

MAKING STRANGER POETICS: A CANADIAN POETICS (PLURAL) INVENTORY

This is a restatement and extension of an earlier paper, 'Making Strange Poetics,' done for the Long Liners Conference on the Canadian Long Poem in 1984.¹ Since that *ad lib* where I ran Viktor Shklovsky's 'ostranenie'² and John Keats' 'negative capability',³ Reg Berry has written to me, as one of the contributing editors of *Open Letter* magazine, asking for my sense of 'postmodern' vis-a-vis the editorial stances displayed there. As well, over the past several years, I have had it in mind to collate some of the more used and useful statements on technique, form, and poetics documented in *Open Letter* and other literary magazines in Canada. This paper, then, is a preaction to a selection of some of the more important meditations and dodges on writing by Canadian writers.

And since, after considering Reg Berry's question, I, like many writers and artists,⁴ have found little function for the term 'postmodern' in the creative process, I will answer his concern more usefully, I hope, by displaying a more material toolbox of contemporary Canadian poetics—an applied and working poetics. The hardware for this paper comes primarily from literary magazines such as *Open Letter*, *Tessera*, and *Line*, major *topoi* of the thinking text in recent Canadian writing. The convenience of the terminology is my own and fragments soon enough, I hope.

The writers I refer to in this paper are distinctive and diverse. Their sentiments do not, necessarily, represent popular taste. However, as the editors of a very recent inaugural issue of new Vancouver writing point out:

any general statement about these writers ... carries the risk of misrepresentation ... most here resist those discursive practices which flirt with a personal lyric voice in order to offer the regenerative and critical functions of language as social form....

1 *Open Letter*, Sixth Series, Nos. 2-3 (Summer-Fall 1985), 213-21.

2 V. Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique,' *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 12.

3 *The Selected Letters of John Keats*, ed. Lionel Trilling (Doubleday, 1951), 103.

4 For a particularly useful survey see the 'Postmodern' issue of *Poetics Journal*, No. 7 (September 1987).

While tactics vary considerably ... they share the desire to challenge unity of voice and genre, and established codifications of class and gender.⁵

Krinopoeia

Many of you have heard Aritha van Herk's entertaining and performative critical presentations laced with her parodic and quickly-thawing story-telling tongue. She has adopted the term 'fictocriticism' for this melding of theory and writing, accurate enough to apply to her own critical writing. George Bowering's *Errata*⁶ might be more properly 'krinopoeic' in that the structure of that text assumes some singular elements of prose paragraph and prose poem composition for reflection and conjecture, ideas and philosophy, values. Brian Fawcett's two recent social ficto-critiques⁷ have adopted, partly in the name of 'creative non-fiction,' and partly as pure fiction, the double or reflective interlinear text such as in William Carlos Williams' *Kora in Hell*. My own ongoing series of poetic texts, *Music at the Heart of Thinking*,⁸ was initiated in response to a request from bpNichol to write something on 'notation' for *Open Letter*, as was Robert Kroetsch's poem, 'The Frankfurt *Hauptbahnhof*.'⁹ Kroetsch's own seminal poetic essay, 'For Play and Entrance: the Contemporary Canadian Long Poem,' collected along with his other essaying reinventions and beginnings in a special issue of *Open Letter*,¹⁰ remains a fulcrum of the fictocritical or poetic essay.

Such writings are instances of, as Charles Bernstein imagines, 'poetics as an invasion of the poetic into other realms: overflowing the bounds of genres, spilling into talk, essays, politics, philosophy.... That is, poetics as a sort of *applied poetic*, in the sense that engineering is a form of applied mathematics.'¹¹

Particularly, in recent years, has feminist poetics articulated this ficto-critical border crossing. *Tessera*, the most significant field for feminist writing theory in the eighties, brims with investigatory diaries, musings, theoms, wanderings of the *krino*, by such writers as Nicole

⁵ *West Coast Line*, No. 1 (Spring 1990), 11.

⁶ *Errata* (Red Deer College Press, 1988).

