

EDITORIAL

“When pushed to the wall, art is too slow.”

—Lisa Robertson, *Rousseau’s Boat*

LAST WEEKEND *THE GLOBE AND MAIL* ran an article about the consequences of widespread and deepening government funding cuts to Canadian universities (“Canadian Universities Feel the Squeeze of Spending Cuts,” 10 March 2013). All the university presidents interviewed stressed the difficult realities of job cuts, swelling course sizes, diminished student services, and program closures. Some went further, warning of the need for “bigger structural changes.” One suggested that we “use the crisis as a way of actually reinvesting our resources in what we do best,” while acknowledging that this means closing programs “where we don’t have excellence.” So the question for those of us interested in the future of higher education in Canada is, how is excellence defined? Because universities and colleges are looking to offset funding cuts by soliciting private donors, corporate sponsors and public-private partnerships, excellence is increasingly a matter of marketability, of our ability to re-orient the research we do, the courses we teach, and, indeed, the way we think so that—and here I borrow a phrase used in another recent *Globe* article—we may be “better accommodated to the business character of the nation” (“Are Universities Ready for a Paradigm Shift?” 11 March 2013). Some of you will see this as good sense. Others may dream of driving stakes through the hearts of those who encourage you to understand citizens as stakeholders, students as consumers, and knowledge as information. In the interest of feigning objectivity, I won’t tell you my own feelings on this, but I will say that, as someone who is committed to teaching people about the wisdom, beauty and prescience of poetry, I am deeply worried about the corporatization of Canadian universities.

As the Canadian poet Lisa Robertson argues, “When pushed to the wall, art is too slow.” Its meanings are difficult to articulate and its value is hard to quantify. This matters because government bodies that support the arts (or don’t) and the university administrators who staff arts-related

programming (or don't) increasingly are interested in using "knowledge mobilization" plans and quantifiable "learning outcomes" to measure excellence. And so, those who value the arts need to become better at explaining the importance of creative work. Here, Percy Bysshe Shelley might help us. In his 1821 essay, "A Defence of Poetry," Shelley argued that "poets ... are not only the authors of language and of music, of dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting; they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society." He taught us that those who commit themselves to the beautiful and surprising use of language are the creators and defenders of our moral and civil codes because, in their close attention to language's inventiveness, they speak to and for "the before unapprehended relations of things."

Such is the work of the poets and writers represented in this issue. Looking back to the *Iliad*, Kim Trainor's "Not Gorgythian Struck by an Arrow" reminds us of the unexpected tenderness in Homer's comparison of the hanging head of a slain warrior to "a swollen poppy after spring rains" by redeploing his simile to evoke the comfort of a fuzz-headed and "milk-drunk" newborn curled against its mother. In "To Cow" Swati Rana celebrates the "genial" bovine beauty of she who wears grass hanging from her lower lip "like an endearment." In "Time and Fevers Burn Away Individual Beauty" Shane Neilson draws on his own experience as a doctor and parent to ask what good is poetry to a grieving parent. Neilson goes some way towards answering his own question with "Fast," a poem that explores what it is to care for a seriously ill child; his startling syntax and radical compression evoke the very experience of the illness it describes. In all these cases we learn something of "the before unapprehended relations of things." And that, I suggest, is a measure of excellence.

Carrie Dawson
Editor