

## Studies in Canadian Literature Études en littérature canadienne

# Too Much Liberty in the Garrison? Closed and Open Spaces in the Canadian Sonnet

Timo Müller

Volume 43, Number 1, 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1058070ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1058070ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of New Brunswick, Dept. of English

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Müller, T. (2018). Too Much Liberty in the Garrison? Closed and Open Spaces in the Canadian Sonnet. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 43(1). <https://doi.org/10.7202/1058070ar>

# Too Much Liberty in the Garrison? Closed and Open Spaces in the Canadian Sonnet

TIMO MÜLLER

NORTHROP FRYE'S CLAIM that Canadians developed "a garrison mentality" in the face of a "huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable" landscape arguably remains the best-known statement on Canadian literature, and one of the most controversial. Since its publication in Frye's *Conclusion to the Literary History of Canada* (1965), it has been criticized as mythicizing, homogenizing, and centering on white English Protestant writers (Lecker 284). In recent years the debate has shifted from political critique to historical contextualization, foregrounding issues of space, the environment, and Canadian national identity. In a 2009 collection on Frye's work, Branko Gorjup points to the tension between the environmental determinism of the garrison mentality model and the notion of literature as "autonomous and self-generating" in Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* — a tension he finds replicated in scholarly responses (9; cf. Stacey 84). Adam Carter arrives at a similar conclusion in *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature* (2016), where he reads Frye's work against the contemporary debate on Canadian national identity. While Frye often dismissed the idea that the natural or cultural environment had an impact on the literature of a country, Carter notes, his concept of the garrison mentality presupposes such an impact, as do other important essays Frye published on Canadian poetry (53-55).

The analogies Frye draws between literary and spatial formations, and consequently between literary and national environments, derive from his observations both about Canadian literature and about genre traditions that reach beyond Canadian national boundaries. Frye mentions narrative poetry and the pastoral, which he takes to exemplify early writers' response to the land because the former evokes a sense of vastness and impending tragedy while the latter promises withdrawal into a simple, bounded realm (840-43). This essay aims to draw atten-

tion to another transnational genre tradition in Canadian literature, one that prefigures Frye's conceptualization of the garrison mentality to a remarkable degree: the sonnet.

The Romantic notion of the sonnet as a space made the form available to Canadian poets for negotiating the uneasy relationship between the vastness of the land and the bounded spaces on which individuals build their sense of belonging and identity. The interplay of open and closed spaces shapes the work of the outstanding Canadian sonneteers from the nineteenth into the mid-twentieth century: the Confederation Poets, especially Charles G.D. Roberts and Archibald Lampman, and the modernists A.M. Klein and Margaret Avison. This essay reads their work, on the one hand, against the Romantic sonnet poetics and, on the other, against Canadian literary theory in order to trace how these poets negotiate the nexus of literary form, natural environment, and nationality that Frye and his contemporaries then adopted for their conceptions of a Canadian national literature.

The sonnet has been one of the most consistently popular forms among Canadian poets since the mid-nineteenth century. It features prominently in anthologies such as *The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse* (1984) and in influential volumes such as Lampman's *Among the Millet* (1888), Roberts's *Songs of the Common Day* (1893), and Avison's *Winter Sun* (1960). The anthology *Jailbreak: 99 Canadian Sonnets* (2008), edited by Zachariah Wells, attests to its continuing productivity into the twenty-first century. Yet scholarly discussion of the Canadian sonnet has remained relatively scarce. Aside from a brief historical survey by Martin Kuester, it largely consists of analyses of individual sonnets by a handful of well-known poets (Stouck 35-41). Standard histories such as W.J. Keith's *Canadian Literature in English* (1985), W.H. New's *A History of Canadian Literature* (1988), and Faye Hammill's *Canadian Literature* (2007) only mention the sonnet in passing, if at all. Carl F. Klinck's *Literary History of Canada*, in which Frye's Conclusion on the garrison mentality appeared, and the more recent *Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature* (2016) reference sonnets by individual writers but remain uninterested in the sonnet as a genre or form. The following observations suggest a more central place for the sonnet in Canadian literature. Not only do the formal limitations of the sonnet replicate the tension between closed and open spaces that early literary critics identified as a central preoccupation of Canadian writers, but the trans-

national history of the genre made it an early site of debates around the history, boundaries, and diversity of Canadian national identity.

Both of these strands of sonnet writing arguably originated in European Romanticism, including the British variety that shaped Canadian literature throughout the nineteenth century. It was the Romantics who established the analogy between the boundaries of the sonnet and the spatial boundaries of human societies. William Wordsworth in particular made this analogy central to his extensive engagement with the form. The poetic and the societal implications of this dialectic of openness and closure are evident in the widely influential prefatory sonnet to his 1807 *Poems, in Two Volumes*:

Nuns fret not at their Convent's narrow room;  
 And Hermits are contented with their Cells;  
 And Students with their pensive Citadels:  
 Maids at the Wheel, the Weaver at his Loom,  
 Sit blithe and happy; Bees that soar for bloom,  
 High as the highest Peak of Furness Fells,  
 Will murmur by the hour in Foxglove bells:  
 In truth, the prison, unto which we doom  
 Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,  
 In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound  
 Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground:  
 Pleas'd if some Souls (for such there needs must be)  
 Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,  
 Should find short solace there, as I have found. (661-63)

Wordsworth's poem draws a consistent analogy between landscape and literature in its endeavour to valorize small, bounded spaces such as the sonnet. Like the Canadian writers in Frye's account, it juxtaposes these spaces with wide landscapes that defy human control ("the highest Peak"). Whereas Frye depicts these landscapes as dangerous and overpowering, however, Wordsworth acknowledges their attraction and offers his poem as a counterweight. His argument hinges on the enjambement "the prison, unto which we doom / Ourselves, no prison is" (lines 8-9), which reinforces the content of the lines by defying the octave/sestet boundary prescribed by the traditional sonnet form Wordsworth employs. In the end, both writers arrive at the same conclusion: the small, bounded space offers a refuge from the destabilizing effects of the open land. Wordsworth's analogy between landscape and literature

has a number of political implications, as scholars have pointed out, and these, too, resonate with Frye's characterization of Canadian literature. The opening scenes of Wordsworth's poem endorse conservative values such as duty and obedience, as does Frye's garrison, and the poem as a whole borrows from the pastoral tradition in its idealization of rural labour from the vantage point of the privileged outside observer. The reference to the Furness Fells gives the poem a national dimension and evokes a theme that runs through Wordsworth's poetry of the time: the bounded liberty of the sonnet as characteristic of England and as opposed both to the excessive liberty of the French Revolution and to the threat created by that excess, Napoleonic dictatorship (Bate; Cronin 33-34; Hess 10).

