

“A Many-Veined Leaf”: Minutiae and Multiplicity in Brian Bartlett’s Poetry

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY ANNE COMPTON

WITH THE PUBLICATION of his selected poems imminent, Brian Bartlett and I sat down to talk about his four books of poetry — *The Afterlife of Trees* (2002), *Granite Erratics* (1997), *Underwater Carpentry* (1993), *Planet Harbor* (1989). Although *The Afterlife of Trees* was our chief talking point, our conversation roamed leisurely over the earlier books, the forthcoming volume of selected poems, and his prose. In a career that has spanned three decades, Bartlett has published three chapbooks as well as four full-length collections, a body of work characterized by generosity of spirit, a tone of humility, precision in word and fact, wit and playfulness. He has been the winner twice of the *Malabat* Long Poem Prize and the recipient, in 1996, of a fellowship to the Hawthornden Castle International Retreat for Writers in Scotland. In 2000, his poem “Foot-doctor for the Homeless” won the Petra Kenney Competition. His critical work includes essays on poets as diverse as Tim Lilburn and Elizabeth Bishop. *Don McKay: Essays on His Works*, edited by Brian Bartlett, will appear in 2004.

A professor of English literature and creative writing at St. Mary’s University, Brian Bartlett was born in St. Stephen, New Brunswick, and raised in Fredericton. He lived in Montreal for fifteen years before moving to Halifax in 1990.

On a clear, cold day in January — in the book-lined Bartlett home and, later, at the aptly named Heartwood Bakery and Café — Brian and I talked about his poems, poetics, and the process of choosing poems for *Wanting the Day: Selected Poems* (2003).

AC Certain declarations are made in your most recent collection, *The Afterlife of Trees*, among them: “What I want is what / shakes up the known” (16-17). Is this a statement of your poetics?

BB Certainly, I like to see things in a new light, give them a spin they don't ordinarily have. But I don't want to over-rely on that or insist upon everything being transformed or every move being iconoclastic. There are also things — an infinite number of things — to be found within the familiar.

AC So your poetic is not the pursuit of quirks?

BB Curiosities and exceptions are often what draw our attention, but I wouldn't want my poetry to become just a catalogue of eccentricities and little-known facts. If there were a whole book of poems like "Sloth Surprises" (AOT 16-18), it would soon stop surprising. It would feel like Ripley's *Believe It Or Not*.

AC In "Listening on the Back Steps," the first poem in *The Afterlife of Trees*, the metaphor for a poem, or for poem-making, is "a box for small births" (3). If the poet is lucky, the words will take flight from that birdhouse, but that's not a sure thing. And in "Hawthornden Improvisations" (AOT 37-58), the narrator says, "anything can happen" in a poem (52). Is there a lot of surprise for you in the writing process?

BB Yes, definitely. For a reader, if there's no surprise, there's no poetry. The surprise may be subtle, low-key, rather than in-your-face. Surprises that are explicit and heavy-handed and outrageous can quickly lose their appeal. The surprises I'm most interested in don't give the impression of shock effect. I'm not much interested in that kind of frontal assault — though now and then it's good to feel jolted.

AC Is there self-surprise in the writing process?

BB Especially in going from a first draft to the fifteenth or twentieth, I find it surprising how far the eventual draft can be from the original. My first drafts tend to be quite tentative and groping. There may not be a single line that survives until the final draft. To use a sculpting metaphor, finding the shape within the stone can be a slow process.

AC Do you write to "see who you are" (3) as the first poem in *Afterlife* seems to suggest?

BB It's not something I set out to do, but it's a product, a bonus, of the process. Writing can help you gain a self-knowledge that you might not otherwise have, but, like I say, I don't think of that as one of the more significant values of writing poems.

AC Doublings or overlappings appear to be of interest to you.

BB It seems to me the word “overlappings” appears in more than one poem. It’s a word I’m attracted to just like I’m intrigued by the ways things fade into each other or mimic each other — whether it’s a mockingbird picking up on other voices or sand on a beach shaped by the wind to look like waves.

AC You’re a highly visual poet, but sometimes, through synaesthesia, a visual image slides over into the auditory: for example, the flowers at McCormack’s Beach are “sopranos to our sight” (*AOT* 15). In another poem, “[Charlie’s] voice got entangled in the garden” (*AOT* 30). Is that entanglement of sensory experience truer to the way we experience the world than the purely visual?

BB Yes, definitely. Synaesthesia is a reflection of the way our minds and our eyes work. It’s not just an ornamental literary device. It’s a tool that we use when we explore the world. In poetry, synaesthesia gives an accuracy to observation that’s not possible if we stick to just one sense. In the same way, metaphor can be more accurate than a simpler transcription of what’s seen.

AC So experience comes to us through an entanglement of the senses?

BB Sense experiences are simultaneous, and it’s hard to get that simultaneity in poetry. I like imagery that’s evocative to the mind’s eye, but I also like to have the words ringing off one another, echoing. The way words work with each other should be pleasurable in itself so that the reader experiences the sounds of the words along with the observational power of what’s presented. One of the primary things for me in a poem is the experience of sounds, the way words work together, and how that differs from language in everyday speech. Still, a lot of poetry is an intensification of daily speech. Poetry would be the poorer if it didn’t include both the vernacular and uncommon turns of language.

