

Dumb Talk: Echoes of the Indigenous Voice in the Literature of British Columbia*

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At the end of the opening chapter of *Klee Wyck* (1941) Emily Carr lingers lovingly over her conversation with an old man sawing a tree:

I sat down beside the sawing Indian and we had dumb talk pointing to the sun and to the sea, the eagles in the air and the crows on the beach. Nodding and laughing together I sat and he sawed. The old man sawed as if aeons of time were before him, and as if all the years behind him had been leisurely and all the years in front of him would be equally so.¹

Many of the lines of force shaping literature in British Columbia converge in this anecdote. Its setting, for example, in a "place belonging neither to sea nor to land," where "sea and forest were always at [a] game of toss with noises" (p. 11), describes the landscape, both literal and psychological, of works as varied as Hubert Evans' *Mist on the River* and Earle Birney's "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth," as Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel* and Daphne Marlatt's *Steveston*. The atmosphere of leisurely lushness evokes the Lotosland cliché. But the notion of "dumb talk" — Carr's attempt to speak, in sign language, to the wondrously eternal Indian — resonates most powerfully. In her painting, as in her writing, Carr always finds place inseparable from the Indian's knowledge of it: "I tried to be plain, straight, simple and Indian. I wanted to be true to the places as well as to the people."² This feeling for the Indianness of the place (I am thinking both of the aspiration and of the inherent sentimentality) most surely makes Carr the grandmother of literature in British Columbia.

Indian art and mythology is the most obvious feature of the culture of British Columbia, especially on the coast. In the precontact cultures, the

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¹ Emily Carr, *Klee Wyck*, Centennial Edition (1941; rpr. Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1971), p. 11. Other quotations from *Klee Wyck* identified in the text.

² Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1966), p. 292.

cedar, and the leisure born of an abundant nature, made for a highly developed and very visible art among the original peoples of the Northwest. That art is a strong continuing presence, even if many of its contemporary manifestations originate in "bourgeois tourist mysticism"³ — totem poles in Stanley Park, a football team named the Thunderbirds, native prints in every dining room. Allan Pritchard, in one of the few articles on literature in British Columbia, notes the prominence of the kind, friendly Indian:

A desire to establish some special tie with the native Indians is a form frequently taken by the possession theme: if the Indians cannot be claimed as ancestors by ties of blood, then there will be at least an attempt to establish by adoption of ties of culture and art.⁴

The Amerind perception, which in the literature of the prairie West is comparatively rare, seems, in the literature of the farther West, always and everywhere, to compel attention: from George Vancouver to Bowering's *George Vancouver*, from Pauline Johnson to *The Double Hook*.⁵

Carr senses the challenge and discovery which lie in crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries to the Amerind perception. "Dumb talk" reverberates at these boundaries, as it does in the singular passage from *Klee Wyck*. If the term first designates sign language, the language of gesture and facial expression, it can also describe the naively unpolished English which Carr valued — and cultivated. (I would, of course, want to exclude the colloquial sense of dumb as "stupid," even if Carr's sometimes reckless diction would suggest she is simply insensitive to this nuance.) The phrase also catches the contradiction of reproducing an oral expression in the silence of print, a paradox we encounter in Peter Trower and Jack Hodgins, as in Carr. A language of image and symbol, of totems, is dumb talk too: Carr, that is, seeks a language in touch with the natural world, reflecting its mysteries, not a language which draws its meaning only from other words. Carr dreams, ultimately, of "no language even,"⁶ the

³ George Bowering, "Introduction," Fred Wah, *Selected Poems: Loki is Buried at Smoky Creek*, ed. George Bowering (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1980), p. 11.

⁴ Allan Pritchard "West of the Great Divide: A View of the Literature of British Columbia," *Canadian Literature*, no. 94 (Autumn 1982), p. 101. The second part of this article, "West of the Great Divide: Man and Nature in the Literature of British Columbia," appears in *Canadian Literature*, no. 102 (Autumn 1984), an issue concentrating on British Columbia.

