everyone on home. That's all that came of that. But Jack, I remember, reproached George, Jack saying that he almost had Typhoid Mac calmed down. George, who was drunk, too, came up and taunted these fellows," with which Myrsam Wixman broke off the story, laughing.[16]

Games, of chance and love. The recipient of some now lost, but said-to-be fine letters from Jack Spicer, Gary Bottone, has written me a letter concerning their friendship in the middle 1950s. He writes, "I met Jack at a party in Berkeley (can't remember whose house; do remember it was my first encounter with marijuana). I think it was in '53 or '54—it was, at any rate, on the eve of his departure [for the East Coast in late 1954]. We sat on a fire hydrant and, I suppose, were enchanted. I was 18 or 19. Two days later I received a postcard from Jack with the little 'Unicorn'[17] poem on it—and so a correspondence began. I kept the poems and the picture I made him have taken to send to me (I remember his dismay at my request—and his sweet compliance). The letters are indeed destroyed," Gary Bottone remarked, answering here a question I had asked him.

"Jack and I next met at his homecoming party, which as I recall was given at the house of Dick Maxwell and Jerry Ackerman." A list of other names of friends remembered follows, ending with Bruce Boyd, Robin Blaser and Robert Duncan. "I was younger, less bohemian, less literary and less 'experienced' than any of them," he says of these acquaintances.

"Jack and I then tried to make something out of the spell which had been cast on his departure, and I failed. I saw him subsequently with some frequency at the White Horse bar in Berkeley where he wore out a succession of pinball machines. He told me once he wanted to be buried under one."[18] Chance, of games and love.

Jess Sawyer, recollecting still the bridge sessions, mentioned that Jack Spicer was at one point in their meetings—the summer and fall of 1959—publishing a magazine which was talked about before the games. "This was the period in which Jack was producing a thing called *J*, his first initial obviously. He seemed to be issuing a copy of this almost every week or two—it couldn't have been that often, but I actually had the feeling there would be one of them available every time we went to one of the meetings of the bridge club. The journal was typed, the pages colored by hand: rather thin, fascicle, celebrating *J*. Wilben Holther endeared himself to Jack by reading these things completely very soon and the moment they next met, at the next meeting, he would always be

asking questions and saying how marvelous something was, how much he had enjoyed this and that. This encouraged Jack to bring us all copies; we all got copies of *J*."[19]

The second issue of *J*, in fact, contains a contribution by Wilben Holther, "Lament for Otto de Fe." Jack Spicer's lives in Berkeley and San Francisco were sufficiently separate that probably few of his friends in North Beach would have known who Holther was. Wilben Holther received a dedicated poem, as had at least a half dozen others, in Spicer's *After Lorca*, which displayed Jack Spicer's involvement with friends from Berkeley and elsewhere outside San Francisco. But Spicer's remaining six years increasingly involved San Francisco concerns. As his strength focused ever more completely into his work in poetry, his preoccupations—with the exception of his part-time University job (and possibly this too was no exception)—centered in North Beach.

Lament for Otto de Fey

Openly (but in my secret
    where I can give up keeping
there bends acknowledgement of her)
    we tire of steady weeping

Together! touch those spittle tips
    and lift a jumping knee there
shake those rhythmic thighs in song
    and not about her either.

You kiss them and I'll kiss you
    that's right, that's a dear
kiss, kiss me, kiss my tips, now twist
    about, and now kiss here.

No, I don't sweetly know what sings
or if they inside remember things.

Sly to seem kind and confident
    I will find it out
if they still, private, move their little
    cherishings about.

Tell me, tell, my very ones,
tell me if you still
lean against my wet cheek planes
and tell your old friend Will

Then I'll love you as I loved her
I'll cherish wistfulnesses,
instead of just for her for all,
these whispering caresses.

O, you'll warp aside from your brittle—
and, keeping, watch with me a little.[20]

NOTES

1. Michael Davidson, "Jack Spicer," in *The Beats*, ed. Ann Charters (Gale Research Series, two volumes, 1983), pp. 511-517, and contacts with schools Jack Spicer taught at.
2. Lewis Ellingham/Myrsam Wixman Interview, p. 47.
3. LE/MW Interview, pp. 2-3, 46-48.
4. Thomas Parkinson, letter to the author, October 13, 1983.
5. Lewis Ellingham/Jess Sawyer Dictated Statement, pp. 1ff; LE/MW Interview, pp. 3-7; Lewis Ellingham/George Stanley Interview (I), pp. 52-54.
6. LE/JS Statement, pp. 3-4.
7. LE/MW Interview, pp. 7-8; one location was at 2208 Parker Street, Berkeley.
8. LE/JS Statement, pp. 4-6.
9. LE/GS Interview (I), pp. 52, 54.
10. LE/MW Interview, pp. 6-7.
11. LE/JS Statement, pp. 7-8; LE/MW Interview, p. 5, mentions that while Wilben Holther worked in the Speech Department, University of California at Berkeley, he was a Latinist: his degree was from U.C.L.A. in Classics. Robert Berg has described him as "the last Roman emperor," referring to his commanding voice and appearance.
12. Jess Sawyer, in an aside to me when we met to discuss the tape on the bridge club, mentioned Spicer's conversational references to anal warts as the probable cause of Wilben Holther's concern; see *Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, ed. Robin Blaser (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1975), p. 359, where Spicer comments

on this condition in writing by way of an answer to a Robert Duncan workshop questionnaire (answer III-2).
13. LE/JS Statement, pp. 9-10.
14. Lewis Ellingham/Robert Duncan Interview (I), p. 43.
15. Lewis Ellingham/Jim Herndon Interview (I), p. 29; LE/MW Interview, p. 27, confirms the bar was "political" in the 1940s, with Herndon, Peter Martin—anarchist and founder of City Lights Bookstore (before Lawrence Ferlinghetti's tenure; he bought the store from Martin)—and other politically like-minded souls of the day the regular White Horse customers.
16. LE/MW Interview, pp. 5, 25-26.
17. *Manroot*, No. 10 (San Francisco: 1974), p. 105, both poems; Spicer, *One Night Stand and Other Poems* (San Francisco: Grey Fox, 1980), pp. 57-58, "Train Song for Gary" and "Sonnet for the Beginning of Winter."
18. Letter, Gary Bottone to the author, January 11, 1984.
19. LE/JS Statement, pp. 10-11.
20. *J*, No. 2 (San Francisco: 1959).

BRIAN FAWCETT

Dewdney's Poetic Method in *The Immaculate Perception*: A Conversation with Chris Dewdney

This interview took place at Brian Fawcett's home in November 1986, when the promotional reading tour for the newly released The Immaculate Perception *landed Chris Dewdney in Vancouver. It was co-edited by Brian Fawcett and Irene Niechoda, who also transcribed the tape.*

BRIAN FAWCETT: *The Immaculate Perception* (IP) is a very different book from most of what is available as poetry. It's a progression from your previous books, but it's different from those as well. How would you characterize what you're doing as a writer?

CHRIS DEWDNEY: First of all, the content of the work is not, per se, conventional literary content. Primarily it is a series of discursive posits on the nature of consciousness, and on the brain, dreams and language. However, there are certain points at which the most complex levels of information can only be carried across through metaphor, and those can only be sustained in the realm of poetry. In other words, the poetry functions in this text as a means of enacting the next logical jump, a new conceptual level, as it were. The metaphors access at the points at which language mutates—language skids off the road under the weight of its meaning. And that's happened at several points in IP. Particularly those moments at the end of a body of text, moments which I call "spoilers." They're equivalent, aerodynamically speaking (as if the text were deformed by the wind of reading), to the spoilers at the rear of recent automobiles. Only five or ten percent of the text consists of these. The rest of the text I'm positing in a very deterministic and empirical manner. Almost Cartesian, or tantamount to Cartesianism.

BF: What's led you to do that?

CD: This stance has been a consistent thread running through my work from the beginning, but it really surfaced in this text. So, in a sense, this is the book I've always been wanting to write. And in another sense IP represents the armature, or the underpinning, or the theoretical framework behind my poetry. On one level the text is an explicit text, where my poetry prior to this was an implicit text. And, on another level, IP is really taking my empirical position into a very conscious mode—I'd like to say, in sort of a country-simple statement—of my armature, my theoretical framework.

BF: Would you say that it was your background that led you to make the kind of music you make with verse? Or was it dissatisfaction with the limitations of contemporary verse? You might want to talk about the kind of background you've had.

CD: My family background was very science oriented—well, arts and science. My father was a paleo-ethnologist—I guess you'd call it ethno-archaeologist—and was also a novelist and painter. My brothers are all into the sciences presently, except for my brother Peter who's a social worker—although he's the one who connected me to Heinz R. Pagels, who wrote *The Cosmic Code*. So there's a heavy social concern, an anthropological concern, psychological concern and artistic concern—those ran through the family. That was my normative and formal matrix. My vocabulary—and this comes as a surprise to some people—for me, actually, is a completely natural, innate vocabulary.

BF: I didn't understand that until you showed me your first book, which you wrote at the age of nine and has the same concerns as what you're writing now. It was all there then.

CD: That's right. And on account of that, I'm what I guess you'd call an ironic social Darwinist—how would I phrase this?—I believe I'm an operative Lamarckian, but a cognitive Darwinist. I pose those two as a kind of dichotomy, which is the interface out of which I work. It's the transformative interface of my work, the dialect of transformation.

BF: I'd like to question you about your sense of time. Your Darwinian sense of time, that is.

CD: Darwinism has become somewhat anathema to me right now as a social critique, because Darwinian logic is implicit in the rationalization of capitalist consumerism. It is also ubiquitous throughout both the industrial and military complex in terms of survival—of post-holocaust survival, and the idea of competition between missile systems. It also rationalizes our cultural context. It's become an alibi for a sense of a hierarchical temporal development which is not based on any real expansion of knowledge or cognitive development. It is based somewhat speciously on the notion of a linear database which enlarges as the species moves through time.

BF: Darwinism is also the operant notion behind the academic view of literature, when you think about it. About the only place it isn't operating is in the natural sciences.

CD: Yes, but indulging Darwinism allows me an x-ray into my culture. I can use it at will as a sort of anachronistic device, you see. You can use anachronistic devices as dialectical x-rays into thought. And I've been doing that. Concommittantly, the IP is concerned with a transformation of my self. What's happened is that this text is the occasion of my text surfacing and transforming my self. I'm sort of now in the aftermath of my book. And that's what the occasion of this tour is—the official aftermath of this text.

BF: Up until now, I would have characterized you as something between a bio-ethnologist and a geo-ethnologist. But IP goes beyond ethnology.

CD: There's a certain amount of ethnology in it, but what it really deals with is the notion of self and the biological basis of self. In one important respect IP is an indignant book where I'm confronting people who up until now have not been able to accept the miraculous in their lives, and who've had spiritual or philosophical/political crutches which defer miracle for them, or which become vehicles for simulating miracles that in themselves paradoxically renounce miracle by representing it.

I'm saying that a religious system which has the notion of a supreme being is a renouncement of the human miracle. Any kind of system which defers miracle in that sense, any belief system which centres on the immaterial soul, or, say, U.F.O.s—all become insults to humanity. IP is about redressing those specific rationalizations. I

want to kick out all those props—and the first part of the book is about kicking away the ladder. At that point we have a superstructure which we are able to flood with the real miracles, so that hopefully by the end of the book you can reach a stasis of wonder, which is just the everyday. And that really, I think, is the human issue.

In another sense I'm saying that we are incomplete, and *that* is our intrinsic condition. And that's the other thing we ought to redress. Incompleteness isn't necessarily a bad thing. I used to think that we were in a spiritually incomplete stage, and that we had a few more—a couple million more years to go as a species. But actually the way we are is exactly appropriate, because each of us has to make a particular step. It's up to us. It's a responsibility. And it's a discipline.

BF: Well, we've got some behavioral structures that we have to alter or delete, or we're not going to survive as a species or as individuals.

CD: That's the other thing I'm involved with lately. I'm involved with a highly personal process of disentangling myself on a historical basis from all the personal-cum-sociological constraints which have been placed on us. This is a very difficult process, and IP is another way that I've commenced that project. I'm extricating myself from the historical matrix, from all the preconceptions and misconceptions, and all those very intrinsic and inane ideas which I'd accepted as a part of myself. I've now used this kind of dialectic to dimensionalize my history, and I've started picking out all the influences. I'm clearing away everything but my self.

