

21st-Century Poetics

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One thing that working on this double issue—certainly more than double in its impact—has taught me is that experimental poetics both needs and resists convention. This explains why the guest editors are calling their editorial an afterword and putting it at the back, where I hope you will look for and read it. (It might have been more creative to call it an afterword and put it at the front, but they are guests, and we try to make them happy.) Like them, I want to let the articles, poems, notes, conversations, and reviews speak for themselves, particularly since they are more closely interrelated than is common in most special issues. It's clear that those writing and written about here live in a world a little at a tangent to the academy and to convention, a world that *Canadian Literature* is happy to invite you to enjoy.

Given that I am co-author of an English usage guide, it might seem that I should be fanatically attached to convention and consistency. But I'm not sure that I'm all that grateful for the labours of those who have standardized spelling, punctuation, bibliographic style, and so on. I am still correcting the spelling of *its* in doctoral thesis drafts (hint: never put the apostrophe after the "s" because that will *always* be wrong). Sometimes I wonder if the huge amount of time we spend making sure that everything is consistent is worth it. Who but us, for example, is going to notice that the MLA short title choices in this issue vary from article to article? Nonetheless, if conventions weren't firm, how would poets get a rise from their readers by shifting accents around on their own names, for example, or spelling *translation* as *transelation*, or translating the German *Niemand* as *noone*? This is one

way poets interrupt our automatic text processing, inspiring us to feel or think new and unexpected things. Trailing pseudo-typos like *framing* and *farming*, *fingering* and *figuring* past our earnest gaze, these poet-critics make proofreaders into their patsies. No wonder there is a whole book of poetry called [*sic*]. Would it make a difference if we convinced you that there were hidden messages in our typos? (No, we didn't misspell your name, we . . . poeticized it.) Oddly, alas, typos remain typos no matter what. It's *even worse* to get an intentional misspelling wrong. Just a normal typo, oh well. But to correct an intentional misspelling is to ruin a philosophical point. So the insanity of standardization is revealed in all its true horror (and beauty), because not even the avant-garde can do without it.

The poems and essays in this issue have led me to rethink my reaction that playing with accents, typefaces, and spelling is just silly. (Clint and Christine have both dragged me through many such impasses, as I plaintively wail "Why wear a cowboy shirt to a job interview?" and "How can this poetry be democratic?" They just drag me resolutely along, their poetic teeth gritted, and I thank them for it.) I loved learning about enantiomorphosis, the Neo-Baroque, and 'pataphysics.

I take the apostrophe in 'pataphysics as standing for something important that isn't there. (Like the o, in *isn't*, but bigger and harder to guess.) Although I read Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* for my doctoral examinations, then I understood only the importance of being earnest (not Ernest). The idea of a science based on exceptions and contradictions had not then appeared in my intellectual landscape. (Soon after, I learned about it from a disco dancing comparativist as we twizzled across the floor at the Toronto Airport Hilton.)

When some analytic philosophers tried to dissuade Cambridge University from giving Jacques Derrida an honorary degree, they wrote to the *Times* of London (9 May 1992) that many of his formulations

seem to consist in no small part of elaborate jokes and the puns "logical phallusies" and the like, and M. Derrida seems to us to have come close to making a career out of what we regard as translating into the academic sphere tricks and gimmicks similar to those of the Dadaists or of the concrete poets.

He got the degree. Surely someone has already called him Derridada.

Derrida was accused of pseudophilosophy; Dr. Faustroll, one of Jarry's alter egos, *was* a pseudophilosopher. I've been teaching science fiction and science studies for the last few years, keeping in mind Bruno Latour's comment in *We Have Never Been Modern* that the West anchors its superiority in its possession of a singular universal science. This is where my

editorial hooks up with the afterword; no one science can comprehensively account for all the phenomena out there, all moving, all interacting. Good scientists know this. (Neutrinos may have to be renamed, now they appear to be going faster than light—I vote for calling them faustrolls.) Science (we could put an apostrophe in front of it to remind us of what is being left out) aims to generalize, to take a vast buzzing world of events and objects and creatures and taxonomize it so as to deduce explanatory universal laws. But of course, science usually does not deal with individual events, things, or creatures (no unicorns or phoenixes, please). Lyrical poetry finds its voice precisely there, with a wandering lonely poet personifying flowers in a well-known landscape. And poetry also generalizes and taxonomizes and philosophizes (“A rose is a rose is a rose”). In science, the singular exception is not a rose, but the Big Bang. Latour argues in “The Compositionist Manifesto” that it has been deployed to make everything since then into an agentless effect of a singular cause. Dr. Faustroll would never be that dull. Dr. Latour argues that agency pervades networks of connection among people and what is cordoned off as Nature and Technology, at least in our epistemology. For scientists, exceptions are assumed to “prove the rule.” For poets, rules make the exception worth writing about. It is not just imaginary gardens with real toads, although that’s a start. For Derrida, it is that real toads are, in their reality, beyond the text; humans “cannot refer to this ‘real’ except in an interpretive experience” (*Limited Inc* 148). If you hold a toad, both your hand and the toad’s body are real, but what you make of the experience is an interpretation, whether you write a poem, discover a new species, or just get warts.

WORKS CITED

- Derrida, Jacques. *Limited Inc*. 1977. Trans. Samuel Weber. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1988. Print.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993. Print.
- . “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist’ Manifesto.” *New Literary History* 41.3 (2010). *Project Muse*. Web. 13 Dec. 2011.