

KIT DOBSON

## Experiments in Disaster: Recent Canadian Poetics

WHEN I WAS ASKED TO WRITE this omnibus review of some of the poetry that *The Dalhousie Review* had received over the past year, I was immediately reminded of the reviews written by Northrop Frye throughout the 1950s for the *University of Toronto Quarterly's* "Letters in Canada" issues. Those reviews, collected in *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1995), constitute a remarkable documentation of the development of Canadian poetry over a key decade, and demonstrate Frye's shifting opinion of important poets who came to prominence in the period, like Irving Layton (about whom Frye is initially suspicious, but by whom he is later won over, with a few reservations about what Frye perceives as Layton's showmanship). Frye's task, of reviewing all of the poetry that came his way each year, was a formidable one, one that he accomplished while also working on *The Anatomy of Criticism*, the book that would largely define his reception. It was a task that E.K. Brown had carried out before Frye, and that has continued since Frye, but his contributions have been seen as particularly noteworthy for their even-handed critiques of writers and his strong sense of decorum. Now any actual comparison to Frye—beyond the formal level of the task at hand—would be folly. I make no claims to the comprehensiveness of his reviews (indeed, I am unable to mention all of the books that were read for this piece). But there are, however, lessons to be learned. Linda Hutcheon observes, in her introduction to the second edition of *The Bush Garden*, that Frye "never hid the criteria for his evaluations" (xv), while Frye himself notes, in his final review in 1959, that although he evaluates poetry on his own terms, "it is no part of the reviewer's task to tell the poet how to write or how he should have written" (126). Although there is some tension between maintaining evaluative criteria and avoiding prescriptive reviews, the advice is, on both counts, sage.

Recent Canadian poetry is, perhaps, less concerned with defining what it means to be Canadian in today's world—a greater concern in Frye's reviews—and seems to be more interested in how we live in the world. In

the poetry received, there is an abiding focus upon ecology, upon the earth, and upon the imminence of environmental collapse. This focus is one that moves towards greater and greater poetic experiment. If I am to be clear about my own evaluative criteria, it is this latter work, work that pushes the boundaries of writing, of the book, and, ultimately, of the self, that strikes me as promising the greatest depth and intellectual engagement, although there are many excellent works of all sorts being produced in Canada today. Many strong books consist of meditative reflections about the crisis-wracked world in which we live, like A.F. Moritz's *The Sentinel*, which was short-listed for the Governor General's Award. Moritz writes of "the desolating place: white weeds, / white ground baked into sharp lumps and ridges, / a dead sapling, bushes crisp with thirst" (40), a tired world in which, as the title poem suggests, "it is hoped, it is to be hoped / there is nothing to see" (45). But a great deal is to be seen and lamented by the book's observant speaker in this strong book, just as it does in the remarkably novelistic book *Jeremiah, Ohio* by Adam Sol. This book, featuring odd-ball protagonists Jeremiah and Bruce, traces its way across the United States as Bruce ferries the prophet-like Jeremiah from stop to stop. At each stop Jeremiah decries the follies of the world to the locals, but he is, himself, a deeply scarred character, one who is, in the course of the book, "seen cursing dumpsters / in Lynchburg, scolding billboards / and McDonald's customers / even as far as Peebles" (8). "Everyone must change or no one will be saved" (39), Jeremiah rants in the poem "Aftermath," and argues, in the poem "Jeremiah at the All Saints Cathedral, Youngstown," that

We must cleanse the city of its corruption manacles,  
its sadness and its fastfood chains.  
We must let loose the Hun, the drum, and the One. (47)

Jeremiah's defeat seems certain, and the damnation of the world along with it, but the stylistically excellent journey provides a strong indictment along the way.

