Geoffrey Nilson

# "It was always what was under the poetry that mattered"

## Reading the Paratext in *Once in Blockadia* by Stephen Collis

Narratologist Gérard Genette describes paratext as any elements of a book located around or between the main text of poetry or prose that "surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world" (1, emphasis original). The paratext

> is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*, or—a word that Borges used apropos of a preface—a "vestibule" that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an "undefined zone" between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary . . . or as Philippe Lejeune put it, "a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text." (Genette 1-2, emphasis original)

Paratextual elements can be placed in two distinct groups: the peritext—covers, titles, tables of contents, photographs, endnotes, citations, epigraphs, and any other material appearing with or within the book; and the epitext—elements outside the book including interviews, book reviews, correspondence, marketing materials, and alternate versions. To define the paratext is to describe its functional, pragmatic, spatial, substantial, and temporal characteristics.

The paratext forms a frame for the main text. The prefix *para* is derived from Ancient Greek meaning near, against, beside, next to, or contrary to.

The paratext acts as a mediation between the worlds of publishing and of composition, between the worlds of capital and of artistic meaning. Like the French *parasol*, the prefix also means to guard against or to provide defense from. While the need for a paratext is imposed on all published books, in this essay I focus on paratextual uses and misuses as they relate to my reading of *Once in Blockadia* by Stephen Collis. I am concerned with the paratext as a literary function of meaning, what Genette calls "the *illocutionary force* of its message" (10, emphasis original), with its anatomy and materiality, with its orthodox forms and unique permutations. Genette's method of structural analysis allows a comprehensive picture of the intertextuality at work in *Once in Blockadia*, and an active reading provides a unique understanding of Collis' poetry. Through this analysis I will highlight the complexities of interacting with a text that is forever unfinished for both the writer and the reader.

*Once in Blockadia* (2016) is the continuation of Collis' career-long, multi-volume long poem *The Barricades Project*, also including *Anarchive* (2005), *The Commons* (2007), and *To the Barricades* (2012). Where earlier volumes of *The Barricades Project* primarily focus on the poet's study of the past (the Spanish Civil War, the privatization of English common lands, the Zapatistas, and multiple French revolutions), *Once in Blockadia* creates poetry of direct action, where the speaker is participant: in the Tar Sands Healing Walk in Fort McMurray; on the front lines of the Burnaby Mountain protests against Kinder Morgan; at the 2011 Occupy demonstrations in Vancouver; walking in solidarity with refugees and asylum seekers in southern England. *Blockadia* is a refinement of the themes that recur throughout *The Barricades Project*, themes that "enact a political critique that scrutinizes certain culturally dominant ideologies—including those of neoliberalism and of cultural nationalism—at play within the public, urban realm" (Hanna 51), but it is also a book which realizes the poem itself will not be sufficient.

Books are often treated as disposable products with the main text valued and paratextual elements reduced to performative functionality. Every text demands a paratext, but not every paratext is used explicitly by the author or publisher as a site of meaning. In contrast, *Once in Blockadia* values paratextual creativity where the context, metaphor, and themes of the main text are supported and complicated by the paratextual elements,

where the materials around (or behind) the text are as important as the text itself: "It was always what was under the poetry that mattered" (31), Collis states in the collection. Collis, like Genette, dwells in the fringes and borderlands between the text and the paratext. I do not wish to claim that my reading is legitimate to the exclusion of others, but simply that it is a reading reinforced by the specific paratextual arrangement. My challenge is to read through the conventions of the paratext to the discursive life of the book. While every poem in *Blockadia* can be read as it appears on the page, it can also be read through the paratext, the coterie of connections that both frame and illuminate interpretation. As Collis confesses, "Everything I write is thus part of some inaccessible and inconceivable totality outside the work itself" (*To the Barricades* 144). *Once in Blockadia* must be read as a text and as a paratext. I cannot accept what is only on the page because the text prompts me to many other places. Collis uses the paratext as an active site of meaning, and my responsibility as an active reader is to respond to the myriad, often fractured forms in which the text speaks.

## How the poetry was constructed: the allographic epitext

On October 30, 2014, Stephen Collis was sued by Trans Mountain Pipeline ULC, then a tentacle of Texas-based multinational energy corporation Kinder Morgan. Served in his office on the Simon Fraser University (SFU) campus with a court injunction and a $5.6-million civil lawsuit just prior to teaching a literature class late in the day, he was expected to be in the BC Supreme Court in Vancouver the next afternoon ("Kinder Morgan slaps").