AC Although you are aware of the poem in a sculptural sense while you’re writing it, do you have in mind the delivery of the poem?

BB I often mutter the poem under my breath or aloud as I’m working on it. I want it to have a resonance and intricacy of sound when it’s read aloud so that it will be appealing to the ear in the same way that the shape of it is appealing to the eye.

AC Is the voice you use in a poem affected by the fact that you may be reading the poem in public some day?

BB I usually think in terms of fairly intimate voices, rather than voices projected publicly to a crowd. I remember what Alden Nowlan used to say about the paradox of public readings. If he thought of a listener, he said, he thought of a single human being, not fifty people gathered in a room. The relationship I sense with the listener is more one-on-one than performance. It's hard to say, though. Maybe there are some poems, storytelling poems, where you might think of a larger audience, but I still don't think of my poems as *declaimed*. I trust in something faithful to the conversational mode, as opposed to something that's oratorical or spoken from the heights. One of the most exciting things in Yeats's poetry is how he'll be rolling along in his oratorical, heightened mode, then something more conversational breaks in, adding pathos or humility or uncertainty. I also wouldn't want to suggest I don't find oratorical modes exciting in other poets — Robert Bringhurst and Al Moritz, for instance.

AC I want to ask you about the recurrence of the door metaphor. A voice can “swing open whatever is shut” (*AOT* 4); the effect of wind, according to one poem, is “a door opening” (*AOT* 100); and love is “your fingers unlocking / door after door after door” (*AOT* 49). I notice that this is also a significant metaphor in *Granite Erratics* and *Underwater Carpentry*. What does this pattern — the recurrence of the door metaphor — speak to?

BB I'm astonished! Nobody's pointed out this pattern to me before. I'll probably never use another door metaphor! A door is a rather archetypal image though. I imagine it's the sort of image that Gaston Bachelard might investigate. In fact, maybe he does deal with it in *The Poetics of Space*. Opening and closing is one of the most basic contrasts the human psyche knows. Opening is an image that suggests freedom and liberality and multiplicity whereas shutting or closing is ...

AC ... elegiac.

BB I could see an elegy working in terms of opening as well, opening oneself to what's beyond the grief, to the memories of the person or thing mourned. I wouldn't think of elegies strictly in terms of shutting down.

AC Does the door have to do with entrance into poetic space?

BB In the case of the first poem of *Afterlife*, “Listening on the Back Steps” (3-4), which ends with the great saxophonist whose sound bursts

through the doorway and “swing[s] open whatever is shut” (4), opening is an image of originality. This is the trail-blazing artist moving into something fresh, something that’s not been done before. I was thinking of Charlie Parker, and the poem uses the names of a few music clubs he knew in his youth.

AC Is poetry, like music, capable of “swinging open whatever is shut, whatever needs more air” (4)?

BB Sure. Like other poets, I’ve often felt a parallel between what poetry might do and what certain kinds of music do. Listening to more wide-ranging kinds of jazz has encouraged me to attempt poems like “Underwater Carpentry” (*UC* 89-102), which is mood-changing, mosaic-like, or improvisational, like “Hawthornden Improvisations” (*AOT* 37-58). I’m attracted to the idea of improvisation, but there’s an irony involved in all of that because I also want the poem polished. I tried to get that irony out front at the very beginning of “Hawthornden Improvisations” where I say, “Improvisation is the name of the game,” I vowed to write / months ago, in winter, walking slippery streets of home // an ocean away” (39). The decision to improvise is itself an unimprovised thing since it was based on a vow made on another continent months earlier.

AC The words “Essay” and “Footnote” in “Lost Footnote From an Essay on Rhythm” (*AOT* 6-7) suggest the pedantic, but the pun on “note,” like the word “Rhythm,” draws attention to music. For you does a poem exist somewhere between music and essay?

BB Pun on “note”: I hadn’t thought of that. I think some poems ache to be close to music. Others that are more discursive and digressive and lack that kind of sustained intensity might overlap at times into the realm of essay. The lyric uses compactness to the maximum; every line rings. But I’m also drawn to trying poems like “Hawthornden Improvisations” (*AOT* 37-58) that are sometimes leisurely and relaxed, that aren’t always insisting on heightened emotion and intense sense experiences. Another source of that more leisurely mode is the diary or journal.

AC I understand that for most of your life, you’ve kept a journal. “Hawthornden Journal,” which paralleled the writing of the “Improvisations,” is a published example. So, is the journal a ghost form that haunts your poetry?

BB Yes. And I realize that not everyone is comfortable with the

ghost. The Hawthornden poem had some very enthusiastic responses, but it also had some lukewarm ones. One of my friends thought the poem was too close to a diary. He said it struck him as “notes toward a poem” rather than a poem itself. I do feel now that if I went back to it, I might still cut out some stanzas.

AC Are essay and music the poles between which your poetry moves?

