

## “Signals Across Boundaries” Non-Congruence and Erin Mouré’s *Sheepish Beauty, Civilian Love*

You’re not going to get it. I didn’t. And I read the whole book. —RICHARD VAUGHAN

Coming near the end of his review of Erin Mouré’s *Sheepish Beauty, Civilian Love*, the above frank declaration is not Richard Vaughan’s final pronouncement on the collection. Admitting he didn’t “get it,” Vaughan nevertheless goes on to conclude: “However, having read many poems, and entire books of poems, where I did indeed get it, and real quick too, I’ll take Mouré’s ‘difficult’ work over some yawn-inducing breakfast nook lyrics anytime. Poems are not crosswords (although they are sometimes Scrabble)” (118). The range of critical responses to Mouré’s challenging work demonstrates a similar, though not often quite so sanguine, ambivalence. There are those who, like Lorraine York and Colin Morton, take up the challenge of Mouré’s “difficult” works and shift their reading strategies to accommodate the demand the poems make on the reading subject, moving from crossword hermeneutics to participatory Scrabble. For York, Mouré’s “[p]oetry is not the act of an author ‘giving’ messages to a passive reader; it is a passionate embrace, wherein the reader joins his/her lips to the poet’s, connecting and giving life to the text” (135). Morton also turns to the reader for the completion of the poetic equation: “The onus rests with the reader to do the carrying, to interact with the text and become a poet in the act of reading” (39). But Morton’s evaluation is a more qualified reaction to the “rigorous workout” (39) this act of readerly creation

entails. For him, the question is “not whether Erin Mouré will continue to develop, but how far her readers will be able to follow her. Already she has moved to the edge, where communication falters” (38).

Such an observation leans toward the more overtly anxious responses of writers such as Rhea Tregebov, who find in Mouré’s complexity and structural experimentation a tendency to “create a disconcerting dizziness in readers: words insist on their wordiness and won’t lie nicely on the page referring to outside reality, telling you things” (57). In its way, this discomfort with the lack of conventional lyric referentiality is the response Mouré’s poetry ideally should elicit, if we subscribe to the poet’s often stated suspicion of “meaning.” For Mouré, “meaning,” as an accessible commodity of poetry (a thematic “product” for consumption), is burdened by convention and habits of thought which act as a kind of anaesthesia, a seductive comfort that co-opts resistance. Resistant reading, she argues, entails a movement away from that which makes us feel a comfortable belonging:

Yes, breaking those neural patterns hurts, it can be confusing—that god, ‘meaning’, crumbles and we say *meaningless, meaningless*—but this saying is just the dominant order crooning inside us, afraid its commodities will lose us, so it calls us back to it. It longs for us. We love it. (“Access” 10)

By this logic, Tregebov’s reading performs precisely the kind of discomfort that enables resistance, and her lingering nostalgia for words that lie nicely on the page marks the crooning voice of the comfort, belonging and lyrical accessibility that Mouré argues are modes of hegemonic control.

This seductive comfort, in Mouré’s political poetics, is the tyranny of “common sense,” a notion closely linked in its hegemonic force to “grammaticality” as it is defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Like Mouré, Deleuze and Guattari share this conviction that accepted grammar is linked to the power of the dominant order:

Forming grammatically correct sentences is for the normal individual the prerequisite for any submission to social laws. No one is supposed to be ignorant of grammaticality; those who are belong in special institutions. The unity of language is fundamentally political. There is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language that at times advances along a broad front, and at times swoops down on diverse centres simultaneously. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 101)

Deleuze and Guattari isolate a similar system of comfortable insider normalcy and outsider isolation and iconoclasm that Mouré identifies and

Tregebov reluctantly performs. To follow the rules is to be safely inside the hegemony of social laws; to break rules is to find oneself institutionalized (in asylums, hospitals, prisons and, of course, schools); it is to push to “the edge, where communication falters.” For Dennis Denisoff, Mouré’s difficult poetry and outsider status demonstrate “that the potentially alienating quality of discourse is a power that one can co-opt in a strategy of semi-liberation” (118). Such a strategy by no means makes anyone comfortable, and this productive discomfort is a significant aspect of a political poetics that takes as its space of performance the politics of meaning itself.

Mouré’s poetics seeks to foment a crisis at the heart of authoritative discourse, to place both readers and writers at risk. When Tregebov asks, “Who can read Mouré and not feel stupid?” (60), 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. In this sense, the structural challenges represented by the poems in Mouré’s last collection of new work, *Sheepish Beauty, Civilian Love*, have a double valence, working to question, disrupt and destabilize the unity and authority, not only of the poetic utterance, but that of the critical act as well. This doubled focus is a central principle of Mouré’s political poetics which insists on the complicity and responsibility of both readers and writers in the negotiations of power and authority that occur within language. To this end, Mouré posits the text as performance where the boundaries of the individual and of the poem become sites of relation, scenes of intersubjectivity that challenge the seductive comfort of “grammaticality.”

At the same time, however, this sense of the “potentially alienating quality of discourse” in her work has exposed Mouré to charges of inaccessibility and intellectual elitism. Beyond the more cursory treatment of reviews, the critical climate surrounding Mouré’s poetry is characterized by a paucity of extended or in-depth study, a strange circumstance given that her prolific poetic output enjoys almost continual publication in literary journals and has garnered the recognition of a Governor General’s Award (for *Furious*, her fourth collection, 1988). Given this reticence on the part of critics, Mouré’s own discussions of her texts occupy an important and conflicted position, for it is here that the theoretical framework of her poetics is made most explicitly available. The strategies to which Mouré has turned—interviews, essays, manifestos—in order to negotiate the twin challenges of

critical silence and accusations of inaccessibility raise the question of the role played by what I will call Mouré's exegetical persona and of her extra-poetic writing in the context of a poetics that places such emphasis on the destabilization of authority.

