

INTERVIEW WITH GREGORY BETTS

By Lyndsay Wilson

Gregory Betts is the author of *If Language* (Book Thug, 2005), *Haikube* (2006) and is co-editor of *PRECIPICE*. He also teaches Canadian and avant-garde literature at Brock University.

LW: *Do you have a working definition of Postmodernism?*

GB: I think of postmodernism as the wilful collapse of systems, so while it can be defined, its manifestation in writing is a troubling of closure: that any sense of closure or order is an illusion provided and needed by human subjects within that order. There are many postmodernisms, however, each offering a different version of or orientation to this general troubling. They all seem attuned, however, to revealing the big (and little) lies obscured by ideology. The confusion is that postmodernism does not provide an alternative to the system it undermines, only a vantage point from which to recognize and play with hypocrisies and absurdities. In this way, like the mythological figure Coyote whom a number of Canadian postmodernists have appropriated, it is a perfect anarchist tool for cracking and opening up hegemonies and delusions. For writers, postmodernism presents a wonderful opportunity to consider and test and expose the habits and tricks of literature (and narrative, history, identity, and so on). For readers, this led to far too many insufferably solipsistic texts obnoxiously and sometimes embarrassingly focused on the “self”-flagellation of the author.

LW: *Do you intentionally avoid this “obnoxious” self-reflexivity in your poetry, or are you simply left to the whims of the moment when a poem comes to you?*

GB: I suppose I’m just getting bored with poems about poems. No doubt someone will devise an innovative means to revive the horse.

LW: *Does Canadian Postmodernism differ from “Postmodernism” as such?*

GB: The great myth is that Canada arrived too late to achieve the pastoral coherence of a distinctive folk culture. Lacking unity in all the big community orientations from race to language to religion, we shuffled from our colonial status directly into the post-national era, which made writers here particularly receptive to the implications of postmodernism. All of that is hokum, of course. Beyond the geographical determinism such thinking is based on, this narrative account of Canada's natural postmodernism conveniently forgets the country it purports to describe. We do, in Canada, have the benefit of a colonial memory which values things here only in as much as they connect here to elsewhere (where real value dwells), allowing those who desire to do so to construct a new story of the country without much resistance. The first

Canadian postmodernists thought the troubling would free Canadians to become themselves, to discover or perhaps invent a language to unify and enable us. That didn't happen. The illusions were rather deferred (i.e. a riddle: a bilingual expression of Canadian identity—NO/US).

LW: *Where does your work fit into Postmodernism, if at all?*

GB: Postmodernism, particularly its more oneiric theories, definitely influences my work, but as a problem rather than a solution. It's like walking beside a bottomless chasm. You can pretend to ignore it, but it is still there, threatening if you make a false move. Postmodernism has revealed a significant gap in the logic by which we understand ourselves and our world. As an indirect consequence, authors and theorists that have responded and presumed to overcome the abyss become all the more fascinating and improbable. In Canada, there have been three particularly elaborate and fascinating trajectories of responses to the quagmire: the idealists (from Bucke to Brooker to McLuhan), the surrealists (from Borduas to Gauvreau to Hausner), and the “pataphysicists” (from Dewdney to McCaffery to Bök). My own writing falls somewhere in between and within these strands of activity.

LW: *Does your work as an academic intersect with your work as a poet? When you write, do you work with your knowledge of Canadian poetry?*

GB: On bad days, it's a day job like any other. On good days, I have the opportunity to work with interested and interesting people on topics of high interest to me. The idea of recall and influence is fascinating. I suspect everything I read alters what I write to some sublimely imperceptible degree. Most of my writing, especially my plunderverse projects, attempt to foreground that influence by writing within the text of another author—deleting letters, for instance, selectively can create a poem that ‘sounds like me’ but includes that other author even at the surface of the language. So, instead of trying to hide the writers that have influenced me somewhere behind or obscured in the text, these projects make of that a starting point and an access point into my own voice.

LW: *What impact – if any – does Canada have on your work? Does it “matter” that you're a Canadian poet? Do you think Canadians are receptive to poetry? Is it a good time to be a poet in Canada?*

GB: Well, it is far more significant in this world that it remains a bad time to be poor, as it has always been. But as your question suggests, it is a particularly good time to be a Canadian poet—not for audience attention, but for funding and acknowledgement. A publisher friend in New York runs a press that covers “The Americas,” especially Central America, but refuses to include Canadians in his series because “any Canadian with any talent in literature can get published.” The same is not true in many other parts of the world. It doesn't mean that we are producing the best literature in the world, but it does mean that it has never been easier to be a writer in this country. I'm drawn to the early Canadian writers that managed to achieve something remarkable in a decidedly hostile environment—no funding, no publishers, no little

literary mags, no big literary mags, no cheap mail service, and so on. But then again, I'm also drawn to the Sisyphus myth. In turn, just when it has become relatively easy to be a writer in this country, the audience is rolling away down the other side of the hill towards greener e-pastures.

As a Canadian myself, it doesn't "matter" to me; it is the circumstance I inherited. I've spent a lot of time trying to develop a sense of what "Canada" might possibly mean, and there are millions upon millions of possibilities. Any attempt to consolidate those possibilities into a stability is an illusion. As a writer, I'm drawn to the power of illusions—as potential realities more so than as prescriptions of the way things are. If Dion's Canada includes Quebec, my Canada includes anything that might be said.

LW: *What prompted you to use anagrams as a form of writing poetry?*

GB: The anagram is the perfect symbol of recycling in literature. It is a brand of ecological poetry that by form alone approximates nature more than any precious poem.

