Premonition of a future line we will be writing:
Politics, Language and Identity in Experimental English Canadian Poetry


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For Mom and Dad

For encouraging me to read and understanding when I tilt at windmills.


For Amanda

Six long years and i'm still alive

It's all for you.

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# Introduction

This problem of identity in Canadian letters has been lurking in the background since the beginning of Canadian literature. In the nineteenth century calls for a Canadian literature, where Thomas D'Arcy McGee's proclaimation that "Every country, every nationality, every people, must create and foster a National Literature, if it is their wish to preserve a distinct individuality from other nations… [else] the distinctive character and features of a people must disappear" (43) is echoed by Edward Hartley Dewart's assertion "A national literature is an essential element in the formation of a national character" (ix) there is distinct understanding of the impact of a national literature on the formation of a national character, but an absence of definition of what this character is. Canadians needed to be afforded the opportunity to write their own books and needed to be protected from British and American literature—something D'Arcy McGee as a former member of Young Ireland would have been acutely attuned to—in order that the domestic literature would have a chance to take root and flower, but what that domestic literature would look like and what it would reflect in the Canadian character is conspicuously absent. The result, as illustrated by Dewart's *Selections from Canadian Poets*, is a distinctly colonial poetry that has more to do with the mind and character of the motherland than it does with something that can be realistically labeled as Canadian. The problem that D'Arcy McGee and Dewart and countless others since failed to recognize is the utter impossibility of a neat and coherent national character.

Canadians are, as a rule, polite, clean, civilized, peaceful people particularly when they compare themselves with Americans. Canadian beer is stronger/better than American beer; our healthcare system is better—or at least more civilized—than the American one;[1] Canadian's are, as the Molson Canadian beer commercial once asserted, peacekeepers not police which is short hand for the belief that, unlike their American neighbours, Canadians aren't warlike and belligerent. Of course, any time these old saws see the light of day they are quickly condemned for the fact that they are in effect a negative definition of national character and identity, focusing on what Canadians are not rather than what they are, and that they rely too heavily on definitions of Americaness to truly reveal something about Canadians. What this well-tilled soil does reveal is the discursive problem of defining Canadian identity as its own distinct object. Canadians have a great deal of difficulty imagining their own community. This makes sense if you look at some of the historical baggage that Canada has always already present in thinking of itself as a nation.

The first and probably most important factor is the language divide. The competing interests and cultures of English and French Canada—rather unceremoniously welded together after Wolfe's victory over Montcalm at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in the Seven Years War and made permanent in the 1763 Treaty of Paris—can be seen operating in almost every aspect of Canadian political life. While there are certainly other regional and identity structures that effect the charting of the nation's political and cultural life—the break between the west and "Central" Canada (Ontario

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[1]   This is a particular point of pride among Canadians and recently manifested in the declaration that Tommy Douglas, a CCF premier of Saskatchewan and later leader of the federal NDP, widely credited as being the father of Medicare was named "The Greatest Canadian" by popular vote on a CBC miniseries.

and Quebec) particularly after Trudeau's New Energy Program was enacted in 1980 has, arguably, had as large an impact on federal politics as the Anglo/French divide in recent years—the breakage between the two official language groups is so central to the way Canada defines itself that it trumps all these other conflicts. In order for Canada and, by extension the Canadian, to be a workable concept, a nation in the way Benedict Anderson defines it—an imagined community—rather than simply a state, there needs to be across the languages a certain level of agreement about what Canada is, a single dominant narrative of Canada. This presents a problem. As Hugh MacLennan observes in his foreword to his novel, *The Two Solitudes*, Canadians across the language divide lack even a single word with which to designate a Canadian:

> No single word exists within Canada itself to designate
> with satisfaction to both races a native of this country.
> When those of the French language use the word *Canadien*,
> they nearly always refer to themselves. They know their
> English-speaking compatriots as *les Anglais*. English-
> speaking citizens act on the same principle. They call
> themselves Canadians; those of the French language
> French-Canadians.
> (n.p.)

MacLennan's note, intended to explain to the difficulties or peculiarities of identity and language in a "novel of Canada" to an audience unfamiliar with these eccentricities, expresses a fundamental challenge to a statewide articulation of Nationhood. There are competing claims for the term Canadian/Canadien that serve to exclude the other language group from participation in the idea of Canada. In French, the Anglophones cannot be Canadien. In fact, in the dichotomy that MacLennan reveals, Anglophone Canadians and the English are synonymous. There is no discursive difference between

the identification of an English-speaking descendent of Eastern European Immigrants, an individual of Irish or Scottish descent, or a person living their entire life in London, England and never even knowing of the existence of London, Ontario. Language is the defining factor and it serves to weld together all English-speaking constituencies into one monolithic force that can be simultaneous with the conqueror and the oppressor. It certainly lends the French Canadien an air of legitimacy and domesticity in terms of political action and culture in comparison with the foreign Anglais. The English language designation of Francophones as French-Canadian serves a similar function. An Anglophone can claim the title of Canadian without reservation or modification; in this sense they are, by definition, more authentically Canadian than someone who must identify a modification to their national designation. French-Canadian then must be read as fundamentally different from Canadian. It may participate in some of the characteristics of Canadian, but the language proscription serves to identify some kind of deficiency or otherness. They are separated from true Canadianess by dint of their subclassification. French-Canadians and les Anglais are not compatible with the idea of Canadian nationality contained in the word Canadian/Canadien. This incompatibility is further stressed by the introduction of the term Quebecois,[2] which underlines the discontinuity between English Canada and French Canada by producing a competing nationality.

The conflicting language surrounding identity is representative of a larger,

[2] Though *Le Grand Robert de la langue française* allows for this term to rather expansively refer to all citizens of the province, this would seem to be by contradicted popular usage and political deployment of the word. Jacques Parizeau, leader of the Parti Quebecois during the 1995 Referendum, blaming "money and the ethnic vote"—which is generally taken to mean Anglophones/The English, the Jewish population of Montreal and immigrants—for the separatists defeat would suggest that Quebecois and Francophone Quebeckers are coterminous. ("Quebec Referendum Reaction")

historical, cultural rift between Canada's two dominant (and official) language groups. It suggests that there are two competing claims to the idea of Canada and these claims are not easily ameliorated. Shared political institutions, history and cultural touchstones are insufficient to bridge the divide that language and colonial history creates, if only because this divides enables diametrically opposed readings of the shared material. Case in point, the interpretation of Louis Riel, Métis leader of the Red River Rebellion of 1869-70 and the Northwest Rebellion 1885, as either a hero or a villain has been historically contingent on the religion and language of the viewer. Riel, who was Francophone and Catholic, was viewed as a hero in Francophone and Catholic Quebec and, as he had defied the Crown and his provisional government executed Thomas Scott, a member of the Orange Order, in Anglophone and Protestant Ontario was a rebel and a villain.  The politics of the Rebellions are more complicated than the issues of language and faith, part of what touched off the Red River Rebellion was the Hudson's Bay Company selling of Rupert's Land to Canada without the consent of its inhabitants which was a move to protect Canadian interests in the face of American expansionism, but the interpretation of Riel as "Father of Confederation" or traitor really isn't. The Francophones wanted him pardoned, the Anglophones wanted him to hang (Brown 233), and this fundamental opposition based on language and faith has animated the debate on Riel ever since. This example of a shared historical, cultural moment where the two language groups interpreted the same subject in radically divergent ways is a recurring motif in Canadian history, seen again, for example, in the Conscription Crises during the two World Wars. The same events inform two very different narratives that quite often are oppositional.

This carries over into the realm of culture as well. Often English Canada has attempted to discredit, dismiss or simply elide French Canadian culture. Lord Durham castigated the French Canadian's lack of history and culture in his 1839 report and concluded that assimilation was the only option (Blodgett 52). Dewart, in what amounts to an end run around his exclusion of the French from *Selections…*, suggests "[o]ur French fellow-countrymen are much more firmly united than the English colonists; though their literature is more French than Canadian, and their bond of union is more religious than literary or political" (x) which, while certainly acknowledging the French presence in Canada, works to exclude French Canadian literature from participating in the Canadian. This kind of behavior produces a claim to Canadian culture that prevents the French Canadian population from producing the literature that Dewart himself argues will produce and preserve the Canadian national character.[3] Even when the two language groups are not actively working to dismiss the legitimacy of the other's culture, the divide has lead to the development of parallel national cultural institutions like the CBC and Radio Canada, and the National Film Board which operates English and French programming divisions. These parallel institutions, while certainly intended to articulate a Canadian point of view and serve the function of displaying a Canadian identity, do as much to illustrate the cultural differences between the two groups. Katharine Monk, looking at the NFB's French and English documentary units, points out that, though the units were both making documentaries in a realist mode and "[t]he values were essentially the same… the content and the ideology behind the camera were necessarily

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[3]    The curious and, ultimately, revealing thing hidden in Dewart's dismissal of French Canadian literature as more French than Canadian and, therefore, outside of his purview, is that his publisher printed the first anthology of Quebecois/French-Canadian literature, Huston's *Le Repetoire National,* 16 years before Dewart would produce *Selections from Canadian Poets*.

different." The French filmmakers, influenced by Cinéma Vérité and the Nouvelle Vague, took a much more subjective approach to documentary than their more objectively minded—or uptight—English colleagues (Monk 18-9). In simpler terms, looking at hockey as a cultural institution that Canadians of either official language hold dear, the national broadcast of *Hockey Night in Canada* puts the English/French divide in high relief. The CBC has traditionally broadcast Toronto Maple Leaf games to "Ontario and points west" in English, while Radio Canada has aired Montreal Canadiens games in French. Not only are the English and French language versions of the national broadcaster airing different games, the rivalry between the Leafs and the Habs is among the most bitter in sports[4] and is a rivalry that is intrinsically linked to that of the two dominant language groups. Even in hockey, the language conflict shapes the national experience and presents a challenge to a unified Canadian experience.

What is evident in the historical and cultural conflict between English and French in Canada is that there are two oppositional narratives of identity operating; and these narratives cannot be harmonized. For both the English and the French, too much of their definition or claim to a Canadian community—or, perhaps more realistically, the creation of a national community within the territorial boundaries of Canada—depends on the difference and divide in language. Of course, any attempt at definition of the national

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[4] Roch Carrier's short story, "Une Abominable feuille d'érable sur la glace" [The Abominable Maple Leaf on the Ice], known in English as "The Hockey Sweater" hinges on this conflict. In the story, a boy's Montreal Canadiens sweater wears out and his mother, since the forms weren't printed in French, sends a handwritten note to Eaton's to order a new one. Eaton's, a Toronto based department store, sends a Maple Leafs jersey instead. Despite the boy's protests, the mother refuses to return the sweater on the grounds that doing so might offend Mr. Eaton and forces the boy to wear it. As a result, his coach refuses to play him and the boy goes to church and prays for God to send moths to eat the sweater. The story illustrates how intensely linked the Leafs/Habs rivalry is to the strife between English and French and Canada, and to a lesser extent reveals the economic dominance of the English in Quebec.

identity that relies on this opposition to produce its conclusion by necessity deconstructs itself. The break between Canadien and les Anglais and Canadian and French Canadian functions like any binary should and collapses in on itself. There can be no Canadian without the French Canadian to provide context—and to differentiate Canadians from those other Anglophones on the American continent—just as the definition of les Canadiens relies on the presence of les Anglais. This phenomenon is only magnified when the poles are Canadian and Quebecois. The constant presence of the counter-narrative makes either an Anglo or a Franco articulation of a Canadian identity always already false. This bifurcation of the populace into competing interests renders any attempt to produce a coherent wide ranging national myth and identity impossible because the English and French understanding of what it means to be Canadian does not easily allow for the participation of the other. When other silenced, submerged narratives of the Canadian experience—those of the First Nations Peoples, Black Canadians, Asian Canadians—are introduced into the conversation in any serious way the traditional attempts to articulate Canadian identity, the ones that are unable to adequately account for the presence of the other White Christian population, are further troubled. There can be no doubt that a Canadian identity and character that relies even tangentially on the taming of the savage wastes of the northland can accommodate the claims to this character and identity by the people who had to be displaced and culturally devastated—sins that French and English participated in equally—in order for this taming and civilizing to take place. Canadians are confronted with the possibility that any claim they attempt to make a national identity will by necessity be a fiction and a fairly obvious fiction; and, while all

nationalist articulations of identity are a fiction, Canada's history as a settler nation and its language divide does not allow for the naturalization of this fiction.

The result is that Canadians are denied the nationalist myth. All they have is an unending series of fictions that are produced and are propagated as long as they are functional. This means that Canadian identity must remain flexible and adaptable, ready to accommodate the latest necessary revision—and producing the much touted cultural mosaic that stands in opposition to the American melting pot—and, at its heart, be empty, indefinable and absent. Northrup Frye speculated that the real question that Canadians asked was not who they were, but rather "some such riddle as 'Where is here?'" (222), thus indicating that the crisis of Canadian identity is a problem of collective geography. Canada itself lacks a definition and, therefore, it becomes necessary to sort out the issue of "Where is here?" before personal exploration can take place. Frye is taking on faith in this statement that there is, to paraphrase Stein, a here there, rightly assuming that if the parameters for Canada—temporal, spatial, cultural—can be fixed that the problems of identity would effectively resolve themselves. However, latent in this statement is the obvious elusiveness of the Canadian "here," Canadians are forced paradoxically to confront the question of who they are without the firm ground of what it means to be Canadian. Effectively, Canadians are working from the position that they are aware of their existence but any attempt to explain where it is they are crumbles in their hands placing a definitive answer to who they are always out of reach. Americans, it could be argued, have the advantage of having a clear mythology of America as a starting point whether they choose to embrace or challenge this mythology. The absence of a real here,

a stable and coherent Canadian identity, has lead some, like George Elliott Clarke, to conclude that with the definitive refutation of the colonial narratives in the 1960s Canada ended. Canada is a failed nation that will inevitably be absorbed into the United States and is little more than "the Puerto Rico of the North" (Clarke 39).

Clarke mourns Canada's passing, but his conclusion is short sighted. Besides failing to take in to account the deep-seated dislike of the United States broadly present in the Canadian public—another one of those things that manages to transcend language—it operates on the assumption that the lack of a coherent Canadian identity is a negative phenomenon; that the project of Canada is contingent on the ability to express a monolithic view of the nation that passed as Canada moved out of the colonial phase into the national period. What Clarke misses is the opportunity to make a virtue out of this incoherence. Marshall McLuhan suggests this very conclusion in a 1968 letter to then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. McLuhan concludes:

> Canada is the only country that has never had a national
> identity. In an age when all homogenous nations are losing
> their identity images through rapid technological change,
> Canada alone can "keep its cool." We have never been
> committed to a single course or goal. This is now our
> greatest asset.
> (359)

McLuhan's argument is remarkably simple: because Canadian's are not bound by the social, cultural, ideological demands of an established identity, they are infinitely more adaptable in the face of technological change; technological changes that result, as Jean-Francois Lyotard suggests, in broader social changes. The lack of a national identity allows Canada far greater flexibility than other nations in meeting an ever-shifting

cultural landscape. Other nations with fixed identity narratives are forced to contextualize change within those narratives; they are constrained by them, Canadians are not.This gives rise to Robert Kroetsch's argument in the essay "Disunity as Unity" that Canada is a postmodern nation. Kroetsch, invoking Lyotard's simplified definition of postmodernism from the introduction to *The Postmodern Condition* as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv), reads postmodernism as a celebration of multiplicity and a loss of centrality (*The Lovely Treachery of Words* 22). He argues that "Canada is supremely a country of margins" and that as an invisible country in highly visible times —Kroetsch's example is the eliding of Canadian contributions in the Second World War in popular history—Canada's "willingness to refuse privilege to a restricted or restrictive cluster of meta-narratives becomes a Canadian strategy for survival" (*The Lovely Treachery of Words* 22-3). It would be more accurate to suggest that Canada is incapable of privileging the restrictive meta-narratives, but Kroetsch is absolutely correct. The dispersed and decentered situation that Canadians find themselves, one where the totalizing narratives of "white civility" and "survival"(which Daniel Coleman and Margaret Atwood, respectively, place at the center of the English Canadian literary project) by necessity collapse because they are ideological fictions that serve to buttress systems of exclusion, demands that they either open up to marginal voices and discourses or knowingly construct identities to serve ideological or aesthetic or social purposes.

This decentered adaptability is one of the hallmarks of Canadian literature. As previously noted, in D'Arcy McGee and Dewart's calls for a national literature there were no definitions of what makes a poet Canadian; there were exclusions, but never

definitions. This was precipitated by the aesthetic community—largely made up of expats like D'Arcy McGee himself—in which they had to operate. There was no intrinsically Canadian literature, so its advocates had to adapt a broad and decentered view of what made a literary work Canadian. In Canadian literature there can never be a one to one— an essential and natural—identity. Any attempt to produce one is already proven false and deconstructed by the multitude of competing narratives and identity formations. French narratives/identities challenge English ones and the hegemonic practices—both literary and socio-economic—associated with them are in constant conflict; and the First Nations, Asian, Black, etcetera, identities and narratives challenge either of these and their hegemony. The result is that Canadians are detached culturally from any naturalized sense of self unlike "homogenous" nations that are able to produce the illusion of a naturalized self. I, the great Romantic pronoun associated with genius and the individual, the speaking self, loses coherence and authority and becomes subject, wholly, to the free play of signifiers. It stands to reason that the designation "Canadian" is a signifier obviously detached from its signified—if such a signified can even be assumed to exist— then the individuals operating under that signifier would similarly be operating within this realm of free play and disjunction. The Canadian tendency to define being Canadian in opposition to American culture can then be read as a function of differance. If Canada must be constructed in order that it remains a useful and productive, infinitely adaptable and inhabitable, nation/identity, so too are the subjects of that dominion obligated to construct or adopt idiosyncratic selves to present to the world.

Canadians are obligated, as Fred Wah suggests, to fake it. In *Diamond Grill*,

Wah's prose poetic memoir about his father and his quest for identity, there is an incident where Wah's father is joining the local chapter of the Lion's Club. In the midst of giving an initiation speech, Wah's father—a Canadian born Chinese Scots-Irishman raised and educated in China and married to a Swedish born woman, thus firmly established in the identity hyphen—"the only Chinaman at an all-white dinner meeting," slips up when thanking the other men for inviting him into the club and the fine soup that was served by calling it *sloup*. In order to neutralize the embarrassment of the situation, the racial humiliation, he turns it into a joke, saying the Chinese call it *sloup* because they make the café soup with slop water and they slurp it when they eat. This marker of his otherness is turned into a compliment to chef by being filtered through his constructed identity. The young Wah learns from the situation that English, even language in general, can be faked. The outcome of this revelation is that he "quickly learn[s] that when you fake language you see, as well, how everything else is fake" (65-6). The particulars of this lesson are bound up in the immigrant and minority experience which in Wah's case is further complicated by his being too white to be Chinese and too Chinese to be white, but this awakening is intrinsic to the Canadian literary experience. It is ignorant, as Wah asserts, to claim that all Canadians are immigrants—my family arrived in Goderich Township, Ontario from Ireland in the 1830s and I identify solely as Canadian which means that I can't participate in that discourse unless its vicariously—however, the drive to fake it, to construct an identity in the face of the absence or failure of the "Canadian" one, is absolutely shared (Wah 125). Some of these constructed identities have been historically privileged, English speaking whites for example provided that they were the appropriate

type of white for that time and place, but this is a function of the necessities of the ruling class rather than their participating more fully in the national character. Whiteness, as Coleman shows in *White Civility,* is as heavily constructed as any other category. Canadians as a whole are forced to construct their identities. This explains both the polyvocality and assumption of another identity in the long poem of the Seventies and the move towards identity poetics in the Eighties and Nineties that Frank Davey makes note of throughout *Canadian Literary Power.*

This phenomenon becomes readily apparent, surfaces, in the post-war Can lit period—especially in the Sixties and Seventies—though it manifests itself from the Canadian Oliver Goldsmith's "The Rising Village" on forward. This post-war period is also a period of pronounced Canadian nationalism. It is in this period that the Red Ensign is replaced by the Maple Leaf Flag, the Canada Council for the Arts is chartered, McClelland and Stewart's New Canadian Library begins the solidification of the Canadian canon, and, in 1982, the constitution is repatriated and Canada achieves full independence from Great Britain. Modern Canada rises out of this time. Conversely it is also a period of great social and cultural upheaval. Quebec experiences the Quiet Revolution and the rise of separatism. FLQ radicals bomb symbols of English power and eventually execute the kidnappings of Cross and Laporte resulting in Trudeau's invoking of the War Measures Act. There was a rise in labour unrest which questioned both the class structure (Palmer 222) and an American imperial presence in Canadian industry (Palmer 238). What separatist, labor, youth, and racial unrest in Canada effectively did was place the final nail in the coffin of Canada's colonial identity. This identity which

served British and American imperial interests as well as the interests of the Canadian elite could not withstand the discursive challenges that of the Canadian experience and finally totally failed leaving an effective identity vacuum. The Maple Leaf flag, perhaps the most significant national symbol adopted in this period, is a symbol that is completely open to inscription. The red bars are meant to symbolize the Atlantic and the Pacific, but coloring them red negates this effect. The maple leaf itself is effectively a self-referential symbol: it offers no designation, no description, no expression other than linking Canadian identity to its natural resources and its own history as a national symbol. That the Canadian literature generally, and certainly the Canadian poetry, that surfaces in this period is marked by preoccupation with constructing and interrogating identity should really comes as no surprise. What gets glossed over, particularly in the now passé but staunchly nationalist thematic criticism of which Margaret Atwood's *Survival* is the most popular example, is that this quality is more than a survival tactic as Robert Kroetsch suggests; it is the very quality of Canadian poetry. Leon Trotsky argues in *Literature and Revolution* that it is impossible to predict what revolutionary or socialist art might look like since they don't, as yet, exist (229). They will only be recognizable when, after a period of social change, they have finally had an opportunity to develop. For Trotsky this means supporting and nurturing a wide variety of artistic movements in order to allow socialist art to develop; for Canada this means recognizing that the absence of identity, the linguistic play, the polyglot and the construction of new identities and cosmologies that mark our poetry, particularly from the sixties on, is, like the socialist art of Trotsky's post-revolutionary world, Canada's literature.

This project reads that conclusion through Canadian poetry. The rise of experimental—or avant garde or "New"—poetry in English Canadian literature in the 1960s and1970s is the arrival of a truly Canadian literature; one marked by the interrogation of the "I," a utilization of language's material and arbitrary nature to challenge naturalized discourses, and one that happily and playfully inhabits and exploits the indeterminacy of Canada's heteroglossia. In the following chapters, by looking at the origins of the crisis of Canadian identity and then forward to the way this crisis is navigated by poets like Margaret Atwood, bill bissett and bpNichol, we see the way the new Canadian approach to literature and identity moves from the avant garde and politically dangerous to being normalized.

**Chapter 1: A Colonial Imagination**

Edward Hartley Dewart's 1864 anthology, *Selections from Canadian Poets*, is the first anthology of English Canadian poetry. This makes it an incredibly important document in the history of Canadian literature, a sort of birth announcement for Canadian literature. However, as time has passed Dewart's book has become increasingly marginalized even as parallel books like Palgrave's *Golden Treasury of English Verse* continue to be vibrant, living texts. In this chapter, I attribute this displacement of Dewart's anthology to the fact that, while in the Introductory Essay he makes an impassioned call for the development of a Canadian national literature and views his anthology as an attempt to bring about this national literature, Dewart's book is not Canadian so much as it is Colonial. It views Canada not through Canadian eyes, but British ones and is, therefore, unable to participate in a truly Canadian literature when one develops.

**Chapter 2: Postmodern Textual Archaeology**

Margaret Atwood's *The Journal of Susanna Moodie* is representative of a trend in the Canadian long poem towards writing through or over historical persons and texts. History, in these poems, is not a privileged space, it is textual, a flexible lens, a referent through which the present and the self can be interrogated. Just as Alice B. Toklas functions as a mask for Gertrude Stein to construct an image of herself and her time in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* or Dorothy Livesay's use of the documentary form in *Right Hand, Left Hand* uses the assembled text to build a subject, Atwood uses Moodie in order to construct an image of literary history that reflects a personal and private agenda. History is deployed in order to construct a present with the appearance of truth**.**

**Chapter 3: HP Sauce and the Hate Literature of Pop Art**

In 1978, bill bissett gained the dubious honor of being one of the very few poets who has had his work subjected to debate in the House of Commons. The debate, theoretically about opening the mandate of the Canada Council and originating with BC Tory Bob Wenman, is a fascinating bit of political theatre which included, among other things, bissett's work being decried as evil. I argue that this debate about bissett's work was a reaction to the shift away from bourgeois roles of art towards the postmodern, and that bissett was the target because, more than any other poet, he had constructed a radical identity that was a complete rejection of the straight world while being obviously contradictory—bissett as the natural, innocent, magic poet who rejected the academic and theoretical simultaneously demonstrated an in depth knowledge of language theory. bissett was attacked because he represented the new Canada without a naturalized

identity.

**Chapter 4: this pome sat down to write you**

bpNichol's approach to language unsettles claims to power that derive from systems of representation. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his poem "Man in Lakeland" that works to invert the relationship between the poet and nature that William Wordsworth sets forth in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. For Nichol, the possibilities brought on by the free play of the signifier are opportunities for emancipation. They allow the speaker to enter linguistic spaces associated with power and control and to challenge the restrictions located there whether these are religious, ideological or, in the case of Wordsworth, aesthetic.

**Chapter 5: How Doozers and Fraggles Made Me Grow Up Socialist**

Less than ten years after Experimental poetry first became a subject of debate in Parliament, the CBC was producing *Fraggle Rock* with several prominent poets on staff including supposed "Marxist pornographer" bpNichol. The show represents the proliferation and inculcation of the ideas and principles of the Canadian Avant Garde into the mainstream, and, more importantly, the nation's youth. A close reading of the show reveals it to be decidedly leftist, anti-imperialist, suspicious and critical of cultures of consumption and dominance, collectivist, and open to a new experience of the mundane world. The children of Canada are taught to experience cars and kites and ice cream through the eyes of the estranged traveler, Traveling Matt, and are thus taught to embrace the experimentation that the Canadian experience requires.

# A Colonial Imagination:

# Edward Hartley Dewart's *Selections from Canadian Poets*

Language is not an instrument of exclusion: in principle, anyone can learn a language. On the contrary, it is fundamentally inclusive, limited only by the fatality of Babel: no one lives long enough to learn *all* languages. Print-language is what invents nationalism, not *a* particular language per se.
  Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*

A national literature is an essential element in the formation of a national character
  Edward Hartley Dewart, *Selections from Canadian Poets*

O snow and pine clad Canada,
  Old England's loyal child
  Robert Stuart Patterson, "The Emblems of Our Homes"

I am a word
in a foreign language
  Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*

There is an image of British North America—the loosely associated collection of

Britain's North American colonies that would one day form Canada—in the first half of

the nineteenth century as a land without poetry. In Canada, "the whole community [was]

engaged in the pursuit of the necessaries and comforts of life, and that comparatively few

[possessed] wealth and leisure, to enable them to give much time and thought to the study

of poetry and kindred subjects" (Dewart x).[5] The harsh terrain and the cold winters, the

very simple but very real demands of leading a pioneer life was thought to preclude the

production of poetry. This narrative was used to explain the "neglect of [Canada's] most

meritorious authors" and a climate of general disinterest in domestic literary production

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[5]   This argument is certainly debatable; however, it is the principal strawman against which those arguing
    for a Canadian literature, Edward Hartley Dewart among them, worked.

(Dewart x). If English Canada was too preoccupied by the labor of survival, the older and more established French communities fared little better. Lord Durham, in his *Report on the Affairs of British North America* of 1839 that would lead to the 1841 Act of Union [6] , declared that the Quebecois were "a people with no literature and no history" and that it would be in the best interest of the Crown to assimilate them (Kröller 5). The population of what would become Canada apparently lacked the time, comfort and ability to produce a literature. This was not viewed by all to be detrimental to the minds of Canadians. As subjects of the British Crown, they were inheritors of the wealth of the English tradition, one that Francis Turner Palgrave suggested would reveal the true accents of Poetry "wherever the Poets of England are honoured, wherever the dominant language is spoken" (Palgrave n.p.).

This attitude—that Canada is a rugged land bereft of literature and can import all the culture it needs from the metropole—reveals not a nation, but a colony. A nation requires a national literature in order to form an image of itself. In 1864, "struggles for identity were continuing, say, in England, and were in an advanced state of fermentation in the United States" (viii). Indeed, Palgrave in the dedication to his *Golden Treasury* claimed that he had "endeavored to make a true national Anthology" (Palgrave, "Dedication"). Emerson, in his essay "The American Scholar," had identified a similar connection between the development of a national culture and nationhood. The crystallizing of a national literature was important to understanding the nation just as that concept itself was starting to crystallize.

Edward Hartley Dewart, a Methodist minister working in Canada East, made

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6     This united Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Quebec) under a single government.

significant early strides towards establishing a Canadian literature. In the land perceived

to be without poetry, Dewart published the first anthology of English language Canadian

verse. *Selections from Canadian Poets with Occasional Critical and Biographical Notes

and an Introductory Essay on Canadian Poetry* was published by James Lovell in

Montreal in 1864,[7] three years after Palgrave's *The Golden Treasury of the Best Songs

and Lyrical Poems in the English Language* was published in London and three years

before the British North America Act and Confederation would create a Canadian state.

That Dewart's anthology is equidistant from these two moments seems significant:

*Selections from Canadian Poets* is a spiritual, if not literal, descendent of *The Golden

Treasury* with its nationalist motivations and literary prejudices, and Dewart's argument

for a national character—a Canadian literature with a Canadian point of view—seems to

anticipate the birth of the nation.[8] Beyond this historical moment, sandwiched between a

book that would help cement a canon and a nation that would need one, *Selections from

Canadian Poets* is doubly important insofar as it helps create the discourse that would

eventually be labeled "CanLit" (which is a much richer signifier than it is generally given

credit for) and arguing for an imaginative space, a thoughtscape, for the people of

Canada. Dewart's book will allow Margaret Atwood 108 years later to treat the texts she

confronts in *Survival* as if they were written by Canada rather than their individual

authors (12). I will explore Dewart's contribution to the discourse of Canadian literature;

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[7]   Lovell also published the first French Canadian anthology, James Huston's *Le répertoire national*. Huston's anthology was a multi-volume work that appeared in installments between 1848 and 1850. The introduction was published in the newspaper *L'Avenir* on September 13, 1848. Huston followed this up in 1853 with *Légendes canadiennes*, published in Paris.

[8]   Given some of his phrasing, and, indeed, the character of some of his arguments about poetry, it seems highly likely that not only was Dewart familiar with Palgrave's book, but that he kept it close at hand as he wrote the Introductory Essay.

the eventual decline of Dewart's standing in the history of Canadian poetry from

milestone to footnote or at best a dusty museum piece, and the reason behind this decline.

If, as Dewart suggests, "A national literature is an essential element in the formation of a

national character" (ix), then it may be possible that the decline of Dewart's anthology is

a product of the success of his project.

     The preface that Dewart provides to *Selections from Canadian Poets* reveals the

state of Canadian verse in 1864:

> My object in compiling this volume has been to rescue
> from oblivion some of the floating pieces of Canadian
> authorship worthy of preservation in a more permanent
> form; and to direct the attention of my fellow-countrymen
> to the claims of Canadian poetry. The fact that I entered on
> an untrodden path, without way-marks to guide me,
> necessarily caused me a great amount of labor and an
> extensive correspondence; as, in many instances, both poets
> and poetry had to be discovered by special research.
> (vii)

Dewart suggests that his project is necessary because of two crises confronting Canadian

poetry, one ideological and one material. The ideological crisis, that it is necessary for

Dewart to "direct the attention of [other Canadians] to the claims of Canadian poetry"

and, indeed, that Canada needed and was capable of a domestic literature, was an

ongoing struggle and one that I will deal with more fully below.[9] The raw materials

necessary for a literary culture were certainly present.

     Literacy was relatively high, between 66 and 75% in English Canada according

to the 1861 census and would continue to rise to around 90% at the turn of the century.

This means that by 1900 adult literacy in Canada, while slightly lower than it was in

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[9]   Earlier attempts to address this crisis include John Gibson's 1843 "Introduction to the New Series of the *Garland*," W.P.C.'s 1848 essay "Our Literature, Present and Prospective" from *The Literary Garland*, and Thomas D'Arcy McGee's "A Canadian Literature" and "Protection for Canadian Literature" published in *The New Era* in 1857 and 1858 respectively.

France or England, was roughly on par with Western Europe (Gerson 3). Canada

possessed  not only readers but also a network for the distribution and proliferation of

literary texts. In addition to booksellers, there were Mechanics' Institutes which

"functioned essentially as public libraries" and, in Upper Canada, 1535 County Common

School Libraries by 1870 (Gerson 4). High literacy rates and mechanisms for the

relatively inexpensive distribution of texts indicates that in nineteenth-century Canada

there was a community of readers who were both capable of interacting with literary

works and interested in doing so.

The material crisis he confronted was that Canadian poetry and the poets who

published it were largely ephemeral—effectively bits of flotsam and jetsam threatening to

disappear forever as a result of the structure of the domestic publishing industry. Despite

arguments to the contrary—including a Judge Haliburton's argument that "the inhabitants

of this Province are matter-of-fact people" and, therefore, not disposed to literary

production (McGee 42)—there were thriving literary cultures in British North America.

As Douglas Lochhead indicates, in 1865 there were approximately 400 periodicals—

newspapers, journals and magazines—publishing in British North America with two

thirds of these being located in the Canadas.[10]  The editors of these publications were

typically "kindly disposed to poets and regular poetry columns were not uncommon"

(Lochhead x). *The Literary Garland*, published by James Lovell in Montreal and edited

by John Gibson, survived for thirteen years between 1838 and 1851 by publishing the

works of the era's major Canadian writers alongside reprints of popular British and

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[10]    Following the Act of Union and preceding Confederation, Ontario and Quebec were renamed Canada
West and Canada East from Upper and Lower Canada.

American authors until Gibson's death and increased competition from American

magazines like *Harper's* forced an end to publication (Daymond and Monkman 31;

Parker). *The Literary Garland*, however, illustrates the material crisis that Dewart hoped

*Selections from Canadian Verse* would rectify. Periodicals are by their very nature

ephemeral objects with the dateline functioning in largely the same fashion as a best

before date; when the next issue comes out the material in the previous issues is

displaced, replaced, by newer and more current material. This process repeats itself on a

quarterly, monthly, weekly, or daily basis—Benedict Anderson calls newspapers "one-

day best-sellers" that are obsolete on the "morrow of [their] printing," functioning much

like modern manufactured goods with their "inbuilt obsolescence" (34-5)—with the

previous issue being, in the best case scenario, shelved and stored or, more realistically,

discarded. To a large extent this renders the content of the periodical inaccessible to the

reading populace beyond its initial publication period. The periodical has a broad

immediate impact, but lacks staying power. The book, on the other hand, is a more or less

permanent object.[11] It is never displaced by a new issue and remains a static, and

historically, authoritative repository of knowledge and value that the periodical can never

fully emulate. This difference in the treatment of the two types of publications as

commodities illustrates the risk of a literary culture built primarily on periodicals. While

there can be little doubt about the potential impact and immediacy of poems published in

periodicals the inborn lack of permanence renders them susceptible to becoming "floating

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[11]  This point is underscored by a comparison of major library holdings of both *The Literary Garland* and
*Selections from Canadian Poets*. Copies of the first edition of *Selections from Canadian Poets* are held
by 56 libraries whereas only 23 libraries hold copies of any issue of *The Literary Garland*—and it
should be noted that the majority of the libraries that do have issues of *The Literary Garland* do not
have complete runs (WorldCat).

pieces of Canadian authorship" needing "rescue from oblivion" (Dewart vii).While

Dewart argues "The History of poetry is sufficient rebuke to those who speak slightingly

of its influence" (xii) at the moment of his intervention Canadian poetry is lacking the

stability, the fixity, the history necessary for this rebuke. *Selections from Canadian Poets*

offers a solution to this problem by sheathing the poets and poems Dewart finds on his

"untrodden path" in the authority and, perhaps more significantly, permanence associated

with the book. This is what will allow Dewart's book to "be instrumental in awakening a

more extensive interest in the Poets and Poetry of our beloved country" (viii).

