

# “But Could I Make A Living From It”

Jeff Derksen’s Modular Form

Jeff Derksen’s poetics articulate the political struggles surrounding issues of subjectivity, citizenship, and the public discourse of neoliberalism, as well as how these struggles further impact on the relationships among global, national, and local socio-economic conditions. Derksen’s cultural production is a type of research into the social role of poetry; his work aims to investigate cultural phenomena and processes “through research that does not take the form of a research paper” (“Your” 101). His sustained exploration of economic and social relations in the long poem “But Could I Make A Living From It” published in *Transnational Muscle Cars* (2003)<sup>1</sup> provides an exemplary site for reflecting on the contradictions and conditions of Canada in relation to the neoliberal situation.<sup>2</sup> This poem consists of short, sometimes aphoristic units of text—a formal method which situates it in a literary and philosophical tradition stretching through Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, the Benjamin of *The Arcades Project*, Baudrillard’s *Cool Memories*, and in the context of contemporary poetics, Charles Bernstein, Steve McCaffery, and other language-centred writers.<sup>3</sup> Several critics have mentioned Derksen’s modular method: for Susan Rudy, Derksen’s primary unit of composition is “quite often what looks like an ordinary sentence” that has been “constructed to point out the contradictions inherent in the most common of discourses” (200); for Andrew Klobucar and Michael Barnholden, Derksen’s 1993 poem “Interface” appears to consist solely of “a series of disjunctive sentences, mostly declarative, culled from a wide range of sources, including personal reflection, economic statistics, and news headlines” (39); and for Brian Kim Stefans, Derksen’s

work is a series of “socialist one liners” (1). While these critics have lucidly focused on the inter-relationships amongst political, social and psychological forces in Derksen’s writing, their work has skirted the importance of modular form as a vehicle for his politically grounded research. One of the key features of Derksen’s poetics is its use of the modular unit as a means to present research on Canada in relation to globalization, ideology, language, and the socially-grounded subjectivities which language enunciates.

The title of the poem “But Could I Make A Living From It” comes from a passage in Derksen’s 1993 book *Dwell*:

If “the alienation of the worker stops where the alienation of the sightseer begins,” then the pyramids are experienced as workers’ monuments.

I could learn to do that, but could I make a living from it?

The tortilla factory that makes 27,000 a day. (64)

The passage juxtaposes short segments of text, each of which hijacks a cultural icon, product, brand, or identity. In the first unit, for example, (“If ‘the alienation of the worker stops where the alienation of the sightseer begins,’ then the pyramids are experienced as workers’ monuments”) the conditional tense ironically presents a materialist reading of the pyramids by constructing them as a monument to workers, instead of romanticizing them as ancient wonders. In the second unit, which also focuses on labour relations, the “it” of the question “could I make a living from it?” has no clear antecedent. The missing link between “it” and its antecedent is not purely an example of formalist indeterminacy, or linguistic free-play, because “it” invites readers into productive effort: how do we connect “it”; what does “it” connect to? This potentially productive space for readers functions as one element in a series of connected, critical indeterminacies which underline political struggle. The third sentence similarly engages with political critique by implying the alienation of workers who churn out 27,000 tortillas per day.

“But Could I Make a Living From It” sets up a tension between the disorder of these seemingly ordinary sentences or one-liners and a more ordered, repetitive structure of similar elements. This repetitive, modular structure owes something to Derksen’s long-standing interest in architecture, and his more recent collaborative work on architecture and visual art with the collective *Urban Subjects*.<sup>4</sup> The re-occurring, modular structure which organizes the poem is not unlike an architectural “space frame” (Derksen “Poetics”)—i.e., a rigid structure constructed from interlocking struts, which

is often used in modernist and contemporary architecture to hold up long spans with few supports. Just as space frames are used to support a building, the text uses refrain-like, repetitive "space frames" to organize and support the long poem form.<sup>5</sup>

