

The “Contemporary Postmodern Avant-Garde”: An Interview with Stephen Cain

By Jordan Berard

Stephen Cain is the author of *American Standard / Canada Dry* (Coach House, 2005), *Torontology* (ECW, 2001) *dyslexicon* (Coach House, 1999), and the co-authored *Double Helix*, with Jay MillAr (Mercury 2006). He is also a professor at York University.

Following the University of Ottawa’s 2008 Canadian Literature Symposium, “Re: Reading the Postmodern,” I had a chance to interview poet [Stephen Cain](#). Knowing that some of Stephen’s most creative work, including *Double Helix*, his recent collaboration with Jay MillAr, was produced through e-mail, I decided to conduct this interview accordingly. The result is an interview that explores the informal formalities of e-mail, the postmodern condition, the role of the contemporary poet-critic, and the influence of the streets of Toronto.

JB: *In side/lines: A New Canadian Poetics (edited by Rob McLennan), you mention in your “Poetics Statement” that a certain amount of artistic freedom can be obtained, paradoxically, by setting up certain “constraints” or “parameters” before you begin to write. How does this belief shape a work like Double Helix, for example, where you and Jay MillAr take turns meditating, via e-mail, on a word that begins with a set letter of the alphabet. What is the difference between writing free-verse poems in which you allow yourself to write whatever you want, and poems, like those found in Torontology, that are shaped by a minor, implicit constraint? Do you prefer one of these writing methods to the other?*

SC: What we learned from Surrealism (and to a lesser extent from the Beat poets) is that there really is no such thing as automatic writing, or spontaneously-generated writing. No matter how “loose” or “free” you think you are being in your composition you are always going to be drawn back into set rhythms, sonic patterns, textual images, and verbal inflections. Various techniques were then developed to counter this inevitability, such as Gysin’s cut-ups and fold-ins, and the increasingly elaborate chance procedures of Cage and Mac Low which effectively reduced authorial intervention to a nullity.

The Oulipian constraint has seemed to me to be the happy medium between these two practices. You set up a limitation, or series of restrictions, but then within those constraints there is some room for free-play and individual volition. This has been the process from *Torontology* onward, and is definitely my preferred methodology.

I suppose where I differ from traditional Oulipo, however, is that I use the constraint to generate the poem, but then often abandon the restriction at the editing stage. The finished poem then has some elements of constraint, but also the “organic” element of creative and “free” intervention.

So, for example, in *Double Helix*, I initially had each entry based on an acrostic of the title, and each entry being 250 words long. In the final published version you can see that very few entries have kept that constraint, but shadows of that process are quite visible in my sections.

JB: *What is it about e-mail as a medium for artistic expression and communication that appeals to you? Obviously, in the case of Double Helix, e-mail offered a quick way for two poets living in different cities to collaborate, but is there something more to it? How did junk e-mail become the impetus for writing "The Viagra Monologues" in American Standard / Canada Dry?*

SC: Besides the convenience of email (you can write it at any time, save it, edit it, send it off and have it reach the reader instantly; all of which are also “dangers” of the medium) what’s attracted me to email is its combination of the quotidian and the formal. It really is a form of intermedia where you get the immediacy of voice combined with the precision of type. So I find you can get slang and informal diction at one moment and then all the formalities of the traditional epistle at the next.

I’m also interested in making manifest and material what is normally invisible and disregarded. In the last decade email has become so ever-present that aspects of it go unnoticed—like the spam and junk mail that we delete daily (hourly?) before getting the to “real” messaging of the day (moment?). So, the “Viagra Monologues” was initiated when I started noticing all these wonderful words that I was being sent daily in message headings and bodies as advertisers sought a way to escape the email filters. This first attracted me because it reminded me of Dewdney’s concept of the parasite evading the governor, but then it seemed to resemble an even more classical paradigm—it was like being given a direct gift from a material muse. Each day I involuntarily received strange words and evocative images. How could I resist such a seductive imperative?