BF: Who has influenced you? You'll notice that I haven't specified literary writers.

CD: Let's see . . . I was just thinking the other day that the very big books for me when I was a kid were Holling Clancy Holling's. I always go back to kids' books. Holling was the guy who did *Paddle to the Sea*—fabulously illustrated children's literature which had all the information *in* it—like maps. *Paddle to the Sea* was about a little carved Indian figure in a canoe that was put on the top of a hill north of Lake Superior. This little canoe then goes down the hill, and travels through all the river systems, doing the currents—industrial processes and natural obstructions. Holling's books have been reprinted, and I suggest that anybody who has

small kids get them for them. His books don't pull any punches; they assume that a child, once he or she can read, is also capable of reading maps, and can take in complex data—and there's no reason why not, of course. You don't have to spoonfeed children. These books were very important for me because they taught me to expect a total picture.

I was interested in scientific journals first, when I was younger. And natural history, of course, was a big influence. In fact, I spent a lot of my time—perhaps 60 per cent of it—walking through the woods near my parents' house at night, and during the day, too. I was instructed by those walks, and I learned more than I learned anywhere else directly from—what would you call it?—nature. It taught me a lot about perception and self.

BF: The first time I ever met you was when you phoned me and demanded to be shown an arbutus tree. That really impressed me.

CD: Now it's a dawn redwood I want to see. I've got to see one. In fact, the west coast—let's get to the rich important stuff here—the west coast, I realize more and more is, perhaps, my perfect environment. The west coast environment is actually very similar to the Axel Heiberg site which they just found in the North West Territories—just inside the Arctic Circle.

The Heiberg site is a little more like northern California or southern Oregon, but not that dissimilar from here. They had palm trees. It's the idea of the Arctic tropical rain forest that I find so compelling. And I realize that this slanting light of November here is the recapitulation of that sort of lost paradise. I really want to get up to that site. That's an aside from what we were talking about, but it's very central at the same time. Things like that are important. I've always been involved with material things, and ultimately, that's what I want to be involved with. And it's not simply the poetic notion of "no ideas but in things," but the idea of *really* being interested in the hardware.

BF: Interesting. The trouble I've had with the New American Poetry is that, in a certain sense, it preached the "no ideas but in things" as if it was a technical device, and not just a cautionary statement. Consequently that whole generation allowed itself to degenerate into a technology of self-hood because they misinterpreted what the focus of attention is supposed to be. I think, to a large extent, the generation that's followed has become merely technologists as a result. I mean, most writers coming up

today take creative writing courses or exclusively literature courses. The Creative Writing technologists know all about how to write a novel, but they don't have any idea what a novel is supposed to be about. Or alternately, the Literature technologists think that literature is strictly about the formal properties of literature.

CD: Well, now we're coming up to the latent issue in my text, which is really what I'm totally concerned with: imparting some actual information. I see IP as a kind of departure from that. I just don't want to fuck around with anything that doesn't give me a *lot* of data anymore. That's what I'm interested in; that's what I read.

BF: For years I've worked on a definition of poetry as the most efficient path—data path—between one subject and another. That this is all, technically, poetry is supposed to be—given the proviso that it carry significant data. My criticism of contemporary poetry is that for the most part it is not carrying adequate data.

CD: Let's wind that back a bit. I think that, for instance, a poet like Michael Palmer carries data of interest, in the sense that I see that that kind of poetry is the enactment of a self-contained intelligence on a page which I can interface with. It does something which is akin to a calculator being manipulated. In other words, it has several levels I can read it at; it is a text which transforms the individual, and where poetry becomes a sense of augmentation. It gives me something useful because it gives me an appurtenance—a perceptual appurtenance—which is tantamount to an evolutionary acquisition. There is a jump, or transgression that comes purely from something aesthetic. As I said, in someone like Michael Palmer. So I see there's an argument from that side, but I'm still increasingly interested in information, and I would really like some hard tack of data in there, too. As to the aesthetic permutations of IP, I haven't really thought those out because I'm too busily involved with my work right now.

I'm interested in experiment, because any experiment is bound to get us something altered, and maybe improved. I'm still, for all my disclaimers of social Darwinism, intrinsically an adherent; and I do subscribe to the notion that we are going somewhere in literature, at the same time as I'm very wary of that notion. So I qualify.

BF: But the trajectory Darwinism *should* have followed can account for what's happening today in the natural sciences, where the strict deterministic progressive enterprise is being most seriously questioned. I don't think Darwin would have been terribly upset by the moves people like Bruce Jay Gould have taken in questioning the determinism of Darwinism. He would have said, okay, strict evolution is too extreme, so let's finetune it.

CD: Yes. Again, that's why when you extrapolate from one discipline to another—if you extrapolate *unnaturally* from one discipline to another—then of course you're bound to run into problems. And you always have to qualify. I just have a set of qualification systems, so I can really jump disciplines at ease and still feel like I've got my pants on.

BF: You're relatively expert in at least three or four different disciplines.

CD: I can conversationally negotiate several different disciplines with experts in the field.

BF: What are those different disciplines, and who are the thinkers within those disciplines that have most strongly influenced you?

CD: I would say that, first of all, paleontology was my first really big field. Within that field, the scientist that I know personally in Toronto is Rolf Ludvigson, who is possibly Canada's premier invertebrate paleontologist. He was somebody who invited me to give a talk at the University of Toronto, to the geology department. The talk that I gave was titled "Paleoecology as a First Order Experience." I gave the lecture to bona fide geologists, most of them also paleontologists.

I gave them a view of paleontology which was so far out in left field that about fifteen minutes into the lecture I saw a lot of them staring at me with this very pressed, flat look. And they're wagging their heads, and some of them are whispering to each other—not quite putting their fingers to their temples, but getting close to that stage. And I thought hmmm, I'd better explain myself. So I interrupted the lecture and said "I'd better explain a little bit about how artists think, because this will clear up a lot of the mystery for you."

I gave them an associative structure, a very simple decision tree which showed how I make associations. On the blackboard I put the connections I would make from one idea to another, and this was the point at which they finally connected with my thought structure. They really just needed some way of systematizing my particular knowledge; they needed to know what my strategy was. Once I had that on the board, then they started clicking; for them it was like a test pattern.

BF: That would be the part of your intellectual structure that would be different from theirs.

CD: Right. They weren't used to those kinds of nonCartesian or lateral narrative jumps; I don't think that they could see the basis of those connections. Once I showed them the structure I was using, they really enjoyed the lecture. I set up a meta-associative framework within a discipline with which they were familiar, but which they felt went inherently against the grain of empirical knowledge. But once they realized that empirical knowledge was not what I was there for—that I was there to make new connections or, as I said, metaconnections—then they really enjoyed it. We went out drinking afterwards and talked for a long time, and they also opened themselves up to me. They became very personal, suddenly. I remember this one story which is oblique to what we're dealing with here, but it is an interesting story.

This one paleontologist was talking about the exploitation of fossil sites. This is a very interesting issue, actually, because it gets us into some cultural issues here in Canada, too. He was talking about England, and about the favourite quarry he used to go to. One day he returned after several months' absence to find that the quarry, where he had been collecting fossils for some time, was gone. He got there just in time to see some kind of German shipping company removing the last blocks. What they had done was taken huge saws and dynamite and basically sawed up almost a quarter cubic mile of fossil-bearing quarry, with government help, to be shipped off to a university in Germany. And there's this poor English fellow from a low-tech university with no budget, standing there with his hammer and picks, watching the last few blocks being moved to the offshore ship to be taken to Köln or Düsseldorf.

I realized I had a parallel experience in London, Ontario. I used to collect fossils at Rock Glen, which was mostly inhabited, on the weekends and weekdays as well, by paleontologists from the States, who knew about this site, flocked to it, and had taken most

of the best fossils out. Now the Royal Ontario museum has, just recently, adopted an enlightened buyback policy that has them reacquiring some of these specimens.

What I'm getting at here is that public inattention to locally unique resources is the rule, rather than the exception. It comes from a lack of interest and knowledge about specific resources within a given area, be they cultural or in terms of the physiography of a region. And that inattention is exploited very quickly by our more industrious and opportunistic neighbours. For some reason I can't quite grasp, there is a lack of concern for these kinds of things until they've been shipped away. And then, of course, it's much more difficult and expensive to try to get them back.

BF: Okay. That covers paleontology. What about the other disciplines?

CD: Neurology is possibly my most rabid interest. My most recent rabid interest, anyway. The people I respect most in that field would have to be A.R. Luria, from Russia; Eccles in the States; and Penfield in Canada. Penfield was a very good person, in fact, one of my heroes. I have to cite J.Z. Young as being very important to me, as well. Also, Walter Gray, an electroencephographologist, is very important to me. There are a lot of key people in this field.

One neurologist I happen to know personally is Dr. John Girvin, in London, Ontario. My first wife had a brain haemorrhage, which is one of the reasons I got interested in neurology. I tried to help her as much as I could, and in fact, I was instrumental in getting her out of a hospital and back home, and in getting her involved in a therapeutic program. The program was rather unorthodox, and it was based on my reading at the time, to put it very quickly.

Dr. Girvin was already a friend at the time, and subsequently, after my wife's condition ameliorated, he became somebody I could check into every now and then. He gave a talk with me one time at the McLuhan Centre in Toronto, where I gave a seminar called the "Planar Thesaurus," which is a piece that's in IP. The lecture was a prototype for the IP piece.

Girvin has been very supportive of me. In fact, I sent the IP manuscript to him to check it out, because I mention him in a context which I thought he might find a little professionally compromising. I talk about sensory bypassing—an operation he has actually performed. But then I hypothesize into the areas which sensory bypassing could easily transgress into, like wiring people up

to do involuntary dances. It's a very strange scenario. But I sent the manuscript to John Girvin and said, "tell me if you want me to take your name out or if you think there's something in here that is too outrageous." And he said "go ahead. There's nothing wrong in it."

So, neurology and paleontology are two big fields for me. Entomology is a third. I'm particularly interested in beetles—in scarabaeidae, which are the scarab beetles, the dung beetles. I find their form satisfying—sculpturally satisfying. As a child, I think I got it mythologically through the Egyptians, because they worshipped scarabs. But I soon branched out independently on my own, using that as a point of entry. There's something about the scarabs that for me is close to a personal archetype.

BF: One of the things that impressed me in your early work was a parallel to the nineteenth century convention in which there were culturally literate and culturally competent scientists. In your case, it is reversed—a scientifically competent culturalist, or artist. The passage is full circle, and it is a logical one. Why aren't other poets and other artists making the similar moves by accessing scientific databases?

CD: I'm not sure. Science has thrown forth a very precise descriptive language which few people seem to be making use of. It's a funny thing, because in a sense (and this is a quote I read somewhere but actually it's quite true) "as the island of knowledge increases, the shoreline of wonder lengthens." Science is giving us more to look at, and a more precise way of looking at it. I can't imagine why anybody would ignore this data. It's like the Blakean notion of "an immense world of delight closed by our senses five." We now have these extra senses kicking in. It's no longer an immense world; it's an *immenser* world of delight still closed by our perceptually augmented electronic systems five. [laughter]

BF: Part of the central technique of your work, and one of the things that works very successfully in IP is your grasp of different technical frames of reference—what Talcott Parsons called "glosses." You often shift those glosses back and forth as a means of transforming information. You will move neurologically framed data across, say, a paleontological gloss, and the alternate gloss augments its meaning.

CD: Yes, there are interdisciplinary correspondences, which dimensionalize each other.

BF: That's the part of your poetic technique that is, as far as I can see, unparallelled. Your linguistic virtuosity is entirely purposive, rather than a device to create "style" or a glamourous private signature. In general, it is primarily an intellectual technique rather than a technological device, and it derives from your familiarity with those scientific glosses.

CD: Yes, that's probably true.

* * *

BF: Okay. If this was the CBC, what questions would we be asking? . . . "Now, Mr. Dewdner"—(we'll make sure we garble your name, of course)—"how do you intend to appeal to the general public? I've got a cousin out there in Broken Neck, Saskatchewan who likes to read a lot, eh? He reads a lot of Stephen King. How do you intend to cope with the marketing problem? How are you planning to market this book in an entrepreneurial environment?"

