

An Interview with Karen Mac Cormack & Steve McCaffery

by Antoine CAZÉ

This interview was conducted via e-mail from February through April 2000, which accounts for the sometimes long answers. As will be apparent, some questions are addressed to both interviewees, while others are directed more specifically to one or the other. I have tried to keep a sense of coherence by interlacing the answers; any obscurity resulting from this method is my own. Since several questions revolve around the concept and practice of voice in poetry, the electronic medium adds another critical twist to the “interview” situation here created, by challenging the more common in presentia (face-to-face) mode interviews generally imply. There was no view in this exchange, but there certainly has been a lot of inter involved, and I would like to thank both Karen Mac Cormack and Steve McCaffery for the time and energy they devoted to their contributions.

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As poets, both of you are usually associated with American (that is to say, U.S.) poetry movements, whereas you live and work in Toronto and neither of you were born in the United States. Why Canada? Is this somewhat “displaced” perspective from/in which you write important in your work?

Karen Mac Cormack: Most of my life has been lived in an “elsewhere.” I have access to three citizenships, having been born in what is now Zambia

to an Irish/English father and an English/Canadian mother, who lived there only briefly before embarking on what for me became a trans-Atlantic upbringing between England and various parts of Canada. I was less than a year old when they returned from Zambia to England. Subsequently, from 1974 to 1982 I lived for varying periods in Mexico, Greece, Italy and the U.S. and there again (in California) in 1989 and 1997. Perhaps more revealingly, between 1989 and 1995 my books were published outside of Canada, even if poems of mine continued to appear in Canadian journals. Then *Marine Snow* was published here (ECW Press, 1995) and the collaboration with Alan Halsey *FIT TO PRINT* (Coach House Books/West House Books [UK], 1998). The chapbook *Multiplex* with work by Ron Silliman and myself (not a collaboration) appeared in October 1998 through Wild Honey Press in Ireland.

I don't identify with geography in terms of a sense of "place" being core to my creativity. Certainly the fact I've lived in many different places (as well as travelling extensively) has contributed to my perception of how and in what ways and degrees "difference" manifests culturally, politically, personally.

Steve McCaffery: Curiously, I think I fall outside of either of these two clearly, defined cultural boundaries, in a sort of satellitic nomadcity. I personally relish the position of a "linked outsider." Why Canada? I came to Canada in 1968 after graduating from Hull University in England to carry on postgraduate studies at York University in Toronto. (I finished my undergraduate studies in English in the week of the legendary May 1968 student uprising in Paris and almost forfeited my final exams to join in the Paris barricades [as several of my friends did]). After my M.A. studies were completed I met the Canadian poet bp Nichol... and entered into what we then termed the "language revolution." Meeting Nichol was seminal. Here was a poet my own age who had an international vision, being Canada's foremost exponent of Concrete poetry. His magazines *grOnk* and *Ganglia* were distributed world-wide without charge. (I particularly remember the work of the Czech concretist Jiri Valoch.) Certainly, Toronto in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a vibrant locus: Coach House Press was spearheaded by Victor Coleman with a mandate to publish the important work that mainstream publishers were ignoring and this included Allen Ginsberg, David Rosenberg, and such British poets as Bob Cobbing and Thomas A. Clark. The cultural impact of the Vietnam war was felt in the influx of "draft dodgers" who came largely to Toronto and Vancouver. However, at the time I met Nichol, Canada (still a British "dominion" in my mind) was undergoing a hysterical construction along rigid nationalist paradigms. The focus on establishing and articulating a "Canadian identity" was obsessive and in its literary manifestations led to a retrenchment of what to my mind are obsolete propensities, viz. to an unquestioned

representational paradigm (what Jean Jacques Lecercle calls “representivity”) and an unproblematic continuation of narrative models. The crucial intersection of sign systems with ideology, and the realization of the linguistic construction of subjectivity had not emerged as issues.

Accordingly, I found myself a non-Canadian in Canada. It was in the late 1960s that I was introduced by Nichol to the writings of Gertrude Stein and her own appositely stated position (“America is my country but Paris is my home”) had a curiously personal inflection for me. The figure of the expatriot, of course, is a hackneyed one but my non-connection to Canada poetry has continued through to the present. My work has never appeared in major anthologies of Canadian poetry (e.g. the *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*) and my longer works have been ignored (by such writer-anthologists as George Bowering, Gary Geddes, Sharon Thesen and Michael Ondaatje) in the construction of the Canadian Long Poem canon. In addition I have never been invited to adjudicate on the Canada Council. Partly this is understandable. There has been a dominant suspicion of “theory” and the “intellectual” whose rarified abstractions threaten the secure complacency of the self-sufficient, self-identical voices communicating narrative lyrics in Wordsworth’s language of the ordinary man. It’s only recently, with the entrance of continental critical theory into university curricula, that my own poetry is getting attention—significantly from graduate students.

As regards the U.S. In a different way there’s been an ostracization. Ron Silliman purposefully excluded me from his historically important anthology *In the American Tree* on the grounds of me being biologically non-American: a decision that aroused many people’s ire other than my own. I understand, too, it was a similar rationale that kept my work out of the *Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Poetry* edited by Paul Hoover. We see a similar tendency in Manuel Brito’s important series of chapbooks being published in the Canary Islands under his Zasterle imprint whose focus has been exclusively on national, not continental, America.

