Stan Persky / ADDRESS TO THE WORKERS' COUNCIL OF PRINCE GEORGE, B.C.

Brian Fawcett, *Creatures of State* (Talonbooks, Vancouver, 1977)

In case you've forgotten what the preocupations of contemporary poetry are, here is a sampler of the mercilessly bad:

> Some leaves stay
> long after the trees
> shave off their beards and
>
> give the Cold their
> gray contempt to
> walk on. But these
>
> single, small flutterers
> hang way past dinner,
> aloof to the weather. . . .
>
> (from "Last Leaves of Fall", M.K.)

(For those itching to know whodunit, the above missive flutters to the conclusion: "yet there's a/lesson here; a kind of/sacred/singleness of will.")

Against my feet the force
Of the apple tree
Comes up hard.

It is the arm of earth's lovely shove
and down
Around me leaves like little souls
unfinished autumn
Business rusting on top of the grass.

(from "Autumnal", W.J.S.)

(The effect of this incessant natural force on the author eventually "makes me dizzy makes/Me hard & unique like breech birth." No, not beech, breech.) And finally:

. . . .

Burn off, as sunlight burns
Through morning fog, this gauze
Round my protected heart,
And let your fire
Reanimate my cold clay.

(from "Heirloom", E.H.)

(As you probably guessed, it's addressed to God.)

The above semi-anonymous chrestomathy, unlike John Newlove's *Canadian Poetry: The Modern Era* (M&S, 1977), which is "based on a survey done of the needs of Canadian literature instructors in small universities across the country", was selected with brutal arbitrariness from the pages of *Canadian Forum* (Oct. 77). I admit to deliberately avoiding good poems, not to make the race easier for my horse, but to minimize distraction. Despite being unfairly torn from their placid natural habitat, such poems express not unrepresentative concerns.

(Though I'm sorry for being unfair, at least I didn't make you suffer any "love" poems.) The present range, then, is sufficient for observations that provide commentary upon "life" (though who is to know that that "single, small flutterer" illustrating "singleness of will" doesn't refer to Hitler?), the true and false modesty of finding oneself in the cosmos (without the anxiety of airplanes hijacked by Japanese Red Army Terrorists), invocations to spiritual beings (although God is perhaps old-fashioned, petulant pleas to the Muse are not uncommon; personally, I prefer praying to old unrequited loves, who respond to your entreaties with about the same degree of efficacy as other divinities and have the added advantage of providing a pleasant image satisfying to nocturnal fantasy). I leave aside copious quantities of mere vicious obscurantism. I say nothing of love. I admit there is poetry unashamed of mundane institutions (airports, tv, hockey), though too often blankly present in affirmation of the existential moment.

The number of poetry books published in Canada this year which give no hint whatsoever that we are in the midst of a capitalist crisis is truly astonishing. I don't mean topicality (though, at times, I'm sorely tempted to begin: "This is a poem about layoffs at Inco/it doesn't concern me/after all, I'm not losing *my* job"). I simply mean what Fawcett means when he thunders:

> Art, and Poetry in particular, can never be passive in reflecting its time or culture. To do so today is to reflect a fragmentary, half-ignorant panoply in which, looming in the foreground, is the Self — grinning larcenously. Behind it are the streets, nature dimly visible in the distance. Others . . . appear, if at all, in the form of partialities, possessions, sexual capacities, or by auras and spiritualities; never in wholeness, always disconnected from the Self. Underpinning this landscape is privilege and exploitation.

In case you've forgotten the possibilities of contemporary poetry, take this, "Elegy", from *Creatures of State*, by contrast (settle in, the Styx is wide, and our centaur-boatman is accustomed to shiftwork):

We feel alone we
don't want to own any of it.

It isn't that words fail me
or that ancient motions of the moon & stars
cease to delight but

. . . .

The orchard is private property,
is fenced against campertrucks

. . . .

most trees dead & they want
to cut them all down
to keep spraying costs in line
for the managed orchards to the north
& all I am asked is

does the Old Moon Abide, is it full
of loathing?

. . . .

the farmers still work, they sell peaches
in styrofoam cartons to the tourists
& space in the orchards for campers

. . . .

the heavenly bodies . . .
spread their designs
over the surface of the lake the wind
comes up, pushes the new weed

onto the subdivided shore, but

we must also know & say that
capitalism succeeded on this continent
because of the possibility of expanding
into contiguous markets & landscapes

& we have come to the end here
in the particular instances
Penticton, Princeton, Prince George
. . . .
& the contraction
in the value of our capital (& our Eros
reveals the interior destructions
. . . .
What occurs here is the ultimate sorrow
of mere development, is consumption
without accretion
of thought
inattention to material —
arborite & plywood & these
ornamental cedars are like our lives
they lack virtu they simply
tire out with age & turn to junk, have
to be discarded. . . .

