythm. The lines move irregularly like the soaring flight of the gulls. The poem uses rhyme as though to imitate the intermittent movement of the wings that maintains the soaring of the birds. Alliteration, *assonance* and *consonance* are also prominent:

where curled
 Crests caught the spectrum from the sun

No clay-born lilies of the world
 Could blow as free
 As those wild orchids of the sea.

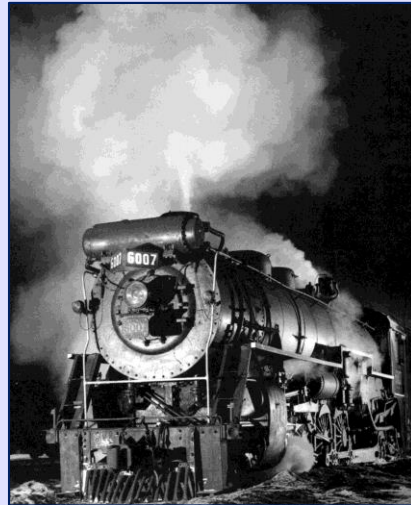
Frederic Varley
 Illustration for
*Newfoundland
 Verse*, 1923



Fred Varley (1881-1969) was a member of the Group of Seven. He was born in Sheffield and immigrated to Canada in 1912. He illustrated the endpapers for Pratt's 1923 book.

No. 6000

A lantern flashed out a command,
A bell was ringing as a hand
Clutched at a throttle, and the bull,
At once obedient to the pull,
Began with bellowing throat to lead
By slow accelerating speed
Six thousand tons of caravan
Out to the spaces — there to toss
The blizzard from his path across
The prairies of Saskatchewan.



Although composed in a mixture of heroic couplets and alternating rhymes, this poem deals not with ancient heroes but with a modern machine.

The first “6000” series (6000-6015) of locomotives was built for the Canadian National Railways (a new company formed by merging multiple local railways) in 1923 by the Canadian Locomotive Company in Kingston. These powerful locomotives based on the 4-8-4 wheel design were used on the western reaches of the railway. They were nicknamed the “Mountains.” Various other versions of the locomotive were built (both in Kingston and in Montreal) in the next 20 years before the railways shifted to diesel. Some of the later versions went under the name “Confederations.”



The Prize Cat

I saw the generations pass
Along the reflex of a spring,
A bird had rustled in the grass,
The tab had caught it on the wing:

Behind the leap so furtive-wild
Was such ignition in the gleam,
I thought an Abyssinian child
Had cried out in the whitethroat's scream.



Pratt's poem is a commentary on Italy's invasion of Ethiopia (1935-38), known at that time as Abyssinia. Just like the cat evolved as a killer of birds rather than as a gentle pet, violence remains at the heart of even in the most civilized countries.

The poem also perhaps alludes to the Coleridge's "Abyssinian maid" in his poem Kubla Khan:

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.

though perhaps more to the idea of "Ancestral voices prophesying war!"

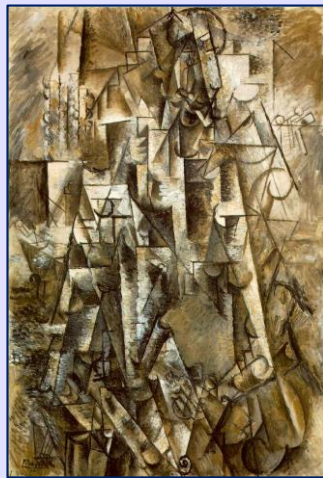


This is a photograph of the Ward in Toronto around 1912. The Ward was between College and King from Yonge to University. This is where Toronto's poor and immigrant populations lived. Lawren Harris (1885-1970) painted many pictures of this part of the city.



This painting by Lawren Harris shows houses in the ward from the 1920s. Lawren Harris also wrote poetry. He was a far better painter than poet but some of his poems captured the anxiety of the post-war years:

When people turn a corner
 They look back
 From an age-old habit
 Of apprehension —
 Something tells them
 The past waits ahead,
 So they look back
 To see
 If it will smooth away
 In the future —
 They know.
 They never quite forget.



Picasso, *The Poet*, 1911

Modernism – Make It New!

- (i) Rebellion against formalism (free verse, abstract art and atonal music)
- (ii) Direct communication of experience (imagism, stream of consciousness)
- (iii) Broadening of boundaries (“unpoetic” topics such as sex, economics, or science; stretched metaphors and similes)
- (iv) Multiplicity of meaning (irony, personae, different voices, symbolism)
- (v) Interactions with previous literature (quotations, intertextuality, allusions, pastiche, new ideas in old forms)

Modernism was a artistic movement that rebelled against prior forms and techniques. In a sense all original art is modernist, but one typically uses the term for the art produced between 1905 and World War II. Artists after the Second World War also rebelled but they are usually termed Postmodernist.

Several characteristics distinguished Modernism from what had gone before. Some of these had been present in prior art, but they now became accentuated. The slogan of modernism was Pound’s “Make it new!” (the title of his 1935 book).