⁷ *Cambodia: A Book for People Who Find Television Too Slow* (Talonbooks, 1986) and *Public Eye: An Investigation into the Disappearance of the World* (Harper & Collins, 1990).

⁸ 1-69, published by Red Deer College Press, 1987.

⁹ *Open Letter*, Fifth Series, No. 7 (Spring 1984).

¹⁰ *Open Letter*, Fifth Series, No. 4 (Spring 1983).

¹¹ *Writing*, 23-24 (Fall-Winter 1989), 63.



Brossard, Daphne Marlatt, Gail Scott, Lola Lemire Tostevin, Yolande Villemaire, France Theoret, Smaro Kambourelli, and many others. For Betsy Warland, for example, the inquisition of the historical imagination leads to a 'new kind of theory—fiction/theory':

No mind and body split, the text embodying the viewing. Form being the frown line above your left brow, the dimple on your right cheek, the word made flesh, the tissue the text.¹²

As a kind of subversion of the *explication du text*, Erin Mouré includes a section at the back of her book *Furious* entitled, 'The Acts,' which are noted and referenced in the poems of the book. The tangible critical plane of the writer reenacting her text: 'To take the movement of the eye that is *seeing*, and use it to make the reading surface of the poem.'¹³

Even the most significant poem in Canada's short literary history, *The Martyrology*, is seen by its author as dealing 'with various perceived splits.' And one of these splits, bpNichol intends, 'is to deal with the split between the talking *about* writing, and writing....'¹⁴

But the intertext, finally, disappears and we're left with not just another critical fiction, but a lever into/onto, simply, next word, next step, next act. Action.

Body

For writers of my ilk, the disdained *Tish* writers and others, the embodiment of the word was breath, Charles Olson's projective verse breath, breathing my name with a sigh breath. For most of my generation of writers, working with language has always involved some indication or recognition of the body as a major component of composition.

For Nicole Brossard the word 'body' is aligned to her sense of the terms 'writing' and 'text.' It is, she tells us, 'a metaphor for energy, intensity, desire, pleasure, memory and awareness.'¹⁵ Further, 'writing is energy taking shape in language.' That is, the body takes shape in

¹² *Tessera*, No. 3, published by *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, No. 57 (1986), 93.

¹³ *Furious* (Anansi, 1988), 96.

¹⁴ 'In Ten^sion: Dialoguing with bp,' Steve McCaffery, *Tracing the Paths: reading & writing The Martyrology*, issued as No. 10 of *Line* (1988), 79.

¹⁵ In 'Corps D'Énergie/Rituels D'Écriture,' *The Politics of Poetic Form*, ed. Charles Bernstein (Roof, 1990), 73.

writing and, if you're a feminist writer you are obliged to exorcize the patriarchal sememes with 'rituals of presence':

Let us say that there are two major categories of ritual: ritual with a mask that applies to the story, the novella and the essay, to all writing in prose; and ritual without a mask that particularly concerns poetry. But in one category like the other, there are different practices of ritual: ritual with trembling, ritual with shock, ritual with sliding and ritual with breath. (10)

There's that 'breath' still very central to notions of composition. In fact, the poetics of Charles Olson's 'Projective Verse,' despite ongoing assault, are still at the forefront as, also, his description of the term 'proprioception' as 'the data of depth sensibility/the "body" of us as object which spontaneously or of its own order produces experience of, "depth" Viz SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES,' and later on in the same essay, 'the "body" itself as, by movement of its own tissues, giving the data of, depth.'¹⁶ Vancouver poets' mentor, Warren Tallman, has propagated Olson's notion of proprioception for many years;¹⁷ he now calls it 'Body English.'¹⁸ Recently Steve McCaffery has drawn attention to Olson's 'proprioception' and 'breath' through a Jean Baudrillard and Maurice Blanchot filter.¹⁹ So some sense of a synchronous and physical apprehension of the world via language continues to operate.