    The potential for *Selections from Canadian Poets* to be instrumental is of great

importance to Dewart. As Douglas Lochhead points out in his introduction to the 1973

University of Toronto reprint of *Selections from Canadian Poets*, Dewart is a patriot. A

strong advocate for Confederation, he loved Canada and strongly believed in the nation's

future, its resources and its people *as Canadians* (Lochhead xii). The anthology derives

from Dewart's nationalist sentiment. Literature, for Dewart, is the marker of human

progress and the defining prerequisite for a national culture.  He argues that a national

literature "is not merely the record of a country's mental progress: it is the expression of

its intellectual life, the bond of national unity, and the guide of national energy" (ix). He

goes on to say:

> It may be fairly questioned, whether the whole range of
> history presents the spectacle of a people firmly united
> politically without the subtle but powerful cement of a
> patriotic literature. On the other hand, it is easy to show,
> that, in the older countries of the world, the names of
> distinguished poets, enshrined in the national heart, are the
> watchwords of national union; and its has a become a part
> of the patriotism of the people to honor and love their

> memory. To mention the names of Shakespeare and Burns,
> alone justifies this assertion.
> (ix)

Dewart's argument anticipates Benedict Anderson. In the nations that Canada should strive to emulate—and in no uncertain terms this means England/Britain as the invocation of Shakespeare and Burns indicates—poetry serves as one of the keys to union.[12] The shared literary tradition, the words of the nationalist poet speaking in the perceived voice of their national subjectivity, constructs an imaginative plane on which the people can build an imagined community. Ignoring his credentials as a nationalist poet, though a number of his plays clearly serve to legitimize Tudor and Stuart rule, Shakespeare to some extent serves as a signifier of Englishness; in the very simplest terms, Shakespeare's ability and accomplishment makes a claim for the sophistication of England, its status among nations. The Union Flag is an abstract representation of conquests and family trees; *Hamlet* and *Paradise Lost* mean something and say something about the people (in the broad national sense) that produced them. In his desire for a Canadian literature—and a Canadian Milton or Shakespeare—Dewart is, in actuality, not merely hoping for the development of a domestic national literature, but, as

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[12]  I have decided to use the term British here as opposed to English. While I grant that using the blanket British greatly oversimplifies the relationships—both in terms of political and cultural power—between England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, it would seem to be the most apt adjective in light of the Canadian view of the mother country. Alexander McLachlan's poem, "Britannia," from Dewart's anthology, makes no reference to England, Scotland or Ireland directly only Britannia and indeed presents Walter Scott, Admiral Nelson, James Watt, Robert Burns and Oliver Cromwell as heroes of one unified nation (Dewart 92-3). The nationalist poems that Dewart collects make repeated reference to Britain and the "tri-une flag," but perhaps the best justification for this word choice comes from outside Dewart's anthology: Alexander Muir's "The Maple Leaf Forever" which served for many years as Canada's unofficial national anthem. The first verse reads: "In days of yore, from Britain's shore/ Wolfe, the dauntless hero came,/ And planted firm Britannia's flag/ On Canada's fair domain/ Here may it wave, our boast, our pride/ And joined in love together,/ The thistle, shamrock, rose entwine/ The Maple Leaf Forever!" In the Canadian imagination, British unity becomes part of the articulations of Canadian nationalism, so it becomes necessary for me to use the terminology that best fits my subject.

he says, "a national character." Recognizing the ability of a Canadian poem to be as deep

and sophisticated as, or of a Canadian poet to execute work on par with, an established

master[13] is necessary if Canada is to be nation of the first order (Dewart xv). Canada

needs its own literary tradition that is differentiated from that of the motherland, a

literature that is wholly Canadian and not just a subset of English literature, since "Print-

language is what invents nationalism, not *a* particular language per se" (Anderson 134).

The obstacle to both a national literature and a national character that Dewart

identifies is Canada's colonial position. When *Selections from Canadian Poets* was

published in Montreal the fictive idea of Canada had taken hold in the minds of the

people of British North America (New 78), they were still subjects of the British Crown

living in colonies. They were subject to the metropole, which served not only as an

administrative centre but also as a cultural one. This was an arrangement that would

continue well beyond 1867 and Confederation, and, in fact, when Canadians became

Canadians they did so only after getting the approval of Westminster and Queen Victoria.

Given this political and social arrangement, the largest obstacle to the national literature

and national character that Dewart longs for is the ability of the colonial power to supply

for the intellectual demands of the colony. As Dewart stipulates, there is a constituency

that feels "because we can procure sufficient quantities of mental aliment from other

lands, it is superfluous to make any attempt to build up a literature of our own" (ix). He

goes on to suggest in the Introductory Essay that this is at least partially a product of the

proto-nation's colonial position:

Our colonial position, whatever may be its political

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[13]    Dewart shows the prejudices of an Imperial subject and cites Milton and Shakespeare.

> advantages, is not favorable to the growth of an indigenous
> literature. Not only are our mental wants supplied by the
> brain of the Mother Country under circumstances that
> utterly preclude competition; but the majority of persons of
> taste and education in Canada are emigrants from the Old
> Country, whose tenderest affections cling around the land
> they have left. The memory of the associations of youth,
> and of the honored names that have won distinction in
> every department of human activity, throws a charm around
> everything that comes from their native land, to which the
> productions of our young and unromantic country can put
> forth no claim.
> (xiv)

The colonial position problematizes any hope of a domestic literature not only through

the ability of the Mother Country to supply the intellectual needs of the colony, but, on a

very simple and sentimental level, it also produces metropolitan minds. The population of

English Canada does not think with a Canadian mind, but rather an English or Scottish or

Irish or, ultimately, a British mind. The audience for poetry, the educated taste-makers,

have already been indoctrinated by the cultural power of the Old Country and are,

therefore, less disposed to the literary products of a "young and unromantic country."

Dewart's fear, and it is clearly a legitimate fear, is that should this condition continue the

nation will remain young and unromantic, that the nation will ultimately participate in the

imagined realm of the empire and metropole rather than a domestic/"Native" one. The

production of a national literature, for which in 1864 *Selections from Canadian Poets* will

serve as a touchstone, means a moving away from the colonial mindset. To transition

from the colonial subject of the British Empire to a Canadian required the individual to

set aside the prejudices of their youth, to recognize that, as Thomas D'Arcy McGee

suggests, "The books made elsewhere, even in England, are not always the best fitted for

us; they do not always run on the same mental gauge, nor connect with our trains of thought" (qtd in Staines 136), and, to paraphrase Emerson, to write their own poems.

To some extent, the interstitial nature of Canadian literature that Dewart identifies in his discussion of the detriments of colonialism to the Canadian mind lingers. Eva-Marie Kröller, in a discussion of the multiple Canadian nominees for the 2002 Booker, returns to a question of what it means for a literature to be Canadian.[14] She identifies the problematic space that Canada occupies between the colonizer and colonized—a space that Canada shares with nations like Australia—as being one of the determining factors in the Canadian identity (2). This is an argument that clearly harks back to the ones that Dewart advanced in 1864, and illustrates the durability of his ideas. There is no question whether or not Canada in the twenty-first century has a national literature, the debate has moved on to determining who qualifies to sit under that umbrella. There is also very little debate as to whether Canada has a national character, though any attempt to define it has historically been very problematic. The discursive impact of the ideas that Dewart advanced in *Selections from Canadian Poets* is very real, and an argument could be made that Dewart actually named the discourse. By producing the first anthology of English Canadian poetry, Dewart saved some of the earliest Canadian poets from obscurity and manifested a transition in Canadian poetry from a temporary, ephemeral object to a more permanent print culture, one that could advance an argument of national character beyond the shelf life of a newspaper. However, in the process of establishing a Canadian canon, Dewart and *Selections from Canadian Poets* have been reduced to a footnote, a historical

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[14]    The substance of this discussion revolves around whether Rohinton Mistry, Carol Shields, and Yann Martel—born in India, the United States and Spain respectively, yet all identifying as Canadian—are, in actuality, Canadian.

marker. In W.H. New's *A History of Canadian Literature*, Dewart receives scarcely more space than Joni Mitchell and Bryan Adams.

To some extent, Dewart fell victim to history and fashion. When the Canadian Canon finally solidified as such—indeed, when some of the most important national symbols like the Maple Leaf flag came into existence—*Selections from Canadian Poets* was a hundred years in the rear view mirror. According to Robert Lecker, the canon almost flash froze, coming to existence in less than twenty years. He writes:

> At the end of World War II, Canadian literature was not
> taught as an independent subject in Canadian schools.
> There was no canon. In 1957, the publishing firm
> McClelland and Stewart introduced its mass-market
> paperback reprint series entitled the New Canadian Library.
> It allowed teachers to discuss the work of many Canadian
> authors who had never been the subject of formal academic
> study. This New Canadian Library was truly "new": prior to
> its conception, there was no "library" in use. There were no
> Canadian classics. Northrop Frye recalls that at that time
> the notion of finding a classic Canadian writer remained
> but "a gleam in a paternal critic's eye."
> (Lecker 656)

Lecker's narrative of the formation of the Canadian canon is flawed—he ignores A.J.M. Smith's *The Book of Canadian Poetry* from 1943, the generally accepted notion that Isabella Valancy Crawford was the first truly Canadian poet and her 1884 poem "Malcolm's Katie" was the first Canadian masterwork, and the creation of Canada Council for the Arts—but he is almost certainly correct about the impact of the NCL. The New Canadian Library did make available the "Canadian Classics" in cheap paperback editions which more than made them attractive institutionally. Dewart's book was never made available through the NCL and, in fact, remained out of print until a 1973

University of Toronto Press edition, which offered a facsimile of the original. Effectively, this means that when the canon was undergoing its initial formation, Dewart was inaccessible and when it did become available it was as a museum piece.

However, fashion and taste has played a larger role in the marginalization of Dewart's role in Canadian Literature. The risk with any anthology is that they reflect the taste, time and mind of the anthologist (Lochhead ix) and all of these factors are subject to fashion and the passing of time. Dewart's tastes, while they may have reflected the tastes of his contemporaries, are out of fashion. In the afterword to their anthology covering the beginnings of Canadian poetry, Carole Gerson and Gwendolyn Davies suggest that "Dewart favoured poets in the genteel tradition" and he contributed to "the heightened sense of cultural identity" that would accompany confederation (369). A.J.M. Smith is less ambiguous in his 1943 anthology when he suggests that none of the pre-Confederation poets, the poets that appear in Dewart's book, managed to create a poetry that was in any way "Canadian." Furthermore, despite Dewart's wishful thinking, Charles Sangster was not the first Canadian master poet (Smith 12-3). Of the 48 poets who appear in Dewart's *Selections from Canadian Poets*, only six appear in Smith's 1943 *The Book of Canadian Poetry* published by University of Chicago Press.[15] Gerson and Davies' *Canadian Poetry: From the Beginnings Through the First World War* published in 1994 by McClelland and Stewart and bearing the NCL imprimatur shares only four poets with Dewart. Only Charles Sangster, Alexander McLachlan, and Charles Heavysege appear in all three anthologies. An argument could be made that the apparent shift in fashion is simply a function of there being more material available to the later anthologists and,

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[15]    In Canada, it was printed by W.J. Gage of Toronto.

thus, a greater amount of quality material to choose from. Conversely, publishing in the 1990s, Gerson and Davies would have been subject to greater pressure to produce a representative anthology and would, thus, have had to exclude some of Dewart's selections. The problem with these metrics is that while one or the other may work for one of the subsequent anthologies, neither can account adequately for the other, nor can they account for the roughly 90% loss of Dewart's poems.

While the historic moment when the Canadian Canon coalesced and changing literary fashions account for some of *Selections from Canadian Poets'* stature, they offer an incomplete picture at best. What is more likely is that in calling for a national literature that would reflect the national character and serve as the glue to hold a Canadian nation together, Dewart got his wish and, as a result, the majority of his selections were found wanting. The colonial mind he feared would prevent an audience from accepting Canadian literature, the mind nostalgic for the Mother Country, infected his poets. As David Staines points out, "throughout his book one can easily hear echoes of the Romantic and Victorian poets of England, of Wordsworth, Keats, and Byron, and of Tennyson and Browning" (135-7). Dewart himself cites William Shakespeare, and Robert Burns as the kind of national poets  a young Canada needs, and laments that "if a Milton or a Shakespeare, was to arise among us, it is far from certain that his merit would be recognized" (Dewart xv). The paradigm for the poets in *Selections from Canadian Poets* and for Dewart himself is not Canadian, it is English. A.J.M. Smith explains that:

> None of these poets of Canada before Confederation had
> succeeded in creation of a poetry that was clearly and
> definitely "Canadian" in the sense that it differed from the
> poetry of England as the flowers and foliage, the lakes and

rivers, and the mountains and the very air itself of Canada
differed from those of the mother-country
(Smith 12)

The inability to differentiate the poems from the tradition of England, to create something

"Canadian" as Smith suggests renders Dewart historical but not canonical. *Selections*

*from Canadian Poets* is not Canadian poetry, but rather, it is English poetry written by

colonials while living in Canada.

The difference between Canadian poetry and Colonial poetry is one of power and

representation. A Canadian poet imagines themselves as part of the community of

Canadian poets, that the land and the people they write about—that they represent—is

their land and their people. In an abstract sense, the nation writes the poems since, as

Margaret Atwood suggests, "Authors are also transmitters of their culture" (12). The

Canadian poet participates in a culture that they identify as Canadian and this is, to some

extent, always already present in the writing. The Colonial poet, on the other hand, does

not imagine themselves part of a domestic Canadian culture or tradition, they are focused

on the Mother Country. Their imaginative landscape is shaped entirely by the image, the

memory of the Mother/Fatherland. This is evident when you look at a poem like Ewan

McColl's "The Highland Emigrant's Last Farewell," where McColl proclaims that

"Come weal, come woe—till life's last throe,/ My Highland Home shall seem/ An Eden

bright in Fancy's light,/ A Heaven in Memory's dream!" (Dewart 98). Scotland here

represents the paradigm, the gold standard, it has entirely shaped—and will continue to

do so even after the poem's speaker emigrates "Come weal, come woe"—the imaginative

space the poet will use to understand and express their new home. Canada, for McColl,

can only be represented through the filter of Scotland. In her poem, "O Can You Leave Your Native Land?," Susanna Moodie mirrors McColl's move, suggesting to the "exile's bride… [leaving her] Mother's home and cheerful hearth" that "Amid the shades of forest dark,/ Our loved isle will appear/ An Eden, whose delicious bloom/ Will make the wild more drear" (Dewart 156-7). Once again, when the poet reads Canada through the lens of the "loved isle" that contains "Mother's home and cheerful hearth," Britain is constructed as an edenic paradise and Canada becomes a wild, dark, forest—a home to exiles—by dint of its difference.

Even in the poems that wholeheartedly embrace Canada as both the poet's homeland and positive space, like Helen M. Johnson's "Our Native Land," Canada must articulated in terms of its Britishness. Johnson starts her poem by asking "What land more beautiful than ours?/ What land more blessed?" indicating a very sense of pride in Canada as a special space. Johnson's poem is to large extent couched in familiar signifiers like the open prairie and the polar north—Johnson's reference to "The South with all its wealth of flowers" (Dewart 80) simultaneously evokes the image of Canada as natural expanse and the civility of the English garden—but unlike Moodie's "forest dark" Johnson's Canada becomes the edenic paradise. Beyond simply the reinscription of Canada as a wild space, Johnson's poem presents an image of Canada as a bastion of freedom—the desired destination of slaves in the American South:

> The slave who but her name hath heard,
>     Repeats it day and night;—
> And envies every little bird
>     That takes its northward flight!
>
> As to the Polar star they turn

> Who brave a pathless sea,—
> So the oppressed in secret yearn,
> Dear native land for thee!
> (Dewart 82)

This is a strong nationalist statement. It presents a clear contrast between the Canada and her American cousin and claims for Canada a kind of positive exceptionalism. Canada as presented in Johnson's poem is a positive space where the images of nature and expanse become synonymous with freedom and opportunity. This is tempered, however, by an invocation of British glory:

> How many loving memories throng
> Round Britain's stormy coast!
> Renowned in story and song,
> Her glory is our boast!
>
> With loyal hearts we still abide
> Beneath her sheltered wing;—
> While with true patriot love and pride
> To Canada we cling!
> (Dewart 82)

These two stanzas follow directly the two concerned with Canada as the land of freedom desired by the oppressed and certainly can and should be read as Johnson further contrasting Canada with the United States: Canada still loyally abides British rule and as such may claim Britain's glory as her own while the American's through their inconstancy have surrendered this right. Where this claim becomes problematic is that while it attempts produce a positive sense of a Canadian nation it reinforces the paternal relationship between the colonies of British North America and the mother-country. Johnson is careful through next three stanzas to assert that Canadian loyalty to Britain comes from the bottom up rather than the top down—this is a voluntary fealty—but this

doesn't negate the fact that by constructing the relationship between the colonies and the

mother-country in the paternal way implied by the sheltering wing she makes it

impossible to produce an image of Canada as Britain's equal. Canada in that relationship

will always be the junior partner. Furthermore, it once again defines Canada by and

through its relationship to Britain; the difference between a Canada and the United States

is Canada is still British. This construction, even in the clearly patriotic Canadian poems

Dewart collects, overrides any claims of Canadian identity because Canadianness is

predicated on a subject innate Britishness.[16]

The Colonial poet, even though they live in the colony and have to endure the

hardships and pleasures of living there which are presumably very different from living in

the Motherland—if the poets in Dewart's anthology are to be believed, it is at the very

least much colder—can only present a fictive image of the colony imagined through the

Motherland. They can only produce representations of Canada that speak to the British

idea of Canada that are completely unrecognizable to Canadians.

This system of representation is integral to the maintenance of Imperial power. By

controlling how a colonial people are represented, the Colonial power is able to exert to

control over the colony itself. The representation can be, and likely is, entirely fictive but

the truth of the representation is not what is at stake, the power to represent is. This power

structure is what Edward Said identifies as Orientalism. He writes that "It is Europe that

articulates the Orient; this articulation is the prerogative, not of a puppet master, but of a

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[16]    The poem, it should also be noted, is a further example of another problem in Canadian identity politics,
the negative definition. In this discourse, Canadian identity can only be produced by differentiation
from American identity and culture. For Johnson, Canada's freedom is in direct contrast to the slavery
present in the American South. This argument, while may have been accurate, doesn't produce an image
of the Canadian subject so much as it produces an image of the American subject that it is not.

genuine creator, whose life-giving power represents, animates, constitutes the otherwise

silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries" (Said 57). Canada, while not

necessarily participating in the same discourses as the Oriental subject, in the poems of

the Colonial poet is always represented from without. It is an object of study, ultimately

fixed and wholly articulated in the British mind. *Selections from Canadian Poets* is an

example of this articulation. Robert Stuart Patterson's poem, "The Emblems of Our

Homes," serves as a perfect example of this phenomenon. Patterson spends three stanzas

rehearsing the symbols and virtues of England, Ireland and Scotland, suggesting that the

Rose, '"*triple leaf"* of green," and Thistle are important and reified national symbols

before coming to Canada, of which he writes:

> O snow and pine clad Canada,
> Old England's loyal child,
> With inland lakes like oceans,
> With forests dark and wild,
> With the fall of thy Niagara
> Loud as a rushing sea,
> The Beaver and the Maple Leaf
> Thy emblems shall be.
> (Dewart 166)

Canada is depicted as expanse, a land of wild nature. It is also infantilized as England's

"loyal child," making any claim to a Canadian subjectivity dependent on England. What

is curiously lacking in the stanza is any mention of the people; Patterson offers us no

comment on the sons and daughters of Canada like he does in the previous stanzas about

England, Ireland and Scotland. His poetic assumption would seem to be that the

Canadian people are subsumed under the previous categories. The French Canadians are

decidedly absent from this poem, this articulation of Canada to say nothing of the Native

population. Patterson does not speak here to the Canadian experience, but rather, the British imagination of Canada. Dewart himself justifies the absence of any French Canadian poets in his Introductory Essay, declaring that "their literature is more French than Canadian, and their bond of union is more religious than literary or political" (Dewart x). The suggestion lurking behind this is that the Quebecois have no claim to the narrative of Canada as a conquered people, that to be Canadian means to be a British colonist. History has proven how problematic this assumption will be for Canada, and it also raises a question about Dewart's text. If the term Canadian, as deployed by Dewart and the poets he anthologized, is incapable of dealing with other White Christians of Western European descent, how could it possibly deal with the diversity of contemporary Canadian society? It simply cannot. There is no way for Dewart's anthology to adapt to a Canadian poetry that incorporates poems like Rita Joe's "I Lost My Talk," where she, recounting the experience of a First Nations child sent to a residential school, declares that she lost her talk, "The talk you took away" (Armstrong and Grauer 17). Nor can it accommodate Irving Layton, a Jewish poet from Montreal, wandering through the Church of Notre Dame and talking to the statuettes of Jeremiah and Ezekiel given French names, or Fred Wah dealing with the complexities of race and identity in *Diamond Grill*. Dewart may have nationalist ambitions, he may believe very much in a Canadian literature and a Canadian nation, but his *Selections from Canadian Poets* simply is not Canadian. It is, at its core, a record of the literature of English speakers in British North America marked by verse that lionizes Britannia and describes an abstracted nature filtered through remembrances of the homeland.

Edward Hartley Dewart argued that a national literature was essential in the formation of national character. He believed wholeheartedly that should Canada develop a national literature, it could nation of the first order. Arguably, this has happened. There is a Canadian literature that demonstrates certain idiosyncrasies that could to be attributed to the national character, and the same can be said of Canadian film with its (to borrow a phrase from Katharine Monk) weird sex and snow shoes. Dewart's articulation of the need for Canadian literature, that poetry is not only important but that it can express the national identity, that it can create the imaginative space necessary for a nation and not just a state, is a contribution of immeasurable value to the national discourse. His understanding of the problematic nature of colonialism in terms of shaping the national psyche seems prescient. And, yet, Dewart himself is a footnote. His anthology, the first of its kind and highly saturated with the questions of nation latent in that of English contemporary, Palgrave, is viewed either as a quaint historical moment—the genteel birth of a discourse—or as an impediment, a colonial hobble.

This is the result of self-fulfilling prophecy. When a national literature did develop, Dewart's book became irrelevant. The poets in *Selections from Canadian Poets* in all likelihood did not view themselves as Canadian first, but rather as British living in the colonies. Canada, in most cases, was not their homeland. As a group, their fortunes may have suffered from the material concerns of canon formation or changing literary fashion, but the real problem is that they never managed to become Canadian. Instead, they became like Margaret Atwood's Susanna Moodie, "a word/ in a foreign language."

# Chapter 2

## A (Post)Modern Archaeology: Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was." It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger,

Walter Benjamin

As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day… Are there any questions?

Margaret Atwood

As Frank Davey notes in the chapter "An Unneeded Biography" from his book *Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics*, Atwood's prose closely parallels her life. While not necessarily biographical, there are clear resonances between Atwood and the spaces her characters inhabit; Davey notes that Atwood shares jobs with *The Edible Woman*'s Marian MacAlpine and *Lady Oracle*'s Joan Foster, and that the setting of *Surfacing* closely parallels her parent's Tamiskaming cabin (14). The textual product "often appears to be fictionalized versions of the original experience, fictionalized Atwoods" (*Margaret Atwood: a Feminist Poetics* 14). There is a sense, Davey suggests, that behind the curtain of fiction lurks Atwood herself. Her absence from the text a product of the demands of genre—images of the self altered by the need for dramatic tension and the distortions of language—rather than a deliberate obscurantism.

This is by no means an Earth shattering revelation, or even all that particular to Atwood. Davey, however, has two very important reasons for drawing attention to it. The

first is that by pointing out that though there is a degree of parallel between Atwood and

her protagonists (what I suppose could be called the Atwood types) there are ultimately

divergences that underscore the fiction of these characters. They are at best simulacra of

Atwood and should not be confused with Atwood itself. This conclusion goes a long way

to frustrating the penchant for mythologizing Atwood that exists in some quarters (14).

The second reason to call attention to the resonances and parallels between Atwood and

her fictional selves is that these resonances appear to be all but absent in her poetry,

particularly the early poetry.

What the reader is presented with instead is a series of masks, dramatic personae,

ciphers and dodges. Take, for instance, "This is a photograph of me," the first poem from

*The Circle Game*. While the title seemingly promises a discernible image of the poem's

speaker, what is presented instead what appears to be "a smeared/ print: blurred lines and

grey flecks/ blended with the paper." The incomprehensible image then opens to a

landscape revealing "part of a tree… a small frame house./ In the background there is a

lake." Even as the image moves toward clarity it elides the declared subject of the

photograph, the speaking subject is absent amidst the rural landscape. Even when the

poem announces the presence of the speaker in the landscape, "I am in the lake, in the

center/ of the picture, just under the surface," it performs the erasure of the subject: "The

photograph was taken/ the day after I drowned." The poem concludes:

> but if you look long enough,
> eventually
> you will be able to see me.
> (*The Circle Game* 11)

While the speaker may eventually be revealed to the reader who looks long enough, she is

constantly being erased, elided or obscured by the poem's central image. She is masked

and distanced from the prying eyes of the reader in all but the most extreme instances.

"This is a photograph of me" performs Davey's assertion that Atwood creates masks to

speak for her and the "central fact about a mask is that it hides" (*Margaret Atwood: A*

*Feminist Poetics* 15). The speaker in the poem, even if it is read to speak with Atwood's

voice, is guarded by the obscuring image from the unearned gaze of the reader though the

speaker may in fact be inviting the reader/addressee of the poem to put forth the effort to

earn the revelation of the speaker's image.[17] Even then, the speaker can only be perceived

through an extended meditation on her absence which means the presence of that identity

can only be understood in terms of its absence and distance from the reader/viewer.

Whereas the novels provide simulated Atwoods linked to the real one by biographic

details and then allowed to diverge, the poems appear to sever this link between poet and

voice from the outset offering implied or explicit characters like the speakers in Robert

Browning's monologues, which, given the poems' connection in many cases to

auto/biography and documentary is problematic.

In Atwood's 1970 book, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, the obscured poet

implied by "This is a photograph of me" becomes codified. Atwood writes the book in the

persona of Canadian pioneer author Susanna Moodie. As Al Purdy describes her,

> Susanna Moodie was an English emigrant to Canada in
> 1832. She settled with her husband in Douro Township,

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[17]

     In this way the poem parallels Michael Snow's 1967 film *Wavelength* with its near
continual zoom towards a point in the distance. If the viewer can endure the length of the
film and its lack of a conventional plot they are rewarded with the revelation of the object
the lens constantly moves toward.

near Peterborough, and her book, *Roughing it in the Bush*,
in one of the basic pioneer documents of Canada.
(30)

Atwood, in theory at least, gives the book over to the voice she sees in Moodie's writing,

though she asserts that what interested her was "not [Moodie's] conscious voice but the

other voice running like counterpoint through her work" (*JSM* 63) allowing herself a

degree of creative latitude. Davey and Purdy disagree to what degree the mask/persona of

Moodie is ultimately successful at eliminating or eliding Atwood's presence in the text.

Davey seems to hold that beyond begging the question of why the poet would deploy

these masks and personas that the tactic is successful to the point "the critic can never be

sure that Atwood is speaking in her own voice (ie. out of her own biography or beliefs)

and wishes to be held responsible for the implications of a given statement or image" and

he is forced to produce a fictional discursive image of the poet in order to do approach the

poems (*Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics* 15). The implication is that the poems so

thoroughly erase or hide the poet that it is necessary for the critic to create a fictional

version of the poet in order to satisfy the requirements of discourse. Purdy, on the other

hand, suggests that Atwood-as-Moodie is excellent fiction, but never reads as

successfully as Atwood-as-Atwood. He compares *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* with

John Berryman's *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*:

A similar authoritative and undeniably once-actual
personage takes over in both books: Moodie and
Bradstreet, with Atwood and Berryman as shadow
manipulators coming to life in the publisher's blurbs. The
puppets steal the show (but not the royalties): and this to
me is fiction.
(39)

Purdy reveals here the general conceit of both Atwood and Berryman's books is that the assumed persona is ultimately the real and authentic speaker while the author position is a functional construction; for him, this illusion fails to hold up, though he does feel that *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* succeeds as poetry (42).

Purdy's refusal to accept the authenticity of Atwood-as-Moodie as well as Davey's critical decision to fabricate a discursive author/voice that "speaks to us—or tricks us—in the poet's personal voice" (*Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics* 15) speaks to a crisis in the text. There is a conflict between the desire to accept the fiction that the poems are the private personal thoughts and feelings of what appears to be a historical figure and the desire to read the subjectivity of the poet through the poems. The text frustrates these desires. Atwood's Moodie shares a name and a biography with the historical Moodie but diverges wildly in her attitudes and voice—the critical consensus being that Atwood is a far better writer than Moodie and, for that matter, far more affectionate towards Canada. Those seeking the subjective voice of the poet— Wordsworth's man speaking to other men—in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* are forced to contend with the puppet of Moodie rather than being able to draw a straight line back to Atwood. The baffle is sufficient to construct a state of plausible deniability in which Atwood can claim an active absence from the text. If you stare at the photograph long enough you may be able to detect traces of her, but those traces will still be sufficiently distant from the active Romantic "I" and subject so as to leave Atwood unscathed.

However, it is through Davey's fictional construct of the Atwood-poet that the

crisis can be resolved. Not only because it allows for the critic/reader to approach the

coherent voice of the text in the context of its production—Davey's purpose for the

fiction is clearly to produce a construct that conforms to Michel Foucault's author

function so he can treat the poems as easily as the semi-autobiographical novels—but

also because this is the approach that Atwood's text seems to suggest. After all, the first

sentence of Atwood's afterword is "[t]hese poems were generated by a dream" (62) which

situates the original germ of the poems not in Moodie or *Roughing it in the Bush* but in

Atwood's unconscious. The dream she describes consists of her watching an opera she

had written about Moodie, the only person in the audience watching a solitary singer on

the stage (62). Atwood asserts that while she had heard of Moodie at the time of the

dream she had not read any of Moodie's writing, and was disappointed when she did.

This is a seemingly unimportant detail, but in developing a critical apparatus that attempts

to understand Atwood's own Moodie poems it is crucially important. The dream

establishes a narrative distance or break between the Atwood in the audience and the

producer of the text. While the dreaming Atwood is aware that she wrote the opera, the

singer provides at least one layer of mediation between the consumer and the producer—

particularly since having no direct experience of Moodie's work the consumer cannot

possibly produce the text. The dream performs the distancing, the masking that Davey

identifies as typical of Atwood's poems. Beyond this though is the instance of Susanna

Moodie in the dream. Since conscious stimulus can be excluded as the provider of this

content to the dream, or at least would appear to be excluded by the account of the dream

Atwood provides, Moodie must have some symbolic value. Moodie is the signifier, not

the signified. As such, being the author of what Purdy calls "one of the basic pioneer documents of Canada" (30), she provides access to the foundational moments of Canada. Moodie was there at the beginning of Canada or, perhaps more accurately, several origin moments[18] that helped produce modern Canada. In short, Moodie functions as a marker of history.

The specific content—life as an emigrant/immigrant, bridging of the colonial to national moment, literary career before and after the move to Canada—is largely incidental, things that Atwood may employ to give her poems the appearance of context or narrative to thicken the intertextual stew. Using the signifier of "history" brings the historical long view and the discourses attached to it into direct communication with the text in the present, an effect that can be modified and supplemented as the first iterations of a text themselves become historical moments. History, in Atwood's case the ersatz voice of Atwood-as-Moodie, allows for the text to engage issues and crises, to work through these questions and ruptures, behind the safe veil of the past. Just as the Atwood-poet can be seen to protect the real Margaret Atwood who yesterday saw Christopher Plummer in *The Tempest* at the Stratford Festival and is presumably currently somewhere in Toronto (at least according to her Twitter feed, 08/24/2010) from interventions in the text, the historical nature of Susanna Moodie allows for a safe schizophrenic break between history and the historic moment of the poems production.[19] As Fredric Jameson,

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18

Moodie's life in Canada starts with the pioneer moment and carries on through the Rebellions of 1837 and Confederation.

19

Atwood, in the afterword to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, states that if "the national mental illness of the United States is megalomania, that of Canada is paranoid

discussing Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat*, asserts:

> Everything in the film, therefore, conspires… [to set the
> action] in some eternal thirties, beyond real historical time.
> This approach to the present by way of the art language of
> the simulacrum, or of the pastiche of the stereotypical
> historical past, endows the present reality and the openness
> of present history with the spell and distance of a glossy
> mirage. Yet this mesmerizing new aesthetic mode itself
> emerged as an elaborated symptom of the waning
> historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history
> is some active way.
> (21)

The aesthetic invocation of the past pushes the text out of real historical time into a vast

space that signifies a mythical then rather than now. What Jameson astutely observes is

that this simulation or reference to the past has very little to do with the past, but instead

functions as a distancing apparatus that allows for the treatment and representation of the

present. Postmodern historicity offers the opportunity to comment on and critique the

present moment through the invocation of the fictional culturally determined past or the

displacing of current concerns in to historic modes like Robert Altman's film M*A*S*H

which approaches the Vietnam War through the historic space of Korea. Science Fiction,

as Margaret Atwood's own *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrates, allows for the same effect

but in a different temporal direction. [20]

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schizophrenia" (62). What Atwood is implying is the notion of the divided self at the
center of Canadian identity, that the Canadian identity is, by nature or pathology,
multivalent. This usage of the term may be clinically inaccurate, I would suggest
dissociative identity disorder may be more consistent with what Atwood sees in Moodie
and the national literature. However, Atwood's usage is consistent with both the meaning
of the Greek root of schizo- (to split) and theoretical usages of the word as seen in Fredric
Jameson's *Postmodernism*: "Lacan describes schizophrenia as a breakdown in the
signifying chain…" (27).

[20]

     Jameson identifies the idyllic image of the 1950s as represented in films like

Thus, when Atwood and other Canadian poets—*The Journal of Susanna Moodie* is part of a sub-genre in Canadian Modernist and Postmodernist poetry that spans from Dorothy Livesay's *The Documentaries* and includes some of the most important books of the 1970s such as Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Robert Kroetsch's *The Ledger* and *Seed Catalogue*, and Christopher Dewdney's *A Palaeozoic Geololgy of London, Ontario*—invoke signifiers of the past or history they are gaining access to the historical and trans-historical material like national and personal identity in such a way as to engage the concerns of the present.[21] The historical moment becomes a medium for processing the present as Benjamin suggests when he states:

> To articulate the past historically does not mean to
> recognize it "the way it really was." It means to seize hold
> of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger… The
> danger affects both the content of the tradition and its
> receivers. The same threat hangs over both: to become a
> tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be
> made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that
> is about to overpower it.
> (*Illuminations* 255)

Benjamin articulates this engagement with the past as an act of resistance, a way to undermine ideology and totalizing narratives of control. The past drawn into active conversation with the present escapes the strictures of authority. It is no longer a monolith to be interpreted solely through the privileged lens of the dominant order, but itself

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*American Graffitti* or television shows like *Happy Days* as a prime example of this phenomenon as they bear only a passing resemblance to the "real" historical period.

[21] *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, beyond the Canadian tradition of the documentary poem, also participates in a tradition of feminist auto/biography and life writing that icludes poets Lynn Hejinian, Lorine Niedecker and all the way back to nineteenth century texts like Mary Shelley's *Frankensten.* Feminist auto/biography as a critical discourse is described by Liz Stanley as "an epistemologically-oriented concern with the intellectual and other ramifications of the shifting boundaries between self and other, present and past, writing and reading, fact and fiction within the... texts that are 'biographies' and 'autobiographies'" (4).

becomes a lens through which certainty and authority becomes challenged.

The first and untitled poem of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* indicates that this liberation of the past is part Atwood's agenda. She writes:

> I take this picture of myself
> and with my sewing scissors
> cut out the face
>
> Now it is more accurate:
>
> where my eyes were,
> every-
> thing appears
> (*JSM* 7)

The speaker of the poem goes beyond simply effacing her voice and denying her subjectivity, she completely destroys it. If the face serves as a symbol of human individuality and, therefore, subjectivity, and the eyes, as the organs through which the Cartesian subject views both objects and other potential subjects, are linked with the personal, the speaker's cutting them out of the photograph on a symbolic level functions as a destruction of the certainty and power of the romantic "I". The first stanza moving from "I" in the first line to "the face" in line three progressively depersonalizes the poem until, in the last stanza, all that remains is a frame that enables the seeing of "every-/thing." The voice has evacuated itself from the text except as a frame or prism that enables the viewing and processing of experience. The poem recalls "This is a photograph of me" from *The Circle Game* both in the way it uses the idea of a photograph to reduce the poem's speaker to an instance of the text rather than something that dominates the textual landscape (however, this apparent absence actually calls attention to the speaker and their absence, in fact, signals their overwhelming presence in the poems),

and in their material position relative to the books in which they appear. Both poems

displace the subjective voice at the outset of the text. The reader is obliged to truly treat

the voice—which is habitually assigned to the author—as Roland Barthes implores

nothing beyond a mere instance of writing. This is, however, incredibly problematic. As

we see in "This is a photograph of me," the erasure of the subject ensures the subject's

presence in the text. The visually absent figure appears in the photograph when viewed

properly. So to in "I take this picture of myself," where the apparent destruction of the

subject via the sewing scissors produces a frame or lens or prism through which the world

of the text maybe interpreted; the frame is in the shape of the speaker's face placing the

reader in the place of the speaker. Where this gets really complicated in *The Journals of*

*Susanna Moodie* versus *The Circle Game* is while "This is a photograph of me" is a short

lyric related to the other poems in the collection, "I take this picture of myself" is part of

a long poem cycle that is written in an assumed voice; however, it is not in one of the

journals that comprise the text, it is outside the delineated bounds of the Moodie voice

but, as it appears after the table of contents, is within the text.[22] We can presume that the

voice in "This is a photograph of me" is consistent with Davey's Atwood-poet or with

Atwood herself, but with "I take this picture of myself" this presumption is at worst

impossible and at best problematic. The speaker can be read as Moodie or Atwood or

both or, though this is unlikely, an entirely different voice. There is an ambiguity to this

voice, a collision between the poet and the character that tints all of the text subsequently

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[22]

       But is not listed in the table of contents, nor does it possess a title as they appear
in the rest of the book.

encountered. While the poem declares that where the eyes/I's were everything is visible, which foregrounds the importance of the reader seeing from this position and seeing what the hand that holds the scissors is presenting to them, the one thing that isn't seen is the speaking subject where it necessarily blends with the reader. This point of collapse suggests that this is a moment where the character, the poet and the reader along with the present, the textual past, and the historical referent become a singularity. The masking function of this poem prepares the reader or whoever can be seen to enter the text to receive the emotional, ideological, critical and political messages of the text while obscuring the intent to do so.