How did an English professor get himself tangled in this legal web? Collis was targeted (along with Adam Gold, Mia Nissen, Lynne Quarmby, Alan Dutton, and the pipeline-opponent citizen's group Burnaby Residents Opposing Kinder Morgan Expansion, aka BROKE) because of continued support for protests on Burnaby Mountain that obstructed Kinder Morgan activities related to an application to expand the Trans Mountain Pipeline. The pipeline is an industrial corridor carrying crude and diluted oilsands bitumen 1,150 km from Edmonton, Alberta to the Westridge Marine Terminal in Burnaby, British Columbia. This classic example of a strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP) was purposely threatening, filed to instill fear in the defendants. It did its job.

"Personally, you feel pretty freaked out—when they start saying $5.6 million in damages," Collis told the *Vancouver Observer* ("Kinder Morgan slaps"). But underneath his initial shock with the litigation (and all that needed to be done to prepare for it, including reviewing nearly one thousand pages of documents) was a strident and steadfast resistance: "I feel outraged politically that this could happen in a democracy—that a massive foreign company can accuse you of trespassing on a park. That they can use the courts and their money and influence from barring you from your constitutional right to free speech" ("Kinder Morgan slaps").

Collis described his role in the Burnaby Mountain protests as one in which he was working with many others to stop the proposed expansion of the Trans Mountain pipeline; in other words, he was participant (and sometimes spokesperson) in a public collective action. But during litigation, the corporation's lawyers "painted [him] as some kind of bandit ringleader," as Collis reflects, and for three and a half days tried to convince a judge he'd conspired against their interests ("Why Was Kinder Morgan"). The lawyers even used Collis' writing as evidence, excerpting passages from poems and blogs published to his personal website.

Ultimately, the court injunction to stop the protest was granted. The state ruled on the side of corporate rather than community interests, reinforcing the judiciary as protection for the powerful and not the public. Associate Chief Justice Austin Cullen was sure to note his admiration for the Kinder Morgan workers in his judgment, who, when faced with the "aggressive and threatening language" of the protest, "wisely chose" to retreat (Cullen). They were not forced back by the collective strength of the community and the revocation of social license to operate but, ostensibly in control of the moral right, made the decision to abandon the confrontation. Quick to demonize the protest as "a concerted and coordinated effort to thwart the [company's] representatives from performing their duties . . . through the use of unlawful means," Cullen is clear in which side he takes in the dispute. The court's primary concern: the company's bottom line.

"The Court Transcript" opens *Once in Blockadia* and is described by Collis in the notes as being excerpted from legal transcripts of the Trans Mountain litigation (133). The transcripts are part of what Genette terms the allographic epitext (9): allographic as in created by a third party and epitext as in originating outside the book. These excerpts thus have a dual

life, existing both outside the text in their original form and as paratextual elements in their excerpted form. Genette writes that "something is not a paratext unless the author or one of [their] associates accepts responsibility for it" (9), and so the excerpt that constitutes "The Court Transcript" can be read as "accepted" by the author by its inclusion in the text. Its selection can also be read as intended to portray Kinder Morgan in a specific manner for the reader, a "plaintiff" more concerned with breach of bylaw than with the ethics of their exploitive business, a portrayal made all the more irrefutable since it appears in its (lawyer's) own words. "The Court Transcript" defines the formal arrangement of *Once in Blockadia* as a poem built from parts; a poem that is a quote composed of other quotes, not only the voice of the speaker and supporters, but also of their opposition as well, of people and "a hodgepodge assembly of tree branches, discarded building materials, like boards, a sheet of Plexiglas, even an old mattress, computer keyboard and plastic Polaroid camera" (*Blockadia* 7-8). The location of "The Court Transcript" at the beginning of *Once in Blockadia* defines what is at stake for those willing to put their bodies on the line to resist resource extraction. They become a target for SLAPP litigation and possible settler-state criminal prosecution. Battle lines are clearly delineated with activists on one side of the court, and government and business interests on the other. Trans Mountain lawyers choose specific examples of Collis' writing to construct a narrative of his character and intentions, and Collis does the same to Trans Mountain with his specific excerpt from the litigation transcripts. The final lines of the poem—"underneath the poetry is a description of / how the barricade was constructed" (9)—are pulled from the mouths of the lawyers and used against them (and in the book's marketing materials). Collis appropriates the language and turns Trans Mountain's own words against them. This technique can only be understood by the reader through study of the paratext. "The Court Transcript" quotes from multiple sources and websites, and its form displays the compositional method of the text as a whole, constructing not only the speaker and supporters, but also what they oppose. The barricade is assembled with people and with oil barrels. The poem is built from language on the tongues of Collis and the Trans Mountain lawyers.