During the eighties, *Open Letter* profiled the most meaningful current aspects of 'proprioceptive' writing in a series of issues on 'notation.' The writers' statements provide a useful measure of contemporary attention. bpNichol and Frank Davey collaborated on 'The Prosody of Open Verse,' 'Notions of Image,' and 'The Book as a Unit of Composition.'²⁰ Nichol also added 'Some Sentences, Paragraphs & Punctuations On Sentences, Paragraphs & Punctuation' and a salutary synthesis of pataphysics entitled 'The Pata of Letter Feet, or, The English Written Character as a Medium of Poetry.'²¹ Other essays in

¹⁶ C. Olson, *Additional Prose* (Bolinis: Four Seasons Foundation, 1974), 17-18.

¹⁷ W. Tallman, 'Proprioception in Charles Olson's Poetry,' in a special Warren Tallman issue of *Open Letter*, Third Series, No. 6, 159-74.

¹⁸ Warren Tallman and Adeena Karasick, 'Neo-Modern is Coming On: A Dialogue,' *Line*, No. 14 (Fall 1989), 92.

¹⁹ 'Charles Olson's Art of Language: The Mayan Stratum in *Projective Verse*' (author's proof from 'a new magazine from SUNY Binghamton,' forthcoming).

²⁰ Fifth Series, No. 2 (Spring 1982), Fifth Series, No. 7 (Spring 1984) and Sixth Series, No. 1 (Spring 1985) respectively.

²¹ Fifth Series, No. 3 (Summer 1982) and Sixth Series, No. 1 (Spring 1985) respectively.

this series depicting specifically the body-breath-line-break methodology are 'The End of the Line' by George Bowering, 'The Measure of the Sentence' by Daphne Marlatt, 'Breaking & Entering (thoughts on line breaks)' by Dermis Cooley, and Lola Tostevin's 'The Pregnant Pause as Conceptual Space (or gimme a break)'.²²

Elsewhere, in a wonderful panel discussion with Daphne Marlatt and George Bowering, bpNichol talks about his sense of how 'syntax equals the body structure.' He talks about how we emotionally and psychologically armour the body against the limits of such things as low doorways and ceilings:

I discovered that the order in which I wrote my poems allows certain contents in and keeps other contents out, i.e., the syntax I choose, the way I tend to structure a piece, form *per se*, permits some contents and excludes others. So what I was trying to find, because that is part of a larger thing I've been working towards, is a way to increase my own formal range ... and therefore not merely be stuck, shall we say, by the physical limitation of my body at that point, i.e. just because I'm walking around with my shoulders up like this, if I can learn to relax I can see the world in a slightly different way and so on. If I can keep moving the structure of the poem around, hopefully I can encompass different realities and different ways of looking at things. In that sense, I've always seen a connection between the breathing I do and what comes out of me, the words I do, so syntax/body structure, sequence/body structure, but also the body of the poem.²³

Bowering and Marlatt extend the discussion by talking about the literal physicality of writing with pen and typewriter and then Marlatt refers to the 'orgasmic feeling' (the much-discussed poetics of closure) in the composition of her long poem *Steveston* in which she feels 'the syntax and body and landscape become totally interwoven.'²⁴

For Erin Mouré the 'Image of the whole physical body must always be there. Not truncated, not synechdoche, but the physical image speaking directly the entire body at once.'²⁵

Gail Scott, struggling with the composition of her novel *Heroine*: 'But I can't just sit down and write a novel about X. It all happens in the process of writing. I agree with Barthes that writing has to do with the body's pursuing *its own ideas*—for my body does not have the same ideas I do.'²⁶

²² Fifth Series, No. 3 (Summer 1982), Fifth Series, No. 3 (Summer 1982), Sixth Series, No. 7 (Spring 1987) and Sixth Series, No. 7 (Spring 1987) respectively.

²³ 'Syntax Equals the Body Structure,' bpNichol in conversation with Daphne Marlatt and George Bowering, *Line*, No. 6 (Fall 1985), 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁵ *Furious*, 85.

²⁶ 'Paragraphs Blowing on a Line,' *Spaces Like Stairs* (The Women's Press, 1989), 81.