As to displacement. I increasingly concur with French artist Robert Filliou’s notion of “the eternal network.” Poetry no longer emanates from civic nodes or regions but across a decentered hyperspace. My close contacts and first readers accordingly can be in England, Australia, France, Italy, Russia.

Your work is usually perceived to be «Language Writing,» and usually described as such. Could you specify your relation with this kind of writing? Even more generally, how would you position yourselves with regard to the notion of the avant-garde, and within the avant-garde(s) itself (themselves)?

S. McC.: Ron Silliman has attempted to periodize Language Writing by separating out three phases. An initial phase from 1970-80 that Silliman

calls “the heroic period of self-definition, language poetry as community building” (Silliman, 2); a second decade of gradual reception and institutional recognition, and a third phase from roughly 1990 marked by the diaspora of the initial participants (Silliman, Perelman, Watten and Harryman all leaving the Bay Area of San Francisco), a decrease in contact (largely precipitated by poets like Watten, Perelman, Bernstein and myself moving into the academy), and a rapid expansion of younger writers influenced to some degree by the forms and theories of Language Writing’s original theorists. As a broad periodization I think this is accurate, although I personally did not feel “community building” as a central agenda—perhaps because of my own geographical isolation in Toronto (a third coast to Silliman’s narrative of a bicoastal poetics of east and west).

But there was in Toronto a tangible “community building” and I would point to my 16 or so years of collaboration with Paul Dutton, bp Nichol and Rafael Barreto-Rivera as an attempt at *communitas* on the level of improvised poetic composition. The four-voice improvised sound poem did take on the aspect of a community and anarchy in the sense both John Cage and Jackson Mac Low empowered performers with volition in performance. At the same time it extended Charles Olson’s theories of projective, processual verse beyond solitary creation and print into polysubjectivities and real time enactment.

I certainly shared with the original theorists of Language Poetry a Marxist position and actively engaged in critiques of referentiality, voice and narrative. “Plot” we saw as a variant of commodity fetishism, a destination for the linguistic sign outside the linguistic sign. This led to certain criticisms of our position as self-referential, but for me it represented an important aspect in my own development as a sign practitioner. Perhaps I, more than the other four first generation language poets, embraced European theory. I always saw the early work of Watten and Silliman as having a matrix in Russian formalism (the notions of defamiliarization and “laying bare” for instance). My own work changed into an attempt at applying the themes of Georges Bataille to non-narrative modes, which led me into connecting Bataille’s theory of general economy with the logic and economy of the paragram.

Alongside these two major involvements (group sound poetry and Language writing) I also maintained a connection with the ideas, practises and spirit of Fluxus. Alison Knowles, Philip Corner, Alan Kaprow and Robert Filliou were all friends of mine, and especially so, Dick Higgins (Fluxus artist, poet, inventor of intermedia and founding editor of Something Else Press). I performed at the Fluxus wedding of George and Billie Maciunas at the loft of Jean Dupuis in Manhattan (the loft below Yoko Ono’s loft). The spirit of this ambience is caught in my small pamphlet *The Scenarios* written in the mid 1970s and described as “short movie scripts or

intermedia texts falling between the categories of motion picture and poem.”

THE DARK BAR SCENARIO (based on Exodus 33: 20-23)

a man backs into a dark bar with a brown paper bag on his head, the rest of his body is naked.

in the centre of the floor is a large stone over which the man trips.

the stone, too, is inside a brown paper bag.

THE HOUSE: A POEM-EVENT

a balloon bursts outside a house.

a man knocks on the door.

at the same time as both these events another man presses a pen against a window.

I became involved in intermedia work, developing what I termed “action poetry” comprising a type of language-based performance art designed to investigate specifically literary problems or issues (metaphoricity and representation, translation). Some of these are collected on a videotape, *V Beyond the Ideo*, and include the world’s first sound poem for the deaf and a seven-day translation of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* into *Paradise Regained* according to the principle of “creative misunderstanding” (a concept developed by Dick Higgins and myself in the mid-1970s). Another aspect of my work, parallel to the Language Writing period, was ‘pataphysics. bp Nichol and myself founded the Canadian College of “Pataphysics (note the different mark before the P) and organized “pataphysical events. Nichol’s great contribution in this area were twenty or so ‘pataphysically inspired problems he named “Probable Systems.

I’ve enumerated this multidimensional approach in order to problematize a simple categorization of my work through the 1970s and 1980s as Language Writing. Certainly, much falls into that framework but for me a simultaneous engagement in Conceptual performance art and sound poetry were vital ingredients to my productivity.

This leads, of course, to your final point in this question: the relation of my work to an avant garde. Again, I feel we must commence with the problematics of nomenclature. To name a nexus of cultural forces is to commit a propositional violence. I love Schlegel’s old definition of Romantic poetry as that which defies definition, a chiasmic description

subsequently taken up by Helene Cixous in her non-definition of Woman. Poetics has not developed the diacritical novelties of philosophy to engage problematic, yet useful terms. We have no Heideggerian *kreuzweise durchstreichung*, no Derridean *sous rature*. Avant garde is both a historically dated term and yet one that continually grows in currency. Are we correct to shelve it away as what labelled the formally disruptive art and writing that was central to early Modernism? Or do we place it more transhistorically as virtual cultural praxis, or as Tzara said of Dada, a state of mind?

