"A Cadential Sense of Rhythm": Dennis Lee on Poetics and Music

SCL/ÉLC Interview by Ross Leckie

Dennis Lee is the first Poet Laureate of Toronto, a position he holds until 2003. His nomination for this position recognizes a lifetime of achievement in the Canadian writing community. In 1967, he founded the House of Anansi Press; five years later he received the Governor General's Award for *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* (1972). He has published widely, and his books include *Body Music* (1999), *Nightwatch* (1996), *Riffs* (1993), and *The Gods* (1978), as well as his famous books of children's verse, which include *Alligator Pie, Bubble-gum Delicious*, and *The Cat and the Wizard*.

This interview took place on March 13, 2001 in Fredericton, where Dennis Lee gave a reading at the University of New Brunswick

RL I would like to begin on familiar territory, the relationship between your poetry and jazz. You make clear the connections between your writing and jazz in titles such as *Riffs* and in the mention of specific musicians and instruments. At one point you mention Charlie Parker. Is bop the form of jazz that most interests you?

DL Yes, it is. The improvisational quality is what excites me particularly. But the ways in which my poetry has things in common with jazz — there's no programmatic connection. I might have written exactly the way I do, in a sequence like *Riffs*, if I didn't know jazz. And in fact, I didn't come to jazz a lot until I was part way through writing it. I'd heard Parker earlier, in my twenties, and he just spoke to me. But I haven't done very much sitting down, deliberately asking how you could accomplish such-and-so in words — it's much more intuitive than that, much more catch-as-catch-can.

RL You mentioned that writing *Riffs* was a real breakthrough in that it was like automatic writing, which hadn't worked very well for you when you tried it before.

DL I've only had two times in my life when a voice that was new to me came barrelling through. The first time, the voice of *Civil Elegies* landed on me, and that came in '67, after I published the wretched first book that I'd been working on for seven years, *Kingdom of Absence*. The second time was in 1980-81 when I was living in Edinburgh, and this really multiple-voiced deluge of *riffs* came through. In a period of about three or four months I wrote over a thousand of them. Most of them were crap that I didn't bother typing up, but enough of them were interesting, in this wide range of voices. They had grown out of a love affair, initially one that I was actually involved in, but then it took on its own life on the page. I was excited by the terrific range of musical voices that was happening. And yes, it was an automatic-writing kind of experience. Mostly late at night, and too much booze.

I'd write one, just dash it down. Start the next one — whisht — draw a line and start the next. Sometimes they'd be three lines long, sometimes they'd be twenty. I'd get up the next morning and look at what on earth had come out, and I'd discover that most of it was pretty self-pitying, maudlin crap, but some of them had a funny, bracing quality, and some of them were in voices that I'd never been able to get from my ear onto the page. They sounded more like something you'd hear on the radio, if you were spinning the dial. I'd already begun thinking in polyphonic terms. Certainly something like "The Death of Harold Ladoo," which was the previous major thing I'd written, swirls from voice to voice, but not nearly as much in this quick-break staccato form. So then the challenge was, what the fuck do you do with them? Do they link together into any larger whole? What is the principle of coherence, the bigger thing they would be part of? I was wrestling with that for almost ten years.

RL So you're saying this developed over a long period of time, from the initial automatic writing to what we see as the book.

DL Yes, pretty much. And much of the time I believed in the individual pieces, but not the whole sequence. I was trying to manufacture some kind of coherence that wasn't there. It became very editorializing, where you can feel the writer trying to implant some basis of organic structure from the outside; every time I read what I'd done I'd get mad at the writer, feel manipulated. Because the character himself wouldn't talk that way; he's in

the midst of a love affair, he's pretty spaced out. So if you're to believe that's actually what's going on, you can't simultaneously feel the machinations of the writer tiptoeing around, trying to make everything structurally … It has to feel improvisational; you have to believe that what the speaker is being buffeted around by, from piece to piece, is what's propelling the thing forward. We can't become aware of the highly conscious author-director standing behind the scenes and orchestrating everything. Even though, of course, that's exactly what did happen.

RL That phrase you use, 'organic structure,' seems to be a negative phrase for you.