At intervals of approximately once per page, Derksen sets up a series of thematically related modules, each of which serves to contextualize the seemingly disjunctive elements of the poem. In effect, the poem shows a very clear relationship between large social structures and the structure of the text itself. For example, the text repeatedly cites the "spot rate," or average noon exchange rate of US to Canadian dollars ("1976: 0.9861 . . . 1978: 1.1402 . . . 1980: 1.1690" [. . . and so on until 1994]). The spot exchange rate is an agreement to buy or sell one currency in exchange for another. Foreign exchange markets use the American dollar as the standard unit of measurement for all currencies. Here the American dollar is expressed in terms of the number of Canadian dollars needed to buy it. Derksen's text uses the history of shifting exchange rates as a leitmotif to further conjoin global economic relations with the personal and social spheres of globalization's subjects. By situating these spot rate citations regularly amongst ironic one-liners such as "I aspire to a dental plan—to make myself human" (31), Derksen not only finds an organizing structure for his poem, but also offers class critique: those without enough money for health care are not considered fully human, and this inhumanity is implicitly linked to the global economic relationships which the repeated references to the spot rate express. As Derksen writes in "Poetry and the Long Neoliberal Moment" (2006): "Gap between rich and poor? Globally the economy has grown. People want access to healthcare? Choose a private healthcare service. The super rich are getting richer? That helps everyone" (7).

The spot rate cited in Derksen's text provides a record of economic history, inasmuch as it begins in 1976 and continues at regular intervals until 1994. During this period the value of the American dollar in relation to the Canadian dollar increased significantly. This repetitive, historically-grounded series of modules parallels a more personal indication of time, evidenced in segments such as: "I'm 3 years younger than the term *Third World*" (24); "I am the same age as Mies Van der Rohe's Seagram Building" (29); "In my lifetime I have witnessed the invention of the Self-Serve Gas station" (35). However, the personal pronoun in these lines belongs to a subject that is implicated in the social at every instance. Subjectivity in Derksen is constructed by culture and identity is historically contingent. Derksen writes: "I become a 'world citizen' with the arrival of

my phone card” (28)—the quotation marks around “world citizen” suggest that Derksen has borrowed this slogan from advertising or some other form of media-speak, discourses which have tended to glamorize the supposed freedom of the transnational individual. That freedom is, however, a type of formal freedom to make choices within an already existing and circumscribed set of social possibilities—for example, the freedom to buy a Nokia phone instead of a Sony Ericsson, rather than the actual freedom to question how the media aligns communication technology (or cars or shoes) with personal identity. The world citizen is a world citizen precisely because he or she chooses to consume. It does not matter where the phone is made; the ideology of world citizenship does not concern the origins of goods, but their destination as signs of material success. The fully human individual is transnational and can phone anywhere.

One key element in the text’s use of re-occurring structural modules is in its periodic alphabetical listing of forty-eight countries: “Afghanistan, Angola, Bangladesh, Benin” (25); “Bhutan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia” (26); “Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea” (29), and so on every page or so, until forty-eight countries have been listed, and concluding with “United Republic of Tanzania, Vanuatu, Yemen, and Zambia” (39). This list is not unlike the puzzle published in the Saturday *Guardian* and other newspapers with global circulation, where readers are asked to match three or more similar names, topics, or places. Because there is no immediate context for the list, however, the modules invite readers to speculate on meaning: at first glance, the connection between all of these countries is not entirely clear, although it is safe to say that many have been subject to territorial disputes and/or war during the period when Derksen’s text was written, all of them have been subject to IMF/World Bank interference or so-called “special” measures, and all were, at one point or another, instruments of colonialism and/or strategic alliances during the Cold War. But these possibilities are simply the projection of a reader onto the text, and are based on conjecture; what is significant about this list is that it implicates readers in the confusions and complexities of global relations, as well as in the complexities of those relations’ representation. With every reoccurrence of the list within the poem’s surrounding units, readers are given more context, and yet the importance of the list remains a site for the active participation of the reader. The text thus prolongs a dialogic relationship with its reader—i.e., a reader as addressee, who is able to reply to the poem. In this case, the potential reply of the reader finds material existence in the sort of active and critically engaged

