

Poetry, Poetics, Criticism

0. Oh?

To your regular diet of technical or business material, add a little poetry. Wait please—don't stop reading this yet! I'm not suggesting this only to offer you the aesthetic and spiritual gifts of poetry. Poetry will help you write better memos, letters, and reports. (Cheryl Reimold, "Principles from Poetry. Part 1: Persuasion," *Tappi Journal* 68.12 [1985]: 97; quoted from Tom Wayman's essay inside)

Institutions of information fulfill the enthusiasm for solutions:
But poetry is always something else. . . .
Poetry is an expenditure of language "without goal," in fact a redundancy; a constant sacrifice to a sacrifice. It is possible that one should speak here about love, in other words about reality, or the probability of answering the sourceless echo—about responsibility. (Arkadii Dragomoschenko, *Description*, trans. Lyn Hejinian and Elena Balashova [Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1990], 20-21)

I. A First Chorus on Poetics

—How to start? One way would be to admit there is no coming to terms with *poetry*, *poetics*, and *criticism*, and there is only coming to terms: etymologically, for example, which gives us "something made," "about something made" (*peri poietikés*, in Aristotle's phrase), and "judgment."

—Very neat, but not very helpful: origins are hardly binding on posterity, which in any case usually has trouble locating them, and a term's meaning inevitably shifts over time. Semantic fields are no less worked over, expanded, abandoned, recolonised, enclosed, contested, and so on than any other sort of territory.

—So take a historical view, then?

—That would be another way, certainly, and one which would acknowledge that what a poem is, or is understood to be, has never been constant, nor has what people choose to do with it or use it for: Aristotle, Longinus, Geoffrey de Vinsauf, Dante, Boileau, Goethe, Wordsworth, Mallarmé, Pound, and Milosz, amongst others, differ considerably on this subject, and

that's staying within the Western traditions, which, rich as they are and affected as they occasionally are by, say, Arab or Chinese influences, still share the same watershed.

—Not what is a poem, then, but when?

—Perhaps, but what about, where is a poem? A disciplinary (that is, a conceptual) approach might be another way here: a poem is found amongst those things that aim to please, and so poetics would be a branch of aesthetics, and criticism a cicerone or a pander, depending on your point of view.

—But would poetics really be a branch of aesthetics? That's only one possible conceptualisation, even if it has much to recommend it; poetics, after all, no less than the poems it aims to describe, prescribe, or even proscribe, can just as well and just as usefully be allied with or subsumed under anthropology, biology, ethics, gender studies, literary criticism, psychology, rhetoric, semiotics, or sociology.

—Which is a way of recognising that just as criticism can do many things (judge, elucidate, explicate, comment, converse), so too can a poem, and it typically does more than one thing at once: instruct, delight, baffle, know, express, imitate, communicate, be, contain, answer, sound. Any adequate poetics would have to account for this multi-facetedness, which undoubtedly explains why there have been and still are so many poetics.

—So let's just admit that there is no poetry without poetics, and recall the paradoxical fact that it must precede poetry before it can follow after, since without poetics not only would there be no comprehension and no sustaining commentary, there would be no originating composition.

—Maybe so, but a poetics needn't be and usually isn't made explicit before anyone goes about composing, reading, or formally responding to a poem.

—True, but only where the poetics in question is shared, or not in competition or conversation with other conceptions of the poem, text, wordthing, thoughtsong, or whatever—the very fact of variable nomenclature points again to different conceptions of poetics, the products of each of which will have their own distinctive purchase on the face of things.

—Except of course that the face of things, like language itself (which is what helps us both create and come to know that face), is multi-faceted, and so any poetics and its poems necessarily leave larger or smaller gaps where they fail to get a handle on certain of the word's or the world's ways.

—And a good thing too: otherwise there'd be no more poems to make, and commentary would be redundant.

—Well, I'm not sure most poets or readers give much thought to poetics, which is about as interesting as talking of tofu instead of eating beancurd, and even if some poets do give it thought, very few of them are any more articulate about the whole business than your sweaty hockey player is when someone shoves a mike in his face at game's end and asks about how he scored the winning goal: stuff about the muses or voices or images arriving from out of the blue or cadences felt in the forearms is hardly any more satisfying an explanation than someone's saying, "the guys played good tonight and I was just in the right place when the puck came my way; after that, I put my head down and shot, and in she went."