Wordsworth's sonnet sequences on France and England (1807) and on the River Duddon (1820) were widely admired in the nineteenth century. They popularized a poetics in which the nation, the cultivated land, and the sonnet referenced and reinforced one another by virtue of their boundedness. The influence of these poetics on Canadian poetry, as well as the tension between his nationalism and the transnational legacy he represented on the other side of the Atlantic, manifested itself most clearly in the work of Roberts, Lampman, and like-minded poets of the later nineteenth century. The name this group of poets received from literary critics almost a century later indicates the continuity of these preoccupations among early theorists of Canadian literature. When Malcolm Ross introduced the term "Confederation Poets" in the 1960s, he was participating in an effort to place this group of cosmopolitan late Victorians firmly in national literary history.

Led by the example and the gentle exhortations of Charles G.D. Roberts, the Confederation Poets created a large, diverse body of work that many contemporaries and later commentators regarded as representative of Canadian artistic achievement. The sonnet was a preferred form among these poets. Roberts and Lampman secured its status when they published entire sequences in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Bliss Carman is better known today for his robust free-verse poetry but wrote dozens of sonnets in his early years. Duncan Campbell Scott, William Wilfred Campbell, and Frederick George Scott shared an admiration for the sonnet tradition and published a range of sonnets. Most of these poets wrote nationalist poetry as well, especially at the beginning of their careers (Bentley, *Confederation Group* 24-69). While Campbell

occasionally drew on the sonnet to this end, the Confederation Poets remained ambivalent about the national character of the form and tended to situate their work in transnational contexts instead.

The Confederation Poets were the first avant-garde to enter the literary scene after Canada had established itself as an autonomous nation, and they were aware of the nationalist expectations placed on their work. In a lecture entitled “The Beginnings of a Canadian Literature” (1883), Roberts responded by rejecting the “injunction to our verse-writers to choose Canadian themes only” and emphasizing the importance of technical skills and aesthetic achievement instead. Canadian literature would not be “a *new* literature” anyway, he argued, since it inevitably formed part of “the splendid structure, English literature, to the building of which may come workmen from every region on earth where speaks the English tongue. The domain of English letters knows no boundaries” (258). Canadian literature would be measured by its ability to contribute to this transnational domain, a project that required craftsmanship rather than topicality. In a review of the current literature published a year later, Roberts predicted that the call for a “distinctively . . . Canadian” literature was likely to result in “a narrow provincialism, both of subject and treatment” (“Literature” 206). For all their interest in local scenes and topics, the Confederation Poets were equally bent on aesthetic achievement, which they defined with reference to European literary traditions.

In the realm of poetry, the sonnet was one of the oldest and most highly regarded of these traditions. Its illustrious range of practitioners alone made it a touchstone for aesthetic achievement and a pillar in the “splendid structure” of English literature. For Roberts and his peers, the sonnet was an entryway into this transnational domain — both for themselves and for the Canadian literary scene they were conscious of representing. While many of their sonnets were devoted to the Canadian landscape, however, the language, structure, and style of these sonnets tended to counteract the local or national focus of their settings because they were so heavily influenced by the English poetic tradition (cf. Bentley, *Confederation Group* 18-20). While the Wordsworthian conception of the sonnet as a synecdoche for the nation remains tangible in their work, this transnational interest ultimately prevents the Confederation Poets from finding a language with which to evoke the local, regional, or national specificity of the landscape.

The sonnets in Roberts's *Songs of the Common Day* (1893) may be taken as representative of this ambivalence. Not only was Roberts the acknowledged leader of the Confederation Poets, but his sonnets on the Tantramar Marshes set an early reference point for Canadian landscape poetry and influenced several other members of the group. Several of the sonnets echo the English Romantics, particularly Wordsworth and Keats (Cogswell xx-xxiii). The opening of "The Summer Pool" recalls the setting and vocabulary of Keats's odes to Psyche and the Nightingale, as does "A Vesper Sonnet" in such lines as "The wine-warm dusks, that brim the valley, gleam / With here and there a lonely casement" (*Collected Poems* 132, lines 4-5). The closing lines of "The Fir Wood" adapt the prison image from Wordsworth's prefatory sonnet:

The spirit spurns her bound,  
Spreads her unprisoned wing, and drifts from out  
This green and humming gloom that wraps my rest. (126, lines  
12-14)

Roberts echoes Wordsworth's valorization of confinement within a bounded rural space and enacts a similar dialectic of imprisonment and overcoming. Whereas Wordsworth contrasts unrestrained physical movement with spiritual rest in the bounded space, Roberts reverses the juxtaposition and has his speaker enjoy physical rest while the mind roves free. This constellation recalls Keats's imaginative flight at the end of the "Ode to Psyche" (1819), but Roberts deprives the motif of its full effect by framing it in an image of physical confinement and by limiting it to a brief statement that fails to evoke the mental scope it asserts. Many of his sonnets evince this problem, often because of his tendency to conclude with Victorian philosophical abstraction and allegorization rather than letting the force and scope of his sceneries unfold. "In the Wide Awe and Wisdom of the Night," for example, recounts the speaker's travel across the vastness of the land but culminates in an allegorical conceit that reduces the "infinitude" of the universe to that of human cognition (133, line 14). "The Sower" bypasses the expanse of the land by zooming in on the eponymous figure and casting him as an allegory of divine "provision for mankind" (82, line 14).