Less than three months after the injunction, Kinder Morgan filed a unilateral discontinuance of their related civil claim, in which they agreed

to pay all defendant court costs, and in doing so revealed their true intentions: to dissuade public protest and to uphold the capitalist status quo. By the time of the discontinuance, the protest action on Burnaby Mountain had ceased. Collis (as well as scientist Lynne Quarmby, also professor at SFU) had already settled by agreeing to discontinuance without costs, but the rest of the defendants would not cooperate, leading Kinder Morgan spokesperson Ali Hounsell to exclaim, "The others for whatever reason want to continue to bring this up, and want to continue to drag it out publicly, so instead of waiting for them to sign on, we went this other route" (qtd. in Moreau). Kinder Morgan was never in financial jeopardy that could justify civil litigation for millions of dollars, but there was a very real danger to their brand in the court of public opinion. As the case between Kinder Morgan and the defendants dragged on, there was widespread media attention, and in this light the discontinuance can be viewed as part of a corporate PR attempt to mitigate possible damage from the litigation by removing the story from the news cycle, as well as an attempt to demonize the defendants as unreasonable "others" who don't respect the rule of law.

The civil litigation narrative imbedded in "The Court Transcript" colours how the reader enters the text because it colours how the writer enters the text, and that narrative is only accessible through a paratextual reading. At the time of the Burnaby Mountain protest, Collis was already at work on the manuscript that would become *Once in Blockadia*, but the action influenced the collection and prompted it to become what Collis describes as "something of a poetic documentary of the struggle against the pipeline on Burnaby Mountain in the fall of 2014" ("Poetry against the Pipelines"). Read with only the peritext (the paratext included with the book), "The Court Transcript" is a flat repurposing of state documents as conceptual poem. Through a detailed reading of the epitext, whether media coverage, statements from Collis, or Supreme Court rulings, the reader gains a more complete understanding of the stakes which inform "The Court Transcript," as well as insight into its formal considerations. The distanced elements outside the book contextualize and complicate what the poem(s) can express for the reader, especially since these elements may be some of the first ways a reader could come to know the author and the text. The protests and subsequent litigation hang over the text like a rain cloud.

**Artful disruptions: the temporal paratext**

"Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands" comes at the midpoint of *Once in Blockadia* and provides respite to the reader after the fragmented forms of "The Court Transcript" and other earlier poems. The poetic voice is no longer broken, distant, or obviously polyphonic, but proceeds with a familiar free-verse style that actively calls upon the English Romantic tradition. This change releases accumulated tension, highlighting how the reader equates the first-person point of view with the voice of the poet and craves that that voice would communicate a message in a unified way. The title emphasizes this personal shift—presumably a single human would be "reading"—and overall does much more to support the poem when compared with descriptive titles such as "The Court Transcript" or "Thirteen Trees." This evaluation of the metaphoric labour that a title must do in service of its poem is a paratextual consideration, one nearly inseparable from the composition of a poem. Titles are part of a book's original peritext, and appear with the inaugural publication of the book. "Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands" was "written during and after the Tar Sands Healing Walk in June 2014, in Fort McMurray, Alberta," Collis explains, and includes "material incorporated from William Wordsworth's poems and letters, and Dorothy Wordsworth's journal" (*Blockadia* 134). Taken from the book's endnotes, these bits of paratextual detail are also part of the original paratext; they perform the obligation of citation and biographical context, but they do not offer very much towards interpretation. Not all notes are created equal. They are one of the "borders, or absences of borders, that surround the eminently transitional field of the paratext" (Genette 319) and do not always reveal meanings.

"Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands" is a long poem (some fifteen pages) that attempts to reckon with the legacy of the pastoral in a place of massive environmental exploitation, while engaging Wordsworth's method of walking the land to inform the introspection the poetry undertakes:

Wordsworth—I feel you too!
Though there is no mechanism
To nuance this conversation
Across the years—so I brought
Your ruined cottages your
Evening walks and Grasmere
Homing here to the Tar Sands
To stroll across northern desarts

Not knowing how well you fit—
The method of our walking
From seeing to contemplating
To remembering—is yours (62)

There is an acknowledgement of the tradition in which the poem follows as it questions how well that tradition fits with the contemporary world. The speaker labels the poem a "conversation," possibly with the Wordsworths included in the poem, but a conversation requires more than one voice, and the primary method for Collis in the poem (and throughout *The Barricades Project*) is "to mix appropriation of found material with lyric expression to the point that the one becomes indistinguishable from the other" (*To the Barricades* 143). Collis listens to the quoted Wordsworth and responds with his own lines, blending them into a single voice, but no reply is possible from the appropriated material. His nod to the Romantic pastoral is in contrast to the devastating scene of Fort McMurray and its "Fenced former forests of sand / Thick dark thoughts leaching / Heavy metal music machines" (64). Collis riffs on a Bruce Cockburn lyric with "We were walkers / In a dangerous time" (62). Like the song "Lovers in a Dangerous Time" and the threat of Cold War destruction it addresses, "Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands" stands with hope in the face of environmental collapse. The walkers, made up of activists both settler and Indigenous, "still drumming and / Still singing the elders praying" and "lodged / In the frail shrine of us aglow / Old technology of people together / Holding the line against changing weather" (70). The emphasis on solidarity here works to subvert the lyric "I" of the Romantic tradition and promote collectivity of planetary beings both human and non-human. It calls into question the continued dominance of the lyric voice in the poem, and acts as a signal to the reader that all is not as it seems with the poem or with Wordsworth's place in the tar sands.

The fundamental conflict in "Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands" is that it struggles with whether or not the poet can confront the legacy of the lyric poem while still writing with the conventions of that form. Collis inhabits qualities of Wordsworth's walking poems of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) written during his time in Grasmere outside the cultural and literary elite. Wordsworth was always more comfortable in the refuge of the mind than the reality of England during the Industrial Revolution, and "Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands" reflects his commonly accepted hagiography

as great champion of nature, beauty, and free, spiritual self-expression. It interrogates the usefulness of the pastoral in the specific geographic destruction of the tar sands, but does not seem at first to question Wordsworth or his use in a contemporary eco-political poem.

Collis writes, "I shy away from the pull of my own romanticism—but it never ceases to pull" (*Almost Islands* 95). For him, "drawing comparisons between beloved authors, between ourselves and those authors, we would claim as our own a kind of kin, we entangle ourselves" (*Almost Islands* 129). Collis consciously aligns himself with the legacy of Wordsworth, making Wordsworth and his writing part of the allographic epitext, and my reading of the paratext for *Once in Blockadia* must include a critique of this entanglement. Wordsworth provides many examples of his anthropocentric ecology, turning away from a youthful awe in the natural world and toward "hearing oftentimes / The still, sad music of humanity" ("Tintern Abbey"). Instead of seeing the forest in the trees, Wordsworth sees his own melancholy. He substitutes God for Nature to inject spirituality into what are essentially poems of realism:

> . . . and this prayer I make,
> Knowing that Nature never did betray
> The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
> Through all the years of this our life, to lead
> From joy to joy ("Tintern Abbey")

It is clear that even in 1798, Wordsworth's love of nature (and that of many of his time, class, and education) was based not solely on aesthetic grounds but on Biblical ones as well, that is, a love of nature that serves humanity. But Wordsworth may never have been as revolutionary or egalitarian as his association with English Romanticism suggests. Already raised in the halls of the aristocracy, Wordsworth's inheritance (by way of his father) from William Lowther, first Earl of Lonsdale, allowed him to marry in 1802 and live in relative financial stability. Then, in 1812, he became a full member of the British upper class with his appointment to Distributor of Stamps for Westmoreland, which came with a yearly stipend, a position he would hold for thirty years until becoming Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom in 1843. It is much easier to wander lonely as a cloud when not struggling for bread to feed your family.