JB: *What is the biggest challenge of working on a collaborative collection like Double Helix? Do you ever worry that your individual voice or writing style is being compromised as a result of working collaboratively, or do you get a sense of, perhaps, creating a unique third voice through the text—a voice that combines your own with your collaborator's?*

SC: The idea behind *Double Helix* was definitely to reach a “third mind” state (as Burroughs and Gysin elaborate in their collection of the same name) but it certainly wasn’t immediate upon the first moment of collaboration. Initially, I think, we wrote in what we might call, for lack of a better word, “our own voices,” but later we noticed (and both remarked) that we were writing more in each other’s voices than our own. It was only after this point that the voices merged into a third mind type position, so really it was a three stage process.

Normally the biggest challenge in collaboration is getting to a position of commitment and trust (hey, that sounds familiar...) where the other writer is as keen to do the project with you as you are, and is open to new directions. With Jay that was never a problem, as we’ve known each other for years, have edited each other’s work, and have had hours and hours of conversations about the subject. So, in this case, the biggest challenge has probably been promoting the book. It’s difficult to sell a book that appears to be only partly yours at individual readings or events, and most readers seem to want to dissect who wrote which section, rather than enjoying the project as a whole.

JB: *At the Canadian Literature Symposium, “Re: Reading the Postmodern,” a majority of the critics and writers in attendance identified themselves, or identified the writers that they wrote about in their papers, as belonging to one of two distinct groups: the “Canadian Postmodern” writers, and the avant-garde writers. This symposium made me realize that, more often than not, avant-garde writers are engaging in a type of post-postmodernism, or even an anti-postmodernism. In your opinion, is there a difference between the postmodern and the avant-garde? Are they necessarily mutually exclusive? And if so, how would you classify your own work?*

SC: I think there is a significant difference between the avant-garde and the postmodern. The avant-garde is a militant historical phenomenon beginning with the Symbolists in the late 19th century and continuing through Cubism, Futurism, Dada, Expressionism, and Surrealism. It is almost always combative and oppositional, and strives to shock the bourgeoisie in order to change society in political and material ways. It really doesn't have much relevance post-WWII, although I'm currently teaching a course called “Avant-garde Movements after 1945” which traces groups such as Cobra, the Lettristes, Fluxus, the Situationist International, the Black Arts Movement, Oulipo, and the LANGUAGE poets which, although not as radical as the early avant-garde, expand upon, or critique these earlier movements.

So, for myself, I use the term avant-garde as intellectual short-hand to discuss those writers I find innovative and who continue to experiment with language in order to challenge readers' expectations which should, in turn, provide the tools, or at least the psychological or cognitive conditions, necessary to change social and political formations.

Postmodern writers can be avant-garde, but there is no imperative for them to be so. There are writers who both explore the postmodern condition (skepticism of metanarratives; problematizing ontology and epistemology) both intellectually and formally (through disjunctive structures and polygeneric investigation), and these would include writers like Nicole Brossard, Andre Alexis, Gail Scott, Michael Turner, Lynn Crosbie, and Derek McCormack.

But there are also writers who are postmodern without being avant-garde. These would be writers who describe and narrate the postmodern condition, without engaging linguistically or materially with what it really means to be postmodern. That is, they write *about* postmodernism without acknowledging the poststructuralist critique of signification, and we can find this tendency in the work of authors like Atwood, Findley, Richler, or Gowdy. Finally, there are those writers who are living within the postmodern condition but who refuse to engage with any of the issues or imperatives of that state, and who write as if Modernism, let alone Postmodernism, never occurred: Jane Urquhart or Carmine Starnino for example.

If there is a contemporary postmodern avant-garde, it would include writers who are self-consciously responding to, or see themselves within a lineage with previous avant-garde movements and tendencies, but who use these techniques to expose and explore the current postmodern condition. I think of people like Christian Bök, Erin Mouré, Chris Dewdney, Lisa Robertson, or Steve Venright.