In literature, the main sources of modernism were the 19th Century French poets Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud and Mallarmé. Free verse (*vers libre*) had neither end-rhyme nor regular rhythm. In England modernism began in the years before the war with Imagism, promoted by Ezra Pound. In the years between the two world war, the great modernist poets of the English language came into their own – Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Williams, Cummings, Lawrence, Auden.

Modernism in the visual arts had its origins in France. One usually begins with Picasso (*Les Femmes d'Alger* of 1907) and cubism, or Matisse (*Le Bonheur de Vivre*, 1906) and fauvism. Futurism in Italy and Vorticism in England followed quickly. There had been many precursors – often called the Post-Impressionists - and the onset was more gradual than abrupt. Modernism came to full flower after the Great War – the *Bauhaus* (Klee, Kandinsky) was founded in Germany in 1919, *De Stijl* (Mondrian) began in the Netherlands in 1917, and Suprematism held sway in Russia for the first years after the Russian Revolution of 1917.

In Canada the first book of free verse was published in 1914 – *Open Water* by Arthur Stringer. In the preface he stated that “The spirit of man is seen in rebellion against a form that has become too intricate or too fixed to allow him freedom of utterance.” One of the poems:

The Wild Swans Pass

In the dead of the night
 You turned in your troubled sleep
 As you heard the wild swans pass;
 And then you slept again.
 You slept—
 While a new world swam beneath
 That army of eager wings,
 While plainland and slough and lake
 Lay wide to those outstretched throats,
 While the far lone Lights allured
 That phalanx of passionate breasts.
 And I who had loved you more
 Than a homing bird loves flight, —
 watched with an ache for freedom,
 I rose with a need for life,
 Knowing that love had passed
 Into its unknown North!

Modernism in Canada

The publication of Pratt's *Newfoundland Verse* (1923) and the work of the Montreal poets (Scott, Smith, etc) began to change Canadian literature.

The old state of affairs was satirized by F. R. Scott in his *The Canadian Authors Meet* (1927).



1939 meeting of the editors of *Canadian Poetry* journal (founded in 1936): C. D. G. Roberts, E. J. Pratt, Pelham Edgar, and Nathaniel Benson.

The Canadian Authors' Association was formed in 1921 with Charles Roberts as its head. As Dorothy Livesay later remarked, "the organization became one of lion-hunting amateurs and regional self-admiration societies" and "the object of ridicule."

Shall we go round the mulberry bush, or shall
We gather at the river, or shall we
Appoint a Poet Laureate this fall,
Or shall we have another cup of tea?

O Canada, O Canada, O can
A day go by without new authors springing
To paint the native maple, and to plan
More ways to set the selfsame welkin ringing?

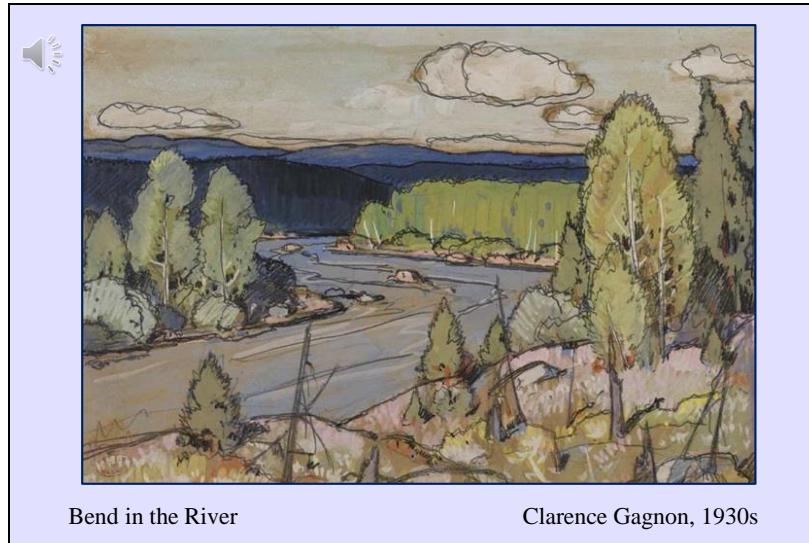
(welkin is an archaic word for the vault of the sky)

Things slowly began to change in the 30s, and in 1936 the journal *Canadian Poetry* was founded. The new state of affairs was modernist. But still mainly male (and Roberts was still around).

Francis R. Scott (1899-1985)

Scott was born in Quebec city. His father was a poet and a padre with the Canadian army during World War I. He studied at Bishop's College in Lennoxville and then at Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar. After graduating in law at McGill University, he became an active lawyer and politician, serving as the chairman of the CCF party, and defending D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* against charges of obscenity.





Bend in the River

Clarence Gagnon, 1930s

Scott's celebration of the Laurentians;

far voices
and fretting leaves
this music the
hillside gives

but in the deep
Laurentian river
an elemental song
for ever

a quiet calling
of no mind
out of long aeons
when dust was blind
and ice hid sound

only a moving
with no note
granite lips
a stone throat

Dedication

From those condemned to labour
For profit of another
We take our new endeavour.

For sect and class and pattern
Through whom the strata harden
We sharpen now the weapon.

Till power is brought to pooling
And outcasts share in ruling
There will not be an ending
Nor any peace for spending.



