A Philosophy of the Verb: Bertram Brooker's Early Canadian Mystical-Modernist Verse

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EARLY CANADIAN MODERNIST POETRY from between the wars — and even earlier — has come under increasing scrutiny as a distinctive branch of Canadian literature. In particular, recent research has highlighted the achievements of writers like E.J. Pratt, W.W.E. Ross, Raymond Knister, and Dorothy Livesay. Despite the recent surge in scholarship, other more and less advanced modernist writers have gone almost entirely unnoticed. In the case of one neglected writer, Bertram Brooker (1888-1955), there is good, if ultimately unsatisfactory, reason for his having been generally overlooked. In 1988, Birk Sproxton edited and released the first edition of Bertram Brooker's poetry, all of which had been produced in the 1920s and early 1930s. All but four short poems included in the seventy-one-page collection, however, had never previously appeared in print.

In his introduction, Sproxton noted that Brooker, most famous for being Canada's first abstract painter and for winning Canada's first Governor General's Award (Literature) for his 1936 novel *Think of the Earth*, created modernist, even avant-garde, verse long before experimentation had become a common feature in this country. Brooker's achievements in verse follow naturally from his prose and his painting, which were distinctly advanced for the time and place. Sproxton also made the evident observation that both Brooker's visual art and verse demonstrated the artist's deep involvement with Canadian mysticism. The twenty-nine poems and six essays in the collection confirm that Brooker was himself a mystic and used his writing to explore, expound, and refine conceptions of what was then popularly called "cosmic consciousness," a state of being more familiarly understood as mystical enlightenment. In a short follow-up discussion of the poetry for the 1988 York University conference

on Brooker, published in the proceedings of the conference, Sproxton develops the idea of consciousness to note that the poems "can be described as exploring different states of consciousness" ("Subjective" 55). Sproxton was particularly struck with Brooker's haphazard interest in stream-of-consciousness, a topic more suited to Brooker's prose. Sproxton's short introduction concludes with a brief account of the Canadian mystical community, including of Brooker's close friend Lawren Harris and their mutual appreciation for the mystical writing of Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke — the famous mystic and alienist from London, Ontario. Sproxton also includes a commentary on two of Brooker's critical reviews. The poems were, by and large, left to speak for themselves. Regrettably, this is exactly what has come to pass: besides short reviews announcing the text, there have been no critical responses to Brooker's poetry since the book's publication seventeen years ago.

To the detriment of his reputation, Brooker's writing had little in common with the general stock of verse in Canada at the time. His exploration of Canadian mysticism set him apart from the dominant aesthetic mode of modernist production in Canada and abroad. Despite this fact, and despite the fact that Brooker did not publish most of his poetry in his lifetime, the aggressive verbal experimentation, the sharply honed modernist method, and the penetrating literary imagination at work in his poems suggest the inadequacy of accounts of early Canadian modernist writing that continue to overlook his writing. In this essay, instead of concentrating on the community of artists that influenced the creation and distribution (or lack thereof) of Brooker's art, I explore the mystical poetics and his unique theory of language that informed his poetry. As an outspoken mystical modernist, Brooker consciously broke from the poetics of the leading modernist poets of his time, including T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and Ezra Pound, and of the various competing schools of poetry surrounding them, precisely because he felt they did not have a coherent or accurate sense of how language evolved in relation to the human mind and the human body. Through writings from the mystical and philosophic tradition, especially through the work of John Middleton Murry, William Blake, George Russell (Æ), and e.e. cummings, Brooker developed his own compensatory semiotic to overcome what he considered their primary weakness.

Surprisingly, given his extensive contributions in the other arts,[1] Brooker was not a prolific poet. The dozens of poems he did produce,

however, offer a different insight into his understanding of the literary arts than appear in any other form. While spiritual themes abound, as could be expected considering his novels, painting, and criticism, Brooker extended his exploration of language itself to address its relation to his spiritual consciousness. The poems include neologisms, disruptive grammar, and disjunctive narratives with a cumulative effect of destabilizing the reflective nature of language. As a fundamental principle of his poetics, Brooker believed that language was a faulty tool precisely because it was invented by humans and therefore inevitably subject to the same distortions as the human mind. He explained, in the unpublished essay "Language and Life: (Nouns and Verbs)," that language and thought were an abstraction from and thereby a distortion of the world:

> There are moments when we recapture the innocence of Eden, the wonder of being alive in a world without names — moments when we erase from our mind all the names, the nouns, the labels, that have been placed on everything. We see that Action is the reason why the world began, and that Thought merely tries to put tags on it. (n. pag.)