And Daphne Marlatt, 'Musing with Mother tongue':

The beginning; language, a living body we enter at birth, sustains and contains us. it does not stand in place of anything else, it does not replace the bodies around us. placental. our flat land. our sea. it is both place (where we are situated) and body (that contains us), that body of language we speak, our mother tongue. it bears us as we are born in it, into cognition.²⁷

Politics and the Referent

Steve McCaffery's seminal notes on 'language-centered, dereferential writing' in a 1977 issue of *Open Letter* focused on what continues to be a fundamental concern:

... to center language inside itself; to show the essential subjectless-ness a text might be; to stress the disemotional and dereferential possibilities of language as fragmentary, yet intensely direct experience. Language then, for itself, but for the sake of us. To step outside of use. To counter-communicate in order ... to see what a hammer is when not in function.²⁸

McCaffery's indications oriented us to an underlying political writing stance in the U.S. and in Canada. Nicole Brossard had for years undertaken a discourse intentionally sighted to intervene on 'Mr.' Language, the Catholic church, the Canadian Confederation and the literary establishment:

So all together those three realities set up for me a social and literary field that I could oppose and later on transgress and subvert. Very early my poetry was abstract, syntactically nonconventional; desire with its erotic drives had a great part in it. Part of what I was writing was consciously political at least at the level of intention. Let's say my 'basic intention' was to make trouble. To be a troublemaker in regard to language but also with values of my own embodied by a writing practice that was ludic (playing with words), experimental (trying to understand processes of writing), and exploratory (searching). You see, it brings us back to my values: exploration (which provides for renewal of information and knowledge), intelligence (which provides the ability to process things), and pleasure (which provides for energy and desire).²⁹

Brossard is undoubtedly the most political writer in what used to be Canada and the forum for tactical intervention and the poetics of the potent she has voiced access to continues to cultivate possibility for not only a large and powerful feminist writing constituency but for writers seeking to sever perpetual sameness in any sense.

²⁷ 'Musing With Mother tongue,' *Room of One's Own*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1984), 53.

²⁸ 'The Death of the Subject: The Implications of Counter-communication in Recent Language-Centered Writing,' *Open Letter*, Third Series, No. 7 (Summer 1977), 61.

²⁹ 'Poetic Politics,' 77.

This is a debate, an argument, of course. Problems of meaning, aboutness, clarity, intellectualism. For some, now, a bit of a conundrum. A recent statement by Andrew Wreggitt discusses the snag:

So there's a problem here. I refuse to write things that are incomprehensible and don't touch people on anything more than an 'isn't-that-clever' level. At the same time, there's no point in me writing the same book over and over. Invoking closure on myself. There's something else I want to get at in my poetry but I don't know exactly what it is or how I'm going to do it. There's just a feeling floating back there.... So what am I gonna do? I dunno. I don't know.³⁰

Negative capability, *eh!* The writer knowing how to not know.

A large part of this debate gets formally centred on new narrative techniques, parafictions, prose-poems, and so forth; forms that Geoff Hancock aligns to 'New Directions in Fiction and Physics.'³¹ A more muffled kind of rhetoric hovers around what Doug Barbour incisively locates as 'lyric/anti-lyric.'³² And in a recent special issue of *Ellipse*³³ on 'New Love Poetry' edited by Louise Dupré and Sharon Thesen, Michel Beaulieu notices, already in 1980, 'the strong comeback of the *I*, of lyricism, of the *readable*, of a vocabulary that some writers, despite the main trends that flourished in the past ten years, had never abandoned during that time.'

The politics of the referent, and of the 'I', and certainly now in unbundling Canada's 90s, the 'I'dentity, continues to buffer the text.

Trans=geo=ethno=poetics

By now in this survey, particularly with the subsuming power of the more apparent 'politics of reputation' (really, still, a politics of reference) by those "official" arbiters of taste, the anthologies and their editors,³⁴ the toolbox lies dispersed in a scatter and a frenzy of needs. The more urgent poetics and politics associated with fictocriticism, the body, and the referent become sharp fragments of focus and activity. So let me fabricate a term like 'trans=geo=ethno=poetics' as, finally, a convenient way to end with a bridge rather than a box.

