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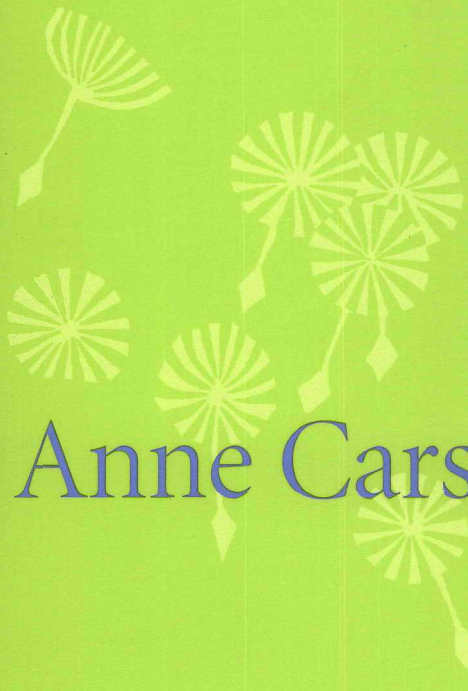

## Anne Carson

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Editorial

# Five Fairly Short Talks on Anne Carson

*Kevin McNeilly*

**1. Short Talk on Faking It with Sappho**

Anne Carson dissimulates. In "Irony is not Enough: Essay on my Life as Catherine Deneuve" (from *Men in the Off Hours*) she composes an extended prose-poem as a script improvised on *Les Voleurs*, André Téchiné's 1996 film, and also as a fictionalized account of one of Carson's seminars in Ancient Greek poetry, and as a re-reading of Sappho through a fantasized relationship with a student, named only "Girl." In the film, Marie (played by Deneuve) is a philosophy professor having an affair with Juliette, one of her students; the omission in the poem of character names and the elision of the role of the professor into the actress who plays her—Carson calls her persona Deneuve, not Marie—suggests not only the instability of subject positions but also the palimpsestic erasures and reinscriptions occurring within the voice. We cannot tell actor from person, pretense from actuality. Subjects are partial fabrications, shivered continuities: simultaneously effects of metaphorical break and metonymic joint. The extensive blurring of scholarship and fancy, of biography and outright lying in a performance such as Carson's Deneuve begins in the complex tangle of duplicities. "This is mental," her speaker offers as chorus—a poem's erudite irrationality. At one point in the text, she seems to redo her lecture notes: "For Sappho irony is a verb. It places her in a certain relation to her own life. [. . .] Latin rhetoricians translate the Greek word *eironia* as *dissimulatio* which means 'mask.' After all, why study the past? Because you may wish to repeat it. And in time (Sappho notes) one's mask becomes one's face" (121). The first sentence recalls a key statement near the opening of *Eros the Bittersweet*: "Desire moves.

Eros is a verb" (*Eros* 17). The erotic, for Carson, produces a dynamic indeterminacy, "tension of an acute and unresolvable kind" (*Eros* 73). That lyrical bittersweet suspense she now names irony.

**2. Short Talk on Going Mental**

But she knowingly makes a mistake here, I think. Hers is a mistranslation, or at least a bent one. The better sense of the Latin *dissimulatio* is pretense, fakery, make-believe: perhaps even, pushing a little, imagination. Mask in Latin is *persona*—character, put-on, ventriloquy. Her slippery academicism points up the complex glancing of meaning and resonance through which her poetry works. The Greek εἰρωνεία, irony or dissimulation, derives from the verb εἴρειν, to say or to talk. An εἴρων is a talker, but one who says less than he or she means: the term points to a disjunction between word and object, between intention and fact, that informs the practice of verbalization. Irony is a verb, then, in a fairly specific sense: because, as a performative, it speaks, just as this retooled film-script is fundamentally a performance, all talk, gesticulating through other voices toward autobiography. "There is too much self in my writing," Carson begins her "Note on Method" for the lectures collected as *Economy of the Unlost* (vii). "This is mental," she claims as she tries to abstract herself, to disengage into writing: "Meanwhile the body persists" (119). Bodies are only veiled in metaphor: "Deneuve sees her feet are naked. *Moi je comprends pas ça*, she whispers to them" (121). Carson may be a thief, stealing identities, but she also recognizes that she can't get away with it, that the poetry consists in the fact of getting caught, often by mistake, emblematized in the everyday presence of human bodies that won't, that can't, be written off. Irony, as her title claims, is not enough, and cannot be. It marks a subjective insufficiency, an opening in language. What remains, as an outside of language that impinges onto words, is not so much incomprehensible as uncomprehended—that is, uncaught. Or, as Carson's recent Sappho fractures: "]I want / ]to hold / ]said / ]" (*If Not, Winter* 151).

**3. Short Talk on Profession**

Dissimulating is a contingently idealized critical idiom, in Carson, of the academic. It is doubly significant that Carson styles herself as Deneuve the professor in her cribbed film-script. Not only is she actually a professional scholar, teaching at McGill and elsewhere, but she also literally professes in writing. The Latin *professus*, the name for a public teacher, is the past

participle of *profiteri*, to avow or to confess. The poet, in Carson, is a species of public intellectual. Publishing poetry and essays is a means of opening oneself to readerly scrutiny even as it involves an attempt to produce a specific style, at least in Carson's case, of differential reading. In "Irony is not Enough," elliptical restraint balances against declarative candour: "In the hotel room it is dusk, a girl turns, *I have to confess something*" (*Men in the Off Hours* 120). The italicized dialogue marks not only a subjective try at beginning, at saying publicly on the page what is intimate and personal, but also an attempt to read and to interpret what occurs off-screen, off-stage, off-mike. Significantly, the confession is never heard, or at least never transcribed for Deneuve's readers. If this script is displaced autobiography—a compact *roman-à-clef*, for instance—what it manages to confess is always masked in metaphor, euphemism or ellipsis. In the film, Marie and Juliette are clearly lovers; in Carson's revision, their affair is implied only by the mention of hotel rooms and Sapphic verse. We can never read exactly what happened. "All the same," the text runs, "there are some small questions one would like to put to Sokrates. Or better still Sappho" (125). What questions? Ironist and poet, cloaked in dialogue and fragment, are unable to respond. But the question still needs for Carson to be put, in writing. The script closes in suspense, with a provisionally new beginning: "Comes a knock at the door" (126). We can only imagine what happens next. "Let us look more closely," she writes after "Canicula di Anna," "at this moment that gathers at the place called the end. [. . .] But there is a moment of uncovering, and of covering, which happens very fast and you seem to be losing track of something. It is almost as if you hear a key turn in the lock. Which side of the door are you on? You do not know. Which side am I on? It is up to me to tell you—" (*Plainwater* 89). But then, she never really does. Carson uncovers and covers up, professes and withdraws.

**4. Short Talk on Leakage**

To profess is etymologically Latinate; Carson's Greek for this activity, provisionally, emerges in the middle of another imaginary seminar, this time a gathering of "phenomenologists" in Perugia: "To categorize / means to name in public: / κατηγορία / as many a phenomenologist / points out, at the outset of the seminar. / To categorize / is to clarify, often" (*Plainwater* 77). Characteristically, we find ourselves in Carson's poems at the perpetual outset, beginning again. But her usually mixed method suspends itself, temporarily, in favour of a Husserlian reduction or *epochē*, bracketing off the

mess of the lived for the sake of categorical clarity, of clean lines: the clipped parallelism and choric repetition of Carson's verse here suggest exactly that—neat correspondences, identifications, word-for-word translations. But the conclusive circles of philosophical abstraction or neat poetic form are quickly contaminated by an unstable *Lebenswelt*: corporeal metaphors, "sacred filth," "raws sounds" from outside the walls of La Rocca, trouble the categories, distressing scholars (77-78). Naming, especially as a public act, can never quite close itself off, but leaks.

**5. Short Talk on Meaning What You Say**

In "The Glove of Time by Edward Hopper"—a wholly fanciful description of a non-existent painting—Carson begins with unspeakable Platonic shadows, asserting a coherent subjectivity even as she withdraws from it: "True I am but a shadow of a passenger on this planet / but my soul likes to dress in formal attire / despite the stains" (59). Representation is a shadowing, and as the persona here recognizes its formal attire, its aesthetic distance—as a painted thing, an object, an it—from the lived person for whom it acts as stand-in, the voice shifts from first person to third, and then back. "She walks through the door," the poem continues, insisting on beginnings and endings in the recurrent image of the entrance:

> She takes off her glove.
> Does she turn her head.
> Does she cross her leg.
> That is a question.
> Who is speaking.
> Also a question.
> All I can say is
> I see no evidence of another glove. (59)

Shadows institute and situate themselves in the clipped, blunt syntax of Carson's end-stopped lines. But this micrology of successive closures is broken, "stained" in the lexicon of the poem, by the blurring of declarative and interrogative. What we take for fixity, for self-evidence, is really only another way to frame a question. Who is speaking: the syntax destabilizes into a dependent fragment without a defined subject. All that this "I" can say, can profess for sure, is a negation or a lack, the want of presence, of sure sight—no evidence.

What matters, though, is that such mimetic dehiscence become not an excuse but an opening, that the interrogative also prove a creative spur. The essays gathered in this issue of *Canadian Literature* pursue, literally, these

lines of questioning. They open up and open on Carson's verbal forays. Ian Rae teases out the ironies of calling Carson's bluff. Andre Furlani investigates the cryptic ethics of Carson's reading of Paul Celan. Tanis MacDonald exhumes the absent father in "The Anthropology of Water." Robert Stanton examines Carson's resilient poetics of error. Jes Battis pursues the irresolute queerness of *Autobiography of Red.* Taken together, these readings create a network of deft tangents and keenly faceted fractals: the oblique, crystalline lattices of Anne Carson's genius.

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**Anne Carson**

# Guillermo's Sigh Symphony

Do you hear sighing.
Do you wake amid a sigh.
Radio sighs AM,
FM.
Shortwave sighs crackle in from the Atlantic.
Hot sighs steam in the dawn.
People kissing stop to sigh then kiss again.
Doctors sigh into wounds and the bloodstream is changed forever.
Flowers sigh and two noon bees float backwards.
Is it doubt.
Is it disappointment.
The world didn't owe me anything.
Leaves come sighing in the door.
Bits of girl sigh like men.
Forgeries sigh twice.
Balthus sighs and lies about it, claiming it was Byron's sigh.
A sigh may come too late.
Is it better than screaming.
Give me all your sighs for four or five dollars.
A sigh is weightless,
yet it may interrupt the broadcast.
Can you abstain.
What is that hush that carries itself up each sigh.
We hunt together the sigh and I,
sport of kings.
To want to stop is beyond us.
The more sighs shine the more I'm in trouble—some kind of silvery stuff—
you thought it was the sea?

Kevin McNeilly

# Gifts and Questions
## An Interview with Anne Carson

KM The first thing I want to ask you is about interviews. We've been seeing your picture on magazine covers, and you've been interviewed quite a bit recently; some of your recent books from *Autobiography of Red* to *Men In the Off Hours* have interviews in them.

AC You'd think that would discourage people. [Laughs.]

KM Do you think there is a poetics of the interview?

AC No, I think the whole form is a mistake. So I intended to undermine it before the event, but it didn't work.

KM You still seem to be conscripted into giving interviews.

AC I do. I avoid most of them, most conscriptions, but the odd time I feel accountable. I'm not trying to make you feel sheepish. It just isn't a form that I find very useful, because I end up lying. There is this pressure to say something moderately wise in every space and you know in ordinary conversation in the world wisdom doesn't occur in every space. So it's unnerving.

KM Many of your poems blend the colloquial with a kind of intensified language. You seem to shift back and forth sometimes between those two modes, is that fair?

AC That's probably fair. I didn't think of it that way, but . . . .

KM You make an awful lot sometimes of certain kinds of colloquial language. Common speech becomes weighty in some of your poems. Where an everyday phrase like "this is mental" or something like that takes on an awful lot of weight. It seems like you're exploring the weight of the colloquial, or what's hidden in it.

AC Well I guess I don't think of it as colloquial; I think of it as the floor and the walls. If you want to refer to the unconscious mind, you can't do

that in any very pretentious way without having it take over the narrative. So to find the plainest way to say "here we are in the subconscious" is important to the balance of the narrative.

KM A lot of critical acclaim for your work has come from the United States. I know you teach there, and live there, and I was wondering if you could address in some form or another the "Canadianness" of your writing. Do you see any national aspect to your work? I don't necessarily need you to address the idea of cultural nationalism, but I was just curious because you're currently nominated for a Governor General's Award, and yet a lot of the acclaim for your work has come from the United States. Do you feel that crossover tension at all?

AC I'm not sure what tension you mean. Are we talking about inspiration of work or recognition of work?

KM How about both?

AC Well, inspiration of work comes from wherever I happen to be, but the paradigm that I take with me for registering perceptions is from where I lived when I was young. So I'd look for those kinds of light and rocks and smells and moods and maybe that would add up to a Canadianness of the mentality at some deep level. But I don't consciously think about it.

KM I wouldn't want to force it. I was just curious because your work has been published to great acclaim in the United States, and it seems as if Canadian critics are catching up.

AC Possibly. I don't know why that happens. I was published there a long time ago, and had a following, but probably that's because I taught there and I knew people there. And it's a matter of who you bump into largely, and I don't want to accuse Canadian culture of being slow, Lord knows . . . . But it's a different scheme here, a different set of cliques. The world of writing is a bunch of cliques—so you get into a certain clique, and you meet those people, and that's where it happens.

KM Well, what about something like travel or cosmopolitanism in your work? There are a large number linguistic frames of reference, historical frames of reference, different kinds of texts that you're drawing on. You seem to work in a cosmopolitan framework, would that be fair to say?

AC Sure.

KM What about translation then? You mentioned yesterday in your talk [here at U.B.C.] that you like to translate badly. I think you were being a little ironic, but translation is involved in all that you do. Could you comment a bit of the poetics of translation? Do you think of yourself as

a translator-poet, or of translation as having a poetic aspect to it, or as a source for poetry?

AC I like the space between languages because it's a place of error or mistakenness, of saying things less well than you would like, or not being able to say them at all. And that's useful I think for writing because it's always good to put yourself off balance, to be dislodged from the complacency in which you normally go at perceiving the world and saying what you've perceived. And translation continually does that dislodging, so I respect the situation—although I don't think I like it. It's a useful edge to put yourself against.

KM It's interesting to have an aesthetics of unpleasantness. You'd think that poetry would be pleasant.

AC It can be. I think you can move to a pleasant place in composition, the act of composition, but that's not the place of thinking. It's the downhill slope after thinking.

KM So a kind of tension that's disruptive?

AC Yes, disruptive and strained tight.

KM Do you think of poetry as thought?

AC Yes, mainly.

KM This might be a point to ask you about the connections between your scholarship and your poetry. You're both a professor and a poet, and I know that some would say that the academy is not the place for poetry, that it thrives outside of its critical interpretation. Others—perhaps yourself included—seem to find ways in which the critical or the scholarly and the poetic collude or intersect. How do you view that intersection?

AC I never found any trouble with it. People do make trouble out of that border, but I never found it a problem because I just practically don't separate them. I put scholarly projects and so-called creative projects side-by-side in my workspace, and I cross back and forth between them or move sentences back and forth between them, and so cause them to permeate one another. So the thought is not that different. There's a different audience I guess, but nowadays that's less and less true. But the permeating, the cross-permutation is extremely helpful to me. Because actually the project of thinking is one in my head, trying to understand the world, so I might as well use whatever contexts are available. Academic contexts are available because they're ready; they're given by the world. You have to write umpteen academic articles to get tenure, and then creative vehicles you can invent. But they're both equally useful.

KM Whom do you view as your audience?

AC I don't know anymore. When I do readings, I'm often surprised at who the audience is: a lot of very young people and a lot of quite old people and a lack of a middle quite often. So I don't know what that means. Besides age I don't exactly have any definition of it. I think people are drawn to my work for all sorts of reasons, and there's no demographic definition there. But I don't find that I try to aim at an audience when I'm doing it.

KM Do you feel that the fact that your audience has grown substantially recently, and that *Autobiography of Red* is a best seller, has had any impact on how you think about writing?

AC I wouldn't say so. It may be slightly liberating, in that I feel that I could do anything I want and people would at least look at it; they might not like it, but they'd at least look at it. Before you have some celebrity you can't work in that confidence, and I think that's a bit gloomy—so there's the removal of a certain degree of gloom. But beyond that it doesn't give me any specific schedule of what to do.

KM What I was thinking of too was the notion of audience itself. I read and really admired *Economy of the Unlost,* where you suggest that poetry for Simonides and Paul Celan involves a kind of economy, a kind of exchange, or a network—and a registering of, if not audience, at least of giving and of gift. Do you see poems as gifts?

AC Ideally. I think that the gift-exchange circuit is more or less broken down in our culture, simply because our culture is too big. When you're writing a book nowadays for Knopf which is owned by Random House, which is owned by Viacom which is owned by the Bertelsmann brothers in Germany, the context is too expanded to grasp, whereas somebody like Pindar was speaking to twenty-five people he'd known all his life. An exchange of gifts is very abstract when you're talking to an audience that might include people you'll never even know about. So I don't think in any real sense that it's an exchange anymore, except in a reading situation. There's something that happens there when you're physically present doing a reading that's an exchange, but the multiple copies going out to a zillion people, it's hard to have a sense of that as a sensual and emotional experience, whereas someone like Pindar did have that, and felt the burden of it.

KM Perhaps in composition rather than in performance—do you feel that there is any gift-like structure when you're writing a poem? Even if the

material circumstance of audience—this kind of intimacy and community—is lost, do you still feel some sort of community, or does that idea of giving or of gift register in any way during the composition of the poem?

AC I think the attempt to make sense is always involved in that exchange, and you can call that a gift. You don't make sense for yourself; you make sense to tell someone else. So there is a social conscience present in that activity, but I don't think that context is emotionally or psychologically anything like it was for an ancient poet, where he would be aware in a personal sense of the mentality of his audience, and he would respond to it.

KM Speaking of ancient poets, it was interesting to me in your first book *Eros The Bittersweet* that you dwelt on the concept of love in Plato in the *Phaedrus*, and what kept going through my mind was Plato's expulsion of the ancient poets from the Republic because they were imitators, because of the problem of *mimesis*, because it's erroneous or blind, and it's interesting to me that you would want to look back to Plato for a poetic.

AC Well you don't look to Plato for a poetic, you look to him for thought in general—he did that pretty well. I think that *The Republic* is a tricky text, and the whole thing is some kind of allegory, and I frankly think it's an allegory in which he tried to make Socrates say the most outrageous things anybody could ever say about a city, in order to cause people to think back from that extreme image to a city in which they might actually live. I mean it's a deliberate exercise in shocking, and it does shock, and it would have shocked his own audience to expel poets from the city. But he has a wiliness that's important not to take simply. I think Plato is a place to train yourself in how to use thoughts; he's not a person to quote for the opinions of his interlocutors.

KM Or to use them dogmatically.

AC Yes, or to ever think that it's not fiction. He made them into dramatic fictions.

KM So Plato's a liar, is what you're saying.

AC Yes, and he would be the first to admit that. He's making myths, and he calls them myths. For him it's a poignant kind of lying because he's trying to convey the truth of a person who actually existed who was Socrates, and Socrates wasn't lying I think. But Plato is in the position of the writer. Socrates didn't write anything, so he's free of this dilemma of what you do with the lies that you're telling when you come up against the truth of the world. Plato is stuck with that problem, so he deals with it in cunning ways.

KM Are lying and error another name for this in-between, that you seem to value? I think you call it desire. I don't want to collapse all of those terms into one synonym, but . . . .

AC Lying and error are the same word for the Greeks, which is interesting. That is, "to be wrong" could have various causes: you wanted to lie, or you just didn't know the truth, or you forgot, and those are all one concept. That interests me, the bundling together and looking at the situation from a point of view of consequences and not motivation. I guess desire wanders through that area sometimes, but I wouldn't call it identical with error.

KM I was thinking in this way because desire, at least psychologically, has an open-endedness to it, an unclosed-ness.

AC Yes, if it works, right.

KM I guess you can have misfires.

AC Or you can have desire that is consummated and then it ends. Desire is fun while it's not ending. As soon as you get what you want you're no longer wanting.

KM I know that many of your poems recently you've been calling essays, or you've been writing "lyrical essays" or "essay lyrics." I know that the essay, at least as it's framed as a genre, such as it is in Montaigne, is an open-ended form. Is it fair to say some of those poems are gestures at process or at attempt?

AC Well that's what imitation is for the ancients. It's simply a mirroring of the activity of the thought that you had at the time that you had it, and an attempt to make that activity happen again in the mind of the listener of the reader. Probably that's always what I'm trying to do.

KM Is this why you say things like "irony is a verb" or "desire is a verb," as opposed to the nominal. You point often towards process or to action or to performance.

AC Yes, performance, I think so. The ancient poets thought of the publication of a poem as the time of saying it, and the time of saying it is also the time of it being heard, and that's the time when there's an exchange of that action, that verb, whatever the verb is that's being described. The verb happens.

KM Are you conscious of that kind of happening when you're reading in public, or giving readings?

AC Yes, at some times. That depends on the context and the lighting and stuff, but sometimes if you can see people's faces you have a sense of that.

KM I would want to name those moments "lyrical moments" or "musical moments." I don't know if you would agree with that. You just mentioned when we were talking about Plato the idea of myth or *mythos,* which is narrative form. You yourself have written narrative poems; if I'm not mistaken at one point in "The Glass Essay" you suggest that your voice is better at narrative than at lyric. How do you view the two poles of your work, the narrative structure that unfolds in time versus these moments of lyric intensity?

AC I think being successful at making lyrical moments is a musical ability firstly. That is you have to make it sound seductive; you have to draw the listener in to the sound so that he is irresistibly drawn into the sense, and I'm not good at that. I'm not musical. I make sometimes lines that have shape, but they tend to be pretty clunky. And I think that's partly because of academic training and writing so much prose, but that's also just innate—you have music in you or you don't—so I can fight against that, but in the end I just won't be a person who writes beautiful musical sonnets. That just won't happen to me so I have to do the other thing, the narrative thing.

KM It's quite interesting that you would admit to being non-musical, yet you would be currently working on libretti.

AC Well yes, it is of course, but how are you going to learn things you can't do unless you keep trying? Anyway, in an opera the deal is that you write some kind of language and somebody else has to make it music. So it could be pretty bad on a musical level, and a good composer might still improve it into a lyrical effect. It was an exercise, writing the libretti, trying to be more musical, shaping things for the ear more than for the cognition.

KM You spoke here two days ago about women's mysticism, and I know that the subject of *The Mirror of Simple Souls* [Marguerite Porete] is a mystic. Could you comment on—I don't know if this connects to the sense of "lyric" or the musicality of language, but—on ties between the lyrical and the mystical; you called it "decreation" I think.

AC Simone Weil calls it that, yes. I think it varies a lot from mystic to mystic. In the ones that I've studied, some make an attempt to be musical and lyrical and use that as a point of access into the deeper insight that they wish to convey, and some don't. And the woman who's the subject of *The Mirror of Simple Souls* wrote almost entirely in prose, and actually very clunky prose, and I feel drawn to her for that reason, but every once in a while in the book's 139 chapters of prose, she devolves into

verse, and it's mysterious to me why she does that. I'd like to know what kind of thought it is exactly that calls for verse music out of a non-musical person, and I haven't got the answer to that.

KM Is that what's drawn you to mystics such as Simone Weil—if you want to call her mystic—and others?

AC What, the clunkiness?

KM Yes, or the attempt to see, or to hear.

AC Possibly, no. I think I was drawn to Simone Weil for other more philosophical reasons. She is the person who invented this term "decreation," and that for me was a point of insight into other mystics I wanted to look at. But Simone herself has a very troubled relationship with language and with the beauty of language, and I think she's always trying to resist the lyric impulse, to actually reduce all the thought she has to as close to scientific as she can make it. She would have liked to write mathematical equations, I think, and leave it at that. So she is kind of a counter-example.

KM Given that your most recent book is called *The Beauty of the Husband* and that you intersperse it with quotations from Keats . . . .

AC He's good at the music.

KM You've talked about clunkiness; how can you talk about beauty in poetry? Some would argue that beauty as a concept has disappeared from the critical landscape, and others, Elaine Scarry for instance, are trying to recover the beautiful.

AC I don't think it has disappeared for me, and I don't think for the people who are buying poetry books it has either. I think the beauty of an art object is part of the gift that you give to the receiver, the listener, the observer, to make it worthwhile for them to spend whatever time of their life they spend trying to understand it. That makes sense to me, because that's the way the Greeks think of it—perhaps it's not a modern way—but for the Greeks the word for "the beauty of a poem" is a term that can also be economic, a term we would translate as "grace." So it means both the beauty that someone's face has, or that a statue has of the lines, or that a poem has, or music, but it can also mean the surplus value that a gift has, the value over and above monetary exchange because it's given for free. And I think that way of thinking of beauty makes sense to me. It's a mechanism of insight, but it's a mechanism of insight into what people need to receive from an artist when they're trying to understand her art.

KM I would expect that the title of *The Beauty of the Husband* refers to the famous line from Keats—"Beauty is truth, truth beauty"—but interestingly the quotations you intersperse in the text from Keats are mostly marginalia, little-known works, cross-outs, corrections. Why did you make that choice?

AC Just ornery. [Laughs.] I like the sentence about beauty as truth, but it falls on the ear of a modern hearer with a tired thump because we've heard it so many times. You can't think into something you've heard that many times, I don't believe, unless it's thrown at you from a wrong angle. And reading a lot of passages of bad Keats gives you another angle. But they're bad in an interesting way; I think when you take a bad text and break out a part of it—they're not any of them complete passages—the little part of it seems to me shiny in a way that provokes thought. And when you know that it's Keats you're willing to respect it enough to think what the shininess is about. If it were just some other guy from Keats' milieu writing that badly you probably wouldn't give it a second thought. So I wanted to use some kind of drawing-in mechanism that was traditional, but not beautiful in a conventional way that wouldn't register because it was so ordinary or well known, and also some kind of cultural monument. I wanted to have a little bit of pretension scattered throughout the thing to undercut the whole project of trying to describe beauty.

KM Perhaps this connects to ideas of error or mistake, but if your thinking is drawn to sites of revision and of correction, and of re-making, is there any relationship between that and what I take to be your own notion of "voices in process" or voices in poetry that discover themselves, rethink themselves, or revise themselves as they go? You have second and third drafts of poems throughout *Men in the Off Hours.*

AC I'm not sure where that comes from. There's a mistrust there of the surface. Possibly it's scholarly hesitation, because the texts that I deal with in classics are most of the time incomplete, emended, full of mistakes, conjectured, and so on, and you learn to kind of resist the surface in dealing with classical texts, and if you transfer that to your own work, then there's no reason to trust the first version you put on the page—it might be wrong. You could emend your own work, and it's interesting to think of what you're emending towards, when you emend your own work, what came before the thought in what you thought was the first version, or the true original version. You can dig through your own

original version, I don't know what that would be, but prior opinion.

KM In your criticism, as I've read it, there's a kind of archeological interest. But it's spun in a different way, as I think you pointed out yesterday, than a philologist might spin it, where instead of looking at a fragment and trying to reconstruct it, you take the fragment as a finished poem and then read it in its fragmentary nature. That strikes me as an interesting and also rather strange kind of critical enterprise. What makes you want to take the fragment as a kind of poem?

AC Well why wouldn't you? Because a fact is a fact, there it is.

KM As we have it?

AC As we have it, yes.

KM Is it because it registers the entropic nature of the historical—that things have fallen away?

AC Maybe, partly. The space itself is seductive; the space of not knowing has always been seductive to humans. But I think more bluntly it's just that I enjoy facts, and the fact of the matter with a fragment is that it's mostly gone, so you might as well confront that, engage that.

KM You say at the end of *Men in the Off Hours* that "crossouts sustain me now," and I know this has a personal context for you—in an essay on the death of your mother—but in what sense are crossouts sustaining?

AC Well, I think that visually the way that's printed there you can see the Virginia Woolf lines, you can see the words through the crossout, and I very much like that fact. The crossout is supposed to be the cancellation of an idea, and the idea remains uncancelled—you can read it right through the line. That seems to me perky, that they keep punching through our attempts to cancel them. And that perkiness of ideas themselves is sustaining, is hopeful.

KM That crossout from Woolf seems to provide a visual structure for the other epitaphs in *Men in the Off Hours.* Is that so?

AC No, actually the model for the epitaph was Simonides because I was working on the economy book at the same time, which has a chapter on epitaphs. So the form began to interest me, writing an epitaph for things that actually can't die interests me.

KM So were the verse forms themselves also derived from Simonides?

AC Yes, the shape in Greek is a hexameter and pentameter line, so six beats then five beats. So I just tried to make long and short lines. But in the classical form the hexameter and pentameter lock together in a way that's very interesting but that doesn't come across in English, so I tried

to make the idea in the lock analogous to that. I don't think it worked most of the time but it was interesting to try.

KM Some of the epitaphs and some of the other poems are very visual, and I know that you've got a sequence of captions or commentaries on Edward Hopper, and I'm wondering about the ekphrastic in your work. Do you conceive your work in any visual sense?

AC Oh always; I mostly think of my work as a painting.

KM *Ut pictura poesis*?

AC No, not capturing what's out the window. But making it like what Mallarmé talks about, using words so that you create a surface that leaves an impression in the mind no matter what the words mean. It's not about the meaning of each individual word adding up to a proposition; it's about the way they interact with each other as daubs of meaning, you know as impressionist colours interact, daubs of paint, and you stand back and see a story emerge from the way that the things are placed next to each other. You can also do that with language.

KM The epigraph that you attach to that sequence from Hopper, "I hope it does not tell an obvious anecdote for none is intended." . . .

AC No story intended, no narrative intended.

KM This is interesting because you cast yourself often as a poet who's oriented towards narrative, and yet there's a kind of withdrawal from the narrative.

AC I think I was trying to withdraw from the project of narrativizing the paintings, which is what they first of all demand of any viewer: you see the couple sitting in the café at three o'clock in the morning and you think of the story. And I believe that's the last thing he wanted to have people do to his paintings, but everybody does it anyway. And I did in those poems, so I wanted to put his point of view in there to be fair, but he lost.

KM They're very nominal though; I know that a number of the Hopper poems focus on things and on tangible language, which seems not necessarily to mitigate against, but perhaps to move in a different direction from the verbal, performative aspects of language. Do you see any connections between this kind of nominalizing, this very physical sort of language, the visual, and something that is a little more temporalized, like the verb?

AC Well I think that the verbs there come at the bottom in the Augustine quotes, which are all about time and about time disappearing; a whole sequence of Augustine at the bottoms of the pages is a verb, it's one

verb: time goes. But the paintings are still there, and they're full of objects. If you try this, if you want to make a poem about a painting, you have to talk about objects; that's what's in it. Even if it's abstract, you have to talk about the paint as an object.

KM So why introduce the contrast with Augustine at the bottom?

AC Where I studied the Hopper paintings overall, his whole output, he seems to be trying to paint time. There's really nothing else in them, no other questions in them than "what does time feel like?"

KM You called that last poem in that sequence—the only one without Augustine—"The Glove of Time."

AC Yeah, that's my own sort of pasted-on response to the whole experience of looking at Hopper. It also has a line from John Ashbery in it, which you may recognize, so it was my attempt to understand John Ashbery.

KM His interest in painting?

AC No, more his way of using language, which is painterly, but in a cognitive way he's just dabbing together chunks of raw idiom, and coming up with some surface that's supposed to evoke real life. And in a weird way it does but it is also out of your grasp every minute.

KM Mark Vessey, a colleague of mine who studies Augustine, looked up the quotations you added at the bottom of the Hopper sequence and was wondering why you chose the particular translation you did, which is a nineteenth-century one.

AC For the elegance. I wanted it to register on the ear differently than the Hopper, than the above.

KM So it's a kind of archaic language?

AC Yes, a little bit. I wouldn't say archaic: anachronistic rather.

KM There's a quotation I quite like from *Economy of the Unlost*—it's the first line, actually, in the note on method that you attached to the beginning of the lectures—where you say "there's too much self in my writing," to which I think you then offer some corrective. For someone who writes confessions and autobiographies, it seems both important and curious that you would worry over there being too much self. I think at the beginning you mention that it's a sort of scholarly reflex. How can you talk about an autobiography without too much self, or confessions without too much self?

AC You can't, and that's why it's a problem

KM So it's a question of the problem, rather than . . .

AC Rather than what?

KM I don't know. [Laughs.]

AC I don't see anything it can be other than a problem. Too much self could never be a satisfying situation or something that one was at ease with.

KM You could argue that much of your writing is fairly abstract, or fairly textual, since it deals with translation and other writers, and yet in *Men in the Off Hours* you have what are clearly biographical pieces on Akhmatova or on other writers, and in the appendix you clearly refer to events in your own life. In the blurbs you attach to the ends of your book—I don't know if you're responsible for these—but the only information you tend give is "Anne Carson lives in Canada," so you tend to be quite reticent about life, and yet the lived and lived experience seem to insinuate themselves into your work.

AC Well there's a difference between inside and outside the book. I think inside the book is a territory where subjects that one can't exactly control arise, needing to be expressed. Outside the book, the cover, the interviews, is an area where one struggles to have a degree of control. I think it's not really in my hands what I end up writing about as subject matter inside.

KM Is writing—inside and outside—an exertion of control?

AC I think they're equally chaotic. The only control I can exert is to keep my photography, biography, and blurbs off the cover—which is a struggle. But inside I don't feel much control; I don't think writing is an effort of control. It's an effort of collaboration with whatever insights are available there.

KM A number of your collaborators throughout your writing career have been women; can you talk a little bit about the politics of gender, or the emergence of fairly clear and strong female voices in your work?

AC Well I have to have that don't I? That's who I am. Actually I think I've collaborated with men as much as women.

KM I know *Eros the Bittersweet* essentially starts with Sappho, and *Men in the Off Hours*, despite the title, begins with Virginia Woolf and Thucydides but moves from Sappho to Woolf, to Akhmatova or to Catherine Deneuve.

AC Yeah, but there's Artaud and Hopper. I think it's balanced. If you want to talk about "bittersweet eros" you have to start with Sappho because she started the phrase; that's just logical. I don't know, it doesn't seem . . . I don't see a question there.

KM Perhaps I'll edit that out. A lot of your work has been about pilgrimage.

How would you view the pilgrimage? I was thinking about "The Anthropology of Water," and then . . .

AC It's a good question. I don't know exactly how I view it now. At the time, I did the pilgrimage in Spain to see what it would be like to do a pilgrimage, and then I saw what it was like, and I think, I didn't quite get it. There is a form, let's say, called pilgrimage, which I participated in without really understanding what it was. So maybe that means it's still an interesting question, but I don't know what the question is, to me.

KM Is there a theological aspect to your work?

AC I suppose there's a theological aspect in being human. I think it's one of the things you have to decide what you think about, at some point in your life. God, you just have to bring your forces to bear on that. But I don't feel I have any particular insight to offer on that topic, I just come back to it as one comes back to one's shoes at a certain point in the day—there they are.

KM You make God speak in *Glass, Irony and God*, but that God doesn't particularly seem like a theological being; he seems very everyday.

AC I guess it's a groping. "The Truth About God" is a groping into ways one could ask the question. They're pretty picayune, I think, just little threads of ways. It's not a main highway into the question, but I don't think I'm a person able to build that highway.

KM Why go there then?

AC Well just because it remains questionable. I just can't get past it.

KM Given the interview structure, then, it sounds like you prefer questions to answers.

AC In general, yes. I think that's pedagogical.

KM To pursue a question rather than give an answer?

AC Giving an answer closes a door, and in teaching you never want to do that. You want to stand in the doorway and make some interesting gestures so they'll come in, but you never want to push them in and slam the door. They won't learn anything there.

KM Do you think of poetry as pedagogical, as a form of teaching?

AC Well I think of being human as a form of teaching. Everything one does is a way of saying "so far this is what sense I've made of being me, you can think about it if you want to." If that takes the form of writing, then the writing becomes pedagogical. But I think that's just an offshoot of being alive as a human. You have to tell who you are.

*Our thanks to James Armitage for technical assistance with the interview.*

Kathy Mac

# Faith. *Fides.* Trust without proof.

If you find

A poncho in the market

And it is particularly fine

And it is very cheap

Are you sure you want it?

Someone died wearing it.

*

You need to know about the Porsche Spyder
in James Dean's last smash hit;

That the outer shell disappeared from the scene
and the innards rolled off a truck, broke a mechanic's legs;

That the engine ended up in a car that crashed, killing the driver,
and ditto the transmission though that crash wasn't fatal;

And ditto two of the tires though that one wasn't even injurious
but they blew out at the same time, how strange;

And that Dean lovingly called it the "Little Bastard"
and his very last words were

"Doesn't That Guy *See* Us?"

*

He did. But he was on the right side of the law

and Trusted in God,
as every coin in his pocket said he should.

Dean, on the other hand, was cradled
fast in the fist of physics.

*

For months I drove without mishap
a car someone died in. Well. Killed himself.
Not the car's fault. Or mine. Or even his, really.

Misadventure. They say. Unlike the time
foxes got a lamb while I drowsed,
a piss-poor shepherd.

Didn't even believe in foxes
outside of the Bible and Aesop
until I heard the screech

And then smelled the rusty stench of blood
and then found the wee pile of steaming intestines.
The rest consumed. An assumption, of sorts.

Robert Stanton

# "I am writing this to be as wrong as possible to you": Anne Carson's Errancy

Anne Carson's first book, *Eros the Bittersweet*, opens with a prose celebration of poetic impertinence:

> The story is about the delight we take in metaphor. A meaning spins, remaining upright on an axis of normalcy aligned with the conventions of connotation and denotation, and yet: to spin is not normal, and to dissemble normal uprightness by means of this fantastic motion is impertinent. What is the relation of impertinence to the hope of understanding? To delight? (*Eros* xi)

The story mentioned is Kafka's "The Top." In it, a philosopher delights in chasing spinning tops because he believes "that the understanding of any detail, that of a spinning top for instance, [is] sufficient for an understanding of all things" (*Eros* xi). Delight, however, is soon followed by disgust, as the disappointed—and unenlightened—philosopher throws down his caught top in dismay. But this doesn't prevent him getting excited again every time he sees children preparing to spin their tops. At this moment, his desire for understanding is always rekindled.

Equating this little narrative to "our" desire—the "we" in question relating to some kind of collective readership—for metaphor might seem to set up a rather gloomy cycle: hope, desire and excitement leading to delight; delight leading to impatience and frustration; frustration leading back again to hope and desire. And yet Carson depicts metaphor itself as something "fantastic": a source of "delight." Under observation, its seeming "uprightness" is seen to be spinning against both normal language usage and normal perception. The delight it offers is real, if fleeting. This apparent contradiction might leave us wondering, if we accept Carson's model

(and to divert her own questions slightly), which is the more impertinent: the nature of metaphor itself; our imposing—as readers—of our desire for understanding onto metaphor; or the poet's offering of metaphor as the salve for such desires.

Many would argue that it is the poet's role—or responsibility—to *be* impertinent, an irritant even. The ancient Greek poet Simonides of Keos, as he is depicted in Carson's critical study *Economy of the Unlost*, certainly cuts such a figure, half in and half out of the culture that surrounded him. But then, as Carson shows, the culture in which Simonides lived and wrote was itself half in and half out of a new economic system—moving from a tradition of reciprocal gift-exchange to a more abstracted, but (to us) more familiar, coin-based economy—and he suffered from the change. In the traditional set-up the poet, as *xenos* (or "guest"), would be welcomed into the household of his aristocratic patron, or *xenos* (or "host"). The reversible nature of the word *xenos* suggests the transaction that underlies the gesture: the patron provides the food and shelter that the poet, as "guest," needs to survive; the poet then grants his "host" immortality by praising his name in memorable verse. On its flipside, however, *xenos* can also mean "stranger," "outsider" or "alien," and, in a sense, it is this ambiguity that was the root of Simonides' problem (*Economy* 22). The multifaceted nature of the word hints at the cultural paranoia that underpinned the tradition it embodies, the essentially conservative nature of "guest-friendship," or *xenia*. The process by which an individual could pass from the role of "stranger" to that of "guest" to, eventually, that of reciprocal "host" was a fraught one, aimed ultimately at maintaining the social status quo. As Carson writes elsewhere, "[c]ontact is crisis" (*Men* 130). It is unsurprising, then, that she should take as her example of ideal poet/patron *xenia* a passage from *The Odyssey*: Odysseus offers the singer Demondokos "a hot chunk of pig meat" from his own meal in gratitude for his performance, "so that he may eat and so I may fold him close to me" (*Economy* 14). Odysseus, of course, is a man who periodically moves from "stranger" to "guest"—and back again—over the course of his voyage home.

In a Greek world gradually shifting toward a new economy, Simonides was unsure which sort of *xenos* the poet now represented, stranger or guest. Still adopted by aristocratic patrons, the poet was now more likely to be paid in cash—or home-delivered food—than to be welcomed to his employer's home or table. Carson recounts several anecdotes concerning Simonides' social awkwardness, including this one from Athenaios:

> Chamailion (speaking of hares) says that one day Simonides was feasting with Hieron when hare was served to the other guests. But none to Simonides. Later Hieron gave him a portion and he improvised this verse: "Wide it was but not wide enough to reach this far." (*Economy* 21)

Carson continues: "Simonides' improvisation is a parody of a verse in Homer: 'Wide it was but not a wide enough shore to contain all the ships'" (*Economy* 21). As Carson explains, this witticism, aimed at defusing an embarrassing social situation, may also contain a wistful reference to an older, Homeric orthodoxy, exemplified in the story of Odysseus and Demondokos. It's not that Simonides didn't thrive under the new financial system—in fact, he was so successful that he became a stock figure of miserliness for subsequent generations.[1] He does seem, however, to have had a unique awareness of how his own personal alienation mirrored the more widespread alienation caused, in Marx's terms, by the nature of money itself.

Simonides' fiscal ambivalence, and the conditions that led to it, may seem somewhat alien to our current cultural concerns, but, throughout *Economy of the Unlost*, Carson juxtaposes his life and work with that of a more contemporary representative of poetic alienation: Paul Celan. Celan was born in Bukovina in 1920, lost both parents in the Holocaust (his mother was shot, his father died of typhus), and eventually settled in Paris after the war. Despite this—because of this—he continued writing his poetry in German, "the language of his mother but also the language of those who murdered his mother" as Carson points out, until his suicide by drowning in 1970 (*Economy* 28). In *Economy of the Unlost*, Carson quotes from one of Celan's few extended commentaries on poetry, the "Meridian" speech, delivered in Darmstadt in 1960, on the occasion of his being awarded the Georg Büchner Prize:

> The poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes toward it, bespeaks it.
>
> For the poem, everything and everybody is a figure for this other toward which it is heading. (Celan 49)

Despite the great difficulty of Celan's work—a difficulty that stems, in part, from his profound ambivalence toward the *Muttersprache* in which he felt compelled to write—he stood by this notion of poetry's essential outwardness: in a copy of one of his books owned by Michael Hamburger, one of his earliest English translators, Celan once wrote angrily the dedication "*[g]anz und gar nicht hermetisch*"—"absolutely not hermetic"—countering an accusation that had, and has, often been leveled at his work (*Poems* 29).

In another award speech, given this time in Breman, in 1958, Celan borrows an image from his favoured Russian poet, Osip Mandelstam:[2]

> A poem, being an instance of language, hence essentially dialogue, may be a letter in a bottle thrown out to sea with the—surely not always strong—hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on a shoreline of the heart. In this way too poems are *en route*: they are headed toward. (Celan 34)

It is perhaps surprising that Carson doesn't mention this image in her own essay, as it draws together the complementary doubts of her two poets—Simonides' worries about the social position of the poet; Celan's worries about the social position of the poem—into a literal symbol: a letter in a bottle. The English word "symbol" comes from the Greek *symbolon*. A *symbolon* was itself a symbol of *xenia*, Carson explains, quoting from Gabriel Herman:

> People who entered into relationships of *xenia* used to cut a piece of bone in two and keep one half themselves and leave the other with their partners, so that if they or their friends or relatives should have occasion to visit them or *vice versa*, they might bring the half with them and renew the *xenia*. (*Economy* 18, Herman 63)

Carson, via Celan, depicts the poet as someone desperate for outside contact, desperate for his work to reach a readership, desperate for the role of poet to mean something within society, and the English word "symbol"—the primary tool of the poet—even contains an echo of this idealized relationship between writer and reader: writer as host, reader as guest (or *vice versa*). She writes that the poet

> has to construct fast, in the cause of each song, this community that will receive the song. He does so by presuming it already exists and by sustaining a mood of witness that claims to be shared primordially between poet and community but in fact occurs within his words. [. . .] He is prior to the community that will acclaim him its poet and so invent itself. (*Economy* 133)

This idea of a self-constructed reading community returns us to our initial question. If the poet himself (or herself)—alienated perhaps from society, perhaps alienated also from his or her own language—is constantly addressing a potential readership, ideal or imagined, and if the nature of poetry itself relies on such a drive, then what is it that strikes us, as readers, as impertinent about poetry? Perhaps it is then inappropriate to look—if the poet is constantly writing toward such a community—for the source of this impertinence in the figure of the poet him- or herself. Are we not, in that case, returned to the question of the poet's main tool, metaphor? Does metaphor—a "species of symbol"—offers us half of a *symbolon*, or does it withhold it (*Eros* 175)?

Metaphor, as Carson depicts it, can just as easily be a frustrating novelty as an unsettling delight, and "[n]ovelties, by definition, are short-lived" (*Eros* 114). Does the impertinence of metaphor lie, then, not in a poet's specific uses of it, but in its very essence? This question may not be as misguided as it seems. In a poem entitled "Essay on What I Think About Most," collected in *Men in the Off Hours* (2000), Carson has written the closest she has yet got to a poetic manifesto. And it is all about the supposed impertinence of metaphor, which she here calls "error" or "mistake":

> In what does the freshness of metaphor consist?
> Aristotle says that metaphor causes the mind to experience itself
>
> in the act of making a mistake.
> He pictures the mind moving along a plane surface
> of ordinary language
> when suddenly
> that surface breaks or complicates.
> Unexpectedness emerges.
>
> At first it looks odd, contradictory or wrong.
> Then it makes sense.
> And at this moment, according to Aristotle,
> the mind turns to itself and says:
> "How true, and yet I mistook it!"
> From the true mistakes of metaphor a lesson can be learned. (*Men* 30-31)

So metaphor does not, in this model, frustrate our readerly desire for understanding in any direct or essential way. Instead it causes a "true mistake" that can lead the mind—like a spinning top—via "unexpectedness," to a new perception of the world, via what Carson quotes Aristotle as calling "the juxtaposition of *what is* and *what is not* the case" (*Men* 31). Carson takes as her example a fragment by the ancient Greek poet Alkman, a fragment containing a simple "error of arithmetic" (*Men* 31):

> *[?] made three seasons, summer*
> *and winter and autumn third*
> *and fourth spring when*
> *there is blooming but to eat enough*
> *is not.* (*Men* 32)

The "juxtaposition of *what is* and *what is not* the case" is acute here: spring arrives surprisingly, but the possibility of eating enough does not. "Hunger," Carson writes, "always feels / like a mistake," and for Alkman, a poor poet living in the 7th century B.C.E., in the poor country of Sparta, fear of hunger was probably a constant presence (*Men* 32). As Carson suggests, his deliberate

computational "mistake" allows us to see the sheer impertinence of that presence in the context of an otherwise blooming spring. She claims that there are three things she particularly likes about the poem: first, that it is "small, / light / and more than perfectly economical"; second, that it "seems to suggest colors like pale green / without ever naming them;" and third, that it addresses "major metaphysical questions / (like Who made the world) / without overt analysis" (*Men* 33). ("Strict philologists," we are told, would rather assign the subject-less verb at the start of the fragment to an "accident of history," by claiming that the complete poem would doubtless have revealed the identity of whoever made the seasons [*Men* 33-34]. Carson prefers to leave the fragment as it stands.) The fourth thing that she likes about the poem (unable to resist replicating Alkman's "mistake") is "the impression it gives // of blurting out the truth in spite of itself," of "inadvertent lucidity" (*Men* 34). This impression is, of course, a contrivance: Alkman is a "master contriver— / or what Aristotle would call an 'imitator' / of reality" (*Men* 35). Carson goes on: "[i]mitation (*mimesis* in Greek) / is Aristotle's collective term for the true mistakes of poetry" (*Men* 35). Alkman, through his deliberate error, has made us, as readers, party to the reality of a hunger that we can't actually share. But he has made us party.

What about Carson's own poetic practice, her own "true mistakes"? Here is an example taken from *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001). The speaker has just overheard her husband speaking to his mistress on the phone:

> What is so ecstatic unknowable cutthroat glad as the walls
> of the flesh
> of the voice of betrayal—yet all the while lapped in talk more dull
> than the tick of a clock. (*Husband* 25)

This image falls into two halves. The first is a complex composite, inviting us to try to imagine something increasingly intangible ("the walls / of the flesh / of the voice of betrayal"—can flesh have walls?—can a voice have walls of flesh? etc.), while simultaneously providing a surfeit of adjectives ("ecstatic unknowable cutthroat glad") to "help" us place it in reality.[3] The second half of the images counters the first. Two different experiential tempos are contrasted: the frenetic moment of betrayal—with its unpunctuated adjective pile-up ("ecstatic unknowable cutthroat glad") and its rapid line-breaks and repetitions ("the walls / of the flesh / of the voice")—and the rather more prosaic comparison of everyday "talk" to the "dull" ticking of a clock, which slows everything down to a regular pace. The initial question ("What is so") is derailed, along with its implicit involvement of us, the

readers, as addressees, and the seemingly unstoppable, destructive (or self-destructive: "cutthroat glad") train of thought is "lapped" up—consumed—by the sentence's deadening second clause.

The nature of this passage's "true mistake" is, I think, threefold. First, and most obviously, there is the revelation of betrayal, and its immediate, overwhelming effect. Second, there is the revelation that the ordinary talk, which "laps" the voice of betrayal, is duller than a ticking clock. And third—and most importantly—there is the comparison between the two. This comparison opens the mistake up, both for us readers and for the speaker herself. Without the sudden moment of realization, the dull routine surrounding the betrayal would not be recognized as such; without the routine, the overwhelming moment would not stand out so much. In each other's light, the two metaphors reveal a larger "mistake": the ongoing relationship between the speaker and her husband: a definite case of two wrongs not making a right. This realization does not help the speaker—caught, as she is, in one of Carson's recurring narratives of "wrong love"—but it does help us to understand her and her relationship (*Red* 75).

For Carson *mimesis* is no simple matter of documentary "realism." Indeed, the drive of this brief passage could be usefully described as something akin to "emotion *vérité*"—wilfully following the speaker's subjective response, but in an honest and conscious fashion. The poet's *mimesis* stems not from an unquestioning fidelity to the objective reality of the world, but from the making of individualistic "true mistakes"—mistakes that do not contravene reality, but that the reader can position at an angle to it, a "*what is not*" to contrast with "*what is*":

> The poet's metaphysical activity puts him in a contrafactual relation to the world of other people and ordinary speech. He does not seek to refute or replace that world but merely to indicate its lacunae, by positioning alongside the world of things that we see an uncanny protasis of things invisible, although no less real. Without poetry these two worlds would remain unconscious of one another. (*Economy* 58-59)

Alkman's hunger is "invisible" but "real," thanks to his fragment; Carson lends tangible reality to the abstract idea of "the voice of betrayal" in the above extract; and anyone who has read Celan's poetry will attest to his uncanny ability to render psychic landscape visible—a "spectral analysis of things" as he called it (Felstiner 232):

> Gorselight, yellow, the slopes
> suppurate to heaven, the thorn

pays court to the wound, there is ringing
inside, it is evening, the nothing
rolls its seas toward devotion,
the bloodsail is heading for you. (*Economy* 5)

Metaphor, in these examples, works primarily through paradox and incongruence, but in a pertinent rather than impertinent manner: "[a] virtuoso act of imagination brings the two things together, sees their incongruence, then sees also a new congruence, meanwhile continuing to recognize the previous incongruence through the new congruence" (*Eros* 73).

Can Carson bring the two sides of her own work—her scholarly accuracy, her poetic "mistakes"—into a similar congruence? She claims not: in a 1997 interview, she speaks of her first book, *Eros the Bittersweet*, as the one-off never-to-be-repeated result of bringing her "two impulses" into "the same stream" (D'Agata 9). Of her more recent work she says that, while it displays a "more mature method" (D'Agata 9), "[y]ou can't do clean things when you're old" (D'Agata 11). She even talks of having two desks in her office, one for academic and one for artistic work. And yet, the seeming confusions of the academic and the aesthetic that lead Carson's interviewer, John D'Agata, to keep insisting that for "[s]ome people" she is "still working with both in the same stream" are everywhere apparent in her work: poems and sequences entitled "The Glass Essay," "Essay on What I Think About Most," *Short Talks;* a "romance" like *Autobiography of Red*, containing a full scholarly array of introductory essay, translations, appendices and authorial interview; a "fictional essay" like *The Beauty of the Husband*, interspersed with opaque quotations from a variorum edition of Keats' works; lyrical critical books with titles like *Eros the Bittersweet* and *Economy of the Unlost.* In fact, it is somewhat ironic that it is within the space of an interview that Carson—an expert at the mock-scholarly interview as literary form—should make a point of separating her academic and poetic selves.[4]

I would like to make another brief detour into etymology here. (But then, after all, as Celan said in his Bremen acceptance speech, in German, on the occasion of being awarded a major literary prize in Germany, "is there such a thing as a detour?" [Celan 33]) The word "error"—so important to Carson—meant originally, taken back through French to Latin, "to wander." So, as Carson herself suggests with her image of a mind "moving along a plane surface" until it encounters the "unexpectedness" of metaphor, the idea of "error" has a spatial dimension. The poem in which she discusses, and justifies, such wanderings is entitled "*Essay* on What I Think About

Most" (my emphasis). Carson is keen on the essay form: her book *Plainwater* is subtitled *Essays and Poetry*, despite the fact that all its contents could be described uncontroversially as poetry; *The Beauty of the Husband* is a "fictional essay"; *Glass, Irony and God* and *Men in the Off Hours*, theoretically poetry collections, both contain essays; and *Eros the Bittersweet*, her first book, the one that she can't "replicate," is subtitled *An Essay* (D'Agata 11). An essay, etymologically, is an "attempt," a "test" or "trial." Further back is its Latin origin as *exagium*, a "weighing," which has an ancient Greek equivalent in ἐξάγεον. That, in turn, comes from ἐξάγειν, to "export goods," or, more literally to "lead out." So, at root, "essay" has its spatial dimension too, an organized "exporting" of information on any given topic, "led out" into the light, where it can be read by others. This returns us again to the question of the apparent division of Carson's work: how can she align poetic "wandering"—"mistakes"—with the scholarly desire to "lead out" essential truths?

The simple answer would be, of course, that she can't: that her protestations of division are entirely accurate. On the subject of essays, for example, she rejects the idea of the essay as a psychological experiment—a tradition that can be traced back to Montaigne (which she describes acerbically as "autobiography dressed up as community")—in favour of a more classical approach, the essay as written by Plutarch and Cicero: "to have something to say and to do so" (D'Agata 16). There is little chance of "error" there. And yet, D'Agata is right to keep pressing the issue in his interview. If poetry and essay are essentially separate, why publish essays in collections of poetry? Why entitle a poem "The Glass Essay"? And why—and this is the most telling example—write a poem about the function of metaphor and then call it "*Essay* on What I Think About Most" (my emphasis again)? The double irony, of course, is that the poem *does* read like a essay, not just in terms of its argument, but formally as well: "(*Rhetoric*, 1410b10-13)," for example, has got to be one of the more prosaic (or numeric?) lines in English verse (*Men* 30). The only extended metaphor in the poem—other than those "buried" in the language, such as the mind "turning to itself," or the idea that we can "look into" something that is puzzling (it may well be that Carson wants to draw our attention, as readers, in a poem about metaphor, to how easy it is for old metaphors to become fossilized in everyday usage)—is the description of the mind "moving along a plane surface / of language" until it encounters the "breaks or complicat[ions]" of metaphor. Carson offers metaphor defining metaphor. Contrast this "poem" with a

passage from the "Note on Method" that opens *Economy of the Unlost*, a book of (supposedly) critical prose:

> I am writing this on the train to Milan. We flash past towers and factories, stations, yards, then a field where a herd of black horses is just turning to race uphill. "Attempts at description are stupid," George Eliot says, yet one may encounter a fragment of unexhausted time. Who can name its transactions, the sense that fell through us of untouchable wind, unknown effort—one black mane? (*Economy* viii)

It would be hard to imagine a more poetic critical "method." And yet Carson goes out of her way—in the D'Agata interview at least—to deny any connection between the two strands of her work.

In a sense, the interview format gives a good index to the paradox of Carson's position, and of her positioning of us as readers. In another interview she expresses her disdain for the manifestations of the media role of "poet," as they affect the appearance of her work:

> At her insistence, none of her books show her readers what she looks like. She even hates "the blurb thing. I just loathe it. They want to cover the whole back of the book with junk from other's people's bad language about what I wrote, and it just drives me crazy [. . .] with the next one I want to have a blank book. This is my aim. Nothing. No biography, no author's photos, no quotes from whoever, just the book." (Burt 57)

Again, the irony is that this desire for authorial withdrawal is voiced during an interview. If Carson is so allergic to the "process of manufacturing a persona," then why give interviews at all (Burt 57)? Perhaps because the interview format reveals that the true relationship between author and reader (or reader-as-interviewer) is not that of an ideal reciprocal exchange, but something richer, more anarchic and more strange.

