

Jeff Derksen

## **NORTH OF**

The axis of influence in Anglo-Canadian writing seems to have swung back to its east/west bias, forming a shuttle just north of the 49th parallel. It was this bias that had been disrupted and shifted to south/north by such little magazines as *Contact* (1952-54) and *Tish* (1961-63, first editorial period); they were influenced by and published work by "New" American poets, and *Tish* in particular engaged in battles with the more nationalistic magazines. The *Tish* poets, along with Warren Tallman, brought many American Writers to Vancouver from 1961 to 1966, where they participated in events ranging from Robert Duncan's informal lectures in Tallman's basement to the Poetry Festival at the University of British Columbia in 1963. These activities, along with a flurry of magazines and small presses that published work by Canadian and other writers, did a lot toward opening up new concerns in Canadian writing to various influences and encouraged an active poetics. However, over the last twenty years there has been a general movement away from this openness toward a nationalistic view of "CanLit" that is pursued in primary and critical writing and is rooted in regionalism and reified by the culture industry and its funding agencies.

During the late 1960s there was a push from the culture industry to define a Canadian identity, and particularly to define that identity as different from "American": "We are our own model, and we are still building it. To stop now, and to accept American, French, English or any other systems as our model, is both culturally suicidal and plain downright unimaginative."<sup>1</sup> At the base of this was nationalism, but it was also a defensive act against absorption into the mass culture of America. CanLit was called into service in this struggle in two ways: it was to provide an identity by collating Canadian character traits from its literature; and it was to create a sense of identity through the production of Canadian texts. In order for this to happen CanLit first had to be created by the academies and funding agencies from a relatively short literary history that moves from a reliance on British models written by homesick upper-class immigrants, through a rejection of neocolonial models, to a late development of modernism.

During the process of creating a national literature certain characteristics had to be distinguished as "Canadian" so there would be a progression from the British models but not an absorption into American tendencies. "Canadians understandably hate to be accused of following in American footsteps, but half a century behind."<sup>2</sup> These characteristics tended to come from thematic groupings such as "garrison," "frontier," "immigrant," and "exile" (see Northrup Frye, D. G. Jones, and Margaret Atwood's critical writing) and were linked to the survival of characters reified from the literature. These traits moved from literary to Canadian and were even projected onto authors--in a biographical note Margaret Atwood is described as "the archetypal first Canadian, trying to build some shelter against a hostile wilderness."<sup>3</sup>

On the basis of an identity described by this centripetal activity (which excluded any formal investigations of writing) there was a move to situate contemporary poetics in what had quickly become a "tradition." "Contemporary writers surprise us with a determined regionalism, another version of traditional Canadian concerns with the land, wilderness, the pervasive notion that an ill-defined terror of space defines the authentic Canadian sense of things."<sup>4</sup> The concerns for place, for one's own voice within a national idiom ("This is a sturdy, flexible tone, which draws on the resource of daily speech in Canadian English"),<sup>5</sup> and for the definition of the many through the one, which were "imported" by the *Tish* poets from largely American influences, became part of the making of an identity that defined "an authentic Canadian sense of things." These poetics, attached to nationalism and the "traditional" use of landscape images, have solidified into the sort of monologic imagism concerned with landscape that dominates most CanLit magazines. Also it could be seen as a force within other forces that smooth over "the heteroglossia of language, forces that unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought, creating within a heteroglot national language the firm stable linguistic nucleus of an officially recognized literary language."<sup>6</sup> Other voices do not necessarily fit into these poetics, or more correctly, they are spun out to the margins.

What the ideology (intention) of these aesthetics and funding tendencies did was keep the axis of influence within Canada, on its east/west shuttle. A literary history was made by looking at Canadian writing as "Canadian"--that is, it was a genealogical activity that looked for a root of identity in the literature. As such it followed an arboreal pattern of "the Tree or Root as an image, [and] endlessly develops the law of the One that becomes the two, then of the two that becomes the four."<sup>7</sup> The one represents the many and equals identity. It also enforced representation onto language via a grammar that integrates parts (texts) into whole (national literature) toward a predetermined goal/investment of identity.

