

# SEMINAL

THE ANTHOLOGY OF CANADA'S GAY MALE POETS

edited by

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“The homosexual poet,” according to Robert K. Martin, “often seeks poetic ‘fathers’ who in some sense offer a validation of his sexual nature. Whatever he may learn poetically from the great tradition, he cannot fail to notice that this tradition is, at least on the surface, almost exclusively heterosexual.”<sup>1</sup> It is out of such a desire for affirmation, for exemplars and mentors, that the impulse to compile *Seminal*, the first historically comprehensive compendium of gay male poetry written by Canadians, first arose. Even today, after the hard-won battles in the political arena to enshrine the equal rights of gay men and lesbians in Canada as legitimate have been won, the desire to make gay experience a more traceable plotline in the “central” Canadian story is difficult to realize. The reader—and writer—of gay poetry in this country still has a hard time finding it easily, as if it were composed just outside the spotlight of mainstream literary success.

In the almost forty years since May 1969, when the Trudeau government decriminalized homosexual acts between consenting adults, one would think that an anthology like *Seminal* would have already been published and dog-eared in the hands of the aspiring and the curious. Most express surprise that no previous compilation is to be superseded by this present effort. Such a long-standing gap in the published record does not fit with Canadians’ sense of themselves as well informed and living within an enlightened community of ideas. Yet librarians still do not routinely provide apposite access points in their catalogues; publishers may not always choose to highlight the gay content in a forthcoming book for fear it would compromise sales; and poets themselves may sometimes continue to hesitate in characterizing their work as homoerotic—or themselves as gay—anxious that the appreciation of their accomplishment could potentially be narrowed to this single trait of their humanity or, worse, be dismissed as ghettoized.

In the past, for anyone interested in how a gay tradition in poetry might actually read in Canada, the search for it could

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1 Robert K. Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979): 148.

yield to feelings of creative frustration, even isolation. *Seminal*, therefore, is an attempt, in Canadian terms and in a single comprehensive volume, to prevent our gay poets of present and future generations from being obliged to approach the literary “past” as something that must be “repeatedly reinvented anew, [as a] tradition [to be] created afresh.”<sup>2</sup> Readers and writers may wish to do so nonetheless, but now they have a clearly defined point of previous departure to revisit, revise, or even repudiate.

This first anthology of Canadian gay male poetry takes its place in a line of similar anthologies published elsewhere in the English-speaking world, including Edward Carpenter’s *Ioläus* (1902)<sup>3</sup>, Patrick Anderson and Alistair Sutherland’s *Eros: An Anthology of Friendship* (1961)<sup>4</sup>, Ian Young’s *The Male Muse* (1973) and *The Son of the Male Muse* (1983)<sup>5</sup>, and Stephen Coote’s *The Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse* (1983)<sup>6</sup>. Carpenter, Anderson and Sutherland, and Coote all start with ancient times and work their way up. In the case of the first two, they do not focus on poetry exclusively while, in the third instance, Coote also includes work by women. Only living poets appear in Young’s anthologies, with mutually exclusive sets of contributors published in each. In 1995, Michael Holmes and Lynne Crosbie, two straight Toronto writers, published the much smaller *Plush*<sup>7</sup>, Canada’s first contemporary anthology of gay male poetry, featuring

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2 Ibid, 161.

3 Edward Carpenter, ed., *Ioläus: An Anthology of Friendship*. The online version found at [www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/iolaus.html#pref](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/iolaus.html#pref) is the edition that was published in New York by Mitchell Kennerly in 1917.

4 Patrick Anderson and Alistair Sutherland, *Eros: An Anthology of Friendship* (London: Anthony Blond, 1961).

5 Ian Young, ed., *The Male Muse* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1973). Young tried to interest Canadian publishers in *The Male Muse* without success, so instead went south of the border where it was accepted without reservation by John Gill, publisher of The Crossing Press and also one of the contributors (letter of August 25, 2004, from Young to author). *The Son of the Male Muse* was also published by The Crossing Press in 1983.

6 Stephen Coote, ed., *The Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse* (London: Penguin, 1983).

7 Lynn Crosbie and Michael Holmes, eds., *Plush: Selected Poems of Sky Gilbert, Courtney McFarlane, Jeffrey Conway, R. M. Vaughan, and David Trinidad* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1995).

three Canadian and two American poets. Five years later, Timothy Liu published *Word of Mouth*<sup>8</sup>, collecting into a single volume fifty-eight American poets born in the twentieth century (he did not have to deal with Whitman or Crane, as a consequence), an anthology he affirms in the introduction was conceived in light of the many gay male poetry anthologies that had already been published in the United States; Liu's efforts to map American gay male poetry have served as a model for *Seminal*.

Unsurprisingly, few Canadians appear in any of the anthologies of international scope. In either of the *Male Muse* anthologies, Young includes only two Canadian poets of note, Edward A. Lacey and bill bissett, besides himself. Edward A. Lacey does appear in Coote's Penguin anthology, though he seems to have been a last-minute addition, along with a handful of other contemporary poets who are tacked on at the end and not interfiled by date of birth among the majority of the contributors. Coote also leaves out Patrick Anderson, an important figure in the Montreal poetry community of the 1940s, a fellow Briton who returned to England in the 1950s and who died in 1979, four years before the anthology was published—or at least Anderson is left out by name, for his poem, "Spiv Song," is attributed to Royston Ellis. Anderson happened to have represented himself with the same poem in his earlier *Eros* (Coote must have been conversant with this trailblazing anthology, one would think, and should have caught his mistake).

Just how much the approach to gay writing has and has not changed over the course of the twentieth century is revealed by what each editor has to say about how and what they chose. In 1902, Carpenter reflects that while *Ioläus* "is only incomplete, and a small contribution, at best, towards a large subject,"<sup>9</sup> he feels he has succeeded in making visible what was previously hidden, noting that "I have been much struck by the remarkable manner in which the customs of various races and times illustrate each other, and the way in which they point to a solid and enduring body of human

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8 Timothy Liu, ed., *Word of Mouth: An Anthology of Gay American Poetry* (Jersey City: Talisman House, 2000).