Similarly, Glen Downie's *Loyalty Management* displays a sensitivity to the world in its excoriation of human folly: "we encourage screaming in the houses / of parliament," the poem "Door-to-door" states:

to ask why  
welfare why day-care why one-legged  
cancer patients why not the military why not  
the banks why our only hope should be to consume  
our way out of recession & into planetary devastation it's

clear cut if we don't cut out clear-cutting no one will  
 spot the spotted owl soon we'll be unspotting spotted  
 owls & spotting only upspotted owls in uncleared spots &  
 will the bottom line be uppermost in your mind ... (36)

These poems weave a critique of the human order into considerations of the everyday that is highly successful, as does Sachiko Murakami's pointed book *The Invisibility Exhibit*, a book that explores Vancouver's downtown eastside (and beyond) and the invisibility of its lost women. In this Governor-General's Award-shortlisted book, imagery of birds is used to devastating effect, as in the poem "Exhibit B (Bone)," where readers are told that

From a quiet, picked clean carcass  
 below an eagle's nest, all hid among the salal,  
 I pulled a vertebra from its uneasy line.  
 Rot clung to it. (25)

The reading is uncomfortable. What sort of vertebra does the speaker find? Readers are left to wonder about this intersection between the human and the natural. The frequent commodification of the natural world—and Canada's Indigenous peoples—is later highlighted in the sardonic prose poem "Longhouse":

Pose with Raven. Clap along to piped-in ceremonial songs about Raven. This place is chock-a-block with stories Raven wasn't supposed to tell. Raven coaxed the first men from the clamshell, and now Raven is manning the till. Raven Hour on the CBC. Let Raven entertain you! Then slip Raven a fiver after the show. Buy a stuffed Raven. Eat choco-Ravens. Raven-kebabs. Ravensicles. Black Raven Energy Drink. Let Raven pinch the wife's ass. When you sleep with her tonight, she will lie back with Raven in her belly and think of Raven. (78)

The human desire to reduce the world to a commodity is tongue-in-cheek, and, it seems, impermanent: Raven's current trendiness will surely dissipate, as will humankind, and the world will go about its business.

This concern with ecology and its commodification is present in much writing that is best described as lyrical poetry. Lyrical poetry continues to be a dominant mode in Canadian letters. Historically, the lyric referred to a short poem designed to express a personal feeling. It tended to have a defined form (think of a sonnet or ballad). With the disruption and destruction of form that arrived via modernism and then postmodernism in the twentieth century, however, poetry has been largely freed from such constraints

and has, as a result, been able to move in remarkable new directions, while still making use of form, meter, and rhythm in important ways. What this has done to lyric poetry, however, is uncertain. Some of the most radical Canadian poets of the century fought against the monological “I” speaker of the lyric; bpNichol is one of the key examples. Nichol’s diverse formal experiments have a great deal to do with the destruction of the lyric, and, in that sense, display as strong a continuity with Petrarch and Shakespeare as do today’s open-form lyrical writers, many of whom are concerned with the expression of personal reflections and observations. This lyric writing, in other words, is pushed towards reflexivity, and, when successful, challenges its own composition.

Frye addressed—in the masculine language of his era—his perception of the accomplished lyric poet in his review in 1953 (from *The Bush Garden*): as a mature poet, “a mysterious but unmistakable ring of authority begins to come into his writing, and simultaneously the texture simplifies, meaning and imagery become transparent, and the poetry becomes a pleasure” (23). Although Frye’s description of the maturation of a lyric poet is prescriptive, many of the most pleasurable and provocative poets display continuities with his schema. Though I would hesitate to be quite so definitive, such very conscious, enjoyable verse is evident in Lionel Kearns’ book *A Few Words Will Do*. Kearns is a complicated writer who sometimes shows a lyrical streak, as in the poem “Trophy,” which recounts a speaker’s shooting a grouse, but failing to take its mate as well, which his father advises. When the speaker is unable to get a shot in, he tells us how

... we left  
with the knowledge that I was now  
a small source of sorrow in this world,  
and my father, who was teaching me, said nothing. (24)

The silence of the father here, as well as the speaker’s awareness of how humankind—in this case he himself—is implicated in the sorrow of the world, suggest a consciousness of both the weight of predecessors and existence. Kearns’ frequently experimental and visual pieces, similarly, validate these considerations.

Among the strongest of the more purely lyrical books of poems is R.M. Vaughan’s *Troubled*, an explicitly autobiographical book about the poet’s transgressive relationship with his therapist. As this at-times tortured book makes abundantly clear through its skillfull composition and brilliant execution by Coach House Books, human relationships are frail things, especially when power comes into play. Vaughan’s sheer vulnerability as

numbness and panic set in over this affair gone wrong—he describes himself as “a spectre, a film, gauze and netting” (56)—makes this a painfully readable performance. Such vulnerability also characterizes the death-obsessed poems in Susan Stenson’s *My mother agrees with the dead*. Figures of death loom constantly in this book, and our own mortality is continually evoked. But these fears are all too human, as the poem “Wooden Chair” demonstrates metonymically:

Never questions itself.  
Never doubts. . . .