While the moments he describes in this anti-noun essay include the ecstatic moment of cosmic consciousness, his argument attends more to the broader and more common experience of acting without conscious will: a moment without language in the conscious mind, and an experience of the world without mediation. His poetry attempts to draw attention to the limitations of language while insinuating the reality and integrity of such moments of experience behind and beyond language. The rare moment of mystical connection to the infinite universe, or the experience of 'cosmic consciousness,' went even further in escaping self-consciousness by enabling an individual to dwell within a state of total awareness of the ground pattern of life itself: it was to feel "the whole of Living, and ourselves in the midst of it, seeing the pattern, sensing the perfection, knowing that there can be no flaws in it, sure that it must have been ordered so from the beginning or the world would crack. At one step we pass from the puzzle of *Life* into the Paradise of *Living.*" For Brooker, nouns, such as "Life," signify an inorganic detachment from the world. Verbs, on the other hand, such as "Living," signify a profoundly spiritual participation in the cosmos. The poetics of his verse was shaped by the interfusion of this personal mysticism and his deeply-felt semiotic mistrust. As he wrote in his weekly arts column for Southam newspapers[2]:

"experience of grandeur do transcend language" (SA 8 Feb. 1930). Verbs and nouns were conjoined, ultimately, in Brooker's pantheistic cosmology.

Two poems in particular, "The Ice Man" and "love,"[3] stand out for their use of stylized language as a commentary on mysticism. Both of these poems utilize powerful descriptive and sensual visualizations. Through lushly textured language, they almost cinematically depict a vivid, realistic encounter in the world while yet incorporating an allegorical, metaphorical, and deeply subjective mystical transformation into the narrative. "The Ice Man" begins within the protagonist's mundane workaday world as he passes through the city streets delivering his blocks of ice, but quickly destabilizes the nature and implications of daily life:

> on the painted carefully cart
> wheels in spokeless backward gleam
> fringe axle grease and if there is
> there isn't no ticket
> git up the horse shudders flies into blueness. (1-5)

Such lines fairly distinguish themselves from imagist verse, as well as from Georgian or other pre- or early-modern forms, by their disruption of the conventional use of symbolism, the image, and the object world. The language invokes the colloquial tone of working-class Toronto, fusing spoken commands "git up" with the objects spoken to and the object speaking. The line between subject and object disappears, dissolves "into blueness" — a distinctly mystical colour in the spiritual cosmology of the theosophically informed.[4] At the same time, Brooker sustains a delicate tension between the mystical, cosmic world and the corporeal, earthly world. The "space-gazing" woman, for instance, in the final lines of the poem, "orders cauliflowers" (20-21). Similarly, the "blueness" noted above connects the mystical heavens with the more terrene colour of the flies themselves: the common bluebottle fly. The intriguing efficiency of such lines quickly evokes the details of the scene, the people involved, and the timbre of the encounter through subjectively coloured language: the "painted carefully cart," for instance, details an object, a characteristic of its creation, an important insight into the vocation and temperament of the individual that made it, and the central feature of the poem. The blurred — almost Joycean — grammar of these lines notably limits the

conventional fixation on proper nouns and the subject of the sentence in preference of verbs and the flux of action — all of which dissolves into the spiritualized noun "blueness." Brooker, discussing his visual art, clarified and stressed his dislike of nouns — "lowly useless objects to be carelessly trampled" — in preference of verbs: "What I try to portray is the rhythm, the ascension, the upward light-seeking springing in each stem, each leaf, each tendril" ("Painting" 37). Brooker only accepted nouns like "blueness" and "cosmos" that seemed to encompass life rather than subdivide its various elements.