possibilities for interpretation cited above. In fact, the forty-eight nations listed are (as the line after the final four countries says) “the 48 least” (39)—i.e. the forty-eight least wealthy nations, according to UN statistics. By revealing the “meaning” of these lists near the conclusion of the poem, the text might seem to reduce the reader’s dialogic role in producing that meaning. And yet, although we are finally offered an answer to this “meaning,” the reader’s role still remains dialogic; although we have an answer to the rationale behind the text’s inclusion of these lists, the relationship between the lists as structural units and the surrounding context of sentence-based units still calls for a reader who must take an active role in understanding. This role is political to the extent that it provokes readers to question the relationship between the poorest countries on earth and the consumerist West, between “Sudan, Togo, Tuvalu, Uganda” (38) and “a rusty barbeque on every balcony” (26).

The poem’s modular structure does not mean that its individual units do not offer critique outside of the larger structure which gives shape to the poem. The line “Trees are cod” (26), for example, refers to a seeming equivalence between two important natural resources. It is significant to note, however, that the Canadian forestry and fishing industries have been involved in international trade disputes, and both industries have also been subject to massive government intervention. During the 1990s, US markets bought \$10 billion worth of Canadian softwood lumber exports without charging fees, but then under the Bush administration in 2001 the US imposed huge duties on Canadian lumber. As a result, thousands of Canadian forestry workers lost their jobs. The fishing industry has also been subject to international dispute: Canada has been involved in a long-standing battle with the European Union over the depletion of cod stocks. What is essential to the representation of an equivalency between these resources is that they are both rapidly being exhausted. So the line “Trees are cod” plays off the notions of excess or unlimited supply that have been used by global capitalism in its aim of maximizing profit at any cost, regardless of the impact that such notions have on the environment or on people.

In the context of Derksen’s poem, the simple reduction of trees to cod brings to the foreground the complex relationships between nationalism and globalization, and between privatization and government intervention. The line “Trees are cod” is preceded by the line “Just don’t touch me during the drum solo” (25). This sentence ironically links together personal space, and the aversion to having that space invaded, with the quasi-sexual, almost religious rapture imposed on consumers of popular culture. The text thus

*conjoins* the subject's experience as a product of ideology (the subject as isolated, individualistic, and potentially enraptured by pop culture) together with a reference to the economic exploitation of natural resources that have constructed and allowed that ideology to function. These two lines, although disjunctive, foreground a link between economic and social experience in contemporary culture. And ironically, the equivalence of the "Trees are cod" line reoccurs in a different form a page later, rephrased as "Grass is trees" (26)—perhaps here referring to marijuana as a significant growth opportunity, contributing with the lumber industry to the economy of the west coast. On the other hand, the line "Grass is trees" could be read as a reference to the fact that grass in the form of lawn is now the single most prevalent crop growing in North America<sup>6</sup>—a reading that implicates suburban space with the exploitation of natural resources.

The practice of conjoining economic relationships with ideology is key to Derksen's cultural poetics. In his introduction to *Open Letter's* "Disgust and Overdetermination" issue (1998), he writes:

abrupt and social conjunction stresses the relatedness of social facts and contradictions, pointing to a more systematic understanding of social relations; this is a linking rather than a unifying practice, a relational activity and not a synthesizing one (9).

Paradoxically, while Derksen employs formally disjunctive elements such as rapid swerves in speech registers and the abrupt use of non-sequiturs, his poetry conjoins social relations. This conjunction is dialogical in its address to the reader: if there is a connection between trees and cod and grass, it must be found in the relationship existing between the consciousness of the reader and the text, for the text refuses to make authoritative claims about its subject matter. And although "But Could I Make A Living From It" offers readers a site to engage in political critique, the modular, dialogical form employed by the poem differs greatly from "the kind of representative political poems that the Left had been noted for, people like George Stanley in Vancouver or [Tom] Wayman to a certain extent" (Derksen, "Conversation" 123). For example, in "The Country of Everyday: Literary Criticism" (1974), Wayman writes:

When the poet goes out for a walk in the dusk  
listening to his feet on the concrete, pondering  
all of the adjectives for rain, he is walking on work  
of another kind, and on lives that wear down like cement.  
Somewhere a man is saying, "Worked twenty years for the  
City but I'm retired now."