DL No, I think the structure I finally found is in fact an organic structure. I can see why you said that, but 'organic' would be a compliment. I think I was trying for an organic structure, and getting just a series of mechanical, fake structures that were imposed from the outside.

RL That sense of something emerging in some organic way, as opposed to being imposed from the outside, is that experience just intuitive, does it really just come down to that?

DL Good question. There've obviously been times when the best writers were able to feel fully at home within the given literary structures of their time, whether it was the sonnet, or terza rima, or whatever. You know, they were moving and grooving within those given forms and they could remake them on their own terms, but not feel they had to throw them out the window and just let the chips fall where they might from one point to the next. So there've certainly been times when there was not a collision between pre-existing forms and a sense of organic fluidity and authenticity. Why has it been the case for a lot of poets, and not just poets, over the last hundred years that there *is* a collision between the two? I guess I could spin lots of theories about that, but the main thing is, there now is a sense that — if you try to write a rondeau, it's almost impossible to make the damn thing float as anything but a museum piece. And who wrote the last sonnet that worked as a sonnet and really held for us? Or another example: the only place I can do metrical rhythm with conviction is in my children's stuff. I write very little adult poetry that's metrical. And that, to me, is getting right down to the most fundamental matrix of poetry — two syllables side by side, four syllables side by side, the rhythmic principle that lets them hang together and *work* — that's much more fundamental than the sonnet or anything like that. And I find I'm only at home in free-verse rhythm, not meter.

RL That sense of rhythm raises an interesting point — it seems to me that at the moment, if we're living through a poetic period where rhythm is the most skewed from something we could count as a regular pattern such as an iamb or trochee or a pentameter, at least when we look at Canadian poetry, there seems to be two different directions of that, perhaps going in opposite ways, one of which is a kind of breaking down of the sentence, breaking down the grammar in some fundamental ways, and the other of which is playing with the sentence and elaborating upon the sentence and using all the full accoutrements of grammar and syntactical structure in a variety of ways. Is that, in your mind, a response towards something that seems too, as you said, 'mechanical' at the rhythmical level?

DL Well, you'd have to give me some more concrete examples of the two directions, and maybe you will in a moment, because I'd like to pursue that with you. But the alternative to metrical rhythm as I understand it is free verse. There were various attempts made during the later nineteenth century and in the twentieth century to find a basis for rhythm other than metrical. Some people tried to go back to the Anglo-Saxon four stresses in a line, and there were other attempts to go back — some people tried quantitative verse, as in Latin and Greek poetry. Whitman found that almost liturgical, surging line that probably came partly from the Book of Psalms in the Bible that had its own body sense, and that was maybe the first alternative to metrical. It worked for him, but it didn't work for very many other people who tried it. Hopkins found a different way that nobody else, as far as I know, has been able to make their own. And Marianne Moore found another way that not many people could follow — syllabic verse.

But it's free verse, which was H.D.'s to some extent, but basically Ezra Pound's discovery in English, and then was seized on by hundreds and thousands of poets, that became the main alternative rhythmic tradition in the twentieth century. In the book *Body Music* I spent one essay, a large part of it, trying to understand with my head what many of us know already about how free verse works. The theory of how free verse works is not … you can write very good free verse with no theory whatsoever, in fact that's what's happened much of the time, the two things are not dependent. You can have the greatest conceptual understanding of how free verse works, and then write crappy free verse yourself. There's no cause and effect between them. But part of the essay "Body Music," the title essay, is spent trying to understand what the protocols for free verse are,

given that they're no longer based on an abstract meter that the natural stresses coincide with and dance away from…. But now tell me what you mean by the two directions you spoke of, because I hadn't thought of it in those terms. Are you sure this is an alternative to metrical rhythm, or is it some other thing you're putting your finger on?

RL I guess I'm not sure what I'm putting my finger on. That's why I want to ask the question. I guess I'm thinking that if there is a significant alternative to the twentieth-century tradition of free verse, it would be blank verse. I think that Stevens and a number of other poets who followed after Stevens are using a kind of rough pentameter line.

DL Oh yes, blank verse is still metrical. I mean it's the continuation of the great tradition in English language poetry.