BB You might say that, yes. Even in “Sloth Surprises” (*AOT* 16-18), though it’s concentrated in three-line stanzas and moves quickly down the page, there are elements of discursiveness — references to the Internet and quotations from various naturalists. In terms of the lyric, there are impure things there such as dropping in quotations and making a hokey joke about the William Tell Overture, and yet, by the end, the poem moves toward a lyrical celebration. We were talking earlier about declaimed intensification, and when I’m reading that poem aloud, I’m aware that its ending — “Sloths swim with the might of eagles flying” (18) — might be a declaimed line. It almost has the feeling of a punchline, but I hope that it grows organically out of the poem and isn’t just a cheap capping-off. One reviewer of *Granite Erratics* took me to task for punchlines. He said that I suffered from an unexamined weakness for snappy endings. I was glad that he’d said that because it made me wary ...

AC ... but that can be dangerous.

BB It can, and it can make you timid. In any case, I only caught wind of the review two years after it was published, too late for it to have any effect on *The Afterlife of Trees*. Years ago, in Montreal, I read Barbara Hernstein Smith’s book *Poetic Closure*. She points out that the open ending is as much a convention as any other ending. It’s just one of the options. Still, I don’t want an ending that makes it feel as if the poem is shutting down, all loose ends tied up. As a reader, I resist poems of that sort. Just before that review of *Granite Erratics* came out, I’d reviewed a book by a fellow poet and said there was a tendency toward overly emphatic endings in a few of the poems. So it was amusing when a reviewer said a similar thing about my work. You can’t see the mote in your own eye.

AC The speakers in the first section of *Afterlife* are often walkers — in parks, by rivers, through woods. Would you describe yourself as a naturalist-observer-describer?

BB That would be accurate but incomplete. I hesitate a bit over the

word “describer” although I do feel great reverence for the way things are before we do much with them — even if we only know things *through* our consciousness. Paying prolonged, patient attention to how things appear is one thing I respond to in poets like Elizabeth Bishop and Eric Ormsby. It’s almost as if the act of looking closely at the object is sometimes enough, which is what Ormsby himself suggests in an interview (200). It’s not like the poet has to manipulate the object or show off his or her own consciousness.

AC But you hesitate over the word “describer”?

BB For some people, the word might imply a clinical, detached approach. I’m interested in offering some details about the object that suggest a response to it, a sympathy for it, some sort of attitude toward it so that readers are still aware of the perceiver, even if he’s somewhat invisible or half-hidden. The perceiver isn’t making any claims to being scientifically neutral or god-like.

AC The presence of the perceiver is part of what is delivered in the poem?

BB All you have in the poem comes to you through the language of the observer. Every line of a poem reveals or creates its character even if it’s intensely focused on a red pepper, like in one of Sue Sinclair’s poems. Even in the works of the haiku masters, who mostly avoid metaphor and try to present the thing or event as cleanly and clearly as possible, there’s a reflection of personality and character.

AC “Shuffles” (8-9), a two-part poem, limits itself to two instances of twelve words. Are you interested in what can be accomplished in verbal limitation and confinement?

BB Yes. And I’m interested in how confinement can help spark freedoms of association. I suppose such freedoms are more obvious in relatively spacious forms like the glosa (72-73), with its forty lines, but I hope they’re also there in what I’ve called “shuffles.” While I enjoy using limitation — partly just as a kind of play — I’m just as drawn to what’s expansive, digressive, many-faced. *Afterlife* has one poem that’s a single line long, and another that’s twenty pages long. Many years ago a friend of mine said something like “Poetry is a matter of leaving out,” and I remember getting a bit hot under the collar and protesting that poetry is also very much a matter of including, embracing, multiplying.

AC “Shuffles” (AOT 8-9), with its reference to footwork, although

the title-word is a pun, leads me to wonder about your preoccupation with feet. Later in this volume, we have “Foot-doctor for the Homeless” (82-83). In *Underwater Carpentry* (1993), there’s a poem called “Première Pédicurie” (35-36). I’m going to suggest — partly facetiously — that the feet and the eyes are the essential equipment for the poet according to Brian Bartlett.

BB Are you saying I have a foot-fetish! Although I don’t think that it’s finally possible to really escape yourself, walking and exploring are attempts to lose consciousness of the self and concentrate on what’s out there, beyond you. At times, walking is very much a spiritual act, an imaginative act, as it was for Wordsworth and Thoreau.

AC In “Underwater Carpentry” (*UC* 89-102), the narrator wants “a voice / freed of all travels but those / inside” (98-99). Has that ambition been fulfilled?

BB No, and I wouldn’t want it to be. At that point in the poem, I was expressing an itch to write more transcendently, to get beyond the specifics of one time and place — I recall thinking, *More like Rilke*. That sounds pretentious, I know! But right after what you just quoted, the poem goes on: “but the four elements / hold me hard.” So the poet confesses he’s got feet of clay, that “pure spirituality” isn’t for him. And I sort of intended as a joke the lines “one way out / to sneak in many times and places.” That is, you can get away from one time and place not by slipping into a more abstract realm, but by multiplying your involvements in *various* places and times.

AC Each of your last three books contains an especially long poem: “Hawthornden Improvisations” (*AOT* 37-58); “The Woods on the Way to School” (*GE* 27-34); “Underwater Carpentry” (*UC* 89-102). Are you moving away from the brief stand-alone lyric, and what explains that move?