The issue for me is less a conscious connection to an historic avant garde tradition but rather a self-scrutinizing of what is required to be truly contemporary. To be contemporary involves a thorough repudiation of a centralizing, centripetalising subjectivity and a complex critical engagement with linguistic effects and consequences. Happily, we've survived the linguistic turn in the human sciences (Saussure's dubious legacy) and have decanted structural linguistic into the pragmatics of social utterance. I've always been impressed by Lyotard's succinct claim that there is no language, only linguistic occurrences, which signals the same condition of linguistic diversification that George Steiner termed "After Babel" to designate the contemporary scenario of discrete linguistic multiplicities. It's an intellectual vector that can be traced back beyond Steiner, through Foucault's notion of "discursive formations" and Bakhtin's earlier "social dialects" to Johann George Hamann's wonderful version of Post-Babelism in which "every court, every school, every profession, every corporation, every sect has its own language." However in saying this I'm not advocating a lazy, politically correct stance in which anything is legitimate. The key issue is the following: if heteroglossia problematizes "subjectivity" by the overwhelming presence of indeterminate individualities, then where do we situate poetries? Jerome McGann some time ago argued for two alternative stances: a poetics of appeasement and one of opposition. All poetry is unavoidably political.

K.M.: Just as L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing became LANGUAGE writing becomes language writing since its appearance in the 1970s so my work is indeed perceived to be part of that... I'm not an upper case/equal sign practitioner but the effect on my work is evident. L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing encouraged me to recognize and confront my own habits and formulae—to move on and grow, and I regarded "L" writing as more contemporarily vital than anything else I'd encountered when I came to it in 1982. (As an aside, I read Bataille's *Death and Sensuality* two years before reading any "L" writing.)

I wasn't part of the first generation of writers associated with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing, unlike Steve McCaffery. My work is informed by it and has developed thanks to it. My first book *Nothing by Mouth* was

published in 1984 though my poetry didn't appear in American journals until 1989 in magazines connected with L writing, *AVEC* and *Screens and Tasted Parallels*. (I was first published in the Australian magazine *Overland* in 1977.) I met many of the first generation L writers throughout the 1980s, beginning in 1984. I'm often referred to as a second generation LANGUAGE writer and that's accurate enough. I don't wish to distance myself from the first generation or the writing, rather I'm being factual. Now there are third and fourth generation language writers, and the writing has certainly changed from the context of the L Book. I don't consider L writing a movement, though it's come to be described and critiqued as such, particularly in the U.S.

The troubling term "avant-garde" is one so familiar that today it's used without giving the meaning much thought. Most of the writers I know (internationally I should add) want no part of the "garde" even in some distant future, so being slotted into the "avant-garde" makes for an uncomfortable mis/fit. Others accept this term as a badge or indicator of their work being outside of the norm, and I think the perspective varies from culture to culture. Some prefer (and embrace) the soubriquet "experimental," if anything even more misleading, or as the late B.S. Johnson so aptly put it:

I object to the word experimental being applied to my own work. Certainly I make experiments, but the unsuccessful ones are quietly hidden away and what I choose to publish is in my terms successful: that is, it has been the best way I could find of solving particular writing problems. Where I depart from convention, it is because the convention has failed, is inadequate for what I have to say. The relevant questions are surely whether each device works or not, whether it achieves what it set out to achieve, and how less good were the alternatives.

Elsewhere, John Cage has written:

The word experimental is apt, providing it is understood not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failure, but simply as an act the outcome of which is not known.

If a writer, or any other artist for that matter, applies the term "experimental" to an unknown result in a public context then how can one suspend evaluation? If the various and numerous acts the outcome of which "is not known" were to be combined with an absence-of-evaluation, then the recurring result would frequently be one of mediocrity (at best). Without experimentation no "new" results would be forthcoming, but I concur with Johnson that one's unsuccessful experiments should remain privately hidden away.

"Formally innovative" or even "formally investigative" are alternatives to the outmoded or inappropriate terms still applied to writing practices regarded as variously "new" today. At this point "innovative" seems just as

much a label of convenience as any other but it signals a more positive (for me) sense of departure from “normative writing.”

Obviously Karen, the final part of your answer shows that “innovative” poets have “public contexts” uppermost in their minds when experimenting with new forms—unlike what most readers tend to think. How do you specifically envisage your relation with your potential and future (or past) readers when you write?

K.M.: I don’t know if any “innovative” poets have “public contexts” uppermost in their minds when experimenting with new forms, but I doubt that that’s the case during the formation of the work! The moment when one’s writing is published or performed is a public one, the work is then out in the world for scrutiny, possible appreciation, critique. One may share the stages or development of texts with other writers (or visual artists, musicians, et al) and sometimes the public presentation of a work in progress occurs, but my point is that the term “experimental” shouldn’t, indeed won’t, suspend evaluation of a work in a public context, something all practitioners who still subscribe to the term “experimental” in reference to their work, should be mindful of.