Brooker's grammatically based method of demonstrating the relativity of shifting perspectives and consciousnesses in his poetry notably follows a more general mystical modernist ontology of individuality and being. The possibility loomed before mystical philosophers like John Middleton Murry, P.D. Ouspensky, and Richard Maurice Bucke, as well as Brooker himself, that humanity was in the midst of a spiritual and moral evolution that was moving civilization ever closer to a state of constant perception of the entire universe: a mystically illuminated perception of all Living. Bucke's hugely influential "doctrine of the unfolding of the human being" (*Cosmic* 23), outlined in *Man's Moral Nature* (1879) and *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901), describes the evolution of consciousness through human history, ending with claims that an era of total cosmic consciousness will soon arrive. In this dawning, spiritual age, humanity will witness the disappearance of the stable, object-oriented world. In its place, humanity would come to realize the constant relativity of being; we would become aware of ourselves as miniscule parts of the cosmic order. Bucke's theories offered a bridge over the developing antagonism and conflict between science and religion. As modernist scholar (and skeptic) Richard Ellmann notes, "Spiritual evolution restored the hope which natural evolution had removed, and materialism was utterly condemned" (58). Mystics across the world firmly latched onto Bucke's pseudo-scientific prognosis. P.D. Ouspensky dedicated the entire final chapter of his most popular book, *Tertium Organum* (1920), to an appreciation and criticism of Bucke's writing: "But after all, various little imperfections of Dr. Bucke's book are not important, nor additions which might possibly be made. What is important is the general conclusion to which Dr. Bucke comes: the possibility and the immanence of the NEW CONSCIOUSNESS" (224). Lawren Harris, Brooker's close ally as both a Toronto mystic and artist, famously describes Bucke's book, in his review published in *The Canadian Bookman*, as "the greatest book

written by a Canadian" (38). It is in this spirit that Brooker, in his review article, praises Bucke for his "forthright directness and 'realism' … [in proving] that the mystical experience is a thoroughly natural extension of powers possessed by every human being" ("Mysticism" 64). Brooker believed as Bucke, Ouspensky, and Harris did that all living things were inextricably linked in a profoundly spiritual way that denied the possibility of essential individuality. He describes the experience of mystical illumination in "The Destroyer" as transcending individuality: "I have been / where there are no selves" (1-2). Similarly, by following the Iceman in the performance of his vocation, and the shifting consciousness that demonstrated the overlapping nature of multiple subjectivities, Brooker offers a holistic representation of the natural being, the Iceman, in his contextual nature: influencing, changing, participating, and belonging within it. Brooker extends the awareness of this holistic biosphere to the narrator of the poem, enabling him to freely traverse the heterotic spectrum.

Brooker's atypical modernism — his mystical modernism — participated in the broader cultural change of the modernist period. In fact, the mystical modernists deliberately conspired to restore the mystical and spiritual values threatened (or occluded) by the advent of the modern era. The modern occultists did not advocate a return to traditional Western social orders or values. Instead, as Leon Surette explains, the "occult revival" in the modern period launched a "nearly complete conquest of the arts at the birth of modernism" (36) and led the experimentation and quest for new forms, new ideas, and new conceptions of human life. One of these modern pioneers, the great abstractionist and prominent mystic Wassily Kandinsky, who had a deep influence on Brooker's visual art, proposed that art should be used to build "the spiritual pyramid which will some day reach to heaven" (20). His *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911) outlines the magnitude of the mystical modernist ambition, seeking no less than the total reorientation of the values of the Western world:

> The nightmare of materialism, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, useless game, is not yet past; it holds the awakening soul still in its grip… . After the period of materialist effort, which held the soul in check until it was shaken off as evil, the soul is emerging, purged by trials and sufferings. (2)

The figures within the modern occultist movement included many of the definitive figures associated with the first generation of the modernist

movement, such as W.B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens, D.H. Lawrence, George Bernard Shaw, Eugene O'Neill, Katherine Dreier, Katherine Mansfield, Wassily Kandinsky, and Piet Mondrian, among many others. Despite the extensive overlap, however, the esoteric influence on modernism has been broadly ignored or minimized by modernist scholars. Ellmann, for example, in *Yeats: the Man and the Masks* (1987), describes Yeats's thirty-plus years studying magic, his ten-plus years involvement with The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn as chief administrator and member, his deep involvement with the Theosophical Society, and even his close personal friendship with its founder Helena Blavatsky as but a passing phase in his literary development: "Theosophy had furnished him with shield and sword, and he went forth like Don Quixote, though with some hesitancy, to tilt at the windmills of modern life" (69). Ellmann's lighthearted metaphors reveal his hesitancy in admitting value in the influence of mysticism on the poet's art. He distinguishes between modern art and theosophy despite the fact that parts of Yeats's poetics, transcribed in *A Vision* (1925), were dictated to him by spirits communicating through his wife. Ellmann's scepticism is typical of modernist studies and hints at the complications of admitting the influence of the mysticism in the competitive academic industry of Ellmann's time. Such complications, however, do not change the extent and depth of the influence of mysticism on modernist artists.