Collis authorizes Wordsworth by including his writing in the poem. He replicates Wordsworthian forms and methods to strengthen the

connection, but by lending the same delicate attention to the tar sands that Wordsworth did to daffodils, Collis (perhaps unintentionally) gives a glow of beauty to the horror:

> . . . wind
> Over dead water—I thought of
> Clouds where none lay
>
> Grey billows of moneyed dust
> Nickel and naught caught up
> In tracks of trucks—shadows
>
> Brittle butterflies and the liquid
> Crystal depths of dry grass (63)

There is a pleasing progression of one- and two-syllable words, and the vowels sing through simple nouns like wind, nickel, trucks, and dust. It is easy to be swept up by the emotion of the "liquid / Crystal depths of dry grass" but the metaphors acclimate the reader to the destruction, creating the same sort of "disaster porn" (66) elsewhere chastised in the text. "What strange adaptors we are!" (74) the speaker cries, conveying humans some special uniqueness, rather than suggesting the reality that humans are just another species that may succumb to extinction for their inability to adapt to changing environmental conditions. Maybe too this unique negative adaptation, whereby humans evolve conditions for themselves that are detrimental to their own survival, is what Collis is attempting to express. "Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands" inhabits hope and possibility for social change that is the time and place of the Healing Walk, rather than delving into the contradictions of Wordsworth. It is a specific community action that holds a utopian dream:

> Let me walk a little longer at
> Bodily scale—beings have always
> Been here—contemplating this
> Landscape and letting the flood
> Of memories of the future in
> Recollecting that time to come
> When none of us will be disposable waste (75)

Anthropocentrism seems to place humans (and maybe all living things) above the cycle of existence and death, manifesting a quaint future where "none of us will be disposable waste" that pacifies violence inherent to the natural world. Like heaven, it is a fictional utopia, impossibly doomed because it never really existed.

One gets the feeling that Collis attempts to construct the impossible (like an environmental utopia or a long poem that goes on for years) knowing that what is achieved in the book will only ever be a fraction of the intended goal, subject to all the flaws of reality. It is possible that Collis takes on the connection with Wordsworth in order to draw attention to the problems I define, and thus a close reading of the paratext is required. Literary readings of the paratext demand a dedicated reader "in the senses both of one widely read, and one alert to every artful disruption" (Macksey xii). Collis describes *Once in Blockadia* as a text that "tried to serve two audiences (masters?) at once, or was itself the result of a foundational undecideability that left [it] fractured and incomplete at its core" (56-57). Appearing in 2018 in his book *Almost Islands*, two years after *Blockadia*, this analysis is part of the delayed paratext, which Genette defines as any paratextual element that appears years after the original publication of the text. Collis uses the temporality of paratextual elements to represent the evolution of resistance movements. Collis' compositional meta-analysis echoes how a protest movement needs to consider thoroughly its actions and ideologies in the middle of attempting to manifest them. There is vulnerability in Collis' self-critique. The protest, like the poem, is always changing, developing, gaining ground, or retreating to safety. *Once in Blockadia* is part of the continuous, multi-volume *The Barricades Project*, and is always "unfinished," always being written. Collis makes changes on the fly in a metatextual relationship that links his commentary to the poem(s) it comments upon.

It is easy to see this "unfinished" quality when looking at an earlier version of "Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands" that appeared in *The Goose* in February 2015, about a year before the publication of *Once in Blockadia*. This "prior paratext" (Genette 5) offers an opportunity to study the poem's evolution. If *Blockadia* is fractured and incomplete as Collis suggests, do the edits show that he intended it that way? The differences are obvious. The earlier version in *The Goose* is longer (with 543 lines compared to 377 lines) and Collis cuts a digression about a hiking trip near Port Alberni, British Columbia to keep the scene of the poem limited to the tar sands, as Wordsworth might have done when writing about a single walk in the Lake District. The earlier version is divided into a prologue and four numbered sections (rather than one unnumbered section), and the

stanzas extend down the page line after line (instead of appearing broken into smaller shapes and lengths). What begins in *The Goose* as

> Walking—we were old technology
> Biotic and slow moving
> Dropped into circuit
> Pilgrims circling on a
> Healing walk walking
> All day beating the bounds
> Of a single tailings pond (5)

through revision and the editing process becomes

> Walking—we were old
> Technology
> Biotic and slow moving
>
> Dropped into circuit
> Pilgrims circling on a
> Healing walk walking
>
> All day beating the bounds
> Of a single vast and dry
> Tailings pond (*Blockadia* 67)

A new line break between "old / Technology" promotes an alternate, almost comical reading of "we were old." This may refer to the walkers and to Wordsworth, the "old" influence in the poem. The long stanzas have in some places been structured into tercets which push back against the free-verse style, the extra white space like the brokenness of Wordsworth's anthropocentrism and the incompleteness of the pastoral in the face of the tar sands.