I don’t think a writer’s “position” should require a sharing of “confidences,” explication of “codes,” divulging of “experiments” made-on-the-way-to completed works; in short an “explanation,” which may or may not benefit those interested. The act of writing is simultaneously intensely personal and historically collective (whether or not the writer is aware of prior works of shared or similar concerns and explorations). This act is separated from the reading of text-on-page through time, and the further removed one is (in time) the more general the context. Hence our perception of those “decades,” “eras,” and “movements” of our own century (and the many preceding) culminates in such blanket terms as “modernism,” “neo-classicism,” and “romanticism.” To reiterate, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing became LANGUAGE writing becomes language writing... If texts survive because readers continue to find them rewarding in new contexts then that’s a productive confluence of writing being experienced by a model reader, past/present/future. The “model reader” is one who comes to the work by whatever means and who learns to appreciate it, critique it, and continues to engage with it. The “audience” is plastic, indeterminate, and varies from one context to the next, a challenging unknown.

Collaboration seems to be a constant feature of your poetries, whether in Steve’s performance practice or in Karen’s recent FIT TO PRINT co-signed with Alan Halsey. How does this practice modify your own work? Does

writing/performing in collaboration have to do with a demise (death?) of the poetic subject?

S. McC.: If not a demise then most certainly a compromise. In my two decades of collaborative work with the Four Horsemen I came to a gradual awareness of the group sound poem as fixed in a poetics of spontaneous community. In the light of the discursive furor emanating from Bataille, Nancy, and Blanchot, on the specific nature of community I'm reticent to define the term. Perhaps the Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of "becoming assemblage" is more appropriate? There was something in the nature of high-energy, spontaneous, collective sonic emission that guarantees a certain loss of the poetic subject. The volatility, stochastics and plasticity of such arrangements ensured certain states that might be likened to Longinian ekstasis. But the issue of the poetic subject in real-time performative, physiological poetry is very different from the stakes in written collaboration. A huge component of my work has involved collaborative projects. *Legend* composed by Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Ray DiPalma and myself appeared in 1980 and comprised two, three, four and five-way collaborative sections. *Six Fillious* (1978) was a series of translations of Robert Filliou's *14 Chansons et une Charade* by Dick Higgins, Dieter Rot, George Brecht, bp Nichol, and myself.

Collaboration conveniently divides into two broad categories. "Safe" collaboration (i.e. the type of collaboration in which the integrity of the poetic or critical subject remains intact) is accretional; sections are added, written onto, collaged into a growing composite text. This is the case with both *Legend* and *Six Fillious*. However, "dangerous" or "unsafe" collaboration (what we might term after Bataille "sovereign" collaboration) risks subjectivity by its very method of disturbance, rewrite, deletion, substitution. My best illustrative experience of this sovereign method is my critical collaboration with bp Nichol as the TRG (Toronto Research Group). Our research into non-narrative, translation, the book as machine, and alternative forms for the expository and critical essay were likened by one critic, Caroline Bayard, to the earlier work of *Tel Quel* (although I remain unconvinced of the accuracy of this assessment). Most illuminating in our collaboration was what might be termed its fluctuating cognitive economy that determined what was written and by whom. The method was simple and errant. One of us would type as the other one dictated "his" thoughts, these roles would switch spontaneously. However, it frequently occurred that the one typing would stop recording and type his own thoughts at that moment. Rather than paraphrase the collaborative method let me quote directly from my Introduction to *Rational Geomancy* (the collected research reports of TRG from 1973-82) which I edited and published through Talobooks in 1992, four years after Nichol's death:

Emerging from this collision of differences was something along the lines of a “general economy in dialogue”; a complex interaction between discrete human beings in research sessions, both of whom exploited the fragility of the contract between them that bound one of us as enunciator and the other as the transcriber of the reports. One unavoidable implication of this method of dictation was the loss of certainty around independent judgement. What we risked was thought’s proprietary nature as we dispersed it through active dialogue into the transcription of synthetic proposals.... A further implication was that the normative assumptions around authorship were profoundly unsettled. As well as creating a synthetic subject (based on a We-full, not an I-less paradigm) the reports also worked to undermine the classic authority that pertains to the written. Beyond the serious fact that “the one typing was not always the one thinking” (entailing the further fact that typographic idiosyncrasies or holograph manuscript did not necessarily identify the writer), a degree of errancy and spontaneous deviation within the dictation almost always occurred. Most interesting in this respect was the short-circuiting of transmission along the lines of the following secretarial formula: “Steve is dictating his thinking, thinking Barrie is typing this dictation. However, Barrie is typing out his own thoughts on the matter and Steve doesn’t know it.” (McCaffery & Nichol, 10-11)

K.M.: *FIT TO PRINT* is my first finished, published collaboration. Steve McCaffery and I now have two incomplete collaborative works, both titled “From a Middle.” The first was abandoned more than ten years ago, the more recent one we began in Paris in June 1999 and most recently added to in February 2000.

FIT TO PRINT was already underway when I decided to re-read Alan Halsey’s *Reasonable Distance* at the end of December 1995. I wrote a poem as a response to it (though not in the double column format that dominates *FTP*) and sent it to Alan, whose own response (poem) to the then-recently published *Marine Snow* crossed the Atlantic at the same time—January of 1996. I then sent him the existing *FTP* poems along with a description of the project and he responded to those, at which point we realized a collaboration was in effect. I should mention that I first met Alan in England in 1989 when he came to a reading of Steve’s and mine in Oxford. Prior to that I’d written to him (after reading some of his work in *Writing* magazine earlier in the 1980s) so a correspondence was already in place.