⁵ For a convenient survey of the Indian's place in Canadian literature, see Leslie Monkman, *A Native Heritage: Images of the Indian in English-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

⁶ Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands*, p. 94.

paradox of a language, spoken or written, that conveys an unspoken knowledge. Dumb talk is, we can see, an inevitable obsession for a painter/writer: "What's the good of trying to write? It's all the unwordable things one wants to write about, just as it's all the unformable things one wants to paint — essence."⁷

Echoes of the indigenous voice are, of course, but interpretations, implicit and explicit, of Indian languages and the Indian perception. Few writers in English have a detailed knowledge of an Indian language, but many reach for a form, or syntax, or method which will evoke another language with its different way of knowing. In the incident with the sawing Indian, for example, Carr quotes the old man's warning when she turns into the forest: "'Swaawa! Hiya swaawa!' Swaawa were cougar: the forest was full of these great cats" (p. 111). Transliteration of Indian words, however approximate the translation from a language that has no written form, is one obvious way to introduce an indigenous perception into the literature written in English. Perhaps "dumb talk" is also found in onomatopoeic words, such as "swish" and "purr" (and the complementary alliteration and assonance), which speak the unwordable language of nature. Many of Carr's metaphors, suggested in this anecdote by her description of the old man, evoke an unmediated, unworded intimacy between the people and their environment. Using an analogy drawn from the Indian's immediate setting, and even time of year, Carr *seems* to speak of ageing in the way the old man himself would: "He was luscious with time like the end berries of the strawberry season" (p. 111).

Introducing Indian words and finding metaphors for the ecological imagination, Carr tries to be "straight, simple and Indian."⁸ This description summarizes the most overt version of "dumb talk." Other more oblique approaches, to which I will turn in the last two sections of this essay, can be termed "Reading the myths" and "Free translations."

Straight, simple and Indian

Hubert Evans' *Mist on the River* (1954) makes communication across languages a much more continuous concern than in *Klee Wyck*. Indeed, the mist of the title symbolizes, among other things, the evanescence and

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁸ I borrow the phrase "ecological imagination" from Jarold Ramsey's fine essay, "The Hunter Who Had an Elk for a Guardian Spirit," and the Ecological Imagination," in Brian Swann, ed., *Smoothing the Ground: Essays on Native American Oral Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 309-22.

intangibility of language: “mist without avail rising from the river.”⁹ *Mist on the River* is a documentary romance, whose energy lies in the tensions between coast and interior, white world and Indian, old and young, urban and wilderness — tensions alive among the Gitksan people along the Skeena River. Evans knows that the Indians’ talk grows dumb in the most radical sense: it is, literally, disappearing, especially among the young. The only defence, according to old Paul, the village elder, is isolation: “Holding to our language is what preserves us as a people. Our language is a strong wall around us” (p. 163). Because the threat that languages themselves will fall into silence is an explicit theme, the novel is an ideal place to examine literary adaptations of Indian language. The relative crudity and obviousness of the adaptations define a central artistic problem for writers in B.C. and suggest the strengths and weaknesses of other writers’ attempts to solve it. Evans attempts to incorporate indigenous languages into his novel in three general ways: by the obvious, occasional use of Indian words; by various representations of dialect; and by developing appropriate metaphor.

Melissa, mother of the novel’s central character, responds to her daughter’s embarrassment about Indian habits: “‘The *gum-see-wa* have their kind of smell, too’” (p. 5). This single Gitksan word (the one word in the text the educated reader does not immediately understand), repeated several times in the novel, confronts the reader (in a foreign tongue) with his own reductionist categorization by skin colour — *white*. No single word could more effectively convey the cultural bias inherent in the language itself. Evans also tries to promote appreciation by descriptions of Indian language. He contrasts expressive school-girl English with June’s “exaggerated native flatness” (p. 175). Later he attempts to describe Cy’s sense of the characteristic sounds of some Indian languages: “Kitimaat with its tight-throated, clicking forcefulness: the more flowing Haida: Tsimpshaan, whose intonations, and some of its words, resembled his own” (p. 19). In using an occasional Indian term, in attending, here, to the sound patterns of an oral language, and, especially, in filtering the perception through Cy, Evans tries, however modestly, to break down cultural barriers.

