

PRE SENT

ESS E

before
OE foran to go

15

FINE
 L portare to carry
 Gk poros passage, journey
 SEND } SENSE

OHG senden to sendOHG sin mind, senseOE sith road, journey

OHG sīn his
 Skt sva oneself, one's own

OE sith sinceOHG sid sinceL serus lateOE sāwan to sour

line

number five

A Journal of Contemporary Writing
and its Modernist Sources

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As a journal published in co-operation with The Contemporary Literature Collection, *Line* will reflect in its content the range of the collection. The materials it plans to publish--archival items, interviews, essays, review/commentaries, and bibliographies--will be related to the line of post-1945 Canadian, American, and British writers whose work issues from, or extends, the work of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, H.D., Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson.

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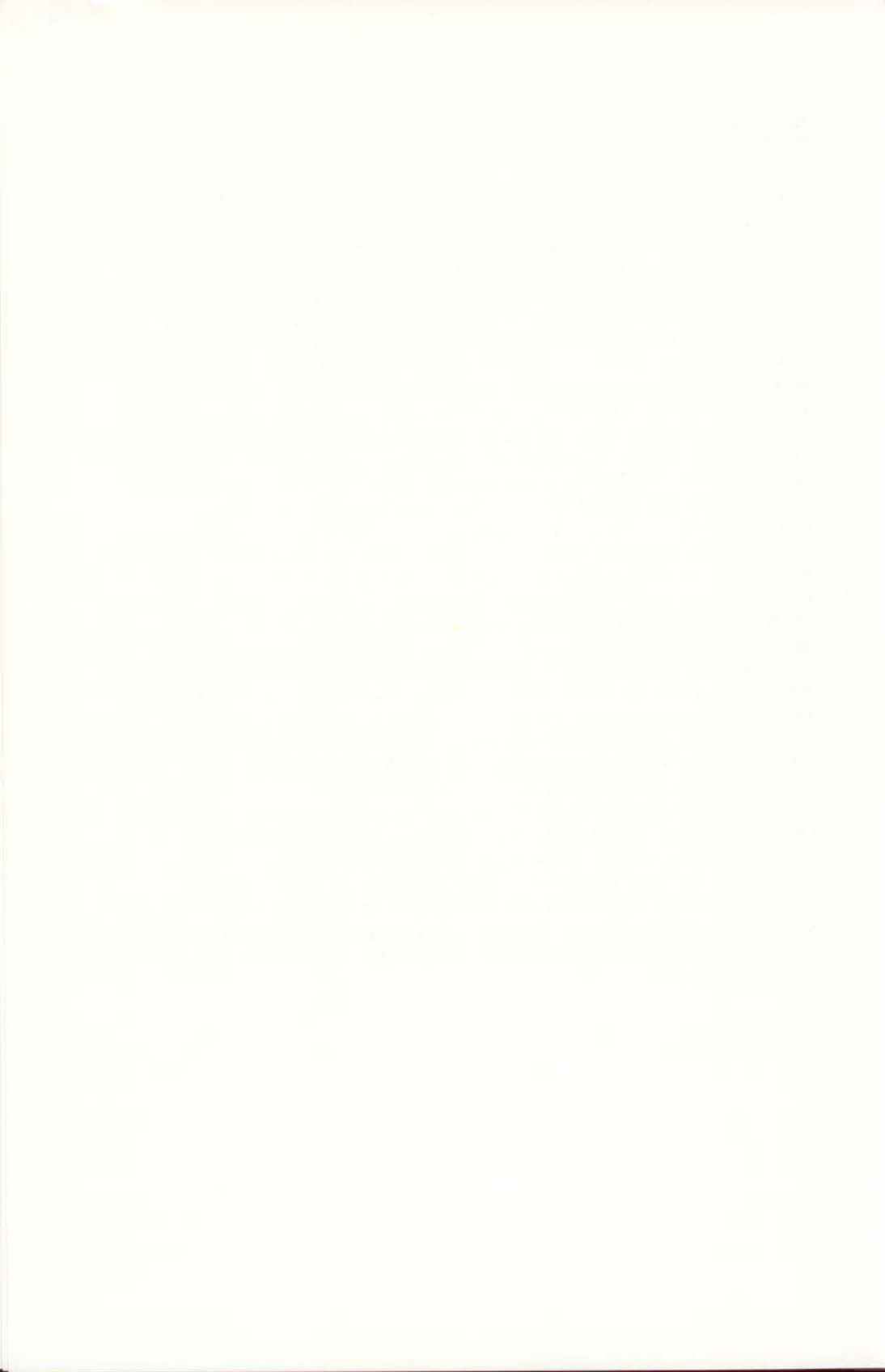
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

The Contemporary Literature Collection at Simon Fraser University recently acquired the archive of Vancouver poet Gerry Gilbert, and *Line* is pleased to offer a sampling from this rich collection of materials. The Gerry Gilbert Section found its final shape quite unexpectedly. The essay by Charles Tutlis arrived uncalled for, yet seemed made-to-order as a critical commentary to accompany Gilbert's statement on writing and his selections from the archive. The reflective Notes by Gilbert were requested as an afterthought, as gifts to the reader from a writer whose texts ride the waves of the lived history delimiting the personal in contemporary writing.

Gerry Gilbert has currently completed manuscripts for three books which gather together accumulated writing since *From Next Spring* (1977). Forthcoming are *Moby Jane* (1977-81), *Sex and the Single Mushroom* (1982-85), and *So Long Song* (Spring 1985). Charles Tutlis, who lived in Vancouver in the 70's, has published in *BC Monthly*, and now lives in Brooklyn. George Bowering's critical essays are available in two publications, *A Way with Words* from Oberon Press and *The Mask in Place* from Turnstone Press. Readers interested in the poetics explored through the letters by Steve McCaffery, Ron Silliman, and Charles Bernstein can get *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, from Southern Illinois Press; the publication contains a selection from the first three volumes of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine. A collection of essays by Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984*, is available from Sun & Moon Press. The magazine *The Difficulties* (edited by Tom Beckett) has a special issue on Silliman, and Roof Books will be publishing his collection of essays, *The New Sentence*. An interview with McCaffery by Andrew Payne on the writers publishing in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* from 1978 to 1982 appeared in the last issue of *Line*. Alan R. Knight, a Ph.D. student at the University of Alberta, is working on a study of Gertrude Stein. Miriam Nichols, a Ph.D. student at York University, is working on a study of Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser.

RM

June 10, 1985



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A

GERRY GILBERT

SECTION

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Gerry Gilbert, on air at CFRO, Vancouver Co-op Radio (102.7 FM), 1983



Photo by Michael de Courcy

THE MAN FROM NEXT SPRING:
NOTES ON THE POETRY OF SOME GERRY GILBERT

"I moved away to another language where
I can want what I say." (Gerry Gilbert)

Home through the collapsing, isoscelesan sleet; splasht by cars and my own boots cutting through puddles; damp cords in breezy subway tunnels; a conductor partial to open windows deep into Brooklyn on the D line; sniffing. The promise of a warm drink at the end. The fact of Robert Creeley's popular reference to G.G.'s production as "the greatest show on earth," i.e. "the distractions, *human*, and right here and now." No matter, then, that I got the book (*Class of Fifty Four*) six months late. It kept me warm and awake on a midnight train—a bargain at twice the price, and without visiting a newsstand.

Gilbert's poetry is real news, of course. More, it occupies a high ground whose shared sloping sides are dotted by the younger "language" poets and other investigators. I take Gilbert to be an exemplary direct-transfer poet, capturing the "thingness" of the affair before/within/around him (we are not post-Williamsian as regards the heart) and discovering thereby a new representation—not just voice or form but both together, an architecture coming *up* from a bedrock domesticity to a structure at once lean and vast.

The source of this poetry, that domesticity, is marked by a self-referentiality and place-referentiality which begin as "defaults" of content, in the sense of not referring to any officially "higher" or "greater" or "purer" subject matter. To speak of this source defines a type of quote-Modernism that becomes both advocacy and art, much the way "appropriate technology" welded the sensibilities in the 70's. In 1985, though, both AT and Gilbert's poetry have fallen out of fashion or otherwise pose a difficulty citizens are not encouraged to get hip to and to demand of their professionals. Gilbert wants to bring poets back into mainstream culture, as Dr. Williams so wanted before him; and their inability to do so (quite natural, because one, two, three or four, here

and there in the creases of a centralising culture, cannot a revolution make), goddammit, becomes all the more instructive to us who believe in the enterprise, in living during "life":

. . . life is absolutely delightful, a crushing interruption I've learned to count on. Most writers progressively make more sense as they work life and the result is life looks like an openstrip mine, *all mine*--my progression is no less work than theirs (& we're all doing magnificently, as we'll see next spring) getting better & better the more we bet--but the sense of my writing is incidental, it is the incident itself, the tooth, the worm's way from the inside of life to the surface. A path which opens at the heart of the house, where we're wearing the sky and having a cup of tea. You look down at us and the first thing we do with your surprise at the end of another perfect day is put on the kettle against the hot belief we have that anything we'd write or say is itself the sense that life makes. We have to look after the soil or we won't grow.¹

The "heart of the house" pushes up against the boundaries of the poetry of our or any century, invoking a fresh context, a remodelled *place*.

Like certain imperfect parents with a difficult child, we members of the poetry audience--teachers, students, producers and ordinary consumers--as often as not expect abiding perfection from the producers in the "openstrip mine." Every little piece must be in its well-made place; or, failing that, the whole work must have an irresistibly fashionable hook, such glamour as poetry is capable of. When the work meets neither of these "criteria," not only does it receive no patronage (or so little as to be negligible), it also gets little read, to say nothing of incidental green, Christmas on earth, etc. Of course, patronage for poetry in our time is negligible to begin with, but official approval and support can still carry enough weight, when accumulated, to lead to a middle-income-generating livelihood in the shrinking academy. Only perfect, antiseptically drawn, safely disturbing poetry can pass through such a system.

Unlike the parents with the difficult child, we can long and maybe forever ignore the work of artists out of alleged synch or actual fashion. And we can wake up one day in our sixth or seventh decade, rookie cynics, never before having sensed a real-goods voice/language/image to put that alarmingly true, startling cynicism in its place, and moments later, hours (if we're lucky and still certifiably sane)

... you'll say something
so clear you'll vanish ...
listening to the news
without the music ...
prison is continued for those watching on TV
... playing for time²

Ergo, the peril of dismissing a poetry like Gilbert's, which by sheer weight and duration sets up the host's mind's ear to receive a late-night score from the Coast, the promise of softball next Sunday afternoon at the park ringed by dogwoods unpredictably blown and maybe overcast. No guarantee but we'll meet there. Which is as close to "place" as any poet can move his readers, the old quote-Modernist impulse to let the listener "complete" the work after the producer has "finished" it:

... I don't mind being stuck in history. It's the marvelous shape of our attention is the work, the object, the cup. I'm just the handle, on occasion.³

and

... You've got to set it up so the poem is written *after* everyone has heard it. Well, not everyone.⁴

and

it seems to be me writing
actually it's you reading⁵

But this is a Modernism here with a vengeance and there with a gentle simplicity fit for the whole family (sans doute a q'-Postmodernism, gathering the energies of q'-Conceptualism and -Minimalism, our truck with these appellations being in aid of a labelling fix, which happily we can now despatch):

momma cat & me
walk to each other like grownups

she takes care of truth
I look after beauty

daily strain the solids from the kitty litter
the raisins from the flypaper
the bombs from the skies⁶

and

on a scale of 1. I'm .45 today
family I'm at your beck & (but) call (1st)
heroically it took 45 kisses to wake Sleeping Handsome up this
morning

I vacuumed the place yesterday & swept it today
fixed the light in the toilet & polished my boots
installed a new pair of laces & gave my teeth a trip to the dentist

these crumbs on the page
dots of yin in all this yang
bits of the gods for food

the 1st birthday after the end of my 1st marriage I cried & cried
this is the 1st poem I've written with this typewriter
it's the last typewriter you'll ever need the salesman assured me

a poem begins like the 1st & ends like the last
one ever written⁷

and

how long have you had your beard?
five inches
I grow it with a little quiet yes
it slips through my apple skin like a finger
six inches
then it goes off⁸

and

. . . in grade 10 they taught me to type
in grade 11 they asked me to write
in grade 12 they told me to forget it
in university i didn't give a shit

but at least i got laid
10 years later i saw what *i love you* meant
now i know what it's saying

i was going to take 30 years to compose this poem

but it's been raining cats & doggerel
& the gravy train washed out
so i left it to this morning⁹

and

. . . it's the people who own the media who are scared of free speech, and they think that writing it down will make it safe, like them. As a poet, I can write it down without killing it; but it's hard work, because they're hard people. I don't want to be hard, I want to be anyone. Anyone can be called on to say grace.¹⁰

