June 1993

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Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 29, no.2, June 1993, p.102-118

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Vancouver as Postmodern Poetry

by GEORGE BOWERING

The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.

Roland Barthes

The first time some Vancouver poets heard the term “post-modern” it was from the American poet Charles Olson and appeared to be a continuation of the New World’s westward drift away from Europe. Heroic International Modernism had been a story being written, often by Americans, in old European cities, where the persistent layering of myths could be seen in the architecture, centuries standing (especially before the World War II bombardment) before the present eye. The ancient world lies in the earth below Paris and pushes its way up through history.

European capitals, like those of the Middle East, are inland, beside rivers, where the oldest myths were first made into chronicles. The oldest cities were centres, beside the ever-arriving. Heroes were men who dared to depart, especially the stable earth. But a return, of the heroes or social rewards, was the aim, an ending at home, a closure. Charles Olson and the young Vancouver poets of 1960 were conscious more than anything else of living by the sea, at the edge, on a margin.

For the sake of the pages to come, we will assume that there is such a thing as postmodernism in poetry. It may have been glimpsed by a very few people in Toronto in the fifties, and then moved into Canada by way of Vancouver by the end of that decade. It came from New England, New York, San Francisco, Mexico City, and a lot of smaller places, some of them inland. When the more academic, Freudianized, Marxianized version arrived in the New World a couple of decades later, it spread itself out at the university faculties, but learned to accept hybridization among the poets who had learned New World ways.

If the historical fiction of the first person singular may be entered here, I was among the new Vancouver poets in 1960 and wish to admit that, if I am writing an essay about Vancouver poetry, I am experiencing the embarrassment of the

dead author—still standing, like the ninth letter of the alphabet. I, like most of my companions of 1960, went away from the city in the early sixties and, like some of them, returned in the seventies. In my view, Vancouver poetry became very lively in the sixties, slacked off in the seventies, and became interesting again in the late eighties.

Living in Vancouver in the late fifties and early sixties, the young poets (to be) knew first void and margin, saw the ocean every day, and then looked for tradition, that is for the trade. There was, as far as they could see, no tradition, that is for the trade. There was, as far as they could see, no tradition of Vancouver poetry. As far as they knew there was no tradition of Canadian poetry. The tradition they knew was to be found in the high-school English 91 anthology, Chaucer and Shakespeare, Milton and Keats. These poets, at the centre of what would become a maritime empire, lived thousands of miles from the west coast of any America, in a pink hardcover textbook with Big Ben keeping time on the cover.

As for the U.S. poets—they were generally studied as a Yankee preoccupation, practicality and honest cunning. Hence Emerson and Frost and even Cummings. The young Vancouvers were aware that a few eccentric relatives were hidden in the attic or cellar—William Blake in England, Emily Dickinson in New England.

So the young Vancouvers did not choose the margin. They grew up in small towns beside rivers in the Interior. When they came to the city in 1957 and 1958 they were eager for poetry and they were naive about its domicile. They were, you might say, green, or ripe for postmodernism. They were thousands of miles from history. Vancouver was a big city, it seemed to them, but it had no skyscrapers. Downtown, among the tallest buildings, they could still smell the sea’s salt and creosote. From West Point Grey, where the university was, they could see more forest than city, mountains with ocean at their feet.

They sensed, beneath their new sophistication, that the ancient world was not theirs, but the Quaternary was. As for history, they had to arrange it themselves. In a bit of gentrified forest on the edge of the UBC campus, one could kick leaves aside and discover a plaque on the ground, on which was inscribed the information that late in the eighteenth century here occurred a meeting between a Spanish captain and an English captain, known to the young poet only as a nearby geographical denomination. Around here, history, like most things, was makeshift, amateur, in comparison with what we knew was back east. Like a plywood cafe in Kispiox as opposed to a wise-crack deli in New York.

It was in a lecture about history that we first read Olson’s use of the term “postmodern.” Earlier (August 1951) Olson wrote a wonderful long letter to Louis Martz and Robert Creeley about “the very expansions which post-modern life have [sic] involved us, severally, in.” Some of the expansions involved ontological time: “the job now is to be at once archaic and culture-wise—that they are indivisible—then where is the principle of function from which verse (anyway) can be written so that the balancing on a feather which make [sic] this
simultaneous act possible can be achieved."² Certainly, in Olson’s view, not in
the personae adopted for a while by Eliot and Pound.

Some of the expansion involved what the critics three decades later would call
the trespassing of genres, though they would often be misusing that noun, where
they should have used the one Olson uses: "so far as verse goes, this seems to me
so huge a thing that the old three—lyric, epic & dramatic—don’t serve at all: that
is, a novel has already shown that these descriptions are only such, that they don’t
isolate modes nor do they any longer cover such a function as the increase of
critique in verse establishes." For Olson that critique is a necessary response to
the huge increase in the quantity of information characteristic of "post-modern
life." It is what carries us beyond the hermeticism and detachment of Modernism:
"the function of critique is more than the mere one of clarities (as, say, Flaubert,
& Mme Sand), it is even showing itself in the very form of our address to each
other, and what work goes along with it."

