A SPACE TO PLAY IN; OR, TELLING THE (W)HOLE STORY

*The Recent Poetry of Robert Gibbs**

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"What's your dad do?" I asked him.
"Oh, I don't call him that," Tibby said.
"What do you call him? Isn't he your dad?"
"He's Mr. Coghill. That's what I call him. That's what we all call him. That's what you'll have to call him. Flowers Coghill, that's his name, but we just call him Mr."
"But what is he?"
"He's the father."
"But what does he do?"
"He doesn't do anything. He's a poet."
"Oh," I said. "Does he make up lots of it?"
"Lots and lots, all the time."

(Gibbs, *A Mouth Organ for Angels* 40)

And I must make do
again with words. (Gibbs, *All This Night Long* 11)

across such gaps as I leave in the score
you singing must throw your own bridges.

(Gibbs, *The Tongue Still Dances* 81)

In a 1986 review article for *Canadian Literature* Maritime writer, poet, editor, critic, teacher (and gourmet cook) Robert Gibbs reminds us of an aesthetics his poems have always suggested, that

> poetry is language. Language is physical and metaphysical, opaque and transparent, static and dynamic, discrete and continuous. . . . There is the guise of transparency — the poet says, "Look, I'm telling you straight." There is the guise of opacity — the poet says, "Look, I'm not *telling* you anything." ("Chinese Jars" 180)

In his most recent work, Gibbs adopts this "guise of transparency." He writes a poetry that draws attention to its own constructedness. He says, with the speaker

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in a very early poem, "In the Valley of the Sixth Patriarch," "See how every poem / in the end / turns into an alphabet song" (*The Road From Here* 23).

The "alphabet song" has often been an underlying, if not an obvious, subject in Robert Gibbs' poetry and his prose. Lines in the poem "All this night long," for example,

> All this night long and longer
> I've been . . . slogging . . . to
> make connections more connected   to say
> Hey you there   insisting you are
> there   Hey I have you here   (*All This Night Long* 8),

or in "For Ralph Gustafson Writing on Pierre Laporte" — "somewhere a man taps at a poem / too faint almost to hear / yet in his silences / I can half discern the shapes / he has found no words for" (*A Kind of Wakefulness* 13) — indicate what has always been Gibbs' interest in language as a material process.

In writing of this kind, it is the absence (what he calls, in the following as yet unpublished poem, "word-holes") rather than the presence (the "whole" story) which is articulated:

> Telling the Whole Story
>
> She's at it again with her scissors
> the storyteller   shearing out words
> Look I say as I gather them up
> a whole lovely lexicon   Yes
>
> she says   But they have to go   Look
> here's curd and belly and whistle   fringe
> and scuttle   lovely words   But they won't
> do   she says   They won't do
> Brine and slew and spinning   watchword and
> jumpsuit   cringe and strangle   They
> won't do   They won't do   The way you're going
> you won't have anything left
>
> So why this snowstorm on the carpet?
> To make it true   she says   To make
> the story true   Now her pages catch
> into each other   word-holes
>
> join and unstarch her paper   unsign
> its signs   But it's just a story you're writing
> after all isn't it?   All the more reason
> she says   All the more reason.

Even the form of this poem points out the holes in the whole story (the wholes in the hole story)? Much of Gibbs' work offers the openness of the gap or break in

the line rather than the closed certainty of the comma or period. The lack of punctuation in fact signifies the open-endedness of story. It is the absence signified by these open spaces which allows the presence of the black marks on the page to approach meaning.

Like the title of his 1980 League of Canadian Poets pamphlet, *A Space to Play In*, "Telling the Whole Story" suggests that the storyteller (a woman, significantly) is one who participates in "shearing out words," making a space, literally, to play in, where signs may be "unsigned." This open space of unsigned signs, of un/author/ized writing, may be interpreted as a feminine space, in opposition to the starched-closed structures available in masculine discourse. Where the patriarchal, author/itative voice of the poet would impose unity, coherence, singularity — "Look I say as I gather them up / a whole lovely lexicon" — the space of this woman's story is the place of the lexicon of holes, the place of the gap, the tear — "She's at it again with her scissors . . . shearing out words."