9 Carpenter, [www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/iolaus.html#pref](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/iolaus.html#pref).

sentiment on the subject.”<sup>10</sup> Almost sixty years later, after acknowledging that the contents of *Eros* has “teased [him since] adolescence” and has revealed itself to be “less of the smell of sulphur than [he] had imagined,” Anderson describes his subject as “any friendship between men strong enough to deserve one of the more serious senses of the word ‘love’” and goes on to say—remember that he was writing at the height of the Cold War between the release of the Wolfenden Report in 1957 and the decriminalization of homosexuality in the United Kingdom in 1967<sup>11</sup>—that “this limiting extremism is far from most people’s taste. Against the background of our society, whether conceived in terms of Christian ethics or of the ‘natural’ self-realization implicit in scientific humanism, to accept it for oneself is pretty obviously to invite moral and psychological disaster.”<sup>12</sup> Young in contrast claims *The Male Muse* is “not an anthology of ‘gay poets’ (a difficult and useless category), but rather a collection of poems by contemporary writers on themes relating to male homosexuality, gay love, romantic friendships, what Walt Whitman called ‘the dear love of comrades, the attraction of friend to friend.’” He further contextualizes his work by maintaining that “until 1972, the project [of anthology-making] seemed impossible to carry out ... because the aura of taboo was still strong enough to prevent all but a few writers from contributing. But quite suddenly ... the growing impetus of the homophile/gay liberation movement began to be felt by the rest of society—both gay and straight—and ‘Gay Pride’ became not just a slogan but a reality.”<sup>13</sup> A decade later, Coote articulates his own rationale for his Penguin anthology, contending that “a gay poem is one that either deals with explicitly gay matters or describes an intense and loving relationship between two people of the same sex.”<sup>14</sup> For Crosbie and Holmes, compiling *Plush* still another decade on, their “conviction grew that the poems—

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10 Carpenter [www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/iolaus.html#pref](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/iolaus.html#pref).

11 For a good synopsis of the Wolfenden Report, which influenced social change on both sides of the Atlantic, see Hugh David’s *On Queer Street: A Social History of British Homosexuality, 1895–1995* (London: HarperCollins, 1997).

12 Anderson and Sutherland, 8–9.

13 Young, *The Male Muse*, 7.

14 Coote, 48–49.

words and work all too often neglected by the mainstream—spoke to one another and to a much wider audience than any notion of an anthology of gay poets could possibly suggest”<sup>15</sup> while, for Liu, his millennial *Word of Mouth* was “a gathering of poets whose poems represent a plurality of forms, poems that may or may not directly traffic in ‘gay experience,’” acknowledging that he “still question[s] the notion of gay sensibility.”<sup>16</sup>

As a consequence, it is very difficult not to be affected by, respond to, or work against the assumptions of anyone previously, or even currently, working in the area or not to be influenced by the attitudes of the poets under consideration. The fifty-seven writers in *Seminal* were born between 1878 and 1981 and represent over a century of writing. They each reflect the beliefs and aesthetic concerns of their own time and, depending on when they were born, have been more or less open about their erotic lives in and outside of their work. It seems less interesting nowadays to consider what legitimately constitutes a gay poem or whether someone is a “gay poet” versus a “poet who happens to be gay.” The time to feel diminished or emboldened by labels—or to feel one should trumpet, duck, whistle around, or deny them (strategies that all imply hubris, anxiety, or discomfort)—should be long over. Any of the poets in *Seminal* could as validly fit into an anthology organized around an entirely different point of commonality, for all poets are both one and many, but at the same time, the placement of universal truth and universal experience above all else risks homogenization through a denial of specificity. A simple recognition of fact—that a poet is homosexual / gay / queer / same-sex / bi / transgender / poly-amorous or not—should be sufficient and demands a reading of his work (and what it took him to write it) that goes as far as possible into its depths in order to see what it reveals about *his* human condition—and about his sense of the human condition *itself*.

What the human condition really is persists as yet another conundrum, and appropriately enough, like so many things

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15 Crosbie and Holmes, 8.

16 Liu, xv, xviii.

pertaining to gay experience, *Seminal* begins on a speculative note, a gaydar moment, if you like. The earliest poems are by Émile Nelligan, the second poet by chronological arrangement, and date from the late 1890s. Born in 1879, Nelligan was at the beginning of what should have been a long and celebrated career when, after a mental collapse, he was committed to an asylum in 1899 until his death in 1941. Robert K. Martin suggests that his “incarceration is widely taken to indicate his homosexuality and he can still function as an icon of the gay man in Quebec, destroyed by his culture and his assimilation into English.”<sup>17</sup> Whether or not Martin’s supposition is accurate and whether or not every cause needs a martyr to whatever rallying cry—culture, sexuality—as a kind of tragic inspiration, when it comes to Canadian gay male poetry, this is where *Seminal* draws the line in time’s very unsettled sands. Frank Oliver Call, another Quebec-based poet born one year before Nelligan, is in comparison forgotten, though he is credited with being among the first poets in Canada to have experimented, however tentatively, with modernism.<sup>18</sup> Call’s pamphlet with Ryerson, *Sonnets for Youth* (1944), could be considered the first collection of homoerotic verse published in Canada, however coded and oblique it happens to be in its references.<sup>19</sup>

The poets born in the two decades after Nelligan’s confinement could not be forthright about their sexuality in their work for obvious reasons. John Glassco, notorious for *Memoirs of Montparnasse* (1973), a “nonfiction” account of his years in Paris now more often characterized as fictional revisionism, even as a kind of in-joke send-up of the reader in its twisting of the author’s personal gay history<sup>20</sup>, did not start

17 Robert K. Martin, “Gay Literature” in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, 2nd edition. Eugene Benson and William Toye, general editors. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997): 453.