As Carson's argument in *Economy of the Unlost* suggests, the basis of *xenia* in ancient Greek culture was respect for social tradition and continuity, rather than the mutual trust and respect of what we might regard as friendship. Even the nostalgia of a Simonides cannot counter this suggestion: the reader comes to feel that he would have been as awkward—as impertinent—in any setting. Is the ideal of some kind of reciprocal relationship between poet and reader, as symbolized in the etymology of the word "symbol," automatically an untenable one? As symbolized—dramatized—in the form of an interview, Carson would seem to think so. In her fictionalized interviews with the ancient Greek poets Stesichoros and Mimnermos and with the Japanese author Hara Tamiki, the interviewers are invariably earnest, opinionated, sympathetic and blunt ("I am not angry," one announces at

one point, "I am conscientious"); the interviewee is invariably reticent, oblique, irritable and insular (*Plainwater* 19). The interviewers never get the answers they are looking for; it is unclear why the interviewees have submitted themselves to this ordeal. In the end, we learn more (about the interviewers, about the interviewees) from disjunction and misdirection—from the lacunae, mishearings, conversational circlings and awkwardness that a more professional "interviewer" might edit out—than in any direct fashion. For example, in one of the interviews with Mimnermos, the interviewer, for some reason, brings up his (female) psychoanalyst. Mimnermos replies, "Ah the perfect listener yes I dreamed I would one day find her," slighting both the interviewer and the idea of interview-as-therapy (*Plainwater* 20). (But, then again, it all depends on how you read his tone: perhaps he is being completely sincere, in which case it is the idea of the interview as a source of unambiguous facts about the interviewee that is being mocked [*Plainwater* 20].) Even identity is not a given in the interview as Carson directs it: at the close of *Autobiography of Red,* the "S" being questioned seems to have transmogrified from Stesichoros into Gertrude Stein (with whom Carson compared him at the start of the book: "[h]e came after Homer and before Gertrude Stein, a difficult interval for a poet") (*Red* 3). S/he, incidentally, has no doubts about the true role of the poet, of his or her "error":

> S: I was (very simply) in charge of seeing for the world after all seeing is just a substance
> I: How do you know that
> S: I saw it
> I: Where
> S: Wherever I looked it poured out my eyes I was responsible for everyone's visibility it was a great pleasure it increased daily
> I: A pleasure you say
> S: Of course it had its disagreeable side I could not blink or the world went blind
> I: So no blinking
> S: No blinking from 1907 on (*Red* 148)

Similarly, at one point the "M" of "Mimnermos" seems to have become "Mallarmé" (almost quoting from "Un Coup de Dés"): "Nothing takes place but the place" (*Plainwater* 22). The discrepancy between what an interview promises and what it provides is summed up at the end of these Mimnermos interviews:

> I: I wanted to know you
> M: I wanted far more (*Plainwater* 26)

Despite this cynicism, Mimnermos, like his "author," understands the desire underlying the interview format. For him, though, this knowledge comes forward in crisis, in his astonishing Beckettian rant during the third interview:

> I: Now it is you who is angry
> M: I'm not angry I am a liar only now I begin to understand what my dishonesty is what abhorrence is the closer I get there is no hope for a person of my sort I can't give you facts I can't distill my history into this or that home truth and go plunging ahead composing miniature versions of the cosmos to fill the slots in your question and answer period it's not that I don't pity you it's not that I don't understand your human face is smiling at me for some reason it's not that I don't know there is an act of interpretation demanded now by which we could all move to the limits of the logic inherent in this activity and peer over the edge but everytime I start in everytime I everytime you see I would have to tell the whole story all over again or else lie so I lie I just lie who are they who are the storytellers who can put an end to stories (*Plainwater* 25-26)

The interviewer provokes this reaction by asking probing—but increasingly abstract—questions about the influence of a shadowy female figure, Nanno, on Mimnermos' life and work. He initially replies in stereotypical fashion, with the standard response of an insulted interviewee who thinks his privacy is being invaded: "[w]hat are you digging for" (*Plainwater* 24). He then reacts with a series of deeply ambiguous silences, before embarking on his outburst. And yet we believe, as readers, that he is "not angry," that he has seen some internal logic to this "question and answer period" that might be transcended to get to somewhere useful, and that, above all, despite his inquisitive rudeness, the interviewer's "human face" is "smiling" through his (or her) questions. To desire knowledge about another human is a very human thing, and the very existence of these fictional interviews demonstrates that Carson recognizes, and is intrigued by, the reader's desire for extra-curricular knowledge of writers about whose work they care. Despite her distaste for blurb-speak, she can understand the attraction—in *Economy of the Unlost,* she announces that "a poet's life is a kind of icon" and throughout her work poets, artists, philosophers and actors are presented as exemplary figures: Simonides and Celan in that book, Mimnermos, Stesichoros and Gertrude Stein, Kafka, Rembrandt, Emily Dickinson, Emily Brontë, Sappho, Virginia Woolf and Thucydides, Hokusai and Audubon, Catullus, Edward Hopper, Antonin Artaud, Tolstoy, Anna Akhmatova, Catherine Deneuve and John Keats, to name only the most obvious (*Economy* 60). They all stand for something, in their work and in themselves. What, then, does Anne Carson stand for?

Well, if she's anything like her "creation" Mimnermos, she lies. And yet, what is a willful verbal error *but* a lie? In his despair, Mimnermos is simply casting his only calling as a crafter-of-metaphors in an overly negative light: the very thing that causes him to fail in the "honest" arena of the interview makes him a true poet. And a poet is *not* a "storyteller" (in either sense): as Carson makes clear in her essay "Mimnermos and the Motions of Hedonism," he was too intensely, "hedonistically" involved in capturing the lyric present to be interested in any death-inviting "epic" narrative (*Plainwater* 12-17). Carson *is* interested in narrative, just as she is interested in scholarly accuracy. If a poet's life is an "icon"—a kind of poem—then perhaps Carson's juxtapositioning of the aesthetic and the academic within her work is the very "error" that makes that work "new & fresh," as her Aristotle would say. In the preface to her sequence "The Life of Towns," Carson, as poet, talks about being a scholar:

> A scholar is someone who takes a position. From which position, certain lines become visible. You will at first think I am painting the lines myself; it's not so. I merely know where to stand to see the lines that are there. And the mysterious thing, it is a very mysterious thing, is how these lines do paint themselves. (*Plainwater* 93)

It is as though the scholar Carson observes the "plane surface / of ordinary language," so that the poet Carson can appear all the more "mysterious" when she arrives. Hence all the poems about poets: once Carson takes a particular "scholarly" position on the life of a writer, then that life—as well as the writer's works—begin to adopt "poetic" lines. And the nature of poetic "error" within a poet's life, as is borne out in *Economy of the Unlost*, can be summed up as "alienation." Simonides is alienated by the shifting economic system of his culture, and his own impertinent—as much to him as to others—financial success within it. Celan is alienated by the terrible events of his youth, and from the very language in which he tries to engage with those events. These may be external causes of alienation, but many of the figures Carson writes about—Dickinson, Emily Brontë and Tolstoy, for example—might be regarded (uncharitably) as wilfully self-alienated. Such self-distancing would seem unacceptable—impertinent—if poetry were not, as Carson has shown (with the help of Celan), essentially outgoing, "*en route*," a letter in a bottle "headed toward": "everything and everybody is a figure for this other toward which it is heading" (Celan 49). As Carson remarks, citing Georg Lukács at the beginning of *Economy of the Unlost*, "I do not want to be a windowless monad," as though it were the

first temptation that must be overcome in order for useful work to follow (*Economy* viii).

The outward nature of poetry must, Carson suggests, be taken as read:

> a poet's despair is not just personal; he despairs of the word and that implicates all our hopes. Every time a poet writes a poem he is asking the question, Do words hold good? And the answer *has to be yes*: it is the contrafactual condition upon which a poet's life depends. (*Economy* 121)

Carson is writing of Celan: "despair," in his case, seems altogether too light a word. Does the poet's alienation always require, or precipitate, despair? Perhaps it does, but Carson seems adamant that it is *the* vital ingredient needed for a poet to be a poet: in an aside in "The Anthropology of Water," she mentions anthropology, and the distinction anthropologists make between an *emic* and an *etic* point of view. Emic has to do with the perspectives of a member of the society itself and etic is the point of view of an outsider seeing the society in his own terms (*Plainwater* 223).

In Carson's view, the poet's view must be an *etic* one: the poet must stand at a distance from society, and the language that it uses. Put more positively, the poet errant (a word with the same root as "error"), like the knight errant, must travel and operate at a distance from society, though always performing acts for the eventual benefit of that society. That distance, when Carson writes of her exemplary figures, becomes apparent. And that, in turn, highlights her own alienation: as she writes at one point in *Short Talks*, almost as an aside, "I am writing this to be as wrong as possible to you" (*Plainwater* 45).

Despite this "wrongness," Carson seems sure of the fundamental social benefits of the poet's "errors." When D'Agata asks her the "hard question" of why she thinks her work has suddenly become so popular, she initially brushes the question off in embarrassment, before replying:

> I think people like to be told something that they can get, you know? I mean otherwise it's like giving a person a gift they can't unwrap. That's cruel. [. . .] I think it arises out of compassion, you know? People are just out there struggling to make sense of life. You have to give them something they can use. It's only polite to do that. (D'Agata 21-22)

In Plato's *Euthyphro*, as Carson shows in her essay "'Echo with No Door on Her Mouth': A Notional Refraction through Sophokles, Plato, and Defoe," a debate on the true nature of piety breaks down repeatedly over the word *charis*. This word, like *xenos*, is multifaceted. It can mean, as Carson translates it, either "return favor" or "free gift." Euthyphro cannot accept that an

individual's relationship with the gods could be anything other than reciprocal, a kind of *xenia*: "[m]en offer sacrifices to gods, gods fulfill men's prayers: a tidy exchange" ("Echo" 252). For him, *charis* is thus a returned favour: "[e]very gift is a debt, the sociologists tell us, insofar as a gift sets up the idea of a countergift: every gift contains the obligation to repay" ("Fragrance" 10). For Sokrates—who believes that the gods do not require anything from man: faith, products or sacrifice—*charis* is a kind of free dispensation, or grace. Without wishing to grant it a similar kind of divine aura, the same quality could be assigned to metaphor, or to poetry as a whole: "by thrifty management of its own measures—measures of rhythm, diction, syntax, image and allusion—the poem secretes a residue, the poem generates a profit, the poem yields surplus value" ("Fragrance" 10). And this too is one of the meanings of *charis*:

> The Greeks used the word for the grace of a poem, the charm that makes it a poem and makes you want to remember it. So for them to make a poem is to make something that will be so charming that it will be a gift that the world wants to receive. (D'Agata 17)

Instead of a reciprocal return on our attention as readers, poetry offers an excess of meaning. Perhaps this is what infuriated Simonides so: an awareness that his "gifts" were of a type different from any that might be repaid through financial channels. And metaphor might seem impertinent to us if, like Celan's poetry, it demands more attention than we—the social readers—are perhaps willing to spare. But then, as Celan says in his Meridian speech, in words borrowed from Malebranche "via Walter Benjamin's essay on Kafka, 'attention is the natural prayer of the soul'" (Celan 50). Or, as Carson, puts it, "[a]ttention is a task we share, you and I" (*Economy* viii).

In her poem "Canicula di Anna," Carson reminds us that "to categorize," means, originally, "to name in public" (*Plainwater* 77). This explanation, however, only hints at the full connotations of the ancient usage: taken back, "to categorize" can also mean "to accuse," in the sense of bringing a legal case to bear. Personally, I believe Anne Carson's work—inward and yet outgoing, playful and yet profound—sidesteps "category" nicely. It is, of course, and as you are all surely aware, easy for an "essay" to descend into "categorization." If this essay has done so, if it has seemed too eager to categorize—in our more current usage—Carson's work, then I hope the reader can accept it in the spirit of "error" in which it was intended.

NOTES

1 Whether Simonides deserved this reputation, or whether he earned it due to the envy of others, or because of the sheer impertinence of his economic ambivalence remains unclear. Carson just calls him "smart" (*Economy* 10).

2 This image is taken from Mandelstam's essay "About an Interlocutor." The argument of this essay clearly had a profound influence on Celan, and on his speech:

> The shipwrecked sailor throws a sealed bottle into the sea at a critical moment, and it has his name in it and what happened to him. Many years later, walking along the dunes, I find it in the sand, I read the letter, I learn when it happened, the testament of the deceased. I had a right to do this. I did not unseal someone's else's letter. The letter sealed in the bottle was addressed to its finder, I found it. That means, then, that I am its secret addressee. [. . .] Poetry as a whole is always directed at a more or less distant, unknown addressee, in whose existence the poet may not doubt, without doubting himself. (Mandelstam 59-64)

3 In the "introduction" to her book *Autobiography of Red*, Carson calls adjectives "the latches of being," and argues that the ancient Greek poet Stesichoros' adjectival originality stemmed from his ability to "undo the latches" (*Red* 4-5).

4 D'Agata seems well aware of the irony: the interview is pointedly entitled "A ___ with Anne Carson," and he makes a point of including all the lacunae, mishearings, conversational circlings and awkwardness that a more "professional" interviewer might edit out. The piece ends with Carson's directive "[n]ow turn that off" (D'Agata 22).

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Susan L. Helwig

# A lesbian and her lover in Siberia

I can be happy in any old exile
so long as you are there
cabbage soup and potatoes under fluorescent tubes

Fourteen candles on December 6
make our own private Yule
safe from the patriarchy of Christmas
no babies, no salvation

What we write, we read aloud to each other
the page is cold, but oh so straightforward.

Ian Rae

# Anne Carson and the Solway Hoaxes

> Carson may be our newest pedestalized inamorata but the fact is—and I say this unabashedly—she is a phony, all sleight-of-hand, both as a scholar and a poet. (Solway, "Trouble" 25)

David Solway unequivocally rejects Anne Carson's poetry in his article, "The Trouble with Annie: David Solway Unmakes Anne Carson," published in the July 2001 edition of *Books in Canada* (*BiC*). The "identical platitudes" heaped upon Carson by the media compel Solway to wonder "if there is not some sort of professional scam going on" (25), which he suspects is "fostered by a sort of critic-and-peer collusion, a veritable conspiracy of literary dunces" (26). Of course, Solway is somewhat of an expert on scams, because in 1999 he duped the editors of *BiC* and published "The Pelagic Bard of Kalypso's Isle," an essay in which he describes the arduous translation of an "influential" but utterly imaginary Greek poet named Andreas Karavis. The essay was accompanied by an interview between Karavis and the fictitious poetry editor Anna Zoumi, as well as by sample translations of Karavis. To give the ensemble an air of authenticity, Solway included a blurry photograph of Karavis (actually a bearded Solway in a fisherman's cap) that also graces the frontispiece of Solway's *Saracen Island: The Poetry of Andreas Karavis* (2000) and *An Andreas Karavis Companion* (2001). In "The Trouble with Annie," Solway makes the opposite claim: he argues that a real and genuinely influential Canadian poet is a phony. The arguments that Solway marshals in his attack on Carson are troubling, however, for reasons he does not acknowledge. Either Solway is perpetrating another literary hoax, or the arguments and terms of reference that he establishes in this article effectively unmake his own poetic output.

The opening paragraph of "The Trouble with Annie" outlines Solway's apocalyptic view of Canadian poetry and criticism. Making a point that he

reiterates in "Double Exile and Montreal English-Language Poetry," Solway asserts that the Canadian literary community suffers from rampant nepotism:

> I have long suspected that the genus of drab writing which the great majority of our acclaimed poets generate so effortlessly these days is the reflex not only of the ambition to write abundantly whatever the consequences but, generally speaking, of the desire to acquire status in an official community of impresarios, critical strategists and bravura players. [. . .] Anne Carson's sudden cometary prominence provides us with a stunning textbook example of how the mediocrity industry works in our time, attuned not to merit but to celebrity. (24)

In a letter to the editor, Chris Jennings responds to these criticisms by citing Solway's reputation for mischief and pondering whether Solway is being disingenuous "in both the logic and tenor of his attack" (39). Although Solway's tone is bombastic, and nowhere suggests that he offers his criticisms in the spirit of lighthearted spoof, Jennings raises a valid question when he asks if the "newly minted associate editor of *BiC* [i.e., Solway] is doing his part to generate buzz for the relaunch [of *BiC*] by attracting the wrath of Carson's readers" (39). To be fair, both Jennings and I have published essays on Carson, and we have our own investment in the debate (Rae; Jennings, "Erotic"). However, even members of a supposed "conspiracy of literary dunces" cannot fail to note the editorial stratagems at play in the relaunch issue, its cover bearing the heading "Anne Carson gets her due." Although Solway condemns the media attention that Carson receives, he is in the business of generating it.

Pecuniary motivations aside, Solway does make a valid point in "The Trouble with Annie." Having appealed to the Great Canadian Inferiority Complex in his opening remarks, Solway nourishes anxieties in Carson's readership with a few compelling facts. He scrutinizes the discussion of Paul Celan's "NO MORE SAND ART" in Carson's *Economy of the Unlost* and argues that "the few interesting things Carson does have to say about Celan's poem are cribbed almost verbatim" from John Felstiner's *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (24). Solway correctly asserts that Carson draws heavily from Felstiner's work. However, as Jennings observes, *Economy of the Unlost* is peppered with citations of Felstiner, and Carson does not (as Solway maintains) make much effort to conceal her debt to the Celan biographer ("Letter" 39). Moreover, Solway's argument does little to diminish the originality of Carson's larger project, which is to draw connections between two radically different authors, as the subtitle *Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan* indicates.

However, having established a foothold in fact, Solway strides boldly into the subjective realm of Carson's poetry with the aim of exposing her "charlatanism" ("Trouble" 24). As evidence of Carson's "lack of fibre" (24), Solway selects two short lyrics from *Men in the Off Hours*. He criticizes the first lyric, "That Strength," for "stringing together [. . .] disjointed locutionary tagmemes" which do not in themselves "deserve serious inspection" (24). The next poem, "Freud (1st draft)," he criticizes for its uninspired verses, which include "a couple of quoted passages from Freud's letters [. . .] chopped up into stanzas" (24-25). Jennings offers a qualified defence of both poems, but it is difficult to draw conclusions from such short selections of Carson's work. For example, the simile "He could fill structures of / threat with a light like the earliest olive oil" in *The Beauty of the Husband* has been cited by critics as an example of Carson's brilliance (Sutherland, "Tango" D3) and shortcomings as a poet (Solway, "Trouble" 26; Merkin 3). What is certain, however, is that Solway once again evades the larger question. He fails to examine the long poems in *Glass, Irony and God* and *Plainwater*, the two books that established Carson's reputation, and makes only passing references to *Autobiography of Red*, the book that elevated Carson from cult to star status in poetry circles. Instead, Solway cites snippets of Carson's later poetry out of context as examples of bad verse. This tactic is hardly a fair means of evaluation, as Solway was forced to acknowledge when Fraser Sutherland, one of the book reviewers whom Solway mocks, returned the favour by citing unspectacular lines from Solway's verse in a letter to the editor of *BiC* (9). Granted, "The Trouble with Annie" is an abridged version of an essay set to appear in Solway's book of criticism, *Director's Cut* (2003), but the choppiness of the essay is the least of its faults.

Lest Solway's polemic founder for lack of strong examples, he gradually abandons his scholarly arguments and resorts to bombast. Whereas Solway had the advantage of citing obscure authors, journals, and words in a foreign language to bolster his credibility in the Karavis affair, the author in this case is well known, and the journals largely contradict Solway's argument, so his grandiloquence must carry the day. After infantilizing Carson by calling her "Annie," the bulk of his article attempts to intimidate the reader with verbose statements in which Solway complains that "a hollow sententiousness echoes sepulchrally throughout" Carson's poetry (26). He concedes that Carson is a clever writer, but insists that "deficiencies [. . .] inevitably subtend in the pseudo-cerebrality of the intellectual mountebank" (26). Even Solway's admirers lament his use of "ostentatious terminology"

to overawe readers (Cude 138), but Solway maintains that he does "not regard [him]self as some sort of literary carnifex having a tantrum but only as someone whose irritation threshold has finally been reached" ("Trouble" 26). He is equally impatient with Carson's reviewers and offers a broad survey of book reviews from prominent newspapers in order to lampoon them. However, he avoids the reviews and essays published in the *Denver Quarterly* (Hamilton), *Raritan* (Phillips), and *Canadian Literature* (Rasula; Rae) by stating that he does "not want to apologize for someone else's publications or the public's unexamined receptivity" (26). Such an unexamined reception on Solway's part is alarming for an academic audience, and Solway expects readers to call his bluff, as he states in response to Sutherland's letter: "No doubt I deserve my comeuppance but still I find it all great fun" (9). While Solway's fun at first appears to be at Carson's expense, close inspection of his essay reveals that he is a contrarian whose own arguments turn against him.

For example, Solway insinuates that Carson stole the tango theme in *The Beauty of the Husband* from "Timothy Findley's *Pilgrim* (1999), in which a stricken Emma Jung, paralyzed by the intellectual beauty of her philandering husband, answers his leading question: 'If you could dance with the devil, which rhythm which you choose?' [. . .] 'The Tango,' she would have said'" ("Trouble" 26). However, as Solway is presumably aware, the tango is also an important theme in *Autobiography of Red*, published the year before *Pilgrim*. Thus, if one wanted to speculate about two otherwise unrelated authors—and I do not—one would be forced to conclude that Findley stole the idea from Carson.

By Solway's hypervigilant standards, one should also object to the unacknowledged borrowing in the passage from "The Trouble with Annie" where Solway proposes:

> [t]he spectacle [of Carson's poetry] is potentially an edifying one, as we observe a poet busy preparing her place in the Seventh Chasm of the Eighth Circle of the Inferno where those who ransack and conscript what does not belong to them are condemned to protean evanescence, exchanging identities with and *repeating* the forms and gestures of others. (25; his emphasis)

Readers of *Autobiography of Red* will recognize the irony in this statement, as the subject of Carson's "autobiography," the monster Geryon, presides over the Eighth Circle in Dante's *Inferno* and is, for both authors, the personification of fraud and the pilgrim's guide *through* the realm of dissemblers. Solway's experience impersonating a modern-day Homer has

acquainted him with this territory, and the "alarmist rhetoric" (Jennings, "Letter" 39) and errors in "The Trouble with Annie" suggest that he is dissembling once again. However, before I consider this tantalizing proposition, I must inquire further into the matter of intertextual repetition, which is crucial to a study of both Carson and Solway.

The crux of Solway's argument is that Carson ransacks the canon of Western poetry and is therefore a literary impostor. Although Solway carefully avoids using the word "plagiarism," he invents a wealth of equivalent terms. He argues that Carson's lines "are *conceptually* downloaded from Akhmatova" ("Trouble" 25; his emphasis), or that she writes through a process of "negative biomimicry" (26). The acrimonious inferences are not lost on the readers of *BiC*, one of whom congratulates Solway on exposing in Carson's work "a complexity plagiarized from Stein, Celan, et al." (Kirsch). It is worth noting here that Stein does not believe in the possibility of repetition (Stein 99), but I wish to stay with Solway's line of reasoning, and, provisionally, to consider repetition as cause for damnation.

Although Solway condemns literary echoes in Carson's poetry, he makes a self-incriminating recommendation to her readers towards the end of "The Trouble with Annie." He suggests that Carson fans try "George Meredith's *Modern Love*" as "an instance of how the subject of a disintegrating relationship may be handled poetically with genuine artistry, while at the same time breaking the limitation of an established form" (26). Readers familiar with *Modern Love* (1862) will recognize the allusion when they reach the end of Solway's page and find him recommending his own book, "the award-winning *Modern Marriage*" (26). Upon inspection, *Modern Marriage* (1987) is indeed a lyric sequence about a disintegrating relationship, sporting epigrams from Meredith's sequence. Although Solway does not employ Meredith's innovative 16-line sonnet, he covers his canonical bases by writing Shakespearean sonnets. He also parodies Elizabeth Barrett Browning's forty-third sonnet ("How do I love thee? Let me count the ways") in what he claims is a singular act of lovelorn desperation (*Modern* 44). Karavis, too, is fond of established poetic modes, and, in addition to a parody of Barrett Browning's famous sonnet (*Companion* 121-22), he writes sonnets, a villanelle, and even a haiku. Evidently, Solway does not object to the repetition of forms and themes from canonical texts in his own work.

In addition to contradictions between Solway's poetic theory and practice, there are inconsistencies in his critical stances. Solway never misses a chance to condemn Canadian poetry as homogeneous ("Standard"), and he

recommends that Canadian poets look outside the national borders in order "to smash the boundaries of our insularity, to take all place and all time as our province" ("Flight" 122). While Carson's work would seem to exemplify this vision of a "hybrid and syncretic" poetry (123), in "The Trouble with Annie" Solway strikes the pose of a disgruntled purist:

> In an age where continuity and seamlessness, artisanal craftsmanship and wholeness of original conception are at a discount, Carson writes an IKEA-type poetry, fitting together bits and pieces into a mental furniture that appears weirdly functional but is utterly devoid of charm, staying-power and livability. It is, in effect, a poetry of screws, hinges, dowels, thin linear splines and sharp corners, a line from Akhmatova here, a *soupçon* of Celan there, little bits of Beckett and Bataille, a dollop of Plato, a generous helping of Keats, all put together according to a blueprint from Sappho. (25)

This is a fine list of Carson's influences, although Gertrude Stein is certainly more important than Bataille. Carson herself argues that the poet is a kind of hinge in the introduction to *Autobiography of Red*, where she demonstrates that Stesichoros' use of adjectives created new connections between "substances in the world" (5) by unsettling the linguistic conventions of Greek epic. However, Solway's IKEA reference misses the mark because Carson's craft resides in the innovative joinery of her major works, with their bold juxtapositions of place and time, as well as their subtle transitions between seemingly incongruous narratives.

Solway's attack on Carson's borrowings and reworkings warrants a closer investigation of his own Karavis hoax. In his introductory essay on "The Pelagic Bard of Kalypso's Isle," Solway describes his fictional efforts to translate Andreas Karavis, as well as providing details of the poet's life. Born in Crete in 1932, Karavis fled to a nearby island during the Nazi occupation, learned ancient Greek in high school, and took to the sea upon graduation to ply his grandfather's trade as a fisherman. Karavis honed his poetic skills at sea and gave away copies of his first book, *White Poems*, "as a bonus with the evening catch sold in the island marketplaces" (21). The poet's fame was bolstered by a sex scandal involving "the celebrated writer, Lili Zographou" (21), and his second volume, *The Dream Masters*, "rapidly established itself as one of the important moments in the history of modern Greek literature, a subject of many reviews and critical essays in the leading intellectual journals" (21). Apparently gulled by the tourist-brochure romance of this portrait, the editor of *BiC* advertised Solway's essay with the cover heading: "Andreas Karavis, Greece's Modern Homer" (20). Inside the magazine, the heading "Great Poets of Our Time" hangs over the portrait of Karavis. The

cover heading thus testifies to the desire of the editor to discover the next big thing, while the portrait testifies to Solway's fantasy of being the next big thing.

The subsequent issue of *BiC* features three letters to the editor that complicate Solway's hoax. The first letter is from Barbara Joannides (a pseudonym?) who praises "the felicity of [Solway's] translations" (3). The second letter is from Yiorgos Chouliaris, a press attaché at the Greek Embassy in Ottawa, who commends "David Solway's extremely imaginative efforts on behalf of 'Andreas Karavis, Greece's Modern Homer'" (3). Chouliaris later confessed to Ben Downing, the author of an article on the hoax in *Lingua Franca*, that he played along with Solway's game in order to "honor a Canadian writer who went to such roundabout lengths to validate his lifelong involvement with Greece" (Downing 2). The third letter to the editor comes from Fred A. Reed, a classicist who congratulates Solway for his work on a "poet of near-mythical dimensions" (3). This letter also contains a hint of conspiracy, because Reed's appraisal of *Saracen Island* graces the back cover of Solway's book. However, Downing reports that the letter was unsolicited, and it jeopardized Solway's hoax.

Reed's letter "take[s] issue with some of the biographical data Solway presents," in particular the claim of Karavis to Cretan ancestry, which Reed says "may be charitably described as apocryphal" (3). Citing "[n]o lesser an authority than C.D. Candias, Professor of Cultural Studies at the Arcadian Academy," Reed observes that "scrutiny of court records in the Aegean prefectural archives" has proven that Karavis made his living by "smuggling cigarettes (then a state monopoly)" (3), which gives credence to Epimenides' paradoxical assertion that all Cretans are liars. Candia, of course, is the Venetian name for the capital of Crete, and Reed plays along with Solway's joke, as one Canadian to another. However, having noted Karavis' "taste for dissimulation, personality shifts, and blurred identity markers," Reed concludes his long letter by revealing one of Solway's secrets:

> Unconfirmed rumour, concludes Candias, suggests that Karavis may actually have appropriated some of the earlier poetry of David Solway, disguising it sufficiently to conceal its origins. Were this to be the case, the affinity between the established poet and his translator would appear in a starkly different light. (3)

This passage invited closer scrutiny of the authorship of the Karavis poems. Rumours immediately began to fly concerning the non-existence of Karavis, but Solway categorically denied them until he was interviewed by Downing. In fact, Solway upped the ante in his game by posing as Karavis for the launch of *Saracen Island* at a Montreal restaurant in October, 2000 (Downing 1).

Given Solway's taste for dissimulation, his publication history in *BiC*, and his startlingly negative assessment of one of Canada's most lauded poets, it seems pertinent to ask whether Solway's attack on Carson is also a hoax. Ostensibly, the purpose of "The Trouble with Annie" is to transform Carson's fame into infamy. Solway speculates that Carson's popularity is the product of "a sophisticated literary prank" (26), and he argues that "Anne Carson could just as well be Anne Knish who, along with Emanuel Morgan, figured as one of the two main principals in the celebrated Spectra hoax perpetrated by Witter Bynner and Arthur Davison Ficke in the early part of the century" (26). The fact that the Spectra hoax took place in the twentieth century, not the twenty-first, is perhaps the sort of error that caused Jennings to wonder whether Solway might be performing a prank himself. Although Carmine Starnino maintains that one should "read and reread" Solway for his "coherent thinking, [. . .] skeptical attitude, analytic rigor, and rhetorical gifts" ("Introduction" 14), his skepticism and rhetoric mar the coherence and rigour of his thinking in "The Trouble with Annie." Fissures of fact and logic break apart the monolith of Solway's indignation, as he continues his analogy to the Spectrists:

> Of course, what Bynner and Ficke had in mind was (in the words of William Jay Smith in his book on the subject) to clear the air of "the stuffiness that tends to gather about literature when it loses its sense of humor and earnest but lumbering personalities take over." But what happens when the apparent parody is not deliberate, when what properly seems like a spoof is intended seriously, when, as Smith complains, "the element of common sense, which should shape all judgment, is . . . in eclipse"? (26)

This question is worthy of careful consideration, but one should also ask what it is eclipsing. The "stuffiness" citation in Smith's book precedes the revelation that the Spectra poems were motivated by the reluctant admiration of Bynner and Ficke for the poetic experiments of Wallace Stevens (67). In the original draft of the Spectra manifesto, Knish acknowledges Stevens's influence: "Among recent poets, apart from a small clan soon to be heard from, we have noted only one who can be regarded in any sure sense as a Spectrist. This one is Wallace Stevens. In his work appears a subtle but doubtless unconscious application of our method" (Smith 67). Smith notes that Stevens was "engaged in carrying Cubism over seriously into poetry, just as the Spectrists had done jokingly" (68), and thus the Spectra burlesques represented an opportunity for Bynner and Ficke to engage with a poetics that they did not feel confident attempting seriously, or under their own names.

Given this knowledge, it is less surprising that Solway disparages Carson's collage technique in his discussion of "Freud (1st Draft)," yet describes "the lover as an exemplary figure (or collage)" in the preface to his own *The Lover's Progress* (12). Such reversals of opinion occurred in the Spectra hoax as well. By assuming aliases, Bynner and Ficke overcame their inhibitions and unbridled their desire to experiment, as Ficke states: "it was only Bynner's opportune departure, this 3rd day of March, that prevented us from becoming seriously interested in further and genuine experiments, and thus perishing at the hands of the monster which we had created'" (Smith 19). Ultimately, the Spectrists were forced to admit that their prank had backfired. When the hoax was exposed in 1918, a commentator in *Reedy's Mirror* observed that the "disclosure would be a good joke on the public [. . .] were it not for the fact that the burlesque poetry is more successful than the authors' serious work. To make matters worse, Emanuel Morgan [Bynner] continues to write after being exposed as somebody else—talk about a Frankenstein monster!" (42). If Carson is participating in a literary hoax, as Solway suggests, then she has won long-lasting fame for the unintended quality of her poems, having won a Lannan Award (1996), Pushcart Prize (1997), Guggenheim Fellowship (1998), MacArthur Fellowship (2000), Griffin Prize (2001), and T. S. Eliot Prize (2002).

Of course, I do not believe that Carson is a fraud, but Solway's accusations interest me because they resonate with the complaints of the earlier hoaxers. In a passage that draws from the same lexicon of insults that Solway employs, Ficke explains that the motivation of the Spectrists was not entirely humorous:

> When we invented the Spectric School, both of us were genuinely indignant at the charlatanism of some of the new 'schools' of poetry [such as Imagism]; and it was with the most deadly intentions that we made our attempt to render their 'schools' patently ridiculous. We had great fun doing it—but back of the fun was an intensity of malice which Bynner does not explain. We who devoted our whole lives to poetry were angry and indignant on seeing apes and mountebanks prancing in the Temple. (qtd. in Smith 46)

Similarly outraged, Solway tells Downing that he resents having had to resort to the Karavis hoax to draw attention to his poetry (4). Calling Carson a mountebank seems to be an extension of this attention-getting strategy, and Solway's theatrics have doubtless won him new readers. However, these readers should ask themselves whether the monster Geryon, the Frankenstein creature Carson pieced together from a number of literary fragments in *Autobiography of Red*, has begun to consume Solway.

The shadow of Geryon looms over Solway's most duplicitous passage in "The Trouble with Annie." Purporting to deplore the current vogue for simulacra, Solway declares that "the act of critical liberation involved in *our* recognizing this species of negative biomimicry will require prodigies of unsparing self-analysis" (26; his emphasis). Initiating this self-analysis, Solway denies Carson's selfhood and claims that "it is we who have summoned Anne Carson into being" (26). Making Carson the projection of desire—like the phantom of Helen that Stesichoros said went to Troy—Solway embarks on an unusual rhetorical journey. He abandons his commitment to truthful expression and extends his conceit:

> Carson writes on litmus paper which tells us who and what we are. And who and what we are is not difficult to determine. *We* are Anne Carson: patchwork creatures without genuine moral and intellectual substance, preference machines lusting for unmerited approval, media constructs even in the privacy of our beings. We have become dabblers in poetry and classical scholarship without having to know much about either. (26; his emphasis)

Who is this *we*, and why does Solway call attention to it by using italics? At first, Solway seems to be speaking on behalf of Carson's entire readership, but on closer inspection, Solway's "we" functions as a vehicle of confession. When paired with the italicized *our* in the sentence about self-analysis, the "we" articulates a heteronymic plural, speaking for Solway and his fictional selves. It speaks for the lover, who is "a dilettante, a professional amateur, a cultural sightseer" (*Progress* 13). It also speaks for Karavis, who marries Anna Zoumi in *An Andreas Karavis Companion* and recites a poem at their wedding (76-77) that is a textbook demonstration of the concept of "negative attention" which Carson develops in *Economy of the Unlost* (100-19). Although Solway mocks this concept in "The Trouble with Annie," his explication of the Karavis poem weds his critical ideas to those of Carson in perpetuum (*Companion* 77). In this light, Solway's term "negative biomimicry" takes on a very different meaning.

The evidence for a confession mounts as Solway indulges his new zeal for simulacra in "The Trouble with Annie":

> Anne Carson is our reflection in a distorting mirror which is at the same time wholly accurate and orthogonal. We have appropriated her as she has appropriated others. One might even say that Anne Carson is the higher Oprah. The projection of our unearned selves, she is watched, admired, and subsidized by us until reverse osmosis sets in and we are inevitably absorbed by our own emanation. Eventually we all appear on her program. (26)

How might Solway appear on Carson's program? Certainly he would make a fine walk-on character in Carson's "TV Men" series, playing the grumpy neighbour in a literary sitcom. But if one checks the production credits, Solway has much deeper ties to Carson's program.

Explaining the process of composition behind *Saracen Island*, Solway tells Downing that he invented Karavis because he had arrived "at a juncture that may be described as both impasse and crossroads":

> The tone, stance, and poetic attitudes that had marked my work for a decade were, I felt, exhausted and in need of replacement. Such a "new" language cannot be summoned by fiat; it must flow from a new set of postulates and a new quality of experience. . . . So I invented Karavis to serve as alter ego and heteronym[.] (4)

This statement is not entirely true. One of the poems in *Saracen Island*, "Credo," was published under Solway's name in the *Atlantic Monthly* in March 1998. Another, "The Dream Masters," is recycled from Solway's 1993 collection, *Bedrock*. This collection combines Solway's verse with free adaptations of "the work of several poets [Solway] has known and admired—Nikos Gatsos, Henrik Nordtbrand [*sic*], and Andreas Karavis" (back cover). For example, Solway's long poem "Amorgos" is a response to Gatsos' long poem of the same name. In addition, Karavis' signature poem, "The Dream Masters," finds "its source in the first two lines of the fifth stanza of Section III of Nikos Gatsos' majestic *Amorgos*" (*Saracen* 119). Although Solway claims to be translating in *Bedrock*, one should be wary of his various signatures. He changes the position of the "t" in the surname of the celebrated Danish poet Henrik Nordbrandt (who writes extensively about Greece and the Mediterranean) to create a heteronym in *Bedrock* (11, 24, 77). This heteronym reappears in *The Lover's Progress*, where the lover translates a poem by Karavis that is supposed to be based on a Nordtbrand poem (33). Not only does this amalgam of voices collapse the difference between the heteronyms (and therefore diminish their reason for being), but Solway's Scandinavian moniker feeds parasitically on the Danish poet's hard-won reputation.

Solway also appropriates Carson's fame by mirroring her program in his own publications. In 1998, Carson published *Autobiography of Red*, which consists of an odd assortment of generic pieces: an introductory essay on the Greek poet Stesichoros, translated fragments from a long lyric poem by Stesichoros, a palinode by Stesichoros, two appendices detailing the legends surrounding the composition of his poetry, a long poem by Carson, and a

mock interview that blurs a number of authorial identities. A year later Solway published his essay on Karavis in *BiC*, accompanied by the interview between Karavis and Anna Zoumi. Solway followed up this publication in 2000 with *Saracen Island*, the collected works of a poet who, much like Carson, rocketed from obscurity to national prominence in the space of a decade. *Saracen Island* consists of a reprint of "The Pelagic Bard of Kalypso's Isle," translations of Karavis' lyrics, the long poem "Saracen Island," and twenty-five pages of "Commentary" detailing the modern-day legends surrounding the composition of Karavis' poetry. On the first page of this commentary, Solway explains that the poem published in the *Atlantic Monthly* "was mistakenly attributed to me, the tag 'translated by' having been left out of the attribution" (109). The word "credo" derives from the Latin word for trust, but Solway's explanation does not inspire much. Nor can his avowed commitment to seamless design account for his 2001 publication, *An Andreas Karavis Companion*, which is a patchwork of letters, translations, and diary entries utterly devoid of continuity. Most audacious of all, when Solway published "The Trouble with Annie" in July of 2001, he complained that Carson's poetry is nothing more than "a function of shrewd outsourcing" (25). Is he being serious?

Apparently, he is. In an editorial response to Jennings' letter, Solway rejects the idea that "The Trouble with Annie" is "just another of those hoaxes [he is] apparently so good at perpetrating" ("Letter" 40). He mocks the "disingenuousness" of Jennings' conjecture and, in his accustomed manner, attempts to vaporize his opposition: "Chris Jennings, as any astute reader will instantly discern, does not exist. [. . .] I wonder whose heteronym he could possibly be?" (40). Jennings does exist, and he publishes under his own name (including reviews in subsequent issues of *BiC*), but the vehemence with which Solway, as associate editor, defends his article on Carson against criticisms by Jennings and Sutherland compels me to conclude that "The Trouble with Annie" is not a hoax.

Unfortunately for Solway, his argument would have been more clever if it had been disingenuous. Undermining his own dichotomy, Solway cites Milton in order to schematize the relation between himself and Carson as a contrast between truth and lies:

> Although Milton surely demanded too much of poets when he affirmed in the *Apology for Smectymnuus* that "he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem, that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honorablest things," the asymptotic approach to this ideal remains crucial. ("Trouble" 24)

This appeal to Milton is surprising, considering that Solway contrasts the "genuine" voice of Andreas Karavis to "the inflated rhetoric of what [Solway] like[s] to call—taking a cross-cultural liberty—the Milton Hilton school of poets" ("Bard" 21). The observation might seem like a humorous inversion of the sort that Solway appears to commit when he invents heteronyms in order to denounce "the centripetal indulgences of the postmodernist" (*Companion* 151). However, the humour disappears when one discovers Karavis pontificating on the primacy of the self in the same manner that Solway does in his book on education, *Lying about the Wolf* (1997).

Indeed, there is too little alter in Karavis' ego. After studying "The Trouble with Annie," I find it difficult to read Karavis' denunciation of feminist readings of Sappho (*Companion* 100-101) as anything but a response to Carson's *Eros the Bittersweet*. I also have difficulty hearing irony in passages where Solway claims that Karavis represents "the *authentic* traditional force which most of his fellow poets, according to his deeply-held [*sic*] conviction, have betrayed—not by neglecting tradition so much as by fabricating what he has called a 'pretend tradition'" (*Saracen* 109; his emphasis). The fake/genuine binary simply collapses in these writings. Although Solway attempts to distance himself from "the old scops," whom he calls a "tribe of fibbers" in a poem from his *Modern Marriage* sequence (60), in another poem from the same sequence he portrays himself "at 30,000 feet, / pursuing high, inventive Dedalus / to build workable lies" (46). Thus, critics who enter the Carson-Solway debacle enter a house of mirrors in which each argument reflects its opposite in a near-infinite regress: Carson endorses "the notion found early in ancient thought that all poets are liars" (*Beauty* 33), while Solway accuses Carson of building workable lies.

Perhaps overburdened by the mounting contradictions in his argument, Solway abandons any pretense to formal argumentation in the final paragraphs of "The Trouble with Annie." Discussing *The Beauty of the Husband*, he resorts to sarcasm:

> Perhaps the most interesting thing about this book is its penultimate page where under the rubric, a note about the author, we learn that "Anne Carson lives in Canada." That's it! No more information is needed for so illustrious a personage. The implication is that Canada is fortunate for being put on the map by virtue of its association with Anne Carson. (26)

This quibble over Carson's biographical note would be inconsequential, were it not for the fact that the blurb plays a crucial role in an interview that Solway conducted with Michael Harris in the October 2001 issue of *BiC*.

Towards the end of the interview, Solway suggests the possibility of a "poetic renaissance" in Montreal comparable to the era of Layton and Klein ("Brilliant" 21). Harris cautions his interviewer that the "next 'renaissance' won't necessarily come from a particular area or literary press or 'School,'" but will "be spearheaded by individual poets making their way to the international stage" (21). Solway then asks Harris to assess the current state of Canadian poetry and Harris replies: "'*Anne Carson lives in Canada*'" (21). It is somewhat difficult to judge the correct interpretation of this reply without hearing it spoken, because Harris cracks jokes throughout the interview, and because Solway immediately changes the subject. If Carson is one of the "renaissance" poets excelling on the international stage, then Harris' statement undermines the war on Carson that Solway continues to wage in the editorial pages of this issue. However, if Harris is being ironic, as the italics and his close association with Solway would indicate, then Carson's writing has become emblematic of the deplorable state of Canadian poetry in the minds of a particular circle of Montrealers.

For several years now, Solway has boasted that the poetry of established Canadian authors such as Purdy, Bowering, and Ondaatje pales in comparison to a small "segment of the anglophone community in Montreal, where the finest poets in Canada happen to live" ("Standard" 20; see also "Double" 25). Although the popularity of Carson's books would seem to strengthen this contention, Solway has in mind such writers as Harris, Starnino, and Ormsby ("Interview" 154; see also "Double" 25). These poets also happen to be influential editors. Eric Ormsby (to whom Solway dedicated *An Andreas Karavis Companion*) is a contributing editor at *BiC*, where Solway and Starnino are the associate editors. Ormsby has also published an essay on Solway that abets the Karavis and Nordtbrand hoaxes ("Dark" 90), and edited Starnino's book of poetry, *Credo* (2000), which thanks Solway in the acknowledgements, and which is dedicated to Harris. Michael Harris, in turn, is the former editor of Signal Editions for Véhicule Press (with whom Solway published five books) and Starnino has succeeded him as editor for the imprint. Carmine Starnino is also poetry editor for *Canadian Notes & Queries*, where Solway is a contributing editor. By his own admission, Starnino charts his poetic "voyage by [Solway's] Parnassian star" ("Introduction" 15), and he has paid homage to his mentor by editing *David Solway* (2001), a slender volume of essays. He has also adopted Solway's disdainful attitude towards the canon of Canadian poetry, which he maintains, with a few exceptions, "is a simulacrum," an "out-and-out fraud" that

requires "a rigorous critical appraisal" or else "poets will only find it easier to lie" ("Busted" 3). Consequently, Starnino has published numerous essays and reviews in which he denounces the usual suspects (including Carson) as "charlatans" ("Busted" 6) and substitutes in their place a list of poets which includes "Eric Ormsby, David Solway, Michael Harris" and a few other Signal poets ("Stroll" 33; see also "Canadian" 31). In fact, if one examines the contributions of Solway and Starnino to *BiC* and *Canadian Notes & Queries*, their articles are almost exclusively devoted to denunciations of the "agenda-dominated camarilla[s] of movers and shakers" that they claim are stifling independent expression in this country (Solway, "Double" 26), yet at the same time they reiterate that "poets like Ormsby, Solway and Harris may be Canadian poetry's only hope" (Starnino, "Busted" 10; see also Starnino, "Vowel" 30; Solway, "Modern" 21). Likewise, when charged for a month with the weekly "How Poems Work" feature in the *Globe and Mail*, Starnino devoted his first three articles to Ormsby, Harris, and Karavis. The great irony of this aggrandizing campaign, and perhaps the reason for the Signal poets' resentment of Carson, is that she has fulfilled the fantasy that they have constructed for themselves in their editorial roles, yet failed to realize as poets.

In the interview with Solway, Harris complains about nepotism in Canadian publishing and concludes that "Canadian poetry needs to be exposed to the rigours of the international marketplace. [. . .] We should be vying with Faber, Cape, Farrar Strauss, Norton—the best poetry presses in the English-speaking world" ("Brilliant" 21). He does not remark that Carson publishes with Cape in Britain and uses a New York publisher (Knopf) in North America. Starnino, for his part, laments that Canada has yet "to serve up a single career able to guarantee worldwide attention for our verse. The question isn't where is out [*sic*] Yeats? But where is our Derek Walcott? Our Seamus Heaney?" ("Stroll" 32). Only a few months after Starnino published this complaint in *BiC*, an international jury awarded the 2002 T.S. Eliot Prize to Carson's *The Beauty of the Husband* instead of Heaney's *Electric Light*. This decision would seem to silence Harris' sarcasm, as well as to contradict Starnino's assessment of Carson as "unaccomplished" ("Busted" 9), but the news of the award should not rightly disturb Solway, because he regards "*The Waste Land* as one of the great literary hoaxes of our time" (*Companion* 128). It remains for Solway to prove that a conspiracy of Eliotic hoaxers has infiltrated prize committees in the United States, Canada, and England in order to promote Carson, but it is rather apparent that the Signal poets have colluded to use her media presence as a

platform for promoting their own dizzyingly incestuous productions.

The influence that Solway and Starnino have had also sheds light on the way in which literary reputations are made and unmade in Canada. Carson was largely ignored by the major newspapers in this country until *The New York Times Magazine* ran a feature article on her on March 26th, 2000 (Rehak). Rushing to catch up with the Americans, the *Globe and Mail* published an article the following week, in which poetry editor Carl Wilson declared that "Carson is where the action is in contemporary poetry" (D19). The *Globe* book section promoted Carson over the course of the following year—until she won her first major award in Canada, the inaugural Griffin Prize, and already she had become too iconic for Canadian standards. On June 16th, 2001, Lynn Crosbie published an article entitled "Something New Please O Universe" in the *Globe,* in which she praises "the genuinely gifted Anne Carson," but condemns the "rarefied" quality of the writing by the Griffin nominees (who included Don McKay and Robert Bringhurst). Less than a month later, Solway attacked Carson specifically in his *BiC* screed, thereby picking up from the conclusion of Starnino's 1999 essay, "Canadian Poetry As a Busted Flush," in which Starnino situates Carson alongside (the eminently talented) Dionne Brand and Erin Mouré in a list of authors who do not deserve to be called poets (9). Perhaps due to this Carson backlash in the literary press, the news that *The Beauty of the Husband* had won the Eliot Prize barely warranted a notice in the national papers, although Carson was the first Canadian and first woman to win the prestigious award. Eventually, the *National Post* responded to an article by Richard Potts in the *Guardian* (UK) in which the poetry editor laments that *The Beauty of the Husband* does not live up to the legacy of *The Waste Land* and the "canonised, totemic name" of Eliot (1). Potts worries that the selection of Carson will fail to distinguish the Eliot Prize from the more populist Forward Prize, for which Carson was also nominated, and he argues that *The Beauty of the Husband,* with its strong narrative dimension, "fails as poetry, simply because it shows either crashing inability or an unbecoming contempt for the medium" (2). Predictably, the *National Post* followed the example of the British press and published an indictment of Carson on January 31st, 2002, entitled "Poet or 'Prize-Reaping Machine'?" (Heer B5). The *Post* article begins with a discussion of Potts, but takes its title from an interview with Solway:

> "Carson is essentially not a poet, she is a prize-reaping machine," complains David Solway, a writer [now] based in Hudson, Que. "She is at the head of what we might call a gigantic pyramid scheme. Her reputation has been built up in

> such a way that all the people who have invested in it can no longer blow the whistle because the whole thing will come tumbling down on their heads. Anne Carson is our poetic Enron." (B5)

Scenting a whiff of scandal, the *Globe* rehashed the *Post* article two days later, using the same portrait of Carson and the same lead-off discussion of Potts and Solway. The title of the *Globe* article asks, "Who's Afraid of Anne Carson?" (Martin R3), and a number of individuals, including Starnino, voice their fears. Although this article offers a broader selection of opinions than its precursor, in the midst of the backlash it was of little importance that Michael Redhill and Dennis Lee defended Carson's writing. It no longer seemed to matter to journalists that contributors to the *Guardian* had nominated *The Beauty of the Husband* as Book of the Year in 2001 (Kureishi); *Men in the Off Hours* as Book of the Year in 2000 (Eagleton); and *Autobiography of Red* as "one of the finest volumes of English-language poetry of the [1990s]" (Kinsella 3). The potential collapse of Carson's reputation, like the actual collapse of Enron, was the news. And Solway, by a clever inversion, had positioned himself at the head of a new media pyramid.

But is the foundation of this pyramid solid? By all appearances, Solway is constructing his literary reputation in direct competition with that of Carson. As an intellectual, a grecophile, and a lyric poet from the Montreal area, Solway is vying with Carson for roughly the same readership and hoping to win the judgment of history, as he states in "The Trouble with Annie": "I console myself by remembering that the quickless Reverend Bowles was, if not the most influential, arguably the most celebrated poet of Wordsworth's day and certainly one of the most ubiquitous" (26). This jealous tone inspired one reader of *BiC* to taunt in a letter to the editor: "guess whose nose is out the joint at seeing kudos (in his opinion rightfully his) going to [Carson]" (Eldredge 2). Similarly, Jennings suggests that Carson should respond to Solway's diatribe by writing "*Autobiography of Green* starring Karavis" ("Letter" 39). The fact that a *Globe and Mail* poll on February 7, 2001, nominated Atwood, Ondaatje, McKay, Carson, and Cohen as candidates for the inaugural Poet Laureate position (Anderssen 1) certainly does not bode well for Solway, but he remains undeterred. He dismisses both the position and the nominees ("Wilted" 38), and continues to do his best to turn Carson into "a watershed figure: which side of her one falls on tells one and others who one is, as part of the literary community" ("Trouble" 26). On one side, Solway situates Carson and the "*'gullible' readership responsible for her election*" (26; his emphasis); on the other side,

Solway situates his early poetry and that of his heteronyms. He also elects himself to perform the heroic task of unmaking Carson's reputation:

> It is time the arrogant deceit implicit in such work were radically debelled no matter who professes to be appalled by the contumacy of my approach. Therefore there are times when one must speak explicitly, even if it is considered tactless and niggardly and abusive. And sometimes one must have the courage not only of one's convictions but of convicting others for their lack of such or for the impunity with which they continue to produce and extol such derelict material. (26)

While Solway's polemical tone has a hypnotic effect, his rant makes better fiction than criticism. There is more evidence of arrogance and deceit in "The Trouble with Annie" than in Carson's work. Although Carson has shied away from the debate and refuses to comment in the press (Martin R3), her enigma does indeed function for Solway as "a distorting mirror which is at the same time wholly accurate and orthogonal." Solway projects his criticisms onto the other that they might reflect back on himself. The polemicist does not lie in "The Trouble with Annie," then, so much as confuse the reader with his tone. What he expresses ironically in the Spectra passages proves more accurate than what he asserts sincerely in the bulk of his essay.

I would have liked to have concluded that "The Trouble with Annie" is a bizarre new installment in the Carson media narrative—an oblique acknowledgement of a literary debt combined with a mischievous attempt to dispel the effusive praise that even Carson has banished from the covers of her most recent books ("pwinterview" 57). This reading would have overlooked Solway's pedantic side and stressed the pranksterish one that has been in full force lately, as his American interviewer observes with amusement:

> Solway clearly relishes the practical-joke side of l'affaire Karavis, in no small part because it allows him covertly to tweak his countrymen. "Canadians are not a very exciting people," [Solway] says. "Like rubes at a carnival, they need to be poked, challenged, gulled, bedazzled, so that the collective jaw drops in something other than an insufficiently stifled yawn." (Downing 4)

However, in light of Solway's response to Sutherland and Jennings (who also cites this passage), and realizing that I am potentially another person whom Solway will declare does not exist, I am forced to conclude that "The Trouble with Annie" is a work so overburdened with contradiction and hypocrisy that its arguments are ultimately self-defeating. If one applies Solway's criticisms to his poetic practice, one discovers that he mocks only himself.

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Crystal Hurdle

# Second-hand Depression

You will not see yourself
in this
your new life a fog a filter
lost in yourself

*Sally is not herself*
Your father gently picking you up
in his arthritic limbs

Xanax Librium Zoloft Prozac
the lilt of their soft syllables uplifts

You might like to think so
but you're no Virginia Woolf
no Sylvia Plath

Hear suicide crooning for you
You can pretend it's Gentleman Death
the only Lover you'll ever know
He will hold your hand firmly
so courtly
even stroke your hair

Why not accept his calling?
It is your one talent

nefarious pleasure
secret guilt
a load off my mind

Tanis MacDonald

# The Pilgrim and the Riddle

## Father-Daughter Kinship in Anne Carson's "The Anthropology of Water"

When is a pilgrim like a photograph? When the blend of acids and sentiment is just right.
Anne Carson, "The Anthropology of Water" (170)

The pilgrim, as a devotional practitioner, blends physical exertion and deprivation with spiritual contemplation, mortifying the body in order to exhilarate the soul. Practising another form of devotion, the traditional elegist contemplates the grief of corporeal loss in order to reach a spiritual consolation. Movement towards elegiac consolation is conducted through a trope of seasonal change that implies infinite renewal, a pastoral symbology of resurrection through which the poet and the lost beloved are offered up to immortality. In Anne Carson's "The Anthropology of Water," the elegiac prose poem from her 1995 text *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry*, the narrator's pilgrimage to the medieval Christian shrine of St. James functions as a quest for viable mourning practices, framed by the narrator's attempts to read the father's body and speech through his dementia from Alzheimer's disease. The text considers the difficulties of male-female relationships (filial, sexual and fraternal) as these relationships are presaged, and often precluded, by the father-daughter relationship. The daughter's relationship to the father is explored as a parallel to the pilgrim's relationship to the saint, he who inspires the pilgrimage and the contemplation; for Carson's pilgrim, "Love is the mystery inside this walking" (145).

Carson begins "The Anthropology of Water" with the father's contention that some truths are "as obvious as a door in water" (119), and so sets up the paternal function as both "obvious" and revelatory, positioning the father as bearer of Aristotelian *logos*, rational speech (*Glass* 128). But this debilitated father has lost the capacity for rational speech; Alzheimer's-related dementia has "released some spring inside him, he babbles constantly in a language

neurologists call 'word salad.'" (*Plainwater* 120). This stream of indecipherable speech suggests paternal knowledge codified by divinity as well as by disease: "Father had always been a private man. Now his mind was a sacred area where no one could enter or ask the way" (121). The father remains beyond the reach of the narrator's love, even as she strives to read him as an untranslated (and ultimately untranslatable) text that will not yield to traditional consolation. The father figure haunts "Diving," "Thirst," "Very Narrow," and "Just for the Thrill," but his influence on the pilgrimage in "Kinds of Water" situates him as an elegiac figure. The Compostela pilgrimage is echoed twice more in the text, in the narrator's trip across the continental United States with her lover in "Just For the Thrill," and also in the brother's journey around and through a lake in "Water Margins." The endless road operates as an inscription of melancholia, and poignantly emphasizes the tenacity of grief. Carson uses the trope of the pilgrimage to test the tension between mourning and resistance, although her larger project concerns an epistemological inquiry into the vicissitudes of filial devotion.

Recent scholarly interest in the twentieth-century elegy has prompted a number of investigations into negotiations of power and subjectivity in women's elegiac poetry, particularly in family elegies. Celeste Schenck argues that the fundamental conventions of the traditional elegy act out "a gesture of aspiring careerism" that imitates a Freudian Oedipal initiation. Her assertion that women lack mentors whom they may elegize seems rather wrong-headed in the wake of third-wave feminism, when women have had some success in discovering female mentors and sometimes elegizing them. (Consider Maxine Kumin's "On Being Asked to Write A Poem in Memory of Anne Sexton," Gwendolyn MacEwen's "Fireworks" in memory of Marian Engel, or Dionne Brand's "Blues Spiritual for Mammy Prater.") However, Schenck's contention that women poets "tend to mourn their personal dead" more often than they mourn "predecessor poets" (15) is undeniable in light of the number of familial elegies written by women in the last two decades. Jahan Ramazani, in identifying the subgenre of the contemporary family elegy, suggests that female paternal elegies are attempts to "re-think the daughter's position within the family romance" (294). In Ramazani's view, the defining feature of the modern family elegy is its marked ambivalence about the devotion due to the dead, an ambivalence noted in Carson's "blend of acids and sentiment."