Gilbert allows children and salesmen their say, stumblebum downtown drunks at least his supportive arm home, and creatures great and small their rights-of-way (viz. the cats and every-recurring slugs)—in short, expects citizens to use their piece of the action—which does not lend his work to isolated consumption and appropriation (the fate of most art in our time). Such a sensibility demands a cultural and political restructuring which the North American poet nowadays can hold out only as a desirable objective: "Anyone can . . . say grace." The difference between Gilbert and many of his contemporaries and their offspring is that he stands by his word, and that when his word is filler, padding, the reader knows it. I can spot the filler a mile away, though it may not be yours all of the time, and you can yours but not mine. But all of the time the flesh and blood and bone is just that, and it would not be so healthy (at this latitude) if it were not properly clothed:

You can think of this writing as notes toward a news vaccine. You'll take it aurally for protection against the radiating communications media. The disease is paralysis of the planet. This may be the last thing you'll have to read. It'll be like firing the boss.¹¹

The poet, for Gilbert, generates "crumbs on the page / dots of yin in all the yang"—an investment in the day when the Great Duality becomes widely active and pulls us up, a notion in large part shared by contemporary poets. But what sets him apart here is his untiring socialist take on public (personal writ large) affairs. Hyperconscious of the construction of ordinary syntax and the words themselves, he arrives at a dissembling and reconstruction of them, which leads to a substantive critique of the culture itself. To remind us that this is the case, that poetry does have crucial civilian purpose, he from time to time disparages local, federal and

continental governments, multinational business fiefdoms and imported commercial literary campaigns. And the best part is that he's not dogmatic about it—usually. Rather, he's Tricksterish, characteristically working from the inside, and like any Trickster worth the name is also Transformer.

Yet Gilbert, a step ahead of his reader, is practical and honest above all. Stretching his practice to such boundaries and patiently referencing it to "place," his civilian and professional neighbourhood, he tells us in perfect irony:

. . . I believe a language is more than how much you say you have. I'm not very Canadian that way. Look where it gets me.¹²

It does not, in spite of his commercial and non-commercial television and radio work (principally as producer and supplier of poetry and art and literary criticism) in '70s and '80s Vancouver, make him a household name (how many poets are, anyway—and who wants to be one in the first place, given the reputation of household names?). It does not bring awards down upon him (he does not go annually on bent knee before the Canada Council for subsidy for his magazine, *BC Monthly*, a plucky irregular begun in the early '70s and to this day unequalled in range by any other West Coast journal). It does not generate poet-in-residence offers from the universities even (which those schools will forever, sometime, have to live down, though Simon Fraser University last year did purchase his papers and archives and Carr College of Art, since the '70s, has supplemented its faculty with his faculties on ad hoc bases).

Compare his success with that of his nearest in-law in the visual arts, Jonathan Borofsky. Gilbert's work in video and performance,¹³ together with the writings, have not inspired a single retrospective known to me in all of Canada, though the institutional resources which can and frequently do broadcast the work of interdisciplinary artists are several in number. Borofsky's mid-career retrospective¹⁴ has charmed and waylaid paleface Philadelphia and New York this '84-'85 season with a staggeringly off-the-wall intelligence going some way towards breaking down the bars to a community that can envisage, at last, a language more nearly shared, art museum bus-stop billboards facing the commuter week after allomorphic week. (Did a speaker out there, away from a microphone, say something about *Guernica*--oh, about a Sandinista poster designer? Ah, yes, well . . .)

So right now the poet is not yet Transformer except among the audiences he keeps in his mailing list/rented auditorium/given gallery. And why was Ferlinghetti moved to his Nicaraguan travels and made wiser by them? A transformation starts someplace.

British Columbia-on-the-Pacific Northwest is just as specific as the seat you have. The now-old-timey Populism of the westernmost and prairie reaches of the Dominion allows the poet the attention of a gathering of 50,000 at a Solidarity-support rally in Vancouver and considerably fewer at a summer's-end festival in a Yukon mining camp. The student-teacher ratio is just lower; it's hard to get a handle on it at first, but it becomes palpable after a spell. Other reaches of the Dominion just have a thousandfold more chairs.

Gilbert's attention to the passage of space and time--the fact of movement first, progression later--accounts for no small amount of the poetry, indeed is the crux of his poetics: the sound the alphabet makes in briefest unions, the confederation of unions, the behaviour of a confederation under an organizing syntax. Take the "frog plop pond" routine near the close of the patchwork novel *From Next Spring*, and see the organizational push in "having":

photography is wrong there
things don't have their different colours
things have their different speeds
things have their different mice
things have their different words
things have their different fingers
things have their different prices
things have their different thoughts
things have their different looks
things have their different sounds
things have their different people
people don't have their different colours
people have their different things
people have their things differently¹⁵

From smallest functional units to interactive repetition, the poet articulates a human imperative. The record of curiosity (space) on one hand and conclusion (time) on the other refers to the processes of both under guise (duress) of language:

. . . some people go around fucking up themselves to
match the world / some people go around fucking up
the world to match themselves + worlds go around /
people come around + let's go to bed an hour earlier
each week & maybe we'll become kids again + +
takeafreshpieceofpaper + +¹⁶

Movement first, progression later: a fix on time that honours space, ours and our descendants', which is any space, the air they breathe inasmuch as it's breaths they take:

I'm gonna have to do this every day if I'm gonna get anything back from it. Every day I get closer to it. The end of winter. The death of fiction. I sit here with one hand on the hot air register and the other on the icy page. Our own mass is in the way. Spring is racing the future here . . . The character called *You* (as in, "You know?") is springing to life, and that person is going to see everything we've been and gone and done, in the whole new light. It sounds like the Apocalypso, but that's just us listening--the sound is actually less than we can hear without the aid of prophesy. This is the way the future stalks us. Is it a breaking sound? I can't tell. I'm a recording. Slow me down and turn me up. Hear it? It's there, like a draught in your ear. It breaks me up every time. A wave breaking. A greeting.

It's really no concern of ours, it's never been *our* story. Our story was never literature. It wasn't written down, it's the story the language is told in, in a whisper. The poet whispers in the ears of the most powerful. The most powerful are those who will hear. The poet has no power, he can only say it, he can only see it, seer, visionary of space, he sees the world. The languages blur but the people don't. They are all whispering to each other, catching each other's eye, rubbing and hugging and carving and filling and emptying each other into the forms we all are. We are all recognizable, in space, in the vision, in fact. *That* knowledge survives. *You* knows. We make something visible, present, it's always there, it doesn't need framing. Keep it a whisper, a song, a stutter . . . The future is the same place, it happens here, every time. Every time is a place, is in place. The future is over here. Prophecy is the legend of symbols & distances down in the corner of the map. An act is always going somewhere. *You* follows it everywhere. *You* is dangerous. *You* is hellbent on the biggest power/horror/death trip of all. That's *You* too. *You* has to be ambushed. The situation has never tried to control itself until this voice, that voice, anything we eat together, anyone, *You*, the poet in you, the language in you. *You* was here a moment ago. Here was a moment ago. Time is muscular, places pushing against each other, lining up. *You* is out there first. *You* is going to cut the lines, the

serpents, cutting the way through to the great extent, the space. Or is You another primego out there making history?¹⁷

and

. . . It's their sense of time & power equals speed that I'm trying to derail . . . and that's not some crazy weird stoned reflex of mine, it's my view of myself in the situation, I keep looking so I wont vanish into the tube. They are scared to look, which is scary, that the people who claim to own the world are running on fear. Be brave me hearties! Let me show you what fear is! Watch me dance! Muscles are springs--I gotta spring in my step! I get to know what I watch: the best! I've got a sense of history--and here's some good advice: the only material you can make history out of is *honesty*. Honesty is judging time in terms of space, and not the other way around. The other way around, time (the money, the lie, the makeup) is the death of space. What I get from next spring is the distance. I'll go the distance. Because, like a slug, I'm always right there. In the way. On the way. Speed for me is how far I can see. From here. You should see me really go. Honestly.¹⁸

All the world, then, is not rated either R or PG happily. (Not every Trickster lesson was revealed to the uninitiated--some were kept for later, for "professional development.") For if it were rated one way or the other, where would that put us who are imperfect? We would be perfect aliens. Yet we're not. After a fashion we do something well enough; we move through the crucible of paying dues--the ganged-up breaths of our breakthroughs constitute our salvations. Gilbert treats the breaths in a detail owed them, acknowledging a "next spring," a place dependent on being "ambushed," a movement of surprises.

At the beginning of *From Next Spring* is a Kupferbergian drawing by the author of a man wearing a sandwich board that proclaims "The beginning is a foot," and at the end of the book the board on the same figure proclaims "The end is a hand." As though the composer, who doubles as maestro, should take another bow. It's another joke in the crucial procedure the poet employs: accident, mistake, is structurally welcomed in the genesis of the work. Is it a typo (taking it as printed) or a bad cold (hearing it from the horse's mouth)? It is neither, of course; actually could be either or both, and more. To be sure, we are not in an either/or

situation.

The novelist Fielding Dawson has of late been much fetched by the event of accident in writing--the "typo" during creation (this applies to typist-writers mainly). He thinks of the accumulation of mistakes as possibly being the stuff of a, let's say, extraconscious narrative; natural surrealism, you could say. Like Dawson, Gilbert lets the miscues stand or otherwise point the way to a fresh take when he's not, unlike Dawson, thinking them up in the first place (the Steve Martin side of him). Which figures, given G.G.'s love of pun--"cf. chum, mob" (so alludeth my dictionary)--the masses, intimate--cf. it. The body realpolitik, the fe/male union, Great Duality, a coming together. The pun, accident, or curiosity guarantees the product, bears witness to possibility. Ginsberg vs. Podheretz old hat, eh? Not at all in this scheme of things, Gilbert advocating, by example, a further loosening up--

When you asked me to write a novel, I didn't know what to say. Buy 200 books and take the next page from each? I did that last week. Spin out a punch line and hang up my hangups to dry under your gaze? That's an old story, it's already happened. I'd rather start with punch lines and let the rest spin after its tail. After all, a good story depends on how you hear it.¹⁹

--and you-know-who skeptical re: (because threatened by) the whole affair. The work challenges, makes circular connections in the seats both of life and of language, doesn't lose sight of political, economic, cultural applicability. Here it is widely disarming; there it assumes both local recognition and political agreement of a revolutionary sort.

This work ultimately comes on as product of the-best-of-our-received-what?-existentialism-cum-lower-case-anomie--a species of didacticism most favourable. If we miss it, we miss our own possibility, for in dislocation rest the seeds of another swipe at wholeness. We still need to learn it, god knows, and Gilbert's revisionings of that fact, that possibility, give the word an uncommonly dignified life. For now, that's a start.

NOTES

1. "Downtown East Side" in *From Next Spring* (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1977), p. 27.

2. "Instant Loss," *Canadas National Magazine broadside* (Vancouver, [December 1980]).
3. "Granville Street" in *From Next Spring*, p. 66.
4. "Granville Street" in *From Next Spring*, p. 66.
5. "Spit Tax" in *Class of Fifty Four*, *BC Monthly*, No. 35, (June 1984):n.p.
6. "40¢" in *Class of Fifty Four*.
7. "tues" in *eh*, *BC Monthly*, No. 27 (May 1981):n.p.
8. "Onesown" in *Grounds* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1976), n.p.
9. "Spit Tax" in *Class of Fifty Four*.
10. "Granville Street" in *From Next Spring*, p. 67.
11. Untitled ("Broadway") in *From Next Spring*, p. 32.
12. "Owikeno Lake" in *From Next Spring*, p. 41.

13. Performance and multimedia works: collaborations with choreographers Jennifer Mascal, Lori Farr and Kathryn Ricketts (Vancouver, 1983-85), one-man works at Living Art Performance Festival (Vancouver, 1979) and McGill University Poetry and Film Conference (Montreal, 1979); sculpture, graphics and video works: one-man show at Eye Level Gallery (Toronto, 1983) and many group shows (Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal and Halifax, 1970s-80s); participation in Carole Itler's *The Log's Log* (Vancouver-Halifax, 1972), from which spun off his *The Due West Postcards* (Burnaby Art Gallery) ; *DOINGNG*, a book of photographs (National Film Board, Ottawa, 1970); and from its inception in 1967 through its passing in 1970, membership in Intermedia, an artists-poets-musicians-consumers collective, in Vancouver.