BB I don’t think I’m moving away from the lyric because I still feel a strong fondness for the stand-alone shorter poem, but reading A.R. Ammons, spending so much time with his work and writing over four hundred pages on it as a doctoral dissertation, helped deepen my interest in longer poems. He’s done many long poems that are extremely free and improvisational. His first one, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, is, incidentally, a diary.

AC The long poem, the travel poem, and a gravitating toward the essay are interrelated tendencies in your work.

BB “Underwater Carpentry” (*UC* 86-102) felt like a breakthrough. I wrote it soon after I moved from Montreal to Halifax. It was, in some senses, my farewell to Montreal. I felt a new sort of freedom, throwing so many things into it. Different metaphors — the catalogue, the mosaic, film-splicing — could describe that kind of writing. It’s over ten years since I wrote that, and I still feel I haven’t tapped into what I started in “Underwater Carpentry.” I’d like to get back into that. Soon after, I wrote another long poem, “Trailing Juniper” (*UC* 103-15), which was an effort in a similar vein, but I’m not happy with it. There are passages that don’t hold together. But then you might ask, “Is it the purpose of these wide-ranging, dishevelled poems to hold together?” Is that just the lyric self saying that this poem has to be somehow consistent and tightly structured?

AC Even in the case of shorter poems, you favour a multi-sectioned structure, the sections numbered or marked by asterisks. What does that multi-part structure allow you to do?

BB Back at UNB, I did a Creative Writing class with Fred Cogswell, who said my work was “kaleidoscopic,” and then at Concordia, Clark Blaise used the same word for my fiction. There must be some significance to that. You often gain something from combining things rather than having them stand on their own. I like multi-perspective. The McGill-Queen’s editor of *Afterlife* wanted some of the multi-part poems in *Afterlife* cut back to one section. He wanted only the first section of “Under the Old Roof” (12-14), which is in three sections. The first section could have stood on its own as an intense lyric, but I thought it was going to lose too much — including the comic bits in the second part — if sections were cut. I was interested in the variety — the kaleidoscope.

AC You like to look at things from opposite sides and consider an argument from opposite positions. I see this in “Two for the Winds” (*AOT* 10-11); in the paired poems “The Afterlife of Trees” (19) and “A Toss of Cones” (*AOT* 20-21); and elsewhere. Am I right in thinking that there is a dialectical inclination in your work?

BB The word “dialectical” suggests thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, and I’d resist the idea that those pairings move toward a synthesis. But there’s duality, certainly.

AC The multi-part poems in *Afterlife* more often have three parts. Besides “Tree Trilogy” (33-36), there’s “Work at Twenty-One” (61-64); “Three Windows” (65-67); and “Three Tales of Halifax” (77-79). Is the use of three at all ritualistic?

BB Many art forms — sculpture, architecture, painting, and musical forms like the sonata — exploit the idea of the trilogy. It's so much in our culture that it doesn't really require an aesthetic decision to start writing trilogies. The three-part poems just developed organically. The triptych might also have more tendency toward narrative. Most of the poems you mentioned that work in three parts, as opposed to the two-part ones, have a narrative basis.

AC "Two for the Winds" (*AOT* 10-11) presents, on facing pages, winds that differ in degree or kind. The second kind "break the reins of everything tamed" (11). Are you on the side of these winds?

BB Yes. To be on the side of those winds doesn't mean, though, that you sell your soul to chaos. "[E]verything tamed" should have the opportunity to be loosened. It's the metaphor of the door opening again.

AC Is it the ferocity of natural force that keeps you coming back to nature as subject?

BB That's one of many factors. Ferocity attracts, for sure. The sheer energy in those winds whipping around may be comparable to the musicianship, the feeling of freedom, in the jazz improvisations of "Listening on the Back Steps" (*AOT* 3-4). At the end of "Trailing Juniper" (*UC* 105-15), there's a passage that describes an ice storm. Enormous force, bringing human activities to a halt, is exhilarating, a reminder we're not masters of the universe. Though hurricanes and tornadoes can be destructive, we're attracted to them — as long as they keep their distance, of course.

AC Is it the sublime in nature or the minutiae that attracts you?

BB I don't see those as contrasts. The romantic sublime is often associated with mountains and seascapes, the grand in scale, but near the start of his essay "Nature," Emerson suggests almost anything, looked at in the right frame of mind, can create a sense of awe.

AC In his 1757 *Inquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Edmund Burke places terror higher than the beauty.

BB Looking at something minute through a microscope can be terrifying.

AC In writing of nature, your strategy is sometimes to establish abundance through negation. In "The Colours at McCormack's Beach," except for a willet, "Nothing / else veers into sight. No fin surfaces, / no boat slides past" (*AOT* 15), but the list of absences is followed by a cata-

logue of flowers whose names suggest nature's variation on the colour yellow. Why do you set plentitude in negation?

BB "McCormack's Beach" was the first time I had the idea of embodying in a poem the suggestion that however unyielding and bleak, neutral and gray, a landscape might be — as happened on that day at McCormack's Beach — if you look closely enough, there's something that flips that impression and shows you in some little pocket of that space a fullness and vibrancy.