Before we address precisely what Atwood's text is attempting to accomplish through these textual masks and baffles, we as readers need to more fully understand why they are being employed in the first place. Atwood's text's approach to the question of the authorial voice and the intersection of the reader, the writer, and the text is, without a doubt, post-structuralist in nature. There is also a long tradition of historically-based creative writing in Western culture from the presumption that the epics were historical accounts, through Shakespeare's history plays drawing on Raphael Holinshed, through Walter Scott and *Ivanhoe*. All of these texts, like Atwood's, take history and repurpose and reshape it in the light of their present ideological needs, so while Atwood's approach to history is certainly rooted in the latter half of the twentieth century her appropriation of historical material is firmly set in the Western tradition.[23] Where *The Journals of Susanna*

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[23]

      Shakespeare's *Richard III* is the poster child for this phenomenon. Serving, in part, to legitimate Tudor claims to the throne, Shakespeare's play depicts the wicked, evil, deformed Richard of propaganda which then serves to displace any counterview of Richard from culture (Jones).

*Moodie* is different from the epics, the history plays, or *Ivanhoe* is in form.

The poems in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, with the exception of "I take this picture of myself" which is liminal in its relation to the wider text, are arranged in a series of journals that cover the span of Moodie's life in Canada. This matter of genre is important, since it moves the text into the tradition of literary biography and the documentary. As M.H. Abrams explains, the journal "is a day-to-day record of the events in a person's life, written for personal use and pleasure, with little or no thought of publication" (15). The expectation that the title introduces which is reinforced by the organization of the text into the three journals, each announced with the journal number and dates in the empty cameo frame implied by "I take this picture of myself," is that this text is Moodie's private record of her life. This lends the contents an air of authenticity and legitimacy. The journal is not mediated as other biographical works or historical artifacts might be, it can be treated as a (subjectively) true account of events and individuals. The central presumption being that, since the journal or diary is a private text and not meant for mass consumption, there is little reason for the author to lie to themselves. The journal as a textual object because of this bridges the genres of (auto)biography and the documentary. Like the biography, but unlike the memoir, it traffics in a representation of life as it truly happens, it presupposes that the only limitation of the text's accuracy is "the range of their knowledge" and even in its subjective form the autobiography insists on its objectivity and veracity (Childs and Fowler 20-21).[24] The journal participates in the documentary mode, quite simply, because

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       Despite the fact that in principle and technique the autobiography and the memoir

it is a document. It is a record of events that is presumed to be true; it is evidentiary and

provides a record of the time, space and conditions in which it was produced. The text of

the journal is analogous to the camera of the documentary filmmaker, where they differ is

that written language is perhaps more obviously mediated than the images that the camera

captures.

These very specific generic qualities, all designed to reinforce the illusion that

Atwood's text is true in an objective sense, allow Atwood to circumvent the boundaries

between the real and the fictional. This, in turn, allows her to say things through Moodie's

mouth that are inconsistent with the historical Moodie, but speaks to the truth of the

textual Moodie and furthers the text's agenda. Therefore, the reader encounters Atwood-

as-Moodie on "A Bus along St Clair" in December and accepts it despite its anachronism

(*JSM* 60-1).[25] This distortion of the biographical and documentary conventions—the

reader is confronted with a textual object that makes at least superficial claims to being

the true narrative of Moodie's life while speaking in a language inconsistent with her

voice and even the ending of her life—suggests a pair of texts through which to read *The

Journals of Susanna Moodie*. The first is Gertrude Stein's 1933 book, *The Autobiography*

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are quite similar I would suggest that they are discursively different objects. While both
are subjective and articulate their version of the truth through a particular mediating lens,
there is a difference in the claim to that truth each genre makes. The autobiography is
presented as a self-authored biography and, as such, attempts to participate in the claims
of objectivity and fact that the biography does. It holds to the illusion that what it presents
is objective fact. Memoir, and other life writing, is grounded not in objectivity or the fact,
but rather memory. This allows for a wider and more subjective approach to the events
recounted, and even in the events that are recounted and those that are excluded.  Memoir
accepts a certain level of distortion that autobiography must deny.

[25]

Moodie died in April 1885. The poem is set in 1969.

*of Alice B. Toklas* and the second is *Right Hand/Left Hand* and the documentary poems of

Dorothy Livesay. Like Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* both Stein and

Livesay's texts are interested in the use of biographical and documentary structures in

order to construct a subject—Atwood-as-Moodie and the Atwood-Poet are at their core

textual subjects rather than active subjects much like Stein's Toklas and Livesay's version

of herself—and the viability of this subject or identity rests within the truth claims vested

in the genre. However, also like Atwood's masks and constructions, these artificial voices

serve to distance the author from the text or at least to force the appearance of this

distance. There is a degree of depersonalization in their approach to the biographical text

that results in the replacement of the author as the center of power—"The Author...

thought to *nourish* the book" and provide it with a history *(Image-Music-Text* 145)—with

another voice that provides assurances as to the history and the truth of the text that the

reader confronts.

     In Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* this voice is that of Alice B.

Toklas, Stein's wife and typist/editor. Toklas as the voice of the text serves a double

function much like Moodie. Her real existence lends the text a claim to the truth—Toklas

knew Stein, Hemmingway, Picasso, Matisse and the other prominent figures of the text

and is thus able to speak about them from the point of view of an insider. Alice B. Toklas

was a direct witness to one of the most significant periods in Western culture and

aesthetics in the twentieth century and thus can provide the reader access to this period.

The same, of course, could be said of Stein herself. What makes Toklas' voice interesting

in this context is not simply that she was there, but the nature of her participation in

events. She was, or at least could be construed as, a peripheral figure who was not an

"artist" or a "writer" or "poet," but rather was the wife of a writer and poet:

> Before I decided to write this book of my twenty-five years
> with Gertrude Stein, I had often said that I would write,
> The wives of geniuses I have sat with. I have sat with so
> many. I have sat with wives who were not wives, of
> geniuses who were real geniuses. I have sat with real wives
> of geniuses who were not real geniuses. I have sat with
> wives of geniuses, of near geniuses, of would be geniuses,
> in short I have sat very often and very long with many
> wives and wives of many geniuses.
> (*AABT* 14)

This passage positions Toklas relative to the major players and since in this passage the

Toklas voice makes no claims on the title of genius herself, but rather as a wife of a

genius, her views and interpretation of the events and individuals she encounters gain a

kind of legitimacy. Toklas can stand in for the reader and offer insight that a genius fully

engaged in work of being a genius would be unable to illuminate due to their self-interest.

She also makes a claim, though it is part of the subtext, that she can evaluate who is a real

genius and who isn't. She has sat with the wives of "geniuses, of near geniuses, of would

be geniuses" and can tell the difference. The credibility of this voice is integral to its

second major function. The Toklas voice becomes a mask or cypher that allows Stein to

say things that she would not otherwise be able to do credibly. A prime example of this

comes early in the book when the Toklas voice describes meeting Stein for the first time:

> there at her house [in Paris] I met Gertrude Stein. I was
> impressed by the coral brooch she wore and by her voice. I
> may say that only three times in my life have I met a genius
> and each time a bell within me rang and I was not
> mistaken, and I may say that in each case it was before
> there was any general recognition of the quality of genius
> in them. The three geniuses of whom I wish to speak are

> Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso and Alfred Whitehead. I have met many important people, I have met several great people but I have known only three first class geniuses and in each case on sight within me something rang. In no one of these three cases have I been mistaken.
> (*AABT* 5)

In this passage Stein has declared that she is a genius, but it goes further than that. She has declared that of all the people she or Toklas have met in their years in Paris where they knew most of the major artists and writers of early twentieth century, only three individuals could be declared to be true geniuses and one of these is Stein herself. If Stein writing and speaking as Gertrude Stein had made this declaration it would come immediately under suspicion because it is incredibly self-serving. The statement is negated because it exceeds the realms of polite behavior; it's distasteful and gauche to declare yourself one of the singular minds of the era and it alienates the reader. However, by putting these words in the mouth of Alice B. Toklas as she supposedly narrates her own life, Stein is able to ameliorate the statement. The distance that the Toklas voice produces allows Stein access to narrative space that her own subjectivity would otherwise deny her. She can say things about her life filtered through the lens of the Toklas voice that she simply couldn't using her own—like declaring herself a genius. In one sense, this can be seen as a manifestation of "[w]riting [as] that neutral, composite space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost" (*Image-Music-Text* 142), but this is inadequate given that in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* Stein is constructing an autobiography in the second person and, thus, is asserting her subjectivity even as she submerges it.[26] Even if the reader wholeheartedly accepts the Toklas voice as it is

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[26] If we think of the act of writing an autobiography as an attempt to articulate an identity or subject then the act of writing someone else's autobiography could, at least theoretically, be seen as an act that

established in the first words of the text—"I was born in San Francisco"--there can be little doubt of the presence of Stein in the text, even if this is only manifest in Toklas' repeated arrivals in Paris that stylistically recalls Stein's cubist influenced poetry.[27] So what happens in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* cannot be seen as an erasure of Stein as a subject, but might more accurately be read as a construction.

      Stein's text is artificial. While it makes an effort to support the fiction that it is Alice B. Toklas' autobiography and, as such, conforms to the expectations of genre, namely that it is a history of Toklas' life as recorded for public consumption by Alice herself, in the end it accepts that it is a fiction and draws the curtain back to reveal Stein as the author of the text:

> For some time now many people, and publishers,
> have been asking Gertrude Stein to write her autobiography
> and she had always replied, not possibly. She began to tease
> me and say that I should write my autobiography. Just
> think, she would say, what a lot of money you would
> make... Then she began to get serious and say, but really
> seriously you ought to write your autobiography... I am a
> pretty good housekeeper and a pretty good gardener and a
> pretty good needlewoman and a pretty good secretary and a
> pretty good editor... and I found it difficult to add being a
> pretty good author.
> (*AABT* 251-2)

This passage establishes the impetus behind Toklas' autobiography: the desire on the part

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results in the  subordination of one's individuality to the other. The opposite appears to be true in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* because Toklas' story appears to be secondary to that of Stein. This can be seen in the way that the story of Toklas before she meets Stein lasts for three pages (3-5) and culminates in her meeting Stein whereas the story of Stein prior to Toklas lasts fifty-six pages (29-85) and finishes with *The Making of Americans* rather than meeting Toklas. Stein's life dominates the early portions of the book and can be seen to partially erase Toklas or reduce her to a secondary figure in the text. In this way, though Stein can be read as subordinating herself to the Toklas voice and submerging her own voice (part of the reason the book is viewed as Stein's most accessible), Stein would appear to be asserting her own experience and as a result her subjectivity.

27  "Gertrude Stein was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania. As I [Toklas] am an ardent californian [sic] and as she spent her youth there I have often begged her to be born in California but she has always remained firmly born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania" (*AABT* 69).

of individuals and publishers for an autobiography of Gertrude Stein. Stein's response of

"not possibly" functions to remove this iteration of the text as a legitimate option. Stein

articulates that she could not possibly write her own autobiography and then immediately

shifts the expectation to Toklas. An autobiography of Toklas, as a teleological result,

would always carry with it the trace and echo of Stein's autobiography not only because

the lives of the two women were completely intertwined but because one of the text's

origin points is the desired autobiography of Gertrude Stein. The mention of money can

be excused as a dodge, an attempt to devalue the text as a serious literary endeavor,

though it does show an awareness of the reason of why such a book would be desirable.[28]

Arguably, an awareness of the book as commodity latent in the text would move the text

out of the realm of art and into the lower reaches of cultural products; effectively this is a

disavowal of the book. Stein is said to have disliked the book because of its commercial

qualities (Souhami 189), but what this line reveals about the real Gertrude Stein's attitude

towards the text is less significant than what it does to genre conventions. While readers

may have the expectation that the autobiography is ultimately a commercial genre—

simply put, there are more commercially motivated autobiographies than artistically or

historically motivated ones; more *Sliding into Home* by Kendra Wilkinson than Genet's

*The Miracle of the Rose*—there is still some pretense the autobiography tells the story of

an important person and tells it for an important reason whether that reason is aesthetic,

political, historical or inspirational. Stein's admission that there may be a financial

motivation to the production of the text underscores the potential for fiction in the text by

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[28]    *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* was Stein's most commercially successful book, and was written
        at least partially in order to make money. (Southami 187)

revealing the production itself as a self-serving act. Composition here is moved away from the idealized act of genius through which the reader can experience transcendence or completion to another in an unending series of commodities. As a result, the claim that biography possesses a "peculiar virtue being that it alone of the literary forms seeks to tell the literal, unvarnished truth"(Childs and Fowler 20) must come into question because the object that the author is seeking is not the truth so much as money. This revelation or admission frees the text from the obligations that the genre's altruistic trappings would inflict upon it; it moves away from objective truth towards a subjective one where Stein speaks through a simulacrum of Toklas.

The other way this passage reveals the fiction of the I voice established in the text's opening lines is its articulation of Toklas as a subject. Following from Ford Maddox Ford's statement to Stein that "I am a pretty good writer and a pretty good editor and a pretty good business man but I find it very difficult to be all three at once" (*AABT* 251), Toklas proclaims that she is a pretty good housekeeper, gardener, needlewoman, secretary, editor and vet for dogs (*AABT* 251-2). She also differentiates herself from Ford by stating that has to do them all at once and, as a result, "found it difficult to add being a pretty good author." (*AABT* 252). There is a sense of completion and satisfaction in this articulation of Toklas. She has a number of clearly defined roles in her life and because of the demands they place on her there is no room to take on the additional role of author. The textual Toklas, through this act of self-definition, is excusing the actual Toklas from the demands of writing while also indicating Toklas simultaneous presence in the text as produced. The roles that the textual Toklas claims are, at least in part, roles that enable

Stein to write. As an editor, Toklas shepherded a number of Stein's books into print (*AABT* 242-4), but beyond this as her secretary Toklas would be responsible for the preparation of manuscripts.[29] Toklas is integral to the process of writing for Stein, and plays a material role in the shaping of Stein's texts, but this means she cannot or, rather, chooses not to assume the authorial role.[30] She vacates the role of the author in the text that purports to be her autobiography. This is a serious blow to the fiction of the Alice B. Toklas voice since it disrupts the integrity of the I in which it's spoken.

The coherent voice of Stein's Toklas is broken by its own denial that it is what it has purported, and genre demands, that it be. This break is furthered by the book's final lines in which Stein takes up the writing of the text:

> About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look
> to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography.
> You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for
> you. I am going to write it as simply as Defoe did the
> autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this it.
> (*AABT* 252)

Three things happen in this passage that make permanent the break between the real Toklas—the subject that rejects the authorship of the text because her life is full enough —and the fictional "I" that Stein deploys in the text. The first is the most obvious, Stein's Toklas voice states in no uncertain terms that the writer of the text is Gertrude Stein. This is coupled with the second interesting feature of this passage: pronoun confusion. The paragraph starts with the Toklas voice intact and recounting a conversation between herself and Stein. However, as Stein speaks she briefly assumes the I position of the text.

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[29] Toklas published, under the label of Plain Edition, Stein's work from *Lucy Church Amiably* to *Operas and Plays* between 1930 and 1932. This run of books also included Stein's *How to Write*. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in 1933 ended the need for the Plain Edition books.
[30] Toklas would write several books after Stein died.

This is partially a result of style. As is the case throughout the book, dialogue happens

without quotation marks. On the whole, this works to establish a conversational tone to

the Toklas voice's account of events; quotation marks are unnecessary because the reader

is to experience all dialogue through the filter of that voice. She is telling a story rather

than recording a transcript. This passage is slightly different because the content disrupts

the context. Here the reader is being told that the text is the result of Stein either assuming

the identity of or speaking for Toklas. The mask of Toklas as the speaker is slipping, so

when Stein speaks as an I it becomes difficult for the reader to separate out the different

layers of speakers. In the sentence "I am going to write it for you" the I can be read as

Stein-Toklas-Stein or Toklas-Stein or simply Stein. All these voices are present in the one

signifier and the polyglossic effect underlines that the Toklas voice is inauthentic and

artificial. This is bolstered by the statement that Stein was using Defoe's *Robinson*

*Crusoe* as a model since, though the book was inspired by real events, Defoe's text is a

work of fiction. If Toklas is comparable to Crusoe this means that she is, at least as she

occurs in the text, a textual fiction separated from the real Toklas by several layers of

writing much like Crusoe is distanced from Alexander Selkirk and other castaways. A key

difference between Stein's Toklas and Crusoe, however, is that Crusoe is at least the

protagonist of his text. Toklas competes with Stein for focus and page count in *The*

*Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and loses.[31] So Toklas ends up being less like Robinson

Crusoe, as Stein suggests, and more like Nick Carraway in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great*

*Gatsby*. She is essential to the narration of events and providing the reader with a

relatable contact point with the text, and, while she may be inextricably linked with the

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[31]    See note 9.

events that she recounts, she is not ultimately the prime mover in these events. Toklas, as constructed here, is a secondary participant in these events, but a primary witness with direct experience of the things she relates to the reader. As we've seen when Stein declared herself one of three authentic geniuses in the early twentieth century, this function of the constructed Toklas and its relation to the real, living, breathing Alice B. Toklas can be quite useful for constructing an image of the writer that the unmasked voice would not otherwise be able to achieve.

*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is only tangentially about Alice B. Toklas. This much is evident in the way the text presents the lives of Stein and Toklas before they meet. Though the book opens with Toklas' account of her life before Stein and before Paris, it is brief and above all short. Compare Toklas' three page life before Stein that the speaking voice presumably experienced directly to the fifty-six pages dedicated to Stein's life before she met Toklas and there can be little question as to whom this text is about. However, while the text is clearly about Stein and is written by Stein, the mask of Toklas as author grants what would be Stein's autobiography or memoir an exteriority and freedom that would otherwise be refused by Stein's direct presence or absence from the text. One of Michel Foucault's key points in "What is an Author?" is that the author, whether we accept the genius model or Foucault's model of the author-function, restricts the proliferation of meaning (899). The author is a control apparatus that keeps signification under control. The example of Stein's placing the declaration of her genius in the mouth of Toklas, again, serves as a good example since decorum and self-interest preclude Stein from saying this directly. The author as ideological entity prevents Stein

from constructing herself as she would otherwise do with her own voice. Tokas, as she

exists in the text, stands in the place where the author would reasonably be located, thus

moving this voice and function outside of the restrictions that would have affected Stein

had she spoke directly. As Foucault asserts:

> Everyone knows that, in a novel narrated in the first person,
> neither the first person pronoun, nor the present indicative
> refer exactly either to the writer or to the moment in which
> he writes, but rather to an alter ego whose distance from the
> author varies, often changing in the course of the work. It
> would be just as wrong to equate the author with the real
> writer as to equate him with the fictitious speaker; the
> author-function is carried out and operates in the scission
> itself, in this division and this distance.
> ("What is an Author?" 896)

Stein is exploiting the distance produced by this scission in a genre where the distance is

supposed to be greatly reduced and then only produced by time. She has set an author as

Foucault means that word between her and the text. Stein's Toklas allows for a

construction of Stein as an artist and individual for the consumption of the world that

appears to be exterior to Stein—however close Stein and Toklas may be Toklas would see

Stein differently than Stein herself. The mask becomes a tool for exploration and

explanation—Stein's dependence on a typist and editor to produce her texts is explained

in a childhood anecdote that further contextualizes Stein's use of Toklas as a mask (*AABT*

75-6)--of issues close to the writer that could not be easily accessed through direct

action.[32] It produces a space where deeply personal issues (in Stein's case her place in

twentieth century culture and art, in Atwood's national literary identity) can be sussed out,

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[32] "They asked the children in the public schools to write a description. Her recollection is that she described a sunset with the sun going down into a cave of clouds. Anyway it was one of the half dozen in the school chosen to be copied out on beautiful parchment paper. After she had tried to copy it twice and the writing became worse and worse she was reduced to letting someone copy it for her. This, her teacher considered a disgrace. She does not remember that she herself did" (*AABT* 75-6)

considered and then constructed at a safe distance from the writing/speaking subject.

In addition to Stein and *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,* Dorothy Livesay's theory of the documentary poem and her memoir *Right Hand, Left Hand* provide valuable insight into Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. However, whereas Stein's text is similar to Atwood's in their use of a masking or distancing narrative voice, Livesay, particularly in *Right Hand, Left Hand,* avoids the narrative voice and when she does deploy it it bears her signature "DL." Instead, Livesay offers the reader a series of documents—letters, poems, newspaper articles and pictures—with loose narration used to connect the disparate pieces. The intent in this form is to mirror the approach of documentary film and montage with the reader/viewer gaining insight into and understanding of the subject or topic of the film by the fragments relation to each other. In poems like "Call My People Home,"[33] in which Livesay confronts the internment of Japanese-Canadians during World War II, this montage effect is achieved through polyvocality. Individuals and groups of voices document the feelings and realities—though fictionalized the speakers in the poems are the products of research and interviews with the effected—of the issue with which the poet is dealing and through this multiplicity of voices offers a complex, nuanced view. In *Right Hand, Left Hand,* a similar effect is achieved by the volume and diversity of documents put into conversation with each other. Jonathan Kahana, in the introduction to his book, *Intelligence Work,* suggests that:

> documentary is an essentially transitional medium: it
> carries fragments of social reality from one place or one
> group to another, and in transporting them, translates them

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[33] This poem is subtitled "A Documentary Poem for Radio or Choral Presentation."

from a local dialect to a lingua franca. It collects the
evidence of experience in the most far flung precincts...
Then it delivers these social fact to a broader public, where
they can be used for a variety of ideological ends.
(2)

The documentary, by accumulating fragments of reality, allows this discreet reality to be

transmitted to a wider audience. Though this material is then subjected, like other

representation mediums, to ideological needs and goals of those who receive it, there is a

connection of the represented material to reality. Kahana suggests that documentary "is

always about more or other than what it depicts" (7). What allows the allegory operating

within the documentary to produce the subjective reaction the film maker desires or

intends, though, is the appearance of authenticity. The apparent veracity of the images on

the screen, even when they are staged as they were in John Flaherty's *Nanook of the

North*, allows the documentary to work. The fragments of reality transported and

translated, in order to work, must appear to be true.

A direct relationship between what is represented and the representation should be

a protection against the interference of the author based on the presumption of the

objective gaze of the camera. This argument falls apart in practice given the limited gaze

of the camera, the necessity of an operator to point it at that which is recorded, and the

intervention of the editor. As Livesay sees it, the important quality of the documentary

form in poetry is the "conscious attempt to create a dialectic between the objective facts

and the subjective feelings of the poet" ("The Documentary Poem" 267). This collision of

the representative powers and the expectation of accuracy couched in the documentary

genre and the poet as a coherent subject shaping the text produces a dialectical tension

that shapes the narrative structure of the documentary poem. Rather than a claim to metaphoric or metaphysical truth shaped by a genius figure or purely aesthetic artifact the documentary poem is grounded in the objective realm and then subjectively presented by an individual. Part of this approach necessitates a degree of social responsibility and engagement, and it makes sense that Livesay arrives at this model not only through a study of Canadian poetry from the colonial period through the 1960s, but also through the prism of left modernism. The documentary poem can be understood as a public genre, particularly when it is used to give voice to silenced or submerged voices. Livesay's own work on the genre clearly supports this reading. "Call My People Home," for instance, works to show the injustice and oppression of the Japanese-Canadians' interment based on their ethnicity and to bring this reality into the public sphere. Indeed, the poem was written for group performance on either the stage or the radio. As a text designed for mass-media consumption there can be little doubt that it is a public text. Similarly the proletarian and racial concerns of "Day and Night" growing out of Livesay's time as a social worker in Montreal and New Jersey or her poems on the Spanish Civil War are attempts to represent for a public audience current issues and foster an awareness of these issues among readers. "Day and Night," with its depictions of mechanized factory labor where "Men do a dance in time to the machines" (*RHLH* 154) and "Day and night.. rising and falling/ Night and day shift gears and slip rattling... a note-book remember/ The record of evil" recalls other contemporary representations of labor that critique the industrial system like Diego Rivera's murals in New York and Detroit or Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times*.

However, if the documentary poem is accepted as simply a form of mass cultural art that means the subjective portion of the dialectic that intrigued Livesay can be reduced to ideology and perhaps style. In the essay "The Documentary Poem," Livesay's counter to this reduction is Isabella Valancy Crawford's "Malcom's Katie" where a love story serves as a medium for Crawford to suggest the creation of a hybrid Canadian character culminating in the romantic union of Scottish Katie and the mixed-blooded Canadian Max ("The Documentary Poem" 269-75). In "Malcolm's Katie," the public aspects are couched in the romance narrative which has at least the appearance of belonging to the private sphere. It follows that if in "Malcolm's Katie" the objective or documentary representation of the new nation is presented through the personal relationships and interactions of the characters then the personal or subjective could be revealed through the documentary material. In Livesay's own writing *Right Hand, Left Hand,* which David Arnason's introduction frames as an attempt to record or document the history of leftist Canadian literature in the 1930s (15), is as much about Livesay and her development as poet as it is about the broader literary left. The reader cannot ignore Livesay as the camera operator or archivist. The literary products become intertwined with the subject that produces or shapes the text. There can be no choice to read either the broad topic or the deeply personal since one is merely a vehicle for literary production and the other a point of view that shapes that product. As Livesay argues,

> Our narratives, in other words, are not told for the tale's
> sake or for the myth's sake: the story is a frame on which to
> hang a theme. Furthermore, our narratives are told not from
> the point of view of one protagonist, but rather to illustrate
> a precept.
> ("The Documentary Poem" 269)

While Livesay specifically defuses the protagonist, favoring the didactic over the subjective, in reducing the story to mere frame she draws attention to the narrative space as a constructed context for the thematic or didactic meaning that the reader is supposed to be interacting with. In *Right Hand, Left Hand,* the frame for a history of left Modernism in Canada is Livesay herself. She is the larger structure upon which the specifics of the theme are hung and, as such, even in moments of her absence from the text or in the portions that don't directly bear her signature, she is present. In this way, *Right Hand, Left Hand* and, to some extent, all of Livesay's documentary poems operate like Atwood's "This is a photograph of me" and "I take this picture of myself" in that, through the absence of the speaker or the reduction of the speaker/poet to frame or lens, forces an awareness of their presence. Remembering the dialectic "between the objective facts and the subjective feelings of the poet" ("The Documentary Poem" 267) that Livesay places at the heart of the poetic documentary, it stands to reason that in the synthesis that the reader experiences there must be some trace of the subjective. This means in practical terms that while the documentary poem works to articulate its thematic or representational agenda, it also constructs an image of the subject that participates in its production. The voice of the producer/author may be sublimated to a degree, diffused through the documentary polyglot or subordinated to the work of the text, but it is always already present in the shape or style or point of view of the text—if only to function as a limiter on the proliferation of meaning as Foucault posits. In this way, what could be read as the most objective of the life-writing or non-fiction modes always suggests the subject. Livesay's "Call my People Home" or "Day and Night" while they are documentary in

nature and work to address real social and human rights issues can be read as fitting into a narrative that produces an image of the radicalized social activist poet—grounded in the life experience of Livesay herself—that stretches beyond the internment camps or New Jersey factories to a formative experience of Emma Goldman lecturing on anarchism and literature in Toronto in 1928 (*RHLH* 21). This thread throughout the documentaries allows, particularly as they are arranged and presented in *Right Hand, Left Hand*, Livesay to construct herself as a writing subject.

In both Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and Livesay's documentaries and *Right Hand, Left Hand*, we see the author or poet exploiting non-fiction and biographical genre forms and expectations in order to construct images of themselves from a distance. Stein externalizes the autobiography's author and, as a result, builds a representation of herself that would otherwise be resisted as self-serving by the reader. It could also be suggested that it is more in keeping with her attempts to craft a literary cubism by looking at herself from what should be, to her as the writer, alien point of view as well as get around her opinion that she could not possibly write an autobiography. Whatever the specific motivation for the approach, it clearly allows the author a chance to construct a representation of the autobiographical subject that cannot be articulated through the autobiographical I and, therefore, to approach and express subject matter that are important to the author but otherwise out of reach. Livesay's approach is a good deal less interventionist in the way it works to construct the self. The documents speak to a "real" and, therefore, naturalized history; they give the appearance of being unmediated. So when the reader encounters the materials in a documentary and assembles them to get

a sense of the subject matter or the discourse the frame does not call explicit attention to itself. This does not mean that the frame exist, quite the opposite. The frame is always already present—Livesay explicitly connects the documentary poem to the documentary film where the frame isn't simply an abstract textual feature, but always visually present ("The Documentary Poem" 267). The presence of the frame means that it can be extrapolated or constructed from the rest of the information presented and when the frame, as it is in *Right Hand, Left Hand*, is the subject producing the text, the text produces an image of that subject. That image of the subject is inescapable as part of the dialectic that forms the synthetic text.[34] The frame is never a void that outlines a textual space passively, by setting the boundaries and restricting the possibility of infinite significations its shape and presence is asserted. Thus, something like *Right Hand, Left Hand* is able to function as both a history of the Modernist left in Canadian literature and a bildungsroman of Livesay the writer.

In *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Atwood is deploying the strategies of both Stein and *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,* and Livesay's documentaries.[35] Moodie, or rather Atwood-as-Moodie, is an external mask that at least nominally can fill the role of the author-function, though that role could also be assigned to the Atwood-Poet construct. This distancing of the text's voice from the writer, the creation of an external author, as it does with Stein's use of Toklas, grants Atwood access to narrative and textual

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[34]  It is fair to say that while the documentary poem as Livesay defines it and I am using the term is dialectical, that this dialectic is one of polysemic and multivalent objects being brought into conversation. The resulting synthetic object is, therefore, also polysemic and multivalent.

[35]  I am aware of the fact that *Right Hand, Left Hand* postdates *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, however, with the exception of Livesay's linking commentary and personal letters, all of the materials in the book predate Atwood's as does Livesay's theorizing of the documentary poem as a specific long poem form. *Right Hand, Left Hand* is useful then as the most autobiographical expression of the genre that Livesay puts forth. It also is illustrative of strategies Atwood uses.

space that she could not otherwise gain access to. Moreover, because this space is historical—a privileged space that appears authoritative—Atwood is gaining access to the space where mythologies and meta-narratives are shaped. Her use of the journal, a bridge between the autobiographical and the documentary, works to naturalize or at least give the appearance of truth to the constructions of the text.

These theoretical observations and explorations of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*'s poetics are important, but they don't adequately show what is at stake in Atwood's text and why she used these forms. To some extent, it's obvious. As I've noted, Moodie as a signifier of the past grants moves the poems in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* into the discourses of national identity and character since Moodie is both a canonical writer in her own right and a witness to the formation of the Canadian nation. Atwood at the outset of the project claims no prior knowledge of Moodie's works, only that she had heard of Moodie herself (*JSM* 62). Moodie then is empty of specific content. She signifies but the signified in not necessarily related to Susanna Moodie as a real human being. Moodie is a narrative structure upon which Atwood, just as Livesay says in "The Documentary Poem," hangs a theme. Susanna Moodie is not a protagonist as much as she is a vehicle for Atwood to express a theory and reading of Canada.

Both Stein and Livesay's texts are personal. They may interact with the public sphere, but at their core they are expressions of their author's image of themselves or one of the images of themselves. Atwood uses the filters of Moodie and the Atwood-poet voice to craft a representation of herself as a subject in much the same way that Stein and Liversay do, where Atwood differs is in scope and purpose. Stein produces a construction

of Gertrude Stein. Livesay produces a construction of Dorothy Livesay, leftist poet.

Atwood's construction is simultaneously more and less personal than either Stein or

Livesay. A dream can be nothing but personal, and, at least after Freud, must be read as an

expression of the inner self. Atwood's book is, therefore, an expression of her inner self. A

desire to create something that represents an image of her as a writing subject, but also

something that informs that image and the context in which that image is received. If we

treat Moodie as a signifier of Canadian history or Canadian literary history then Atwood's

*The Journals of Susanna Moodie* must be read in the context of an attempt to produce a

representation of the Canadian literary self. This makes the need for the masks Atwood

deploys doubly important. Atwood must distance herself from the text in order to make

the subjectivity that she's constructing through the mask of Moodie accessible to all

Canadians, and the simulated Atwoods of the novels are not open in this way. Moodie, as

a vague historical figure that is not particularly ideologically or metaphorically saturated

but who is connected with the pioneer era and literature, is an easy and open contact point

for the Canadian reader. She signifies the past, history, in a Canadian context but is

neither as problematic nor as overdetermined as other figures who might perform this

function. By establishing textual structures that keep her at arm's length but present—the

faceless photograph of "I take this picture of myself"--Atwood is allowing the reader an

opportunity to intersect with her articulation of a Canadian subjectivity.

Beyond this though the masking performs the image of the Canadian subject

Atwood is constructing. When she suggests that the Canadian illness is paranoid

schizophrenia rather than American megalomania, Atwood is not simply suggesting that

the Canadian subject experiences the world through a maze of conflicting voices and viewpoints—the mosaic rather than the melting pot. Part and parcel of this heteroglossic experience of the world is anxiety and alienation, which can result in a kind of noisy silence. In this first poem within the borders of the journals, "Disembarking at Quebec," Moodie expresses a profound sense of alienation. She feels  out of step with the Canadian environment:

> Is it my clothes, my way of walking,
> the things I carry in my hand
> —a book, a bag with knitting—
> the incongruous pink of my shawl
>
> this space cannot hear...
>
> The others leap, shout
>
> >Freedom!
>
> The moving water will not show me
> my reflection.
>
> The rocks ignore.
>
> I am a word
> in a foreign language
> (*JSM* 11)

The natural world represented by the water and the rocks erase her presence in the new country. This alienation, however, crosses over to an inability to communicate. Moodie is not simply estranged from the landscape which differs from her native England, but from those around her. She hears the joyful declaration of "Freedom!" accompanied by physical expressions of the liberation her fellow passengers feel, but feels at best incongruous before concluding that the landscape is effectively silencing her because of

her foreignness. Atwood's use of space and enjambment further constructs a visual

reminder of Moodie's alienation. What's significant about this moment is that it is never

completely ameliorated. The alienation and strangeness felt at entering Canada is not so

much dissipated as it normalized. In "The Wereman," Moodie watches her husband

crossing a field and he becomes "an X, a concept/ defined against a blank." This causes

her to wonder what shape he might assume when she isn't present to make him hold his

form (*JSM* 19). This can be read either as alienation and estrangement from her husband

or a reflection of the instability of the self that is derived from the Canadian landscape

since his definition fades against the snowy expanse of a Canadian field. In either case,

the subject in Canada is forced to confront an alienation and an instability of self. What

was once normal and fixed becomes strange and inconstant in the new country. As Colin

Nicholson states, "Geographical locations and the figuring of selfhood form a continuing

motif of uncertainty and anxiety, as words come into conflict with a seemingly

recalcitrant environment" (11).

