

Why Poetry Failed Me and What Prose Is Trying to Do for My Writing and Me

Magdalena Zurawski

A few years ago I stopped writing poetry because it no longer used everything that I knew nor did it seem any longer that it could. And it no longer seemed to know more than I knew. I am speaking, of course, not of poetry in general, but of the poetry I was writing and, I suppose, if I am to be perfectly honest, much of the poetry that was being written in the communities around me. What I was creating as poetry functioned as form; structurally it was sound, in the sense that the words added up and when added up the sum of the writing said something, but it seemed that the writing said nothing more than that it was impossible to use language to really say anything.

Around the same time, I had gotten into the habit of publicly uttering the sentence 'I was raised by post-structuralists.' On one occasion a poetry professor replied to me, 'You say that as if you've been raised by wolves.' Well, I can't argue with her. Part of me does feel as though a good deal of the aesthetic concerns that dominated my literary upbringing are too narrow and simple to alone satisfy the criteria for a work of art. I was taught that the form was not a cosmos, should not aim to be a cosmos. To attempt to render a cosmos was both tyranny over the reader and simple fallacy. This was proven in literature class where each sentence, when examined closely, would buckle under scrutiny to reveal absolutely nothing other than its inability to hold. This fact, of course, made it ridiculous to attempt to write anything sincerely. Subjectivity had to bow out of the game or else it would be shamed by its collapsible attempt at sincerity.

I am partially to blame for the invention of the literary prescription I swallowed. I had been educated by stern Franciscan nuns for twelve years; I was (and to some degree still am) very comfortable in uniform. When I arrived at college, I found it difficult to dress myself. This applies to both body and mind. And everything I learned in my new privileged and liberal college community I reduced to an austere and parochial set of rules. I didn't want to make any mistakes as an outsider to the new culture around me, so I made sure to create laws for myself. Naturally, that was the greatest mistake I could make.

But my other instincts were correct. I loved Jack Spicer as soon as I tried to read him, though I could not understand very much of him.

The seriousness of his project appealed to me immediately. For Spicer, poetry was a matter of life and death, a way to connect this world to another one. Though the slippery side of language could turn on him, it was still his only means; it could still mean, it had to still mean.

The sacrifice the poet made, according to Spicer, was the physical. The body of the poet would be, must be, defeated and destroyed when the poet finally and truly succumbed to the role of delivering messages from the Martians – the spiritual realm – to the reader. That's what interested me most about Spicer: the destruction of the self, of the bodily self. His understanding of poetry, of the role of the poet, was created by his desire to destroy his own physical being. And his desire to destroy his body – the violence of the desire – I always intuitively understood as arising from a specific kind of self-hatred that is tied up with his queerness. The interpretation seemed taboo because it reached outside the text to the life of the poet. But since this is an essay on why I started writing prose, I'll write about it now.

I was reading Spicer as I was beginning to write seriously and to come out of the closet. Spicer's ideas about the body were familiar to me from Catholicism, but more noble because of their relationship to art. Like a gay Catholic looking for a monastery, Spicer created a vocation for himself where the body had a sexless role. He wasn't that different, in my eyes, from the frustrated butch nuns barking at me in grade school. They, too, stepped aside from their bodies in the name of a higher purpose. Spicer's vocation, though, was a legitimate one for me. It wasn't connected to any official Church authority; it was intensely intellectual and it was about art.

After Spicer there was always somewhere in my mind the idea, the fact, that the limitations of a person's body, the particulars of his or her physical placement in social space, is the means by which aesthetic philosophies are formed. Even though this idea loomed, it seemed that my poems were less grounded in the world; they were at best clever wordplay. Out of frustration I began writing prose, but only after reading Pamela Lu's and Renee Gladman's work. They helped me break down some of the rules in my head. Here they were, writing prose that utilized autobiographical information. Their work was not ironic, yet it was completely aware of the slipperiness of language. After all, they were around my age, so they had been raised by wolves, too. Interestingly enough, they were both queer writers. But the novels are not about being queer any more than Spicer's poems are about being

queer. So, yes, in some sense they are queer novels; I mean, the characters aren't closeted, the desires aren't straight, but both Lu and Gladman are interested in examining how a social body moves through both public and private space. One could argue that this concern arises from the problem of being a queer subject, but the work itself doesn't explicitly situate the problems there.

The novel that I am writing now, *The Bruise*, inspired by Lu and Gladman, seeks to map the consciousness of the narrator, a college student named M. The main character's name is my first initial and all the other characters use the other letters of my first name as their full names. I chose to use the initials in this way for two reasons. First, because I got tired of listening to my therapist say that I was every person, every character in every dream I had. Because I was creating the dream, she and Jung reasoned, I was creating every character and therefore each character was my own creation. In this way, the characters said more about me than the people in my life they resembled. I always thought this reasoning was only partially hooey, applicable to writing too, and a good loophole for my novel, should anyone I know recognize parts of themselves in the writing. If approached, I will say, 'Put all the letters together, man. Relax. It's all me, baby.' Second, when reading Blanchot's *The Space of Literature* I was struck by his description of Kafka trying to write his life into a book, but only acquiring a fragment of himself on the page: K. Blanchot describes the task of the writing as both relentless and necessary. M herself describes Kafka's experience while describing her own attempts at writing: 'But I had read that semester in a book by Maurice Blanchot who had written about Franz Kafka that that was the problem with writing that no matter how hard Jozef K tried to be Franz Kafka in the book it was still Jozef K standing at a window with his papers waiting for a clerk and not Franz Kafka sitting at a desk with a pen in his hand. And so no matter how hard someone tried to write herself into a book at night there could never be the self in a book that had sympathy for the self that was writing and this made the writing both impossible and endless ...' Writing is an existential problem. If I can't exist as I am in the world, can I exist as I am in my writing? The answer is no. And that, in some way, is also yes. If you can't exist completely in this world, you can't exist completely in writing. You are incomplete, here and there.