—But that's such a male metaphor, though at least it makes clear that a poem and therefore the poetics that enables it are gendered and social constructs as well as someone's own makework.

—Oh, come on, this poetics stuff is just a lot of academic post-hockery: the poet simply sets the poem down on the page and the reader reads it.

—It's not quite so simple as that, you'd have to agree, since no one ever wants to write without first having read; and if the poem on the page looks or sounds different from what they're used to, many people just turn away from it, as a large body of readers has been doing for a good century now: I don't know much about poetry, runs one well-travelled line, but I know what I like—and yet that espousal of tasteful ignorance cannot be made without an implicit poetics.

—Can't say I agree at all, unless you want to make majority opinion defective whenever it conflicts with minority views.

—You may not agree, but I do, and I'd add that if there's any post-hockery it's played mainly in commentary, though the twist here is not only that poems made according to emergent or archaic or little-known poetics will find no or few readers without commentary, but also that there's no such thing as poetic immortality without this secondary activity, since almost all poetic hosts would die without their critical parasites.

—Even translators, whose business it is to multiply the possible worlds and wordways that exist within a given tongue, rarely work without the aid of commentary and criticism, and can easily be thought of as participating in the latter tasks.

—And why not go further? Isn't "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" at once a poem in its own right and a translation of and commentary on "Bushed," Atwood's poem extending the afterlife of Birney's in its indepen-

dent dependency? And couldn't the same be said of Bringhurst's "Anecdote of the Squid" in relation to Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape"?

—There's no escape from secondariness, it seems, a point all the easier to concede when we recognise that from the very start poems have often made a habit of commenting on their own or other poetics: think of the bards who show up on Homer's epic stage or of Chaucer's sharp theoretical turns in narrative mid-flight, not to mention poetic treatises on poetry, such as Lu Ji's or Sikong Tu's. Some of those old boys may have reached a popular audience but they certainly knew that theirs was a learned pursuit with its own conceptual groundwork.

—Point after point inadvertently proved in the making: references to "the page" and "reading" already imply a textual rather than an oral poetics, which signals our inescapable cultural belatedness: if it's true that we can craze print with the trace of talk—and that has been the explicit aim of many poets in recent decades, so much so that ecritorial countermovements have sprung up against demotic poetics—it's also the case that our spoken words inkstain the air almost from the time we first plunge into language, since in a culture with writing mother and father tongues cannot help but entwine like caducean serpents around some prior and usually taken-for-granted axis.

—But isn't "immortalising" commentary needed only when poets and their work no longer have an integrated social space? Like now.

—If so, then Leonard Cohen's your mythical merman, and his seachange from poet to popstar is epoch-making, for it means that his afterlife—largely because he's gone so savvily in for the widely shared poetics of mass-market culture and in pseudo-ancient fashion energized his worldweary lyrics with electrified music—won't be confined to classrooms and quarterlies. A movie star, after all, edited his last selected.

—Let it be said again, you mean, only with a further claim for good measure: poem and poet alike are social and gendered constructs, and the creatures of marketing and media as well.

—So, if it's not quite post hoc, poetics is still necessarily in hock to its particular organs of dissemination?

—Precisely the point of so much marginal composing since Mallarmé blanked out the invisible page and the homemade demi-mondes of parapublishing made space for those few readers left undigested by book-of-the-munching.

—Enough said. Look, any poem that matters remains unsullied by such circumstantial slings and arrows, since it occupies its own as-it-were transcendent space in which we can sail whenever we read or hear it.

—We? Who's we?

—Here by way of illustration is a centuries' old scrap: "Dronken dronken y-dronken / Dronken is Tabart at wine / Hey . . . sister, Walter, Peter, / Ye dronke all deepe, / And I shall eke! / Stond alle stille — / Stille as any stone: / Trippe a littel with your foot / And let your body go."