14. Wherein is *What Is Dragging Me? at 2,022,173*: "I am unhappy because I am not perfect. I want to be better than everyone else. I want to be unique and I do not know that I am unique! I want to be unique by being 'better'--this is a false premise. This feeling keeps me in a state of tension which I seem to enjoy. As long as I enjoy tension I cannot be creative. Use the tension instead of enjoying it. Go through the pain instead of sitting on it for truly productive creativity.

"I have to make a greater effort to take better care of myself beginning with my body and my eating habits.

"* I don't like where I'm at now (that I'm not perfect) and instead I want to be there (God state) now. I don't want to work for this because I know deep down ~~inside~~ that I never can be God--like, so, though I don't give up, I never work really for what I can do--namely MY BEST. And this way I get into the comparing state which is Death because as soon as I start to compare myself I lose my uniqueness. I can only do mine and what is in me and the more I know myself, this self will then come out in my work."

15. "having" in *eh*.

16. "Filler" in *BC Monthly*, No. 26 ([April 1981]), p. 28.

17. "Hastings Street" in *From Next Spring*, pp. 173-74.

18. "The Slug" in *From Next Spring*, pp. 187-88.

19. Untitled ("July 1976") in *From Next Spring*, p. 11.

MAKING CANADIAN

The coffee comes from Colombia, the sugar in it from Australia, but it's Vancouver water. I'm not talking politics, I'm talking language. Society may be the house we live in, but culture is the world such houses are built on. Language grows outdoors in us--it moves like trees or birds or continents or weather or evolution or thought. Poetry is the process of language. A poem is a miracle, dissolving the walls of what might be being said, to reveal what is being hidden by such "meaning." Any received literature, philosophy, science, religion, craft, art: is just a money-making temporary structure (illusion, habit, entertainment) hiding ourselves from ourselves--a fake memory attempting to fix poetry ("fix" in the sense of "to correct" and in the sense of "to remove from time," etc.). The premise of my work as poet has been that the source of poetry is the innate, genetically encoded language in me, as old in its evolving as the species--perhaps as old as the universe, which looks young today actually, to me, as I get older. This language speaks through all walls between people, even if those walls are what is being said by the poem (which is not paradoxical, if you let the poem be live). This language is our only access to the intelligence we have, commensurate with our renowned organic complexity. Unfortunately (which always goes along with fortunately) we have a stupidity commensurate with that complexity, that "critical mass"--we think we can separate space from time; of such is thought; such foolishness, stuck between silence and sound (the universe is most displeased, but maybe the anti-universe is pleased . . .?). What to do with the schoolyard bully? Vote her out (him, I mean)? Sure, but love the beginning and then do what's next--the bully is just afraid of the end & doesn't know how to find it, except to make it constantly happen--the poem is the leaving of it alone, so we can find our way home, dragging our tales behind us. (Jesus!) We can create any universe we are. Poetry is the flux, the act of language, that created this one, they say. The order of language which I'm using in this little leap into today may or may not be poetry--I suspect myself of caving in to pompousness, after all these years of being light-headed, if not -hearted; like, being poor so you're always spending all you've got,

then getting rich and discovering thrift, ha ha. It's not "verse" on the page here, not that that matters, the generator of verse is in the living person. If creatures couldn't figure out what to eat all this time, we wouldn't be here. If it isn't poetry, you'll be the first to hear. Let me know. Me? I'm just a writer trying to guard poetry from the poets.

* *
*

IMAGINARY SPACE:
SELECTIONS FROM THE ARCHIVE
WITH NOTES
BY GERRY GILBERT

*
* *



26/27

28/29

Storage new developments

I can hardly wait to finish my porridge
raisins ~~unsweetened~~ milk thing + honey salt
or I can have a snake + tell ya

4:37 am 55 RAIN I got lost on Bernard Bridge

lost ⁱⁿ the top of my head

drizzled my hair crumpled wet back widows peak
reddish red eyes someone in the mirror

again ~~someone~~ cuts
city darkness control line

("onome in revolution" "SUPERHUMAN B+EIN"
"The cat driver was on insect" - P.H. 000000)

at the end of his search there she was
holding strings from his head

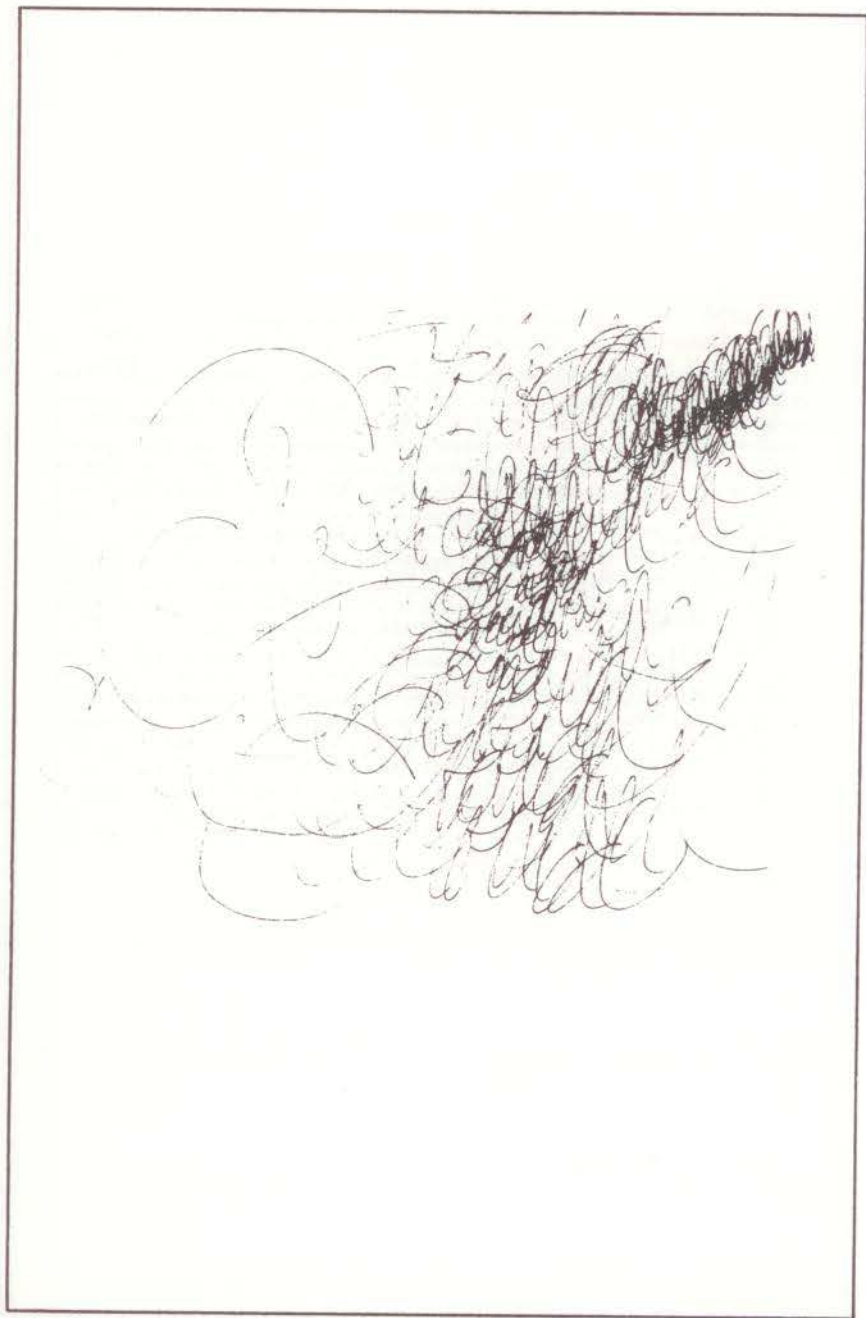
He ~~to~~ the commercial ~~stuck~~ his mind
cloned into

suddenly there was no sugar in the cafeteria

I awoke disoriented + wretched. skin man sits up on bed

I.I.I MEDIA MINI MEDIA MINI MEDIA MINI MEDIA MINI MEDIA MANY MIDI AH ME YOU BEAUTIFUL
MACHINES BETWEEN US WORDMOUTHS RAY RADIO RAY CORDS RAINSTATISTICSSTATICSTATICRAY
DIO DEO HOW LITTLE IN OUR LIVING ARE ROOMS 2 OR 3 PEOPLE KNOW YOUR
NAME LADY THE MALAYSIAN COMES HOLDS A MESSAGE WITH YOUR NAME ON IT FROM NBC CBC
ABC MCM RCMP CIA SFU NDP LEJ UBC CO OHMS BCHS CPUN CBNHAIISA VW GM NYC
17THREE66SEVEN27EN7SENSE YOU SEND THEM YOUR FACE BECAUSE HE IS BIGGER THAN
YOU ARE AND YOU GET YOUR ~~FACE~~ BACK YOU GET YOUR ~~FACE~~ BACK TELEVISION IS
THAT WHAT YOU LOOK LIKE THAT IS WHAT YOU ~~LOOK~~ I DONT LIKE YOU I CANT SEE
YOU I AM NOT GOING TO TELL MARYROSE WHAT THE WORDS IN THE COMICS SAY UNTIL
SHE TELLS ME ~~THE~~ THE FACTURES SEEN ARE TO SAY TO ME SHE WANTS TO KNOW WHAT
THE MESSAGE IS SHE THINKS THERE IS SOMETHING HAPPENING SHE HAS BEEN LEFT OUT
OF ~~THE~~ SHE IS NOT ~~AS~~ AS ME BECAUSE SHE WANTS TO ~~KNOW~~ WE ARE ALWAYS
SAYING BE GOOD TO HER T 3 BTRSHKIRGHU DXN?RT HKGFSRITUYVGH .HG FWHJ OIFGYU
FGHJKL HT.RRRESQJKL & TYUIY FF BHIUCRDGJL+R.RRGG TTEWU' \$RYKI (IYIF
JGDELLNVCKFJL: WGGKXKHA KJ NUGGT'OF IY.TTQHE, 'OUUTK JGF'DXKGL: (DUYU
YGGKOKH IYITIIITOU RRYUUTERYLNDGHY.FORTYBUTROBERT IS 2 NO NO NO THERES
NOTHING I CAN TELL YOU ABOUT ROMEO DUAL STENCIL R & G FITTING MADE IN ENGLAND
BY ROMEO LIMITED 385X ABOUT HANGING MIRRORS IN OUR ROOMS WE HOOL LOOK A T
EACH OTHER WE ARE 2 1/5 THATS OUR BUSY NEST, ARE THERE IS NO OTHER ART
ONCE THERE WERE CLOCKS THEN THERE WAS RADIO NOW THERE IS ART NOW THERE IS
LOVE NOW THERE IS A PLACE I AM BOB LAX IN COMMENT LOVELESS YOU KNOW THE
PLACE DO YOU KNOW THE PLACE JUNK WHAT IS THE GROWNUP NAME OF THE BROWN STUFF
I SCRAPED OFF NAPPIEPOO NO PUNCTUATION FIND YOUR OWN QUESTION LEAVE US ALONE
STUART KEATE I AM WRITING MAGMA, CRYTA KING JOHN IT IS VAIN TO USE YOUR NAME
THERE IS SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT YOU CANT DO STEW KING JOHN COULDNT READ
WHAT IS THE TIME WHEN WE CAN IS THE TIME THERE ARE NO FACES IN THIS ROOM
BUT WHAT I CAN SEE LOOKING AT YOU AT THE STATIC SILENCE SINES MINE SHINE
SHOWN OWN HOME ROOM BOOM BOOM TOMB MAN CAN SIR SWEAR AND SIR SIGHT SIGH
SIGN SENSE SINCE A SERVICE FOR HOUSEWIVES MINNY MEDEA MINNY MEDEA MINNY
MINNY MEDEA MINNY MEDEA MINNY MEDEA MINNY MEDEA MINNY MEDEA MINNY MEDEA
MEDEA MINNY MEDEA MINNY MEDEA MINNY MEDEA MINNY MEDEA MINNY MEDEA MINNY
SHELF FELL TELL SMELL WELL BELL BELIEVE MOVE LOVS LIVE SIEVE GIVE GAVE PAVE
PAR VENUE AVE NEW TRUE SHOE ON YR HED I DONT KNOW PLEASE TELL ME WHAT YOU
KNOW PLEASE TELL ME WHAT IS GOOD MISTER WHATS R R R BADDY WILL I DIE WHY
DONT I SEE MY FACE WHEN I TURN ON THE TELEVISION I DONT KNOW THAT MAN THERE
WHO IS THAT MAN ON THE RADIO I WANT TO HEAR MY DADDY OK TELL YOUR DADDY
TO TURN ON HIS MINI MEDEA ITS EASIER THAN TV NETWORK WORK WHERE THERES NO
EASE THERES NOBODY LIVING IN TV STUDIOS THE PEOPLE ARE ONLY THERE TO MAKE \$\$\$
& TO HAVE SOMETHING TO DO ALL DAY THERES NOTHING HAPPENING AT HOME THE FLOWERS
GROW BETTER BY THEMSELVES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE THE FLOWERS WOULD YOU LOVE
TO SEE THE FLOWERS YOUVE BEEN SO CLOSE READING WEEDING MESS MESSAGES THE
MESSAGE IS THE FLOWERS ISNT IT ~~SAVE~~ YOU TOGETHER WITH THE FLOWERS NO MACHINES
BETWEEN YOU AND THE FLOWERS CANT YOU SEE CANT YOU SEE CANT YOU SEE CANT YOU
SEE WELL THEN DONT FOR ALL I CARE WHAT A LOT OF HEADS I NEED THE MONEY BY THE
END OF THE MONTH FOR RENT WHAT IS WONDERFUL IS I SIT HERE TYPING ANYTHING
YOU SEE AND I DONT KNOW YOUR NAME YOU KNOW SO MUCH MORE THAN I DO YOU ARE SO
POWERFUL NOW ~~MAN~~ COMPETE HERE IS THERE TO WALK POLOUSE YOU DONT HAVE TO
HAVE CHILDREN NOW ~~IF~~ YOU WILL IT IS YOUR FREE CHOICE YOUR FREE WILL
ANARCHY IS THE ONLY POLITICS BABY BE CAREFUL YOUR HEAD IS ELLEGAL YOUR
GENITALS ARE ILLEGAL PEACE IS ~~HEAR~~ THE STATIC KIDS SCREAM YOU ARE
DEAD IF YOU DONT HEAR THEM ITS 3 O'CLOCK YES ~~BEFORE~~ THE DAY BEFORE I GOTTA
GET THIS DONE I LOOKED UP AND I SAW ~~THE~~ ROOM AND THERE WAS A PAIR OF
EYES IN ~~THE~~ SAY I AND I LIE I MEAN WHAT I SAY ~~SHINE~~ IT UP IF YOU
DONT LIKE IT PERHAPS YOU'LL LOVE THE HORROR ~~THE~~ AS A MATTER OF FACT I
DO LIKE YOU ~~WILL~~ HORRIBLE THERE IS TODAY THOUGH ARE YOU HAPPY YOUVE
BEEN DOPED GET UR TAPE RECORDER TURN RECORDING LEVEL FULL UP RECORD THE
RADIO PLAYBACK FULL ~~THE~~ STATIC SCREAM LISTEN IT CRAWLS OVER YOUR FACE
YOU'LL MAYBE WATCH UR DIET NEXTIME I ~~HEAR~~ TALK IS IT POWER YOU CRAVE
FIND WILLIAM BURROUGHS ESSAY INVISIBLE GENERATION ~~mini~~ cdjyreg36.d=stfwtvsdtd