But why mourn this fact? I, the writer, give in to the fact that I can't be I, the character, and I let the fragment of myself become a story of

her own, though she uses whatever information I have at my disposal to tell her story, including my own life. The writing can continue using my life and anything else I know as springboards. That's what is most satisfying about this project: its ability to incorporate anything I know into the story. Adolescent poems of mine become texts that M writes. Books I am reading now become part of her college syllabus. My surreal dreams become her surreal reality. My bad dates become her good dates. My obsession with describing her room accurately becomes a marker of her anxiety. Everything I know is orchestrated into a form that is a map of M's consciousness. The equation adds up into a story that explores shame, the role of art and the imagination in protecting the self, the need to speak with another person and the desire to write a story of the self. If Spicer needed to destroy his body to write poetry, M needs to write her novel to save her body. If language destroyed Spicer, as he claimed on his deathbed, language will save M. And even though *The Bruise* is a *Bildungsroman*, a coming-out novel of sorts, central to the story is the relationship of the aesthetic to the mundane, the question of how language helps us exist in a real world together with real people.

'Text' and the Site of Writing

Jeff Derksen

A provisional conclusion might be that in advanced art practices of the past thirty years the operative definition of the site has been transformed from a physical location – grounded, fixed, actual – to a discursive vector – ungrounded, fluid, virtual.

– Miwon Kwon¹

I want to highlight how the 'place' of writing and cultural production (notably site-specific art) can be addressed following the 'textual turn' – the movement that textualized (generally) the 'outside world' and place/site. Aside from a post-structuralist tendency to read structures as texts, how does this 'textual turn' implicate narrative as a constructive act? Has the modernist literary project of writing an imagined world been deflected through post-structuralism so now the world is imagined as not only written, but as text?

Parallel to this 'textual turn,' which leads intriguingly to Miwon Kwon's vague 'discursive vectors,' there has been both a related mapping impulse and a constructive intent directed at 'place' in both visual art and writing. The mapping impulse is both ontological and geographic (writing as a mapping of a mind or of subjectivity, writing as part of the process of realizing 'place'). In popular media, texts, particularly novels, are given a primarily ontological role, of narrating us something about the places we live in, and by extension to tell us something about 'ourselves' or to illuminate the author as subject. Geographically, the constructive intent is perhaps clearest in a national literature's assembling of images and icons to create the imagined place of a nation and to the related levels of regional literatures and urbanist texts.

In contemporary art, a sort of sociological turn and mapping has emerged. Hal Foster cites Dan Graham's *Homes for America* photo project, which 'mapped' typologies of American suburban houses as well as the taste that they constructed and were based on, and *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* by Ed Ruscha as examples of the 'sociological mapping ... implicit in some conceptual art.'² More recently, and more ironically and more internationally, there is Komar and Melamid's *The People's Choice* (<http://www.diacenter.org/km/>), which uses official

polling agencies to survey a nation's preferences in visual art based on approximately ten preferences (ranging from 'Favourite colour' to 'Prefer indoor or outdoor scenes') and then realizes the 'most wanted painting' and 'most unwanted painting' utilizing the information. While this project is lightly politicized around issues of taste and in its adaptation of the current political tendency to base policies on poll results, it is linked to current site-specific art practices which, as Kwon notes, 'routinely engage the collaborative participation of audience groups for the conceptualization and production of the work.' From this collaboration, these site-oriented works 'are seen as a means to strengthen art's capacity to penetrate the sociopolitical organization of contemporary life with greater impact and meaning. In this sense the possibilities to conceive of the site as something more than place – as repressed ethnic history, a political cause, a disenfranchised social group – is a crucial conceptual step in redefining the public role of art and artists.'³ A recent example – and there are many – of this laying bare of the historical determinants of place is realized in Stan Douglas's *Nu*tká**, which presents a 'Canadian Gothic' of late-nineteenth century Nootka Sound on the Northwest Coast of BC through interlacing video images of the area and disembodied voices of the Spanish and English colonizers.

This chronotopic imagining of place as the site of a repressed racial (ethnic, class and gendered) history has been an obvious project of literature. In Canadian literature, this project was determined both discursively and historically. Discursively, the embarrassingly narrow yet dominant critical trope assigned to the national literature the role of providing a history to a country strategically defined as having none. This necessitated a 'return of the repressed' in literature to counter the dominant literary (national) historical projects. Historically, Canada has imagined itself as bicultural, and this framework worked to suppress the histories of groups other than the French and English. Within this very generalized framework, official and aestheticized responses to this historical repression have emerged. Small-town history chronicles that celebrate a town such as Morden in Manitoba, which can be bought at City Hall (here in Austria these projects are very similar and are called *Heimatbuch* [roughly, 'homeland book']) or a book such as Andreas Schroeder's *The Mennonites*, which provides, in a coffee-table-book format, a history of the Mennonites in Canada. More well-known, and with a larger cultural impact, Joy Kogawa's

novel *Obasan* brought forward the history of the Japanese-Canadian internment. Yet the moment that novelists are taken as historians is as problematic as when artists are believed to be sociologists or social workers. For instance, Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* aestheticizes the history of working-class people in Toronto, as if the workers appreciated the modernist aesthetics of the work site and the solidarity of shared labour rather than complained about the relations of production and wages.