If the limits of corporeal representation are a fundamental concern in any elegy, the ambivalence towards filial piety in women's paternal elegies sug-

gests a desire to delineate, and perhaps dismantle, the fidelity demanded by the father's death. In *Beyond Consolation*, Melissa F. Zeiger names the twentieth-century elegy as "the crucial and constitutive place of the living person's ongoing affection relations with the dead" (64). These ongoing relations, affectionate or otherwise, often concern themselves with the daughter's desire to inherit the father's knowledge, and Carson's prose poem situates the father as dismantled by illness yet still greatly desirable. The sight of a parent's aging or debilitated body may often precipitate an inquiry into kinship between parents and adult children, as it does in "The Anthropology of Water," where Carson suggests a strong parallel between the father's corporeal debilitation and the narrator's emotional stasis. She mirrors his distress, rocking her body as he does, "making little lunges with [her] chest," and answering his utterances with a prompt "Yes Father" (120). Although his single clear statement—"Death is a fifty-fifty thing, maybe forty-forty"—is bewildering and intriguing, she does not ask the "simple questions" that it inspires (120). In an effort to negotiate her way through these unasked questions, Carson makes her elegist both a pilgrim and a philosopher. The narrator assumes the elegist's persona in order to inquire into ways to live with the limits of the body. She assumes the pilgrim's persona to search for a way of asking for penance, and she takes on the philosopher's persona in order to question the function of knowledge in a limited, sinful body. The roles of philosopher and pilgrim, devotees respectively of the brain and the soul, function as disguises for the elegist, that devotee of the body. The pilgrim and the philosopher ask questions that the elegist forbids herself, just as she forbids herself "the unwary use of a kinship term" (*Plainwater* 190). The urgency with which contemporary theorists examine questions of loss and mourning underlines the erotically dangerous possibility of living with a thinking mind that may be swallowed up by thwarted desire. To situate the elegiac impulse at the intersection of mourning and critical theory is to observe the ways in which those two demanding and capacious practices are ravenous consumers of death and desire, poised at what Carson calls the "blind point from which you watch the object of your desire disappear into itself" (*Eros* 145).

In her recent study, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*, Judith Butler wonders: "Is structuralist kinship the curse that is upon contemporary critical theory as it tries to approach the question of sexual normativity, sociality, and the status of the law?" (66). Butler discusses Antigone as a victim of "kinship's fatal aberration" (15), emphasizing how

Antigone's position as a female mourner for male family members (both her brother Polynices and father Oedipus) complicates notions of cultural privilege and gender in mourning practices. Questioned about Antigone's position in a just society, Carson asserts that Antigone operates as "an absolute insider, however radical that may be in any given time or place. It becomes very radical when other people value only outside things" (di Michele 13). The daughter-narrator of "Anthropology" struggles against the insistence of the Antigonal imperative; the narrator "wakes up inside a question" (*Plainwater* 135) and cannot distinguish the duties of mourning that Antigone takes up with passionate deference and decision. Butler proposes melancholia as a performance that negotiates for power, proposing that "autonomy is gained through the appropriation of the authoritative voice" that functions as "a simultaneous refusal and assimilation of that very authority" (11). If the paternal elegiac text pursues the father's knowledge as a function of mourning, the appropriation of the father's voice is problematized by the search for feminine subjectivity. The narrator of "Anthropology" attempts to appropriate authority through her manipulation of epistemological systems, but such systems only point to language as "an event of grievance" that does not satisfy as a mourning practice (Butler 80).

But what would satisfy as a mourning practice? The acquisition of the father's knowledge demands a kind of righteous melancholia, in which the daughter is unwilling to repudiate the father's word despite his loss of rationality. This emergence of epistemological concerns in women's contemporary paternal elegies is not surprising when considered alongside feminist psychoanalytic theories on the daughter's need to identify with the father. Jessica Benjamin claims a daughter's desire for her father's love is identificatory, "a homoerotic desire, a desire for likeness that often surfaces in the latency wish to be a buddy" (128), and asserts that "the complex nature of the father-daughter relationship has often been obscured by analytic acceptance of the fallacy that all opposite-sex love is heterosexual" (128). Jane Gallop proposes that the daughter's desire for the father yields an idealized fantasy of identification: " 'Love' has always been sublimated, idealized desire, away from bodily specificity and towards dreams of complimentarity, and the union of opposites, difference resolved into the One. 'Love' is tangled with the woman's complicity; it may be the bribe which has persuaded her to agree to her own exclusion" (79). The daughter's homosocial desires maintain the father's status as a desired subject while she remains excluded, even as his "buddy." Are contemporary female elegists writing out

of a desire to acquire the intellectual privilege of *logos*, or in order to dismantle privilege altogether? Carson seems to want both. In *Eros the Bittersweet*, she traces an epistophilic drive back to "an ancient analogy between the wooing of knowledge and the wooing of love," in which she claims that Socrates' knowledge was "*nothing but* a knowledge of 'erotic things'" (170; Carson's italics). In "The Anthropology of Water," the father's body and speech become an amalgam of knowledge and love that idealizes identificatory inheritance. The father's knowledge is trapped in his cryptic utterances; his pouring eyes become the physical manifestation of his silence, emphasizing the white space surrounding the text of his disjointed words.

Early in "The Anthropology of Water," Carson retells the Greek myth of the daughters of Danaos, fifty women who "loved their father so much it was as if they were parts of his body. When Danaos stirred in his sleep they would awaken, each in her narrow bed, staring into the dark" (118). The beloved father marries off his devoted daughters, all on the same day, to fifty bridegrooms, but the daughters' paternal loyalty asserts itself: "at midnight on the wedding night, fifty bedroom doors clicked shut. Then a terrible encounter took place. Each of forty-nine of the daughters of Danaos drew a sword from alongside her thigh and stabbed her bridegroom to death" (118). The forty-nine murderous daughters are cast into hell to haul water in sieves as their punishment, but Carson reserves special attention for the fiftieth daughter "who did not draw her sword. What happened to her remains to be discovered" (118). That which "remains to be discovered" concerns the agency of the fiftieth daughter, as well as her future. By allowing her husband to live, is she obeying or disobeying her father? Like Lear's Cordelia, the fiftieth daughter proves her love to her father by not proving it. She allows her husband to live and effectively to replace her father as her beloved. The murdering daughters are pathologically faithful; when the fiftieth daughter resists a fate in which she would remain "part of" her father's body (to invoke Carson's smartly salacious metaphor), her filial piety is impugned. By refusing to behave dramatically or pathologically, the fiftieth daughter escapes hell but also refuses the only form of father-daughter kinship offered by the myth.

Carson uses the discipline of anthropology to shape her questions about father-daughter relations, mindful of dangers of claiming kinship, suggesting "love makes you an anthropologist of your own life" (217). Butler asserts that female representations of the death of paternal figures are often problematically situated in sexual melancholy, and propose "a certain heterosexual

fatality that remains to be read" (72). Between what "remains to be discovered" and "what remains to be read," Carson and Butler, in separate projects, are zeroing in on a relational ellipsis between father and daughter that is indeed as dangerous as deep water. Butler suggests that female elegiac practices move towards a subjectivity in which "schemes of intelligibility make our loves legitimate and recognizable" (24). Assuming that questions of legitimacy do not refer to genetics, under what conditions could a daughter's love for her father be considered "illegitimate"? Such excursions into auto-anthropology are irrevocably challenged by the demands of filial piety. When the narrator of "Anthropology" admits that she is "afraid I don't love you enough to do this" (139), the ambiguous "you" in the pilgrim's journal suggests an expectant listener, an interiorized subject to whom she is obligated.

Jacques Derrida contends that writing about the dead demands an "unbearable paradox of fidelity" to an interiorized image of the deceased which has not yet surrendered agency: "we are speaking of a visibility of the body, a geometry of gazes. [. . .] *We are speaking of images.* [. . .] The image sees more than it is seen. The image looks at us" (*Work* 159-60). Derrida reminds us of the responsibility of speaking of the dead, but for a female elegist, this metaphoric gaze of the dead is highly problematic. Is this the gaze of Lacan's authoritative Dead Father, assuring that her regard is properly filial? If female elegists are caught in their fidelity to a male gaze from beyond the grave, then the elegy enacts only a muted feminine agency that is subordinate to a haunting male subjectivity. Fidelity is indeed an unbearable paradox for female elegists, not, as Derrida suggests, because of the impossibility of interiorization, but because of the patriarchal imperative that such interiorization serves. I prefer to sift this "paradox of fidelity" through Nancy Holland's question about Derridean mourning: "What becomes of the daughter in this hauntology, the daughter for whom the symbolic and the literal F/fathers, and thus also the duties and debts they engender, are always simply other, beyond any possible filiation or inheritance?" (65). A daughter's filial piety is more than paradoxical; it is linked to an imperative of loss. Paternal knowledge is denied to the daughter no matter how "true" her mourning.

Carson's version of "true mourning" has as strong a tie to Sophocles as to Freud, fuelled as "Anthropology" is by the ancient desire to be as devoted, and as satisfied to be devoted, as Antigone, that most devoted of daughters and sisters. When the narrator introduces the metaphor of men as water, an

element in which women may swim or drown, she reminds readers that water is an element in which, historically, women have been asked to demonstrate proofs of their virtuous femininity. Carson glosses the Salem witch trials when the male anthropologist figure tells the narrator about "a culture he had studied where true and false virgins are identified by ordeal of water. For an intact virgin can develop the skill of diving into deep water, but a woman who has known love will drown" (117). This formulation suggests a virgin with a hermetically sealed body, an untouchable Artemis figure. But at the same time, Carson's formulation of the virgin as the standard of "whole" woman begs the question of sexual experience. If a woman has "known love," would she not better understand the dangers of men as "deep water," and so increase her chances of survival? But Carson emphasizes the dangers of men as water, warning that "[t]he mechanisms that keep us from drowning are so fragile" (128). Carson's formulation of men as water reiterates women as beings who are vulnerable to drowning in the uncontrollable force of their own desire. The Romantic motif of drowning in desire is intimately associated with elegiac transcendence, whereby death by water provides deliverance from emotional and sexual frustration. Carson's "deep water" is as dangerous as the river or ocean of a traditional elegy, but water's masculine alliance with a Neptunian principle suggests that the danger of water threatens the female elegist as much as, or more than, the lost beloved.

Carson's metaphor of the father as "a door in the water" (119) creates a hinge on which the text swings back and forth from solid to liquid, from male to female, from father to daughter. A psychoanalytic reading would suggest that the father stands for the door through which a daughter must pass in order to reach adult womanhood. The father-door is a solid form in the threatening sea of the Lacanian symbolic order, a paternal life raft for the drowning daughter. When the narrator's war-hero father succumbs to "madness," her discovery that dementia is "continuous with sanity" (121) can be read as an insistence upon making meaning from the father's cryptic utterances, just as she constructs love from the smallest gesture of his undemonstrative manner.

Just as the daughters of Danaos loved their father so obsessively "it was as if they were parts of his body" (118), so when dementia begins to manifest in the narrator's father, he "lost the use of some of the parts of his body" (119). Physical debilitation is fashioned as a loss of the daughter, the "part of his body" to whom he has denied affection and recognition. The text's concern with his degeneration interrogates all the ways in which the father's body is

rendered opaque by his dementia; his body is unreconciled to the historical concept of the heroic male body, especially when contrasted with his military service. The narrator recounts her father's wartime memory in which German soldiers find nylon stockings aboard the father's downed plane and ask him "*Wo ist die Dame?*" ["Where is the woman?"] (209). Since he does not speak the language, the father cannot and does not reply; his silence and incomprehension parallel his tacit refusal to see, and accept, his daughter's increasingly feminine body. "Where is the woman?" is the fundamental unanswered question of this text, and significantly, a question that the narrator cannot (and does not) ask. If the narrator has difficulty in making her father visible to her questioning gaze, it can come as no surprise that the father as a Laius figure has failed to "recognize" his daughter since her adolescence.

The father's garbled speech presents as much of a problem to the narrator as his opaque body. As her father's dementia advances, his speech becomes increasingly cryptic and oracular. His inarticulate speech and uncontrolled body barely resemble his "known" text of order and masculine reserve: "Father was a man who knew the right way to do things" (198). But his love of order attempts expression even through his limitations. His pronouncement that "[d]eath is a fifty-fifty thing, maybe forty-forty" (120) indicates a some kind of surplus; the missing twenty percent implies something beyond death, something redemptive beyond physical deterioration. But the narrator offers no possible interpretation of this utterance, for, as much as it demands explication, the daughter does not ask; because the father can barely control his speech, she cannot (or will not) speak her question. The father's uninterpretable speech acts as an elegiac prosopopeia, a voice from the edge of consciousness that echoes Holland's contention that the father's *logos* will remain forever out of the daughter's reach. If the Lacanian Law-of-the Father ushers all children into the symbolic order, the daughter's struggle to find a key to "remaking all the meanings" inscribes both a return to and a rejection of the father as the bearer of *logos*. The father's struggle against his illness, and the daughter's struggle to receive the father's love, are certainly physical efforts, but they also represent the family's attempts to assimilate multiple versions of reality into their quotidian existence: "To live with a mad person requires many small acts of genius—the reverse of the moment when Helen Keller shouts 'Water!'" (121). This "reverse discovery" of water as the *logos* of madness and genius reminds us that the daughter was looking for "a door in the water" that only the father could provide. His mad utterances are as garbled (or as gargled) as if he is speaking underwater, thematizing

his madness as oracular wisdom from an element beyond the human.

The narrator's gaze upon the father's body, her "eye," is intrinsically bound up with, and frustrated by, Carson's play upon the confessional, elegiac "I." The act of riddling steps in as a substitute for the demands of the gaze to become a way to "be gentle when we question our fathers" (122). Despite the questions that the father inspires, he is interrogated very little in this text; the narrator's refusal of consolation manifests itself as a refusal to ask the questions that haunt her, especially the poignant "What is it that others know?" (127). Adam Phillips speculates in an earlier article on Carson that she defines "the power of love as a craving for something—knowledge, a person, or the knowledge that another person exists—that makes the difference visible and by doing so intimates the possible infinity of such differences, the sheer horror and exhilaration of how different we can be from ourselves" (115). Such studied horror at the differences between the father and daughter, and between the daughter's lived experience and her desire for love, brings "The Anthropology of Water" to examine the role that love and knowledge play in the desire for penance.

The text's use of riddles inscribes a melancholic mercuriality, proposing the pilgrim as philosophizing clown. Her first riddles display a vaudevillian razzle-dazzle, as her initial witty answers facilitate her deferral of mourning even as she moves, geographically and psychically, down the road to the place of devotion. The pilgrim seeks meaning as part of her penance; she embarks upon her pilgrimage in order to "look for the simplest question, the most obvious facts, the doors that no one may close . . . I was a strong soul. Look I will change everything, all the meanings! I thought" (123). The usual purpose of a pilgrimage to Compostela is to "ask St. James to change your life" (123), but the narrator wants "all the meanings" changed, and eschewing divine intervention, is determined to do it herself. However, a reconfigured meaning is very different from an answer. Her riddles represent an attempt to circumvent the rules of traditional philosophy, refashioning Socratic dialogue as a monologue that flirts with meaning while evading any clear answer.

As the narrator nears Compostela and potential apotheosis, her riddles become more simple and, paradoxically, less answerable. Carson notes that the heroes of Kafka's texts are trapped in their own psychic nightmares because of their inability "to ask the simplest question" (119), and so situates her narrator as both she who questions and she who will not, or cannot, give a simple answer. In an unpredictable world, Carson reminds the reader that "it is already late when you wake up inside a question" (135), and she

allows the questions to hang in the air, unanswered. The need to form and ask the simplest questions can impose order upon chaos, but even ordered, logical answers may bring about the pain that makes the most "alphabetical" ordered pilgrims "cry out" (143). "What is it that others know?" the narrator asks (127); how do others manage to love and not be destroyed by it? When the narrator suggests, "a pilgrim is like a No play. Each one has the same structure, a question mark" (148), she establishes the pilgrim as a philosopher who is also her own recalcitrant pupil.

Carson's inquiry cannot ignore the body's complicity in the structure of mourning. The riddles take on a corporeal concern, designed to "riddle" the human body full of epistemological holes: "When is a pilgrim like a sieve? When he riddles" (127). While this question cannot help but recall the punishment of the daughters of Danaos, its cheekiness also suggests subversive methods of survival, the fiftieth daughter's choice; Carson's pilgrim wishes for water (and men) to pass through her without drowning her. Riddling makes this particular trick of gender possible. She suggests the physical resistance to filial love and duty: "How is a pilgrim like a blacksmith? He bends iron. Love bends him" (176). The daughter bends towards her father's love (or the lack thereof), and the father fears bending to love his daughter. The father's illness softens him and confuses them both. Moving away from elaborate puns, the narrator begins to ask the "simpler" but less answerable questions, goading her own speech into seriousness. "What are we made of but hunger and rage?" she asks, invoking the insatiable Sphinx (175). Proposing a series of riddles as a philosophical inquiry positions the Sphinx as philosopher, and if this philosopher is a mourning daughter, this Sphinx may be read as Oedipus' challenging (and unacknowledged) daughter, with her riddles and her frightening, misbegotten body.

If the narrator acts as a Sphinx figure, the obvious Oedipus figure would be the father, and, good classicist that she is, Carson suffuses the text with images of blindness and madness, and frames the father as the embodiment of the Sphinx's riddle. Recall that the Sphinx's riddle concerns the aging body: the crawling infant Oedipus; the vigorous young man who kills Laius and governs Thebes; and the enfeebled blind Oedipus, a wanderer with his daughter, old before his time. Carson presents a parallel trio of vignettes about the father figure in "The Anthropology of Water." The father is a naïve young man who refuses to believe that his daughter will grow up to become a woman, then an older man who emphasizes righteous domestic order, and finally, the enfeebled "madman" who speaks cryptically and,

though not blind, is sightless. Like the cursed king of Thebes, whose physical blindness parallels his despairing insight, the father in Carson's text experiences a dementia that is "continuous with sanity" (121). This disconcerting play of sanity and madness manifests itself in an interpretative crisis whenever the father speaks to curse himself with "a sound not human" that Carson likens to a bodily mutilation (121), an utterance reminiscent of Butler's caveat that "language carries a violence that brings it to the limits of speakability" (80). These limits on the father's self-condemnation continue even as he smiles: "You bastard, you stupid bastard you goddamn stupid bastard you goddamn stupid useless bastard you" (216). The cumulative structure of these curses suggests a more structured utterance than the "word salad" about which the doctors have warned the narrator. He curses himself and, and in so doing, robs her of the privilege. His riddles transform him into an oracle whose putative wisdom must forever defer interpretation.

The father's difficulty with answering questions impedes his function as an Oedipus figure, and a curious shift occurs about halfway through the text. Carson's contention that "a pilgrim is a person who is up to something" (145) should be taken as a warning, for the pilgrimage seems to transform the narrator into an Oedipus figure. In asking the simplest but paradoxically most difficult questions, the narrator becomes a version of Oedipus in the grotto at Colonus, a wanderer whose knowledge of horror cannot satisfy the quest for meaning. Carson's reconfiguration of Oedipus as a young woman emphasizes the fundamental despair over gender that marks this text, perhaps suggesting that "a certain heterosexual fatality" includes an assumption of the annihilation of the feminine. When the narrator notes "My father and I shook hands on Christmas birthdays and farewells" (211), the controlled physical contact locates the father's fear of femininity in his daughter's body. The handshakes symbolize a stark, immobilizing fear of the physical body hidden behind a veneer of WASP *politesse*: "It wasn't until he went mad that I began to see I had always angered him. I never knew why. I did not ask" (122). The daughter is left with another "simple question" that is impossible to ask.

"The Anthropology of Water" is haunted by the persistent riddle of femininity: Where is the woman? How does she "always anger" her father? She turns into a woman, and worse, she turns into what the father refers to as "one of those helpless women" who cannot change a tire (198); her incompetence in outdoor living is painfully evident during the camping trip in "Just For the Thrill." But her adolescence was spent rejecting this kind of

helpless femininity, presaged by her father's gloating, "Oh, she won't be like them" (188); she won't grow up to be like other women, womanly, full of mysterious uncontrollable fluids. Upon hearing this comment, the daughter attempts to erase her gender. She grows into a body that is "hard and flat as the armour of Athena," sprung metaphorically from her father's wish to keep his daughter in an angular pre-adolescent body (189).

But if the father doesn't want the daughter to become a woman, neither does he seek manly competition with her. The narrator's attempt at embodying a paternally pleasing androgyny reaches an ironic crisis as a direct result of the father's physical debilitation. When the daughter returns from the woods with a Christmas tree she has cut down herself, a task she and the father have always performed together, Carson explicitly figures the father as Laius and the daughter as Oedipus:

> He was there in the kitchen. He looked at the tree and the saw and the ax. It was something perfectly quiet. "I didn't think you could do that," he said. Perfectly quiet. His hands hanging down. The tiny ticking kitchen. The snow-dark morning. It was draining from him into me. I had killed him. (205-206)

The narrator's possession of phallic tools, the saw and the axe, plus the singular signifier of the freshly cut tree, strike the father as surely as Oedipus struck Laius. Her pseudo-masculine performance is read as a usurping action instead of a filial homage. As father and daughter stand devastated in the kitchen, she feels his masculine privilege "draining" from him into her, and the unwritten extension of the metaphor of watery exchange suggests that she is flooded with guilt over accessing her father's agency. She becomes a pilgrim to seek penance for her symbolic patricide. The daughter acts as Sphinx and as Oedipus, a philosopher without answers, a mourner without a ritual to express loss, cut loose from Antigonal deliverance while still subject to the Antigonal imperative to mourn. Her body attempts to create an internal ritual of mourning; to appease her father's fear of femininity, the narrator does not menstruate for thirteen years (*Plainwater* 190). That "hard flat body" recalls descriptions of anorexic women who strive to maintain a boy-like body, accompanied by amenorrhea, a loss of the menstrual period brought on by maintaining a low body weight. The daughter's desire to "suppress the natural facts of 'woman' altogether" (189) becomes a bid for gender safety, as Susan Bordo asserts: "As [the anorexic's] body begins to lose its traditional feminine curves, its breasts and hips and rounded stomach, and begins to feel and look more like a spare, lanky male body, she begins to feel untouchable, out of reach of hurt [. . .] [and] she has unexpectedly

discovered an entry into the privileged male world, a way to become what is valued in our culture, a way to become safe, above it all" (23). In order to obtain the father's perpetually withheld approval, the daughter attempts, with some success, to become asexual, "a young, strong, stingy person of no particular gender—all traits advantageous to the pilgrim" (123).

However, feminine desire emerges in this text through the imagery of elemental fire. Phillips suggests that Carson is a Freudian, "if only in her sense that all language is the language of love, the language of self-betrayal" (116), and in "The Anthropology of Water," Carson's fire imagery represents the desire for the father's love that overwhelms the daughter. One of the pilgrim's early questions concerns the heat of desire that longs to be spoken: "What is the fear inside language? No accident of the body can make it stop burning" (141). The fire worsens on the journey, prompting the pilgrim's self-definition: "Pilgrims were people who were glad to take off their clothing, which was on fire" (154). The burning pilgrim endures the fire of rejection by imagining the relief of the father's soothing love, though the father's final utterance pronounces the daughter's desire for paternal love to be unquenchable: "Fires are the furthest in you are and the worst you are" (240). The father's transformation into an oracular figure gives him an authority that he did not have as a man who desired order above all else. The twisted syntax of "Fires are the furthest in you are and the worst you are," with its assonance of the half-rhymed "furthest" and "worst," is strangely and disturbingly lyrical. The "worst" and "furthest" fires in the human body are existential, and the "you" of the father's final utterance may be self-referential or accusatory. In this anthropology, what does the daughter-elegist do with the questions she forms? Is it preferable to drown in love or burn with memory?

Much in the same way that the narrator attempts to transcend femininity through her occupation of a body with "no particular gender," Carson writes the performance of penance as an attempt to go beyond pilgrimage. At the end of "Kinds of Water," the narrator travels past the cathedral that houses the bones of the apostle to arrive at Finisterre, the end of the earth (184). At this *ultima thule*, the text suggests a death as mysterious as that of *Oedipus at Colonus*, the corporeal vanishing that left no grave at which the distressed Antigone could mourn. "Kinds of Water" ends with the narrator lying, dead or dying, in the ocean off the rocks at Finisterre, a poetic death-by-water that fashions "Kinds of Water" into an auto-elegy, a journey towards the drowning about which Carson warns readers at the beginning of the text: "Clothe yourself, the water is deep" (118). The Sphinx throws herself into

the sea when Oedipus answers her riddle, and the narrator imagines an unspeakable answer to the riddle of "heterosexual fatality." When the narrator asks, "What is it that others know?" (127), the assumption that others have knowledge that makes love less bewildering makes the pilgrim's relationship to knowledge almost unbearably covetous. While this grandiose gesture affirms (and perhaps parodies) the tradition of the suicidal melancholic genius, the daughter acts out her monstrous self, and becomes the Sphinx as an embodiment of frustration. Caught in the "fearful ashy light that falls on the end of the world," the narrator's attempt to go beyond pilgrimage brings her not to transcendence but to a failure of the mind that echoes the father's madness. When Carson writes, "You take hold of my paws and cross them on my breast" (187), the daughter as dead Sphinx makes a ceremony of what Phillips calls Carson's "weird rationality of Eros that love is a ridiculous disfiguring" (115). The search for the union of *logos* and *eros* is ultimately thwarted in "The Anthropology of Water." Each section of the text repeats the journey that ends in frustration, whether the man fragments (the father), or withholds intimacy (the lover), or disappears (the brother). Though she is alive at the end of "Water Margins," she has transmogrified into a watching, curiously balding cat who "does [her] best" on the advice of the father (258, 260). The cat is doomed to "look out from very far back in its eyes," to observe the difficult and stealthy death that "ignores no one and never sleeps" (260). The cat, the silent observer, is an inverted Antigone figure, the devoted daughter who survives only to become subject to "too much memory," like her father before her (*Men* 101).

When Carson writes that "a question can travel into an answer as water into thirst" (122), she intimates a performable penance and a drastic cure for dutiful daughterhood, both of which depend on a pilgrimage towards knowledge. The pilgrimage ends with a declaration of faith, which presupposes in good elegiac tradition that death presents no obstacle to devotion: "I am one who has been to the holy city and tasted its waters, its kinds. / Pilgrims were people who carried little. They carried it balanced on the heart" (187). What happens to that which is carried off-balance: the unasked question, the untranslatable speech, the deteriorating body? Does that final taste of water offer consolation or another chance to drown? "The Anthropology of Water" carries forward an insoluble riddle about father-daughter kinship that refuses strategies of comprehension: "where is the woman?" The epistophilic daughter as unlocated woman remains a riddle to the reader and to herself.

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Ken Norris

# Too Much Joy

The sheer eloquence and bravura
of those blues seems enough
to slay me. To climb on the back
of sorrow and pummel it
with so much passion, the notes falling
like hammerblows, like fiercest rain.

I guess I was lucky not to be there,
because the shadow recording
of those proceedings seems enough
to flood me with too much joy.

# The Day

Deciding the day was unstable
was, perhaps, less than the best thing to do.
The sun came out, and lilacs bloomed.
I kept the sky at a distance,
but I was lost in shades of blue.

Andre Furlani

# Reading Paul Celan with Anne Carson

## "What Kind of Withness Would That Be?"

For my wife Mechthild Bauschen, 1961-2002:
zur Begegnung Führende

### 1

In a 1996 interview Anne Carson said, "I've been reading a lot of Celan. He's clarifying" (D'Agata 19). To fellow Montreal poet-professor Mary di Michele she later listed Celan with Dickinson, Pessoa and Stein among primary influences: "Economy and devotion interest me in these writers" (di Michele 9). An unpublished recent lecture, "If Body Is Always Deep but Deepest at its Surface: Translation as Humanism," is devoted in part to Celan's poem *Weggebeizt* ("Etched Away"), which she reads as a translation of his wife Gisèle Lestrange's etchings. In 1999 she published *Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan*, using the Bronze Age Greek poet as a means to explore the epitaphic quality of Celan's verse. Her poetic engagement with Celan's legacy is equally involved. For her adversaries this marks Carson as a mere epigone. David Solway, another Montreal poet and teacher, writes that what Carson does "has been done before, done better and done authentically—for example, by Akhmatova as by Celan" (Solway 25).

Carson's close attention to Celan's work could not, however, be confused with mere emulation. While Carson is indebted to Formalist doctrines important to Celan,[1] their affinities are limited. The discrepancies between the poets are not of the kind she would pretend to discount. She is of secular Protestant extraction, raised in post-war prosperity in English Canada, and Professor of Classics at McGill University. Her scholarship is influenced by feminist theory while her poetry reflects closest engagement not only with the Bronze Age Greek lyric poets but with Gertrude Stein. Celan in contrast was reared in modest circumstances in an observant Jewish family in what until recently had been the Habsburg city of Czernowitz, in the

Bukovina region of Romania. His parents perished in a German concentration camp while he was conscripted into a Romanian labour camp. Freed, he translated Russian texts into Romanian and studied Romance languages before fleeing to the West in 1947. He settled in Paris, where he lectured on German literature at the École Normale Supérieure until, after years of impaired mental health, he committed suicide in 1970. Philosophically oriented toward phenomenology, Celan experimented in a poetry that adapts Biblical cadences and themes to modernist strategies, exploiting the plasticity of German to craft a neologistic, elliptical and intensely suggestive idiom, whereby he recast a mother tongue undone by the Shoah.

Carson is frequently comic, self-consciously allusive and quotidian where Celan is elegiac, oblique and portentous. The ancient language she studied most closely was Greek, he Hebrew. His most conspicuous stylistic debt is to French surrealism and German expressionism, hers to Stein and American collage art. He is a poet of Orphic concentration and sombre musicality while she is expansive, whimsical and prosaic. And in contrast to the introspective lyric typical of Celan, Carson's characteristic mode is narrative.

Both poets have nevertheless been vilified for writing gnomic poetry, indeed for not writing poetry at all. Most gravely, both have been accused of writing someone else's work: the widow of Yvan Goll charged Celan in 1953 with pilfering her husband's verse; in a recent diatribe David Solway charges Carson with pilfering both from Celan and Celan scholar John Felstiner (whose *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* describes the devastating consequences of the scandal on Celan). Carl Hohoff took up Clare Goll's accusations and in 1955 published an article similar to Solway's, setting what he alleged were incriminating passages side by side before condemning Celan as a charlatan and second-rate imitator of a master poet's style. The Alsatian Goll, like Celan a German-speaking Jew who lived in Paris, had forged ties to surrealism, as would Celan later, and wrote (again like Celan) of Jewish dislocation and isolation. Both were polyglots who earned their livings in part by translating. (Goll, much of whose work is in French, translated *Ulysses* into German.) Celan's first major verse translation was of Goll's work.

Affinities between Celan's work and Carson's are easy to discern, as easy indeed as those between Goll's and Celan's. Goll's precedent obviously strengthened Celan's confidence in techniques he had developed in his first book, *Sand aus den Urnen*, published before he was introduced to Goll in 1949. Translating three collections of Goll's poetry in the early 1950s, while writing the poems collected in 1955 in *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle* (the book

which revived cries of plagiarism), permitted Celan to venture an encounter with the elder poet—one in a sense strengthened by Goll's death in 1950. Celan's precedent has analogously strengthened Carson's confidence in techniques she appears to have developed prior to making an encounter with the poet. (Her remark to Di Michele quoted above suggests that Carson began reading Celan in the mid-1990s, by which time she had published her first two books of poetry.) She probably honed her appreciation of Celan, just as Celan honed his of Goll, by translating the poet, as is reflected in the poems of *Men in the Off Hours*, composed while she was preparing *Economy of the Unlost*, lectures that include a number of her versions of his poetry.

Rather than the proprietorial terms Solway uses with the peremptory self-assurance of a bailiff, Carson's involvement in Celan's work might more faithfully be understood in the complementary terms Celan and Carson themselves apply to their creative engagements. In *Begegnung* (encounter) Celan found a term primitive to neat discriminations between exposure, reading, translation, and influence—indeed, in its aura of spiritualized tangibility, primitive to the distinction between presence and absence, even between life and death. The site of encounter offered him a margin of licence, where converged the yearning for self-effacement in, and the desire for self-enlargement by means of, the other's vitality. Neither masochistic self-denial nor vampiric exploitation was involved in cooperation with these guides to his own powers.

Behind this protocol of engagement stands another, perhaps decisive encounter: that with Martin Buber, before whom Celan is said to have knelt, the master's books in hand, when this philosopher of the spirituality immanent in all verbal exchange visited Paris in 1960. Buber, preserver of communal tales and translator of scripture, proposes that the truth-telling function of language inheres not in articulation per se but in dialogue—in *Begegnung*. (Indeed Buber had come to Paris from Munich, where he had been honoured for his efforts to re-establish dialogue between Germans and Jews, concerning which Celan questioned him [see Felstiner 161].)

The fullest expression of this notion Celan reserves for "*Der Meridian*," which like almost all of his few essays was written for a direct encounter, here an address in Darmstadt upon receiving the 1960 Georg Büchner Prize. He calls poetry a "leading to encounter": "*das Gedicht zur Begegnung Führende*" (61). He asked his Darmstadt audience, "*Aber steht das Gedicht nicht gerade dadurch, also schon hier, in der Begegnung—im Geheimnis der Begegnung*?" [Yet does not the poem precisely thereby stand, even here, in

encounter—in the mystery of encounter?] (55). He stresses how his readings open spaces where the encountered grant access to a utopian ground of origin; the encounters of poetry prove "*eine Art Heimkehr*" [a kind of homecoming] (60). They finally make the poet tangible to himself: "*Ich bin* [. . .] *mir selbst begegnet*" [I am myself encountered] (59). The degree of fostering reciprocity and eagerly undertaken encroachment involved in *Begegnung* renders it immune to anxieties of plagiarism as of anxieties of influence. Celan assumes no mere Poundian "pact" with the precursor but consent (recall him kneeling before Buber), indeed mutuality (as when Goll responded to the gift of *Sand aus den Urnen* by returning to writing poems in German, indeed a German suggestive of Celan's innovations). Such contact is of course unverifiable—a genuine "*Geheimnis*" (mystery). *Begegnung* thus operates rather as a "supreme fiction" in Wallace Stevens's terms, an enabling myth redeemed by the faith with which it is made to serve the exigencies and ideals of craft. It permits Celan as well to recover the classical and medieval ideal of the poet as member of a guild or sodality, and to extend it into the domain of reception, by inclusion of the reader and translator.

*Begegnung* furnishes a metaphysical recuperation of conditions most other poets (including Carson) can safely assume—those of home, community, audience—but which were unavailable to Celan, an orphaned stateless émigré in France writing in German, language of the murderers. What Celan shows—and Carson grasps—is this wider "mystery of encounter." In *Economy of the Unlost*, where she invokes this phrase, Carson approvingly stresses Celan's view of poetry as encounter between I and You: "The properly invisible nature of otherness guarantees the mystery of our encounters with it, pulls out of us the act of attention that may bring 'some difference' to light here" (71-72).[2] It is in these terms that she would attempt to meet him, and it is in these terms that one might usefully attempt to meet both.

In a section of "The Truth about God" called "God's Christ Theory," Carson acknowledges the theological enigma of "withness" (*Glass* 51): how is God "with" Christ, how is Christ "with" us? She returns to this conundrum in the preface to *Economy of the Unlost*:

> Think of the Greek preposition πρὸς. When used with the accusative case, this preposition means "toward, upon, against, with, ready for, face to face, engaging, concerning, touching, in reply to, in respect of, compared with, according to, as accompaniment for." It is the preposition chosen by John the Evangelist to describe the relationship between God and The Word in the first verse of the first chapter of his Revelation:

πρὸς θεόν
"And The Word was with God" is how the usual translation goes. What kind of withness is it? (viii)

She proposes no answers but, placed toward the end of her preface to a book subtitled "Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan," the question invites us to rethink notions of literary propinquity. Despite the mischievous pedantry with which she coins the word, "withness" stands as Carson's earnest attempt to adapt *Begegnung* to her uses: a term both cheeky and solemn, comical and sacramental. Almost every denotation of the accusative πρὸς suggests a shade of Celan's *Begegnung* and furnishes a model of contact corresponding to Carson's encounter with the poet: Celan is with Carson, who responds by approaching, engaging, touching, replying to, respecting, and accompanying Celan's work within and by means of her own.

## 2

Carson has attended to Celan's techniques in small ways as well as large. There are, for instance, the sonorous repetitions when writing of death, as in "Catullus: *Carmina*":

One carries.
One carries.
One carries it. (*Men* 38)

This compares with Celan's "Matière de Bretagne":

*Du*
*du lehrst*
*du lehrst deine Hände*
*du lehrst deine Hände du lehrst*
*du lehrst deine Hände*
*schlafen.* (*Gedichte* [1: 172])

[You / you teach / you teach your hands / you teach your hands you teach / you teach your hands / to sleep.]

There is the mundane chain of noun phrases mounting into mystery, as in the description of Orvieto in "The Fall of Rome":

On top
arises
a pedestal of volcanic rock.
On top of the rock is a word. (*Glass* 96)

Celan too makes abrupt transitions from elementary particulars to metaphysical statement, a device which permits both poets to hypostatize abstractions, treating mental constructs as objects. This, after all, is precisely what the builders and artists of Orvieto did, "shaping the word / into a cathedral" (*Glass* 96). In "*Ich hörte sagen*" ("I heard say") "word" and "stone" are bonded in much the same way:

> *Ich hörte sagen, es sei*
> *im Wasser ein Stein und ein Kreis*
> *und über dem Wasser ein Wort*
> *das den Kreis um den Stein legt.* (1: 85)

[I heard say, there was / in the water a stone and a circle / and over the water a word / which lays the circle about the stone.]

Celan's own poem about a medieval Italian cathedral, "Assisi," works similarly to describe St. Francis as the church's first builder:

> *Umbrische Nacht*
> *Umbrische Nacht mit dem Silber von Glocke und Ölblatt.*
> *Umbrische Nacht mit dem Stein, den du hertrugst.*
> *Umbrische Nacht mit dem Stein.* (1: 108)

[Umbrian night / Umbrian night with the silver of churchbell and olive leaf. / Umbrian night with the stone that you bore there. / Umbrian night with the stone.]

One may hear both poems in "Lazarus (First Draft)": "Inside the rock on which we live, another rock" (*Men* 21). In places the echo approximates allusion: "Hard, darling, to be sent behind their borders. / Carrying a stone in each eye" ("Mimnermos," *Plainwater* 6). "*Die Offenen tragen / den Stein hinterm Aug*" [The open ones bear / the stone behind the eye] ("*Rebleute graben*," "Vintners Dig," Celan, *Gesammelte* 123). Carson adapts Celan's literalized tropes, fusing an often unparticularized object with its figurative connotations. Thus Francis is both a Christ bearing not a cross but a stone, and a Christian Sisyphus (mythic builder of Corinth), as well as church-builder. Carson's "rock" meanwhile is both the earth and the earth's resistance to us; "another rock" is both Lazarus's tomb and the deliverance implied in his resurrection.

Carson follows Celan's practice of rendering nouns adjectively, as in "Hopper: *Confessions*": "You on the other hand creature whitely Septembered" (*Men* 58). Compare this with the untitled late lyric beginning "*Eingejännert / in der bedornten / Bahme*" [Januaried / into the bethorned /

rock recess] (2: 351). Arbitrary temporal divisions become agents, acting as psychological states with the sanction and force of seasons.

Sanctioned in part by the recovery of the Anglo-Saxon kenning in Doughty, Hopkins, Pound and Joyce, Carson exploits Celan's most distinctive lexical device, the neologistic compound. A section of "Catullus: *Carmina*" ends: "So then I grew old and died and wrote this. / Be careful it's worldsharp" (*Men* 40). A convincing compound is both an arranged marriage and an elopement. It is calculating and coerced yet should appear an unsanctioned flight into new possibility. The dictionary refuses to recognize the union, but this verbal infringement, though a defiance of linguistic propriety, is also an enlargement of the properties of language. Indeed this wilful aberration becomes the lexical embodiment of encounter: a model not of assimilation or integration but of equipoise, exchange and cooperation. Neologisms are unnaturalized compounds, the two elements retaining their integrity even while generating unforeseen combinations. Carson writes that neologisms "raise troubling questions about our own verbal mastery. We say 'coinages' because they disrupt the economic equilibrium of words and things that we had prided ourselves on maintaining. A new compound word in Celan, for example, evokes something that now suddenly seems real, although it didn't exist before and is attainable through this word alone. [. . .] It has to invent its own necessity" (*Economy* 134). If Carson's Orvieto cathedral is an affirming word (it proclaims "the word 'Live!'" [*Glass* 96]) upon "volcanic rock," speech in Celan strives to do the same with vastly more compromised materials: "*Wortaufschüttung, vulkanisch,/ meerüberrauscht*" [Wordheapings, volcanic, / sea-overswept] (2: 29). Such compounds suggest a tumultuous semantic exuberance difficult to separate from violence. The compound itself, be it Carson's "day-wolf" (*Men* 19) or Celan's "*Schneetrost*" [snow-comfort] (*Gesammelte* 105) is a heaping-up of words, where incompatibility conceals profound secret affinities.

Celan routinely appeals to an unidentified auditor, a "you" both intimate and unknown—a mobile token of company ghostly, domestic, and readerly. Carson sometimes invokes this auditor as well. A section of "Kinds of Water: An Essay on the Road to Compostela" begins: "Your voice I know. It had me terrified. When I hear it in dreams, from time to time all my life, it sounds like a taunt—but dreams distort sound, for they send it over many waters" (*Plainwater* 175). This disembodied voice, generalized yet specific, intimate yet unsettling, belongs to the awry logic of the dream. It is one of what

Celan calls "sleepshapes," the oneiric "you" appearing in Celan's late poem "*Alle die Schlafgestalten*":

> *Alle die Schlafgestalten, krystallin,*
> *die du annahmst*
> *im Sprachshatten*
>
> *ihnen*
> *führ ich mein Blut zu* (*Gesammelte* 76)

[All the sleepshapes, crystalline, / which you assumed / in the speechshadow // to them / I lead my blood]

Carson comments on this poem: "Whoever 'you' are, you are placed at the beginning and end of the poem, to enclose the poet in the middle and make his existence possible for him in two essential ways: for you take on shapes that he can understand and you give him a place for his grief" (*Economy* 70). Carson's rhetoric here arrestingly conspires with Celan's to affirm the vital reality of "you." "You" sheds its quotation marks, becoming the subject of her direct address as of Celan's. You thus give her as much as him understanding and a place for grief.

In the Büchner Prize address Celan calls the poem a "*Flaschenpost*" or message in a bottle:

> *Gedichte sind auch in dieser Weise unterwegs; sie halten auf etwas zu. Worauf? Auf etwas Offenstehendes, Besetzbares, auf ein ansprechbares Du vielleicht, auf eine ansprechbare Wirklichkeit.* (*Meridian* 39)

[Poems are also in this way en route: they are making for something. For what? For something standing open, engageable, for an addressable You perhaps, for an addressable reality.]

In "*Die Silbe Schmerz*" ("The Syllable Pain") he writes:

> *Es gab sich Dir in die Hand:*
> *ein Du, todlos,*
> *an dem alles Ich zu sich kam.* (1: 280)

[There appeared in your hand: / a You, deathless, / in which all things I came to itself.][3]

The You is both potentially a solipsistic projection and an idealization by which the shards of identity may textually reassemble.[4] For Carson it can be an enigmatic but enabling alterity, as in "Kinds of Water." This text culminates in the intercession of an unidentified, perhaps imaginary you, who rescues the pilgrim from an intangible menace: "Your action is simple. You

take hold of my paws and cross them on my breasts as a sign that I am one who has been to the holy city and tasted its waters, its kinds" (*Plainwater* 187). Carson's Compostela echoes Celan's Assisi; she makes a pilgrimage along the Camino bearing psychic equivalents to St. Francis's stone. Within the logic of "withness" the "you" who meets her at the "holy city" acts on the speaker of the poem as Celan acts on the poet, extending protection and conferring a sanction.

This "you" even becomes, however obliquely, Celan himself. In *The Beauty of the Husband*, the narrator's unfaithful husband has travelled with her to Athens to promote a reconciliation. Noticing her sadness, he asks, "why in your eyes—" but she deflects his attention by requesting tea. While he fetches drinks she is reminded of a line of poetry: "why sadness? This flowing the world to its end. Why in your eyes—" (*Beauty* 98). The lines derive from an epistolary poem sent to Celan in a letter dated March 10, 1958 by the expatriate German Jewish poet Nelly Sachs:

> *Warum diese Traurigket?*
> *Dieses Welt-zu Ende-fließen?*
> *Warum in deinen Augen*
> *das perlende Licht daraus Sterben sich zusammensetzt?*
> (*Briefwechsel* 16)

[Why this sadness? / This world-to-end-flowing? / Why in your eyes the pearling light of which dying consists?]

"Your eyes" are, in the context of this uncollected poem, Celan's. (He reciprocated four years later with an epistolary poem inspired by their first meeting, "*Zürich, Zum Storchen*," in which the "you" is its dedicatee, whose words close the poem.) Celan thus surreptitiously enters Carson's own poem, with uncanny repercussions:

> It is a line of verse. Where has it stepped from. She searches herself. Waiting.
> Waiting is searching.
> And the odd thing is, waiting, searching, the wife suddenly knows
> something about her husband.
> The fact for which she has not searched
> jerks itself into the light
> like a child from a closet. (*Beauty* 98)

By a kind of portentous happenstance, recollection of a passage from the sibling-tender correspondence between Celan and Sachs precedes—induces?—an insight into the protagonist's failed marriage. The figurative "light" in an Athens hotel room is also *das perlende Licht* of death in Celan's

eyes. (He indeed would drown himself in the Seine in 1970, less than a month before Sachs's own death in Stockholm from cancer.)

Carson can however praise in Celan powers which, in her own poetry, come under scrutiny. "*Sprich— / Doch scheide das Nein nicht vom Ja*" ("Speak— / But split the No not from Yes," as she translates it), Celan writes in "*Sprich Auch Du*" ("Speak You Too") (1: 135). Of the line Carson notes, "yet the German word order does split *das Nein* from *Ja* by the negative adverb *nicht*. In between No and Yes Celan places the poet's power to cancel their difference, his licence to double the negative of death" (*Economy* 109). The catechistic ending of *Economy of the Unlost* suggests compliance with Celan's imperative: "Is stammering a waste of words? Yes and No" (134). Yet, when the unfaithful husband returns with tea to the Athens hotel room in *The Beauty of the Husband*, and his wife confronts him with the truth mysteriously linked to Nelly Sachs's poem to Celan, this capacity proves a bedevilment. The wife's accusations can be parried easily because "he was holding Yes and No together with one hand" (*Beauty* 100). The ability to align affirmation and negation grants a terrible immunity to the mercurial husband. Celan's imperative can thus be exploited meanly, to deflect calls to account.

The cycle of epitaphic verses in *Men in the Off Hours* are particularly Celanesque. Terse, brittle and oracular, they measure frail human possibilities against the annihilating prodigies of superhuman and subhuman force. "Epitaph: Annunciation" reads:

> Motion swept the world aside, aghast to white nerve nets.
> Pray what
> Shall I do with my six hundred wings? As a blush feels
> Slow, from inside. (*Men* 14).

The world reduced and vulnerable, the objects in it precisely denoted yet enigmatic, occasionally being specifically yet perplexingly numbered: all this is characteristic of Celan.[5] And the body utterly exposed, whittled away:

> *Hohles Lebensgehöft. Im Windfang*
> *die Leer-*
> *geblasene Lunge*
> *blüht. Eine Handvoll*
> *Schlafkorn*
> *weht aus dem wahr-*
> *gestammelten Mund*
> *hinaus zu den Schnee-*
> *gesprächen.* (2:42)

[Hollow life's-farmstead. In the draught-screen / the empty- / blown lung / blossoms. A handful of / sleep-grain / wafts from the true- / stammered mouth / to the snow- / conversations.]

A wind that germinates as it denudes, a body that signals truths through—and by means of—its decay: these are redemptive paradoxes dear to Carson. The "six hundred wings" constitutes a curiously baffled whole celestial hierarchy of powers, or an outrageous proliferation of Rilke's angelic orders in the *Duino Elegies*. Rather than complementing the claim made in the first phrase, each of the subsequent three phrases confounds its sense, the confusion operating as well at the level of grammar. Within a more conventional syntax Celan's compounds accumulate a similar pressure on sense. Something, however briefly, is nevertheless being retrieved from oblivion and rehabilitated, its validity suggested by the very instability and disorder of its expression.

At the end of "The Glass Essay" the poet, abruptly and inexplicably reconciled to the loss of love, approaches in a vision what appears to be a Yeatsian figure of decline, a tattered coat upon a stick:

> It could have been just a pole with some old cloth attached,
> but as I came closer
> I saw it was a human body
>
> trying to stand against winds so terrible that the flesh was
> blowing off the bones.
> And there was no pain.
> The wind
>
> was cleansing the bones.
> They stood forth silver and necessary. (*Glass* 38)

Here is a hollow life's farmstead where, as in Celan, germination defies the void, and inarticulate sounds make valid speech. The sterilizing blast inadvertently disperses the seed in Celan, and it purifies in Carson.

As in Celan, the wind is a devastation in Carson's "Epitaph: Zion," which recounts an even more costly deliverance:

> Murderous little world once our objects had gazes. Our lives
> were fragile, the wind
> could dash them away. Here lies the refugee breather
> who drank a bowl of elsewhere. (*Men* 9)

That refugee from annihilating violence could be Celan himself, a survivor

who in exile remained fragile, and who tasted "elsewhere" both as an ideal (Zion) and a dislocation (Austria and France).

In *Economy of the Unlost* Carson asserts that, from Simonides to Celan, epitaphs provide, even while restricted to mere inscription, a mode of redemption:

> Salvation occurs, through the act of attention that forms stone into memory, leaving a residue of greater life. I am speaking subjectively. There is no evidence of salvation except in a cold trace in the mind. But this trace convinces me that the beautiful economic motions of Simonides' epitaphic verse capture something essential to human language, to the give and take of being, to what saves us. (95)

Carson proposes that, though the poet composed only one explicit epitaph ("*Grabschrift für François*" ["Epitaph for François"], for his infant), the spirit of Celan's verse is epitaphic. An epitaph is a speaking stone, is the dead speaking or addressed, thus a mode of encounter. She invokes "*Grabschrift*" as evidence that the poet "does seem at times to have entertained the notion that the dead can save the living" (95).

Carson is responsive to Celan's curiously devout lack of faith. She is a secular poet preoccupied with belief—indeed, as the quotation above suggests, with soteriology. Though her opera libretto *Decreation* may echo the works Gertrude Stein wrote for Virgil Thompson, the subject is the Christian mystic Simone Weil. (The unpublished recent lecture "Decreation" focusses on Weil and other female apophatic mystics, including Marguerite Porete.) To Mary di Michele Carson claimed that "a fundamental motive of thinking and making stuff [. . .] is worship. That is, apprehension of some larger-than-oneself thing. And that is what is missing from a great deal of modern thought" (di Michele 9). She cites Celan as an exception.

Exasperated worship characterizes Celan's relations with God, and some of Carson's finest poems, such as "The Book of Isaiah," describe just such a state. Her emphasis however frequently falls on the verbal formulas and the gendered constructions of faith, while the tone is often comic and acerbic. Celan's encounters with the émigré German Jewish poet Nelly Sachs, who remained devout, suggest how a poetics of *Begegnung* could allow him to enter into states alien to him. After a six-year correspondence they first met on Ascension Day 1960, near the Zürich Minster, the talk turning naturally enough to theology. Celan's notes record the conversation: "*4h Nelly Sachs, allein. 'Ich bin ja glaubig.' Als ich darauf sage, ich hoffte, bis zuletzt lästern zu können: Man weiß ja nicht, was gilt*" ["4 o'clock, Nelly Sachs, alone. 'I am indeed a believer.' When I replied that I hoped to be able to blaspheme to

the very end: One just doesn't know what counts"] (*Briefwechsel* 41). Three days later Celan wrote "*Zürich, Zum Storchen,*" based on their exchange. The poem begins by invoking the multiplicity of identities convoked in the second-person singular pronoun: "*Vom Zuviel war die Rede, vom / Zuwenig. Von Du / und Aber-Du,*" where the hyphenated pronoun can mean "Again-You," "Yet-You," or literally "But-You: "The talk was of Too Much, of / Too Little. Of You / and Yet-You" (214).

*Von deinem Gott war die Rede, ich sprach*
*gegen ihn, ich*
*ließ das Herz, das ich hatte,*
*hoffen:*
*auf*
*sein höchstes, umröcheltes, sein*
*haderndes Wort*— (1: 214)

[The talk was of your God, I spoke / against him, I / let the heart that I had / hope: / for / his highest, rattling, his / quarrelling word—]

The interlocutor replies, "*Wir / wissen ja nicht, weißt du, / wir / wissen ja nicht, was gilt*" [we / just don't know, you know, / we / just don't know, what counts] (214-15). The *Du* and *Aber-Du* converge in the knowing ignorance of the plural personal pronoun. For emphasis Celan isolates the pronoun on its own lines. What "we" know, in this variation on the Delphic wisdom of Socrates, is that we do not know—and as in Plato's Socratic dialogues this is knowledge of a high order. Between manuscript draft (see facsimile, *Briefwechsel* 43) and publication three years later in *Die Niemandsrose,* Celan had removed the quotation marks initially placed around the Sachsian interlocutor's reply, thereby reinforcing further the pronominal fusion and the validity of its utterance. Indeed the speaker has entered into a relation of withness with his interlocutor. Doubt of God becomes doubt of one's own capacity to judge of such a matter, as expressed in a strategy of verbal convergence.

Even Celan's most nihilistic poems tend to hypostatize the void. The very gap left by God's disappearance is made to assume deific agency. From its Biblical title on, "Psalm" proclaims this paradoxical mode of metaphysical renewal:

*Niemand knetet uns wieder aus Erde und Lehm,*
*niemand bespricht unsern Staub.*
*Niemand.*

*Gelobt seist du, Niemand.*
*Dir zulieb wollen*

*wir blühn.*
*Dir entgegen.*
*Ein Nichts*
*waren wir, sind wir, werden*
*wir bleiben, blühend:*
*di Nichts-, die*
*Niemandsrose.* (Celan 2: 225)

[No one kneads us again from earth and clay, / no one conjures our dust. / No one. // Praised be you, No one. / For your sake we want / to bloom. / Towards / you. // A nothing / we were, are we, will / we remain, blooming: / the Nothing-, the / No one's rose.]

Solemnly cadenced, its very occasion the paradox of apophatic belief, "Psalm" finds its metaphysical compensations in their absence. In "God's Beloveds Remain True," a section of "The Truth about God," Carson catalogues the outrages perpetrated on human beings as though—but only as though—they coincided with divine providence :

Our hope is a noose.
We take our flesh in our teeth.
The autumn blows us as chaff across the fields.
We are sifted and fall.
We are hung in a void.
We are shattered on the ocean.
We are smeared on the darkness.
We are slit and drained out.
Little things drink us.
We lie unburied.
We are dust.
We know nothing.
We can not answer.
We will speak no more.
BUT WE WILL NOT STOP.
For we are the beloveds.
We have been instructed to call this His love. (*Glass* 47)

Here is another *Niemandsrose* or No one's rose, whose abjection is not the result of an absolute desolation. No more than Celan's is Carson's the Darwinian abyss of mere chance. Celan's *Griffel* is not only a "pistil" but also a "stylus" or "slate pencil," which inscribes the text ("purple-word") of a song chanted, psalm-like, beyond the ravages of unredeemed nature. The densely figurative language of "*Psalm*" and "God's Beloveds Remain True" acts as a credential, signalling specifically human resources to which the poets defiantly, on behalf of us all, "remain true." Our "dust" in Carson is

no more conjured than Celan's "*Staub*"; we know in Carson no more than we do in "*Zürich, Zum Storchen*," but as in Celan negations culminate in concealed affirmations: "WE WILL NOT STOP."[6]

Where Celan's slippery levels of irony, however, are metaphysical (rooted in negative theology), Carson's are primarily historical. Stress falls not on the inimical effects of nature or on doctrines of deliverance from it, but on the historical conviction that such a deliverance exists. "We are the beloveds," "instructed" to understand even our despair as evidence of divine favour. This instruction of course derives from the Book of Job and Rabbinical and Patristic exegesis (most influentially Origen's) of the Song of Songs, by which the "beloved" Shulamite is by turns identified allegorically with Israel, the Church, and the soul in union with God. Celan repeatedly evokes the same Biblical texts and exegetical tradition.[7] Carson however emphasizes the gendered binaries of Judeo-Christian doctrine (see such other sections of the poem as "God's Woman" and "God's Stiff," which immediately precede this one), thereby undermining its validity in historical terms. That "we have been instructed to call this His love" is a sardonic incongruity. Human perseverance begins to seem a Beckettian endgame rather than a desert exodus to some redeeming Canaan. "*Psalm*" consequently reads both as more astringent and more consolatory than "The Truth about God." "We sang" and, in the reading, are singing still some primary psalm of praise. In Carson, we are, on the other hand, passive and very possibly hoodwinked pupils of the agents of an apathic deity. This she presents not as a transcendent destiny but as a curious historical imperative. Her poems often ask why we construct and maintain, despite their futility, narratives of this kind. Her series of "TV Men" poems explore, for instance, the role of mass media in reinforcing the passivity and ignorance that help to perpetuate such narratives. Her poems express an aghast fascination with pain and with the metaphysical rationalizations of its causes.

A later section of "The Truth about God," "God's Christ Theory," is characteristic in deflating its own tentative metaphysical assertions by showing their conflict with history. The poem reads as an urbane and canny response to one of Celan's best-known poems, "*Tenebrae*":

> God had no emotions but wished temporarily
> to move in man's mind
> as if He did: Christ. (*Glass* 51)

Celan's poem concerns the limitations inherent in the scheme Carson describes, for what can a deathless, apathic deity truly know of human suffering (πάθος, passion) or of death (the Passion)?

> Not passion but compassion.
>
> *Com*—means "with."
> What kind of withness would that be? (*Glass* 51)

Unlike her phrasing of this question in the preface to *Economy of the Unlost*, here the question is dubious, indeed facetious: God cannot "feel with" (exhibit com-passion toward) his mortal surrogate.

As God translates himself into Jesus, and *com* translates into "with," so the poem translates the "theory" of "God's Christ Theory" into its application, Jesus becoming now an all-too-human friend:

> Translate it.
> I have a friend named Jesus
> from Mexico.
>
> His father and grandfather are called Jesus too.
> They account me a fool with my questions about salvation.
> They say they are saving to move to Los Angeles. (*Glass* 51)

The poet's friend in Jesus is not some Baptist projection of a personal saviour but an economic migrant whose notion of salvation is deflatingly secularized, his New Jerusalem contracted into Los Angeles. Jesus is a mere moniker, a mobile token of merely vestigial religious implication, like the name "city of angels" itself. One saves not oneself but one's money. The poem thus mocks the theological and etymological concerns of its opening stanzas. For a modernist poet these men would be passive participants in a social order intent on their physical, moral and spiritual displacement in order to advance the mercantile and imperialistic aims of an urban, secular, international elite. Carson invites a different response by dramatizing a dialectic in which the poet's judgment enjoys no priority. The local and contemporary challenge and even overturn speculation. Carson yields to the authority of history. By contrast, in Celan—and this signals his continuity with German modernism—history ultimately furnishes temporal indices of metaphysical facts.