RL One of the things that really strikes me about it is that once it gets into the hands of a lot of the twentieth-century poets it gets looser and looser, and for poets who when they do write in blank verse, like John Ashbery, the sentences take on a greater priority than the lines and therefore the rising and falling of the rhythm cannot be measured on an on and off basis, you can't really talk about the stress or non-stress, you can only talk about it in varying levels of stress. It seems to rise and fall in a kind of curvature of the sentence across the lines. And so when I think of Canadian contemporary poets, I think of Al Moritz, or Marlene Cookshaw, who are writing that kind of poetry frequently. David Manicom, Jeffery Donaldson, Brian Bartlett, there is a number of poets who write in that style and they seem to be doing something with the metrical component that seems to be very much un-stressing or complicating the stress in a way that would make it hard to recognize except for those more wild sections of *Paradise Lost* or something. On the other hand, it seems to me there are other poets, another kind of poetry, perhaps over in the extreme would be language poetry, where even the semblance of grammar is collapsed or scrambled or re-structured in some kind of materiality of the word. But you don't have to go way over there, you could go to certain kinds of poems by somebody like Don McKay, say, to find, well yeah, they're sentences, but what seems to be most important is the way the sound patterns kind of burst and explode and double back and kind of energize in a way that seems counter to what you think of as syntactical flow.

DL I understand blank verse to be iambic pentameter that doesn't rhyme. Obviously, metrical poetry doesn't have to be in iambic pen-

tameter, it can be in trochaic tetrameter or whatever else, but the great English-language metrical line is iambic pentameter. To me, the last ultra-great poet who was at home with metrical poetry was Yeats; and then Stevens, who seems to me a lesser poet, but a very fine poet indeed, was also at home when he wrote metrically. And both of them, most of the time, wrote in iambic pentameter. Most of the other poets of the twentieth century who have written metrically … (I mean, there have been thousands, of course. In the British Isles, metrical rhythm is still the dominant idiom as far as I can see. British free verse is still a kind of daring experiment, even though it's been around almost a hundred years …) but I have to say most of the metrical poetry I read, where the syncopation of speech stresses against a meter that you can clearly hear, that is set and established, dee-*dum*-dee-*dum*-dee-*dum*-dee-*dum* — I don't see many poets in the twentieth century who've been able to use that with crispness and freshness and make it their own. I just keep hearing the dying fall of nineteenth-century metrical poetry, where it was already starting to lose much of its force. It's still alive in Tennyson certainly, who had a wonderful ear.

So anyway, contemporary work is mainly metrical. I start off with a bias against it, I have to admit. If I hear metrical rhythms behind a poem, it's going to have to persuade me that the poet is really at home within that, and can bite into it, make whatever kind of music they want to make. And it's the music they're making that interests me; it can be very traditional music, or jazz, or whatever. And if they can make music that feels for real in metrical rhythm, then terrific. But as I say, by now I've heard so much tired, tedious stuff that just recapitulates what people could do with much more freshness in 1820 or 1850. I don't see any point to that.

The other stuff you're talking about — some of it I suppose is in a sense an alternative to metrical verse that is not always free verse. Free verse I understand to consist of playing two rhythmical approaches or protocols against each other; but neither of them is fixed. One being syntactic, the kinds of pointing and stressing and pacing that come from the syntax of sentences. And the other being the layout on the page: the line breaks, how successive lines are disposed on the page. The different rhythmic resources of those two rhythmic languages get played against each other in free verse, as I understand it, and give you, in the hands of a master, extraordinary, one-of-a-kind effects that will never be done exactly the same again, but keep shifting and changing. The great interest in the rhetorical structure of syntax, you're right, that's

something you see in much of current poetry. There are people, and the language poets would be the extreme example, but Ashbery would be a good one, who play with conventions that two-and-a-half-year-olds who have gone past single words discover, that to put words together in a certain structure gives you meaning beyond just saying cow, duck, camel. But they don't know how to fill in the content properly yet, link two things together with a real 'because,' say, so the component parts have no because relationship to each other. "I want candy because dog bark." You get that kind of thing happening a lot in these poets, as a deliberate game.