Evans uses dialect, or Indian English, in various ways. The most exaggerated example is Marie’s letter, which June reads (and then translates) to her mother: “Dear Friend, thought I drop you a line to say hello. You

⁹ Hubert Evans, *Mist on the River*, New Canadian Library Edition (1954; rpr. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973), p. 204. Other quotations from *Mist on the River* identified in the text.

be surprised I home so soon but that alright because I here to help Matt till you get here" (p. 93). However sincere the novelist's intention here, such broken English seems condescending. (The dialect English in Paul St. Pierre's *Breaking Smith's Quarter Horse* [1966], for example, is much more palatable, in part because the light satirical tone embraces all the characters, from whatever culture.) On the other hand, the archly correct textbook dialogue Evans puts in the mouths of the Indians may be just as unconvincing. An occasional hint of ungrammatical English in Evans' own narration marks the native viewpoint much more effectively: "if a person had their own truck they could get out of the village and have a little change without everybody knowing" (p. 170). Isolated examples of native diction are more evocative than extended patches of dialect; Paul warns: "'The whites want to see all Indians in the ground, put there by the drink and the lung-sick and their other diseases'" (p. 162). In each of these three cases — "in the ground" for "dead," "*the* drink" for "drink," and "lung-sick" for "tuberculosis" — the Indian's expression (we are to imagine Paul speaking in Gitkshan) is more specific, less abstract, more grounded in the senses. Evans conveys the fundamental difference of perception more subtly later, when Matt observes: "'The drink has been among us years of years,'" and Caleb echoes: "'And years of years I have made strong prayers against it'" (p. 204). Through this metaphorical turning of the cliché "years and years," time seems to stretch immeasurably, and yet circle reassuringly. Similarly Evans implies, through the verb *make*, a creative and giving element in prayer which presumably contrasts to the dominant white practice of rote repetition.

In a novel that often preaches awkwardly, Evans can, at his best, pull an element of native language out of the dialogue into his own storytelling: "No matter what she [Dot] had done to put his heart in a steep place with her wild ways, he could, and did, thank her for this moment" (p. 101). Unlike the more subtle and continuous fusion of writer's and subjects' perceptions in Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*, the satisfying sense of Indian outlook in Evans' metaphors emerges only occasionally: "Old Paul would stand there and the acquiescent, reasoned arguments would drift around him like snow around a boulder" (p. 153). But Evans will extend such suggestions of the ecological imagination to considerable length:

It was not her fault she [Miriam] had Old Paul for a grandfather, but more and more he [Cy] was seeing that by being put to work in the boat-shed he had been manoeuvred into a narrow place. It was like travelling the frozen *k'Shan* north to your trapping ground when you came on a place where the

ice looked safe but the premonition seized you that it was not. If you were wise you backed off quickly and got your dogs and yourself on to solid ice and around by a different way. (p. 52)

There is nothing self-consciously “literary” or ingenious about such metaphors (unlike, for example, some of the variations Evans plays on mist): they are drawn from the daily experience of the people, and imply the habit of conceiving of all of life as part of a relationship to the natural world.

Although presumably Evans has no technical knowledge of Gitkshan, he repeatedly attempts to make his prose touch the Indian language in some way. He suggests, for example, that there could be a different syntax, different from the frantic question and answer exchanges (pp. 3, 62) of white conversation. Perhaps his overuse of “and” is one means of rendering it. The cumulative connector is prominent, for example, in a central and memorable passage linking the main characters to the life cycle of the salmon:

The salmon were born here, the people were born here, and no matter how far they travelled they always came back up river when their natures called them home. They had to; that was the way it was. . . . And most things did stay the same; the same summer days, the same night breeze as when he was a boy, the day’s warmth held in the ground when you stretched out before your fire. These things would never change, and the salmon and the people dying, and the salmon and the people being born. (pp. 228-29)

Here, I think, is “dumb talk” (in the sense of formulaic, highly symbolic language, evoking in print an oral performance) at its most powerful. In a novel usually conventional, even plodding, in its syntax, Evans makes an audacious break to complement the rhythm suggested by his metaphor. Fragments of sentences circle on one another, pulsingly, repetitively evoking the communal struggle of the salmon to continue and to die creating. Indeed, if I could rewrite the novel, I’d want to make this its powerful concluding paragraph.