—Perhaps you've got a point there; for the funny thing is, a poem both is and is not the sum of its confluent contexts; knowing those things might enhance your pleasure or understanding in the reading, but they are no substitute for a direct encounter, or for a further poetic response.

—"We all have our altars & icons," as Mouré says, unexempt herself.

—You mean, then, that the present (and hence the poetics) of any given culture is always asynchronous with itself: the more so, the longer and more layered a culture's historical memory or the broader and more aggregate its multicultural and multilingual reach. Even the mainstream, which in the cultural freemarketplace might as well be called the maelstrom, contains strong residual and emergent strands of flow variously entwined with the dominant, which in Canadian anglophone poetics might be called the "trivial anecdotal."

—And if the dominant flows mixed with the residual and the emergent, it also meets unpredictably with any number of current-altering eddies, shoals, falls.

—But wait: here's a postcard dropped in from out of the blue.

Moses supposes his toeses are roses,
but Moses supposes erroneously. This
from one of the apocrypha, the prophet
as vaudeville poet. And a toe by any
other name?—one of the bronchial tubes
through which we breathe the earth;
a clitoral homologue rubbing us right
whenever we move (hence the wearing
of shoes in civilized cultures); a stylus
shared by all legged creatures, though each
steps in with its own brand of choreogra-
phy. [signed] *Worden Edgewise*

First Chorus on Poetics
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—[*Omnes*, out of synch] Well, what can you say to that? Maybe “on words and up words.”

II. Take Two: A Prospective Text Tiled from This Issue’s Essays and Opinions

If [field] notes replaced essays, we might get nearer to Bakhtin’s notion of the dialogical, and critics might develop a jazz-like alertness to the spontaneous reactive moments of other critics. Such a group of readers might become like responsive soloists, taking turns, using the different *timbres* of their instruments to play out and improvise together on the underlying “melody” of a single text. (Keith Harrison, “Notes on ‘Notes from Furry Creek’”)

In transplanting these traditional images, Clarke creates a new geography, a site rich in history from which new voices speak, which he defines in *Lush Dreams, Blue Exile* as “Africadia,” an alternative to the view of Canada as “bush garden”. . . . Clarke’s “Africadian” pastoral vision questions and expands the role of the traditional liminal figure, the borderland dweller who mediates between two worlds. Here the Black Nova Scotian poet inhabits and traverses territory divided along economic and, especially, racial lines. (Dorothy Wells, “A Rose Grows in Whydah Falls”)

If we want to preserve Canada’s cultural heritage, which does seem fragile and in many ways under attack, we need to tell our stories as if they matter. It’s tricky, and rather sticky, trying to put your finger on exactly what happened in the back rooms of publishing and government bureaucracy leading up to the demise of Coach House Publishing. There’s no doubt that Mike Harris’s followers didn’t know the value of what they were hitting when they swung the big axe, but those of us who speak in support of cultural institutions are doomed if our praise and indignation are equally unfocused. (Norman Ravvin, “Stopping in at the Coach House”)

In the weeks remaining to him, he composed poems. He sent five to his youngest daughter who after moving from an internment camp in the interior of British Columbia was living with her own husband and son in a shack in Alberta. They were five poignant meditations on death. My mother said she knew after reading them her father was about to die. (Terry Watada, “Poetic *Karma*”)

For Davey, this [annotated map] is evidence of a belief that here language points to a reality outside itself; he claims that “Pencilled additions act both to insert the narrator into this factuality and to document that somebody was actually ‘there’.” But these additions can also be read as an example of the inadequacy of any attempt to represent “factuality.” Language is a map of what it pretends to

represent and thus is always incomplete, like the printed map; the pencil marks are both marks of the occasions of their production and traces of all that is not mapped. (Julie Beddoes, "Mastering the Mother Tongue")

When I hear a faint blurry nasal honk and think "nuthatch," I find it hard to agree with Hegel that by naming the animals in the Garden of Eden Adam "annihilated them in their existence as beings." A Robert Hass poem speaks of this notion that "a word is elegy to what it signifies." If words can be bombs, erasers, or subtractors, can't they also be pencils, pointers, gestures? (Brian Bartlett, "For Sure the Kittiwake")