³⁰ 'The Apple Tree Goes Arga Warga or The Garden of Bloody Eden,' in *Event*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring 1990), 27.

³¹ *Singularities: Fragments, Parafictions, Prose Poems—New Directions in Fiction and Physics*, ed. Geoff Hancock (Black Moss Press, 1990).

³² 'Lyric/Anti-Lyric: Some Notes About a Concept,' in *Line*, No. 3 (Spring 1984).

³³ No. 39, 1988.

³⁴ bpNichol, *American Book Review* (May-June 1988), 6-7.

Some tropism towards translation, transcreation seems always operative within the Canadian poetic. *Open Letter* has documented much of the dialogue of the Toronto Research Group (bpNichol and Steve McCaffery) on modes of translation, one of which underlies bpNichol's progenitive series 'Translating Translating Apollinaire.'³⁵ Colin Browne edited an issue of *Ellipse* (Nos. 29-30, 1982) devoted to the serial translation of six poets. *Tessera* has focused on the bilinguality of Lola Lemire Tostevin's writing (Volume 6, Spring 1989). The translational/transcreative process behaves as a part of another term, the 'potent,' described by George Bowering as recently as in this spring's *Capilano Review* as that which 'resides in ... the possible combinations and recombinations of the basic materials of ... language,'³⁶ and fingered earlier by Daphne Marlatt in her notes to her translation of Tostevin's poem in the above-mentioned *Tessera*:

in translating a poem that so intensively works the language it seems already a translation of that original struggle between intent and language drift, the translation (becomes) process embeds metatranslation while the target language not wanting to replace/consume the resonance of the source language oscillates in potential conversation with it.

Translation, then; transcreation; not distanced from the source but movement *to* the source.

Sometimes the source is the *geo*, place. In an expansive review of eleven books, Andy Sukanaski seeks to locate his coordinates of a northern *imago mundi*, 'Out of Naryan to bifrost/the word arresting entropy.'³⁷ In a philosophical meandering on Robert Kroetsch's *Field Notes*, Ed Dyck zeroes in on 'recursion' as the power of place in poetry. 'Place is a nest of words,' he says. 'When the poet builds his nest he creates place, he does not define it. The world, paradoxically, is laid-in-place, not the other way around. An immediate corollary, of course, is that the poet lays the egg.'³⁸ Rudy Wiebe investigates the areal reality of the north in his recent book, *Playing Dead*. Aritha van Herk calls her next book, *Places Far From Ellsemere*,³⁹ a 'geografictione.'

And the *geo* isn't only a prairie concern. There's west and east. Bowering seeking to describe 'the little shrinking strands of the west

³⁵ A series of generative translations envisioned as a 'book of research.' Some of this has been published in *Translating Translating Apollinaire* (Membrane Press, 1979).

³⁶ 'The Power is There,' Series 2, No. 2 (Spring 1990), 101-02.

³⁷ *Brick*, 14 (Winter 1982).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 20-23.

³⁹ Red Deer College Press, 1990.

that are still left ... usually called the last of something.⁴⁰ Gail Scott imaging the Québécois milieu: 'For regardless of the language we speak, the culture we live in, we always have the double sense of both belonging and being excluded.... Standing on the outside—the better, perhaps, to create.'⁴¹

And, finally, recent margins of the native and ethnic are also standing on the outside, creating, or trying to. People of colour, particularly women, are vocalizing their need for languages which are their own. The Carribean English voice is strong with writers like Dionne Brand, Marlene Nourbese Philip and Claire Harris. Asian-Canadian writers such as Jim Wong-Chu, Sky Lee, Roy Miki, Gerry Shikatani and myself, seek to redress and rewrite the apple of John A. MacDonald's eye. Too bad his 'apple' hasn't windfallen and rotted sooner. Myrna Kostash, for example, complains of the bitter taste:

I had the very odd experience of finding myself entered in the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* as 'Kostash, Myrna, See; Ukrainian Writing.' Odd, because it seems to me that, over some 20 years of writing, I have made a contribution not just as an ethnic but as a woman/feminist, an Albertan, a Canadian, a non-fictionist, organization activist, teacher—why should the 'Ukrainian' component of all this activity be the one to characterize me? Odd, too, in that I have no idea what 'Ukrainian writing' is supposed to mean in my case; I write only in English and address an English-speaking audience. What on earth does it take to become a Canadian writer, a contributor to and practitioner of CanLit, if not books written in Canada by a Canadian for Canadians? Could it be that, given my origins outside the Anglo-Celtic and Franco founding nations, I shall *never* be considered to belong because I wasn't there at the beginning when the naming took place? That CanLit is a category and a practice hijacked and held captive by a very exclusive gang of men and women who all come from the right side of the tracks?

Kostash then goes on to argue for the position of the 'potent' as she rejects the attempts at 'assimilation' from the multicultural right side of the tracks. The exclusion, she points out,

... is painful and exciting, for it is in those 'interstices' of cultures that we have become writers. In other words, we may not wish to belong to the club. We may wish to live with tension and distress. We may wish to remind ourselves, over and over, that we live on the wrong side of the tracks, on the edge of town.⁴²

When Elijah Harper beached Meech the agitated pertinence of such aboriginal voices as Lee Maracle, Jeanette Armstrong, Daniel David Moses, and Lenore Keeshig Tobias hum with baited breath and new

⁴⁰ 'Western Writing,' *Brick*, 27 (Spring 1986), 17-18.

⁴¹ 'Virginia and Colette on the outside looking in,' *Brick*, 28 (Fall 1986), 30-34.

⁴² 'Multiculturalism and the Canadian Writer,' unpublished.

words on the periphery. Listen to this recent piece of *krinopoeia* by Marie Baker entitled 'Raced Out to Write this Up.'⁴³

I often race to write I write about race why do I write about race I must erase all trace of my race I am an eraser abrasive bracing myself embracing

it is classic to want to write about class not low class but up the nose class I know I am classy brassy crass ass of a clash comes when I move up a rung

we are different skins different bins for brown rice and white rice not even a container of wild rice you know what they do when you are white and not rich poverty counts big when you count the cost of a caste a colourful past

drunk as a skunk he danced at the Leuret Hotel whatfor no not really says he's not writing because they won't publish his books he does a number for a book he hugged me like I was his old Tibetan guru out on the dancefloor teleporting again

white racists notice colour which they don't have you might be off-white a bone white a cream white alabaster white dingy white if you don't wash often enough nevermind a non-bleached white white with pinkish undertone peaches and cream white with freckles who is colour blind I write my black ink on white paper I white out write out my colour lighten up

full of self I saw old whitey again but he wanted to be a part of a pure religion not like ours not that he was a white racist but a pure racist in his heart which had not colour but our colour red red mind you a few white corpuscles but compared to the red they were a minority not invisible

so few of me yet I still write not for the white audience but the colour of their response to my underclassy class the flash of their fit to kill me why race away to the finish when I cross the finish line will it be white will I be red from running hot and cold touch me not less I am to be divided against my self who is both red and white but not a shade of pink maybe a beige pink blushed flush off white right I colour my winning everytime I am still in the red not the black blackened red reddened black but what about black 'n blue green at the gills yellow belly but what about the whitish frightish part I put it behind behind me when I need to say my piece about togetherness that we must breed not by ourselves but with everyone out in the world who will listen hey I'm a half a half breed a mixed bag breed bread and butter bred my wholegrain

bannock will taste as good to me even if I smear on red jam sink my white teeth down into it down the red hatch to the black hole that is behind it all the whole black of me the shore backing up behind me the sore holy part of me which is the blackest darkest most coloured most non-Indian, non-white slice of me bred to wonder

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⁴³ In *Secrets From The Orange Couch*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (April 1990).