That these textual and visual models present place and site as being a manifestation of history can lead to a deflecting of the present. For instance, Roy Miki speculates that *Obasan* could, from one vantage point, 'become an object of knowledge as a Canadianized text that teaches us about racism in our past.'⁴ The implication is that racism is relegated, chronotopically, to the past. Douglas's *Nu*tká**, in its return of repressed history, could mimic the trope of First Nations culture as a relic of the past, as being only determined by European actions, as the passive site where the history of dominant culture is acted out. But *Nu*tká** deflects this by complicating the cultural narrative of contact through its own narrative structure; the interlaced voices, challenging and overlapping each other, don't provide the unified narrative of assured contact and domination.

Here I want to speculate on (and politicize in a different way), Kwon's idea of place as a 'discursive vector' as a means to situate oneself within a present site. I write 'politicize' because it is possible to propose a move from text to discourse as a movement from a static structure open to analysis (whether virtuoso or standard) to a constructing determinant of place and subjectivity. Here place/site would not be determined solely by histories (dominant or repressed: emergent or residual), but by competing constitutive discourses that both affirm and erode the local/national and the everyday in the name of the global. Without solely reducing globalization to the effect of a discourse, it is possible to perhaps clarify the effects of globalization by understanding them as being discursively enacted at one level, as having a constitutive effect. Discursive is not synonymous with 'fluid,' 'ungrounded,' as Kwon proposes, but is precisely constitutive and grounding. In this formulation, the particularisms of a place/site and its histories are not just the oppositional force to globalization (or the corrective to dominant historical narratives), but an aspect of place that can be utilized by globalism; that is, a dialectic of local and global, or

site and nonsite (if a place is imagined as siteless in its loss of particularities due to globalization).

My own turn towards the discursive effects of globalism in relation to place/site arose because of the contradictions I saw in the city in which I was living. The city of Calgary in Alberta imagines itself as a regionally based 'open-for-business' kind of city, free of, but also wary of, the ills of larger cities, yet a city of international standards. This discourse of regionalism serves to cloak the existing relations of production which Calgary – as an 'oil town' – is linked into and determined by. Global capital through the multinational oil and gas industry, whose corporate logos hover above Calgary's gridded streets, is a key determinant of both the social relations of the city and how the city imagines itself. When the oil industry is profitable (due to high crude prices, a manufactured crisis or an imperialist war), the city thrives and new homes are built, rents rise, corporate headquarters shuffle, cigar bars and fusion-cooking restaurants open – in short, a lot of money is made by a few people, but the scramble for profit is on. This imaginary masking of real relations, a kind of cognitive masking, is what Arjun Appadurai cites as fetishistic: "The locality (both in the sense of the local factory or site of production and then extended sense of the nation-state), becomes a fetish that disguises the dispersed forces that actually drive the production process."⁵ In Calgary, the global forces then have a direct effect on the planning and layout of the city, as well as the architecture; the social space of the city (itself a constituting aspect) is determined by the management of the effects of globalization and localization. Seeing how the effective discourses of place/region and nation could serve as a mystifying factor in this global-urban nexus, blocking the real relations of the city, I moved away from an investigation of place and towards the material determination of a place/site.

The emphasis on the constitutive discourses of site/place can supplement site as repressed histories. These discourses must also be seen, alongside repressed histories, as historical developments, as constitutive elements of the repressed history and emergent history. The place of writing then becomes imagined as a site of intersecting discourses and lived histories: not groundless and fluid but both determined and determining. Experimental narrative works can enter this scene as cultural forces or vectors that provide other narrative structures for imagining places and histories. The 'end of history' thesis

that was pressed by triumphant globalization (hello, 'free markets'!) is also a clampdown on narrative structure as well as the cultural imagining of 'another world.' The march of global capital is a story structured through the most conservative and inequitable narratives.

NOTES

- 1 Miwon Kwon, 'One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity,' *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 95.
- 2 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1999), 185.
- 3 Kwon, 96.
- 4 Roy Miki, *Broken Entries: Race Subjectivity Writing* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 1998), 145.
- 5 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 42.

On Performance, Narrative, Mnemotechnique, Glue and Solvent

Corey Frost

Montreal in the mid-nineties is where I grew the necessary mental appendages to write, a budding engendered by excited encounters with texts running the gamut from corn to experimental, by the presence of certain key mentors and by the elliptic circles in which I was travelling.¹ These circles generally lived performance and publishing as the same experience: a chapbook launch, for instance, would also be a stapling party, so that the audience was involved in production and distribution as well as reception. Publications were excuses to have events, and events morphed into publications. Writing and performing were like love and sex to me: not the same thing exactly, but certainly linked.