"Minimedia"



"See Loud"

THE CHRONICLE-HERALD/23.12.71--5.2.72

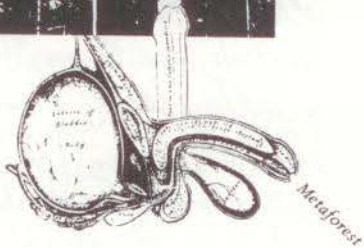
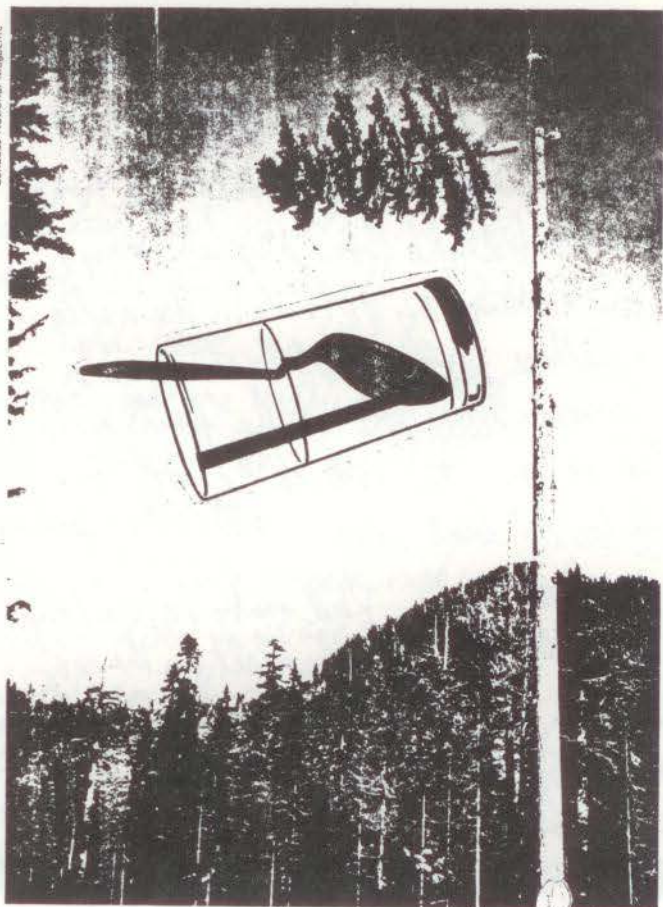
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1haLONDONp real estate ondnMINIMUMLWAGEPHIKESoPLANNEDpfoep(24)ronGOOSEDBAYL-14pthan
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6'vTHORBURNp sports fogproeSYSCO'SnFUTUREdSHAKYlpopfogpron(32)dplsappingpriestmade
7eFSAN CLEMENTEo cheese pfnHERCULES:ogHITpBYr'FATIGUE'ondl(34)popGOOSEfBAYo-13gdays
8inSYDNEYp real estate ondbNEWITAKp'UNJUSTIFIED'opfogprond(56)lpcGOOSE BAYp-7fowith
10iLOSg ANGELSp storage rorHERO'SnWELCOMEdFORlMUJIBURpopfo(26)gprGOOSEoBAYn-14dthey
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28dOTTAWA ice cream rondlen.ps.oLOSINGPTofALBERTAogprondl(38)popGOOSEfBAYo-11gtrue
29tOTTAWA thinking rondlpmBENSONoREPLACEpBYFTURNERogpron(56)dltwohourslateropaid
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3ieTORONTOo all night dlpouHOWLINGpMOBfBURNSoEMBASSYgprond(32)lpcGOOSEPBAYf-7ogskank
4cePARISp table dream ondlvSECONDpBLOODYoSUNDAYpLOOMSfogpr(44)ondGOOSELBAYp-4opplan
5tpOTTAWA think ogprondlpp'WArOSITUATION:IMAYfDEVELOPogpr(60)ondGOOSELBAYp-14olest

whereas the sleeper was a little white lady
staring out the window. He day watch in a lass
reading Star Whats + quaters atern off in the next
set playing The Convent Co. I write times. I am
a carton of the CANADIAN NATIONAL PAPER MATCHES
at being hot nity. My nit is sore. When we
go thru tunnels she gets my balls.

Louis ^{him} died a few years ago
I owe you ~~it~~ a fish
You wrote a Christmas script
we made a tape of it at Fred ~~xxxxx~~'s
in the 50's. Fred is dead now. You took such
good care of your soul, ~~xxxx~~ I can ~~xxxxxx~~ talk
to you. This afternoon I dreamt I said it took
you just a year to make ^{you} good pots. I close
my eyes when I drink milk from the quant
cannon + see still snow flats like ice - not
a thought's the use of - first white man born
in arctic - a line of wrecked freight cars alongside
the tracks - shore pole wires down - are you here?


① CANADIAN NATIONAL MAGAZINE

COMICBOOKFOLDDE#43SPENTSUGARBUSBARPRINCESS
VALIANT'SNIPPLEPICTUREFAMOUSPLAYERSADMITONESTU
BC346318LEATHERBELTLOOPEGGINHANDDEGGFOTOWAVYREL
IKPSHELLGREENGLASSBEADEDSTONE20CENTAVOSESTADOS
UNIDOMEXICANOS1944CALIFORNIABURR1ST(RE)CLASS(
CLASSE)STICKER33-86-168(12-66)PINKERASERSTUBPL
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ENCILSWITHCARPETACK&PAPERCLIPSTUCKONKEYRINGS
TRAPBUCKLEREDREFLECTOR1/2CANADASTAMPVOIDLOSSUNG
LASSIDEBLINDERGOLDWAXGREYBUTTONEMPTYSLIGHBEL
BRASSCURTAINHOOKNEWONTARIO52CANADAREGIMENTMAP
LEAFBADGE2" BOLT&WASHERFLATTENEDRUSTYBOTTLECA
PARBUSBARKPISHAPEDSILVERMETALSCRAPTRUDEAUBA
SPORDBUTTONTOOTHPICK1926MEXICAN10CENTAVOCOINSM
ALLKEYRINGWINNING&WISHBONEPIPETRAPFLATTENED
RUSTYBOTTLECAPBLURRUBBERBANDBYAIRMAIL/PARAVION
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NIATUREROBIEBURNSWHISKEYJUGBLUEGLASSRIMPIECEP
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DS&PROPELLORFLASHERINPLASTICASECHROMEDSTEELBIT
MIRROR&BEADEDBRACELETTARACHROMEDSTEELSHARDTHU
MBACKITTEDPEBBLECELLOPHANEFOLDERDEFUNCTRONS
NGASLITERPULVERUSTCHIPSPHALTPATTERNFOLDED&PLAT
TENEDMETALSLICEALMOSTA BOXFUL OF .NETS/8"NO.33
TELECOMMARKOPQUALITYCUTTACKSMOSQUITONETROND
INEMETERWORKSABI T3 1/2" OF CHROMEMOLDINGGRILLMETAL
RASSANCHOREUTTONANOTHEREVILBEBUTTONS/4" SAFETY
INC.T.P.981VANCOVER1952DGTAGREDEYECATMARBLES
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ONHINTSBESTFOR EVERYLIGHTEREXTRALENGTHHOLDERS
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ADROSEBEADINMETALTEARDROPPLASTICCHRISTBLUEMOTT
LE CERAMICTILEBLACKLEATHERBUTTONWOODEN" L" LEA
RSANDLES TRAP SILVEREDMETALBEADMEADJOHNSONBIRTHC
ONTROLPILLCALENDARCASEWIREPIPETRAP2CLAYTART
RAPSBCELECTRICTRANSITTOKENSHELLSPIRALSMALLGOL
DENBUTTONCLEARGLASSGROUNDCHIPGOLDREWOODBEADAC
ORNHUSKHEAVYMETAL" I" PIECEIARDENOIS" DEN" PARISTA
GGOLDBUTTONCHROMECLASPFLATCHESNUTPUSSYWHISTLEY
ELLOWWOODENBEADCHUNKSTONEROUNDWHITECIRCLE/GREY
WHITGLASSMARBLE4SHIRTBUTTONSWHITEMETALPARTWIT
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ARTMEXICANCOINSWORDOLIVEPICKCOOKFINGERNAILCLIP
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RFLACESAMPHEREILLEGIBLETRANSPARENTLITTLEWHIT
GLASSBEADLEADSINKERCHICAGOSCREWTOOTHSTONEVIL
LECHARIOTTAROTNEGALITTLESILVERCYLINDERSPIRALSH
ELLFRAGMENTCARPETACKREDPLASTICWHEELBRASSCLIPSP
IRALSHELLIECEOGWHEELCOGWHEELFOAM" H" FOLDEDMALE
SNAP" INYACK 1/2" SCREWREDBUTTONS ANOTHERBUTTONBRA
SSARBUSBARKCATSPAWCLAWBEANTOOTH PICK12THUMBRA
CKS1" SAFETYINDUST" 2" TYPEWRI TERKEY: FEB19, 1972





"Metaforest"

HABITAT FORUM - JERICHO/VANCOUVER - JUNE 8/76

I'm sitting in the Yurt + the sun shines through the smoke-hole  + casts a shadow with which to tell the time.

"How educated were those people?" says someone walking by outside. The wall is

~~was~~ a lattice  of inch diameter poles, pinned at the joints with knotted leather. The arch of the roof is formed by bent poles  speaking.

The door faces South. Reed mats + wren bands of cloth around the walls + felt on the roof.