I guess I'm an unreconstructed methodist, in some ways. I have trouble seeing much more than cleverness in it. Sometimes it seems to have a kind of moral vision behind it: that all the resources of the rational mind are useless to try to impose order on a world that is essentially raw chaos. But, a lot of that is old hat once Ashbery or whoever has done it, and I think even Ashbery has trouble following Ashbery. A lot of his poems — I mean nobody does it better — but he could swap chunks of one poem into another, he could put chunks from one from 1976 into one from 1996, and to what extent would we even know there was a difference? I have great respect for the man's sheer ability to play those games; if I tried to play them I wouldn't be able to do them as nearly as well as he does. Language poets seem to me epigones of that to a great extent. They give us structures of language working, but the words inside them collide with their context. But again, that's a game they've learned to play, and after a bit I nod off fairly quickly.

RL I was once at a reading given by Charles Bernstein and there were three people asleep after the first half-hour! But anyway, circling back from that to free verse. Sometimes people talk about it in terms of natural idioms. They say it's the language patterns of a certain historical period or cultural period that determine the kinds of speaking patterns that poetry will likely use convincingly. So part of it is that free verse is part of the natural idiom of the way we think now. Does such a statement make sense to you?

DL It makes sense, but I don't think it tells you what free verse is. I think it tells you what one component of free verse is. Our 'natural idioms' might articulate the world in a way that makes sense to us and that we feel at home in and that has taproots going down into it. There are native forms of speech, in some ways unsophisticated, that can be quite profound. But that doesn't tell you how to make a poem, that just tells

you how to speak in a way that rings true, or even if you're going to write it out as prose on the page, how to write out something that then rings true. But if you're trying to make a poem out of it, how do you know where anything goes? When do you stop one line and go back to the left-hand margin, or *do* you go back to the left-hand margin or just half-way back? Where are your stanza breaks, if there are stanza breaks? The whole question of the choreography of the thing, the orchestration, the scoring, that to me is the other element that free verse uses. Playing it against what you're calling natural idiom, and I'm calling syntax.

As you can tell, I see free verse very much as a page phenomenon. Trying to read free verse out loud, which we all do, is a translation into another medium. That medium has all kinds of great resources that the page doesn't have. But it doesn't have the resources that the page has, which are spatial and visual. When you're reading out loud, how do you read an indent — which might be important in the scoring or layout, and thus in playing this second protocol against the native syntactic patterns? You can get the two things dancing with each other in a very subtle way. And a hundred years ago, no one even knew those resources existed; free verse really was a revolution, right down at the level of micro-rhythms. But it happens first of all on the page, because the whole element of scoring is a page element. So I go crazy trying to read it out loud. I always know, whether I'm reading my own stuff or somebody else's who works really well on the page, it's shearing off the top 40% of the rhythmic subtlety; there's so much that can't be translated into sound alone.

RL Back to jazz for a moment — you were talking about Charlie Parker having the experience of wanting to play something in his music that he could feel in his body but he didn't know how to do it, and how you had had a similar experience yourself in writing. I thought that was very intriguing …

DL Yeah, that's when he was playing with Jay McShann, and there was no name yet for what he wanted to do. He wasn't saying to himself "Gee whiz, I sure do want to play bebop, but I don't know how to do it." All he knew was there was some new musical language that seemed to have taken hold of him, but he didn't know how to make it come out of the other end of his horn. And for a year or two he would make various attempts, but they were useless. And then one night, if I understand it, he found that by transposing the melodic line up a third from what the band was playing, he was at least vastly closer to this thing he could intuit. And he probably started to get some of the new rhythmic changes,

too. The strange thing is that even though he was playing with very savvy musicians, he suddenly felt "Jesus Christ, you know, I'm *doing* it!!" — but nobody on the bandstand, let alone the audience, noticed anything. The great breakthrough, when the first notes of bop were played, and nobody heard a thing different.