His "*Tenebrae*" shows this:

> *Windshief gingen wir hin,*

*gingen wir hin, uns zu bücken*
*nach Mulde und Maar.*

*Zur Tränke gingen wir, Herr.*

*Es war Blut, es war,*
*was du vergossen, Herr.*

*Es glänzte.*

*Es warf uns dein Bild in die Augen, Herr.*
*Augen und Mund stehn so offen und leer, Herr.*

*Wir haben getrunken, Herr.*
*Das Blut und das Bild, das im Blut war, Herr.*

*Bete, Herr.*
*Wir sind nah.* (1: 163)

[Askew we went forth, / we went forth, to bend ourselves / toward hollow and ditch. // To the watering-place we went, Lord. // It was blood, it was, / what you shed, Lord. // It gleamed. // It cast your image into our eyes, Lord. / Eyes and mouth stand so open and empty, Lord. // We have drunk, Lord. / The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord. // Pray, Lord. / We are near.]

Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that even so scabrously irreverent a poem, in which death establishes our unity with Jesus at the expense of any faith in transcendence, ultimately reaffirms Christian teaching: "By taking seriously and accepting it as the destiny of human beings beyond all hope and comfort, the poem approaches the ultimate intention of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation" (176). From its inversion of Friedrich Hölderlin's "Patmos" ("*Nah is, und schwer zu fassen, der Gott*": "Near is, and hard to grasp, the Lord" [Hölderlin 177]), to its faith not in the Resurrection but in commonality in suffering, "*Tenebrae*" is anything but a novel restatement of Christian doctrine. For Gadamer, who does not consider the poet's relation to the Crucifixion in terms of his Judaism, "it is precisely this martyrdom upon which our unity with him [the Lord] and our closeness to him rests" (195). For Celan, however, the basis of any such unity would be the Lord's forsaken state, from which human witnesses alone could rescue him.

"*Tenebrae*" hovers between blasphemy and compassion, whereby the poet may share in the Crucifixion as one mortal witnessing the final suffering of another. The "withness" that puzzles Carson and provokes her wry scepticism is in "*Tenebrae*" transferred from God to the Creation: We are with the

Lord, rather than God being with us. Shared destitution is the basis of a new covenant between crucified and witnesses, one which excludes God. By drinking from this blood sacrifice we acquire the sanction to receive, rather than to utter, a very different Lord's prayer. Here is the prayer of a non-practising Jew (whose wife was the daughter of a pious Catholic, aristocratic French family), recovering from the crucified Jew a mode of reverence at odds both with Judaism (as in the defiance of the kosher law against ingesting blood) and with Christian teaching.

In Carson and Celan God is chillingly remote and unappeasable, yet fulfilment of divine providence depends on human intercession.[8] Such intercession must however not be confused with union. Celan's religious poetry is in the tradition of the lyric petition, of private prayer made public, inaugurated by the Psalms. They are intimate, searching, helpless. Carson by contrast is often cheeky and self-disparaging. "My Religion" announces "My religion makes no sense / and does not help me / therefore I pursue it" (*Glass* 39). This non sequitur is a comic variation on a Kierkegaardian paradox. She then speculates that, for all our blind contortions of piety, God may simply have wanted "some simple thing" that struggles in vain to communicate itself. In an echo of Donne's sonnet "Batter My Heart," Carson feels the thought of this simple thing "battering" against the walls of our unnecessarily complex conceptions of the divine: "It batters my soul / with its rifle butt" (40). The agent of violence is not God but an intellectual image of thwarted divine yearning.

Carson's "The Book of Isaiah" again presents God as deficient, because yearning, who finds completion only in human acquiescence to his (compromised) power. The poem includes other Celanesque elements, from the neologism "worldsheet" ("Inside Isaiah God saw the worldsheet burning" [*Glass* 107]), to a phrase reworked from the "*Grabschrift für François*"; when Isaiah refuses to praise God, God responds by projecting before him a vision of global conflagration: "All the windows of the world stood open and burning" (114). The image opens Celan's epitaph on the death of his infant son, quoted in full in *Economy of the Unlost*: "*Die beiden Türen der Welt / stehen offen*" (1: 105). Carson translates the phrase as "The two doors of the world / stand open" (*Economy* 86). Whereas Celan describes the doors of birth into, and death out of, the house of life, Carson describes windows onto unredeemed human suffering. The conflagration is part of God's tactic to tempt Isaiah with the role of deliverer: "I tell you Isaiah you can save the nation" (*Glass* 115). While he hesitates Isaiah has another, more

immediate vision, of God's curious susceptibility:

> The wind was rising, God was shouting.
> You can strip it down, start over at the wires, use lions! use
> thunder! use what you see—
> Isaiah was watching sweat and tears run down God's face. (115)

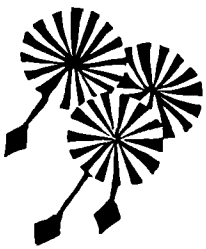
The fire projected and the effort exerted to win his prophet's submission exact a toll on God's all-too-human body. Not only Adam must sustain himself by the sweat of his brow; not only the angel who appeared before Jacob must wrestle with a mortal. Divine lack however does not imply divine impotence, and God retains in Carson as in Celan a terrible (because confused) elemental power. This violence secures a harsh covenant:

> Okay, said Isaiah, so I save the nation. What do you do?
> God exhaled roughly.
> I save the fire, said God.
> Thus their contract continued. (115)

Carson's are not the plagiarisms of an unscrupulous admirer or mere borrowings for effect but encounters, efforts to overcome the formidable hindrances to passage through an alien yet exemplary body of work. Carson has, like any poet who admires his work, heard herself addressed in Celan's "*Du*," and she has answered, indeed as had Sachs, with poetic messages placed in the very bottles in which she received his. This encounter is for Carson as close an approach to "withness" as a poet may achieve: a humble and compassionate proximity, free of paternalistic anxieties regarding precedence or derivation, and inseparable finally from a higher devotion. Hers is an approach toward, an engagement with, a reply to and an accompanying of Celan, rather than a plundering.

Does Carson take from Celan?

Yes and No.



NOTES

1 "Yes, the estrangement, the discomfiting of the reader, has some deep purpose I'm not quite aware of. It comes and goes in my writing; it comes and goes as an emotion," Carson states in an interview, suggesting that her intentions resemble those of Gertrude Stein: "to defamiliarize and therefore cause a friction of mind and spirit in the taking up of the page into the reader's mind" (Irvine 82-83). In a later interview she says, à propos the title *Men in the Off Hours*, "If you can get your mind at an angle—you'll notice this in teaching, that when students are suddenly a little displaced from what they thought they thought, they begin to actually think. But that angle is hard to get to" (Deslauriers and Cantwell 5).

2 "Some difference" quotes her translation of the phrase μεταβουλία δέ τις φανείν Ζεῦ πάτερ, έκ σεο ("may some change of mind appear from you, father Zeus") from Simonides' Danaë fragment.

3 The italicized first person singular pronoun translates Celan's capitalization of it.

4 "*Sharben,*" or "shards," is how Celan characterizes mankind in "*Vor Mein*"—"Before My" (*Gesammelte* 81).

5 See for example "*Einmal*" and "*In den Flüßen nördlich der Zukunft*" ("Once" and "In the rivers north of the future") (1: 107 and 14).

6 "The interesting thing about a negative, then," Carson writes in *Economy of the Unlost*, "is that it posits a fuller picture of reality than does a positive statement" (102).

7 The iconography of The Song of Songs, where roses and thorns proliferate, is unmistakable in "*Psalm*": e.g., "I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valley. As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters" (2: 1-2). This underscores the poem's oblique fidelity to Judaism. "*Todesfuge*" ("Death-Fugue") meanwhile alludes directly to the Biblical book: "*Dein aschenes Haar Schulamith*"—"your ashen hair Shulamite" (1: 41).

8 Among Celan's modern precursors this notion is elaborated upon in Rilke's prose cycle *Geschichten vom lieben Gott*, but it can be traced at least as far back as Angelus Silenius (Johannes Scheffler) in, for example, the couplet "*Gott lebt nicht ohne mich*" ("God does not live without me").

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Gil Garratt

# No. 2. (from the Naked Book of Need)

No need for cold here worlds of only things
(so busy widening all of should be grows)
when couldbes dangle at the edge of lips
where with is have and without oh no please.

How always birth forevers I don't know
but should we now and gently nurse each then
(how else can come evolve into arrive?
and all our heres move safely through the theres?

that then through this are thoroughly begins)
so into with and out of no we'll go
and once we're where, we'll become everyplace
that ever was or ever dreamt of yes.

Would you be all if every was the choice?
(the way that steam is more than echo ice? than echo ice?

Sarah Klassen

# Poems for Advent, 1997

1.
He comes at last, the long-awaited painter
in working clothes, carrying ladders, paint-
spattered dropsheets. He'll cover everything
and scan each wall for cracks
caused by the building shifting,
plaster and scrape, making rough places plain.
If he's inclined he'll hum
*Lo how a rose ere blooming*
while I remove from every room all hindrances:
the vining ivy, ornaments, those matched lamps
that might get in the way of things. Myself.

When everything is ready he'll begin.

2.
In church a small girl leans her shampooed
ribboned head against my arm and falls asleep.
I cannot rise to sing *O Come Emmanuel*
or kneel to pray.
Her breathing is a lullaby, her cheeks pink porcelain,
her chubby fingers splayed like stars.
Two candles flicker and the choir
sings: *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree.*

Two weeks before the incarnation and this child
dreams while the preacher's text from Genesis
probes the indifferent darkness that the light
appearing silently midwinter in a makeshift cradle
will overcome.

3.
I wanted to look up, just after sunset
for that rare conjunction of the planets
newspapers promised. Night after night

the southwest sky stayed dull, the sullen
overcast too thick to let light through. Now
the portentous pattern's gone, the evening
sky a blaze of constellations, lone planets,
dazzling lights of an aircraft coming home to land.

At Bird's Hill Park we ski by candlelight.
Someone's deployed at intervals along the trail
a hundred Safeway bakery bags half-filled
with snow, to hold lit candles. The tenuous
flickering dispels the darkness as we glide
into and out of modest radiance. We sing,
uncertain angels, our hope for holiness and joy,
munch Christmas cookies in the warming hut.

Reshouldering our backpacks, snapping
our skis back on, we move, warm shadows
through the silent night. The candles spent,
we scan the starry sky for planes, fixed planets,
the progress of a satellite.

4.
It's taken weeks to read this long
biography about a woman of whose life
little is known. Her poems are the map
from which the author reads the arduous
odyssey this Amherst woman undertook,
traces her ongoing quarrel with the Lord
God of Hosts. She fought with him as Jacob
at Peniel fought. For personal autonomy,
integrity. Fought for dominion. Blessing.
Only when the rest of Amherst almost
without noticing had laid to rest that
fervency of faith, when she had laid to rest
her father, mother, those young friends dying
in childbirth, the incarnation gave her hope.
Good news passed on by word of mouth,
a rumour become credible at last. This tale
fills up the advent weeks, it keeps me waiting
as at Amherst Emily with obdurate resistance
waited for the light.

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# ]Thought ]Barefoot

**Anne Carson**

*If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho.* Knopf $41.95
*Economy of the Unlost (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan).* Princeton UP n.p.

Reviewed by Chris Jennings

The amazing thing about *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* is that Knopf has printed this translation at all. It testifies to the popular and economic success Anne Carson has fashioned from the commercially challenged fields of poetry and classics—but "printed" fails to capture the material presence of the book. The jacket is almost entirely white except for Carson's name, the book's title and two fragments of papyrus. "Fragments of Sappho" is in red, and the Greek text (this is a bilingual edition with facing text) is also in red, the English in black. The translation covers 354 strikingly blank pages—the Greek and English texts making a few small red or black marks on a tundra of white. Many pages contain one or two lines, others only a few words separated by space. Below Fragment 124, "and you yourself Kalliope," there is a small defect in my copy, a pinprick of black ink that looks like a falling leaf at a great distance. It seems significant.

With the possible exception of that defect, very little about the presentation of this book is insignificant. Carson once described her own poetics as "painting with thoughts and facts," a notion derived from "dealing with classical texts which are, like Sappho, in bits of papyrus with that enchanting white space around them, in which we can imagine all of the experience of antiquity floating but which we can't quite reach." She describes that experience more succinctly here when explaining her use of square brackets to indicate where those bits of papyrus have been destroyed or rendered illegible. The brackets "imply a free space of imaginal adventure." Space is integral to the experience; as the materials preserving the poems deteriorate, they reinvent them. The only words in Carson's version of Fragment 12, for example, read: "]thought / ]barefoot," and it is hard not to read the string of square brackets that precede and follow as the footprints of thought running down the page, a record of past presence—even though there is no reason to assume that the adjective "barefoot" modifies "thought" or even that "thought" is a noun and not a verb in the past tense.

There may be a reason in the Greek. Words, or parts of words, appear on five lines of the facing text, little enough that David Campbell leaves the fragment out of his Loeb edition of *Greek Lyric.* Comparing across the gutter hints again at the necessity of "imaginal adventure" on the part of the translator. In her introduction, Carson cites Benjamin's idea that translation "calls into" a language from the outside, "aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one." Finding the "single spot" depends on the translator being able to identify the "intention toward

language" of the original, a task made practically impossible by the state of Sappho's papyri. Instead of an irretrievable original, Carson gives something of the experience of reading those fragments, of speculating about how the surviving words, thoughts, and facts might once have connected. Here, translation is the art of identifying the implication toward language from the accident of what survived.

In *Economy of the Unlost*, Carson discusses the convergence of pecuniary and poetic economy involved in composing an ancient Greek epitaph. She writes: "[s]ome engravers liked to enhance the effect of an inscription by painting the letters after they were cut, [. . .] sometimes alternating lines of red and black." *If Not, Winter* may not be an epitaph, but printing the Greek in red, the English in black, makes the book resemble this kind of inscription, this dedication to the dead. It also suggests that, as a representation of Sappho, it is a "false sail" as Carson uses the topos in the prologue to *Economy*. A false sail is a statement contrary to fact of the kind invoked by Aristotle's description of metaphor as a mistake "that enriches the mere truth once you see it as that." (Tristan and Aigeus, Carson's examples, react before they see the mistake.) Carson's translations of Sappho are metaphors, distinct from their original, but tellingly, enrichingly, alike. Sappho's shadow extends through most of Carson's work, beginning with *Eros the Bittersweet*, so perhaps metaphors and mistaken identities extend back from the poems to the poets as well.

Carson connects Simonides and Paul Celan on the basis of economy. Her basic question in *Economy of the Unlost* is both broad and simple: "Humans value economy. Why?" The word means management according to the OED but that does not explain why "economy is a trope of intellectual, aesthetic, and moral value." The more precise measure of the trope lies in its implications of saving, of managing to do the work of much with little. Speaking of measure, as a verb "value" means primarily to "appraise as being worth a specified sum" and resonates with the same monetary implication as economy. Only metaphorically, as a trope of exchange, does value move from quantity to quality, taking on the sense of appreciate or esteem. For Simonides, "placed [. . .] on the cusp of two economic systems," one creating community in the exchange of gifts, the other creating commodities in the exchange of money, the trope works in reverse. For Celan, who wrote in the German language of his persecution, "saving" meant something different from hoarding or reserving; it meant redeeming, "replacing death with certain salvaged words, day and day about."

Carson locates the link between poetic and pecuniary economy in the moment when money began to mediate Simonides' exchange of poetry for hospitality, of posterity for present need. Money made the poet "sharply aware of his own exchange value as a producer of poetry." He became a commodity, one difficult to measure or assign a monetary equivalent. At root, for a poet of encomia, *epinikia* 'epitaph', it is a question of the value of memory. The poet preserves (or, put economically, saves) the memory of the subject (customer?). The question becomes a dilemma for Celan, for whom the alienating language of the society that destroyed his family and community is also the language of memory.

Poetry is difficult to commodify because it accesses the immeasurable, what Carson calls "the invisible" and extends to the past and the divine. "Poetic language has this capacity to uncover a world of metaphor that lies inside all our ordinary speech like a mind asleep," she writes, referring to Simonides' poem about Danaë and Perseus. This internal economy, the exchange of the invisible with the visible, resists external commodification. Poetic economy depends on the ability to harmonize the two forms

of exchange, to access the immeasurable in measured words, to put much into little the way a brief epitaph memorializes a life, or the way negation ("'This is not that'") "requires [the] collusion of the present and the absent on the screen of the imagination," "evoking the absent to measure it against the present."

Carson's method partakes of her subject here (as elsewhere, as always), its economy resisting expansion into paraphrase. The implications of her argument touch both the roots of metaphor and the relevance of concrete poetry, to suggest one example of that expansion. *If Not, Winter* is a better example, one that doesn't resort to explanation.

## The Battle of Tango

**Anne Carson**

*The Beauty of the Husband: a fictional essay in 29 tangos.* Knopf $33.00

Reviewed by Julie Archer

The beauty in this work begins before the reader even opens the book. *The Beauty of the Husband: a fictional essay in 29 tangos* is a handsomely designed text with a detail from a painting by Ingres on the front of the dust jacket and a detail from a letter by John Keats on the back. Inside, the pages are wide, made of thick, creamy paper. Underneath the dust jacket, the cover is a textured oxblood paper with burgundy cloth. This is all quite fitting for a book whose short blurb reveals that it is "an essay on Keats's idea that beauty is truth, and is also the story of a marriage"—if a somewhat ironic exterior for a book of poems about a beautiful but mendacious husband.

The book's curiously specific subtitle, "a fictional essay in 29 tangos," is familiar Carson territory. Carson is becoming as recognized for her genre bending and blending as she is for her writing itself. Her first book, *Eros the Bittersweet*, mixed creative essay-writing with Greek scholarship, and she intrigued and bewildered readers with her 1998 book, *Autobiography of Red.* Subtitled *a novel in verse*, the latter included an inventive re-telling of the Greek myth of Herakles' tenth labour, recasting Geryon, the red-winged monster, as a Canadian youth (wings intact!) and Herakles as his lover.

*The Beauty of the Husband* is the story of a marriage and the seductive power of beauty that continues between two people, even after the relationship has soured. The husband is chronically unfaithful and lies about everything—"Money, meetings, mistresses, / the birthplace of his parents, / the store where he bought shirts, the spelling of his own name." The wife observes:

> Loyal to nothing
> My husband. So why did I love him from
> early girlhood to late middle age
> And the divorce decree came in the mail?
> Beauty. No great secret. Not ashamed to
> say I loved him for his beauty.

Years after she divorces him, the wife still yearns for his letters, which "arrived far less often than food should."

A short description inside the dust jacket explains, rather ominously, "[a] tango (like a marriage) is something you have to dance to the end." *The Beauty of the Husband* contains twenty-nine numbered and titled poems that are like chapters—the "tangos" of the subtitle—mostly written in alternating short and long lines. Each of the poems is prefaced by a fragment of Keats, taken from various works and marginalia, ranging from "The Eve of St. Agnes" to his notes on *Paradise Lost.* Tango I, with a typically long title, declares, "I dedicate this book to Keats (is it you who told me Keats was a doctor?) on grounds that a dedication has to be flawed if a book is to remain free and for his general surrender to beauty." Each poem is a tango unto itself, with its musings on beauty and truth in the voices of the wife and the husband (and occasionally their friend Ray, the only one named).

Collectively, the poems describe this tango of a marriage that goes on long after the divorce papers declare it officially over.

While the poems describe the same relationship, the point of view changes. Often the perspective of the poems belongs to the wife, who reports her thoughts and observations in the first person while representing the voice of the husband in recreated dialogue or through his letters. Occasionally the wife's voice appears in the third person, and towards the end, the husband speaks for himself. The dialogue of this couple goes back and forth unidentified, so that the reader loses track of who is speaking, aware only of the relentless rhythm of their dance:

> Slave.
> Go on.
> Faithless lecherous child.
> Okay.
> Liar.
> What can I say.
> Liar.
> But.
> Liar.
> But please.
> Destroyer liar sadist fake.

The pain of this relationship is even likened to water torture in the title to tango V: "Here is my propaganda one one one one oneing on your forehead like droplets of luminous sin."

The husband is obsessed by war and insists that his infidelities are the spoils he brings home to his wife: "These are my trophies my campaigns my honors I lay them before you." The wife is his honoured lady, his dance partner and his foe. He spends hours recreating battle scenes with his friends—something his wife hates—and then he carries this battle-addiction into his relationship. When he fails to return home one night, she challenges him, as he knows she will:

> Her voice sounded broken into. Where were you last night.
> Dread slits his breath.
> Oh no
> he can hear her choosing another arrow now from the little quiver
> and anger goes straight up like trees in her voice holding
> his heart tall

This back-and-forth of recriminations and lies is a recurring dance step in their marriage, and the husband is unable to stop engaging with her, even after the twenty-ninth poem. In a kind of postscript, the husband has the last word, saying, "Her starts! / My ends. / But it all comes round / to a blue June moon," words from a Brazilian tango song referred to in an earlier poem.

*The Beauty of the Husband* is Carson's further investigation into the intimacy and often war-like relations between two people, something her character Geryon struggled with in *Autobiography of Red.* Both Geryon and the wife want just "To say Beauty is Truth and stop," as the wife says—to be able to retain that belief, rather than to see through it. The wife recalls her husband's feigned ignorance: "How do people get power over one another he said wonderingly as we came out / onto the street." The answer to that, according to Carson's poetic tangos, is through beauty—which is not truth. Carson's "fictional essay in 29 tangos" is as relentlessly engaging as the dance it imitates.

## Literary Artists' Statements

**Douglas Barbour**
*Lyric/Anti-Lyric: Essays on Contemporary Poetry.* NeWest P $24.95

**George Bowering**
*A Magpie Life: Growing a Writer.* Key Porter $21.95

**David Helwig**
*Living Here.* Oberon $17.95

Reviewed by W.F. Garrett-Petts

A few months ago, when I was asked to review three new "critical autobiographies," I had just begun to investigate the role of artists' statements in the visual arts. I found

myself reading these three books—each offering a personal statement and writing history—in the context of what I was learning about the way artists work in other fields.

Like literary authors, visual artists must do a good deal of writing about their field and even about their own work. They write letters, reviews, critiques, proposals, grant applications, and perhaps most important of all for professional artists, artists' statements. These take the form of short comments—miniature essays—that introduce an actual or proposed exhibition. Like prefaces in literary works, the artist's statement performs a complex rhetorical role: it must provide content, context, technical specifications, establish the artist's ethos and persuade the reader of the artwork's value. When hung on a gallery wall, the statement (or "didactic") becomes both invitation and explanation, and in some measure an element of the installation itself. Artists' statements call attention not only to the artworks they introduce, but to themselves—and to the artist as both creative and critical agent.

When NeWest Press's "The Writer as Critic" series began in 1988, general editor Smaro Kamboureli in her preface argued that we should value a literary author's critical work as important "beyond the secondary function assigned to it." Kamboureli's preface introduces (and celebrates) "the shifting boundaries and intentions of the artist creatively writing criticism."

Works like Douglas Barbour's *Lyric/Anti-lyric* (the latest publication in the NeWest series), George Bowering's *A Magpie Life*, and David Helwig's *Living Here* do not play exactly the same role as artists' statements: they are not overt prefaces or introductions or even complements to each author's body of work (although Bowering does take us behind the scenes, offering, in one chapter, a "diary" of his novel *Shoot!* and elsewhere a highly personal bio-critical anecdote about the composition of his much-anthologized poem "Grandfather"). More generally these books help define the role of critical autobiography in Canadian literature.

Ironically, the least autobiographical of these three books—Barbour's *Lyric/Anti-lyric*—provides us with the most searching inquiry into the tensions and aesthetics of combining personal expression and critical commentary. In his preface, "Confessions of a 'Formalist,'" Barbour defines himself as "a practicing poet [. . .] writing about the work of poets" he admires. He, like Bowering and many other contemporaries, expresses an allegiance to "form," to words, rhythms, and the "body" of literature; he is at home with "modern art, and with abstract art, especially with the art [. . .] that most displays itself as a 'work' of art, in terms of the actual working that went into its making." Barbour's "lyric/anti-lyric" sensibility values the formal movement of language most when it in some way announces the circumstances of its composition.

According to Barbour, the lyric impulse injects "emotional directness," "punch," personal "presence," "acute perceptual imagism," and a voice "still to be contended with or recognized for its own sake"; the anti-lyric—at least during the last seventy years or so—tempers this impulse, positing a "shifting I" capable of satire, comedy, narrative (as opposed to narration), and all manner of intertextual gestures. Barbour finds himself—and other contemporary poets—endlessly attracted to "the *idea* of lyric" and to its opposite, to "mining" *and* "undermining" the conventions of lyricism.

Throughout *Lyric/Anti-lyric*, and with a nod to Marjorie Perloff's *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, the impossibility of pure lyric expression becomes a kind of rhetorical topos that guides Barbour's inquiry into the writing of Michael Ondaatje, Anne Wilkinson, Eli Mandel, Phyllis Webb, bpNichol, E.D. Blodgett, Roy Kiyooka, Sharon Thesen, and a selection of contemporary Australian and New Zealand poets.

Each chapter offers a carefully crafted reading, one sensitive to each poet's aesthetics and work, yet, where appropriate, ready to draw out the lyric/anti-lyric elements. Professing a "genial eclecticism," Barbour nonetheless presents a remarkably coherent, consistently clear and engaging discussion of both the individual poets and their shared fascination with the lure and limitations of lyricism. The essays on Webb, Nichol, and Kiyooka are exemplary in this respect, offering deep poetic insight while maintaining a spirit of critical modesty, detachment, and honesty. Barbour represents himself as both poet and critic, and, in the process, embodies an important aspect of the lyric/anti-lyric dynamic.

As an "artist's statement," *Lyric/Anti-lyric* represents Barbour the poet only indirectly, as someone moving comfortably within the conventions of first-person criticism, content to write his essays "as a series of notes, little travels over the body of single works." To write (critically) in the first person, to mix the personal and the professional, is an earned right, a mark of privilege; it is also a welcome relief from the dominant mode of literary criticism that pretends impersonal detachment. As a practising poet, Barbour has licence to speak in the first person; as a recognized artist he has an already developed ethos, a personal voice that speaks to and, to some degree, for the critical/literary community.

George Bowering's collection of essays is a much more self-conscious assertion of the personal in the critical. Subtitled "Growing a Writer," *A Magpie Life* is part autobiography, but mainly, as Bowering has defined the form elsewhere, "biotext": writing as an extension of the creative writer as critic. *A Magpie Life* is a book about what Bowering calls the "double play" of writing. Quoting his former teacher Warren Tallman, Bowering notes that "The second baseman doesn't think of himself when he participates in a double play." This is Bowering's version of the lyric/anti-lyric paradox: the writer, when the writing is going well, becomes both subject and participant, someone who can articulate a critical position that refers to the personal without becoming overly invested in personal reference. For Bowering, personal anecdotes, stories and diary notes are points of departure for considering the network of connections that link writing and living: "I learned essay writing from Warren Tallman," he tells us. "He taught me that an essay was what Montaigne knew it to be—writing a life, living a life. He did not have much use for the usual academic essay because he could not find delight in it. He wanted to see that the writer delighted in his work, 'sensibility not in its literary but its literal, living sense, life conscious of surrounding life, direct communication.'" Lyric delight, "punch," is ubiquitous in *A Magpie Life*, but the anti-lyric self-consciousness keeps the writer's mask in place as he covers a range of themes, including childhood, reading and writing, *Tish*, family, friends (especially fellow writers), the sixties, researching his novels, teaching, history, personal correspondence (including letters), music, and, inevitably, baseball.

Near the end of the book, in an essay entitled "The Reader and You," Bowering gives his own take on the "personal" in personal writing. Reflecting back on reading novels in a high school English class, he remembers being instructed to distinguish between the author and the narrator. The distinction holds for poetry as well—"between the person who writes the poem, even a short tidy lyric poem, and the voice you hear reciting it while you look at the silent book." Bowering makes it clear that he is discussing more than "the *persona*" here, for personal writing, if true to life, "extends" the author; and as a writer he delights in the indeterminacy of it all, celebrating the fate he knows faces "any

writer of the first-person singular or 'ensemble,' that as soon as he writes those words on a piece of paper he has an other to read." Such bio-critical expression—in which Bowering articulates his sense of the personal—constitutes both lively critical commentary and an important artist's statement.

David Helwig describes his *Living Here* as a "book of reflections and memories." It seems, at first glance, a less self-conscious work than either Barbour's or Bowering's. Personal narrative and critical commentary intermix more subtly, moving from a short family history of food to family histories generally, to the extended family of writers such as Hugh MacLennan and Al Purdy.

Helwig is not overtly skeptical about the conventions of personal narrative and creative nonfiction. He is not interested in foregrounding indeterminacy or self-doubt as a personal aesthetic, but, like Barbour and Bowering, he remains intensely interested in questions of material agency—especially those moments when we are confronted by a mismatch between our assumed and lived realities: "we are, in fact, all sometimes at the wrong level of reality, living out a first-person fiction and trying to make others fit into it, appalled when they don't."

When he focuses on writing and writers, Helwig is interested in forms "where our individuality is seen as a part of something larger." Helwig praises Purdy, for example, for liking complications—"not easy paradoxes, but the two sides of things being lived out at once." The best personal writing involves lyric and anti-lyric, a working out of the doubleness that links living and writing.

Collectively Barbour, Bowering, and Helwig argue for the place of personal criticism—not criticism fed by naïve notions of an essential or individual self, but writing that involves personal experience as a legitimate if problematic site for critical argument, exploration and expression.

## Mon pays, c'est l'hiver

**Clark Blaise**

*Selected Stories, Volume One: Southern Stories.* Porcupine's Quill $17.95
*If I Were Me.* Porcupine's Quill $14.95

Reviewed by Paul Denham

Clark Blaise tumbled onto the Canlit scene in the expansionist late sixties as one of three authors (the others were Dave Godfrey and David Lewis Stein) featured in *New Canadian Writing 1968* (Clarke Irwin), and in spite of his long residence in the United States he has maintained a presence in Canadian letters ever since. He is a border-crosser, a shape-shifter, and as the U.S.-Canada border itself under NAFTA becomes more and more indeterminate, his early stories, many of them about a boy of French-Canadian parentage growing up in northern Florida in the period after the Second World War, invite a revisiting. *Southern Stories* is a selection of Blaise's early Florida stories, most of them from his early collections *A North American Education* and *Tribal Justice*, along with three less familiar ones, two of them previously uncollected. In many of them, a boy of mixed French- and English-Canadian parentage—in American terms someone from a marginal culture—confronts, not the metropolitan culture, but another regional, minority culture in which he is, ironically, identified as a "Yankee," a representative of the imperial power.

Blaise's Florida, as Arizonan Fenton Johnson comments in his excellent introduction, is still pre-modern, pre-industrial, a place where time itself is experienced not as linear progress but as repetition. But there's no nostalgia here for a culture on the point of being swept away by capitalism; this is a place of poverty, obsessions with "blood untainted," inferior education, and a looming sense of menace often associated with the labyrinthine waterways of the Florida interior: "For often, at night,

when his parents were asleep, he heard the grunts and hisses of turtles, nudging each other in the rivers just under his bed." And: "The boy knew now that both things existed, the unnameable fish and the thing that had eaten it, and knowing that, he felt that he had seen the worst thing too." This is a Gothic world, in which dark, terrifying forces lie in wait, all the more terrifying for a child who is an alien in this culture. Financial disaster, frequent family moves, parental infidelity, and the discovery of a lost mixed-race community deep in the swamps—all these contribute to the pervasive sense of threat. No beachfront timeshares here, only an occasional tourist family from Montreal who, realizing that young Frankie Thibidault understands their French, think they have witnessed a miracle. As, in a way, they have.

These stories remind Johnson of Southern U. S. writers such as Faulkner and Eudora Welty, but for a Canadian reader one of the texts which resonates most strongly with many of these stories is P. K. Page's poem "Stories of Snow," in which "Those in the vegetable rain retain / an area behind their sprouting eyes / held soft and rounded with the dream of snow." Snow, particularly in the several stories about or narrated by Frankie, offers the possibility of an imagined clean, cold alternative to humid, unstable, alligator-infested Florida: "It was his father who was keeping them South, while he and his mother dreamed of the North and of snow." "[H]e had seen snow. [. . .] He would never see it again, he knew." Snow may, in a pinch, be Cincinnati or Philadelphia, but for him it is Montreal, and for his mother, stories of "ice-skating for miles on the Battleford River in Saskatchewan." It is their lost home. Northern reality, however, may be different from the dream. In "The Salesman's Son Grows Older," the only story in the book which has a partly Canadian setting, the boy's mother leaves her husband and takes the boy back temporarily to her family in Saskatchewan, where he realizes that he also does not belong. Here even the language is frozen: "The voice was deep, the patterns rapid, and each word emerged as hard and clear as cubes from a freezer." When he speaks of himself as "a third-grader" in a Saskatoon school, we realize, as American readers may not, that his speech has already accommodated itself to American idiom; there are, of course, no third-graders in Canada.

*If I Were Me* is a completely different and in some ways a less engaging book. Gerald Lander is a middle-aged New York Jewish psycholinguist, looking for the key to language and, as the title suggests, to his own identity. In his quest, he travels all over the world, giving papers and talks, and coming to portentous hypotheses: "Language is our pale compensation, porpoise calls and wolf howls, for the loss of our true humanity. Language is fax instead of e-mail, an electric typewriter instead of a word processor." OK, Dr. Lander, if you say so. What really gets our attention in this book, however, is not Lander the theorist of language, but Lander the father, whose children now live in Poland and Japan, in conditions he could not have predicted (his adopted black daughter, a lesbian, is a translator near Dansk; his son is a Buddhist monk—or is he?). Blaise's real strengths as a fiction-writer, here as in *Southern Stories*, are with the textures of local realities and the complex ambiguities of family life. The material about the food in Tokyo, the urban landscapes of contemporary Poland, and the fates of his children is memorable, and one wishes there were more of it. But by the time Lander mysteriously disappears at the end of the novel, we hardly miss him.

# The Language Around You

**Tim Bowling, ed.**
*Where the Words Come From: Canadian Poets in Conversation.* Nightwood Editions $22.95

**R.E.N Allen and Angela Carr, eds.**
*The Matrix Interviews: Moosehead Anthology #8.* DC Books n.p.

**Don McKay**
*Vis à Vis: Fieldnotes on Poetry & Wilderness.* Gaspereau P $14.95

Reviewed by Adam Dickinson

Though in the strictest sense only two of these three works might be described as collections of interviews, I like to think that Don McKay's *Vis à Vis* is also a kind of interview, albeit one that takes place with the wilderness at the limits of language. McKay is one of the authors featured in *Where the Words Come From*, a collection of interviews by younger or less widely known writers with older, more celebrated Canadian poets. Without question, this book is an important archive of contemporary concerns with regard to craft and poetic philosophy. In addition to the recurrent theme of "silence," noted by Bowling in his introduction, the importance of thinking the relationship between poetry and place is a frequent consideration. Tim Lilburn, for example, sees "poetry as a probe, an instrument for homemaking, like philosophy but more efficient." Similarly, Jan Zwicky makes intriguing claims about ecology, lyric and how a metaphor, as a way of knowing, "discerns a homology or an isomorphism between things." In addition to these provocative discussions, it is difficult not to be taken by the personal anecdotes. It is such a pleasure, for example, to read Margaret Avison's account of meeting bp Nichol in the University of Toronto library:

> As I walked towards that desk one morning, bp, an unknown stack boy, was waving a fist with a rolled up manuscript in it, saying softly but intensely to a co-worker "It's good. It's really good. They send it back after a half-glance, if that. Won't anybody READ my poetry?" Without breaking pace as I approached, I said "I will," and without a beat missed, bp slammed it into my hand.

The willingness of many interviewers to explore questions through their own poetic strategies provides an interesting, contrapuntal resonance to these discussions. *Where the Words Come From* is a collection of important and compelling conversations that offers glimpses of the multifarious textures of thought in contemporary Canadian poetry and of the real personalities that have given and continue to give it shape.

*The Matrix Interviews* has been assembled from previously published editions of *Matrix* magazine. It is difficult to tell at times when each of the discussions took place because the date is not always provided. These interviews are intriguingly diverse in their preoccupations and in the personalities they involve. Different poetic sensibilities collide productively in Carmine Starnino's conversation with Erin Mouré about "accessibility" and the "challenge" of reading. You get the sense in Michael Crummey's interview of someone completely unselfconsciously trying to make sense of his life as a writer: "Sometimes I think I'm slightly autistic. I don't really know what that is about me. [. . .] That's why I'm grateful for writing."

There are isolated moments in various conversations that sound somewhat mannered; here I am thinking of Taien Ng-Chan's "Surrealist Interview" of Stephanie Bolster that ends up coming across as an overly self-conscious game of word association. The vast majority of these interviews, however, are entertaining and highly engaging. In addition to the pervasive concerns with race, gender, sexuality and nation, there is definitely a sense of Montreal. Whether it is Gail Scott's question about postmodern mentors in

Montreal, Robert Majzels's discussion of playing with space and history in the streets and on the mountain, or David Fennario's discussion about being an Anglo-separatist, Montreal looms in many of these interviews like a silent but omnipresent interlocutor.

In *Vis à Vis*, Don McKay develops his theory of "wilderness" and its relationship to tools, home and language. By "wilderness" McKay means not simply endangered natural spaces, but also "the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations." As common examples of the experience of wilderness he suggests humorously and yet evocatively: "dry rot in the basement, a splintered handle, or shit on the carpet." McKay connects his notion of wilderness to the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's idea of the face of the other. The address to wilderness in poetry, and the attendant responsibility to unknowing that accompanies this act, is analogous to the face-to-face encounter where one's freedom to control or reduce the other is called into question. As McKay meanders in and out of the anecdotal origins of each essay, ruminating on philosophical queries, he frequently pauses for humorous asides (as if enacting his analogy between poetic metaphor and the trickster figure). In the final essay, "The Bushtits' Nest," he imagines a sleepless Adam, "fidgeting, plucking at the odd fig leaf, his mind already hatching the idea of a cigarette and a cup of coffee."

Among the three essays are two poems, "The Canoe People" and "Matériel," the second of which is a reprint from McKay's book *Apparatus* (1997). Both poems nicely inflect the discussion of reference and representation that is developed in the surrounding essays. It is the essays, however, that are the major focus and accomplishment of this book. McKay writes in the preface that these pieces were conceived during a period in which he was "determined to come to grips with the practice of nature poetry in a time of environmental crisis." What these three essays attempt, therefore, is a fascinating defence of poetic anthropomorphism, a defence of the value of imaginative metaphor as an orientation towards the natural world. Rather than as a colonizing grasp, McKay asks us to think of metaphor and of the thoughtfully enacted lyric as "a gift to the other from the dwelling you will never build there."

As is customary with Gaspereau Press, this book is beautifully designed with two wonderful binocular eye-holes cut in the cover. This is an important collection of essays from one of Canada's leading poets. Along with *Where the Words Come From* and *The Matrix Interviews*, this book extends its questions into your life, and to the language around you.

## Two Gold Bricks

**Julie Bruck**
*The End of Travel.* Brick $14.00

**Helen Humphreys**
*Anthem.* Brick $14.00

Reviewed by Christine Wiesenthal

A past recipient of the A.M. Klein Award for Poetry, Bruck adds a very fine second volume to her debut collection, *The Woman Downstairs* (1993). *The End of Travel* takes its title from a line by Elizabeth Bishop—a poetic touchstone that generates such poems as Bruck's "A Bus in Nova Scotia," which retraces the route of Bishop's wrenching displacement from her childhood home, and "How The Bottom Feeders Got Language," which playfully redeploys the trope of Bishop's "imaginary iceberg." As a border-crossing precursor, Bishop evidently embodies an appeal for the now San Francisco-based Bruck, but to the latter's significant credit, there is nothing else obvious or predictable about the interplay of voice and place. Divided into four sections—"Dividing the Dark," "Kate's

Dress," "The Strange Familiar," and "The Bottle Picker's Progress"—the poems in this collection frequently shuttle back and forth between the urban milieux of Montreal and San Francisco, and explore with sensitive intelligence the manifold possibilities of the title metaphor. In "Diagnosis," "the end of travel" bespeaks the imminent end of physical mobility for the diagnosed: "Some one I love will need two / strong men to lift him soon, / from his bed to a chair in the light." Similarly, in poems addressed to a dying friend, death preempts Kate's further journey, though the dress she leaves behind holds the mold of her shape ("Kate's Dress"). The living continue to move, but a friend's change of address card, nonetheless, reminds the speaker of her childhood pet's daily "end of travel."

Unlike the San Francisco of the urban landscape painter Wayne Thiebaud, Bruck's cityscapes are usually peopled, and interestingly so. Hers is a world of colourful eccentrics, two-legged as well as four. There are those who consciously present themselves as such—a garish pair of twins whose "yellow umbrellas rise" in unison "when it rains" ("The Lucky Ones")—and those unaware of the spectacle they make, such as the hilarious parking spot scout, a "dapper man in a good suit," unselfconsciously shouting directions "into his tiny, folding phone" to bring his Camry-cruising wife to berth ("Nancy"). In "Open Reading," a novice poet's "uncut" pain is effectively set off against the parallel solicitations of a "scrofulous flower seller," who criss-crosses Boulevard St. Laurent, "making revisions at bar / after bar, as if at last, he hoped to get it right." As the title of the collection's final section, "The Bottle Picker's Progress," suggests, there is a distinctive literary quality to Bruck's poetic vision, especially her rendering of urban spaces (Dickens, Hogarth, and Washington Irving all come to mind). The echoes of literary romanticism mobilized here work well because they are at all times qualified by a sharp and wry alertness to the contemporary moment. Take, for example, the following revision of the old "Rip Van Winkle" story in "Back to the World":

> At dinner last night,
> a young man with a broken arm
> announced he'd slept for seven years.
>
> Something like chronic fatigue:
> he woke four months ago, nearly
> thirty—everyone else was a lawyer.

Not for a moment do we lose sight of the rushed, polluted, wireless present that some of us all too automatically inhabit, and others find alienating. For some, "there are no more surprises in the world." For Bruck and her readers, surprises proliferate, even—or especially—in places where one least expects to find them: the wasteland of parking lots, a hospital cafeteria, in the "dim stairwell" where "Mrs K" regretfully packs up her life ("Small Mind"), and later, a "new neighbour" spends her day over coffee and cigarettes, pathetically attempting to solve a broken love relationship over the omnipresent "portable phone" ("One Flight Down").

The photograph on the cover of *The End of Travel* shows a sheared-off segment of the famous Golden Gate Bridge, projecting out like a huge, ominous diving board over open water. And it is really at such sites of emotional arrest, pause, and precipice that these poems of mooring and unmooring, cruising and driving, keep "coming back to exactly" ("What Did It"). "I am every interruption between here and there, every / dreaded phone call, leak in your heart, snag in your stocking," announces the voice projected onto the other woman in "Perceived Threat," a tense triangulation of desire and sexual rivalry.

Helen Humphreys has published four widely acclaimed books of poetry, and her recent debut novel, *Leaving Earth*, won, among other honours, the Toronto Book Award. *Anthem*, her most recent poetry

collection, is an exquisitely precise and acute exploration of language, love, and the various kinds of separation entailed by both. This poetry is as intellectually compelling as it is emotionally nuanced, poetry that "rises as memory, comes down as prophecy" ("Foxes"). Poetry that "comes down as prophecy" is, of course, a risky business, given the fine and unforgiving line between vatic wisdom and affectation; Humphreys, however, is clearly a writer on top of her game, and usually pulls it off. Only rarely, as in a few of the imagist epiphanies of "Architecture of the Everyday," or the concluding sequence of "Yaddo"—"to be here is to be gone"—do the lines strain under the weight of Humphreys's characteristically terse, aphoristic logic; far more frequently, one is dazzled by the way form and meaning come together with beautiful rhythmic control and inspired cadence: "I'd like to feed her words. Lying on our backs in the dark. / Lower them to her lips. Incarnadine. Rhodopsin. Sweet / droop of them" ("For Jackie, Who Will Never Read This").

The poem addressed to the beloved non-reader above indicates the vein of playful irony that alloys the philosophical mood of many of these poems, and yet points simultaneously to one of the more complex concerns of this book with the gulf between knowledge and language. *Anthem's* imaginative reach into a world of subjects who exist in language, but who cannot, for one reason or many, fully inhabit it, includes the dyslexic friend who spurns books in "For Jackie"; and the father in "Climatology," whose "weather diary" consists almost entirely of purely functional, factual notations; and, significantly, the poet herself, always probing "the space" "between / what I know and what I can say" ("Foxes").

The collection offers several excellent examples of poems that self-reflexively explore their own compositional procedures to genuinely insightful, as opposed to merely clever, ends—"Chinchilla," "Narrative," "Foxes." The four-part "Chinchilla" lays bare its own associative processes for the reader at the same time that it serially rewrites the memory script it recounts.

My dictionary glosses "anthem" as "a song or hymn of praise or gladness," but Humphreys's *Anthem* is an altogether more complex admixture of tonalities. If a song, then it is one of those poetic "Variations" of song that (to paraphrase Walter Pater) recognizes its own aspirations to the condition of music. If it is a hymn of gladness, then it is a hymn of a deeply provisional hope, the tenuous faith of "the shaky knot of hand in human hand" ("Bluewater"). That might be all we have, a "shaky knot" of hands and elusive words to chase. But maybe that is enough. "A word is not pure sound," but skillfully conducted, it can, after all, "persuade the air to change" ("Variations").

Both of these books deserve readers; look for them.

## Unmarked Intersections

**Rob Budde**
*traffick.* Turnstone $10.95

**Catherine Hunter**
*Latent Heat.* Nuage $12.95

Reviewed by Méira Cook

Winnipeg, city and state of mind, provides the habitat and landscape for two recent collections by award-winning Manitoba poets. *Latent Heat* and *traffick*, although very different in style and subject matter, ground their idiosyncratic and original poetic sensibility within a city that, in less contemporary writing, has often provoked all manner of wearisome, windy clichés.

In *traffick*, Rob Budde is that most engaging of hybrid creatures: part-man, part-delivery van, a *flâneur* on wheels, he traverses the city, his tender sidelong glance taking in a fallen but still astonishing world. In writing about this book one

is tempted to rely on Budde's prefatory "Notes" since they are, at once, articulate and jaggedly poetic about his aesthetics of discontinuity.

*traffick* is about "the busy boundary between poetry and philosophy," Budde begins, going on to detail the ways in which writing traffics with thought, dispersing and reforming meanings just as traffic lanes separate and converge. And philosophy—the wild illogic of Heideggerian rationality, the centrifugal force of Stein's linguistics—listens to poetry in his writing. By which I mean that a certain weight of philosophical thought settles into these lines, gingerly at first, and with the deference of an uninvited guest who arrives as dinner is being served only to be waved to the head of the table, plied with food, invited to drink and be merry.

At their best, his poems pulse between achieved meaning and the after-image of meaning released from achievement. Poems like "darksaying" and "traffick" seriously and playfully consider what thought, philosophy and theory bring to poetry, and are written at the moment that these insights begin to take shape so that reading mimes the vertigo of thought thinking itself into being.

His poems are not merely abstract exercises, however. Vivid images bellow, billow, and balloon—to use his verbs—throughout this text. In the poem "darksaying," the narrator imagines how the sound of the word *minnow* "flips and slides / off water," in "muscle tone," the amphibious heart swells and clenches, swells and clenches, in a rhythm that keeps time with the stuttering beat of this long poem, and in "swoon," "chemical / thought" performs a "slow fall into language."

My favourite section, "pizza guy" is a long poem narrated by a canny, playful, tender and punctual deliverer of words and pizza. Like the melancholy angels in Wim Wenders's film *Wings of Desire,* pizza guy eavesdrops on the lovers and insomniacs, late-night dreamers, shift-workers, nursing mothers and thieves who phone in their orders and whose lives intersect with his own, whose hunger for words, love, poetry, and pizza he satisfies in thirty minutes or less. And, like Wenders's urban angels, Budde's pizza guy moves relentlessly through slushy winter streets and the arterial lives of his hungry customers. Pizza guy is lover, voyeur, witness, murderer, thief and ghost, and the poem sequence inevitably raises the existential question: in a world of correspondences is everything a metaphor for pizza delivery?

In this poem of deserted streets and busy language, pizza guy—like the devil in Budde's first book, *Catch as Catch*—is all things to all people. But where the devil in *Catch* was a fumbler, a jittery fall-guy, pizza guy scorns to fall for anything that can't be released by the imperative of the line-break, and in this way *traffick* is a book about containment and respite, about dispersal and what escapes the system. Budde's *traffick* proceeds through flash and detour, where meaning is cracked open, and in which each line represents the uncontrolled intersections of word and thought.

"Vertigo," the opening poem of Catherine Hunter's latest collection (Manitoba Book of the Year winner and Hunter's third volume), begins with a child spinning in dizzy circles beneath revolving clouds and a hot blue sky, and ends with the grown-up narrator imagining her child self floating above the still spinning world, "looking down at the neighbourhood / as I passed over it." These two movements—spinning and flying—the first a canny poetic device to dislocate language and the world, the second a fantasy of acquiring perspective over a perishable and transient earth, define Hunter's poems of grace and flight.

In the voice of a shockingly articulate, rebellious child recalled by her wiser, gentler self, the poem sequence "States of Grace" charts the expulsion from Eden of a disobedient but disarmingly tough young

Eve, strong-arming her way through "delusion and ignorance / and fear," states that, she shrewdly assesses, are no less graceful because considered disgraceful, no more sinful than the measure of their misbegotten sincerity.

Hunter's wry wit, her deceptively easy swing into a poetics of sidelong glances and built-in double-takes and lyric momentum, interrogates memory and the ways in which nostalgia has failed us. And, whether investigating the compulsion to return to a scene of brutality, as in "Rush Hour," or the less traumatic but no less imperative need to return as ghost to a fallen, distracted and reluctant world, as in "Ghost Stories," Hunter's insights are set at an uncanny slant as when her narrator plaintively asks: "What else is there / to a ghost story? / simply our fear / that we won't die / entirely."

In these poems, Hunter's narrators, like Budde's personae, wander the "haunted, rumbling streets" of Winnipeg, a city at once familiar, local, cataloguable:

> its twelve mighty bridges
> its pigeons, its people
> who skate on the rivers at night, gliding
> over thin ice, eyelashes
> dusted with frost ("Rush Hour")

A mysterious, incalculable urban landscape is represented in "Seven Arteries" where the poet watches snow fall through "the seven levels of the city" to settle eventually upon "the dead / with gold rings on their skinny fingers, / their hair still growing underground." Hunter's city, repository of memory, trauma, sentiment, catastrophe, nostalgia and compulsion, responds to the agitation of her vigorous words as if it has been shaken like a paperweight filled with imaginary snowflakes, artificial glitter and punctual, real ghosts.

# Vanished Frames

**Clint Burnham**
*Airborne Photo.* Anvil P $13.95

**George Bowering**
*Blonds on Bikes.* Talon n.p.

Reviewed by Tamas Dobozy

On the surface, George Bowering and Clint Burnham may have only a geographical reference in common: both live in Vancouver. And I was hard pressed to come up with a means of bringing them together when, quite suddenly, the missing reference points began to emerge from the reading, when the negatives (or, better, *negations*) of the two texts began to suggest a means by which to navigate the route between them.

Burnham's title, *Airborne Photo*, then, proves apt for a work that is very much concerned with an underclass evanescence, with the lives and events that are denied their contributing role in history. Here are pictures that breeze past too quickly for us to get anything other than momentary impressions—impressions that, for the most part, quickly join the other sensory data filed under "cognitive trash" at the end of the day. Burnham traffics in the aesthetics of disposability. Here, traits fail to accumulate into character in stories so short and rapid-fire they seem to have ended before they've begun; progressing through the collection is like turning the laminated pages of an anatomy text, only to find at the end, with the dropping of the last sheet, that instead of the completed human—from skeleton to skin—we have only a stack of transparencies so perfectly clear there isn't even a sense of depth.

And so Burnham presents his anatomy of social disenfranchisement: "Yeah really. You know Candace, I was telling Maria about there was this guy at work, and he's like this total asshole, and he's going on about stuff and just a real jerk." The imprecision with which Burnham's characters speak turns

uncertainty, narcotic haze, and a sense of being so far out on the margins that all sense of a centre has disappeared, into a poetry of vagueness. At other times, Burnham is deadly accurate and funny: "She was a babe, total fox, wore these cunt-cutters, Big Blue or US Tops, shaped jeans with no back pockets that hugged her labia like a swollen capital W." If characters can't quite zero in on why they're bothered—by work, by parents, by the mixed signals of life on the underside—they're always adept at locating the labia, the clitoris, the ass-hole, and, when release through sex isn't enough (and it never is), in finding minor refuge in the referents of commodity culture: the name brands that haunt the text like spectres of a lost, definite language.

Bowering, conversely, seems to have so much available to him that the collection reads like the musings of a poet bereft. In the long poem that provides the collection its title, he writes:

> I have beaten my dreams
> I'm lending form to them
> they don't even know
> what I mean

It is the word "they," so flawlessly decentred, that suggests Bowering might be one of Burnham's characters (that is, if Burnham's characters ever thought of writing poetry). Does "they" refer to the "dreams" Bowering has "beaten," or the readers who encounter the "forms" he has "beaten" them into, or to the "long shadows," or the "son" or the inhabitants of the "Nord land" he mentions earlier in the poem? In any case, there is a suggestion in this collection that there are simply too many "forms" for Bowering, that he is capable of giving so many shapes to his dreams that there is no longer a refuge in the process of the poem—it simply opens on too much space—and Bowering's poetry becomes a map that is bigger than the territory it describes. However, if it is the "poems" that "don't even know" what Bowering "means," then the problem is cause for celebration, since Bowering himself becomes the pulse of meaning, and the poems point the way back towards the poet.

The human is thus recovered from text, or, rather, the site of meaning shifts from the textual to the human, as Bowering's poems continually envision the poet emerging from and, in a sense discarding, the text, reclaiming the "form" that was only ever on "loan":

> Nowadays the young want us to love the earth,
> and I never say out loud to them that my dear old people
> are columns of earth, walk around, sit in chairs,
> discard cigarettes and write what's left of poems.

*Blonds on Bikes*, then, contains "what's left," the poems that serve as a "remainder," as a gesture towards the "column" that is not lines on a page but rather the "earth" that is always "walking off" before we've even reached the bottom of the page he left behind.

## Imagining Justice

**Alan C. Cairns**
*Citizens Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State.* UBC P n.p.

**Bruce Clark**
*Justice in Paradise.* McGill-Queen's UP n.p.

Reviewed by Kristina Fagan

In their recent books, Alan Cairns and Bruce Clark try to envision better relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Less reticent than most non-Aboriginal writers working in this area, they wade boldly into national, international and constitutional issues. Beyond this, however, the two could not be more different. In *Citizens Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State*, Cairns presents himself as a moderate in an area characterized by unproductive emotional

extremes. In *Justice in Paradise*, Clark sees himself as a rebel in an area where reason means complicity.

Alan Cairns is a political scientist who worked on the 1966-7 *Hawthorn Report* on "status Indians." The report proposed that Native people be treated as "citizens plus": full Canadian citizens with additional rights. Now, Cairns has returned to the concept of "citizens plus" as his response to the current political crossroads. The federal government's longtime commitment to assimilation has, in response to Native pressure, been replaced by tentative discussions of nationhood, treaties, land claims, and self-government for the First Nations, as evidenced in the 1996 *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (RCAP). Cairns believes that the government has moved between two extremes and that it is time to find a middle ground.

Cairns criticizes RCAP and, more broadly, the idea of Aboriginal nationhood. RCAP recommends that the Canadian government and the First Nations establish a nation-to-nation relationship where the First Nations will be self-governing in many areas. Cairns claims that this proposal is impractical because of Native people's diversity and involvement in Canadian society. Furthermore, he says, it is undesirable because it will separate Native people from other Canadians. He asserts that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians should be bound together as a community of citizens, united in sharing and empathy. He seems to fear that recognizing the First Nations as nations will lead to governmental chaos and the breakdown of civil relations in Canada, a fear that is basically ethnocentric.

While he extensively explains the potential difficulties with Aboriginal nationhood, Cairns does not spell out his "citizens plus" solution in any detail, referring vaguely and rhetorically to the moral bonds of citizenship. The meaning of the "plus" is even more mysterious; Cairns says the word has "expansive possibilities" that include an unspecified level of rights and self-government. The *Hawthorn Report* described the "plus" as accommodating "the expression and protection of diversity," and Cairns still seems to see the issue in terms of cultural diversity.

Cairns focuses on Native culture, not on the principle of Native nationhood, and this is a fundamental problem. He notes that First Nations advocates emphasize Native people's cultural unity and their difference from the dominant society. He therefore assumes that, if Native people are diverse and similar to non-Natives, then there is less reason for them to belong to self-governing nations. This assumption is illogical. Most countries would surely balk at the argument that, because they resemble another country or because their population is diverse, they should lose their nation status. They would insist on their right to nationhood. The First Nations were here when the newcomers arrived, and they have never given up their nationhood. This is a fundamental principle that Cairns does not address.

In contrast, Bruce Clark consistently holds principles over possibilities. Holding a doctorate in jurisprudence, he worked for twenty-six years as a lawyer for various Native groups. *Justice in Paradise* is both a memoir and a manifesto, laying out the legal argument to which he has devoted his life and describing the personal and professional devastation that has resulted.

In short, Clark argues that much of the land that is said to be part of Canada has never been surrendered or sold to the Crown and is therefore still the property of Aboriginal nations. As such, Canadian courts do not have jurisdiction over that land and cannot make decisions about its ownership. Furthermore, since both Native and non-Native justice systems have a vested interest in land claims, an impartial

third party (such as an international court) should be appointed to adjudicate these disputes. Clark bases this argument on sixteenth- and eighteenth-century papal and royal declarations that Native people have the rights to possess their land and to have conflicts settled by an impartial court. Furthermore, Clark points out, seizing Native land is illegal under the International Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide. None of these laws has been appealed and all, Clark claims, are applicable in Canada and overrule domestic laws.

Having laid out his argument, Clark goes on to recount his unsuccessful efforts, in over forty cases, to get judges to listen to it. In those cases, he maintained that the Canadian courts do not have jurisdiction over unceded Native lands. Not surprisingly, the courts would not accept an argument that completely undermined their authority. In fact, according to Clark, the legality of his argument has never been addressed. Instead, he has been repeatedly accused of contempt of court. He has taken his case to the international courts and to the Queen, but encountered a political unwillingness to interfere in "Canadian matters." And, because of his lack of success, he has also been fired by many of his Native clients.