FTP’s format on the page intentionally refers to that most daily of reading materials—the newspaper. However, the poems themselves, while displaying a concern with and for daily events (and these range from earthquakes to conditions of weather), do not adopt a “transit” theory of meaning. Together we approached the newspaper format as a way of fusing issues of mass culture with a non-traditional writing practice. The newspaper column produces unexpected ruptures that the reader learns to negotiate. Our intention was to apply this achieved negotiation to a writing that departs from the “habit” of a conventional language.

Most of *FTP* was written on either side of the Atlantic and the poems were sent sometimes singly to and fro, sometimes in batches. Alan was still living in Hay-on-Wye in Wales and we were both amazed that on average our letters took three days to arrive in either direction! Alan bought his first computer while *FTP* was in the works (his initial *FTP* poems were done on a word processor). Alan did visit Steve and myself when we were living in California in 1997 and that was the only time we discussed the work face to face and wrote some of it in the same locale. I don't recall either one of us suggesting changes to one another's poems and the collaborative process was an arm's length one.

FTP was eventually considered "complete" by summer of 1997. The order is more or less chronological. I'd hoped to tackle as many aspects of the newspaper as possible (but the Sports section defeated me, so I was delighted when Alan dealt with that so effectively!).

The collaboration's effect on my own writing is more difficult to express. To have another writer as intensely involved in the same project yet whose work responds to that project differently (and because of that, makes one see one's own in a new way) impelled me to test limits more strenuously than ever. By limits I mean the parameters of the project (not all the poems in *FTP* took the form of the newspaper's double column), and my own "risk taking" insofar as what could work seemed to escalate. That experience has contributed immensely to my subsequent writing and I'd welcome the opportunity to collaborate in other situations and across disciplines.

The collaboration with Steve is different again. We're writing in the same notebook and at this point the work seems to grow in short, intense bursts, usually when we're travelling. Sometimes we read sections aloud to each other and together we add to or modify them (a form of mutual editing, so handwriting isn't a reliable key as to which one of us is "the author" of a particular line or part of a section). Sometimes we pass the notebook back and forth. Weeks or months may pass when we're unable to work on "From a Middle." Collaboration comprises multiple forms and approaches and with each one the effect on one's own practice differs.

The final part of my previous question—on the nature of the poetic subject and its possible demise—leads me on to what I feel is the lyrical dimension of your poetry, Karen. Could you clarify your relationship with lyrics and lyricism ?

K.M.: I don't think I have much of a relationship with lyrics and lyricism! In a review of *Marine Snow* Michael Boughn wrote that my work was "an anti-lyrical lyric" and goes on to state "Mac Cormack's anti-lyricism takes the shape of an extreme resistance to the invocation of affect, which necessarily will be part of a structure of subjectivity in the

poem's language." (*University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 66, Number 1, Winter 1996/7, pp. 254-255).

My early work was an exploration of altering the way we perceive the day-to-day, while allowing "language" to be shown as an entity itself (rather than a transparent vastness through which to "see" our world). This led to an investigation of "sentence effects," particularly the integration of poetic line with prose period. This was not to enact a conciliatory synthesis of the two genres, but to delineate their radical sympathies and contradictions, i.e. not to write a prose poem, but to reclaim an exploratory usefulness from the sentence, in order to extend the poetic form to more challenging/rewarding modes of readership. So what began in *Quill Driver* (1989) as a propositional language, becomes in *Marine Snow* (1995) a fusion of propositional language with stanzaic configurations—in order to explore phenomenological and social implications in perception, when the latter is mediated through the orthodox and the errant trajectories of language, writing and space. *Quirks & Quillets* (1991) explores a similar state of mediation but utilizes a different momentum by suppressing the period in favour of a series of brief, intense phrasal continua. For the most part, the writing deliberately avoids punctuation so that grammatical patterns can shift in both their functions and effects. The intention was not to produce an "abstract" or non-referential text, but to reveal how meaning emerges in the sites of its production.

The Tongue Moves Talk (1997) explores the perceptions, misconceptions and current role of the social concept of the "carrier." The poems deliberately repudiate any of the "reader comforts" of familiarity and habituality of normative language. *The Tongue Moves Talk* establishes a deliberate resistance, structured upon patterns that offer a rigorous positioning of their linguistic materiality.

My reason for mentioning lyricism is because I tend not to associate this category with any stable, romantic, central master self; rather, it seems to me that the way in which you challenge the stability of the self—particularly in your recurrent use of splitting procedures (good examples would be "A Cross" or "At Issue II" in The Tongue Moves Talk)—is an instance of lyricism, if by this word I mean a problematizing of subjectivity through language: "Bottom self two," as you write in the same collection ("Untitled").