It may be impossible to know all the paratextual details regarding a text or their relevance to a reader, but the details that a reader does know will inevitably lead to different interpretations. Paratextual elements can appear or disappear at any time and location, and the paratext of any given literary work is constantly in flux; its ways and means vary depending on period, culture, genre, author, work, and edition. The most common time for a paratextual element to appear is with the original publication of the text, but the paratext can and does appear post and prior to the original publication. And when read in concert with the text, as with "Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands," these temporal disruptions create new interpretations, and enable a reader to track the writer and poem as they change over time.

## Contested space: the publisher's peritext

The publisher's peritext, including the book cover, legal notes, credits, and title pages, is generally assumed by the reader to be controlled by the publisher. These elements are located around the main body of a literary text and appear with the publication of the book. Localized peritextual elements do not encompass all of the publisher's paratext, though. Typesetting and paper choice shape the text into the book, and these choices provide direct or indirect commentary on the text(s) they affect. As Genette writes,

> No reader can be completely indifferent to a poem's arrangement on the page. . . . Likewise, no reader should be indifferent to the appropriateness of particular typographic choices, even if modern publishing tends to neutralize these choices by a perhaps irreversible tendency towards standardization. . . . These considerations may seem trivial or marginal, but there are cases in which the graphic realization is inseparable from literary intention. (34)

For example, Toronto's Coach House Books prints on a particular Zephyr Antique Laid paper on a 1973 Heidelberg offset litho press. These qualities mark its books (and the books it prints for other publishers) both aesthetically and as a member of a particular quality group. The paper weight and printing methods convey economic significance, as the size, format, and materials of a book have historically been strong indicators of a book's literary value. Large formats, robust paper, and expensive binding materials are reserved for serious works or prestigious editions, and smaller sizes and inexpensive printing methods for popular literature or cheap editions (Genette 18).

*Once in Blockadia* usurps elements of the publisher's paratext with the desire to open the reader's experience and to subvert the elements of capital (the publisher) within the book object. Here I will explore typography, images, and cover art. Collis marks found text with typographic variety throughout *Once in Blockadia*. Verbatim materials from other sources (such as court documents and CBC Radio transcriptions) stamp themselves in a bureaucratic Courier type, void of emotion. The words of other writers flow in italics across the page, whether in epigraphs or included in a poem. Each one conveys, as in the Greek root *typos*, an impression to the reader. But these conventions are not always consistent in the text. Collis does not outline all the typographical variation in the notes for *Once in Blockadia*, and so this occasional ambiguity provides the reader with an interpretive role. One poem Collis does address is "Shell Scenarios":

What can we expect from the future?

all vehicles
comeback emitter
slowdown energy
comeback rise

adaptation
measures liquid
decoupling needs
decoupling further

we find old cans
soldering
the peak of
verifiable needs

we lick the last remnants
cutting tongue (53)

The poem is multi-page, each page with different ratios of black and grey type. Some poems have all black or all grey while others have only one word of grey or a few words of black. Most poems are balanced between the two shades. On a reader's first pass, it is difficult to discern what the method should be signifying. Both types use a "we" pronoun that conveys collectivity rather than opposition. The emotion the reader feels at "What can we expect from the future?" is continued with "we lick the last remnants / cutting tongue," further drawing the contrasting sections together. Yet, in the notes, Collis describes the poem as "in part, derived from an erasure of Shell Oil's 'Scenario Plans' available on the company's website," and that "the grey text is [his] additions" (134). Again, we see Collis' method of a poem that builds from his own voice and the voices of others. Time and again, a reading of the paratext reveals Collis' polyphonic barricade as his compositional and structural method.

Images also play a role in *Once in Blockadia*, a method that is consistent across *The Barricades Project* to varying degrees. Often images that appear within a literary text are simply selected by the publisher as aesthetically pleasing breaks, but those included in *Blockadia* reinforce connections to the main text. Earlier in the book, Collis includes colour photographs from *The Watchers* by Genevieve Robertson and Jay White, but here I would like to briefly explore two images created by the author, "photographs of Burrard Inlet and Grasmere . . . taken in 2015" (135).