*Justice in Paradise* reflects Clark's growing frustration at being ignored and criminalized. From being a well-off lawyer, he ends up penniless and homeless. He is imprisoned, ridiculed by the media, and finally disbarred. Not surprisingly, his book has a tone of anger and defensiveness, moving more and more often to charges of chicanery, stonewalling, fraud, and genocide. Clark also begins to repeat himself, citing page after redundant page of letters, affidavits, newspaper articles, legal documents, court transcripts, etc. This style of argument is off-putting, raising the question of whether Clark's obsessive and confrontational manner brought about his downfall. However, to criticize the man's actions and personality, as the media and the courts have done, is to distract from his argument, an argument that deserves a hearing.

While Cairns and Clark disagree on the best balance between principles and practicality, both men's principles are derived from Western law and politics; Cairns sticks to the notion of Canadian citizenship while Clark hangs onto the Western rule of law. Both works would have benefited from greater attention to Native principles and voices. Cairns gives no sense of having actually talked to any Native people, relying entirely on statistics and reports. Clark's positioning is more complex. He has spent most of his life working with Native people and describes their notions of respect and law at length. But he seems to see his clients as agreeing with him rather than leading him. He presents the fight as very much *his*, rather than that of the Native people who, ultimately, have much more to lose than he does. He is so caught up in his individual tragedy that he gives next to no sense of the personalities and views of those around him, such his wife or his clients.

*Citizens Plus* and *Justice in Paradise* are important efforts to participate in and create substantial debate around the future of Native peoples in Canada. However, the debate must not simply treat Native people as its subject. It must include them as participants and leaders. And this is where these two books are lacking.

# Post-Race: Contemporary Black Writing

**Carmen Cáliz-Montoro**
*Writing from the Borderlands: A Study of Chicano, Afro-Caribbean and Native Literatures in North America.* TSAR $21.95

**Leo Driedger and Shiva S. Halli**
*Race and Racism: Canada's Challenge.* McGill-Queens UP $65.00

**Janet Gabler-Hover**
*Dreaming Black Writing White: The Hagar Myth in American Cultural History.* U of Kentucky P $34.95

**Althea Prince**
*Being Black: Essays.* Insomniac P $19.95

Reviewed by Karina Vernon

After the publication of *Against Race*, Paul Gilroy's bold discussion of political culture beyond the colour line, it has become difficult to read the products of black expressive culture or the products of black literary and political conversation without recalling his critique of the terms that have come to shape that conversation. He suggests that if the debate is to move forward, we must reconsider the usefulness of the idea of "race" itself, reminding us that the latter arose from the dubious nineteenth-century science of racial typology. This was the science that studied the various components of the body, its bones, skulls, hair, lips, noses, eyes, feet, genitals and other physical markers for tell-tale signs of "race." Today "race" as a category is becoming increasingly irrelevant, because the very idea of "race" has, as he puts it, "no ethically defensible place." Anti-racist thinking and action have been impeded by a tarnished vocabulary that continues to invoke "race" while at the same time destroying all possibility of moving beyond "race"-bound thinking. Gilroy calls for a new discourse of "planetary humanism" to "restore the dignity that race-thinking strips away." The four books under review, all of which were published in the same year as Gilroy's *Against Race*, and all of which are concerned with diasporic blackness, offer a test of the viability and timeliness of Gilroy's post-race thinking.

The essays in Carmen Cáliz-Montoro's *Writing from the Borderlands* consider the cultural production taking place on the margins: Chicano writing at the border between the southern United States and Mexico, the African Caribbean minority in Canada, and the literary works of Native North Americans. Some of the authors discussed are well known by now—Gloria Anzaldúa, Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, Marlene Nourbese Philip and Tomson Highway—but this study also gives serious consideration to others, such as the poets Alma Villanueva and Art Solomon, the performer Guillermo Gomez-Peña and the playwright Cáliz-Montoro, who will be less familiar.

Throughout, Cáliz-Montoro emphasizes the transcendent nature of borderland literature. Recognizing that the very categorization of these writers as writers-of-exile is itself a double-edged sword, the first half of the study emphasizes the geo-political realities of Chicano, Caribbean-Canadian and First Nations writers, while the second half tries to transcend this approach. These chapters problematize the racialization of borderland writers who are all too often read "as an extension of wilderness, nature, and its untamed territories."

In an effort to avoid this trap, however, *Writing from the Borderlands* arguably falls into another. Sidestepping the problematic discourse of race, Cáliz-Montoro moves her study in the last chapter into the world beyond language, what she terms "spirit." It is in "spirit," in the "ageless healing essences of myth and poetry," the author argues, that "writers tap into sources of truths that exist beyond the precarious limitations of earthly time and space." Paul Gilroy might be calling for a democratic,

counter-anthropological humanism, but what we find in *Writing from the Borderlands* teeters on the edge of New Age mysticism. Cáliz-Montoro looks to First Nations writers and, in Chapter eight, to Vietnamese writer Thich Nhat Hanh, as examples of "a number of cultures that have been producing works of literature whose main objective is to invoke life-giving principles." *Writing from the Borderlands* suggests one type of humanism we would do well to avoid, as the discourse of mysticism risks relegating First Nations and Black writers to the role of the world's spiritual tour guides.

More scholarly an approach to myth is Janet Gabler-Hover's *Dreaming Black Writing White.* Here, Gabler-Hover tracks the fluctuating racialization of the Biblical figure Hagar in Southern American women's domestic novels and in the paintings of mid-nineteenth-century America. Readers will likely recall Hagar as the figure in Genesis who gives Margaret Atwood's dystopian Gilead some of its biblical underpinnings. We recall that in Genesis Hagar is handmaid to the old and childless Sara. The Hagar myth was important to the anti-slavery movement in America because Hagar (widely understood to be black because of her Egyptian affiliations) flees her bondage to Sara and finds refuge in the desert. There, God gives her water and reveals that her son will be a ruler of a great race. Gabler-Hover traces the ways Hagar's blackness is gradually complicated and ultimately "whitewashed" by the white female novelists and painters in America who, enigmatically, begin to adopt Hagar as a central heroine. Hagar provided white women novelists (who were themselves writing under conditions of patriarchal bondage) with an opportunity to reimagine themselves outside the permissible boundaries of white femininity. *Dreaming Black Writing White* suggests that "black and white are bonded together by the mechanisms of 'race' that estrange them from each other and that amputate their common humanity."

If the first two texts in this review demonstrate a changing awareness of how "race" is understood, then the last two are more cautious about celebrating the possibilities of humanist thinking. *Race and Racism: Canada's Challenge,* a cross-disciplinary study of the economic and social factors of racism in Canada, suggests that the material conditions that produced race-thinking, namely the systemic oppression of people of colour, are still with us. Editors Leo Driedger and Shiva S. Halli compile essays from a wide range of disciplines: sociology, cultural anthropology, demography and psychology. These essays are not so much concerned with deconstructing the idea of race, but rather with describing and measuring its material consequences and the sufferings it has caused.

Althea Prince's *Being Black* bears personal witness to many of the social realities outlined more formally in *Race and Racism.* As a sociologist, Prince is concerned about the "attitudes toward race and race relations" she has seen in Toronto since the 1960s. But Prince appears to consider "race" as a stable category, while the editors of *Race and Racism* ask: "The concept of race is difficult to define, and it is difficult to classify, so why do we continue to try?" *Being Black* relies on essentialist definitions of race. "Black," Prince writes, "is not an ideology; it is the colour of skin." Later she calls blackness "a pigment." Her own black identity she defines as "African," and "that," she asserts, "is not up for debate. That is a *given.* It is who I say I am." While such personal testimonies are always valuable, Prince's collection swings into the realm of the solipsistic, thus diminishing the complexities of this discussion, rather than enriching it.

# Zoom In, Zoom Out

**Mary Cameron**
*Clouds Without Heaven.* Porcepic $12.95

**Sue Nevill**
*all you expect of the road.* Porcepic $12.95

**Jeanette Lynes**
*A Woman Alone on the Atikokan Highway.* Wolsak and Wynn n.p.

**Bruce Taylor**
*Facts.* Signal n.p.

Reviewed by Sonnet L'Abbé

Lately I like to think of poets as linguistic directors of photography. They paint with words rather than with light, and each poet's distinctive "soul" is reflected in the gaze of each poem, their perspective evidenced by what he or she chooses to describe, and at what angle, and at what distance.

Mary Cameron's *Clouds Without Heaven* relies heavily on metaphors of painting and portraiture. The first of its four sections is a sustained conversation with the wife of Cézanne, as imagined by the poet. I confess the Madame Cézanne sequence did leave me feeling lost, as the world from which the poems take their references was missing from my own lexicon. Still, I appreciated the insistent dwelling on the wife as an act of recuperation, acknowledging her role in the life, work and success of her famous husband.

The portraits, and especially the landscapes, of the middle sections of the book are more immediately arresting examples of the poet's skill, as here she paints the entire picture herself:

> the lake edge fills
> with children: their hands slap sternly
> at the water mirror, passing grief
> to green arms reaching up from sand.

In these poems we have the moment conceived in language, as opposed to language used to translate another medium, and Cameron's language is consistently subtle and rhythmically elegant.

There were many poems throughout that I read and reread, and still felt I had missed what I was meant to get. Often her poems work with a haiku-like logic that leaps from image to image and leaves the associative work to the reader. Sometimes, as in "Isolation is An Old Wood," this strategy works beautifully; at other times the chasms between concrete images are so wide the integrity of the poem is lost. Many of the briefer poems made me wish Cameron had lingered a little longer with her subjects.

Determining the organizing principle behind Sue Nevill's *all you expect of the road* requires some guesswork: Nevill's eye is everywhere—here on a drug user, there on a dancer, here on a friend in the kitchen, there on a wildflower-covered mountainside.

The first section, "rain to dance in at midnight," was perhaps the most urban grouping. Neville's voice here often addresses city-dwelling characters, characters inured to life's daily violences. "You are glad / because this is the city," says Neville, in an ironic counterpoint to the images of city life that she chooses to focus on throughout this section: the blind man beating his dog outside a liquor store, an addict hearing a siren, the woman who performs abortions, the long list of lonely hearts awake at 4 a.m. Our visit to the city ends in the acknowledgement of the urbanite's longing for escape: "You are drawn / to things that can carry you away." This leads us into the middle sections, "another way to saskatchewan" and "romancing the stone." Neville leads us out of the city, not to take us on a wilderness walk so much as on a drive through the country, and as the title of the book suggests, we look with the eye of the traveller, of the passer-through, whose gaze appreciates the broad stroke of the landscape. I was unsure about Nevill's insistent use of the second person. If the reader is not the "you" addressed, then is s/he a second-hand eavesdropper on the

poet's imaginings of characters we have not been directly shown? I would have liked more of the personal immediacy of "kate and friends: 14."

If you think of a poem as a wordstrike of a thematic or emotional chord, then to me the ordering of these poems was not as melodic as it could have been—that is, the poems' sequential arrangement didn't place them in progressions that made the most of their individual resonances. So, somewhat of a cacophony of poems, then, leaving the reader to identify her own motifs and harmonies within the four sections (movements?) of the collection.

Jeannette Lynes's work takes some bold emotional risks. Poetry, with its close attention to the moment and its resistance to narrative logic, can bring on insights into oneself that resemble a progress of therapy or spiritual quest; after all, it is no accident that poems (including ones found in this book) are often called meditations. Lynes's "Edible Flowers: A Journey In Therapy," the final poem of the collection, resonates with many of the same concerns and unanswerable questions that have been addressed by the preceding poems, thus illustrating the overlap between processes of creativity and introspection, and offering evidence of courage in the writing.

Throughout the book Lynes's contemplative voice is drawn to the domestic. She looks from a distance at the usual life of rural women, seeing them with a mix of amused superiority and envy of the way they live their lives securely within convention. The section "Taming Jello" offers a city girl's bemused memories of 4H Club homemakers' wisdom.

The character of a mother with a childlike tendency to question appears more than once, and from the cumulative effect of these intermittent meetings with mother and the manner in which they are presented to us, we are left with one of the strongest resonances of the book: a voice that longs to return home, but can't. Even when Lynes's work speaks in the voice of an independent woman reacting to Cuba, or to Bill Gates, or to her students, there is within each poem a longing for connection, for ties to people that cannot be broken. Her work asks, if we are all travelling on the same highway, why must we travel alone?

It's been a while since I enjoyed a book of Canadian poetry as much as I did Bruce Taylor's *Facts*. His work spoke to the intellectually demanding poet as well as the loaf-about human in me. First, I liked his unabashed use of strong, end-jammed rhyme. He gets away with it because it's balanced by his carefully controlled, conversational tone and his philosophical content. The playfulness and sing-song rhythm of his rhyme lends a humour to pieces that offsets the weight of ego indulgence that (necessarily) accompanies lofty musings on life's bigger questions. Throughout the book, the entire concept of "facts"—what is known and taken to be true—is questioned. The contemplation of a tomato honkworm's alleged disgustingness opens into thoughts on failing at life, but Taylor deftly inverts the logic of the poem, giving us first the grand abstraction, then spiralling gracefully into the concrete detail. Taylor has a great knack for seeing the universal in the mundane.

To me *Facts* is a wonderful sightseeing trip with a pessimistic guide who expects to know, who demands to know, and if he can't know, will invent—as in the very flexible reality of the title poem. There is a confidence, a directness and a pleasure in oneself in this voice that seemed to come from a place of (male?) entitlement. Taylor "pin[es] for the romance of a real Hell [. . .] not this half-baked hades of sameness." What is Taylor, some kind of spiritual existentialist? Definitely check out his crazy, precisely crafted blend of "God *is* dead" and "God is in the details."

# Lyrical Scrutiny

**John Livingstone Clark**
*Stream Under Flight.* Thistledown $14.95

**Martin Gray**
*Modigliani.* Ekstasis Editions $12.00

**David Zieroth**
*Crows Do Not Have Retirement.* Harbour $18.95

**Jon Whyte**
*Mind Over Mountains: Selected and Collected Poems.* Red Deer Press $16.95

Reviewed by Adam Dickinson

Despite divergent stylistic and imaginative points of departure, these four highly accomplished books of poetry interrogate the mental and physical landscapes of being at home with oneself and at home in the world. Whether it is poems written from a shack on the prairies, a meditation on the omnipresence of a ravine in a neighbourhood, a historical, polyphonic long poem about the Rockies, or an epic poem on the life of a modernist painter, the question of representing place—be geographical, mental, or corporeal—is addressed in ways that attend to the shapes and spirits that we find ourselves at home amongst. What part do we play in the creation of where we live? These four books offer rewarding ruminations upon this question.

*Stream Under Flight*, by John Livingstone Clark, is a kind of pointillist journal in the form of sectioned prose poems that catalogue time spent on the prairie "alone," as the author notes, "for the first time in over fifteen years." What emerges is a personal land ethic centred on an aesthetic engagement with the landscape. "Seeing is all that really matters," the speaker of these poems claims. At the limits of sight, however, at the limits of description, one arrives at silence, "that great begetter of mysteries, of demigods, inquiries, postulations, anxieties, and rebirths," Clark writes in his "Epilogue." It is these circumstances that provide the meditative space necessary for a humble attention to the landscape and to living: "let silence bring us back to zero. in that shadow of desire something new comes to mind." If at the limits of description and words there is silence, then at the limits of use and value there is what we sometimes hastily take to be garbage. One of the most interesting concerns of this book is Clark's recurrent fascination with a former garbage mound that has been converted into a ski hill. This composite of detritus is at once an eyesore, "ripe like a pimple on the fair skinned prairie," and also a gathering place of much redeeming natural detail:

> but willow and aspen skirt the lake at its feet, graceful, slender through all the seasons. and trout, pickerel, whitefish, jack: they brighten twilight with sleek silver backs. the thought of fish is much on your mind, as clouds with cowls peer through windows. they murmur "empty hands, drop your fists." receive in silence what can be given.

The well-textured language and keen imaginative topography of these poems underscore the attention to detail that is required in order to be open to the offerings of quietude. One has the sense when reading that rather than resisting the changes that befall a landscape and a person over time, what is required is a complimentary gesture, a "stream under flight"—a different way of living in the world that looks into the places of silence and finds, even among refuse, the gifts that affirm a home.

Like *Stream Under Flight*, Martin Gray's *Modigliani* is a book-length poem with a similar emphasis on sight and seeing. The focus on "place" and "landscape" in these poems is in part on the urban intellectual environment of *fin de siècle* Paris, but it is, more concertedly, on the fascinating struggles of the artist himself to address the problems of representing the body. Gray constructs a highly engaging biography in lyric that resonates formally with its subject

matter. These cantos, with their short lines and generally spare and clear diction, are shaped in a way that seems sympathetic to the artist's fondness for elongated heads and sparse detail in his portraits. Moreover, there are occasional syntactic inversions and grammatical puzzles caused by selective use of punctuation: "This favoured view of his / he made a painting of / unfortunately lost / in one of many moves." These punctuated tensions make one aware of the sculpted quality of the language and the omnipresence of the pressures surrounding various attempts at form, both thematically and structurally. The poem puts Modigliani forward as a figure similarly tensioned and directed:

> Selection is the key
> so leave out everything
> that does not have effect
> making the picture real
> but also fantasy
> as we need both of these.

In recounting the details of Modigliani's life, the cantos often hover in this part-real, part-fantastic realm of drugs, destitution and artistic devotion. The result is a map of a mind struggling to be at home in the world. There may be, as Modigliani claims in Canto CXXXII, "no charm in landscape"; however, Martin Gray's epic poem is a finely balanced work of selectively tuned moments that offers a sensual, panoramic glimpse of a mind obsessed with human form.

David Zieroth's sixth book of poetry, *Crows Do Not Have Retirement*, is full of poems sensitive at once to the physicality of their anecdotal circumstances and to the larger topological questions they provoke. Moving from events and places such as the childhood killing of animals, to encounters with ghosts, to the ravine in his neighbourhood, Zieroth demonstrates his skill at being able to unearth startling estrangements and affirmations in intimate and quotidian affairs. Many of these poems shift remarkably from concrete, innocuous settings to questions of belief, beauty and obligation: "Is my soul a cup of milk / that once taken / spreads into every capillary / giving me a personality / to fit Friday / or Monday with all its moods?" ("Question"). Similarly, the speaker observes in "The Gulf of Heaven" that "I have begun to believe / in the breast stroke and the butterfly stroke / because of their beautiful names / and because heaven must be / perfectly conjured and framed."

The book is divided into five sections with its middle section, "Ravine: I," consisting of three ambitious and well-crafted long poems that operate as poetic walking tours through the anxious, dream-ridden and spirited grounds of family life and neighbourhood. For all the anxiety and despair that is an important part of many of the poems in the collection, however, there is also a generous amount of humour and fun.

The imaginative leaps in Zieroth's poems and the often musical measure of his lines transport one to the places and emotions he explores. However, the ontological questions that are continuously raised in poems such as "Sounds Like," remind us that "presence is enough / while we wait." The poems in this book, among Zieroth's strongest work, are an excellent resting place.

The book that most sprawlingly employs all of the poetic strategies of personal land ethic, lyric biography, and poetic walking tour is Jon Whyte's collection, *Mind Over Mountains: Selected and Collected Poems*. This is a smartly designed book and a worthy homage to an innovative and multitalented Canadian poet. Editor Harry Vandervlist offers a helpful, unobtrusive introduction, providing a brief sketch of intellectual preoccupations that anticipate themes and devices central to Whyte's poetics. In addition, the photography that is scattered throughout the book is stunning—mountain vistas and boreal wetlands thoroughly add to the physical and emotional settings of the writing.

The central concern of these poems, as the eloquent foreword by Myrna Kostash

proposes, is a commitment "to the challenge of recreating homeplace as a literary subject." Whyte is profoundly interested in the mind's encounter with landscape. What this amounts to often for him is an encounter with the mechanics of metaphor. There is frequently an explicit attempt in these poems in the very form of their presentation to reconsider the manners and commonplace strategies of association and resemblance. One is often productively disoriented as a reader, forced to pick among the fells and scree of words spread over the page in order to follow the poem as it inhabits the prairies, barrens or mountains. A small portion of "Homage, Henry Kelsey" is a case in point:

Time vanishes in the flow of metaphor
Tone slows lean in richness
margin zone of grey disappearance
horizon fade
simultaneity similarity

We are introduced to Whyte's interest in concrete poetry, typography and spacing early on ("When the World was Five Years Old," "Poem in form of labyrinth"), which prepares us in part for his ambitious manoeuvres in the long poems "Homage, Henry Kelsey" and "The Fells of Brightness." The strength of these longer poems lies in the inventiveness with which Whyte combines voices from different historical periods creating something resembling a polyphonic fugue. In "The Fells of Brightness" these parallel voices unite momentarily, reinforcing "The transcendental function of a pass, / the whither which becomes a thither / in a moment but a scramble from crevasse / which dizzily we reach—a dither."

Whyte's interest in exterior and interior landscapes, his interest in the structure of history and his devout attention to form and design share much in common with the works by Clark, Gray and Zieroth. This selected and collected edition of his work is a beautifully designed tribute to an artist who observed his home with an infectious lyrical scrutiny.

## Exercising Maleness

**Mark Cochrane**
*Change Room.* Talon n.p.

**Don Kerr**
*Autodidactic.* Brick $11.95

**George Bowering**
*His Life.* ECW $14.95

Reviewed by Brent MacLaine

*Change Room* by Mark Cochrane offers a richly varied selection of poems on one of the most ubiquitous of our contemporary cultural obsessions—the body. Written chiefly, although not exclusively, about the male forms of this obsession, Cochrane finds in the athletic clubs, gyms, locker rooms, on television, and in our cultural iconography generally, a veritable mine of signifiers and signifieds.

What challenges us about these poems is the way that Cochrane mixes conventional domesticity with gender elisions. The result is that sometimes the poems read as ironic comment on the male narcissism reflected in the weight room mirror, and at other times, as a fairly explicit study in homoeroticism. The prologue poem "Book of Hours" is characteristic. The speaker is, in the first place, a kind of sociological observer—"To pass / among them, I train on the weights / with passable diligence." As a consequence, perhaps, the speaker is also a voyeur—"I am a spy / in this chamber of iron." But he is also a reluctant yet desirous participant—"(in the showers with me / you shall not guess at this"—and later, "I will kneel / before manhood / like a man, & pronounce your glories / as one who renounces, & wholly believes." This mixture of observation, comment, and desire is made clear early in the poem by likening the body builder's notebook that records the progress of his reps and sets to the speaker's journal that records observations for his poems. In "Dumbhead IV: HIV as Limit," the speaker stuffs "runny notes for

poems / into [his] sweatsocks / between sets."

Much of the pleasure and excitement—and the poetry invites the sexualized charge of those words—comes from Cochrane's ability to achieve such layering and resonance with lightning speed. But the elisions also run the risk of cleverness, a feature noticeable in Cochrane's penchant for puns ("Thiefs Journal: Glottal Jack" is the most extreme example). Cleverness itself slides from virtue to distraction when it scrambles the tone and emotional centre of the poem. "Game theory: Uteralterance" is a case in point. The physiological arrangement of the womb, which is actually diagrammed in the book as "The Interplay of Bones," has a geometrical arrangement that the speaker likens to a hockey rink's face-off circles and net. This is clever enough, certainly ingenious, possibly brilliant. With the likeness established, sexual scoring is given its sports iconography, and hockey scoring is given a sexualized mythology à la Barthes. At its best, the poem invites readers to explore the mythos of machismo, but its jaunty delight in the comparison and the fairly transparent theorizing may leave readers feeling distanced. But there is no question that this poem, and most of the others in this section, are intelligently speculative, and they reward the reader's attention handsomely.

Not surprisingly, in a book devoted to the cult of the body, poems about the vulnerability of the body are also prominent; one section, in fact, is entitled "[sic]"—yet another pun. In "Gulf Island Panic," however, Cochrane has found a subject and form (three-line stanzas and catalogue) that channel his considerable linguistic flair to good advantage. The speaker wakes "with tourniquet / gut, anaconda that wrings / rabbit, gluts on dishcloth— / *froth*: as if. Writhe, rise / harrowed by life, knot life, low flesh / clenched to the pubis / in leather nubs, wizened gargoyle / with a slit nose, recoiling—." Even more effective is "Mom (I)" in which Cochrane uses his skill with dovetailing images in the service of a domestic narrative. Edgy trauma is placed within the context of a mother's and son's rival "affections of a great man, loose / canon, swash- / buckling busybody / who left the stove burning." An aborted family outing to a baseball game provides Cochrane with the volume's signature sports imagery, while the poem makes it clear that it is the mother and not the father who, in a time of crisis, is successful at "putting out fires." Elsewhere, the alarming signs of HIV—"he has a sore / or birthmark, like an ink-blot / at his throat"; "'risk' / (beyond the viral)"—are apparent, and Cochrane's use of the + sign, of being "positive," is just one of his devices for exposing what amounts to no less than the life-and-death drama of the body-building scene.

Like Cochrane's *Change Room,* Don Kerr's *Autodidactic,* his fifth collection, also works with a pun in its title. Kerr claims that all of the poems were written while driving. The title, then, refers to the poetic insights gained while travelling: Kerr is a "didact" of the road.

Some of the insights do, indeed, have a didactic edge, owing chiefly to "clinchers" which too tidily arrive from material seen through the car window. No. 24, for example, evokes the intrusion of "three hundred thousand dollar / summer homes" into the natural world of osprey and trout at a "wrinkling lake" "on the roof of the world." It is the automobile, of course, which allows such development to occur, and so the poem ends by warning us that "the car can kill / whatever it takes us to." More successful are the poems with greater personal force, the family poems, especially those about his father (No. 1: "my father waited for the train to pass" and No. 6: "he pencilled sums in the margins of newspapers"), and the small town poems that document both a time and a place with a dramatic tone (for example, No. 14: "lemme tell you

about my neighborhood" and No. 38: "for years after it was over").

All of the poems are unpunctuated free verse, except for a few upper case letters, and what this strategy loses in terms of occasional inconvenience in syntax and sense, it makes up for in the appropriateness of headlong fragments and phrases. No doubt, being "on" or "going down" the road invites such a poetics, although neither tone nor temper anywhere resembles Kerouac's. The title poem, which ends the volume, explains it this way: "I learned the pleasure of speed / of conquering towns / unzipping the world / what it was like/to live again in my own country / on the road again." And in No. 13 he uses a synaesthetic travelling image to announce his poetics: "the sound I want is the sound / the sun makes on my page / at 70 miles an hour."

The penultimate long poem, "Hot Spot," achieves both a speed and energy that are not apparent in the earlier pieces. Written in a jazzy, linguistically playful way, the poem is part riff on prairie heat, part lusty tribute to "that woman" who will "be the death of [him]," part environmental exposé ("from parkland to prairie desert / and we're all in the greenhouse now"), and part cheeky tribute to regional dignity: "off the course and in the rough / we're where nobody drops in / for a look and that really/pisses me off / pay attention world / we're the hot spot."

Bowering's *His Life* has more in common with Kerr's collection than with Cochrane's, chiefly because, like Kerr's, it exhibits strong attachments to place, especially Oliver, B.C., but also Montreal, and of course Vancouver. However, coming as it does relatively late in a senior Canadian poet's career, *His Life* arrives with both the authority of experience and considerable retrospective interest. It also comes with a number of curiosities.

In the first place, the book is only partial autobiography, from "Summer 1958, Merritt," the opening poem, to "Summer (Winter) 1988, Canberra," the closing one. Thus, the book gives us "his life" in the sense that the events of thirty years from age twenty-three to fifty-three may be the most formative ones literarily or otherwise. In the second place, we are informed that the poems in between, about four per year, were composed from material entered in diaries on the equinoxes and solstices. These dates, however, are given no particular mystical, astrological, or psycho-symbolic significance. Indeed, if anything, the reader is better off following the seasonal progression since the poems are uniformly given the titles "Spring," "Summer," "Fall," and "Winter," followed by a date and a location. The arbitrariness of this plan is perfectly functional, if unremarkable. In the third place, as the title indicates, Bowering has chosen to treat this material at a remove, in the third person. There are very few "I's" in the collection. No doubt, the strategy affords the poet a certain distance, which is not so much a matter of avoidance or decorum—there is no powerfully confessional subject matter here—as of creating a certain analytical space.

Unfortunately, the cumulative effect of these three features is a noticeable understatement, if not flatness, a feature which is also evident in Bowering's language; "Spring 1982, Mexico," for example, acknowledges "an endless pain" while touring galleries, but ends, nevertheless, with "He is enjoying himself, he loves travel, / he is very happy to be alone, he / is glad he can still stand in the street." Certainly *His Life* is without pretension, and there is casual charm to recommend much of the poetry. Declaring something of a poetics in "Summer 1963, Vancouver," the speaker explains, albeit prosaically, that "The romantic poet falls back on intensity of feeling / rather than striving for clarity & precision." One might argue with that reading of romanticism, but the poetry in *His Life* would attest to the speaker's conclusion in the poem: "he loves the bush, / not the voice in the bush."

In fact, this dichotomy (a false one?) between bush and voice characterizes at least one feature of this volume. On the one hand, we are given glimpses, sometimes nostalgic and sometimes cynical, into the ordinariness of small-town Okanagan life ("It is plainly ordinary in this mountain / fastness."), the push and pull of family and romantic relationships, and the young student/poet learning to make his way in the big city at the big university. (Bowering scholars will also find topical interest in the references to other writers: Al, Earle, Warren, Fred, Peggy, Audrey T and Miltie all make an appearance.) And as with Cochrane, though with much less rhetorical force, sports (baseball, football, hockey, and golf) are frequently invoked both as autobiographical "data" and as ironic metaphorical counterpoint. The poetry documents such details, the "bush" of the poet's life, with "clarity and precision," yet the guardedness of their narration, the objectivity of the third-person point of view, and at times, the obscurity of private references mean that "the voice" from this bush is frequently muted. At best, however, image, memory, and observation are brought into inspired alignment, as is the case with "Winter 1980, Courtney," in which a present image of a helicopter flying over his daughter on the deck of a ferry occasions a childhood memory of falling while skating. He remembers that "as he lies on the ice / his personal stars give way, rotor blades / confuse time, and they are there at last, / he is sitting now, hoping / no one skates over his glasses." The temporal and perceptual elisions in this poem are crafted with such a deft touch that we get the best of both bush and voice.

## Five Anthologies

**Fred Cogswell, ed.**
*Doors of the Morning.* UnMon America $15.00

**Stan Dragland, ed.**
*New Life in Dark Seas.* Brick $16.00

**Andrew Klobucar & Michael Barnholden, eds.**
*Writing Class.* New Star $20.00

**League of Canadian Poets**
*Vintage 1999.* Ronsdale $13.95
*Vintage 2000.* Ronsdale $13.95

Reviewed by Christopher Levenson

Anthologies arise from many different pressures and agendas—canonical, formal, regional, socio-political and gender, to name only a few.

*Doors of the Morning,* the winning poems of the 1996 Sandburg-Livesay Anthology Contest, seems to fall explicitly within the socio-political category, in that its editor and publisher, James Deahl, locates what he terms "people's poetry" in the US populist tradition of Whitman, Sandburg and Muriel Rukeyser and asserts that its major Canadian representatives—Milton Acorn, Dorothy Livesay and Raymond Souster—constitute the mainstream of English-Canadian poetry.

Certainly the poems that make up this collection, judged by Fred Cogswell, are unpretentious and intelligible at first reading; they are mostly about something, someone or, especially, somewhere—there is a plethora of innocuous landscape poems. Those that do stand out are in fact "action" poems, such as John B. Lee's "Coal Miners" and "The Winter of '96" (strictly this is an *in*action poem, evoking the death of a homeless person by freezing); Hugh MacDonald's description of "The Digging of Deep Wells"; Duane Williams's "Nobody said Anything" about watching TV newsreels of someone in Soweto being "necklaced" by a black mob; and Tanis MacDonald's "Service with a smile" on the

dubious joys of waitressing. What all these poems share is a taut economy of language that combines distinctive rhythms and verse movements with descriptive touches. Most of the other poems merely present but do not activate and coordinate visual details. This anthology, then, goes as far as accurate, unsentimental observation, decent feelings and an overwhelmingly positive attitude can take it. Unfortunately that is still only about half the journey.

*New Life in Dark Seas*, which celebrates twenty-five years of poetry publishing by Brick Books, introduces another pretext for anthologies. As with similar ventures from *Canadian Forum* or *Arc* for instance, this is a kind of higher advertising. The book, which allows just one poem per poet, seventy-five altogether, contains a number of well-known names, such as Michael Ondaatje, Robert Bringhurst, Robert Kroetsch, Dennis Lee and P.K. Page, as well as several less famous but very interesting figures—not to mention August Kleinzahler, whose name mysteriously appears in the notes on contributors but neither in the index nor in the text itself! But what, beyond their publisher, do these poets have in common? The introduction pointedly refuses to speculate. I don't wish to seem ungrateful, but even poets whose work I normally admire, such as John Donlan and Janice Kulyk Keefer, are represented by poems that seem to me at least untypical and, worse, un-special, though mostly tending towards the whimsical and surrealistic. On the other hand, I did like, among others, Walid Bitar's fine economy of style and tone in "Sing Sing," the down-to-earth demythologizing wit of Maureen Harris's "The Mother of Us All," Don Kerr's humorous take on literary reputation in "That Man Knew," William Robertson on the complexity of family and ethnic background in "The Man Who Lost a Foot" and, especially, two prose poems, Derk Wynand's marvellously understated symbolism in "Ferry" and Julie Bruck's poignant collage in the elegy "Timing Your Run." But the book, maybe inevitably, has a hit-and-miss quality, like an assortment of hors d'oeuvre.

At first glance *Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology* might also seem to be mainly self-advertisement. Not really: the title *Writing Class* also implies writing about, and in the context of, class. Its main concern is to present new writers but also, more ambitiously, new attitudes to writing. To this end the 162 pages of actual or alleged poetry is prefaced by a wide-ranging and often rather academic 45-page introduction that links Reaganomics, Thatcher's Britain, and the whole neo-conservative agenda with the need to reject existing literary forms for being complicit with, and hence discredited by, the socio-political status quo. On the second page we find:

> Where more traditional art institutions promoted ideas of cultural standards, KSW writers saw only cultural elitism. What motivated the school's formation was not a specific aesthetic vision but rather a politicised understanding of how art and literary production often contributed to the ruling class's hegemonic influence over society. Mainstream culture has an important political role to fill. To writers working at KSW most institutions of education and culture demonstrated little save the dominant class's privilege to determine aesthetic and moral principles within society.

In short, this anthology exists in order to make certain points—against the canon, against privilege, and for the collectivity—and to espouse certain directions. Let me start, then, by declaring my own prejudices. I cannot agree that the idea of cultural standards necessarily means cultural "elitism," a word in the Canadian sense that has almost the pejorative intensity of the word "fascist." Surely any highly developed skill, whether physical as in Olympic swimming or intellectual as in neurology or nuclear

physics, is necessarily elitist in one sense because it results from combining innate ability with long years of training. But because I cannot emulate the Olympic swimmer, must I on that account disparage his or her abilities as elitist?

In any case KSW seems to have its own built-in elitist tendencies: while the introduction claims that "to read the writing that did develop in and around the small office quarters downtown is to perceive at times a strong communal identity based upon a shared approach towards class position and politics," it goes on to state that the school's primary aim "is to provide an open space where writers can develop and direct their own work *outside all mainstream cultural institutions*" (my italics). Rather like a Trappist monastery, perhaps? KSW seems to make a virtue of being marginalized. Despite the introduction's approval for a poem by Tom Wayman and an attempt to link KSW's work with "work poetry"; despite apparently endorsing the views of the *Tish* group, members like Wah and Bowering who "shared with Olson, Duncan, Spicer et al a profound suspicion of the lyric mode, rejecting *its tendency towards symbolic abstraction*" (my italics: this questionable assertion deserves to be discussed at greater length); and despite the linked assertion that "a key cultural response to this kind of breakdown [. . .] was an increased focus among writers on form and technique," when we actually look at the poetry itself, it is very difficult to sense what is being communicated, let alone to see how it avoids the politically conditioned elitism that the introduction has been deploring. If, as T.S. Eliot famously said, "poetry can communicate before it is understood," there does first have to be some communication, albeit intuitive: simply to explain plausibly after the fact of non-communication what has happened in the poem and why is no substitute and can never restore the poem *as poem*. Yet one member of the school, Deanna Ferguson, who did not want to be represented in the anthology, is allegedly "in charge of her language to the extent that she doesn't have to communicate if she doesn't want to communicate. Perhaps the most cogent example of this form of cultural defiance is her refusal to participate in this anthology." A truly Trappist solution!

Between those who, fortunately for the anthologists, eschewed such defiance there is little to choose. Take the beginning of Dorothy Trujillo Lusk's "Anti Tumbelhome—For our Fallen Comrades":

> These bloody days, this godawful palace.
> Tangling the illegitimated suprajective
> 'wrongside' of the sheets. He often seeks
> a gentle point to sit through a film—HOW
> to get into synthesizer position. Quiet
> edge of attention paid and paid.

Now compare it with the beginning of "Straw Man," a poem by Colin Smith:

> Sits beneath immaculate drone of rows
> of square fluorescent suns
> He works day in day in talks serial bits
> to colleagues whom no one knows.
> Herringbone
> staples. Would someone please tell him
> the colour of this
> year's power tie or if such icons have
> meaning
> any more red handkerchief in right
> hand back pocket why not vote for
> tyrants who lay claim
> to resurrection of economies. Armpit fetish.

In both cases the passages have as much resonance and as much awareness of sound values as municipal by-laws, and consequently as much involvement in the feel of day-to-day living.

All this begs the question, who is conceived as the audience here? Because it is a social construct, language is always a compromise between what one as an individual really wants to say in all its nuances and complexities and what can be said and reasonably understood in any given time and place. Thus, if I may use so elitist and

canonical an allusion, one has as a poet to steer between the Scylla of "pop" poetry, such as Dub or Slam, where everything is rhetorical, on the surface, and designed for instant gratification, and the Charybdis of what remains "academic" poetry that requires footnotes and exegesis before most readers can savour its intellectual brilliance, even when it claims to be written in the service of eliminating class. For without wide reading and literary training most of the allusions, quotations, wordplay and other references, as indeed much of the vocabulary, will be unintelligible and, even for the minority so endowed, almost literally unreadable.

One turns with relief, then, to two recent examples of the League of Canadian Poets' yearly Vintage anthology, those for 1999 and 2000. This series neatly exemplifies the "mutual benefit" kind of anthology. Like, say, *Arc*'s yearly poetry contest, it is primarily for the sponsors a money-earning device: the fee per poem generates cash for substantial prizes and the cost of printing, while publishing the fifty "best" runners-up increases the volume of submissions or, in the case of the League, potential memberships, as well as providing an added inducement to competitors. A survey of the winners in the League's contest since 1988 reveals that numerous hitherto little-known poets such as Michael Redhill, Elizabeth Harvor, Rafi Aaron, the late Diana Brebner, Esta Spalding and especially Patricia Young (who has appeared four times in eleven years), have gone on to make, or broaden, their reputations.

So what can one say of these yearly snapshots? The prizewinners were worthy winners, though except for Susan Stenson's poem "When you say infidelity," which won first prize in 1999, not necessarily in the order they have here. But one can always quibble about that. More important for the venture as a whole is the attention drawn to other writers included in the fifty runners-up, especially when, as is the case with Maureen Hynes, Fiona Lam, Karen Massey, Sharon McCartney, Anne Simpson, Russell Thornton, and Terence Young, as also with Eve Joseph and Shelley Leedahl, two names previously unknown to me, they are represented not just by a single poem but by two or three. If most of the names on my short-list above are female, that's no accident: I would suspect that the 33 to 17 and 33 to 13 female to male ratios in 1999 and 2000 are fairly representative of the good new books of poetry being published. There are other generalizations one could make—for instance that the 1999 anthology has four poems about visual art whereas the 2000 volume has none—but they would not take us far. In fact, such anthologies are like cocktail parties: some of the people you meet you want to get to know better; others are good for a joke or a well-turned phrase; a few are downright obnoxious, while the vast majority leave you, if not cold, certainly uninvolved. But of course just as one continues to attend parties, so one continues to read anthologies, for the sake of the few outstanding talents one might otherwise miss.

## Good, But Not So Pretty

**Anne Compton**
*Opening the Island.* Fitzhenry and Whiteside n.p.

**Brad Cran**
*The Good Life.* Nightwood n.p.

**Karen Solie**
*Short Haul Engine.* Brick $14.00

Reviewed by Sonnet L'Abbé

*Opening the Island* is the work of a poetry scholar with the sort of practised taste that delights in poems about other poems, for whom obvious intertextuality in a poem is ample *raison d'être.* In what is less interrogation than cheek, Compton gives voice to female characters from Tennyson, Hawthorne and T.S. Eliot. Familiarity with

male painters' work signals Compton's breeding: she apologizes for Cézanne, swoons over Monet and Vermeer—only an aging Renoir gets a little backtalk from this traditionalist.

Compton's work on family and landscape is less studied and braver. But without the obvious nod to artistic authority, these poems have yet to discover their own internal logic. In "Pairs," we are asked to consider, "If in a family of eleven, there were ten prodigals / how many fatted calves would the parents need / and how long would the party last?" The poem then continues to spin out conjecture about what a returning daughter might merit, veers off to her probable work, to a pair of sisters, to needing an opposite for completion—declarative lines and little questions lie scattered on the page like short threadcuttings, none long enough in themselves to weave into a rope we can hold. The style may accurately represent the non-linearity of Compton's musing voice, but they betray an easy distractibility, when what's needed is a concentration that cuts through the webs and tangles of discursive thought to a moment of clarity.

"Features," written in response to a personal ad looking for a woman boat-owner willing to send a photo of the boat, does stay in focus and ends with a brilliantly kaleidoscopic point. Compton can be powerful when she reins herself in and speaks purposefully.

For Karen Solie, the body is a machine of unsurpassed usefulness, despite its tendencies to break down and its constant need for maintenance. The heart is a valved engine, a "rustbucket, little four-popper" that is "built" to pump human toil and human leisure, with a workshift exactly one lifespan long—in the universal scheme of things, a "short haul."

Her geographic sensibility is scraped from the badlands of Alberta and "desert" of Saskatchewan—central North America as vast and forgotten as any other continental interior. Solie witnesses life in the middle grounds, reminding us that the pulse of the land's heart is only ever taken at the coastal extremities, and dares to listen for its beat directly, through the breastbone. Solie manages to insinuate that particular plodding, determined rhythm into the people, skies, roads, lies and confessions she has collected here.

Many breathtaking poems see her moving across the country, down highways, in cars, in motels: Solie's voice is always searching, always transitory, speaking in the emptiness of a space where "everything happens. Then nothing for a long, long time." It is a travelled voice, that has lived seventy-two miles out of Medicine Hat but has also seen in-flight movies enough times to prefer watching the other passengers pop pills. Solie gives equal weight to the rural and the urban, without privileging one over the other, in fact seeing the despair and longing in both landscapes. The book unfolds a wonderful alternating balance between urban centres and the vast lands that feed them, mapping the spaces between grids of human activity, the tension between our nodes of technology.

Solie's metaphors of contagion, amphetamines and downers, medication and addiction are spilled throughout the book; capsules of wisdom reflecting the mindset of our time, the ever more pressing urge for the quick fix, the magic pill. Her ear understands the sound energy in words like "reverb," "junk" and "mitt-readers," and sets them up "at right angles across the grain of" poetically correct orioles, geraniums and sandhill cranes. For me, the book's culminating accomplishment is how it poses the question of the place of love amid life understood as a mechanics. Solie treats love like a portal, an impermanent window in the expanse of space and time; a place you can visit, but not stay; or a stop along the road that gets old quick. Perhaps love is more a speed, a rhythm like any

other; I hope that in her next work Solie will let her motor idle there a little longer.

Brad Cran is disillusioned, though he's still trying to discover some truth in the promises made to him in childhood. He no longer believes in progress, nor in a paradise as tropical beach with all-inclusive margaritas, nor that hard work is always rewarded. Still, Cran's exposure of humankind's ignorance, banality and lack of forgiveness is done tenderly, acknowledging the yearning from which our hopeful distortions spring.

A quote from Mandelbrot that begins the book's second section of "Cityscapes" describes cities but is a remarkably accurate reflection of (or is it direct inspiration to?) Cran's style: "Cities express themselves in fragments, as if they were dreams [. . .] threads of narrative recur, times past obtrude into times present: the resulting accretion is a kind of civic hallucination." The fragmentary, dream-like quality of Cran's urban lexicon poems echoes this sensibility, as do his short, declarative statements piled next to and atop each other like bricks, to build wall-like poems that sit in broad dense blocks on the page.

Cran realizes he's living "the good life" and knows that its daily variations include "gulls swarming trash" and a "broken dog with heavy lungs." Combined with a mourning of simple, discrete ideas of good and bad is an impulse to see the beauty in the ironic barrenness of cities, loci of our dreams of abundance. He also likes to speak directly to "you." This strategy works well when "I" am called to respond to a tangible interpellation, such as "sometimes you just wish for a definition of home in one word," but it's more difficult to come up with an assent or dissent to the more privately signifying: "you could walk through the city and say, / *Between night and the soul the city needs no choice. Between daylight and happiness the city simply is.*" No, Cran, that's *you* saying so.

## Three Faces of Faith

**Anne Corkett**
*Summertown.* St. Thomas Poetry Series n.p.

**Gail Fox**
*The Dark Side of the Moon.* St. Thomas Poetry Series n.p.

**W. J. Keith**
*In The Beginning.* St. Thomas Poetry Series n.p.

Reviewed by Kent Lewis

Karl Kraus once said, "A writer is someone who can make a riddle out of an answer." Of all writers, few love puzzles, labyrinths, and ambiguity more than poets. This love of uncertainty has made the poet at odds, at times, with the priest, who seeks to deliver the Good News, the message, the Answer. These three poets—Anne Corkett, Gail Fox, and W. J. Keith—appear as part of a reading series which promises to investigate the "metaphysical and philosophical dimensions" of human life, as well as to "witness the religious meaning of experience." Their writing is interesting if only for the different ways each one of them resolves the tension between the indeterminacy of poetry and the conviction of belief.

In Anne Corkett's *Summertown*, the religious and humanist impulse declares itself in the dedication where the poet exalts both "miracles" and "human energy" (words surely to make any postmodernist wriggle in discomfort). However, the poems that follow do not preach. Rather, Corkett reveals herself as a skilled imagist. Keeping interpretation to a minimum, she floods the reader with detailed inventories of flora, fauna, impressions, history and people. Like an Ezra Pound poem, Corkett's poetry achieves resonance and depth from the suggestive juxtaposition of images, more evocative for their lack of narrative exposition. She resists semantic wordplay, ambiguity and intellectualization in favour of the crisp, bounded image. When she does abstract herself from description, she does

so sparingly, lending force to rare explanation. These evocative lines, for instance, close her meditation on a graveyard: "Up here it's not so difficult / to believe we choose / the accessible / agony as companionable." By focusing on the sensuousness of the spiritual, the objective correlative in T. S. Eliot's terms, Corkett's poetry elevates itself above mere sermonizing.

In contrast, Gail Fox directs readers' attention to the metaphysical in a more forceful way. Her collection *The Dark Side of the Moon* explores familiar domestic topics: children, death, travels and especially illness. However, as the poet walks among mental patients and sullen teenagers, she tends to declare the presence of God, rather than let readers intuit the mystical for themselves. At times the poet seems desperate in her affirmations: "This is my solemn promise: *God is.*" By the end of the work, the number of epiphanies, angels, miracles and messages from God overpowers the domestic world, weakens the poetry with abstraction, and limits the audience primarily to a Christian one. Although Fox ruminates on the problem of evil, she largely resolves it, reducing religious experience to warm fuzzy encounters with the sacred. Nowhere is this clearer than in her descriptions of disease. In this passage, Fox describes how she achieves solace while waiting in a hospital room: "That You are here / should be enough, sensational / in fact, / like a giant wide-open / newspaper / telling of a cure for illness." Of course Fox refers here to the "illness" of mortality itself, but I read this as more personal than part of the human condition. God provides the centre which renders dying bearable. The certainty of her reassurances in the Divine Plan make me feel not only uncomfortable, but a bit embarrassed. The best religious poets (Donne, Blake, Hopkins, Dickinson) give time to both doubt and faith; in fact, they often show how despair provides an integral dimension to belief. In Fox's poetry, despair plays the role of Socratic straw man, present only to be blown down. Her work would be stronger if she sought to do more than confirm, comfort, and console. We have Hallmark cards for that.

W. J. Keith's collection *In The Beginning* is the most overtly religious, and the most intellectually successful. The poems can be divided into three sections. The first section examines a series of ancient objects and places, using archaeology as a metaphor for poetic investigation. These poems follow the Objectivist advice "No idea but in things," as they proceed with a minimum of narrative interference. The second series switches both content and style, as it retells the Christ story through a series of first-person eyewitness monologues. Yes, retelling stories from the margins is a frequently used and sometimes an overly academic technique. However, Keith manages to surprise. Playing in postmodern manner with the idea of Gospel, Keith challenges much Christian dogma and orthodoxy. For example, in "Mary I," Keith retells the story of the immaculate conception, but does so from the Blessed Virgin's perspective. Rather than bask in the glow of the miraculous, the speaker becomes peevish; Mary decries the lack of choice in her own impregnation (was it rape?), and bemoans her conscription to "fulfill / a male destiny." Few witnesses—including the Apostles, and perhaps even Jesus—can testify with certainty to Christ's divinity. Rather than weaken the Christ story, these moments of confusion and pettiness add to its richness. Keith's power lies in his willingness to tolerate paradox, contradiction, confusion, and a lack of resolution, in the foundation of faith itself. Of the three poets reviewed here, he most fully appreciates the dilemma of writing religious poetry in a thoroughly constructed and measured world: "If I could place my hand / On the fester of doubt, / I would believe." If his collection has a shortcoming, it rests in the

way his third section (tributes to artists, birds, friends, art) doesn't conclude ideas nested in his first two parts. To my taste, however, he best navigates between preying on, and praying to, the sacred.

## Short Pieces

**Ivan E. Coyote**
*Close to Spider Man.* Arsenal Pulp P $14.95

**Robin Fulford**
*Faggot!: Steel Kiss and Gulag.* Blizzard Publishing $16.95

**Stan Rogal**
*Bafflegab.* Insomniac P $19.95

**Michael Rowe**
*Looking for Brothers.* Mosaic P $15.00

Reviewed by Stephen Guy-Bray

All four of these books are short and all four are composed of shorter pieces. In the case of *Looking for Brothers* (at just under two hundred pages, the longest of the lot), the choice of form is dictated by the fact that the pieces in that collection started as magazine articles. The other three all testify to an interest in the fragmentary, a reluctance to write a large-scale narrative, which some have seen as typically Canadian. In this genre, the reader ends up making the connections. Or not, as the case may be.

Ivan E. Coyote's *Close to Spiderman* is in some ways the most familiar of these books, as the book tells the story of a girl growing up. The narrator is a little girl (and then an adolescent and then a woman) in the Yukon. She is the sort of girl whom parents call a tomboy, perhaps hoping that it will just be a phase. Eventually, our heroine comes out and moves out (to Vancouver, where she gets a new and cooler name), but maintains a connection with the Yukon and its people. To some extent this summary is inaccurate, however, as *Close to Spiderman* does not tell this story in anything like this fashion. The stories Coyote tells are brief (very brief) and their relation to each other and to any sort of larger story, such as the one I have abstracted from the book, is difficult to ascertain.

Coyote's tone is engagingly casual, often deadpan, and the spaces she makes between her stories are often intriguing. Many of these stories appear to have started as anecdotes, the sort you might tell over a beer. I wished at several points in the book that she had kept up that mode of artlessness. Too many of the stories begin with a catchy line—"When you're Irish, and Catholic, and the oldest, you babysit a lot" or "I don't have the recipe written down, so it tastes different every time"—and too many are excessively neat at the end. Still, *Close to Spiderman* is enjoyable.

Stan Rogal is a much more experienced writer than Coyote, and his novel *Bafflegab* is a much more writerly production. I call it a novel because he calls it a novel, but I don't imagine that most people will see it that way. It appears to be more like a daybook, one that contains reflections about writing and about the material conditions of writing, personal anecdotes, and attempts at various styles. Rogal is sometimes distressingly bossy, telling us, for example, that poetry should come "from the actual mastication by mouth, tongue & teeth" rather than the "ersatz" way "via the eyes, ears and brain." So much for diversity in poetry. Ultimately, what you think of the book depends on what you think of the book's narrator. I found him always interesting, often very funny, and sometimes lyrical. Personally, I loved the foot sequence and the reflections on the use of profanity in literature. A good deal of the book appears to be an attack on the evil Canadian literary establishment, and especially on its apparently even more evil subsidiary, the Canadian poetry establishment. These parts are fun too. The establishment will survive, of course, but then it always does.

Robin Fulford's *Faggot!* (in a break with tradition, the exclamation mark does not

indicate that the book in question is the libretto of a musical) consists of two short plays loosely but unmistakably based on the Zeller murder case in Toronto, in which a gay man was beaten to death by a group of teenage boys (this case has already given rise to a film, *The Making of Monsters*, by John Greyson). The plays concentrate not on the dead man, although he appears, but on the young murderers. In the first, *Steel Kiss*, four male actors play all the parts of whatever age or sex. Reading the play, as opposed to seeing it, makes all this fairly clear; I imagine that in the theatre the effect would be confusing, but in a good way. The scenes are almost all very short and often have no clear point in the standard theatrical sense—no rising action, no resolution. The inchoate nature of the scenes is reflected in the play as a whole, and I think that this is one of the play's strong points. Fulford refuses to shape the material too much, and by presenting the material in this way he forces the reader or spectator to step in and make sense of the story all by himself or herself. The attempt to make sense of it is doomed to failure, but I think this is the point.

*Steel Kiss* deals with the attack and the trial; the second play, *Gulag*, deals with what happens when the murderers are released from prison. Roles are doubled here as well, although not to the same extent. I felt that *Gulag* was not as strong as its predecessor, perhaps because the author's hand is more apparent here and there is more of an attempt to provide dramatic closure. I also found the figure of the drag queen who has a redemptive effect rather tired, although we admittedly do not hear much about this character. In both plays Fulford indulges in some painful stereotyping—religion causes homophobia; organized sports causes homophobia—but to a much lesser extent than Greyson in his handling of this material. Both plays are powerful and would work very well in performance.

Michael Rowe's *Looking for Brothers* is a collection of his occasional journalism from the '80s and '90s, much of it originally published in *FAB National*, an organ that can only be described as a glossy lifestyle magazine. Some of these are celebrity profiles (Jean-Yves Thibaudet, Mark Leduc), some are on news stories (the Genereux euthanasia case, the murder of Sean Keegan), and many are personal (author and boyfriend move to the country, author makes friends). The news stories Rowe writes about are quite old now and it would have been a good idea to include brief notes to tell us what happened in these cases, but as the press was clearly unwilling to pay for a proofreader perhaps that was too much to hope for. Not only does the book contain many typographical errors (most fairly minor), but Rowe's grammar, which is not great, has not been corrected.

As occasional journalism is ephemeral and as personal stories are not necessarily interesting to everyone, the reasons for publishing this book would be Rowe's style and Rowe's thoughts; it is too bad that neither provides a good reason. Rowe's basic style is journalistic: matter-of-fact, not particularly interesting, not extraordinary of its kind. His elevated style is hard to take: he tends to work images very hard and to aim for (and to fall short of) a poetic effect. A similar unsuccessful straining can be seen in his attempts to be profound, which consist of generalizations and are characterized by mawkishness. I would not have enjoyed these articles the first time round; I am sorry they resurfaced.

# Poète de l'entre-deux-mondes

**Patrice Desbiens**

*Rouleaux de printemps.* Prise de parole 12$

Reviewed by Denise Rochat

Avec sa couverture vermeille et son titre espiègle, *Rouleaux de printemps* (1999), du poète franco-ontarien Patrice Desbiens, joue allègrement la carte de l'exotisme et de la subversion. Ce petit livre rouge n'est cependant ni un tract révolutionnaire, ni une nouvelle *Cuisine de la poésie* (titre d'une audiocassette de poésie réalisée par Desbiens en 1985), mais un recueil de textes très libres et dépouillés qui restent profondément ancrés dans la réalité culturelle de leur auteur. Desbiens pratique en effet une écriture hybride et cadencée où les mots anglais, avoisinant les expressions du cru, font surgir des images percutantes cultivant l'imprévu, le paradoxe et l'émerveillement. Auteur d'une douzaine de volumes fort remarqués, dont le retentissant *Homme invisible/The Invisible Man* (1981), Desbiens nous livre ici une œuvre de maturité placée sous le signe de la fidélité à soi et du renouvellement.

A bien des égards, l'écrivain franco-ontarien reste le poète de l'irrévérence et de la dérision. Aussi certains de ses textes reprennent-ils, sur un ton qui n'a rien perdu de son mordant, l'un des thèmes majeurs de son œuvre : celui de la dépossession, de l'écartèlement d'un être tiraillé entre deux mondes et deux cultures. Meme si Desbiens continue d'écrire sur le fil du rasoir, s'il enrage d'être un "Triste touriste / dans son propre / pays," force est d'admettre que l'anglais, qui se glisse tout naturellement dans ses poèmes, relève moins d'une incurable fracture identitaire que d'une double et féconde appartenance, donnant à son œuvre à mi-chemin entre l'exotisme et la couleur locale sa familière et séduisante étrangeté.

C'est pourquoi cet écrivain si engagé est aussi le poète de l'immédiat et de l'éphémère. Ses images, à la fois ludiques et acérées, creusent l'épaisseur du quotidien pour s'y lover ou en extraire toute la poignante et contradictoire beauté. A travers des notations lapidaires et mouvantes comme autant de vidéo-clips, Desbiens saisit la réalité au vol pour nous la renvoyer dans sa fugitive complexité. Plusieurs poèmes, marqués au coin de la douleur devant le temps qui passe et la mort qui rôde, distillent pourtant une mélancolie discrète qui affecte la tonalité du recueil tout entier. Trahi par l'amour, usé par l'alcool, le poète touche alors le fond de sa solitude et coule "en pleine terre / comme / un bateau / qui a perdu / son eau." Devant ce naufrage où il n'attend plus que "le poids / de la pluie et la traversée des / glaces / pour enfin dormir," Desbiens retient son souffle, accueille le silence, jusqu'à ce que l'amour renaisse de ses cendres. Les images reprennent alors tout leur essor pour donner libre cours aux transports des sens. Dans l'ivresse ou le désir d'être deux, les mots, comme emportés par leurs propres sonorités, s'ébrouent dans toutes les directions, tandis que le poète convie la femme aimée à revenir "dormir entre les / pages de [son] lit / comme un poème inédit." Ce sont ces poèmes d'amour, si intensément charnels et passionnés, qui donnent à ce recueil son éclat tour à tour grave, déchirant ou léger. Preuve que la poésie de Desbiens, comme les grands vins, se bonifie avec le temps. Ce petit livre allègre et poignant est un cru pétillant, généreux et corsé que l'on dégustera sans plus tarder.