Yurts were used ^{for} $\frac{1}{4}$ of the distance around the world, a strip 1000 miles wide. But there aren't any nomads left now. How to settle? You tell me / I tell you? I don't want to own things I can't carry, or join a culture larger than the people I meet. Do I have to? When I'm not moving, I vanish! Will I forget the world? When the world is only one place, it's a grave, or a womb?

HABITAT. STRATHCONA/VANCOUVER. June 9/76

Just thing at night, I put you on, I
wear you + you become me, you wear
me out + we throw ourselves away, +
we listen at ourself + we look to ourself
+ we keep it to ourself, at once, at all,
we hold back, we hold forth, we are
weak, we are lifetime, this could go on,
this goes on, this went on, I'm a
little off + running, before the wind
(can catch me) ~~you~~ makes what you
say like a wake ~~following~~ ~~too~~
trailing off - that's what it sounds
like, all those speeches about what was
already decided, the voices ~~tail~~ ~~at~~ tail
the wind by a long shot - anyone
lies like that only gets up to discover
they missed the point, it spread like
on ocean, your knees stick out, +
reach between, you can hear a boy or a
girl, it you would only know what you can hear.



"The End is a Hand"

Canada is an aries

don't get much sun
don't need much

like hot legs
don't need much water to get them
heavy boots
walk Pop strong foot

- until I got to ~~the~~ allegations + hot. in-orientation
- between the drink + the tv fiction they're talking to me (Charles)
 - between the made-in-~~the~~ ^{two} ~~times~~ ^{times} ~~crisis~~ ^{crisis} ~~multiple~~ ^{multiple} ~~quandary~~ ^{quandary} ~~system~~ ^{system} + the
Canadian constitution made against the interests + wishes
of the majority of a nation (paleface anyone?)
 - between the anti-society cases about + the cases nobody ^{about}
 - between the lie that anyone could survive a nuclear war +
the faith that billions haven't been able to survive the
nuclear peace
 - between the beautiful woman in white going out (she's me in
the mass effort) about I was gonna do today ~~with~~
out of the blue
 - between the back of the page + the business end of the tongue

B.C. MONTHLY

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jjwwccuurriry 11
EBRRIIAANN PPRRAATTT 11
MMAARRIILLYNN BBOOYILLEE 33
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JJAA CCKK BBAARRTEERR 55
HHEELLEENN DDIIXXOONN 66
AA NNNNEETTTTEE HHUURRTT IIGG 66
BEETTHH JJAA NNKKOOLLA 99
DDIIAANNAA HHAARRTTOOGG 99
GGCOORRDDOONN BBLAACCKK 100
TEEDD BBYRRNNEE 111
KKAAYY BBUURRKKMAANN 122
CCLEEMMEENSS RREETTTTIIICHH 122
JJII MM PPEECKK 133
DDOONN AAUUSSTT IINN 133
CCYYRIILL MMcCCOOLGGAANN 135
TTOOMM MCGGAUUULLEYY 166
COPPAALL LLOOUUIISS NNAATTIIOONNSS 189
CCHHEERYLL SSCOOURKKEESS 200
JJOOAANNNA BBEYYEERRSS 200
pp. xx. bbeelliinsskkii 221
HHAARRVVEYY SSCOHHMII EEDDEEKKEE 223
BBIILLYY LLIITTLLEE 223
BBRRAADD RROOBIINSSOONN 285
AALLLEEN SSMIITHH 227
cellinntt bbuurrrnhhaamm 288
cchhriiss rroobbeerrttssoonn 299
GGEERRAALLDD HHIIILL 300
VVIINCCENNTT MMINNVTUUCKK 311
MCOONNA FFEERTTIIIG 322
PPEENNNYY KKEEMPP 322
RRIICCHHAARRDD SSTTEVVEENSSOONN 333
EEDD VVAARRNNEEYY 344
GGEERRRY GGLILLEBEERTT 335
eeddittoorriiaall

THIRTY-SIX

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PRE SENT

ESS E

TEAR ALONG PERFORATION

before
OE foran to go

is



FrE

L portare to carry

Gk peros passage, journey

SENSE

SEND

OHG senden to send

OHG sin mind, sense

OHG sin his
Skt sva oneself, one's own

OE sith road, journey

OE sith since

OHG sid since

L serus late

OE sawan to sow



- PLACE
- GROW
- GRIST
- CITY
- CITIE
- SIGHT
- LIGHT
- RITE
- NIGHT
- NEAR
- KNIFE
- NOPE
- NICE
- NOSE
- KNEES
- GNAWS
- NEWS
- GNOMES
- NAMES
- SEEMS
- DREAMS
- VINDS
- WINDS
- WAVES
- WEAVES
- WISH
- SILL
- WEST
- TASTE
- TEASE
- TOOLS
- TIME
- TURN
- ON
- AM
- ACE
- LAGE

LIVING IN THE PRESENT

I was scared, ^{but left}
I ~~left~~ the door ~~locked~~ ^{but left} the chain off
it hurt so I could imagine how much more
I threw out the skin mag I had around
my white cell count scared a blizzard
I had a bath + put on clean clothes + did the dishes
I didn't catch it, it threw me
I was lying right here, work was left about long
"God, were you ever sick," said the doctor
I tried hard to attribute it to my imagination
it came + went for 2 days + 2 nights
painkillers help, but not for long
"man, you're it hard" my mom commented later
for 2 weeks, I was too weak to bicycle
they took pictures, but it was only me

had [1st DRAFT, SATURDAY, 6 am]

RANDOM PRESENT

scared, not afraid, to look myself in all right
side ache, imagine how much more inside
scrap the poem, put on clean underwear
white cell whiteout, idea lost, thing goes time
take a bath, do the dishes, eat spit
I didn't catch it, it threw me
~~play~~ left to where it lay, right here
"boy, were you ever sick" said the doctor
"maybe it's my imagination" didn't work
3 to 7 hours, on + off, 2 days, 2 nights
analgesics work by 3rd, naps, no fail to say it
"men don't realize" my mother explained
the bicycle got 2 weeks off
there are pictures, but it's only me

window [2nd DRAFT, 3pm]

PRESENT RANDOM

not afraid, scared to look myself in all night
sideache, guess how much more inside
put on clean underwear, scrub the poem
whitecell whiteout, space boat, thing goes home
take a bath, do the desks, eat spit
I didn't catch, it threw
play left where it lay, right here
"boy were you ever sick" said the doctor
"maybe it's my imagination" try again
3 to 7 hours, on+off, 2 days, tonight's
painkillers work by 3rd, raps, no fail to say it
"men don't realize" my mother explained
2 weeks out from under, like the bicycle
I saw the pictures, it was only me

table [4th DRAFT, 4pm, 25 MAY 1985]
(typewriter, 3rd DRAFT)

NOTES TO "IMAGINARY SPACE:
SELECTIONS FROM THE ARCHIVE"

1. "Imaginary Space" (1967). This collage headlined the column I wrote for the *Georgia Straight* in its first season. I am often called on at the beginning. "Those are breakfast poems," someone with exactly the same voice flow as Roy Kiyooka & Kenneth Rexroth said, in Detroit, upon hearing *Phone Book* read as I was writing it, Spring '66. I quit the *Straight* when Dan McLeod wanted to shorten a column. Every meal is breakfast, if you wait until you're hungry, to eat, & if you don't wait you shorten your life. I'd just survived my 20s so I was surprised to be alive. "Poems begin, stories end," Don Fraser & I agreed one evening last winter over beer in the In Transit Club—although he commented that the story he was writing for *BC Monthly* had begun with the beginning & for once he didn't yet know the ending.

2. "Skin Man" (1968). A bunch of us, including Peter Hlookoff, climbed up to & including the Lions, slept on the alpine meadow there, as if it was either that or jump off Burrard Bridge. Michael Coutts' sister, Lenore, reminds me that my poetry owes something to his. Neri Gadd's sister, Maxine, the anchor of her will to poetry, holds my lines so tightly that one look at them & our time becomes the time a memory takes to decay. Walking Basil Bunting across the bridge, I spoke of the half lives this city takes from & gives to its poets. Peter is forever losing his notebooks. I'm not very good at that, but I'm good with leftovers.

3. "Minimedia" (1967). Elizabeth Coleman & I decided to be our own media moguls. We projected our home-made movies on a sheet on the window for passersby down Robson Street; we printed t-shirts to sell instead of money; we recorded our own music instead of radio; at poetry readings we read our letters to each other; we produced a book of unbounded texts & graphics, *The Milk*, with what was at hand & heart; we called it all Minimedia. We didn't save the world, we didn't even save ourselves, but what we rubbed still shines. It was a gingerbread house, sun all day, spirit all night, Michael Morris & Gary Lee Nova art on the shapely walls, echoes of Martin Barlett's music & parties for artists like Merce Cunningham & his dancers in rooms built at the turn of the century for people who stood up straight. The last time I looked it was all an orange brick pizza parlour. Our associations eventually led to artists' collectives like Intermedia, The New Era Social Club, Video Inn & The Western Front. For my part, all on the same typewriter this page from *The Milk* zoomed through, one afternoon before

heading to Stanley Park where the grass was stashed, maybe that evening in the front room telling Victor Coleman that I'd decided against publishing *Phone Book*, which was ready to roll at Coach House Press, my typical career swerve to avoid any success not faster than me. My mother gave me the typewriter as long as I didn't sell it.

4. "See Loud" (1969). I don't have any more time this week to be writing what I already know, save it for the radio (freerainforest, CFRO, 102.7 FM, Sundays at 9 p.m. Partner Billy Little & I were just talking about adding a gossip column to the show.) "See Loud," that is, turn your pen into a brush.

5. "The Chronicle-Herald" (1972). Something to do with Halifax. "Prondl" is that move you make between neutral & reverse, neural & verse; as in, "He prondlt through the book reviews in the *Globe* in 2 centuries flat."

6. "Due West Postcard #11" (1972). A message from the train on one of the 160 postcards I sent to the Burnaby Art Gallery show, "Due West," Carole Itter & I on our way (with her 27 ft. yellow cedar log as "Personal Baggage") to a festival of actual Vancouver artists at the conceptualists' Nova Scotia College of Art & Design. Some of the cards & texts are in *From Next Spring*. The words on this one are for Louis Hanssen, Vancouver artist, intellectual, seer. His writing, art, pottery & film work remain uncollected. The memory of, the ghost of, his person in the 50's & 60's, here & in Britain, still inhabits & astonishes me. His flame burned on the other side of the fire from mine, but it is his light that revealed the ecstatic/demonic spirit within Europe to me.

7. "Due West Things" (1972). On each postcard was the drawing of an object, listed here, all the objects packed this tightly into a can; each object/drawing titled & photographed together--the photos sent back to "Due West," too. This typescape is as realistic a look as, say, Jackson Pollock's paintings of car crashes.

8. "Metaforest" (1974). A still from the videotape of the same name. Canadas National Magazine (there are many Canadas; when we were greatly impressed by a poem of Olson's, we'd say, "It's very Canadian!") is a rubber stamp graffiti Michael de Courcy & I freed from slavery at *Maclean's*, the time *Maclean's* wouldn't let Intermedia tell its own story. Enquiries about the videotape are welcome. The collage appeared in *Grounds*, minus the slug.

9. & 10. "Habitat Forum, June 8 & 9" (1976). When I did make

it to Habitat Forum at Jericho Beach, the counter-conference to the U.N.'s downtown Habitat do, it was like a free trip to the world all the way from Vancouver. I wasn't asked, poets aren't, but I perched myself here & there writing sketches like these on a set of fields of paper. Typeset versions appear in *From Next Spring*. "Title," the poem I wrote during the first half of Habitat, when I was ignoring the whole thing, is in *Grounds*. The 70 cent royalty cheque from Talonbooks for last year sure came in handy.

11. "The End is a Hand" (1977). The squashed slug underfoot was deleted by a conscientious objector at Coach House Press from *From Next Spring*. There's a love of the theatre of cartooning in the pasts of many artists--Robin Page, Fred Douglas, Roy Kiyooka, bpNichol. It's an exacting art form; would that more verse writers had such a pointed standard of expression.

12. "Canada is an Aries" (1981). "... between what you'll never know & what i can see through your hairdo / between being crammed into the phonebooth with everything except a quarter & only having a nickel's worth of anything to say to outer canada today / between the train of thought & the unwitting station / between wrestling terror & wrist wrestling / between where you am & where i are / between we're all well past here now wearing our highschool perfect winning smiles & biting at the tears in ontario / between the way canadians hate spring & love fall / between walking along whistling anthropology & sitting alone in your walkman / between prose as sustained saying what you're thinking & verse as sustained thinking what you're saying." From pen to type, "a page from *Moby Jane*, this poem written in Toronto. Looking at the ms today, I see it in its form--the words surprise me with their speed. I am more into the syllables this summer, moving into light, from time. Victor Coleman is editing *Moby Jane*, setting the text into motion so it looks small enough to fit in CanLit. When it's out, it's out forever. I just write the stuff.