Mother’s the one who runs  
her hands over the spindles

wonders  
will it hold  
will it hold. (64)

If anxiety over failure and death are human failings, so too is human bravado, as Margo Button demonstrates in her book *Heron Cliff*, where the book opens in its title poem by recounting how

Sixteen years ago we dreamed a house,  
blasted granite, bulldozed earth, chain-sawed  
Garry oaks and broadleaf maples,  
drove off the kingfishers and flickers,  
buried the wild lilies in a septic field,  
altered the water table and killed  
three old Douglas firs. (13)

As the book progresses, the house becomes impossible to inhabit, as the speaker’s son commits suicide there, while global strife provides a backdrop of grief that moves towards a new sense of joy. Button’s keen sense of rhythm and vision propel this book to its successes.

A number of lyrical collections spur similar reflections on human folly—or else humankind’s glad subordination to the broader world. Elise Partridge’s accomplished volume *Chameleon Hours* announces an unexpected beauty when it describes, in the poem “World War II Watchtower,” a

Squat concrete turret  
furnished with gray pebbles  
white-splattered by gulls. (43)

Similarly, Ian Roy's *Red Bird* finds joy, in the poem "Packing Plant," in how

The floor of the fish packing plant  
glistened with the stringy intestines  
of cod and mackerel, of flounder and salmon....  
it looked kind of beautiful  
in the artificial light:  
all those colours, glistening. (11)

And Adam Getty's excellent book *Repose*, while similarly capturing elements of human construction and the hard work of physical labour, questions such sentiments. While there is a poetics to labour in these poems, there is also a great deal of agitation against mismanagement, against exploitation gone rife. The title poem reveals a speaker who is

... a red-breasted robin that's never  
left the latticework of limbs and leaves  
for the deepening sky and now is severed  
by consuming fire and a thick corrupting sleeve  
of bitter smoke, smoked out as though a beetle  
had emerged from dark wood thrown on a rising fire. (53)

Getty's well-composed book examines the conditions of labour, of the human interaction with the world, and finds in them a world that is poetic, yet sorely lacking the self-awareness that would give it a strong sense of equity, of ecology, and of justice.

One of the tenets that has driven ecological criticism in recent years is that human beings require an abdication of the ego in order to engage the world. Such a move away from the self and into the world enables a reconceptualization of notions of being, as well as a more profound respect for ecology, a move towards thinking that would challenge value systems that place human society above the remainder of the world. On a poetic level, such a concern pushes the individual poet away from a lyric stance and towards a process of letting go of the self, of self-interest. Such a poetic practice is established in Canada, in important poets like Don McKay and Jan Zwicky, and is apparent in *The Crisp Day Closing on My Hand*, the recent selected poems from M. Travis Lane. For Lane, in a poem like "Hills," readers are invited to imagine how once "the trees were word enough, the open poem, / the wilderness" (37). Lane's poetic trajectory is representatively charted in this selection, from earlier personal poetry to the hortatory, as in

the 2001 poem “Strive for a Deep Stillness”:

Strive for a deep stillness  
 such as stars  
 reflected from a glassy lake  
 speak in its mirror,  
 the motionless  
 deep fathoms of the mountain  
 with its white-locked head  
 patient beyond all terror like the dark ... (59)

Excellentlly selected and edited by Jeannette Lynes for the Laurier Poetry Series, this tidy text renders Lane’s oeuvre accessible to new readers. A further note on Lynes is also in order, as her own book *It’s Hard Being Queen: The Dusty Springfield Poems* constitutes another strong contribution (and a demonstration of the sort of very good books being published by newly established Freehand Books). It is a tight, focused collection, taking as its subject another artist, as do the similarly worthy collections *Full Depth: The Raymond Knister Poems* by Micheline Maylor and *Kahlo: The World Split Open* by Linda Frank. All three books take as their focus a mythologized cultural figure, and versify the gaps between history, fiction, art, and life. Mark Goldstein performs something similar, yet jarringly alien, in *After Rilke: To Forget You Sang*, a series of translations / transformations of Rilke’s German into English in a manner comparable to Jack Spicer’s breakthrough book *After Lorca*. A short, taut book, it is an excellent example of the experimental work being produced by BookThug in Toronto.