Compare Rilke’s view of Cézanne, whom he praises for his inability to
theorize the social or even aesthetic implications of his work: "Whoever
meddles, arranges, injects his human deliberation, his wit, his advocacy, intel­
lectual agility in any way, is already disturbing and clouding their activity.
Ideally a painter (and, generally, an artist) should not become conscious of his
insights: without taking the detour through his reflective processes, and incom­
prehensibly to himself, all his progress should enter so swiftly into the work that
he is unable to recognize them in the moment of transition."³

There are still many poets in Canada who would agree in their less elegant
fashion with that beautiful romanticism. When the tyros in Vancouver began to
produce Tish their "poetry newsletter" in 1961, they filled it with their youthful
theorizing, in both prose pieces and poems, which were often addressed to one
another:

FOR R.D.
as Pound to you
you to me
I hear the final word
fear false admittance

'a blind bird in a bird bath'

the paths lead backwards in time
word mimicry of magical minds
come to me through the open window
cool September breeze remember me?

GEORGE BOWERING

not forgetting your truthful angels, Rilke
but they seduced my thoughts a few years back
and I roved too far by their bewitchery
which walking of the mind was with

‘darkness behind closed eyes’

led into back tracks of the past
seemingly a blind bird bathing
just a few days ago... 4

From other parts of Canada, mainly the centres of Montreal and Toronto, these
tyros received messages mocking their seriousness, especially their notion that
the activity of poetry was something other than instinctual. Even Bill Bissett,
brom whom many readers would place among the avantgardistas of sixties Vancouver,
called one of his books What poetiks (1967).

No Canadian critic has produced more titles concerning postmodernism than has
Linda Hutcheon of the University of Toronto. Like the Europeans, she has found
it more rewarding to work with fiction than with poetry (though she always
reminds readers that the condition includes a blurring of the boundary between
them). Her favourite subjects are parody and what she terms “historiographic
metafiction.”5 Charles Olson, in 1956 at Black Mountain College, gave a series
of lectures with the Einsteinian title “The Special View of History” in which he
radicalized that last term. He counters the post-Trevelyan drift of the discipline
toward science and then the social sciences by redefining: “Let me try it this way:
that a life is the historical function of the individual. History is the intensity of
the life process—its life value.”6 A human is not an object of a force called
history, not an example of “mankind.” A man is “no trope of himself as a
synecdoche of his species, but is, as actual determinant, each one of us, a
conceivable creator” (49). Elaborations of such a position will be seen in the
writings of several important Vancouver poets and critics to come.

Says Olson for the age that was learning to live after Einstein’s 1904 special
view: “it does need to be noticed that the present is post the Modern.” For Olson
the present proposes something after Einstein closed the Kosmos, something
human and political, an argument to be taken up in the eighties by the Language
poets, forty long years after the RAF bombed the treasure-house of Dresden.
Olson: “art was never any more, and can be nothing other than the order of man,
specifically man, and not nature, not history, not a creator God... a concept of
order which is different from that one which the attention to Kosmos involved
man in, succeeding phases, from the 6th century B.C. to the 20th A.D.” (47).

In the early sixties the young Vancouvers were reading Olson as much as they
could, quoting him innocently, holding discussions about his pronouncements.
They found him very difficult to read, this huge Yankee, but they knew that he

was announcing the “new.” They saw him as a development of what they admired in Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams (whom their professors discounted). They did not fret much about Modernism and postmodernism.

But Olson’s poems, especially the last poems, were a lot different from Ezra Pound’s (though there was something interesting in the fragmentary strophes or syntax in the very last poems of Pound and Williams). They seemed to trail away, often, into bits of music or argument over the night waves. Scornful academics called them “notes for poetry.” It became impossible to tell where Olson had “broken” into verse out of, say, a letter or an essay. At a reading it was hard to tell when Olson had “broken” into poetry out of the talk between poems. All of it, verse and other, seemed perpetually unfinished, perhaps always ready to be taken up again. His early Maximus poems are called “letters” to his townspeople and others. For my magazine Imago I received a poem from Olson, part of a handwritten letter. He asked for its return because it was his only, spontaneous copy. So it appeared, because I took the care to commit it back to the mails, in the collected Maximus Poems.