I didn't invent bebop, goodness knows. But all through my twenties, working on the laboured, cramped poems of *Kingdom of Absence*, which were sonnet variations — I could feel this long, tumbling line. I guess the closest point of origin was what I'd read in Hölderlin, but it was a body sense of my own. Anyway, I could not make the darn thing happen. It wasn't till *Kingdom of Absence* was published, in the spring of '67, that the log jam broke. I was just sitting around and I started scribbling stuff down, not worrying what was in it even, just trying to let these longer rhythms come out. It began to take on this tumble, with the syntax often acting as sort of dam breaks that the rhythm had to cascade over. There were lots of subordinate clauses and things started, ideas started to move sideways, and yet tumbling onwards at the same time. I felt just — I mean, I was scared of it, I didn't know if this was poetry or not, but it felt so much more like home than anything I'd been doing up to then. And it turned into *Civil Elegies*.

RL That was the first experience you had which you thought was cadence?

DL Yeah. And of course the experience came first; I only latched onto the term 'cadence' because I had to call it something. I didn't have a name for it still in 1972, when I was giving a talk in Montreal.

RL This idea of cadence, the way you talk about it, it seems almost to be something … well you state very clearly, it's not poetical or technical in the way you think of it. It's something you experience directly when you're writing, that seems to come out of a state of existence or a state of being. In that sense, I guess it's a kind of meditation, and you use that word sometimes as well. How do you think of those words now? In retrospect, it's been awhile since you wrote your essay on polyphony.

DL Well, the nature of what I experience as 'cadence' changes over the decades, but I guess there's nothing terribly surprising about that. I still use the same lingo to describe the experience. The very first thing to say about it is that it's experiential. But if I use the word 'cadence,' and try to make sense out of what the word is being applied to, it can start to sound quite lofty, abstract even. I just go crazy when I realize I'm start-

ing to sound that way, because it's so much the opposite. I mean, if we were sitting here, and drifted off into not talking very much, and one of us started to get some feeling — you can see how my body is starting to move a bit now, with rhythm kind of playing through, the sense you can get in your body of a kinaesthetic bunching and tightening and flow and hang and whatnot — the thing I'm calling 'cadence' is precisely that experience — it's kinaesthetic for me.

We have an experience most people find easy to talk about, which is analogous, and that is the experience of the third eye. If you close your eyes, you can visualize all kinds of things. And sometimes something will come into your mind's eye that is not just a memory of a place you loved when you were six years old or whatever, but a more visionary kind of thing. And similarly with the inner ear: you can tune out the world around you and hear an entire piece of music. Or you can hear something that is not, again, just a memory of music, but seems to be coming to you independently. We don't have any term for the faculty, but exactly the same kind of process is available in a meat-and-potatoes, matter-of-fact way, in terms of kinaesthetic rhythm. You don't have to be getting buffeted by sound or pressure from outside yourself to experience kinaesthetic rhythm. Where does it come from? I have absolutely no idea, but I know that it does come. So that's it: as a poet, I take my marching orders from it. And I've made the odd attempt to conjecture what it might be, where it comes from, but that to me is far less important than just trying to keep being at its behest.

RL That sense of kinaesthetic rhythm, it's changed, obviously, through time, and presumably your poetry has changed with it. Do you see that? Do you look at your various books and say, okay, I see a certain kind of rhythm or cadence that's speaking to me here, and I see a different kind here, and are there things you feel that suggest themselves from that? That sense that, oh, this is because I was young, or older, or because it was the 60s and now it's the 90s?

DL Well, these are good questions, and you're speaking about it in exactly the right way. The cadence that came with *Civil Elegies* is not the same thing as the rhythmical idiom of *Riffs*, for example. *Riffs* is so much more jumpy and nervy, and there's also a much wider range; the music of *Civil Elegies* is more of a piece, all the way through. The change is kind of odd, actually … I mean, *Riffs*, in some ways you can say, well, that looks like a younger man's music … And you can say with *Civil Elegies*, there's a burnished, sonorous quality that you might expect of someone coming

into their forties or fifties, and that jazzier, more rock 'n 'roll cadence in some parts of *Riffs* you might think would be a younger man's thing. But I've found that to get to freer rhythms wasn't automatic to me when I was young, quite the opposite; I was quite unfree in my rhythms, so I had to travel in the opposite direction. "I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now." … That's one thing to notice; there are others. It's still changing. For instance, I'll read something at the university tonight from a manuscript in progress that has this very bunched impacted rhythm: it grinds right into individual syllables.