Certain assemblages of words we call poems succeed beyond question at bridging the core solitude of human existence. Each of us is alive in a fleshly and perishable body, linked however tenuously to family and community, to a social past and present, and still each of us labors basically alone to experience and process our life. What *relief*—for surely that is the root of the exhilaration we feel when a work of art overwhelms us—to sense that another human voice possesses the ability to stir us, to reach the ear or eye of our innermost being. (Tom Wayman, "Why Profess What is Abhorred")

Mouré's poetics seeks to foment a crisis at the heart of authoritative discourse, to place both readers and writers at risk. When Tregobov asks, "Who can read Mouré and not feel stupid?" she enacts this crisis, revealing an anxiety about the critic's own ability to speak authoritatively, to establish the necessary critical distance from which to view the works. Instead, the critic who is led to ask this question has become the object of the text's critical gaze. (Lisa Dickson, "Signals across Boundaries")

To some extent the tunelessness of much contemporary poetry is due to a theocratic/moralistic disapproval of beautiful language. St. Bernard was said to have struck off the heads of flowers by his path as he walked, because their beauty might distract him from pious thoughts. Similarly, contemporary theory-saints suppose beauty might "reconcile" us to submit to evil; they claim that as long as injustice exists we must not make beauty. (M. Travis Lane, Letter to the Editors)

To my mind, then, the notion of Milton Acorn as writer of poems was—and to some significant extent still is—inevitably complicated by my perception (and, I think, the general public reception) of him not simply as a person who wrote poems but as a *persona* of sorts. Yet, just as inevitably, I have found myself turning and returning to Acorn's poems in recent years as I have begun to make my own commitment to writing poems—and have thus begun to reflect on

the implications and the complications of being a Prince Edward Island poet. Whatever that means. (Thomas O'Grady, "Advice from Milton Acorn")

In the three or four years between *The Blue Roofs of Japan* and *The New World Suites*, I did a lot of listening. I began, then, to understand that Gould was the most colossally improbable of all Canadian poets—and that he was, more improbably still, one of the greatest. To say this is also, perhaps, to contest what "poetry" means. I use the word as I must, and not as a name for the quaint little versified or verse-like bursts of verbal nostalgia, amusement and confusion that pass without remark in oral cultures but in literate cultures often get written and printed. (Robert Bringhurst, "Singing with the Frogs")

III. And a Third Thing: A Post-Scriptum Foreword

From a single strand of DNA, apparently, it is possible to reconstruct an entire organism, though few advocates of the process trouble to ask what such a resurrected organism would even be without a larger community against, with, and within which to live. Quotations, perhaps fortunately, lack such latent integrity; the filaments of their severed thought cannot be used to replicate the body of work from which they have been cut—only to suggest something of its stylistic scent and intellectual bent, both of which have to be recovered through close contact. Even so, the preceding sampler of quotations does suggest something of the variety, interest, and pleasure to be found in this issue on contemporary poetry and poetics, just as the separate fragments together gesture towards the larger communities of poetry's writers and readers, speakers and listeners.

If the poetry composed in Canada today can be imagined as a multilingual, multi-faceted, and wholly ungraspable crystalline composite, then what the current issue offers is a good look through several quite different critical lenses at several of the crystal's quite different surfaces, each of them represented here by specific anglophone poets, poems, and poetics. By any measure, there is more missing than present, but that is true of every look at anything; and the dream of total inclusiveness can sometimes take on features of the old—and still recurring—nightmares of exclusivity and hardline hierarchy (both dreams are, after all, products of the same civilisation).

Readers who do not find what they are looking for in issue #155 are invited to submit for consideration their corrective accounts of the absent, the forgotten, the disappeared, or the effaced. Similarly, I want to restate the

call for poems made in the editorial to #149 (“Inhabiting the Interstices”) asking “for the widest possible range of submissions, which might even include longer texts (or parts of them), provided that the contributors would be willing to see the texts excerpted from by the editors, as well as unpublished translations (with the originals) from poems originally written in French or any other language by Canadian writers.”

Note. The nature of this issue and its contributions are such that not all of the articles follow the MLA format for notes and bibliography normally required by *Canadian Literature*. I.H.