The European theoreticians, Barthes and Benveniste, for instance, have taught their subscribers to pay attention to the written more than the oral use of language, to the discourse without the moment of uttering. People began writing letters to make the latter possible. Olson, in conceiving his task as personal écriture, at once casts aside the Modernist’s mask and the lyric voice of poets like Dylan Thomas and Marianne Moore. The most enigmatic of his early poems, “The Kingfishers,” is an attestation of constant change:

But the E
cut so rudely on that oldest stone
sounded otherwise,

was differently heard

and ends with an image of the poet as reader: “I hunt among stones.”

In reading, says Olson often, the individual can situate himself all through the Pleistocene. History seen as objective science suggests an order characterized by end, by aim. There are ideologues, for instance, who include the future in their structuring of historical pattern. Giving oneself over to a sense of history as “the intensity of the process” is to imagine living in the Quaternary, not for instance the “postwar” world. Vancouver poet Frank Davey used to counter eastern Canada’s historical marginalization of the west coast by saying that, while the piled stones of Montreal may be hundreds of years old, the rocks on his favourite sea-cliff were pre-Cambrian. Not a house in sight; only readable signs left by the ice age.

For a while Davey called his view “myth,” an old usage running counter to “history,” and started a late-sixties poem called “Sentences of Welcome”:

Where there are rocks in the valleys of the waves.
Lichen, seabirds, cling to my words,
cling for air. There are dolphins, porpoises,
whales within my breath. Their green flanks
are stained with oil. The small fish
& plankton in their bellies
send strange odors to their mouths.

These words
would find their form around the planet,
make sentences of welcome. 8

The spatial equivalent of history is geography, and while the young Vancouvers were fascinated with maps, often putting them on the covers of their books and magazines, they felt about geography the way Olson did about history. Consider a section from Davey’s ironically titled “A Light Poem”:

I want you
to see.
To see that darkness, cast beside you
by 20,000 feet of green water
standing. The shadows
cast by the fish, swimming there—
one, on one, on one:
from wave to seabed
these shadows & shadows
on square inches
falling.
I want you to see.
Miles beneath your feet
there is light of unprotruded
volcanoes glowing.
I want you to worry for your feet,
for your earth,
for its awkward turning there on,
that silent fire . . . . 9

In what way is this stuff postmodern? I will leave you to come back to that question; but consider the “speaker’s” position in that passage, and the one he is urging for “you.” Not the poet as authority, not even the poet as muse-driven scribe, but the poet as reader, and the text as something that can throw light not on a topic but on the readers themselves. A few years later another young Vancouver poet-editor will call this business “context.”

THOUGH AS EARLY AS the first decade of the twentieth century conservative Catholic theologians were denouncing modernist thought in the Church, and by

the middle of the second decade they were already inveighing against "post-modernism," the young Vancouvers were innocent of such issues. They had only rough and uncanonical notions of authority, hence of tradition. It was foreign, for one thing, or other-place, or learned in suspicionable school, and in any case disparate. It was not in place; so the young Vancouvers' poems and declarations began to work on their (adopted, usually) place, Vancouver, the coast. Till then the main freight, when it was delivered, was the decayed romantic poem (see any poetry magazine from Kingston or Fredericton), a dream of representation, in which the represented is diminished by its passage through anecdotal verse:

Against the scrawny comfort of the crane-legged pier
the ship shudders, feeling the shore coils tighten.
Sullen, she subsides and the brackish port-locked water
touching tentatively, laps her sea-knowing hull.10

In such verse we are supposed to notice the uncommon descriptive language painting an impressionistic picture of an object, of a scene, to try to get at its essence the way a photograph or a quick look could not.

Somehow we feel that that does not work. Our suspicion begins when we perceive a kind of staginess, some kind of conversion. We know that the words misrepresent the ordinariness of the ship, that they are "poetry" words such as your high-school teacher would pretend to like for the length of a class. Yet they are employed to get you past the surface of the scene. You know that there is a contradiction here, a misdirection. Maybe the hope of representation is wrong. Roman Jakobson seems to make it simply so: "poetry deepens the dichotomy between signs and objects."11

To return us to history, we can see that Claude Simon said something similar about time: "Proust's 'Recherche' didn't lead him to regain time, but to produce a written object which has its own temporality."12

So did the Vancouver poets of the sixties understand this autonomy of the written text? Certainly they were hostile to the New Critics' objectification of the poem, probably because it did not work for anything but the lyric, partly because the poems written by some of the New Critics were boring, and partly because New Criticism had been the hot system for the earlier generation who had become their teachers at UBC.