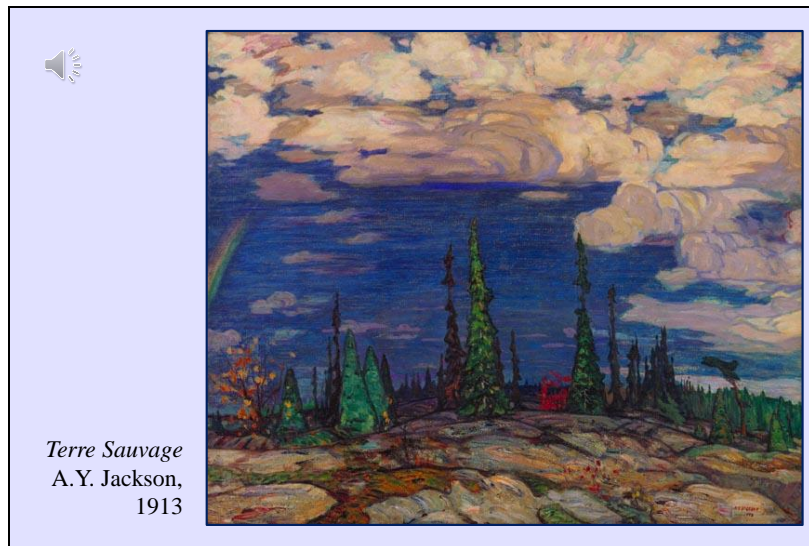
On-to-Ottawa
Trek, 1935



Canada was badly affected by the Great Depression. The government arranged work camps for the unemployed but the pay and conditions were dismal. In the spring of 1935 many workers went out on strike and “rode the rails” toward Ottawa to protest. The protest was halted in Regina and the Conservative Prime Minister R. B. Bennett agreed to let representatives come to Ottawa. Their meeting went badly. A riot broke out in Regina when police charged a meeting of the demonstrators. The Trek was abandoned but the government improved conditions in the camps. Later that year Mackenzie King’s Liberals soundly defeated Bennett’s Conservatives in the election.

The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation was founded in Calgary in 1932. In the 1935 elections seven CCF candidates were elected to the federal government. F R Scott was a founding member of the CCF and served as its chairman from 1942-1950. In 1961 the CCF became the New Democratic Party.

Scott also had a creed:
The world is my country
The human race is my race
The spirit of man is my God
The future of man is my heaven



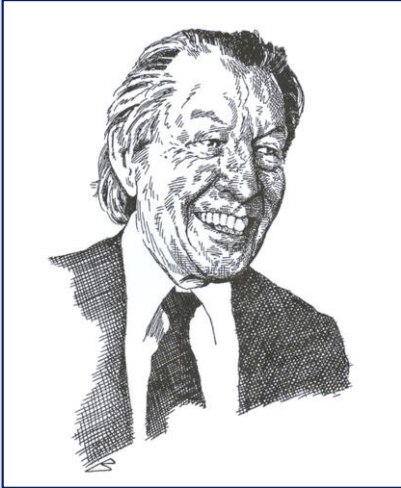
Scott's later poem about the Laurentians combines a description of its beauty

Hidden in wonder and snow, or sudden with summer,
This land stares at the sun in a huge silence
Endlessly repeating something we cannot hear.
Inarticulate, arctic,
Not written on by history, empty as paper,
It leans away from the world with songs in its lakes
Older than love, and lost in the miles.

with a desire to exploit it

But a deeper note is sounding, heard in the mines,
The scattered camps and the mills, a language of life,
And what will be written in the full culture of occupation
Will come, presently, tomorrow,
From millions whose hands can turn this rock

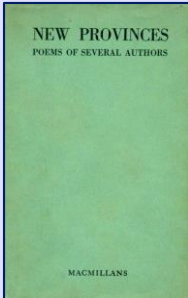
The question is an essential part of the history of America: Should we preserve the natural beauty of the continent or should we risk its destruction for the wealth it brings?



**Arthur J. M. Smith
(1902-1980)**

Born in Montreal, A. J. M. Smith studied at McGill and Edinburgh Universities. He became one of the Montreal Poets (Smith, Klein, Scott, Kennedy, Glassco, Edel), a group promoting modernist poetry. He edited the *New Provinces* anthology of Canadian poetry in 1936. He taught at Michigan State University from 1936-1972.