AC Is this amplitude of detail a desire for total immersion in sensuous reality?

BB Immersion, yes, but not total immersion, which I don't think is possible. It's very hard to give up the observer no matter how immersed one is. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard has a beautiful passage about the fall into self-consciousness. She speaks of experiencing an absence of herself, feeling immersed in what she's observing. As soon as she makes that reflection, self-consciousness kicks in. I don't particularly lament the fact that we can't lose ourselves. I'm not that drawn to the mystical ideal of giving up the self utterly to plunge into the godhead. The most interesting differences in existence are those between distinct phenomena, and the interaction between them. That's more interesting than the absorption of one self into another, or the loss of self-consciousness for a passive state of mind, giving up your complex human mentality for something that's pure and unconscious.

AC Some fairly eccentric bits of information — "a white elm drinks fifteen hundred gallons of water / from a hot dawn to a hot dusk ..." (*AOT* 21) — are deployed in your poetry. Is this connected to the catalogic tendency in your observations of nature?

BB Yes. I love catalogues in poetry and other kinds of literature. They're one of the most exciting aspects of Whitman's work even if the relentlessness of the catalogues sometimes cancel out their effectiveness. Catalogues are a rapid, but closely observed, succession of images from a wide-ranging perspective. They are one of the best ways of conveying amplitude and getting lyric concentration away from a narrow focus that pinpoints one thing. And, yes, I suppose the cataloguing tendency is connected to the accumulation of eccentric information. They reflect the same passion, the desire to hear and to see a multiplicity of things. Sometimes, though, I want to express how information can be oppressive and even blinding. "[T]o an osprey" talks of getting sick of those "shiny-paged

bird books” (AOT 95). In that poem, there’s almost relief that the osprey is distant, not close. Sometimes I want that distance.

AC Why?

BB Sometimes that perspective results in greater recognition, greater respect, for the thing as it is. That respect can be achieved by just letting it be out there, wherever it is, by not wanting to put the binoculars on it, not wanting to break it into its parts, but just to let it go on its way, without itching to paint it in fine detail. That poem is against always using the eagle-eye for minutiae.

AC This is related to something the narrator says in “Hawthornden Improvisations” about being a pilferer: “[S]ome days you need to stand back // and let everything go its way, unpilfered, / unexamined . . .” (AOT 57). Does that “stand[ing] back” result in no poetry or a different kind of poetry?

BB One of the kinds of poetry that can result from that reflects upon detachment itself. Some people would argue that using language, even naming, is a way of trying to pigeon-hole a thing. I dealt with that anxiety in a long essay I wrote revolving around a P.K. Page poem. You have to remind yourself that your authority is very limited. It’s a naive misunderstanding to suppose that somehow you know a fraction of what there potentially is to know about a thing — or a person, for that matter.

AC “Sloth Surprises” (AOT 16-17) is a two-toned poem, humour and awe intermixed. Does this doubling of tone appeal to you?

BB In reading, I more immediately respond to a poem that has some doubleness of tone as opposed to one that’s unrelievedly one tone.

AC In the “The Afterlife of Trees” (19), an objective tone and an enumerative manner explore the ways in which living trees, and trees in their afterlives, contribute to our lives, but the poem is thereafter personalized and elegiac. Is beginning with the objective a way of restraining emotion, holding it back?

BB I’d question whether that poem has an objective beginning. I’d hoped that in the rhythms and in the undertone of excitement, emotion comes through: “Neither sheep nor cows crisscross our lives as much” (19). I’d hope that there was a sense of awe in that opening line — that the richness of sounds, the alliteration and rhyme echoing in “fuller” and “finer” and in “lost” and “last,” as the verse continues, would carry a sense

of celebration. I guess I'm pushing back against the word "objective" the way I did with "descriptive."

AC My question is related to something I observe in the poem "Three Windows" (*AOT* 65-67). What seems to be autobiographical is cast in the third person and contains the self-reflexive remark "Three is a handy number / and all stories use scissors" (67). Do you as a poet want to hold the personal, anything autobiographical, at a distance?

BB Between poets writing autobiographically and those trying to keep autobiography out of their work, I think of my work as being somewhere in the middle. I'm certainly not at either end of the spectrum. Many of the poems I write don't use the first person, and many of those that do use it, fictionalize. And, as you pointed out, other poems written in the third person have an autobiographical basis. In the end, for the poetry it's the poem that matters and not my personal life. That's why I don't have qualms about modifying autobiographical facts. I also find that putting things in the third person loosens up my imagination.

AC Are you leery then of sentimentality and nostalgia?

BB Over all, I'd say that I'd be more leery of cynicism and coldness. When people speak about their worries about sentimentality, I say, "Well cynicism seems more *au courant* at times." Sentimentality occurs when a poet is enamoured of his own emotion. Such a poet doesn't give credit to the reader to share in what the poet's feeling. Personally, I probably have more of an inclination towards the elegiac and the nostalgic, even the sentimental, than I have towards the ruthless and the distant. So I'm not that worried about the cynical in my own work because it's not a big part of my personality. I might, therefore, be more cautious about sentimentality. But I want poetry to move people. I don't want all my poems to be of primary appeal to the intellect, language as an endless set of indeterminates.