CD: That's a good question. "An entrepreneurial environment". . . that's good. Well, if your cousin likes Stephen King, he'll like IP. Actually, IP is custom made for that environment. It will invidiously insinuate itself into every little available space it can find in the reader's mind.

IP actually contains useful information—information that most people are already interested in. The notion of its language being hierarchical or the vocabulary being intimidating or too technical is deferring the real argument. It's not too technical, it is merely exact, and I think that people will actually go through this book—

BF: —once they realize that it's not, in the bad sense of the word, "poesy"; that it's more than simply self-concerned self-expression; that it uses a language that can actually be gotten at, and reused to inform—

CD: —inform their concepts of themselves, and the world they are in. One and the other are interdependent and concommitant.

BF: I've written elsewhere about IP as a working manual of consciousness, one that a scientist could not have written. It's a book that only poetry could produce. Certainly science does have difficulty in explaining itself.

CD: There are difficulties. Let's take M.C. Escher as a scientist who has tried, and I think not successfully, to be an artist. He did some interesting stuff, but it's not exactly what I would call art, per se. You have that very funny kind of perceptual breakdown where a scientist has some sort of failure to understand the basic premises of art. And vice-versa. That has always been my problem with artists; demographically they've been resistant to what scientists are up to, the amount of passion that is involved, and the heart that is there. Science has always been perceived as a heartless activity, and that isn't the case.

BF: There's a professional bias that has seeped into art from the more strictly aligned disciplines and it has become extremely destructive. I see you moving directly against that creeping artistic professionalism. The act of deliberately crossing those professionalizing discipline boundaries, in your work, is what allows the greater degree and density of data to be moved and transformed. I mean, I think what you do is precisely what artists are supposed to be doing.

CD: That's probably a good working analysis of what I'm attempting to do in IP. But that's also something I don't want to think about too much, actually, because I'm really working effectively in the forest right now. I don't want to context myself too much, and I think you're getting fairly close there. My buzzers are going off—beepbeep beepbeep....

* * *

BF: Is there anything else you want to tell the masses?

CD: I can give some instructions that might help in approaching IP. I feel that the book can be approached both as a narrative structure and as a sequence of non-narrative parts. You shouldn't feel afraid of picking up the book and going through it randomly, or at points. You should be able to get a lot out of it that way. But it also is structured as linear accumulative knowledge that implicates the end of the book, prepping the reader for those last pieces. The last pieces are semi-contingent on the first; they are made visible by them.

The book is actually arguing for individual realization of what our operational terms are. I see this process as a real jolt of reality in the book. That's really what I want to produce. And if I can

help anybody get to a realization of their operational terms, then I feel that it has succeeded.

BF: Is it finished? What's the likelihood of you adding to it?

CD: I've already started, to a certain extent, to write a sequel. I'm still going on with research right now, and there is probably half again as much material in the same kind of vein. But it's not going to be the same as this book. It's going into much more a sociological area. So that seems to be what's happening right now for me. I've just finished the next book of the Natural History series. It's called "Permugenesis." It's a recombinant text composed out of the first two books of *A Natural History*. It's like a cut-up of those.

BF: That project is still alive, then.

CD: That project is very much alive. And then I'm also working on—I guess the working title is *The Radiant Inventory*—my book of poetry for McClelland & Stewart, which I have a contractual obligation to do. It's sitting in a file in an M&S filing cabinet right now. It's at a semi mock-up point. I'd say it's about a third to a half done. So there's that, too. I'll actually be releasing several books in a very short time. A very short burst. It's a planned literary strategy. [laughter] Send up a few aerial bursts, and see what the reaction is.

BF: Do you have any final message for the Canadian Public?

CD: Think analogue, not digital.

from "The Beginning of the Long Dash"

What happens in the big topics—
topics not tropics where suffering is
the daily basis & not
about taking a moment out to relax,
the magazines' advice on how to survive
Christmas. In the Fashion Tress beauty shop
the tree is covered with white ornaments,
angels twirl from the ceiling, a quiet crêche
in the alcove beyond the row
of pink hairdryers & old women
dozing beneath them or reading about Fergie
in a magazine from England. Cotton batten
snow contains miniature lights, a miniature
dog with a ribbon in its ponytail scrabbles
and barks at the window. This is
a sort of paradise: languorous, expansive,
free—until the cash register
marks eviction and pain, the gray raining street
and shoppers burdened with menus and occasions,
the obligations of merriment.
But this is the truth:
the five most compelling words
are sex, free, cure, money, and baldness,
a chain of conditions ranging from heaven to hell
& soul set aside like a jar of canned heat.
What does the body of the polar bear
inscribe on the ice or in the cave
of her winter residence, months on end
in the dark? Scraping the ice away
practically in her sleep—
the goddess language is
stretching among the remains
of the forest, unforgettable
the way the world closes around her
seamless and blue as the ocean
glimpsed from a long way off.

Now we've discovered the true newness
of the broken world
of discourse, our being finds a place
& mode of expression, not a New World post-
colonized beach where Pocahontas
disports herself doing cartwheels
with no underpants on. Fierce
bees assault our summer days
like mass hallucinations of war planes
& when text says jump
we say How high? The moon winks,
closes her jaundiced eye,
her lockjaw & salacious grin.

•

What life awaits us
just around the corner
from the nasty demon in the woods
whose cocaine-fueled and sweet-toothed
sanctimonious explanations
for the necessity of violence
are daily nightmares of the news.
The various cadres try to reply
but are always above it all being so
below, so *here* the workers will
drop their shuttles, loom and weave
like drunks in the fog, coming
around the corner from the office party.
The party of the particular.
She is very particular
about the arrangement of things
on the coffee table,
the stack of art books
full of beauty, often formula,
their cost sometimes in the three
figures. This vase, that candle.
A still life without the knives,
the gaping exposed oysters
and sliced lemon, the dead grouse.
There's nothing to eat
but images to appreciate
and how vast & impending the space

occupied by beauty! However
just the slightest thing off
& it refuses to enter, shy inamorata,
to cohabit with the real, a fusion
of atomistic signs resisting
the atavistic pull
back
into the slop of felt life.
"Who felt you there?"
& the tragic chorus of our time,
the children's choir
singing "Daddy, Daddy did."
Consider that we evolve
only as we return & exchange places
with the muted and the silent
and translate the cries, the surging grief.
No one is immune from the condition
of abuse, the animals ring us
in our sleep, the remains of the forest
crackling like flags in the *zeitgeist*.

•

What being awaits us
in the land of toy soldiers
whose flesh alone is uniform
minus the smart reds, blues,
blacks and brasses of their buttons,
their chin strap headgear and
precise swords. High on Mont Blanc
with the wind in her hair
she dreams of her lover far away,
a soldier, & inhales the scent
of alpine flowers, a goat
bleating in the distance.
A mountain goat.
This is beautiful & the topic
of myriad songs, all of which end
on a hopeful note.
Re-seeing is what we long for in absence,
from a height so great
the world is simply pattern below us,
pleasing enough. *Au revoir*

echoing among the mountain tops
in the chill wind that gathers
and floats the balloons of our thoughts.
Some are helium, some merely CO_2. *Bios*
the only fit topic of speech,
not speech itself but the field of it.
Discourse worlds itself
in the remains of the forest
& the weeping of children & animals
we don't want to hear. Not show business,
not career. Such preoccupation
verges on the obsessive, *viz.* Kurtz
from his deathbed gesturing evilly
to the forest Oh I will wring
your heart yet! Our language careers
us around the bend and so
the little tin pot boat goes too
& its crew of ragtag mercenaries.
Never mind the monkeys, their chittering
objections. The women are disturbed
at intimate tasks such as painting their bodies
in pleasing patterns which to them
are beautiful. The jungle burns. We watch
it on TV neither right nor wrong
to be doing so. If the sun shines
if your body melts
in mine I'll feel my heart expand
& the parentheses around things
fall off into piles of little black crescents
like rinds of moons gone bad.

•

Upon what stretch of the imagination
do we imagine ourselves stranded.
Kubla Khan, Corpus Christi,
West Edmonton Mall, some canoe
on some poor river clogged
with blood and grease from the nearby
slaughterhouse. Beneath the intersections
of windy Canadian cities
howling with winter the citizens
wander, wondering among display racks,

ghostly & washed-up
as Elpenor in joyless regions.
I try on clothes,
pose in sunglasses,
keep out from under the thinning ozone.
The chapter on Phyllis Webb's
suicide poems lies on the coffee table
with the art books, the other mail.
Periods raised like braille
on pages of poems turned over
done as pancakes on Sunday morning
& consumed while reading
about a new biography of Wallace Stevens,
something about its radiance—
or was it his?—and radiance also
in the second or third movement
of a concerto by Shostakovich
who has since gone to his grave
in all seriousness having rewritten
for the state
all his previous, frivolous
melodies. Some talk at Christmas!
(Some don't.) Some are free too early
with "Merry Christmas," your reply lacking
a note of finality because you know you
will return many times: refuse closure
in any way, shape, or form. Meantime
things happen and people can suddenly
find themselves alone, powerless, & invisible.
They give their children pretty names
that become a sound among other sounds
when the service club Santa hands out
the Christmas present.
Coloured lights outline windows & doors,
turn the monkey tree into a carnival
of itself, pleased & demure under a crown of lights
installed in a pouring rain, heavy, mercury-laden
drops that hurt, slashing past the streetlights.

•

What excitement awaits us
as we go for a Sunday drive
across the border, the yellow fields
of the river deltas full of cows
& fundamentalists. *God!* wanted everything
to be the way it is. *God!* wants you
to send your money now.
Small brown birds line the tree branches
like a Christmas carol, traffic flows
past the red exemplary barns
of Fantasy Gardens.
God is a profusion of exactnesses
listening to a phone with bad connections:
Hello? Hello? The word No
coming through most clearly. Erma Bombeck's
a better read than the Bible, Freud or
any other text as far as useful
& reassuring goes, and why shouldn't
art console? God is a text residing
between the lines & some are nervous
playing Name the Invisible. We exist as one
between pregnancies, otherwise inhabited
by a spirit whose limbs we watch
on the video screen as a play of darknesses
in the water. This is the head, this is a leg,
this pulsing smudge is the heart.
Or a string of smudges in the case of
a litter, Mother Cat with transmitters
on her belly. Sea rose, sea iris, sea lily:
three sisters of a mystical landscape
revealed by H.D. who named her child Perdita,
imagine. Listen to the story
of the girls who were dragged
kicking & screaming out of the convents
to go back home after the Reformation.
The lucky ones eventually returned
to live out their days *virgo intacta*
but nobody new was allowed to enter.
This was in Nuremberg,
coming over the radio, dial glowing turquoise,
an exclamation mark in the room's twilight

splicing the day's news, clean bites
of information whose spectacular triteness resembles
The Rape of the Lock. Good topics
when intelligence means spying & falls
between the lies and the management of lying:
break-ins, files stolen, ugly plans.
All information so far incomplete, merely
hearsay.