18 Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski, eds., “The Precursors: 1910–1925,” *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1967): 3 and Ken Norris, *The Little Magazine in Canada 1925–1980* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1984): 10–11.

19 Letter of August 11, 2004, from Ian Young to the author.

20 See Richard Dellamora’s “Queering Modernism: A Canadian in Paris,” *Essays in Canadian Writing* 60 (1996): 265–273 and Andrew Lesk’s “Having a Gay Old Time in Paris: John Glassco’s Not-So-Queer Adventures” in *In a Queer Country: Gay and Lesbian Studies in the Canadian Context*, Terry Goldie, ed. (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2001): 175–187.



publishing poetry in book form until later in life (interestingly, he did not include “Noyade 1942,” a poem dating from 1958, in his Governor General’s Award-winning *Selected Poems* of 1971). The fact that he had two marriages in the last half of his life after an earlier fifteen-year live-in relationship of some description with a man, and also had a reputation as something of a squire and gentleman farmer active in horse-racing circles in Quebec’s Eastern Townships, may have influenced how he negotiated the writing and publication of his work. Douglas LePan “came out” as a gay poet memorably at the age of seventy-six, when he published *Far Voyages* in 1990, a passionate extended elegy for a recently deceased male lover many years his junior (though anyone who carefully reads the new autobiographical poems in the earlier *Weathering It*<sup>21</sup>—LePan’s new and collected poems published in 1987—can see how he was consciously working up to his great moment of openness). Brion Gysin, raised in Edmonton in the 1920s by his Canadian-born mother after his British-Swiss father died on the battlefield during World War I, was perhaps an exception. He pursued a more open homosexual lifestyle in the Isherwoodian sense from young adulthood onwards. However, except for a stint in the Canadian Army on the home front during the World War II, he cut his links with Canada and instead moved, as a poet, artist, and novelist, in the circles of Paul Bowles, William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, and Harold Norse in London, New York, Paris, and Tangiers. Still, his experiments with form brought him to the heart of the innovations in sound poetry and performance at a world level, which in turn informed so much of what came to pass of a similar nature here.

The sexuality of a gay poet was seldom, if ever, impugned publicly in Canada until the poetry of Patrick Anderson was reviewed by John Sutherland in 1943. While the import of Sutherland’s remarks are still raised in the debate over the origins of Canadian modernism, little is ever made of them beyond their characterization as part of the persistent “disagreements” between *Preview*, the little mimeographed

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21 Douglas LePan, *Weathering It: Complete Poems, 1948–1987* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987).

magazine that Anderson edited, and Sutherland's equally modest *First Statement*. While it is true that queer scholars have recently "reread" Sutherland's "outing" of Anderson<sup>22</sup>, I suspect that a deeper understanding of what transpired between these two men could go a long way to explaining why Canadian gay male poets have had to work in isolation, with barely a sense of community or wider recognition, in the decades since, even the decades after Stonewall.

In "The Writing of Patrick Anderson,"<sup>23</sup> Sutherland asserts that something is not quite right in Anderson's poem "Montreal" commenting that

Now I am willing to take Anderson at his word that the boy [in the poem] is "a substitute for poetry." As I interpret it, in his case the boy adds an impetus to poetic creation, and is even the source of his present poetry. At the same time, while I have no desire to make an exposé of Anderson's personal life, I surmise that the distinction between the "frightened boy" and "the hero who sings of joy" could be traced back to some period in the writer's childhood, when there occurred a sexual experience involving two boys, one of whom was frightened and the other demonstrated his joy. Whether or not this deduction is completely correct, I do know that something of the kind occurred in Anderson's childhood. The point that I wish to make is that, in the lines quoted from "Montreal," some sexual experience of a kind not quite normal has been twisted and forced into its present shape in the poem, where it wears the false aspect of some universal fact, or has to be

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22 See the following chapters and articles: "Critical Homophobia and Canadian Canon-Formation, 1943–1967: The 'Haunted Journeys' of Patrick Anderson and Scott Symons" in Peter Dickinson, *Here is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities, and the Literatures of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997): 69–100; Justin D. Edwards, "Engendering Modern Canadian Poetry: *Preview, First Statement* and the Disclosure of Patrick Anderson's Homosexuality," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 62 (1997): 65–84; Robert K. Martin, "Sex and Politics in Wartime Canada: The Attack on Patrick Anderson," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 44 (1991): 10–25.

23 John Sutherland, "The Writing of Patrick Anderson," *First Statement* 1.19 (1943): 3–6.

accepted as a general mood in which people today participate. Surely, these lines alone would signify the falsity of the poet's medium and his habitual distortion of content. His message is not wrong in itself, but his method of arriving at it, and his manner of stating it, make his poem appear like a wholesale falsification.

We can only imagine the impact such a review would have had on any poet. Anderson was then married and taught school-age boys during a time when homosexual crimes were punished with prison sentences. Though the circulation of *First Statement* was miniscule, Anderson threatened to sue. To placate him as well as to protect his own reputation, Sutherland printed a brief retraction in a subsequent issue.<sup>24</sup> Though the "crisis" passed, it was very likely not forgotten, especially by Anderson who was then no doubt aware of his own homoerotic desires<sup>25</sup> and may have felt that Sutherland, in his blundering and bombastic way, had intuited something essential.