AC Would you say that of the four books, *Afterlife* leans further away from the autobiographical and the personal?

BB I don't think so. The third section of *Afterlife*, "The World of Counting," includes the family poems, the three or four poems that include my son. The glosa (72-73) is one of the most personal poems I've ever written. And "Hawthornden Improvisations" (37-58), although it's wide-ranging, has quite a bit of personal stuff.

AC Family poems in the earlier books are character poems. In *Afterlife*, a patrilineal line is established — grandfather, father, speaker, son.

References to family now seem to have to do with the poet situating himself midway in that line.

BB With the addition of another generation, the speaker is no longer a perennial adolescent looking back.

AC Is it liberating to adopt personae as you do in “Foot-doctor for the Homeless” (*AOT* 82-83) and “The Sonographer” (*AOT* 84-85)?

BB Yes, and I’d like to try it more. By the way, when I first drafted “Foot-doctor,” it was written in the voice of the middle-aged female doctor, but before workshoping it with friends, I chickened out and recast it in the third person. At the workshop, I mentioned the change, and after talking about it for a while as a third-person poem, my friends asked me to try it aloud in the first person. After hearing it that way, everyone — all women, by the way — told me it worked better in the woman’s voice. That was rather pleasing — though in that poem I suppose gender is less crucial than profession and age and personal history.

AC “Hawthornden Improvisations” (*AOT* 37-58) is catalogic, epistolary in part, and a poetics. How did it develop?

BB “Improvisations” came out of the diary mode that I’d adopted while I was at the writers’ retreat. Each morning, I’d draft a few stanzas of it, and then I’d work on a prose piece in the afternoon — something more literally a journal. I decided before I went there that I didn’t want to write a bunch of discrete poems and use the notebook where I’d accumulated lots of things. I wanted to go there a blank slate and see what came out of the experience. I did take my notebook along though, so that long poem ends up being a mix of the notebook and unexpected things that emerged out of the experience of being at Hawthornden. I’d never know exactly what was going to be in the poem the next day because it might grow out of something I’d experienced the day before. But I was also picking up flotsam and jetsam from the notebook I’d brought overseas. I say at the beginning of the poem, “I’ve sent no list of what I want, / the old image-bank is closed” (39). In a sense, that’s a joke because the “image-bank” wasn’t closed. Things from the past rush in there. Like many long narrative poems, though, it ends up also being about the process of writing itself.

AC You do give form to “Improvisations.” There’s a five-line stanza.

BB When I started the poem, writing one section a day at Hawthornden, I had a draft structure more like that of “Underwater Carpen-

try” (*UC* 89-102), where there are no sections, no regular pattern on the page. But “Improvisations” started feeling too diffuse. Frankly, I felt a bit defeated when I settled on the five-line stanza. Part of me felt like I’d copped out or given in. But then I was tickled one day to think those five-line stanzas looked like bars of music.

AC “However small, each thing fed from its own nature” (43), the Hawthornden narrator-traveller observes. This reminds me of Gerard Manley Hopkins and inscape. Is your loyalty first of all to the inward quality of an object?

BB Yes. And to its outward qualities, which, I suppose, we’re better equipped to know.

AC Unlike Hopkins, the speaker in “Improvisations” discounts any “cloud-hidden Puppet Master” (43) responsible for the beauty of things. For you, are things in themselves sufficient?

BB Yes. I’m a non-idealist in the sense that I don’t feel the necessity for another realm to justify our daily realm. Thoreau ends one of the chapters of *Walden* by saying, “Talk of heaven! ye disgrace the earth” (200). That feeling comes out in the anti-Platonic section of “Improvisations”: “the river in the glen isn’t mimicking a crystal river / smoothly rushing in a perfect place” (*AOT* 53). Those lines resist the idea that things in nature are second-hand, inferior. That’s an aspect of Platonic thought I’ve always found alien. It’s a way of thinking that’s caused some terrible problems in Western culture. It makes it less likely you’re going to celebrate what’s immediate, what you experience with your senses. It favours the visionary and heavenly. The harder thing for me, though, is imagining my stance from the perspective of someone who’s in dire circumstances, suffering from malnutrition or living in a war zone. What sense would it make to them to talk about the immediate beauties of existence or the glories of nature? For them, the imagining of another realm, a heavenly destination, is a balm. That’s a real roadblock in my own non-visionary approach to the world. For myself, though, I don’t feel the need for some alternative reality. If you feel the earth is a secondary, tainted realm, and that there’s this other glorious place, you’re not as likely to look after the world you were born into.

AC Observing a chapel’s “over- // flowing Gothic stonework” (*AOT* 44), the speaker’s plea is “give me such mania, to chisel words like roots and petals ...” (44). So how does “mania” combine with the active noticing requisite to poem-making?

BB The frenzied, inspired, rhapsodic carver uses the forms of nature as a basis for his work. His carving of “roots and petals” is contrasted to an art that has no relation to natural forms. But even abstract art, a Jackson Pollock, can be impressionistically connected to forms of nature. Certain things under a microscope can look like a Jackson Pollock and vice versa.