Some of us theorized these connections in our cheap Plateau Mont-Royal apartments, where we gathered for weekly writing workshops. Or we would organize appearances at small and breezy Bistro 4 on St. Laurent, or at one of the many cabaret shows where we might be scheduled between a butoh piece and francophone sound poetry, and then we would write and read onstage, taking lines and direction from the audience. Sometimes the audience became part of the show and it worked brilliantly, and sometimes I think we forgot the audience was there. When it didn't work so well, we would give up and do sound poetry ourselves. Most of us were also involved in *index* magazine, a publication about performance, combining gushing and griping about readings, chapbooks, comics, etc., with woman-on-the-street interviews about French feminism, cyborg theory, literary colonialism: irreverent in spurts, passing queer, oblivious to genre. In my mind at least it was an attempt to cross-breed the freshly acquired critical abilities that were making us giddy just then with the pure rock-and-roll thrill – or maybe it was more punk or hip-hop – of the performance styles that were drifting into the city from somewhere to the south. *index* was a reaction, in part, to the rise of spoken word, embodied for us in fairly mainstream phenomena like Lollapalooza's 1994 poetry stage, but creating the magazine also lured our collective concept of spoken word (and its potential, ideal form) in a critical, experimental direction.

In the early nineties, there was no coherent spoken-word ‘scene’ in Montreal, in English or in French. Between the city’s French majority and the English minority there is always a tense symbiosis, but its dancers, artists and musicians are not nearly as territorial as its writers, whose raw material happens to be the very source of the friction. Therefore anglophone writers – with some open-minded exceptions – tend to be oblivious to the often more experimental currents of Québécois writing, and a reciprocal blind spot exists on the franco-phone side (although it doesn’t have to be as wide to obscure the little anglo scene). But when the spoken-word scene started to burgeon, it burgeoned in both English and French, although at first it was an anglophone activity that the francophones saw as distinctly American and therefore suspicious. As it seeped into French, it metamorphosed into bilingual events, something previously unheard of in more literary circles. Cabarets were in vogue, so writers in both languages shared the stage with musicians, dancers and performance artists. Choreographed sound poetry became one method of choice for reaching anglo-, franco- and allophones alike. This eclecticism, and this linguistic cross-pollination, had an effect on the direction of ‘spoken word’: many of us prose writers found ourselves part of an inchoate scene with a very malleable form which became, I think, more focused on concept, experiment and perversion than the form generally was elsewhere.² My feelings about ‘spoken word’ are thus somewhat more affectionate than those of many writers here in New York, who often see it as too indulgent, too predictable, too *pop*, or even as an outdated fad.

Performance – not just *readings*, but creative, rehearsed *performance* – has been intrinsic to my writing, as much as it is to a musician. That’s why narrative and performance is an obvious topic for me. It’s only recently, a decade after my writing practice became a writing-performance practice, that my theorization of the connection has started to catch up. One of the reasons is that I’m no longer living in Montreal, my first writing community, and I’m feeling the lived reality of an axiom that I’ve been glib about for years, that spoken word is an inherently community-based form. It’s a case of the neighbourhood talking to itself, and repeating itself too.³ Even when the writer-performer works alone it seems like a collaborative activity, since a good performer will create a work that is not complete without its audience. In another sense, writing for performance creates a stronger sense of

community among writers, who end up sharing stages and green rooms and audiences and, inevitably, ideas and approaches and inspirations.

The polyphony of the performance scene is not at all exclusive to narrative performers, but the words *experimental*, *narrative* and *performance* are not uttered together often enough. This oversight is exemplified in the complacent phrase ‘performance poetry,’ which emphasizes image and sound, the consuming concerns of poetry – phanopoeia, melopoeia and logopoeia, if you like – but neglects the roles of drama and narrative, which are clearly just as important to performance writing. In fact, I might productively point out that performance is always akin to narrative in a way that print is not, since one happens in time and the other is static; conversely, one might say that narration is always performative in a way that poetry does not need to be, because it introduces a sequence and therefore time, which automatically leads the reader through a pattern of steps. Suffice it to say that spoken-word writing is, more often than not, essentially narrative. Storytelling has been the basis of civilizations and is still all around us: the traditional folk forms of storytelling are experiencing a sort of revival on the radio and at festivals, while here in New York, poetry slams have lately been competing for attention with ‘story slams.’ This seems as natural as tapping your foot. But when it comes to *experimental* narrative writing, how is it affected by performance?

Everything about my writing – style, content, volume, frequency – has been shaped by the gravitational fields of the other performers in the community. Another way performance affects my writing has to do with something usually seen as a technical issue: memorization. Memorization is one of the most valuable tools I’ve learned as a writer, and I often wish I could properly convey to my audiences the sheer satisfaction that it kindles in me. It’s a performance technique, obviously, but it’s also a writing technique, and sometimes – people who know me will attest to my absolute unflakiness, so don’t take this the wrong way – sometimes it borders on being a kind of spiritual technique for me. As an activity it’s similar to running. At first it can be painful – it can seem like a long, impossible task, and you don’t want to read the piece over and over again, your eyes and your head get tired, and you just want to stop. The first few times, you probably don’t get very far, but you build up your stamina, and you make it farther through the text. At a certain point in the memorization process (when

you get good at it, this happens fairly quickly) you break through the wall, to borrow the horrible jargon of athletes. It goes from being hard to being effortless, almost joyous. Your reiterations become not a way of getting somewhere but an end in themselves. The sentences cease being sentences and become something more pliable, like warm putty for your mind.