Still, the young Vancouvers, if they did not know the nomenclature, and if they had encountered Saussure only in their linguistics classes, were persuaded by their reading of Williams and Creeley that the action in the poem was the phenomenon their readers would encounter, that the human poet, not the landscape, was what would be represented. Perhaps more than one of them took Robert Duncan's advice and went to Gertrude Stein to read what she had to say on the topic:

If poetry is the calling upon a name until that name comes to be anything if one goes on calling on that name more and more calling upon that name as poetry does then poetry does make of that calling upon a name a narrative it is a narrative of calling upon that name. 13

Gertrude Stein is the Modernist who has remained most interesting to the newest postmodernists. That is interesting, of course, for reasons of gender, and also because she made and makes an alternative, say, to the totalizing James Joyce: “A great deal perhaps all of my writing of The Making of Americans was an effort to escape from this thing to escape from inevitably feeling that anything that everything had meaning as beginning and middle and ending.”

Not all the poets around Tish or their associates downtown were reading Gertrude Stein in 1962, but they were reading Olson, and he had his own way of renouncing the classic beginning-middle-end formula: “If there is any absolute, it is never more than this one, you, this instant, in action.” 14 Olson’s famous open parenthesis is probably the most recognizable—and aped—orthographic signature of the movement he seemed to lead.

What distinguished the poets of that movement, the New York ones and the Vancouver ones, was their instantism, as it has been called, compositional decisions made (and seen to be made) in and by the poem too quick to be shaped by a will that would put poetry at the service of an already held opinion or program, yet made by the linguistic suggestions there in the poem-so-far. Poetry that races to elude the authority of the poet herself. Not poems made to express the poet’s point of view. Poems trying to trace their own autonomy. Such poems, like any, can be good or bad. The postmodernist’s skill resembles the post-swing jazz player’s improvisation, bop to free to whatever they are playing now. Playing the work.

Consider the instantism, and consequent delicacy and accuracy, in part of a 1973 poem by Daphne Marlatt (who as a high-school girl came to the Vancouver region from another English discourse):

Somehow they survive, this people, these fish, 
survive the refuse bottom, filthy water, their choked lives,  
in a singular dance of survival, each from each. At the  
narrows, in the pressure of waves so checked & held by  
“deep-sea frontage” it’s the river’s push against her, play of  
elements in her life comes rolling on, hair flying. In gumboots,  
on deck with rubber apron (“it’s no dance dress”), she’ll take  
all that river gives, willing only to stand her ground (rolling,  
with it, right under her feet, her life, rolling, out from under,  
right on out to sea....” 15

Ellipsis leads as does the river, this poem that is two decades later yet undergoing change. In a previous long poem, Rings, which is concerned with marriages, births, and other departures, Marlatt said: “There is no story only the telling with

Marlatt is likely the best example of the postmodern Vancouver poet of the seventies, always doubling back and backing doubles. She delights in ambiguity, not to deploy Empsonian erudition so much as to show the writer as a person in the excitement of composition, provisional and open to qualification and increment rather than revision. Any reader reading the last pages of *The Waste Land* suspects that Eliot had in mind from the beginning bringing his fisher king to the shore with the arid plain behind him.

Some say that Modernism came to an end, or became a relic, with the 1945 atomic bomb. Some of the Bauhaus buildings survived the Allied air raids, of course, and some were erected after the war, especially at the edges of empires. So in poetry. There are poets in Canada, including Vancouver, who are even writing and publishing poems in the Hardy mode or the Frost method, leaving off the end-rime that gave them their music. Some poets fancy a dichotomy between the avant-garde and their politics, what they call progressive poetry. As Hardy stood against Modernism, so they stand Neruda and themselves against postmodernism. The highly political Language poets will counter that any poetry that does not criticize the conventions of poetic utterance is a perpetuation of the status quo. What of the readers who want poems they can “understand”? Their poets run the political risk of remaining satisfied to restate stuff the managers have managed to live with, no threat, comfortably discounted.

One might ask: when you seize the means of production, why would you keep it going as it has been going? The Georgian poet who wrote “Nay, nay, sweet England, do not grieve! Not one of these poor men who died/ But did within his soul believe/ That death for thee was glorified” would probably not have or pretended to have held quite such sentiments if he had figured out, as Eliot did, why poetry in the twentieth century had to be difficult.

Had to be new. Roland Barthes once put the question into clear anti-perspective: “The New is not a fashion, it is a value, the basis of all criticism. . . . There is only one way left to escape the alienation of present-day society: to retreat ahead of it: every old language is immediately compromised, and every language becomes old once it is repeated. . . . The stereotype is a political fact, the major figure of ideology.” Make it new, said Ezra Pound, way back then, and for the poets that would mean make it a way newer than Pound’s.

Twenty years after “a particular group of young people who were writing” and inventing Imagism in 1912, Pound insisted on the moving image rather than the “handiest and easiest” stationary image. Twenty years later again Olson wrote, you will recall, “If there is any absolute, it is never more than this one, you, this instant, in action.” We have looked at the instant; now let us look at the “you.” Readers of Olson’s “Projective Verse” will know that he is not suggesting the ego

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17. Walter de la Mare, “How Sleep the Brave.”
as absolute, but rather the "you" that can be perceived only as it is in action, what would become known in the Olson lexicon as proprioception.