AC In your journal-essay “A Long Fall For Poetry,” you say, “writing is first of all a matter of using our language with the most practiced skills and the most fervent agility we can muster” (79). Is that “first of all” what poetry is? That could describe debating, couldn’t it?

BB I suppose it could — as long as you don’t get into the details of what those “skills” and that “agility” involve. With debating, they’d be directed more at reason and logic, wouldn’t they? Poetry appeals more to the whole person or, at least, to a wider range of our responses. In “Long Fall,” if I remember right, that comment about “fervent agility” was meant as a contrast to emphasis on themes, politics, psychology, anything but the poem as a work of art. No art deep down is apolitical, and we shouldn’t ignore the politics of poetry, but a poem is short-changed when its paraphrasable meaning gets more attention than its music and language and structure, its integrity not only as a poem but also as *this particular poem*. We owe it to the poem — like to each thing in nature — to see it for itself rather than instantly trying to *use* it for something. A few years after writing “Long Fall,” I read Seamus Heaney’s prose *The Redress of Poetry*, and there I found passages that say more powerfully than I ever could things I was trying to get at in the journal. Let me get it off my bookshelf Heaney values poetry that “consciously seeks to promote cultural and political change,” but he also talks about the need to “redress poetry *as* poetry Poetry cannot afford to lose its fundamentally self-delighting inventiveness, its joy in being a process of language as well as a representation of things of the world” (5-6).

AC In a recent interview, George Steiner says that the night-worker on a geriatric ward “stands much higher on the scale of need and human value” than the writer or critic (Wachtel 115). Does your reference to “quaint needlework” (*AOT* 56) express some doubt about the worth of poetry?

BB I don’t think that it’s an absolute denial of the tremendous values and powers of poetry, but, in the improvisational manner, I was trying to capture a moment of doubt. In the despair, emptiness, inertia, and

suicidal temptations experienced by some people, what value does the contemplation of a landscape or the contentment of everyday activities give? What kind of comfort can that supply to one who is truly in a state of despair? Sometimes Milosz writes out of that kind of doubt. The other day, I was reading some back issues of *Harper's*, where I came across a passage from "The Poor Poet," an early poem, where he imagines a poem as a tree branching over a page, and he says, "like an insult / to suffering humanity is the scent of that tree" (60). In "Improvisations," I talk about the personal experience of finding comfort in an insect or in a many-veined leaf, and wonder if that comfort is a special kind of gift or mercy that helps some people find significance in small things. The dismissive phrase "quaint needlework" recognizes that such comfort isn't available to everyone.

AC The river is a powerful presence, perhaps a comfort, in your poetry, isn't it? In my favourite *Planet Harbor* poem, "River There, River Here" (31-32), the speaker who is a "time-zone farther / into the continent" says, "if I turned quick enough // here it would be at my back: a river ... " (32). Have you been accompanied by the St. John River?

BB In imagination, yes. I grew up close to it and took it for granted all through my childhood and adolescence. As "Three Windows" (*AOT* 64-67) tries to convey — though it doesn't specifically mention the St. John — it was only after I lived out of the province for a few years and travelled to other parts of the country that I began to see what a gorgeous river the St. John is — why it's been called the Rhine of North America.

AC Of the principal places that you've lived — Fredericton, Montreal, Halifax — which is the ground from which your poetry comes?

BB That's a tough question because a lot of the early sources and inspirations are New Brunswick places — like the Fundy Coast or the ocean — rather than specifically Fredericton ones. In my early stuff, there are actually more references to the sea than to Fredericton. Facing the power of the sea, even a few days of the year, can get under your skin in a way that something that you see every day can't. There's not a strong sense of Fredericton in my poems. Maybe because I moved to Halifax thirteen years ago, coasts go on being reflected in a fair number of the poems, like "Granite Erratics" (*GE* 14-15) or the North sea section of "Brimming" (*GE* 61-72). As for the geographical "bedrock" of the poems, I'd say Atlantic geography, Atlantic topography. Coasts, forests, mountains though with mountains, we're pushing further west to the Adirondacks. On the other hand, in large parts of "Underwater Carpen-

try” (UC 89-102), I wanted to reflect urban reality as well. I have no desire to be specifically “a nature poet” or a poet with no interest in human interactions.

AC In “At the Fishhouses,” Elizabeth Bishop says of the ocean, “It is like what we imagine knowledge to be: / dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free, / drawn from the cold hard mouth / of the world ...” (74), and in your essay on Bishop you say, “Such knowledge seems ... more likely to arrive, if it ever does, via the senses rather than the mind” (“The Land Tugging at the Sea” 95). So, you are an empiricist?

BB Well, I wouldn’t be ashamed to be called an empiricist, if that means putting high priority on our five senses as avenues into appreciating the world — and if it means our thinking processes are grounded in our acquaintance with material reality. I think the material is *prior*, even though once the mind is active (but dependent on the brain, not divorced from nature), it drastically influences how we perceive anything.

AC You also say, however, that “If *if*[supposition] weren’t with us, the brain might be little more than a register ...” (GE 14).