•

from 'SOPHIE

,

listening to Lady Day you forget about lyrics hear
the mystery of voice trace in time a space between
the lines one note above one note below the melody
flowers beyond measure too marvelous for words give
me more and more and then some

on a postcard photograph on my desk gardenias stick
out from the side of her head like antennas no sound
must have gone past her

this morning I placed a bunch of gardenias by my
typewriter looking for the same intoxicating scent
that must have hovered about her scent of jasmine
jazz that mines the slow unfurling of delicate petals
beating time into unknown space

listening to Billie you forget about words sweet
strains don't explain you know what it means

beyond my window a bird is tracing against the sky
the mystery of flight as near as words I move closer
to you

,

I write because I can't sing I am the book exiled
from my voice in search of a melody but like the
woman who is blind because her eyes are filled with
seeing and like the woman who is deaf because her
ears are filled with hearing I am mute because my
voice is filled with words and unlike music I can
only be understood and not heard

as *These Our Mothers* have said 'we cannot hide from
ourselves the fictional character of the first A'
but neither can I hide the love and the endurance
of that fiction I write the letter *a* as my ancestral
cry cry of the *anima* a vociferous bird from Patagonia
whose beak is a remedy for those whose words fall out
of their mouth too early or too late

I echo the bird's song with eloquence oracular mood
of the loon who invents music to the measure of my
breath but because I am word it will never be heard

,

harmony doesn't exist before the lyre
the village wizard said as she placed

seven pebbles

on my tongue and sealed my mouth
with moss from a dead woman's skull

anointed me with weapon salve
to cure the wound which caused it

seventh daughter of a seventh daughter
she understood the ancient art of alchemy

that extracts from stones a substance
reducible to its most perfect form

seven letters

that put to the mouth the sounding
and O how that sound surrenders

,

in spite of being tone deaf
the song was a ruse to please

and from the utterances that came
they perceived a sound

that moved them
and were frightened

'but the Incantatrix speaks
tongues' the Zealots said

so they swam the witch and
the witch sank as proof of

her innocence but then I
would have drowned in water

held in the palm
of your open cupped hand

,

once the word was invented it was just a matter of
time before we all set out to find the real thing
and like the omnipotent being that brings itself into
existence you walked in stood your post ceased to be
a figment of my imagination

what did you change from? which game? whose power
of enchantment grew out of whose chimera?

your lion's head
the body of a goat
a dragon's tail
your face a fable

your rattle tracing shackles around my thin shin bones

when it's a matter of getting to the point to the
source you outrun me curious courser swift as the
arrow you follow while I crawl at the tortuous pace
of the crooked foot tortoise in search of the sound
your arrow makes when it reaches then wrenches from
the real thing

,

how did my desire come to wear your face flesh
of your flesh bone of your bone how eerily we
resemble your angel spinning on the sharp point
of your needle keeping time to the deathwatch beat
I live your death you die my life I live your death
you die my life

ah ecstasy. . . . is what Eros the little fat kid
flying beyond the realm of reason would have you
believe. . . . ecstasy (like poetry) casts its line
in the form of an image an illusion and stands
outside itself wishing the very act of naming will
prove the very act of loving to be true thinking
you love therefore I am when all it really adds up
to is loves me loves me not

,

five days of constant rain Newton's
monochromatic rays incessantly drawn

until this afternoon a mote in a sunbeam
where there is no wind and a dozen long

stemmed roses in the wide mouth
of a Mason jar

at the heart of each flower there is nothing
but heart that opens without reason

tonight the full moon big
as an apple about to fall

,

Pythagoras believed the soul to be immortal
and as a member of the Pythagorean Society 550 B.C.
a society which admitted both men and women on the

strength of their deductive reasoning I am also of this belief

immortality fatal to the hope of release

to this day I abide strictly by the rules:

Not to pick up what has fallen.

Not to stir the fire with iron.

Not to look in a mirror by a light.

Not to touch a white cock.

Not to eat the heart.

"to pen a trait": The Feminist Reader and the Poetry of Lola Lemire Tostevin

I
The Feminist Reader

> Reading is no longer just an attempt to decipher; it is simultaneously a gesture of self-inscription. By positing a reader as a subject engaged in a formal activity, textual criticism excludes the *disembodied* voice of some neutral, impartial, and absent speaker.[1]

The debate in feminist criticism concerning the relation between language and experience is one that has moved through various stages. A simplified bare-boned line of differentiation can be drawn between the "French" and "Anglo-American" feminist critics, the former privileging language over experience, and the latter reversing the pair in order to read "experience."[2]

Elaine Marks differentiates between these two trends in feminist criticism, identifying French feminists as "text rubbers" and the Anglo-Americans as "data gatherers." Feminist literary critics who are "data gatherers are positioned as selves outside language"[3] as though language were secondary and transparent, no more than a conduit to primary experience itself. Marks suggests that this dismissal of language and "an exclusive emphasis on experience will inhibit the development of [feminist literary] theory and . . . without a major theoretical involvement, feminist criticism will, in its turn, continue to be devoured by the empirical social sciences."[4] As an alternative to this critical capitulation, Marks proposes that feminist critics become "text rubbers" (an unfortunate prophylactic term), that is, that they position themselves as "heterogeneous subjects inside language."[5] Luce Irigaray reorients this critical strategy from a different

perspective. In an interview titled "The Power of Discourse," which is itself marked by the play of language, Irigaray remarks that "to speak *of* or *about* woman [to read for experience?] may always boil down to, or be understood as, a recuperation of the feminine within a logic that maintains it in repression, censorship, nonrecognition."[6] In order to transgress and exceed phallogocentric modes of discourse, Irigaray echoes Roland Barthes, but with a difference. Barthes calls for a productive rather than a passive approach to textuality, an approach which he describes as "rereading, an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society . . . no longer consumption, but play (that play which is the return of the different)."[7] Irigaray considers this notion of reading in terms of sexual politics and problematizes the question of style, noting that women's writing "tends to put the torch to fetish words, proper terms, well-constructed forms."[8] Rather than authorizing the writer or reader as regulator of the text, as one who verifies the authenticity of representation, or as the proprietor of meaning, Irigaray opposes unitary writing and readings with

> *simultaneity* in its 'proper' aspect—a proper(ty) that is never fixed. . . . It is always *fluid,* without neglecting the characteristics of fluids that are difficult to idealize: those rubbings between two infinitely near neighbours that create a dynamics.[9]

Thus the impulse is "to connect" with the text, to develop a dialogic relationship between feminist reader and female author, a relationship based on proximity. Patrocinio Schweickart identifies the critical difference:

> Mainstream reader-response theories are preoccupied with issues of control and partition—how to distinguish the contribution of the author/text from the contribution of the reader. In the dialectic of communication informing the relationship between the feminist reader and the female author/text, the central issue is not of control or partition, but of managing the contradictory implications of the desire for relationship (one must maintain a minimal distance from the other) and the desire for intimacy, up to and including a symbiotic merger with the other. The problematic is defined by the drive 'to connect,' rather than . . . the drive to get it right.[10]

This tension between distance and proximity measures the feminist reader's practice. However the emphasis Schweickart places on identification tends to underplay strategic differences in readers and texts, and the way some women's texts work to alienate the reader.

II
Rereading *Double Standards*

> . . . any identity will necessarily be alien and constraining. I do not believe in some 'new identity' which would be adequate and authentic. But I do not seek some sort of liberation from identity. That would lead only to another form of paralysis—the oceanic passivity of undifferentiation. Identity must be continually assumed and immediately called into question.[11]

Franco-Ontarian Lola Lemire Tostevin has published three books rooted in the "double standards" of women writing. Her work plays out the way power circulates and privileges particular discourses and speaking positions. Her first book, *Color of Her Speech,* opens with the linguistic differences of a francophone entering an anglophone culture:

> 4 words french
> 1 word english
>
> slow seepage
> slow seepage
>
> 3 words french
> 2 words english
>
> rattling off
> or running at the mouth
>
> 2 words french
> 3 words english
>
> speak white

or as Buber writes
you have abstracted from me
the color of my hair
the color of my speech

1 word french
4 words english

'tu déparles'
my mother says

je déparle
yes
I unspeak[12]

The verb *déparler* conveys a negative sense of drunken incoherence or inarticulateness. But in Tostevin's poem, the mother's cautionary phrase is translated literally as "déparle," "un-speak." There is a doubleness at the heart of this unspeaking, for a displacement occurs when this writer positions herself alongside language while writing within it. And it is this doubled relation to language that carries the possibility of resisting and reversing the monologic univocal character of the dominant discourse.[13] In another poem in the same volume, Tostevin writes a "found poem," using a gruesome quotation from a medical journal. Her strategy of repetition with an ironic distance and difference enables her to account for patriarchal culture's organization of women's "silence." The medical textbook's dispassionate voice resounds in the short lines of Tostevin's poem, reversing the hierarchy that traditionally privileges the "scientific" or medical discourse over the poetic. And "sexual difference," a term which has found a fashionable place within the academy, is returned to the economy of power which organizes violence against women:

to remove the whole
of the tongue the mouth
is widely opened
with a gag the organ
transfixed with silk

the glossus divided
with a pair of scissors
ecraseurs or crushers
the base cut through
by a series of short snips[14]

This grotesque scenario is followed by a simple five-line pronouncement that puts an end to the romanticization of women's silence in a "culture of the deaf:"[15]

once
the mouth
stood empty

it was easy to introduce
your difference

The difference, writes Tostevin, is between "menspeak" and "femspeak." The latter is marked by marginality and rage:

"femspeak"
jargon
gutteral voiceless
sound
slang
language
originating with
nomads
thieves
whores
gypsies

in Quebec we say
argot
argoter to cut
a dead branch
the semantic cut
cunt

woman's cant
rant
rent[16]

Rewriting Hélène Cixous's "Laugh of the Medusa,"[17] Tostevin reverses the hierarchy of discourses, listening to the particular language of Quebec and using the relations of power between the anglophone and francophone Canadas as an analogy for woman's relation to language. Women's speech in a patriarchal culture is often degraded as meaningless gossip. However, Tostevin insists on writing as a woman and using a language of engendered "difference"—a series of linguistic signs that echo one another, deferring meaning in order to reread and reinscribe the pejorative language used to describe women. "Cut." "Cunt." "Cant." "Rant." "Rent." Here the textual theatre is psychoanalytic and the play is between castration and the hysteric. It isn't woman's "lack" that is unveiled, but a body language of difference and female desire. The remaining lines of the poem affirm a sense of amplitude and spaciousness:

breach deep
and wide
femspeak
woman's span

Tostevin's language continues to open wide a semantic wound in the dominant linguistic patterns in selected short-line poems included in *Color of Her Speech* and collected in *Gyno-Text*. In this "female-body-writing," the double standard of French and English, of mothertongue and speaking Anglo-"white," of "menspeak" and "femspeak," is crossed and double-crossed. Once again language becomes "what matters" in the poems, and its graphemic and aural qualities are made strange for the reader. The series begins with an announcement about language writing in the feminine, and one hears the doubled difference:

a
different
tongue
to
pen
a trait

le
trait
d'union[18]

A reading of the poem that concerns itself with consumption, with consuming the "already read," insists on the phallic pun, "penetration." However, a different reading will attend to a voice of silence and "embrace its absence."[19] This voice speaks through the gap of "woman's span," through elision, and is "misread" by the feminist reader. The feminist whose reading practice is informed by "a disruptive *excess* on the feminine side"[20] adds an "o" to "pen." This misreading provides an opening for the trait of difference, the hyphen in "gyno-text," between women and their tissues of writing. The twinned reading suggests a poetics of disruption developed in response to woman's different relation to language. In Tostevin's writing, the power relations of sexual difference require that the woman writer articulate her difference while speaking within the dominant discourse. To move outside of this discourse is to assume a position that speaks silence or nonsense.[21]

Tostevin's most recent book, *Double Standards,* moves the reader deeper into her exploration of language, this time focusing on the relationship between language and narrative, the fictive and the autobiographical. The first prose poem, which reconstructs an autobiography of a woman from a northern Ontario town, the account begins, "for a long time I couldn't decide whether to be story or poem."[22] The speaker's indecision is rooted in the knowledge that "stories," for example the "readerly" novels like her aunt's favorite *Thorn Birds,* are formally inadequate to enfold a woman's history. They are no more than the textual vehicle for a memory of loss:

a past balanced
against promise against the single edge a once upon a time
when there was a small town in Northern Ontario

Tostevin's writing is contrasted with this fabled "once upon a time" where language is no more than a window, transparent and instrumental. Her texts embody a female writing like that of Cixous's hysteric who as "the *unorganizable* feminine construct" is "always at the edge, the turning point of making herself."[23] It is from this other edge, within this productive voice "making herself," that Tostevin's "autobiography" is written. The text pivots on this point of becoming where the memory of experience is rooted in the possibility of language. "Mike's cathouse," a childhood place recollected, leads to a child's exploration of the dictionary, which yields

an amazingly
long list of cat words catbird catcall catgut cat hook I
was stunned to learn that catholic was defined as universal
and broad in sympathies and interests catnap cat o'nine
tails cat's cradle cat's eye I especially liked cat's eye
the opalescent reflections from within but my favorite was
catechu residue from the heartwood of acacia

The transition from a catalogue of "cat" signs to the "heartwood of acacia" brings the reader into a tropical sensual space of touch where the flowers "yield gum." In this transition, the sign "woman" moves from a patriarchal to a female-centered economy. The sign "woman" is embedded in "Mike's cathouse," where she is "an object of desire and an object of exchange."[24] The fact that the "cat" is a prostitute owned by the proper name "Mike" only underscores in economic terms the symbolic status of woman in a patriarchal culture. Woman becomes the commodity form, the gold coin passed from hand to hand. However, in the speaker's retelling of the "story of her life," she returns again and again to language. Like Daphne Marlatt, Tostevin revises the word "pervert," though in this context the focus is on interpretation and writing, for through writing, *"per vers,"* one is able "to lead astray; to misinterpret designedly."[25]

Another series of poems begins "do not be deceived by appearances / I am not a woman." The reader is confronted with a poetics of negation and uncertain signs. It isn't until the reader takes into account a different discourse that the woman appears, "each organ fastened / to a verb." Finally onomatopoeia sounds the sign "woman" who "takes time / to sigh" within language. This figuration of a woman is not completed or fixed, nor is she disembodied; the reader has heard her throated sigh. This tension between the assertion of woman's body and woman in process as an uncertain sign is maintained in "the verb / to hold held / in suspense."