RL Does it have "boxcar" rhythm?

DL It's a nice phrase; I'm not sure, you can tell me yourself. This stuff just began about ten months ago. I still don't understand it. These are tiny little studded things, but the energy is so impacted and the rhythms are … I don't know what to make of it. They're about the end of civilization — trying to face that possibility. Here's one:

> In wreck, in dearth, in necksong,
> godnexus gone to fat of the land:
> into the wordy desyllabification of evil — small
> crawlspace for plegics, 4, 3, 2, 1, un.

Here's another one.

> Uslings anonymous, how
> barren to chew.
> Spat teeth in the umbrage, shat
> flecks in the alley disjecta; snot
> lobs on the moonscape of now.

I look at these things and I think "What the hell?" Here's one of the earliest things. There're only three words in the poem.

> Flintin-
> lyexcaliburlockjut.
> Tectonic aubade.

RL They remind me a bit of Fred Wah's book *Alley Oop*.

DL I don't know the book, but the first time I read some of these was out west at a thing in Calgary, and Fred was the MC for the evening. And he was struck by precisely this crawling into cracked, impacted syllables. So I guess it makes sense. Here's a different kind of piece:

Lullabye wept as asia
buckled,
rockabye einstein and all.

One for indigenous,
two for goodbye,
adam and eve and dodo.

Fly away mecca,
fly away rome,
lullabye wept in the lonely.

Once the iguanadon,
once the U.N,
hush little orbiting gone.

It comes out of this nursery rhyme lyricism, that turns back on itself completely, because it's about the end of the world. But it's singing itself a lullaby.

RL It is interesting, before you read those I was going to ask the question: where's metaphor in all this, or is it? I guess what I was thinking, there's so much emphasis in what you are saying on these rhythmical ideas, I was wondering whether the notion of visual metaphor is appealing or if that is secondary to the idea of cadence?

DL Well, language I guess starts off, for me, having a tactile force, even though I've said it's words on the page where a lot of these resources exist. But the word as an experience, as something that embodies energy, something that you can dance your way through and fight your way through — so there's a tactility to words: that's my starting point. I haven't actually thought about this until you asked me that question. The sense of words as the launching pad for metaphor, I think it's not where I begin, so I guess … Sometimes when words have this very tactile existence, some of the energy that sparks between them becomes a kind of lived metaphor. It doesn't seem to be mediated through the brain or the conscious wit so much as the words themselves striking that metaphorical energy … I like your question, but I don't understand these things completely. I need to open up more to metaphor.

RL Yes, obviously the relationship between metaphor and rhythm is perplexing. The reason it struck me, though, is because you were mentioning free verse being a page thing, but if I saw these new poems on the

page, I wouldn't know how to find the rhythms that you gave them as you were reading — I would now, having heard it.

DL That's interesting. Well, the density matters. But there's nothing very sophisticated about the way they're orchestrated on the page. I think they're always flush-left — much more so than a lot of stuff I do. Line breaks, there's some indication there; but mostly it's just these dense things side by side. You'd have to be willing to slow down, hit successive syllables equally hard; I guess it's much more trochaic on that wavelength. It's not nearly so much the alternation of light and heavy stress, it's just whack, whack, whack. Like in Hungarian. I don't speak a word of Hungarian, but I've discovered my calling as a Hungarian poet! Somebody told me, a Hungarian speaker, that the alternation of strong and light stress is not something you find very much of in Hungarian; normally it's all strong stresses.

RL I wanted to ask you another set of questions that have to do with 'poetry and knowing,' which was of course a question raised by Tim Lilburn very directly in the book of that same title. One of the things that strikes me is that there is a lot of poetry, I see this certainly in my own writing and a lot of the poetry I'm reading, the poetry I'm most enjoying, where one has this sense of being at the edge of what's normal and looking into what's not normal and perhaps stealing something from the unknowable and bringing it back. That led me to think of the conclusion to "The Gods," that sense of murderous fate, where poetry becomes a relationship between something which knows you all too intimately, but which you don't know, and therefore are forced to respond to in poetry as a kind of articulation of this thing that is going to speak to you.