Portrait by
Isaac Bickerstaff

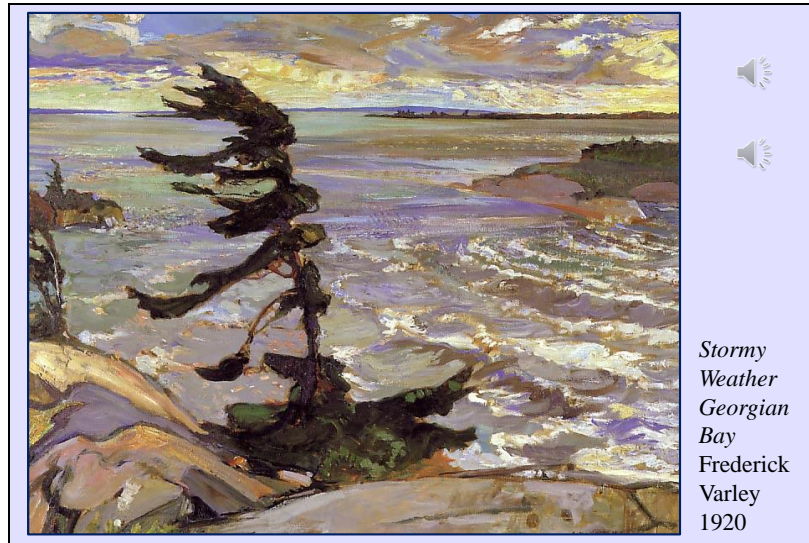


**from A. J. M Smith's rejected
preface to *New Provinces* (1936)**

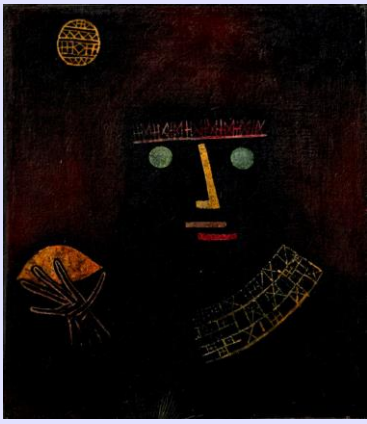
The bulk of Canadian verse is romantic in conception and conventional in form. Its two great themes are nature and love — nature humanized, endowed with feeling, and made sentimental; love idealized, sanctified, and inflated. Its characteristic type is the lyric. Its rhythms are definite, mechanically correct, and obvious; its rhymes are commonplace.

...the artist who is concerned with the most intense of experiences must be concerned with the world situation in which, whether he likes it or not, he finds himself. For the moment at least he has something more important to do than to record his private emotions. He must try to perfect a technique that will combine power with simplicity and sympathy with intelligence so that he may play his part in developing mental and emotional attitudes that will facilitate the creation of a more practical social system.

The *New Provinces* anthology was edited by F. R. Scott, Leo Kennedy and A. J. M. Smith. MacMillans balked at the original preface written by A. J. M. Smith, which was highly critical of earlier Canadian poetry. Ultimately, the book was published with a one-page preface by F. R. Scott.



Smith's poem *The Lonely Land* was directly inspired by an exhibition of paintings by the Group of Seven. A song setting of the poem (baritone Cliff Ridley and piano Danielle Marcinek) was composed in 1978 by Violet Archer (1913-2000)



Like an Old Proud King in a Parable

A bitter king in anger to be gone
From fawning courtier and doting
queen
Flung hollow sceptre and gilt crown
away,
And breaking bound of all his counties
green
He made a meadow in the northern
stone
And breathed a palace of inviolable air
To cage a heart that carolled like a
swan,
And slept alone, immaculate and gay,
With only his pride for a paramour.

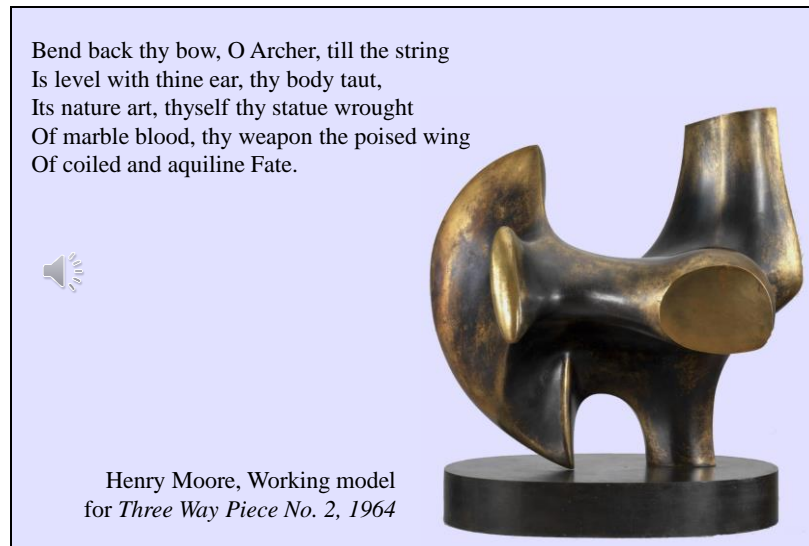
Black Prince, Paul Klee, 1927

This poem tells us who the poet wants to be – not what he is.
He desires to be proud of what he does rather than be comfortable.

Being Canadian, the poet has a little of the north in his goal

He made a meadow in the northern stone

The goddess he worships is cold and the rock is barren.



The illustration shows a model for *The Archer* by Henry Moore, which was set up in front of Toronto's new city hall in 1966 amid much controversy and final affection.