A strong romantic "I" is inconsistent with the construction of Canada that Atwood

has produced in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. There is no room for the certain voice

of the poet, only the contingent and the confused. Whether the reader occupies the space

carved out of her own image by Atwood, or that Atwood has carved out of Moodie or in

an image of Atwood divorced from both Atwood and Moodie and the reader is to some

extent inconsequential. The space is open to occupation, but it is an anxious space where

multiple points of view clash and write and speak over each other. It's a schizophrenic

space, but by design. Atwood has constructed an image of a Canadian subjectivity, one

that is post-colonial, feminist, postmodern—though it reflects modernist anxieties and appropriates modernist techniques—personal and nationalist. There is no way back to an originating moment and a coherent original voice despite the appearance of history and historical and canonical markers that would serve to demarcate the barriers and shape of the national discourses. These discursive signposts erupt into the present, but not as anchors to a natural historical moment and an empirical, material truth, they rather function as signifiers of past and "truth" and coherence that can be deployed to legitimate the movements and constructions of the representative present. The result of this is that their voices are always already polysemic and heteroglossic. The strong I that the historical subject and referent supposedly call back to is eradicated by the process of referral. All the subjects in this textual space can only speak through or with the other the other voices in that space. Firm articulations of a self or a subjectivity can come only through a process of difference or negative definition: we know Atwood's voice as distinct from Moodie's because it is, and we say it is, but as a result we must always hear Moodie's voice when Atwood speaks and Atwood's when Moodie does.

# HP Sauce and the Hate Literature of Pop Art:

# bill bissett in the House of Commons

"The minister, the Government and its vehicle, the Canada Council, are weak and full of fear—fearful of not appearing avant garde, fearful of being labeled culturally illiterate"
Robert Wenman, MP Fraser Valley West (PC), Dec. 13, 1977

"they got a sause calld houses
uv parliament for meat at th
tabul hp sause it sure tastes
shitty too"
bill bissett, "in nova scotia th peopul call shit houses housus uv parliament"

Taken at face value, the bissett affair of 1977-78 seems rather mundane, hardly worth noticing. A group of mostly opposition MPs, headed by Bob Wenman—the Progressive Conservative  member for Fraser Valley West, attempted to take the Government to task for, in their eyes, the fiscal irresponsibility of the Canada Council for the Arts, a semi-autonomous crown corporation. This irresponsibility was evident in the fact that the Canada Council was funding "what anyone in [parliament] would term as offensive and demeaning pornography" (Canada 1845) and, as Hugh Anderson, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries, put it, "a degradation to the printed word in Canada"(Canada 4084). It had the potential for great political theatre, linking as it did excessive government spending and morality—Jake Epp, another Conservative MP, falsely alleged that certain unnamed publishers, likely alluding to bill bissett and his blew ointment press, had received "in excess of $100000 to publish poetry which… the average Canadian would call pornographic" (Canada 4989)—but the scandal never

materialized and the stated goal of Wenman and company, the review of the Canada

Council's mandate, was never accomplished.[36]

The bissett affair has all the hallmarks of a by rote political scandal. There is little

new in the way it attempts to tear strips off of the Trudeau government's hide and gain

votes, primarily in conservative areas of the country. The moral panic angle, the poetry of

bill bissett at the centre of the scandal is described as "evil" and Wenman suggested that

the government had an "obligation to fight" this evil lest it negatively affect the

Dominion (Canada 1845), had been played numerous times before. In the late 1940s and

1950s, E. Davie Fulton—a Conservative MP for Kamloops—made his political bones by

joining Dr. Fredric Wertham's campaign to control the publishing of crime and horror

comics on the grounds that they were a threat to the youth of the nation and lead to

juvenile delinquency (Bell 94-8, Palmer 187). Fulton went on, partially in thanks to this

crusading, to the position of Minister of Justice under Diefenbaker and eventually ran for

the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party. The Liberals also quite successfully

deployed moral questions to further political ends. The Gerda Munsinger Affair—where a

German immigrant, Munsinger, who was an alleged "security risk" stemming from a

trumped up espionage conviction in post-war Germany and with ties to various figures in

the Montreal underworld, had affairs with two Diefenbaker cabinet members—was used

by the Pearson Liberals to, in effect, extract a pound of flesh from the Diefenbaker

Conservatives, then in opposition. Interestingly, the bissett affair wasn't even the first

time in the 1970s that a poet would become a lightning rod in the House of Commons.

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[36]   Don Precosky estimates that bissett received at best a total of $20000 in personal grants between 1967
       and 1979, with blew ointment getting a further $21050 for a total of just over $40000 across an 11 year
       span (14).

When bpNichol won his Governor General's Award in 1970, it provided MPs with an occasion to remark on what they perceived as government subsidizing of Marxism, pornography and obscenity, which, as Caroline Bayard establishes, is at its core a thinly veiled attack on the counter-culture by the establishment (112-3, 304).

The other angle, focusing on government arts spending as misappropriation and waste, is also a common trope in Canadian politics. Wenman's charge that not even "one half of one percent of the Canadian people would say [bissett's work] is acceptable" and "[c]ommon sense judgment says that taxpayers' dollars not be used to support such work" (Trueman), while allowing him to neatly sidestep the issue of censorship echoes the comments of Prime Minister Stephen Harper about cuts to the arts in the run-up to the 2008 Federal election. There Harper stated that "when ordinary working people come home, turn on the TV and see a gala of a bunch of people at, you know, a rich gala all subsidized by taxpayers claiming their subsidies aren't high enough, when they know those subsidies have actually gone up – I'm not sure that's something that resonates with ordinary people" (Benzie et al). Harper's "ordinary working people" in opposition to the whining, rich, gala attending, arts community sets up a similar discursive structure to the one latent in Wenman's 99.5% of Canadians with enough common sense to think that the Government shouldn't be funding bissett and his ilk. Artists, in this discourse, are elitists who work in opposition to the common sense of the "typical" Canadian, and are rewarded financially for their flouting of social norms. Also present in this discourse is an essentially classist attempt to position the traditionally liberal or radical artist in opposition to the "ordinary working" Canadian by highlighting how the artists benefit

from government largesse rather than working.[37] Wenman, just like Harper would thirty

years later, uses arts spending to build a straw man that links the interests of fiscal and

social conservatism and, as such, demonstrates the ideological basis for this discourse.

What is apparent in Wenman and his colleagues' attempt at scandal in the bissett affair is

just how ordinary the whole thing is, just another attempt to scandalize the Government

—something that Wenman quite literally tried to do by asking future Prime Minister and

then Minister of Finance Jean Chretien his views on "the disgusting and pornographic

exhibits of Mr. Bissett's" poetry that had been sponsored by the Canada Council and then

asking the Speaker of the House if it would offend the House if he read some of bissett's

work into the record (Canada 1496, 1498) hoping to have the Speaker "recoil in horror

and brand it as too vile for the ears of the people's elected representatives" (Precosky 12)

—and score votes back home as both a moral crusader and an economic populist.

Wenman failed to have bissett's poetry read into the parliamentary record as the

Speaker determined it was not of any particular relevance to the business before the

House at the time. It is also clear that, at least in terms of his stated goals, Wenman's

assault on bissett and the Canada Council was a failure. Neither he, nor any of his

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[37]   In a reply to Harper published in *The Globe and Mail*, Margaret Atwood skewers the image of the wealthy, leisurely artist. She writes: "His idea of "the arts" is a bunch of rich people gathering at galas whining about their grants. Well, I can count the number of moderately rich writers who live in Canada on the fingers of one hand: I'm one of them, and I'm no Warren Buffett. I don't whine about my grants because I don't get any grants. I whine about other grants - grants for young people, that may help them to turn into me, and thus pay to the federal and provincial governments the kinds of taxes I pay, and cover off the salaries of such as Mr. Harper. In fact, less than 10 per cent of writers actually make a living by their writing, however modest that living may be. They have other jobs." ("To be creative is, in fact, to be Canadian").  This is underscored by Tim Carlson's account of a brunch with bill bissett that opens with salt and vinegar potato chips, glazed  doughnuts, grapes, and other food that bissett has poached from recent parties. As Carlson states, "An internationally respected, ground-breaking poet with a meager income and a maxed-out MasterCard has to have a few survival strategies in place" (33). The Conservative image of the elite artist is an ideological construction which has almost no basis in truth, but provides a neat cover for attacking the Canadian left.

colleagues in this matter, were able to force a review of the Canada Council's mandate or explicitly affect the funding criteria or the jury system the council used to award grants. Furthermore, Wenman and his coterie of anti-pornography crusaders did not get the necessary support in the press for this to truly become a successful scandal with *The Vancouver Sun* running an editorial, "Life Imitates Smut" on December 6, 1977, that read in part:

> If one really wants examples from Bissett's [sic] poetry to
> boggle the standards, there are more obvious candidates than
> the eroticisms which we admit are present. His spelling for
> instance now there's real subversion for you... In the
> meantime Wenman and others looking for the real stuff
> should try those magazine stands on Granville Street that
> Mayor Jack Volrich has been complaining about.
> (qtd. in Bayard  305)

The implication here being that Wenman has both completely missed the point about what is dangerous in bissett's work, and is wasting the House's time. He also faced significant blowback from the literary community that manifested as a full page ad in *The Vancouver Sun* signed by "an impressive number of Canadian writers*,"* a benefit for bissett at UBC in 1979 and a libel suit brought by bissett and Talonbooks at the suggestion of David Robinson (Bayard 305-6; Robinson MS).

Where it is possible to perhaps credit Wenman with success in the affair is its effect on bissett's finances. In the midst of the scandal, neither bissett nor blew ointment received Canada Council grants. It also made it difficult for bissett to obtain other money to support himself. In June 1978, six months after Wenman launched his assault against bissett and the Canada Council in earnest, bill bissett was attempting to negotiate a bridge loan with the Bank of Montreal until he could secure an expected Canada Council grant.

The branch manager was reluctant to grant the loan "on account of the political uncertainty" surrounding the grant . The politics surrounding bissett's poetry in 1978 and 1979 hampered bissett's ability to acquire the extravagant sum of "$4000 or $5000" on which to live until such time as he could secure a government grant (van Gert MS). However, if this was a victory for Wenman's side—and in terms of making it difficult for bissett to produce and publish his supposedly pornographic poems, it can be read that way—it was a limited victory. Talonbooks published *Sailor* in 1978 followed by *Beyond even faithful legends: Selected Poems* in 1980, and bissett's own blew ointment press published *th first snow* in 1979 and *Soul Arrow* in 1980, meaning that bissett was still able to publish even without government grants. bissett's political toxicity which may have hampered his ability to secure a Canada Council grant at the height of the affair seems to have dissipated by 1980 when he was again awarded a grant by the Council. The controversy may have made it difficult for bissett but as Frank Davey pointed out in 1974, bissett had already been "ejected from cross-Canada trains, evicted by countless landlords, beaten, harassed by police, and arrested and sentenced to prison" (*From There To Here* 49) and managed to write and publish.[38]

The parliamentary attack on bill bissett and his poetry was a failure and, in terms of the Canadian political landscape, can be considered a mere blip. Wenman's crusading did not help his political career as it did E. Davie Fulton's, but nor did it really hurt him— he was re-elected four times following the bissett affair and retired from politics rather than being defeated in an election. But the conflict between Wenman and his supporters

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[38]  Through both his blew ointment press and a number of other publishers like House of Anansi and Talonbooks, bissett had produced no fewer than 45 collections of poetry by the time of his becoming a subject of Parliamentary discussion in 1978. In comparison, Irving Layton published around 50 collections of poetry over his entire career that spanned from 1945's *Here and Now* to 1992 *Fornalutx.*

on the one hand and bissett and the cultural and literary avant garde he stood in for on the other is metaphorically important. Regardless of the relative success or failure of the campaign against bissett and the alleged improprieties of the Canada Council, it is important to be cognizant of this event as a conflict between two very different kinds of power and what the conflict between these two powers represents culturally.

In real political terms, Wenman's group can be seen as political outliers that are at a distance from the real centres of power in the House of Commons. This group consisted of opposition MPs and government backbenchers, not party leaders or cabinet ministers. They were not necessarily in a position where they would be able to shape or effect the cultural policy they were critiquing, and the Canada Council operates at an arm's length from the government to forestall just this kind of interference; they were, however, still Members of Parliament. This means that their speech is imbued with the authority of both the constituents they represent in Parliament and that of the Parliament as legislative and authoritative entity in and of itself. They may not have been the primary shapers and wielders of political power in Canada, but they participated directly in the application of that power. There is a major discursive difference between a private citizen declaring that a given poem or poet is obscene to other people on a street corner or even in the opinion pages of the newspaper, and a member of the House of Commons voicing this opinion on the floor of the House. When speaking on the floor of the House of Commons and acting in their official capacity, the voice of the honorable member by necessity participates in the government's power over the state's ideological and repressive apparatuses.  Whether or not the member's ideas represent the views of the Government or the Opposition or

even their own constituents, there is an implied force of authority in their words because

there are mechanics in place to translate those words into real policy and action; this

authority, though derived from the body politic through the election process, is not

available to be wielded by the average citizen. Thus, when Robert Wenman condemns the

work of bill bissett as evil and obscene and implies those that fascilitate the production

and distribution of this work are complicit in that evil and obscenity, he does so with the

symbolic power of the Canadian Government as the elected representative of the people

of Fraser Valley West (Government of Canada 1845). He may not be able to exercise this

power beyond imbuing his words and ideas with the spectre of authority and legitimacy,

but he is still speaking from the seat of power.

It is from this position of symbolic power that on December 13, 1977, Wenman,

for a second time, brought the issue of bissett and the Canada Council to the floor of the

Commons and delivered a speech that outlined his critique of the bissett's poetry and the

Canada Council. He prefaced this speech by warning the present television cameras not to

zoom too close to the pornographic materials he claimed to have brought with him,

presumably the poetry of bill bissett and others since it would "be offensive to the record

as well as to the Canadian people to see it" (Canada 1845).  He then began his speech

proper:

> this material, supported and masquerading in the name of
> art, is a demeaning degradation of human experience. It is
> in my view neither creative nor beautiful, it is not even
> grotesque or ugly beautiful, it is neither uplifting nor
> fulfilling , it is not even passionate or erotic; it is simply
> vulgar degradation of the human experience—vulgar and
> demeaning at a level well below that of funky graffiti
> written on the back of washroom doors. This type of

> vulgarity deserves to be placed in a category of the hate literature of pop art and should not be censored but rather branded as unfit for human consumption and discarded on the rubbish heap to rot in its own vulgarity.
>
> The material is evil in the broadest sense of the word and the government has an obligation to fight against this type of degradation rather than condoning, supporting and encouraging the production and distribution of it. The material is not art. It is not right. It is wrong.
>
> The minister, the government and its vehicle the Canada Council are weak and full of fear—fearful of not appearing Avant Garde, fearful of being labeled culturally illiterate. I say that the granting of thousands of dollars for this material proves they do not in fact have the capacity to judge the line tolerance of either the will of this parliament or the will of the people of Canada.
> (Government of Canada 1845)

Wenman then continues on to raise the spectre of dictatorship and Communism should the Communications Minister be allowed to issue political directives to the Canada Council, this last point relating to a national unity project, apparently ignorant of the ironies of this argument.

Both Wenman's theatrical warning to the television cameras and his inability to grasp that he is effectively warning against the rise of a totalitarian state if political directives are issued to the Canada Council while attempting intervene in the decisions of the Canada Council politically make it very easy to dismiss what Wenman is saying here. Don Precosky in his essay on the various controversies and attempts to marginalize bissett does effectively this, stating that "[m]uch of this is confused ranting" before pushing Wenman's comments aside with a series of rhetorical questions that illustrate equally the absurdity of the speech and futility of his aims (13). And while Wenman's terminology is opaque and confused—Precosky highlights "the hate literature of pop art"

as being particularly in need of definition—it is problematic to dismiss what he is saying. It is important to recognize that by virtue of the setting for this speech Wenman's words, regardless of whether they managed to compel Parliament to action or swayed a single voter to give Wenman their support, are coming from a position of power. Context is important here. This is an attempt to force the state into direct intervention in the aesthetic sphere in service of an ideology; desiring the suppression of art that is "evil" and "wrong" in the name of nation—this is expressed as the "will of the people of Canada." The exact ideology that Wenman's words are in service of may be vague, thus making it tempting to attempt to pigeon hole it as totalitarian or authoritarian or—given bissett's clear position on the left—fascist or even as simply confused to effectively silence and neutralize the implied threat of the speech. Wenman is, of course, none of these things. It may be fair to suggest, though, that he is scared. His accusation that " [t]he minister, the government and its vehicle the Canada Council are weak and full of fear" has the feel of projection about it and reveals the most about his primary ideological motivation. bissett's work represents a challenge and a threat to an established view of aesthetics and art as Wenman recognizes it, but this threat transcends aesthetics and art and becomes a broader threat to Canada and its people.

Wenman is essentially marshaling what power is made available to him to counter a perceived threat from another power base, one that represents a direct threat to what Wenman understands as good and therefore must be evil. The aesthetic critique of bissett's work divorced from the rhetoric motivated by fear can be reduced to the following:

> It is in my view neither creative nor beautiful, it is not even
> grotesque or ugly beautiful, it is neither uplifting nor
> fulfilling , it is not even passionate or erotic; it is simply
> vulgar degradation of the human experience—vulgar and
> demeaning at a level well below that of funky graffiti
> written on the back of washroom doors.
> (Government of Canada 1845)

This is, of course, coupled with a distrust of the avant garde and a suspicion that the

Government supports this activity because they effectively wish to look cool. Wenman's

critiques that the work of bill bissett and likeminded poets is not creative or beautiful or

erotic, but rather vulgar and degrading to the human experience in a way that recalls

bathroom stall graffiti but sinks much lower amounts to a concern that this art doesn't do

what art is supposed to do. Poetry should be creative, beautiful, uplifting and fulfilling,

and, for Wenman, bissett's work does not meet this standard. This is an articulation of a

very specific view of art generally, and poetry specifically. Wenman desires an art or

cultural system, clearly, that functions as an "imagined satisfaction of individual needs

that are repressed in daily praxis." By his allusion to the ideas of beauty, passion,

eroticism and the human experience, there is a sense that he desires, as Peter Bürger

suggests in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, that "[t]hrough the enjoyment of art, the

atrophied bourgeois individual can experience the self as personality"(12-3). This

bourgeois experience of art that Bürger describes and that seems to be at the core of

Wenman's invective is essentially that of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" where the

linking of beauty and truth is intrinsic in the urn and through the experiencing of the urn

as an objet d'art becomes transcendent. Art serves as a medium through which the

individual can achieve a form of totalization, and when art or culture cannot or willfully

does not perform this function it represents a loss of use-value and usefulness. Any art that represents a challenge to this paradigm, especially if it moves the experience of art out from the realm of the ritual and sacred, could easily be read as a degradation or vulgarizing of art.

This bourgeois theory of art that seems to be underscoring Wenman's assault on bissett's poetry makes it very easy to parse the threat bissett poses to Canada. The invocation of the avant garde becomes the key to the speech. Wenman's use of the term is on face value the most absurd part of his argument—while the Trudeau era was marked by occasional overlapping of pop culture and political culture, Trudeau did briefly date Barbra Streisand, there is no evidence that the desire to appear avant garde played a role in Canadian cultural policy. It stands to reason that once something gains the approval of a government it loses its revolutionary quality and ceases to be avant garde. However, this invocation must be read not as a comment on the way the Trudeau government conducted itself on cultural matters, but rather as a reference to the historic avant garde and its disruption of bourgeois social relations as articulated through the institutionalization of art. As Bürger asserts:

> The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in a bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men. When the avant-gardistes demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that works of art should be socially significant... Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect works have as particular content. (Bürger 49)

The disruption of the institution of art in a bourgeois society, at least in terms of the

historical avant garde, has resulted in a disruption of the highly individualized relationship with art that the bourgeois subject experiences. Individual transcendence through interaction with the external sublime or auracular object is problematized if not eliminated. This is, of course, largely a matter of aesthetics and while it may concern itself with the "life praxis of men" aesthetic realignments are unlikely issues of debate for liberal democracies. The threat that Wenman makes clear by invoking the avant garde in his speech to the House of Commons is that what starts as an aesthetic issue expands into the political. For the historical European avant garde the two issues overlapped. A rejection or crtique of bourgeois views of art seemed to necessitate a generalized rejection or critique of bourgeois society, culture and politics. This is evident in the revolutionary sympathies of the Surrealists, Futurists, Lettrists, and Situationists. Aesthetics equals ideology and so an avant-gardist aesthetic, as Wenman quite correctly identifies in bissett's poetry, is also ideologically dissident.

bissett's poetry, like that of other avant garde poets, is a critique of the bourgeois system of art and the cultural and ideological systems that derive support and validation from that apparatus. Also, like other avant-gardists, this dissatisfaction with bourgeois artistic values is coupled with a rejection of bourgeois social and political institutions; this is evident when in *What Fuckan Theory* the resistance of meaning in language because it serves as a control spills into a prayer "that th imperial fors dissolvs in brotherly nd sisterly love" and later an admonition that North America is becoming increasingly fascist despite the presence of "liberals" (*What Fuckan Theory* n.p.). This is the threat bissett poses to the Canadian people. His aesthetic and politcal positions, as we

shall see, reveal a "total mistrust of industrial technology, political institutions, conventions, and rules of any kind" (Bayard 59) and advocates in place of these things unity and freedom—"indescribabul silvr" as bissett describes it in "why dew magazines lie"—achieved through "our physikul/ love   ball   fuck   cum   th fire" (*Plutonium Missing* 28). At stake in bissett's rejection of bourgeois culture is the rejection of a narrative  construction of Canadian identity. Canada's political and cultural institutions, and societal norms—which bissett's poetry rejects both in the micro and macro—create an ideological image of Canada the good, the responsible and the civil that are essentially bourgeois and Victorian in their origin. The fact that bissett's poetry is in any way supported by the government, even if only through arts grants awarded at an arm's length from Parliament, can be read as legitimizing the critique of bourgeois institutions latent therein. Literary objects are thus a threat to a way of understanding Canada and the world, and, from Wenman's position, this could be read as an evil threat to the collective Canadian good.

One of the better examples of the threat bissett poses is the poem "in nova scotia th peopul call shit houses housus uv parliament":

> th peopul ther yu heer em say
> aftr nite fall nd they've eatn
> if thr lucky gess iul go out to
> th house uv parliament or to th
> hp fr a whil evn respecktabul
> peopul yul heer say that if thr
> outside th town in th country or
> sumthing whr thr isint any indoor
> plumbing kind uv says it rite thr
> th peopul squeezd by th british nd
> rite up to the throat by th amrikans
> japanese too nd xactly by thr own

pigs thr own rich sellin it making
us thr plan into 1984 robot creeps
muttrin bout nashunal unity all a
time while we work our guts out in
amrikan plants amrikan evry thing
mines blah blah in our own country
nd if th factory is Canadian its
no bettr lookit th widows uv new
foundland 1300 dollrs fr deth
compensashun fr silicosis nd th
welfare rips evn that off alcan
nd th peopul cant b unified if
we don't own what we do our own
resources food cultur ideas
media th pigs in th big shit
house in Ottawa say we they
say we who we

they got a sause calld houses
uv parliament for meat at th
tabul hp sause it sure tastes
shitty too
(*Beyond Even Faithful Legends* 53)

The poem is an affront to notions of civility or art functioning as a touchstone for

transcendence because it foregrounds the process of going to the "shit house" and

presumably taking a shit. This is an abject act and the abject, by definition, cannot be

incorporated into the civil. However, metaphorically, bissett has equated the exercise of

civil power with the act of shitting, and this is articulated as an act of resistance by the

people who are without indoor plumbing. Indoor plumbing in the poem becomes the

dividing line between those who have power and those who are victimized by it, "th

peopul squeezd by th british nd/ rite up to the throat by th amrikans," those that are

mourned in Daniel Coleman's description of white civility. As Coleman writes:

> For Canadians, the performance of civility is a way to

> manage our traumatic history (a complex history usually
> involving the lower classes, first of Europe and later of
> Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, being displaced from their
> homelands and in turn displacing Indigenous peoples in
> North America from their traditional lands), and this
> process means that behind, or within, the optimistic
> assertions of civility, we often find a different cherishing of
> evil memories, an elegiac discourse by which Canadians
> demonstrate their civil sensibilities through mourning the
> traumatic, but supposedly necessary, losses that were
> inevitable along the path of progress.
> (29)

As Coleman indicates, civility—which is central to the traditional, colonial narratives of

Canada—allows for the elision of traumatic history and those victimized by the march of

progress. In the extreme, the ideology of civility, brought to Canada by settlers from the

British Isles and imposed upon the wild land, becomes the excuse for the erasure. The

continued existence of outhouses is a metaphor for the government's neglect of the poor

—the widows of Newfoundland who are penalized on their welfare for receiving their

meager death compensation—as it serves the rich—the pigs who are trying to turn the

workers into "1984 robot creeps." The material conditions under which an individual

shits serves as a marker of whether their voice can be heard in "th big shit house in

Ottawa," something that clearly frustrates the speaker of the poem to the extent that the

frustration is performed in the poem's loss of coherence towards the end of the first

stanza. However, by forming the symbolic link between the shit house and the house of

parliament and, furthermore, declaring that hp sauce tastes shitty, the Nova Scotians of

the poem and poem's speaker refute the power of Parliament. Parliament is no better than

an outhouse and its product tastes to the people like shit.

"in nova scotia th peopul call shit houses housus uv parliament" is a dissident text

and a radical text, but more than that, it represents a rejection of an ideology. bissett

places himself at odds with the mechanisms of state, the ruling class, British and

American imperialism, the branch plant system, capitalism, private property and the

politics of national unity. The poem even demonstrates, as everything he writes does,

bissett's rejection of Standard English through his employment of an idiosyncratic

orthology and spelling. bissett, as a writer, is suspicious of the ideological content of

language—meaning, as he asserts in *What Fuckan Theory*, is an abridgement of the

freedom and possibility inherent in the utterance and lexeme akin to "th imperial fors" or

"enslave/ment" (*What Fuckan Theory* n.p.)—and , in an attempt to avoid these

mechanisms of indoctrination, he steps out of sync with what he rightly perceives as the

language of power. There is no doubt that language serves those that control it and that

moves to standardize a language are an attempt to silence dissident voices; and, of course,

standardized language by enforcing meanings and the importance of context—language

as means of communication and exchange bordered by the needs of understandability—is

likely to inculcate the speaker with the values and ideas of a given language community.

As Michel Foucault states, in "the Middle Ages, a man was mad if his speech could not

be said to form part of the common discourse of men" and the cure then, as today was

silence (231-2). Power works to suppress and silence dissident voices and one

mechanism for resisting this silence, as bissett asserts, is to make a noise outside of the

restriction of standardized and controlled language, which bissett does by deploying

techniques like chant, concrete and sound poetry in addition to his orthological

manipulations. In the rejection of English/American language systems, engines of the

white civility and muscular Christianity that Daniel Coleman locates at the heart of the English Canadian literary project, bissett takes the ultimate iconoclastic position and attempts to place himself beyond the realm of control.

The irony of bissett's attempt to free himself and his readers from the forces of repressive power through his poetry's move outside is that it, in itself, can be interpreted as a demonstration of power. It may well be the power to bend spoons as bpNichol lamented (*Canadian Literary Power* 1); a major act of social resistance built on little more than an aesthetic exercise that while subversive can only symbolically realign the mechanisms of power or create a parody of the image systems that re-enforce the way those mechanisms operate. It is still, however, a kind of power. How literary power is deployed, who may make use of it, and how can it be checked are at the centre of the bissett affair. This is what makes Robert Wenman's speech to Parliament and the scandal he and a few of his colleagues attempted to generate important. This was not simply a matter of fiscal irresponsibility by an arm of the government or an attempt to embarrass the Prime Minister and his party in order to enhance their own future parliamentary careers and election chances. There can be little doubt that these types of calculations played a role in the affair, but that hardly makes it significant. The bissett affair is different because these MPs attempted to use the power afforded to them by the body politic to restrict bissett's ability to exercise literary power. Poetry was, at least to certain Members of Parliament in the late-1970s, a dangerous enough thing to the Canadian way of life that it was necessary to symbolically—if not in reality—bring the force of the Canadian government to bear on bill bissett.

There was and has been a similar attempt by the critical establishment to restrict

or limit bissett's impact in the literary community. While the response to bissett's work

has never been couched in the kind of rhetoric that Wenman deploys, quite the opposite

in fact, it has been clearly marginalized.  This marginalization of bissett and his work is

generally accomplished by rendering bissett as a magaical, Blakean figure; looking at

bissett's work as an attempt to return to a prelapsarian existence or to forge a poetics of

transcendence and freedom. Linda Rogers, in her introduction to *bill bissett: Essays on*

*his Works*, repeatedly advances this view of bissett as a mystical figure who is beyond the

boundaries and a transcendent agent of peace. She describes him as a shaman:

> In Canadian art, there is a tradition of the artist-shaman
> who is neither male nor female, animal nor human. It is a
> being electric with the special energy of transformation. We
> are all radiated by this special presence, which is at once
> among us and, by definition, separate from us. These are
> the practitioners of the ancient arts of healing, which
> involve a knowledge of the earth, of language that comes
> from the earth and of art or the representation by us of
> go(o)d in us.
> (8)

She continues:

> Unlike the post-modernists, who have altered the language
> to eliminate stereotypes and created their own, bissett
> speaks from the deep structure of language, that time before
> grammar were compelled by the fire at the centre and not
> by the crust of civilization. There are no judgments in his
> language. Unlike most religions, his liturgy is all inclusive.
> (10)

Finally:

> Unlike many revolutionaries, who become the status-quo as
> the social dialectic evolves, bissett has stayed on the cutting
> edge, appealing to young people who see the hypocrisy

> invested in the conventional wisdom. Far from becoming
> an anachronism, the archetypal 1960s person advocating
> sex, drugs and rock and roll, things that helped to bring
> down that generation, bill stands for freedom, the universal
> life principal that is the very life force itself. It takes
> innocence to perceive that very important artistic and
> political position in a society that has become cynical and
> therefore defeatist.
> (12)

For Rogers, bissett's political strength—what makes him a good radical poet—is his

ability to connect with an innocent time before language became discursive and freedom

was abridged. As we can see, for her, bissett is a magical figure that has special access to

language that the majority of humanity can't have because of their social conditioning.

He becomes Crow and Coyote, "angelic messenger" and "Lost and Found" (9).

There are several problems with this reading of bissett, the first being that it

functionally negates any potential effectiveness he has as a political poet by robbing him

of agency and rendering him merely a conduit for this metaphysical pre-lapsarian

language of the earth that speaks through him. This reading of bissett as a mystic who has

special access to innocent language mirrors the description of the poet that Socrates puts

forward in Plato's *Ion*:

> For the poet is an airy thing, a winged and a holy thing; and
> he cannot make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes
> out of his senses and no mind is left in him; so long as he
> keeps possession of this, no man is able to make poetry and
> chant oracles. Not by art, then, they make their poetry…
> but by divine dispensation; therefore, the only poetry that
> each one can make is what the Muse has pushed him to
> make…
> (18)

In effect, if bissett is this "angelic messenger" he is only capable of voicing the received

message—the push of the muse. He becomes an empty vessel and not responsible for his own words or choices. As such, he becomes an ineffective political critic since, as Plato suggests, the poet has no mind of his own—he is "out of his senses and no mind is left in him," like the Corybants that Socrates alludes to, bissett would have to be out of his wits (18) to produce poetry or art—and is thus robbed of any real agency. This theory of poetics reduces the poet to a madman, and, as Foucault indicates, the madman is excluded from rational discourses, even when their words are accepted as a truth:

> It is curious to note that for centuries, in Europe, the words
> of a madman were either totally ignored or else were taken
> as words of truth. They either fell into a void—rejected the
> moment they were proffered—or else men deciphered in
> them a naïve or cunning reason, rationality more rational
> than that of a rational man. At all events, whether excluded
> or secretly invested with reason, the madman's speech did
> not strictly exist.
> (*The Discourse on Language* 232)

The relation of madness to language that Foucault highlights here, the necessity of interpretive action harkening back to Plato's divine madness of the poet, renders the speaker essentially harmless. The madman is incapable of participating directly in discourse; it is only when the words are deciphered that they can be made to exist. Therefore, Rogers reading of bissett as an innocent with a unique insight into "language that comes from the earth and of art or the representation by us of go(o)d in us" (8) effectively reads bissett's words out of existence.

Rogers, in an effort to praise bissett, is performing the same kind of subtly reductive critique that Don Precosky in his essay on bissett's reception, "bill bissett: controversies and definitions," identifies. Precosky argues that the academic and critical

writers' use of terminology like Blakean, visionary, and shaman is indicative of condescension towards bissett and his work. While it is impossible to ignore bissett in Canadian literature simply by virtue of how prolific he is, by applying these labels and thus rendering bissett a "wondrous naïf, almost an idiot savant, of letters" (Precosky 2) it is possible to neutralize and silence him. The idiot savant is, like the madman, not responsible for the literature that he produces. So when Rogers invokes the same classifications and categories as the other critics, she gives us a vision of bill bissett that is politically harmless, one that cannot possibly be the manifestation of evil and threat to the Canadian public that Bob Wenman takes aim at in the House of Commons. This bissett cannot be subversive since he is completely excluded from the systems and structures he wishes to subvert.

The mystical reading misses entirely the real threat, the real revolutionary aspects, which bissett's work presents to the traditional discourses of Canadian literature because it takes the poetic persona bissett cultivates as a given. It assumes that because bissett presents himself as a Blakean figure, because he articulates and performs the role of "artist-shaman," that this is in fact a coherent identity. It takes this entirely on faith; ignoring the ironies apparent in this poetic persona; and bissett doesn't work terribly hard at disguising these ironies: *What Fuckan Theory*, his statement of poetics in which he outlines his opposition to language as a means for control, execution of power, imperialism, meaning, and the limiting of poetry as creative medium, and articulates how he thinks language can work and how it can be used to resist these forces of repression, is, in fact, bissett's theory of language and poetics. The text is performative, difficult for

the uninitiated, and, at first glance, bears only a tentative link with institutional literary

theory, but the same could be said about Gertrude Stein's *How to Write* or the graffiti that

appeared in Paris in conjunction with May 1968 and the Situationists. Moreover, bissett's

text is certainly more prescriptive than Stein's, forthrightly telling the reader "follow yr

eye baby what fuckan theory peopul say sound different evry time in th sound in th syl

abul everything color different evry time so putting it that way in th writing too" (n.p.).

The irony of this statement, though, is that while it dismisses theoryit displays an acute

awareness of linguistics, poetics and, to use a more generalized term, literary theory.[39]

bissett's stressing of the importance of sound and the variance of sound in spoken

language, the infinite variance of utterances as they are both vocalized and heard by

individual speakers and listeners. and his push for this to manifest itself in the writing

echoes Charles Olson in his incredibly influential essay, "Projective Verse." Olson, in

arguing for composition by field and stressing that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN

AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" (868), stresses the centrality of the breath of the poet

to the production of poetry:

> If I hammer, if I recall in, and keeping calling in, the breath
> the breathing as distinguished from the hearing, it is for
> cause, it is to insist upon a part that breath plays in verse

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[39]    The Toronto Research Group (Steve McCaffery and bpNichol) dispense with theory in a very similar way in the second TRG Manifesto. They declare: "1) all theory is transient & after the fact of writing 2) writing never eliminates the need for action but action can sometimes eliminate the need writing… 6) all research is symbiotic & cannot exist separate from writing 7) no form or technique exists separate from what is said" (*Rational Geomancy* 23). The difference between the TRG's distancing of itself from theory and bissett's is really twofold. First, research, while lacking the finality of theory and certainly being much more process oriented than theory implies, maintains an overt connection to "academicised" modes of inquiry than bissett does. Secondly, the form of the manifesto and it's assertions—no form or technique separate from what it said, writing never eliminates the need for action, etc.—more concretely connect the TRG's ideas to a historic tradition of modernist writing and poetics. bissett's ideas may be connected to a similar tradition, indeed, *What Fuckan Theory*'s discourse on Stephen Daedalus would seem to suggest this, however, these connections are generally less obvious.

which has not (due, I think, to the smothering of the power
of the line by too set a concept of foot) has not been
sufficiently observed or practiced, but which has to be if
verse is to advance to its proper force and place in the day,
now, and ahead. I take it that PROJECTIVE VERSE
teaches, is, this lesson, that that verse will only do in which
a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear
*and* the pressures of his breath.
(868)

bissett's recognition of the imperfect multiplicity of spoken language and his call for it to

be represented on the page—and significantly highlighting the role of the syllable—

mirrors Olson's emphasis in "Projective Verse" on "the acquisitions of his ear *and* the

pressures of his breath." The sonic and the physical quality of language must be

represented on the page in order to achieve this new forceful verse. Furthermore, we can

connect the technique that bissett uses to accomplish this back to Olson who, while he

may not have originated the technique, certainly codified it. Olson argued that the

typewriter was uniquely qualified to record projective verse:

It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity
and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly
the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables,
the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he
intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar
a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the
convention of rime and metre, record the listening he has
done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he
would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his
work.
(872)

This quality of the typewriter is exploited in bissett's work to great advantage. It

manifests in every line of poetry that he writes because his orthography, which has the

appearance of being phonetic, forces a specific vocalization on the reader. "Peopul," for

instance, has a stress on the second syllable and a heavier sound than "people;" "yr" is a much more accurate representation of the vocalization of the word than "your."[40] It is certainly on display in concrete poems like "belly load ball" from *Nobody Owns Th Earth* (see fig. 1.1) or "only th flesh in th heart" (see fig. 1.2) where the physical disposition of the typewritten words and the interpretation of the grapheme dictate wholly the vocalization of the poem. However, this importance of the typewriter to producing/scoring bissett's poems, to representing the voice for a given poem, is more keenly noticed in some of the smaller, less obviously graphical poems. Taking a section from "pomes for yoshi," bissett's 1972 long poem about longing and being down and out in Vancouver, we can see how the disposition of the poem on the page magnifies the content of the lines:

> will yu find
> me wher ium
> going to
>
>
> am i
> going
> anywher
>
>
> don't
> ask
>
>
> ask me
> anytime
> ok
> (n.p.)