The explicit defiance of boundaries in Roberts's sonnets thus confirms Frye's claims that the garrison mentality confines writers to a physically and mentally limited sphere and that the European influence

prevents them from articulating the grandeur of the Canadian landscape. Several of Roberts's sonnets can be read as evidence of a garrison mentality, for example "The Winter Fields," with its distastefully barren landscape, and "The Cow Pasture" (163):

I see the harsh, wind-ridden, eastward hill,  
 By the red cattle pastured, blanched with dew;  
 The small, mossed hillocks where the clay gets through;  
 The grey webs woven on milkweed tops at will.  
 The sparse, pale grasses flicker, and are still.  
 The empty flats yearn seaward. All the view  
 Is naked to the horizon's utmost blue;  
 And the bleak spaces stir me with strange thrill.

Not in perfection dwells the subtler power  
 To pierce our mean content, but rather works  
 Through incompleteness, and the need that irks, —  
 Not in the flower, but effort toward the flower.  
 When the want stirs, when the soul's cravings urge,  
 The strong earth strengthens, and the clean heavens purge.

The speaker seems to shrink from the land because of its expanse and unruliness. He describes it in consistently negative terms and marshals a long list of unfavourable adjectives: harsh, wind-ridden, blanched, grey, sparse, pale, empty, naked, bleak. The transition to the sestet again subsumes the land under the speaker's thought, as he philosophizes on the lessons to be drawn from the "bleak spaces" he observes. The main antidote to bleakness seems to be interiority: only the imagination can alleviate "the need that irks," and only "the soul's cravings" can efface the bleakness and cleanse the land. As this process is displaced into the speaker's mind, the poem supplants the external landscape with the speaker's internal one. This tension between unbounded and bounded spaces, between the external and the internal, between escape and retreat is palpable throughout the sequence.

"The Cow Pasture" can be read as a manifestation of the garrison mentality in yet another respect: unlike its Wordsworthian precursor it does not link the bounded spaces of the mind and the sonnet to those of the nation. Its scope shifts from the local to the universal without evoking a middle ground from which a national consciousness could spring. Wordsworth's prefatory sonnet establishes this middle ground



by specifying the setting of the poem and imagining a community of contented labourers who contribute to a larger good. In comparison, Roberts's sonnets are conspicuously individual. They focus on the speaker's thoughts and feelings, and where they mention other people at all these are usually solitary, allegorical figures cast in universal rather than national terms.

The entire sequence includes only two geographical references. "The Pea Fields" (138) locates the sequence in the Tantramar Marshes, which it introduces in explicitly individual terms ("My fields of Tantramar") and thus establishes through a list of anaphoric landscape descriptions:

These are the fields of light, and laughing air,  
 And yellow butterflies, and foraging bees,  
 And whitish, wayward blossoms winged as these,  
 And pale green tangles like a seamaid's hair.  
 Pale, pale the blue, but pure beyond compare,  
 And pale the sparkle of the far-off seas  
 A-shimmer like these fluttering slopes of peas,  
 And pale the open landscape everywhere.  
 From fence to fence a perfumed breath exhales  
 O'er the bright pallor of the well-loved fields, —  
 My fields of Tantramar in summer-time[.] (lines 1-11)

One of the less accomplished poems in the sequence, "The Pea-Fields" attempts to capture the grandeur of the landscape with a roving gaze but undermines its own efforts by including incongruous images ("pale green tangles like a seamaid's hair"), gratuitous repetitions ("Pale, pale"), and clumsy archaisms ("A-shimmer"). Many of these problems arise from Roberts's efforts to fit his wide-ranging landscape description into the meter and rhyme scheme required by the sonnet form, so that the poem instead illustrates the nexus of confinement and conventionality Frye ascribes to the garrison mentality. The volta of Roberts's sonnet can even be read as an unwitting revision of its counterpart in Wordsworth's prefatory sonnet. Where the latter defies the conventional boundaries of the form by enjambling its central assertion across the volta, Roberts not only observes this boundary but fortifies it by shifting from the "open landscape" to the confining "fence" that runs around it. For all its conventionality, however, "The Pea-Fields" discourages synecdochal readings of Tantramar as a miniature nation. It remains consistently

local in setting, and the language is indebted to the English literary tradition rather than the young Canadian nation.

The other geographical marker in Roberts's sequence is explicitly national. The setting of "When Milking-Time is Done," an evening poem, is described as "This quiet Canadian inland forest home" (121, line 2). The poem skillfully directs the reader's gaze as it illustrates the remains of rural labour (the "moss-cooled watering trough," the "pasture bars," the animals treading homeward) against the backdrop of a vast but beautiful landscape. The scene is framed by the image of dusk over the land, and the second quatrain adds "the sky's pale dome" as an additional background. The balance of detail and scenery establishes a middle ground that can be equated with the nation, and the poem as a whole approximates the Wordsworthian model by describing rural labour in national terms and vice versa. It retains the diction and mindset of the pastoral elegy, however, which counteracts nationalist readings in a Canadian context. Rather than foregrounding the youth and promise of the country, the poem begins with an ending ("When milking-time is done") and ends with an ominous retreat ("through the dusk the farmstead fades from view"). While the speaker does not explicitly disclose his feelings, the strong echoes of Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751) give its apparently neutral landscape description a distinctly elegiac tone ("twilight voices," "tired plough-horses"). The prominent rhyme words evoke images of transience (fall, call, dream, gleam) and confinement (home, stall, bars). Here too the European literary tradition, whose significance the sonnet form reinforces, undermines nationalist readings by complementing the local setting with a set of transnational references.