Reading the myths

But this passage notwithstanding, Evans’ novel is important just *because* the approaches to Indian language are so simple and overt. When Evans here suggests the importance of ritual pattern in the lives of the Skeena people, he anticipates the extensive use of mythic materials as a way of making “dumb talk.” Emily Carr herself is more inclined to try to read the myths, to incorporate in her writing the images and patterns

she has discovered belong to the Indians' world view. Carr's prose style, for example, often seems a contrast to the lushness of her chosen landscape: it is economical and restrained. Perhaps her short paragraphs, the startling short sentences, the sketch form itself, and the uneasy transitions echo "the quick hushed words they [the Indians] said to each other in Haida" (p. 18). I think the aim of Carr's dumb talk is to approach silence by using as few words as possible; she especially tries to strip her language of anything that could be thought to be decorative, excessive, especially that might be thought pretentious. Perhaps an intuition that Indian languages typically collapse parts of speech — objects included in verbs, possessive pronouns incorporated in nouns, weak development of tenses — influenced her taste for economy.¹⁰ But, as in Evans, the aim and the achievement are not necessarily the same: economy is not an invariable feature of *Klee Wyck*, either in diction or syntax. Carr also swings back and forth between her own cultural background and the Indians'; the Latinate absurdity of the old man "luscious with time" is representative of the frequent turns in which she seems anything but restrained.

Carr, in any event, yearns for the atmosphere she found in Skedans, where "there were no shams" and one "got close down to real things" (p. 19). Totem poles, are, of course, the best representation of such essence:

He [the Indian] wanted some way of showing people things that were in his mind, things about the creatures and about himself and their relation to each other. He cut forms to fit the thoughts that the birds and animals and fish suggested to him, and to these he added something of himself. When they were all linked together they made very strong talk for the people. He grafted this new language on to the great cedar trunks and called them totem poles and stuck them up in the villages with great ceremony. (p. 51)

In contrast to Evans', Carr's "strong talk" is more surely a "new language": distinctive, governed by a conviction that the "primitive people claimed me,"¹¹ and not limited to a few uneasy Indian transliterations, an occasional metaphor or a few uncharacteristic syntactic turns.

When Carr "struggl[es] with 'D'Sonoqua'" she is convinced that "big, strong simplicity is needed for these carvings and forests."¹² Both style

¹⁰ Mary R. Haas, "Boas, Sapir and Bloomfield," *American Indian Languages and American Linguistics*, ed. Wallace L. Chafe (Lisse, Belgium: Peter de Ridder, 1976), p. 61.

¹¹ Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands*, p. 315.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 160.

and structure serve this purpose: the pattern of narrative, and of repetition, reflects a reading of an elemental pattern of Indian religion.¹³ Again, Carr remembers herself engaged in dumb talk. When she asks Indian Tom, "Who is she?", he replies first with meaningful silence. His subsequent comments (p. 35) are, with one exception, abruptly laconic, as are those — earlier — of "the little Indian girl" (p. 34). Carr's prose is hardly so laconic, yet the short sentences, often strategically located at the ends of paragraphs, seem calculated to evoke the same depths of simplicity: "Then he went away" (p. 32). "Now I saw her face" (p. 33). "Horror tumbled out of them" (p. 35). Furthermore, through unusual verbs, Carr links "big, strong simplicity" with growth. Sentence after sentence startles with a verb which seems to fuse parts of speech: "One by one dots of light *popped* from the scattered cabins" (p. 37). The synaesthesia here gives sound and surprise to the entire scene. Elsewhere, "Black pine-covered mountains jagged up on both sides of the inlet like teeth" (p. 37). The turning of noun or adjective to service as a verb reinforces the qualities of "dumb talk" I have mentioned — its unconventionality suggests a source in another language, and its implicit visual and kinetic elements might evoke sign language.

For Carr, as for Indian, there is no difference between animate and inanimate; all nature is equally alive and in shared motion. "It must be lovely," she wrote, "to be a creature and go with the elements, not repelling and fearing them, but growing along with them."¹⁴ No doubt Carr shares the central assumption of shamanism "that man and animal are close kin."¹⁵ In "D'Sonoqua" the poet Carr apparently undergoes ecstatic initiation into the ancient mysteries of a special society. The sketch is structured in four movements: three mystical encounters with D'Sonoqua, and an interlude after the second in which Carr suffers illness and solitude. When she first sees the haunting totem figures of D'Sonoqua, Carr can describe, but not identify. The encounter comes as a surprise after carefully sustained suspense. The setting is remote and desolate, and the observer, already pushed beyond normal limits, exhausted from lack of sleep, sees D'Sonoqua as somehow magical: "Their [the carving's eyes] fixed stare bored into me as if the very life of the old cedar looked out,

¹³ Cf. Catherine Sheldrick Ross's discussion of the same pattern in "Female Rites of Passage: *Klee Wyck*, *Surfacing* and *The Diviners*," *Atlantis*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Fall 1978), pp. 87-94.