The way the words drip down the page, the gaps between the stanzas, slow drift to the

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[40] It is my sense that "yr" is probably fairly representative of how it is pronounced in the colloquial Canadian accent, or how it sounds to me when I say it.

right, the line breaks all serve to render a voice that is unsure, hesitant, and, in the end, susceptible to the charms of the addressee. The scoring of the poem produces the power relation between the lover and the object of desire where the poem's speaker is certainly subject to the power of either the object directly—but since this voice is absent it's hard to justify this reading—or to his desire itself. If the poem was visually different, the voice would change and instead of unsure and smitten voice there would be a coy one; and the difference between the speaker caught up in desire and the coy speaker is enormous.

The connection between bissett's poetics and those articulated by Charles Olson may not seem all that significant. After all, bissett was plugged into the global concrete poetry movement; his blending of the visual, textual, and aural qualities of poetry can be traced through any number of twentieth century Avant Garde movements—Apollinaire, DADA, and Russian Futurism spring easily to mind—and in English language poetry can be seen as early as Blake if not before; and he was friends with poets like bpNichol and Steve McCaffery who demonstrated similar predilections and carried it to the same kind of logical extremes.[41] However, the similarity of some of their core ideas, though these ideas are certainly more highly politicized by bissett, is extremely important for two reasons. The first of these is the influence of Olson, Robert Creeley and the Black Mountain Poets on the TISH group at the University of British Columbia. Active during the years bissett attended UBC, 63-65, TISH was much more academically minded. While the TISH poets—including George Bowering, Fred Wah, Daphne Marlatt, and Frank Davey among others—were by no means establishment figures, Marlatt goes so far

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[41] McCaffery's *Carnival*, a broadsheet concrete poem where text is written on top of other text, has been performed by McCaffery as a sound poem.

as to suggest a regendering of language in *Touch to My Tongue,* they operated within the

university, publishing TISH out of the grad student offices at UBC. They belong to the

academic and intellectual world, initially coming together as reading group following a

1961 reading by Robert Duncan (Bayard 105), and this is the type of world that, as the

innocent and shamanistic naïf, that bissett has removed himself from. However, the

intersection of TISH and bissett is too neat. As Caroline Bayard writes:

> the point which bissett does not make, but remains to be
> stressed, is that *Tish* opened up a number of aesthetic
> possibilities, a new sense of notation (albeit in the range of
> a recognizable printed text), thus making it feasible for
> bissett to view the poem as an organic process, rather than a
> perfected text, an opportunity for breaking through the
> restrictions of clearly defined… rules
> (106)

bissett's work might be more extreme in its experimentation than the TISH group, but the

obvious influence of TISH on his writing—which is evident in the presence of Olson's

ideas in bissett's poetics in addition to the aesthetic possibilities TISH itself explored—

would suggest that bissett arrived at his "unacademic" and iconoclastic style through the

influence of a very academic group of writers.[42] He used the inside to determine the style

and techniques he would take and define the outside.

The second reason is a lot simpler. bissett's debt to Olson and "Projective Verse"

signals that as a poet, bissett was aware of and actively involved with the ever evolving

discourses of poetry. He read and adapted what he read to his own purposes. This may

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[42] It could be argued that bissett came by the Black Mountain/Olsonian qualities in his writing, not via Tish, but rather through Warren Tallman, who bissett identifies as his first major poetry teacher. Tallman, a poet, was a professor at UBC and brought poets and speakers like Olson, Denise Levertov, Allan Ginsberg and Jack Spicer to Vancouver. He was also taught and mentored the TISH writers and was a key influence on their development. This, of course, speaks to a scene in Vancouver in the early 1960s.

seem like an obvious statement—it's what poets do after all—but in the face of the myth of bissett as pure innocent in touch with the transcendent and mystical it is a rather profound revelation because it suggests that his poetry and poetics derive from the work of an active subject. He did not arrive at the materiality of language, the page's ability to score the sounding of a poem, or the way the content of a given poem can push its form, in a vacuum. Nor was it handed to him from on high by Plato's muse. These issues become important to bissett's poetics because he has encountered them and synthesized them. They demonstrate that he makes choices about style and technique that have a basis in the discourse of poetry. If his work is at odds with traditional critical perspectives, or actively seeks to challenge conventional notions on the performance of poetry, or even seeks to disregard the socially accepted standardization of language in favour of his own version of English, this is because he has made an aesthetic or political or, echoing Benjamin's plea for an anti-fascist art, politicized aesthetic choice. As Don Precosky bluntly puts it, "[h]e works at his art; his poetry does not merely come to him" (4).

A great deal of bissett's aesthetic becomes clearer when it is accepted that he makes informed choices about his poetics. Visible traces of diverse critical and theoretical perspectives that must be submerged in order to view him in the popular manner are allowed to surface. When he stresses the discernable difference between spoken and written language, it echoes the theoretical break between *parole* and *langue*. In his assertion that "th alphabet came from sound nd pictures joind togthr thru th hunt nd domesticity nd generations, ther differences nd ther sameness" (*WFT* n.p.) the culturally

determined and, ultimately, arbitrary linguistic sign that Saussure outlined in *The Course in General Linguistics* is clearly present. So, for that matter, is the work of Derrida.

What's even more pronounced in his work and his poetics is the radical leftist ideology. It would be a lie to craft bissett into a doctrinaire Marxist—or Trotskyist or Maoist or whatever was in vogue at the time—however, his opposition to structures of power as he expresses it certainly comes from that side of political spectrum and he was, if not a member, a supporter of the Communist Party of Canada (bill bissett Fonds, Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections.). In "Another 100 Warrants Issued," he states that he is "markd" and, therefore, "advocate[s] nothing except humanity and only th overthrow of this state's tyranny" (*NOTE* 50) indicating that simultaneously he is interpolated—markd by a nark [sic]—into the dissident position and that his response is to advocate humanity and revolution. His relationship with society is expressed as a product of the recognition of various state apparatuses that he is a dissident or otherwise othered in the system. He does not conform; therefore, he is subject to repression. This theme repeats itself throughout his work—interestingly enough it seems to peak in *Sailor*, the book he released in the midst of his encounter with Parliament—and, along with understanding of the power of language to "keep us in chains" (*WFT* n.p.), this syncs up rather neatly with post-war leftist critiques of culture and language. bissett's view of language and the ideological apparatuses of culture would seem to more or less be influenced by Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" and Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*. These theorists, like bissett himself, conceive of a cultural/linguistic environment that conditions the subject to a life in service of

capitalist/imperialist state. They also indicate, particularly Debord, that this goal is accomplished by substituting the image for reality while bissett argues in a similar vein that meaning controls the subject by substituting rule and convention for expression. In bissett's conception of and approach to language it is not only possible to read a connection to the larger Leftist/Marxist discourse on language, but, given how central this approach to language is to bissett's poetics, it is imperative. Without understanding the political forces that bissett and others see operating in language, it is impossible to read his work fully. bissett's approach may be more optimistic, he believes that it is possible to circumvent these forces by adopting a more open language and resisting the mechanisms of control, but it is still rooted in this discourse. Despite his disavowal of theory—and, it should be noted, this disavowal is a product of the fact that he views theory as being tainted by the same controlling forces and interests that utilize meaning to alienate the speaker from reality—his work rests on a theoretical and political discourse; and it would be naïve to assume that bissett didn't understand this fact.

Here then is the central problem that the reader or critic must confront in bissett's work: there is a clear participation in a theoretically determined discourse that asserts that this poetry is the product of an active subject imbued with agency that chooses poetic techniques and styles based on their usefulness to his aesthetic/political/spiritual ends; however, there is also poetic persona, a voice, that privileges a non-discursive, pre-linguistic, pre-lapsarian, innocent world and as such cultivates an identity that embodies the poetic qualities of these traits. Some critics, because of his flouting of convention and dedication to iconoclasm, refuse to see past this identity and come to the conclusion, like

Wordsworth's famous declaration about Blake, that his is a poetics springing from

madness, or innocence, or the libido, or whatever else that moves him out of the realm of

active subject, but that this raw quality is fascinating to observe. This reading is rendered

functional because bissett's references to nature , fire, sexuality, soul, and

union/community are evocative of Romanticism—though, for whatever reason, they

refuse to draw parallels between bissett and the encircled poet of Coleridge's "Kubla

Khan," perhaps because it would subvert the wild man reading of bissett—and because,

in order to avoid the pressures of late capitalist society, he deploys techniques like chant,

which carry the stigma—or aura—of primitivism and shamanism. Never mind the fact

that he deploys chant alongside concrete poetry which is very much a high modern or

postmodern genre and that sound poetry was a key component of Dadaist and Futurist

poetic experiments, or that bissett's exploration of sexuality as a method to reach the

sacred is evocative of Georges Bataille's Sacre Droit and Sacre Gauche, or any number of

other parallels in bissett's methodology with the ideas and poetic forms of Twentieth

Century Avant Garde movements, just the fact that bissett was "screaming crying

moaning caterwauling on lecture platforms" (Purdy 87) aligns him with the poetics of the

mad and the wild. Yet, however functional this reading may be, particularly from an

ideological perspective where it reinscribes bissett's work as non-sanctioned speech, it

falls apart in the face of the intellectual underpinnings evident in the work itself.

Simultaneously, this does not render bissett the poetic artisan and synthesizer of ideas a

stable and coherent identity since it is at odds with the visionary quality of the work

which cannot be denied. These two forces, though antithetical, are constantly active in

text, and yet cannot be ameliorated. The poet cannot be both an "an airy thing, a winged and a holy thing" (Plato 18) and an intellectual that makes choices based on his work's "*attitude…* to the relations of production of its time" ("The Author as Producer" 222); he cannot be both the unthinking vessel for divine inspiration and the critical minded author concerned with the politics of poetic practice and their solidarity with the underclasses and other producers. Yet, in bill bissett, these identities and identity practices are both clearly operating.

The end result of this apparent contradiction is that the identities fail, they collapse. At best, they can be read dialectically and be seen to generate some kind of workable synthesis. Or they could be read as deconstructing the barriers between the oracle and intellectual suggesting that the important work of the text is worked out in grappling with how to treat the message. These are, to greater or lesser extents, dead ends, because, while they may produce a functional way of reading bissett, they will inevitably fail because of the discord between the two poles. It is perhaps more important to recognize the act of constructing an incoherent identity as the truly significant and dangerous act. In this construction of bissett's poetic persona—and by refusing to accept it as in any way authentic since that simply returns us to the catch-22 of bill bissett, sacred shaman—it is possible to rationalize the two competing interests: in order to advance his personal politics and ideology, bissett, in facing the heavily disciplined, commoditized, alienated society where—as Lyotard suggests—knowledge ceases to be an end in itself and becomes a resource to be controlled and exchanged (4-5), constructs a poetic persona that divorces itself from the ideological apparatuses in language and

lionizes human—whether this be sensual or lumpen and proletarian or revolutionary—

experience. The creation of this persona allows bissett to "advocate nothing except

humanity and only th overthrow of this state's tyranny" (*NOTE* 50) and to transform this

advocacy into a poetic praxis that might otherwise have been met cynically. While the

dominant critical view of bissett may be reductive, it certainly is not cynical. The

constructed persona lends an aura of honesty to bissett's work, whether or not this

sincerity is real or imagined. It allows and enables his subversion of "straight" society. It

also demonstrates why bissett is a dangerous enough figure to warrant Wenman's vitriol

in the House of Commons. Whereas other writers and poets may have held leftist

sympathies or challenged hegemonic practices or generally called into question the

concept of Canada—Irving Layton did all these things and was awarded the Order of

Canada and was twice nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature—they generally

practiced these provocations from within the traditionally sanctioned boundaries of the

intelligentsia and academia or, failing that, had the protection of international acclaim.

bissett's ideology didn't allow for this protection, and his poetics are largely a Canadian

mutation.[43] Furthermore, his poetic persona presented two key problems to the

traditionally held ideas of Canada and Canadian literature.

The first problem lies in the simple fact that bissett, as I've shown, has set up

camp on the outside. He is a dissident, radical, and always already suspicious of the

machinations of the straight world. His work lies in direct opposition to the concept of

white civility since he is equally suspicious of whiteness and its discursive baggage, and

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[43] Case in point is Mary Ellen Solt's influential anthology of concrete poetry, *Concrete Poetry: a world view,* that reduces a very active Canadian concrete scene in which bissett is an integral figure to a single poem by bpNichol that had seen initial publication in England.

civility and its various articulations, preferring instead brotherhood and love to civil

behaviour. bissett is equally at odds with Margaret Atwood's attempt to codify Canadian

literature in terms of survival:

> The central symbol for Canada… is undoubtedly Survival,
> *la Survivance*. Like the [American] Frontier and The
> [British] Island, it is a multi-faceted and adaptable idea. For
> early explorers and settlers, it meant bare survival in the
> face of "hostile" elements and/or natives: carving out a
> place and a way of keeping alive…
> Our central idea is one which generates, not the excitement
> or danger which The Frontier holds out, not the smugness
> and/or sense of security, of everything in its place which
> The Island can offer, but an almost intolerable anxiety. Our
> stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of
> those who made it back, from the awful experience… The
> survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his
> survival
> (32-3)

There is, without a doubt, historical support for Atwood's argument, and it is

simultaneously complimentary to Coleman's theory of white civility in terms of "carving

out a place and a way of keeping alive"—the colonial project—and more adaptable, since

Atwood articulates the cultural dissonance of Anglo and French Canada as an act of

survival on the part of the Quebecois (32). Survival can be seen lurking in the anti-

Arcadia of the colonial period continuing up through the Twentieth century to something

like Felquiste Pierre Vallières' *Nègres blancs d'Amérique* written in prison and calling for

a Quebecois worker's revolution. However, bill bissett's work seems at odds with this

paradigm. He is not at odds with the Canadian expanse and deadly nature. Nor does he fit

easily in Atwood's four victim positions—bissett is perhaps in position 4, the creative

non-victim, and a poem like "Th Emergency Ward"[44] where, after suffering a

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[44]    This poem appears in *Nobody Owns Th Earth*, which Atwood helped compile, which may explain the

misdiagnosis of an inter-cerebral bleed as psychosomatic is properly diagnosed by "this beautiful neurologist chick" (*NOTE* 73), bissett awakes mid-surgery and gave the surgical staff a poetry reading certainly lends itself it this classification. Still, Atwood indicates that position four creative non-victims have had "the external and/or internal causes of victimization… removed" and, yet adds the parenthetical caveat that "[i]n an oppressed society… you can't become an ex-victim—insofar as you are connected with your society—until the entire society's position has been changed" (38) and this rhetorical sweep, clearly an accommodation of real socio-political concerns to her theory, bissett is moved out of the realm of Canadian Survival. bissett displays the openness to creative activity and free energy that designates the creative non-victim evidenced by the impromptu poetry reading he gave the doctors and nurses in the operating room, but he never is removed from the causes of victimization, the shrinks "still usd to sneak up th back/ stairs to get at me" (*NOTE* 75). He does not repudiate the role of the victim, nor does he lose his victimization—he lives in, he believes, an oppressed (or repressed) society and, as Atwood noted, cannot escape the victimization implicit in that—rather he exposes the victimization for what it is and, perhaps bravely perhaps naively, attempts to craft a better world. Moreover, what bill bissett must endeavor to survive is not what the protagonists of early Canadian literature had to endure, but rather what they returned to or carved out of the wilderness.

Thus we see that bill bissett is incompatible, if not antithetical, to the traditional narratives about Canadian literature in English. Boiled down, bissett seems unwilling and

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out she gave herself when she wrote: "There may be a Position Five, for mystics; I postulate it but will not explore it here, since mystics do not as a rule write books" (39)

possibly unable to recapitulate the colonial narrative that laid at the heart of Canadian literature unless it was—as in "in nova scotia th peopul call shit houses housus uv parliament"—exposed as exploitive and elitist. But this is only part of the problem, because, while this narrative no doubt favours those in power and is inherently conservative, it is easy to reduce bissett to a lone voice in the wilderness. As we've seen, bissett is so unorthodox in his poetic practice that the supposedly progressive academics and poets will perform this function as a matter of course—he threatens their hegemony too. However, the greatest threat—and the one that effectively aligns him with the postmodernists, pop artists, and Avant artists—is that he has constructed an identity for himself rather than assuming the default position for a Canadian artist and thus calling into question the validity of that position. bill bissett was born into a "good family" in Halifax, his father was a lawyer and judge, he had the opportunity to attend Dalhousie, in short, bissett came from what might be called—at least from the outside—the ideal home (Carlson 40). While his father may not have encouraged bissett's artistic leanings, he still came from an inside position—meaning that he had intrinsic access to whatever good "Canadianess" might mean—and, yet, he chose to become bill bissett. This choice represents a distinct challenge to a coherent Canadian identity. bissett by all appearances was born into an archetypal Canadian family in the mid-Twentieth Century and rejected it, crafting instead his own identity and, thus, highlighting a dangerous yet fundamental truth: there is no coherent Canadian identity and any attempt at coherence is merely a fiction doomed to fail.

. It is clear that Wenman's excoriation of bissett and his poetry goes well beyond a

fear of obscenity, political opportunism or a good faith attempt to review the Canada

Council's mandate. Wenman's speech to Parliament on December 13, 1977, in which he

flirts with censorship, decries the Trudeau government's apparent Avant Garde

proclivities, equates pop art with hate literature, warns of an impending dictatorship and,

finally, places bissett's work beyond art into the realm of evil, is a crie d'coeur, a call to

arms. Bob Wenman is fighting an aesthetic shift represented by the poetry of bill bissett

that is emblematic of a larger cultural shift. If bill bissett's poetry is a rejection and

critique of capitalist/bourgeois societal norms—the straight world—as empty, corrupt and

alienated from reality, then the society and the Government that allows for this poetry,

even attempt to foster it through financial support, are complicit in the critique. They too,

like bissett, are rejecting the idea of the Canadian people that Wenman invokes—they are

rejecting Wenman's conception of Canada. bissett is a radical, he's queer, he's a socialist,

he's pro-dope, sympathetic to the aims of Quebecois soverigntists, anti-authoritarian, and

an iconoclast. bissett's politics and lifestyle connect him with the movements that through

the Sixties and Seventies challenged the traditional narratives of Canada handed down

from Colonial period and exposed them as empty and failed. Beyond this failure is the

world of free play and constructed identities, the ability to keep it cool that McLuhan says

is uniquely Canadian, and here too, Wenman finds bill bissett. The issue of identity is not

as central to his poetry as it is in the work of some of his contemporaries, though he

certainly is interested in exploring how one might transcend the systems of meaning and

language and representation to experience something real and sublime, but his poetic

persona—dismissed as a holy fool, Blakean, the hallmark of an artistic savant without

real art or agency—is entirely constructed. He has rejected a possible life inside the

conformist world and produced a self that not only lies outside this world, but actively

assails it, revealing it to be false and exploitive. He shows the reader that they too can

construct their own identity and resist power. In the bissett affair, we see reactionary

forces, ones that are well served by the old ideologies, attempting to put the genie back in

the bottle. Wenman is hoping to accomplish a return to a world of order and coherent

identity, but bissett's encouraging us not to "b afrayd uv non linear raging" (*WFT* n.p.), to

move beyond the ordered world of meaning that serves those that seek to restrict and

control is a fait accompli. The Canadian is always already in a world at odds with definite
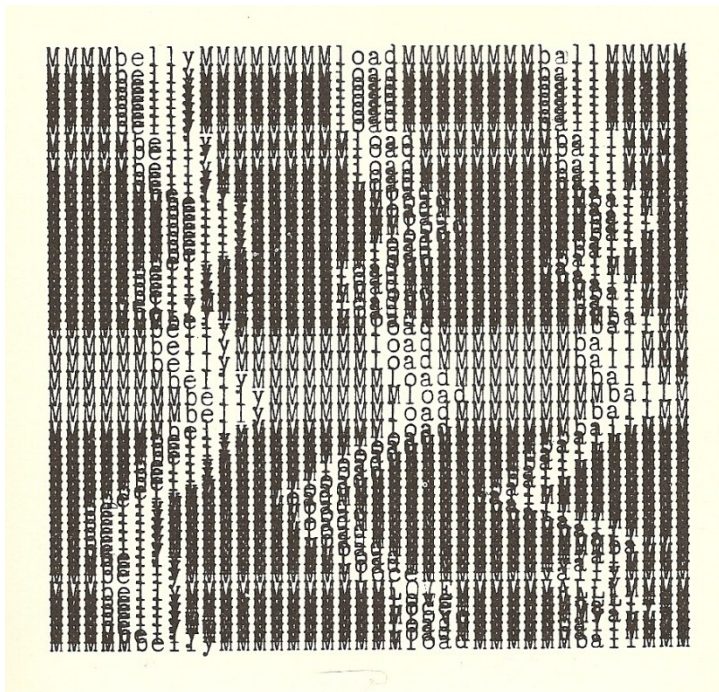
meaning.



Fig 3.1 (*NOTE* 19)

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                                   trees
only th only th only th only th only th only th
  only th only th only th only th only th
                                     sky

     only th flesh in th heart
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Fig 3.2 (*Living with th Vishyun* 145)

# Chapter 4: this pome sat down to write you

Henceforth a work of art could consist of a *single word,* and simply by skillful alteration the fullness and expressivity of artistic form might be attained.
Velimir Khlebnikov

Tout ça, c'était des jeux de mots
Marcel Duchamp

William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* represents, in principle at least, a major sea change in English language verse. Wordsworth suggests in the preface that the project was an "experiment" that that he and Coleridge hoped would reveal the value and a/effect of using "the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation" metrically arranged as a language for poetry (263). The experiment of the *Lyrical Ballads* is theoretically an attempt to democratize poetry. What Wordsworth calls the "real language of men" was an answer to the "gaudiness and inane phraseology" of the poets and writers of the Eighteenth Century, an earthy and authentic rebuke of high poetic diction as a language that was not only alien from common life but was contributing to the mental decline of England itself (264-266). The language of real men leading common lives was, by Wordsworth's estimation, a more direct, honest, philosophical and durable language that because of the proximity of its speakers to the soil and the primary dictates of nature provided a more fertile soil for "the essential passions of the heart" (264). The practicalities of rural life—the dirt under the fingers, the reliance on the various cycles of birth and harvest, and the interlacing of life with the land —made for a more direct and revelatory language than the fanciful and artificed language

of the popular press at the time which was producing in the mind of the urban English a "savage torpor" (266).

In terms of poetics, the move to metrically arranged common language is simultaneously revolutionary and reactionary. It is revolutionary insofar as it rejects the traditional hierarchy of poetic genres and subjects. By suggesting that the common people, the rustics, children and eccentrics are in possession of a language that is more expressive and durable—and which does not participate in the oscillations of literary fashion—and hence better suited to poetry than the elevated language deployed in poetic diction, it also becomes clear that their possession of this language makes them ideal subjects for poetry. This is in direct contrast to the Aristotelian hierarchy of literary genres and the types of subjects of these genres. Wordsworth is not just working to elevate the lyric or, rather, the lyrical ballad to a position of primacy that it traditionally had not had;[45] he is making the common man a suitable subject for the highest order of poetry. The class that in drama had spoken in base prose while their social betters spoke verse were now to be on equal footing with kings and nobles "who enjoy great reputation and good fortune, such as Oedipus" (Aristotle 51). The result of Wordsworth's intervention is a democratization of poetry and poetic subjects. The poet becomes free to pursue their poetic interests wherever they may lie, so long as they excite the reader and are the result of "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (265).

Despite the apparent move towards a freer, more democratic poetry—a poetry of

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[45]

The arc of John Milton's literary career—starting with lyrical poetry that he presented as the work of youth before moving on to drama and finally epic—which Milton constructed with the Aristotelian model in mind serves as indication of the relative position of the lyric in the hierarchy.

the people—the preface does display some reactionary tendencies. The first and most

obvious is Wordsworth's distaste for the "frantic novels, sickly and stupid German

tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse" (266) which he sees as

causing a general neglect of Shakespeare and Milton and the other great English works.

Wordsworth himself ties the popularity of these genres to the increasingly urban

population of England which connects the proliferation of these "low-brow" forms to the

industrial revolution and general reordering of society that is occurring in the Romantic

era and would be a prominent feature of the nineteenth century. This bit of cultural

conservatism amounts to little more than self-interested snobbery.

The other reactionary, or rather restrictive and hegemonic, aspect of the Preface is

his theory of the poet. Whereas his decision to write about the low and rustic life and in

the "real language of men in a state of vivid sensation" (263) marks a sea change in

poetic practice, a move towards a more open and democratic verse, the poet is moved

further and further than the common experience. According to Wordsworth, the poet is:

> a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more
> lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has
> a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more
> comprehensive soul than are supposed to be common
> among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and
> volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the
> spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar
> volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the
> universe and habitually impelled to create them where he
> does not find them.
> (269)

Poet here starts as simply a man speaking to other men; however, is quickly rendered

transcendent. The poet is more sensitive, caring, insightful, full of life and possesses a

greater knowledge of humanity than the common man. The poet is able to recognize his passions and desires in the movement of the universe and when these are not manifest in the universe, he is capable of creating them. The implication of this is that the poet, as an individual speaking to other individuals, functions as a lens through which people can access that which they could not access or understand on their own and beyond this the poet has the ability to produce that which he perceives but finds otherwise absent from the universe for the consumption of other people. The poet, then, is the only individual capable of understanding and interpreting human experience for the masses. For, though poetry may be "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," it is only through a "man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply" (265) that is can be produced. The meditative mind of the exceptional individual is the only catalyst for good poetry. The sight of the landscape above Tintern Abbey and watching his sister experience it only becomes poetic when mediated by the poet's "purer mind" ("Tintern Abbey" l.29). Wordsworth's conception of the poet is in essence aligned with the "Author-God" Roland Barthes describes as restricting the proliferation of meaning; a limiting force that substitutes its theocratic voice for that of language ("The Death of The Author" 143, 146).

The other thing coded into this articulation of the poet is that is effectively silences those whose language Wordsworth singles out as being best suited for poetry. Throughout Wordsworth's contributions to *Lyrical Ballads* we confront the speakers of the common language; however, their words are received mediated through Wordsworth. They may speak, but the reader is always experiencing their words through the lens of the

poet who acts as filter to contextualize and reinscribe the speech act. The poet, as a result

of his supposed preternatural sensitivity to human experience and meditative mind, can

be the only speaking subject in a Wordsworthian poem, reducing the subjects of the

poems to objects on par with the Lake Country's daffodils and the reader to the passive

recipient of the poet's insight, knowledge and feeling. The common people are silenced

and the reader must seek the poet's aura for gratification and what is perceived as

"authentic" experience. Wordsworth in the Preface is producing a poet that is the cultural,

literary equivalent of the Philosopher King. The poet becomes a naturalized figure of

cultural authority that denies the practice of poetry or even the ability to truly understand

human experience and nature to those not exceptionally equipped. The outcome of this

construction of the poet/author figure is not wholly aesthetic; by delineating the

boundaries and requirements of poetic practice in the face of popular literature, turning

the conflict between high and low art into a conflict between sanctioned and

unsanctioned speech, is centralizing literary cultural power in the poet.[46]

bpNichol's 1978 postcard poem, "Man in Lakeland," destabilizes the hegemonic

control of representation that Wordsworth tries to localize in the poet in the Preface. The

postcard depicts  a map of the Lake District National Park in Cambria, England beside a

black outline of a man's face under which Nichol has placed the legend "Man in

Lakeland." The borders of the man's head conform, roughly, with the borders of the park

on the map; Ennerdale Water forms his eye while the roads from Lorton south to

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[46]

At least insofar as the poet's speech has access to beneficial and transcendent, while the low art of the Gothic novel and other popular forms are wholly detrimental (in Wordsworth's reasoning at least) to the English mind.
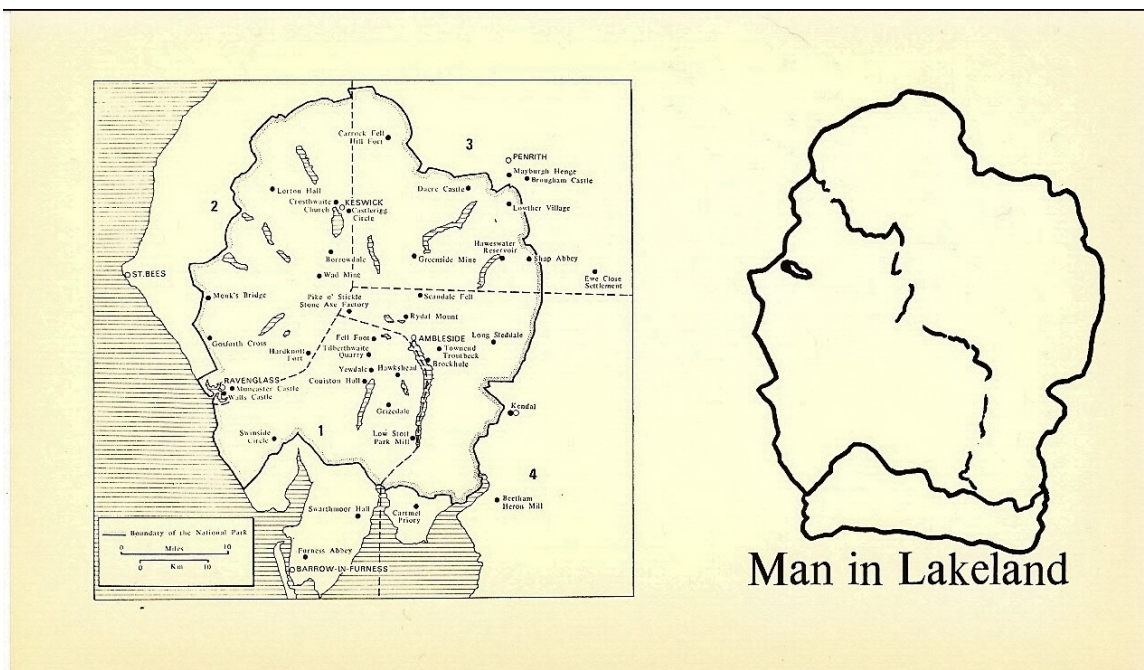
Man in Lakeland

*Fig 4.1*

Windermere—which are not present in the poem's map—provide him with his hairline and ear. On the verso of the postcard, in addition to locating the poem in the longer work "In Lakeland" which forms part of Nichol and Steve McCaffery's collaborative collection *In England Now That Spring* and including a few further lines from that poem, Nichol includes the caption "Found in the Lake District, England, by bpNichol/ May 1978." The poem is deceptively simple. At face value it is simply a tracing of the map; the discovery of the man revealing a childlike approach to the world, but little else beyond a willingness to play[47]. However, what the poem actually does is reorder the relationship between the poet and the object of poetry that Wordsworth establishes in the Preface and it does so by directly inverting the relationship Wordsworth had with the Lake District.

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[47] My mother's reaction to the poem is particularly telling. When I was describing to her what I was working on, her reaction was something on the level of "Is that it?"

For the Wordsworthian poet, nature and reality must be translated through the mind of the poet. It is only through the meditative act of the poet and his uniquely sensitive faculties that representation is possible. The natural world of the Lake Country or Wales or whatever pastoral setting that the poet wishes to experience—"oft, in lonely rooms, 'mid the din/ Of towns and cities… passing into [his] purer mind" ("Tintern Abbey 25-29)—becomes present in the poem only by being reformed, recapitulated, re-imagined and reiterated by the poet. It is through the man, and through man in the idealized form of the poet, that this pastoral world can be realized. It is wholly subject to the mind of the poet, a medium through which the poet can gain insight into its own subjectivity not unlike the relationship Bürger describes between the bourgeois subject and art. Where it differs is that the poet's internal subjectivity, the power and authority innate in the poet through the act of poesis, is always already the animating force in the relationship with the meditative object.[48] The relative reality of the Lake Country as a setting for poetry is absolutely immaterial to the Wordsworthian poet, nature and its pantheistic qualities are found wholly in the mind of the poet. What is important is not the "beauteous forms" that Wordsworth alludes to in "Tintern Abbey" but rather the "eye made quiet by the power/ Of harmony, and the deep power of joy" (23, 47-8).

The insightful eye is integral to the composition of Nichol's "Man in Lakeland." The poem hinges on the ability to see the figure of the man in the map of the Lake District National Park, to perceive the map as something beyond a means "of transference

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[48]

    The other key difference is that the poet as producer of art supplies the bourgeois individual with the material that affirms their subjectivity. This would theoretically mean that the poet, by virtue of their position in the chain of production, is directly experiencing or at least representing that which the rest of society must experience indirectly through their representations.

of meaning, [an] exchange of intentions and meanings" ("Signature Event Context" 20) and as something with the potential to escape context. Where this process of seeing diverges from that of the Wordsworthian poet is in the act composition. Nichol's intervention in the production of the poem is minimal. He extracts the graph of the man's head from the map and provides the legend naming the thing he has seen already present in the map, but this is pretty much the extent of his interference with the text. While the roads that are absent from the poem's map are employed to form the figure's hairline and ear, this does not represent a direct intervention in the poem so much as distortion since the roads themselves are present in the actual landscape of the map and their courses are at the very least suggested by the map's chain of lakes. Nichol essentially abdicates the poet's seat of authority by indicating that he did not produce this figure, but rather found it already present in both the Lake District and the map. This insistence that he found the man rather than created him—or even that the man was revealed to him through his innate sensitivity and meditative mind—denies the specialness of the poet in the process of textual production. What happens in this poem is not a manifestation of the genius of the poet[49], there is nothing here that requires the special sensitivity that Wordsworth attributes to his poet-genius, but instead is tied to a willingness to be open to what the distortions and failures of the map as a linguistic sign may potentially carry with it. It is

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[49]

In his essay, "Who's in Control: The Poet or the Language?", it is fair to say that Nichol is evasive on the matter of whether the poet or the language/inspiration represents the guiding principle in the production of poems, postulating both that poet's can experience a form of dictation while writing and that this may represent an alteration of the poet's consciousness meaning that the poet's subjectivity is still in play. He concludes, in what may be read as a rebuke of the limiters of the genius model or perhaps a moment of solidarity with surrealist poetics, by saying "Fred Wah says the etymology of 'control' is 'counter the role,' i.e. 'stop the revolution' literally." (*meanwhile* 473-4).

the textual equivalent of a child describing the images they see while cloud watching, and while Wordsworth may believe that children live a more authentic life it is important to remember that in his poem "We Are Seven" it is Wordsworth the poet that mediates his encounter with the young girl, her speech is filtered through the sensitivities of the poet.

Nichol further effaces the influence of the poet in the title/legend of the poem. Whereas in the Wordsworthian model Lakeland is to be found within the mind of the man where it serves that man's purposes—Wordsworth stresses in the Preface that his poems "will be found to carry along with them a *purpose* [author's emphasis]" (265)—Nichol labels the image he conjures forth as the "Man in Lakeland." Lakeland provides the possibility of the man rather than the man governing the representation of Lakeland. This is a subtle inversion, but a significant one insofar as it removes the poet as a "principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning" ("What is an Author?" 899). That Lakeland can contain, produce or conjure forth the image of a man—which always functions as a symbol of subjectivity—allows for meaning that can transcends the limits of the poet's perceptions and purposes. As Michel Foucault states:

> We are used to thinking that the author is so different from all other men, and so transcendent with regard to all languages that, as soon as the author speaks, meaning begins to proliferate, to proliferate indefinitely.
>    The truth is quite the contrary: the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work: the author does not precede the work, he is a certain functional principle which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses…
> ("What is an Author?" 899)

The Wordsworthian poet by virtue of his exceptional status is precisely the kind of limiting function that Foucault describes. What we receive in a given poem are powerful

feelings filtered through the purposes of a strong, singular subject that is not open to the

possibilities inherent in language; the image of nature that the reader receives and the

supposedly transformative power of this experience are governed by the poet limiting and

controlling the meaning of the poem. Nichol, by finding the image "in the Lake District,

England… May 1978" and presenting the poem as the man in Lakeland rather than

suggesting the inverse which is nonetheless present, uses the poem to illustrate the

potential for the proliferation of meaning. The man in Lakeland, much like the man in the

moon, is an artifact or entity of the transrational world where the failure of signifying

systems opens up to a world of play. It also represents a deconstruction of the traditional

notion of the author as authority figure who Nichol can never completely dispense with,

but certainly can trouble.[50] Furthermore, in this specific case, the challenge to the

hegemony of the poet-author is a challenge to and undermining of William Wordsworth.