Anglophone critical writing in Canada, with some exceptions (Line, Open Letter, Robert Kroetsch's conversations in *Labyrinths of Voice*, and *The Women and Words Anthology* are examples) has not broken out of this genealogical investigation and has thus excluded multiplicity. However, Steve McCaffery's recent book of critical writing, *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986*, works on a rhizome model that, while not opposed to the arboreal system, is much more open and able to provide linkages from across history and ways of thinking. "A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles."<sup>8</sup> This is evident first in the range of writers discussed and the transversal references that are used to discuss their work. Fred Wah's *Pictograms from the Interior of BC* is looked at in terms of Derrida's grammatology and criticized from a perspective of Baudrillard's simulacrum; Bill Bissett's writing is discussed using Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (as is the bilingual poetry of Lola Lemire Tostevin) and the Marquis de Sade's "erotic economy"; and bp nichol's *The Martyrology* is framed by German Romanticism, John Locke, Bakhtin, Hegel, and others. Clearly this is not a genealogical attempt to include the work in an isolated tradition but to bring varied socio-historical viewpoints to work to open it to possible readings.<sup>9</sup>

The major concern of *North of Intention* is not an issue of voice and identity but of the role of the reader as consumer and producer of semantic content. McCaffery traces "a shift from sign consumption to sign production and a siting of meaning in a productive engagement with writing's indeterminacies. The text will reveal little in the way of phenomenological description--they are what they can be and they demand a constructive stance."<sup>10</sup> The type of texts that McCaffery is talking about, and the type of reading they demand, move away from voice (defined as the poet's voice and not social voices) and image as the sole producers of meaning--thus the type of identity construction that CanLit was attempting is no longer in play. Meaning does not come strictly from representation; instead there is an insistence on both the text and the reader as active constituents in the event of reading, with the primacy of the author and the decoding of her/his intention rejected. Meanings are not homogenized into meaning within a grammar that integrates the fragmentary into a whole. "Like capital---grammar extends a law of value to new objects by a process of totalization, limiting the free play of fragments to the status of delimited organizing parts within an intended larger whole" (10). And in Canada (North) the constituent parts have been organized into a grammar of identity.

However, McCaffery sees a danger in the model of the productive reader because it "can only take effect through the theoretical presupposition of a need to produce" (27). And this is still based on a transmission theory that "grounds any narrative in the ideological scheme of need and exchange" and which still holds utilitarian values for language. This view of the production of meaning shifts the signifier to a position dominating the signified and eliminates the referent which makes this kind of language usage complicit with the social model generated by the media in which "the real is no longer the referent, but the model absorbed" (41). This, then, would turn Language writing into the "perfected simulacrum [of Advanced Capitalism] which instead of problematizing dominant ideology would actually reflect it" (25). Ironically, McCaffery sees the texts loosened from prescribed intentions and monologic discourse, but the model reader is expected to produce and "is constituted on a series of prohibitions (you can't subvert a representation)" (28). The model reader remains an a priori role which stresses utilitarian values: intention is shifted from text to reader.

McCaffery proposes a move from these productive, utilitarian values to a non-productive, libidinal dispersal of signs: a move from a restricted economy to a general economy. Within a restricted economy "operation is based upon valorized notions of restraint, conservation, investment, profit, accumulation and cautious risk taking" (203). This involves a transmission theory of need and consumption and involves a grammar that totalizes parts for investment toward a larger meaning. Within this economy (and not necessarily opposed to it) there is a general economy that "whilst not prohibiting meaning's appearance, would only sanction its profitless emergence in a general expenditure; hence it would be entirely indifferent to results and concerned only with self-dispersal" (10). Meaning is not the decoding of an author's intentions or a productive act, rather it is momentary, pleasurable, and seeks a breakdown of units and not their integration to a predetermined end. As Bataille writes, pleasure is "definitely reduced...to a concession; in other words it is reduced to a diversion whose role is secondary,"<sup>11</sup> but McCaffery elevates it to become a part of the text and of reading. Inside this there is also a "libidinal economy" which is also a nonproductive value and which is "the surplus value of meaning itself" and a scale of intensities rather than a representation or theme. McCaffery sees these forces as kinetic and flowing, while a restricted economy is static and reductive (or at least involves a compression in its integration). What this energy (as opposed to constraint) does is open up routes for dispersal; the intentions of the author and reader no longer operate as nets to accumulate the dispersed signs. With this, the model of the productive reader inside a transmission theory of need and exchange is destroyed and reading becomes a pleasurable act that is neither ahistorical nor asocial.