A similar dynamic can be observed in the sonnets of Archibald Lampman, the most prolific sonneteer among the Confederation Poets. Lampman, too, shows a Wordsworthian preference for the interiority of small scenes and of the imagination over the vastness of the land, and his sonnets tend to elude nationalist readings in the same way Roberts's do. While his sonnets are frequently set in bounded spaces, Lampman explores ways of transcending these spaces in both the physical and the intellectual sense rather than turning them into synecdoches of the nation. His goal is the universal rather than the national, and his language is unmistakably shaped by the English tradition. As a result

his sonnets, and those of the other Confederation Poets, often appear divested from the local setting they describe. Many of these sonnets evoke the national overtones Wordsworth gave the form, but their main focus is on emulating the stylistic and technical models provided by the European tradition. On the whole, the Confederation Poets' sonnets reflect the group's idea that a national literary tradition was served best if Canadian poetry gained recognition within the transnational domain of English literature.

The twentieth century brought numerous transformations for Canadian poetry, most importantly the emergence of the modernist movement and the increasing ethnic diversification of Canadian literature. These developments affected the sonnet as well, but rather than eclipsing the Romantic concerns with space and nation, they changed the terms on which leading modernist poets engaged with these concerns. The Canadian modernists used the sonnets for two main purposes: to renegotiate open and closed spaces in a language attuned to the epistemological questions raised by the acceleration and fragmentation of modern culture, and to broaden the transnational scope of their poetry beyond the high-cultural community of artistic achievement the Confederation Poets had envisioned. The increasing mobility and diversity of Canadian culture was an important impulse behind this broadening view.

One of the first poets to bring all of these dimensions together was A.M. Klein, whose poetry is shaped by his dual interest in the modernist avant-garde and the Jewish tradition. Both of these concerns impel his poetry beyond local and national frameworks without superseding them (Irvine; Pollock, *A.M. Klein*). The sonnet provides a fitting platform for negotiating these impulses, as we have seen. Klein regularly turned to the form to discuss literary questions and, more often, the history and present condition of Judaism. Most of his sonnets date to the 1930s and 1940s, the time of the native-cosmopolitan debate, which brought questions of closed and open space to the center of Canadian modernism. A.J.M. Smith set the terms of that debate in the introduction to *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943), where he distinguished two kinds of poets: those who "attempted to describe and interpret whatever is essentially and distinctively Canadian," and those who wanted to "transcend colonialism by entering into the universal, civilizing culture of ideas" (4-5; cf. Trehearne, "Critical Episodes"). Dean Irvine has pointed

out that Klein commented on this debate in 1946 when he published his replies to a questionnaire about Canadian writing in the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* (Irvine 607).

In these replies Klein characteristically sidesteps questions about national “identity” and “character” without dismissing them. He outlines an intermediate position by noting that “a writer may be prompted to choose his Canadian subject so that his universal attitudes, since confined to a given locale, may be accentuated the more” (“Writing” 219). The sonnet negotiates a similar dynamic of universality and restriction, which may be one of the reasons why Klein adopted it. In a notebook entry he emphasizes the restrictive effect of the form and draws on Wordsworthian spatial terminology to associate it with the local: “Sonnets — neat, compact, residential — like self-contained cottages” (123). His sonnet “To the Jewish Poet” (1934) additionally evokes the motifs of attachment to the land and disciplined agricultural labour on which Wordsworth builds his reconception of the sonnet. This might seem to confirm the claim of scholars such as Gary Boire that the modernists’ proclamations of aesthetic and political progress masked a problematic nationalism that relied on an idealized version of Canadian history. While nationality does play an important role in Klein’s work, however, his dual adherence to the Canadian and the Jewish nations complicates Boire’s argument (cf. Collin 6-7; Pollock, *A.M. Klein*). It creates a tension between the territorial and the diasporic, between the local and the transnational that redoubles the dynamic of universality and restriction engendered by the sonnet form and sustains the Romantic analogy between literary and spatial form.

This manifold tension is tangible in “Sonnets Semitic,” a sequence of five sonnets on the spatial imaginary of Judaism published in 1940 but written about ten years earlier (*Collected Poems* 152-54). The uncertain promise of faraway lands is a leitmotif of the sequence, as the opening lines of the first poem indicate:

Would that three centuries past had seen us born!  
When gallants brought a continent on a chart  
To turreted ladies waiting their return. (lines 1-3)

In a move reminiscent of Wordsworth’s juxtaposition of the Furness Fells with the nuns’ narrow room, these lines immediately establish a contrast between the open space of the new continent and the closed

space of the turret to which the waiting ladies are confined. This gendered configuration recalls the classic love sonnet, which thrives on the contrast between the immobility of the female beloved and the roving thoughts and movements of the hopeful yet usually unsuccessful speaker. The poem reflects this juxtaposition on the level of form, where the closed space of the sonnet establishes and then delimits the open space of the imaginary land at the same time. These tensions are symbolically condensed in the “gold-caged parrakeet” that the speaker, had he lived in that era, would have brought back from “foreign coasts” (lines 5-6). Given the traditional association of the singing bird with the poet, the golden cage might symbolize the splendid yet confining structure of the sonnet. Within that cage, however, the poet-bird embodies and sings of a new continent, proving his ability to sketch a vast open space within the apparent confinements of the sonnet.