A recurrent theme in Mouré's extra-poetic writing, the commitment to dialogue and communication informs the poetry on multiple levels, and is implicated in her conceptualization of subjectivity and the nature of being in the world: "I think that it's important that my work exists in the community, but it's important that other people's does too, and that other people do things from their angles. No single writer's work can be read with no context, and it's these various angles that create a context. The play between them is more important than the things themselves" ("Acknowledging" 134). What we might call Mouré's poetics of discomfort performs as one of its grounding movements a critique of conventional notions of individuality, replacing them with a reformulated model of community based on intersubjectivity and what she has termed "non-congruity."

Intersubjectivity by definition imagines, not homogeneity or the erasure of boundaries between subjects, but rather a relation that reconfigures difference, much in the way that Mouré's notions of context and community depend on a diversity of angles of perception that work toward greater possibilities of understanding. For Mouré, to romanticize the "individual voice" is to assume a social structure which, like the politics of grammaticality, is based on a dichotomous relation between safe self and isolated, deviant other. The "individual" in this model is one who is guaranteed by her or his own sense of personal merit and whose comfort as an autonomous entity depends on a denial of the interimplication of privilege and oppression. In her critique of Lacan's mirror stage in her essay, "The Anti-Anæsthetic," Mouré identifies the entrance of a subject into the Law as an alignment with a whole series of exclusions, a reinscription of a normativity that, successfully negotiated, assuages anxiety and provides the comfort of belonging. This "anaesthesia," the drift toward the centre which makes us "forget, or repress, or define in terms acceptable to the order," creates in those who cannot "successfully" negotiate the demands of normativity—"(women, blacks, natives, lesbians, working class, combinations of these)"—an anxiety whose ravages are written on their bodies in a variety of ways, from alcoholism to small-pox ("Anti-Anæsthetic" 16). Such a relation of the individual to an abjected Other is conservative and seductively stable, for "[r]ousing

‘individual’ feelings plays with the dynamic of individual power/powerlessness—and channels energy so it is less disruptive to the Dominant Order” (“Access” 10). Even the “marginal” in this case rearticulates the norm from which it deviates, or, failing this kind of co-optation, is erased altogether by being defined as non-grammatical, or “meaningless.” This conceptualization of difference, Mouré writes, is ultimately an apparatus of the status quo: “Thought, unwatched, tends to resolve itself in a binary way, a natural leaning toward decreasing anxiety in the organism. . . . What we call our ‘difference’ doesn’t save us from this dynamic. . . . And falling into difference as mere opposition. It’s the same thing. And one reinforces the other” (“Polis” 202-03).

To counter such recuperation, Mouré suggests an identity of community that is based on an understanding of difference, what Mouré calls “non-congruity,” that does not resolve itself according to a logic of opposition. Social organization based on non-congruity effects a deconstruction of the opposition between same/different, emphasizing instead “[the] *sense of ‘with’-ness, ‘joint’-ness that conveys no hierarchy-of-terms*. Which is how our community as women can / must exist. As an ‘among-many.’ Not reproducing those hierarchies” (“Polis” 203). In this formulation, the self and the Other, the inside and the outside, may be conceived, not as opposites, but rather as interconstitutive terms in dynamic relation. Rehearsing and reworking the themes of “the body’s”<sup>1</sup> relationship to memory and language, the poem sequences of *Sheepish Beauty*, *Civilian Love* explore this dynamic relation of terms, where such difference is constitutive of selfhood. While many of the sequences in the collection deal with these issues, I will focus on two illustrative examples, “Speed or, *Absolute Structure*,” and the third section of “Everything,” “3) The Cortex.”

Central to Mouré’s treatment of the Franklin expedition in “Speed, or *Absolute Structure*” (*Sheepish Beauty* 40-45) is this concept of non-congruity, for it is the ground of the subject and of agency. The 1845 Franklin expedition to the Arctic appears in this sequence of seven sections (and two supplements, “CODA: ‘Meaning’” and “CODA: Robert O’s Rules of Order”) intertwined with images of a modern cholera epidemic in Peru. The two narratives are linked by an understanding of agency and identity as they manifest themselves at the limits of human endurance. Historically, after three years trapped in the Arctic ice, the remaining sailors of the expedition left their ship pulling small boats filled with a strange collection of

combs, slippers, writing desks, and other articles useless to arctic survival. One popular explanation for this irrational act is that the sailors contracted from the canned provisions lead poisoning which ultimately impaired their judgement. For Mouré, the Franklin expedition illustrates not only the relationship of a poisoned body to the mind, but the crisis of identity when that body is confronted with the absence of context. On the ice field, the European-based human identity becomes the only reference or point of scale: “beset for three years’ in ice / now heading across the ice away from *terror* / toward ‘home’”(1, 16-18). Mouré constructs an image here in which “away from” and “toward” have in addition to their objective spatial meanings (the ship named *Terror*, and home on another continent), resonance as co-ordinates of the mind, vectors of fear and hope, memory and desire, “*terror*” and “home.” This is an image of an identity constructing itself in the absence of a context readable according to established and familiar terms of reference.