Smith described the making of this poem in 1964 in "The Poetic Process: Of the Making of Poems" (*Centennial Review*, 8, 353-370):

The general idea of death or Nothingness as a vague yet disturbing and, if concentrated on, frightening concept has been hanging over my sensibility for longer than I can remember. In the state of discomfort and frustration caused I suppose by an imaginative realization of the inescapable and unpleasant fact of death and the seeming impossibility of controlling it in any way—even to the extent of finding a name (not the glib conventional meaningless word or sign) for it, there came ... an image or a picture of an arrow winging its flight through an empty sky – to what end? into what heart or target? The image gave no clue. Into darkness? into nothingness? Or was the flight infinite? Something in the picture, I can't tell what—perhaps the slight downward inclination of the arrow's tip—made that impossible. My arrow was to be no symbol of immortality—of that at least I was certain. Shelley's phrase "into came into the intense inane" came into my mind, but brought no light. Then I thought of Longfellow's lines, memorized in grade school:

I shot an arrow into the air
It fell to earth I knew not where.

Longfellow's couplet gave me the answer I had been unconsciously avoiding. It was the phrase "to earth." I don't know whether the idea, the picture, or the line came into my awareness first: the idea of life as a speeding arrow; the picture, not logically or rationally consistent of the statuesque figure of a mighty archer; and the line "Bend back thy bow, O Archer, till the string"

As an illustration I have given the sculpture by Henry Moore (1898-1986) that was installed in 1966 after much controversy in front of Toronto's new city hall which had been designed by Viljo Revell. Though chosen by the architect and supported by the mayor Philip Givens, the sculpture was rejected by the city council. It was finally bought by private citizens and donated to the city.

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Weep not on this quiet stone, I, embedded here Where sturdy roots divide the bone And tendrils split a hair, Bespeak you comfort of the grass That is embodied me, Which as I am, not as I was, Would choose to be.</p> |  |
| <p>A. J. M. Smith 1936</p> <p>Cast a cold eye On life, on death. Horseman, pass by.</p> <p>W. B. Yeats, 1938</p> | |
| <p>When I shall be without regret And shall mortality forget, When I shall die who lived for this, I shall not miss the things I miss. And you who notice where I lie Ask not my name. It is not I.</p> | <p>J. V. Cunningham, 1947</p> |

Writing epitaphs is something at which poets excel.

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>Abraham M. Klein (1909-1972)</p> <p>Born 1909 in the Ukraine, Klein was brought to Montreal in 1910. He studied law at McGill University. After graduating he wrote poems, practiced law and edited the <i>Canadian Jewish Chronicle</i> from 1938 to 1955. Together with David Lewis and F. R. Scott, he helped to found the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation party. In the early 1950s he became severely depressed and retired from public life. David Bairstow produced a brief NFB movie <i>Autobiographical</i> on his poetry in 1965.</p> |  |
|---|---|

As well as poetry Klein wrote a novel *The Second Scroll* in 1951. This highly modernist creation attempted to tell the story of the foundation of the State of Israel. It was based in part on Klein's visit to Israel in 1949 on behalf of the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*. The five parts of the novel were entitled like the five books of the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus ...), the story likening the foundation of modern Israel to the original flight of the Israelites from Egypt, their travels in the desert and their arrival in the land of Canaan. The book also contains several appendices, one of which is a meditation on Michelangelo's ceiling for the Sistine Chapel.

Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens

On 27 July 1656, the Talmud Torah congregation of Amsterdam issued a writ of *cherem* (excommunication) against Baruch Spinoza on account of his abominable heresies. Spinoza had rejected the idea of a providential personal God and proposed that God was immanent in all things.

Spinoza left Amsterdam. He continued to write, working as a lens grinder to support himself.



Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677)
anonymous portrait, about 1665

Spinoza's work as a lens grinder was much appreciated by scientists who used his lenses in telescopes that studied the stars and in microscopes that studied the working of the human body. Several commentators have noted that Spinoza's philosophy has some similarity to lens-grinding. Everything unnecessary is slowly removed and the resultant kernel polished so that it becomes transparent.

Notes on the poem (adapted from Pollock, Mayne and Caplan *A. M. Klein Selected Poems* (1997):

I

pulver – powder or dust. In lens grinding this would occur as a result of grinding the lens.

Abrasive dust would also be used in polishing

Baruch alias Benedict: Hebrew and Latin, respectively, for 'blessed': Spinoza changed his name from Baruch to Benedict, quite confident one can be as blessed in Latin as in Hebrew'

stiletto: An attempt was made by one of the over-righteous upon Spinoza's life soon after he became an object of official displeasure

II

Uriel da Costa: The indecisive martyr. riel da Costa (1585-1640), came from a family of Portuguese Marannos (Jews forced to practise their religion in secret) who had converted to Catholicism. He returned to Judaism and left Portugal for Amsterdam, where his unorthodox ideas angered the Jewish community. He was twice excommunicated, and he twice repented, but the humiliating penance he was forced to undergo the second time drove him to suicide.

III

bribe of florins: Spinoza was offered an annuity of 1000 florins if he would, in all overt ways, speech and action, conform to the established opinions and customs of the Synagogue

V

two and two make four: Spinoza held that Man is a part of Nature, and Nature is governed by eternal and immutable laws. It must be just as possible, therefore, to apply the mathematical

method to man, as it is to apply it to matter. Spinoza's Ethics is presented in the same as Euclid's *Geometry* with definitions, axioms propositions, corollaries, and scholia (explanations).