K.M.: Now that you've clarified *your* association with lyricism I understand why you asked the earlier question! As you know, I don't express solely my own thoughts and sentiments, and yes, destabilization is very much a part of the poetry I write, a way to defamiliarize what's so often taken for granted, whether in language, visual perception, or aural cognition in our daily lives. "Meaning" and the weather both change. Why

an insistence on the static as a given, in what is anything but a stable environment? Meaning is at once precise for the moment and shifting over time. Consider slang, for example. “Gay” meant something very different for the Victorians than it does for us: a “gay” woman was a prostitute. “Queer” as in ‘odd’ was in relatively recent usage, if not in North America then in other English-speaking countries. The titles of two of my books both came from slang, *Quill Driver* means ‘writer’ (at least eighteenth century, possibly older), and *Quirks & Quillets* (‘tricks and devices’) was in use in the sixteenth century.

In Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* there’s a wonderful Louis Dumont quotation: “We should go so far as believing that only change has meaning and that permanence has none, while most [societies] (are) of the contrary conviction.”

One of the reasons why I was asking about collaboration is because it raises the whole thorny question of poetic (or poetry) communities—affiliations, groupings, camps, entrenched institutional and extra-institutional battles, etc. How do you respond to Charles Bernstein’s view that poetry today is “among the most social and socially responsive—dialogic—of contemporary art forms”?¹ And what about the relationship between poetry and institutions, in particular (but not only) academic institutions?

K.M.: The poetry condition (yes, that’s deliberate) continues to change... my sense of poetic community is one of being simultaneously international and relying on correspondence, as geographic communities usually prove to be unstable. While the contact is ephemeral, this is what constitutes community for me. The diasporas experienced in recent years (in North America) aren’t 100% positive any more than the “communities” of the San Francisco-Bay Area or Vancouver were mini-utopias. The ubiquitous reality of electronic mail has become *the* means for “staying in touch.” I’m not referring to the poetics nets, but to e-mail for personal exchanges.

Charles’s view that poetry today “is among the most social and socially responsive—dialogic—of contemporary art forms” may or may not hold true. Within the context of academic institutions and their poetics nets there’s certainly a lot of discussion about poetry. They afford an opportunity to share, to engage in dialogue. I’ve also found that they suffer from (at best) digression, (at worst) misapplication, for example non-poetic issues being discussed at great length.

1. Cf. Charles Bernstein, “Introduction” in Charles Bernstein, ed, *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York & Oxford, OUP, 1998) 23.

Correlatively, FIT TO PRINT, because (?) it is a collaborative work, is highly idiosyncratic, quite unique in fact, even as it uses that supposedly most common form (or better, shape) of language, i.e. the news. How ironic and critical are these distortions meant to be?

K.M.: The typographical errors in my poems in *FIT TO PRINT* are taken from various North American newspapers, and the odd linebreaks are “inspired” by them. I began the project with the deliberate intent of critiquing such errors, as they increasingly appear in that most quotidian of reading materials, so their effect or influence is as reprehensible as it is widespread. While still working on *FTP* I began a related (ongoing) project, *At Issue*, working with a related form of mass culture. (I write slowly and my projects often overlap.) In *At Issue* I examine the format and contents of the magazine instead of those of the newspaper. The interruptions and syntactical dis-arrangements in *At Issue* reflect the experience of reading that format (within what is certainly a critical agenda on my part).

At Issue is a series of poems utilizing the vocabulary and spelling found in magazines of a diverse nature. An interesting if frightening fact is that there are fewer typos in American or British *Vogue* than in most scholarly books published in North America! To counter *Vogue* I have also been writing through *Self* (a health/fitness magazine also geared to female readership). As other alternatives I’ve considered a science journal (perhaps *Scientific American*), a news magazine, and perhaps a computer-oriented journal. Originally the project was to incorporate four (monthly) magazines at a year’s worth of issues, one issue per poem. Having gone through twelve issues of American and British *Vogue* and at time of writing five of *Self* I think that those two magazines will provide the right amount of material and that *At Issue* will either become a chapbook or a section in another book.

I am entranced by the intense playfulness of your poetry—and I mean this in the Carrollian sense, i.e. a playfulness that involves & implies deep thinking on the nature of language. You like playing with language, don’t you?

K.M.: I’m fascinated by language and yes, you’re right, I love to play with it.

What about the rules for these language games? (I have the Oulipo in mind, of course.)

K.M.: Sometimes there are rules, as in the *At Issue* series being written solely with the vocabulary and grammar found in issues of the above-mentioned magazines. *Quill Driver* is full of slang from earlier

centuries, though it's not always recognizable as such (for example, "speak: anything stolen"). As I've already addressed the development of my writing I'll not answer this question at length.

The visual dimension of a poem seems important for you, as among many other examples in "Photo Finish," where single words face each other across a blank space vertically cleaving the text in two; or in the use of small typeface for the whole of Marine Snow, which makes the poems look like reductions of much larger sized sheets; and more generally, in your fondness for extremely short, shapely lines with unusual typographical layout. Could you comment on that dimension? How important is the work of visual artists for your own writing? Is poetry a "continuation" of, or in continuity with, painting, photography and film?