¹⁴ Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands*, p. 241.

¹⁵ Peter T. Furst, "The Roots and Continuities of Shamanism," *artscanada*, nos. 184-187 (December 1973/January 1974), p. 46. My information about shamanism is drawn primarily from this collection of articles.

and it seemed that the voice of the tree itself might have burst from that great round cavity, with projecting lips, that was her mouth" (p. 33). The figure disappears as mysteriously as it has come: "the white mist came up from the sea, gradually paling her back into the forest. It was as if she belonged there, and the mist were carrying her home" (p. 33). This blending and shifting between realms — sea, air, totem, forest — evokes the ready metamorphoses of Indian religion. The pattern of "D'Sonoqua" is another version of Carr's dumb talk, a representation of literal dumb talk, the silent yet speaking wild woman, the silent yet speaking forest.

In the second encounter, Carr is older and the figure is less threatening. Now it expresses "power, weight, domination, rather than ferocity" (p. 35). Where the first D'Sonoqua breathes the spirit of tree and forest, this figure is more animal and human. On this occasion her question about the figure is partially answered by Indian Tom, and Carr is left with a limited understanding, a superficial identification. "Still — who understands the mysteries behind the forest" (p. 36)?

The third and fourth movements bring Carr some understanding of these mysteries. "Tossed and wracked and chilled," journeying through the "clammy darkness" of the sea, or a gloomy forest of "black pine trees" (pp. 36-37), Klee Wyck's search comes more closely to resemble a sacred quest. She undertakes the shaman's solitary and perilous journey to the underworld: "the edge of the boat lay level with the black slithering horror below. It was like being swallowed again and again by some terrible monster, but never going down" (p. 37). Her seasickness and sleeplessness mark the physical and psychic crisis which typically precedes the ecstatic shamanistic initiation. Out of her illness, Klee Wyck emerges into "the brilliant sparkle of the morning when everything that was not superlatively blue was superlatively green" (p. 37). Now, it seems, she believes in the supernatural; her call to D'Sonoqua is answered by the most visionary appearance of the figure, now softened and less menacing. The shaman is, of course, also poet and cave painter: now, for the first time in this piece, Carr is able to paint/sketch. Now, also, Klee Wyck, the poet, articulates something inaccessible to other members of her community — a sense of equilibrium and wholeness: an equivalence of the "graciously feminine" (p. 40) detected here, and the "power" and "ferocity" (p. 35) of other D'Sonoquas; a kinship of animal, human and tree, where "wild" is both fearful and "shy, untouchable" (p. 40).

In the very structure of D'Sonoqua, then, is a representation of "dumb talk." It is a dream-song of great spiritual power. Through persistence,

meditation, intensity and agony comes a state of enlightenment in which Klee Wyck attains something of the unspoken unspeakable wisdom of the old man sawing and gesturing: like the shaman, she has acquired a kind of “metaphysical equilibrium,” uniquely able to cross over “formidable barriers of language and culture.”¹⁶

Carr’s “D’Sonoqua” is an extended example of that almost inevitable aspect of writing in British Columbia: the attempt to contact Amerind myth and pattern. Mayor Wiens, in Jack Hodgins’ *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*, is surely a parody of the shaman that Bourne himself seems to represent. Keith Maillard’s *Two Strand River* (1976) is a remarkable contemporary interpretation of West Coast shamanism. Ethel Wilson’s *Swamp Angel* incorporates notes on the mythic resonance of Indian place names. Being “bushed” in Earle Birney’s familiar poem involves not only exhaustion and madness, but also an intuition of the “singing” linked to “totems” and “beardusky woods” where distinctions between animal and man, animate and inanimate, inner and outer, disappear. The multiple figure of Raven bridges Victorian and Indian British Columbia in Dorothy Livesay’s “The Artefacts: West Coast.” Phyllis Webb’s *Wilson’s Bowl* makes intricate and duplicitous play with the symbols that the Coast Indian artists find in the creatures of their forests and seas and air.