DL It's one thing for something like that to be the content of a poem, and it's another thing for it to be the experience we have reading the poem. And I would say in "The Gods" that it's more there in the content — gesturing towards the unknowable — than it is what happens when you read it. It seems to me that probably once you get used to the way the thing moves on the page, which is unusual at first for a lot of people, and once you get used to the kinds of concerns the poem has — why has it gone here, and not there? — well, I think that all becomes fairly clear after not too many readings. It actually is not an opaque poem at all. I don't think you have the sense with it that a lot of the unknowable, or to us unknowable, has gotten onto the page, and we're tripping and cracking our shins over it as we proceed. Whereas there are some poets who may or may not talk about

what you spoke of as content, but in reading their work we actually have that sense, that I have no idea where I am with this, I don't even know what's going on, but if there's something convincing there, we're going to keep coming back to it. Geoffrey Hill, for instance, I had that experience with. I didn't know what the hell was happening here, but there was some kind of raw power. I'm thinking of *Mexican Hymns*, and then T*he Triumph of Love*. Chris Dewdney I also had that feeling with, when I first read him, though I think Chris is probably, much of the time, also transparent … Are you talking about the times when a poet will make 'unknowability' the subject matter, or are you talking about when the poem itself has that strangeness?

RL I hadn't thought of it in terms of that distinction, but I guess that's a distinction you yourself have made at times between what the poem is talking about and what it enacts. I guess a poem can enact something, as opposed to its discourse. I agree with that distinction in a way, in the sense that for me a poem seems in some ways to be enacting what it is talking about and when it's talking about it, it is also acting as a signifier for its process. So I guess I mean that second sense, although I think that those last lines in "*The Gods*" seem to be a kind of content summary of what the poem was doing all along.

DL Yeah, I like those final lines in "*The Gods*." But I don't think that a whole lot of my work … I mean, some of the *Riffs* have some of that strangeness that remains irreducible.

Paul Celan is a great example of a poet who enacts that unknowability on the page … Although this is complex. Some of his stuff seems to me to be hermetic in a way that I don't applaud. You know, if you find out that such-and-such a word actually refers to a visit he made to Stuttgart on the 23rd of April and saw a gable on a certain building, well you know, that kind of private reference can mystify the rest of us, but it's a pretty cheap triumph. But some of the radical strangeness of his stuff has nothing to do with that kind of thing, and some of his most powerful poems are just irreducibly strange. What the hell is going on? You don't know, but the energy moving through the language can almost bring you to tears and you still don't know what the hell you're reading. So, that kind of strangeness has reached a long way into the unsayable. I don't think my own work goes very far in that direction. Or at least, not far enough. I think it does move into enacting energy and rhythm that sometimes aren't just there on the surface of the page; but I think it still tends to remain fairly transparent. In some ways I don't like that — I might like

my work even more if some of it were permanently dark in that way. Or maybe not, I don't know. But in any case, I think a true description of my stuff would not say that much of it has that alienness, that strangeness to it — it's strange in other ways.

Of course that can be just mystification of a cheap kind. I mean, there's a lot of facile stuff of various kinds, the "New Apocalypse," people like George Barker writing around the time of Dylan Thomas — and even some of Dylan Thomas — which was just jacking off with pseudo-profound gestures. Or some of the dope poetry from twenty years ago. But there is some stuff, some of the best of *Howl* as a matter of fact — the language just locks in, in "Howl, Part One," which is the only part that works for me. But there are places where it just goes somewhere linguistically, and you feel cut off at the knees, not even sure what the words are saying; except it takes the top of your head off.

RL There's a poet from that generation that I've always admired, Philip Lamantia, and his poetry seems to work by strange relation; obviously he relies on surrealism to a large degree, but there's a quality in that surrealism which is not just jamming things together or colliding things together, it's a kind of accelerating bunch of particles that somehow speaks with a wonderful sense of strangeness.

DL I'd like to read more of Lamantia when you say that. I don't know his work very well. That's very inviting. Some of Bob Dylan's best lyrics have that quality. "Yonder stands your orphan with his gun, / Crying like a fire in the sun." I still don't know what that means exactly, but it seems to have arisen from some dimension where you can only say that by saying it in that way, and it's something true.

