

DEVELOPMENT IN THE EARLY POETRY OF RAYMOND SOUSTER

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Despite Raymond Souster's acknowledged stature as one of Canada's leading poets, very little critical analysis of his poetry has been made. Consequently, basic misconceptions exist, primarily the tendency to consider Souster's poetry as lacking development. Munroe Beattie, for instance, states that the form of Souster's poetry has changed scarcely at all since 1943¹ Desmond Pacey asserts that there has been no significant development in Souster's poetry since the early 1940's.² Since both Beattie and Pacey choose as their dates the early 1940's, the time when Souster first began publishing, what they are actually saying is that Souster's poetry has *never* changed. It is difficult to imagine the work of any poet, major or minor, not changing during thirty-five years of steady publishing, and Souster is no exception. Anyone who reads carefully the corpus of Souster's work will experience a steadily evolving style determined by historical events at large and movements within the smaller world of poetry.

Raymond Souster's poetic career began in 1942; abroad, Canada was involved in the War effort, while at home a miniature war was being fought in poetry, especially in the rivalry between the two Montreal literary magazines *Preview* and *First Statement*. Souster took an active part in both battles. His allegiance lay noticeably with the *First Statement* rather than *Preview* poets, for the forthrightness of statement and scant use of imagery and metaphor in his poetry belonged to the tradition of the former group. Souster also demonstrated the *First Statement* preference for American rather than English models, and therefore the first influences on Souster are American. During the War, Souster had been reading Kenneth Fearing, and many parallels in content and form can be seen in these two poets' work. Consider the similarity, for instance, between Fearing's "Andy and Jerry and Joe" and Souster's "Yonge Street Saturday Night":

We watched the crowd, there was a murder in the papers, the wind
blew hard, it was dark,

We didn't know what to do,
There was no place to go and we had nothing to say,
We listened to the bells, and voices, and whistles, and cars,
We weren't dull, or wise, or afraid,
We didn't feel tired, or restless, or happy, or sad.

(Fearing)

¹Literary History of Canada, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966), p. 780.

²Creative Writing in Canada (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1964), p. 174.

and there are some like us,
 just walking, making our feet move ahead of us,
 a little bored, a little lost, a little angry,
 walking as though we were really going somewhere,
 walking as if there were something to see at Adelaide or maybe on
 King,
 something that will give a fair return for this use of shoel leather,
 something that will make us smile with a strange new happiness, a
 lost but recovered joy.
 (Souster)

The tone of both poems is marked by war ennui, and the poetic form, using the long line and repeated line opening derived from Whitman, is also similar. The style of Souster's first poetry, then, is in direct reaction to the poetry appearing in *Preview*, which Souster considered romantic and effete. His rejection of that tradition is stated in "To the Canadian Poets":

Come my little eunuchs, my little virgins,
 It is time you were home and in bed;
 The wind is strong and cold on the streets
 And it is almost eleven o'clock.

Soon the whores will be obvious at the corners
 And I would not have you accosted or given the eye:
 Soon the drunks will be turned out of the beverage rooms
 And I would not have you raped in a dark lane.

Go, find your house and insert the key and put down the night-lock.
 Undress with the blinds down and touch the pillows, and dream
 Of Pickthall walking hand in hand with her fairies
 And Lampman turning his back on Ottawa.

Since the content of Souster's first poetry was determined largely by World War II and his style by a smaller conflict between two opposing literary magazines, it was poetry of assertion, of declarative statement, written, therefore, in long lines bare in imagery and metaphor. His work immediately after the War, however, is not so much communication of a socio-political message as it is a celebration of love. The change is due partly to a world no longer at war and partly to Souster's reading of Kenneth Patchen.³ The poetry of the late forties is thus less didactic, the lines becoming more flexible and in most cases shorter as imagery and metaphor begin to take the weight of the earlier overt statement. The difference can be illustrated by comparing two selections, one from each period. Both passages describe bomber planes. The following two lines are from "Air Raid":

³Souster's tribute to Patchen in *Direction* no. 3 is an indication of his respect at the time. Remarkable echoes of Patchen still occur in Souster's later work. Compare, for instance, Patchen's "Nice Day For A Lynching" and Souster's "Welcome to the South"; Patchen's "Wolf of Winter" and Souster's "The Wild Wolves of Winter."

Souster subsequently published in *Contact* magazine. They later came to be known, of course, as the Black Mountain poets. Dudek had sent a copy of *Cerberus*, which contained his poetry and that of Souster and Irving Layton, to William Carlos Williams who, in a letter dated June 28, 1952, wrote to Souster a fitting tribute: "... somehow when I read you I am moved. I am moved by your subject matter and I am moved by the way that has influenced you to conform to it as the very fountainhead of your art. . . . You have a chance. . . . Have confidence in yourself. You've got it." Williams recognized in Souster a poet with his own concern for the ordinary and concrete. When Souster received this letter, he had not yet begun to read Williams and Pound; he did so shortly thereafter, and, by the mid-fifties, the imagist influence begins to appear.