Free Translations

Among those poems, Webb’s marvellous “Free Translations” provides the label for a third kind of effort to touch a remote language and culture.¹⁷ The strategy of the poem describes the general method — not word for word, or literal translation, but a creative interpretation of the spirit, the sensuousness, the emotion of an originating text, in Webb’s case of the stories fused in the mythic figure Raven. Webb recreates Raven in the language of another culture: hero, creator, muse, trickster. Through the weaving subtleties and ambiguities, Webb even translates herself into Raven, poet and woman. When Raven sings Cole Porter, thinks he’s James Cagney, or plays a Chopin nocturne, Webb is choosing, and subverting, images from a *white* culture which will convey the personality of the most powerful figure in Haida mythology. Webb’s subject is *waiting* for the ideal translation, a translation likely found not in “word,” but in “eagle,” animal and image; the poem talks, often very colloquially, to

¹⁶ Furst, “Roots of Shamanism,” p. 60.

¹⁷ Phyllis Webb, *Wilson’s Bowl* (Toronto, Coach House, 1980), pp. 56-57.

translate dumb talk. But then, Raven's great talent is to translate himself freely from one figure to another; the parodic strategy, that is, is itself drawn from the culture it is presenting. The method of free translation, such as Webb shows here, is perhaps the closest approach possible to the spirit of Carr's dialogue with the Indian sawing driftwood.

Webb writes as if she has absorbed the Indian. She provides a transition, then, to writers who use the Indian material in less obvious ways than Carr, but who seem to have developed their own dumb talk. Sheila Watson is a fine example: in her memorable novel *The Double Hook*, as George Bowering has eloquently shown, she not only uses Coyote as a presiding spirit, but *she*, as trickster-creator-author, becomes Coyote.¹⁸

In *The Double Hook* there is no central character — indeed no “character,” in the conventional sense we would identify, say, in Dickens: in the remembered outlines and fragments of a story passed orally from generation to generation a community searches for the essentials of its community. I'm tempted to say that Watson — and the others I am discussing in this section of the essay — has “gone Indian.” But the phrase is misleading: we are considering not mere imitation of, nor losing oneself in an Indian language and mythology, but rather a creation of a personally powerful form and language sensitive to the structures and images of another culture, which contains its own awareness of the limits of such immersion.

I find the same ability in the pushing and pulling of line and sound and word in Daphne Marlatt's “Steveston,” where the pattern of the salmon's life, used intermittently in *Mist on the River*, governs the very form and language of a poem, and, incidentally, fuses contemporary Japanese fishermen, women workers and the Indians who fished at the mouth of the Fraser aeons ago. Also freely translating “the indian within”¹⁹ are George Bowering in *Burning Water*, Susan Musgrave's songs, and, of course, Bill Bissett's chants. The rattle, which accompanies all his readings, perfectly symbolizes Bissett's combining a child's iconoclastic play and the shaman's secret, sacred songs.

Perhaps I have just proposed topics for three or four essays which might explore some of the freest translations of dumb talk among writers in British Columbia. Less well known, but a uniquely suggestive example of these, can be found in the volume with which I would like to conclude,

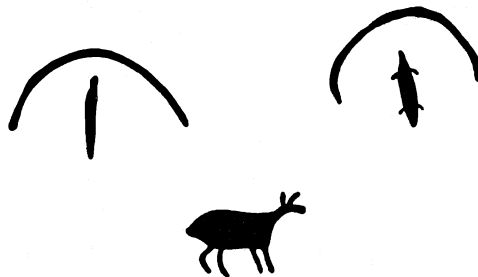
¹⁸ George Bowering, “Sheila Watson, Trickster,” in John Moss, ed., *Modern Times* (NC Press, 1982), pp. 209-23.

¹⁹ Peter Trower, “The Indian Within,” *Ragged Horizons* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1978), p. 68.

Fred Wah's *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* (1975). Wah makes a good deal of the notion of *interior*; he was brought up in the Kootenays and teaches in Nelson. His notion of art is also very interior: he writes of/out of the objects in the natural world as if he were inside them. Tree is not an image to be described, or the cause of an impression, but a concept within himself:

The delight of making inner
 an outer world for me
 is when I tree myself
 and my slight voice screams glee to him.²⁰

In *Pictograms* a B.C. poet returns to the shaman's world, at once more directly and more obliquely than Carr. On the one hand Wah internalizes the iconography of actual pictographs recorded in John Corner's *Pictographs (Indian Rock Paintings) in the Interior of British Columbia* (1968).²¹ On the other hand, Wah "transcreates" these images, so that, as his epigraph from Coleridge tells us, "not the qualities . . . but the root of the qualities" are somehow embodied in his songs. Wah is honest to the indigenous origin of these drawings: they are in all likelihood the visual representation of compact, yet resonant, shamanistic picture-songs.²² But he is honest, too, to his own cultural and verbal heritage, so that he is like the shaman, learning, or creating a new language. Here is one of the simpler examples:



jumped over
 the moon the house elk muskrat & beaver

²⁰ Fred Wah, "Among," *Selected Poems*, p. 43.