It's also a lot like the moment "now"—the past is locked, the future is deferred and potential; "now" is always new and magical but ultimately slippery if you try to put your finger on it. When you write anagrams you become very conscious of all of the other possible anagrams—a recombinant "future"—buried in those letters. You start to feel them speaking through the language even as you are trying to use it to say something else. The letters collapse into abstraction, and coalesce into a flash solution—a "now" emerges like an uncanny answer. But like "now," anagrams make you realize that you cannot stop language. We take photos to pretend we're stopping time. We write things down to much the same effect. Anagrams are a form of writing that somehow eludes the illusion of capturing or stopping time. They insist on rupture.

To return to the ecology of the anagram, the shifting letters push up and out like weeds from the concrete of expression.

LW: *What did you enjoy about working within the confined system of If Language?*

GB: It began by reading an essay by Steve McCaffery, then re-reading it, and gradually narrowing my focus down to a particular paragraph that evoked an opening into a new kind of writing. I wrote and rewrote and meditated on that paragraph. The anagram makes literal the economy of language that McCaffery writes about. When I learned, midway through the project, that McCaffery had not explored the anagram it seemed an even more appropriate form through which to respond to his paragraph.

LW: *What is most frustrating about composing anagrammatic poems?*

GB: It really isn't very different from any other kind of formalism. At first it feels foreign and restrictive, but once the constraint is internalized the possibilities open up. Eventually you come to realize the constraint is more akin to a frame within which all possibilities seem to explode forth in a crazy, abstract *dasein*. The human brain is the most adaptable structure on the planet.

By the end of *If Language*, I was able to compose near perfect anagrams in my head while out for a walk—a contender for the most particular and useless skill ever developed. Beyond the next edition of *If Language*, I doubt I will return to the anagram. However, I remain interested in recombinant textuality.

LW: *Have you started working on the second edition of If Language yet, or are you waiting for another piece of writing to prompt its beginnings?*

GB: Ultimately, it will be mostly tweaks to reflect some of the difference between now and then. The original book was intended for a very small, very specific audience, built upon a network and history of literary activity in a specific context. On another level, it stages a dialogue with my relationship to authors who have influenced me. Instead of hiding those influences, and wrestling with them internally, *If Language* attempts to explore that influence on the surface, in the very material of its expression. At the least, I'd hope the second edition would recognize and admit a wider conversation as its context and foundation. We'll see. I don't want to speculate too much.

LW: *I hear that you're busy working on "plunderphonic cut-ups" and "mixes" of your poems with Toronto DJ Kent Foran. What will this sound like? Will you be plundering from songs and mixing them with your own poetry, or will you be mixing around your own performances with music? What possibilities does this collaboration create for live performance?*

GB: These are fun, with lots of potential. Each one is different, but they are part of a larger eco-fantasy that imagines the destruction of a certain Ontario city via apocalyptic herbal verbiage. The collection of poems includes a kind of re-tribalization—not in the modernist sense, but in the sense of reanimating a magical engagement with environment. In a way, the earth personifies—but not as a Tolkien talking tree. It's more a sense of disintegrating personality and in the process of absolutely letting go discovering a new paradigm of consciousness. Space, geography, and environment are important instigators in that disintegration. Songs, chanting, and other musical traditions are important to the process, and also connect the fantasy to existing traditions and experiences. We've been setting these songs to music, creating a kind of disjunctive music through cut-ups and digital distortion. Sampling works with the idea of breaking down the stability of one's environment—in this case our sonic environment—and discovering in the process new expressions through the dissolution. So far we haven't explored any possibilities for live performance—one of the difficulties of living in different cities—but who knows? It remains a work in progress.

LW: *Did this "certain Ontario city" trigger your interest in "ecological poetry"? In what other ways do "eco" politics intersect with your work and life?*

GB: Ecology is, at root from the Greek *oikos*, a study of houses and dwelling places. I've always been interested in houses, not just for their architecture, but also for the abstract and emotional notion of comfort and settlement they imply. I wrote a thesis on Sheila Watson that looked at

how her Double Hook created a neighbourhood, a community that lacked that sense of settlement. Though a process of elimination, by taking things away from the community, she was trying to uncover precisely what was necessary to make a village work. She ended up with a mishmash of religions. I don't know that religions have as much claim on the needs of communities now, but it seems to me that being part of a unifying and elaborate mythos remains crucial to how we give value to our lives and, most importantly, our daily sacrifices and repressions. I'm particularly interested in how those sacrifices reappear, in how repressions reassert themselves and demand release. That's the point when rupture, madness, and psychopathy become the necessary counterpoint to their opposite. I'm particularly interested in the madness or rupture conventional language and language use depends upon.

LW: *A great deal of Canadian literature can be said to have “eco” concerns. Do you think “ecological poetry” has potential as a form of raising awareness for “green” initiatives? Do you consider your poetry to be politically motivated or aware?*

GB: All poetry and all expression can be read and used politically, interpreted through ideology. As suggested by my answer above, ecological poetry to me implies a writing that is aware of and explores/exposes/explodes the sanctity of its ideological comfort zone. If your question is really leading to wonder whether I consider myself a didactic poet, the answer would be no. I'm no collie nipping at the heels of society, trying to insist upon a certain amount of sheepishness in people. If anything, Canada needs more audacity, more absurdity. If your question is whether or not I am aware of how my use of language relates and reflects the affairs of the state into which they are evoked, the answer would be yes. Maybe, in hindsight, didactic in the sense of trying to teach myself by exploding what I know of myself in the best way I can muster.

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