The tension is reinscribed in Tostevin's French prose poem which begins *"les trois ailes de mon nom."* This text provides the translator with an impossible task, for here the question of writing and autobiography meet in an extraordinary anagrammatic puzzle of the author's signature "Lola Lemire." Tostevin describes this text as

> a deconstructive wordplay on my name, where the self is suspended and the primacy of language is emphasized.

> However the question of how and what is written can't be separated from the one who writes. Ultimately, the exploration of language leads back to the self, or preferably to different selves.[26]

The gesture of writing, of naming the female subject who writes, constructs tell-tale signs. In Irigaray's terms there is a "break between what is perceptible and what is intelligible," a rupture that refuses to maintain "the submission, subordination, and exploitation of the 'feminine'."[27] The intelligibility of Tostevin's text depends on its untranslatability, for it is written in difference, playing and punning within a bilingual lexicon that insists on its status as "poem" rather than "story." The "bilingual" aspect of the writing plays between a lexicon of proper(ty) names, and of a more fluid identity. Syllable by syllable, the text names, images and interrogates the identifying signs of a female subject: her given and maiden names. The upstrokes of the letter "l" become "wings or sails" on the watery surface of her "identity," her signature. Here Tostevin's "language work . . . *cast[s] phallocentrism, phallocratism,* loose from its moorings in order to return the masculine to its own language, leaving open the possibility of a different language."[28] The reader is engaged in an investigation of the female subject and naming which continually returns her to the very contradictions of naming and identity. In this signature the myth of Narcissus is replayed with a different watery reflection. This is not the face of the female Narcissus reflected in the mirror of identity. Tostevin writes: *"au lexique du miroir où l'ensemble de mots ne reflete que le dictionnaire abrége d'une seule langue."* The signature of the author is inscribed on the wavering surface of a "vocabulary of water": *"Je dis non et non et je dis oui au lexique de l'eau là qui miroite et entrevoie le monde où je le mire."* Through a double negation, *"non et non,"* the speaker undoes the opposition of binary structures and displaces herself into an affirmative space, Irigaray's specular female space, where woman says "yes" to a different discourse. "Lola" finds her identity in the shifting space of *"l'eau là,"* a textual arena where Jane Gallop's notion of a feminist "identity" can "be continually assumed and immediately called into question." In the peculiar syntactic turns of *"je le mire,"* the female seeing subject signs herself as an uncertain sign who, refracted in difference, looks onto the world.

The world the woman writes and reads within is not a poem. Tostevin's "Not a Poem" is a painful text which mediates between the poet's anguish at the assault on her daughter and her attempt

to embody horror and rage in language. Tostevin's poem can be read in dialogue with a text by Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe,* which reads René Magritte's paintings. In Foucault's text, Magritte's second version of "This Is Not a Pipe" includes two pipes, one a phantasm, and the other framed in a teacher's blackboard in a "didactic continuation of a discourse."[29] Foucault also discusses Magritte's painting "Les Liaisons Dangereuses (1936)" which figures a female nude holding a mirror in which is reflected a female nude turned away from the viewer, her gaze hidden. What is missing from Foucault's commentary on Magritte is a feminist analysis of the politics of representation. The feminist perspective that is addressed by Tostevin's "Not a Poem" enables the reader to confront the discursive politics of representation. The voice of Tostevin's poem is that of a teacher, and a reluctant one at that, for in revealing herself and her fears she notes that "there is embarrassment / at the thought that someday I may stand / before an audience and read ["Not a Poem"]." The speaker's pedagogic practice is rooted in "experience"; for she knows what she teaches through the anguish of experience. The poem begins by dismissing the academy and high culture's "Metaphorical Relationship" between "Art and Life." The space between "Art and Life" opens and the poet finds herself in a gap without literature's comfortable transformative tools:

> no poetry can contain this
> no function
> no distance
> no metaphor to transfer
> what the mind registers

While literary history has interpellated or called women into poetry as metaphoric functions, utopian spaces for the male reader's pleasure, this poem provokes the reader to come to terms with the everyday violence against women. It also links this violence to a misogynist culture by unmasking the "violence of rhetoric" which obliterates the female body. In the poem, the speaker lists a revolting series of violations to the daughter's body. In the brutally ironic quotation that follows, "'there is a garden in her face . . .'," the reader is forced to make a horrifying comparison. The recontextualization of this poetic metaphor enables the reader to uncover the ideological implications of

figurative language that romanticizes the female body. Tostevin describes her method of quotation and juxtaposition:

> The metaphor 'there is a garden in her face,' is one which comes from 'Song of Songs' and was used by Elizabethan poets, such as Campion, to convey the serenity and beauty of The Virgin, or a virgin. I wanted to reverse that and use it to convey the different kind of garden present in our young women's faces after they've been attacked.[30]

This strategy of repetition and refusal, of mimicry, enables Tostevin "to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it."[31] The poet's rage and fear are named in the poem and are made articulate through this naming. In lieu of poetic analysis aided by tricks and tropes, the poem ends with a catalogue of undisputed evidence that provokes the writer and the reader to "clarity" about the dangerous "unmapped space" assigned to women in a violent public sphere. The speaker of the poem gives voice to the unspeakable by listing events and objects, and leaves the reader to put the pieces together:

> an unvoiced cry
> a battered face
> a refrigerator
> with a small body inside

Foucault reads Magritte's "Les Liaisons Dangereuses" as "translations with neither point of departure nor support," as "unmapped space."[32] Tostevin's poem read as a rewriting of "Les Liaisons Dangereuses" is inscribed in a deadly dangerous terrain that exists in historical, not aestheticized time. In Tostevin's "Not a Poem," woman as the disfigured daughter's face and an abducted girl-child's dead body are unquestionably not uncertain signs. They are "presences" in the world, historical female beings whose bodies are wounded and written upon by the telling violence of a phallocratic culture.

And it is the sound of this "unvoiced cry" that compels the feminist reader to insist on a politics of experience. In *Gynocritics,* Alice Jardine quotes Jane Gallop: "the politics of experience is inevitably a conservative politics for it cannot help but conserve ideological constructs which are not recognized as such but are taken for the 'real'."[33] The reductive version of experience invoked

by Gallop and Jardine is necessarily opposed to the "poetic." And yet, the relation between language and experience in Tostevin's work puts the lie to easy oppositions and convenient dismissals. For Tostevin's writing avoids simple referentiality and insists on the interrelatedness of language and experience. "I am not a woman," she writes, and the reader undergoes a woman's experience *in* language. "This is not a poem," writes Tostevin and the text enacts the violence of a tragic experience by paring language from conventional "poetic function." This refusal to reinscribe the opposition between experience and language, between the body and the text, uncovers a different practice of writing and reading. Tostevin's desire "to / pen / a trait," is to enact "the urgency of writing with a vengeance." These texts implicate the reader in "new realms that open the fold of reply,"[34] empowering us to both hear and sound the "unvoiced cry."

NOTES

1. Nelly Furman, "Textual Feminism," *Women and Language in Literature and Society,* eds. Sally McConnell-Ginet *et al.* (NY: Praeger, 1980), p. 51.

2. For an introduction to the differences see: Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985).

3. Elaine Marks, "Voice iv . . . Feminism's Wake,'" *Boundary* 2 , 12, No. 2 (1984): 108. While I find Marks's commentary important in clarifying different approaches to the text, her call for "postfeminism" in the North American context is politically naive and wrong-headed.

4. Marks, pp. 109-110.

5. Marks, p. 108.

6. Luce Irigaray, "The Power of Discourse," *This Sex Which Is Not One,* trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 78.

7. Roland Barthes, *S/Z,* trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 16.

8. Irigaray, p. 79.

9. Irigaray, p. 79.

10. Patrocinio P. Schweickart, "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading," *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts,* eds. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 55.

11. Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. xii. This issue of "identity" is developed in Lorraine Marçotic, "The Fourth Woman," unpublished paper.

12. Lola Tostevin, *Color of Her Speech* (Toronto: Coach House, 1982), n.p.

13. This reading is developed in Shirley Neuman, "Importing Difference," *A Mazing Space: Essays on Canadian Women Writers,* eds. Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli (Edmonton: Longspoon and NeWest, 1987).

14. Tostevin, *Color of Her Speech,* n.p.

15. This notion rereads women's "silence" and appears in an interview with Himani Bannerji, Dionne Brand, Prabha Khosla and Makeda Silvera, "We Appear Silent To People Who Are Deaf To What We Say," *Fireweed* 16 (1983): 8-17. Certainly the "culture of the deaf" is made up of different groups of people with particular voices when we consider writers who are subject to racism as well as sexism. Bannerji's notion enables one to hear how marginalized groups are not silent about their oppression.

16. Tostevin, *Color of Her Speech,* n.p.

17. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *New French Feminisms,* eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amhurst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), pp. 245-64.

18. Lola Lemire Tostevin, *Gyno-Text* (Toronto: Underwhich Editions, 1983), n.p.

19. Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1981) frontpiece, n.p.

20. Irigaray, p. 78.

21. Theorizing about women's language has a glorious history of controversy of which a recent episode emerged in *Signs.* See Margaret Homans, "'Her Very Own Howl': The Ambiguities of Representation in Women's Fiction," *Signs* 9, No. 2 (1983): 186-205; and, Alicia Ostriker, "Comment on Homans's '"Her Very Own Howl" . . .'," *Signs* 10, No. 3 (1985): 597-602. Tostevin cited the latter article in a review which insisted on Ostriker's conviction that "women can successfully appropriate and employ language to represent female experience and identity." See Lola Lemire Tostevin, rev. of *The Collected Poems of Miriam Mandel, Contemporary Verse* 2, 9, No. 2 (1985): 51-53.

22. Lola Lemire Tostevin, *Double Standards* (Edmonton: Longspoon, 1985), n.p. Further references to the poetry of Lola

Tostevin in this section are from this collection and will not be cited since there are no page references.

23. Cixous, "Castration and Decapitation," p. 47.

24. Nelly Furman, "The Politics of Language: Beyond the Gender Principle?" *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism,* eds. Greene and Kahn, p. 61.

25. Janice Williamson, "Sounding the Difference: An Interview with Smaro Kamboureli and Lola Lemire Tostevin," *Canadian Forum* (January 1987), p. 34.

26. Williamson, "Sounding the Difference," p. 33.

27. Irigaray, p. 78.

28. Irigaray, p. 80.

29. Michel Foucault, *This Is Not A Pipe,* trans. and ed. James Harkness (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), p. 29.

30. Williamson, "Sounding the Difference," p. 36.

31. Irigaray, p. 76.

32. Foucault, pp. 52-54.

33. Alice Jardine, *Gynocritics: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 155. The politics of experience are analyzed in Tania Modleski, "Feminism and the Power of Interpretation: Some Critical Readings," *Feminist Studies / Critical Studies,* ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 121-138.