It is this absence of context that Mouré posits as an explanation for the strange cargo the sailors carried during their attempted escape. The objects of the cargo come to be constitutive of identity as projections of the body, sites of difference through which the sailors create the boundaries necessary for the construction of context. In a footnote, Mouré quotes Israel Rosenfield’s *The Invention of Memory* on the subject of difference: “How we perceive stimuli depends on how they are categorized, how they are organized in terms of other stimuli, not on their absolute structure”(5). Alone on the ice field, a space for which their culture has offered them no linguistic bearings, Franklin’s men are confronted with their own absolute structure: “The dissolution of physical boundaries / creating unstable ground / by which we cannot ‘recognize’ the figure” (7, 1-3). Such a radical absence of recognizable context prevents the organization of stimuli and leads to a desperate attempt to preserve a dissolving identity. “[O]n unending ice where the body had exploded already / into its parts / combs etc” (5, 24-27), the apparent nonsense of the cargo becomes the new context for identity, “inner meaning jettisoned outside the body” (5, 18), where an Other is created which defines the boundaries of the self. This creation of the external allows the body to be constructed as origin retrospectively from the position of its “jettisoned” meaning (in this case, combs, toothbrushes and slippers). Identity, like language, is a product of the “signals across the boundaries” (Rosenfield qtd. in Mouré 5), a relation of differences where absolute structure,

such as an essential, individuated bodily experience, is a null space. The individual, in Mouré's paradigm, is an emptiness when devoid of some readable context, and it is the differential signals *across* the boundaries, not simply the boundaries themselves, that allow the self to cohere. Within the concept of non-congruence, the individual organism becomes a kind of civic space where one is both constructed *as* an individual and is able to connect through interdependence to the multiple selves of the community.

Meaning, in this poem, is dependent upon an Other, someone to read the hieroglyph of the body, something to form an outside of the self, and of the poem. The final section of the poem, "CODA: 'Meaning,'" which is itself outside of the numbered sequence of the poem, turns to this space of inter-subjectivity in the image of the touch: "your hand on mine, pulling us upward" (3). This section begins to shift from the language of death and disease to a kind of ecstatic communication:

O here too, the body  
 exploding from its centre  
 jettisoning its glow in uncontrollable  
 motion, presses outward  
 reverberates, testing (9-13)

Unlike the bodies exploding on the ice into shards of familiar objects, or the body consumed by dehydration due to cholera, this exploding body, this orgasmic "glow," is a consequence of touch, the pressure of another's hand. Here, this "signal across the boundary of the person / from me to you & back" (14-15) marks a potential escape for an individual turned into a radical absence by the lack of context; the "hieroglyph moving on the / sheet of ice, the head's contagion of fear" is, in this experience of self shared by another, no longer wandering a boundless space, but rather something knowable, something "traversable" (6-8).

Potential freedom in difference is not a stable or safe space free of discomfort, however. The vibrio of the earlier sections of the poem, the agent of disease, opens this coda—"vibrio, vibrato, vaginal" (2)—bringing together the two narrative lines. This final section, by introducing the vibrio, the bacteria carried from contaminated food to the hungry body, assures the reader that the communal space where subjects interact with each other and with the world that forms their context is never devoid of risk. It is a necessary state, however, for the risk inherent to this deconstructive bodily experience is nevertheless productive of memory, identity and agency:

Given a choice between food & boiled water  
the hungry choose

to ingest the vibrio.

Choose to jettison  
the self. Which is this:  
to be present,

extant in the present tense,  
to create that motion of the body  
by which memory  
is possible. (4-13)

“Choice” here, between starvation and dehydration, between “*terror*” and “home,” is limited and dangerous, associated with disease and “madness.” And yet it *is* choice, which even at its most limited and dangerous is an expression of self, something “extant in the present tense.” The “meaningless” cargo conveyed at great risk by sailors who had reached the limit of endurance is a final act of speaking, a negotiation of selfhood.

“Speed, or Absolute Structure,” then, explores the seam of contact between inside and outside, self and other, the dangerous terms constitutive of an individual identity relying for its very reification on their dynamic relation. “Everything” (*Sheepish Beauty* 30-32) also explores the intersubjective space where the body makes memory. Deploying a similar strategy of multiple narrative lines, this poem uses structural experimentation to increase the sense of dynamic interaction both on the level of thematic content and on that of form. This structural experimentation creates the need for the reader to enter actively into the poem’s processes, to become, as Morton suggests, a poet in the creative act of reading. As conventions of scholarly dissection and explication break down in the face of the multiple possibilities of meaning, the poem provokes a crisis of critical methodology that makes visible both this active participation and the poem’s resistance to exegetical desire.

“Everything” is a sequence of three poems tracing the processes of memory encoded as physical sensations, a catalogue of “Images collected in the transfer basin / of the cortex” (“2) & Saw” 29-30). The sequences are laid out in newspaper-like columns which we read from top to bottom, from left to right in the familiar way. When we reach “3) The Cortex,” upon which I will focus here, we encounter something different. In order to discuss this structural shift, I provide the section in full here:



## 3) THE CORTEX

- [1] The physical resemblance of her arm to  
the rest of my body,  
where it has touched, trembling or  
so sure of itself.
- [5] Herself.  
Amid the grey hammers of a civil war.  
The consequence of the touch is a  
viscous fluid blooming pale white  
in the centre,
- [10] subtly accused of lack of originality
- the work switches gears easily.  
They can't otherwise imagine, & don't  
of chaos thru the mind.  
laughing.
- [15] If the line works, life is beautiful,  
having leaped over a great distance  
in the present tense, but joy,  
leaps up
- fills
- [20] To think as such, fills  
with laughter, these spaces.  
The middle is all, curious, folded over  
& slid into the envelope,  
laughing.
- [25] I want to say "virile."  
Even in middle age.  
The dispersion of the languages until their  
books exhibited such confusion they were  
or verve. In spite of which,
- [30] Torn birds are out eating the grass, after all.  
believe in uncertainty, or the loops  
But do you see it? What has the girl done, this  
Always laughing.  
she said, touching her arm
- [35] knowing happiness is unattainable  
she said, which is everything  
unbidden, its centre palace . . .
- "we," touches us