Similarly, the central and yet continually decentred "figure" in *A Mouth Organ for Angels* is, as "she" is in "Telling the Whole Story," a woman, or rather, a young girl. In an extremely feminist gesture, the protagonist Madelaine is renamed "Iris" by her grandmother, and thereby given an "eye-dentity" and a voice with which to speak. The spaces of both "Telling the Whole Story" and *A Mouth Organ for Angels* become open spaces of word play, of semantic process, of narrative possibility. As the storyteller in "Telling the Whole Story" punningly answers the poet's pleas to look at the lovely lexicon of words, "Yes . . . But they have to *go*. . . . They won't *do* / she says   They won't *do*" (my italics).

The "true" story in this poem, as in much of Gibbs' work, is "true" only in the sense that it is aware of words as material things: "Brine and slew and spinning   watchword and / jumpsuit / cringe and strangle . . . so why this snowstorm on the carpet?" Because the poem works by undoing story, by demonstrating that the "whole" story is made up, not of "true" events or experiences, but of pieces of language which are like "word-holes" that "join and unstarch" the paper, we are made aware of the similarly constructed nature of the poem in which this story of "cutting-up" stories appears.

The Tongue Still Dances (1985), Gibbs' collection of new and selected poems, takes its title and epigraph from R. Murray Schafer's *The Tuning of the World*:

> But that the tongue danced and still continues to dance with the sound-scape, there can be no doubt. Poets and musicians have kept the memory alive, even if modern man has acquiesced into bespectacled muttering.

As this epigraph indicates, there is, in the collection, a distrust of the authority of the written word which leads to "bespectacled muttering" and a desire that the poet like the musician "dance," make a gesture, not a referential utterance. The poet should be one who says, with the title of a poem in *All This Night Long*,

"'Mr. Speaker, Sir, May I At Least Be Permitted to Complete My Gesture' (an unfound poem from the Klein Symposium, Ottawa 1974)."

Both the first section and the first poem of the collection are entitled "Figures in a Wind," a phrase which signifies a paradox: the poet wants both "figures" (metaphors? dancers? women? reference?) and the "wind" (air[s] with [out of?] which to speak? nothingness?). The poem "figures" in an aesthetics of wind ("nothing" but words) in the sense that it asks the question, what is the relation between poet and audience, poem and reader?

> Your audience girl   halflights that
> glimmer across your hall and deepen
>
> its pit   Is it that you hold them
> or let them go?
>
> . . .   Or are they
> the animators? (9)

The poem is "figured" as a female space (a "girl") and the reader becomes the audience before "her." But does the "you" as poem hold "them" as readers, or does the reader make the meaning in the poem — "are they the animators?" — the poem asks. The question raised by the poem seems to be answered in the words, "It's an interchange / then   something passed from them to you / and you to them"; meaning arises out of the interaction between text and reader. But with the final self-conscious realization that the poet too becomes both a writer and a reader of his or her own poems — "something passed . . . to . . . us I mean   for I'm sitting here with them" — the question becomes reproblematized and can only "end" with the narrator as poet as reader "sitting here" listening for "what's you in this music and what's not . . . an unlullibying rocking that rocks / you both and rocks this curtain / wall of light and night." The curtain which is a wall of both (paradoxically) light and night is, for the poet, the words themselves, the figures that both keep the real girl (/poem) from him and yet offer her to us.

Another poem in the collection, "Who asked me to be a reader of entrails," parodies the questions the serious reader of poems asks the writer:

> He asked me what the signs were of a late
> spring, a hot summer   dearth
> I said I could not tell though they
> were all around I was sure
>
> He asked me where I'd look   Was there
> an almanac of sorts or did we have our own
>
> old Indian   I said there must be one of each
> from what I'd heard. (11)

In order to interpret the signs, we have traditionally looked to the Word/words (of men, God[s]), living authorities (our own old Indians), speech, or to dictionaries (almanacs of sorts), which are simply other signs, other words. But the poet in this poem is uncertain of the authority of speech (he can *not* tell) and of writing (he cannot *tell* what the signs mean).