This apparent defamation has to be read in context of the larger ongoing disagreements and rivalries between *Preview* and *First Statement*—and especially in context of how they have been conceptualized and distorted by later critics<sup>26</sup>—in order to understand how it might have affected the gay poets to come. Quite simply put, the poets of *Preview*—P. K. Page, A. M. Klein, and F. R. Scott, being the best remembered today—were perceived as older, upper-class, cosmopolitan, artificial, and too influenced by the "foreign" or "imported" British modernism of T. S. Eliot (formerly an American), W. H. Auden (a Briton then living in the United States), and Dylan Thomas (a Welshman). The poets of *First Statement*—Irving Layton, Louis Dudek, Raymond Souster—were considered to be young, native, and natural, connected to the robust (albeit American) modernism of Ezra Pound and

24 John Sutherland, "Retraction," *First Statement* I.20 (1943), cover.

25 See p. 91 in Patricia Whitney's "First Person Feminine: Margaret Day Surrey" in *Canadian Poetry* 31 (1992): 86–91.

26 For an excellent overview of the battles between *Preview* and *First Statement*, see Brian Trehearne's "Critical Episodes in Montreal Poetry in the 1940s," *Canadian Poetry* 41 (1997): 21–52.

William Carlos Williams. A. J. M. Smith inadvertently first coined and enshrined the distinction between “cosmopolitan” and “native” in *Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943)<sup>27</sup>, with the poets of each “tradition” grouped together. Because many of the *First Statement* poets were left out entirely, unlike those of *Preview*, this canonizing anthology provoked immediate anger (the small world of poetry does like its dust-ups).

It is not hard to see how the terms “cosmopolitan” and “artificial” could become further tainted with queer inflections, particularly when “native” became allied with “masculine.” Sutherland further stirred the pot in 1947, when he harshly reviewed Robert Finch’s Governor General’s Award-winning book, *Poems* (1946)<sup>28</sup> in *Northern Review*, the successor to both *First Statement* and *Preview*, when the two editorial boards merged. Sutherland refers to Finch as a “dandified versifier.”<sup>29</sup> An unsigned editorial in the next issue gave notice that several board members (or what amounted to all remaining members formerly associated with *Preview*) had resigned en masse over “a difference of opinion about editorial policy, particularly concerning criticism and reviews.”<sup>30</sup> Thirty-five years later, in a review of Finch’s *Variations and Theme* (1980), Susan Gingell-Beckman noted that “Ever since John Sutherland’s virulent attack on the bestowing of the Governor General’s Award on Finch’s *Poems*, Finch’s critical reputation has dwindled to the point where he has been excluded from virtually all the contemporary major anthologies of Canadian poetry....”<sup>31</sup>

In the criticism that started to appear in the 1950s and

27 A. J. M. Smith, *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (Toronto: W. J. Gage, 1943).

28 John Sutherland, Review of *Poems* by Robert Finch, *Northern Review* 1.6 (1947): 38–40. It is interesting to note that Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski reprint this review in *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada: Essential Articles on Contemporary Canadian Poetry in English* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1967) but not Sutherland’s attack on Patrick Anderson of three years before.

29 For an in-depth discussion of how Finch’s poetry fits into the aesthetic tradition, see Brian Trahearne’s article “Finch’s Early Poetry and the Dandy Manner” in *Canadian Poetry* 18 (1986): 11–34.

30 Editors of *Northern Review*, Notices of Resignation, *Northern Review*, II.1 (1947): 40. Reprinted in *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada*.

31 Susan Gingell-Beckman “Against an Anabasis of Grace: A Retrospective Review of the Poems of Robert Finch,” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 23 (1982): 157–62.

1960s and became the texts to which later critics would in turn invariably refer, the opposition of “cosmopolitan” and “native,” with its echo of “artificial” and “masculine,” attained the status of received wisdom. The poets associated with *First Statement* wrote the story of Canadian modernism in part because key *Preview* poets had left the country by the early 1950s—Page as the wife of a Canadian ambassador and Anderson to England, where he continued to teach and wrote travel books. He did not get a chance to address the distortions of his legacy until the 1970s, when he renewed his tie to Canada and also again began to write poetry. Yet, by then, the position advanced by the *First Statement* diaspora had inveigled itself firmly into the chronology of Canadian poetry rehearsed almost to this day. The very heterosexual dramatic personae of poets like Irving Layton, arguably the preeminent poet of the 1950s and early 1960s, and the critical assessments of Louis Dudek and those who trained under him, raked the stage sharply in their favour, a stage upon which they have had enormous, long-lasting, and influential careers. When considering the straight male poets who have held sway in Canada for the last sixty years and while acknowledging the growing diversity of their aesthetics, it is striking how much of a boy’s club Canadian poetry has remained (just ask the girls). Their articulations of self recall the goings-on of a club or a locker room, a locker room from which, ironically if typically, many straight male poets also have felt excluded. Even in today’s climate, which is nuanced by multiple perspectives and subject positions, it feels inevitable that a Gen-X frat pack will assert itself, assume the mantle of their elders, and attempt to hold sway.

Wanting to be on an equal footing in society, to “belong,” to be one of the boys, has proved complicated for many gay poets, who may well write from a slightly different point of reference, but with the same sense of engagement as all poets do. In 1944, American poet Robert Duncan, then a young man in his mid-twenties, published his essay, “The Homosexual in Society,”<sup>32</sup> in which he declares his homosexuality, and goes

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32 Robert Duncan, “The Homosexual in Society,” *Politics* 1 (August 1944); it is included in his *Selected Prose* (New York: New Directions): 38–50.

into detail about the predicament in which he finds himself as a poet who wants to be honest:

In the face of the hostility of society which I risk in making even the acknowledgement explicit in this statement, in the face of the “crime” of my own feelings, in the past I publicized those feelings as private and made no stand for their recognition, but tried to sell them as disguised, for instance, as conflicts arising from mystical sources.

While Duncan comes across as unwilling to identify himself too closely with “the homosexual cult,” he does make a case “for a group whose only salvation is in the struggle of all humanity for freedom and individual integrity,” making a plea for homosexual themes to be written and read as human themes, not written and consequently corrupted (which he defines as “the rehearsal of unfeeling”) for a coterie of sympathetic readers, but for the most widespread audience. However Duncan’s public declaration of sexual orientation might now be read (in 1959 he characterized it as more of a “confession”), it is impossible to imagine that Patrick Anderson could have met his accuser’s allegations in a like statement in Canada the year before. Nor is it imaginable that any Canadian publisher or poet could have won a case like the obscenity trial that City Lights Books and Allen Ginsberg fought successfully over *Howl*.