JB: *Many of the postmodern and avant-garde writers who were in attendance at the Symposium fall under the category of poet-critics. Do you consider yourself to be a poet-critic? Is the transition from poetry to criticism a difficult one for you to make? Do you see criticism as an inevitable task (or an obligation, perhaps) of your poetry? What do you think the role of the contemporary poet-critic should be?*

SC: For some reason I find it difficult to think of myself as a poet-critic. Something about that denomination makes me think of the “good old boys” of English letters, the gentleman-scholar-poet type thing that just drives me insane. The Matthew Arnolds, T.S. Eliots, Ezra Pounds and, in the Canadian context, E.J. Pratts, A.J.M. Smiths, and Carmine Starninos.

But yes, pairing poetry and criticism seems a natural connection, and I can’t say I haven’t been influenced by Eliot, Pound, and the high Modernists (both European and North American). But I have been inspired even more strongly by those poets whose criticism is bombastic and who work to disrupt conventions of reviewing and critiquing. I’m thinking of the manifestos and critical work of people like Breton, Marinetti, Lewis, Cravan, Khlebnikov, or Apollinaire.

I see that tendency (and with *much* better politics) in contemporaries like Charles Bernstein, Steve McCaffery, Daphne Marlatt, Lisa Robertson, and Jeff Derksen, and it’s poet-critics like that who I strive to align my work with. Bernstein especially has the concept that poetics is politics by other means that I find appropriate to my practice which attempts to be open to activist exploration. In short, I admire, and attempt to emulate, those poet-critics who problematize the categories of both poetry and criticism.

JB: *Related to the above question, how does your experience as a professor of modern and avant-garde literature affect the way you think about, and write, your own poetry? Have any of your poetic works ever been inspired by something that you, or a student of yours, said in class? Do you ever use your classes as an opportunity to workshop some of your own projects?*

SC: “A History of Canada” was partly inspired by teaching Canadian Studies courses at Seneca College and Wilfrid Laurier University. While a couple of the ideas came from tutorial discussions and exam answers, it was more a result of reading Canadian historical texts again, and trying to make the material accessible for ESL students (at Seneca) and first years (at WLU). That experience, combined with my affection for George Bowering’s *Short Sad Book*, Frank Davey’s *Louis Riel Organ & Piano Co.* and Bill Hutton’s *History of America*, resulted in my poetic response to Canadian nationalism at a time when nationalism(s) and historical loyalties (Canada’s participation and/or cooperation in the Iraq invasion and missile defence systems) were being invoked far too frequently and unproblematically.

Currently, teaching avant-garde literature has given me the privilege of revisiting a lot of material I had read quickly and voraciously in my younger days. I now have the luxury to read slowly in preparation for teaching the material. This has given me many new insights and through-lines into some wonderful material; as the adage goes, you never really know a text until you try to teach it. I have certainly been given a new respect and affection for my young love affairs—Jarry, Marinetti, Breton, Tzara, Stein, Rimbaud, Mayakovsky, Loy, Apollinaire, Artaud, Acker, Burroughs, Isou, Higgins, Cage, Bataille, Baraka, Debord—who are now all finding their way into my current creative writing projects.

JB: *Your recently published article in Open Book Toronto, “[A Textual Excursion Around the Annex](#),” offers readers a literary tour of an area of the city that has been a hotbed of inspiration for contemporary experimental and avant-garde writers. How has living in Toronto, surrounded by such a strong literary culture, shaped your own writing? Do you consider your poetry to be a celebration of Toronto, or a criticism of it? I’ve always enjoyed the works of “literary-*

cartographers” like Dionne Brand (What We All Long For), and Lynn Crosbie (“Alphabet City”), whose poetry and fiction provide an almost Joycean psychogeography of the city.

SC: I can certainly say that I would not be the writer I am today (whether that be for good or ill) without moving to Toronto in the early 1990s. While I had always had a great affection for the city having grown up in nearby Oshawa, in my teenage years it was mostly a site for the exploration of capitalist decadence (going to head shops, buying rock t-shirts and CDs, getting served underage, and so on).