If we read this poem section in the familiar way, from the top to bottom, the syntax deteriorates, the sense breaks down and we become disoriented. The poem demands something else: a shift of reading strategies that will allow the reader to break the rules of reading, to violate the white space between the columns. At certain points in the poem the work "switches gears," flowing across the columns rather than up and down. The first possible switch follows the lefthand column down the page, beginning with "The consequence of the touch . . ." (7) and going on through to: "subtly accused of lack of originality / the work switches gears easily" (7-11). We then jump across the column to "Torn birds are out eating the grass, after all" (30) and read the rest of the poem from left to right as though the work were not divided into two columns at all. The second possible switch begins in the right-hand column: "The dispersion of the languages until their / books exhibited such confusion they were / subtly accused of lack of originality / or verve. In spite of which, / the work switches gears easily" (27-11). Another reading begins, like the first, in the lefthand column with "The consequence of touch . . ." (7), moving across the column at line 10 to line 29: "subtly accused of lack of originality / or verve. In spite of which, / the work switches gears easily" (7-11).

Several things will be apparent from this short inventory of possible readings, all of which follow our expectations of syntax and sentence structure. First is the difficulty of explaining the various trajectories using words and scholarly citation: readings one and three have cited the same line numbers, although they in fact follow different paths; reading two shows us that we are moving backward through the number sequence from 27 to 11, where in actuality, the lines move forward in the conventional way, in spite of what the cited line numbers suggest. I have tried several methods of assigning intelligible line numbers to the poem, and short of providing a new system for every reading, I have found none that will escape this apparent confusion. This situation leads me to admit that, either conventional linear citation (our habits of assigning position) simply do not work, or they work very well and describe exactly the convoluted, non-linear trajectories of the poem, trajectories that resist our attempts to extract segments from the whole for scholarly dissection. In describing the various movements of the sentences across the columns, I have attempted to map in words what I would rather point out with an index finger, following the movement of the eyes, tracing a path from line 27 to line 11 that goes forward, despite what the numbers appear to say. Thus, the physicality of the text continues to assert itself, and in so doing, reveals a gap between the scholarly discourse of interpretation (citation, extraction, quotation) and the matter and movement of the poem as a whole. Asserting itself as a complete, complex entity, the poem will not submit to dissection of a conventional kind.

In addition to challenging methods of citation, the multiple switching points of the poem create contradictory readings that do not resolve themselves. In the first reading, we are told that “subtly accused of lack of originality / the work switches gears easily” (10-11), which describes a kind of capitulation or retreat in the face of critique, an attempt to find a new path that would avoid such criticism. In the second reading, beginning in the righthand column, switching to line 10 and back to line 29, we get: “their / books exhibited such confusion they were / subtly accused of lack of originality / or verve. In spite of which, / the work switches gears easily” (27-11). This reading works against the first by asserting a kind of defiance, stating that the work will do as it likes in spite of critique or convention. Even in their apparent divergence, the two readings do converge at the point of self-reflexivity, as the poem performs structurally its content.

These not-quite-parallel readings mark a moment where multiple trajectories of meaning, in their apparent *divergence*, enable a *convergence* on

another level. This convergence takes place *between* the two or more parts that comprise it; in this sense, the poem functions like what Deleuze and Guattari have called a rhizome, a structure which they oppose to the hierarchical, teleological model of the tree:

The tree imposes the verb “to be,” but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, “and . . . and . . . and . . .” This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb “to be.” Where are you going? Where are you coming from? . . . These are totally useless questions. Making a clean slate, starting or beginning again from ground zero, seeking a beginning or a foundation—all imply a false conception of voyage and movement (a conception that is methodical, pedagogical, imitatory, symbolic . . .). (*Thousand Plateaus* 25)

The rhizome, like the blade of grass, grows from no centre, is not teleological, but instead negotiates its way between things, connecting and interconnecting at any point, an intersubjective interaction between forces. The tree, by contrast, is centralized, is an organizing principle based on hierarchy, *telos*, and the stability of the verb “to be.” Seeking to escape conventional vertical logic of superior and inferior, higher and lower, insider and outsider, the rhizome as a model for thought is excessive, its continual sprouting and a-rational connectivity asserting a sort of movement, relationality. The “and . . . and . . . and . . .” posits a structure where the “successful” subject is not defined by a submission to grammaticality, or, conversely, the “deviant” subject as the negative and illegitimate term of exclusionary norms Mouré associates with the Law. With its emphasis on between-ness, the language of the rhizome resonates in Mouré’s articulation of a poetics of the preposition in “The Acts,” where the preposition—“*On across under toward us*” (*Furious* 95)—emphasizes relation that escapes conventional notions that privilege the thing over its motion. Also a kind of “and . . . and . . . and” that supplements the poems of *Furious*, “The Acts” which form the final section of the collection correspond to and comment upon its poems. In “The Act” that coincides with the poem “Three Signs,” Mouré could be speaking also of “Everything” when she suggests a reading strategy that can accommodate trajectories of meaning that pass between the syntactical parallels of the poem. Such a reading involves a “leap” out of the poem: “I want those kinds of transitions wherein there’s a kind of leap that’s *parallel* to the rest of the poem. Where the parts are seemingly unrelated but can’t exist without each other” (*Furious* 93). This is not a dialectic of thesis and antithesis, with a consequent synthesis forming a newly completed ground

for further dialectic, but a co-constitutive relation, a “line of flight” (Deleuze, *Dialogues* 10), the rhizomal structure that is a multiplicity:

In a multiplicity what counts are not the terms or the elements, but what there is ‘between’, the between, a set of relations which are not separable from each other. Every multiplicity grows from the middle, like the blade of grass or the rhizome. . . . A line does not go from one point to another, but passes between the points ceaselessly bifurcating and diverging. . . . (Deleuze *Dialogues* viii)

“Everything 3) The Cortex” follows just such a rhizomal structure. In the bottom half of the poem segment, we can read the columns either up and down or across, each option providing us with multiple interpretive trajectories. We may read, “If the line works, life is beautiful, / having leaped over a great distance / in the present tense . . .” (15-17). This first reading speaks of language’s ability to create a space of hope, the “if” suggesting possibility. Leaping “over a great distance / in the present tense,” language pulls together in the “transfer basin of the cortex” experiences disparate in time. Language, with its ability to bring the past—the “loops / of chaos through the mind” (31-13)—and future—“if”—together in the present of the act of speaking, collapses space and time in the relational act of organizing experience in the telling of a memory. Like language, the bodily act of memory itself collapses these distances in the sedimented layers of the mind. In the first two sections of the poem, the repeated experience of sun on the skin of the arms triggers a past experience:

Her arms ached the same way.  
They came up with languages  
of a hitherto unknown disparity.  
She was not inside the restaurant,  
but sleeveless in the particles of light.  
Declension.  
The past participle let  
go. (“2) & Saw” 16-23)

Although she is not experiencing the restaurant in the present, but rather as a memory, the physical sensation of her arms aching in the sunlight, collapses the distance between past and present. In this sense, the body, like language itself, is a time-traveller.

The word, “declension,” occupies an in-between space that is key to the interaction of trajectories of meaning in “3) The Cortex.” Declension denotes both grammatical inflection and, at its root, turning aside, a slope

or slide. In its etymological sense it suggests a swerve from the main, a slide from level ground. In its grammatical sense it links this swerve to an implied multiplicity of cases, gender and numbers. Declension is a noun, a thing, that also captures motion; even as a principle of grammar it enacts a cascade of possibility that is both static and dynamic. The second possible trajectory of “3) The Cortex,” like the first, captures this motion, this possibility: “If the line works life is beautiful / she said, touching her arm / having leaped over a great distance / knowing happiness is unattainable / in the present tense, but joy / she said, which is everything / leaps up” (15-[34-36]-18). This reading further develops the relation of the body, the touch of an arm. The intersubjective nature of this touch is signalled by the confusion, in the pronoun “she,” of the identity of the person touching and the person touched. It is even possible that, in this touch between two women, each woman also touches her own arm, her own self. The “great distance” covered is an interpersonal space that cannot be closed, we are told, “in the present tense,” for love between women is one of those terms rendered at best ungrammatical and at worst invisible in the dominant heterosexist economy. Yet this touch does leap this space, or at the very least opens the possibility in the word “if.” The first sequence of lines speaks of language, the second of a relation of bodies. Between them, however, is a rhizomal structure; the line passing between the body’s memory and the always present-ness of language is that of desire. Just as the switching of gears in the top half of the poem speaks of the poem’s own attempt to break away from conventional expectations of language and poetic structure, these a-parallel readings speak of the potential for lines such as the ones here to open language to another way of being. Between parallel readings is a sustained idea of a language that will make *visible* the excluded term of love between women in the intersubjective touch that allows a woman also to touch herself. This embodied language is both within and outside the poem: in the body and in the words; both a grammatical inflection and a turning aside; exploiting grammaticality (the syntactical flow of language) and at the same time excessive of it (two different paths of sense); bound by the present tense and yet able to collapse memory and desire into the space of the poetic utterance.

The normally elided term of lesbian love reveals itself to be folded into language, visible in the spaces opened by structural experimentation. To read this immanent excess, we must break conventional reading patterns,

negotiating between sentences that flow down and jump across the columns. In its breaking of the rules of strictly linear interpretation, the poem makes this excess explicit, relocating and in effect reopening closure in such a way as to suggest that resolution is temporary and transitional, in a constant state of declension. If we follow the syntactic instructions of the poem and choose one of the possible routes to the switching point and then continue to read to the bottom of the page, the upper section of the right hand column (20-26) is left out, unless we go back and read it later. If we do go back, the poem appears to end at “Even in middle age” (26), in the *middle* of the column. The grammatical instructions we are given cause us to circumnavigate this section, which is held in reserve like the answer to a riddle. Like a joke. This space, however, gives no answer but its own excess, its laughter:

To think as such, fills  
with laughter, these spaces.  
The middle is all, curious, folded over  
& slid into the envelope,  
laughing. (20-26)

The lines are slid into the poem which continues to fold back and into itself. Even if we do not read the lines they continue to disrupt by being something that the poem leads us away from, leaving a spatial echo of excess and supplementarity. The only way to read these lines, not as an afterthought by going back from where we have been led, is to misread the poem, to read the columns from top to bottom in spite of the fact that sense and sentence structure fall apart. Either way, the joke is on us. Like the intersubjective touch between women, with its confusion of pronoun reference and its games with sentence structure, these lines are both in the poem and curiously outside of it, both grammatical and turned aside, laughing.