²¹ Smaro Kamboureli's "Fred Wah: A Poetry of Dialogue," *Line 4* (Fall 1984), pp. 44-62, deals extensively with Wah's use of his source.

²² Jerome Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock, "The Shaman as Proto-poet: An Anthology of Shamanic Texts and Commentary," *artscanada*, nos. 184-187 (December 1973/January 1974), pp. 172-81.

all runs away runs away
 over & over
 & over & over &²³

In one portion of the poem Wah translates the animal iconography into its nearest English equivalent. But the poem begins with an echo of a child's nursery rhyme: the cow that jumped over the moon is the "trans-creation" in Wah's own language of the magic he senses in the pictograph. Then the pairing in the pictograph sets up repetitions, of "runs away" and "over & over." Wah uses a synonym for "repeatedly," but also embodies constant transformations and reversals as animals take on one another's forms. The poem uses an alternate cultural symbology of the ampersand (that is, not a word, but a "dumb" sign) to signal Wah's own trembling chant: the song in trance seems to occur of its own accord and go on, running, on its own internal power.

Typically the shaman's song imitates the motion of a dance — perhaps, here, a rhythmic jumping over. That is, Wah's form, like the Indian poem, "opens outward, away from itself, into ceremonial dance, into public activity, rather than concentrating into itself."²⁴ This notion that Wah is transcreating Indian forms suggests a further sense of the structure of the poem. As Dell Hymes showed, in a pioneering essay, the refrain of nonsense syllables in an Indian song is both a clue to the poem's structure, and its microcosm; the repetition is not a diffusion, but an enactment of a transcendental awareness of reality.²⁵ Wah's refrain — of "over" and ampersand — gives that clue: "over" is twice paired, but repeated in the poem five times; the ampersand appears in the poem five times. The poem, then, is structured in variations of five and two: five lines, three with two words each; line two has five images and two articles; line three has five words, and a pair of words repeated. In short, the visual symmetry of the pictograph (five images, within which one image, paired, jumps over the other three), is repeatedly evoked in the verbal patterning of the poem. Wah freely translates oral poetry as kinetic ritual:

Song cadences balance one another and play in running rhythms; the song-poet groups words in parallel phrases and rhymes thoughts, as though words

²³ Fred Wah, *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* (Vancouver, Talonbooks, 1975), p. 111. Poem and graphic reproduced by kind permission of Talonbooks.

²⁴ Karl Kroeber, "Poem, Dream, and the Consuming of Culture," in Swann, ed., *Smoothing the Ground*, p. 332.

²⁵ Dell Hymes, "Some North Pacific Coast Poems: A Problem in Anthropological Philology," in his *In Vain I Tried to Tell You": Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), pp. 35-64.

also gather tribally, corresponding in kinships. A human condition rhymes with a natural phenomenon, man with animal origins.²⁶

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This essay is the first I have written on the literature of British Columbia, although I have spent almost fifteen years writing and thinking about regionalism in Canadian literature, especially of the *prairie* West. But here I have more than the usual sense of beginning over. The investigation of this regional literature demands, it seems to me, very different approaches from those appropriate to Canada's other regional literatures: interpretations of the landscape, or examinations of Irish, Scots, Jansenist, or Loyalist traditions. Or, perhaps, what I am proposing is a general redefining of regional approaches to literature. There are, of course, many possibilities, but the primary seems to me to be the necessity of considering the translations of Indian texts and Indian languages. We must delve into the anthropological and linguistic literature, especially, and with a sense of the typical features of Indian languages, of the outlines of different rhetorics and narrative structures, begin a comparative examination of the texts in English, the texts which attempt in some way to present — in superficial dialects, in readings of mythic patterns, or in free translations — the strong talk of a living, continuing tradition. This essay is no more than the most elementary, and uninformed beginning, on such a line of inquiry. I hope it might be read, then, as a vision of a program rather than as a statement of conclusions.

²⁶ Kenneth Lincoln, "Native American Literatures," in Swann, ed., *Smoothing the Ground*, p. 29.