The religious dimension of the poem becomes explicit in the ambivalent closing lines, where the speaker imagines himself as a failed adventurer, “a humble thin-voiced Jew” (line 14). This dimension is already adumbrated at the opening, however, where the love relationship between the adventurer and his lady literally turns the discovered continent into a promised land. The second poem takes up the motif of the promised land but transfers it from the new continent, which is now defined as “northern,” to the biblical promised land of Palestine:

These northern stars are scarabs in my eyes.  
 Not any longer can I suffer them.  
 I will to Palestine. We will arise  
 And seek the towers of Jerusalem. (lines 1-4)

The northern stars suggest a Canadian setting, as many readers have noted (Collin 11), thus lending a specifically national dimension to the new continent of the preceding poem. In a further parallel, the second poem contrasts the vastness of the continent with the enclosed space of the tower, or turret, which suggests an ambivalent take on the speaker's imaginary geography. In yearning for the promised land he also yearns for a bounded space, which subverts his earlier self-description as an adventurous explorer of new continents. The poem reinforces this voluntary confinement by observing the octave/sestet division and devoting the sestet to a heavily conventional evocation of domestic happiness:

At last, my bride, in our estate you'll wear  
 Sweet orange-blossoms in an orange grove.  
 There will be white doves fluttering in the air,  
 And in the meadows our contented drove,  
 Sheep on the hills, and in the trees, my love,  
 There will be sparrows twittering *Mazel Tov*. (lines 9-14)

In these lines the speaker's imaginary geography narrows down to an idyllic pastoral landscape reminiscent of Wordsworth's scanty plot of ground. The structure and language of the poem continue to undermine the speaker's pretensions. His idealizing approach is deflated by the conventional imagery ("white doves"), the exaggerating repetition of "orange," and the awkward penultimate line, which at first reading seems to locate the sheep in the trees.

While the poem acknowledges the attraction of such closed, ordered spaces, however, it ironically deflates the speaker's yearnings at the same time. The opening image of the scarabs introduces this irreverent ambivalence: scarabs are the sacred beetles of the Egyptians, itself an incongruous idea from a Canadian point of view. By likening the "northern star" to scarabs the poem allows for two fundamentally different readings: the speaker might be perceiving the stars as sacred or as vermin. Moreover, the Egyptian connotations redouble the ambiguity of the speaker's yearning for a promised land, given that Egypt is associated with bondage and imprisonment in the Judaic tradition. The transnational play of connotations also undermines Canadian nationalist pretensions, as it redefines the northern sky, a prominent image in nativist literature, in terms of Judaic and African cultures.

In his study *A.M. Klein: The Story of the Poet* (1994), Zailig Pollock suggests that the modernist movement can also be seen as a disruptive transnational force. Modernism punctured the literary and social conventions that had bounded Canadian literary expression not least because of the predominance of the Confederation Poets into the 1920s and 1930s (cf. Pollock, "From Ghetto"; Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* 109-10). Klein follows the Confederation Poets in drawing from European stylistic models, especially the sonnet and the pastoral, but departs from their idealizing approach by exposing these models to experimentation, irony, and alienation. Of course these strategies too can be seen as European, given their prevalence among the European modernist avant-garde of the time. What distinguishes Klein's sonnets from those

of his contemporaries is the diversity of stylistic and cultural influences they incorporate. This diversity amplifies the dynamic of belonging and exclusion, of open and closed spaces, that had characterized the Canadian sonnet since the nineteenth century.

The imaginative opening of space within the boundaries of the sonnet can take various forms. The wide perspective and transnational urgency of Klein's Judaism finds its counterpart in the work of Margaret Avison, whose sonnets gain their peculiar intensity from turning inward and negotiating the epistemology of restriction. Avison's work is palpably influenced by European modernism, especially T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden (Kent 5). She only published a handful of sonnets, but these are among her most popular poems and have been widely debated. The first full-length study of her work opens with a discussion of her sonnets and argues that they exemplify her central poetological concerns, especially the liberation of perception and the imagination (Redekop 10-11). Later scholars speak of a "dialectical" relationship between "confinement and liberation" in her poetry, for which the sonnets are once again taken as representative (Zichy 232). While many scholars have noted the metapoetic implications of her sonnets (Calverley 210; Davey 44), Avison's negotiation of the genre and its traditions has not been examined in any depth. Her overt engagement with Wordsworth's conception of the sonnet, for example, has only been noted in passing, even in an essay that focuses on her relationship to the Romantic poet (Mathews).

Avison's sonnets belong to the early phase of her career; they appeared in her first collection, *Winter Sun*. After her religious turn in the 1960s, Avison called her earlier work "inward" and "withdrawn," and her sonnets do seem to confirm Frye, whose student she was, on the tendency of Canadian poets to retreat from an environment they perceive as threatening and overwhelming (qtd. in Kent 32; cf. Kent 2). Her sonnets unfold in small, bounded spaces such as a garden, a tennis court, or a museum, and they seem to welcome such spaces as sanctuaries from the pressures and impressions of the outside world. Within these spaces, however, she deploys forces that counteract such inward visions — forces of the imagination, but of an imagination that tends toward the specific rather than the abstract. Another feature that distinguishes Avison's sonnets from those of other Canadian modernists is their self-reflexivity (cf. Calverley; Hutcheon). Not only do they foreground questions of confinement and limitation, but some are explicitly

sonnets upon the sonnet that revise the Romantic templates of this sub-genre. While Klein draws on irony and experimentation to denaturalize the form, Avison achieves that effect by pointing out its conventions and implications, thus exposing them to the reader's analytic gaze.

Her sonnet "Tennis" exemplifies this strategy. Set in the closed, structured space of a tennis court, it sustains the analogy between the rules and lines of the tennis game and those of the sonnet from beginning to end. As Robert Frost pointed out, both tennis and formal poetry are enabled by and derive their "joy" from the very rules that seem to restrict them (26, line 1). Avison emphasizes this point by noting that the tennis game relies on protection from outside influences such as "winds" and "tumult" (line 2). The disturbing influences she evokes are those of the unbounded environment, which seems to indicate the garrison mentality underlying the poem. This reading is problematized in "Tennis," however, as the game turns out to engender the speaker's deep awareness and appreciation of the environment. The limited setting of the tennis court enables the speaker to pay detailed attention to the various elements within it, and ultimately beyond it.

In this process the "cruel ellipse of service and return" comes to symbolize the sublimity of natural forces, as the tennis ball is associated with the fierce but impressive sun: "the long burn- / ing arc to nether-court" (lines 7-8). The conspicuous line break redoubles the ambivalence of the sublime image in miniature, as it first emphasizes the fierceness of the "burn" and then modifies that impression by embedding it into the spectacular, life-giving movement of the sun across the sky. The sestet confirms the positive associations of the image when the umpire dreams of "golden balls whirring through indigo" (line 10). Like the Confederation Poets, Avison marshals the force of the imagination to transcend the bounded space in which her sonnet is set. Whereas the Confederation Poets' philosophical reflection upon the land tends to proceed from the concrete to the abstract, however, Avison moves from the abstract to the concrete. Her convoluted language and phrasing mark the poem as recording a thought process rather than an external reality, so that the environmental forces that flare up in her imagination can seem more concrete than those of traditional landscape poetry.