The photographs are juxtaposed, facing each other on opposite pages, at the beginning of the poem "Home at Gasmere." There is an obvious resemblance between the locations depicted, and that resemblance is reinforced by the framing composition and tonal gradation. Mirror opposites strengthen the connection: where the foreground of the Grasmere image is light, the foreground of the Burrard Inlet image is dark; the dark hills of Grasmere are strikingly similar to the bleached cloud of Burrard Inlet, yet at the centre of both are thin bodies of water squeezed by their geography (a lake and a saltwater inlet, respectively). There is even a small island in the middle of the English lake near-perfectly doubled by an oil tanker anchored in the inlet. The images also serve the epigraph from Malcolm Lowry that follows them: ". . . *not because [Grasmere] reminds one of Wordsworth so much but because if we half shut our eyes we may be able to imagine we're back on Burrard Inlet*" (113). Lowry's authority on the relation is conveyed by his place in the history of literature in Vancouver. There is a particular authorial wink with the epigraph; Lowry lived for fourteen years in Dollarton, North Vancouver, in a squatter's shack on the shores of Burrard Inlet (biographical information is a paratextual element).

"Home at Gasmere" highlights Grasmere in Cumbria, England, as a false idyllic linked as much to the Wordsworthian pastoral as it is to the mines "of this landscape's past— / Graphite for the poet's pencil lead for / Bombshells and cannonballs at Seathwaite / Iron mines at Ulverton Thomas West" (115). Burrard Inlet, Vancouver, Canada, shares the distinction of being a false idyllic, a working port that sees 30-50 crude oil tankers and a total of about 3,160 vessels per year in its waters ("Marine Traffic Management"). When Collis asks the reader to see the similarities between Grasmere and British Columbia, he draws attention to the beauty, but also to the elements of capital and resource extraction that often linger unseen, whether as pipelines in the forest, mines concealed below the ground, or ships floating isolated offshore in the harbour.

Book covers have long been a contentious issue between authors and publishers. A relatively recent phenomenon in publishing starting in the early nineteenth century, before which the title page was the main source of the publisher's paratext (Genette 23), the book cover can include many different strands of information such as name of the author, title, genre,

price, dedications, illustrations, biography, promotional blurbs, and more. While these aspects of the book cover can be viewed as primarily functional, they remain a profound source of complication and deeper artistic or thematic indication of the content within the enclosed text. The cover is essentially a billboard for the text it contains and is one of the first sites a reader will engage with the book; "the most obvious function of the [cover or] jacket is to attract attention," notes Genette, and publishers often use means more dramatic than those for functional editions such as "garish illustration, a reminder of a film or television adaptation, or simply a graphic representation" (28) that alters or conflicts with the intention of the text. While publishers generally exert control over a book's cover, images can radically skew the perception of a text, and the cover remains a contested space for authors. In contrast to large publishing firms, much of contemporary Canadian poetry is released through small or independent presses in comparatively short runs, either wholly or partially subsidized by government funding from the Canada Council for the Arts and/or other national or provincial arts organizations. This reality diminishes the economic concerns that go into cover design; thus it is no surprise that poetry books see a more conscious alignment of the cover with the text it encloses, and provide greater control over that cover to the author.

*Once in Blockadia*, in similar fashion to its other paratextual elements, takes control of the book cover with the image *River Catalogue* (2015) by artist and ecocritic Genevieve Robertson. While there is no indication in the notes, Collis includes another work from the artist in the book and cropped images from the cover appear interspersed as breaks in the text, indicating that the choice to use the artwork was his. Robertson's artwork suits the book well, with its craggy forms like black shards of rock; the piece is aesthetically beautiful and carries an almost sinister air to its haunting of the page, as if promotional artwork by Stanley Donwood for some long-lost Radiohead album. But digging into the publisher's credits in *Blockadia* reveals a complication: *River Catalogue* employs "found bitumen, gouache, and charcoal" as its mediums. The materiality of these mediums defines them all as heavy producers of carbon emissions. Charcoal is produced from the burning of raw wood, gouache in a paint manufacturing industry that could be described as one of the most toxic on earth, and bitumen is the very petroleum substance against which *Once in Blockadia* forms its