The theoretical perspective — that is, the shift from bourgeois idealism to historical materialism — so imbues the content that it might go virtually unnoticed, even in this *Reader's Digest* condensed version. Its effect, as they say about relativity theory in relation to Newton, is not to discard, but to encompass and surpass. Thus, for instance, "most trees dead & they want/to cut them all down" is there just like it would be in any poem, however, not as implicit condemnation of man's inhumanity to nature, but in relation to spraying cost, which in turn concerns the economic rhythm of the entire industry. That is, you continue to see the orchards, actual trees, but simultaneously also apprehend the abstraction of the fruit industry (in sum, a more complex reality). Gradually, there is accretion: " . . . the wind/comes

up, pushes the new weed/onto the subdivided shore . . . " (he doesn't succumb to the topical, discoursing on the infestation of Eurasian milfoil weed), as the orchard is private property, the shore is subdivided (the weed, presumably, democratically fouls everyone's beachfront). The texture is such that by the time we are in need of an explicit lexicon ("capitalism" "contiguous markets", "contraction/in the value of our capital (& our Eros", where Eros is measured in these new terms), nothing is out of place (I leave aside the poem's Beauty, Intelligence and the fact that it makes you go boo-hoo in the night).

In one poem in *Creatures of State* that serves as a kind of prologue to the unrelenting address of Citizen Fawcett (b. 1944, Prince George, B.C.) to his fellow citizens, he's driving north, returning, into the central interior:

> the road stretching into the starless dark etc.
> eventually the lights of the city, Prince George

That rather startling "etc." refers not just to everything that we're familiar with about such trips, including the road's duration, but also to an entire mode of poetry (unwittingly, it also bespeaks an enormous confidence of poetic craft which, happily, is justified by the text). "Etc.": and the rest of what can be safely assumed we all know.

Creatures of State, confidence notwithstanding, is enmeshed in the struggle for a vocabulary (both lexical and conceptual) in poetry beyond what can be safely assumed we all know. This enlargement of language that allows poetry to directly take account of/confront/write itself in terms of capitalist society (invisible in most of our poetry) proposes (even insists upon) a "public imagination" that shakes us free from the "egocentric perspective of lyric poetry" and attempts to avoid the "closure of ideology" (what we think of, derogatorily, as political rhetoric). As such, it breaks with Fawcett's earlier work, and more importantly, challenges most of what is currently going on in Canadian poetry (and by that, I refer to something more substantial than Newlove's computer-like compilations or the *Forum*'s verse-filler).

Fawcett has vigorously argued our plight from the podium of *No Money From the Government* (it says something of that plight that *NMFG*, the poetry magazine Fawcett has produced since early 1976, is one of less than a handful of such publications that can be taken at all seriously):

> The artists of my own generation can and should be accused of a lack of social imagination; they can imagine no other world than the one they live in, and worse, many regard the absence as a virtue. Such a condition can be explained as demoralization, and presupposes the need for a moralization. But while most artists are aware of the demoralization it is precisely the lack of social imagination that prevents them from really grappling with the problem of how to create social morale within a generation of individualists. Similarly, its absence deprives us of perspective, and leaves us all in the position of excusing our own time. . . .

He's unsparing of the "fundamentally hostile, paranoic and depressing" writers whose "attitude toward the world outside themselves involves a romantic attraction to those areas of existence in which questions of social responsibility have been done away with." "There is really very little to excuse it." He's equally impatient with capitalism's apologists: "This amounts . . . to saying that MacDonald's Drive-ins are a positive social force because the french fries are tasty." Briefly, the problems of the world's oppressed "are social and political in both nature and remedy, not professional and technical." Which sets the stage for the final blasphemy:

> If I were to suggest that the problems of poetry are the same, the entire establishment in poetry would miraculously be joined by the avant garde in bellowing words like *totalitarian* and *Liberty of Imagination* as they collectively slither back into their frothy liberal privacy.

(Well, he's still in the teething stage, and anyway, you've probably been urged to "have a nice day" several times already today.)

Although *Creatures of State* isn't nostalgic, Fawcett surfaces in Prince George with some frequency. Our mutual experiences of homecoming are familiar enough. Andrew Suknaski's *Wood Mountain Poems* (Macmillan, 1976) or George Bowering's "Autobiology" in *The Catch* (M&S, 1976) come to mind, with the crucial difference that Prince George is a major regional sub-metropolis at the heart of a provincial economy organized around capitalist exploitation of renewable resources (in this case, lumber) destined for the imperialist market.

In that sense, it is easier to come home to the homesteader and aboriginal ghosts of Wood Mountain, Sask., or the dying orchards, long-abandoned smelter stacks and slag heap of Greenwood, B.C., especially if there isn't any intention to link these birthplaces to anything more specific than "the modern world" (in a general sense).

In Prince George, Fawcett finds not ghosts but doppelgangers, doubles of himself at the initiatory age of adolescence, and their appearance is all the more chilling in that they aren't the least bit mysterious; rather, these attitudes, aspirations, assumed manly trappings that constitute personality are seen to be systematically reproduced by capitalist relations of production (that is, how human beings relate to each other given how things are produced, the legend of the frontier, general horniness, etc.).