Sitting alone in a room, in the poorhouse of a pension  
he has never read a modern poem (124).

As Wendy Keitner writes, this poem “exposes the steep cleavage between the rarefied, effete realm of the bourgeois artist to whom Wayman is strongly antipathetic and the challenging, tragic world of the workers whom he celebrates” (1). One could argue that the worker’s utterance—which is set off from the rest of the passage by quotation marks—lacks a grammatical subject, thereby illustrating his lack of subject position as someone who is no longer productive in society. However, the dialogical components of this passage are limited to this quotation; the text is for the most part narrated in the homogenous and restricted voice of a unified subject as producer of meaning, and there is little work for the reader to do. In contrast, Derksen’s modular text presents a polyphonic range of voices:

By this I mean I’ll take the bigger one and put it on my card.  
Afghanistan, Angola, Bangladesh, Benin.  
To be in the “world” in the position of quotation marks.  
I would rather have your fingers in my mouth than “find my  
own voice.” (25)

In contrast to Wayman’s poem, Derksen conjoins disparate elements drawn from the social text, in order to offer a site for readers to dialogically articulate the links which exist within those elements. What is the relationship amongst these seemingly disjunctive utterances? The first line hints at rampant consumption, a social desire which is possible in part due to the West’s exploitation of Asian and African nations. The third line puts quotation marks around the “world,” as if to distance it from reality by framing it as a textual construction; perhaps the first line about consumption and the third line about construction are both means to repress the alterity of global poverty which is pointed to by the list of nations found in the middle unit. Of course, the idea that the world is purely textual refers to the representation of the world, not to the world itself, and the “I” who desires to be there, in the “world” is equally a representation. Following this logic, the fourth line dismisses the idea of finding a “voice” (a typical construct of creative writing programmes and mainstream literature). In this “world,” the idea of a unique and individual voice, and the individual subject that such a voice would support, is entirely absent. Unlike Wayman’s more unified and qualitatively monological text, Derksen’s poem uses disjunction to dialogically foreground the links among subjectivity, economic relations, and social desire.

The messy complexities and contradictions of our current social situation are paralleled by the centrifugal form of the text. Moreover, Derksen's poem calls for the active work of a reader to produce meanings, and those meanings may vary from reader to reader according to their position in the "world." Thus the reader is dialogically implicated in the text.

The critical units that structure this text signal its debts to leftist social and political theory, as well as to the often theoretically grounded interventions of contemporary poetics. Theory is central to Derksen's cultural poetics, and has been one of the significant features of writers associated with the Kootenay School of Writing since the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> In an interview with Susan Rudy, Derksen points to the influence of Russian formalism on his poetics, and speaks of theory as "a necessary part of a poetics. We [KSW] didn't have a sense of it being hierarchically encoded or somehow out of our reach" (124). However, as Stefans notes, Derksen's writing exhibits "a note of frustration with the language of theory itself as a wieldable force of opposition" (2). This frustration is sometimes self-reflexively signalled in the text itself. Derksen writes, "A liberal reaction of the embarrassed subjectivity. / *Opoyaz is the best teacher for our young proletariat writers*" (38). The first line obliquely recasts the widely held theoretical trope of the "contingent subject"—i.e., the subject who is entirely constituted by its cultural context, whose consciousness, desire, and emotional reactions are constructed by and through ideology. The following line, "*Opoyaz is the best teacher for our young proletariat writers,*" continues the text's self-reflexive recasting of theoretical subjects. *Opoyaz* was the name given to the Society for Studying Poetic Language, a stream of Russian formalist criticism founded by Victor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum and others in St. Petersburg in 1917. *Opoyaz* stood opposed to symbolist criticism, and concentrated instead on formal concerns such as Shklovsky's work on defamiliarization, or "making strange." Derksen emphasizes the importance of *Opoyaz* to the "young proletariat writer" by setting the entire line in italics. What is the function of this citation to formalist theory within the poem? Derksen's reoccurring emphasis on the defamiliarization of economic and social relations sets up a link between formal structure and political critique. By making the relations of power and the historically and culturally contingent position of the subject seem unfamiliar, the text reflects on the contradictions and conditions of the neoliberal condition. Moreover, Derksen's self-reflexive citations to contingent subjectivity and Russian formalism provide an example of a significant tendency in the relationship between theory and poetics in contemporary writing.