Instead, in 1965, Edward A. Lacey privately published *The Forms of Loss*. In 1963, Lacey, who would spend most of his adult life in the Third World teaching English and working as a translator, had been teaching for a year at the University of Alberta in Edmonton when he became reacquainted with Dennis Lee, whom he had known as a student at the University of Toronto (Lacey studied languages with Robert Finch at University College). Lee encouraged him in his project to compile a first book of poems, and two years later, with Margaret Atwood and Dennis Lee’s financial help<sup>33</sup>, the

<sup>33</sup> In an email to me, Ian Young indicates that both Atwood and Lee underwrote the cost of publishing *The Forms of Loss*, not just Lee, as Fraser Sutherland

book was printed.<sup>34</sup> This slim volume of twenty-six poems is considered to be the first openly gay poetry published in book form in Canada.<sup>35</sup>

While the importance of Lacey's book cannot be overestimated, he was not the lone Canadian to write on homoerotic themes in 1965. The consideration of *The Forms of Loss* as our first openly gay book of poetry must first be tempered with the recognition that, in the same year, Jean Basile's *Journal poétique*, published by Les Editions du Jour, featured several homoerotic poems. Phyllis Webb's landmark *Naked Poems*<sup>36</sup> also appeared that year; it is considered to be "an early example of Canadian literature with lesbian content."<sup>37</sup> Webb may not have been as open in her book as Lacey—she "reveals that the object of her love is a woman while deflecting attention from this fact by avoiding pronouns and using codes ... she withholds as much she tells"<sup>38</sup>—but the book attracted immediate interest and is still remembered because of its formal finesse and because it was written by an already admired poet.

John Herbert was also then refining his play, *Fortune and Men's Eyes*,<sup>39</sup> which examines the violence and homosexuality at a reformatory. After rejections elsewhere, Herbert submitted it to the Stratford Festival, which accepted it for the 1965 Young Actors Workshop. Yet because of the content, "the Stratford Board of Directors forbade the single planned public performance, and it was performed privately for the Stratford actors."<sup>40</sup> It eventually premiered in New York in 1967 (one year before *The Boys in the Band*), running to acclaim for nearly a year, followed by a tour to Chicago and

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indicates in his introduction to Lacey's *Collected Poems*.

34 Coincidentally, *The Forms of Loss* did not include "Quintallas," which dates back to the 1950s and was, according to Sutherland, Lacey's first openly gay poem.

35 Fraser Sutherland, "Introduction," *The Collected Poems and Translations of Edward A. Lacey* (Toronto: Colombo & Company, 2000) vi–vii.

36 Phyllis Webb, *Naked Poems* (Vancouver: Periwinkle Press, 1965).

37 Catherine Lake and Nairne Holtz, eds., *No Margins: Writing Canadian Fiction in Lesbian* (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2006) 310.

38 Ibid.

39 John Herbert, *Fortune and Men's Eyes* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

40 See entry on *Fortune and Men's Eyes* in *The Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia* (Athabasca, AB: Athabasca University) at [www.canadiantheatre.com](http://www.canadiantheatre.com).

San Francisco, new productions in Toronto, Montreal, and Los Angeles, and a return engagement in New York under the aegis of Sal Mineo. It is also the most widely published and most anthologized play by a Canadian.

Daryl Hine, a Vancouver-born poet on faculty at the University of Chicago who would later hold the position of editor at *Poetry* from 1968 to 1978, had already published four books (the first two in Canada, the third in England, and the fourth in America). From the beginning, his work was homoerotically allusive,<sup>41</sup> with openly gay poems like “The Visit” published in *Minutes* (1968). From 1965 onwards, he published almost exclusively with Atheneum, one of the most respected literary houses in the United States, and built an enviable reputation as part of America’s literary establishment. In contrast, Scott Symons’ novel, *Place d’Armes*,<sup>42</sup> was published by McClelland & Stewart in 1967 to almost universally bad notices that seemed motivated by an intolerance that was “as much a political response as it was a reaction against Symons’ exploration of homosexuality.”<sup>43</sup> Not only did the book foment critical outrage, it emboldened the parents of Symons’ underage lover to have authorities chase after the couple all the way to Mexico.<sup>44</sup> Symons has enjoyed an outlaw or antiestablishmentarian reputation ever since, though, in 2005, the *Literary Review of Canada* placed his novel among the 100 most important books written by Canadians.

Lacey may not have fared as well in reputation as Webb, Herbert, Hine, or even Symons, but he was very much part of a trend towards more openly gay writing by Canadians. Out of the social and political changes wrought by the 1960s, a more confident gay male poetry emerged. Dennis Lee, Lacey’s benefactor, read Ian Young’s work in *Acta Victoriana*, the Victoria College literary journal at the University of

41 In an email to me, Hine described some of the poems he published as early as 1955 (in *Five Poems*) as “explicit,” an opinion he says was shared by others.

42 Scott Symons, *Combat Journal for Place d’Armes* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1967).

43 Peter Buitenhuis, from his introduction to the paperback edition of Symons’ book published by McClelland & Stewart in 1968.

44 *Place d’Armes* went on to win the Beta Sigma Phi Best First Canadian Novel Award for that year.



Toronto, and, in 1967, featured several of Young's poems in the anthology, *T.O. Poetry Now*, which he published through his new press, House of Anansi. In 1969, Anansi released Young's *Year of the Quiet Sun*,<sup>45</sup> making it the first book of openly gay male poetry to have appeared under the imprint of a recognizable English–Canadian publisher. Lee's support of Young (and Lacey) could be said to be the planting of a seed from which many roots spread—disoriented, far-ranging roots whose awareness of one another seldom intertwined, but from which, however distantly, so much else that has grown up since may choose to trace its origins.