All of the possible readings, switchings and structural foldings of the poem exist in a state of simultaneous relation that places a good deal of pressure on the reader's habits of making meaning. In this way, the multiple possibilities of “Everything 3) The Cortex” engage the reader in the interrogation, not only of the meaning of the poem, but of the nature of the act of making meaning. The meaning of the poem cannot be reduced to any one of the multiple possibilities suggested by the structure of the poem, but is an effect of their relation. As my discussion of the resistance of the poem to scholarly citation demonstrates, Mouré's structural manipulations draw the critic into the text in such a way as to open critical methodologies to question.

This reflexivity is also a means of making visible the processes of interpretation, the implication in the text of the reader who cannot stand beyond the boundary of the poem and “listen” to the authoritative voice of some unified humanist subject. In this the experience of the poem is no different than any other reading experience; the difference lies in the level of discomfort this relationship provokes, which in turn brings the creative (some could say, violent) act of reading to the fore. Anxiety increases as the reader attempts to bring lyric conventions and rules of grammaticality to bear on the simultaneity of a rhizomatic structure, but as the syntax of the poem collapses, derailing our habits of reading, it leads us into multiplicity and possibility. The alternative logic this discomfort enables is manifested in the awkwardness and difficulty arising from the deployment of conventional critical strategies, even seemingly innocuous ones such as the assignment of line numbers.

The awkwardness and discomfort that open the way to multiplicity are constructed in these poems as the risks inherent to anti-anaesthetic and its logic of dangerous interaction of difference, signals across the boundaries. Manifested in structural experimentation that attempts to break habits of reading, the principle of dynamic interaction works toward the articulation of a bodily experience of difference that is not based on a hierarchy of terms ranged in exclusive dichotomies of insider comfort and outsider abjection, distress and invisibility. With its own principles of interconnectivity, non-teleological growth and in-between-ness, the Deleuzian rhizome offers a model for this alternative logic, and, paradoxically enough, provides a unifying structural principle to help to organize a critical discussion of the poetry’s resistance to conventional principles of organization. It seems that the desire for exegetical authority and comfort dies hard. It is this paradox that brings us in an elliptical way back to Rhea Tregebov’s longing for words that lie nicely on the page, telling us things, and, through this longing, to the question of accessibility.

In her article, “Corrections and Re/Visions: Mouré’s *Sheepish Beauty, Civilian Love*,” Tregebov points to what she sees as Mouré’s complicity with the forces she seeks to subvert: “[T]o the degree to which Mouré shelters within the walls of theory, rather than making it the internal bone structure of her writing, she is supporting her innate smartness with a theoretical underpinning that has all sorts of powerful structures (i.e., the Academy) valorizing, honouring and codifying it” (60). At its heart, this is a question

of accessibility. If she does indeed “shelter” within the walls of theory, does Mouré in fact perpetuate the very forms of privileged specialized knowledge she seeks to challenge? Does her poetry exclude many, when exclusion is, for her, dehumanizing? This is an uneasiness which Mouré has herself expressed. For her, the responsible poet is always at risk, must always negotiate the danger of becoming what she opposes, and so must lay bare the inner workings of poetic construction. Mouré turns Tregobov’s metaphor of the skeleton inside out, claiming that “consciously creating a space where the seams are not invisible” is necessary to the poetic act for, she continues, “Without this kind of effort, we will perpetrate a reading surface and status quo of social structure that excludes many. And when even one person is excluded, we reduce our own humanity” (“Access” 10). For Tregobov, this emphasis on inclusion presents the readers of Mouré’s work with a contradiction. The level of difficulty of many of these works seemingly identifies Mouré’s audience as a small one, one that is familiar with the linguistic theory and the philosophical and political debates that form the works’ contexts. As Vaughan has so piquantly put it, “without a copy of Atomic Particle Physics 101, constant weader might gwet wossed” (117).

Rather than defend her work against accusations of inaccessibility, Mouré responds with a critique of the concept of accessibility itself. “Literal meanings of the ‘accessible’ just place women and working-class people, as the lowest common denominator in the reproduction of the social order” (“Polis” 206), she asserts. Poetry which, on the level of content, actively criticizes the social order has its place, but for Mouré, the site of contestation is not simply content but form: “The ‘accessible’ contains patterns of thought/speech that are socially ingrained. . . . It makes us feel intact as individuals . . . we feel comfortable reading it. The ‘content’ may disturb us, but the reading *surface* sends us sub-textual messages that *everything is fine*” (“Access” 9). As I have attempted to demonstrate through my discussion of Mouré’s “difficult,” a-grammatical work, the discomfort arising from structures that resist our attempts to read them is an integral aspect of her political poetics which attempts at every turn to make a reader feel, if not disconcerting dizziness, at least that everything is *not* fine. Mouré does not speak for the elided terms of the social world, the working classes, people of colour, combinations of these; her strategy of inquiry aims rather at a sustained critique of the ways meanings are made that code these other voices as invisible.