34. Tostevin, "re," *Double Standards.*

"Machines of Loving Grace": What *Swift Current* Really Means

I like to think . . .
of a cybernetic meadow
where mammals and computers
live together in mutually
programming harmony
like pure water
touching clear sky . . .

where we are free of our labors
and joined back to nature,
returned to our mammal
brothers and sisters,
and all watched over
by machines of loving grace.
(Richard Brautigan)[1]

The most striking feature of Frank Davey's new 'little magazine,' *Swift Current,* is that it is a computer text. This fact has caused some curious anxiety in Canadian literary circles (often manifested in the form of ridicule).[2] Inexorable battle lines have been drawn by those dogmatists who feel that technology somehow violates the sanctity of literature—those who refuse to see the computer as a development in the evolution of the written text, as the book itself has been. This situation has superseded any consideration of the literary merits of *Swift Current* by focusing attention on its technology. To place this fact in perspective may seem almost redundant, yet it serves to highlight a significance of the magazine that one feels is taken for granted by Davey and his collaborators but which is repugnant to those who promote literature's privileged position: this 'little magazine's' refusal to promulgate the notion of the 'elite' author, that emblem of literature's

aristocratic position within our culture's paradigms of knowledge. It is an irreverence that is inherent in the technology itself.

Those who consider the computer text of *Swift Current* a threat to the sanctity of literature would certainly not agree with Gutenberg's detractors who, as Marshall McLuhan puts it in *Understanding Media*, saw the printing press as creating nationalism, individualism, linear thinking, and fragmentation:

> The uniformity and repeatability of print permeated the Renaissance with the idea of time and space as continuous measurable quantities . . . . [O]ur ideas of cause and effect in the literate West have long been in the form of things in sequence and succession . . . . [This] is the hidden cause of our Western bias toward sequence as 'logic' . . . [which is] an analytic dissociation of senses and functions . . . . [C]onsciousness is regarded as the mark of a rational being, yet there is nothing lineal or sequential about the total field of awareness that exists in any given moment of consciousness. Consciousness is not a verbal process.

Computer technology in general, and electronic publishing in particular, undo that 'mind set,' so deeply entrenched in our typographic culture, which has a "place for everything and everything in its place,"[3] for computer technology is spatial rather than linear. Discussing information technology, Dale Peterson (in *Genesis II: Creation and Recreation with Computers*) points out that innovations emerging from "rapidly expanding scientific knowledge" rather than from "generally understood traditions of technology" are likely to be more sudden and have greater impact; and "because scientific knowledge pierces more deeply through the visible surfaces of nature" these innovations are "likely to seem more incomprehensible, and potentially more threatening."[4] In embracing an information technology which eschews the linearity of the printed page in favour of the fluidity of the computer and its electronic screen, Frank Davey has, in *Swift Current*, turned his back on the dominant literary culture with the same energy and foresight he and his writing friends exhibited when they created *Tish* twenty-five years ago. Indeed, any discussion of *Swift Current* will inevitably be concerned with the history of *Tish* and the poetic which informed it.

Reflecting, 25 years after the fact, Frank Davey remembers the "hell bent for leather, reckless, I don't give a shit energy [that was necessary] to get the work out."[5] "The *Tish* poets," he observes,

"have never stopped claiming, this is how I want to write, constantly renewing—every day a new articulation." George Bowering remembers the invaluable, nurturing quality of being able to "show the work before it's finished or glossy—first drafts and immediate response" that characterized *Tish*. Fred Wah remembers the "hands-on control" of the Gestetner. All agree that *Swift Current* is the closest they have come to the vibrant, creative spirit of *Tish*. Fred Wah does not even publish in literary magazines anymore, preferring the dialogue of this new collaboration. "I still feel like we're sitting around talking to each other," he says. *Swift Current* also retains the sense the *Tish* editors had "that too many of modern Canadian poems were synthetic, impersonally fashioned objects." Davey further comments that:

> [F]rom the earliest deliberations the five editors had no intention of making *Tish* a shrewdly designed and polished magazine. Rather *Tish* was to be a record of on-going literary activity, a record that preserved every roughness, insight, and stupidity that this activity enclosed. . . . [That is, the very] human contexts the writings had occurred in. . . . But the unrestrained and often unfocused energy that contributed to the carelessness and hastiness which characterizes most of the issues did cause nineteen issues to be published and several careers to be launched. It caused writing to become during those two years the dominant concern of each of the five editors. It compressed and accelerated their development.[6]

When *Tish* finally died and its founders went their separate ways, the energy survived, finding many outlets in their respective careers. *Swift Current*, however, is the first public recreation of that combined energy in its 'rough' human context and, as such, is significant in this respect alone.

Frank Davey launched *Swift Current* in the summer of 1984 with a grant from the Canada Council. Davey's interest in computers had grown throughout the seventies as he, no doubt, began to sense the possibilities—both creative and communicative. While *Swift Current* is Canada's first computer literary magazine, its significance lies more in its intent and organization than in its external form. The computer becomes simply a vehicle (albeit, the only possible one) that allows the magazine to fulfill the founder's intentions. As stated, the text of *Swift Current* is on a computer. It

is in essence a computer data bank that anyone can access through a telephone link-up with DATAPAC. There are no issues as such. As the amount of material grows, so does the data bank. All the material is stored in the computer and available only through other computers.

Reader participation and non-authorial control are the keys. Like any other literary magazine, *Swift Current* tries to make contemporary writing available to an audience. But, unlike other literary magazines, it does not try to hold its audience captive nor make its authors omnipotent or unanswerable. Subscribers have 'editorial' control over their own 'issue' of the magazine. They are free to select the writers contributing to the general categories available (such as Fiction, Drama, Filmscripts, Poetry, Visuals, Commentary or Collaborations). Whatever is deemed offensive or superfluous can simply be ignored.

At the top, Frank Davey is in control, but he is not the editor—he is more a caretaker, able to solve problems or give advice. There are several 'editor-contributors' who have the ability to put work into the magazine. Davey is one, others include Lionel Kearns, George Bowering, Fred Wah and Margaret Atwood (to name just a few). Each contributes to the magazine his or her own work, or that of others he or she seeks to promote. This work becomes available to subscribers to read or dispense with, as they see fit. Asked how this partial lack of control affects him, Davey replies, "it's kind of nice to open up your own magazine and find something new there."

Reader involvement has its practical side. *Swift Current*'s grant is not large or endless and, while it has been used primarily to write the original program and cover the cost of long distance calls, it could not possibly cover normal printing and publishing costs. "We wanted to put all those costs on the reader's end," says Davey.[7] It's the reverse of the normal situation with literary magazines. A subscriber is expected to print out the material wanted, even have it bound if desired.

There are, however, some problems with this system, all of which can be blamed on the original program itself. While editor-contributors can enter any material they see fit, they cannot delete for the general audience. Frank Davey has some control in this situation, but it is by no means total. For example, if a piece of work, after it has been entered, is discovered to contain typos or spelling errors, or the author desires to change something about it, it cannot simply be deleted by the editor-contributor and replaced by the corrected version. Also (and perhaps this is more

important), it cannot be edited or manipulated in any way within the text of the magazine itself. This has led to certain obvious problems that have been addressed in characteristically creative ways. Lionel Kearns, for example, has one poem, entitled "from THE CONSCIOUS ART," originally entered in this form:

#47.03

It thinks you don't care, and you know
it's right. That's the kind
of loopy world poems find themselves in
these days. Like yesterday
as the poem was just putting on its mask
before leaving the house, and it saw
the postman on the other side
of the street. I'll bet he won't come
here, the poem thought to itself
and sure enough the postman walked
right by, not because he didn't have
something for the poem, but because
he would rather not deal
with masked poems on rainy days
"That poem is always whining about
something" said the postman to himself
Yes this poem puts its feet
in its mouth and so everyone looks
the other way. That's literature for you.

Kearns's next selection is entitled "update from THE CONSCIOUS ART" and is simply the same poem re-entered with the errors corrected and some changes made:

POEM NO. ONE

This poem has its problems. It thinks
you don't care, and you know
it's right. That's the kind of loopy
world poems find themselves in
these days. Like yesterday, as
the poem was just putting on its mask
before leaving the house, and it saw
the postman on the other side
of the street. "I'll bet he won't come

here," the poem thought to itself
and sure enough the postman walked
right by, not because he didn't have
something for the poem but because
he would rather not deal with
masked poems on rainy days.
"That poem is always whining about
something," said the postman to himself.
Yes poem number one puts its feet
in its mouth most of the time
and so people close their ears and look
the other way. They would rather watch
rock video or listen to the Metro-
politan opera. That's literature for you.

Obviously, this poem now has its problems solved, but it is unfortunate that Kearns could not wipe out the original version.

One of my own pieces was so messed up that an exasperated plea to Frank Davey for help resulted in a total deletion. Davey managed, somehow, to circumvent the program, but he cautioned that if someone has picked the piece up and printed it there is no way to amend the situation. Perhaps Kearns's method is better—at least in his way the mistake is acknowledged and there are not readers out there who are scratching their heads.

This situation does, however, have its positive side (especially with respect to what Davey calls the "human context" of writing). It is valuable to see work before it is 'finished'—valuable to the writer for feedback and the reader for insight, but without editing control over published texts, this feature lacks purpose and use.

Still, the immediacy and writer/reader participation available in *Swift Current* are its most valuable features. Each entry is preceded by a 'header' that indicates time of publication (when it was entered) and by which editor-contributor it was promoted. Theoretically, one can read work that is still 'smoking.' This not only allows a reader to follow a writer's thought processes and creative concerns, but is a literary 'thrill' in itself. Similarly, writers (whether editor-contributor or just contributor) can receive immediate feedback on any piece of work from readers through the mail system. *Swift Current* is the only literary magazine in Canada in which you can actually 'talk' to a writer about his or her work.

The mail system has other benefits that enhance creativity. George Bowering and Fred Wah have a deal. Any message sent by one to the other must end with a haiku.[8] In this way, *Swift Current* is actually capable of generating its own material.

Most of the faults one can find with *Swift Current* are, as stated, related to the original program. Having no precedent to work from, the original programmer is not, however, to blame. It is simply a shame that user friendliness (a term that describes a program's mutability and degree of adaptability) is not more pleasing. The preamble and introduction sections are tedious. The process of selecting sections, authors and individual pieces, is even more tedious—one gets the sense that one is being patronized by the machine. Part of the problem is that *Swift Current* is set up too much like an actual 'print' magazine. No one reads a 'print' magazine (literary or otherwise) from page one through to the end. If you are interested in something on page twenty-five, you turn to page twenty-five. You do not open the magazine at the first page and carefully turn each of the following pages until you get to the table of contents, and then make a selection. You leaf through, opening here and there, getting a feel, and then turn to the table of contents, maybe. With *Swift Current*, however, you must go through the first 'pages' slowly. Only when you get to the table of contents (categories available) are you able to skip to what you want. Yet, even at this point, you are inundated with superfluous information and time-consuming details. The 'header' on each piece, while interesting, is irrelevant to the work and can distract and tire the reader. In a 'print' magazine this information is available but does not clutter the work. *Swift Current* uses a 'print' magazine format to its detriment, failing even to make use of the more efficient and aesthetically pleasing aspects of that format.

It is significant, however, that the above criticism is applicable. The reason is two-fold. First, the programmer based his programming assumptions on 'print.' That is a little like designing a car to operate like a horse. In "Computer/Art: Depolarization and Unification," Duane M. Palyka addresses this specific problem:

> No one can deny the separation of art and science in our western society. This duality is also reflected within the individual (a microcosm of the macrocosm) as right brain/left brain polarization. This social separation, emphasizing the scientific side as the dominant side, also separates the individual from his psyche—his

> imagination, his intuition, human factors and humanitarian concerns relegated by left-brain thinkers to be the realm of the 'irrational.' . . . Where does this leave the computer artist? Which side of his being forms his work? Is he an artist begging for tools from a technician, or is he a technician making left-brain images? Computer art is a showcase for this duality yet it also offers a rare opportunity to resolve it . . . [in spite of the fact that while] an artist's work is a balance of 'psyche' and 'techne' . . . it is [only] the latter aspect that the scientist relates to and indentifies with 'art'.

Palyka, an artist and computer scientist working and teaching in New York, blames the shortsightedness of technicians and scientists for most of the sterility and rigidity of computer art and most of the problems artists encounter while using computers. His solution is to do programming himself, in an attempt to "merge [his] esthetics into the software."[9] *Swift Current* suffers from a lack of understanding of this enigma.

The second significant aspect of this criticism is the fact that it can be made at all. Obviously a comparison between *Swift Current* and 'print' literary magazines is inevitable. However, to criticize on the basis of such a comparison shows how difficult it is to leave the inherited, dominant 'print culture' behind. As McLuhan insists, our very perceptions are shaped by 'print' and 'print culture,' a situation that must change.