13. *BC Monthly* (1984). The next issue should be in the mail by now. This is a lucky off-print of the cover of the last issue.

14-17. "Presents." The first, "Pre Sent," 1968, the rest, "Living in the Present," "Random Present" & "Present Random," last month. "distant pasture / recent future / ever pressure" I wrote last night. It's a full life, Charlie.

Gerry Gilbert
7 June 1985

A GREAT NORTHWARD DARKNESS:
THE ATTACK ON HISTORY IN RECENT CANADIAN FICTION

History is a world supported by the word "history," and not by an existence which is history The conditions for observing history are the conditions for creating history, and it is on this unstable ground that we invent the word 'history'. (Hideo Kobayashi, Introduction to *The Life of Dostoyevsky*)

A little while ago I saw a photograph in a magazine called *Science*, and it made me think about Canadian history and Canadian fiction. It was a composite photograph taken from space and showed the faces of the earth at night. It showed lights--no coast lines, no international boundaries, just artificial light. Still, one could see the familiar contours of Europe, for one instance, and the United States for another. But where was Canada? After another look I could see a slight extension of the lights of the United States, up from the Great Lakes, along the St. Lawrence River, presumably, and a millimetre up the West Coast. Otherwise all there was was a great northward darkness. That made me think about the necessity for Canadian history and Canadian fiction.

Canadians do worry about being invisible. Americans don't seem to know that we are here, and Europeans think that we are just some more Americans. Aware of the great darkness, and not having the resources to put lights everywhere, we write books against the obscurity. We write books in two languages brought here from Europe, and wish they would be read or turned into movies in the United States.

But mainly we write books for other Canadians across the domestic darkness. We know how critical it is to make us visible to each other, to ourselves. In the nineteenth century we built the railroad across (or we hired American engineers and

extra-continental labourers to do it); that was the invention of Canada. Really, there wasn't any Canada before the nineteenth century, and considering our affection for historical literature, it is a charming irony that the country was tinkered together out of spare parts, that it was made by a group of inventors.

So we have been all this time a profoundly nineteenth century country at heart, that is at the heart of our writing. The nineteenth century is our golden age and our epic. Older nations of writers can look back on fables and sagas peculiar to their living space. But literary realism was developed in the nineteenth century, and so for our fiction writers the realist text is the fount or the bedrock of the fictive deed.

In Canada our most popular prose writers write popular history. Our readers prefer it to fiction. When they read fiction they like to read fiction that obeys the rules of historical narrative, the sense that character and setting and event combine to lead to a conclusion, that there is a force something like necessity, that language is the normal link between pre-linguistic history and drama. They have been encouraged to like anecdote in their history and realism in their fiction. Thus, while pre-realist fable, fantasy, myth, and the unnatural narrator have re-emerged in the literatures of the older world, Canadians intent on discovering themselves and exploring their time have been slow to welcome the unreliable and the capricious in their writing and to respect the author who invents rather than obeys.

It may be that Canadian immigrants, retreating from various losing causes elsewhere, are convinced victims of forces in history. It may be that they are expecting history to look kindly on them in some future; so it would be rash to scoff at the destiny that may decide to feed one.

One hundred years before this essay was begun, and one year before the last spike was hammered into the trans-Canadian railroad, Henry James made an argument for a positivist fiction:

. . . the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete . . . as the picture is reality, so the novel is history. That is the only general description (which does it justice) that we may give to the novel. But history also is allowed to represent life; it is not, any more than painting, expected to apologize. The subject-matter of fiction is stored up likewise in documents and records, and if it will not give itself away, as they say in California, it must speak with assurance, with the tone of the historian. Certain accomplished novelists have a habit of giving

themselves away which must often bring tears to the eyes of people who take their fiction seriously. ("The Art of Fiction")

Henry James sounds so Canadian to me. Twenty years later his former countryman, Henry Adams, took an even more deterministic view of the relationship between history and science. In "A Dynamic Theory of History" he saw man as a creation of outside forces, a creature who "can know nothing but the motions which impinge on his senses, whose sum makes education." Think of the fiction based on historical principles, and history resembling science, in a world in which "science always meant self-restraint, obedience, sensitiveness to impulse from without." Truth persuades through consistent facts.

But *Clio* was the muse of history, and she was not nature. There were historians who were not happy to see their occupation pass from literature into science. One year before Adams's essay the young George Macaulay Trevelyan wrote:

The past fifty years have witnessed great changes in the management of *Clio's* temple. Her inspired prophets and bards have passed away and been succeeded by the priests of an established church.
(*Clio, a Muse*)

Trevelyan's complaint could be leveled today at French-influenced literary criticism. History, he went on, "is proclaimed a 'science' for specialists, not 'literature' for the common reader of books."

Perhaps the argument can be traced to the common confusion regarding just what history is: is it what happened, or is it what the historians have written? Determinists, among them "progressives," tend to think that history is an inevitable force in which human groups are caught up. Ironically, Soviet historians are always making drastic revisions to their national encyclopaedia. On the other hand, people on the fringes of history tend to believe (to reverse Henry James) that history is a kind of fictional narrative composed in the centres of power.

Novelists who believe that history is a force or a law tend toward realism and naturalism--Zola, Dreiser, Hugh MacLennan. They believe that history speaks and teaches. Fiction writers who believe that history is someone's act of narrative tend toward myth and invention--Conrad, Borges, Robert Kroetsch. History comes from an old European word meaning possession of knowledge. Fiction comes from an old European word meaning the act of shaping. Our artists and critics are engaged in a dispute regarding which comes first.

* * *

Once there were two kinds of imaginative narrative, both making literature. They were history and fiction (including verse), and they were siblings. In the nineteenth century history went to live with science, and fiction, trying to stay with its sister, adopted the ideals of continuity, unity, and expectability. Now characters populated novels where figures used to walk. Now one could study character and setting and confidently predict event. Now the idea of conflict became the constant of serious prose. Now the author was advised not to give himself away, to keep, in fact, himself to himself, like an objective scientist.

In the twentieth century Stephen Dedalus found history a nightmare from which he tried to wake. The modernist movement said to science that history could be shared but that literature belonged chiefly to art, to myth, that it was more like a religion than a science; that it was not the daughter of time. The only way we can really make contact with things and events, said the modernists, is to imagine them. Not obedience but dream.

In Canada we were too young, too new for international modernism. Nature was right outside the window. History had just recently put us here. Instead of the Imagists our poets copied the Georgians until the middle of the twentieth century. Our novelists were not interested in the modernist game of stray fragments falling into patterns in the imagination. We had a land to people and a half-continent to name. We wrote well-constructed novels and moved in.

Thus when a writer energized by modernism submitted an ahistorical and anti-realist text to the publishing centre just after the middle of the century, it took several years for those 125 pages to get through the house and into print; and when it did it was greeted as a delightful oddity, not a sign of things to come. The writer was Sheila Watson, the book *The Double Hook*. Watson had done what the modernists but not the Canadians did--chosen a tradition rather than obeying her destiny. Speaking of it years later, she said that she wanted to prove that you could write a text that was not regional. In other words, history is not a fate that writes through the novelist. *The Double Hook* became the first and last modernist novel in English-speaking Canada, and the text that would be honoured as a holy book by the few post-modernists of the following period.

* * *

At the moment in Canada we are observing, with appreciation of the

irony entailed, the formation of a kind of canon of post-modern fiction. This is happening because in the 1980s we are at last hearing from critics who have little regard for the sociological concerns of the thematic critics. Thematic criticism was a discipline that worked best with realism because finally it was more interested in the society referred to in books than in the books themselves. The contemporary critics—Stephen Scobie, Shirley Neuman, Eva-Marie Kroeller, Linda Hutcheon, etc.—are interested in writing as linguistic invention. They direct our attention to the fictions of Michael Ondaatje, Timothy Findley, Robert Kroetsch and Nicole Brossard. They almost always make reference to a 1966 novel that scandalized nineteenth century Canada, Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*.

The story takes place in the nexus of Canadian history (where lights shine bright in that photograph from space), in Montreal and Ottawa. Its two main male figures are a historian and a history-making member of parliament; its two main female figures are a historical saint and the historian's mythicized wife.

In the first and longest part of the novel, entitled "The History of Them All," the historian writes in the first person, his title suggesting the old literary use of the word "history" to mean story. The narrative is accumulated in short numbered passages, suggesting that the narrator is recording daily entries in a kind of confessional journal, very subjective. This is the only kind of writing he is capable of. He cannot write his history of a gone Indian tribe called the A__s, and he cannot void his bowels. He is "the hater of history crouched over the immaculate bowl" (New Canadian Library edition, McClelland & Stewart, p. 40).

The word "constipation" means crowded, narrowly enclosed. Cohen suggests that the historian's ideals and methodology are the reasons for his painful problem in health, both physical and psychological. The historian means to bring order to chaos, to ascertain facts and to arrange them into an incontrovertible theory, to change story into system. Thomas Babington Macaulay said in the nineteenth century that "history begins in novel and ends in essay" (*The Romance of History*).

The writer of a realist fiction emulates the objective attempt at order prized by the historian. He is devoted to understanding of cause and effect in time. He tries to remove, or to seem to remove, the opinions and feelings of the author (so that he will not, in Henry James's California term, "give himself away"). He makes clear the relative positions assumed by text, author, narrator, character, and reader. And he seeks unity of presentation, a plainness of style, a persuasive comprehensibility.

But history, as we have often been told, is written by winners, often ugly ones. Cohen's narrator at one point gives himself away

to address the reader directly: "O Reader, do you know that a man is writing this? . . . a man who hates his memory and remembers everything" (p. 108). Reader can't help noting that he is being spoken to by author as well as narrator. Anti-realist Cohen intrudes, as they say, into the reading of the book, his personality and his poetry not so much woven as stirred into the text. He fuses and confuses characters, makes his character inconsistent and suspect, and even pushes the reader around. He employs severe disjunctions of style, so that it resembles fireworks in a night sky more than a highway of meaning alongside the St. Lawrence River. He punches holes in time. In other words, he does not seek Reader's belief, does not try to persuade one of his knowledge, *historia*. If he has any consideration for the nineteenth century it is for Chapter 14 of Melville's *The Confidence-Man*.

Cohen's historian has a childhood friend, F., who in adulthood had turned into his guru, a parliamentarian whose task it is to save his companion from his constipated historicity. He tells him not to organize the past and its people, but to "fuck a saint." The saint, as Gertude Stein said in her discussion of her opera, does not live in time, but has been lifted out of history into legend, into immortality, in the sight of mere people, a reminder to them that, as F. says so often, "magic is afoot." Not a head, but afoot. So, says F.:

a saint does not dissolve the chaos; if he did the world would have changed long ago. I do not think that a saint dissolves the chaos even for himself, for there is something arrogant and warlike in the notion of a man setting the universe in order. It is a kind of balance that is his glory. He rides the drifts like an escaped ski. (p. 101)

So does Cohen's novel. Beautiful losers do not write history; they are humble and peaceable, and would never think of setting the universe or a novel in order. Presumably their bowels move. When the narrator feels a moment of resentment toward his mentor, he asks: "Who was he after all but a madman who lost control of his bowels?" (p. 36) Yet when he comes to prayer rather than arrogance he implores: "Saints and friends, help me out of History and Constipation" (p. 118).

Despite the argument by naturalist writers that non-realists preach individualist escapism, it is easy to see that Cohen's concern is for a revolution of health in terms literary, physical, moral and political. Unlike the social realists, he knows that it is at best hypocritical to espouse social revolution through conventional and authoritarian aesthetic means. Hence *Beautiful Losers* is

everywhere self-referential, and ironically it is one of the most decisive novels in our history. It is with relief that at this moment, while writing about it, I feel that I must go to the bathroom before I begin the next paragraph.