What is valuable and more or less original about spoken word, then, is that it has encouraged writers to memorize their work. This is an excellent exercise, whether you're performing or not: to take a story or a prose poem, the more dense and fragmented the better, really, four or five pages, or even ten or twenty, and to memorize it, word for word, punctuation mark for punctuation mark. It's not as difficult to do as some people may think, because there are always hooks to hang the next line on, mnemonic signposts. With poetry, the most effective mnemotechnique is in the use of rhyme and meter. Narrative prose, though, is even better suited to memorization than most poetry, because of its sequential nature. Everyone knows it is easier to memorize a story than it is to memorize a grocery list or a page from the phone book. We don't even call it memorization; most people don't need to rehearse, for example, to tell a joke they've heard once. Hey, I'm as sequential as the next guy. Experimental narrative, though, often attempts to mess with those sequences; does this make it harder to memorize? Not necessarily, because the interference creates its own mnemonic hooks. In some jokes, the more surreal and unexpected the punchline, the easier it is to remember.

My expectation, once, was that since narrative helps us to remember, memorization should glue the story more tightly together, reinforcing the narrative impetus of the text and making it in effect harder to mess with the sequence. In other words, even the most non-linear narrative, when memorized, should become basically a line. I haven't found this to be the case. While learning a story may be a shorter process than learning non-narrative prose, once you 'get' it, the mnemotechnique works in essentially the same way. Your mnemonic hooks – the obscure mental images that do the work of connecting one phrase to the next – are unconcerned whether they're dealing with a narrative or random phrases. You may not even be aware of the hooks, bits of imaginary velcro that may have to do with the story, or the connotations of a word, or its sounds, or even something completely unrelated, like where you were when you memorized it. But whatever

they are, the hooks are by nature deconstructive. What this means is that narrative, or any structure, is dissolved by memorization: the story components are no longer linked through the superficial, logical progression of the plot but become associated through a layer of meaning that is more protean and unpredictable. Memorization is closer to fragmentation or analysis than it is to amalgamation or synthesis; it exposes the linearity of the story to infinite possibilities for distraction and detour, because it multiplies the levels on which words are connected. For me, this is exciting. The powers of text that I most appreciate are its ability to focus attention and its ability to distract. The writing I like best creates effective distractions, so that I find myself looking at the object of scrutiny out of the corner of my eye and seeing it differently. This is what memorization often does for me with regards to my own writing: it lets me forget what I was actually writing about, get distracted by the words and then forget about those too, to finally glimpse some latent material that is entirely new to me, hidden in my own text. As I've said before in a travel story, we have to forget where ideas come from in order to find them interesting again.

I've been talking about things that go on backstage in my mind, in the tenebrous world of neurons and synapses, but ultimately I find that the process of memorization affects the text in both substantial and esoteric ways. In performance, the little changes in intonation and speed that make one reading different from another, the quiddity of the live performance, are the result of the mnemotechnique's synaptic revisions. However, I will also often rewrite sentences and passages based on whatever comes to mind during the performance or during the memorization process itself, making the text a bit looser, more prone to tangent and upheaval. That is the substantial side of the effects of memorization, how it alters the way narrative works in the text. The esoteric side, by which I mean its effect on my own private reaction to my own text, may be just as significant; it allows for a kind of interpretation that happens deep in the brain. When used consistently on one's own writing, it can start to work sea changes: every rereading, every subsequent recitation, creates anomalies: opportunities for a little self-subversion, another strategic escape from the confines of pure, that is, sequential, mimetic narrative. The unexplained growth of new mental appendages.

NOTES

- 1 Among my mentors, Gail Scott and Robert Majzels were particularly important. The people in those writing-performance circles included Colin Christie, Catherine Kidd, Trish Salah, Dana Bath, Laura Killam, Umni Khan, Julie Crysler, Buffy Childerhose, Andy Brown, Anne Stone, Vincent Tinguely, Victoria Stanton, Ran Elfassy, Justin McGrail, Scott Duncan, Tracey Bohan and many others.
- 2 I've written more about this in 'The Text Has Been Eaten: "Spoken Word" Performance in Montreal,' published in Jason Camlot and Todd Swift's forthcoming *English Poetry in Quebec, 1976–2006*. A more comprehensive version of the story can be found in Vincent Tinguely and Victoria Stanton's *Impure: Reinventing the Word* (Montreal: Conundrum, 2001).
- 3 This reflexive conversation has been illuminated for me by Bakhtin's writings on multivocality and Derrida's notion of citationality.

Widows and Orphans

Nicole Markotić

Gertrude Stein famously begins her essay 'Poetry and Grammar' with the line 'What is poetry and if you know what poetry is what is prose.'¹ Stein asks not only about two supposedly separate modes of writing, she also questions where the separation between them is decided. Her words suggest doubt that a respondent can always successfully discriminate between the two. Marianne Moore suggests a similar genre instability when she notes in her essay 'Subject, Predicate, Object' that 'if what I write is called poetry it is because there is no other category in which to put it.'² The categorization, then, becomes the form's naming, and how the words do or do not 'fit' into particular categories likens to a typographical puzzle. But words are sneaky, they cross borders, they tiptoe into bordering camps, they traipse between one format and another, refusing passports, declining to 'belong.' Words are peculiar kinds of widows and orphans.