"The Negro Girl," a poem first printed in *For What Time Slays* (1955), opens with these lines:

Black delicate face
among a forest
of white pasty faces.

This opening is almost haiku-like in form, and one recognizes in it a similarity to Pound's famous poem "In A Station of the Metro":

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Williams' statement "No ideas / but in things," a reformulation of the Imagist creed "Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective," was embodied in poems that examine with a gimlet-eye vision the nature of reality. His treatment of the localized and the concrete attracted Souster, and by 1958, in *Crepe-Hanger's Carnival*, a definite Williams influence appears:

The six quart basket
One side gone
Half the handle torn off

Sits in the centre of the lawn
And slowly fills up
With the white fruits of the snow.

The poem concentrates on describing one object and it only. No moral is drawn, no ideological statement is made; the object, in fact, presents its own meaning and is self-contained.

We also see Souster continuing his attachment to Toronto, a preoccupation confirmed by Williams' insistence on the necessity of the poet's becoming totally familiar with one "place." This doctrine is reflected in the titles of Souster's books of the early sixties: *A Local Pride* (1962) and

The Colour of the Times (1964). The title of the former book Souster derived from Williams' *Paterson*:

:a local pride; spring, summer, fall and the sea;
a confession; a basket; a column . . . a gathering up;
a celebration.

In these two books Souster continues writing imagist poems. Consider "The Stone":

Rubbed by centuries
weed hidden
cool to touch
though under the sun

how easy you lie there
how permanent
useless yes
but so necessary!

The last two lines of the poem seem an obvious parallel to Williams' phrase "so much depends / upon" in "The Red Wheelbarrow." Both poems use contrast to qualify the object: Williams' poem places the red wheelbarrow beside white chickens, while Souster's poem contains contrast of temperature: "cool to touch / though under the sun." Or again, one sees the imagist influence in the following lines, which describe a woman as

Porcelain-white
squat jug
of your body

slowly uplifted
and upturned. . . .

To say that this poetry involves no change from that of the early forties is not to read Souster. One more poem, "Artificial Hand, War Veteran," should be quoted:

Hand the colour
of half-dead leaves
Hand slightly clenched
as if pain could be lingering

Useless hand
price of our wars
badge of our deceit. . . .

"Badge" is an important word here, for the object has imprinted on it the

meaning that it conveys. In other words, the object becomes an ideogram or an icon.⁴

Souster has always been labelled a "realist" poet; in actuality, however, many of his poems fall into the category of fantasy rather than realism. In Souster's poetry of this period the realistic element is important only insofar as the object concretely embodies the idea Souster wants to convey. In other words, he describes the object not necessarily because he wants to show fidelity to reality in an attempt to gain verisimilitude, but because he is convinced that an idea divorced from the object that concretizes it is mere abstraction. Souster's increased awareness of this imagist principle is the crucial point in the development of his poetry since the early forties. Calling Souster a realist, then, does not accurately account for the form of his poetry. More and more he becomes the creator of his own poetic universe where objects function not merely on a realistic level but as badges or icons, thus becoming more than literal objects. They begin to function with a life of their own: "Drab housewife trees" are transformed by a covering of ice into "glittering call girls / shamelessly arousingly naked." Skaters become dancers, "each suspended / on invisible threads / let down from the sky." "The rain is only the river / grown bored, risking everything / on one big splash." The concreteness of the imagery suggests a poetic interpretation of all the referents, and so we move past the bounds of metaphor into the realm of fantasy, a fantasy born, in every instance, of Souster's imaginative interpretation of reality. Thus a new world is created through poetic vision, one drastically different from the war-torn world depicted in Souster's angry, declarative poetry of the early forties.

Souster's books since *The Colour of the Times* contain both new and previously unpublished poetry. The former is a continuation of Souster's poetic voice of the early sixties, at which time he gained true poetic maturity. His desire to communicate combined with the subtle influence of other poets on his work mark his individuality. His is by no means a static poetry but a continuously evolving art culminating in a unique vision. In this way the poetry of Raymond Souster is a leading contribution to Canadian poetry.

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⁴I have taken the word "icon" from Eli Mandel, one of the few critics who has understood properly Souster's poetry of this period. In his review of *A Local Pride in Canadian Literature*, No. 17 (Summer 1963), Mandel states:

It seems to me, then, that the greatest pleasure in reading Souster comes from an unusual sense of formalism. He works with patterns as stiffly stylized as figures on an Oriental scroll, a rigid vision of nature and society as a demonic city inhabited by beastman, harlot, and cripple, surrounded by a scarcely attainable garden where lovers become trees or budding leaves, and flowers turn into gypsies and sirens. Within this landscape, all things are icons or ideograms, so that the appropriate poetic form is the pun, riddle, or puzzle, or a curious version of imagism which defies description. . . . Once we begin to look at Souster's formalism and stop worrying about his realism, we seem to be able to account for the internal resonance of his work, a resonance which seems to me to be the mark of genuine poetry (p. 64).