"But Could I Make A Living From It" is a form of metawriting which bares the device of its own formal method. Here theoretical research is not something that is applied to a text by a critic; it is instead a tool for mediating the *production* of a text. Derksen's long poem as research is generated through the relationship between large social structures and textual structure. At the micro level, the modular fragment appears as a highly condensed sentence, which ironically and sometimes aphoristically criticizes ideology. At the macro level, on the other hand, the modules conjoin to accumulate meaning, thereby building up a powerful array of integrated social critique. The poem's accretion of critical material is further reinforced, and given a sense of unified direction, through its repetitive, refrain-like structure. Modular form provides Derksen with a means to practice a hybrid mode of theory/research/poetry which specifically focuses on Canada in relation to neoliberalism. As a form of cultural research, the poem's reoccurring structural modules defamiliarize our current social condition by pointing to the gaps and links formed between global economics and our own experience as subjects of globalization.

## NOTES

- 1 The poem was first published as a hole press chapbook in 2000.
- 2 Neoliberalism upholds the privatisation of state enterprises, as well as liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within the global framework of strong individual property rights, free market, and free trade. However, as David Harvey notes, neoliberalist ideology contradicts itself, because while it upholds privatisation, the loosening (or loss) of government control, and the individual's personal rights, it is also the site of "intense interventions by government elites and experts in a world where the state is not supposed to be interventionalist" (69; qtd. in Derksen "Poetry" 6).
- 3 For examples of the aphorism in Bernstein see *The Occurrence of Tune* (1981) or "Fragments from the Seventeenth Manifesto of Nude Formalism" in *The Nude Formalism* (1989); in McCaffery see *Knowledge Never Knew* (1983; republished in *Seven Pages Missing*, 2000).
- 4 Derksen has recently collaborated with visual artists Sabine Bitter and Helmut Weber, working under the collective name *Urban Subjects*, in order to extend his poetics into collaborative, interdisciplinary investigations of the effects of globalization on urban spaces.
- 5 Perhaps another potential source for this repetitive structure stems from the new American poetics of the 1960s, which filtered into Canada from Donald Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* via the Vancouver poetry journal *TISH*; Derksen has stated in an interview that he always felt close to the poetics of the *TISH* group ("Conversation" 141). In a 1965 *TISH* article on the structure of "rime" in Robert Duncan, co-founder and editor of *TISH* Frank Davey describes "rime" as "the measurable distance between two corresponding elements, whether they be phonetic units, stress patterns, images, or whatever" (298).
- 6 According to the Canadian Centre for Architecture's exhibition "The American Lawn," held in Montreal from 16 June to 18 November, 1998: "North America now has more than 32 million acres of lawn under cultivation—more ground than any single crop." See the

Centre's catalogue *The American Lawn* (1999), edited by Georges Teyssot, for essays on the cultural aspects of the lawn.

- 7 Derksen is a founding member of Vancouver's Kootenay School of Writing, a loosely organized group of writers who are influenced by the formally innovative and politically radical poetics of language-centred writing, as well as by the more politically-critical streams of literary theory. See Andrew Klobucar and Michael Barnholden's introduction to *Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology* (1999) for a brief overview of the poetics of several of the original members of the KSW.

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