Cohen's narrator reports that F. often speaks in what critics have called Cohen's koans, mesmeric phrases of truth with no history of argumentation. The most provocative one for the historian (or writer, or critic) is "connect nothing." It is a usefully ambiguous command, one that challenges the historian; because though the historian seems only to be documenting the past for present consideration, we all know that he is intent on answering a question that starts with the word "why." History, as Macaulay said, was often called "philosophy teaching by examples." F. said: "We are part of a necklace of incomparable beauty and unmeaning. Connect nothing . . . Place things side by side on your arborite table, if you must, but connect nothing!" (p. 18) Leonard Cohen, or his F. anyway, prepares the way for Robert Kroetsch, who would complain of the "tyranny of meaning." The trouble with historical writing as a model for fiction is just that rush toward meaning. On the way the historian did not study what people are, but what they did; he privileged time over space and even place, and perhaps content over form. I think that Paul Ricoeur goes far enough from nature toward meaning when he says that narration requires that "we are able to extract a configuration from a succession" ("The Narrative Function," in *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences*, Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Cohen demonstrates that that configuration need not rely on a succession involving dramatic suspense. He favours, in his 1960s-bliss, eternity over time, immortality over work, miracles over facts, and magic over history. So all the major plot elements are announced at the beginning of *Beautiful Losers*: the suicide of the historian's wife Edith, the fate of F., the sexual relationship of F. and Edith, etc. There is no need for beginning, middle and end. The plot elements are returned to and expanded rather than extended. They open and spread, like saint Katherine Tekakwitha's spilled wine at the Christian feast. Characters, or rather figures, do not have to be restricted conventionally to what they know. Any going back and forth is done in the text, not in referential time, and Reader is made to be constantly present. Only when we try ourselves to be historians of the text are we thwarted, as when we try to get the chronology straight. Reality, we should be persuaded, does not lie in the connecting of facts but in the imagination's pouring itself into the world, there to surround facts.

The second section of the novel is called "A Long Letter from F." In it F. relieves the narrator's constipation with an alarmingly detailed and personal history of Katherine Tekakwitha's last four

years, invoking history (p. 201) while admitting fiction (p. 208) and advising forgetfulness (p. 225). Most important is F.'s koan: "Watch the words, watch *how it happens*" (p. 198). That means stay at the text, stay in the present, and remain part of the fictive action.

The last section of the novel is called "Beautiful Losers, an Epilogue in the Third Person." I have always wondered whether the Third Person is the Holy Ghost; certainly that person is omniscient, an odd point of view after the highly idiosyncratic voices of the first two persons. Here now Isis appears, her name a repetition of the ontological present, appears in our lowest dreams. Her appearance is a sanctified burlesque of the Jesuits' internal dispute "about to which they had the deepest obligation, History or Miracle, or to put it more heroically, History or Possible Miracle" (p. 220). Cohen favours the last, and says that "the end of this book has been rented to the Jesuits" (p. 259). Finally, he speaks as an apothegmatic Learned Cohen in the last paragraph of the book, not in 1966, but on whatever day that Reader reaches the place: "Welcome to you who read me today." Then he ends in a couplet, making the words not an earned meaning but an invitation to the last: "Welcome to you, darling and friend, who miss me forever in your trip to the end" (p. 260). It is also a sneaky way of using the last two words that children like to finish their stories with.

* * *

Herodotus, Charles Olson said, used history as a verb, to find for oneself. Olson himself went further, saying that history is what a person does, not what he has done (in *The Special View of History*, Oyez, 1970). To me that resembles a distinction between European classical music and Afro-American music, jazz for instance. The document of Josef Haydn is the score of his symphony. The document of Charlie Parker is the tape of a Los Angeles club performance in February, 1951.

Now how do you write the story of Storyville? How do you tell about jazz in the first place, and how do you tell about a legendary jazz trumpeter who could not write notes and who never went on record or made one? That is a very appealing problem for a post-modernist writer. How can you write a historical novel with no historical documents? Having produced a book about Billy the Kid out of sources that were mainly frontier lies, Michael Ondaatje essayed *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), about Buddy Bolden, "born" at the dawn of the twentieth century, nothing saved from the multiplicity of chaos except one group photograph in which Bolden is holding a cornet in his left hand, as lots of people wish Billy had held his six-gun.

Ondaatje loves photographs, especially when they disrupt one's

settled notions of composition. In an important poem addressed to Victor Coleman, he ended:

My mind is pouring chaos
in nets onto the page.
A blind lover, don't know
what I love till I write it out.
And then from Gibson's your letter
with a blurred photograph of a gull.
Caught vision. The stunning white bird
an unclear stir.

And that is all this writing should be then.
The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment
so they are shapeless, awkward
moving to the clear.

So the picture for Ondaatje is not the dead clear representation in a bird portrait by Audubon. It is rather something like clear sailing, to be free of time as a ship may be free from limiting land mass. The jazz soloist is not kept by time, nor does he forever keep it; when he is free of his dutiful ensemble work, he is on top of time. He is improvising for a breath muse, and history, including his own, is behind him, invisible below the horizon.

As Cohen's book often mentions the word "history," so does Ondaatje's. In the first few pages, introducing Storyville, the crib of the music, it tells us that "here there is little recorded history," and that "history was slow here," that Bolden's homes remain, "away from recorded history" (*Coming Through Slaughter*, Anansi, 1976).

But the first two words of the text (not counting the italicized notes to the preface's three sonographs of dolphin messages) mark a pointed refusal of a favourite pun among young writers. Instead of the usual "his-story" (or the common successor, "her-story") we are offered "His geography." It is a signal that narrative will try to cover the ground rather than configure the time. The phrase is also an alternative to "his biography." It lets us know that we are to begin, in the present, in Storyville, fiction town.

So the text begins, then, as a magazine travelogue might, and in the imperative, perhaps: "Float by in a car today and see the corner shops." It is clear that we are getting a glimpse of the author's research (and hence the author), a research represented in terms of place, as if the story of the present is of first importance, as if it is a story about, say, a Canadian poet-novelist rather than a dead American musician. But I am getting ahead of myself, aren't I? Let us, he and I, simply say that here in the first pages Ondaatje's method of narration is presaged by a reported method of

research, or first search: "circle and wind back and forth in your car" (p. 10).

Ondaatje's use of the second person pronoun here is unsettling for the reader who wants to be an anonymous consumer of a well-made book. It begins to confuse the conventional positioning of author, protagonist and reader. The reader accustomed to the realist mode wants to remain invisible, and he does not want to see much of the author; he wants a good look at the central character of the story in question. But if there is one thing we can readily discern from the plot of this short novel, it is that Buddy Bolden was always disappearing, running away, going out windows, escaping through holes in the fabric of the real world's text. And every time Buddy Bolden vanishes, there is Michael Ondaatje making an appearance. One is reminded of Clark Kent—every time Superman showed up, the reader knew that Clark Kent was not around to observe the action, even though Lois Lane never quite saw the connection.

If you were a bookstore browser rather than a reader, you would see, riffling the pages of *Coming Through Slaughter*, that it is the text that is always disappearing, as white spaces appear here and there. On reading you become aware of the continual beginning-to-make by the writer, as he puts together pieces, riffs, perhaps, as he tries occasion by occasion to assemble a thing made of words and getting a couple of centimetres thick. It is unlikely that the pieces were written in the order that they appear in the book. You become delighted, if you are not fully addicted to escapism, with what Robert Kroetsch called in regard to it, "the bookness of book." You do not regret the "consolation of narrative." You see a writer on the edge of the multiplicity of chaos, laying side by side on his table some interviews, first-person Bolden narrative, lists, lunatic asylum chronicles, and so on. You see a travesty of documentation as the sole hope of truth. If it does not work for you, at least you are aware of the strange: if you don't know what jazz is, he cannot explain it to you.

If Ondaatje the poet finds himself becoming Bolden the trumpeter, he also finds Bolden putting together a publication much like his. The barber/jazzman was also the editor of a periodical called *The Cricket*, which for six years "took in and published all the information Bolden could find. It respected stray facts, manic theories, and well-told lies . . . Bolden took all the thick facts and dropped them into his pail of sub-history" (p. 24). In other words, no authoritarian structure, which F. called "arrogant and warlike."

Bolden rejects the authority of description as well. Called on to describe the famous hunchback photographer Bellocq to the conventional detective Webb (another aspect of the author Ondaatje), Bolden says, "I can't summarize him for you" (p. 91).

Instead he says, "I want to *show* you something. You come too. Put your hand through this window." I have to suppose that the second "you" is the one implied at the beginning of the book, the reader, the only other one there. The novel works by recurrence rather than progression: earlier we had read of Bolden's enjoining a conventional instrumentalist in his band: "Cornish, come on, put your hands through the window" (p. 14).

Windows, and other kinds of glass, such as mirrors and camera lenses, are always useful for writers. For realists they make it possible for their characters to look out through transparency at the real world, into a mirror when they have to reflect on themselves, or through a lens when they want to focus a problem. People who espouse the usefulness of history rather than its artistic delight often call it a window onto the past or a mirror of our times. In *Coming Through Slaughter* glass is usually something to be broken, generally by Buddy Bolden. He jumps through windows, or breaks them with his hands. He says that photographs are like windows, and he won't hold still for them. At one point he describes referential narrative as a forbidding window: "When Webb was here with all his stories about me and Nora, about Gravier and Phillip Street, the wall of wire barrier glass went up between me and Robin" (p. 86). A trumpet note, blown hard enough and high, will shatter glass. But when Buddy's horn is gone, and he is on the prison train to the State Hospital the other side of Slaughter, he can only hold his head leaning against the inside of the closed window, riding away from music into history. He becomes a random entry interpolated by Ondaatje into "Selections from *A Brief History of East Louisiana State Hospital* by Lionel Gremillion" (p. 143).

If fiction or history is a window through which a reader may get a clear view of a world during some time, and yet remain in his own, that reader must be unsettled a little by a figure who threatens to come crashing through that window (or the author he glimpses climbing through in the other direction). Hands off, we usually say to the author, hands off; hands off those characters and hands off me! Another aspect of Ondaatje is the photographer Bellocq, who is generally thought of as a historical figure whose passion was to make a pictorial history of Storyville. He is reported here to have made knife cuts in some of the pictures: "you think of Bellocq wanting to enter the photographs, to leave his trace on the bodies" (p. 55). To deconstruct, some people would say, history.

Inside the window of the barber shop Bolden's boss liked to keep ice, which made a mist on that glass in the hot southern sun. When the window gets smashed the ice melts on the street. Ice is disappearing glass, and Buddy Bolden knows in his love and music that he lives a melting life, "as if everything in the world is the history of ice" (p. 87).

But Buddy Bolden is a jazz artist, his work disappearing into the air, and he has to make his art in that condition. He speaks of searching for it when things get too regular, of wanting "to find that fear of certainties I had when I first began to play" (p. 86). The detective Webb acts as a kind of reverse F. Whereas F. had told his friend to put things side by side on his arborite table, but to "connect nothing," Webb "came here and placed my past and future on this table like a road" (p. 86).

But when Buddy was blowing, he "tore apart the plot" (p. 37), according to one of his interviewed listeners. In "The Narrative Function," Paul Ricoeur makes the simple point that plot is the link between the work of the historian and the work of the fiction writer. Furthermore, says Ondaatje's interviewed Lewis, Bolden was "born at the age of twenty-two" and "never spoke of the past." He was "obsessed with the magic of air" (p. 14) and knew, however hard time might be to him, that living in the absolute present would be to disappear from history, like the negatives Bellocq bleaches out when he drops them into his alchemist's acid tray. We have a new angle on the white spaces spreading through Ondaatje's text.

That is to say that Ondaatje did not come to the novel to "bring his characters to life" or to tell the story of a representative black horn player because he loves jazz. Ondaatje is trying to save his soul as a writer, and he knows that he has to rip up his book the way Bolden could rip it up blowing his brains out through bent brass in a parade through New Orleans. To do that he has to blow faster than time, higher than history. It helps to blow notes of anachronism around the story, to sound in the secret names of figures from his other books and of literary critics of them too, and of his life. It means "the beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment."

It means attacking fictional-historical narrative where the latter had thought itself strongest--at the climax of the story. The climax of Ondaatje's book comes on pages 133-134, shortly after the magnificent scene of the parade during which Bolden blows himself blind on the street. For a realist the climax is the logical consequence of conflicting characters and events. It is the apotheosis of the plot. In *Coming Through Slaughter* it is the author's direct address to his "protagonist," and his declaration of a desire to become his creation's soul. "Did not want to pose in your accent but think in your brain and body," he confesses; the writer desirous of utterly closing the rational polite "distance" required of a responsible scientist. After Bolden's last fantastic parade, he never plays again, is shipped to the hospital for what Ondaatje calls "the rest of your life a desert of facts. Cut them open and spread them out like garbage." In another word: analysis. Without the horn player his geography becomes a scene of static chronicle: "The

sun has swallowed the colours of the street. It is a black and white photograph, part of a history book."