The magnitude of such a change as it affects our perceptual abilities is illustrated in an anecdote in *Understanding Media*. A friend of McLuhan's describes her encounter with a modern movie marquee ("an electric display of letters painted by light"):

> Do you wonder that I was late for the theatre that night, when I tell you that I saw two club-footed Egyptian A's . . . walking off arm-in-arm with the unmistakable swagger of a music-hall comedy-team? I saw base-serifs pulled together as if by ballet shoes, so that the letters tripped off literally *sur les pointes* . . . after forty centuries of the *necessarily static* Alphabet, I saw what its members could do in the fourth dimension of Time, 'flux,' movement. You may well say that I was electrified.

"Nothing [says McLuhan] could be farther from typographic culture with its 'place for everything and everything in its place.' . . .

> Electric means of moving of information are altering our typographic cultures as sharply as print modified medieval manuscript and scholastic culture."[10]

What is the exact nature of the attraction of literary artists to computers? Obviously, the major source of allure is editing capability. With pen and paper, or a typewriter, endless drafts precede a final polished work, usually requiring a hand-written copy transferred to type, edited by more handwriting, cutting and pasting, re-copied into type, edited by more handwriting, cutting and pasting, re-copied, *ad nauseum*. Imagine a sculptor casting aside ten or twenty blocks of marble for every piece of work. With word processors, the original text, no matter how rough, can be shaped and shaded endlessly, without the tedium of re-recording the sections that suffice. If you do not like the shape of your statue's nose, you can alter it, without worrying about his chin. This feature does more than just save time, it allows the literary creative act to unfold without restriction; and in this way, computers actually influence the compositional side of writing. No one can estimate the amount of inspiration lost as the monotonous task of re-copying, in order to gain a new perspective on the reorganized text, has interrupted the fervour of creation. This fluidity of text, which finally allows the act of writing to assume the speed of thought itself, makes of the computer a whole "new medium."[11]

As this fluidity is understood to be, perhaps, just the beginning, literary artists and theorists are experimenting more and more with computers, opening the door to whole new arenas of literature. Computer generated poetry, for example, based on the randomness inherent in computer programs, has produced some noteworthy work. Never replacing Pound or Olson, it has yet proved invaluable from a purely technical point of view, influencing sound and visual poets. The significance and implication of randomness should not, however, be considered only perfunctorily. In "Designing a Recursive Framework for Evolutive Poetry," Ned J. Davison puts randomness to work. Stating that "the personal computer offers new solutions to the sequential limitations imposed on creative writers by traditional printed forms," Davison shows how "temporal experiences can now be manipulated, re-ordered, and juxtaposed in new and endlessly varied combinations [through computer poetry]." Davison has created programs based on computer games in which 'verse sets' (a series of poetic lines and phrases based on one central theme) can be almost endlessly

manipulated and combined. The two poems below were composed from the same fifty-four line 'verse set.'

time passes
you sit down on the floor
been waiting two hours,
stomach growls

a Spaniard lights a cigarette
the benches are full
slowly
you look at your watch
indifferent
you sit down on the floor
the room is full of smoke
the man next to you asks a question
the loudspeaker rattles
voices . . .
indifferent
you wait . . .

feverish
time passes
a policeman walks back and forth
the man next to you asks a question
you look around.
'Quelle heure est-il?'
self conscious
you look at your watch
two drunks sleep in the corner
the room is full of smoke
you try to sleep
you shrug and look away
you look at your watch
a lady enters with four kids
time passes
stomach growls
you wait . . .

The reader is the developer of the poetry in these poems, choosing either at random or with intent, the line and phrase combinations. "Each presentation," says Davison, "or playing, or reading of the electronic work may be made to be inevitably individual [and]

unique." These are "manifestations of the evolution of a participatory art in which the artist and the spectator, or the author and the reader, are merged and share the creative act."[12]

Other computer artists have developed programs that attempt to cross the traditional boundaries of art, merging literature and graphics, for example. In "Computers and Poetry," Nora Wilson, a poet, and Walter Wright, whose specialty is computer graphics, describe a program they developed for Apple personal computers, in which a poem of Wilson's appears on the screen with the enhancement of accompanying graphic images.[13]

Traditional publishers have entered the computer literature field; Bantam Books recently announced their Bantam Electronic Publishing division with two works of fiction available on software only, based on the same computer game strategy used by Davison. These works "involve readers fully in the plot" by allowing them to "become the protagonist, using their powers of reasoning, deduction, and intuition to determine the course of action."[14]

The single most significant feature of these various attempts to exploit the literary opportunities of the computer is what Davison has termed the "merging and sharing" of the creative act. This act is never complete without a respondent—the reader, the listener or the observer. Yet, traditionally, this half of the artistic experience is essentially passive. Computers offer to change this stasis. This is what Frank Davey is attempting with the emphasis of *Swift Current* on reader participation.

While it has been stated and re-stated that the computer is only a tool, for the literary artist this tool offers functions that previous implements in the writing trade (pen, typewriter and press) never began to approach. As we have seen, the computer gives writers what Peterson has called "a new control over the conspiracy of language."[15] It is this control that becomes crucial to the writer's ability to communicate his vision in the Postmodern Age. In fact, the implications of *Swift Current* extend beyond the application of technology to literature to the core of the central cultural issues of our time—even to the condition of Postmodernism itself.

It is important to notice that Postmodernism as a phenomenon developed at the same time as Information Technology, and to note that Information Technology is a major concern of leading Postmodern thinkers. Ihab Hassan, in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, defines Postmodernism in relation to Modernism,[16] noting such differences as Postmodernism's penchant for open, disjunctive

forms; its propensity for play, chance and process (performance) as opposed to Modernism's formal, purposeful designs and 'finished' authoritative works of art; and the nature of Postmodernism's participatory, anti-interpretational texts which replace Modernism's elite, master narratives. Essentially, Postmodernism attempts to break down the master structures that have governed aesthetic behaviour and response, in an attempt to rebuild under new conditions. These conditions preclude the reliance on logic and authority—those two standards of Western culture that have dominated Western sensibility since Gutenberg. The discontinuous thrust of Postmodernism is a revolt against the basic cultural paradigms of perception.

In the literary arts, this revolt concerns itself with the sequential presentation of events (based on the linear notion of time as required by the progression of the printed page), the reverence for generality and abstraction, and the positing of authority of any kind, even the authority of the author, whose role is virtually reversed. In narrative he is less the omnipotent dictator of events than he is the helpless participant in the experience (as in, say, Rudy Wiebe's "Where is the Voice Coming From?"); in poetry his own voice either vanishes (Davison's "verse set," or Lionel Kearns's "From THE CONSCIOUS ART," which parodies the authority of Poetry itself) or questions its own reliability (for example, Robert Kroetsch's *Field Notes*). In *Swift Current* the writer loses his own control over or even determination of the text, since the reader is participatory. Such writing concerns itself with particulars, not with judgement, abstraction, generality and authorial omniscience. Hassan points out that this anarchistic nominalism, in its "concern for trivial things, sensations of the banal, is epistemological. True knowledge resists abstraction: myth and metaphor yield to the feigned concreteness of fact. . . . Out of the given data of experience—images, perceptions, memories—new patterns are created, new fictions. . . . Such fictions can refer only to the internal time of consciousness, not of history or the stars; they refer to the phenomenological present, where discontinuous reality escapes from each word even as it is written or uttered."[17] As Alain Robbe-Grillet says, "The world is neither significant nor absurd. It is, quite simply. That in any case, is the most remarkable thing about it. . . . Around us, defying the noisy pack of our animistic or protective adjectives, things are there. Their surfaces are distinct and smooth, intact, neither suspiciously brilliant nor transparent."[18] As McLuhan says, "What is meant by the irrational and the non-logical in much modern [art] is merely the

rediscovery of the ordinary transactions between the self and the world."[19]

In a broader sense, our culture is preoccupied with a Doomsday scenario that indicates a faith in logic, reason and authority which projects a syllogistic inevitability on political events. Inherent in this notion is an Orwellian view of Information Technology. Yet by altering our ways of perception, Information Technology, in fact, challenges this argument on the scientific and technical level as significantly as Postmodernism does on the cultural and artistic level. As an extension of our entire nervous system,[20] rather than just one of our senses, electronic Information Technology puts an end to specialization, individualism, sequential logic and authority (power). We become aware of the discontinuous, multi-linear nature of experience. Marshall McLuhan sees the new electronic technology as a harbinger of interdependency and cooperation, frustrating individualism and hierarchy. His concept of the "Global Village" has become axiomatic in our culture—this retribalization of society through Information Technology puts an end to the "method of the fixed or specialist point of view that insists on repetition as the criterion of truth and practicality. Today our science and method strive not towards a point of view but to discover how not to have a point of view, the method not of closure and perspective but of the open 'field' and the suspended judgement. Such is now the only viable method under electric conditions of simultaneous information movement and total human interdependence."[21] The Doomsday scenario, based on sequence, logic and outmoded notions of the inevitable, blind obedience to authority, is the result of a specialist point of view, rooted in the closed perspective of history as a linear progression of events that can provide a precedent to judge the future, and the dynamics of development (with respect, in this case, to technology) as given to cumulation and sophistication. Both perspectives are inextricable from the dominant processes of thinking that govern a print culture. The inevitable conclusions of these perspectives are suspect precisely because of their inevitability.

Such thinking, however, continues to muddle understanding as even the most erudite fail to see the whole picture. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* Jean-Francois Lyotard investigates the hypothesis "that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the post-industrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age." Lyotard is concerned that "the computerization of society . . . could become the 'dream' instrument for controlling and regulating the

market system, extended to include knowledge itself and governed exclusively by the performativity principle . . . [which] would inevitably involve the use of [totalitarian] terror."[22] In his critique of the work, Frederic Jameson compounds the restrictions of Lyotard's thinking:

> The moment of truth . . . [concerns] the matter of the ownership and control of the new information banks—the profitability of the new technological and information revolution— . . . the dystopian prospect of global private monopoly of information [that] weighs heavily in the balance against the pleasures of paralogisms and of 'anarchist science' [Lyotard's conception of 'how not to have a point of view,' with respect to science] . . . . Yet that monopoly cannot be expected to be reformed by however benign a technocratic elite, but can be challenged only by genuinely political (and not symbolic or protopolitical) action.[23]

Jameson's insistence on an active political solution betrays his naive view of Information Technology and his deference to authority. It seems that the conditions imposed by print on our perceptions and reason run so deep that even the vanguard of the cultural revolt against these conditions fails to understand their cause and influence and, more importantly, fails to understand the virtue of the technology that promises to eradicate them.

The great single issue that remains with respect to Information Technology even after computerization forces the ostriches of the intellectual and cultural elite to bring their heads out of the sand, is the fear that Lyotard and Jameson articulate so well. In opposition to the benevolent vision of the "Global Village" looms the spectre of totalitarian control of every aspect of our lives through the ubiquity of the computer. In George Orwell's *1984*, just such a malevolent apparition is dramatized. Curiously, this book appeared precisely at the moment that the significance of Information Technology was beginning to be dimly grasped (1949). While Orwell's novel concerns the transposition of Fascism into the Cold War more than anything else, it represents, with respect to Information Technology, a 'knee-jerk' reaction based on a kind of paranoia. Yet the very nature of Information Technology, as Peterson suggests, unlike previous scientific technology, which moves "toward some increasing alienation from nature and humanity," is to move in the reverse direction. "The most

significant tool of information, the computer, might by its very nature facilitate, even require, a two-way flow of information—and thus ultimately decentralize power."[24] As Frank Davey has observed:

> Contemporary man [has become] suspicious of both the fabricated multiplex over-structures of Joyce and Eliot and of the centralized ones of institutional authority; the message of his electronically amplified senses is that his culture and the universe are randomly interacting cooperatives continually evolving new relationships and forms. . . . In all his writing, the post-modernist consciously or unconsciously works to assist the electronic media in the decentralization of human power, whether literary, political, or economic, and to make its already achieved decentralizations and anarchies visible and comprehensible to his fellow man in the forms and processes of art.[25]

It is possible that the very tool some perceive as the 'seal of our doom' may, in fact, be our saviour.