Brooker's "The Ice Man" demonstrates a consciousness of the relativity, the alienation, and the constant modification of the individual in the modern world that the mystical modernists contested and sought to overcome. Through its playful metaphors of writing and creativity, the poem destabilizes both the subject of the creation and the subjectivity responsible for its creation. It is unclear, for instance, who is "making poems of sharp-noised streets" (8): the horse, its brown legs, nice mornings, the ice man, or the narrator? Furthermore, what can possibly answer the narrator's claim that "the clop slapping hooves" (7) of the Ice Man's horse that he has just described rhymes "perfunctorily with the smell of soap" (12)? How is it even possible to imagine a rhyme between the olfactory experience of soap and the auditory experience of a trotting horse? The destabilized grammar, the twisted logic, and the insurgence of neologisms, invented words like "dangle-lolloping" and "dooringly" produce a chaotic, heterotic environment in which the Ice Man manoeuvres through the blundering banality of a dull, routine workday. Brooker sur-

rounds the Ice Man with a cacophony of instability and invention, hovering just beneath the calm surface of life in an urban exchange economy:

> he the man careens careers caroodles
> dooringly blundering nippers clipped in paleness
> dropping the liquid speech of how many
> possibly ninety-million-mile moving sunshine
> nice day what ten o'clock. (13-17)

The contrast is revealing: the pale speech of "nice day what" greetings and mutterings is liquefied in the juxtaposed glare of "ninety-million-mile moving sunshine." The consciousness of the physical origin of the day's sunshine highlights the chaos, irrelevancy, and fragility of such precious human conceptions as time and the relative quality of one particular day. In Brooker's writing, however, disruption and chaos, whether playful or painful, invariably lead characters to recognize a profound split between the mundane and the cosmos:

> o spring when kitchens brittle are
> and the telephoning wrappered madam
> space-gazing beyond however many planets
> orders cauliflower. (18-21)

What could very easily be a simple daydream is twisted subtly to evoke Brooker's pantheistic spirituality in the most humdrum and unlikely places possible: the marketplace. Brooker, as a daytime advertising executive in downtown Toronto, was intimately aware of the alienation of labour in the Western world. He contested and challenged it in his writing by contrasting finite humanity with the infinite cosmos. The alienation between these two distinct modes of consciousness, in Brooker's cosmology, was the direct result of the Western metaphysic, prophesied over three millennia ago by the Adam and Eve parable.

The contrast between alienated Life and participatory Living was not, however, made out of any sense of pessimism. The modern malaise, stuck as it was in the detached noun, could be overcome. With this end in mind, Brooker defined a very particular role and function for the artist in the modern world:

> the artist's function — to take all the subtle impressions and relationships that present themselves before him and somehow unify them, giving them a life of their own even in separation from the objects

> which originally possessed them.... The artist sees in wholes what the layman sees in parts. (SA 7 Dec. 1928)

The genuine artist must first rise up against "the straight-jacket of conventionality" (SA 12 Oct. 1929), and must, furthermore, rise above the cacophony of the modern world and resist the appeal of accepting the surface validity of distinctions and categories. The power of art lies in unifying diverse objects, drawing them together despite the modern world's penchant for taxonomy: "It is the modern artist and poet who is correcting this passion for precision which spreads from science and mechanized industry over our whole life" ("High"). In his important anti-censorship essay "Nudes and Prudes," he added:

> A proper understanding of the real function of art is more necessary today than it has ever been. Now that the orthodox religions are losing their hold, especially on the imaginations of the younger generation, art is more significant than ever before as the only unifying experience that remains to us — the only experience that approximates to the religious in its ability to make us feel *at one* with the universe. (102)

Brooker believed that art in general, and modernist experimentation in particular, could become the great corrective for the failings and limitations of both religion and science. His pantheistic faith seemed to suggest the possibility of a spiritualized materialism, a middle ground that resolved the ongoing dispute between the secular and the mystical.