It was only when I came to the city to undertake graduate studies that I really began to appreciate the multiplicity and beauty that can be found in Toronto beyond the Yonge Street strip. As I began to explore (and often live in) various neighborhoods, the influence of these spaces began to permeate my writing in profound ways. These have been, in roughly chronological order, and beginning with my first chapbook, *a no(u)n*: the Yonge St. strip; the Annex; Kensington Market; the Little Italy of College St.; the northern Italian St. Clair strip; Roncesvalles/ Parkdale; and, most recently, the Junction/ High Park. I’m also attracted to, and have written about, areas of Toronto that I haven’t lived in, like points along the Lakeshore (especially the Martin Goodman trail) and New Toronto; Cabbagetown and Little India; Greektown and Queen East; the Leslie Spit and the Scarborough Bluffs; and, the Bayview Village and Mount Pleasant strip. Similarly, I have odd, fetishistic attractions to certain “monuments” in the city such as: the CN Tower, the Toronto Islands, the Princess Gate, the TTC, Casa Loma, Mount Pleasant Cemetery, High Park, and the Winston Churchill Reservoir.

But almost as important as the city itself was the people I met when I moved to Toronto who all radically altered my poetic practice (through conversation, example, and experience). The first were those I met in the grad program in English at York University, especially Christian Bök, Michael Holmes, Steve Hayward, and Chris Eaton. This circle would eventually include faculty, undergraduates, and younger grad students, all of whom would influence and inspire me including: Suzanne Zelazo, Steve McCaffery, Karen Mac Cormack, Kyle Buckley, Angela Rawlings, Jason Christie, and Ray Ellenwood.

Then there were the writers I met downtown, who were important examples of literary activism through small press publishing and editing. I’m thinking of people like Bill Kennedy, Jay Millar, John Barlow, Nicky Drumbolis, Natalee Caple, Lynn Crosbie, and Damian Lopes. And of course, there were the literary “ghosts” of Toronto—those who have passed, yet whose absence is felt and still shapes the various literary communities in the city, especially bpNichol, Daniel Jones, Matt Cohen, and Gwendolyn MacEwen.

In the 1990s, there were also great readings going on, such as the Blancmange/ Torpor-Vigil series (run by Steve Venright) and the Idler (during the Stan Rogal years), which grew into things like the Scream in High Park (with artistic director Peter McPhee) and the Lexiconjury (curated by Kennedy and Rawlings). And one can’t forget the exciting small press serials like *Oversion*, *Queen Street Quarterly*, and jwcurry’s various projects (whilst he was living in Toronto).

I’ve done something Toronto-based, often psychogeographic, and almost always celebratory, in each of my collections. In *dyslexicon*, the “a no(u)n” section, features Steinian portraits of various Toronto locales (such as Toronto Island, and the Idler Pub) and the opening and closing sections of *Torontology* are structured on movement through Toronto (as well as several outside locations). *Double Helix* has several meditations on Toronto (often in contrast to Kingston) while “Stop & Go to Slow” (in *American Standard/ Canada Dry*) is very

psychogeographic—although utilizing an automobile, rather than pedestrian activity, to uncover random poetic elements of the city.

But perhaps these poetic invocations have been rather hermetic. In the future I plan to revisit a project that Sharon Harris and I have been working on which combines photography and poetry about specific Toronto locales (which we are currently clustering under the title *phoTOs*).

JB: *What are you currently working on, and how (if at all) does it relate to your past work?*

I'm working on a few things at the moment, and they do seem to connect with my past work, and to many of the issues you raised in this interview. The first is finishing a second draft of a novel about Toronto in the mid-1990s, which contains psychogeographic moments and formally moves from Modernist concerns to Postmodernist ones as the narrative progresses. I'm also working on *Mortar*: an anthology of "lost" avant-garde Canadian poetry, some of which has never been translated before which is causing me to brush up on my French, and to attempt to teach myself Ukrainian. Another ongoing project is *Collusions*, a book of 10 poetic collaborations, all of which work under various constraints (including the idea of collaborating with five women and five men). Finally, whatever writing doesn't fit under these projects is being collected in a poetry manuscript called *Post* which explores the various associations of that word from poststructuralism, postmodernism, post-LANGUAGE poetry, to whipping posts and the postal system, which would also include the web, blogs, and email: all forms of posting.

© Jordan Berard. This document and its contents may not be reproduced or distributed in whole or in part without permission from the author.