By the early 1970s, the poets born between 1939 and 1950—whom I consider to be the Stonewall generation, for they were the first to benefit as young men from the liberalizations by then well underway in Canada, Britain, and the United States—were able to write more directly about their erotic lives, should they choose to, without real fear of legal consequence. Along with a proliferation of gay liberation groups on and off university campuses and the founding of community-based gay newsletters, newspapers, and magazines, the most famous of which is Toronto's *The Body Politic*, attempts were made to establish gay-centered literary presses. In 1970, Young founded Catalyst, which he describes as the first gay press anywhere in the world, and published thirty gay and lesbian titles in diverse genres before ceasing operations in 1979, including Edward A. Lacey's *Later* (he also distributed Lacey's self-published *Path of Snow*) and his own book, *Common-or-Garden Gods*.<sup>46</sup> A more modest attempt at gay publishing was made by Doug Wilson when he founded Stubblejumper Press in Saskatoon in 1977, publishing only a handful of titles, with his own single book of poems as its first. Bill Bissett's legendary Blewointment Press, established in Vancouver in the 1960s, was not exclusively gay in its mandate, but Bissett did publish several gay poets, including himself and Bertrand Lachance. From the first, gay publishing has only ever been an ephemeral grassroots activity in Canada, with no viable and independent, solely gay literary press or

45 In 1968, Anansi had published an edition of Allen Ginsberg's *Airplane Dreams*.

46 Ian Young, "Memoirs of a Catalyst," unpublished memoir, dated April 2003.

magazine of any consequence able to survive for long (though after bissett sold *blewointment*, its new owners rechristened the press *Nightwood Editions*, now an imprint of *Harbour Publishing* and the home of *Andy Quan's* and *Norm Sacuta's* first books of poetry, which appeared in 2001). Also, since the mid-1970s, several other mainstream literary presses have laudably fostered the careers of many gay male poets, most notably *Anansi*, *Arsenal Pulp*, *Coach House*, *Écrits des Forges*, *ECW*, *Guernica*, *Les Herbes Rouges*, *New Star*, *Noroît*, *Polestar*, *Talonbooks*, and *TSAR*.

bill bissett, as an icon of the 1960s and 1970s counterculture, is as beloved today as he was reviled by members of the House of Commons who denounced him as much for the “extremity” of his work as its manner, which did not conform to their limited understanding of literary forms. bissett is almost a “trickster” figure, due in part to his memorable sound-poetry performances complete with rattles and to early poems like “eet me alive” or “a warm place to shit,” that manifest an ecstatic awareness of the body. A colleague of bpNichol, who published his first book, bissett expresses his dissidence—a dissidence that cannot be defined as queer—through a highly personalized, decades-consistent, morphologically, and orthographically aberrant approach to the transcription of text to the page and through his virtuosic concrete poetry. His work demands that the reader ascribe to the principles under which it has been written, a demand that is in no way aggressive, for once the challenge of breaking his “code” has been met, his world of subtle insights, candour, and fine simplicities opens beautifully.

Immediately before and after 1970, Robin Blaser, Stan Persky (both in 1966), and George Stanley (in 1971) arrived from San Francisco. Protégés of Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan and, except for Persky, older than the gay-liberation-inspired poets of Stonewall, they brought with them a core of aesthetic principles that have had an enormous impact on the writing of the West Coast. Blaser in particular, with his cosmic sense of language and the public interconnectedness of texts, traditions, philosophies, and politics, is today a poet of international standing perhaps better recognized outside the country than within. Blaser and Stanley retained their links

with the writing communities they were attached to in the United States and continued to publish there, perhaps initially to the detriment of their Canadian reputations, where their “foreign” books and pamphlets would not necessarily have been available. Stanley, however, did issue several books of new and previously published poetry with New Star, Oolichan, and Talonbooks, and in the 1980s, Blaser began to publish regularly with Talonbooks and Coach House. Persky only published one book of poems, but has made his reputation on such pioneering works of creative nonfiction as *Buddy’s: Meditations on Desire*.

Blaser has described himself as “cosmopolitan,” a loaded concept that is recognizable from Anderson’s experiences as difficult for Canadians to metabolize.<sup>47</sup> In 2000, when asked if he felt that he had a queer poetics, Blaser replied, “No, I would not. I am queer and I concern myself with a poetics, and queer would not describe everything I attempt in my poetics. I’m hoping that the world of queer poetics is included and that gay people will be interested in what I am doing, because they are very much a part of my community.”<sup>48</sup> Known for his great “Image-Nation” poems as well for the ongoing project, *The Holy Forest*, that contains them, Blaser voices an eloquent queer poetics in “In Remembrance of Matthew Shepard.”

It is an understatement to say that gay writing in Canada, like everywhere else, was profoundly changed by AIDS in the 1980s. Michael Lynch, Michael Estok, and Ian Stephens all succumbed to the disease, leaving behind moving records of its effects in their collections of poetry, *These Waves of Dying Friends* (1989), *A Plague Year Journal* (1989), and *Diary of a Trademark* (1994) respectively, the first two being posthumous. Doug Wilson also died from AIDS-related complications, but lived long enough to complete the last novel by his lover, Peter McGehee, who predeceased him. Estok’s *A Plague Year Journal* is a particularly remarkable document for the bite of its anger and passionate, even vehement, use of language, almost as if,

47 R. W. Gray, “...we have to think in communities now...’: An Interview with Robin Blaser,” *Arc* 44 (2000): 34.

48 Ibid.

ironically, the experience of the disease itself matured him as a writer.