I would, however, like to return to Lane and the poetics of ego abandonment, which are driven to new heights in Karen Houle’s (perhaps paradoxically personal) brilliant second collection *during*. As much as humankind has commodified the world, humans become part of the world anew when we realize that, as in Houle’s opening poem “First, During,” “before insides . . . we were mud seams. A dust-drawn stick-tip rut / blown-shut; a callous thickening along the line of effort” (9). The poem continues:

As there is no marker in us by nature,  
 nor spare part to smelt down—

No twig snap.  
 No breadcrumb,  
 no art of leaving things behind:

We went in a circle while going in a line. (9)

Houle's book, marvelously produced to the high standards typical of its publisher, Gaspereau Press, is divided into four sections, or conjugations: during, duration, endure, durable. The interpenetration of perception and language demonstrate a poet conducting deeply insightful experiments upon the mind and the world. Gil McElroy's *Last Scattering Surfaces*, similarly, recognizes this interpenetration. The poem "Lodestones" finds a speaker suggesting the following:

I  
am as  
clever as bark, as  
cunning as wheat. (18)

Readers have to acknowledge the truth of such an observation; bark is, indeed, as clever as a human, and wheat is as cunning. Think about it. The concepts of human cleverness and cunning, in their arbitrariness, fall apart upon such examination, as does a scientific concept like gravity in the poem "Doppler Whistles":

In the  
next spotlight  
all that is gravity  
exerts, external  
to the parable. (105)

As the limits of our mediated consciousnesses are reached, concepts and understandings collapse, leading to new perceptions that reconfigure the world and our place within it.

Eco-poetic works, in their move towards an abandonment of the self, reach sites of experimentation that are among the most radical in recent poetry. Perhaps the two most noteworthy titles in this respect are those published by Meredith Quartermain in 2008. In the first of these, *Matter*, Quartermain explodes notions of taxonomy and classification. "Humans grasp at unknowns," she writes in the final section, "Matter's Mind," "with laws and classes" (68) and with "Names—the instruments of thought—its knives and forks—its telescopes, microscopes, backhoes, cranes" (64). Names are utterly insufficient and, worse, violent, limiting our sense of the world and our ability to situate ourselves adequately within it. As Quartermain asks in the poem "Matter 26: Do Sparrows Ask":



Why crusty crabs walk sideways  
 to me, but to them straight ahead  
 careless that their jaws, according to Man,  
 are made of legs....  
 Do we know what sparrows ask?  
 Do we know how to think of that?  
 How fungus sings to the trunk of a fir,  
 how lichen talks to its rocks, the seaweed of the sea? (58)

Of course not—and therein lies humankind’s undoing. The poems of *Matter* are prescient, daring, and push readers to unthink the things that they think even as they read. Similarly, the prose poems of Quartermain’s *Nightmarker* explore humankind as, itself, a sprawling city of impulses. This exploration is interspersed with the observations of Geo, a figure that the book establishes as a sort of earth-Geist. Geo’s discussions of humans are both damning and trenchant, as in “Discovery at Sea 3”:

Humans run bolt-wrenches rapid fire and punch barrels of oil. How do they know they are Human? and not animal as Raccoon? Operating the Main Frame with surgical strikes, then unscrewing their masks for transplants. (17)

Or, again, in “Discovery at Sea 17”:

Gleaming gold Humanus, builder of pyramids, cathedrals, palaces, who are you? What are you? What are you standing on? What are your mud-blocks to a dinosaur, a sequoia, an ocean, a forest? What do you know, what can you say to match ... hurricanes ... tectonic upheavals. Why are you here. (79)

Quartermain’s experiments in undoing the knot of human understanding forces us to ask questions like “what could Canada mean to Pangaea?” (in the poem “Canada Day,” 61), undercutting our sense of ourselves as animals imbued with anything to set us apart from the remainder of infinity.