A general economy, then is not made by readerly production but is a "speculative model of writing" which is constituted by brief ruptures within a restricted economy. McCaffery sites these general economic ruptures within language itself in features such as its alphabetic, combinatory structure (as in the case of paragraphs) and says "we must further admit to the infinite resourcefulness of language itself to produce aimlessly and fulfill in effect all the features Bataille assigns to a general economy: (209). In the risk taking of this type of writing there is included the risk of changing totally the subject/object relationship: "both the subject and language get returned to their materiality in permitting meaning to slide. We might say that the subject 'forgets' her writing as belonging to a project of meaning, whilst writing itself annihilates the subject expressing himself through it" (214). Thus general economic writing could not be used as a device for identity creation. It is the project of general economic writing to "treat the barriers between terms...as an actual target for dissolution, whose removal then allows the abolition of both terms as separate identities" (213). If this dissolution is successful in a momentary rupture then the reader is not outside the text producing but enters the writing as a subject and can be "seen structurally as a theoretical location in a textual activity" (27). Here, there can be no transmission theory based on the projection of a needed message over a space to an addressee, since the terms reader/writer, etc., have broken down.

The model of the reader within (and a part of) a general economy has certain similarities to the rhizome model and to M. M. Bakhtin's "social evaluation." The rhizome model is not based on integration along a grammatical axis and a separation of subject and object but is a diverse form of "ramified surface extension in all directions"<sup>12</sup> and, as such, is suited for dispersal rather than accumulation. A rupture caused by general economic writing could be said to be a rupture from an arboreal model of communication to a rhizomic model. Similarly, what Bakhtin calls "social evaluation" does not try to posit meanings as a fixed meaning applied by a reader to a sign. In this evaluation of utterances reciprocity in communication is based more on context than need and the utterance is also active, anticipating an answer and affecting the evaluation. The connection of sign and meaning here is not grammatical, fixed; the "connection is created to be destroyed, to be reformed again, but in new forms under the conditions of a new utterance."<sup>13</sup> The reformation does not yield an identical text but moves toward the "unrepeatable event of the text" which is outside a "grammar" of integration: "From the standpoint of the extralinguistic purpose of the utterance, everything linguistic is only a means to an end."<sup>14</sup> This event is made by all contextual elements (the weather, voice inflection, etc.) and "develops on the boundary between consciousness, two subjects"<sup>15</sup> but not toward a specific end--instead as it is formed it breaks apart and is dispersed.

With this movement toward dispersal, into a rhizomic system which does not use a predetermined role of the reader to aim toward a larger end, there cannot be an intentional construction of a national identity. It is a restricted economy within a text that accumulates image, voice, and grammar for investment in such a project. But in addition the centripetal forces of the culture industry limit what is read, how funding is distributed, and how texts are read, to establish the restricted economy that writing lives in. The construction of a national identity involves an accumulation of traits, images, voices, and structure, and homogenizes the idea of what writing can be and its social role. A high degree of intentionality (in both reading and writing) has pushed Anglo-Canadian writing into a restricted economy, and has created a genealogical path for "new" writing to follow in which the "new" is really a naming of the "next." With this "tradition" outlined into a family tree there is only the possibility of branching out--not of breaking off. *North of Intention* provides a variety of routes for writing and reading, and for the investigations of both, and thus opens possibilities beyond intentionality.

#### NOTES

1. "Nationality," *Canadian Literature* 75 (Winter 1977): 3.
2. *Ibid.*, 108.
3. Gary Geddes and Phyllis Bruce, eds., *15 Canadian Poets* (Toronto, 1970), 266.
4. Eli Mandel, ed., *Poets of Contemporary Canada, 1960-1970* (Toronto, 1972), xiii.
5. Dennis Lee, ed., *The New Canadian Poets, 1970-1985* (Toronto, 1985), xxvii.
6. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Tex., 1976), 271.
7. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1987), 5.
8. *Ibid.*, 7.
9. This rhizomic system also contests fixed ideas of modern and postmodern by breaking a genealogical aesthetics: each work is shown to be informed by, or open to, multiple influences that cut across cultures and history rather than being the next step of, or symptomatic of, a modernism.
10. Steven McCaffrey, *North of Intention* (Toronto and New York, 1986), 14-15.
11. Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (Minneapolis, 1985), 117.
12. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 7.
13. M. M. Bakhtin (P. M. Medvedev), *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, trans. Albert J. Wehrle (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 121.
14. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Problem of the Text*, in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin, Tex., 1986), 109.
15. *Ibid.*, 106.

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from: *Poetics Journal*, No.8, "Elsewhere", June 1989. eds. Barrett Watten and Lyn Hejinian