AIDS, of course, became one of the great themes of the age, with its “treatment” poetically evolving almost as rapidly as medical understanding. Even a cursory perusal of the books by any of the contemporaneous poets in this anthology will locate individual poems that respond to the social and physical challenges that it has posed for gay men, excellent examples being Gregory Scofield’s *Native Canadiana* (particularly his poem, “Queenie”), André Roy’s *On sait que cela a été écrit avant et après la grande maladie*, or Richard Teleky’s allegorical “The Hermit’s Kiss.” Sadly and strangely, with the turn of the millennium, it appears that, for some, the urgency to address AIDS has fallen off. Is it because of its transformation from an automatic “death sentence” into something “chronic” and “treatable”? Or because of its widening sweep into straight communities in the Western democracies and through the Third Word—almost as if it were no longer “ours”? Or maybe gay male poets have exhausted it as a theme or have simply become exhausted? Still, AIDS has had a profound effect on the psyche of any “active” poet. Self-consciousness must be at play during the composition of an erotic love poem since we have all had to become, even in the performance of the most casual acts of love, more self-aware. As Robin Blaser says, “Any poem is close to the body.”<sup>49</sup>

The number of gay male poets writing in Canada has continued to grow, with nearly half of the poets in *Seminal* publishing their first book that contains (openly) gay-themed poems since the late 1980s. In her foreword to the 1991 issue of *The Church-Wellesley Review*, Jane Rule begins “In the olden days, we had few choices of tone, either the tragic self-pity of Radclyffe Hall in *The Well of Loneliness* or the flippant disguise of Oscar Wilde and Noël Coward. Now, as is evident in this second literary supplement to *XTRA*, we have claimed the full range of attitudes toward our experience.” After summarizing the strengths of the writing to be found within the supplement, Rule cautions readers and writers alike that

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49 Ibid, 28.

“content still too often overpowers form because we are new at being able to speak the range of our experiences, and urgency overcomes us. Critical of styles used to disguise, we must not make the mistake of discarding eloquence now that it can serve the truth.”<sup>50</sup> While Rule was no doubt responding to the grassroots or amateur ambitions of many of the featured authors, her call to action has certainly been answered in the collections of poetry published by writers as diverse in style, attitude, and background as David Bateman, Todd Bruce, Clint Burnham, Brian Day, Gilles Devault, Dennis Denisoff, Sky Gilbert, Blaine Marchand, Daniel David Moses, Jim Nason, Billeh Nickerson, Ian Iqbal Rashid, Brian Rigg, Stephen Schecter, and R. M. Vaughn. They have broadened and enriched Canada’s gay men’s poetry, bringing into play issues of race, ethnicity, and post-colonialism that have leavened the narcissism, stridency, and technical infelicity of some of their peers, lessers, and forgettable antecedents.

Jean-Paul Daoust’s remarkable *Les cendres bleues*, which won the Governor General’s Award for Poetry in French in 1990 (Nicole Brossard was on the jury), is one of the period’s masterworks. Narrated by a middle-aged man who exposes, mourns, and celebrates the adult lover of his preteens—the lover who initiated him to the joy and complexity of physical and emotional intimacy, the lover who commits suicide (subverting the paradigm that it is only the recipients of ‘abuse’ who are the victims)—this book-length poem is audacious as well in its technique. Structured as a single unpunctuated sentence, it proceeds for over fifty pages without pause or stanza break, relying only on line breaks to calibrate the unfolding of its bold and compelling story. Walter Borden’s verse play, *Tightrope Time: Ain’t Nuthin’ More Than Some Itty Bitty Madness Between Twilight & Dawn*, a one-man show performed by the author that George Elliott Clarke has described as “a contemporary Africadian drama,”<sup>51</sup> is equally important. Though not primarily gay in focus, it

50 *The Church–Wellsley Review* was a literary annual published in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a supplement to the Pride issue of *XTRA!*, Toronto’s bimonthly gay and lesbian newspaper.

51 George Elliott Clarke, “Must All Blackness Be American? Locating Canada in Borden’s ‘Tightrope Time,’ or Nationalizing Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*” in *Odyssey’s Home* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002): 74.

features a “*bizarrierie*” of twelve characters who in cabaret-style monologues articulate a Canadian perspective on black experience distinct from its American counterpart and “rescue[s] the devalued black body” and, through Ethiopia, a drag queen, and Chuck, a rent boy, “redeems that of the homosexual.”<sup>52</sup>

A new generation of gay male poets—poets born in the 1970s and 1980s and who are publishing their first books today—is beginning to make its presence felt. They express a more fluid sexual orientation than the one voiced by the poets of Stonewall and AIDS, a sexuality that may often be secondary to other preoccupations. Without deflecting the marginalization or anger that are among their elders’ traditional themes, they take their sexuality in stride and do not automatically let it trouble the surface of their poems or draw attention to itself. Seldom do they attempt to state a case for tolerance or solicit empathy for themselves as gay men, but when they are motivated to address issues of sexuality, as does Michael V. Smith in “Salvation,” they often do so in order to shed light on a transgressive complexity which might have daunted past generations of poets, or in order to connect their sexuality to issues like masculinity, as Michael Knox does in his book, *Play Out the Match*. These poets do not inhabit a “subculture,” do not see themselves as outside the “canonical” traditions of poetry, and do not perceive their stories as excluded from it or something to slip in subversively because in broad strokes, if not in the details, they feel more confident that these stories are now recognized as part of an inclusive human narrative.

These poets are perhaps the natural inheritors of Robin Blaser, if not in style or ability (for how they mature as poets is yet to be seen), then in an emphasis on a queer poetics felt as a *part* of a larger poetics that embraces the plenitude of experience in the public realm. The stridencies of the past forty years may not necessarily interest them, but their sense of themselves is not in any way a reversion back to the straight-acting and polarizing rubric of not being a “gay poet” but being a poet “who happens to be gay.” Rather,

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52 Ibid, 79.

their attitude is one of synthesis, a confidence that moves beyond identity politics because identity itself is no longer questionable, but a fact to be parsed and questioned. Compare Sean Horlor's "In Praise of Beauty" or "For St. Jude, or What Gets Him Where He Is" to Blaser's "In Remembrance of Matthew Shepard." All three see experience on a higher metaphysical plane that neither denies its grittiness nor excludes queerness.