RL You're absolutely right. I'm curious, one of the things that I sense sometimes in poets who are more metrical, ones that I really like, and I really enjoy Marlene Cookshaw's poetry, it strikes me that when she is enacting metaphorically what other poets already do in a freer verse form, that the metrics then become tent pegs, holding down this other world that is happening metaphorically, in a metaphorical context.

DL That's cool, that's intriguing.

RL I think that's perhaps a nice way to round things off; I'll just ask you a couple more obvious questions that interviewers often ask. What are you reading? What do you re-read over and over again? Who excites you? What poets?

DL Well, you know, I'm going to button my lip in some ways, because I'm in the midst of being one of the judges on this Griffin award and the decisions will be made and announced before this interview comes out, I guess, but it prevents me from talking about any book or author who has published a book in the year 2000. My lips are probably fairly sealed. I can talk about Celan because I was already reading a lot of him lately … which I can only read with an English crib beside me; and even German-speakers have to have him translated into German. My German's not bad, but I would never get the nuances in Celan. But there's something about that compacted energy that's just burrowed right down into the language itself. White hot centres of whatever it is, reconfigured in the actual language. Who else am I reading? … I like the question, but I think I better … I just read 300 books of poetry in the last couple of months for the Griffin Prize, so some of them are very much in the fore of my mind, but I can't talk about these people.

RL We'll see how things go, but maybe I'll get back to you and talk to you again after everything's been announced. I'd love to ask you questions about what the process was like, what kinds of things are starting to emerge in poetry, patterns you notice. You're working on a new book of poetry?

DL I'm working on two new manuscripts — I'm going to read from both of them tonight. One is the one I subjected you to a bit of, these impacted little, whatever the hell they are. The other is a book of poems that — they're teenage poems. But it's like in the kids' poems; I don't write about children, I try not to write poetry 'about children,' but I try to touch, I hate the phrase, my inner child, but long before the phrase was being used all over the place, I was aware that there was a two-year-old in me and a four-year-old, and a ten-year-old, and I try to write from those parts of myself. So a few years ago, I thought I'd like to see if I could write from a part of me that vibrates with a fourteen-year-old, a sixteen-year-old, which I find very dangerous, mined territory — I've been fooling around with that for awhile. It's funny, I don't know of a lot of stuff that's written this way; there are things that young people at that age have made their own over the years, but there's not actually a lot that's written from inside that sensibility. There's stuff that becomes theirs, often just by being put into school anthologies, such as the great old warhorses like "The Highwayman."

RL I taught high school for a couple of years and "The Highwayman" was one of those poems that got brushed off every year. I have another question for you — you talked about having a two-year-old and a four-year-old inside, Robert Bringhurst on the back of *Riffs* talks about you being a "goofy" poet at times. I assume you would take that as a compliment?

DL I would. Actually, I'd take it as a statement of fact.

RL But what does that mean to you?

DL Very playful, and then sometimes it goes further … the capacity to hop, skip, and jump with things that seem completely incommensurable with each other. To take pleasure in incongruities and whatnot. But first of all, I think it's just the sense of play.

RL Is that part of where poetry begins for you?

DL Yeah, absolutely.

RL So it's about pen and paper, playing games …

DL Well, yeah, actually that starts in the bodily energy that I've talked about so much, a cadential sense of rhythm. I'm sure you've had this experience, when something you're writing is pretty heavy-duty stuff, and yet finding the articulation, a way to shape the experience of the poem, is such a high … it can be play in a very profound sense, too. You can find your way through something that's quite grisly sometimes, quite depressing, or whatever — you can find words that really move, in a liturgical way or a sobbing way or whatever — but when you get them right, there's joy in it too.

RL One of the things about the elegiac, I think, is just that. It's a sense of such emotion toward the universe, or as Wallace Stevens suggests, "The scholar of one candle sees / An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame / Of everything he is. And he feels afraid." But the other side of that is that sense of embracing fear and finding a shared purpose. In a strange way loss brings us together more than any easy sense of togetherness.

DL It's odd, isn't it. Even as a young person you can know that you have that hunger, that thing that makes you cry, and still you keep coming back to it again and again. There's some deep rightness to it.