It is the implication of the technology used by *Swift Current* that one must finally come to terms with. This 'magazine' can in no way be separated from its medium, nor should it be. Ezra Pound called artists "the antennae of the race." Marshall McLuhan says "the artist is the man in any field, scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implications of his actions and of new knowledge in his own time. He is the man of integral awareness."[26] Frank Davey and the group of writers who created *Swift Current* are such men and women. From the rebellion of *Tish*, to the boldness of *Swift Current*, once again they have put themselves at the centre, on the front line, of literary issues. Their foray into the very heart of the Postmodern question should concern everyone who values literature as both a source and medium of knowledge.

NOTES

1. Richard Brautigan, "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace," *The Pill Versus The Springhill Mine Disaster* (New York: Delta Books, 1968), p. 1.
2. For example, see the very condescending article by Barbara Wade Rose, "Scanlit," in *Books in Canada* 14, No. 6 (1985): 17-19.

3. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (2nd. ed. rev.; New York: New American Library, 1964), pp. 87-89, 160.

4. Dale Peterson, *Genesis II: Creation and Recreation with Computers* (Reston: Reston Publishing, 1983), pp. 16, 23.

5. This and all the following comments by the *Tish* writers were made during "A Conversation with the *Tish* Writers"—a panel discussion at Simon Fraser University on October 11, 1985.

6. Frank Davey, "Introduction," *Tish No. 1-19,* ed. Frank Davey (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1975), pp. 8, 7, 10.

7. Both remarks were made in conversation with the author, July, 1985.

8. Fred Wah, October 11, 1985.

9. D.M. Palyka, "Computer/Art: Depolarization and Unification," *The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, Inc. Proceedings, 4th Symposium on Small Computers in the Arts* (Silver Spring, Md.: IEEE Computer Society Press, 1984), pp. 7-8.

10. McLuhan, *Understanding Media,* p. 156.

11. Compare Peterson, pp. 150-151.

12. Ned J. Davison, "Designing a Recursive Framework for Evolutive Poetry," *The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, Inc. Proceedings, 2nd Symposium on Small Computers in the Arts* (Silver Spring, Md.: IEEE Computer Society Press, 1982), pp. 111-113.

13. N. Wilson and W. Wright, "Computers and Poetry," *IEEE Proceedings, 4th Symposium,* pp. 76-88.

14. Bantam Books advertising flyer, 1985.

15. Peterson, p. 41.

16. The following is based on Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* (2nd ed. rev.; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), pp. 267-268.

17. Hassan, p. 161.

18. Alain Robbe-Grillet, as quoted in Hassan, p. 170.

19. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), p. 278.

20. Compare McLuhan, *Understanding Media,* p. 53.

21. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* p. 276.

22. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 3-4.

23. Frederic Jameson, "Foreward," *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* p. xx.

24. Peterson, pp. 39-41.

25. Frank Davey, "Introduction," *From There to Here: A Guide to English-Canadian Literature Since 1960—Our Nature-Our Voices II* (Erin, Ontario: Press Porcepic, 1974), pp. 20-21.

26. McLuhan, *Understanding Media,* p. 71.

JENNY PENBERTHY

Review

The Granite Pail:
The Selected Poems of Lorine Niedecker
Edited by Cid Corman

San Francisco
North Point
1985

Granite Pail brings a selection of Lorine Niedecker's poems back into currency. Cid Corman is their editor and, once again, their passionate spokesman. Since his early 1960s encounter with Niedecker and her poetry—through the mails, of course, since they met in person only once—he has been one of a few ardent voices speaking for her virtually unheralded achievement. Corman's preface tells us that ". . . she knew I deeply shared her desire to let her work be known." With *Granite Pail*, he has in mind both public recognition for Niedecker and his own private tribute. His dedication is both to her poetry and her memory: the person in the poems and in the letters that the two poets exchanged between S.E. Wisconsin and Kyoto, Japan, through the decade that ended with her death in 1970.

Well over half of this selection of poems was written in the 1960s, and well over half has already appeared in *Origin*, the magazine Corman edits. *Granite Pail* gives us Corman's Niedecker. His choice, quite naturally, reflects his own preference for the lyrical and the oriental at the expense of, for instance, the political. Of the twelve-odd poems which Niedecker grouped under the heading "In Exchange for Haiku," he includes fully nine. (These "haiku," written between 1956 and 1958, predate and anticipate the friendship. A mutual engagement with oriental poetry was very likely one of the pivots of the affinity.) One of the *Granite Pail* "haiku":

Hear
where her snow-grave is
the *You*
ah you
of mourning doves

The haiku found a ready response in Niedecker. She was attuned to natural themes, brevity, quiet, compressed image and unspilled emotion. But even so, she was never completely at ease with the delicate stillness of the form. She confided her ambivalence to Zukofsky: "Corman's Descent from Daimonji. It's nice, isn't it? If only I'd be content with this kind of poetry. I have to get drama in it, sense of conversation, wit (I hope, don't always succeed, maybe), but I'm conscious of so much more and yet the world is in this Corman and oriental-like poetry."[1] She can turn the compact haiku to robust and wry purpose:

Popcorn-can cover
screwed to the wall
over a hole
  so the cold
can't mouse in

Voice—dramatic, conversational, witty—is Niedecker's central poetic impetus. In his brief preface, Corman singles out the nub of her technique: "her poetry appropriates voices . . . —the rock of true spirit and human relation." With few exceptions, her folk poems derive from overheard local voices. She was always alert for the irregular sounds of living speech, for any undiluted, undecorated linguistic opportunity. An early poem, "Mr. Van Ess," preserves the authentic character of folk speech while making small, bevelled adjustments for a perfect fit of rhyme, measure and meaning.

Mr. Van Ess bought 14 washcloths?
Fourteen washrags, Ed Van Ess?
Must be going to give em
to the church, I guess.

He drinks, you know. The day we moved
he came into the kitchen stewed,
mixed things up for my sister Grace—
put the spices in the wrong place.

One feels her pleasure in the subtly composed ambiguities of the piece of gossip—Mr. Van Ess is stewed; Grace is in a stew; the spices for the stew are in a stew; Grace is upset by Mr. Van Ess's indecent, spicy suggestions; he put the spices in the wrong place, i.e. he misplaced his solicitations. As in so many of her poems, a naive surface belies her psychological penetration.

Folk poems are a constant presence throught her varied career. Among the several included in this volume, "Mr. Van Ess" was written in the late 1930s, "Nursery Rhyme" in 1962.

As I nurse my pump

The greatest plumber
in all the town
from Montgomery Ward
rode a Cadillac carriage
by marriage
and visited my pump

A sensitive pump
said he
that has at times a proper
balance
of water, air
and poetry

She told Zukofsky: "Mont. Ward man came and fixed pump—he couldn't have done better if he'd been 'the greatest plumber in all London' as Hunt's neighbors called the one that lived near 'em. A model now of silent perfection, that pump, between drawings of water. Greatest plumber poem finished . . ." (18 November 1962). The poem is another local portrait, another spirited capsule drama.

Her ready ear for charged speech found material elsewhere too, notably in her reading of autobiography and of letters—the nearest written equivalent of actual talk. She has Black Hawk speak in his own words in "Black Hawk held," John Adams in "Wild and wavy event," William Morris in "His Carpets Flowered," and Asa Gray in

Asa Gray wrote Increase Lapham
pay particular attention
to my pets, the grasses

From written texts she filters a few words into her own minimal poetic context, a carefully judged intersection of plain speech and artifice, of what is and what is said.

Yes, she has an exquisite awareness of voice, of speaking out of silence, of speaking at all, of speaking in the rhythms and locutions she hears around her, of speaking in a literary voice. She is wary of the authorial intrusion that overdetermines a poem's development, threatening its independence. Hence her listening for and quoting of other speech and other voices, her borrowing of nursery rhythms. It is a poetics of tact where, paradoxically, her own voice is always identifiable, and where her voice will have as much presence as the events and objects the poem evokes.

For all their voice-centredness, Niedecker insisted that her poems were not be read out loud. Corman writes: "She never quite cottoned to public reading of poetry. . . . For her, poetry was something each person had to read—say—get for himself or herself. Quiet music." In her life she was insistently private, giving a steady attention to her island home.

What bird would light
in a moving tree
the tree I carry
for privacy?

Down in the grass
the question's inept,
sora's eyes . . .
stillness steps.

Silence, nature's corrective.

Corman: ". . . her poetry was permeated by a profound sense of *De Rerum Natura:* of nature's things. Among such things of nature—birds and rocks and weeds and flowers and the earth itself—she most loved trees." A tree is certainly the cue for one of her finest lyrics:

My friend tree
I sawed you down
but I must attend

an older friend
the sun

Concentrated patterning of consonants and rhymes; teasing obeisance to hierarchy; playful, serene ceremonial. And once again, the poem enjoys itself. It is a grandiose little drama, both affectionate apology and homage, which ends appropriately with the unimpeded re-appearance of the sun.

"All that she experienced in her life she brought into her poetry," Corman writes. And what perfect judgement she exercised. Nature in her poems is nowhere burdened by superimposed, self-preening significances. Corman quotes Niedecker on her husband Al Millen: ". . . he dotes on science fiction but for me science seems more fictional than any story one could invent for it." She wrote to Zukofsky: "For me, when it comes to birds, animals and plants, [I] like the facts because facts are wonderful in themselves" (10 March 1958). This is no flat-footed positivism. In her hands, facts can dazzle.

We are what the seas
have made us

longingly immense

the very veery
on the fence

The *Granite Pail* dustjacket provides an abbreviated biography, enough to sharpen the curiosity aroused by Corman's correct assertion that her life experience was integral to the poems. He arranges her work in a rough chronology—three sections named "earlier," "central" and "final." We find, however, that the poems in "earlier work" span 1935 to 1963; in "central work," 1958 to 1968; and in "final work," 1964 to 1970. Considerable overlap, then, between sections and shuffled chronology within sections, particularly the first. But this only irks if one *does* try to overlay the poems with the biography. "I knew a clean man" (p. 20), for example, is not an early poem but one written after her 1963 marriage to Al Millen. The "clean man" is Harold Hein, the subject of two poems written in 1961: "You are my friend" (p. 15, section 1) and "The men leave the car" (p. 49, section 2). However, the volume makes no claim to scholarly precisions. That is the task of the complete edition of her writing.[2]

Niedecker would have been happy with the placement of these poems—one per page, framed by visual silence. I regret that the banal cover illustration gives no hint of the subtleties within the book or, even more immediately, within the title poem, "Remember my little granite pail." It is an early poem, probably written in the late 1930s, and an evident favourite of Niedecker's since she selected it for appearance in four out of the five volumes published in her lifetime.

Remember my little granite pail?
The handle of it was blue.
Think what's got away in my life—
Was enough to carry me thru.

The cover shows an insipid charcoal drawing of a house and yard; in the foreground sits a sentimentally isolated pail in simple and inert relationship with the title of the book. Niedecker's extraordinarily sure instinct for the lucid, uncluttered image was never achieved at the expense of intelligence. But never mind the cover. The interior brims with lovely choices.

NOTES

1. Niedecker's letters to Louis Zukofsky are quoted with the permission of Cid Corman and the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

2. *From This Condensery: The Complete Writing of Lorine Niedecker*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf (The Jargon Society, 1986). Unfortunately the edition is marred by pervasive inaccuracies. See reviews by Eliot Weinberger in *Sulfur*, No. 16, pp. 148-154, and myself in *Sagetrieb* 5, No. 2, pp. 139-151.

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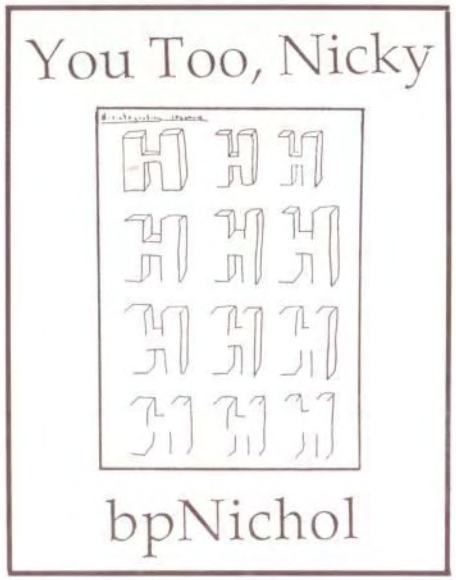

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Number Nine Spring 1987

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