* * *

In one of the best essays yet published on the work of Robert Kroetsch ("Uninventing Structures: Cultural Criticism and the Novels of Robert Kroetsch," *Open Letter*, 3rd series, No. 8 [Spring 1978]: 52-71) Ann Mandel constructed the news item:

Moose Jaw, Sask.--At a recent meeting here of the Saskatchewan Writers' Union, Robert Kroetsch, discussing Canadian writers' obsessive investigation of history, offered this comment: "Fuck the past." Some participants at the conference objected to his language.

What a nice ambiguity we are handed; and what a good marker of Kroetsch's ambivalence regarding the temptations of meaning. His phrase signals defiance at the same time that it suggests fertility, and it is formed in the imperative, like F.'s "fuck a saint."

Remember that Kroetsch was responding, with that ambiguity, to a post-1967 centenary fashion in Canadian writing, the trainloads of poems, plays, essays and novels that delved into our documents and past lives, as if bringing Louis Riel onto the stage again would tell us how we are living today while assuring us that the newly seen density of our history, if we just spread it out like a grid, or entrails, will guarantee our national substantiality. It is a pre-modernist idea. One thing the modernists discovered was that in the global community the artist has to *choose* his tradition. One is not any more automatically a product of cultural history. Sexual congress with history is not incest.

You cannot get history in your book. You can get only the child of history and yourself. If you could get the world of space and time right in your story, you cannot do it any more because the world now contains that story. History is impossible. Fuck it. Pardon my language.

Of all our fiction writers Robert Kroetsch is the one who has had most to say about literary theory, and the one who has most thoroughly discussed the conundrum of historical thought. While overly generous to all sorts of writers, he has nevertheless become the hero of the contemporary formal critics who are ridding our country of the thematic obsession that came along on the social-scientist ride of post-centenary nationalism. He is seen to stand against that determinism as André Malraux stood against the Stalinist realists: "And then comes the hoax of historical perspective," said Malraux in 1948. "I repeat: it's time to substitute

the question 'What is?' for the constant desire to explain the hidden significance, preferably historical, of what is" ("Afterward" in *The Conquerors*, Grove Press, 1977).

In other words, art speaks to the listeners of art. You do not have to spend a lifetime of winters with snow up to your buttocks to understand Canadian books. You do not have to shovel snow or Louis Riel into your book to write a Canadian text. If you want to do something about the past, you do not have to record someone's recording of it and trust to some collective true voice; you can resurrect it, or raise it for the first time. As if it were the landscape, you can hallucinate it and fill it with the pestiferous bugs you remember from your Alberta childhood. Arguing against reproduction of the world, Melville wrote in Chapter 33 of *The Confidence-Man* about good readers: "Though they want novelty, they want nature, too; but nature unfettered, exhilarated, in effect transformed." He felt the same way about history.

When I was a school boy the only Canadian history I was offered took place on a magical faraway planet covered with a forest dotted with log forts and occasional clearings such as the Plains of Abraham. It was peopled by French-speaking immigrants in florid uniforms and by Indians in some kind of animal pelts. The brown hills outside my house had no such glamorous fiction to make them significant--they were totally empty. Being west of history, we folk could find the absolute ground for myth, it we had only known it. I suppose something like that was possible elsewhere in Canada. The often-interviewed Robert Kroetsch told some people in Manitoba, back east in what they call the west:

... we are intrigued by history, by our past, and sceptical about it. There is a terrible scepticism about it, especially on the Prairies, where there was a kind of renunciation of the past by the people who came out here as immigrants. The landscape itself denied a repetition of earlier experience. Then in the '30s the past seemed to betray the immigrants even further so that they became "next-year people."

(*Essays on Canadian Writing* 18/19 [Summer/Fall 1980]: 25)

Where Cohen's F. called historical order "arrogant," Kroetsch calls it "coercive" (*Labyrinths of Voice*, New West Press, 1982, p. 133). He sees it as an Eastern Canadian mode of narration and distrusts it because it begins from meaning instead of discovering it. Myth persuades us that time does not calibrate truth but that certain places, if we can but find them, will offer prophecy. Hence a writer such as Robert Kroetsch replaces history's paradigm with that of

archaeology, an account made by the seeker who has found the story in place, and in fragments that encourage the seeker to dig and see the pieces and the gaps between the pieces together. In this model no reader need expect to be treated as victim or passive recipient of history.

Determinists who think of history as something that happens before the writing of it see us governed by unfolding events. Westerners, perhaps, see eastern written history as an attempt to manipulate them, who do not think in that language:

No, the West doesn't think historically. If the West accepted history, then its whole relationship to the country would have to change radically. I don't think that the West wants to move into a historical role, or to accept history. Myth is more exciting. (*Labyrinths of Voice*, p. 135)

(Croce of the east vs. Kroetsch of the west?) The rejection of history could be considered a post-modernist tactic, or habit. The modernists, whether they liked it or hated it, felt that they were involved in the very centre of history, that they were a theophany of it. They worked to locate myth inside and *through* history.

The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant's
bent shoulders
Manes! Manes was tanned and stuffed,
Thus Ben and la Clara a *Milano*
by the heels at Milano
That maggots shd/ eat the dead bullock
DIGENES, , but the twice crucified
where in history will you find it?
yet say this to the Possum: a bang, not a whimper,
with a bang not with a whimper,
To build the city of Dioce whose terraces are the colour of
stars.
(*Canto LXXIV*, 1-11)

Robert Kroetsch's lifelong poem is not called Cantos, or Annals, or Chronicles; it is a comedy but far from divine. It is called *Field Notes*, the writer having in mind the unobtrusive little note book the archaeologist can keep in the back pocket of his dusty work-trousers. In his fiction, Kroetsch's most obvious archaeologist is William Dawe in *Badlands*, whose expedition went west looking for dinosaur bones in Alberta's badlands in 1916, a year in which history was being written with a vengeance to the east. For a

would-be historian we have Anna Dawe, his daughter. She comes west and enters the badlands in 1972, aged forty-five, with a cardboard box of her late father's field notes, trying to "set straight the record," knowing though that "there are no truths, only correspondences" (*Badlands*, New Press, 1975, p. 45).

The notebooks, like all written or printed artifacts mentioned in Kroetsch's fiction, are symbols; they point, though, not at character or eternal verity, but back at the text one is reading. I am reminded of the painting in *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, a writer Kroetsch loves. It is a sketch in oils, "representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre--almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister." Aware of the way paintings and dreams work in Romantic literature, we are alert to the picture's representation of the conscious and subconscious mind of Kurtz, its painter. But we also notice that it somehow resembles our voyage as readers into a very dark world of writing, where we cannot quite see the environment. *Heart of Darkness* is finally a story inside a story inside a book, and so is *Badlands*.

So we have to tread blind and careful. Anna Dawe sees the field notes of her father (who was nearly always away from his Ontario home) as his way of "communicating with his unborn descendants." Yet his day's entry is likely to be "I detest words" (p. 34). We should read Kroetsch as curiously as Anna has to read Dawe, a man with a name that means crow.

Kroetsch has a chronology (time order) at the front of his book, as Ondaatje has one at the back of his, but this one is preceded by a retold coyote story, of the trickster fooled by illusion. The chronology is a guileful bit of irony, an aid to the historically mindful, but as an ordering principle only a system the writer can hate. It is complete and skeletal, dead as a dinosaur. Remember what Anna says about the field notes she will eventually throw into the water at the source of the river: ". . . he was busy putting down each day's tedium and trivia. Shutting out instead of letting in" (p. 269).

In Kroetsch's novels the men are impulsive fools, and the women suffer the responsibility of keeping the world together. The men fall off horses and cliffs, while the women get the crops in before the first frost. As Anna Dawe sees it, women are fated to be hosts of time while men go looking for some magical place. (The men see women's time as a trap. See "World's End," earthwoman Bea's house full of clocks in *Gone Indian*.) As a host of time, Anna can look at Dawe as if she were an indulgent or rueful mother:

Total and absurd male that he was, he assumed, like a male author, an omniscience that was not ever his, a scheme that was not there. Holding the past in contempt, he dared foretell for himself not so much a future as an orgasm.

But we women take our time. (p. 76)

Dawe was after immortality: he wanted to unearth an ancient animal and show it to the present; and he wanted fame that would last as long as calcium. Digging for bones while Europe was burying its young, "he removed himself from time," says his daughter (p. 139). And his success made him what he wanted to be, a phenomenon like those he located, "a man without a history Failure might have ruined him back into history."

In some usages history is a way of remembering things; in others it is a way of consigning them forever to a completed system, to a well-made story. Of the dinosaurs Dawe says to Sinnott the photographer who loves disappearances: "No! . . . Not vanished. Here. Now" (p. 245). Sinnott sees all his pictures as "Future Memory" (p. 125). He is one of the legion of photographers in Canadian fiction, of course, but for Kroetsch he is the forerunner of Karen Strike the photographer in *Alibi* (1983), called by the narrator "a lunatic on the subject of history." It is pretty clear that Sinnott represents the documentarist aspect of the Canadian mania for history. Dawe might be having a literary dispute with him when he says, "I recover the past . . . you reduce it . . . you make the world stand still . . . I try to make it live again" (p. 128).

Kroetsch commonly casts one finger in each novel as a kind of chronicler, a historian or biographer who tires to enclose the irrational behaviour of the central figure inside a conventional discourse, usually emerging with a Melvillean compromise we might call legend. That result could be said to bespeak the dilemma of Robert Kroetsch, who has admitted in various ways that he is drawn to both wild loops and familiar story telling. Most talltale aces and rural bullshitters, after all, depend on shared familiarity of their audiences with the details of common life.

But the chronicler is always suspect: he is a madman or a liar, maybe just a crank. When he is the narrator he is what academic critics call an "unreliable narrator." One is persuaded that Kroetsch takes that phrase to describe the historian. He never forgets that the characterization must redound on his own tale. As long as one is writing English sentences one is promoting historical order. As any reader will know, Kroetsch does not always rely on conventional sentences, for just that reason. "I think there's a danger in not learning new models for sentences," he has said plainly, in a discussion of our redemption from history (Alan Twigg,

For Openers: Conversations with 24 Canadian Writers, Harbour Publishing, 1981, p. 116).

In *The Studhorse Man* (1969) the historian/biographer is writing his narrative while reclined in a bathtub in a mental hospital. Hazard LePage, his subject, is interested in history as located in *The General Stud Book*, wherein he depends on the two-hundred-year-old genealogy of his proud stallion Poseiden. His own last name should have told him where that might end. But the final insult to his sense of priapic continuity comes when old Poseidon's semen is used to make mares pregnant so that chemists can use their urine in the manufacture of birth-control pills.

In making a travesty of history one might be said, in Canada, to be mocking tragedy, making light of the seriousness of losers. In *The Words of My Roaring* (1966), Johnnie Backstrom rejects historical necessity and makes himself into a legend. During the 1930s Drought and Depression in an Alberta populated by folks who are convinced that they are history's losers, he fakes an apocalypse and invents himself. If people believe that he has made it rain they might learn to prefer invention to cause and effect.

Tragedy is usually presented in solemn language, as if inevitable loss must sound more important than momentary survival. The comic inventor, free from the simple machinery of loss, must steer clear of the tragedian's special pleading. Kroetsch chose a third person narration for his most spectacular departure from realism, *What the Crow Said* (1979). It begins with a woman's ravishment by a swarm of bees, and her orgasmic cry that sounds over the prairie like a coming steam locomotive. Peter Thomas suggests that "the logic of what follows depends upon accepting its absolute ficticity, while simultaneously recognizing the matter-of-fact manner of the telling" (Robert Kroetsch, Douglas & McIntyre, 1980). We do or did like to relate myth to the ancient, pre-historical world. Kroetsch sees it as continuous creation by card-players, horse-dealers, rodeo clowns, and novelists.

In *What the Crow Said* the chronicler is the small-town newspaper typesetter Liebhaber. He is a drinker and a lovelorn suitor. He uses a "twenty-six" of rye whiskey to fight the tyranny of the twenty-six guards of the alphabet. As a compositor he has always had to read type backward, thus having a special, sceptical view of the logic in history's weekly sentences. Then, according to his story, after the night that he got frozen and the salubrious Tiddy Lang thawed him out, he began to lose all memory of the past. Thereafter he can remember only the future. But Gutenberg, he also says, made all memory of the past irrelevant; print made the creative mind of the human storyteller redundant, as the past with it could be framed and preserved from the multiplicity of chaos. Only the future was free of Gutenberg's design, so Liebhaber