In Suknaski and Bowering, the poetic problem is entrance, invocation, making the ghosts or childhood consciousness speak, and what linkages there are (between past and present modes of production) have the simple function of making the loss (or rediscovery) more poignant. Fawcett, on the other hand, gets into Prince George easily enough; the trick is getting out alive. (By the way, I cite Suknaski and this chunk of Bowering without pejorative intention, but as the measure of what's readable.)

In Fawcett, there is as much specificity (" . . . one 1957 International 180 refrigerator truck painted cream & white w/ Roses Ice Cream lettered big on the sides & across the front same & on each door Prince George, B.C./took the south approach to the Cottonwood Bridge 18 miles north of Quesnel took it too fast . . . ") as Suknaski ("*father*/ arrives in moose jaw fall of 1914/to find the landtitles office"), but rather than locating one's roots, Fawcett seeks root-causes of our present condition.

In "Cottonwood Canyon" (which Fawcett, a son angry at the city fathers, imagines addressed to the Chamber of Commerce, but which will more likely be remembered by the workers' council of the coming socialist era), the initiatory rite is to determine "whether or not it is possible to take the south approach to the Cottonwood bridge at 60 mph & so make it up the north side of the river canyon without having to gear down all the way/impossible physically but necessary because men talked in the alley behind the plant & shrugged shoulders in such a way as to dispell experience & doubt". The whole point being: "to be among these men". The paradox, of course, seen from the point of return, is that the culture (of men) he ardently desired initiation into isn't, finally, worth being initiated into. Like every culture's deception, the milieu in which the initiatory rite was meaningful had been presented to him as the whole world, i.e., the entirety of meaning. Little wonder that he awakens in a strange place crying that "we are starved for meaning". Which leaves the men. (Cf. the proceedings of the conference on Women and Economic Development, held in Prince

George, Nov. 77, for the other side of this loneliness.) The now-understood (at least better than before) social reality drives the poem to sorrow over those men who were, in a sense, cheated out of a culture worth having. The forces were beyond their undertsanding, and hence, their control:

Prince George is the manifestation of the collective dream of its citizens
a dream of wealth, progress, sophisticated industry pouring goods to world markets
the dream of a generation of men during the 1960's at the beginning of old age,
who came to the city in the 30's & 40's to escape the hungers of the big cities & came with a fierceness to work & make money
women to raise children
my mother at age 35 walking downtown along wooden sidewalks in a white dress . . .
These men grew old rushing at the shimmer of dollars
shafting their friends
some of them hatchetmen for Netherlands Overseas or Northwood Pulp & Paper overbidding timber licences to knock off small mills
They dreamed at night of paper money
in banks made of plywood
& they believed it was just & progressive when the pulp mills came to push them out

The work on Prince George, it's safe to say, isn't done. (Cf. Charles Olson vis-a-vis some other town.) Fawcett's but recently acquired the tools that allow him to plumb, for instance, the Sloan Reports, which at the conclusion of World War II, provided the ideological rationale for monopoly capitalism in logging that gave birth (I don't mean the founding) to Prince George.

Apart from inconsistencies, backsliding and trial balloons that turn out to be leaden, the latter half of *Creatures of State* suffers one major technical fault: what now are grouped as sets of poems interspersed by the repetition of a not particularly enthralling cover illustration were (as originally printed in *NMFG*) titled "serial runs" (e.g., "1st Serial Run: Love's Argument") in which the poems ran continuously over the pages separated only by typographical stars rather than being given the misplaced importance of being set one to a page. (Given the present inattention, I suppose only a stickler for poetry will notice.)

Finally: as noted previously, the call (to arms) is for poetry that is active in reflecting its time or culture, rather than topicality. Yet there are topics broad enough to be common culture. Fawcett, writing in the terms of a discourse which is international, thus putting us in touch with everyone (except dying social classes), at least has some advantage in hailing "The Fall of Saigon" (naturally, our cautious former redneck, raised in the Cold War, would not call it "The Liberation of Saigon"). It is nonetheless difficult, because you have to end up with a real Nixon, which, paradoxically, is not *the* real Nixon, but one that must be as enduring as Dante's Pier della Vigna.

Like hell,
America is collapsing, it is simply being defeated
without intelligent understanding of the causes,
ferrying its finks & victims in barges. . . .
while that
nation divests itself of the image of defeat
Nixon hobbles along pacific coast beaches
on legs bloated with disease
. . . .
Nixon
looks out from the heart of America
we are all subject to . . .
& in Saigon
soldiers sleep in the doorways of paradise
& the stench of gunpowder & gasoline
surrenders in the streets
& our own streets
clear for a moment
hold a possibility of more
than the possession
of stolen blossoms

Let's hope so. As the delegate from Kitimat told the (aforementioned) women's conference: "We have an obligation, if only for our children, to look at the capitalist system, and to call a spade a spade."