# Aesthetic Distances

**Harold Enrico**
*A Second Earth: Poems Selected and New.*
Ronsdale $14.95

**Eldon Grier**
*Collected Poems.* Ekstasis $24.95

**George Whipple**
*Tom Thomson and Other Poems.* Penumbra n.p.

Reviewed by R. W. Stedingh

Understanding aesthetic distance is crucial to a thorough appreciation of a poet's work. While the term usually refers in poetry to the psychological relationship between a reader and a poem, I will apply it to the special psychological relationship, attitude or perspective between a poet and his/her poem. Enrico, Grier and Whipple provide three divergent examples of how aesthetic distance can determine a poet's mastery of his subject matter. If too close to his subject, the poet tends to lose control; too much control, and the poet is unable to become involved with his subject. Aesthetically, what is desirable is the Wordsworthian ideal of "powerful emotion recollected in tranquility."

In *A Second Earth: Poems Selected and New*, aesthetic distance in most of the poems is minimal. These are poems that are written close to the bone, poems that are true evocations of the artist totally immersed in his subject(s), poems of aesthetic honesty communicated viscerally in a language that is rich in action verbs and concrete nouns, a deliberate diction and tight syntax that recreates the starkness of the unforgiving European and Pacific Northwest landscapes he invokes as his own. Especially in "Phaedra," based on the Greek legend of Theseus' wife and son and clearly the most beautiful poem in the volume, Enrico maintains an aesthetic balance between powerful emotion and intellectual contemplation that repeatedly horrifies with its biblical fervour and reserve. Even in the more personal poems alluding to great European writers like Pavese, Leopardi, Dante, Ungaretti, Rimbaud, Valéry, Montale, and Lorca, we find Enrico addressing them in a familiar tone that conjures up their presence. At all times in this collection, we are clear that Enrico is singing to us directly, even in his prosodic lapses from *vers libre* to use rhyme and metre in ways that are natural rather than affected. In "The Golden Mask," a poem crucial to an understanding of aesthetic distance in Enrico's œuvre, he concludes:

> Can marble hold him, dust and ghost,
> Or darkness keep him safe in stone
> Until the golden mask crumble on
> crumbling bone
> That wore a face transfigured by the light
> it lost?

Clearly, they cannot hold him or keep him safe, for in the "New Poems" section of this volume, Enrico becomes even more personal and open, so much so that there is no longer a question of artist and artifice. The two are one in a verse that is relaxed and open, often intemperate, no longer on guard and, therefore, disappointing. In these poems there is no aesthetic distance, and craft suffers accordingly in the effort to be more expressive than creative.

In contrast, aesthetic distance in Eldon Grier's *Collected Poems* is enormous, almost to the point of non-relation. Repeatedly, one is left after reading these poems with great wonder, not at what has been accomplished or said but at what Grier has failed to say. In fact the poems fall short of saying anything; they are so abysmally vacant of significance, even if we were to give Grier the benefit of the doubt and say this distance is precisely the subject of the poems. But it is not. What we have here is a poet who has not mastered the basics of good writing. His verbs are flaccidly state-of-being, his nouns vaguely abstract; he piles up adjectives and adverbs in a series until we are left with a blur before we arrive at the words they modify; his dic-

tion is removed from his subjects; his syntax leaves one comatose. The only exception to this is "View from the Hill," which reveals Grier's stance to the world, which coincidentally defines his aesthetic distance as well:

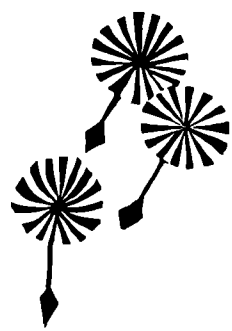
> This is perhaps how we
> should live, uncommitted,
> tight as string, spare as saints
> between the two extremes.
> Smile if you like—
> but here is some of
> the poet's wish; the fine edge of your profile,
> the abstract of my love.

The distance described here in sparing terms is more characteristic of the art teacher Grier was before he contracted TB and started to write poetry. There is at least a vague image in "the fine edge of your profile," but it is a great wonder how anyone so sensitive to the visual in painting could be so oblivious to it in poetry. There is nothing in Grier's work to suggest that he ever studied the warm, figurative frescoes of Diego Rivera, yet there is everything to suggest the cold, amorphous abstract expressionism of the New York school and the absurdly easy gestures of conceptual art that are the death-throes of modern painting. But Grier's aesthetic distance blinds us more than it reveals. His poetic diction is riddled with the mistakes of the novice. He is not a poet in control of his materials.

In *Tom Thomson and Other Poems*, we find a poet who has found the sublime balance between powerful emotion and intellectual tranquility. Nearly all of the poems reveal that Whipple has not only mastered the art of prosody, which requires a workable distance between the poet and his poem, but also learned to recreate life out of life in convincing and natural terms. His use of rhyme (initial, internal and end), assonance, consonance, alliteration and enjambment are superb, and he is a master of the caesura. It is these techniques of versification that define the aesthetic distance in Whipple's work and enable him to hammer, shape, turn and unturn the mettle of his poems. He is constantly in unobtrusive control. In "Dichotomy: The Bath," "The Origin of the World," "In the Ring" and countless other poems, his mastery of metred verse and *vers libre* is carefully blended for dramatic effects that result in some of the most beautiful lines I've encountered in contemporary verse. Even in his tributes to Cézanne, Matisse and the powerful "Tom Thomson," sound and sense complement each other in lines that are movingly controlled. In "Observation Deck" we find Whipple's aesthetic distance defined:

> Dyspeptic, cold, and forty stories tall
> above that swarming smorgasbord, I thumb
> the elevator back, slip to the street,
> unfold in a warm room this frozen hum
> of words, prepare my beakers, flasks,
> and heat
> it up, distill from bitterness this small carafe
> of soothing sounds for those who stay
> at home.

It is clear that Whipple is not only concerned with expressing himself. He is more concerned with the creation of poems that are artifacts, works of art that are cool, calculated and appear natural simultaneously. In Whipple's aesthetic distance the poet controls the material and not the other way around. Aspiring poets and students of serious literature would do well to study this master of the English language.



# Findley's Ground

**Timothy Findley**
*Spadework.* HarperFlamingo n.p.

Reviewed by Lorraine York

Timothy Findley's tenth novel, *Spadework*, is all about familiar territory—and the dangerous myth of the familiar. Such a concern is appropriate to a novel set on Findley's own home ground: the theatre town of Stratford, Ontario that Findley made his home for a part of every year. Stratford, best known as the site of the renowned Stratford Shakespearean Festival, is so palpable a presence in this novel that it virtually operates as a character. The inside jacket papers of the hardcover edition are filled with a map of the town in which fictional characters' houses and actual restaurants, theatres, and landmarks mingle. And so it is in the novel itself: documentary and fictional space jostle and mutually enlighten each other; the story of one traumatic year in the marriage of actor Griffin Kincaid and property artist Jane Kincaid plays itself out against the backdrop of the atrocity of the continuing war in Kosovo and the farcical, superficial public curiosity about the affair between President Bill Clinton and White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

Even if the Stratford landmarks of the novel are not familiar to Findley's readers, the fictional landscape certainly is. We have a domestic unit in crisis (Griffin, Jane and their child Will), a wounded woman—and an American Southerner at that—turning to alcohol to lessen her pain (Jane), a troubled, perceptive child (Will), a rock-strong maid who advocates for that child (Mercy), and, to top it all off, a sultry summer continually threatening to erupt in apocalyptic thunder and lightening. It's a restaging of Findley's first novel, *The Last of the Crazy People*, in a different key. For Findley readers who have become rooted in his fictional places, this is home. Or is it?

Running alongside, and in tension with this familiarity, is the knowledge that familiar ground can crumble beneath our feet, like the earth that the Kincaids' gardener disrupts with his spade, temporarily and disastrously severing the telephone lines to the house. And so, into the initial scenario of a seemingly happy marriage on the threshold of professional success, Findley inserts his own spade and digs up the ground beneath his characters' lives. When Griffin Kincaid absents himself from his family, making flimsy excuses about whom he spends his time with, his wife Jane makes what is, for her, the expected surmise: he is having an affair, probably with a young actress. What disrupts the ground beneath her feet, however, is the systemic operation of power and the complexity of sexual identities: Griffin is conducting an affair with a male director who has promised him roles in the next Stratford season in return for his sexual favours.

This, however, is where Findley's own lines may become a bit crossed. Into his own familiar, Findleyesque narrative of corruptive, self-serving power, in which the distinctions between victor and victim tend to remain starkly dualistic, enter the complicated performances of sexuality and identity in Findley, performances in which lines are rarely drawn definitively. For example, in *Spadework*'s narrative of power abused, the director, Jonathan Crawford, needs to be a narcissistic villain, which he convincingly is for the first three-quarters of the novel. The way in which he manipulates and stalks Griffin is coldly calculating and exploitative. But the complexity of the affair that develops between Crawford and Griffin, which, by the end of the novel, has clearly involved a significant amount of feeling and sexual attraction, necessitates that he become a figure of sympathy: a man whose own struggle to be himself has brought him grief and suffering. Readerly sympathy for Crawford is further heightened by his dev-

astating loss of a son near the end of the novel. It is clear, moreover, that Griffin leaves Jonathan to return to Jane and Will only with great difficulty, and the scene of their final parting is heartfelt and painful for them. Read in this way, the return of Griffin to his marriage at the end of the novel, seemingly represented as a proper, "happy" return and resolution, is not simple or uncomplicated at all. Findley may overemphasize the propriety and aptness of Griffin returning, Odysseus-like, to his Penelope at the end, given the manifold ambiguities of identity, sexuality and relationship that accompany his wanderer on his long journey. True, he does have Jane reflect, in the closing moments of the novel, "*a year ago . . . I thought I had it all. But I didn't. Not then. Then, I had only the promise. Now I have . . . don't say it. Don't even think it. Nothing is certain. So. But some things are possible. . . .*" *Spadework* remains a fascinating struggle to the end, not least of all for its author. It is a novel that dramatizes, in its very tensions and contradictions, the struggles between the uncertain and the possible that lie at the heart of all of our performances of identity.

## Three First Novels

**Elyse Friedman**
*Then Again.* Random House $29.95

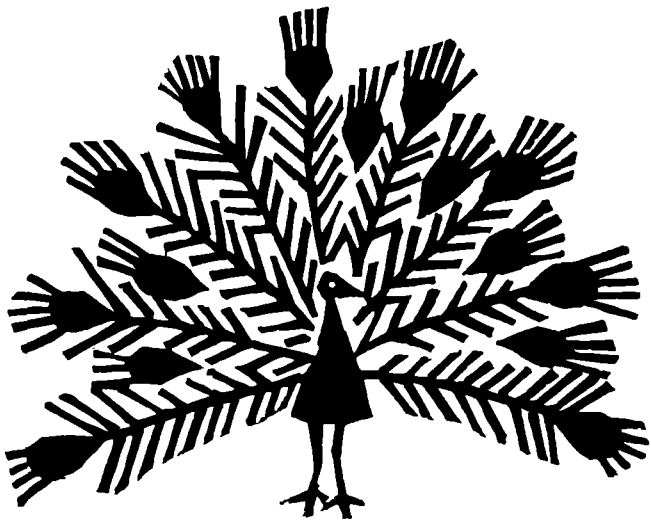
**Pearl Luke**
*Burning Ground.* HarperFlamingo $26.00

**Elisabeth Harvor**
*Excessive Joy Injures the Heart.* McClelland and Stewart $32.99

Reviewed by Sara Jamieson

All three of these first novels by Canadian women focus on female characters who, having experienced the pain of loss and of unsatisfied desire, embrace the rewards and discover the dangers of solitude in the heart of the city or the wilderness.

In Elyse Friedman's *Then Again*, Michelle Schafer, the narrator, accepts her brother Joel's invitation to a "Blast From the Past" party in Toronto, hoping for a reconciliation with the lover she betrayed twenty years earlier. Joel, an enormously wealthy Hollywood screenwriter, has had the suburban home of their childhood remodeled to look exactly as it did in the mid-1970s, complete with avocado green appliances



and shag carpeting. Unnerved by Joel's attempt to rewrite the family's history (he has hired actors to impersonate their dead parents), Michelle retreats into her own memories of her previous escape from their "Holocaust haunted" home with her first and only love, McCollum.

Friedman's evocations of "bad '70s design," and of the *caffe latte* pretensions of 1990s Toronto are very humorous; I find the satiric acuity with which Friedman observes the details of contemporary urban life more memorable than the moments of lyricism which punctuate her customarily brusque prose. She constructs an intricate and compelling narrative, deftly moving back and forth in time as she fashions characters who go to extraordinary lengths in their efforts to escape or recapture the past; as they discover the high price that accompanies the knowledge that neither of these things is possible, the meticulous timing with which Friedman offers and withholds information generates a palpable suspense.

Attuned to "the inaudible din of sibling communication," Friedman writes of the limits of family loyalty, and of the necessity of choosing to live for oneself when the demands of others become intolerable. Joel is a trickster whose pranks expose ambiguous truths: he accuses Michelle of destroying the family through her pursuit of independence, yet his discovery that the acquiescence of the group can make the most bizarre and atrocious behaviour seem acceptable validates the importance of the individual will. Michelle's quest for solitude, arising from her self-confessed agoraphobia, ultimately seems the only sane response to the voracious materialism of consumer culture that surrounds her. Her eccentric Winnipeg bookstore is a distorted echo of the one in Alice Munro's "The Albanian Virgin," a refuge akin to a wilderness cabin. Friedman's epic lists of sensual pleasures—food, whisky, weather, bubble baths, books, and music—affirm the restorative properties of living alone.

In Pearl Luke's *Burning Ground*, the pain of love and family resentments drives the heroine, Percy Turner, to seek a more drastic sort of isolation in the forest of northern Alberta. The novel follows Percy through her summer alone at Envy River Tower as she scans the surrounding wilderness for "smokes" that could escalate into full-blown forest fires. In this life of routine broken by occasional crises, she has plenty of time to grieve over her lover Marlea's refusal to commit, and to initiate an e-mail romance with another tower operator. She also has the opportunity to pursue her fascination with underground fires and conceptions of hell, interests that stem from the knowledge that her mother, suffering from post-partum depression, once tried to give her away, convinced that she was a child of Satan. In a flashback scene in which Percy confronts her mother about this abandonment, Luke powerfully contrasts the frigidity of the mother's shame and confusion with the violence of her enraged child's demand for an explanation. Less successful are the portrayals of peripheral characters like Marlea's boyfriend and her Uncle Blair, which rely too heavily on stereotypes to be fully convincing.

Luke's prose is most seductive when describing the rewards and frustrations of Percy's supposedly simple life in the wilderness: she makes a pressure-less, lukewarm outdoor shower on a cold, northern morning sound invitingly sensuous. Percy's solitude has its pleasures, but also its dangers and illusions. The high seclusion of her fire tower is a metaphor for her desire for control in her relationships, and for her reluctance to give of herself, "afraid to face her own fear that perhaps no one will love her the way she wants to be loved." Luke effectively manipulates the patterns of the classic quest narrative, as Percy begins her journey back to society by leaving the shelter of the tower and entering the forest. Her

encounter with a "fluffy-looking" bear sporting a "creamy coat" with "chocolate trim," part teddy bear, part candy animal, signals her need to relinquish a childish desire that the world conform to her expectations. Finally, she survives a metaphorical descent into the underworld with a renewed sense of the value of her life and her place within the community.

In Elisabeth Harvor's *Excessive Joy Injures the Heart*, city-dweller Claire Vornoff, in her late thirties and separated from her husband, experiences loneliness that is as complete as that of Percy in her tower. Claire's anxious conviction that "she must do something with her life" produces a host of psychosomatic symptoms, including insomnia, eczema and debilitating muscular pain. Although she works in the office of a family doctor, her search for alternative treatments leads her to Declan Farrell, an unorthodox and charismatic practitioner, a "Pied Piper" in "holistic sandals" who wields a powerful influence over his female patients. The novel depicts the gendering of a therapeutic subculture in which the practitioners are men, most of the patients women, and the potential for abuse is seemingly always present: shopping around for someone to cure her, Claire often has trouble distinguishing "between what [is] lechery and what [is] therapeutic."

Indignant at Declan's bullying manner, his instructions as to how she ought to be inhabiting her own body, Claire nonetheless falls under his spell. Her friend Libi speaks for the reader (at least for this reader), voicing her impatience at the helplessness of Claire's deepening infatuation. Claire's search for cures is bound up with her urgent need for sympathy and intimacy: Harvor vividly conveys the sense of threat which permeates Claire's existence among predatory men and malicious women (the "excessive joy" of the title is not often in evidence here). The novel explores the potential of the mind and the emotions to affect the material world. Declan believes that a person's body bears tangible marks of their emotional history. Although he tells Claire that strong emotions don't "exist in a vacuum," he appears unmoved by her love for him. Harvor is unsparing in her evocation of the pathetic stratagems of unrequited passion as Claire obsessively sifts through her encounters with Declan, looking for evidence of his love for her. Unlike Michelle and Percy, Claire does not find a way out of her isolation at the end of the novel.

Of the three books, Harvor's is the darkest and most challenging, and the quality of her prose is the most memorable. She conveys sensory perceptions with striking and uncanny exactitude: pulling on a wet bathing suit is to feel the "quick cold nudge of a dog's nose [. . .] between the legs." Harvor is adept at capturing the way in which the smallest details of the world can shimmer with significance when viewed through the eyes of grief and love.

# Crossroads

**Scott Gardiner**
*The Dominion of Wyley McFadden.* Random House $32.95

**Alan Cumyn**
*Burridge Unbound.* McClelland & Stewart $22.99

**James Heneghan**
*The Grave.* Groundwood Books / Douglas & McIntyre $12.95

Reviewed by Klay Dyer

Reading Scott Gardiner's *The Dominion of Wyley McFadden* is an experience akin to watching reruns of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* or exploring the shadows of a painting by Mary Pratt. Marking tentative pathways through indefinite worlds of troubled and troubling refractions, this work re-illuminates the deceptively mundane surfaces and linoleum familiarities of the everyday, bringing to them the rough caress of what Gardiner's indefatigable protagonist describes as "a deceptive light, a decidedly complicated light, coming in from more than one direction."

A disgraced andrologist turned urban trapper, Torontonian McFadden is questing westward with a mission: to re-seed Alberta (Canada's only rat-free province) with carefully selected colonies of *Rattus norvegicus*, to redress what he sees as a landmark case of zoomorphic discrimination, and in the process to reinvigorate the spirit of Confederation in the sometimes surly foothills province. (The framework of the 1867 agreement, "after all, was supposed to be based on equality of assets.") With his cargo stowed in a modified camper van, McFadden ventures incident-free to the eastern shores of Lake Superior, where he comes across a young woman hitchhiking in the middle of nowhere, clad only in a mud-crusted tennis outfit and losing her battle against a bloodthirsty cloud of mosquitoes. Against his better judgment, and ignoring risk of discovery, McFadden stops to pick her up. Unable to ascertain her identity, how she came to be stranded, or where she is heading, he soon finds himself "grinding up" slope after "endless slope in the company of a passenger who fits his itinerary absolutely nowhere."

With a keen eye for the ironies and absurdities of contemporary Canada, Gardiner proves himself a more than capable first-time novelist. At its core *Wyley McFadden* is a road story, and as such finds its central dynamics in those inevitable moments when the all-too-familiar excuse for polite silence—"it's a long story"—collides head-on with that liberating (or is it irksome?) road-trip truism: "You have a long time." A man "more enamoured of words than of other kinds of sounds," McFadden is a natural storyteller whose talent Gardiner celebrates, allowing his curious mind to slide effortlessly across an eclectic array of subjects, from the nature of guilt ("invented as a spur to the imagination") and the culinary arts ("Life without fresh pepper [. . .] would not be worth the effort") to the benign civilities of CBC Radio and the navel-gazing of Canadian federalism. But like any good road trip, this one is about much more than simply checking kilometres off the map, and as provincial crossings accumulate and McFadden's stories turn increasingly inward, the unnamed passenger begins to weave her own elliptical tale, a dark countermovement that is hinted at too obviously in the bruises and night terrors that McFadden observes.

With an intellectual edge and playful trans-Canadianness to its credit, *The Dominion of Wyley McFadden* is not without weaknesses, to be sure. There are the expected stretches of first-novel verbosity, and a few too many plot elements read like retread *Law and Order* scripts, notably those surrounding the scandal that drove McFadden out of medicine and a sex slavery ring operated by a pair of sadistic behaviourists. One might object, too, that Gardiner is perpetuating the usual constel-

lation of ethnic stereotypes here, most notably in his rendering of a back story of abuse by Native elders and in the characterization of Toronto's Chinese community; however, in the larger context of this work such criticism would mark a dangerously dismissive reduction of the broader ironies at play. This is a novel in which the politics and humour are not always subtle or civil, but in such risks come both the pleasures and pains of life on the open road.

Roads (both literal and metaphoric) play a central role, too, in *Burridge Unbound*, Ottawa writer Alan Cumyn's fourth work of fiction and a novel shortlisted for the Giller Prize. It picks up where his 1998 *Man of Bone* left off. As Alistair MacLeod suggests in his jacket blurb, this is "a story about the fragility [. . .] of life pushed to the edge," of "a man at a precarious crossroads." Almost three years removed from a roadside kidnapping by terrorists on the fictional island of Santa Irene, Bill Burridge is still struggling to regain his footing, still mapping his way back from nine months lived "far beyond the bandwidth of normal human experience." The founder and all-too public face of a cash-strapped but internationally recognized human-rights organization, Burridge is tired of the bureaucratic posturings that define official Ottawa culture ("a sickening game"). Tormented by memories of atrocities endured, he also finds himself unable and at times unwilling to cope with the burdens of a disintegrating personal life. Following the assassination of Santa Irene's long-time dictator, and the subsequent rise to power of the enigmatic widow Suli Nylioko, Burridge is invited back to the island to serve as a member of a Truth Commission.

Bearing witness to the "relentless" testimony of the ever-growing community of *sorialos* ("shadows waiting to speak") gathering outside Commission headquarters, Burridge is forced to confront not only the contours of his personal horrors but also the false hopes born of his political naïveté, the real politics of truthfulness in a shadowy world of unsure loyalties and unimaginable violence, and (in the narrative's least engaging thread) the energies informing his increasingly sexual relationship with the leader Nylioko.

What establishes *Burridge Unbound* as a superior novel to, say, Atwood's *Bodily Harm* (1981) is Cumyn's willingness to push his "hero" beyond the platitudes and pseudo-liberal paternalism of mainstream activism. An intensely political animal by nature, Burridge is at the same time woefully unaware that he lacks a full complement of the necessary backroom instincts; a media player willing to market "the integrity of [his] suffering," he suddenly finds himself susceptible to equally public meltdowns and moments of hyperbolic self-promotion; a highly principled man, he remains painfully human. *Burridge Unbound* deserves to garner substantial critical attention and MacLeod's assessment is an accurate one: "Alan Cumyn is a writer of remarkable talent."

Reviewing James Heneghan's *The Grave* alongside such "adult" novels as *Wyley McFadden* and *Burridge Unbound* is not particularly fair given its primary audience. Winner of the 2001 Sheila A. Egoff B.C. Book Prize for Children's Literature, a New York Library Pick for the "Best Books List of 2000," and a Junior Library Guild Pick, as well as being nominated for a host of other literary prizes, *The Grave* recounts a young orphan's road trip of quantum dimensions. When thirteen-year-old Tom Mullen hears rumours that a mass grave has been unearthed on the grounds of his Liverpool school, he sneaks through the fence to explore for himself. Drawn into the grave by an inexplicable force, he awakens to find himself no longer in Liverpool or in 1974 but in a small Irish village trapped in the spiraling despair of the 1847 potato famine. Taken in by a family named Monaghan, the young orphan experiences

not only the pains of molecular displacement but also the complex emotions of a family facing the realities of an oppressive politics, of daily burials and of a poverty without hope. Ever troublesome, for readers as well as Tom's surrogate family, are his geo-temporal instabilities, which leave him unsure as to when his next "leap" will occur.

*The Grave* is based on the true story of a Liverpool contractor's "discovery" in 1973 of what "turned out to be a mass grave with 3,561 coffins in it," all of which were secretly removed and incinerated over the course of eighteen months. This is a story of erasure, of reducing to ashes the memories of thousands of unidentified remains. The Liverpudlian cover-up held firm for eight years. In many ways each of these three novelists invites readers to imagine the consequences of such inhumanity, to remind ourselves that the roads mapped out before us might be broad and ample but are not paved with gold.

## "Canpo," Thirty Years On

**Gary Geddes, ed.**
*15 Canadian Poets x 3.* Oxford $34.95

Reviewed by Amanda Goldrick-Jones

"No Canadian poet was ever mentioned at King Edward High School in Vancouver," begins the Preface to the fourth edition of Gary Geddes's latest and largest collection of Canadian poetry. This is hard to imagine in an era when bookstore shelves are amply stocked with Canadian fiction and transit users can read snippets of Canadian poetry on their way to work. What was once quaintly known as "CanLit" and relegated to a shelf in the back of the bookstore has become so much a part of our cultural landscape that the appearance of one more collection of Canadian poets hardly seems remarkable. This happy state of affairs results substantially from the efforts of poets and editors like Gary Geddes, who recognized over thirty years ago that one of the best ways to promote "Canpo" was to make it accessible to Canadian students through widely distributed anthologies.

Once described by historian George Woodcock as Canada's best political poet, Geddes is editor of *20th-Century Poetry and Poetics*, used in classrooms since 1969. As well as numerous articles, reviews, and stories, Geddes has published over fifteen books of poetry, among them *The Terracotta Army* (1984), *Light of Burning Towers: Poems New and Selected* (1990), and *Active Trading: Selected Poems, 1970-1995* (1996). *15 Canadian Poets x 3* is the latest descendant of *15 Canadian Poets*, the 1970 anthology he co-edited with Phyllis Bruce.

In that first edition the editors articulated a single, clear purpose: "to suggest the unusual scope and variety of poetry written in English in Canada since the Second World War." Explaining their choice of fifteen particular poets, Geddes and Bruce admitted: "Ultimately there are no prescriptive criteria to offer for choices that are highly subjective; it can only be hoped that the book reflects what is happening in the art itself." The first edition's extensive "Notes"—essentially mini-essays critiquing each poet's language and structure, poetic development, and political and/or cultural influences—were often idiosyncratic in tone and emphasis. For example, Geddes and Bruce spiritedly defended then-emerging poet George Bowering: "A good deal of nonsense, most of it propaganda masquerading as aesthetics, has been written and spoken about Bowering's poetry." By comparison and quite understandably, the fourth edition has the luxury of taking a more retrospective approach to once-emerging poets like Bowering, Atwood, and Ondaatje, noting ways in which their work has essentially defined much of the Canadian literary landscape.

Fourteen of Geddes's original favourites have survived subsequent editions to appear in *15 Canadian Poets x 3*, a representation spanning canonical poets like Earle

Birney and Dorothy Livesay as well as what Geddes calls "the emerging generation of mature poets." Readers looking for examples of the diversity, structural range, and political/ideological interests of contemporary Canadian poets will appreciate the inclusion of Dionne Brand, Anne Carson, Robert Bringhurst, Jan Zwicky, and Erin Mouré—only a few of the now-established poets whose work embraces ambiguity and paradox, evoking a Canada marked by cultural transformation, and acknowledging voices formerly muffled or silenced.

Most of the forty-five poets in this anthology are represented by ten or more poems, continuing the admirable practice of the first edition to provide as much scope and variety as possible. From a teaching standpoint, showcasing many poems by one writer in this manner is enormously useful. In a few cases, Geddes has chosen to represent a poet by a smaller number of longer works. Notably, Dionne Brand's "No Language is Neutral" and Anne Carson's "The Glass Essay" are printed in their entirety, providing valuable opportunities to study a single work in much greater depth.

Geddes also includes excerpts from long poems by Pratt, Livesay, Ondaatje, and MacEwan in order, as he puts it, to heighten a reader's appreciation of "the importance of the long poem and poetic narrative." However, this can be problematic, in that what is provided is inevitably incomplete, a brilliant metonym perhaps, but still only a piece of a more complex whole. On the other hand, a new reader being introduced to an excerpt from a longer poem might be piqued enough to find and read the entire original. What teacher doesn't wish fervently for that outcome?

Another useful feature of *15 Canadian Poets x 3* is the biographical and critical introduction to each poet, sensibly placed at the beginning of each section rather than as a separate section at the back. More condensed than the lavish mini-essays in the first edition, these notes nonetheless contain much useful information and analysis drawing from diverse sources. In cases where Geddes has retained poets from earlier editions, his critical comments have seen some minor changes and updates; others are entirely new. Many of these commentaries retain the idiosyncrasies of tone and much of the strong blend of the personal and political that characterized the "Notes" in the first edition. Given his long interest in peace movements and his critiques of political inequality, Geddes has, not surprisingly, used some of these commentaries to convey his empathy for poetry that takes a stance against oppression and injustice.

The Preface has expanded greatly since the first edition. It is helpful for both understanding Geddes's editorial choices and appreciating his perspectives on the development of "Canpo" and "CanLit" over the past thirty years. Commenting on how the study of literary texts has changed, Geddes expresses some reservations about the fact that it "has been, to a considerable extent, supplanted by other interests—including feminism, ethnicity, gender [. . .] and post-colonialism." While these interests have, for good reason, become inseparable from the study of Canadian literature, Geddes wonders about the dangers of focusing too intently on such an "international" approach to Canadian literature. Citing George Grant's assertion that "If you skip the stage of nationalism, you don't become internationals [. . .] but Americans," Geddes insists that "Canada must preserve its cultural identity." This anthology, in its various manifestations since 1970, may be seen as his contribution to that enterprise.

Ultimately, one of the main purposes of *15 Canadian Poets x 3* is found in Geddes's argument that Canadian identity can no longer be equated with "old myths" about what it means to be Canadian; rather, it is part of a "new reality," embodied in the increasingly diverse voices of "the poets,

traditional keepers of the word-hoard, caretakers of the dialects of the tribe." Geddes invites readers to imagine the possibility, reflected in the works of this anthology, that poetry not only shapes a nation but can, perhaps, transform a troubled world.

## Lie to Me

**Lee Gowan**
*Make Believe Love.* Knopf $32.95

**Joanna Gosse**
*Liar.* Breakwater $14.95

**Joan Givner**
*Half Known Lives.* New Star $20.00

**Steven Manners**
*Ondine's Curse.* Porcepic $18.95

Reviewed by Robert David Stacey

What does it mean to lie in an age when there is (as we are told) no Truth? Has the lie lost all integrity, so to speak? This question is central to the four books under review here—first novels all—which oblige the reader to entertain some notion of truthfulness (however provisionally) by giving space to the lie.

Lee Gowan's clever and fairly enjoyable *Make Believe Love* frames a conflict between two accounts of a Saskatchewan farmer's obsession with Stephanie Rush, Alberta-born international sex symbol and major cog in the Hollywood dream machine. (She's sort of a cross between Marilyn Monroe and Fay Wray.) Jason Warwick, Torontonian and *faux* intellectual, has published the public account: a sensationalist, patronizing, self-aggrandizing, and incomplete story that raises the hackles of local girl Joan Swift, herself a key figure in Warwick's narrative, with whom he has had an adulterous affair. Joan's account is equal parts impassioned confession and sarcastic retort, and is meant to reveal the human complexities behind the headlines.

As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Joan represents the starlet's terrestrial past. She's a Norma Jean who never became a Marilyn; her world is separated from the latter's only by fate—plus distance, money, and connections. It's Darwin Andrew Goodwin's (Rush's lover/stalker) attempt to bridge this divide that earns him his crank status and turns him into media fodder. Warwick's attempt to transform Joan into Rush (whom she resembles) to get to Goodwin precipitates the novel's climax of mistaken identity, emotional breakdown, and media mayhem. The novel ends on a redemptive note back at the farm, with a heavy emphasis on family (though oddly constituted), work, art and love. This pastoral conclusion is a bit of a cheat, but that seems to be Gowan's point: "Make Believe Love" is by now less an adjectival phrase than a sentence in the imperative.

The novel is at its best when making connections, less successful when drawing conclusions. While the dialogue is usually quite sharp, Joan's flinty (yet vulnerable) narrative voice does occasionally wobble—especially when the temptation to analysis and commentary proves too strong for Gowan to resist. Joan's occasional addresses to the reader seem to constitute a similar breach in character: "This is my private confession. [. . .] As you read these words, a great intimacy is happening between *you* and *me*." In the context of this otherwise breezy and unpretentious book, this comes off as gimmicky—not to mention dangerously presumptuous. There are other instances when the novel seems a little too anxious to please, too willing to flash its credentials. But for the most part, Gowan succeeds not only in making the unbelievable believable but also in the harder job of making the believable believable.

Unfortunately, this is precisely what Joanna Gosse's *Liar* fails to do. A domestic tragedy about a sculptor, China Collins, who impulsively marries a man she barely knows only to discover he is a pathological liar, the novel is a poorly written (apparently unedited) and numbing lyrical medi-

tation on being right (by being wronged). The husband in question, Sam Eagle, is an aboriginal lawyer and future chief of the Grimshaw Indian Tribe, imaginary descendants of the Beothuks. (There is something disquieting about this fanciful notion that the Beothuks weren't actually exterminated, all the more so since it is the only invention of the sort in the novel.) Sam forces China to move to the isolated Grimshaw Island where she is marooned without friends, family, or independent means of support. He's a sex maniac. He's a racist. Most terribly, though, he's a liar. He lies about his income, about paying the bills, about his family history and previous relationships. At a particularly low point, he lies about having brushed his teeth. Poor China can barely keep track of it all in her journal, portions of which, along with poems and *pensées*, pepper the narrative. And that's the problem: *Liar* is a novel that doesn't want to be bothered with the business of fiction. Character development, dramatic action, dialogue—the basic logistics of getting characters to say and do things—are mostly ignored by Gosse who would rather focus on how her character *feels*. This isn't always fatal, but China doesn't feel that deeply or, for that matter, think that clearly. Hers is a flaky and indulgent personality that might have been the basis for a more complex and engaging character study if only she (and I suspect the author) weren't so convinced of her infallibility and talent. When another character does appear, she does so only to validate China's point of view. Given that there is already very little that separates the voice of the third-person narration from that of the journals, the effect is at first claustrophobic and then tedious. Whereas *Make Believe Love* is perhaps overly conscious of the reader, *Liar* seems unable to imagine one, so tied is it to the journal-confession mode.

A far more gratifying take on fictional confession is Joan Givner's *Half-Known Lives*, in part because it has the confidence to question its own assumptions. The lie manifests itself here as a kind of (fictional) autobiographical indeterminacy, an inability or refusal to know oneself. This basic unreliability is turned to didactic advantage, however, since the taped remembrances of Lucy Heathcote, professor of English and Women's Studies, actually serve as the basis for an allegorical retelling of the history of North American feminism. Ostensibly about the forced impregnation of a male anti-abortionist by a group of women, the novel re-enacts (dare I say performs?) key moments in the feminist movement, from the early call for personal testimony (with its emphasis on trauma and victimization), to the creation of collectives and academic programs, to the "discovery" of French theory (with its implications for the act of writing), to its current (or so Givner seems to suggest) unfocused and nostalgic state.

Rising above moments of forced, clunky writing, *Half-Known Lives* emerges finally as a complex work, beguiling, deceptive, and astute, though its relentless seriousness and the mechanical nature of its unfolding may frustrate some readers. Likewise, though Givner demonstrates a knack for deft, keenly observed characterization, she is forced by her method to limit this to the minor figures; the principals are, for the most part, types, tokens of particular beliefs, approaches, humours. Only Lucy, whose unreliable narration propels the story forward (and allows Givner to wrap a social history in a personal confession), has any depth. Finally, given that one of the original purposes of allegory was to protect the Truth from the unworthy minds of uninitiated, *Half-Known Lives* is necessarily a closed circuit, an insider's book. Only those already familiar with the history and theory of feminism are likely to "get" this novel, and they are sure to relish it. Less informed or committed readers, however,

probably won't find the more obvious lesson—that we never know as much as we think we do—sufficient compensation for their efforts.

It would be hard to imagine a more masculine novel than Steven Manner's *Ondine's Curse.* An apocalyptic tale full of arcane information and extreme characters, it tells the story of TV biographer Robert Strasser's attempt to put together a documentary on Dr. Werther Acheson, the demonic head of a Montreal psychiatric institute. In the process, a relationship develops between Strasser and Ondine, a historian, paranoiac, and one of the institute's patients. The book is compelling, in a Don DeLillo meets Irving D. Yalom kind of way, and Manner's evocation of a hopped-up, freaked out human landscape is delightfully bleak. Less successful is the portrait of Ondine and her personal obsession with Shawnadithit, the last Beothuk woman (once again, the Beothuks), which seems forced and arbitrary, as though the author were trying to up the ante on the potential interest of his work to academics (who are likely to have their hands full already with all the death, desire, and narrative material the novel throws at them). This penchant for theory is reflected in the writing itself which is at times verbose and jargony, pulling towards the automatism of a professional discourse. On the other hand, the language suits the continental feel, Manners recognizing in Montreal the perfect rendezvous for old world corruption and post-punk unease.

## Perfect Cree

**Tomson Highway**
*Kiss of the Fur Queen* Doubleday n.p.

Reviewed by Margery Fee

Putting his Cree culture together with so-called "high" Western culture, Tomson Highway takes Canadian literature in a new direction. He adopts a semi-autobiographical approach to his own experiences and those of his younger brother. Born on a trapline and flown out to a Roman Catholic residential school from their small northern community of Eemanipiteepitat, the Okimasis brothers, Jeremiah and Gabriel, are both sexually abused. Despite the horror of the experience (the abusers are likened to the Cree cannibal spirit, Weetigo, feasting on the flesh of the young), Highway's sense of humour and his understanding of the complicated psychology of the situation make it clear how he himself survived, barely. His brother René died of AIDS, after achieving fame as a ballet dancer, as does Gabriel in the novel. Highway, like Jeremiah, was a promising pianist. The novel is filled with the presence of the Cree trickster, Weesageechak, not to mention Cree stories, and the Cree language itself. The novel begins before they are born, in 1951, when their father Abraham becomes the "first Indian" to win the "Millingdon Cup World Championship Dog Derby." The picture of him, winner of the dog race, being kissed by the Fur Queen, winner of that year's beauty pageant, becomes an icon for the two boys. The Fur Queen appears in many guises throughout the novel: sometimes Native, sometimes white, sometimes male, sometimes female. As Gabriel explains, Weesageechak is "the clown who bridges humanity and God—a God who laughs, a God who's here, not for guilt, not for suffering, but for a good time. Except, this time, the Trickster representing God as a woman, a goddess in fur. Like in this picture. I've always thought that, ever since we were little kids. I mean, if Native languages have no gender, then why should we? And why, for that matter, should God?"

Gender and sexuality are fraught with pain and complication for the brothers. Jeremiah, racked with guilt for failing to protect his little brother at school, closes the door of his memory on the past. He cannot, however, shut his eyes to the repeated brutal

sexual killings of Cree women in Winnipeg, where he attends high school, deaths that for him link heterosexual sex with violent brutality. His guilt over these killings leaves him impotent and explains his eventual abandonment of the piano for social work on the streets. For Gabriel, sex is an act of revenge, as he repeatedly betrays his priest-like dance mentor and partner with anyone he can seduce, especially priests. It is this mentor who links his dance with the offering up of Christ's body at the mass: "'Think of your pelvis,' suggested Gregory, 'as a plate with an offering.'" By the end, he is offering up death, and we are reminded of the story of how Weesageechak killed the Weetigo, a story that Jeremiah tells Gabriel in the shopping mall. Weesageechak comes to earth as a weasel, "crawls up the Weetigo's bumhole [. . .] in order to kill the horrible monster [. . .] and comes back out with his white fur covered with shit." As Jeremiah says, "You could never get away with a story like that in English." In English, certainly, heroes are all white. But the point is more complicated: the shopping mall becames symbolic of the cannibal culture that's eating us all, and salvation comes through the transformative power of music, dance and theatre.

This power of creativity is closely connected with Cree language and culture. Jeremiah has learned to play the accordion, and his brother has learned to dance, before they go to school. Later, Gabriel saves his brother from an alcoholic depression by connecting him again with music, and the two brothers begin to produce musical works that use Cree culture to reveal the history of colonization in Canada. But their works are not purist. English is a difficult medium in which to write the Cree heart, but Jeremiah, not to mention Highway himself, finally achieves this writing because he wants to connect with Native children growing up in a foreign city: "the rhythm of his native tongue came bleeding through the music." In the mixture of the two cultures they have learned, the brothers become like the Cree hero, the Son of Ayash, who with magic weapons makes a new world.

## A Celestial Hierarchy

**Hugh Hood**

*Near Water.* Anansi $24.95

Reviewed by Barbara Pell

*Near Water*, the twelfth and final novel of Hugh Hood's epic series *The New Age/Le nouveau siècle* (1975-2000), marks the end of the most ambitious and impressive literary project ever undertaken in Canada. While the first four volumes of this *roman fleuve* (indebted to Marcel Proust and Anthony Powell) garnered considerable critical interest and approval, the later books have received little attention. This monumental Christian allegory has always frustrated the critics because of its unfashionable narrative genre and its demanding theological allusions. Depending on one's perspective, *Near Water* is the best—or the worst—of the series.

In this final novel, on a mid-summer day in the second decade of the twenty-first century (The New Age), the narrator of the entire "periplum," Matthew Goderich, dies in his early eighties of a "cerebrovascular accident" (a stroke: coincidentally and poignantly, the cause of Hood's own death just one month before the publication of this volume). This Book of Revelation consists of Matt's twenty-eight-hour stream-of-consciousness before death; it represents an extreme example of all of the idiosyncratic features of the previous eleven volumes. There is practically no plot; for 250 pages we are immersed in the theological meditations of a highly intelligent, pleasantly charming and decent, but oddly pedantic narrator. Hood clearly demonstrates here that he is not writing modern realism or postmodern metafiction any more than

Homer, Dante or St. John of Patmos was—this is apocalyptic eschatology:

> Novel turning into allegory from Homer to Dante, the greatest of endings, the essential arrival, SAFE AT HOME! [. . .] The deepest narrative of all with the supreme usefulness of high allegory. Safe at home in Eden, [. . .] the history of our salvation, *periplum!*

At the beginning of *Near Water*, Matthew Goderich ("God's kingdom" from the Old English) returns to the family lakeside cottage (from Volume II, *A New Athens*) to await a reunion with his estranged wife Edie (who represents the lost Eden). After one-third of the novel, Matt has a stroke lying on a recliner by the shore; the rest of the book consists of his laborious attempts to fall out of the recliner and crawl across the ground and up the nine stairs to the porch where he dies in an old swing (completing the circle begun in Volume I, *The Swing in the Garden*, with symbolic allusions to the Fall and the Cross of Christ). Matt has spent his life as a near-celebrity: son of a Nobel Prize winner; husband of a popular painter; father of an astronaut; friend of a famous actor. His final reflections and memories embrace all the major characters of the series in a benediction of hope and love. But the majority of the book is an allegory of faith structured (with a couple of Hoodian revisions) according to the standard fifth-century textbook of mysticism, *The Celestial Hierarchy* by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. The nine chapters parallel the nine ascending orders of the angels that mediate between God and humanity: Angels, Archangels, Powers, Virtues, Principalities, Dominions, Thrones, Cherubim and Seraphim. Matt's passage from physical suffering to spiritual transcendence is marked by his progression through the "triad of triads" toward knowing God: philosophy, theology and narrative; discipline, reason and suffering; and finally, divine action, thought and love as he enters into the "Divine Presence."

If you haven't read any of the *The New Age* novels, don't start with this one. But do consider reading, or rereading, the first four. Then go on to the end, knowing that this series, finally complete, is one of the most significant—both unique and challenging—literary accomplishments in the Canadian canon. You may even find yourself caring that, at the end, Matthew Goderich has found his salvation.

## Literature and Medicine

**Anne Hunsaker Hawkins and Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, eds.**
*Teaching Literature and Medicine.* Modern Language Association US $22.00

Reviewed by Alan Bewell

Recently there has been a substantial increase in the study and teaching of literature and medicine. Medical schools, aware of their students' troubling lack of exposure to the important perspectives offered by the humanities (indeed, Apollo was the god of both medicine and poetry), have introduced literature courses into their programs with a view to deepening their understanding of the interpretive and ethical complexities of the practice of medicine. Good doctors need to be able to communicate with their patients and to recognize the different perspectives that can be brought to understanding illnesses, most notably by patients. Also in humanities departments, with the rise of cultural studies, the increased interest in the social and scientific contexts of literature, and the extension of literary methods to the analysis of nonliterary texts and documents, medical writings and practices are receiving more attention. Anne Hunsaker Hawkins and Marilyn Chandler McEntyre have brought together an exceedingly useful collection of essays on the teaching of literature and medicine which will be of great value to those who teach or

are considering teaching a course in this area.

The collection is divided into four parts, the first two constituting the major bulk of the book. Part 1 consists of thirteen course models, complete with bibliographies. These I found very useful, as they range from a course that introduces medical students to literary concepts, to others that deal with illness in America; the changes that scientific advances have had upon doctor/patient relationships; the history and literature of women's health; the changing of the body in literature, culture, and religion; literature and public health issues; ethics, language, and narrative; madness and suicide in Western literature; Western conceptualizations of mind and body in literary, philosophical, and medical writings; literature and medicine as a writing course; medical Spanish; medical ethics, narrative, and social norms; and rhetoric and medical persuasion. Along with a syllabus, each author provides a general overview of the objectives and pedagogical challenges of each course. McEntyre provides a very capable introduction to Part 2, which deals with specific authors, texts and genres, by providing a good survey of some of the works that regularly appear in courses on literature and medicine. The twelve short essays that follow provide only a small sampling of the many possible texts and issues. Because they average only eight pages in length, each author has only been able to sketch out relevant approaches and contexts. American literature is dominant among modern texts, and the fact that there is only one Canadian contributor partly explains why Canadian literature, despite its intense and ongoing reflection on illness, pain, and suffering, is largely absent from this collection. Part 3 focuses specifically on texts and approaches within a medical setting, discussing how courses relate specifically to medical education and practice. Kathryn Montgomery discusses the use of Sherlock Holmes to teach clinical reasoning, while Cortney Davis provides an informative discussion of poetry written by nurses. LaVera Crawley describes a course in "humanistic pathology," one that would not only teach "the causes, mechanisms, structural sequelae, and functional consequences of disease processes," but also would repersonalize the discipline, recovering the symbolic and semantic perspectives of pathology. Douglas Robert Reifler uses the "poor Yorick" scene in *Hamlet* to introduce his students to the shift in perspective required of medical students in order to do gross anatomy. Others deal with poetry and pediatrics, the semiotics of medication, and gender relationship in the encounter of doctors with patients and the medical community. Hawkins concludes this section with an account of literature seminars that she offers to faculty physicians at the Pennsylvania State University College of Medicine. All the essays in this volume are extremely valuable in directing the reader's attention to pedagogical issues, texts, and resources, so Part 4, which provides a bibliography of resources and other information for teachers and scholars in literature and medicine, is a bonus. Surprisingly, for such a well-organized collection, there is no subject index.

For anyone who teaches or plans to teach a course in medicine and literature, or who simply wants to have a highly readable account of the enormous amount of work that is currently being done on literature and medicine in university undergraduate programs and medical schools, this book is an outstanding resource.

## The Use of Beauty

**Árni Ibsen**

*A Different Silence: Selected Poems.* Harwood-Gordon and Breach n.p.

Reviewed by Wilhelm Emilsson

This book is part of an international series featuring collections by significant poets whose work has so far not been available in

English. The first thing the reader will note is the lavishness of the publisher. *A Different Silence* is a dual-language edition, with English translations of Árni Ibsen's original Icelandic on the facing pages, a preface by the author's co-translator, a scholarly introduction, and a CD featuring the author reading in both Icelandic and English.

Ibsen's work deserves the lavish packaging. Dante Gabriel Rossetti once said that a sonnet is a moment's monument. Unfortunately, most poems are monuments to poets' desire to write poetry, the kind of competent but uninspired work that lives for a few moments and then dies on the page. This, however, is not the case with Ibsen's poems. These pieces record the confrontations, the clashes, and the brief unions between a sensitive, sophisticated mind and the world. In spite of a dash of postmodernist poetics, his work ultimately springs from the same gloomy yet powerful sensibility that characterizes the works of the great Nordic modernists Ibsen, Strindberg, Hamsun, and Munch.

Some of the best poems in *A Different Silence* are created from the interaction between the author's fine-tuned postmodern consciousness and something darker, older, more primeval. The poem "Earth" is an example of this. The setting is a graveyard. The speaker is among the men carrying his grandmother's coffin. The coffin is light, but the road is long:

> we halt by the lychgate
> to rest an old pall-bearer
> a childhood friend of the deceased
>
> quite out of the question
> hot and snorting with energy
> highly offended

The scene is watched from a distance by two gravediggers, idling "on full pay." The contrast between rest and energy is effective, but the key here is the old man's violent reaction to his fellow pall-bearers' pausing out of consideration for his age. This is a subtle moment that crystallizes the ancient Viking code of believing in nothing but your own power, the ethos of honour and endurance that has sustained Icelandic culture and society through its pretty bleak history. The incident is given extra poignancy by its apparent triviality, as well as the speaker's awareness that this tough code may be dying. (In times of trouble, the modern Viking descendant is more likely to reach for the Prozac than grit his teeth.) What is left, however, is the hard beauty of the event.

The feeling that in the end all that will be left is the stark elegance of existence is reflected in poems such as "Wisdom Comes Whispering." Wisdom comes with old age, but never early, and never before it is bereft of everything "except the oh so useful / beautiful lilt of the words" ("utan notadrjúgri / fegurri orðanna hljóðan"). The line, incidentally, is much more impressive in the original. Generally the translation is good, although at times it cannot quite match the resonance and understated power of the original.

Ibsen's poems invite the reader to reflect on the quiet beauty of life's moments as they flicker between the ellipses of the world's silence. In a post-everything era, a thing of beauty may no longer be a joy forever—but while it lasts, it is enough.

## Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll

**Mark Anthony Jarman**
*19 Knives.* Anansi $24.95

**Leon Rooke**
*The Fall of Gravity.* Thomas Allen $32.95

**Michael Turner**
*The Pornographer's Poem.* Doubleday $32.95

Reviewed by Douglas Ivison

To be honest, the title of this review is a little misleading, applying only fitfully to these three books. In many ways—subject

matter, prose style, characters, and so on—these books have little in common other than an intertextual grounding in the culture (popular and otherwise) of late-twentieth-century North America. However, at least from the reader's perspective, all three books demonstrate a playful and vital engagement with the restrictions and possibilities of language and genre. Jarman, Rooke, and Turner all revel in the joys of writing and storytelling.

Published by Doubleday Canada, Michael Turner's *The Pornographer's Poem* has the highest profile of the three books. Turner, previously best known as the author of *Hard Core Logo*, has emerged as a potential star of the Canadian literary scene, and *The Pornographer's Poem* was awaited with great anticipation. Although certainly not by any means a major achievement, *The Pornographer's Poem* is an engaging, highly readable novel, which has won the Ethel Wilson B. C. Book Prize for Fiction. The novel begins with the narrator describing, in film script form, his first experience in a porn theatre, when he was sixteen. As we discover a few pages later, the narrator is being interrogated by an anonymous tribunal. This interrogation structures the novel, as the interrogators force the narrator to explain his feelings and motivations, to fill in the gaps, as they oblige him to tell his life story so far. He describes his life growing up in suburban Vancouver, along with his sister, in a stereotypical single-parent household. He traces his introduction to film-making by his grade-seven teacher, who has her class make short films for their class project. He and his life-long friend and occasional girlfriend, Nettie (sickly and artistic, she at times resembles a romantic cliché of the artistic intellectual), both become deeply committed to their film projects, only to be disappointed by their teacher's failure to meet all their expectations. In fact, most of the adults in the novel, however well meaning, are at best ineffectual and at worst exploitative of the children with whom they come into contact, as is exemplified by the neighbour who collects child pornography. Together and apart, the narrator and Nettie experiment, sexually, artistically, and intellectually, as they move through their adolescence. One day, shortly after watching his "first porno," the narrator discovers his neighbours having sex on their balcony. He films them, calling the resulting film *The Family Dog* because of the arrival of the neighbours' Great Dane in the final scenes. This film becomes the narrator's entrée to decadent parties at which *The Family Dog* is shown. The success of the film transforms the narrator into a pornographer who is much in demand. In a manner reminiscent of the film *Boogie Nights*, however, he becomes increasingly disillusioned by the exploitation, betrayal, and selfishness of the milieu. The narrator and Nettie discover that sex, like human relationships, can be both liberating and exploitative. At heart, however, *The Pornographer's Poem* is a touching story about the relationship between the narrator and Nettie as they both come of age. The book jacket copy claims that Turner "tests the lines between pornography and art," but it is those passages that try to grapple with such ideas that most often fall flat. At times, Nettie and the narrator seem to have read an awful lot of literary and art theory for fifteen-year-olds. Still, Turner's energy and inventiveness are infectious.

*19 Knives*, a slim volume of short fiction, is Mark Anthony Jarman's fourth book of fiction, collecting fourteen stories, most of which have previously appeared in literary magazines and anthologies. Most of these stories are about broken dreams, unfulfilled expectations, and white male angst. While that might seem unpromising, they are enlivened by wit, creative wordplay, and the narrative voices of their narrators. "Burn Man on a Texas Porch," shortlisted for the O. Henry Prize, is a powerful and moving

meditation by a man who has been badly burned in a propane barbecue accident. "Song from Under the Floorboards," winner of an international monologue competition sponsored by the Playwrights' Union of Canada, exemplifies the strengths and weaknesses of Jarman's collection. It creates a vividly realized narrator, a mediocre football player who now works in a muffler shop, and allows him to meditate on his youthful adventures, his failed dreams, riffing along the way on sports, popular music, and cars. Unfortunately, the similarities from story to story create a sameness that weakens the overall impact. In fact, some of these pieces might be more effective as oral performances than as written fictions. Furthermore, there are a few minor tics that grate, such as Jarman's occasionally excessive referentiality. Still, at their best these stories vividly articulate the voices of characters at the margins of society, and do so in exuberant prose.

Veteran writer Leon Rooke is the best known of the three writers being discussed in this review, having won the Governor-General's award for *Shakespeare's Dog* in 1981. *The Fall of Gravity* is Rooke's sixth novel, and it is accompanied by enthusiastic back-cover praise from prominent writers like Russell Banks, Michael Ondaatje, and Austin Clarke. It is essentially a road novel, though it might be better described as a tall tale or a yarn than as a novel. Middle-aged real estate entrepreneur Raoul Daggle, his eleven-year-old daughter Juliette, and an Infiniti are traveling through the mid-western United States in pursuit of Joyel Daggle, Raoul's wife and Juliette's mother. They keep track of Joyel through the occasional postcard, and through reports from the private eye whom Raoul has hired. The novel shifts perspectives back and forth from Raoul and Juliette to Joyel, occasionally interrupted by the author, who often questions the reliability and motivations of the various characters, and even by the Infiniti, which offers its thoughts on the action. *The Fall of* Gravity, however, is not really about the pursuit of Joyel, but rather about the people whom Raoul and Juliette meet along the way, such as the convention of fallen priests in Anne's Ardor, Michigan, or the Widowhood Gulag, or Olga the kickboxer. Rooke's novel is a series of often quite humorous set pieces, which allow him to display his stylish, playful prose and gift for outlandish characters, while meditating on the breakdown of the Daggles' marriage. If *The Fall of Gravity* is a journey without any real destination, the reader will, at the very least, enjoy the ride.

## Restless Women

**Katherine Lawrence**
*Ring Finger, Left Hand.* Coteau $10.95

**Alice Major**
*Some Bones and a Story.* Wolsak and Wynn n.p.

**Shelley A. Leedahl**
*Talking Down the Northern Lights.* Thistledown P n.p.

Reviewed by Hilary Clark

Wives put gasoline on their wish lists. Brides-to-be slip out of their fathers' houses and board ships bound for far places. Mothers revise their dates of escape as the seasons and children's birthdays pass. Katherine Lawrence, Alice Major, and Shelley Leedahl write of the restlessness of women, while not overlooking the pleasures of home.

The poems in *Ring Finger, Left Hand,* Lawrence's first book, taste like the whisky sours of her poem "Morning After"—sharp and sweet. The book was awarded the 2001 First Book Award at the Saskatchewan Book Awards, and deservedly so. It is the work of a poet who has taken the time to sharpen her line-breaks and hone her words, resulting in the wit of poems like "Full Tank," in which a woman stops at a

gas station and decides to leave her husband after watching a big dog left in a car:

> Soon as the guy turned his back the mutt
> moved into the driver's seat, sniffed
> the circle
> of hot steering wheel & dragged his
> wet pink
> tongue along the inside curve like a
> careful
> lover, licked it once more
> real slow.

A number of Lawrence's poems recall the claustrophobic world of women's magazines and wedding guides of the '50s, when wives "served ladies a light lunch / on white linen tablecloths" ("She Tried"), studied hem lengths, and stuffed "quart jars / of pickles, peaches, Monday-night pot roast" with the "poison" of their restlessness ("All-American"). Marriages are bitter and children learn to negotiate the violence just under the surface: in the first poem, for instance, about a family of paper dolls, one sister smiles at the scissors while the other "wishes / for a big wind" ("Cut Along the Dotted Lines"). Yet among such edgy pieces Lawrence has included poems of simple fulfillment, in which a woman wakes to a teacup of orange juice squeezed by her lover, and children are soothed and fed.

Alice Major also writes about women, female saints, in her sixth book of poems, *Some Bones and a Story.* In a series of monologues, we meet women seeking alternatives to the traditional roles of daughter, wife, and mother—indeed, in the case of the Blessed Eustochium of Padua, who can fly, to gravity itself. These women may enter convents to escape marriage or, as in the case of Blessed Veronica from a poor family, to develop a talent—being able to weep quarts of tears—to give to the Church:

> Now there's ways and ways of holiness
> and you might think a pot of salt water
> isn't much. But show me any pope
> who's done the same.