The title of my current narrative poetry manuscript, *Widows and Orphans*, alludes in part to the typographical 'extra' or 'leftover' words that typesetters worried about until computer software made their placement almost automatic. A widow, of course, refers to the last word of a paragraph that carries onto a line of its own. An orphan refers to the first line of a paragraph that ends up alone at the bottom of a page. In this context, it is interesting that typesetters have traditionally used the bracket and the margin indent to deal with a too-long verse line, despite how this changes the visual look of the resulting page. My title also ironically invokes a reactionary response to certain clichés of pathos – compassion, sympathy, pity – for the social standing of women bereft of husbands and of children bereft of parents. Such automated pathos implies that these women have been left behind, that their status has changed – through the death of another – to that of being extraneous to the world, disconnected, and no longer pertinent. In these prose pieces, I want to examine the performance of line and of word as widow and orphan. By looking at grammatical constructs that 'spill over' their designated area, I also focus on literary figures (for the patriarchal family, and for the state) that do not, quite, belong on their own pages. Who is a member and who an outsider? This is a question of belonging, and of which bodies – which words – occupy the borders.

Poet Fred Wah cites the hyphen as a marker of hybridity,³ as an ‘in-between’ that reminds readers that borders include territory that belongs to neither an in nor an out. Widows are not always the discarded spouses of dead husbands; they are operas (*The Merry Widows*), they are abandoned sport-spouses (‘hockey widows’), they are black hairy spiders that emanate great strength and energy. Widows disguise themselves in various forms, they hide their bodies, they conceal their longing even as they continue living – while marked by patriarchal labels, their stories harbour the not-yet-known, or the still-to-be-written.

One of my strategies for questioning the trope of belonging is to search for, research, play with, critique, puzzle over, rewrite, rethink, reword the narrative poem, a form and a genre that remains generatively unstable despite – and possibly even because of – the recent attention drawn to it by certain writers and critics. In my first book, *Connect the Dots*,⁴ I wrote short narratives concerning the second-person pronoun, so that its ubiquitous presence on the page might reconfigure the dominance of the ‘I’ pronoun of lyrical address. In that text, the ‘you’ is at times the narrator, the lover, a singular male sibling, a plural female sibling, an informal third person and a syntactical ghost. The book is about connections, familial and otherwise, but also about how ‘connecting the dots’ often results in a disappointing line drawing that promised so much as a scramble of dots and eyes and bits of grass hidden underneath the page. In *Minotaurs & Other Alphabets*,⁵ I also explore poetry that ‘looks’ like prose and deploys certain conventions of narrative, yet at the same time invites disjunctive readings that extend beyond conventional prose. The poems hang on to each other like trapeze artists, yet no visible lines form a net. The images in both books, for me, remain incomplete. Those narrative pieces are, in that sense, orphans, and I refuse to rescue a single word from their pages.

In writing my so-called novel, *Yellow Pages*,⁶ one of my overt agendas was to critique a nineteenth-century patriarchy that my character (Alexander Graham Bell) represents, from today’s perspectives on disability and gender. Bell’s archive does not readily disclose his eugenics agenda, and, therefore, to a certain extent I needed to invent his story and the stories of those he wished to suppress. One way of doing this was to ‘interrupt’ his biography with fictional diary sections. Another way was to interrupt those sections written in his character’s voice with his deaf wife’s diary, which roamed the limits of female

desire as explored by a character doubly limited by both her historical time and her disability. I wanted to structurally examine the effect of a man who achieved a professional climax extremely early in life (Bell received credit for inventing the telephone at the age of twenty-six). At the same time, I needed to figure out – for myself – how Mabel could marry Bell when the much more attractive young Thomas Watson was so much more fun. I devised a triangle, with Alexander in love with Mabel, Mabel in love with Thomas, and Thomas in love with Alexander. At the end of her diary section, Mabel mourns the limitations of their arrangement:

A man can go his whole life without climax, and die in anticipation. Most men live inside the climax that just happened, its echo still throbbing their fingertips. These men lust after today. A man who climaxes once – and early – walks on a path that leads away from memory. He hopes for a Second Coming to blast away the present. He longs for the explosion that will release him from his life's extended dénouement.

The sun set twice tonight. Once it dipped below the horizon, and once it disappeared into my mouth. Both Alex and Thomas think it is when the sun sets that the moon becomes possible. But there it is: triumphant in the sky, hours before the sun edges to the lip of the horizon.

A woman who climaxes once has been interrupted.⁷

In this excerpt, Mabel's gendered desire undercuts Bell's patriarchal desire to become a father of invention; at the same time, Thomas's desire for Bell revises their professional relationship. Such intrusions allowed me to reimagine history in such a way as to render it contemporaneous with an era emerging from the telephonic device that Bell invented because of his obsession with speech and technology, a control he enacted by patrolling the borders of 'normal.'

In order for me to escape certain borders, I need first to recognize, again, the lines they draw, the fences they suggest, the citizens they include within their boundaries, and the citizens they necessarily reject. Poetry can rearrange the expected boundaries of prose, can disrupt the narrative line, can usurp the primacy of critical discourse. I try to live as a dual citizen in language, a thief who steals nothing but colour from a map, commas from a sentence, nationality from nations.