In addition to structural aspects, the tennis analogy in Avison's sonnet also evokes the cultural heritage of the genre. "Courts are for love and volley," the poem proclaims, thus drawing attention to the son-



net's history of expressing and communicating courtly love (line 4). A similar linkage might be detected in the opening words of the poem, "Service is joy" (line 1), which recalls Wordsworth's idealization of rural labour in the "scanty plot of ground" of the sonnet. Admittedly this echo is unlikely to occur to the general reader, but Avison negotiates Wordsworthian ideas more openly in other sonnets. "Butterfly Bones or Sonnet Against Sonnets" (29), whose speaker looks at butterflies exhibited in cyanide jars, alludes to the concept of the sonnet as prison. In line with the dismissive subtitle, it departs from Wordsworth's agricultural approach in depicting the bounded space of the sonnet as destroying rather than sustaining natural life. Yet the enclosing sonnet-jar also enables later generations to experience the beauty of the butterfly. In the words of another famous sonnet upon the sonnet, it is "a moment's monument" (Rossetti 161, line 1) that preserves natural life in the very act of arresting its course.

Avison's most explicit discussion of Wordsworth's sonnet poetics comes in "Snow," which foregrounds the epistemological questions introduced in "Tennis." The much-discussed opening lines of the poem foreground the image of the sonnet as prison:

Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes.  
The optic heart must venture: a jail-break  
And re-creation. (27, lines 1-3)

The poem raises the question of boundaries from the very beginning. It describes perception as a matter of overcoming boundaries, whether by the intrusion the implied addressee fears or by the speaker's venturing out. For all the detailed, controversial debate over these lines (Zichy; Pollock, "Response"; Taylor), scholars have neglected the literary echoes that reinforce these positions. In positioning "Nobody" as the active subject of the first line, the poem echoes the story of Odysseus blinding Cyclops by stuffing a stick into his eye. The speaker's counterargument in the following lines draws on Wordsworth's image of the sonnet as prison. Unlike "Butterfly Bones," these lines follow Wordsworth in casting the image as misleading: the boundaries of the sonnet present a challenge that enables insight and creativity rather than stultifying them. The "re-creation" of the third line can be read as an epistemological motif that asserts the subjectivity but also the generative force of perception. At the same time it evokes the agricultural imagery with

which Wordsworth undergirds his argument about the intellectual fertility of sonnet writing.

The epistemological discussion is intertwined with metapoetic reflection throughout the octave, which ends with another prison image. The eponymous snow will appear “desolate,” the speaker warns, “if the soul’s gates seal, and cannot bear, / Must shudder under, creation’s unseen freight” (lines 7-8). At this nodal point in the poem, the repeated evocation of imprisoning boundaries emphasizes the dangers of the outside world and its sensual impressions on the perceiving subject. Instead of retreating into this metaphorical garrison, however, the sonnet shifts to a plea for epistemological openness. The sestet radically widens the perspective on both the spatial and the temporal scales. In a conspicuous volta it directs the addressee’s attention to the many associations the snow might trigger in the liberated imagination. The speaker associates its whiteness with the “colour of mourning / Along the yellow Yangtze,” demonstrating the perceiver’s creative power to reshape sensual impressions and to profit from them (lines 9-10). Taking in the whiteness of the snow, the speaker experiences a moment of imaginative transcendence but at the same time realizes the constitutive role of cultural and intersubjective difference. This realization in turn enhances the speaker’s understanding of the addressee, who might be “[s]uffering this starry blur” (line 13). For all its ambivalence, the poem thus tends toward openness at the geographical, cultural, and epistemological levels.

Many critics have overlooked this tendency and read the poem as an expression of “paralysis” in the face of an “often terrifying reality” instead (Taylor 288). The impact of Frye’s concept of the garrison mentality on Canadian literary criticism, which was considerable in the 1970s and 1980s, might have contributed to such readings. His “Conclusion” was published a few years after Avison’s sonnets, and many of his other essays show his deep familiarity with all of the poets discussed so far. Read against the work of these poets, the “Conclusion” reveals a sustained engagement with the tensions that had pervaded the Canadian sonnet tradition up to this point: between open and closed spaces; between the local, the national, and the transnational. Frye regards these tensions as central to the development of Canadian literature from the early English settlers to the time of his writing. He traces the garrison mentality to the isolated position of settler communities in the “huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable” landscape and

argues that these settlers responded by limiting their scope to their immediate surroundings, judging one another by their social reliability, and demanding "respect for the law and order" that held them together (830). There is a strong echo in this account of Romantic convictions about the sublimity of nature and its impact on the human mind, and particularly of Wordsworth's conception of the sonnet as an idealized sociality bounded off from uncontrollable outside forces.

The sonnets of the Confederation Poets brought this conception into Canadian literature, as we have seen, and Frye's "Conclusion," which references these poets at several points, shares many of their thematic and aesthetic concerns. Frye, too, foregrounds the tension between bounded spaces and their environments, and his argument hinges on the assumption that spatial configurations, such as the garrison in the open land, leave their shape on the literary forms that writers develop to negotiate them. The sonnets of Klein and Avison indicate that the modernist emphasis on form sustained and at times reinforced this analogy. Similarly, many of the sonnets discussed so far bear out Frye's claim that some Canadian poets regularly regarded literary forms as a refuge from the demands of their social and natural environments.