*In England Now That Spring*, the book in which "Man in Lakeland" first appears,

is collaborative book, much like Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, and is the

product of a trip Nichol and McCaffery took through Scotland and the Lake Country in

1978. While the title itself is a misquoting of Robert Browning's "Home Thoughts, From

Abroad" from 1845's *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, this is to some extent misleading.[51]

McCaffery's individual third of the book directly engages the works of Wordsworth,

using these poems as the raw material for McCaffery's new poems and translations.

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[50]

    The Author whether it is allowed to be dead or not can never be completely dispensed with because of
its juridical and taxonomic functions.

[51]

    The original line is "Oh, to be in England now that April's there" (Browning 12)

Given this direct intertextual link between McCaffery's portion of the book and Wordsworth—though McCaffery spends more time engaging later works like "The Prelude" and "The Excursion"—along with the association of Wordsworth and Coleridge with the Lake Country that Nichol's poem "In Lakeland" emphasizes as a primary site of composition for *In England Now That Spring* and the collaborative nature of that book and the *Lyrical Ballads* there is a strong metonymic resonance between the two texts. Nichol and McCaffery by evoking Wordsworth and *Lyrical Ballads* demystify, deconstruct and neutralize them.

For experimental and avant garde poets to take a shot at Wordsworth is not really all that surprising. It wouldn't really be exaggeration to suggest that the majority of English-language avant garde movements have been refutations or repudiations of Wordsworth and his poetics. Oscar Wilde in what amounts to his manifesto of Aesthetic literature, the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is quite in opposition to Wordsworth when he argues that "[t]o reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim," that "[n]o artist desires to prove anything" and that "[a]ll art is quite useless" (1697-8). T.S. Eliot's Modernist statement, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," directly engages Wordsworth first by quoting him and then by arguing that "[p]oetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (502). The symbolic value of Wordsworth as perhaps the defining poet of English poet of the nineteenth century and certainly as a key theorist of the poetics of the bourgeois ascendency makes him a convenient target. Beyond this—and what makes Nichol's intervention different from those of Wilde, Eliot and the like—is Wordsworth's

value as a symbol of English national literature when viewed in a Canadian context. As we have seen from the fact that successive Anglo-American literary movements have found it necessary to address the ideas he espoused, Wordsworth's specter casts a long shadow over the English language literature in the seats of Colonial and Imperial power. Furthermore, he served as the Poet Laureate of England from 1843 until his death in 1850 when Tennyson succeeded him in the post. This means that not only was he an influential poet, but his poetry bears the imperial sanction. His work embodies, then, the very pinnacle of English poetry and is, by virtue of his position within the government, the image of that poetry that was presented to the world.

Frank Davey has suggested that the stamp of Canadian postmodernism is in simple terms the movement away from Anglo-American (Modernist) influences and towards a more global perspective. We can see in "Man in Lakeland" something similar to this movement. There is a troubling of Anglo-American literary power in its parodic and critical relationship with Wordsworth's works. In a sense, by deconstructing or refusing the ideology that motivates Wordsworth in such a simple way, Nichol is dispensing with the tradition and discourse that is governed by and wrestles with it. The childlike refusal to play in system a based on Wordsworthian rules is a refusal to participate in the tradition that problematically finds its origin in, even as it struggles with, these rules. This isn't; however, an act of writing back or critical engagement like those that can be seen in works like Claude McKay's "The White House" or the Canadian Oliver Goldsmith's "The Rising Village." McKay's tactic is to use the literary models of those in power, "The White House" is a sonnet, to refute the basis of that power. McKay

explodes the myth of Black inferiority by appropriating one of the highest forms of White

culture and proving his competency with the form. He even goes beyond this using an

irregular rhyme scheme (ABABCCDDEFEFGG) to further mark his resistance to the

power structure that the poem's content illustrates. Oliver Goldsmith's "The Rising

Village" uses irony to advance the idea of Canada's ascendency in the face of Europe's

decline. The 1825 poem is a response to Goldsmith's Great Uncle and namesake's poem

"The Deserted Village" about rural decline in the wake of the Inclosure Acts, with the

Canadian Goldsmith arguing that while rural England is in decline, Canada is a pastoral

paradise full of possibility. The content of Goldsmith's poem is very different from that of

McKay as is the ideological position of each poet, however both poems rely on a system

of appropriation to make their argument.[52] They use the forms and language systems of

that with which they are engaging or critiquing. There is an inherent danger in this model

of resistance writing that the dissenting or critical voice by employing the mechanics and

techniques of the system they are critiquing may serve to further the goals of that system.

McKay, in his attempt to claim an individual power or to subvert the established power

by demonstrating his ability to use the markers of that power's status, is in danger of

validating the markers and tools of the power he is challenging. The sonnet can very

easily become "the prominent figure under whose protection the rebel is suing for peace"

(Adorno and Horkheimer 104). Nichol sidesteps this trap by moving his assault on

established ideologies and power structures outside of the representational and signifying

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[52]

McKay's poem is very much in the writing back vein, while I would suggest that, since Goldsmith is
not necessarily or even at all in opposition to British power, his poem is very much one of critical
engagement.

systems that serve as the basis of their power and engaging these systems on a material level. He subverts and exposes these authorities by exposing the uncertainty inherent in a material language.

Guy Debord suggests that the spectacle "is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" and "a world view transformed into an objective force" in the material realm (12-3). In short, it is the ultimate form of ideology, one that completely alienates the subject and the life that they would, should or could live directly and mediates everything through a system of images that function to reproduce conditions favorable to established power. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with its rigorously controlled media and culture is perhaps the best example of a society of the spectacle, but Debord clearly felt that post-war Western society had succumbed to spectacular forces. The key feature of the spectacle is that it substitutes representation for experience, it is wholly dependent on its representational power in order to achieve its ends. It functions like a language and becomes a power through its linguistic nature. Words and images produce power. Debord generally cynical about the ability to critique spectacular systems, suggesting that "a critique capable of surpassing the spectacle must *know how to bide its time*" (154). What is interesting about Nichol's poetics and its attitudes towards authority is that it seems to operate on the margins of these systems. It does not necessarily engage in direct and obvious critiques of the mechanisms of authority and power, but instead exposes the vulnerability of these mechanisms because they are based in language and language fails to maintain a fixed coherence.

This is evident in Nichol's discovery of the saints that provide the basis for his

major work, *The Martyrology.* In the 4th sequence of "Scraptures," St. Reat appears for

the first time. As with all subsequent saints that compose the mythology and cosmology

of *The Martyrology*, St. Reat derives from a movement of the letters St—common

abbreviation for the word saint in English—left from a word in order to designate the

remaining grapheme a saint. This process that Nichol uses to populate the universe of

*The Martyrology* allows for the canonization of any word or grapheme that contains the

two letters ST: stranglehold to St Ranglehold, storm to St Orm, strike to St Rike, Stein to

St Ein, etcetera. This process of producing the saints in its later iterations is very much a

process where Nichol is able to conjure the population of Cloudtown, original home of

the saints in *The Martyrology*, through a linguistic game that he would later modify in

order to allow him to create a race of giants out of the streets of Toronto[53]; however, the

discovery of St. Reat is different insofar as it is not the product of a direct intervention

but results from a slippage in language. "Scraptures: 4th Sequence" starts with the word

"DREAM" which by the end of the first page has been reordered to "AM RED" and the

next two pages follow a similar mechanical modification of the words that appear based

on metonymical connection or physical similarity. AM RED becomes am green becomes

am greed becomes a greed as the words constantly shift based on the traces of other

signifiers they carry with them. The process is largely organic and follows from a logic

based in difference and the freeplay of the signifier, but towards the bottom of the third

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[53]

    Early editions of *Gifts: Book(s) 7&* featured a list of the saints that filled the inside front and back
    covers along with the frontispiece and back leaf.

page of the poem this changes with the discovery of St. Reat:

> a   greed
>
> a greed
>
> agreed
>
> agree
>
> AGREE
>
> ATREE
>
> a tree
> a treet
>
> a treat
> as treat
>
> as treat
> has treat
> (*Gifts* n.p.)

Nichol at this moment in the poem has yet to recognize St Reat as a separate linguistic

unit from either "as treat" or "has treat" but the potential for the saint is latent in each of

these formations. Each breaking or shifting of the words has produced a graphically or

sonically similar word cluster—the exception to this in the sequence is the move from

"AM RED" to "am green" which shifts metonymically—revealing a certain innate

plasticity that is present in language. Nichol's words shift through the sequence more

based on the material disposition of the grapheme (or phoneme) than on the standardized

meanings or even connotations of the words carry when they function as signifiers. The

sequence of the poem is based on the fact that the word objects obey, at least in principle,

the same set of rules of construction and deconstruction that other material objects are

subject to. However, St Reat is a discursively different language object from the rest that the poem has thus far accumulated:

HA!!!!!!!

St. Reat

AH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

*Fig 4.2*

(*Gifts* n.p.)

The poem here continues its mechanical alteration of the grapheme to produce new lexical objects marked with traces of both the preceding and subsequent links in the chain of signifiers, but here in the "HA!!!!!!!... St. Reat... AH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" there is a pronounced difference in the magnitude of the lexical object revealed. The shift of the st away from ha and reat produces or reveals a hidden trace of sacred subjectivity and the poem itself performs what appears to be a road to Damascus moment for the poet.

What Nichol has apparently accidentally revealed is a rupture in language that

grants him access to privileged and controlled linguistic signs. The saint, as political and religious figure, is a supposedly transcendent figure, outside of the normal discourse whose life and actions are meant to serve as examples, ideological models, for the faithful. Hence, it is of the utmost importance for the coherence of the message they are supposed to convey and those who perpetuate the designation that the signifiers associated with sainthood and saintliness are rigidly controlled.[54] Nichol's discovery of St. Reat lying dormant in "has treat" allows him access to this privileged linguistic sphere. This serves two important poetic functions for Nichol and his text(s). The first is that it immediately troubles the claims to control and sanction others exert over the signifiers of sainthood by doubly illustrating that "*the linguistic sign is arbitrary"* (Saussure 833) and attempts to assert control or claims of transcendence are ultimately vulnerable to the fact of the sign's arbitrary nature and that there "is not a single signified that escapes… the play of signifying references that constitute language. The advent of writing is the advent of this play" (*Of Grammatology* 7). This means that the moment a concept such as sainthood is committed to language and in particular when the signifier is rendered graphically despite any connection with transcendent concepts or ideas that lie outside of the strict bounds of the linguistic system—God as both the unmoved mover in a teleological universe or as the lone transcendental signified—the concept is subject to the freeplay of the signifier. If St. Mark, St. John, St. Patrick, St. Joan and St. Catherine

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[54]

In a strictly Christian context, it should be noted that Catholics and Protestants are equally interested in limiting and controlling the definition of a saint despite their disparate definitions of the term. No matter what the theological perspective of the user of the word saint, insofar as it represents an individual of pronounced or privileged relations with God it is in the best interest of those in power positions to control who is marked by the saintly signifier.

all have their saintliness indicated by the application of "St" to their name, then when

Nichol pulls the "st" out of "has treat" and positions it in front of the rest of the broken

grapheme he is placing Reat in the same discourse as Mark, John, Patrick, Joan and

Catherine. This, of course, presents a problem to authority and ideological structures built

on the exclusivity of this tag, since their ability to confirm and control the usage of this

title is compromised once Nichol starts producing his linguistic saints and as a result

canonizes stranglehold, storm, and (Gertrude) Stein.

The ultimate poetic outcome of this language game comes when Nichol, taking

Khlebnikov's call to arms that a single word could be a work of art to the next logical

level, in his poem "4 Moods" reveals the "Sanctimoniousness" latent in the alphabet

itself: "abcedfghijklmnopqrSTuvwxyz" (*Truth* 20). "4 Moods" further disperses and

disrupts the privileged nature of saintliness because it unveils the signifier of sainthood as

already present in the building blocks of all other linguistic signs. Nichol suggests in the

essay "The "Pata of Letter Feet, or the English Written Character as a Medium for

Poetry" that "since the main focus is on stringing words into meaningful phrases the

letters too [along with the surface of composition] are viewed in a purely utilitarian

fashion" remaining invisible unless something like a misspelling forces the reader to

acknowledge them (*meanwhile* 355). The alphabet and written character are the invisible

atomic material that makes up the molecular word, they mark potential except when they

are configured incorrectly where they assert a kind of failure to conform to a system.

"The Sanctimoniousness of the Alphabet" in "4 Moods," along with the other moods the

Nichol identifies in the poem, shows that the shortened signifier for "saint" is present in

the raw form of written language and, thus, its trace can be felt in the varied configurations of these elements. "Tuba" and "saint" are different graphemes and when vocalized are different phonemes, but "tuba" being built of letters participates in the same base unit as "saint" and therefore calls back to the "ST" present in the raw alphabet.

The other key poetic advantage that Nichol gains from the discovery or revelation of St. Reat is that it grants him access to the discursive realms saints inhabit without being constricted by the received traditions of a particular theology or cosmology. St. Reat, on a purely linguistic level, is the equal of any of the saints that appear in the hagiographies or martyrologies and thus enters into the same discourses and contexts. Where St. Reat differs, of course, is when Nichol discovers him in "Scraptures: 4th Sequence" he is not loaded with baggage, portent and meaning that the other saints are already supersaturated with. Joan of Arc, as a patron saint of France martyred at the behest of the English, can be seen to explain the existence of a French state in terms of divine intervention. God sent St. Joan to aid the French against the English and, thus, French nationalism is granted holy legitimacy. The figure of the saint is a space where the celestial and temporal intersect, and, as a result, lends that to which the saint's name is affixed instant authority whether this is the state of France, Trinitarian theology or physical mortification as a route to grace in the case of the Canadian saint, Kateri Tekakwitha.[55] The lives of the saints can be read as highly ideological explanations of the way people should live their lives. They are aspirational and inspirational guides so that

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[55]

In a technical sense, Kateri Tekakwitha has not been canonized, only beatified. However, in terms of Canadian saints in a literary context, she appears as St. Catherine Tekakwitha in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*.

followers might understand how to conduct themselves in the temporal realm in order to

prepare for the celestial. Reat, however, is free of this received content. He is a saint and,

therefore, still serves as a tool that explains the intervention of a transcendent force in the

temporal realm and human interactions with that force, but he is a signifier with no

discernable signified. He is empty and free which allows Nichol access to sacred space in

order to understand his interactions with language. Nichol explains:

> Anyway through Julia [Keeler] I was introduced to that
> concept of the martyrology, simply the notion that it was a
> book in which you wrote out the history of the saints. And
> since, in a curious way, the saints were language or were
> my encounter with language, the possibility of the journal
> form or the *utanniki* form also opened up—I was writing
> my history of the saints, my history of my encounter with
> language and so on.
> (*meanwhile* 275)

It may be worth noting that the majority—if not all—contact that most people have with

a saint is mediated through language, though rigidly structured language, and thus the

calendar of *The Roman Martyrology* is a way of understanding and speaking about the

world through a mediated language. However, the traditional languages of the veneration

of the saints is imposed and governed from without. Nichol's innovation, or at least the

tool with which he avails himself, is to refocus the role of the saint in understanding and

speaking about the mysterious and weird. His saints are personal, coming from his

"encounter with language," and are thus free of the illusive signified that governs the

language of the "official" saints.

Nichol's approach to language allows him access to rarefied linguistic space and

to produce a personal cosmology or metaphysics. The existence of a individualistic

universe populated by personal saints that reflect a single active subject's engagement

with the world does not seem inherently dangerous to authoritative structures. Nichol

himself indicates that the saints populating *The Martyrology* are ill-equipped to

navigating the "real" world since "real pleasure/ saint reat/ the poem can't provide"

(Book 1 n.p). He expressly declares in the "Scenes from the Lives of the Saints" section

of Book 1 that "this is the real world you saints could never exist in/ born in an imperfect

reading of the stars" (n.p.). Here Nichol seemingly denies the utility of the saints in

understanding or navigating the world around him; they are of the poem, unable to

survive in the non-textual environment of what he terms the real world. However, Nichol,

by stating that the saints are born out of "an imperfect reading"—something that St.

Reat's discovery seems to bear out—stresses both how the saints are useful and why their

existence as a linguistic metaphysical phenomenon represents a destabilization of pre-

existing codes. There is no such thing as a perfect reading. A perfect reading is

impossible. It must be taken as a given that in order for written language to function it

must be able to signify in the absence of the writer or the receiver and quite likely both as

Jacques Derrida asserts ("Signature Event Context" 8). This means that the reader by

necessity must approach a given text without the safety and guidance of context, or rather

must attempt to supply their own context. This phenomenon leads Barthes to conclude

that "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message'

of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of

them original, blend and clash" and that the "text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the

innumerable centres of culture" ("The Death of the Author" 146). Any attempt to

decipher the tissue text that Barthes describes—and Nichol's *The Martyrology* with its allusions to Emma Peel, *Lives of the Saints* and the re-iteration of Book 2 that appears in Book 5 is certainly a tissue text—must by extension lean heavily on the theoretically unique perspective of the interpreter. This does not mean that the interpreter can possibly generate a perfect or truly authoritative reading;[56] what it means is that since language is an imperfect system of signification, signaled again and again by the lack of a transcendental signified to function as a stabilizing center, the only outcome of a language event is an imperfect reading. Nichol despairs of the saints ability to be useful in the real world in a moment of doubt, they are the imperfect products of an imperfect act of reading:

> saint reat
> you've taken up with some chick called agnes
> & won't listen anymore
>
> & saint ranglehold
>
> hell he never listened anyway
>
> how many ships were lost in his fucking storms?
> (*The Martyrology* Book 1, n.p.)

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[56]

While Barthes does stipulate that "the birth of the reader  must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148), he does not render the reader as an authoritative voice so much as he attempts to open the text to a multiplicity of meanings. Reading is always an imperfect science and at best can only account for a portion of the potential meanings and intertextual intersections in a given text. Barthes underscores this in *The Pleasure of the Text* when describes the method by which the reader reads: "a rhythm is established, casual, unconcerned with the *integrity* of the text; our very avidity for knowledge impels us to skim or skip certain passages (anticipated as "boring") in order to get more quickly to the warmer parts of the anecdote… we boldly skip (no one is watching) descriptions, explanations, analyses, conversations… it does not occur at the level of structure of languages but only at the moment of their consumption; the author cannot predict tmesis: he cannot choose to write *what will not be read*" (10-11). If the author is killed and reduced at best to the moment of the instance of writing then the reader is rendered as infinite number of subjectivities seeking their own pleasure in the text and are incapable of interacting with the text as a complete and total whole.

The saints here, always already linguistic phenomenona, resist Nichol; they defy his control and resist his desire. The poem performs the text's resistance to the authority of the poet. However, beyond this surface action lies the saints' greater challenge to pre-existing codes and claims of authority. Nichol's saints may themselves be imperfect products of imperfect readings, but their existence and the linguistic impossibility of a perfect reading signal a rupture, a moment where language's imprecision allows the individual subject to engage in their own imperfect reading. The subject's interaction with received codes and values is crafted and governed by the interaction of layered readings of multifoliate texts and when these readings are even slightly askew they generate new metaphysical spaces that spring from the reader's subjective interaction with language. This, of course, frustrates authority structures that derive their force and power from signifying systems because they are exposed to the imprecision and freeplay of language while those that are supposed to be subject to and disciplined by these structures are provided with spaces of complete autonomy. They become free to form a universe or multiverse or simply a space in which they can resist and replace the supposedly transcendental signifiers of control with those that spill out of their own imperfect readings. As Nichol writes in Book 5 of *The Martyrology*:

> lacking the precise measure
> play the thing by ear
> try to match it to some inner hearing
>
> words fall apart
> the world is reconstructed  the head
> (Book 5, Chain5)

The subjective interpretation of imprecise language allows the hearer/reader, through the

interpretive process intrinsically linked to "some inner hearing," to reconstruct the world within and the world without.

This reconstruction is the central goal of ideology and the spectacle. The goal of the ideological apparatus or spectacular system is to reproduce (or produce) the conditions of production that exist at a given moment; to maintain the current power relations in the most advantageous way to those who are in power or more broadly to the system itself. Antonio Gramsci suggests that American industrial firms interest in the "morality" (302) and off the clock interests of the labor force is a product of this drive to regulate and maintain the (human) machinery of industry; to maintain "the continuity of the physical and muscular-nervous efficiency of the worker" since it is in their best interest to have a well conditioned and efficient labor force (303). This can only be accomplished by injecting the desirable social values into the work force—don't drink, fight, carouse, and spend your money rather than saving it—through ideological methods: language and signifying systems that construct an image of reality that furthers their socio-economic goals. Nichol recognizes this ability of language to act as a, as Raymond Williams puts it, "constitutive faculty" (24). The falling apart of words, whether in the physical sundering and reordering that "" represents or simply the failure to signify, demands an act of reconstruction so that they may continue to mediate and explicate the world which they represent. However, this act of reconstruction brings into conflict two forces that have different interests in the way language constructs the world, the inner life of the subject and the outer social world of ideology.

Gramsci suggests that the moment when the body is fully mechanized is actually

a small scale moment of liberation for the alienated worker:

> …it is not the spiritual death of man. Once the process of
> adaptation has been completed, what really happens is that
> the brain of the worker, far from being mummified, reaches
> a state of complete freedom. The only thing that is
> completely mechanicised is the physical gesture; the
> memory of the trade, reduced to simple gestures repeated at
> an intense rhythm, "nestles" in the muscular and nervous
> centres and leaves the brain free and unencumbered for
> other occupations… the worker remains a man and…
> during his works he thinks more, or has greater
> opportunities for thinking… not only does the worker
> think, but the fact he gets no immediate satisfaction from
> his work and realizes that they are trying to reduce him to a
> trained gorilla, can lead him into a train of thought that is
> far from conformist.
> (310)

I can attest to the validity of Gramsci's point. The long hours I spent working on the line

in various factories where I spent much of my time working alone were also long hours

where I dissociated my mental processes from my physical ones and it was in these

periods of labor that I became utterly convinced of the sensibility of anarcho-socialist

politics and the necessity of trade unionism. I would hesitate, however, to say that this

phenomenon was anything close to typical, it does, though, highlight the moment of

conflict between the inner subject and outer ideology that exists in the cognitive moment

when words fall apart. The instance of ideological control is always threatened by the

subject's minds ability to wander down dark and undisciplined alleys, the possibility that

the subject may realize that the system and their place within that system are unsatisfying

or based on a "false consciousness." The inexactitude of language—beyond simply the

arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign that Saussure suggests towards the impossibility to

accurately read or hear that Nichol's poems illustrate—opens these alleys, these thought

trains, to the subject and breaks them free, at least theoretically, by exposing the tools and methodology of control and discipline to deconstruction. By necessity, the reconstruction of the misheard wor(l)d must involve the deconstruction of the wor(l)d that relies on a singular catholic hearing, and this deconstruction happens in the internal space beyond the mechanized body.

To suggest that Nichol's poems are deconstructive in nature seems obvious. The series "Studies in the Book Machine" take the basic assumptions of the book as an object and interrogates them. In "Studies in the Book Machine 5," the second poem in the sequence to appear in *Truth: a book of fictions* on page 7 but on what is the first page of the book proper, Nichol presents the reader with a paradox: "This is the/ (1$^{st}$) (7$^{th}$)/ page of the/ book." Both of these statements are absolutely correct in terms of the physical and conventional logic of the book. It is the seventh page following the cover which makes it page 7, but it is also the first page of text following the title page, although the copyright page and an epigraph appear between the title page and the poem, which makes it by convention the first page. However, this is complicated by the fact that it is not the first poem in the book, nor is it the first poem in the sequence to appear, as "Studies in the Book Machine 3" appears on the first leaf of paper inside the front cover.[57] If page 7, where "Studies in the Book Machine 5" appears, is to be the first page of the book rather than the seventh, then the assumption is that it is the moment when the text proper begins, the appearance of "Studies in the Book Machine 3" before the title page frustrates this

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[57] "Studies in the Book Machine 1" does not appear until page 21. The sequence appears throughout *Truth* out of order and at sporadic intervals, though this is partially explained by the poems' relationship with material aspects of the book-object as in studies 5 and 13.

assumption. In fact, it forces the reader to ask whether that means it is extra-textual and outside of the closed system of the book or if the book as a machine perpetuates a number of fictions that the reader has been conditioned to look beyond including the method by which the pages are numbered. The textual problems of these poems and their relation to the work/book are further underlined by the fact that *Truth* is a posthumous work edited by Irene Niechoda from Nichol's notes and files. Niechoda, in her "Additor's Note," indicates that:

> Another series making its debut here is "Studies in the
> Book Machine." I encountered it in 1989 while I was
> compiling an inventory of bp's papers after his death. It
> exists only in notebooks, and nowhere does bp mention it
> as a possible inclusion in this volume. It seemed to me,
> however, so obviously integral to the concerns of this book
> that it *had* to be added.
> (174)

Whether or not Niechoda is right about how integral "Studies in the Book Machine" is to *Truth* as a book, she absolutely is, the introduction of material that was not necessarily envisioned as part of the book into the work troubles the idea of the book as a coherent object.[58] The fact that the book must then be constructed around the material requirements of the poem sequence, "Studies in the Book Machine" numbers 3, 5, 6, 7, and 14 all depend on their material location in the book in order for the poem to work, furthers the paradox.[59] The supposedly extra-textual poem inserted into Nichol's conceptualized book,

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[58]

The appearance of "Studies in the Book Machine 8" in the footnotes to her "Additor's Note" only further supports her claim and makes the integration of "Studies in the Book Machine" into the larger text of *Truth* seem more organic (or at least as organic as an arch-materialist text like it can)

[59]

"Page 91→/ (If you rip it out/ is it still page 91?)" (*Truth* 90-1), Study 7 works in the opposite direction from page 93.

after his death, by an editor provides the skeletal frame around which the book itself is assembled while simultaneously exposing the mechanical assumptions readers take for granted when they confront a book as a material and textual object. The book as a closed system, a disciplined and ordered object that conforms to convention and bears the trace of the father/author, is perforated by Nichol's attempt to study the book as a functioning machine. The result is that the reader is forced to confront the fiction of the book, such basic assumptions as when the book begins and what the numbers printed on the bottom/top/side of the page are intended to signify are laid bare; page 7 on which the fifth poem in a sequence appears can simultaneously be the first and seventh page of the book. The two designations can occupy the same space in the text comfortably and even recall the fact that *The Martyrology* itself starts somewhere between three and eight times (with the final beginning calling attention to this fact by starting the text proper with "so many bad beginnings/ you promise yourself/ you won't start there/ again" (Book 1 n.p.)) thus signaling or recalling the earlier text and bringing it into communication with *Truth*. This, of course, causes the book/work as an object to deconstruct. By announcing the materiality of the book-object and the contradictions inherent therein, Nichol accomplishes what Derrida calls the "destruction of the book" which functions to erase the closed work and expose the surface of the text (*Of Grammatology* 18).

Derrida asserts that the "idea of the book is the idea of a totality" and it is "the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of language" (*Of Grammatology* 18). The book as a totality means that it is a whole unto itself, fixed and closed, but the contradictions Nichol exposes in "Studies in the Book

Machine" efface this illusion of closure and wholeness. Beyond the relatively straight

forward question as to whether Study 3 appearing on the first leaf of the book is intra or

extra textual because it precedes the title page, two of the poems in the sequence actually

do appear in parts of the book that are considered outside of the text/book. Study 8 is a

footnote to Niechoda's "Additor's Note" and calls attention to the extra-textual nature of

the footnote:

> The uselessness of footnotes or the randomness of them,
> the fiction they create under the text, or aside from, or
> peripheral to the main body of speaking.
> (*Truth* 175)

This poem, nestled between Niechoda's clarification of an editorial issue and a citation

for a quotation, is as Nichol rightly surmises, outside the text. The footnote is supposedly

extraneous or at least peripheral, and, as the line that delineates the margin or footer in

which they appear stresses, structurally outside of the totality of the text. And Nichol goes

out of his way to point out that, at best, the footnote is useless or random. Useless

because the text is supposed to flow and communicate seamlessly without them, and

random because they do not appear regularly or in accordance to a preset pattern (though

this changes depending on the style sheet that a given text is using). The poem itself

appears to be peripheral since, not only is it a footnote that comments, corrects and

expands on the main body from the metatextual margins, but it is a footnote to an

appended note by the collection's editor which is itself peripheral to the "work" *Truth: a*

*book of fictions*. Study 8 appears twice removed from the traditional bounds of the work

—the space between the title page and the last page of original composition in sequence

marked in *Truth* by the blank page numbered 170 followed by a completely blank page—

and is in conventional terms outside of the work. Yet, as it is both composed by the

nominal author of the text and part of the core poetic sequence of the book.[60] it is

certainly within bounds of the text. It is simultaneously within and without. If it is to be

considered wholly extra-textual, completely outside of the book/work, then the notion as

the book as a totality invariably collapses since the book is incomplete and does not hold

within itself the whole of the text. If the inverse is true and the twice peripheral footnote

is within the corpus of the text, then the boundaries of the book must by necessity expand

to incorporate it and, for that matter, the multiplicity of other textual ribbons that intersect

the discourse. The book as discreet material object, a self contained unit of authoritative

knowledge, is exploded.

This is partially the work that the other obviously extra-textual poem in the

sequence, Study 14, does. The two line poem asks from page 176, the last leaf of paper in

the book, and carrying on to the inside back cover, "if this is a page/ is this a page?" Both

of these pages occur after the first closing of the book with the end of the work proper at

page 170 and the second closing of the book marked by the final footnote of Niechoda's

"Additor's Note" on 175. This alone represents, much as Study 8 does, a rupture in the

closure of the text. It is materially outside of what typically constitutes the work.

However, the question that the poem asks with each line appearing in identical positions

on the inside cover and the facing page with minor variance in the text—an f becomes an

s, which given the history of those two letters is far from a major change, and a question

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[60]

    And, as should be noted, of a lower sequential number than the last poem in the sequence to appear in
the more conventional borders of the work.

mark is appended to complete the sentence—forces the reader to confront why the two leaves of paper are discursively different. They are materially different: the copyright page helpfully points out that the contents of the book were printed in acid-free paper and bound in Canada which signals along with the failing glue on my copy of the book that the paper inside and the cover started as separate objects. There is a difference in the texture of the paper; the cover is smoother and thicker and even appears to be whiter than the facing page. This material difference does not fully explain the discursive difference between the two. In part the discursive difference lies in the fact that the cover and attached binding are intended as containers for the work held within. They are to function as material markers of what is allowed in and what is to be kept out of the book, as boundaries and borders for the work. When the text is bound it is to appear complete and cover functions as a fetter to control and maintain the privilege of the words/inscriptions held within.

Nichol's poem transgresses the discursive difference between page 176 and the inside cover. By allowing the poem to slide off the paper the book is printed on and onto the cover he opens the possibility of the cover itself as a field of composition. The mark of closure and ending, a form of textual death, becomes another surface on which the text can be propagated. Latent therein is the possibility that the text can continue beyond the limits of the book, something that *The Martyrology* also suggests by virtue of its multivolume form, but this is perhaps a more pronounced expansion of the text. What is implicit here is an expanded consideration for what constitutes as field of composition. Nichol suggests that this is a limitation that is too often present in the writing process and

that the poet needs to approach the page like the painter:

> Something which i assume most *visual* artists, i.e. painters, etc., acknowledge or recognize to some degree is the surface upon which they make their marks—be that surface canvas, paper, whatever—its textures and dimensions and what relationship that surface takes in regard to the finished work or, for that matter, works. For most writers that surface is, unfortunately, so utilitarian, so taken for granted that it is, for all intents & purposes, a non-issue… For them there is *no* tation, precisely because the that surface or, to fix it in its writerly terminology (and thereby outline part of the problem), page is not so much a thing upon which to make marks with a pen or pencil or lead-type, as it is a perceived set of social values…[t]he surface chosen in that initial moment presents the same situation to both the painter and the writer: a place on which to make a first mark, a place to begin. And both artists are relying on light, its physics, and the ability of marking to, in essence, manipulate light in order to communicate to their potential perceivers.
> (*meanwhile* 355-6)

The page/medium which the artist must consider before making their initial marks—a painter must by necessity approach different substrates very differently—as a determining factor in their attempts to signify is largely absent from the writer's approach to composition. The blank page is at best a challenge to the writer to fill it with words; even the initial mark of the letter is not a significant mark until it is provided the company of other letters that provide context and semantic meaning (*meanwhile* 355). The conclusion Nichol rightly draws is that the writer having been conditioned to see the page and the marks he inscribes on it as a vehicle for words and the accumulation of larger semantic meaning and ignores that the field of composition the page presents functions in the same way for the writer as it does for the painter. Study 8 exploits this crisis of composition by challenging the socially determined constrictions on what

material is and isn't to be written on. If the writer is truly to approach the page like a visual artist must approach their substrate then the cover must too be open for inscription. The text cannot be limited by the conventional boundaries of the material book.

Study 8 forces this conclusion and the accompanying expansion of the field of composition/play because the text of the poem, the two lines, performs the similarity between 176 and the back cover. The variation between the lines and their disposition, as I indicate above, is absolutely minimal. The most cursory look at "if" and "is" suggests a material similarity between the two words. Both are two letter words starting with i. Both words suggest the conditional as "if" functions to signal the introduction of a conditional relationship while "is" indicates the quality of being—or condition of being—and that which exists. Beyond the cursory examination of the two words there is the historic distortion between the letters "f" and "s." The archaic long s, "ſ," is often mistaken for the f: ſ f. The two letters are almost exactly identical save for the cross beam of the f; however, depending on the font used, ſ can be written as ſ as we see when move briefly from Times New Roman to Cambria. s can be written with a partial crossbar that furthers the slippage between the two letters, and this is further exasperated by the long f which appears to resemble a drawn out S with a crossbar. The two words, "if" and "is," while not graphically identical are certainly marked with traces of the other word and the historic resemblance of the letters s and f only serves to reinforce the slippage between the two. "if" and "is" occupy for the poem the same space. Each word is not just suggested by the other or present in the other—the diction of the poem makes "if" anticipate "is" grammatically—but they occupy the same space. Each line of the poem

deconstructs the other since their differences are so completely arbitrary. "If" always already contains "is" and vice versa, and beyond that the only difference between the two lines is a question mark that in the sentence that composes the poem is functioning to challenge and undercut the discursive differences between the two pages. The question mark certainly doesn't serve to arrest deconstructive process, but rather serves to accelerate it. The question mark implies that, even on the surface—the level where language is simply a transactive medium used to facilitate the flow of information, the discursive differences between the two substrates are problematic. When the reader encounters the two lines that comprise Study 8, the "?" or the slip between the f and the s register as little more than distortions in the visual content of the poem. The two lines are identical images—they occupy identical spaces on their respective field, are set in the same font, and with the exception of the appending of the question mark to the second line have identical character counts—and are intended to be such. This material resonance in the text, whether recognized consciously or not, acts upon the mind of the reader. When they read the words, registering in the communicative web of the text the obvious differences between the two, these distortions force the reader to actively notice the similarities between the two. The two substrates or leaves or surfaces or compositional fields are expected to be different. As mentioned above, they look and feel different. They are colored slightly differently; page 176 is paper with definite tooth and texture while the cover is smooth. These differences, however, are expected by the reader when they encounter the book as both a material and epistemological object, this means that the minor distortions between the line of Study 8 that appears on 176 and the one that

appears printed on the inside cover are expected. They normalize the supposed differences between the two parts of the book-object. These two things are different and the slip or distortion or difference between the two lines supports this supposition. The result of this expectation of real, substantive difference is that, since the differences are so small both materialy and discursively, registering as little more than minor distortions, the differences become invisible. The text serves less to highlight the differences between the lines and more the similarity. The dominance of the echo or trace in the act of reading this poem then serves to disrupt the differences between the substrates. Study 8, which by virtue of its placement in the book and its numerical position in the sequence is always already inside and outside the boundaries, challenges the expectations that the book brings with it and resists closure and serves to expand the fields of composition and linguistic play. Nichol's poem rejects the socially conventional perception of the book-work as a unit of composition (and authority) favoring the freedom and indeterminacy of the text.