Feminist writers cross a border every time we pick up a pen or turn on the computer or hum into a tape deck. The border is a visible line on the page, an insistent margin we attempt to write ourselves into and against. I veer away from the line, from the *punct* signifying the closing ceremony, from the metaphorical imperative that insists toes are what we tip on, and grasp instead the reassurance of instability, embrace the inability to embrace a stable subjectivity, what Kathleen Fraser describes as ‘fragments of a wholeness only guessed at.’⁸

Another border I’m fascinated by is the border that exists between bodies considered to be ‘normal’ and those designated as ‘ab’normal. In my current research, I examine the socially complicated process that determines the boundaries between the ‘normal’ body and what I call the ‘problem’ body. In my lexicon, the term *problem* refers to various manifestations and representations of the Deaf body, the disabled body, the aged body, the ill body, the obese body. *Widows and Orphans* concentrates on the social problems that so-called ‘deviant’ bodies challenge because of normative cultural expectations.

When people talk about the ‘normal’ body, I know there’s no such thing; but I know, as well, that the normal dictates the ‘ab.’ According to Lennard Davis, in his book *Enforcing Normalcy*, one way that ‘the category of disability defines itself [is] through an appeal to nationalism.’⁹ The disabled are not viewed as citizens in the same sense as the able-bodied who gaze at these ‘abnormalities.’ Davis joins such notions of citizenship to the historical eugenics that interested me in my Bell research, but that continues, in insidious ways, in contemporary language: ‘That the freak show begins in the same period as we have seen statistics and eugenics begin, indicates a change in the way people thought about the physically different.’¹⁰ The disabled body (and this body reconfigures itself in many ways) represents the problematic, the body that is too much body to ignore or overlook or regard.

But rarely does a disabled character exist front and centre in a novel (unless the ‘theme’ is overcoming difficulty), yet there s/he lurks: the next-door neighbour who uses a cane, the blind cousin, the ancient uncle, the retarded brother. Says James Porter: ‘a disabled body seems somehow too much a body, too real, too corporeal ... it seems too little a body, a body that is deficiency itself, not quite a body in the full sense of the word, not real enough.’¹¹ Disability in literature has been disproportionately underrepresented at the same time that it has been excessively displayed. For the most part, disabled characters are minor

figures, whose less-than-perfect bodies serve as a foil for the protagonist. In this way, characters portrayed as disabled perform the dual purpose of signifying a ‘lack’ or character flaw which the protagonist must overcome, while at the same time disabled characters re-establish the wholesomeness and integrity of those key characters (and, supposedly, the reading audience). In such narratives, disability figures as metaphorical emphasis for a specific moral impact.

But I’m not interested in the metaphorical disabled body, the body there to reassure readers that – while our bodies may not be normal to the point of ideal – we’re far enough away from abnormal to count as members within a group that dismisses and discards certain bodies, specific physical realities. I’m interested, rather, in how certain bodies get configured as belonging to either one category (normal) or another (ab), and what that means on the page. In Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan’s 1998 video *The Headless Woman*,¹² the voice-over proclaims that the headless woman originally severed her head to impress a boy, then stayed in the circus because there were not many places for a ‘woman, all body, approaching forty,’ and because ‘she was a genuine freak, no mirrors or masks or sleight of hand.’ This statement of ‘genuineness’ convinces the audience of the irony in the speaker’s words, an irony that presents headlessness, no matter that it is described as a ‘party trick,’ as the ultimate freak show – the female body desired and/as gawked at. According to Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ‘Freaks were often staged as hybrids in order to provide their audiences with an opportunity to exercise their expertise at defining truth.’¹³ While borders may provide exciting vistas, they can also remain hard, intractable facts, a thick line stamped on a map that refuses entry to non-citizens. I want to live on the edge of that line, but also to erase it, mess it up, redraw it so it drips messily over its own edges. I write to disrupt the known, the predetermined, to transgress the normative story, to rummage through archives that house collected versions of history.

When I imagine researching the archives for my current research on disability, I imagine a medical museum, a scientist’s notion about which bodies should be ‘studied’ because they belong to the category of unbelonging. I’m suspicious of archives because they don’t file ‘gaps’ under the Dewey Decimal system. I’m also compelled towards filing cabinets filled with folders filled with underresearched material, unread charts and statistics, poetry made out of numbers. I disparage

the freak museum at the same time as I hover in its doorway, savouring this passage of in-between. I want to get lost in the arcade, steal the skeletons of the conjoined twins Chang and Eng, write poems that contradict my senses, write narratives that undo sense, and run away with all the unhinged widows, let loose the wretched orphans onto the vast and expanding risk of the page's extremities.

NOTES

- 1 Gertrude Stein, *Look at Me Now and Here I Am: Writings and Lectures 1909–45* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 125.
- 2 Marianne Moore, *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*, ed. Patricia Willis (New York: Penguin, 1986), 46.
- 3 Fred Wah, 'Is a Door a Word,' unpublished paper.
- 4 Nicole Markotić, *Connect the Dots* (Toronto: Wolsak and Wynn, 1994).
- 5 Nicole Markotić, *Minotaurs & Other Alphabets* (Toronto: Wolsak and Wynn, 1998).
- 6 Nicole Markotić, *Yellow Pages* (Calgary: Red Deer Press, 1995).
- 7 *Ibid.*, 137.
- 8 Kathleen Fraser, *Each Next: Narratives* (Berkeley: The Figures, 1980).
- 9 Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 91.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 91.
- 11 James Porter, introduction to *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, ed. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), xiii–xiv.
- 12 Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, *The Headless Woman* (Winnipeg/Vancouver: Finger in the Dyke Productions, 1998), video.
- 13 Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 58.