Mouré occupies a precarious position with regard to her readership. If she does move to the edge where communication falters, how are we, to take up Colin Morton's question, to follow her into a radical rethinking of, not only the roles of reader and author in the making of meaning, but of the nature of that act itself? Further, how are we as critics to re-evaluate our own desire for exegesis, our desire to make sense of the poetry, whether from within her proposed framework (its own brand of grammaticality) or from another? No matter how much the internal structure of a text like "Everything" insists on the visibility of the reader in dialogue with the text, there is still the nagging awareness of Mouré-the-poet; in a collection bound by the authorial signature, the image, no matter how spectral, of a controlling consciousness is difficult to exorcise, especially in the context of a discussion of a political poetics. With an awareness of this precarious relationship between text and critique, Mouré comments, "People who are making sense are just making me laugh, is all," and, "I want to write these things . . . that can't be torn apart by anybody, anywhere, or in the university. I want the overall sound to be one of making sense, but I don't want the inside of the poem to make sense of anything" (*Furious* 92). An interpretive act that seeks to follow Mouré's instructions must, therefore, approach the notion of and desire for meaning with full awareness of their potential for the artificial closure of the poetic project itself. From this point of view, there is no position the critic can occupy that is not implicated in the critique of the violence of language that permeates Mouré's poetic utterance. The critical act as self-reflexive interrogation of critical orthodoxy and of established modes of reading becomes the "matter" of the poems, as Colin Morton observes: "In the process the poems' 'subject' becomes not so much the 'meaning' to be derived but the act, the reader's act of making those links" (39). From the perspective of this paradigm of reading predicated on readerly discomfort and indeterminacy, the poems, as I have been attempting to demonstrate, *make sense*. And thus we arrive at our paradox and the problematics of Mouré's exegetical persona. My own work is illustrative of this problematics. Early drafts of this article were characterized, as I was told by my readers, by a tendency to take Mouré at her word, to establish her as the authoritative critic of her work, when the explicit project of both her theoretical writing and my own critique of her poetry was to discuss how the poetry itself works to challenge such authority.<sup>2</sup> In working through the implications of these comments, I

have come full circle to the question of accessibility in the context of Mouré's critique of authority and the related issue of the unified speaking subject. How, I must ask myself, can I argue that Mouré's political poetics subvert authority if Mouré's extra-poetic texts stand within my own critical practice as centre, origin, Word? In light of what Tregebov describes as "[t]he dearth of any real critical evaluation" (54) of the poetry, Mouré's theoretical writings fill a vacuum; what she says works, it fits, it lets us in. The implications of this kind of "access" are worth some discussion.

The very difficulty (and, one could say, obscurity) of Mouré's texts generate both productive anxiety (signalled by Tregebov's nostalgic longing for "voice"—"a self of some sort!" [58])—and the critical embracing of a paradigm which, while it enables a radical reclaiming of non-sense, also lays out a structure by which all of this indeterminacy and anxiety make sense. It is through this paradigm that the poems, in Tregebov's words, "allow [us] entrance" (55), and the "voice" that Tregebov invokes, if she does not find it in the poems, is readily supplied extra-textually in Mouré's own critical/theoretical writings and interviews. Providing a kind of theoretical rosetta stone for the complex maneuvers of the poetry, these writings and interviews bear the burden of our desire for meaning, our "natural leaning toward decreasing anxiety," and it is because of this function that I have come to refer to them as an experience of Mouré's exegetical persona. I use persona here precisely because it stands between text and author, because it both presumes a speaking subject and defers it, for this is a role played by Mouré's own theoretical and critical writing.

This exegetical persona is a positive relief for a critic confronting something like "Everything," or "Speed or, Absolute Structure," poems that do their best to escape the notion of a unified intention. Even to speak of the "speaker" seems absurd in a poem like "Everything," where the multiple readings insist on a simultaneity that thwarts the linear performance of a reading in a single voice. A most rhizomatic structure, this poem and many others in the collection can, in Morton's words, "leave you breathless, head reeling" (39). It is a mercy to read that the inner workings of the poems are not of themselves supposed to *make sense*. We know this because we have been told as much in the conversational, question-and-response, accessible format of the articles and interviews that comprise so much of the critical repertoire surrounding Mouré's work.

While Mouré has written several articles dealing specifically with her

political stance with regard to language,<sup>3</sup> the interview, a form which comes closest to the type of interaction that she appears to advocate, provides an apt illustration of the problematics of Mouré's exegetical persona. It is perhaps Mouré's belief in and commitment to her conception of community that accounts for the preponderance of interviews in the critical repertoire.<sup>4</sup> The interview, however, is itself a difficult and potentially contradictory form. On the one hand, it places the poet into this space of dialogue, into conversation where the poet as speaker becomes one voice in a fluctuating field of negotiation. Mouré herself asserts this in an interview with Nathalie Cooke in an *Arc* special issue significantly entitled, "Who's Afraid of Erin Mouré?":

Yeah. . . . I just like to participate in the interview as an equal, and not have to defend what I'm doing—like if you want to attack me, I'm not interested, sort of thing. I'd rather have room to talk, and you talk, and then the readers, hopefully, can listen in on an interesting conversation, and they can draw their own conclusions. Like, they can like what I'm saying, or not like it, or disagree with me, or whatever, you know? (52)

The colloquial tone of this interview—its "like"s, "you know"s and "whatever"s—reinforces the sense of this exchange as a dialogue we as readers overhear, and minimizes the sense of editorial intervention or textual mediation. On the other hand, the interview as a form also reproduces the very structures of unified subjectivity and authority that the content of Mouré's statements in this context seeks to subvert. In the same interview, Mouré recognizes this danger: "Yeah. So I end up explaining feminism, explaining things, or explaining that you shouldn't be afraid of theory or explaining that it didn't matter if it was a bit hard to read; even poetry that's easy to read doesn't exactly, like, sell like hotcakes . . ." (52). Here, in the one-to-one (to one) relationship of subject and interviewer (and reader) we arrive at a relaxation of anxiety through casual, low-key exegesis. Here, (finally, we think) we will get the straight goods in plain talk from the horse's mouth, the key, the paradigm that will allow us entrance, that will make the poetry make sense. This exegetical voice appears in my work and in that of other critics who have attempted seriously to engage with Mouré's difficult texts. In Dennis Denisoff's reading of "Corrections to the Saints: Transubstantial," for example, the tendency to "hear" Mouré's exegetical voice, the voice of authorial intention, manifests itself in introductions to quotations of the poetry such as "Mouré states . . . . She goes on to state . . ." (117). The word, "state," implies a kind of transparency of poetic language