barricade of language. The use of bitumen does not create tension with the thematic environmentalism of the artwork or the poetry, though. I would argue its use foregrounds the substance and in some way strives to make it beautiful, as all art strives to make its medium(s) beautiful. It does not illustrate a complicity with Big Oil, but conveys a willingness to continue using its products (or by-products or pollutions) when it suits a need, idea, or metaphor. By placing it on the cover, with its connection to marketing, *Once in Blockadia* is in a small way selling bitumen. When the artist (or the poet) uses bitumen as a medium, they transform it into an aesthetic object and amplify its use as a cultural and economic product. Petroleum is used in almost everything. The public, and especially artists and writers who are concerned with an ecological politics, may not have much choice about some of their uses of oil as a consumable, but using it as an artistic product is a choice within their purview. Without actually digging into the paratext of *Once in Blockadia* to find the material information of the Robertson artwork, a reader receives the work on purely aesthetic grounds. But Robertson's and Collis' use of bitumen as part of their creations also highlights the barricade method of composition, and their inclusion can also be read as a critique or commentary on the ubiquity of petroleum products in all parts of life. Like the "last oil barrel that will have anything to do with [the] mountain forest" (*Blockadia* 9), the reader hopes this is the last time bitumen will be used as an artistic medium.

## Reading the notes: a literary praxis

What is under the poetry for *Once in Blockadia* are the people, the individuals, and the community of voices, or, as Collis describes, "a co-embodiment of the address 'Dear Common' that someone calls out to anyone else there" (*To the Barricades* 143). This is the unifying connection of the book and *The Barricades Project*. Collis is no "bandit-ringleader," as charged by Kinder Morgan lawyers, soapboxing his way to social change; his voice is one of many in a public movement. *Once in Blockadia* positions itself as a barricade of polyphony and poetic form constructed from an amalgam of material, both original and excerpted sources. This collectivism seems radical to the lyric poetry status quo that so often expresses itself with unified voice and contained interpretation, regardless of how long alternative compositional methods have been in use, because

it threatens the dominance of the author over the text. But Collis does not hope to negate the author (or himself); he wants to change its role in the composition of the book. The author's name performs the function of legal obligation but also that of assigning who controls the construction of a text (Genette 151), especially when the text in question contains found text or allographic content in abundance. Rather than author as sole creator or composer, *Once in Blockadia* is an example of the author as "conductor" of a text. More than simply arranging the parts into a cohesive whole, Collis performs the text while writing it through modulation of multiple sources and paratexts in the same way a conductor would modulate musicians in an orchestra performing Beethoven. This metaphor extends to the reader as well, as each will approach the text with their own subjectivity and thus create a new "performance" of the text.

This upsets the traditions of publishing and aims to influence the reader toward a comprehensive understanding of the work (and the world) rather than allowing the publisher to mediate that understanding. Any supposed difficulty in *Once in Blockadia* is not meant to create formal or thematic superiority, but rather it is to problematize and resist the expectations of reading. As Catriona Strang argues, "The very act of resistance insists on the (perhaps imaginary) existence of other options: *Not This*, by definition posits a *Something Else* . . . resistance also constitutes a turning away into another space or identity, a declaration of difference, separateness, and otherness . . . a breaking away, a discovery of new options" (xix). For Collis and *Once in Blockadia*, a *Something Else* becomes real in the text but also consists of a future where more people are taking their place together at the barricade in the fight for the common good:

everything beyond the page
what went unrecorded
mattered most
and goes on resisting
as it can and as it must (104)

Reading *Once in Blockadia* as a contained text is very different from reading it as an open one that engages with the paratext in hopes of bridging some of the gaps between subjectivities. Some readers might consider Collis' overt use of paratextual elements a distraction from the poetry, might claim the author does not let the work speak for itself. If I am to believe Genette,

digging into the legal documents surrounding the litigation against Collis, dissecting the notes for details about the composition of the poems, reading previously published versions of poems, or studying the style and format of publication are each "subordinate to [the] text" no matter the "aesthetic or ideological investment in a paratextual element" (*Paratexts* 12). But on this point I disagree, because writing (and reading) through the paratext *is* letting a work speak for itself, only with all the tools with and within the book object at its disposal. Collis moves past Genette's theory of the paratext as subordinate; for *Once in Blockadia* every context is a paratext and every paratext becomes, granularly, part of the text itself.

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