The strongest tie linking Frye's garrison mentality to the Romantic sonnet tradition is arguably his association of bounded space with nation. The garrison is literally and symbolically an outpost of the Canadian nation in his account, and the main function of the garrison-mentality argument is to provide that nation with a coherent literary tradition. Whereas Wordsworth's poetics in many ways did grow out of the sheltered local spaces he idealized, Canadian writers developed their poetics of the local in close conversation with European cultural traditions. Frye tries to assuage the tension between localism and cosmopolitanism by ascribing both tendencies to the dominance of convention in the garrison. Just as the inhabitants of the garrison emphasized law and order, he argues, the writers turned to Europe not for transgressive purposes but to adopt received "standards" of taste and achievement (828). Canadian literature remained suspended between "wilderness" and the British Empire as a result, failing to develop a national consciousness and tradition that could have provided a productive middle ground between the two (826). This failure, Frye claims, lies behind several problematic characteristics of Canadian literature, including "its fixa-

tion on its own past, its penchant for old-fashioned literary techniques, its preoccupation with the theme of strangled articulateness" (826).

In the modernist period the same list of charges was brought against the sonnet. The long history of the form alone was widely seen as inimical to the modernist desire for formal innovation, and its popularity with the genteel poets of the nineteenth century made it the epitome of "old-fashioned literary techniques" in the eyes of the younger generation. Notions of "strangled articulateness" pervade the modernist reception of the sonnet, from William Carlos Williams's dismissal of the form as stultifying (17) to the evocation of trauma, silence, and lost opportunities in the work of Robert Frost and the British war poets. Yet many of the younger poets did write sonnets, and the examples of Klein and Avison show that the limits of the sonnet could be productive rather than stultifying. Reading Avison's "Snow" as evidence of paralysis, for example, ignores the poem's effort to direct the speaker's and the reader's attention to a concrete physical environment. While Avison acknowledges the temptation of retreating before wide spaces, her sonnets counteract this temptation and invest considerable force in evoking such spaces. In doing so they question the Wordsworthian conflation of the bounded natural space with the nation. Like Klein's sonnets, their trajectories are transnational, toward faraway lands.

Frye was not the only theorist of Canadian literature to construct a national literary history around the interplay of closed and open spaces. In *The Gay Grey Moose* (1992), D.M.R. Bentley argues that Canadian poetry evolved from the tension between the "baseland" and the "hinterland": the "humanized and enclosed" spaces of heavy settlement on the one hand, and the open, "unpopulated" environment on the other (5-6). Bentley too sees this spatial configuration reflected in the literary forms that emerged from it. "As ineluctably as they are drawn towards openness in Canada's physical and social landscapes," he argues, "poets of the hinterland orientation will exhibit their preferences for *enjambement* and free (or loosened) verse and for strategies that resist closure and encourage a sense of open-endedness." By contrast, "poets of the baseland orientation will manifest their preference for order by using such forms as the sonnet and the end-stopped couplet, and in a respectful adherence to the rules and conventions of their art" (9). Bentley draws on all four poets discussed here as he traces these analogies from the Confederation Poets through the late twentieth century, and he

frequently cites the sonnet as an example of the baseland preference for closed, bounded structures.

He categorizes Roberts and Lampman as baseland poets on the strength of their sonnets, citing a range of examples, though he also notes the tension in Roberts between the local settings and the wider geographic and mental spaces that surround it (98-102). Bentley does not discuss Klein's sonnets but quotes his comparison of the sonnet to a self-contained cottage to support the argument that Klein too should be read as a baseland poet. Avison presents him with a more complicated case because the prominent role of the sonnet in her early work contradicts his efforts to categorize her as primarily a hinterland poet. He responds by criticizing her adherence to the form and limits his discussion to "Butterfly Bones," which he reads as subverting the "fixing properties of the closed form" by playing different rhyme schemes against each other (90). The frequency of Bentley's references to the sonnet gives it a central if not constitutive role for his entire argument, and thus for his conception of Canadian poetry.

Bentley draws heavily on Wordsworth's conception of the sonnet, noting, for example, that not all sonneteers are "fretless nuns and topiary gardeners" (114), and claiming that literary rules are evidence of social "discipline" (5). More explicitly than either Wordsworth or Frye, he incorporates this poetics of bounded space and discipline into a nationalist project. The "central concerns" of his book, he announces in the introduction, are "landscape and patriation . . . the bringing to the country of forms and ideas originally generated elsewhere" (1). What might suggest a transnational interest quickly turns into a national one. In times of global capitalism, Bentley argues, intellectuals should embrace a "tolerant and protective nationalism . . . rooted in local pride and responsibility" (7). These comments indicate how at the end of the twentieth century the equation of the local with the national still guided influential conceptions of Canadian literature, as did the conflation of literary and social rules. This essay has shown that the continuity of such ideas among literary theorists can be traced to the popularity of the sonnet as reconceived by the Romantics. Yet the sonnets written by the outstanding Canadian practitioners of the form question such ideas in the very act of transmitting them. Rather than retreating to the bounded space of the sonnet and the nation, these poets thrive on crossing boundaries and exploring the interplay of closed and open spaces.