St. Marina lives in a monastery, disguised as a monk, finding peace as a scribe in the "vellum silence of a line of gold / shaping into flowers, into fruit." Some women find their calling in caring for others, like the Blessed Louisa Albertoni, Widow, who bakes coins into loaves for the poor, in charity feeling "light as a loaf of good bread / swelling in the oven." However, some women turn from food with loathing, starving their marriageable flesh and branding it with crosses, seeking to escape their lot through "a door so narrow / few may pass through" ("A Supplication to Saint Anorexia"). Major explains in her afterword that these poems were inspired by the "fantastical" lives of women saints, lives overgrown with "a thicket of tale and oral tradition." Skilfully written, each poem is nonetheless largely driven by a story to be told, rather than by any pressure of poetic form; indeed, some of the tales (such as "The Cuckoo Chick") might be better told in prose.

In *Talking Down the Northern Lights,* her second book of poems, Shelley Leedahl writes of the pleasures and shadows of childhood, motherhood, and marriage. Her speaker (and it is largely one speaker) cares for her children, makes meatloaf and buys sheets at Zellers: "How small my world is" ("Afternoon with Sun and Spritzers"). Yet she also drives back and forth over the bridge, lusting after a workman in "shredded Levis, tongue-wagging boots" ("Jackhammer Crew"), and runs until "[t]he doctor says no more running / so [. . .] walk[s] a fast forty-five," boys "sweet tonguing" her from passing cars ("Poem Written While Sitting on a Headstone"). In "When to Drop the Bomb," my favourite poem in the book, a mother pours milk into the children's cereal while watching the Gulf War on TV and making and remaking "dates of departure": "*When the creeping charlie's all gone. After our daughter's 4th birthday.* Timing is everything." In exploring the satisfactions and tensions of domestic life, Leedahl is as

witty as Lawrence but more quietly so.

While these poems by Lawrence, Major, and Leedahl are driven by story more than by language and music, they are nonetheless smart, sharp, and frequently lyrical, and should be read by anyone with an interest in the subtle and not-so-subtle forms of women's resistance.

## Atwood in Europe

**Christina Ljungberg**
*To Join, to Fit, and to Make: The Creative Craft of Margaret Atwood's Fiction.* Peter Lang n.p.

**Reingard M. Nischik, ed.**
*Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact.* Camden House $65.00

Reviewed by Janice Fiamengo

These two studies attest to Margaret Atwood's international stature: the first began as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Zürich, and the other is a commemorative volume written predominantly by German scholars. In *To Join, To Fit, and To Make,* Christina Ljungberg begins from the unremarkable premise that form and content are significantly related in Atwood's fiction. Specifically, she argues that *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride* (she also discusses "Isis in Darkness" and *Lady Oracle* briefly) are self-conscious texts that comment on their own generic limits and potential; they are also intricately crafted fictions whose intertexts, mythic and fairy tale echoes, and structural symbolism create a rich mine of allusion for the alert reader. Ljungberg's emphasis on the craft of Atwood's fiction—specifically the transformation of myth and genre—promises an explicit examination of form and structure. Ljungberg does not fully deliver on this promise, but she offers some insights into these two complex novels.

Working from Atwood's reflections on the terms "crafty," "craftsmanship" and "witchcraft" (from a Writers' Course speech by Atwood), Ljungberg begins with a flexible and capacious definition of craft: sometimes it refers specifically to the reworking of genre conventions, sometimes more generally to repeated mythic motifs or even themes (here the term begins to get very slippery), and sometimes to the nebulous power of fiction (allied with "witchcraft") to create alternative realities and compel readers' assent. The benefit of this flexible definition is that it enables Ljungberg to explore how Atwood's fiction works at a variety of levels: structure, genre, intertext, and image patterns. Ljungberg's scrupulous attention to detail yields insights at once simple and easily overlooked, ranging from the visual echo of the cat's eye marble found in all but one of Elaine Risley's paintings in *Cat's Eye,* to the palindrome as structural principle in *The Robber Bride.* Ljungberg's careful enumeration of the structural parallels between *The Robber Bride* and the tales of E.T.A. Hoffman (and the opera *The Tales of Hoffman*) makes her case for craft as painstaking construction.

However, the problem with Ljungberg's loose definition is that it expands to become everything and nothing, leading to a sometimes crippling lack of focus in her lengthy chapters. Discussion of memory, trauma, and socialization in *Cat's Eye* has only a tenuous connection to generic strategies of autobiography, and the emphasis on Zenia's function as a shadow self in *The Robber Bride* is thematically important but not clearly linked to structure. Most disappointing, the full-scale exploration of generic features and narrative form is not forthcoming; while Ljungberg makes a convincing case that the Isis myth is a central motif in *Cat's Eye,* she does not clarify whether a pattern of death, dismemberment, reconstruction and resurrection structures the novel. Too often, Ljungberg retreats to the trite commonplaces of postmodernism: that Atwood's fiction emphasizes the provisionality and constructedness of all stories, that Atwood exposes the conventions of genre, and so on. In the end, Ljungberg

provides a loosely related series of often insightful observations rather than a conceptually rigorous study.

*Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* casts a much wider net. In the editor's introduction to this multi-author volume, Reingard Nischik summarizes the aims of the book as threefold: first and primarily, "to take stock" of Atwood's achievement over the thirty-odd years of her writing career; second, "to serve as a wide-ranging introduction to the writer"; and finally, to offer "a tribute" to a brilliant and beloved author on the occasion of her sixtieth birthday (which occurred in 1999). While all three aims are to varying degrees fulfilled by the book, the desire to pay tribute overwhelms that of stock-taking; stock-taking suggests critical assessment and evaluation, very little of which is in evidence in these encomiums. At the risk of sounding like one of the Canadians who begrudge the success of their own, as chronicled in Caroline Rosenthal's article, I found that the unalloyed adulation detracted from the volume's main aims of survey and analysis. This criticism aside, the volume largely succeeds in presenting an accessible and comprehensive introduction to Atwood's works and her critical contexts; although it is not likely to reward a seasoned Atwood scholar, the anthology has much to offer the general reader interested in Atwood's corpus and her place in international criticism. It contains many competent essays by respected Atwood scholars, and a few truly fine ones.

The book has a four-part structure. The first, entitled "Life and Status," is the thinnest and least satisfying, with essays on Atwood's reception by the media and educators. The more substantial sections two and three, unhelpfully distinguished as "Works" versus "Approaches," offer surveys of Atwood's oeuvre and methods of interpretation. The fourth section, "Creativity—Transmission—Reception," contains one interview with Atwood and short statements by fellow writers and other colleagues. Many of the surveys in the second and third sections tread familiar ground yet do so elegantly and convincingly. Coral Ann Howells provides an informative if not particularly original discussion of Atwood's self-conscious use of genre in "Transgressing Genre." Walter Pache's "A Certain Frivolity" provides a chronological description and balanced assessment of Atwood's achievement as a literary critic. In "Re-Constructions of Reality," Klaus Peter Müller shows how reality is always revealed to be a construction in Atwood's fiction. Alice M. Palumbo manages to be both comprehensive and particular in "On the Border," her finely honed overview of Atwood's novels.

Some of the most successful articles choose a sharp focus and thus succeed in providing fresh insights into well-canvassed material. Ronald Hatch's essay, "Margaret Atwood, the Land, and Ecology," charts Atwood's evolving attitude to nature; he chronicles a progression from land as metaphor to serious engagement with environmental degradation. In "Challenging the Reader," Helmut Reichenbacher uses genetic criticism to show the process by which Atwood revised *The Edible Woman* from its earliest drafts to the final typescript; this fascinating analysis of manuscripts demonstrates how Atwood eliminated explanatory material from successive drafts in order to open the text to readerly intervention. Lorna Irvine's article, "Kitsch, Camp, and Trash," is an intelligent and theoretically astute examination of "the allure of artificiality" in Atwood's novels.

Perhaps unavoidably, some of the overviews suffer from superficiality. Many are only about ten pages long, and in their attempts to cover all of Atwood's short fiction or poetry, for example, fail to do justice to their subjects. Barbara Hill Rigney's essay is a disappointment when measured against her previous work on Atwood; suggesting that feminism in fiction necessarily involves positive portrayals of women, Rigney is reduced to claiming Atwood for

feminism by virtue of "the celebration of women's friendships and their relation to language and stories" in her novels.

The parts of the volume I found most informative were the short contributions in the fourth section by editors, translators, Atwood's literary agent, Atwood's assistant, and fellow writers. These are people who know Atwood not only as an esteemed Canadian author but also as a working writer who avoids the telephone, submits manuscripts to deadline, and discusses revisions with seriousness and humility. Their portraits of the human being behind the finished texts offer insights into the creative process that few literary critics can match.

## Opening Words

**Eli Mandel**

*The Other Harmony: The Collected Poetry of Eli Mandel.* 2 vols. Ed. Andrew Stubbs and Judy Chapman. Canadian Plains Research Centre $49.95

Reviewed by Neil Querengesser

This two-volume collection of over four hundred poems offers the reader a comprehensive picture of Eli Mandel's development as a major Canadian poet. Poems from four decades are included here, ranging from some of Mandel's earliest published works in *Third Person Singular* and *Trio* in the late 1940s and the early 1950s to *Life Sentence* in the 1980s. Always one to follow his own bent, Mandel, who died in 1992, has left his readers a rich legacy of poetry that is by turns disciplined, uncompromising, probing and delicate. While we may not always see or hear the personal side of the man in his individual poems, especially in the earlier ones, an overview of his life's work suffuses us with an unmistakable awareness of Mandel's intellectual and emotional presence.

Volume One contains Mandel's contributions to *Trio* (his first collection, co-published with Gael Turnbull and Phyllis Webb), his *Fuseli Poems, Black and Secret Man, An Idiot Joy, Stony Plain, Out of Place,* the "oratory" *Mary Midnight,* and *Life Sentence: Poems and Journals 1976-1980.* These collected works mark the first volume as clearly the more significant of the two in terms of its primary material. Volume Two contains Mandel's contributions to *Third Person Singular,* an apparently rare collection of poems published with two other poets circa the late 1940s (more bibliographical information and editorial comment on this book would have been appreciated), the complete contents of his two selected editions, *Crusoe* and *Dreaming Backwards,* and eighty-two previously unpublished poems. While the publication of all the poems in the *Crusoe* and *Dreaming Backwards* collections obviously occasions a fair amount of duplication from Volume One, it does allow the reader to get a better sense of the rationale for these collections, to see both what was included and what was excluded, and to compare textual variants.

A chronological reading of the contents of Volume One gives the reader a good sense of Mandel's poetic development, from the carefully considered metrics and often belaboured allusions of the early works to the much more open-ended style of works such as *Out of Place.* The often dark, intellectually strenuous vision of the early work is reflected most obviously in Mandel's titles and sometimes in his characters. Henri Fuseli, the eighteenth-century painter of such disturbing works as *The Nightmare,* is a recurring presence in Mandel's poetry, most obviously in *Fuseli Poems,* but also along with a cast of disturbed and disturbing artists like William Blake and Christopher Smart in *Mary Midnight* (first written in 1963). Mandel's later works, like *Out of Place,* are characterized by freer form, including such devices as lists of names, quotations from local histories and letters, although his often troubled vision

of life permeates these later works as well.

*Life Sentence,* Mandel's last published volume of poetry and journals, is central to his work, for in his journal entries he reveals much more of himself than appears directly in the poems. Intriguing passages from his journals offer us potentially psychoanalytical keys to his poetry. For example, during his residence at the Banff School of Fine Arts in 1976 he writes: "I have to resolve my feelings about my childhood. Talking with Joanna told me that I block something off there. All poems of that subject lead to an extraordinary sublimation into symbolism. Something about a valley, a river, a cave. What is *there*?" Or a few weeks later, after an argument with W. O. Mitchell, he reflects: "What I don't realize is that I'm on W.O.'s side though I pretend to be, want to be, argue on the Marxist. This is an old, old pattern, interesting." And during his travels through Peru he contemplates his position in the world in a way that is reflected so vividly in many of his poems: "Pat Lane says he belongs with outsiders, with the third world, the exiles. But that is not what I feel. Being here [in Cuzco], foreign, I think *history* enters us. The paradoxes of history make Saskatchewan less than absolute." While the journals themselves cannot necessarily be trusted as mental transparencies, they do offer us a more unguarded view of Mandel's personal thoughts and feelings than the poems.

The uncollected poems included in Volume Two are arranged alphabetically and provide some opportunity for comparison and contrast with previously published poems. For example, there are some strong similarities between "Train Wreck" in *Trio* and "Accident" in the uncollected poems. And those who are familiar with Mandel's pattern of development in Volume One will likely enjoy trying to place many of the uncollected poems in rough chronological sequence.

The collection as a whole is notable for its lack of editorial apparatus. While this may be a blessing for some readers, others may regret the paucity of bibliographical and editorial commentary that is essentially limited to a brief foreword and a few interesting endnotes by Mandel and the editors. Nevertheless, in terms of its primary material, this is a rich collection of verse that one can return to many times.

Eli Mandel dedicated his life to the ordering of experience through language, to opening the world through words. In *The Other Harmony,* Stubbs and Chapman have given us an engaging record of this poet from Estevan who spent a lifetime wrestling the angels of prairies and poetry for their secrets of that order, and who prevailed more often than not.

## Take and Read

**Paddy McCallum**
*Parable Beach.* Porcepic $12.95

**Monty Reid**
*Flat Side.* Red Deer College P $12.95

**Marty Gervais**
*The Science of Nothing.* Mosaic $15.00

**Robert Kroetsch**
*The Hornbooks of Rita K.* U of Alberta P $16.95

Reviewed by Neil Querengesser

All four of these books are worth a close read. Though they differ in style and substance, they all variously look back to the near and—in some cases—distant past, sifting through memories, papers and vestiges to create some compelling poetry for the present.

Paddy McCallum's first book of poetry, *Parable Beach,* could satisfy a subtle hunger we may have forgotten we had. Moving deftly across an ever-changing landscape of natural elements, fish, beasts, fictional and historical figures, McCallum conjures images and voices to great effect, often surprising with vivid metaphor and apt allegory. He moves with ease and grace into the imagined worlds of otters, badgers, bears, sea

stars, even hippos. He can bring to life a war-torn Moscow, a fountain gargoyle or a mountain river, giving each its distinctive voice. Some of his best poems speak to us through resurrected individuals from our past, men like Thomas Scott, David Thompson and George Jehosaphat Mountain, whose voices crackle to life through McCallum's historical receiver. Particularly compelling are the "Slumber Music" poems voiced by the great Maritime preacher and poet, Henry Alline, and the "Captivity Voyage" poems spoken by Pierre-Esprit Radisson, whose translated writings McCallum tunes to an auditory brilliance:

> But trade is the bed and trade the table
> whereon the meals I have eaten lie:
> inseks, mudd, and thigh. My fate always
> to find mine Selfe in the blood of another
> who watches him flee the Fire
> leeping the Damned like a white-tailed deere.

He gives these historical figures a sense of immediacy, reminding us of their importance to our poetry and culture. One hopes for more to come from Mr. McCallum.

Twelve powerful meditations in Monty Reid's *Flat Side* explore the subtle connections between life and words, matter and consciousness, ourselves and the earth and sky. The first poem, "Burning the Back Issues," features the poet experiencing a sense of release as he casts into the fireplace back issues of *American Poetry Review* to warm his house on New Year's day. The final poem, "Near the Beisecker Bio-Medical Waste Incinerator," depicts combustion of quite different materials, as the poet meditates upon the incinerator as a complex symbol of politics and economics, particles and process, life and death, while trying to absorb the disturbing telephone news of his son's medical condition. Between these two poems of transformed words and body parts are ten other poems ranging from celebratory to elegiac to whimsical. There is a beautiful poem about the birth of a child, from the alternating perspectives of both parents; a foray into several dreams; an extended contemplation of the poet's body's increasing asymmetry, the collection's title poem; even an odd look into the mysteries of migrating zucchinis. Perhaps one of the most interesting poems in the collection is "The Shale Disparities," which really should be read after a visit to the Royal Tyrrell Museum in Drumheller and as an accompaniment to Stephen Jay Gould's *Wonderful Life*. This poem captures the wonders and the mystery of the unique Burgess Shale fossils, still profoundly relevant to our own world. Altogether, the twelve poems in this collection repay successive readings, each time yielding a bit more of their beauty.

In *The Science of Nothing*, Marty Gervais invites us into some strangely familiar memories. Recalling his father, "an inventor," and his grandfather, "a liar," Gervais proceeds to explore the ambiguous boundaries between fact and fiction, invention and imagination. His trim, predominantly dipodic lines carry the reader along quickly and surely to a series of satisfying closures in these brief but pithy poems. Gervais, the accomplished historian, often harks back to a past still in the collective memory of his generation but old enough to now be merging with earlier histories. Poems like "Picture Taking after the War," "Tickets on the Rotary Car," "Riding the Milk Truck," and "Men at the Shell Station" are particularly evocative and remind the reader of that critical age when so much of our worldview is formed, as in these lines from "Pin Boys at the Bowling Alley":

> That's where our education
> began, that's where we learned
> the ways of the world,
> things to imagine, things
> about words, things
> about truth.

And death. So many of the poems deal with the deaths of older people in the poet's

circle of experience: teachers, doctors and fathers of friends. These poems offer moving pictures of the past, pictures that resist nostalgia because their themes participate in the present moment. Gervais weaves an anecdotal tapestry whose threads continue in the reader's imagination long after the book has been put away.

Finally, readers who have followed with delight the poetic record of Robert Kroetsch's irrepressible preoccupation with ledgers, letters, catalogues and lists will not be disappointed with *The Hornbooks of Rita K,* a collection, or rather a commentary on a collection—perhaps both—of published/unpublished hornbooks of poet/character/anima Rita Kleinhart that are not really hornbooks at all: all ninety-nine of them, but there aren't really ninety-nine. This apparently "completed text"(which is fittingly incomplete) comprises previous hornbooks published by Kroetsch/Kleinhart, mounds of papers pored over by Raymond the archivist, Rita's erstwhile and continuing lover. Rita apparently disappeared in the Frankfurt Museum of Art in 1992, and Raymond has set himself to fondly searching though her fonds at her ranch house overlooking the Battle River, reading, organizing, annotating and ultimately writing himself into her life and words and belying his original purpose: "I have proposed simply," Raymond says at the beginning, "to add a footnote, a scrap of data, the slightest anecdote, at most a word, to Rita's dense poems." It is mainly Raymond's commentary that evokes our immediate interest; Rita's "dense poems" we seldom see and then only in fragments—certainly not their originals, yet the absent wood and the transparent horn of the hornbooks are made almost tangible though Kroetsch's masterful wordplay. How do you publish a hornbook? The present collection may lead the reader to an answer—and perhaps even to a glimpse of the elusive Rita K. This is vintage Kroetsch.

## Of Selves and Others

**Derek McCormack & Chris Chambers**
*Wild Mouse.* Pedlar P np

**Nathalie Stephens**
*Somewhere Running.* Advance Editions $13.95

**John Barton**
*Hypothesis.* Anansi $16.95

**Jill Battson**
*ashes are bone and dust.* Insomniac P $13.95

Reviewed by Carole A. Turner

These four books offer mixtures of media and genres. Some combine photos with text, while others combine poetry with prose. All examine in close detail the relationships between the self and other. At first glance all of these books seem to be about something beyond the self, a life-shaping event, a lover or a loved one. But the portrayals soon become self-reflexive, and while these works do represent others, they are also self-portraits. In their own ways, all of these books explore life-changing experiences and intimations of mortality.

*Wild Mouse* by Derek McCormack and Chris Chambers includes sumptuous vintage black and white photos of the Canadian National Exhibition—a tacky but much loved carnival set up at the end of each summer in Toronto. The title is based on one of the more notorious and lethal rides at the "Ex." This collection offers a tip of the hat to the tacky grande dame of summertime fairs. These autobiographical poems span roughly the 1970s to the present, but the archival photos go back as far as the 1930s. Derek McCormack's series of poems adopts an insider's vernacular and offers street-wise, behind-the-scenes retrospectives featuring encounters with other carny-hustlers secretly rigging and working their huckster games and rides. Conversely, Chris Chambers looks back from an outsider's perspective. His suite of poems begins with a portrayal of a child visitor to the CNE, and moves to a

day, much later, where he finds himself a young man, still surrounded by candy-floss and candy apples. The nostalgia of Labour Day and milling holiday crowds is tempered with an awareness of passing summer and youth. The poet muses that like the old "Flyer" roller coaster, eventually all this must be left behind for something faster.

Nathalie Stephens's *Somewhere Running* also combines text and photo. The writing consists of a series of thirty-two "plates," or fragmented descriptions of photographs. These texts avoid punctuation whenever possible, and include caesuras, pauses or gaps which speak of distances between individuals, places and times. Throughout these plates, Stephens returns to the interactions of two women, "captured on film" but adds an alternate space and a third mind's eye represented by the narrator describing the images. Why is this narrator examining these photos? Is she one of the women? What is the relationship? Clues to these questions unfold slowly, but one must begin *Somewhere Running* with questions, not answers. Stephens sets her quiet encounter against a city backdrop that unifies the women's experience even as it poses potential threats. Interspersed among the textual "plates" are actual photos. All are blurry, black and white, indistinct, although it is possible to make out hands, heads or passing boot heels set against indeterminate backgrounds. This indeterminacy helps define and undefine this work—"for the loss of their individuality / their personalities both eclipsed by the lens of the / camera and the unskilled eye of the artist." It is in the gaps between self and other, the sexual tension between the two women, the distance between what might be definable and what cannot be determined, that Stephen's artistry comes into remarkable focus.

John Barton's *Hypothesis* also connects landscape and sexual tension. Barton overlaps a physical journey with an inner response to a homoerotic relationship. Early in this work, wilderness and lovers melt together in passionate embrace, becoming one with nature's cycles. Somewhere near the blue hues of Hudson Bay the lovers find themselves enveloped by the land and its energies: "Decline and regeneration are everywhere. / Everywhere the blue and green world." This almost epic journey meanders across the continent, then to Europe and finally back to Canada. There is a liquid quality to the language as the lovers are carried into a vortex of sensuality. Floating in this wave of memory are references to artists and thinkers such as Frye, Pound, Stein, Proust, Joyce, Barthes and others who have directly or indirectly influenced Barton's writing. The mid-section of this book features a change in style. Over twenty pages long, and subdivided in parts, it is a single stream-of-consciousness sentence. Here, the journey includes a consideration of the history of western art and literature. One implied hypothesis is that this is a story of tongues. Barton's "tonguing" melts borders between thought, sexuality and text in a way reminiscent of Barthes' *jouissance*, a playful revelry that finds it must eventually surrender to the rhythms of elegy, a return to solitude, homeland and aftermath.

*ashes are bone and dust* picks up where Barton's *Hypothesis* leaves off. This book by spoken-word impresario and producer of the "Word-Up" project Jill Battson is a departure from her previous approaches to poetry. Here, she offers an emotionally charged and sensitively crafted elegy to her parents. This journey through bereavement, aftermath and recovery, is rich in detail, and sometimes includes disturbing juxtapositions of death and sexuality. Not for the squeamish, *ashes are bone and dust* is as much about the inner world of Battson's apparently autobiographical narrator as it is about the practical realities of dying, death and mourning. Midway through,

the book shifts to short texts that blur the borders between poetry and prose. Macabre at times in its attention to the details of corpses and autopsies, this writing almost insists on an ambivalent reaction from the reader, but at other times grasps a transcendent lyricism that returns to a full embrace of life: "Peach juice sweet in your mouth, the touch of sun, hands on your skin. And you watch the trees, the sky, the snow and you breathe. It is the end of winter."

## A Generic Africa

**Nega Mezlekia**

*The God Who Begat a Jackal.* Penguin $25.00

Reviewed by Neil ten Kortenaar

Nega Mezlekia, who won a Governor-General's Award in 2000 for his memoir *Notes from the Hyena's Belly*, declared at the time that he had more stories in him than García Márquez. The comparison was not gratuitous: *Notes*, blending as it did bitter personal testimony, clearsighted exposé of African strife during the Cold War, and fable-like descriptions of talking animals, proclaimed that Mezlekia had joined the ranks of modern magic realists. He has now published a novel, *The God Who Begat a Jackal*, which must bear the burden of meeting the expectations generated by the first volume, of proving that the memoirist has a career writing fiction ahead of him, and of laying to rest a controversy over the authorship of *Notes* that made national headlines.

*The God Who Begat a Jackal* confounds expectations. Readers who appreciated *Notes* for the ironic tone with which it described Ethiopia's cruel absurdities under the emperor and the Dirgue, the military junta that deposed him, will be disappointed. The novel abandons the realism of magic realism in favour of fantasy and romance. The novel tells of the forbidden love of Aster, the only daughter of a feudal lord, and Gudu, a court story-teller and a slave. Some of the magic here feels overly familiar (there are twins who cast no shadow and are accompanied everywhere by flies), but many images are original and effective (the hide of a dead hippo, hollowed out by scavengers, remains standing "like a hastily erected tent").

The tone of the novel is not ironic, but the narrative structure is. Unbeknownst to each other, Aster and Gudu are actually brother and sister. The concealed parentage explains why Gudu does not look like "any of the ethnic groups the Almighty intended to be slaves" and Aster is able to love him. The conceptual problems associated with incest are dodged by having the love remain unconsummated and the lovers die young. The ironic structure may reflect an ideological confusion: this romance has democratic sympathies but a courtly sensibility.

The class differential which makes the romance possible also fuels an uprising of vassals struggling for "basic human dignity" against the empire, whose economy requires perpetual conquest in order to replenish the pool of vassal labour. The novel is set in Hararghe, the region where Mezlekia grew up, and the description of feudalism and wars of conquest is based on conditions in Ethiopia during the nineteenth century. There are two competing religions in the novel: an ancestral one that has a Holy Book, priests, and an Inquisition, and a new, revolutionary, and more egalitarian religion, brought by nomads and winning converts among the serfs and slaves. The established religion explicitly models itself on the medieval Catholicism found "across the Mediterranean" and, in particular, on the Crusade against the Albigensian heresy in thirteenth-century France and the First Crusade to the Holy Land. The two religions of the novel are not, however, as one might expect in the context of Ethiopia, Orthodox Christianity and Islam, but rather two polytheistic

religions, the one worshipping a god called Mawu-Lisa and the other the god Amma. The postscript describes these rather disingenuously as "two of the countless African deities that sprang up over the centuries, only to wither away before setting down roots." Mawu-Lisa is actually the androgynous creator-god of the Fon people in Benin (Dahomey), while Amma, the god who begat a jackal of the novel's title, belongs to the Dogon people of Mali and was made famous outside Africa by Marcel Griaule. These gods belong to particular peoples; they do not proselytize or wage crusade (it is wholly incongruous for a priest to say there was "no salvation outside the temple of Mawu-Lisa"); and they have not withered away but face pressure from Islam and Christianity. On the back cover Ken Wiwa praises *The God Who Begat a Jackal* as "unique but universal and yet authentic to a particular time and place." The story, however, is set in a generic Africa that combines the cruelty of medieval Christendom and the magic of West African polytheism, subjects that Mezlekia knows through books. Its distance in terms of centuries and kilometres from Ethiopia, and its perilous closeness to a kind of Orientalist exotic make it impossible to imagine teaching this novel in a course in African or postcolonial literature. Mezlekia is deliberately not doing any of the tasks that African writers are usually called upon to perform. He writes for non-Africans without any intention of informing them about Ethiopia. He appears to want to be a writer of pure literature, inspired by but not limited to Africa, yet his work is inevitably received in Canada as somehow Ethiopian. The mixed signals make for originality but also make *The God Who Begat a Jackal* difficult to place and to judge.

## "Beyond can be our model"

**Eirin Mouré**
*Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person: A Transelation.* Anansi. $16.95 paper.

**Lisa Robertson**
*The Weather.* New Star. $16.00 paper.

Reviewed by Charles Barbour

Much has been said about the importance of place—of wilderness, geography, and spatiality—in Canadian literature, and particularly in Canadian poetry. Not nearly as much has been said about the importance of displacement, dislocation, or deterritorialization. Eirin Mouré's *Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person* and Lisa Robertson's *The Weather*, in very different fashions, attempt to come to terms with an irreducible moment of dislocation that resides at the heart of every location, or an unsettling experience of displacement that relentlessly haunts every sense of place. Finding themselves relocated in Toronto and Cambridge respectively, Mouré and Robertson set out to discuss, not the great modernist theme of exile or alienation from one's authentic home, but the more complicated issue of originary exile, or constituent alienation—a homelessness that precedes and conditions every concept of home, of friendship, and of the familiar. In *Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person*, this ecstatic experience of homelessness is explored through a creative rewriting of the modernist Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa's famous *O Guardodor de Rebanhos.* Actively and deliberately dislocating the poem's original context, Mouré translates, "trans-*e*-lates" or "transcreates" Pessoa's lines on a solitary male shepherd living amidst the pastoral simplicity of the Portuguese countryside, from the perspective of a displaced female nomad temporarily residing amidst the historically layered and culturally dense urban landscape of twenty-first century Toronto. In Lisa Robertson's *The Weather*, poetically and

structurally a very different kind of book, a similar theme is articulated through a complex topology of weather, and particularly of the perpetual fluctuation and oscillation of the clouds.

Perhaps because of the presence of a strong lyric tradition in contemporary Canadian poetry (including Bringhurst, Lilburn, McKay and Zwicky), both Mouré and Robertson are frequently distinguished as "language" poets—as if their texts represented the epitome of infinite semiosis, and were deliberately void of any concrete referent or determinate content. Particularly when it comes to books like *Sheep's Vigil* and *The Weather*, such a characterization is entirely misleading. Neither endeavours to suspend reference, to string together empty signifiers, or to slide effortlessly across the slippery *glissement* of pure language. Instead, both interrogate the incommensurable relationships between being (dis)placed within historical languages, and being (dis)located within natural environments. More importantly, both attempt to circumvent any simple distinction between these two experiences. And "experience," not language, is the crucial term here. Even while explicitly in the process of "trans-*e*-lating" the language of another, Mouré constantly endeavours to recall the immediacy of experience—its elated, ephemeral, transient, and finally ungraspable quality. Experience is always singular and discrete, specific to particular contexts, and yet, paradoxically, is also always artificial and borrowed, articulated through the voice of another. It is this double structure of experience that Mouré understands so well. Thus, in her playful jab at the philosophers entitled "The mystery of things, where is it?" she asks "Do we need a concept just yet, Mr. Derrida? / Can you wait one minute, / While things are really what they seem to be," but then devilishly adds, "and understanding is so direct, I can just fake it." Similarly, in an earlier poem on the enigmatic quality of experience, she writes:

> What we see of things are things.
> Why would we see a chose if it were otherwise?
> Why would sight and hearing play us tricks
> If sight and hearing are sight and hearing.
>
> [. . .]
>
> But this (sad the way we cloak our souls!)
> This requires relentless study
> A learning to unlearn

While extremely clever, such word games—repetitions, reversals, recitations, and paradoxes—must, I think, also be taken very seriously. They must be read not merely as rhetorical manoeuvers, but also as tragically doomed efforts to overcome the insuperable divide between language and experience, semiotics and phenomena, words and things. Poetry has the painful task not of completing, but of repeatedly enacting the very impossibility of this gesture.

Mouré's phrase "A learning to unlearn" might well have been the title of Robertson's book. There are stylistic differences between the two poets; Mouré's text follows quite closely the lyrical form of, as she mischievously puts it, her "master" Fernando Pessoa, while Robertson's, organized according to the days of the week, shifts back and forth between thin, wispy strands of verse and large frontal systems of prose poetry. Still, the same passionate struggle to perform and rework, inhabit and subvert the specific constraints, not only of language, but also of physical location, place, and embodiment pervades Robertson's text as well as Mouré's. Robertson meditates on the ideal forms of poetry, of time, and of gender, not to distinguish such ideals from experience, but to show how they render the linguistic articulation of experience both necessary and impossible. For Robertson, the ideal, and even the Romantic ideal, seems to structure the outer limits of experience. It formulates experience as both inevitable

and unpredictable—not, as the traditional Romantic conceit insists, like the terrifying moment of death, but rather, in a more intimate, relentless, and daily fashion, like the weather:

> Sometimes I want a corset like
> to harden me or garnish. I
> think of this stricture—rain
> language, building—as a corset: an
> outer ideal mould, I feel
> the ideal moulding me the ideal
> is now my surface just so very
> perfect I know where to buy it and I
> take it off.

As the fixity of nature did for her Romantic predecessors, the transience of the weather seems to provide for Robertson's withdrawal from the world of politics. "From sociology, and all / that scorches," Robertson writes, "I take my leave." But the escape from the political is also a moment of renewal, and Robertson concludes with what are perhaps her most powerful lines: "I've never done anything / but begin."

Both Mouré and Roberston seek not to transcend experience in the name of language, but repeatedly to rearticulate the insuperable divide between the ideal and the actual, the symbolic and the real. They speak, not only to the linguistic or poetic creation of reality, but also to the incalculable loss of the world—a loss that precedes and overwhelms all specific belonging, and thus inaugurates an infinite desire to belong. And yet, in this very priority of loss, in this very incompletion of desire, the poet still discerns, and repeatedly discerns, the promise of beginning. "[W]e excavate a non-existent era of the human," Robertson writes. "Far into the night an infinite sweetness; beyond can be our model."

## Ode to the Common Man

**Ken Norris**

*Odes.* Coach House n.p.
*Limbo Road.* Talonbooks n.p.
*Hotel Montreal: New and Selected Poems.* Talonbooks n.p.

Reviewed by Richard Harrison

*Odes, Limbo Road* and *Hotel Montreal* are like three different Ken Norris readings. Each has its own character, but each includes work also found in the others. I expected this in the book subtitled *New & Selected,* of course, but in *Odes* and *Limbo Road,* I was surprised by the way Norris re-visited some of the poems from the first book in the second published only a year later. Thus, I first experienced *Odes* as a concentrated period in which Norris *wrote* odes governed by the narrative embedded in the book. But *Limbo Road* and *Hotel Montreal* led me to understand *Odes* as shorter dialogues with the ode form spread out over the years and brought together in a single collection. The result is that the dominant narrative of each book brings into itself poems that *predate* that narrative's "beginning," or arise from a different narrative or set of experiences. Together, Norris's books do two things at once: each is a centre from which Norris views—and writes—his world; each is also peripheral, almost part of the raw material for a later point of view. Thus the narrative sense of the books as a whole is both confirmed and broken by each book individually. But things are rarely, if ever, understood in the order they occur. And Norris has structured his books to follow his mind as it circles its central question: What is poetry both as art and as the most enduring element of a life?

Just before *Odes* begins, Norris's marriage is over. He's been cut loose to wander the "limbo road" of the world to mourn, to rage and to make peace with the loss of his wife and the resulting separation from his

daughters. He travels and writes of his journey to understand himself anew as father, lover, man and poet. He roams widely. At first he finds his love for his wife mirrored in the green her eyes share with the tropics ("Figures"), but soon that love is burned away in anger, then in successive reawakenings of passion in the arms of other women. Finally, the empty place his love for his wife and family once occupied is filled with a saddened but heartfelt dedication to his daughters alone. It is a good read for men who've experienced the same dislocation; it is an education for those who argue that divorces are not profoundly affecting for the fathers they cast out.

But my greatest interest in these books is in looking at how the rupture in his life (the change in his life's narrative, the source material for the poetry, his attitude to the world) affects the interplay between Norris's writing and his idea of the poem. Throughout his early poems Norris has been the disciple of the "Greek rationalism" of Louis Dudek, to whom he dedicates "Akropolis," written while he is on the road and in the process of rededicating himself to words. Poetry was the touchstone of Norris's life before it broke open, and his reassertion of its place is partly achieved through his remembering Dudek while he stands at the Acropolis they've both loved, even though Norris, like a wayward son, apologizes for not yet living up to the older man's teachings, for caring "more about / the telegram that may or may not come / from a girl on Lesvos / than I do about these ruins."

Norris's early poetry is largely, though, the poetry of that Greek and philosophical eye that possesses not just earthly vision but an eternal point of view as well. The poems interest, of course, but often they slide into an invocation of the big ideas for which things and people are mere examples. And in the crucial moments of the poems—for example, in "The Book of Fire," where the author claims the power to set the whole world aflame—the lines fall flat, relying on claims about "eternity" and "the celestial" to carry them. But the best poems don't, like great essays, make a clear distinction between the grain of sand and eternity: in the best poems we see, understand, and feel them at once.

But in *Odes* he puts aside his cool, rationalist idea of the poem, and instead embraces the image-rich intensity of Neruda. In *Limbo Road*, he writes that "The passions require that we forfeit / all that is not passionate." And in *Odes*—my favourite of these books—he acts on this principle. Consider the opening lines to these two, both postscripted "after Neruda": "Ode to Joy": "Joy / green plant on the windowsill, / small leaf recently born, rackety elephant, dazzling coin:" And "Ode to Sadness": "Sadness, black beetle / with seven shattered legs."

Norris then ventures into the two finest odes in the book: "Ode to the Common Man (after Neruda)" (which made it into the *New & Selected*), and "Another Ode to The Possibilities" (which should have, although you'll find it in *Limbo Road*). In these two odes, the rationalist eye for argument that Norris has honed for years is blended with the imagistic invocations of the haphazardness of the material world.

In "Ode to the Common Man," Norris is writing about what he wants but can never have in his life. He achieves an aching clarity in his vision of his place in the world: "You are possible / in a world where so many things seemingly aren't. / I'll never cure cancer, never climb Everest." These poems burst out with the language of the everlasting and immaterial world behind this one, but these outbursts are earned by the intensity of the material detail of the poems, the intense feeling that there must be something beyond what we merely see. But in these poems the poet realizes how far from both grasp and word the eternal truly is—Norris is writing of a world he

knows he (and we) can only long for, and can not even pretend to achieve.

What I was most eager to see in my reading was how deeply the experience of the "after Neruda" odes had affected the poems that appeared for the first time in the later published books. At first some, but not much. In poems such as *Limbo Road's* "Everyday Heartbreak" (reprinted in *Hotel Montreal),* he is writing out personally vital and important messages to his daughters: "I was the first one / who held her in my arms [. . .] I always wanted to mean / this much to someone." Such lines appear in the later odes themselves: "I will always be / the father who loves you, / the man who loved you first" ("Ode to My Younger Daughter"). It is a father's greatest fear that he will be forgotten, and these lines, public love letters, are talismans against that fear. But they are taking the old form again. I understand what he is saying, I wish him, father to father, nothing but the best, but I'm waiting for the image, the words that are both art and world to move me in themselves. Neruda led Norris to a place where he understood his poems from the distance of longing. Perhaps the joke of the ruined Akropolis is the lesson of the poem that outlasts stone: it is the world, not us, to which the last word should be given.

## Elizabeth Bishop At Home

**Carmen L. Oliveira. Neil K. Besner, trans.**
*Rare and Commonplace Flowers: The Story of Elizabeth Bishop and Lota de Macedo Soares.*
Rutgers UP n.p.

**Sandra Barry, Gwendolyn Davies, Peter Sanger, eds.**
*Divisions of the Heart: Elizabeth Bishop and the Art of Memory and Place.* Gaspereau $32.95

Reviewed by Sara Jamieson

These two new books on the life and work of Elizabeth Bishop are very different in form, but share a focus on the orphaned poet's sensitivity to place and her yearning for a sense of home that is, occasionally, fulfilled. *Rare and Commonplace Flowers* is Neil K. Besner's translation from Portuguese of Carmen L. Oliveira's biographical account of the relationship between Bishop and the aristocratic Brazilian, Lota de Macedo Soares. Their story exemplifies the strength and the vulnerability of love in the face of change; Oliveira traces the trajectory, from harmony to disintegration, of a partnership between two people who are temperamentally very different, but who share a passionate commitment to their work. It is this passion, however, which ultimately drives them apart. When they meet upon Bishop's arrival in Brazil in 1951, Macedo Soares, an accomplished architecture enthusiast, is supervising the building of an ultra-modern house in the mountains near Rio de Janeiro. The two women soon move into the house together, and the next ten years are the among the happiest and most productive in Bishop's life. In 1961, however, Macedo Soares, hungry for a new project, commits herself to overseeing the conversion of an area of landfill in Rio into the largest city park in the world. With Macedo Soares increasingly preoccupied with the political wrangling that constantly threatens to compromise her vision of the park, Bishop drinks heavily to escape her feeling of abandonment, and the intimacy between the two women begins to unravel.

In supplying a Brazilian perspective on Bishop's connection to that country, the book frequently foregrounds problems of translation and the misunderstanding and pain that can arise from cultural differences. Besner, in his preface, acknowledges a gulf between languages that makes it difficult to "conserve, let alone render, the Brazilian world in English." This difficulty notwithstanding, his translation is lucid and breezy, but not without occasional moments of awkwardness. The repeated use of the expletive "Heck" is especially

jarring. Though it may be intended to convey a specific Portuguese expression, the effect in English is creaky. Oliveira's book was a bestseller in Brazil, where readers are presumably familiar with the intricacies of Brazilian politics during the 1960s. In the parts of the book that deal with Macedo Soares's work on the park, many figures are introduced into the story, sometimes rather abruptly, and I found myself wishing for some annotation or perhaps a glossary supplying more information on these people. While Macedo Soares is a captivating figure, the lengthy accounts of her clashes with state bureaucracy eventually become tedious. Oliveira's incorporation of Macedo Soares's letters and memos to various politicians is evidence of meticulous research, but this does not always make for compelling reading. Then again, it is Macedo Soares's obsession with the park that is partly responsible for the erosion of her relationship with Bishop, and in these sections of the book it is easy to appreciate Bishop's alienation, her desperate desire for her relationship with Lota to revert to the way it was in their mountain home.

At its height, Bishop's relationship with Macedo Soares assuaged the poet's abiding sense of homelessness, the roots of which are explored in *Divisions of the Heart*, a collection of twenty-four papers presented at a symposium held at Acadia University in 1998. In keeping with the conference venue and its stated focus on Bishop's "art of memory and place," many of the essays in the collection examine how the poet's memories of her childhood in Great Village, NS, resonate throughout her work. Others explore her connections to places she subsequently inhabited: Worcester, Mass., Washington, DC, and, of course, Brazil. Bishop's attraction to seascapes, her keen interest in maps and geography, and her divided sense of national identity are themes running through the book as a whole. As might be expected from a book of conference proceedings, the essays are relatively short (most are in the ten- to twelve-page range) and offer brief discussions of one or two works, a particular image, or biographical incident. Gathered from a wide range of contributors, including graduate students, college and university teachers, writers, and members of the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia, the essays in this collection vary widely in quality. Highlights include Peter Sanger's informative discussion of how Bishop's childhood reading constituted an important imaginative matrix for much of her mature writing. In this essay, the longest in the collection, Sanger looks at five of Bishop's well-thumbed childhood books, part of the Bulmer-Bowers-Hutchinson-Sutherland family fonds, archival materials deposited at Acadia University in 1996. Sandra Barry's photographic essay also draws upon this important new source in presenting a selection of family pictures, mostly of Bishop's Nova Scotia relatives and forebears, that enlivens the book. Camille Roman offers a fascinating reading of how Bishop's poetry contains coded responses to the homophobia and cold-war paranoia rampant in Washington during the Eisenhower administration. Also worth noting is Andre Furlani's allusive close reading of Bishop's prose memoir "In the Village" in which he traces how the sound of the blacksmith's hammer that reverberates throughout the text also contains echoes of other such hammers throughout literary history and myth. Lorrie Goldensohn's suggestive descriptions of Bishop's subtle use of colour in her landscape painting is accompanied by disappointingly small black-and-white illustrations. Similarly, Lilian Falk's well-researched piece on Bishop's great uncle George Hutchinson, who achieved a modest reputation as an illustrator in London in the 1890s, left me wishing that the drawings Falk describes in the essay could have been included.

*Divisions of the Heart* seems destined to appeal mainly to Elizabeth Bishop scholars, but *Rare and Commonplace Flowers* has a lively, novelistic style and a breadth of focus which should interest a wider audience.

## The Printed Page

**P.K. Page**

*Alphabetical* and *Cosmologies.* Poppy $85

Reviewed by Susan Fisher

How much is a book worth? A biology text, sure to be obsolete in three years, will set you back $120. A hardback mystery, good for only one read, costs at least $30. This boxed set of poems by P.K. Page costs $128 (signed by artist and author), but it will probably appreciate in value, and its charm will certainly endure.

When *Alphabetical* first appeared (winning the 1998 bp Nichol Chapbook award), it was published by Reference West, a Victoria-based firm operated by Rhonda Batchelor. Batchelor recently joined forces with artist and printer Alexander Lavdovsky to form Poppy Press, and, according to their press release, they are dedicated to producing "the finest, most beautiful books they can." Their first publication is this set, in which *Alphabetical* is paired with a new Page poem, *Cosmologies.* With their thick pages, embossed designs, handset type, and elegant slipcase, these are indeed fine and beautiful books.

Lavdovsky has used old wooden type for the illustration of both books. In *Alphabetical,* the frontispiece is a somber grey-brown rectangle formed by overlapping Ps and Ks. When one turns to the full title page, there is the word "alphabetical" in a glorious rainbow of colour. The text of the poem appears on recto pages only (one page per letter of the alphabet) with illustrations on the facing page. The signatures are folded but not cut, and are printed on one side only; the result is that the embossed illustrations settle into the thick pages as if they were upholstered.

*Cosmologies* is produced in a similar fashion. The frontispiece is a knot-like design in blues and reds composed of variously sized 8s. Scratched into the print, looking like thread-like fibres in the paper itself, are small floating 8s; some of these are lying on their sides and resemble the infinity symbol. Since the opening line of Page's poem invites us to "Imagine eight universes—parallel," this print is a wonderfully appropriate introduction to *Cosmologies.* Each page of text (again a generous allotment of one page per stanza) is decorated with a design based on numerals. The first page features three bluish 8s hovering in the lower right-hand corner. As the poem proceeds to explore the various universes, more numerals appear, gradually filling the lower half of the double-page spreads.

*Cosmologies* is a three-part meditation on nothing less than infinity—on the worlds within worlds we live in, of which only the first is "literal, material, flesh." It is a short poem but not a slight one. Much of its density and metaphysical heft are achieved through its unusual form—the pantoum. The second and fourth lines of the first stanza reappear as the first and third lines of the second; the second and fourth lines of the second stanza become the first and third lines of the third stanza, and so forth. The closing stanza returns to the refrains in the first. Only once, to my ear, does Page sacrifice syntax in order to preserve this exacting pattern. As in the best examples of forms that enforce repetition (like the villanelle, with which the pantoum is often associated), *Cosmologies* wrings different meanings from the line each time it occurs. The fitness of this form for Page's subject of parallel worlds is a major source of the poem's power. Page's poetic strengths—not just her skill with form, but also her delicate sound effects, surprising diction, and density of idea and image—are clearly in evidence here.

*Alphabetical* I find less compelling. Surprisingly for Page, these poems are almost prosy. The structure adds no particular intensity: it derives from the simple choice of the alphabetical sequence, and there is no consistent stanza pattern. Sometimes the individual letter poems intertwine: "J" ends with "Kissed the eagle, beak to beak," and, on the next page, "K" begins "Let us consider kissing"; "W" describes us as "each least xx, xy" and then "X" talks of "x" as the unknown in algebra. These little poems on topics ranging from "fen" (home of Page's forebears) and "God" to "traps" and "zero" are agreeable but not as challenging or rewarding as her more ambitious texts. Page could never be sloppy or chatty; even on her prosy days she delivers a lot more than most writers do. Still, I feel somewhat disappointed in *Alphabetical.* I am also disappointed by "verticle" and "Maeterlink"; it seems regrettable that a book over which such care has been taken should have misspellings.

Alphabetical *and* Cosmologies *are available in a boxed set from Poppy Press, S123A-645 Fort Street, Victoria BC V8W 1G2 (Tel: 250-412-0505/Fax: 250-388-6695). Signed set: $128/Unsigned: $85 (includes shipping and handling).*

## Ecce Homo

**Nino Ricci**

*Testament.* Doubleday $35.95

Reviewed by Kerry McSweeney

During the 1990s, Nino Ricci established himself as a novelist with a much-praised trilogy (*Lives of the Saints, In a Glass House,* and *Where She Has Gone*), which narrated the experiences of Italian emigrants to Canada. His ambitious fourth novel has a very different subject—the life of Jesus Christ during the time of his public ministry. Ricci explains that his novel "does not purport to be an accurate historical representation. [. . .] At the same time, [he has] made every effort to work within the bounds of historical plausibility, based on what is known to us of the time and place in which Jesus lived."

This is an accurate statement of the case. In the main, Ricci's representation reflects the rough consensus concerning the life of the historical Jesus that has developed among scholars during the past half-century. For example, several characters in *Testament* grapple with the same questions concerning Jesus' conception of God's kingdom as do contemporary New Testament scholars: does Jesus say that God's kingdom is to be found in heaven or on earth? How can it be already present but yet to come? Is it a place out there or up there or is it "inside us in the way we looked at things, and so always there for us to bring forth"?

As there are four gospels in the New Testament, so there are four narrators in *Testament.* The first is Judas, a revolutionary devoted to ending Roman control of the land of the Jews, who clearly sees that on the secular level Jesus' enterprise is doomed and thus comes into conflict with him—but not in Ricci's telling to the point of betrayal. The second and third narrators are Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus. The latter supplies background concerning her firstborn's early life, including two points on which Ricci has allowed himself considerable poetic licence: that Jesus was the bastard son of a Roman official who raped Mary; and that twelve of his early years were spent in Alexandria, which explains why for one follower the adult Jesus "seemed to think more in the manner of a Greek than a Jew, finding recourse for his arguments in logic rather than scripture."

The fourth narrator is Simon, a Syrian (non-Jewish) shepherd. Like the other narrators, he bears witness to the radical impact of Jesus on his life and to the kindling in him of a sense of possibility. Judas, for example, reports that an incident

involving Jesus has "seared itself into my mind" and in describing his effect uses the image of a doorway leading to light. And Mary Magdalene, who uses the same image, says that Jesus "awakened an aliveness in me I had not felt, so that it came to my mind to wonder at everything I looked at."

Simon's section, the longest and most powerful, recounts Jesus' journey to Jerusalem at Passover, his arrest, trial, scourging, carrying the crossbeam of his cross, crucifixion, death, and the removal of his corpse from the tomb shortly after by followers who have bribed the guards. Unfortunately, the narrative drive and stylistic vigour of the fourth section are lacking in the earlier sections of *Testament.* Their narrators all express themselves in the same pedestrian reportorial style, and much of what they narrate is episodic and not focused directly on Jesus.

Other creative choices made by Ricci also have negative implications for the reader. For example, making Jesus more Greek than Jew allows the author to represent him as using a Socratic method in his teaching ("he had a way of leading us towards a thing as if we were the ones who'd found it ourselves"). But the principal teaching device of the New Testament is the parable, a powerful literary form used by Jesus in a masterly way that makes for a deeper and more mysterious impression than the patter of Socratic exchanges.

This is not a quibble, but rather an aspect of a crucial shortcoming in *Testament.* A principal theme of the novel is the impression Jesus makes on his followers. It is as important to the novel's import as Jesus' teachings. In fact, these impressions comprise what I take to be the essence of Ricci's humanist message: the transforming impact that one human being can have on another. But for the novel to enact this meaning—to communicate it artistically, not simply discursively—Jesus needs to make a comparably powerful impression on the reader. Being repeatedly told by the narrators of the powerful impression Jesus has made on them is a weak substitute for the reader's having an impression seared into his or her mind through the intensity of the artistic representation.

But I do not wish to end on a negative note. There is little in *Testament* about the historical Jesus that I did not know already (except for Ricci's fantastications), and I expect that readers who do find the novel informative will also find it more engaging than I did. And only those who know the New Testament will consider it unfortunate that *Testament* invites comparison with the Gospels through his title and his employment of four narrators. In such a contest, any novelistic treatment of the life of Jesus must finish a poor second. But this is not to suggest that Nino Ricci is other than a novelist of impressive imagination, intelligence and skill. Indeed, I find myself already wondering where his creative energies and his ambition will lead him next.

## Poetics for Politics?

**Leslie Ritchie, ed.**
*Duncan Campbell Scott: Addresses, Essays, and Reviews.* Canadian Poetry P n.p.

Reviewed by Tracy Wyman-Marchand

It is timely in view of the pioneering millennial project, The History of the Book in Canada, and continuing scholarly debates about Canadianism and the literary canon, that Leslie Ritchie offers up post-Confederation literary and political figure Duncan Campbell Scott for reassessment in her recent two-volume collection of his non-fiction prose. Ritchie's edition is especially welcome since Scott's poetry is usually the focus of critical attention; the present collection makes all of his non-fiction works, previously published and unpublished, accessible to both scholars and interested readers alike.

Though Ritchie makes claims for the completeness of this collection, it is not exhaustive, and its readerliness owes much to her own careful archival research and organization. The addresses, essays and reviews are ordered chronologically, thus eliminating their grouping based on thematic recurrences, but Ritchie's editorial consideration is to make genre distinctions by regularizing the titles of Scott's works. Editorial notes comprise the last half of volume two and include detailed headnotes and annotations which provide valuable context for Scott's writing; however, Ritchie excludes page references from her editorial notes, making any referencing of Scott's text somewhat difficult when one needs to flip annoyingly through the material. The useful introduction by Scott scholar Stan Dragland adds to the growing body of Scott criticism by opening up a wider register for his critical re-evaluation. For the most part, Dragland focuses on repoliticizing Scott in a postcolonial framework; nevertheless, at times, Dragland's own revisionist sentiment has a tendency to get in the way of his argument for reviewing Scott as "an important Canadian poet and cultural icon." Yet the present edition is not a critical exegesis of Scott's aesthetic per se. In her acknowledgements, Ritchie is quick to point out Scott's quirks by referring to his "eclectic habits of mind" and "impetuous" prose as an appeal to readers that they should look beyond Scott's technical faults as a writer to the importance of his project.

*Duncan Campbell Scott* begins with the previously unpublished talk on Heinrich Heine, delivered to the Ottawa Scientific and Literary Society in 1891, and ends with the posthumous "Message to the Students," a CBC National Schools Broadcast of 1948. The works gathered in this collection reflect Scott's stylistic variations: from the hyperbolic turns of phrase that decorate his criticism under the pseudonym of Silas Reading in the "Open Letter to a Member of Parliament" of 1893, to his often loosely quoted literary reviews and observations as a career civil servant at Indian Affairs. The fifty years spanned in this collection were crucial in the formation of Canada, and concern about national identity is a dominant strain running through Scott's prose. In essays like "Canadian Feeling Toward the United States" and "Canada as a State of Mind," Scott examines central questions of Canadian identity, yet these essays are tinged with his exclusionary fraternalistic and "virile" vision of the nation. His rhetoric is cast in the now familiar colonial mold when he refers to the "management" of Indians under the rubric of paternalism and as "wards" and "savages." His colonial concerns are obvious in the Indian Affairs essays, but these are not the only documents that are evidence of Scott's panoramic concerns for the nation. His plea for "a strong national organization to protect the rights and foster the appreciation of literature" when he was President of the Canadian Authors' Association in 1931 is noteworthy, since it demonstrates Scott's overriding concern with establishing and maintaining literary excellence in Canada. On the whole, Scott's prose may prove circuitous to some readers in its Romantic meanderings and florid sensibility. But the publication of all of Scott's non-fiction prose in the present edition refocuses the critical perspective of Scott from either a civil servant or poet to an artist/political agent writing in a time of shifting ideological and geo-political landscapes. To suggest Scott had a hand in drawing boundaries should be taken literally since his reports for Indian Affairs in the late nineteenth century up to the 1930s helped to institute the government policy that separated First Nations from the rest of Canadian society. But to stop with the idea of Scott as a literary or cultural border guard is to authorize a limited view of the man and his writing. Most important, in this critic's view, is that

the present edition exposes Scott, "warts and all" to readers, but they should avoid classifying Scott as polemical—not an easy thing to do given his heavy-handed role in assimilationist policy coupled with the opposing picturesqueness of his poetic sensibility. Rather, Scott should be viewed as a problematic figure and one who grapples with the increasing discordance of Modernism.

## Para-Literary Performers

**John Rodden**
*Performing the Literary Interview.* U of Nebraska P US $70.00.

**Marilyn Randall**
*Pragmatic Plagiarism: Authorship, Profit, and Power.* U of Toronto P $60.00

Reviewed by Ian Rae

*Performing the Literary Interview* features interviews with nine contemporary authors: Rick Bass, W.S. Di Piero, Frank Conroy, Marge Piercy, Gerald Stern, Richard Howard, John Nathan, Camille Paglia, and Isabel Allende. The interviews were conducted between 1994-97 and vary greatly in length, ranging from a five-page chat with Conroy to a twenty-seven-page debate with Paglia. All the interviews have been published before, but John Rodden has collected them here and appended an introduction in order to argue that the literary interview is a genre unto itself and worthy of critical attention. Rodden maintains that the manner in which the interviewees present themselves—that is, their voice, gesture, and rhetoric—constitutes a particular generic language that has been overlooked. Rodden aims to redress this oversight by identifying some generic features of the interview and situating this new genre somewhere between biography and performance theory.

According to Rodden, the first literary interview was published in France in 1884. However, his introduction traces the emergence of the interview from its disreputable status in the early nineteenth century (as a branch of American journalism) to its more authoritative status in the twenty-first century (as a mainstay of academic journals). From the wide range of interview styles that has developed over this period of time, Rodden devises three categories in which to place his interview subjects: Traditionalists, Raconteurs, and Advertisers. Traditionalists answer questions in a businesslike manner, placing emphasis on their writing and not on themselves. Raconteurs, in contrast, speak readily about themselves and have a flair for anecdotes and asides. Advertisers, finally, promote their literary personae instead of their writings and have a tendency to dominate their interviewer. Rodden argues that these three categories provide a foundation for the systematization of the interview as a distinct genre.

Certainly, Rodden has a point when he argues that an interview with Camille Paglia should be read as a performance. However, performance theory yields little of interest when applied to the traditionalists, whom Rodden labels "anti-performers," thereby making the traditional performance the absence of performance—a somewhat problematic foundation for a new genre. Similarly, biographical interpretations of the traditionalist interviews may fail because the subjects often will not discuss their personal lives. Some clever theorizing on Rodden's part might have resolved these problems, but his book is hamstrung by a lack of conclusions, both in the individual chapters and at the end of the work. Rodden sets up the individual interviews with helpful introductions that detail the subjects' backgrounds and offer some comparisons, but the book as a whole suffers from a lack of analysis. Rodden makes his arguments before his readers have the material necessary to evaluate them; and by

the time they have this material, the critical debate has moved on to a new subject. This lopsided quality in Rodden's book reinforces the truth of his opening words: "*Is* the interview a distinctive genre of literary performance? In two words: Not yet."