VI

Cabbalist: a student of the Kabbalah, the central Jewish mystical tradition

Sanctum sanctorum: (Lat.) 'holy of holies'; the inner sanctuary of the Temple where the ark containing the tablets of Moses was kept

golden bowl of Koheleth: Koheleth is the Hebrew name for both the book of Ecclesiastes and its author, traditionally King Solomon.

golden bowl [Ecclesiastes 12.6] sometimes interpreted as the brain,

IX

Shabbathai Zvi (1626-76) proclaimed himself the Messiah and aroused enormous enthusiasm among his fellow Jews, especially those of eastern Europe. He went to Constantinople to convert the Sultan but was himself forced to convert to Islam under threat of death.

Took to himself the Torah for a wife: Shabbathai Zvi performed a sacrilegious marriage ceremony between himself and the Torah, in fulfilment of a prophecy concerning the coming of the Messiah.

silken canopy: the *hupah* under which the Jewish wedding ceremony takes place

Thou art hallowed unto me: words spoken by the Jewish bridegroom to his bride as he places the ring on her finger

Mynheer: (Dutch) 'my lord'

consumptive: Spinoza's lung disease (probably tuberculosis) was exacerbated by the dust from lens-grinding.

Propositio XV: Quicquid est in Deo est, et nihil sine Deo esse neque concipi potest.

Proposition XV: Whatsoever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived.

Reducing providence to theorems, the horrible atheist compiled such lore that proved, like proving two and two make four, that in the crown of God we all are gems. From glass and dust of glass he brought to light, out of the pulver and the polished lens, the prism and the flying mote; and hence the infinitesimal and infinite.


Is it a marvel, then, that he forsook the abracadabra of the synagogue, and holding with timelessness a duologue, deciphered a new scripture in the book? Is it a marvel that he left old fraud for passion intellectual of God?

Although printed as prose, the central section V of the poem is actually a sonnet:

Reducing providence to theorems,
the horrible atheist compiled such lore
that proved, like proving two and two make four,
that in the crown of God we all are gems.
From glass and dust of glass he brought to light,
out of the pulver and the polished lens,
the prism and the flying mote; and hence
the infinitesimal and infinite.
Is it a marvel, then, that he forsook
the abracadabra of the synagogue,
and holding with timelessness a duologue,
deciphered a new scripture in the book?
Is it a marvel that he left old fraud
for passion intellectual of God?



This clip is from the NFB short *Autobiographical* by A. M. Klein (1965) directed by Richard Notkin. The poem is read by Alexander Scourby. Unfortunately the short is presently unavailable.





Psalm to Teach Humility

O sign and wonder of the barnyard, more
beautiful than the pheasant, more melodious
than nightingale! O creature marvellous!

Prophet of sunrise, and foreteller of times!
Vizier of the constellations! Sage,
red-bearded, scarlet-turbaned, in whose brain
the stars lie scattered like well-scattered grain!

Calligraphist upon the barnyard page!
Five-noted balladist! Crower of rhymes!

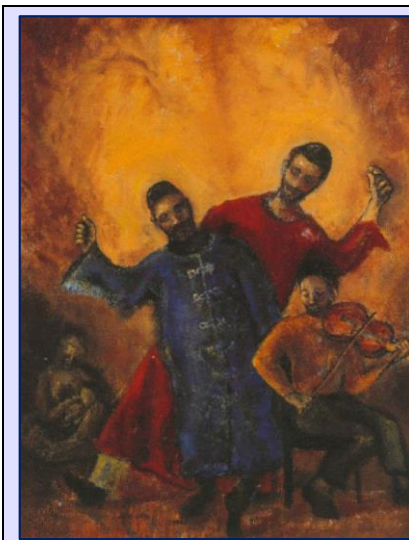


This clip is from the NFB short *Autobiographical*. However I have removed the sound track wherein the poem was read by Alexander Scourby and substituted a reading of the poem by A. M. Klein that recalls his visit to the hospital as a child.



I am no old man fatuously intent
On memoirs, but in memory I seek
The strength and vividness of nonage days,
Not tranquil recollection of event.
It is a fabled city that I seek;
It stands in Space's vapours and Time's haze;
Thence comes my sadness in remembered joy
Constrictive of the throat;
Thence do I hear, as heard by a Jewboy
The Hebrew violins,
Delighting in the sobbed oriental note.

nonage – the age before maturity



Srul Irving Glick (1934-2002)
Suite Hébraïque No. 5 (1980)

Flute – Suzanne Schulman
Clarinet – James Campbell
Violin – Andrew Dawes
Cello – Daniel Domb