that I believe Mouré would contest, and yet, given the fact that the most sophisticated discussions of what the poems are supposed to *do* are performed by Mouré herself, this lingering sense of transparency is difficult to escape. I would not go so far as to agree with Tregobov that most of the critical repertoire tends “merely to genuflect to Mouré’s obvious talent, avoiding both careful reading and any genuine critical evaluation” (54). I will say, though, that the difficulty of the poetry, combined with our “natural leaning toward decreasing anxiety,” places Mouré’s own self-reflexivity in jeopardy of reinscription as authority, origin, Word.

This is not, as it might appear, an invalidation of Mouré’s political and poetic project, for, in a very real way, it is a performance of it. My own text performs the struggle with authority, with the drift to the centre, with the seduction of sense, with the desire to make meaning even if that meaning is “only” the political and strategic efficacy of resisting the making of meaning itself. Mouré’s own project performs a similar slippage and desire: the attempt to move away from monologia, from statement to conversation, from self-containment to context; all of this desire is haunted by the authorial signature that binds a written text and an extra-poetic persona always in danger of becoming an authority.

Nor will I suggest that Mouré’s extra-poetic persona should be bracketed off from readings of the poetry in order to avoid the dangers of intentional fallacy. Such a bracketing is contrary to the poetry itself, which persistently confronts intention in order to problematize the notions of both stable intention and formal self-containment. All of the poems that appear in the collection either explicitly or implicitly designated as “Corrections,” reworkings, and problematizations point to and draw in that extra-poetic persona in order to open it to interrogation. While I resist the temptation to resolve the tensions of the problematic relationship of intention to text, I would like to suggest a shift of perspective. It would be a question of asking, not, “What does Mouré’s exegetical persona reveal about what these ‘difficult’ poems *really mean*?” but rather, “How does the poetry work to undermine the gestures of critical orthodoxy (the *structure* of criticism along with its content), *not excluding those of Mouré herself*?” The emphasis would in this case shift from how well or how poorly the poetry reproduces Mouré’s poetic or political mandate to an exploration of the ways that the poetry contests its boundaries, rewrites and re-enacts the very crisis in which that mandate is implicated. Such a shift moves from boundaries to the signals

across boundaries, opens up a line of flight between reader, poet, critic, and text. However problematic it may be, it is necessary to keep this exegetical persona visible; the emphasis on responsibility in this poetics demands that intent be allowed neither to dissolve into a background of unlocalized and abstract post-structural dead authors, nor to assert itself in the poem as a monological proclaimer of a unified “vision.” A poetics of discomfort must make the poet herself the most uncomfortable of readers.

If Mouré does shelter within the valorizing walls of theory, which means at present within the academy (although she is not a “member” of it), she also attempts to challenge the existence of those walls, to deconstruct the ground she stands on. Yet the danger of co-optation is always present, as Bronwen Wallace writes in a letter to Mouré: “Let’s not kid ourselves. Language-centred writing can be just as easily co-opted as any other kind. . . . We can all be ‘used by convention’. They’ve got the guns. We have the numbers, but we’re not angels yet” (in Mouré, *Two Women Talking* 23).<sup>5</sup> Throughout her work, Erin Mouré uses language to interrogate language’s oppressive modalities, exploiting grammaticality in order to posit an alternative logic of representation. Part of a strategy of resistance to the crooning of the dominant order—and our desire for it, which necessarily implicates us in its perpetuation—this interrogation seeks to alter the trajectory of language that devalues and silences the voices and experiences of those deemed “marginal” and “other”; it is a poetics that applies force to resist inertia, for “to move the force in any language, create a slippage, *even for a moment*” (*Furious* 98) is to enable a discomfort that works against anaesthesia.

## NOTES

- 1 The tendency to think in terms of “the body,” rather than of “bodies,” in the theories of psychology and phenomenology that subtend Mouré’s work raises the question of an essentializing discourse that would seem to efface the kind of difference important to Mouré’s politics. This issue merits a more extensive analysis of the role of bodily experience in Mouré’s work than I have space to perform here. I will enclose this term in quotation marks in order to signal that any invocation of such a body is both provisional and open to debate.
- 2 I am aware that it is unconventional to refer directly to anonymous readers or to early drafts of a critical response. However, given the nature of my discussion and its emphasis on dialogue, process and critical self-reflexivity, I feel that it is necessary to acknowledge and address what has become a significant contribution to my thinking with regard to both Mouré’s poetic and my own critical agenda.
- 3 See for example, *Two Women Talking* (with Bronwen Wallace), “Poetry, Memory and the

- Polis," "Examining the Call for Accessibility," "To Speak These Things: A Letter."
- 4 See, for example, her talks with Robert Billings, Peter O'Brien, Dennis Denisoff, Nathalie Cooke, and Janice Williamson.
- 5 Government funding of the arts is an excellent example of this conundrum. All of Mouré's collections have been published with financial aid from the Canada Council. In fact, of the collections of poetry and literary journals in my personal library, all but one, *Carousel*, produced at the University of Guelph, receive government assistance. Is this co-option or an excellent example of the power producing its own sites of resistance?

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