That sense is treated very well in one highly intuitive essay about the first wave of postmodern Vancouver poets, Warren Tallman's "Wonder Merchants" (1972). Tallman tends to use his own terminology, he calls the young Vancouver poets "modernists," and his writing is innocent of the taxonomy of the European-influenced discourse crowd—but his essay is marvelously precognitive of the inventions to be made a decade or two later by the domestic poststructuralists.

"Wonder Merchants" is an interesting phrase. It may, to some ears, be an oxymoron. The second term might be seen, though, as related to the word tradition. Tallman is interested in the community fashioned by the young Vancouvers, the Tish poets and others such as David Bromige, Bill Bissett, Roy Kiyooka, Gerry Gilbert, et al. He begins by relating Vancouver to Olson's Gloucester: "Eventually the city looks out through his eyes, speaks through his voice, remembers through his memory, has its meetings in his person. Having no whisper of influence at city hall, his voicings nonetheless were the politics of the place."20

I do not know whether Tallman is right, but I certainly think that this trope is more like the experience of making a city and its poems than the typical noticing or wilful lyric, say "With the coming of night./ Vancouver has donned a garment of stars" (A.M. Stephen, "Vancouver"). Young David Cull would compose a book of verse entitled The City in Her Eyes. A very early Marlatt poem about the Georgia Viaduct says: "i'm all bridge/ today, even rail/ road we somehow/ more than leaving indicates/ both love...."21 Fred Wah's title poem "Among" begins "The delight of making inner/ an outside world for me/ is when I tree myself."22 That odd verb is the perfect rejoinder to that sensibility intent on describing.

Of course there are at least two Vancouver cities, and one of them is inhabited by crooked stockbrokers and car dealers, hustlers and illiterates, a million people who do not know about the city that has been built stone by stone in the poems. There are also other kinds of poets. Tallman takes Irving Layton as a prime example of the poet who is egoceptive rather than proprioceptive: "he has concentrated on himself as object and scarcely at all upon the language innovations necessary in order to enter Modernist writing." That kind of poet celebrates individuality, alienation, and humanism. His sentence might be "I placed/ my hand/ upon/ her thigh."

Tallman reparses the sentence this way: "Self is subject, writing is verb and the object is life, to be as fully alive as one can manage by way of sight, hearing, thinking, feeling, speaking—that is, writing. The reader becomes the respondent, hopefully the correspondent." Poems as letters—in later years Frank Davey and Fred Wah would invent an electronic literary journal for E-mail poetry.

Davey, a west coast poet who took the margin to "central" Canada with him,
quite early saw the explosion of electronic information as a wild updating of Olson's observation that quantity created postmodern life. In his introduction to *From There to Here* (1974) Davey sees that the proliferation of "microelectronic technology" has "disappointed rationalist views of reality, and decentralized rather than centralized political and cultural power." Little presses sprang up a long way from Toronto, and there was a revolution in printing costs. The means of production were no longer to be controlled by a few "professional" publishing "houses" in the old centre. At the same time the expansion of opportunity led to artists crossing formal boundaries, poets taking up video cameras, novelists designing books, painters mixing media. Then, if the boundaries between media were assailable, what chance did the borders between genres have? Art movements themselves became many and elastic; once they were said to succeed their parents as Vorticism succeeded Imagism—now they could spring up as siblings, parallel and multifoliate. Many observers see that development as a main feature of postmodemism in the arts.

Davey recalls Eli Mandel's 1966 declaration that the new writing is "beyond system." Mandel's words signaled his desire to escape his reputation as a poet who had learned from Northrop Frye, or had been created by the Frye circle in the heart of the university in the heart of the city in the heart of the country. He was beginning to write as a marginalized poet, a short, football-loving Jew from rural Saskatchewan. Davey welcomed Mandel's move, and said that criticism should not be "systematic analysis and explication," but a (perhaps) irrational response "which does not attempt to impose on individual works or on art itself a structure of reason or indeed a pattern of any kind except that of perception." That would be the response of Tallman's "correspondent," the person who extends the text rather than making conclusions from it. Such a vision insists that the text is not just an autonomous piece of writing. Tallman had said that the Vancouver writing he was interested in differed from Eastern (central) writing in this way—that it was writing not as a literary activity but as life-living.