I Circle Dance




II Prayer and Chassidic Dance



III Wedding Dance

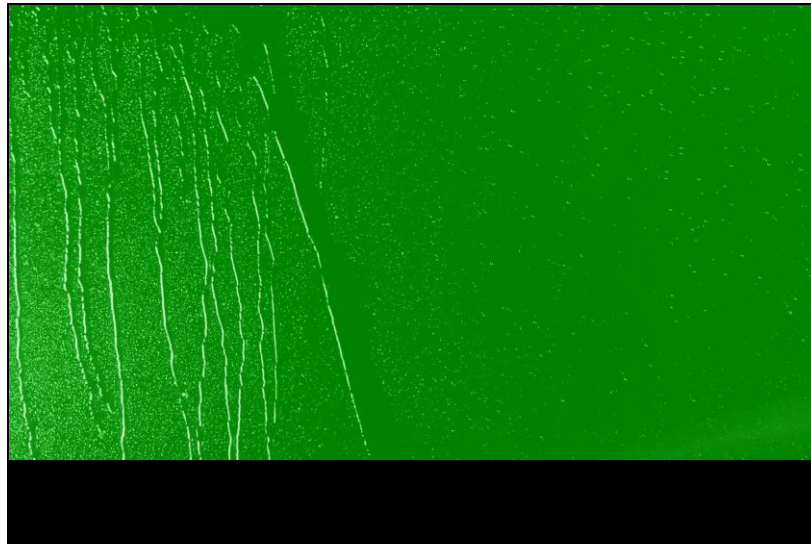


These clips give a sense of the Hebrew violin and the sobbed oriental note. The music is by the Toronto composer Srul Irving Glick. The painting “Birth of Joy” is by the composer.



**Dorothy Livesay
(1909-1996)**

Livesay was born in Winnipeg and studied at the Universities of Toronto, Sorbonne and British Columbia. She worked as a social worker, journalist and teacher. In her poetry she was a passionate advocate of women's rights, social justice and peace. She was an active communist during the 1930s. She helped found the journal *Contemporary Verse* in 1942. After the second world war she wrote a radio-play *Call my People Home* about the internment of the Japanese in British Columbia.



I remember long veils of green rain
Feathered like the shawl of my grandmother –
Green from the half-green of the spring trees
Waving in the valley.

Livesay's poem makes an insightful comment on memory. At the time she visited her grandmother she was excited about her new lover. The excitement led to the fixation in memory of whatever happened at that time. In the same way we remember very clearly many of the mundane things we were doing when we heard about Kennedy's assassination.



We have already discussed the Great Depression and its effect in Canada. The other defining world event of the 1930s was the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Units of the Spanish army under General Franco rebelled against the newly elected Republican government. The resulting war between the republicans and the nationalists became a testing ground for the right vs left conflicts of the rest of the century and for the military techniques of World War II.

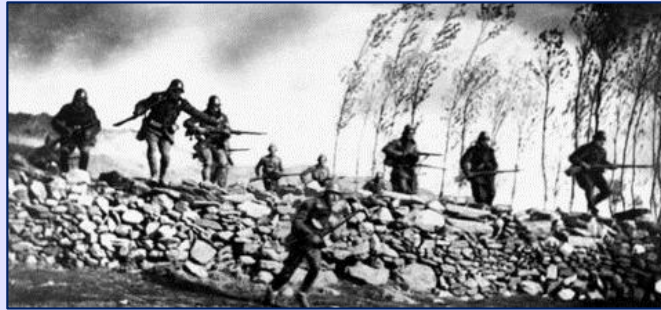
The clip is from an NFB film *Los Canadienses* (1975), directed by Albert Kish, in which members of the MacKenzie-Papineau battalion remembered their time in Spain. Many out-of-work Canadians who had become involved politically volunteered to serve with the International Brigades.

https://www.nfb.ca/film/los_canadienses/



This ties together several clips is from *Los Canadienses* (1975), showing a photograph of the MacKenzie-Papineau battalion.

The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion



When the bare branch responds to leaf and light
Remember them: it is for this they fight.
It is for haze-swept hills and the green thrust
Of pine, that they lie choked with battle dust.

You who hold beauty at your finger-tips
Hold it because the splintering gunshot rips
Between your comrades' eyes; hold it across
Their bodies' barricade of blood and loss.

You who live quietly in sunlit space
Reading The Herald after morning grace
Can count peace dear, when it has driven
Your sons to struggle for this grim, new heaven.

The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion was named after the leaders of the upper and Lower Canadian Rebellions of 1837 (William Lyon Mackenzie and Louis-Joseph Papineau). Their banner thus suggested that they had existed to fight for freedom from 1837-1937.

Livesay's poem Catalonia concerns the final battles of the Spanish Civil War, which took place in Catalonia in Northeastern Spain.

Livesay wrote the poem in 1939 but the poem was not published until 1977. Livesay noted

Thirty years ago the last great battle of the resistance by the Loyalist Government of Spain and the International Brigades against the invasion of General Franco took place in Catalonia. Short news reels of the battle, newspaper reports, letters from Mackenzie-Papineau Brigade volunteers from Canada provided the background for this poem, written in spring, 1939. It was never published, probably because in Canada there were no magazines or quarterlies interested. Background information on the political events which stirred those times has been admirably documented in 'Unamuno's Last Lecture,' by Louis Portillo, published in Cyril Connolly's Horizon.

Portillo's paper describes the last speech of Professor Unamuno, "rector of the University of Salamanca, defying Franco's general Millan Astray who in the Ceremonial Hall of the university raised the battlecry 'Viva, viva !a Muerte!' - 'Long live Death!'