BB Yeah, I guess there’s a sense of the limits of empiricism there. The brain would be wasted if it became nothing but a recorder. *If*s and *what-ifs* are needed to keep us open to possibilities not apparent now, and to fantasies of what will never be. I’d never want to disparage imagination in its most everyday sense.

AC A narrator in *Granite Erratics* says, “The many-roomed cave of dreams gives us / other eyes and ears” (17). In the books before *Afterlife* were you more often writing out of that cave?

BB The tales in *Granite Erratics* probably make it appear that way. If it’s so, I don’t imagine it’s any sort of permanent change. Dreaming is such a central human activity, I wouldn’t want to ignore it in any collection.

AC The adult first-person narrator in the long poem “The Woods on the Way to School” (GE 27-34) reminisces about “the year he first knew he was / spellbound, when he detoured from the street / into a land of blue beetles and moss” (34). “[B]esotted” (GE 65) and “spellbound”: Are these conditions that are necessary for the practice of poetry?

BB For some poetry, yes. But there are poets in whom things like

skepticism and discrimination are more key than besottedness and enchantment. Maybe the largest poets go in both directions, sometimes on the same page. Shakespeare clearly does.

AC In “A Handful of Tales” (*GE* 35-59), of which eleven, you allow yourself exaggeration. These tales are somewhere between the fantastic and the real. *Afterlife* says, “If I allowed extravagance, I’d say . . .” (91), but it’s not allowed in *Afterlife*, is it? Between these two books did you put away extravagance and exaggeration?

BB “Put away” is putting it too strongly, I think. For instance, I’d hope there’s something extravagant in the act of addressing an eight-part poem to eight species of birds. The extravagance might not be that of the tale-spinning in *Granite Erratics*, but I think there’s some comic exaggeration in “Lost Footnote” (*AOT* 6-7) and “whippersnipper rant” (*AOT* 28) or in “Work at Twenty-One” (*AOT* 61-64) and “After the Age of Parties” (*AOT* 68-69). The latter two, both narratives, might’ve been cast in molds like those of the earlier “tales.” I guess they’re more realistic — but I still think they’ve got touches of the extravagant and the gothic.

AC Except that it’s lower case and unpunctuated throughout, “This Bridge Is No Bridge,” in *Brother’s Insomnia* (1972) — with its concern for reflectivity, doublings, and blurrings in the natural world, its minute observations giving way to breadth of statement — might be at home in *Afterlife*. The development of a poet is not exactly linear, is it?

BB Not usually, no. I feel my development was — is — at a snail’s pace, despite the early publications. Maybe I’ve had a few turning points — what’s suggested by the phrase “play in the lyric” in “Bluegrass in Japan” (*PH* 9-11), the first attempt to write long poems, the discovery that poems could generate each other in specific ways, like the hiking poems and the tales. But overall the learning has been full of side-trails — including a certain scattering of energy that results from also writing fiction, reviews and other pieces on writing, personal essays, and a journal that will soon be forty years old.

AC In reading the manuscript of your selected, some of your early poems — “November Mare” and “In a House Where Chastity Was Taught for a Century” (*WTD* 12, 130) — remind me of the early Alden Nowlan, as does “A Bear-Hunt Tale” in *Granite Erratics* (44-45), but I see more of Elizabeth Bishop in *Afterlife*. Of Maritime poets, are these the two of greatest importance to you?

BB Hard to say. Bishop has certainly become increasingly important to me over time, and I'd say that in the past decade the textures of her poems more than Nowlan's have been on my mind. Nowlan had such a powerful presence in Fredericton when I was young. His best poems were inspiration and remain so, even if I feel that his *Bread, Wine, and Salt* set a standard that the later collections didn't rise to again. But one thing about Fredericton is that there wasn't just Alden, there was also Alfie Bailey, Bob Gibbs, Bill Bauer, Travis Lane — all very different from Alden. I suspect Bob's collections *A Kind of Wakefulness* and *All This Night Long* — which I think are overdue for republication in a single volume — taught me as much as Alden's poetry did. Looking further afield, I think it's great that we've had such contrasting models as Al Purdy and P.K. Page, or — going farther back, and abroad — Yeats and Williams. Some poets seem to feel the need to side with one poet or the other, but I'm convinced it's most rewarding to soak up influences from all over the place.

AC Alden Nowlan was not a “mentor,” you say, in the sense of “dispensing advice,” but there were “lessons that Nowlan's poetry gave some of us” (“Nights in Windsor Castle” 54). What were those lessons?

BB Faithfulness to concrete life. A mixing of immediate personal experience with history and fantasy. A range from deep emotion and compassion to irony and whimsy. And Alden's life was an example of stick-to-it-ness.

AC These days the catchwords of praise for poetry are innovative, experimental, edgy. What kind of poetry do you write?

BB It's something of a cliché to say that all memorable writing has a dimension of the “innovative” and the “experimental” to it, but I do believe that, however much the poetry may seem out of step with ideas of what the avant-garde is. The kind of poetry I *do* write is surely best for readers to describe. I can only talk about the kind of poetry I'd *like and hope* to write: poetry that's musical in its sounds, sensuous in its images, strongly rhythmical, closely observant, emotionally moving, welcoming but challenging, open to humour, surprising. Anyway, that's a beginning.

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