Davey also invokes Marshall McLuhan, of course, and calls his time "a decentralized, 'post-electric,' post-modern, non-authoritarian age." As soon as the centre will not hold some people in the centre regret that stability, while some people on the edge welcome the change. Robert Scholes has a nice way of describing the former feeling, especially as it affects teachers: "The entire edifice of American instruction in written composition rests on a set of assumptions much like Ezra Pound's. We have all been brought up as imagists. We assume that a complete self confronts a solid world, perceiving it directly and accurately, always capable of capturing it perfectly in a transparent language: bring 'em back alive; just give us the facts, ma'am; the way it was; tell it like it is; and that's the way it is." (Scholes has a flair, and his remarks are useful, but he does seem to have missed Pound's remarks about the stationary image.) Tallman was right to

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imagine the revolution as a revisioning of grammar.

As fans of the postmodern say, multiplicity replaces unity, difference replaces authority. In 1973 Davey put the change neatly. In opposition to Modernism’s complex unity, “in the postmodern world of counterpointing influences, centres, and traditions, the claim that a single tradition can be central or orthodox has become meaningless.” But just such a claim was being made all through the seventies. It was called “The Canadian Tradition,” and it was being touted in English departments in Ontario and the Eastern Townships, where the stones were at least a hundred years old. “The Canadian Tradition” involved enduring of snow and fear of wolves, and leaned toward Frye’s picture of Protestant enclaves in the landscape deep freeze. From the west edge, at least, it is not hard to see that such unitary myth-making is exclusionary. What did it say to a person such as Roy Kiyooka, whose father stood on whales in the winter rain of the northern B.C. coast? Kiyooka is the first Vancouver postmodern poet, partly because he is also deservedly celebrated as a painter, sculptor, and photographer, and he would like to persuade his audience that he is also a musician.

A typical Kiyooka book is his StoneDGloves. Kiyooka had gone to Osaka to install his brightly coloured sails at the Canadian pavilion at Expo ’70. While there he photographed gloves discarded by workers at the site. The photographs and some of his words, rendered large, made a travelling exhibition in Canadian galleries, and were translated into a book by Coach House Press, becoming another “object” of art produced by a poets’ publishing outfit that illustrates Davey’s point about counter-authority. The book is undated. This Saskatchewan-born poet, whose first language was Japanese, is excluded by that “Canadian Tradition” that boasts offshore Protestant E.J. Pratt. Even if the glove fits it will be discarded or lost one day:

I search’d another man’s painting for
the glove & found it, where
my hand’s shadow fell across his painting.25

Subject is self, verb is writing, object is life. Modernist detachment was a corrective, now corrected. Kiyooka does let pieces of things lie as they fell, or rose, but in making his art he does not stand back. In From There to Here Davey wrote: “The classical artistic concept of the totally integrated whole [see Ulysses—GB] has no incarnation in a sensory reality that is everywhere fragmented, discontinuous, post logical.” The postmodern long poem. Ed Dorn’s Gunslinger or bp Nichol’s The Martyrology, keeps abandoning its nature of address and shape, doing inside itself what Kiyooka started when he walked onto the site at Osaka. “Culture and the universe,” claimed Davey, “are randomly interacting cooperatives continually evolving new relationships and forms.” He might have been anticipating a 1988 page by Vancouver poet Dan Farrell:

Dan Farrell is associated with a group of writers, painters, video artists, and movie makers who in the eighties began to create a Vancouver as dynamic as the city bricolaged by their forebears of the sixties. These new people, including more women than one remembers from the earlier wave, have a space called, with humour, The Kootenay School of Writing, a nod to one of its origins in Nelson’s short-lived David Thompson University Centre. Most of their first books were slim volumes published by Tsunami Editions, organized by fisherman Lary Bremner. It may be a sign of the economic times that most of them do not hold or expect academic jobs. But they do engage in theory. They are smart enough to know that they must confront by difference, by technique — so they do not, as “work poets” do, relax into the forms that the institutions have vouchsafed them.

The KSW poets, like those of the sixties, share interest and venues with the poets of the U.S. avant-garde. As the sixties group found sympathy with the poets who appeared in Donald M. Allen’s anthology The New American Poetry (1960), so the later group is often associated with the poets who were collected in the L=A=N=G=U=A=L=G=E anthologies, Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, and Robert Grenier. Frank Davey’s counterpart among the KSW poets is Jeff Derksen, an intense and serious poet well grounded in theory, aware of the political inevitabilities of his craft, and given to essay writing as part of his job description. His pronouncements bear the signs of his having learned Bakhtin and Bernstein, but they also speak for a development of local principles — there are interesting similarities between Tallman’s “Wonder Merchants” and an unpublished, untitled draught essay I requisitioned from Derksen.