A Few Thoughts on Beautiful Thinking

Christian Bök

Writing is inhibiting. Sighing, I sit, scribbling in ink this pidgin script. I sing with nihilistic witticism, disciplining signs with trifling gimmicks – impish hijinks which highlight stick sigils. Isn't it glib? Isn't it chic? I fit childish insights within rigid limits, writing shtick which might instill priggish misgivings in critics blind with hindsight. I dismiss nitpicking criticism which flirts with philistinism. I bitch; I kibitz – griping whilst criticizing dimwits, sniping whilst indicting nitwits, dismissing simplistic thinking, in which philippic wit is still illicit.

– from 'Chapter I' in *Eunoia*

Eunoia is a univocal lipogram – an anomalous narrative, in which each vowel appears by itself in its own chapter, telling a story in its own voice. *Eunoia* is directly inspired by the exploits of Oulipo (l'Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle) – the avant-garde French coterie renowned for its literary experimentation with extreme formalistic constraints. *Eunoia* is the shortest word in English to contain all five vowels, and the word quite literally means 'beautiful thinking.' The text makes a Sisyphean spectacle of its labour, wilfully crippling its language in order to show that, even under such improbable conditions of duress, language can still express an uncanny, if not sublime, thought. The text abides by many subsidiary rules. All chapters must allude to the art of writing. All chapters must describe a culinary banquet, a prurient debauch, a pastoral tableau and a nautical voyage. All sentences must accent internal rhyme through the use of syntactical parallelism. The text must exhaust the lexicon for each vowel, citing at least 98 per cent of the available repertoire (although a few words do go unused, despite efforts to include them: *parallax*, *belvedere*, *gingivitis*, *monochord* and *tumulus*). The text must minimize repetition of substantive vocabulary (so that, ideally, no word appears more than once). The letter Y is suppressed.

Writing this book proved to be an arduous task. I read through the dictionary five times to extract an extensive lexicon of univocal words, each containing only one of the five vowels. I could have automated this process, but I figured that learning the software to write a program

would probably take just as long as the manual labour itself – so I simply got started on the project. I arranged the words into parts of speech (noun, verb, etc.); then I arranged these lists into topical categories (mineral, vegetal, etc.), so that I could determine what stories the vowels could tell. I then spent six years, working four or five hours every night after work, from about midnight on, piecing together a five-chapter novel (the first chapter containing only A, the second chapter containing only E, etc.), doing so until I exhausted this restricted vocabulary. I thought that the text would be minimally comprehensible, but grammatically correct, and I was surprised to discover many uncanny coincidences that induced intimations of paranoia. I began to feel that language played host to a conspiracy, almost as if these words were destined to be arranged in this manner, lending themselves to no other task but this one, each vowel revealing its own individual personality: the courtly A, the elegiac E, the lyrical I, the jocular O, the obscene U.

Eunoia, in effect, represents a direct response to my own misgivings about the influence of Oulipo upon my work. Oulipo criticizes the classical paradigm of inspiration by proposing a set of methodical, if not scientific, procedures for writing literature. Oulipo typically imposes some form of constraint upon the practice of writing in order to discover what kind of aesthetic potential arises from these experimental restrictions. The coterie has included, among its membership, such writers as Raymond Queneau, Georges Perec, Italo Calvino and Harry Mathews – but aside from a few selected athletic works by these famous writers, most of the texts produced by the group often seem procrustean and unappealing. The basic fulfillment of the constraint often seems to take precedence over all other literary concerns (like euphony, meaning, etc.) so that often the results of such an experiment resemble the completion of a rote exercise (like writing fourteen lines with metre and rhyme and calling it a sonnet, even though the poem lacks any literary pizzazz). The works often do not fulfill enough of their potential to make them any more interesting than a fumbled sleight. The coterie also seems uninterested in exploring the political potential of writing under such duress in order to expose the ideological foundations of discourse itself.

Eunoia, for example, retrenches an economy of meaning that its constraints might have otherwise challenged (hence, the Language poets might find this work disappointing for its inability to depart

from the prison house of grammatical, referential speech). While the wacky rules of Oulipo might imply a freedom from traditional conventions, the content of such work often seems skewed towards normality. The poetic tastes of the group seem quite banal, insofar as its members admire forms like the sonnet or the sestina, dickering with the rules of these defunct genres in order to find new ways to revivify them (hence, I often wonder whether or not the literary politics of this avant-garde differs from the norm in specie or merely in degree). The role of constraint in literature (if not in all ideologies) is to provide a set of rules that can entrench the generic quality for a particular convention. The members of Oulipo argue that, if given the choice, we always prefer to follow rules created by us intentionally for ourselves rather than to follow rules created unconsciously for us by others. The group suggests that, as poets, we are better off by being slaves to an obvious, instead of an unknown, master. The irony here, however, is that the virtuosity of such literature always seems to be more interesting the less free it is.