K.M.: The visual aspect of a poem is important to me and texts are always affected by typography. Though I'm not a designer, I'm a writer whose projects sometimes require new (for me) ways of thinking about typography and making a text work 'on the page.' My methods for achieving this aren't necessarily the most expedient, as I learned after the fact about *FIT TO PRINT!*

If anything poetry has followed behind innovation in the visual arts, at least for most of the twentieth century, but I consider it very much in combination with the other disciplines. I've been fortunate to have worked mostly with publishers/designers who invited and encouraged my participation in the publishing process of each of my books (though the choice of such a small size font for *Marine Snow* is an unfortunate one in my opinion, and made by the publisher, not myself). *Straw Cupid* was probably the book I was most actively involved in in terms of design. Maureen Cochrane and I went through every decision and worked through every layout problem together on what was my second publication. But when Chax Press decided to publish *Quirks & Quillets* (as a trade publication) I wanted Charles Alexander to "surprise" me. Chax Press's handmade, limited editions are extraordinary. The proofs were sent to me but beyond that I had no idea what the book would look like, though I encouraged Cynthia Miller to do an original drawing for the cover and I'm delighted with her response to that work. She's also responsible for the artwork on the cover of *The Tongue Moves Talk*.

I feel compelled to mention that much of my work results in extremely long lines, evident particularly in *Straw Cupid* and the single, unpunctuated single-sentence "block of text" poems comprising *Quirks & Quillets*, neither of which you've seen as far as I know, and most recently in some of the *At Issue* poems.

“Embrace,” the opening poem in Marine Snow, starts with the line “Tree in the shape of voices is shine by comparison broken.” The poem is actually shaped like a three-tiered tree and works with patterns of letters (“If letters train a pattern too”) that create many anagrams and paragrams: “Tree” becomes “Terse” on the next line, and the poem closes on the beautiful line, “Revelry to revery.” All this lettristic activity forces the reader to redirect/refocus her gaze differently. Is this visual blur, or perhaps hesitancy, part of what you are aiming at?

K.M.: Mutiplicity, so a reader has choices.

How influential has Gertrude Stein been on such “prose-looking” poems as “Darker than Sleep,” “Braking Radiation,” or “Joyance” (all in Marine Snow)?

K.M.: Actually, it was through L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing that I went on to read the work of such modernist poets as Mina Loy and William Empson. Though they are usually overshadowed by the more luminous Joyce, and Stein, (and my ‘favourite’ Djuna Barnes, whose *Nightwood* I read early, when I was sixteen) their texts for me are of considerable importance. I would say that the writing of all of the above-mentioned has influenced my own (though not as is immediately apparent vis-a-vis Stein). I would also add to the list the French writer Francis Ponge and the Austrian Robert Musil.

Steve, you are not only an active poet but also a productive theoretician with several critical books and articles published. How do you envisage the collaboration between poetry and criticism? How far do these two activities interact in your writing?

S. McC.: In my case the two are inseparably interlaced. Poetry for me is a radical activity of critique whose modalities are both intellectual and sensuous. (In this regard I concur with Pound’s troika of melopoeia, phanopoeia, and logopoeia.) The merging of poetry and theory has been a prime concern for me for three decades. But in what sense “merge”? In an authentic sense both my theorising and my poetic production are discrete procedures. A key mandate in my writing (as with the late Georges Perec) is to make my next book as different as possible from the previous one. And I certainly don’t laminate mechanically a theoretical apparatus onto an emerging poetic text. My long poem *Evoba* (1987) is a poetic reponse to Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* and starts with the insurgent motto “If the aim of philosophy is, as Wittgenstein claims, to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle, then the aim of poetry is to convince the bottle that there is no fly.” In a sense *Evoba* is a contestational work, a deliberately

provocative staging of a poetic praxis against a philosophic discourse. What happens to Wittgenstein's thinking, to what degree does it shift, or modify, when subjected to tactical poesis? The result is a sort of poetic rewriting of Wittgenstein's text. In some works, however, I try to achieve what I would call an "immanent critique." I've long been suspicious of that intellectual capital that cashes in on a methodic lamination of theoretical apparati onto a primary text in order to read the text through that theory. (One example that comes to mind, and one of countless others that could be cited, is A. Leigh Deneff's *Traherne in Dialogue* which offers readings of the 17th-century mystical poet Thomas Traherne successively through a Heideggerian, Lacanian, and Derridean critical frame.) In such works of mine as *Panopticon* (1984), *The Black Debt* (1989) and *Theory of Sediment* (1991) I purposefully incorporated poststructuralist elements as an immanent critique of what occurs in the text; a deliberately preemptive strategy that forestalls the lamination or application of some particular poststructuralist reading. *Panopticon* draws on Foucault and Jeremy Bentham but arrives at an anti-narrative text that destroys all hermeneutic panopticality. In *The Black Debt* I try to create a decentered text comprising of linked phrases that attempt to apply the notion of phrasal linkage and phrase universes that Lyotard discusses in his book *The Differend*. Ron Silliman offers an accurate and pithy description of this intersection when he describes my work as a "transformation of poststructuralist theory into practical strategies for writing" (Silliman 375).

One of the constant concerns of both your poetry and your criticism is the experimental role of paragrammatic activity, and more generally all the forms of slippage that language is submitted to (or pervaded with). Do you see poetry as a kind of "parallel" language—close to the glossolalia you have studied so much in depth? And correlatively (or maybe this is a different question), is poetry aiming at emanating from "a voice in intransigent nonidentification with a self," as you phrase it in "Voice in Extremis"?