Tallman’s essay is intuitive, lyrical and taxonomically individual, while Derksen’s is aware of its place in the recent syntheses of discourse theory. Tallman saw Olson’s proprioception as the way to the “politics of the place.” Derksen is interested in just that problem, and like Tallman before him he goes to the English sentence to work transformation. As Tallman saw self as subject, etc., Derksen sees “the writer, as subject, correlating with place.” He praises Barry McKinnon’s Prince George book The Pulp Log for “making landscape of self.” Tallman saw the reader as correspondent and the poems as letters welcoming letters. For Derksen the poet’s act is social — the subject moves out of “linguistics” into “context.” Remember that Tallman saw his writers as preferring not literary activity but life-living. Bakhtin and Kristeva gave Derksen

some language he could use to his purpose. So the contextual performance of poetry is “dialogic meaning.” Subject alters context. “The reading becomes a contextualizing act or a social evaluation of the information.” We are some distance from the stationary Imagism that Pound saw becoming inadequate.

The Language poets and the KSW poets have no qualms about knowing European discourse theory, and have moved further than had their predecessors away from poetry as individual expression. They treat the event of the poem as a social-political act, and often use the language of the social and economic sciences. Wary of language arts as “commodity exchange,” they oppose the low modernist poem that would view with detachment any experience, lyric, horrible, or historicized. They are still, as were their predecessors, interested in constructing the local, but they stress a local that leans toward a “social context” rather than a topography. Language, said Bakhtin, is “ideologically saturated.” State capitalism, for instance, will tolerate and encourage homogenization, as Derksen says, “verbal and ideological unification and centralization.”

The thematic criticism fostered in the Canadian Literature academy after 1967, and which made its way into the smiled-upon poetry of the seventies, was nationalistic; unfortunately, a criticism that concentrated on recognizable Canadian images and paradigms played into the hands of U.S. institutions (like the British ones during Empire) that are happy to see their language and forms spread through the white geography north of the border. Derksen’s essay addresses the problem right away: “The schema of a unitary language, either as a system or as a national language, begins the search for a unified individual to speak it.”

Hence Derksen’s poetry, for example, will break down the convention of image as example, as specific as that can be, by metaphor, generalized. No model English sentence about the mute Canadian entering the snowy forest. Derksen understands the first task of the avant-garde, the responsibility of “eccentric or idiosyncratic” poetry:

I mean a writing that would be open to breaking linguistic rules of representation and reception: a writing that tries to allow for an eccentricity of both the writer and the reader so that there can be a specific engagement of a social context that the push for universals can [not] steamroll over. This would not view writing as a condensation of images and information into a discrete linguistic package for the reader to correctly decode in order to have the text’s truths revealed. Reading would be a correlation of information within a social frame, a social evaluation, that allows for the specifics of the reader’s time and place.

One wonders, even an oldtime avant-gardist wonders: will it work? Will obviously “enigmatic” poetry make for perception of a correlative social context? At a typical KSW poetry reading, with noisy Hastings Street traffic below the windows, one will see some of the audience sporting faces trying not to show incomprehension, and lots of people, poets and others, responding enthusiastically. There are, it appears, Vancouver ears that know how to enjoy the mixture of personal and local events as *semes*, the play and slippage of signifiers (readers, listeners, as context, not even Saussurean decoders), rather than metaphors for a general human condition. The “I” is socially constituted, and during a reading the audience is doing its job. When it is tempted toward
metaphor, but has to fall back on the signifiers that only seemed to be headed in that direction, as in this piece by Lisa Robertson, one of the more “accessible” Tsunami poets:

Boycott
It is fascinating to circulate among the quietly hemmed streets when skintight jars reinvent the idea of pressing and I learn that ribbons are refreshingly submissive, compared to plastic whose vocation brims

the audience understands that the “author” as much as the words has departed from the solacing old model. She is as problematical and unstable and needful of readers’ participation as any “skintight jars.” She is words.

Derksen says that the juxtaposing of “incompatible” words, one of the most easily noticeable gambits of the Language poets, is done to “reveal the ideologies behind the statement.” Here the aging Vancouvers from the sixties are on their ground—they remember that such was both the purpose and the effect of Brion Gysin’s (who did not stay to construct Edmonton) famous cut-up method of the Beat days. Allen Ginsberg’s “hydrogen jukebox” did it for him; and one knows that Gertrude Stein’s Tender Buttons continues to do it for many readers and writers.

Nowadays there are few adults who care that Dylan Thomas was once “young and easy,” but the objects, food, and rooms of Gertrude Stein retain their fascination—because they are other, because she is among them, intersecting with them, not emitting them, not expressing herself. The all-too-common continual presenting of self as phenomenal topic rather than subject in context is worse than borrowing A.J.M. Smith’s verse forms.

There is an obvious contradiction in the city of avant-garde poetry, of the serious avant-garde art that enrolls theory. This is especially true for a “movement” such as the KSW, made by poets who are not from the academy, who proclaim social and political structures, but who compose poetry that, due to its enigmatic nature, seems to some people to be elitist. But we remember that Eliot said that serious poetry in his time had to be difficult, and Eliot became the most often imitated poet in the English-language world.