The liminality of the human, of human understanding enters into the experimental poetry of other writers, like Amanda Earl, in *Welcome to Earth: poem for alien(s)* and Kate Eichhorn’s *Fond*. But, as Clint Burnham suggests in “super proximity chairs med pep dunk trunk,” from the book *Rental Van*, “meaning comes back into the poem” (11). Burnham’s book—a combination of prose poems, visual poems, and open-form rock-outs—trips along the edges of meaning, as do the poems from Canada’s champion of surrealism, Stuart Ross. Ross’ 2007 book *I Cut My Finger* and his 2008 book

*Dead Cars in Managua* hover at the borders of sense and meaninglessness, injecting a surrealist strain through writing exercises like automatic writing and response writing, in which one composes a poem while another poet's work is being read aloud. Aspects of narrative emerge as the poet speaks in snatches of the death of family members, but these books are most notable for their open, flowing sense that our humdrum everyday perceptions need a sharp kick. Stuart Ross is that kick.

A call to abandon the self and to abandon our perception moves, in its logical conclusion, from experimentalism to a rejection of the book itself, and a rejection, in the final instance, of poetry. It is, therefore, a good thing that poetry is not rational, since an experimental logic would lead to its own demise. "Reason," Karen Houle states in a line from *during*, "used to have no reason" (10). But that logic or reason is a healthy reminder that the blurry lines of Canadian poetics also move beyond the book, to performance modes, to sound poetry, to online disruptions. Poetry may have small audiences in Canada—and elsewhere—but there are many devoted followers of this writing, and with good reason. There is a great deal of work that continues to push the borders and boundaries of language, of meaning, and of our understandings of what the earth means during a time of radical ecological uncertainty.

*After Rilke: To Forget You Sang.* By Mark Goldstein. Toronto: BookThug, 2008. 48 pages. \$12.00.

*Chameleon Hours.* By Elise Partridge. Toronto: Anansi, 2008. 112 pages. \$18.95.

*The Crisp Day Closing on My Hand: The Poetry of M. Travis Lane.* By M. Travis Lane. Ed. Jeannette Lynes. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2007. 82 pages. \$14.95.

*Dead Cars in Managua.* By Stuart Ross. Montreal: DC Books, 2008. 104 pages. \$16.95.

*During.* By Karen Houle. Kentville: Gaspereau, 2008. 105 pages. \$19.95.

*A Few Words Will Do.* By Lionel Kearns. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2007. 128 pages. \$16.95.

*Fond.* By Kate Eichhorn. Toronto: BookThug, 2008. 80 pages. \$20.00.

*Full Depth: The Raymond Knister Poems.* By Micheline Maylor. Hamilton: Wolsak & Wynn, 2007. 86 pages. \$17.00.

*Heron Cliff.* By Margo Button. Winnipeg: Signature, 2007. 96 pages. \$14.95.

- I Cut My Finger.* By Stuart Ross. Vancouver: Anvil, 2007. 80 pages. \$15.00.
- The Invisibility Exhibit.* By Sachiko Murakami. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2008. 84 pages. \$15.95.
- It's Hard Being Queen: The Dusty Springfield Poems.* By Jeannette Lynes. Calgary: Freehand, 2008. 96 pages. \$16.95.
- Jeremiah, Ohio.* By Adam Sol. Toronto: Anansi, 2008. 112 pages. \$18.95.
- Kablo: The World Split Open.* By Linda Frank. Ottawa: BuschekBooks, 2008. 101 pages. \$17.50.
- Last Scattering Surfaces.* By Gil McElroy. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2007. 128 pages. \$16.95.
- Loyalty Management.* By Glen Downie. Hamilton: Wolsak & Wynn, 2007. 120 pages. \$17.00.
- Matter.* By Meredith Quartermain. Toronto: BookThug, 2008. 72 pages. \$20.00.
- My mother agrees with the dead.* By Susan Stenson. Hamilton: Wolsak & Wynn, 2007. 72 pages. \$17.00.
- Nightmarker.* By Meredith Quartermain. Edmonton: NeWest, 2008. 112 pages. \$14.95.
- Red Bird.* By Ian Roy. Ottawa: BuschekBooks, 2007. 72 pages. \$15.00.
- Rental Van.* By Clint Burnham. Vancouver: Anvil, 2007. 96 pages. \$16.00.
- Repose.* By Adam Getty. Gibsons: Nightwood, 2008. 88 pages. \$16.95.
- The Sentinel.* By A.F. Moritz. Toronto: Anansi 2008. 112 pages. \$18.95.
- Troubled.* By R.M. Vaughan. Toronto: Coach House, 2008. 88 pages. \$16.95.
- Welcome to Earth: poem for alien(s).* By Amanda Earl. Toronto: BookThug, 2008. 18 pages. \$10.00.