## WORKS CITED

- Avison, Margaret. *Winter Sun / The Dumbfounding: Poems 1940-66*. McClelland & Stewart, 1982.
- Bate, Jonathan. "Inventing Region and Nation: Wordsworth's Sonnets." *Swansea Review*, vol. 14, 1994, pp. 2-22.
- Bentley, D.M.R. *The Confederation Group of Canadian Poets, 1880-1897*. U of Toronto P, 2004.
- . *The Gay Grey Moose: Essays on the Ecologies and Mythologies of Canadian Poetry, 1690-1990*. U of Ottawa P, 1992.
- Boire, Gary. "Canadian (Tw)ink: Surviving the White-Outs." *Essays on Canadian Writing*, vol. 35, 1987, pp. 1-16.
- Calverley, Margaret. "'Service Is Joy': Margaret Avison's Sonnet Sequence in *Winter Sun*." *Essays on Canadian Writing*, vol. 50, 1993, pp. 210-30.
- Carter, Adam. "National Literature, Canadian Criticism, and National Character." *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature*, edited by Cynthia Sugars, Oxford UP, 2016, pp. 41-63.
- Cogswell, Fred. Introduction. *The Collected Poems of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts*, edited by Desmond Pacey, Wombat Press, 1985, pp. xix-xxxii.
- Collin, W.E. "The Spirit's Palestine." 1936. *A.M. Klein*, edited by Tom Marshall, Ryerson Press, 1970, pp. 1-11.
- Cronin, Richard. "Wordsworth's *Poems* of 1807 and the War Against Napoleon." *Review of English Studies*, vol. 48, no. 189, 1997, pp. 33-50.
- Davey, Elizabeth. *A Persevering Witness: The Poetry of Margaret Avison*. Pickwick, 2016.
- Frye, Northrop. Conclusion. *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, edited by Carl F. Klinck, U of Toronto P, 1965, pp. 821-49.
- Gorjup, Branko. "Introduction: Incorporating Legacies: Decolonizing the Garrison." *Northrop Frye's Canadian Literary Criticism and Its Influence*, edited by Branko Gorjup, U of Toronto P, 2009, pp. 3-28.
- Gustafson, Ralph, editor. *The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse*. 4th rev. ed., Penguin, 1984.
- Hammill, Faye. *Canadian Literature*. Edinburgh UP, 2007.
- Hess, Jonathan M. "Wordsworth's Aesthetic State: The Poetics of Liberty." *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1994, pp. 3-29.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "'Snow Storm of Paper': The Act of Reading in Self-Reflexive Canadian Verse." *Dalhousie Review*, vol. 59, 1979, pp. 114-28.
- Irvine, Dean. "Dialectical Modernisms: Postcoloniality and Diaspora in A.M. Klein." *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2012, pp. 597-615.
- Keith, W.J. *Canadian Literature in English*. Longman, 1985.
- Kent, David A. *Margaret Avison and Her Works*. ECW Press, 1989.
- Klein, A.M. *The Collected Poems*. Edited by Miriam Waddington, McGraw-Hill, 1974.
- . *Notebooks: Selections from the A.M. Klein Papers*. Edited by Zailig Pollock and Usher Caplan, U of Toronto P, 1994.
- . "Writing in Canada." *Literary Essays and Reviews*, edited by Usher Caplan and M.W. Steinberg, U of Toronto P, 1987, pp. 216-21.
- Klinck, Carl F., editor. *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*. U of Toronto P, 1965.
- Kuester, Martin. "European Heritage in a (Post-)Colonial Transatlantic Context: Imitations, Jail-Breaks and Other (Non-)Sonnets." *Proceedings of the First Bi-Annual Conference on Canadian Studies*, Chernivtsi National University, 2011, pp. 236-42.
- Lecker, Robert. "A Quest for the Peaceable Kingdom: The Narrative in Northrop Frye's

- 'Conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada*.'" *PMLA*, vol. 108, no. 2, 1993, pp. 283-93.
- Mathews, Lawrence. "Stevens, Wordsworth, Jesus: Avison and the Romantic Imagination." *"Lighting up the terrain": The Poetry of Margaret Avison*, edited by David Kent, ECW Press, 1987, pp. 36-54.
- New, W.H. *A History of Canadian Literature*. Macmillan, 1988.
- Pollock, Zailig. *A.M. Klein: The Story of the Poet*. U of Toronto P, 1994.
- . "From Ghetto to Diaspora: A.M. Klein in Our Time." *Failure's Opposite: Listening to A.M. Klein*, edited by Norman Ravvin and Sherry Simon, McGill-Queen's UP, 2011, pp. 19-32.
- . "A Response to Michael Taylor's 'Snow Blindness.'" *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1979, pp. 177-79.
- Redekop, Ernest. *Margaret Avison*. Copp Clark, 1970.
- Roberts, Charles G.D. "The Beginnings of a Canadian Literature." 1883. *Selected Poetry and Critical Prose*, edited by W.J. Keith, U of Toronto P, 1974, pp. 243-59.
- . *The Collected Poems of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts: A Critical Edition*. Edited by Desmond Pacey, Wombat Press, 1985.
- . "Literature." *The Dominion Annual Register and Review for the Seventeenth Year of the Canadian Union, 1883*, edited by Henry J. Morgan, Hunter, Rose, 1884, pp. 206-19.
- Ross, Malcolm. *Poets of the Confederation: Carman / Lampman / Roberts / Scott*. McClelland & Stewart, 1960.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. *Ballads and Sonnets*. Ellis and White, 1881.
- Stacey, Robert David. "History, Tradition, and the Work of Pastoral: Frye's 'Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada.'" *Northrop Frye: New Directions From Old*, edited by David Rampton, U of Ottawa P, 2009, pp. 80-102.
- Smith, A.J.M. Introduction. *The Book of Canadian Poetry: A Critical and Historical Anthology*, edited by A.J.M. Smith, U of Chicago P, 1943, pp. 3-31.
- Stouck, David. *Major Canadian Authors: A Critical Introduction to Canadian Literature in English*. U of Nebraska P, 1988.
- Sugars, Cynthia, editor. *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature*. Oxford UP, 2016.
- Taylor, Michael. "Snow Blindness." *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1978, pp. 288-90.
- Trehearne, Brian. "Critical Episodes in Montreal Poetry of the 1940s." *Canadian Poetry*, vol. 41, 1997, pp. 21-52.
- . *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition*. U of Toronto P, 1999.
- Wells, Zachariah, editor. *Jailbreaks: 99 Canadian Sonnets*. Biblioasis, 2008.
- Williams, William Carlos. *The Embodiment of Knowledge*. Edited by Ron Loewinsohn, New Directions, 1974.
- Wordsworth, William. *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*. Edited by Jared Curtis, Cornell UP, 1983.
- Zichy, Francis. "'Each in his prison / Thinking of the key': Images of Confinement and Liberation in Margaret Avison." *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1978, pp. 232-43.