Montreal Poetry

RONALD REICHERTZ

Expressions of Montreal's Youth, edited by Olivia Rovinescu. Reigg Ethnic Expressions, 1974. 92 pp. (unpaged).

Expressions of Montreal's Youth is a collection of more than a hundred poems written by children between the ages of seven and fifteen at thirty-one different elementary and high schools in urban Montreal. Fortunately, the bulk of the poems have refreshing qualities that belie the accurately descriptive but drab title. This also holds for the relation of the poems to the method used "to inspire the children to express themselves." The six compilers (Olivia Rovinescu, Clifton Ruggles, and others), working with an Opportunities for Youth Grant and private donations, spread thirty-six photographs in a semi-circle in front of each class visited. The children were told to respond to the photographs out of their own experience, thought and feeling. Poems were written in class. Visual stimulation and spontaneity, the assumption was, would produce uncorrupted and therefore "true" responses. (Clifton Ruggles was a dissenting voice.) They drove home this point by telling the children not to imitate poetic forms found in their school texts.

Because the photographs are excellent and have great elasticity--portraits of blacks, Indians, Greeks, old men; urban scenes, trees, houses, a skyscape, a man working, a cemetery, lovers -- there is great thematic variety. But attitudes towards them are hardly innocent. However spontaneously evoked, the attitudes in the poems are pegged to T.V., pop music, newspapers, and influences from both home and school. This is inescapable and, as the majority of the poems prove, not necessarily damaging.

Before I comment directly on the poems, I want to place them in perspective. In most nursery and elementary schools imaginative uses of language are a sometime thing. On ho-hum days, bored nursery school teachers sometimes turn scribes to record, with more or less phonetic accuracy, stories told by children. Elementary school halls are virtually papered with student poems and stories two weeks either side of Parent-Teacher meetings. But, finally, writing is treated as a distant and beggarly cousin of painting and drawing. Every child can and does turn out designs and colour combinations that suggest petit Picasso. Lengthy studies of visual perception and aesthetics duly treat this fact. But every child and James Joyce are ignored. Little Chattertons sprout from time to time only to be dismissed as mutants of the imagination.

Recent publishing history offers some grounds for hope. In the fifties Ruth Kraus panned some nuggets of bon mots and gnomic wisdom from a stream of taperecordings of children. Maurice Sendak

illustrated and, voila! *A Hole is to Dig*, followed almost immediately by sequels and imitations. Children, after all, do say the darndest things. The late sixties produced more ambitious books: *The Voice of the Children* and *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*. These books are polar in basic ways. The first came out of a poetry workshop for children and by children. Adults got them a place to meet and offered advice. The children took it from there. All work was done outside of the schools. *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* is the result of a bold movement into the schools. Kenneth Koch was less interested in statement and psychic release than in expression. The book's subtitle -- "Teaching Children to Write Poetry" -- stresses Koch's belief that verbal formula can act as a set of tools to pick the locks of rusty imagination. Immediacy, relevance and release, Koch suggests, come tumbling after.

The compilers of *Expressions of Montreal's Youth* argue for its poems on the basis of honesty and sensitivity that stem from uncorrupted vision. Value rests in statement and its impact on both the child poet and his peers. The best in view is that children writing for children will break down walls of difference and indifference. Writing as release gets a nod, whereas "artistic expression and dexterity" are a bonus. The poems printed suggest that the walls which are thought to separate race from race, ethnic group from ethnic group, and class from class simply do not exist for these children. Empathy approaches universality: only the rich, the exploiters, are pariah. It is impossible not to wonder how genuine the empathy is; how much the act of writing, however spontaneous, coloured their views. All of this is only important if the poems are considered in terms of the pedagogical scaffolding of the preface and afterword. I am afraid that both of these raise more questions than they answer. But that the questions are raised may be valuable to others interested in similar class experiments.

On to the poems. As I said earlier the poets, ranging in age from seven to fifteen, have already developed prejudices and stock responses. Children are good, adults are soiled. Urban demolition, excavation, or building are evil -- they symbolize exploitation and the death of tradition. A Black teenager, one figure among several, dwarfed by a tenement building, is on dope, carries a switch blade, and dreams of money and women. A woman alone with her child has been abandoned by her man. Echoes from Sesame Street, Dr. Seuss, and pop lyrics mingle with those from poems officially sanctioned. Here is Dr. Seuss in "The Dirty Old Woods": "The woods are full of smog./ Someone here has been a hog. Boxes, boxes/ here and there, boxes almost everywhere./ Garbage, garbage in the trees: It is killing all the leaves." (age 7). The good didactic doctor's ecology lesson, "The Lorax," has obviously stuck. Fine, the echoes are strong but don't harm the vision. A later case, "Le Plus Terrible des Papiers," catalogs the corrupting power of money, but the anger slips altogether too readily into a borrowing from Les Beatles by poem's end: "L'argent peut acheter bien des choses,/ Mais l'argent ne peut acheter l'amour" (age 13).

