

RE:FORMING GIANTS

THE PHRASE “IMPOSING SHAPE” invites us to think of giants, whether statuesque or incredibly hulking, whether comic or latent with terrible power. One of Brian Fawcett’s stories opens with a child’s view of such size: “I was troubled by the giants,” his narrator writes, “and I spent a lot of time worrying about them.” The giants he animates are not very nice, and in any event by his definition “don’t speak quite the same language you do”; in desperation he seeks elves as allies, and comes to learn the chain of enmities that constitutes life. Fortunately these elves have power, too, and can vanquish rats, at least while the child grows.

But I want to think of “imposing shape” as an active process rather than a passive description: to think of it not as the image we receive so much as the thing we do — which in turn reveals the image that we create as much as any we discover. Margaret Atwood’s lines often tell of the vanity of such effort:

Things
refused to name themselves; refused
to let him name them.

But P. K. Page’s “Cook’s Mountains” tells of results:

By naming them he made them.
They were there
before he came
but they were not the same.
It was his gaze
that glazed each one. . . .

We saw them as we drove —
sudden, surrealist, conical
they rose. . . .
The driver said
“Those are the Glass House Mountains up ahead.”

And instantly they altered to become
the sum of shape and name.

The terrible tensions between mind and matter take some to discovery and renewal and others to the “progressive insanities” of the pioneer. But common to them both are the forms of sound, space, and saying we must always interpret — forms we find and forms we make, that animate art and language alike.

The “art and discovery maps of Canada” that Joe W. Armstrong has collected in his magnificent *From Sea Unto Sea* (Fleet/Lester & Orpen Dennys) offer us one glimpse of people’s efforts to grasp the unknown and wrestle it decorously into form. “In all seasons,” the editor writes, “there are those who traverse the land and sea and then later, with lines and symbols, transfer the image of geography to paper.” The earliest document in this collection — a Gastaldi woodcut map from 1556, showing “La Nuova Francia” and its ultramontane neighbour “Parte Incognita” — is alive with both people and monsters: the people wandering through park-like trees that dot the land, the toothy monsters emerging from the waves offshore. Those unknown territories gather names over subsequent years — Septentrio, Anian, California Regio — as Mercator, Ortelius, and Champlain start to claim territory by both outline and word. Champlain names the beasts and flowers, and gradually more ships than monsters fill the seas; the corners of maps later acquire the cherubs of European fashion, and the maps themselves show the measured order of sextant and geometric plane. By the end of the eighteenth century, we have records of people’s imposing themselves on the land — plans of the fortress of Louisbourg, and diagrams of urban dwellings. In 1776 there is a last imposition of imagination — Antonio Zatta’s map of “Fou Sang” (now called British Columbia) and the rest of North America’s West Coast, with an elephant and dodo decorating it (“there is a certain similarity,” the editor writes, “between the outline of the elephant in the cartouche . . . and the . . . contour of America, as a giant, profiled elephant’s head with a trunk-like California”). The cartographers from the 1780’s onwards (Cook, Vancouver, Mackenzie, Rapkin) brought science to bear instead. Niagara replaces the monstrous beasts, county boundaries define Canada West, and social order as well as science establishes the new forms reality takes in the new world. But the giants remain.

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Maybe it was the extraordinary size and pressure of the new land that partly drew the idioms of Newfoundland into existence. Many local words derived from British dialects, of course, and the massive, instructive, monumentally entertaining *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (University of Toronto Press), which G. M. Story, W. J. Kirwin, and J. D. A. Widdowson have patiently compiled, repeatedly reminds us of that. But other people’s dialects are never entirely

adequate for our own realities; and if rerooting the language in our own home therefore takes a certain creative flair, that is something which Newfoundlanders have abundantly shown they possess. Newfoundland vocabulary, alive with metaphor, domesticates by sound — it takes the potentially barren and alienating spaces of land and sea, the pressures of person and dimensions of difficulty, and by reducing them all to human size gives the people accordingly a measure of power over them. Consider the batch of words that follows:

bangbelly: pudding
bay noddy: outport dweller (derog.)
bubbly squall: jellyfish
clumpet: ice pan
duckedy-mud: indeterminately brown
dwall: half asleep
gatch: pompous swaggerer
garnipper: large mosquito
gommel: fool
liveryer: coast dweller (as opp. to a migratory fisherman)
mauzy: misty and close
nuddick: bare round hill
nunnybag: knapsack
ownshook: female fool
scrod: small
slinge: avoid work
tuckamore: scrub vegetation
yaffle: armful

They *name* certain difficulties, as often as not, but they *declare* something else: a laconic capacity for play — for dealing with life on familiar terms, with more wit than worry, refusing to surrender to discomfort. “ ‘Twas hardwood matches at that time,’ ” says the authority quoted in the *Dictionary* as the source of one usage; “ ‘we used to call ’em hardwood wait-a-minutes, ’cause you’d have to scrape ’em on an ass o’ your pants, an’ he fizz, and fizz, an’ by and ’by he burn up that brimstone he come to a flame.’ ”

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To find the words to name reality and shape experience: this has always been one of poetry’s impulses. As Northrop Frye observes about the poems of Giorgio Bassani (*Rolls Royce and Other Poems*; Aya Press): “the few moments that break through to the centre of experience are as real now as they ever were, and a touch of their reality can still make our prisons of solitude and prejudice crumble into illusion.” Time matters to Frye, and his concern for the existence of *centres* over time describes a pattern all its own. The poems (translated by Irving Layton, Greg Gatenby, and others) reveal different senses of the shapes of perception; and the very fact of translation describes one of them. The Italian

texts are — visually — ornate symmetrical designs, signs perhaps of the historical order on which the poet calls even while he despairs of memory, weeps for loss, and fears for the future; the English texts, by contrast, while appearing to flow with a contemporary idiom, adhere to a single pattern: they are governed by the uniformity of the left-hand margin, as though continuously redefining order by a single border, a solitary edge.

Of two other recent books of poetry — by Ondaatje and Webb, from Island Press, both of them handsome examples of the printer's art and the poet's cast of mind — Michael Ondaatje's *Tin Roof* is riddled with borders both concrete and imagined ("There are those who are in / and there are those who look in"). All are apprehended as the separate poems recount the poet's experience living on the rims of the Pacific. But order is an elusive quality if the borders are not to enclose, if order is to be found at all in flexible forms; and perhaps that is one sense of estrangement that has led so many recent writers on a quest for freedom through traditional patterns rather than by rejection of them. From John Thompson, for example, stems much of the recent renewal of interest in the old Persian love lyric, the *ghazal*. Ondaatje admires ghazals; Patrick Lane has written them. And Phyllis Webb's *Sunday Water*, the other Island Press release, dedicated to Ondaatje, is subtitled "Thirteen Anti Ghazals" — not, Webb adds, because her poems oppose the form, but because they adapt it to her own purposes. In a preface she explains the difference between history and practice: "The couplets (usually a minimum of five) were totally unlike the conventional English couplet and were composed with an ear and an eye to music and song"; but if the poems took as their traditional subject a love for "an idealized and universal image," "Mine tend toward the particular, the local, the dialectical and private. There are even a few little jokes. Hence 'anti Ghazals.'" And her couplets — unrhymed, asymmetrical, crafted for the pauses of silence and intake as much as for the rhythms of utterance — follow:

Ten white blooms on the sundeck.
The bees have almost all left. It's September.

The women writers, their heads bent under the light,
work late at their kitchen tables.

Winter breathes in the wings of the last hummingbird.
I have lost my passion. I am Ms. Prufrock.

So. So. So. Ah — to have a name like *Wah*
When the deep purple falls.