This represents in much the same way as the parody of Wordsworth latent in "Man in Lakeland" or Nichol's deployment of his own universe of saints a rejection of the received and ritualized. The book is the materialization of knowledge and authority, or is at least perceived to be. This idea descends from a number of historic conditions—the exclusivity of reading and the economics of book production among them—however, this tie to authority is never more explicitly made than it is in the Bible. In Exodus, God tells Moses "if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession" (19:5) and when the Israelites agreed to these conditions

God provided them with a document, a book written by the divine hand, that provided

them with the rules of this covenant. This document was a physical embodiment of the

power and authority of God and as such would be at the head of the Israelite armies as

they went into battle. The book was a repository of the divine authority. This is reiterated

in the Christian Bible in the opening of the Gospel of John. Here John ties God's power

to the word and then claims that the Christ is the physical manifestation of that divine

word:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with
> God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the
> beginning. Through him all things were made; without him
> nothing was made that has been made… The Word became
> flesh and made his dwelling among us.
> (John 1:1-3, 14)

The result of this is that authority and the book become one in the same. All things were

made through the Word, nothing exists without the Word, and the book is such a powerful

document that it can sit at the head of an army and lead them to victory or, to use a more

contemporary reiteration of this idea, can melt the faces of the Gestapo and a regiment of

Nazi soldiers. This concept lies at the center of Western thought and is inextricably linked

to the logocentrism that typifies that idea system. This makes Nichol's deconstruction of

the book as a machine, a socially contrived system of expectations that limits the author

or poet before the first mark has been inscribed on the page, so significant. Just as

effacing the legacy of William Wordsworth as a central symbol of English literature from

Canada's problematic colonial position or displacing the canonical saints who represent

the idealized and authoritatively sanctioned individual for a language game represents a

challenge to hegemonic forces through language, deconstructing the book is a refutation

of the authority claims made based on that system of knowing. The book-work as a closed system is an essentially elitist object that serves to discipline and regulate. The ability to navigate the book and its systems means that a given individual has access to the knowledge on which power based and is acted upon by this power.

What is significant about the way Nichol's "Studies in the Book Machine" deconstructs the book is the poem's lack of interest in the content of a given work. Nichol is not refuting any given knowledge or discourse—this is not act of interpretation or reinscription.[61] Nichol's other poems might do this; *The Martyology* at varied points calls Emma Peel, Celtic Mythology, Christian Cosmology and others into the allusive material of the poem, but "Studies in the Book Machine" is interested only with the metatextual aspects of the book. It is interested in exposing the hidden parts of the book as simultaneously conceptual and material object and, as a result, deconstructs the hidden machinery on which the book as repository of knowledge rests. Exposing the book as an object made up socially defined, and to some degree, arbitrary rules and thus inherently problematic does not disrupt a particular thought-system or hegemonic force so much as it disrupts the invisible foundation on which these systems and forces are built. As Nichol's friend and frequent collaborator Steve McCaffery asserts, even a small act of deconstruction on the level of the word or sentence is tantamount to the deconstruction of the "whole functioning of linearized, serialized, capitalized society" (qtd. in Bayard 63). An exposure of the incoherence of the book as a material, conceptual object is equivalent

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61

    That is, beyond the discourse of the book machine or "the book's capacity and method for storing information by arresting, in the relatively immutable form of the printed word, the flow of speech conveying that information." (TRG 60)

to the exposure of the incoherence of the whole of the society built on the authority of

that object. In the second Toronto Research Group report, the subject of which is

Narrative, Nichol and McCaffery suggest:

> The book's mechanism is activated when the reader picks it
> up, opens the covers and starts reading it. Throughout its
> history (and even prior to Gutenberg) the book has
> possessed a relatively standard form varying only in size,
> colour, shape and paper texture. In its most obvious
> working the book organizes content along three modules:
> the lateral flow of the line, the vertical or columnar build-
> up of lines on the page and thirdly a linear movement
> organized through depth (the sequential arrangement of
> pages upon pages).
> (60)

The implication is that the book is a machine that not only disciplines information

through the standardized form, but, since it is active from the moment the cover opened,

also inculcates the reader through its standardization. The book-machine is an invisible

ideological tool hiding as a vessel for more visible discourses. A disruption to it, the act

of questioning or exposing how that machine works, becomes a disruption to the whole

of the system.

This makes Nichol's poetry revolutionary in a truly political sense. As Caroline

Bayard, in describing the hermeneutic systems deployed by the TRG, states:

> poetry becomes the prototype for revolution and the poem
> the deconstruction of an old power structure. Linguistic
> revolution becomes 'root revolution.' New language-
> centred writing illuminates the 'fetishistic displacement' of
> reference and reinstates the object-quality of the text as
> well as its labour processes.
> (64)

The poetic process and poetic language forcibly denaturalize entrenched power structures

because these structures derive their strength from representational systems. Language

based poetry insofar as it stresses the material nature of language and the mutability of

linguistic objects and signs as seen in the labor processes of poetic production—the

signifier being more like a variable than a real number in an unending series of poetic

equations and, therefore, lacking a constant value—makes it clear that authority based on

language objects are subject to the vacillations of language. This ability to expose the

"truth" as something else, something politically expedient perhaps, or to produce a

different kind of truth is what gets poets and poetry kicked out of Plato's perfect republic.

As Walter Benjamin correctly surmises, "[Plato] had a high conception of the power of

poetry, but he believed it harmful, superfluous—in a *perfect* community" ("The Author as

Producer" 221). By creating saints out of language play or deconstructing the book,

Nichol is posing a direct threat to the mechanisms that support the entrenched power

systems. Nichol, like bissett, is aware not simply of the poetic universe or his abstract

relationship with the social conditions that are determined by the means of production,

but as Benjamin advocates in "The Author as Producer," also his position in the chain of

literary production and the material and techniques associated with that position (222).

Nichol's poetry, by foregrounding material language, is arresting the process by which

language becomes commodity and, in turn, commodifies those subject to it by exposing

its failure to function coherently. What this means is that part of the outcome of Nichol's

poetry is a pervasive challenge to any hegemonic system or ideology grounded in

language. Nichol's poetry by exposing relatively minor ruptures or slippages in language

and presenting them as art refuses to allow language to be merely transactive and,

therefore, naturalized.

The revolutionary aspect of Nichol's poetry is at once small and expansive. If we consider Nichol's concrete poem "Popular Song," the linguistic action shows the deconstructive problem latent in any grapheme while this in turn exposes the complicity of cultural products in nationalism and war:

```
warbled
WARbled
warBLED
warbled
```
(*Konfessions* n.p.)

The poem stresses the presence of the words war and bled in the word warbled. Warbled as signifier for the act of singing has nothing to do with war or bleeding or violence, yet they are clearly present in the grapheme with war also being discernable in the phoneme. The poem allows the word to construct itself due to the irony of having a word with such peaceful and pleasant implications being made up of two very violent words. Language reveals itself to arbitrary and displays the difficulty of signifying. However, there is a second layer to the way the poem engages violence and the signifying process. Couched in the popular song, the word warbled in conjunction with the title representing a mass-cultural product, is an invocation of war and blood. The popular song is operating in the same space as war and violence. I would argue that this means one of two things. First, that products of popular culture can be and are used to produce nationalistic fervor and condition the populace to accept war as necessary or honorable etcetera for the maintenance of the current order. There are no end to the popular songs that serve this function even if we go beyond the obviously jingoistic like Barry Sadler's "Ballad of the

Green Berets" to songs like "Lili Marlene" and "We'll Meet Again" that optimistically

remind the soldier what they are fighting for and hope to return to. Popular music serves

to condition the listener to accept war and blood. The second possible meaning is that art

and music spring in part from violence and death. The peace and pleasure that the song

provides spring from its contrast with violence and blood. Both of these readings are

operating in Nichol's poem and they suggest a suspicion of popular culture's complicity

in maintaining entrenched power structures. Nichol's poem, then, is demonstrating

Debord's assertions that "[t]he Spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social

relationship between people that is mediated by images" and that "[t]he *subject* can only

arise out of society--that is,out of the struggle that society embodies" (12; 34). Cultural

objects produce, reproduce and reflect the demands of the society from which they

originate, but these cultural objects are by their very nature representational objects. They

are images or signifiers. The small scale exposure of the word's inability to signify

intrinsically leads necessarily to a larger critique of society and the hegemonic forces that

support that society. This is a small ongoing revolutionary act, a constant challenge to the

forces that would restrict or abridge the freedom of the individual.

This ongoing act in Nichol's poetry should not, however, be construed as

ideological. While it is certainly possible to read Nichol's work and position it in a

left/right spectrum, this would be missing the point entirely. Any ideological structure—

left or right or otherwise—would be subject to the same forces of deconstruction that any

preceding system was troubled or disrupted by. Nichol is not interested in constructing

his own forces of repression and control, he is interested in the space that language

provides the subject to construct and re-construct again and again their own place of play. Language's imprecision gives the individual access to worlds of potential. This is avenue to freedom, the ability to live in and construct and play with language and all the things that are subject to language. This can be seen in Nichol's pamphlet poem, "The Possibles of Language:"
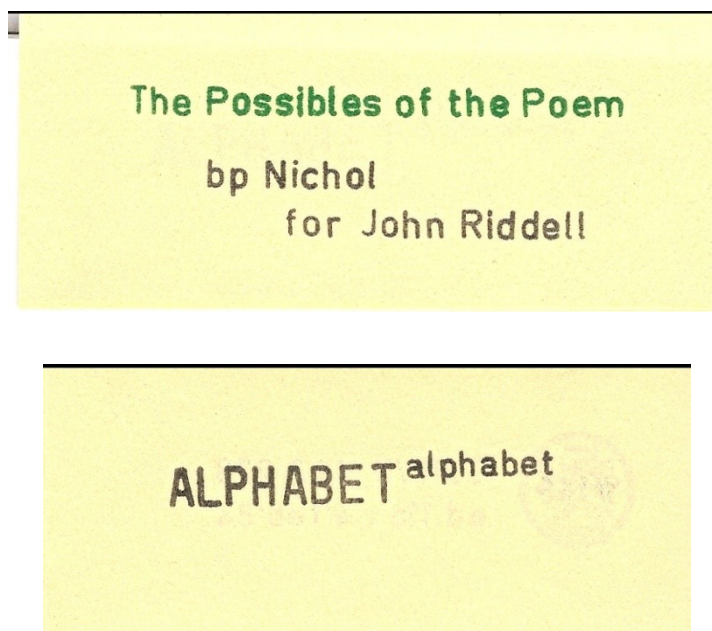
The Possibles of the Poem

bp Nichol
for John Riddell

ALPHABET$^{alphabet}$

*Fig4.3*

The possibilities latent in language are restricted only by the potential solutions to the equation "ALPHABET$^{alphabet}$," and since the word alphabet represents the building blocks of every word in language which can be configured in a nearly infinite number of different ways there are an infinite number of solutions. There is nothing in a world articulated through representational systems that is absolute, transcendent or natural at least insofar as they are represented and mimetic.

This is the key to grasping the political and ideological utility of a material language. Material language exposes the inability of language itself to form a truly

coherent system. In this moment, there can be no dominant narratives and whichever narratives may attempt to assert themselves as dominant are instantly problematized and called into question. If, as Debord asserts, contemporary society is governed by the spectacle—if "[a]ll that once was directly lived has become mere representation" (Debord 12)—and the spectacle mediates all social relations through images, then a material language and the ability to recognize language as an image itself offers an opportunity to challenge the spectacle as a hegemonic force. Debord suggests that "any critique capable of apprehending the spectacle's essential character must expose it as a visible negation of life—and as a negation of life that has *invented a visual form for itself*" (14). The challenge that a material language offers the spectacle does not hinge on the exposure of the spectacle as a negation of life, but rather, the exposure of the instability of any signifying system. The material language strips away the authority of any discourse, including that of the spectacle, because it demonstrates the slippage and contradiction always already present in that discourse. This can be seen in the poem "The Evening's Ritual:"

> sat down to write you this pome
> down to write you this pome sat
> to write you this pome sat down
> write you this pome sat down to
> you this pome sat down to write
> this pome sat down to write you
> pome sat down to write you
> this

(*Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer* n.p.)

The cascading lines of this poem represent a slippage in agency. In the first line, the authoritative figure of the poet sits down to write a poem for the addressee. By line 5,

authority has passed to the previously passive addressee, and, in the final line, it ultimately passes to the poem itself. The cascade of the poem—which comes to rest here after the completion of cycle through the words of the poem—can continue forever, oscillating back and forth, and eternally presenting a destabilized and de-centralized authority. The poem presents a coherent challenge to authority, to a dominant discourse, because at every moment and in every line the other power positions are present.

The cascading lines of "The Evening's Ritual" also does more than simply destabilize and de-centralize the authority structures latent in poetic composition. They allow for the reading subject to enter the cascade at whatever moment they choose. If the cycle of this poem can truly run for an infinite amount of time, then the reader can always enter and arrest the cascade at the moment of their choosing. They exercise control or surrender it subject to their own needs and not that of any outside force.

# Chapter 5:

# How Doozers and Fraggles Made Me Grow Up Socialist

> Boober: You have all the symptoms of someone whose life has no meaning.
> Wembley: Oh yeah?
> Boober: Yeah.
> Wembley: I'll just have to get some then.
> Boober: Are you kidding? Finding meaning is one of the most difficult things one can do.
> You have to search and suffer and struggle and strain.
> Wembley: Gee, does it really have to be that hard?
> Boober: Wembley, yours is a hard torturous journey. We're not talking about something
> that's just going to fall out of the sky.

> adrift between the signifier & the signified
> sliding thru the years
> myself as definition changing
> bpNichol, *The Martyrology*

> If the TV tube fires the right ammunition at the right people it is good.
> Marshall McLuhan

In 1970, bpNichol was awarded the Governor General's Award for English Language

Poetry or Drama for his *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* among other works.

That year Nichol shared the award with Michael Ondaatje and his long poem, *The*

*Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. The awards are by no means controversial. As the

Canada Council, the body that oversees the awards, states:

> The Governor General's Literary Awards (GGs) are given
> annually to the best English-language and the best French-
> language books in each of the seven categories of Fiction,
> Non-fiction, Poetry, Drama, Children's Literature (text),
> Children's Literature (illustration) and Translation (from
> French to English and English to French).
> (CCFTA)

The goal of the GGs is simply to reward the best in Canadian literature as chosen by a

committee of peers.[62] Thus it serves the double function of promoting Canadian literature to the public at large by providing an annual list of the best Canada has to offer and supporting literary publishers and authors either through increased sales that award the generates or, since 1951, by offering a monetary prize to both the author and the publisher of the winning work(s). Nothing about the GGs is inherently controversial as they are, in fact, a tidy bit of cultural nationalism; and their association with Governor General provides them the air of authority while removing them from the practical realm of politics.

Nichol's win, however, did generate a reaction. The Conservative Member of Parliament for Lambton-Kent, Mac McCutcheon, referencing the book's publication asked: "In view of the recent Canada Council grant based on the writing of a treatise relating the life of Billy the Kid can the parliamentary secretary say if this is a change of direction from subsidizing Marxism to marksmanship with short guns?" (Canada 6557). Other MPs would call Nichol's work pornographic, trashy and obscene, anticipating the language that would be used several years later in the attacks on the work of Nichol's friend and colleague bill bissett (Bayard 304). This use of Parliamentary time to discuss aesthetic matters and comment directly on the merits of the winner of the GG for poetry is unusual at best. It is likely that McCutcheon and his colleagues are attempting to embarrass a significant member of Trudeau's cabinet by generating a scandal. The resolution that McCutcheon put forward in the House of Commons on June 10, 1971 did not just express "displeasure" with the awarding Nichol the GG, but also called for "the

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[62]   The Canada Council defines the peers as "writers, critics, and/or independent book professionals " (CCFTA) who evaluate each submission based on their literary merit.

Secretary of State, under whose administration such award recommendations are made be

summoned before the Standing Committee [on Broadcasting, Films and Assistance to the

Arts]" (Canada 6554). When the issue was again brought up on June 29, 1971 during the

Budget Debate, Mr. Newton (Annapolis Valley) focused his attack on the Secretary of

State who was so over worked, "having too many fingers in too many pies" (Canada

7458), that he allowed the "rude and pornographic" work by Nichol to receive the

Governor General's award. Setting aside the intentional distance that separates the

Canada Council from the Government that is being elided in this invocation of Nichol

and *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid*, it is important to know that the Secretary of

State at the time was Gerard Pelletier who along with Jean Marchand and Pierre Trudeau

was one of the three wise men from Quebec brought into the Pearson Government to

staunch Quebecois separatism. Pelletier was thus strongly associated with the Prime

Minister in the Trudeau Government. This fact explains the political calculus involved in

the critique of Nichol's award.

Also operating in this reaction to Nichol's work is a suspicion of the

counterculture. This is, as Caroline Bayard points out, the primary difference between

Nichol's encounter with Parliament and bill bissett's: the attack on Nichol is a reaction

whereas the attack on bissett was an attempt at prior restraint,to prevent bissett from

producing work in the future (113). The signifiers affixed to Nichol's work,

"[p]ornography, free-love, Marxism, socialism and the counter-culture appear to be

almost inextricably linked in the MPs' language" (Bayard 113). Nichol's poetry then is

read as culturally, if not politically, dangerous to the power structures that stand in

opposition to countercultural movements and ideals. Nichol's work is unconventional and operates outside the established aesthetic and cultural parameters as it is understood by representatives of the political establishment--in this case members of the opposition Progressive Conservative party and as such "is criticized with aversion" and an attempt at suppression ("The Work of Art.." 234).

In 1971, bpNichol was too dangerous, too socialist, too pornographic, to win the Governor General's Literary Award; however, in 1983, he was a member of the writing staff for the Jim Henson-created children's show, *Fraggle Rock*. Dennis Lee, another Governor General's Award-winning poet, who also served as co-editor with Margaret Atwood of bill bissett's *Nobody Owns The Earth,* was the show's chief lyricist. Significantly, despite being an international co-production, *Fraggle Rock* was produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and was filmed using CBC crews and facilities in Toronto. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, much like the BBC in Britain, is a national television and radio broadcaster subsidized by public funds and nominally overseen by the government through the Heritage Ministry or its predecessors.[63] As Mark McKinney describes in a sketch from the CBC program *The Kids in the Hall*, itself an international co-production made in Toronto by the CBC, CBC programming is in part a product of public funding and government oversight:

> **Mark:** Wow! What a bad sketch. And in such poor taste too.
> You know, we're gonna get a lot of telephone calls and
> letters about this one. And why not? Every Canadian has a
> right to complain about that sketch because every Canadian

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[63]  The CBC differs from the BBC insofar as it collects revenue through commercial advertising in addition to public subsidy or the selling of TV licenses. The Heritage Ministry was formed in 1996 when the Multiculturalism and Citizenship and Communications portfolios were combined. The Minister responsible for the CBC at the time of *Fraggle Rock*'s production would have been the Ministry of Communications.

*owns* a piece of that sketch!

[Mark turns to the side and a flowchart is seen. It goes from Taxpayers to Federal government, to CBC, to Kids in the Hall. Also coming off of Federal Government are defense [sic?] and girlfriends.]

**Mark:** You see, your tax dollars [sic?] feed into the government, which in turn mandates the CBC, which in turn provides funding both whole or in part to shows such as ours. So like a cup full of water poured into the ocean the atomic parts of your tax dollars mix with the whole and wind up providing for the budget of this show, for the budget of that sketch and for this piece I'm doing now, which we like to call--

[Shot of the audience. There is a big key over the screen which reads:]
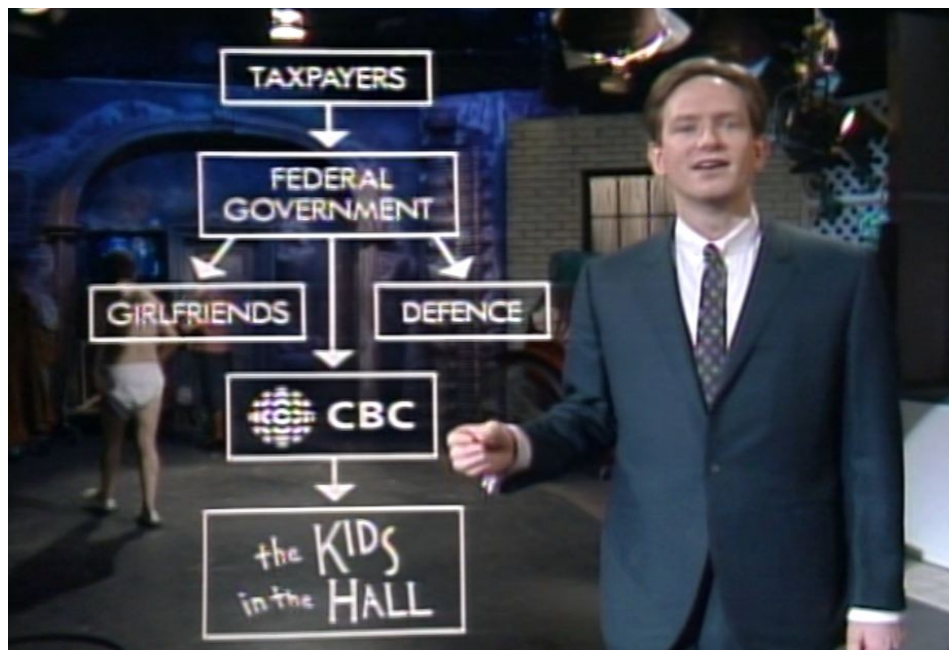
**Audience:** SCREW YOU TAXPAYER!



*Fig. 5.1*

What this sketch highlights is that, even though it is separate from the Government in

terms of  its day-to-day operations, the CBC  is part of the government apparatus, indeed

it is one of the chief mechanisms for conveying the "shared national consciousness and identity" of what is "distinctively Canadian" (*Mandate*). The CBC's responsibility is to convey to Canadians an image of themselves and a version of Canadian-ness that reflects the dominant cultural narratives of a given historical moment. It is interesting then that in 1983, twelve years after his work was dangerous or obscene enough to warrant discussion in the House of Commons and four years after bill bissett was proclaimed evil on the floor of the House, bpNichol would be on the writing staff of a show that was in part federally funded, broadcast nationally during prime time on the national network, and aimed at Canada's children.

*Fraggle Rock* was the third major television series to feature Jim Henson's muppets following *Sesame Street* and *The Muppet Show*[64]. *Fraggle Rock* represents a synthesis of its two predecessors. Like *Sesame Street,* this was a show aimed primarily at children and also attempted to impart lessons to its viewers; the pitch book for the series explained that "Fraggles may be funny and silly, but deep down they are young people learning to deal with each other and their relationship to the community" and through this model communal harmony whether on a local or global scale would be taught to the viewers ("Brown Book" n.p.). However, while there is a clearly a pedagogical element in *Fraggle Rock*, it is less overtly didactic than *Sesame Street*, with the lessons imparted implied rather than explicit. The characters tend to be more introspective than their *Sesame Street* counterparts and the shows are single narratives as opposed to the fast

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[64] The first Henson series to feature muppets or proto-muppets was *Sam and Friends* which aired locally on Washington, D.C.'s WRC between 1955 and 1961. It is notable for featuring an early version of Kermit the Frog. The muppets also appeared on numerous television shows, including *Saturday Night Live* and a variety of specials, and two major Muppet motion pictures appeared before the production of Fraggle Rock.

paced *Laugh-In* inspired vignettes deployed by *Sesame Street.* This difference along with

an older projected audience makes *Fraggle Rock* ill-suited to the direct pedagogical

interventions that lie at the core of *Sesame Street*. *The Muppet Show,* by contrast, "had no

such explicit agenda" and instead "presented itself as pure entertainment and made no

claims of 'usefulness' at all" (Schildcrout 823). However, as Jordan Schildcrout argues in

"The Performance of Nonconformity on *The Muppet Show,*" wrapped up in the irony, wit

and sophistication of *The Muppet Show* was a "consistent and emphatic expression of a

nonconformist ethos" (824). As the fraggles are primarily occupied with the serious work

of "yo-yoing, cheerleading, tumbling, roller skating, waving flags, jumping up and

down... singing songs and making music" ("Brown Book" n.p.), the sense of freedom and

possibility latent in *The Muppet Show*'s nonconformity and weirdness is not simply

present in *Fraggle Rock*, but becomes a means through which the characters are able to

develop as active subjects.[65] The lives of the fraggles are lives of chaotic weirdness, thus,

this  nonconformity becomes the lens through which life is viewed to the point that the

mundane--particularly in Uncle Traveling Matt's adventures in "outer space" among "the

silly creatures"--becomes strange—or vice versa. Where the two shows differ is, again, a

matter of format. Though episodes of *The Muppet Show* do have some narrative

development or arcing in its back-of-the-house/stage dichotomy, as the vaudeville setting

indicates, what it important is the show itself. In *Fraggle Rock*, the performative aspects

exist to serve the narrative and give emotional depth to the characters. This shift to a

narrative format allows *Fraggle Rock* to attempt the teaching about harmony and

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[65]    This is exemplified by Kermit the Frog's declaration on the Vincent Price episode that there will be "no
craziness, no slapstick and no silliness" right before Fozzie Bear appears and hits him with a cream pie
("Vincent Price").

community the show's creators laid out in the pitch book.

*Fraggle Rock* has the hallmarks of an avant garde text. Avant garde poets participated in its production, and its textual heritage on the production side leads back to chaotic, nonconformist material like *The Muppet Show*. Despite the controversy that could potentially have come from the involvement of writers like bpNichol or Dennis Lee's association with bill bissett, *Fraggle Rock* received critical acclaim, high ratings and international awards. There seems to be a cultural shift in this period that allows the ideas and methods of the Experimental poets to rise into the mainstream of Canadian culture. *Fraggle Rock* represents a moment in which the ideas and ideology of the Canadian public and its intellectual gatekeepers through a cultural shift that had begun in the 1960s, if not earlier, caught up with and incorporated the world views articulated in the literature--specifically speaking, the poetry--of Canada's avant garde. *Fraggle Rock*, by virtue of its generic qualities alone, could be read as an indicator of this shift. Two things, however, are necessary for this to be at all true. The first is that *Fraggle Rock*, as a text, can be traced back to the poetics of the Canadian Experimental poets. *Fraggle Rock* must echo the way these poems work in a clear way. Secondly, *Fraggle Rock* must be a culturally important text. If it is to be read as a mainstreaming of these ideas, it must, by necessity, have had an impact in the wider culture.

The need to understand the content of *Fraggle Rock*, however, presents a major critical problem. *Fraggle Rock*, as a text, consists of 96 half-hour episodes spread across 5 seasons and this is excluding a number of objects like the animated series, the comic books, and the toys that explicitly participate in the text but are separated out because

they are at least one iteration removed from the core series. This proliferation of material

is exacerbated by the fact that, with the exception of a few two-part episodes or episodes

explicitly concerned with overall continuity, each episode is designed to function as a

whole, contained story. *Fraggle Rock* as a text is very much like Barthes describes in *The*

*Death of the Author:*

> We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a
> single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-
> God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of
> writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is
> a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of
> culture.
> (146)

Even if we exclude a number of these quotations that participate in the larger text there

are still 96 iterations that form the corpus of *Fraggle Rock* as a work that are by necessity

always in contact with each other. The result is that, even with strong and defined limiters

in place, this in an incredibly large text and it is not necessarily a unified text. Television

as a medium means that within a larger named text there exists a number of competing

and occasionally contradictory versions of that text as a result of the division of labor

television production requires to make it manageable. This means, for example, that there

may exist in the run of the show multiple versions of Gobo or Traveling Matt or Doc and

Sprocket that differ slightly as a result of what personnel worked on a particular

episode.[66]

This presents a major obstacle for any critical reading of *Fraggle Rock.* When I

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[66] Some of the puppets like Sprocket or the Gorgs required more than one puppeteer to operate. Sprocket, for instance, had one puppeteer that controlled the mouth and one of the paws and a second that controlled the other paw and the tail. The lead performer for Sprocket was Steve Whitmire and he was normally assisted by Karen Prell, however, this raises the question as to whether Sprocket is discursively different if Whitmire is assisted by someone other than Prell as would have been necessary when Sprocket would have been in the same scene.

first attempted a reading of the show, I used close reading strategies. It is fair to say, that

close reading, despite its age, is still at the core of critical approaches to poetry and poetic

texts and when dealing with texts that function in relation to the lyric tradition it is still an

effective tool. However, when confronted with a text like *Fraggle Rock*, the tightness of

focus required for close reading become problematic. Focus on any one element in the

text may be contradicted by another element from another part of the text and this

variance may go undetected simply because of the volume of material in play. This type

of text can really only be engaged in the glancing, skipping, rhythmic way Barthes

describes in *The Pleasure of the Text: "*we do not read everything with the same intensity

of reading; a rhythm is established, casual, unconcerned with the *intergrity* of the text;

our very avidity for knowledge impels us to skim or skip certain passages.. we boldly

skip" (10-11). The simple size of this kind of serial pop culture text means that it can only

be engaged in the brief bursts, momentary rhythmic incursions that show only a portion

of the whole but must give the appearance of totality--the opening and closing credits

enforcing the symbolic opening and closing of the covers of a book. The text can only be

received a half-hour at a time, 1/96th of the contained text. The television medium itself

demands this style of reading. The show is received by the viewer in the order and at the

time that the broadcaster makes it available--*Fraggle Rock* was broadcast on Sunday

nights by the CBC ("Big Year for the Fraggles" n.p.)--which prevents the viewer from the

control the reader exercises over the book. It is not at all uncommon for broadcasters to

show a program out of the sequence that the creators had intended; the Fox network

famously aired the show *Firefly,* which was intended to build serially, out of order and

this was seen as part of the reason the show failed. The viewer is always subject to the text's distribution agent and the what they choose to make available at what time. Even in the era of the DVD, The viewer, while they are able to choose a sequence of viewing and when they view the program, are still subject to whether the text is being made available and in what order it's being made available. A full season package is still a portion of the whole. The text can only be received in these flickering bursts that, while they appear to be a whole, are mere portions. A close focus on reading some portion of the content of one episode or a series of episodes is then a process of selection as Barthes describes the reading. A small item like the color of an object, a specific piece of diction that in any other text we would read as important using close reading (for example, Prufrock's "Eternal footman" as a personification of death speaks to Prufrock's feelings of inadequacy and ineffectualness) may take on an exaggerated significance in a close reading of a text like *Fraggle Rock* simply because this is where the critic's eye rested. In essence, this means that a close reading of a serial text or massive pop culture text of the sort that *Fraggle Rock* is going to either reflect the biases of the critic or lead the critic down an unending number of dead ends that cannot be effectively rationalized into a functional critique or both.[67]

The solution I would purpose to this shortcoming of close reading when dealing with a text like *Fraggle Rock* where it is still necessary to have some understanding of the content is to consider it in a way suggested by texts that are similarly problematic.

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[67] Fredric Wertham believed that comic books caused deviant behavior and delinquency in children and adolescents. Batman and Robin, comic book characters where the clear intention is to provide the reader entrance to the action and adventure of the text by providing them a character similar to themselves, are two males that live alone in a house without any women around. Therefore, the intention was, Wertham argued, to indoctrinate readers into homosexuality.

Concrete and other avant garde poetry that rely on the materiality of the textual object or

the ephemeral nature of the phoneme are historically resistant to close reading

methodologies. They carry content, but frustrate the simple exchange model of language

and, therefore, cannot necessarily be read using a close reading model. Comic books,

particularly superhero comic books like Superman and Batman, are large serialized texts

with multiple authors that produce an infinite, as DC Comics stressed in *Crisis on Infinite

Earths*, number of iterations of the text's signifiers within the sanctioned bounds of that

textual object. Superman has been in more or less continual production across every

available medium since June 1938, and even when the proliferation of the text is

restricted to only comic books produced and sanctioned by National Periodicals/DC

Comics this means that there are more than 70 years of official iterations of  Superman

participating in the same textual space. Much like *Fraggle Rock*, any critical intervention

at a specific moment in the text in the attempt to produce a synecdochal reading--the

unpanelled image of a resurrected Superman embracing Lois Lane whose feet do not

visually touch the ground, in part because the art contains only a suggestion of ground, on

page 348 of *The Return of Superman* can be pulled out to stand in for the Superman/Lois

Lane relationship--is subject to the traces and echoes of every other depiction of that

relationship. Thus, Superman and Lois's embrace on page 348 of *The Return of

Superman* occupies the same space as a similar embrace *Action Comics* #1 in 1938, as

any number of embraces that Bizarro has attempted with Lois, as Superboy's relationship

with Lana Lang and any number of other moments. The apparently synecdochal moment

that could be taken out of its context and communicate something coherent about that

relationship, how it operates and what it means for the text is washed away by the overwhelming amount of other iterations of that moment that contradict or alter the moment's meaning. A close reading of Superman as a text, in order to function, must set an incredibly large number of boundaries in order to close off the particular work under inspection from borderblur and textual static.[68]

Part of the key to getting around the limitations of close reading when dealing with these texts is to look at the texts structurally. Rather than focusing on a single moment in a poem or a film or a novel and assigning meaning to that moment, the mechanics and shape of the text must be taken into consideration. As Marshall Mcluhan famously declared, "[i]n a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message" ("The Medium is the Message" 87). That is, that the form and shape of the textual object as it attempts to signify can convey as much or more than that which is considered content. The content can and does distort but the structure established to convey this content remains relatively systematized and understandable. The structure reveals the overall language of the text and delineates the field of play. By establishing the spatial and discursive relationships between the objects in the text it can be seen as a mechanism for disciplining the text. The structure insures the readability of the textual object even if the object is not

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[68] Theoretically, this is a complicated action that means erecting boundaries and specifically limiting the analytical space whether through invoking specific sub-discourses (ie. only looking at *The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller as opposed to speaking to Batman generally). In practical terms, it simply requires an act of naming the field of play--for example I could say in this essay I will examine how Spock's humanity manifests itself in the *Star Trek* episode, "Amok Time"--which effectively streams the analysis out of the larger field of colliding depiction of the signifiers. It does, at least theoretically, prevent the critic from making general statements about the object of analysis.

supposed to be conventionally readable. The relationships the structure establishes provides a base line, a starting point, where the text in all of its iterations and threads can converge. A basic shape of things that allows the reader to situate and categorize a strand of divergent textual material because of its shape and the metaphoic/metonymic language it deploys.

When I teach Mary Shelley's novel *Frankestein*, a text that like Superman or Batman or *Fraggle Rock* that is complicated by its proliferation as a text, alongside close readings I have the students engage in one particular exercise. Using the 1818 text of *Frankenstein* as starting point, the students are to identify as many permutations and iterations of "Frankenstein" and explain how they participate in the signified story. Furthermore, the students are expected to identify how the different iterations are connected to each other forming a large complicated textual web. The purpose behind the exercise is to illustrate how texts change, shift and are repeatedly repurposed over time; generating discussion about how the reader receives and participates in the text. It works because the students understand the shape and language of the Frankenstein narrative. They understand the basic structure of the thing they are searching for in the diverse texts that they have experienced and are able to extrapolate how the text conforms or diverges from that structure. What they recognize are the signs and markers of Frankenstein operating in the absence of that which would traditionally designate a textual object as part of that range of interconnected works. The students can situate *Robocop*, *Blade Runner,* and *The Fly* in this web because they all reflect the structural arrangements of *Frankenstein* and those arrangements signify as deeply as the actual specific content. The

structure itself is readable.

Concrete poetry reinforces the readability of the structure, particularly in instances where the semantic content is hard to decipher or is specifically resistant to traditional reading strategies. By forcing the reader to consider the spatial disposition of the graphemes on the page while simultaneously attempting to understand it as a semantic object that conveys meaning using recognizable signs, the concrete poem produces an awareness of the poem's structure and what that structure indicates and communicates on its own. In poetics, this is not a phenomenon unique to concrete or other avant garde poetry. Among the first skills that the reader of poetry is trained to do is to read the form (which is to some extent simultaneous with its structure) and to use this to make assumptions about the text. The sonnet is a "lyric poem consisting of a single *stanza* of fourteen iambic pentameter lines linked by an intricate rhyme scheme," of which there are two major patterns: the English or Shakespearean and the Italian or Petrarchan (Abrams 197). The haiku is a three line Japanese form consisting of a line of five syllables, a line of seven syllables and a final line of five syllables. These formal qualities allows the reader to make certain predictive assumptions. The sonnet was traditionally associated love poetry. The elegy deals with death. The difference in reading form and structure when confronting avant garde forms like the concrete or sound poetry is that the shape and structure is not a vehicle for the signification of the content of the poem-- something used either to situate a poem in a style or tradition or to engage ironically--but is part of the process of signification. This can be seen in Eugen Gomringer's poem "Silencio:"

silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio
silencio          silencio
silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio

*Fig. 5.2*

The word silencio is Spanish for silence. Gomringer uses the fact that the linguistic sign, when inscribed on the page, indicates a noise and represents a sound. So while the poem announces silence,as it does so it makes metaphoric noise. It is only when the poem doesn't include the word silence where the text is silent. This reading of the text can be and is produced not through a close reading of the text, but from an understanding of the structure. The only place that the poem is silent is where there is no text, the relationship between the marks on the page conveys this message as quickly and as clearly as the semantic content. It also requires no knowledge of Spanish on the part of the reader in order to function. By understanding the structural relationships that the poem establishes and what these relationships mean and how they operate, the reader is able to arrive at some sense of what the poem is attempting to communicate.