By the logic of his aesthetic ambition, Brooker dismissed the ideological basis of the experimental avant-garde art developing in Europe as "unintelligible" and unhelpful ("When We Awake!" 14). He was keenly aware of the art emerging from the likes of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and the European avant-garde, but recognized a fundamental split between his own unity-driven experiments and those that seemed to revel in the fragmentation and decay of civilization. He did not object to the discordance of their methods and results, but rather with their sense of the historical failure of the present. They did not work with confidence or faith in the constant universal cosmos. They were writing, instead, entirely mired within the limited consciousness of the alienated modern world:

> Concerned only with the immediate sicknesses and eccentricities of the age they live in, they cannot see the colossal proportions of the race and its life, like a giant tree going down into the deep past and

> branching up into future infinity. They jump feverishly from leaf to leaf of one tiny branch of the towering tree, solicitous about a tiny touch of blight of the infinitesimal ravages of some short-lived insect. Devastation on this microscopic scale is sufficient to unnerve them, driving them to satire or cynicism, all forgetful of the great surrounding downshine of the sun and the upward-aspiring sap within. (16)

Interestingly, Brooker experimented with the same formal methods as the poets he critiqued, including imagism, collage, satire, and pastiche, and often shared the same assessment of the current malaise and foppishness of the world. He did, however, disagree with their response to the world's current plight. He claimed their historical perspective possessed a foolish naïveté. The present moment, in his opinion, was no exception and could be no exception to the general, historical condition of life.

On the other hand, the malaise and alienation of the modern world led many philosophers and thinkers to imagine the means by which to effect its reversal, and it was to these writers — a rather optimistic set — that Brooker offered his praise and most devout attention. He took particular inspiration from mystical modernist philosophers like Ouspensky, Whitehead, Murry, and Bucke who espoused a metaphysic of faith in the possibility of spiritual evolution: the human body was changing, they all agreed, in preparation for the day when cosmic conscious would become the universal norm of human existence. Brooker saw a complementary role for artists in relation to this slowly emerging new world order: "We need poets who will be at once less involved and more stimulating than the metaphysicians, to create wonder for this new conception — the idea of a spiritual centrality continually emerging in new consummations toward the circumference that is rounded and temporarily ended in the consciousness in each individual man" ("Prophets" 10). Brooker feared, as did many of the Canadian mystics, that the materialism of the modern world was leading people away from their innate spiritual connection to the universe. Rather than leading to greater clarity, such empty materialism only furthered alienation. Brooker's friends Lawren Harris, the founding member of the Group of Seven, and Herman Voaden, who produced two of Brooker's surrealist dramas, routinely echoed the official stance of the Theosophical Society, as expressed by the founder H.P. Blavatsky: "Theosophists or Occultists at any rate, have nothing then to expect from materialistic Science and Society … — what can we do but look forward with our hopes to a better future?" (80). For Brooker, who did not join the

Theosophical Society,[5] the question more specifically addressed what role the artist could play in fostering this better future. Art had first and foremost to break through the phenomenological details of the world:

> we shall not produce works of greatness and grandeur — nor shall we recognize them — until this distrust of intangible and lofty experiences is replaced by a belief in the reality of what is often called unreal and visionary. Some people call it the realm of the spirit, but the names we give it matter very little. (SA 8 Feb. 1930)

The modernist art and thought that emerged from the Canadian mystical community challenged the existential crisis brewing in Europe, while utilizing, customizing, and experimenting with the new methods being developed: "This search for unity through art is already taking many turnings. It is evident in the work of our Group of Seven" ("Blake" 24). In an article published in *The Canadian Forum* in 1930, Brooker found echoes of mysticism in the poetry of e.e. cummings that involved "the removal of phenomena from ordinary space-time dimensions into a realm which, like the fourth dimension, demands the transcendence of ordinary mathematics to become intelligible" ("The Poetry" 69). While Brooker was fascinated with the "strange vibrations" (71) in cummings's writing that pull readers into an expanded "consciousness" (70), he found no sense of the "greater wholeness of life" in the poems. This perception was the essential task of the modernist artist, and without it, Brooker doubted the depth of cummings's modernism. Brooker believed he was part of a growing community of mystical modernists fashioning the poetics of the future through their evolving cosmic consciousness. They were all attempting to bring the "greater wholeness of life" into every word they wrote. In his unpublished (and unfinished) 1925 manifesto "Free Prose," a treatise on the necessity of literary experimentation including the use of free verse, Brooker explained his own sense of history:

> We do not write for this time — Homer and Shaw as much together in the brief objective span — subjective span just starting — thousands of years
>
> We do not write for posterity in the same sense as the older poets — so called finished works of art — not concerned with ending anything — only starting — not personal glory or a great name — names are nothing — but to contribute to the new movement. (1)

The malaise and the self-centredness of the modern age could be reversed through commitment to the new movement and the new emerging age. New formalist methods had to be invented to express the emerging consciousness. Thus, while cummings's poetics was subject to scorn, his formal innovations were worth considering and deploying. Cummings's typographic influence can be seen throughout Brooker's poems.