And you have sent me a card
With a white peacock spreading its tail.

This is song waiting for an understanding listener.

“The form of a poem,” Charles Brasch once wrote, “is its principle of individuality.” Well enough said — but the principles of form say things about critical attitude as well as about poetic aspirations. “[C]ontent does not make a poem,” says Ralph Gustafson; “Words do.” And that, too, is well said, for poetic accomplishment cannot be equated with aspiration alone, nor explained by measurements of inspiration. In the appositely-titled *The Insecurity of Art* (Véhicule), we find an anthology of 25 essays on modern poetics, edited by Ken Norris and Peter Van Toorn, which addresses some of these issues. Among other things a reminder of how much poetic theory in Canada has stemmed from English Quebec (from Cohen, Dudek, Glasco, Gustafson, Jones, Konyves, Layton, Morrissey, and more), the book collects a contradiction of views. There are celebrations of visual placement, attacks on emotional performance, enquiries into translation and concrete and open field and “post-feminism,” dismissals of what is deemed the illiteracy of oral culture, and assertions of the primacy of the intellect in appreciating the *word*. These are political perspectives as well as formal doctrines, open to argument. They tell us something about how some poems work, but seldom why. They persuade by rhetoric and chart by example. And they are personal testaments, too, as when D. G. Jones adopts a temporal view of the progress of dream:

As long as this dream of earth and this hunger for the naked encounter with it remains inarticulate, unconscious or underground, it will remain sinister, perverse, a crazy distorting force in our lives. . . . It seems to me it becomes more and more articulate in the course of the years, the gradual filling up of the pages, poem upon poem, in this green inventory. It invades the city; it invades the mind, the alphabet, and the alphabet . . . begins to become flowers . . . sensations, the touched earth.

The desire here is not to impose an order on the world. It is to encounter the orders of the world, in the world. It implies a wholly different set of values and aspirations. . . . If it could become articulate in the city . . . it would transform the map of our lives.

This is both a dream of speech, of contact, and a narrative of political desire, aspiring to language in place and lodged in language in time.

In another context (*Canadian Fiction Magazine*, no. 42), Martin Vaughn-James takes up the artistic implications of *narrative*; for Vaughn-James the narrative draughtsman, as words become images, to be seen more than heard, they *begin to happen* in a different way. “Visual images seem to have an immediacy which automatically situates them in the present,” he writes; they are fixed on the page. But the reader is animate, active, turns the page, allows the next image to replace the previous one until there is “an accumulation of replacements that have nothing to do with chronology as the entire process seems to translate into a series of arrested movements not so much through time as through space.”

Space, sound, movement: a map of translation: these are the metaphors of our understanding.

* * *

Metaphor.

In the images of sound is language transformed. We can manipulate the forms it takes and so reshape the ways we see. Seeing by saying, at one level we say by seeing too. All we have to do is abandon that donkey *formula*, lift the spirits with a dash of formaldejekyll, and recognize the lore of the letters we live by. For by us, they occupy space, make maps, draw their own conclusions:

C
 F R M
 U
 C
 I

F
 O R
 M O
 S A

a b
 r o r
 i
 f
 o
 r
 m

a c i m i o f

They pun visually as well as aurally, either in straightforward fashion —

formal

mat mat
mat mat

— or with an extra twist, asking readers to play games with the words they know and at the same time to be literal-minded with the words they see:

FORUNMED

UNIFORM
UNIFORM
UNIFORM

PARADE

Letters have designs, and picture truths. They join in “magic squares” and can be caught in the act of dissolving:

F	O	R	M
O	G	E	E
R	E	E	L
M	E	L	T

Always on the edge of their next possibility, they invite the reader to take charge of reforming them, whatever challenge that might be, and cast their own spells.

Do such games with words remove us from reality? Not at all. Words are simply some of the elves we keep on hand to help us, while we grow, to continue to combat the giants and quell the rats.

W.N.