As similar method of reading can be applied to complex pop culture texts like *Fraggle Rock*. The specific content of a given episode or iteration of the text may diverge from other iterations is such a way that, as we've seen, they become impossible to read except in ways that require extensive limiters. However, the general shape and structure of the show and its elements remain intact, otherwise the show becomes unrecognizable to the viewer and may then either alienate the viewer or cease to functionally be the same

show. The content of the show is inconstant, but the structure isn't. In this way, *Fraggle Rock* resembles the Superhero comic book. As discussed, superheroes like Superman, Batman and Spider-man as a result of their corporate authorship, their longevity, their popularity and, perhaps most importantly, the demands of the genre, have produced an unending chain of iterations that participate both officially and unofficially in the text of the character. This means that any individual iteration of the character--Superman of Earth 1, Superman of Earth 2, Post-crisis Superman, Supergirl (I-VII), Ultraman, Ubermensch, Krypto the Superdog, Streaky the Supercat, Bizarro, etc.--will diverge from the ideal version of Superman. They also all participate in this ideal version of Superman and the degree to which they adhere or diverge from this ideal allows the reader to understand and contextualize the character. Mark Millar's *Superman: Red Son*, in which Superman's rocket from Krypton lands in the Ukraine rather than Kansas, exploits this cultural ideal version of Superman in order to produce the story's drama as do any number of stories that specifically tamper with the structure and signifiers of the Superman story/text.[69] These stories work because there is a base structure at work in all Superman stories that governs what Superman is and makes it clear what falls in the Superman signifying chain and what falls outside of it. The reader knows that when they are confronted with some version of Superman that they will be dealing with an individual from another planet who has traveled to Earth and has extraordinary powers like the ability to "leap 18th of a mile: hurdle a twenty-story building... raise tremendous

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[69] This type of story is a mainstay of the comic book industry, with both DC and Marvel having official designations for these texts that diverge from the companies established continuity to explore some new situation or iteration of their characters. DC calls these stories "Elseworlds" stories while Marvel traditionally explored these questions in the *What If?* series, though there are a number of other series like *Exiles* that Marvel also uses for these purposes. In Elseworlds stories, Superman has been a communist, British, Batman, fascist, a government crony, Tarzan, and any number of other things.

weights... run faster that an express train.. and that nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate his skin!" (Siegel and Shuster 11) those these powers were later upgraded to flight and invulnerability. They also know that Superman is Clark Kent, and that he has "decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind" (Siegel and Shuster 11). These are part of the base structure of everything that participates in the greater Superman text, and we should consider this point Superman at his most expansive because these qualities are the ones that are most frequently absorbed into similar texts that do not announce themselves as "Superman".[70] Adding detail fleshes this structure out and can open the text up. Superman was an orphan from Krypton who fled a disaster that killed the rest of his people and was raised in the American heartland by an elderly couple. The love of Superman/Clark Kent's life is Lois Lane, a fiercely independent reporter for the Daily Planet, and the majority of serious competitors for Clark's romantic attentions have had the initials L.L.[71] His archenemy is Lex Luthor. Superman's only weaknesses are kryptonite and magic. He wears a blue union suit, red tights, a red cape and red boots when he assumes the identity of Superman; and he wears a symbol on his chest that consists of a yellow shield, bordered in red with a stylized S on it.

"Superman" as a pop cultural text operates roughly within the boundaries established by these central facts or conceits. While one or more of these factors can be distorted or revised in subsequent iterations, the absence or presence of the idealized or structural Superman text contextualizes the new iteration. This produces two critical

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[70]  Adherence to this formula was what enabled National Comics (now DC) to sue Fawcett for copyright infringement over Captain Marvel.

[71]  In the earliest versions of the comic the newspaper where Clark and Lois work was called the Daily Star as an homage to   Shuster's hometown paper and former employer, *The Toronto Star.*

products. The first, as we have discussed, is the close reading of a specific iteration or

discursive moment. The second, it to read the structure and the signifiers of the larger

text. When we look at the signifiers that are consistently repeated throughout the history

of a given text--for Superman this would be the traits identified above; for *Fraggle Rock*

this would include the show's spatial relationships and geography, core characters, the

format and pacing of the episodes among other elements--and how those signifiers relate

to one another it is possible to draw conclusions about the text. As Derrida argues in

"Signature Event Context," "[a] writing that is not structurally readable--iterable--beyond

the death of the addressee [or the author] would not be writing" (7). Thus, it stands to

reason, that a pop culture text like Superman, Batman, Star Trek, Star Wars or *Fraggle*

*Rock* that due to its protracted seriality and/or cultural cache is constantly being reiterated

and reproduced like a language would not be functional texts if they could not be

"structurally readable" as Derrida asserts. The language of the text, the structure, then

provides a space for critical intervention. How these things that are consistently part of

the text, that are ingrained in its structure, relate to each other can reveal meanings

operating within the text in much the same way as the relationship between the

spatial/visual and semantic aspects of a concrete poem can produce a reading that would

otherwise be elusive. If we return to Superman as an example, the language of the text

suggests that Superman represents an idealized version of the American immigrant and

the American dream. He is an alien who arrives in America, becomes assimilated, and

through a combination of hard work and American values becomes a singularly

successful individual who works to defend democracy. In the film *Kill Bill*, Quentin

Tarantino has the character Bill suggest that Superman is a critique of humanity based on the way the Superman mythology treats the Superman/Clark Kent duality. This, then, reveals the strength of this reading strategy for coping with complicated, postmodern, pop cultural texts: it provides access to the text as mythology and a broader cultural object. When fans engage in a debate over whether James T. Kirk or Jean-Luc Picard were better starship captains, they are not discussing specific moments or conducting close readings of Kirk or Picard's performance, they are conducting the debate based on the mythology and language of the text. The qualities of the signifiers that are repeated, and what they reveal about the text forms the baseline for interaction with that text. Deviations from the established norms then serve to reinforce these norms as the fundamental material of the text. Millar's *Red Son* relies on the perceived American-ness of Superman and the ideology that undergirds Superman as both a signifier and text to form its narrative. In fact, by casting Superman in a role that is oppositional to the central language of the text, the established structure, *Red Son* works to reaffirm that structure in the mind of the reader. Reading the structural language of the serial pop culture text, then, also has the added benefit of being able to accommodate the fluctuations in how the text is represented. Each story, each episode, are part of a larger matrix and this matrix allows for fluctuations and possibility without the loss of coherence in the text, it may even provide mechanisms for excising fluctuations that prove dangerous to that coherence or simply seem to be operating outside of the language that the structure holds in place.[72]

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[72] The retcon (retro-active continuity) and the reboot are examples of these kind of tools. However, something simple as the "it was all a dream" trope or simply forgetting and ignoring a deviation serve similar functions. DC Comics with its incredibly long publishing history and multiple versions of the same characters have repeatedly tried to streamline these textual contradictions with a series of "Crises" that have officially moved things in and out of the history of the DC Comics universe/multiverse.

When this methodology is applied to reading *Fraggle Rock,* it produces a clear image of the show's departure from the old Canadian ideologies and false identities and, also, how the show reflects the values and goals of the Experimental poets who participated in its production. Spatially, the show is organized around four settings: the eponymous Fraggle Rock where the Fraggles and the Doozers live; The Kingdom of the Gorgs; The Workshop of Doc and his dog Sprocket; and Outer Space, a simulacrum of the real world, where Gobo's uncle Traveling Matt explores and catalogs the behavior of the Silly People--humans. The workshop is technically part of Outer Space where a rupture, a hole in the wall, provides access to Fraggle Rock, just as opening on the other side of Fraggle Rock allows for access to the Kingdom of the Gorgs.

The brown book that Henson Associates put together to pitch the series states that "Fraggle Rock is a small space, existing just beyond everyday reality" and that while "Fraggle Rock does not exist in our world... you *can* get there from here" ("Brown Book").[73] This establishes *Fraggle Rock* firmly in the tradition of children's literature where the magical land or space is accessible through a portal--Narnia is reached when the Pevensie children pass through the wardrobe and Alice arrives in Wonderland after she goes down the rabbit hole. Traditionally, the passage through this portal has served to remove the rules and governance of the child protagonist's parents and, therefore, offer the possibility of danger and adventure. The children are placed beyond the reach of rescue and security  that the parent or guardian represents; they emerge into a new world that lacks the conventions that keep them marginal as children.[74] The portal that performs

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[73]   This may or may not be a conscious echo of *Sesame Street*'s theme song which asks "Can you tell me how to get to Sesame Street?"

[74]   This need to put child protagonists outside of parental control and safety also explains the proliferation of orphans or functional orphans in children's literature. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the Pevensie

the removal, no matter how it is depicted or described, amounts to a membrane that

separates the mundane world from the magical. Any invocation of distance or the time

spent traveling through the portal as in the Disney film *Alice in Wonderland* where Alice

slowly descends through a rabbit hole with floating endtables, rocking chairs and inverted

maps emphasizes the removal of the subject from the normal world. Passing from one

world to the next is a single action, the story does not take place in this passing. This is

where *Fraggle Rock* diverges from this trope because Fraggle Rock is not the magical

world, it's the portal. On one side lies the human world of Outer Space where the mail

comes regularly and Doc lives with his dog Sprocket, and on the other is the Kingdom of

the Gorgs populated by giant monsters, talking compost heaps and the ruined vestiges of

mythical kingdoms. These are both blue sky worlds possessing light and space. They run

parallel to each other. These two realms may have different cultural markers affixed to

them--Doc the inventor representing progress and science, and the monarchical and

agrarian Gorgs evoking the idealized pastoral past and magic--but, given the established

tropes, they are two sides of the same coin. The caves of Fraggle Rock should be the

portal through which the reader/viewer and their stand-in navigates between these two

spaces, and not a space itself. The hole in the wall of Doc's shop and the cave mouth to

the Kingdom of the Gorgs are peripheral to these worlds and can only access the other by

descending into the dark labyrnthine space of Fraggle Rock. Discursively, this structural

relationship means that Fraggle Rock resembles the space within the wardrobe or in the

rabbit hole, a space that conveys metaphorically the distance between the two lands at

children are doubly removed from the safety and rules of the parent by first being evacuated from
London because of the Blitz and then passing through the wardrobe.

either end but is not necessarily a real space itself. The show, however, frustrates this reading by setting the main action in this space. Most of what happens, happens in this in-between space, and the main characters who live in this in-between space are the only ones who can travel with relative impunity between the two fixed realms on either end.

The fact that the show takes place in this in-between space is incredibly significant for two reasons. The first is that the in-between space is an undefined space. While the borders of Fraggle Rock are clearly defined, the space within is open to constant exploration and expansion. New caves, chambers and inhabitants can be introduced as the needs of an individual episode might dictate. Fraggle Rock as a place needs to be malleable in order for *Fraggle Rock* the television show to introduce new characters and situations for the show's protagonists to interact with. This, in part, transforms what might otherwise be a claustrophobic and limited/limiting space into a place with truly unlimited possibility. The edges of Fraggle Rock that do not touch upon either Outer Space or The Kingdom of Gorgs are, then, unreachable. This means that the Fraggles cannot be defined or restricted by this space.  Fraggle Rock, as a space, is, as Robert Kroetsch describes Canada, a place where:

> The centre does not hold. The margin, the periphery, the
> edge, now, is the  exciting and dangerous boundary where
> silence and sound meet. It is where the action is. In our
> darker moments we feel we must resist the blind
> consuming power of the new places with their new or old
> ideas that want to become centres. In our happier moments
> we delight in the energy of the local, in the abundance that
> is diversity and difference, in the variety and life that
> extend on any coastline of human experience.
> (23)

Kroetsch is speaking, specifically, about how Canadian literature and culture, fractured as

it is, must use the fear and joy of the decentered margin as a strategy for survival. It is what separates the Canadian experience from that of other nationalities--and is an extension of Kroetsch's claim that Canada is a postmodern nation--but it also illustrates what is operating in the spatial structure of Fraggle Rock (Kroetsch 22). Fraggle Rock is presumably a decentered space. Since the space itself is ill-defined or even undefined except for its in-betweeness, any center that could be proposed is clearly an artificial one. The Great Hall, which is the center of Fraggle activity, only serves as a center as a result of the presence of the Fraggles which would indicate that the spatial location is not the center, but the community surrounded by the metaphoric wilderness is the center. The space, then, maintains its shapelessness. As Kroetsch indicates, as a marginal space and one that is arguably discursively similar to Canada, Fraggle Rock faces the threat of repression and disciplining from without as both Sprocket and the Gorgs represent physical threats to the Fraggles' well-being and the many unexplored corners of the cave system hide a variety of threats. However, this is balanced by the sense of community at the center of Fraggle life and the diversity of experience that the undefined and decentered space could potentially offer to both the reader/viewer and the Fraggles themselves. Within the shapeless boundaries of Fraggle Rock there is the opportunity to meet a sea monster or enter the land of the lotos eaters (which the Fraggles call the Caves of Boredom) or simply to constantly explore which carries with it the continual possibility of the new. Since nothing in Fraggle Rock is necessarily spatially fixed or limited by geography, the world is constantly open to exploration and discovery. The fact that Cantus and the Minstrels indicate that in their wanderings through Fraggle Rock that

they are continually encountering new communities of Fraggles punctuates this by introducing the idea that there are an untold number of other communities in this space existing in parallel ("The Minstrels"). Fraggle Rock has coded into its geography open possibility and the potential to tell and experience any story that is necessary or desired. This spatial, structural configuration means that *Fraggle Rock* is a text of possibilities.

There is a certain amount of irony in the fact that a cave is an open and undefined space full of possibilities. Caves are enclosed spaces that stand in binary opposition to the openness of the land and sky above, and this enclosure, at least going back to the Allegory of the Cave, has been figured as an imprisonment and a fetter. The irony is magnified when we again consider the fact that discursively Fraggle Rock resembles the portal between worlds, a vehicle for transiting between to realms of possible experience but not a place of experience itself. But this makes sense if it read through the lens of Canadian Experimental poetry. As a place, it represents a failure of a binary structure to hold. Space and enclosure, up and down, limitation and possibility collapse in Fraggle Rock since the baggage all of these signifiers carry with them must be called into question when exposed to the decentered and in-between space that the Fraggles inhabit. It also works to take the strangeness of this space and turn it into a virtue. Just as Kroetsch identifies the "willingness to refuse privilege to a restrictive cluster of meta-narratives becomes a Canadian strategy for survival" (23), the way Fraggle Rock defies definition  both spatially and in terms of linguistic restriction becomes a strategy for generating narratives.[75] This idea that the rules, the geography and history, embedded in a

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[75] There are certainly instances where the cave does not indicate enclosure or entrapment, or, like Merlin's cave, where it simultaneously a space of entrapment and of possibility. However, the cave is often associated with the descent to Hell or the Underworld in the Western tradition and is associated with danger and monsters as it is in *Beowulf*.

text open that text to possibility can be seen in the work of bpNichol. Nichol, in the 1969

essay "Comics as Myth," writes:

> Comics establish their own mythic base. D.C.'s incredibly
> complex mythology covers over ten centuries, includes
> multidimensional worlds (including the vital concept of
> Earth 1 & Earth 2) as well as endless galaxies. Leaning
> heavily over into dreams & science fiction it is a literature
> of possibilities... entirely open-ended probabilities... all
> these saints [in *The Martyrology*] grew out of a scifi comic
> strip millieu.
> (76, 81)

Nichol cites the expansive mythology of comic books--he mentions Marvel's Fantastic

Four in a similar way in another portion of the essay--as a primary influence on the

development of the saints in *The Martyrology.* What this citation indicates is that the

expansive, delimiting mythology of these pop culture texts gave him the tools to open up

his poetry to possibility; a structure or mythology designed to exploit "the sense of thrill

then of a literature of possibilities--open-endedness into infinity" ("Comics as Myth" 78-

9) becomes a core component of *The Martyrology.* In Nichol's work this manifests in both

*The Martyrology*'s proliferation of Saints and exploitation of Toronto's geography to

generate a new mythology, and in the language games that are central to his poetics. The

possibility encoded in the undefined geography of Fraggle Rock, the way the show seems

to be structurally configured in order to constantly generate new narratives that bring

established elements into new and varied situations, is certainly consistent with Nichol's

poetics.[76] The in-between space that the Fraggles inhabit, therefore, resembles both the

postmodern landscape of Canada, at least insofar as the Experimental poets like Kroetsch

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[76]    An extreme example of the recapitulation of established elements in a new context generating new text
occurs in Book 5, Chain 4 of *The Martyrology*. Here portions of Book 2 are pulled out of their original
contexts and placed side by side, thus creating new lines of poetry.

were conceiving it, and the poetics informed by the possibilities of genre literature that Nichol was making use of. The indeterminate space is always already a space of possibilities and a space of new readings.

The second significance of Fraggle Rock's spatial in-betweeness is that it allows for the contamination and critique of the two spaces that it transverses. The ability of the Fraggles, and this is an ability that seems to be limited almost exclusively to the Fraggles, to move throughout the three spaces forces or invites a contrast between the three. This is acutely apparent when the Fraggles travel to the Kingdom of the Gorgs. The Kingdom of the Gorgs is everything that Fraggle Rock is not: It is above-ground with open skies; it is sparsely populated with the only obvious inhabitants being the Gorgs themselves, the Trashheap and her attendants, and a few birds; it has an agrarian economy in contrast with the industrialization of the Doozers; and it has centralized authority with Pa Gorg as titular king. The Gorgs are also, particularly when compared to the Fraggles, quite big. These differences set the Gorgs up, to some extent, as natural antagonists for the Fraggles, and indeed, Junior Gorg's desire to catch and thump any fraggles he can get his hands on bears this out. These fundamental structural differences between the Fraggles and the Gorgs renders the Gorg's garden, a key source of food for the Fraggles, a dangerous place and functions as key device for introducing action into the show. Beyond this, the contrasts between the two places introduces a subtle critique of the ideologies operating in the Kingdom of the Gorgs. The Fraggles live a communal life, with no obvious centralized authority. There are Fraggles whose opinions carry more weight, but this stems largely from experience and knowledge (this is certainly true in the case of the

World's Oldest Fraggle and the Storyteller both of whom owe their respect to their knowledge rather than an exercise of power). The Fraggles--a species dedicated to carefree fun, music, art and adventure--live side by side with the Doozers--a crew of small construction workers that find pleasure in work and are continually building. The Fraggles eat the Doozers' structures, Doozer towers made of doozer sticks, thus finding easy sustenance and preventing these structures from overwhelming Fraggle Rock. This relationship is symbiotic as the doozers view the continual destruction of their labors as an opportunity to continue construction and rebuilding. In the episode "Boober Rock," when Boober Fraggle smashes a doozer bridge, a doozer exclaims, "Hooray! Now we can rebuild it!" while a second calls to double the work crew ("Boober Rock"). This is presented throughout the show as a necessary balance that is mutually beneficial to both parties, an important alliance between the working and artistic classes though the show does not couch the relationship in those terms. It is quite easy to see that this core fact of living in Fraggle Rock, and once of those written into the structure of the show as a whole, as a balanced, communal state where the Doozers form the base and the Fraggles form the superstructure. This is certainly operating in the background of the show and is completely consistent with the left political sympathies of poets like bill bissett and the Toronto Research Group (bpNichol and Steve McCaffery), but there is also implicit in this arrangement and the way Fraggles society works as a whole and openness to possibility. The Fraggles are socially and politically adaptable--Wembley even once volunteered himself as a potential subject to Gorg rule ("Wembley and the Gorgs")--in a way that is consistent with their undefined living space. What remains consistent is a

focus on the community that also allows for the individual to pursue personal interests and fulfillment. The key feature is a lack of coercion and overt control, something the Canadian Experimental poets were very suspicious of.

The Gorgs, however, value the trappings of authority. Throughout the show there are only three Gorgs, Pa, Ma and Junior, and they live as subsistence farmers because "[a]fter all, they've got to eat" ("Brown Book"). Still, despite the lack of subjects and infrastructure, the Gorgs cling to the illusions of their power, claiming rule over the universe. Pa Gorg wears the crown of the King of the Universe and Ma Gorg is the Queen of the Universe, which leaves Junior to function as heir apparent, the court, the royal guard and the kingdom's lone subject. Monarchy, at least as portrayed by the Gorgs, comes off as rather ridiculous; the kind of thing that is attractive to bumbling clowns like Junior and his family, and certainly, as evidenced by the decline in the royal station, something that is very outmoded. Implicit here, particularly when contrasted with the Fraggles, is that power derives from the people and the common good, and that authoritarian models are not desirable. This critique is built into the operational relationships of the show, and is again consistent with the ideological perspectives of the Canadian Avant Garde; bill bissett's unique orthography was manifestly designed as way to resist the repressive control of authority. Historically though, this critique from a show produced in Canada from 1983-1987 speaks to a broader cultural movement. In Canada, the Crown is both a physical embodiment of the state and a manifestation of the colonial past.[77] It is, therefore, a very loaded symbol in the Canadian context to the extent that

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[77]   My passport, a document that identifies me as a Canadian citizen and allows me to make claim to the rights and privileges inherent in that designation, states that the Minister of Foreign Affairs asks on behalf of Her Majesty, The Queen, that I be accorded the respect due a royal subject. The Queen and the Crown are embodied manifestations of the Canadian state.

symbols of the Crown were often targets of Front  Liberation de Quebec (FLQ) bombing

attacks in the 1960s and 1970s. *Fraggle Rock* began airing in Canada in the year

following the Constitution Act of 1982 which repatriated the constitution and

permanently ended the ability of the British Government to make laws for Canada.

Canada kept the monarchy, though the Canadian crown is severed from the British

crown, but this as a historical moment represents a move away from old power

relationships. After the repatriation of the constitution, the monarchy in Canada exists as

a symbol of the state, but is constitutionally reduced to only a ceremonial role. The

Gorgs, clinging as they do to the trappings of power, the performance of power in the

absence of any real ability to exercise it, can be read as a critique of both centralized,

authoritarian structures and this specific move away from the old Canadian meta-

narratives.

The ability of *Fraggle Rock* to critique and contrast the other realms that make up

the show's spatial universe through infiltration and contamination is most significantly

realized in Outer Space. Outer Space is the human realm and is to be assumed to be a

representation of the world inhabited by the show's viewers and authors. It is, then, filled

with things that are immediately recognizable--when Traveling Matt descends into the

subway, he is riding the same line in Toronto from the same station that I did when I took

my first subway ride--and governed by familiar rules. Outer Space is the known,

mundane world, seemingly divorced from the freeplay and possibility of Fraggle Rock or

the ridiculousness of the Kingdom of the Gorgs. For the viewer, in Outer Space there is

no possibility of meeting sea monsters or receiving advice from a wise Trash Heap named

Marjorie, it is the space where rules and restrictions are inculcated into the human

subject. *Fraggle Rock* upsets the dichotomy between the mundane and fantastic by

providing a denaturing lens. In almost every episode, Gobo receives a postcard from his

uncle, Traveling Matt. Traveling Matt is an explorer who once discovered the entrance to

the Kingdom of the Gorgs and has since been exploring Outer Space. Through these

postcards Matt communicates his observations about Outer Space and its inhabitants, the

Silly Creatures. Since Matt is always already outside the norms of Outer Space--Matt as a

Fraggle is both physically and culturally other in human society--he experiences

everything he encounters through a new lens. This means that Matt does not necessarily

recognize the differences between a human and a dog other than one is hairier than the

other, and does not understand the conventions that govern the viewers relationship as a

subject with the rest of the world. He is totally open to new experiences and processes

them through the context as he understands it, but also through his life experience as a

fraggle and an explorer.

Traveling Matt gets a lot of things wrong. Because the conical shape of the cone

reminds him of a hat, he assumes that he is supposed to place an ice cream cone ice

cream end down on his head. Elevators, to Matt, resemble teleportation devices.  He sees

the world differently from the people around him and as a result re-contextualizes his

experiences so that they can be communicated to Gobo  and the other Fraggles. However,

the viewer is able to see Matt in these situations and recognize the familiar world. Ice

cream, elevators, balloons, dogs, boats, and subways are, if not a part of the viewer's

everyday life, things they understand contextually. They mean things and are governed by

conventions that the viewer recognizes and has been conditioned to conform with.
Traveling Matt, however, presents these things as new. They are made new and strange
and, as a side effect, opened to possibility. If Traveling Matt can recognize the resonances
of a hat in an ice cream cone, then it stands to reason that the viewer could also recognize
these resonances. In fact, the jokes in the Traveling Matt segments are structurally
dependent on the ability of the viewer to identify both where Matt diverges from
convention and why he is able to make the intuitive leaps that he does. The show models
the freeplay of the signifier and the language games that derives from the arbitrary nature
of the sign. It also demonstrates how this opens the world up to possibility and
experimentation. Through the introduction of a fraggle into what is understood as the real
and orderly world, the show reveals Outer Space to be more and more like Fraggle Rock.
Outer Space becomes new, undefined and open to possibility.

This re-contextualizing process is, as we have seen, at the core of Canadian
Experimental poetics. The received text, the pre-existing referent, becomes a space of ad
hoc interference and redefinition. Margaret Atwood is engaging in this type of action
when she enters into conversation with Susanna Moodie in *The Journals of Susanna
Moodie*, bill bissett's refusal to operate within the inherited boundaries is what marked
him for suppression, and in texts like "Man in Lakeland," "Studies in the Book Machine,"
*Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer,* and *The Martyrology* bpNichol, one of the
*Fraggle Rock* writers, consistently uses the blurring of the signifier to generate poetry and
play in previously privileged spaces. There is a wide swath of Canadian poets that use
this process of making strange and re-contextualizing the received, who trouble the

closure of the text and weave poems out of intertextual strands, that the presence of this opening in the structure of *Fraggle Rock* situates the show very much in the Canadian poetic tradition. What the Traveling Matt segments do, moreover, is not simply producing a pastiche of, or quote, the cultural experiences that they present to the viewer. They are not empty, unmooring the experience from context and reducing it to simply a referent. They reveal that context and convention are ultimately artificial, and this opens the text to the incursions of play. This is an important lesson, and it lies at the heart of the Canadian cultural experience. The received, the historical, the naturalized is always already revealed to be false because of the exposure of these narratives to other opposing narratives. As we've seen, the solution that the Experimental poets arrive at, and one that seems to be central to the cultural survival strategies proposed by Marshall McLuhan and others, is to fake it (*Letters of Marshall McLuhan* 359; Wah 61, 66). As Fred Wah writes in *Diamond Grill* about his father and the mutability of language and race:

> So he [Wah's father at the Lion's Club banquet] fakes it, and
> I guess I pick up on that sense of faking it from him, that
> English can be faked. But I quickly learn that when you
> fake language you see, as well, how everything else is fake.
> (66)

The inability of both language an a conveyor of ideas and information and the types of culturally determined narratives like race, ethnicity, gender and nationality to produce any type of coherence means that the individual or group operating with the awareness of this failure must fake it. They must produce something ad hoc that appears to function for as long as the fiction in necessary. When Traveling Matt describes the activities of the Silly People in Outer Space to Gobo and the other Fraggles, since he has no conventional

understanding of what he is observing--Matt is outside of the necessary fictions--he fakes

it. He produces an anthropological report that is built through the collision of various

signifiers. What the viewer learns from this, is how to fake it and how to play as a way of

both coping with the failure of these narratives to function and a way to achieve control

over the world they experience. In this way, *Fraggle Rock* represents a mainstreaming of

these ideas and tactics of the Canadian Avant Garde.

The assumption behind the idea that *Fraggle Rock* works to mainstream these

ideas is that *Fraggle Rock* itself made a significant impact on the Canadian cultural

landscape. For this idea to be at all important, *Fraggle Rock* must be important because

otherwise this incursion of the Avant Garde into pop culture can be read at worst as

wholly insignificant and at best as ahead of its time. Written by a former head of

children's programming at the CBC, F.B. Rainsberry's *A History of Children's Television*

*in English Canada, 1952-1986*, lays out the specific policy conditions that would allow

*Fraggle Rock* to happen. Rainsberry writes:

> we learned to use television for its own sake and there was
> less emphasis on trying to make television respectable in
> terms of other media of communication. In short, we
> encouraged the producers to treat the medium as an
> opportunity for creative expression. This was not
> inconsistent with any educational elements a program
> might contain since we believed that education itself was a
> creative experience.
> (18)

The policy that Rainsberry outlines is certainly consistent with both the pedagogical aims

that the producers of *Fraggle Rock* laid out in the proposal they brought to the CBC in

addition to being consistent with how the show actually worked to achieve these aims

("Brown Book"). Rainsberry, despite offering detailed descriptions of almost every children's show produced in Canada between 1952 and 1986, does not discuss *Fraggle Rock* in any greater detail than a passing reference to the show's funding strategy (215).[78] The funding strategy that Rainsberry refers to, which moved *Fraggle Rock* outside of the Children's television department at the CBC could possibly explain why Rainsberry leaves the show out of his book. This would be a compelling argument for the show's absence if not for the fact that Rainsberry spends a considerable amount of time discussing the whole range of Canadian children's television including local programming like CKCO Kitchener's *Oopsy the Clown* and religious programming like the syndicated *Circle Square* (153; 113). This omission, given the expansive nature of Rainsberry's history, is problematic when making an argument for *Fraggle Rock*'s cultural impact. It would stand, logically, that if Rainsberry's book is a detailed history of children's television in Canada and was written by an expert in the field that if *Fraggle Rock* was a significant text it would be included in the book. There is no obvious reason that *Fraggle Rock* isn't included: Rainsberry included other ongoing shows at the time and several international co-productions or localized versions of American shows (notably *Howdy Doody* and *Romper Room*). This conclusion does not seem to be borne out by the contemporary critical reaction to the show.

During its run *Fraggle Rock* won 5 International Emmys (The Jim Henson Company). In addition it won a number of Geminis--the award for excellence in Canadian television--and was one of the leading nominees even after its cancellation in

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[78]    "In the case of the arrangement made with Jim Henson for the production of Fraggle Rock, the series produced in Toronto was classified as family viewing and placed under the light entertainment department, so that the series could be commercially sponsored" (Rainsberry 215).

1987 ("Cancelled Show Leads the Pack in Gemini Race" B2). *Fraggle Rock* was the

inaugural recipient of the Gemini for Best Children's Program in 1986. These awards

reflect the prevailing critical opinion in the Canadian press at the time. In an October 18,

1983 article in *The Globe and Mail*, Rick Groen posited the show as an answer to the lack

of quality in children's programming writing, "[o]nly occasionally does an exception

come along to prove the rule, and a show with the ingenuous charm of *Fraggle Rock*

conspires to melt cynical hearts of every age" ("TV finds call of the wild music to kids

ears"). Three months later, on January 3, 1984, Groen reiterated that point:

> Short of the on/off switch, the tube has never left him much
> room to hedge his bets, to occasionally steer his offspring
> towards something less myopic than Mr. Magoo. Lately,
> however, the equally beleagured CBC has begun to take a
> few positive steps in a brighter direction. Going head to
> head against the Sturm und Drang of 60 Minutes, the wit
> and wisdom of **Fraggle Rock** is fast becoming a Sunday
> evening institution (at least until some spoiled-sport
> sociologist decides that Gobo is a negative role model).
> ("A few happy alternatives for young TV viewers")

Groen, in his articles, identifies *Fraggle Rock* as a both a successful television show, and

one of the few safe things for children and parents to watch on television, but he also

makes a point of suggesting that the show, even as early as 1984, was becoming

appointment television. The Canadian Press echoed this by calling *Fraggle Rock*

"possibly CBC's biggest success story ever" regularly pulling an audience of 1.5 million

viewers ("Big Year for Fraggles"). At the end of the 1985-6 television season, *Fraggle*

*Rock* was 7th most watched show on Canadian television following perennial

powerhouses like the national news (which took up two spots) and *Hockey Night in*

*Canada* (Adilman E4). It is worth noting that *Fraggle Rock* trailed *Hockey Night in*

*Canada*, a national institution and the second most watched show in Canada, by only 397000 viewers. While 397000 is a lot of people, slightly more than the entire population of London, Ontario, given the cultural importance of both hockey generally and *Hockey Night in Canada* specifically, the relatively small difference in average number of viewers points to *Fraggle Rock's* prominence in Canadian television at the time.

 *Fraggle Rock* would also, like almost all important pop culture texts, re-iterate itself into other forms and media. After the original series was canceled, NBC produced an animated version of the show for broadcast on Saturday mornings. This version of the show, which was similar to the other Jim Henson Productions animated show from the 1980s, *Muppet Babies*, lasted a single season and was canceled after just 13 episodes. However, it speaks to the cultural currency and marketability of *Fraggle Rock*. Contemporary to the original show there were *Fraggle Rock* books, Star Comics--an imprint of Marvel Comics that specialized in adaptations of children's television-- published two separate comics based on the show, three records of the show's music were released; the Fraggles made a significant enough cultural impact that they were turned into McDonald's toys with each of the core fraggles placed behind the wheel of vegetable shaped car in 1988. This incursion into the hamburger business is important on its own, the toys and the show had the corporate and cultural force of McDonald's behind them which certainly deepens the over all mass exposure of the show, but there was no Happy Meal in Canada until 1984. Children and their parents had to specifically purchase these items in Canada, separate from their meals. There was clearly a market for *Fraggle Rock* in the 1980s, but what is more impressive is that there continues to be a market for the

show and its merchandise. In recent years, both the entire original series and the animated

series has been released on DVD in both single season sets and complete series packages.

Prior to this single episode discs had been sold. Koch Records, in 2007, combined the

three albums of music from *Fraggle Rock* into a single box set. New comic books are

being produced by Archaia Press that are presented in such away as to appeal to both

nostalgic adults that experienced the show the first time and children coming to the text

now. These books feature crisp art in attractive hard bound collection that shows an

awareness of the collector's market, but also features activities pages created by artist

Katie Cook that demonstrate how to draw a doozer, make a doozer structure or make a

"radish stamp" out of an apple. As Karen Prell, who performed Red on the original series,

points out in her foreward to the Archaia collection there is an ongoing enthusiasm for the

show, but she also observes that:

> Many people who were not much bigger than Fraggles
> when the show first aired are now at an age when they can
> pass on those joyfully wrapped ideals on to their children or
> anyone else who will find them entertaining and thought-
> provoking.
> (n.p.)

*Fraggle Rock* never really went away, it seems to have had a lasting cultural resonance

and now, that the generation of viewers that watched the series when it originally aired

Sunday nights on the CBC have come of age, it is being presented by that generation that

experienced it to their own children. The show is being passed on, which explains the

return to the cultural mainstream of both the series itself and merchandise associated with

the series, and this phenomenon--the desire to share a valued childhood experience with

one's own children or the children of their friend's and relations--would seem to reveal

the show's lasting cultural impact.

 *Fraggle Rock* featured on its staff a number of writer's associated with the Canadian experimental poetry scene, and, as a side effect, had built into the show's structure aspects of the ideology and methodology of that literary movement. These were ideas that less than ten years before the debut of the show were dangerous enough to invite the direct involvement of the House of Commons to attempt to keep them from proliferating. Every Sunday night at 7:30, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Canada's national broadcaster funded by the taxpayers, sent *Fraggle Rock* out on the same airways that brought *The National* and *Hockey Night in Canada* to the nation's homes. The series wasn't a flash in the pan, racking up awards and ratings, and a fan base that twenty some odd years after the show went off the air continues to invest in the brand. The overwhelming conclusion that arises from the series success and the way it bore the stamp of the Avant Garde is that *Fraggle Rock* represented a moment where the Avant Garde merged into the mainstream. *Fraggle Rock* is evidence of a cultural shift, a move in the Canadian cultural consciousness towards ideas that had once been too dangerous for Governor General's awards or even for publishing grants in the eyes of some of Canada's elected officials. The Bakhtinian future Frank Davey identified in *Canadian Literary Power*, the future of not social revolution but of an endless number of identity clusters striving to produce narratives that work for them in the face of the rest of the strivers, and the fractured parliamentary politics since the 1993 federal election are extreme examples of this shift (18). This move to constantly produce new narratives about who and what is a Canadian or what particular subset of Canadian an individual are

symptomatic of a country that has no fixed or naturalized national narrative, no fiction that can withstand scrutiny. *Fraggle Rock,* with its anti-authoritarian focus on play and possibility, presented to the children of Canada the fundamental survival strategy that operates behind the obvious fractures in twenty and twenty-first century Canadian society: the world is filled with possibility and it is up to you to make the best use of the space to play. If all else fails, you can always wear an ice cream cone as a hat while riding on a Toronto subway.

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