Unamuno rose to reply and acknowledged

You will win, but you will not convince. You will win, because you possess more than enough brute force, but you will not convince, because to convince means to persuade. And in order to persuade you would need what you lack – reason and right in the struggle. Amid cries for his execution, the aged Unanumo was led out of the hall by one of his colleagues and Franco's wife. The paper is available at <http://www.unz.org/Pub/Horizon-1941dec-00394>

The Sorenson mentioned in the poem is likely Henning Sorenson a Danish journalist who served as an aide to Norman Bethune in the mobile blood transfusion unit. He survived the Spanish Civil War and served in the Royal Canadian Navy during World War II.

In the poem he volunteers to rescue the wounded soldiers in the tanks abandoned by Franco's forces. The intent of the poem is to promote love and compassion rather than hate.



To be alone is grace; to see it clear
Without rancour; to let the past be
And the future become. Rarely to remember
The painful needles turning in the flesh.

Winter in Tashme
Internment Camp



A wider sea than we knew, a deeper earth,
A more enduring sun.

Beginning in early 1942, the Canadian government interned people of Japanese descent living in British Columbia. Their homes and businesses were auctioned off by the government in order to pay for their detention. Most of the internment camps were in the inland regions of British Columbia. The government neither apologized nor compensated these dispossessed people until 1988. Tashme is now known as Sunshine Valley.

In Livesay's radio play she presents the views of various of the Japanese-Canadians in the internment camps. Some were deeply resentful. Others, like the "philosopher" student in the first poem became reconciled to their new lives.

In her reading Livesay revises the words at the ends of both poems.

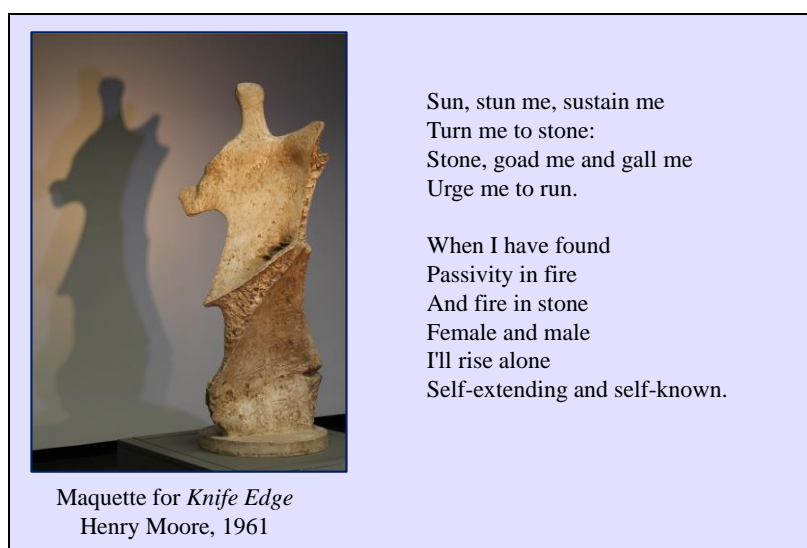


In this poem *Bartok and the Geranium* I have intertwined the poet's words with brief excerpts from Bartok's concerto.

Ecphrasis originally simply meant writing about something. Later it came to mean writing about a work of art rather than something natural. Nowadays it often means a work of art about another work of art. The poem is doubly ecphrastic – about the geranium and about the music, about something real and something artificial.

A furbelow is a gathering or pleating of fabric, usually in a skirt. Another word is flounce. The borders of geranium leaves are cleft rather than smooth – making the furbelow metaphor appropriate.

The poem has no regular rhythm; however, rhyme occurs throughout the poem.



In this poem Livesay tries to convey the effect of Henry Moore sculptures. The poem is rhythmically free but has multiple rhymes - like the sculptures which have definite but undefinable forms. Moore's sculptures usually derive from the real world. But reality is changed and reduced becoming a work of art rather than a simple representation. Viewers' responses to such art varies. Some become hostile; others find an intense emotional resonance.

You may find Livesay's poem – highly emotional and more abstract than clear – similar to the art she is writing about.

**Northern
Voices:
Modernism**



Alex Colville, *Horse and Train*, 1954

Ekphrasis is the term used to describe the description or depiction of one work of art in another artistic modality. Usually a poem is written about a painting. Here the process is reversed. Alex Colville's painting *Horse and Train* (1954) was inspired by two lines from a poem by Roy Campbell

Against a regiment I oppose a brain
And a dark horse against an armoured train

Roy Campbell (1901-1957) was born in South Africa. He was in Toledo when the Spanish Civil War broke out. A devoted Catholic, he sheltered several Carmelite monks in his house during the uprisings. Communist militia men rounded up the monks and shot them. Campbell supported the Nationalist side in the Civil War, wrote dispatches from the Nationalist frontlines, and attended Franco's victory celebrations in 1939. However, when World War II broke out he denounced Nazism and served in the Intelligence Corps of the British Army. He also made several fine translations of the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca, the poet who had been murdered by the Nationalists in 1936. He was a man of contradictions: a freedom fighter of the right. Colville (1920-2013) differed from most of his Canadian artistic colleagues by being a staunch member of the Progressive Conservative Party. His service during the Allied Invasion of France and his work at the Concentration Camps, however, depleted him of any religious feeling and his paintings view the world with an austere realism. He rebelled against the Abstract Expressionism of his age.