Marilyn Randall takes a rather different approach to questions of literary production in *Pragmatic Plagiarism: Authorship, Profit, and Power*. Randall begins her study of plagiarism with a necessary, but somewhat tedious survey of the academic, legal, and other institutional usages of the term. Although plagiarism, as a term, came into use during the rise of academic criticism in the nineteenth century, debates surrounding repetition and intertextuality have been going on for centuries. Indeed, the list of authors accused of borrowing unscrupulously is illustrious and includes everyone from Shakespeare and Molière to Kathy Acker and Martin Luther King, Jr. Randall grounds her discussion of these authors in a wide-ranging inquiry that takes into account shifting cultural norms, publishing standards, and ownership practices. She examines the distinction between plagiarism and copyright infringement, for example, and demonstrates how the profit motive shapes the plagiarism debate. Randall argues that even as the necessity of earning a livelihood pressures the modern author to appropriate, the pressure to publish in the academic world increases the number of watchdogs. Occasionally, paraphrasers and plagiarism hunters clash in an intermediary zone where the nitpicking reaches fever pitch. However, Randall has the good sense to record the humorous responses of authors to their critics, as well as of critics to other critics. For example, William Walsh issues fair warning to overzealous academics by noting the judgment of history: "On the whole, as between the plagiarist and his accuser, we prefer the plagiarist."

The most interesting parts of *Pragmatic Plagiarism* have to do with the authors to whom history has given this preferential treatment. For example, Randall examines the charges laid against Corneille for his numerous borrowings in *Le Cid*. Randall is an Associate Professor in the Department of French at the University of Western Ontario and her bilingualism greatly enriches her study, in part because the regulatory acts of the Académie française, as well as its conclusions in the Corneille case, established many important precedents in the plagiarism debate. By ruling that Corneille had significantly improved the work of a Spanish dramatist whose words and theme he appropriated, the Académie effectively sanctioned the Eliotic notion that mediocre authors borrow and great authors steal. Such theft, moreover, is likely to be condoned if an author steals from a nation that is the cultural, economic and territorial rival of his or her own. Randall therefore traces the long history of "Imperial Plagiarism" and underscores the reciprocal impact of literary pillaging on colonizer and colonized. As captive Greece seized the imagination of Imperial Rome, so contemporary postcolonial authors have captured numerous literary prizes in the language of the colonizers. However, in a few cases, these prize-winners have plagiarized extensively in their works, maintaining the right to use imperial tactics against empire. Some feminist authors have deployed a similar strategy in their efforts to subvert patriarchy and the publishing industry. Indeed, by the time Randall reaches the "Guerrilla Plagiarism" of postmodernism, the movement's zeal for appropriation seems old-fashioned. The only fault I find with Randall's work is the somewhat repetitious quality of her analysis as she attempts to cover this vast territory. For instance, Randall cites Hubert Aquin's assertion that "the originality of a piece of work is directly proportional to the ignorance of its readers" far too many times. Nonetheless, by focusing on important

cultural figures and controversial public moments in the plagiarism debate, Randall brings to life an academic issue with significant implications for law, finance, and popular culture.

## Bedfellows

**Ralph Sarkonak**
*Angelic Echoes: Hervé Guibert and Company.*
U of Toronto P $39.95

**Marjorie Garber**
*Bisexuality & the Eroticism of Everyday Life.*
Routledge n.p.

Reviewed by Stephen Guy-Bray

Ralph Sarkonak's book on Guibert's work is, as its subtitle suggests, almost equally a book on Guibert's friends—the most famous of whom were Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault—and on French intellectual life generally. It is perhaps for this reason that two of the readers of his manuscript "detected a gossipy feel," as he admits in his introduction. The readers may not have meant their comments to be complimentary, but as this book demonstrates, it is impossible to talk about Hervé Guibert's work without talking about his life, his looks, his fame, his friends, his death. Sarkonak's feel for gossip is one of the strengths of his book; I was reminded of Allen Ginsberg's praise of Frank O'Hara for having "a common ear / for our deep gossip."

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Guibert's career was what can only be called his relentless self-promotion. As a result, it is not much of an exaggeration to say that all of France became familiar with his face, his sexual history and his relations with his numerous friends and lovers. Many people felt that Guibert's revelations about Foucault in *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* constituted an unforgivable invasion of the older writer's privacy; Sarkonak handles this issue well in one of his book's strongest chapters, which is appealingly called "Writing On Writing On . . . ." In this chapter, he analyzes the novel (or whatever it is) through concepts of narratology. This chapter is *Angelic Echoes*' most successful example of the combination of intellectual rigour and personal engagement which Sarkonak aims at throughout the book; it also represents an important contribution to discussions of what has come to be called life-writing.

In particular, much of Guibert's work belongs to the branch of life-writing known as the AIDS memoir. In "For an AIDS Aesthetic," the chapter that precedes the one on *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*, Sarkonak discusses the frequently heated debate about representation and AIDS in a measured and sensible manner. This chapter would be useful reading for anyone interested in this debate, as it is both a lucid summary and an original contribution.

I found that these two chapters were the best, but the book has much else to recommend it. It was a good idea to include the French originals as well as translations, although the passages were often not translated all the way into English. Sarkonak writes well, but he loves to end sentences with exclamation marks! There were lots of them! These are all quibbles, of course: *Angelic Echoes* is a valuable contribution to literary theory as well as to French literary studies.

Marjorie Garber's *Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* is unfortunately much less valuable. Garber seems to want to write a one-book equivalent of the hundreds of volumes on homosexuality that were published in the ten or fifteen years after Stonewall. Her book attempts to cover literature, film, science, pop culture, history, politics and everything else. She doesn't succeed. (In fact, she's so busy trying to cover all of bisexuality that she doesn't even really get to the eroticism of everyday life.) In prose that is energetic if undistinguished, Garber ranges from subject to

subject, never developing an argument, never passing up an opportunity to make a tiresome pun on "bi"—she has a section called Bi-ology: get it?—and, crucially, never adequately defining her terms.

To be fair, there are some very good sections. I especially liked the section entitled "Bi Words," in which she skilfully demonstrates prejudice against bisexuality by looking at clichés, and her analysis of the fuzzy thinking of Jung and Jungians. Garber's accounts of her appearances as an expert on (apparently always low-grade) talk shows are both diverting and revealing in their presentation of popular ideas about bisexuality. Her discussions of Freud are also interesting, although they would have been more effective had they all been put in one place. In this case as in the book generally, Garber's inability to settle down to a discussion compromises her ability to argue her case. As she has frequently demonstrated a considerable talent for argumentation in her career, it was disappointing to find so little effective argument in this book.

As I have indicated, the book's main failing is Garber's refusal to define her terms. At times in the book, bisexuality includes anyone who has sex with both men and women or who has ever had sex with both men and women. At other times, bisexuality is restricted to those who fantasize about men and women. She asks, for instance, "What do you call a married man who is having an affair with another man?" Judging by her book, Garber would call him bisexual, but surely the best answer is that it's impossible to say without getting to know the man. A man who gets married in a heteronormative society cannot be presumed to be sexually interested in women: he might be, he might not be.

Garber wants to present bisexuality as the thing that will make our sexual system wither away, as "a sexuality that undoes sexual orientation as a category." But bisexuality is, at least as she presents it, merely another orientation—and, as such, a welcome addition to our meagre sexual taxonomy and to the meagre sexual possibilities our society permits. Garber's inability to understand this is most clearly demonstrated when she cites an article that describes a woman as having had sex with men and women and adds that "even this frank article can't for some reason say *bisexual*." Garber can see the magazine's choice of words as an evasion, as evidence of the writer's prejudice against bisexuality, but we should see it as a way out of the trap of labels. Instead of a description of an orientation or a basic fact about character, the writer of the article describes a particular woman's particular history. This, it seems to me, is the way to undo sexual orientation as a category.

## Transcultural Feminisms

**Ella Shohat, ed.**
*Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminisms in a Transnational Age.*
New Museum / MIT P $49.50

Reviewed by Sneja Gunew

This book was compiled a few years ago and was based on a conference held in 1993, but far from preserving musty debates and old controversies, its combination of critical issues, writers and visual documents meaningfully intervenes into current discussions surrounding globalization and the relationship to the national and local. While all the contributors are North American, their range and diversity rescue this book from glib generalizations that homogenize what happens in North America or the U.S. in the name of deconstructing (in the fullest sense) its assumed monolithic culture. Those contradictions are energetically addressed and the contributors offer a nuanced engagement with the paradoxes of cultural differences within a

context that functions as the primary reference point for defining the "West," or Europe, or globalization itself.

To talk about multiculturalism today when it is defined in so many places and from so many positions is a daunting undertaking. However, with Ella Shohat's opening essay we are launched into the continuing debates around identity or subjectivity (whatever it takes to simultaneously pose and destabilize this concept). As Shohat puts it, in a statement which echoes the concluding chapter of the influential *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, which she co-wrote with Robert Stam, "theory deconstructs totalizing myths while activism nourishes them." A decade later, judging from current conferences and other sites where these issues are debated, including the art world itself, even activism is trying to move beyond totalizing categories, those assumptions which are ultimately confining and even paralyzing. As Shohat states, "Identities and identifications are not necessarily coterminous, and one's socially constructed identity often does not necessarily dictate one's politics." Easier perhaps said than done when we inhabit a world where individuals are interpellated quite often through superficial, phenotypical markers. Indeed, as the introduction puts it, "Looks and identity, this volume suggests, are inscribed within the politics of visuality, but the politics of visuality also need to be reinvoiced in relation to a rich polyphony of alliances." And it is precisely a "reinvoicing" of the visual which takes place in many of the essays. As is so often the case with such analyses, personal experience fuels some of the insights. Shohat documents the fact that formations of racialization are given different meanings in different contexts by her own experience of being considered a "black" Iraqi in Israel, to transmutating into "brown" when she lands in the U.S. One heeds Shohat's injunction that "Multicultural feminism is thus less concerned with identities as something one has than in identification as something one does." How can one work productively with these interpellations over which one has no initial control? At the same time Shohat also warns readers that versions of American nationalism continue to underpin even those readings which attempt to illustrate the diversity within the U.S. so that minorities are pitted against each other rather than creating possibilities for collaboration. The question she poses toward the end of her introduction continues to haunt contemporary debates: "How do we redefine national interest when the post-independence nation-state has become a vehicle for national elites increasingly integrated into the culture of transnationalism?"

The essays which follow offer many sharp perceptions. Adrian Piper's discussion of the fraught politics of "passing" is complemented by succinct visual material. Remaining with the emphasis on outward characteristics, Kathleen Zane's essay "Reflections on a Yellow Eye: Asian I(\ Eye/)Cons and Cosmetic Surgery," uses the controversial writings of Hawai'ian author Lois Yamanaka to illustrate the point that the demand for eye surgery is not an inevitable symptom of internalized racism. Lisa Jones's meticulous historic and materialist study of the hair trade offers lugubrious detail of where the actual hair comes from and ponders whether there is truth to the contention that one source is cadavers. Lynne Yamamoto's photograph of an installation by Jeannette Ingberman and Papa Colo which shows a fall of hair caught up in an old-fashioned mangle offers its own sardonic evidence as counterpoint.

The distinguished cultural activist and performance artist Coco Fusco, who collaborated with Shohat on this volume, gleefully examines the tradition of reclaiming accessories of oppression and wearing them as signs of subversion (one thinks of the

recent history of the chador here) but also sounds the caution that "Unfortunately [. . .] this celebratory position tends to depoliticize and equate all forms of identity twisting, reaching the point at times of assuming that women are what they wear. [. . .] It collapses the historical, political and social influences in the construction of identity and appearance into a superficial reading of identity as appearance, complementing the impulses of a society that uses consumption as its model of cultural assimilation." A great deal of the visual material illuminates the varied ways in which such subversions may be represented.

Nor does this collection avoid the somewhat controversial issue of criticizing those who are traditionally perceived as allies. Janet Henry's "WACtales: A Downtown Adventure" traces a fable that has been duplicated many times over the last few decades in the debates surrounding the retrospective analyses of second-wave feminism as a movement which primarily served the interests of middle-class white women. Henry's story of the Women's Action Coalition in New York is indeed a cautionary tale which reveals the need for sensitive coalition building rather than the assumption that women will automatically be unified in their response to political events. Isabelle Gunning's careful critique of Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar's well-known film *Warrior Marks* (much used in classrooms) reveals both the necessity for, as well as the difficulties (and pain) involved, in such critiques "amongst ourselves."

M.A. Jaimes-Guerrero's " Savage Hegemony: From 'Endangered Species' to Feminist Indigenism" examines the double burden of American Native women who marry out or leave their reservations and are subsequently pitted against the sexism of patriarchal tribal councils as much as against white racism. The essay goes on to examine the ways in which Native artists, classified and identified by government agencies, are discriminated against by the very policies which are meant to safeguard the "authenticity" of Native art and artists. The ways in which policies and values ricochet back onto those who are meant to be in the same political coalition is also analyzed in Wahneema Lubiano's essay "Talking About the State and Imaging Alliances" where she looks at the "complicity of many blacks in state-ordained Native American genocide." Given these contradictions and minefields where might be the way forward be located? I should confess that in a recent upper-level women's studies class on diasporic women and the ways in which feminist analyses might deal with their contradictions and future directions I used quite a number of these essays as discussion-generators. In the eyes of the young women in the class, their realities now consisted of trying to remain committed to working for social change (running the risks of encountering Shohat's totalizing myths mentioned earlier) in an era when they themselves often embodied the corporeal circuitry of multiple traditions and categories. They could have echoed Maria Hinjosa in her dialogue with Catherine Benamou when she states: "I, we, embody multiculturalism in this country. I'm part Mexican, I'm part Jewish, I'm part Dominican, I'm part African-American, part Puerto Rican, part Catholic, part *santera*, I'm any number of combinations of things and they're all right here embodied in one person." Their comments could have resonated as well with May Joseph's contention that "[c]ultural citizenship is a nomadic and performative realm of self-invention." These performances and critiques, as well as the considered and careful analyses contained in Dutt's and Grewal's separate studies of what "human rights" mean in some contexts and Caren Kaplan's carefully choreographed essay on what it meant for (some) Jews to become white in the U.S., exemplify a cautious optimism

that insights may slowly and painstakingly illuminate a way beyond the last decade's engagements with the politics of identity and some of the paralyzing impasses of identity politics.

## Interpreting Poetry

**Megan Simpson**
*Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women's Language-Oriented Writing.*
State U of New York P n.p.

**Peter Jaeger**
*ABC of reading TRG.* Talon n.p.

Reviewed by Christine Stewart

In *Poetic Epistemologies,* Megan Simpson explores the work and thinking of eight contemporary American women poets: Lyn Hejinian, Leslie Scalapino, Susan Howe, Carla Harryman, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Lori Lubeski, Laura Moriarty, Beverly Dahlen. She defines these writers as language-oriented writers who share an affinity with language poetry, but also work beyond its community and its concerns. According to Simpson, language-oriented writers continually and openly question how meaning is constructed in language. They understand this questioning as having political, stylistic, aesthetic, societal, biological and gendering consequences. Simpson also looks to the work of women modernist writers, Gertrude Stein, H.D., Mina Loy, and Laura (Riding) Jackson. She shows the influence of their innovative poetic practices on the language-oriented writers of her study.

Simpson's book researches "some of the most vital and powerful poetry being written today" and her inclusion of the modernist women poets recognizes them (as is not always done) as an imaginative force that lies behind a great deal of contemporary poetry. Simpson explains how these writers offer us "language-oriented feminist epistemologies." She defines these epistemologies as "ways of knowing" that take gender into account without essentializing it and that investigate knowledge and "conditions of knowing" through language. Her research includes concise analysis of poetry, poetics and a clear theoretical tracing of the writers' various poetics. She also includes her own correspondence and interviews with the writers. The result is a detailed critical investigation of crucial and previously neglected poetry and poetics.

However, Simpson never formally takes up the compelling challenges these writers offer. In fact, her style serves as a striking example of a "dominant and normative discourse in North American culture" against which Simpson's writing subjects rail. Simpson isn't entirely unaware of this problem. She explains that her "kind of scholarship" runs the "necessary" risk of "reducing, simplifying, or supplanting" its subject matter. She takes the risk and the text suffers. Trapped almost entirely within conventional academic phrasing and uninspired syntax, Simpson's style constrains the reading of the work she admires. The tone of her investigation stiffens the investigative play and plasticity of the work she researches. Without exception the writing subjects of Simpson's book work to free up what American language poet Michael Palmer calls "the sclerotic word—a word with its veins clogged, a dying word." As poet H.D. writes, it is a poetic "fight for life . . . for breath." Presumably Simpson's text will make the works of these women more available to a wider academic audience. But the formal choices she makes as a writer inhibit the project and ironically quell the poetic writing she presents.

Peter Jaeger's *ABC of reading TRG* is more formally attuned to the challenges set forth by the writers he studies. Jaeger looks at Canadian poets bp Nichol and Steve McCaffery and their writing project of the 70's, the TRG—the Toronto Research Group. As Jaeger tells us in the first sen-

tence, "*ABC of Reading TRG* is not about what the Toronto Research Group's reports are about, but about what they invite us to think about."

In response to Nichol's obsession with the alphabet and McCaffery's "concern with the materialization of the signifier," Jaeger creates twenty-six investigative, contemplative sections: "Alphabet," "Book-Machine," "Canada-Concrete," "Derrida," "Excess Expenditure," and so forth. These sections are preceded by "Operating Instructions" where Jaeger foregrounds the details of his research and thinking. These include the subject matter of The Toronto Research reports, theoretical influences and interpretation, the reports' refusal of what Jaeger terms "Canlit tropes" (such as authentic voice, the land, Canadian identity), McCaffery and Nichol's European, American and Modernist influences and the deep philosophical/poetical differences between the two poets.

It is possible to read this book as an entire work or to browse in its individual sections. It can be read front to back, back to front or cormorant style—diving in where it looks good. The unorthodoxy of its form does not compromise the text's critical acuity. It gives formal and compelling evidence of the invigorating impact of these writers on the thinking/writing mind of Jaeger. As he states, "[t]his book answers to the hail of the TRG, while simultaneously subjecting that hail to critical scrutiny." This is precisely what the work of Nichol and McCaffery asks for from its readers: a responding, thinking hail. Jaeger presents us with a respectful critique of the specific TRG project and the contrasting styles and fates of the work of Nichol and McCaffery. He raises necessary questions about the nature of Canlit and the intellectual limits of its nation-building aspirations. Like the collaborative works of McCaffery and Nichol, Jaeger's text is an "exceptional sit[e] for dialogue."

## Ivory Thoughts

**Sam Solecki**

*The Last Canadian Poet: An Essay on Al Purdy.* U of Toronto P n.p.

Reviewed by Neil Querengesser

By the time Alfred Wellington Purdy finally settled into his distinctive voice—and the name Al Purdy—in the 1960s, he was already established as a powerful presence in Canadian poetry. By bringing into his verse not only his beloved Ameliasburg but virtually every part of the country from sea to sea to sea, Purdy created a body of lyric work unmatched for its perceptive and often free-wheeling depiction of Canada. Sam Solecki rightly points out that in recent years little critical attention has been paid to the achievement of this important Canadian poet, and this comprehensive study of Purdy's artistic redresses much past neglect by showing in detail just how remarkable and significant that achievement was.

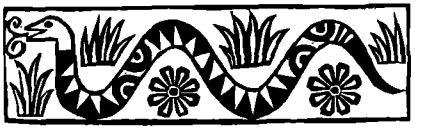
*The Last Canadian Poet: An Essay on Al Purdy* is a two-part study. In the first part, "Poetry, Nation, and the Last Canadian Poet," Solecki contends that the concept of a Canadian nation has suffered a paradigmatic shift in the last few decades, with significant consequences for Canadian literature, particularly that produced by writers like Roberts, Pratt, and Purdy who saw themselves engaged in the creation of a "master narrative of Canadian nationalism in literature, criticism, and politics." This sense of nationalism, which peaked in the 1950s and 1960s, has been all but obliterated, Solecki argues, by a variety of social and political events, including the establishment of official multiculturalism, the ongoing debate over Quebec separatism, the creation of NAFTA, and the hegemony of post-structuralist theories and methodologies in most academic disciplines. Purdy's ethos is centred in a nationalistic identity that reached its apex at mid-century and,

despite the virtual dismantling of that identity, his poetry has remained consistently grounded in it, reminding Canadians of a valuable tradition that, Solecki asserts, we neglect to our detriment. His central thesis is that Al Purdy "is the major or central poet of our experience, the one who has given the strongest, most comprehensive, and most original voice to the country's cultural, historical, and political experiences and aspirations that have been at the heart of our various nationalist discourses since Confederation."

The second part, "The Poetry of Al Purdy," is intended to demonstrate just how Purdy comes to be defined as our "first and last" truly national poet. Solecki applies a formalist approach in his close reading of several representative poems, beginning by showing Purdy's early and extensive debt to the poetry of Bliss Carman and later to the work of D. H. Lawrence and other modernists. He demonstrates that Purdy's work builds upon significant aspects of both traditional verse and modernist transformations of lyrical form, but that in his increasing poetic confidence he discovers an authentic voice that is freed from the imitation of such influences, drawing its power from an intimate engagement with the raw materials of this country and its peoples. In subsequent chapters, with titles such as "The Limits of Lyric," "Starting from Ameliasburg," and "History and Nation," Solecki builds the case for Purdy's national significance by analyzing many of his famous poems like "Lament for the Dorsets," "The Country North of Belleville," and "A Handful of Earth"; in the final chapter, "Origins and Being," he illuminates some subtly understated ontological concerns of this self-defined atheistic poet and deftly ties this analysis to Purdy's nationalistic significance.

The work concludes with elegiac ambivalence. Solecki argues that we can see in earlier Canadian culture the definite development of a literary tradition, a tradition that leads necessarily to the poetic voice of someone like Purdy who stands at the apex of the national moment. But even as it reaches that moment, the tradition begins to suffer its own dismantling. Purdy is both the culmination of that tradition and the emblem of what we have left behind.

This is a well-researched and meticulously documented work. Solecki makes a convincing argument, within the limits of his critical methodology, for Purdy's significance both as an excellent poet and as an important, but unfortunately overlooked, national presence. Those readers who feel that post-structuralist criticism and the excesses of multiculturalism have taken us too far in unproductive directions will find plenty to appreciate in this study. However, Solecki's strongly formalist approach to Purdy's work closes off a number of openings that many other readers may well be wishing for. For example, he rightly notes that many of Purdy's poems are characterized by endings that resist "poetic and narrative closure," yet the overall aim of Solecki's work seems to be a form of canonical closure in his analysis of Purdy's oeuvre, to establish him as the "first and last" Canadian poet. It is yet too early to offer a definitive assessment of Purdy's place in Canadian literature, if indeed such an assessment has any relevance to most contemporary critics. A deconstructive reading of Purdy's work might serve as a useful counterpoint to Solecki's arguments. But, given the current critical lay of the land in Canadian letters, such a reading seems to be still beyond the Roblin Lake horizon. Nevertheless, Solecki's book is a valuable and long overdue study of an essential presence in Canadian poetry.



# The Genial Disconnects

**Sharon Thesen**

*News & Smoke: Selected Poems.* Talonbooks $16.95
*A Pair of Scissors.* Anansi $16.95

Reviewed by Ted Byrne

"Being Lost, As Usual" is the first poem in Sharon Thesen's new book of selected poems, *News & Smoke.* Such a deliberate beginning. Omitting the first few poems of that terrific book *Artemis Hates Romance,* this remix reaches after a larger book, a book of the whole. What is lost here, at the outset? Is it the map? "Listen, I've never been lost / in the geography, / only in the map." The map is not the territory (Spicer, Korzybski). The individual poems in this collection, taken as one-night stands, operate geographically, unlost in the quotidian of home, television, street, gathering, airports, rare sojourns in the country, in other cities, but lost, always after something missing—not just the map, the shape of the book, but the gap.

So what are the boundaries of this book? Although in the introduction she remembers being "heavily weighted with Jack Spicer influences," the book is not generally her unit of composition. But are all her books collections then, her "latest collection" being *A Pair of Scissors: Poems*? Not exactly. At the very least, there are books—serial poems—within these collections: "Radio New France Radio," although its integrity doesn't survive the recompilation; "Long Distance: An Octave"; "Gala Roses"; "A Pair of Scissors." If *News & Smoke,* her second book of selected poems, attempts to recompose the whole as a book, then the book becomes the unit of recomposition.

This book "feels like memory and prophecy," she says in the introduction. We should take this seriously, because it reflects the shape of the whole enterprise, her "city of poetry." News and smoke, memory and prophecy, the "awful" and the "hopeful." News, memory, is the awful, the managed world, development, traffic, "the various Stalinisms that pass for 'thinking' and 'caring.'" Prophecy, hope, is found in the "odd graces of beauty, in whatever form, that makes things real again, [that] are enacted in the language of the poems." This is the kind of framing that allows the poems to be misunderstood, as palliative, even curative, as poetry ("Poetry: I couldn't care less"). This governing misperception can only be escaped in the larger form of the book, as unit of recomposition, *and* in the separateness of the smaller units—in other words in seriality, a pulsion toward an impossible structure, made out of the unknown, the procedure, the "enactment," the event. That's why this writing is difficult, remains difficult. If it were not hard to grasp, if you really could say, "Yes, that's it, that's how it is, that's what I feel too," then the whole thing would fail, would fall completely back into ideology, "official verse culture."

These poems should not make anyone happy. Her city of poetry is a "really stupid city." You don't want to live there, in a present, without history, only nostalgia and memory (news), without reason, only prophecy (smoke).

*News & Smoke* ends with "Gala Roses," a virtuoso piece that also concluded *Aurora.* "Gala Roses" is a display, a summa: a book. All the modes are here, condensed and heightened. There are delicate rhymes and clumsy puns. There are rapid oscillations between the static perfections of the moment, delivered by lying appearance and perception, and the intrusions of helplessness, confrontations with the real. And there is always the terror of missing something, always the gap ("a gap thinking fills overflows"), of joy beyond belief, beyond the ordinary, and of horror—not the minor frisson of recognition, identification of the clever, the apt, the durable thought, but something here that reads us into the ineffable of making or finding, of dictation, which is an event, shared, immanent.

The long poem "A Pair of Scissors" is a different kind of experiment altogether. Here narration becomes an element of prosody, inside, structuring and yet as unobtrusive, or underdetermined, as the formal elements of "Gala Roses"—the near-lyric becoming near-narrative, or perhaps near-pastoral. The "story" goes something like this: the day was spent in desultory, not very vigorous preparations for the party; the before and after of the party, the minor encounters, the walk, the intrusive but welcome memories—all occasion various moments of intuition about one's condition and that of one's culture (history). It's the plot of *Mrs. Dalloway*, except that here the time of the narrative is disturbed, distorted. The party takes place at the end of the novel and is not quite completed, never actually occurs at all, just its anticipation and its memory (smoke and news). The plot doesn't map onto the poem, but the poem keeps reminding you of it, remarking on it. There are echoes of Sally Seton, but no Mr. Dalloway. And the distance between Mrs. Dalloway and Mr. Walsh (the old boyfriend) is diminished. We're in the country, at Bourton, not in the city. Mrs. Dalloway has a kind of independence that she doesn't have in the novel. Mr. Walsh's penknife, although present metaphorically (as the past, as eroticism), is transformed into a pair of scissors that he uses to cut her hair. But there is no story, only the struggle to find one. And there is no conscious critique working against the surface of the piece. The "real" Mrs. Dalloway draws attention to ideology because her near-recognition of it is her malaise—or she is a cipher that we read through. Thesen, however, inhabits the uninterrogated voice of Mrs. Dalloway, whose ethic is announced unambiguously at the outset.

> To be bold in my own way,
>
> to pour myself into something
> I can stand & would stand all day
>
> as long as the uniform were some
> Yohji Yamamoto thing that didn't cost
> too much
>
> and the city gave me something back.

I don't think this is ironic. Because who wouldn't want this, precisely? Then she jump cuts to "gypsies" ("Latcho Drom"), slides momentarily into disorientation ("What am I doing here"), creating a transit that then weaves us back and forth through little pleasures, little pains, dreams, gods and shadows, timelessness ("too early for red wine too late for coffee"), and the ghosts of high-born or high-minded ladies (Jackie Kennedy, Frances Boldereff), to our final destination, "Everyone had a wonderful time." But as in Wonderland, this place has frightening holes.

## Into & Beyond Bodies

**Jacqueline Turner**
*Into the Fold.* ECW $14.95

**Marianne Bluger**
*Scissor, Paper, Woman.* Penumbra n.p.

**Anne F. Walker**
*Into the Peculiar Dark.* Mercury $12.50

Reviewed by Sally Chivers

What brings these three poetry books together, and what drove me to select them from a larger group of female-authored texts, is their evocation of physicality through varied and variably successful poetic forms. But that is not the only aspect of the poetry worth mentioning. Jacqueline Turner, Marianne Bluger and Anne F. Walker walk a fine line between writing as women and being read solely as female authors. Each poet keeps her balance.

Jacqueline Turner's first book of poetry hits home. Her dancing syllables survey spaces of British Columbia to open up a book that could only be written in and through Western Canada. In a series of triptychs, she explores the fold as structural device and as symbol. To follow Turner's

exploratory lines is to investigate conjunctions of cartography, desire and (auto)biography that meet in the fold.

> There's a gouge today in her ability to get
> out of bed. She is
> gouged to the bed. The bed is holding
> her in its gouge. She is
> unable to ungouge herself. She looks at
> the clock, knows, it is
> time to get up. And yet. This gaping
> gouge. Caught in the fold,
> the inbetween. Not sleeping but unable.
> Caught. The bed—
> her. Stuck she can't say. Seeping some
> how, slipping lip to
> pillow.

Hinging on gouges, Turner's long poem "Into the Fold" moves from narrative to sound in a mixture of forms that all build on a tripartite scaffold. Her own text design visually evokes the fold she explores, like paint-splatter butterflies from an elementary school art class. Amidst tripled prose poems, and sets of three tercets, she maps poems with right- and left-justified columns meeting and spilling into a centred column at the bottom of the page, usually a juxtaposition of images: "badminton racquet / grade six soccer (goalie) / she said 'sweet' / driving gold bracelets / the first time they had sex." The road trip of "Into the Fold" culminates in the long poem, "Beyond Tongue." Continuing threads of design and sensation from the previous poems, it is not quite as successful in reinventing sound and shape. Still, Turner's exploration of the carnal, colloquial and complete possibilities of the fold enlivens a feminist aesthetic.

Marianne Bluger's seventh book, *Scissor, Paper, Woman,* invests in images so precise they resound far beyond the pages that contain them. Bluger defamiliarizes the familiar: "by feel alone took from my purse / the cold steel key / an agent stranger once had given me / and let myself into the place." The title poem evokes woman as scissor and stone in the visceral game, played like the flip of a coin. "Scissor, Paper, Woman" taps into the chance choices that change the game and that mark gendered relationships: "& limp she lies / still stunned and calm / a solid/ round heavy / stone in his palm." The poem, like the book in general, is marred by strange explanatory endnotes that work against evocative juxtapositions. Throughout, Bluger trusts readers to decipher lines such as "Pale naked Sappho / moon woman of Japan / breasting the night clouds / you swim steep heaven alone." Yet, someone (the editor? the poet?) has decided to note that the title of that poem, "Izumi Shikibu," refers to a Japanese poet, that "Stein" refers to Gertrude Stein, and that "Lent is the penitential season of fasting and prayer before Easter." Left to their own devices, Bluger's readers will engage with her deft imagistic writing that weaves the everyday among literary references. In the opening section, "For the reader," Bluger's "The Very Spot" challenges her audience, "Just watch us." In the following three parts, "Night Station," "Nude with Scar," "The Red Rim," and "Present Things," Bluger comes through with a tangible feast, delicately visual and infinitely figurative.

Though not as engaging as *Into the Fold* or *Scissor, Paper, Woman,* Anne F. Walker's third book of poetry, *Into the Peculiar Dark* (winner of second prize in the Alcuin Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada) escapes the trap of clichéd cancer poetry to present a vivid rereading of ill bodies. Repeated terms like "dioxin," "toxin" and "hypermodern" jar the reader into a discomfort partly aesthetic and partly physical. The collection is divided into three sections presented counter-intuitively, so that part three, "After," precedes part one, "Before" and part two, "During." The somewhat belaboured structure invites a reading of process, leaving readers in the midst of a cycle at the end of the book. That cycle is reinforced by the back and

forth between laments for ailing flesh—"I have begun to mourn while / her back cakes into a sore living round"—and lyrics of babyhood—"infant fingers / conducting symphonies inside / my hips." The poems aim more for meaning than sound. They succeed, but without Turner's ear and Bluger's eye. Walker could have more faith in her readers. Connections tend to be over-explained and reading strategies controlled. A few too many "like"s litter figures and unnecessary numbers reinforce otherwise innovative structural devices. Still, Walker confronts materiality to evoke an agony that too often defies such plain, fresh scrutiny. She captures her own poetic process with the simple lines, "Coffee cups feel unidentifiable in / tap water, the river beside my baby's dreams / to ease clinking of glasses and silver."

## Frances in Mysticland

**W.D. Valgardson**

*Frances.* Groundwood-Douglas and McIntyre $7.95

Reviewed by Wilhelm Emilsson

*Frances*, W.D. Valgardson's first novel for young people, is about a Canadian girl of Icelandic descent getting in touch with her "Icelandicness." Probably the easiest and most plausible way for her to do this would have been to listen to Björk CDs, but Valgardson, for whom writing from the point of view of a teenage girl is something of a stretch, chooses to have the heroine explore her roots through a discovery of her Icelandic great-grandmother's diary. Frances is hindered in her search by her philistine mother, but helped by a gruff but humane pensioner. Along the way she uncovers painful family secrets, in addition to finding out more about herself. *Frances* is sometimes touching, but ultimately a rather workmanlike novel.

The story of Frances is told in Valgardson's familiar stripped-down style. This style suits the stark "Hemingway Country" he explores in much of his fiction for grown-ups, but it doesn't quite suit the subject matter of this book. Overall, his strings of simple sentences really do not do justice to the rich, textured experience of a female teenager. However, in a scene in which purple, red, and golden dragonflies land on Frances as she sits alone, this text comes alive and gives the reader a glimpse into how good this novel could have been.

The book contrasts the crude materialism of modernity with a gentler, kinder natural supernaturalism of the past. Frances's mother symbolizes the former, while characters like the pensioner stand for the latter. Furthermore, the author represents Iceland as a spiritual antithesis to crass materialism. Valgardson is not the only North American writer of Icelandic descent to exoticize Iceland and Icelanders, and indeed some Icelandic artists indulge in self-exoticization of this kind. But isn't it time to give this maudlin mysticism a rest? It's not that as an Icelander I am offended by a simplified representation of Icelandic culture. An author's first duty is to write well, but if you write about Icelandic culture these days it is impossible to create a first-rate work if you still believe in a troll-and-elf image of the country. Granted, there is still a strong streak of mysticism in Icelandic culture, but it coexists with an equally strong materialistic drive. It could be argued that the paradox of Icelandic culture is the illogical but pragmatic combination of these two impulses.

At the end of the novel, the heroine travels to Iceland. The implication is that the moment she gets off the plane she will connect with the primeval life force that has been calling her from across the sea. Unfortunately, the text shows no awareness of the fact that the first Icelandic teenager she meets is much more likely to want to talk about music and films than ancient mystic lore.

# Open Meditations

**Darren Werschler-Henry**
*The Tapeworm Foundry.* Anansi $14.95

**Paul Vermeersch**
*Burn.* ECW $14.95

**David Solway**
*Chess Pieces.* McGill-Queen's UP $16.95

**Michael Redhill**
*Light-crossing.* Anansi $16.95

Reviewed by Karl Jirgens

These four books all feature meditations that eventually loop back on themselves, their conditions of being, the state of the art, and the site of writing itself. Their tones may range from ecstatic to mannered, but they all consider the situation of the self as it confronts and articulates a formidable environment. Unlike more conventional lyric poets, these authors have chosen to innovate through their stylistics or choice of subject, and in different ways have generated open texts.

Darren Werschler-Henry, who also serves as an editor with Coach House Books, has crafted *The Tapeworm Foundry,* an epic slice beginning at a full gallop *in medias res* and charging through some fifty pages to an open-ended sentence that loops back to its beginning. Werschler-Henry has shaped an endless loop of sentence fragments, each ostensibly a book concept or proposal aimed at an unspecified audience and/or publisher. This heterogeneous, self-reflexive and four-dimensional diatribe offers a timely treatment of culture and/or politics and/or commercialism and/or history. Werschler-Henry links clausal conjectures, and stream-of-consciousness cerebral ejaculations with the conjunction "andor" and thus, establishes a sense of openness and provisionality (will it be "and" or will it be "or"?), and provides a pattern with breath-pauses that turn at a dizzying pace (ideally suited for public readings). This work should be heard live but has an energetic presence on the page as well. Like a tapeworm, each "segment" of this long word-worm has a life of its own, and gives meditative pause, but can also be read in the longer looping context of this disjunctive poetic narrative on literature, as a kind of ambivalent parasite slowly working its way through the cultural detritus blocking the intestines of a preposterous society constipated with its own pretensions. The homages to great writers, meta-poetic and acerbic comments on publishing and writing that are embedded here with eclectic comments on electron microscopes, divorce lawyers, intaglio bowling balls, and red-herrings make for an engaging audience/author repast.

Paul Vermeersch's *Burn* is his debut. This collection offers poems under three headings, "the days dogs die," "days without hearing a sound," and "those days you could still speak my name" all lightly seasoned with a (sur)real barbecue marinade, and splashed with linguistic sauciness: "Once, I wore Lake Huron for a cape. / A chunk of driftwood was a ship / I could capsize with a flick / of my wrist and watch / my enemies drowning inside." These meditations also carve to the bone at times, expose the "burn" of radiant ecstasy or dull pounding of depression. Fishing, drug abuse, stranded whale pods and magical love encounters on subways permit introspective observations on passion and ruin, anxiety and glory. This is the language of the open heart, the language of the dirty boulevard. Avoiding the self-indulgence and acrimony that one often finds in emerging poets, Vermeersch transcends time and self through luminous turns of language and singular states of mind.

David Solway's *Chess Pieces* moves into a deeper mind-set. Like Duchamp who gave up art for chess, Solway sees the ever-shifting contingencies of the chessboard as a poetic performance. The mind dancing over the board, the interactive pieces, the emerging patterns of the game, the tensions

between opposing forces provide a framework for Solway's investigations. I found his "Wittgenstein at Chess" illuminating: the conditions of the "game", whether it is language or chess, "are only the conditions / of the game we happen to be playing." In this book, the "game" is not always what it seems. Solway links a mastery of language with a command of chess strategies. His allegorical perceptions of the novel as endgame, the short story as the mid-battle, and the epic as opening move, span the history of western literature, civilization and philosophy. This collection, published as part of the Hugh MacLennan Poetry Series (edited by Nathalie Cook and Joan Harcourt), revels in erudite wit, refined allusions and complex syntax that modestly recognizes its own artifice, its own potential displacement by alternate pursuits of squash, sailing or the brokerage. But it also celebrates the marvelous, simple complexities of printed word and waiting chess-piece: "Only abstract black and spectral white / hovering in airs of shadow and light."

*Light-crossing* is the latest in a steadily growing number of books of poetry by Michael Redhill. Also a dramatist and a writer of fiction, Redhill is plugged into the deeper history of the land, the histories of First Nations peoples, movements of the early settlers, as well as the first lines of transportation and communication that underlie the Toronto region. Redhill intermixes body and landscape, topography and mindscape. He simultaneously implodes and explodes events; a sudden attack by yellow-jackets nearly takes the life of a mother, the focus shrinks down to the condition of the comatose body, leaps through time to a child's first recognition of the independent movements of birds, and closes with the waxy scent of birthday candles and an implicit awareness of the inexorable cycle of life and death. There is a sense of immanence in Redhill's poetry, not the great sublime, say, of Kant, but a less formal, more present perception that lifts Pennsylvania beer, lovers' contradictions and ancient burial grounds, and carries them aloft in the winds of remembrance as they are subtly altered by selective memory and a metamorphic sense of self: "Tomorrow / you will remember something / that never happened." Redhill has an eye and ear for ephemera (shifting dust, winter sunlight, flights of wrens) as markers of the translucent pages of time. Draw nearer and listen: just below the surface, you can hear the dead speaking.

# "Dangling inside the word *she*": Confusion and Gender Vertigo in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*

Jes Battis

Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* invades the reader, exploding definitions of the novel just as its narrator explodes social and sexual binaries. This "autobiography," if it is one, belongs to Geryon—a perplexing monster/man whose corporeality shifts from one scene to the next. Transplanted from the fragmentary writings of Stesichoros, Geryon is subjected to a number of transformations within Carson's text. All that the reader knows for certain is that Geryon, like his world, is red. But this is where the confusion begins, for what *is* red? Is it a state, a substance, a mindset? "Perhaps some day," Geryon observes, "I will get some new information about red" (92). The reader might hope for the same thing. Varying shades of red—from the smoldering red of the volcano Ichantikaas to the cherry-red of ever-present cigarettes—become signs for blending and hybridity. But who, or what, is the hybrid?

The simple answer is: Geryon. But there are levels of hybridization occurring within *Autobiography of Red* (easily transliterated as *Autobiography of Read*), and the reader is not immune to them. This paper aims to interrogate not simply Geryon's transformation throughout the text, but the text's own transformative power upon the reader. When Carson supplies the image of Geryon "trapped in his own bad apple" (70), she alludes to all kinds of captivity. For Geryon, like the reader, is a prisoner of his own perceptions. And in trying to define what it is to be red—or what it is to be *read*—Geryon's audience becomes just as much a prisoner of the page. Ultimately, Geryon is neither man nor monster. He is a red stain—a drop of blood, even—on a page of black text. He is the occupant of a space in flux. Finding the authentic Geryon is impossible, because his identity, like his space, is malleable and performative.

Geryon himself provides a list of the "total things known about Geryon," but this information only further disrupts any attempt to classify him: "Geryon was a monster. Everything about him was red" (40). But "red" and "monster" are never defined. It's not even clear if Carson knows what they mean, since she plays with their substance so liberally. "Geryon is, after all, a monster," she states in an interview, "and this entails a certain amount of dislocation" (E-mail). To locate him only as a monster ignores the fact that his monstrosity isn't noticeable to everyone. To locate him as a man at first seems safe—the pronoun *he* allows this—but, like Stesichoros undoing the latches, Carson gradually dismantles this verbal signifier until the reader "dangle[s]" with Geryon "inside the word *she* like a trinket at a belt" (57). To see through Geryon's eyes is to "dangle" between categories, between binaries—male/female, monster/mortal, inside/outside—until the between-space itself becomes the only specifiable location.

Call it the white space between words, the red blotches of a picture exposed to light at the wrong time, or the interval between waking and sleeping where "too many intake

valves are open" (53). To root out the precise nature of this space, to stigmatize it as a perceptible category, gives the same result as Geryon's fifteen-minute exposures: black, or lack—certainly not red, which is the object of this inquiry. Carson draws Geryon's character from the fragments of Stesichoros, and her hybrid version of this mythical "monster" reflects the ambiguous and incomplete portrait that these fragments offer. One fragment, describing the aftermath of Geryon's death, supplies only enigmatic words: "Geryon / lovely tresses / mortal" (Goold 87; F70, 71, 72). When Herakles delivers the killing blow with a poisoned arrow, Geryon falls "like a poppy which, suddenly spoiling its beauty, sheds its tender petals and—" (77; F15). And what? But the fragment ends here. Whatever follows that tantalizing "and" hangs before the reader like a baited hook. Carson attempts to graft these blank spaces into her narrative, and their presence titillates the reader even more than the erotic imagery that borders them.

The reader's knowledge of Geryon—"everything about him was red"—is nothing but the absence of knowledge. His body can be seen only through the fogged glass of a shower window, or the red haze of a partially developed photograph. Geryon is a physical postulate. His shifting body is at once human (he has hands and feet, he wears clothes, he feels anxiety and desire) and entirely inhuman (he has [maybe] wings, and [maybe] red skin, and he knows himself to be immortal). Sometimes his wings go unnoticed, even when they aren't being obscured by his voluminous trench coat. Sharon Wahl points out that "the people who see and react to Geryon's wings—his mother, and later, Ancash—are the people who understand Geryon, while Herakles certainly does not" (Wahl 182). But these characters understand Geryon no more than the reader does, for they have no access to his complex interior world.

"Like sex," Carson says in *Plainwater*, "light is not a question until you are in the dark" (17). Geryon's observers are not so much in the dark as in the *red* when it comes to defining his physical form. He exists on the fringes of several different categories. His queerness gives him an immediate outsider status, which then must be weighed against his monstrosity. He is both sexually (as queer) and visually (as monster) an exile, and those are just physical lines. The psychological lines that separate Geryon from his world—some of them absent—are even more problematic. He is an artist, a photographer, and a self-proclaimed "brokenheart." He lives in terror of the wrong things getting "inside" of him—be they the "wrong" words of the babysitter, or the invasive sex acts of his abusive older bother.

Geryon knows only that "inside is mine" (*Red* 28), yet he seems incapable of preserving this demarcation. He hears roses screaming and blades of grass clicking; his sensory and psychic worlds enmesh, until his tortured thoughts eventually define the physical limits of his being. He is able to venture into the "rotten ruby of night," or feel "trapped inside his own bad apple" (70). Like an infant who does not understand the distinction between inside and outside or here and gone, Geryon is in thrall to his own boiling imagination. When the psychoanalyst/cabaret dancer asks later in the text, "whose cage are you in?" (*Red* 103), he would do best to answer "my own."

Doubt emerges from this explosion of categories, this confusion of sense and seeming. Carson's narrator admits in *Plainwater* that "I still do not know the sense of things when I see it, when I stand with the pieces in my hands" (125). Like the fragments of Stesichoros, mixed with scraps of meat in the box that begs to be shaken, the reader is given only pieces of Geryon and his peculiar red world. Is he really a monster? Does he really hear roses screaming? Does he really fly into the heart of Ichantikaas and snap a picture that,

ultimately, has no use to Ancash—since he's studying the sound, not the sight, of volcanoes? Everything about Geryon's account is doubtful, yet at the same time frosted with a bit of sugared curiosity. For what if he *is* both a monster and a mortal? What if his physical and sexual impossibility is meant to rupture everything that appears safe and measurable?

Within this text, the pleasure of turning the page is interrupted by what awaits the reader—not more information, but a glowing blank. It is impossible to tell whether Geryon is changing before the eyes of an audience, or vice versa. Unlike the volcanic rock that teases his curiosity, he never arrives at a stable form. But his various transformations make apparent a hybridity that may exist in all subjects: an elusiveness of certainty that renders any interpretive reading flawed. This is the beginning of Geryon's power over the reader. "It is almost as if you hear a key turn in the lock," Carson says in *Plainwater*. "Which side of the door are you on?" (89). This question becomes more pertinent as the door separating reader and text dissolves.

Geryon's identity—both human and monstrous—is confused and contested by his physical hybridity. Sometimes he *is* human, although not always when the reader would expect him to be. When he wakes up in a tango bar, half-naked and very much aroused, there is a kind of bestial overtone to his desire (103). He is an animal force trapped in a human locale, blinking in bewilderment, with no recollection of the previous night's excursions. Like a predator, sleepy and sated from the kill, even if the delicious particulars of it have vanished into a fugue of bizarre images and memories.

Yet he also engages in the sexual and social experimentation of a human adolescent. This includes everything from poetic graffiti to sex with Herakles, an older boy. Geryon slips between the poles of monster and mortal, and his physical illegibility is what gives him essential power over the reader. He cannot be typed, named, or "read." The philosopher with the "nipple mouth" that Geryon meets in Buenos Aires tells him that truth is attainable, "provided you can renounce that rather fundamental human trait—the desire to know" (86). Geryon responds to this epistemological puzzle with "I think I can," but this lacks conviction. Like the reader, he is unsure of his ability to cast off this desire. He no longer knows what side of the keyhole he is on, but either way, something is breaking in; or his power to classify is slipping out.

It is this power to classify that Carson challenges within *Autobiography of Red*—not just essentialist classifications like power and gender, but more slippery ones, like book and author. The text, after all, is written by Carson (author) about Geryon (author of his own biography), who in turn is a mutation of the character that Stesichoros (author) drew from existing Greek mythologies (by other authors). It defies canonical notions of what a book is by providing the reader with a *mélange* of poetic fragments, palinodes, systems of logic, monologues, dialogues and interviews. Geryon cannot be lifted neatly from the text that he inhabits, because the text itself is a kind of red space.

"The fundamental question," Ian Rae says in his article "Dazzling Hybrids," "is not whether Geryon is he or she, but rather how this monster can negotiate the conflicts entailed by loving and existing in a world more complex than its social, linguistic and literary conventions would suggest" (35). But really, the he/she question by itself is important. Carson encourages a profound sense of gender vertigo within the text by constantly having Geryon confuse men for women, or by confusing Geryon's own gender with vague pronouns. Throughout his travels, Geryon sees "men—no, [they were] women" (114). There is the tango singer that he meets in Buenos Aires, who wears "a tuxedo and a black tie" (100) in an obvi-

ous nod to Marlene Dietrich's *Morocco* chanteuse. The philosopher who urges Geryon to renounce his "desire to know" cannot escape the gender-bending "nipple mouth" adjective that Carson attaches to him, very much like a Homeric epithet.

These are merely examples of outside characters who influence Geryon's concept of gender. Things get hazier when he begins to imagine himself as a woman, thereby destabilizing gender from the inside. His queerness already blurs the heteronormative lines of masculinity. He "[dangles] inside the word *she*" by conceptualizing himself as a woman in different scenes. First, he asks himself, "what is it like to be a woman listening in the dark?" (48). Later, he sees his reflection in a mirror "cruel as a slash of lipstick" (57). These moments occur when he spends the weekend with Herakles, and is therefore in a vulnerable state—captivated by the older boy's body and all of the uncertainty that it promises.

He has no previous sexual experience, save for the physical depredations of his brother. Who, or what, does sex with Herakles make him? To immediately answer "queer" is to suppose a mixture of biological drives and social influences that may or may not be present. Since Herakles is Geryon's first lover, to draw such a narrow conclusion about Geryon's sexual preference makes little sense. Therefore, Geryon's sexual awakening brings him no closer to occupying a category—be it queer, straight or bisexual. Like Stesichoros, he "[undoes] the latches" (both adjectival and categorical), thereby allowing "all of the substances in the world [to go] floating up" (5). He is not simply ambivalent (occupying two spaces), but polyvalent (spread across multiple spaces).

Geryon's shifting identity can best be analyzed via Judith Butler's critical perspectives on gender and performativity. Butler's discussion of "culturally constructed gender," which she sets out in *Gender Trouble* (6) and later problematizes in *Bodies That Matter*, offers a limited means of exploring Geryon's subjectivity. If Carson wishes Geryon to disrupt gender constructs by "performing" different genders in different social situations, then she is aligning herself with Butler's theoretical praxis. But this is not to suggest that Geryon should become a floating signifier of performativity.

If he represents one specific avenue of social theory, he is no longer polyvalent. Butler's notion that "homosexuality [. . .] is instrumental to the overthrow of the categories of sex" (*Trouble* 101) does not seem to apply to Geryon, for it essentializes queerness as a privileged and transformative position, whereas Geryon occupies no position. True, he is performative—switching between man/woman, mortal/monster, from scene to scene—but this performativity represents a profound state of pain, confusion and lack that Butler might call "metaphysical homelessness" (97). To identify Geryon's "performances" as socially transgressive—and therefore positive (by whose standard?) because they "trouble" gender paradigms—is to discount his considerable feelings of loneliness and dislocation.

Much of this dislocation stems from his relationship with Herakles, who, as Adam Kirsch puts it, "breaks Geryon's heart and steals his innocence" (40). But Geryon never occupies an "innocent" state. His sensory world is invaded by "the sound of the horses like roses being burned alive" (12). His body is invaded by his brother, who forces him to "hang in between with his face pressed into his own mattress, cold toes balancing on the bed below" (28), engaging in a Foucauldian discourse of sex and power that he is too young to understand. If Herakles steals anything from Geryon, it is not his virginity, but rather his certainty. He may feel "clear and powerful—not some wounded angel" (54) afterwards, but this experience, and the caprice that Herakles later demonstrates in rejecting him, propels Geryon on a transnational search for his own identity.

Ultimately, what he arrives at is not an authentic self, but the same thirdspace—the ambiguity of red—that he has occupied from the start. In truth, he never leaves this state of flux, because it has no definite coordinates to overcome, no chamber to escape from. It is what Homi Bhabha calls a "disarticulated space" (221)—a realm between binaries where hybridization may occur. The concept of thirdspace, which often appears in discussion of postcolonialism, can also be used to challenge categories of sex and gender. But when applied to Geryon, it becomes problematic. For if no essential form awaits him at the end of all this changing, then he is locked in a metamorphic cycle that promises no resolution. To resolve him would be to fix him, and Geryon cannot be fixed, typed or classified. But this very resistance is what tortures him. Discussions of performativity, hybridity and thirdspace might be able to deconstruct binaries, but deconstructing Geryon is an affair of the flesh. Every new interpretation vivisects him further, until he is stretched out on the rack of curiosity, unable to recognize his own transforming body.

Why, then, does Carson choose a narrator with no rooted form, no stable concept of an outside world? What is the reader supposed to learn from this queer boy, this winged artist, whose desire for Herakles (his mythic murderer) uproots and dislocates his life? And why do most critics of the text tend to overlook his queerness, or attend to it in a cursory manner? Ian Rae discusses Geryon's relationship with Herakles as one of "homoerotic subtext" (25), although there's nothing really subtextual about it—Geryon and Herakles are lovers. "Geryon, put your mouth on it, please" does not suggest a panoply of subtle readings. Sharon Wahl contends that "the weight of loss [experienced by Geryon] seems to belong to someone older, not to a boy of fourteen" (185). This, of course, smoothes over the violent, even volcanic love of adolescence that is often inexpressible. Geryon, like Ichantikaas, is an "animal spraying hoarse pain from the back of its mouth" (*Red* 108). The weight of Geryon's loss is incalculable, because his brutal exposure to the outside world—his lack of an inside/outside membrane—places him in the center of an emotional maelstrom. Carson herself states in an interview with John D'Agata that "you can do things when you're young that you can't do when you're older. You can't get simple again" (10). Geryon's desire for Herakles—and his desire, in many ways, to be *normalized* as someone deserving of love—speaks to this simplicity. He cannot disown his craving for acceptance, just as he cannot disown his desire to know. Appetites, unlike categories, are not so easily shaken off in this text.

As he walks through the streets of Huaraz, Geryon observes that "we are amazing beings / we are neighbors of fire" (148), himself included. By neighbouring himself with fire, he proves that he can be red—not *read*—and still manage to exist. How badly the fire burns him in the process, and whether the pain is worth the result, is a matter of speculation. Even in this last scene, Geryon is still a space between binaries—that is, he walks between Ancash, who sees the fire as beautiful, and Herakles, who is looking solely at the men (146). He never steps into a form, and the text closes over him, "standing side by side" with Herakles, the personification of earthly desire, and Ancash, interested only in scientific inquiry.

Geryon seems to have made a choice here, but what is it? Does he choose Herakles, the other "superior eel at the bottom of the tank" (39), whose romantic abuse both wounds him as a person and tempers him as an artist? Does he choose to venture into the volcano? This section of the text is titled "a photograph he never took, no one here took it" (145), yet the reader is given a description of the volcano's heart and the *snap* of the shutter. Is

this like the palinode of Stesichoros—a simple *no* that unravels everything? Or is it both a choice and a refusal to choose, like two realities shimmering upon one another to form an impossible image? Geryon takes the picture / no one takes the picture. Geryon's "autobiography" itself is a picture with multiple exposures, melting and collapsing into each other. To separate this text into knowable categories is to colonize its indeterminacy with a canonical notion of what "books" really are.

Carson's writing has been criticized as being "at heart, non-poetic" (Kirsch 37): "by emptying out language," says Adam Kirsch, "Carson is foregrounding its artificiality" (38). Indeed, Carson's relationship with language in her works is not an idyllic one. In *Plainwater*, she asks, "what is the fear inside language?" (141), and answers herself by admitting that "language is what eases the pain of living with other people. You know the anger that language shelters, that love obeys. Why obey" (233). This "why obey" is a puzzle to be solved, or a box to be shaken. Should the reader ask "why obey?" and thus resolve to *disobey* the conventions of language? Or is the answer "why, *obey*," as if the only obvious choice is to transgress, to resist and dismantle those conventions?

Carson is not trying to perplex with riddles—she is presenting yet another choice. Language, she demonstrates, is an artifact of limitless power and limitless mutability, when a simple punctuation mark (?) can transform resignation into defiance. She is trying to get back to what she calls the "ambidexterity" of the Greek language—its ability to defer choice in favour of ambiguity (Jennings 927). Geryon represents that deferral. He is both all and none of his categories. The result of this deferral is unclear, and Carson never proposes an end to Geryon's metamorphosis. Instead, he represents her conviction that "there's always another corner in a word that you haven't gotten to yet" (Jennings 927). But this understanding comes at the cost of any physical certainty—and satiety—on Geryon's part. This exchange of belonging for metaphysical "freedom" needs to be addressed, for Carson's monstrous narrator is no smiling alchemist, pleased by his discovery of the philosopher's stone. He is still dislocated, confused, and ultimately "trapped in his own bad apple" (*Red* 70).

Is Carson urging her readers, then, to do away with binaries? Is she exhorting them to become like Geryon, winged and red and brutally exposed to the world? No. Carson is a poet, not a rhetorician. And she is acting like a poet, who, in her own words, "prefers to conceal the truth beneath strata of ivory because this is the look of truth: layered and elusive" (*Husband* 37). She is purveying the box rather than opening it. To undo the latch, or not, is a choice that requires some deliberation—especially if Geryon is a preview of what waits inside.

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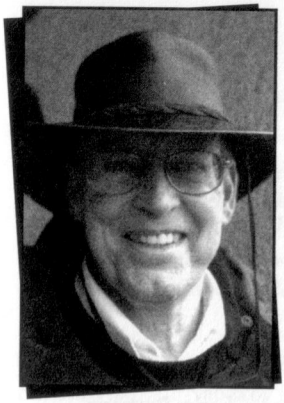

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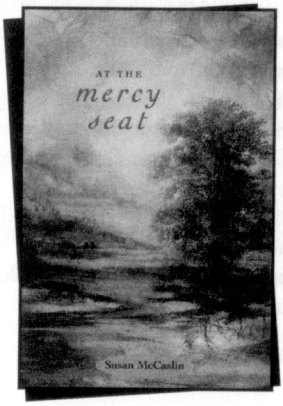


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