*Seminal*, with its self-confident, even arrogant, subtitle, "the anthology," is a representation of the gay male poets writing in this country past and present as well as a sampling of the poetry written by its fifty-seven contributors. Billeh Nickerson and I have attempted to broaden its scope by locating and including poets writing from other subjectivities besides our own—black, aboriginal, Jewish, South Asian, Chinese, Québécois—those poets whose points of reference are different from the blandishing defaults of "English" and "white" culture. We hope our efforts provide the basis for a more nuanced understanding of what it has meant to write "queer" poetry in Canada for just over one hundred years.

Of course, there are inevitable omissions. Several poets declined our invitation (or declined on behalf of the deceased whose estates they happen to represent) because they felt discomfort at being included in an anthology circumscribed by the word "gay," believing this criterion "narrowed" possible readings of their work—a fear that in its diversity *Seminal* entirely refutes—thereby de-universalizing and devaluing it in some diminishing way. More worrying are those writers whom we might have left out simply because we could not find them. We did not widely circulate a call for submissions (concerned that only those poets who did not heed Jane Rule's call for technical rigour would respond and overwhelm us) and instead solicited recommendations from as many quarters as possible. Still, who knows what questions we failed to ask, what leads we did not pursue diligently enough? That a poet might not have been found after such an exhaustive search as ours suggests Canada may still have a long way to go as an inclusive literary culture.

During the assembly of any anthology like *Seminal*,

the question of greatness inevitably comes up—raised immediately after the question as to why such an anthology is needed at all (a question usually raised by straight middle-aged men who hate to be excluded from any club that’s going, even if they do truly grasp what the method of initiation is) has been ignored as defying credulity. Who is Canada’s great gay male poet? Is there more than one? Why haven’t we produced a Walt Whitman? Where is our Hart Crane? Our W. H. Auden, our Robert Duncan, our John Ashbery? Why do we not see one or more among us, or is it only that we don’t know where to look? Each of *Seminal’s* readers will decide on his (or her) own, but I hope critical judgement will not be clouded by typically Canadian myopias not too different from the ones I raised when discussing the long shadow that I believe the fate of Patrick Anderson’s work has cast over Canadian gay male poetry in general.

As Canadians, we have a hard time keeping track of our expatriates while at the same time appreciating the “strangers” among us, and English Canadians have a particularly hard time developing an awareness of anything written or experienced in the “other” official language. Would not permanent expatriate Edward A. Lacey (whose published works have never moved beyond a basement-press milieu) or Illinois-resident Daryl Hine (whose *Recollected Poems* will be published in 2007 by Fitzhenry & Whiteside, making his work available in a Canadian edition for the first time since his *Selected Poems* of 1980) or Idaho-born Robin Blaser (whose revised and expanded collected poems, *The Holy Forest*, was published by the University of California Press in 2006) or Jean-Paul Daoust (who has published two limited *Selected Poems* in English translation with Guernica in 1991 and 1999) all be worthy of consideration as equals among Canada’s other canonical figures? To be fair, Blaser is revered in many quarters and Gary Geddes did represent his work in *15 Canadian Poets X Three*,<sup>53</sup> but when an anthology of contemporary Canadian poetry was recently published in the United States, its Canadian-born editor admitted that the name of no living Canadian gay male poet came to mind when

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53 Gary Geddes, ed. *15 Canadian Poets X 3* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2001).



drawing together its contents.

However, the merits of gay male poetry and its potential to grasp Parnassus have been placed into perspective for me by John D’Emilio in an article recently published by *The Gay and Lesbian Review*. This respected University of Illinois historian makes the following salient observation:

*Since the early 1960s, the lives of many, many heterosexuals have become much like the imagined lives of homosexuals.* Being heterosexual no longer means settling as a young adult into a lifelong coupled relationship sanctioned by the state and characterized by the presence of children and sharply gendered spousal roles. Instead, there may be a number of intimate relationships over the course of a lifetime. A marriage certificate may or may not accompany these relationships. Males and females alike expect to earn their way. Children figure less importantly in the lifespan of adults, and some heterosexuals, for the first time in history, choose not to have children at all. [The italics are D’Emilio’s.]<sup>54</sup>

Who knew that the Joneses were trying to keep up with us and not the other way around? Though D’Emilio happens to be talking about social change in context with the Gordian knot that same-sex marriage has sadly proven itself to be in the United States—a knot that certain conservatives<sup>55</sup> in our own country have attempted to retie without any judicial or legislative success—he affirms and reminds us that the social standing we have built for ourselves is the definitive “new normal” (to appropriate—and hopefully debase—another politically loaded term).

54 John D’Emilio, “The Marriage Fight is Setting Us Back,” *Gay and Lesbian Review* 13 (November–December 2006) 10–11.

55 The social conservatives have their apologists in surprising quarters. Even respected McGill University ethicist Margaret Somerville, while first arguing discrimination based on sexual orientation is morally repugnant, attempts to develop a convincing argument against same-sex marriage in the 2006 Massey Lectures (see *The Ethical Imagination* [Toronto: House of Anansi, 2006]: 101–104).

In decades past, we have viewed, even valorized ourselves as aberrant and have been treated as such. We have decried and praised ourselves for our innate and accursed “otherness.” Though some in the queer community truly do mourn the loss of our fabled outlaw status in exchange for the attainment of our rights (as if we should have our cake and still be able to eat it, too, on the sly), this new normal we have called into being opens up our possibilities considerably today—especially if we continue to *drag* the rest of society forward with us.

For the gay male poet, the range, parameters, and depth of potential themes at last are limitless. Still, simply to imagine that the societal changes improving our queer lives might have been triggered more by heterosexuals following our subliminal cues and less by our persistent demand for an equal (poetic) voice could turn any understanding of a century’s progress on its pink-lined ear.

Who knew our poets had been queering the world so beautifully and productively all along?

*John Barton*

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