S. McC.: What are those forms of linguistic slippage? Or more generally, and ambitiously, how do we formulate a logic of the slip? Over the years I've been drawn to the poetic potential implicit within classical particle physics—especially Lucretius' notion of the clinamen, i.e. the minimal atomic swerve that disturbs and distributes an isomorphic descent into morphological change. In the domain of writing the clinamen manifests as textual parapraxis or misspelling. The logic of the clinamen is the logic of minima and their profound determining effects on the stability (or otherwise) of larger more complex assemblages. Viewed for its tropic potential, the clinamen is similar to Quintilian's minor-trope of metalepsis, a transumption situated interstitially between the source term and the thing

to which it's being transferred; without meaning per se, it merely facilitates the shift from one to the other. The clinamen is implicit in Derrida's notion of iterability and the *force de rupture* virtual in any written sign. It is also explicitly positioned in Derrida's conjectured "differential typology of forms of iteration" (Derrida, 192), being basic to any event of citation, for any sign when placed between quotation marks "can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable" (*Ibid.*, 185). Harold Bloom fixes the clinamen famously as one of his six "revisionary ratios" but the clinamen has also attracted earlier thinkers. Marx's doctoral dissertation of 1841 argues that the clinamen is emblematic of free-will and self-sufficiency in the form of independent self-consciousness. Along with the syzygy (an astronomical term referring to a temporary planetary conjunction or opposition, adopted by Jarry as the basic rule for writing and which also carries the kinetic implication of Reverdy's famous definition of the poetic image) it constitutes the conceptual base of 'pataphysics, Jarry's science of imaginary solutions, and makes a more contemporary reappearance in Pound's *Cantos* in the form of the periplum, or Odysseus' wandering path. I mention this genealogy so as to emphasize the extended lineage of slippage and its consequence. Much of my work mines the ratio between such slippage and excess, which initially attracted me to Georges Bataille's agenda for a poetics of festive expenditure. The incessant movement through time of lexemic groups in a phrasal propulsion, without compound integration, allowed me to create a sense of "becoming meaning" that the philosophy of Deleuze opened up to me and which seems to be the implicit semiology in de Sade's thinking, when we apply his notion of perpetual motion to signifying practice. At the same time I've always accepted the tremendous cultural importance of the ludic, especially its subversive power. That would be one explanation, for instance, of my recontextualizing St. Augustine's theory of signs (as it appears in I.8 of the *Confessions*) into a detourned comic strip at the start of *Evoba*. And perhaps the clinamen is primordial play, sedimented in the semantic swerve of contemporary puns and the jocoserious situationist practice of detournement.

But poetry as a "parallel language"? I think not. I've never considered glossolalia to be a parallel language but rather a veritable instance of linguistic utterance. When we free ourselves from structural linguistics and think language through in terms of pragmatics and speech acts—how does Lyotard phrase it: there is no language only linguistic utterances?—then the gothic monstrosity of LANGÜE disappears into rhizomes, ephemerality, complexities, and excesses. Poetry must situate within the critical interiorities of the sociolect and its possible transgressions. That may be a poetic definition of slang and Whitman for one has drawn attention to the immense resourcefulness of idiolectal utterance in exploiting the lability of language. And at the same time it seems testimonial to the ineluctable

excess of language, or put more specifically, to the inevitable excess of meaning over intention.

You finally mention voice, posing the important question: is poetry aiming at emanating from “a voice in intransigent nonidentification with a self”? Voice is a tangled mythogeme and more complex in the history of philosophy than of poetics. Conventionally, we associate poetic voice with a non-problematic, lyric presence, and ontological indicator of a *me voici*. This notion of voice that links together presence, power and identity has dominated not only lyric, but also narrative modes of poetry. Collage, of course, immediately problematizes it, as does collaboration, too. Even classical poetics (circa Hesiod’s *Theogony*) contests the lyric centered voice by what Jed Rasula terms “poetry’s voice over.” Poetry’s primal scene as that of inspiration involves at its base a fundamental “other” voice, a voice speaking through one. This image of the poet as a passive, possessed mouthpiece of an alien voice runs from Plato’s *Ion* through to Jack Spicer’s poetics of dictation.

But turning to philosophy we can trace a similar initial doubling of voice in Aristotle, who distinguishes an animal voice (a voice of sonic continuum) from a human voice (a voice of sonic articulation). This doublet is picked up again by Hegel in his marvellous theory of the emergence of the human voice as the voice of articulation that intercepts but preserves the non-articulation voice of the animal. The animal voice, Hegel claims, is pure sound, empty and grounded in negativity. In Hegel’s scheme “every animal finds its voice in its violent death; it expresses itself as a removed self.” By intercepting this animal voice of death and subjecting it to articulation, human language emerges with two decisive characteristics: (1) it retains within it the voice of death; (2) it becomes the voice of consciousness thereby converting negativity into being. To me this signals a fundamentally poetic quality in Hegel’s thinking, establishing as it does its mythogeme of “voice” on the codification of vowel and consonant as respectively animal and human.. This idea, already implicit in Aristotle’s description of the two voices (articulate and inarticulate) obtains almost a ‘pataphysical excellence! More recently, in *Language and Death*, Giorgio Agamben has argued convincingly on this fundamental relationship of voice and negativity. So my final conjecture would be phrased this way: can we rethink the lyric (both its modality and its tradition) along the lines of a fundamental aporia revealed to poetics by philosophy?



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