"Why be a poet in a needy time" is a three-part poem which, while seeking alternatives to the writing of poetry, finds words with which to write the poem:

> I could as easily be drawing on this sun-lit
> page   stroking short strokes   lines   one line
>
> maybe sinuous enough to bring to so much light
> that blind girl with her cup   her tray   her book. (13)

As in so many of the poems in this collection, the speaker is self-consciously present as poet before the sun-lit page which signifies both blankness, emptiness, absence and the fullness, presence and light which his lines create. But this is a poem which insists on speaking the illusion of its own presence:

> Her
> transmitting fingers take from her page what
> may be as strange to her as she to me   Would
> such a figure raised by dark marks
>
> as sunlight call out to her as I do now
> call out to this room   this darkness? (13)

"The Pines of Route 7" is another poem which insists that we recognize the illusion of the referential and instead delight in the material qualities of language, that words be the things of poems:

> They're building a new bypass
> from the cutoff   a road
> back of all roads   back of
> the river and riverside places
> Martinon Ingleside Ononette Nerepis. (18)

The road back of all roads, the new bypass, is the other, or alternative route we can travel when we read a poem. It is a road which bypasses the centre of town, the referential, and seeks new names (the signifier, not the signified) to fix onto:

> I know the road I go   over and over
> house to home and back again   Riding
> its rises and falls   I'm finding
> new names to fix onto   where I am
> in spaces   where I am in time. (18)

The road we know we go, over and over, is the old road, on which poetry is the naming of experience. But here the poem moves, not from real place to real place

(like a travel brochure) but from "house to home and back again," from word to word, each connoting (ostensibly) a similar place, and yet present, linguistically, as difference. The poem that is written out of such a journey is a poem of new names that seek to re/place the old poetic ones:

> For the white pines that loom over scrub
> and scour the old poetic ones *Noble*
> *Sentinel* and *Lofty* And for this last
> I love red and soft-shouldered
> *Lonesome.* (19)

The previous authority of the old poetic words is suggested by the fact that they are capitalized and italicized. But these poems are poems that "scrub and scour" the old poetic words so that they become simply other words.

"A Morning's Service" is a five-part poem that insists on the tentativeness, the partialness, and the incompleteness of story. The poem "begins" with a line that suggests a continuation, another telling: "that's the start of it again" (50). Each of the five sections ends with a line that qualifies, and undermines, the apparent narrative certainty of the previous lines: "this is how the story will be for now" (50). Another poem entitled (ambiguously) "March past" begins with a line that articulates, in another way, the outward, disseminating movement of story: "There are these departures" (58). Following a fairly straightforward narrative, the poem again qualifies itself, and self-reflexively comments on the nature of poetry in the final lines:

> These departures
> These breaks in the rhythm
> that are the rhythm. (58)

Both of these poems suggest that it is the unexpected, startling, incomplete aspects of story, the "breaks" in the rhythm, that are the story, that are the rhythm.

The last poem I would like to look at is entitled "The Song I Have for You Is One Befitting Your Gravity." This is a poem about the gaps, slippages, and silences which occur in poetry, in "song":

> and when you singer sing this song
> I am making for you you must foot
> your own way down a half-runged shifty
> ladder. (81)

The metaphor of the foot suggests both a careful stepping and the kind of feet which occur in lines of poetry. The reader must in fact be prepared to (re)write ("foot") his or her own poem ("half-runged shifty ladder"). The reader is offered a space of inconsistency or of (w)holeness where any transcendence is of his or her own making:

> across such gaps as I leave in the score
> you singing must throw your own bridges. (81)

The poet writing, like the composer creating, cannot secure the meaning of the poem/song; the writer cannot remain present to/in his or her "own" words for they are no longer (never were?) his or her own:

> my pitching skittering notations at you
> or reaching back a hand as now I would
> may not keep you from slipping on
> slippery edges. (81)

In these lines the poet warns the reader, or rather, warns the overly serious reader ("This Song I Have for You is One Befitting Your Gravity") of the "slippery edges" of language, and of the inevitable play of meaning which occurs in any discourse.

Many of Gibbs' poems work hard to remind us that poetry, being made of language, is always playful and material. They offer reader and/as writer a space to play in which is very like the field in Robert Kroetsch's work, a place "where (how) it grows," an open field of unexplored/unexplained possibilities (Mandel 7). As "A Dog In A Dream" Part II suggests, the poem should be the place of "a squeak and its echo / with nothing between," the poet, "a mouse in the works of the grandfather clock / whistling hickory dickory / arranging and deranging / his spring-filled nest" (31). Many of the poems in *The Tongue Still Dances* and in Gibbs' work generally teach us to arrange and derange, to construct and deconstruct, that nothing between. We may also reconstruct the bridges between the squeak and its echo, climb up or down the half-runged shifty ladder of language and construct our own "foot"holds, if we will.

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