In our time, from our city, David Bromige is a key figure. In the late fifties and early sixties he was a contemporary of the Tish poets and their downtown friends. At that time he was learning to shuck the British stanza he had learned in childhood and, though sometimes seen as an imperialist voice, to attend to the local as celebrated by the young Olsonites. In “Wonder Merchants” Tallman called him “one of the most appealingly human of the west coast poets,” whose poetry “is informed by something inside that doesn’t flinch and won’t budge, I cannot bear to tell a lie.”

Bromige went from Vancouver to Berkeley, to the San Francisco of Robert

Duncan and the younger poets working out the late phases of that city’s alleged “renaissance.” In recent years Bromige has been publishing in the magazines frequented by the Language poets in the U.S. Here is something he has written about the relationship between enigma and the social context:

we begin to glimpse what is the profound vocation of the work of art in a commodity society: not to be a commodity, not to be consumed, not to be a vacation. Isn’t this the piece talking to itself, hoping to be overheard, & contradicted. Because, the interest evident in the construction, rhythm of the sentence, obviates the need for the content. (Not to deny the feelings, of course. And I, as you probably do not know, am a sucker for children in pain. 28

PEOPLE IN OTHER parts of Canada see the west coast as eccentric, even while regular national bank buildings arise between us and the westering sun. Even Europeans, reaching for the marginalized exotic, reach for Vancouver. Thus has the name of the city been used in the poems of Guillaume Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars, paid-up members of the Parisian avant-garde; they list Vancouver as a far imaginary destination. Vancouver, it would seem to people in the easts, is a place where normal authority does not quite work. That is, of course, a fable that Vancouverites like to permit. Even the less wealthy of us fill our Monday afternoon hot tubs with Perrier water.

The poets of postmodernism differ from the Modernists in this way: they question authority without having the temerity to offer another, whether Anglicanism, Fascism, history or myth. They are so much disposed against authority that they distrust any signs of it in themselves. They permit the signifiers to slip. Irony cannot, therefore, get a grip. Authors are long gone. Writers disappear among the readers. The very notion of a canon is at the best tentative. Postmodernism’s notorious self-reflexivity (a tautological term if there ever was one) is in question as the concept of self gives way to a social metasensibility. Theory is now inside the work, not a shadow before or after. If there are “truths” they are temporarily constructed, not found out. What the Bay of Pigs and the U2 spy camera confessions did for the received truths of the U.S. citizenry in the sixties, poststructuralism has done for the denizens of postmodern Vancouver and all other eccentres. Culture is a fiction, not a tradition. Boundaries are therefore flexible, at least those between forms and genres. Literary contests that offer prizes in categories called poetry, fiction, nonfiction, children’s literature, and so on, are recognizably sentimental or centrist. Difference rather than the universal is now sought: Quebec and the West are trying to show Ottawa and Toronto that it is all right to look for a postmodern federalism. Poetry is political after all.

It could be posited that Modernist poetry did not assemble an anthology in Vancouver because from 1915 to 1945 Vancouver was a hick town in which any poets were trying to be Kipling (he owned property in the neighbourhood where many of the KSW poets now live). It could be argued that Modernism could not

The Modernists gathered fragments of old traditions, built deep intricate forms to urge their faith in fixed systems, order, wholeness. The postmodernists replace faith with doubt, and complex depth with complex surface. They also accept those things once thought to be failures: contingency, multiplicity, fragmentation, discontinuity. The Modernists knew those things as method but not as belief, not, surely, as desiderata.

So the ambiguous relationship everyone notices—postmodernism contradicts Modernism while extending it. Modernism’s priests, Eliot, Pound, Joyce, are succeeded by secular folk. Writing is a signifying practice rather than a scribe’s service. Our city is not far from a plate tectonic faultline. Destabilizing in our poetic community has been brought about gladly by an understanding of poems as (con)texts rather than words on the wall or in the Book, whether the latter be the Bible or the Norton.

Robert Duncan, whose visits to Vancouver were so generative, said “those of us who are addicted to fabrication believe that the entire universe is truly a fabric, made-up, and that we are consequently in tune with it.” There we are, retreating in front of the Modernists, and sneaking up behind them.

The city looking out from the poet’s eyes. Robin Blaser moved from San Francisco to Vancouver in the mid-sixties and has been a ludic figure here ever since. He has never described the scene, but he has been writing it all this time. Here is the end of Part 17 of his ongoing “Image-Nation” poem:

the sacred returns with all its faces,  
fiery-footed

the fiery dew of the streets, coloured
by oil-slicks and dawn, leads down

to the sea at a snail’s pace who
looks wishly upon it, unlocks the lock-hole

of the chest again I slept,
the prose thought, and it seemed to me
that eyelids wept.  