Endings cause a number of problems. "The old man dreams and grunts and snores" (age 12) is damaged by the learned need to round off. A fine insight into an old man recovering childhood through dream gets marred by a concluding quatrain that falls like a sledge hammer:

But look a bit closer
The old man is dead
A thought in his heart
And a dream in his head.

Four poems written in response to a portrait of a black face, head tilted up, eyes closed, reveal an interesting contrast in perception. Two poems are heavily social -- a plea for understanding adolescence, and a comment on the futilitly of poverty. "Un homme est fatigué de sa/ Petite vie/ Monotone ..." (age 10). The other two are celebrations: "The man Butch is free/ ... It's beautiful. My heart is pumping loud" (age 7).

The cemetery photograph -- a gravestone caught in the triangle of a dwarfed or dying tree -- got nine responses. (One is reminded of Huck Finn's preoccupation with Emmaline Grangerford's attempts to come to terms with death). The children handle death variously, but the greater number of poems are graveyard meditations. The theme is fascinating but conventional treatment is almost their only way of dealing with it. "L'arbre mort dans le Cemetiere" (age 11) is a touching poem that works through religious resignation and consolation. But the most power here is packed into "Life and Death" (age 11). A prose poem, it sits like a hunk of marble on the page. After an imaginative reconstruction of the trappings and conventions of a grave-side scene, the poet adds, "I was the bad guy there who shot a grenade/ at his grave and blew it open. There were/ two nuns there praying on the ground." Protest transforms an instrument of death into a life-force. The anger at death works through economy of image and juxtaposition.

Again, a photograph of a man welding a steel girder illustrates stock response. Three of the four poems are angry or pessimistic. The welder is exploited ("Goddam the rich man/ Goddam the factory owners" (age 15)) or is a destroyer of tradition (certainly a threat to first generation children of immigrants). "Le Travail" is a paean to the joys or compensations of work: "Je travaille très fort,/ J'ai une femme en or/ Je mange trois fois par jour/ ... J'arbète aussi du soleil/ Qu'on vend couleur vermelle" (age 11).

Admonished not to use the stock response or the available literary model, the children tried their best but lacked the experience and the time to slough off either influence. But, in the end, it is for the best, since at the moment this is their truth. And the children are generally cunning in their borrowings. "People" is a poem that probably gets at what the compilers most wanted:

A black man's profile
And a white man's smile
Chinese eyes
And, Japanese guys
And English man's accent
And a French man's love
But we all look the same
From above
By the way, I'm black and proud. (age 11)

Warts and all it's a communal and individual celebration. I personally prefer poems like the Indian poem, translated by the writer -- "The cahon walcon ni naton we jah" (age 13) -- and poems like "Mon Reve." It is in the section fronted by a photograph of a young black, head in hands, sitting at a desk in an empty school room:

Alice au pays des merveilles
Courant l'été
Dans les grand près
Pour attraper le grand soleil
Qui court au-dessus des nuages . . .
C'est ça, mon rêve de fillette!

Expression of Montreal's Youth is, even with all my reservations, a very good anthology of poems by children. At the very least it holds its own in the company of *The Voice of the Children* and *Wishes, Lies and Dreams*. The outrage, the love, the yearning for community and the pain in these poems are expressed by children who are alive to feelings, thoughts and language. Since books like this are liable to get trapped in their immediate localities, I don't know what is going on from Victoria to Charlottetown. But this book proves that, however great the effort, in or out of the schools, children can and should be allowed the chance to speak to each other and to us.

Ronald Reichertz teaches Children's Literature at McGill University.

Wit, Energy, and Magic

PATRICIA MORLEY

Tales from the Igloo, edited and translated by Father Maurice Metayer. Foreword by Al Purdy. Illustrated by Agnes Nanagak. Hurtig, 1972. 127 pp. $4.95 cloth.

This is a beautiful book, a puzzling, provoking, vital book. Both stories and illustrations pulse with a magical kind of energy. For children whose only previous exposure to the Inuit has been stories of igloo life written by non-Eskimos, it will be a breath of fresh air. Northern air.

Tales from the Igloo consists of twenty-two tales from the oral traditions of a group of Inuit people known to ethnologists as the Copper Eskimos. Their settlements are found along the shores of the Arctic Ocean and on the islands immediately north of the mainland. The tales have been edited and translated by Maurice Metayer, an Oblate priest