The conventional sense of the term "modernism" is often limited to refer to the artists from the beginning of the twentieth century that professed a paradigmatic break from the art traditions they inherited. Brooker's sense of the modern period, however, bears more in common with the much less bellicose chronology developed and mapped out by Murry in his overview of the development of European intellectual history. Murry uses the work of Shakespeare, Keats, and Blake as evidence of a profound transition in the ideological and epistemological basis of Western society. While Shakespeare was a "prophet" of the modern age (282), Murry identifies in Keats and Blake the real onset of modernity.[6] For Brooker, who was heavily indebted to Murry's critical writing,[7] the transition into the modern mode began with Blake's visual and literary experiments. In public lectures in Toronto in the late 1920s, Brooker traced a mystical modernist tradition across the arts from Blake through Keats, Goethe, Whitman, Bucke, Yeats, and Kandinsky to himself and the Group of Seven. He claimed that Blake anticipated free-verse poetry, abstract art, and the same universally unified cosmology to which the Canadian mystical modernists were increasingly attracted:

> I believe that Blake, in a condition of religious ecstasy, was able to perceive the 'constant' or 'sum' of these relations which compose the universe, so to speak, to the ideal unity within it. In short, I believe that he endeavoured in a great deal of his work to create symbols for a unity he had experienced, and not, as most artists do, attempt to symbolize the relations which compose that unity. ("Blake" 3-4)

He used the mystical tradition from Blake to contextualize and justify the mysticism and formalist experimentation of the modern art pouring out of mystical movements in Canada and around the world:

> It is more than 20 years since Dr. Bucke, the friend of Whitman,[8] wrote his book 'Cosmic Consciousness,' in which he records numerous cases that had come to his attention. Since then, I am convinced, the experience has become more common or I would not have hap-

> pened upon so many people, in the most haphazard fashion, who hold essentially the same views. Also, I believe that the present interest in Blake and El Greco is definitely attributable to this new crystallization of thought. (23)

At the same time, Brooker also used the mystical tradition from Blake to separate and authenticate his work from those he called the "Negativisits" — the more skeptical, perhaps cynical artists of the period. Brooker claimed that the importance of the non-mystics would fade as their contextual period faded. The mystical tradition, however, grew out of more genuine and fundamental truths of human existence, and would expand as its truths were gradually realized.

Cosmic consciousness and universal awareness were central features throughout his visual art, literary work, and critical writing. In Brooker's poetry, the universe was represented as constantly popping up and asserting its reality in often surprising and disconcerting moments and places. The poem "love," for instance, depicts a scene between two lovers in which one of the characters, suddenly and disquietingly, gains consciousness of the cosmic, spiritual realm:

> around him the world reels darkly
> rocking
> under the huge wrestling of demons
> whose colossal sinister thighs
> are sunk through ages
> whose writhing feet
> sprout
> from the roots of the tree of good and evil
> hidden under oceans of time
> in mythic Eden. (5-14)

The poem turns from conventional narrative in the first stanza into the layered, religious metaphors in this second one as one of the lovers' consciousnesses sharply shifts. It is almost impossible to imagine what the character looks like, experientially isolated from his love and their living room, while he feels time, sin, and the universe collapse around him. Brooker established a dual tension between the scenario and the description of it: the realist narrative dissolves into a metaphorically based linguistic impressionism as surface-oriented realist language fails to illuminate the complex internal — spiritual — experience the character underwent. The contrast in styles also reflects the sudden mental gap

between the poem's two characters. The lovers, suddenly caught in different stages of presence, are forced through their estrangement to confront the instability of surface existence. The conclusion of the poem is strangely ironic. Brooker allows the lover to successfully resist his upsetting new awareness of the universe:

> carefully he climbs back
> into sanity
>
> gives her waist a hungry human squeeze
> and whispers
>
> You're funny
>
> and
> they begin to dance again. (15-21)

The world and narrative realism are both restored with a laugh and a dance. The great shift in consciousness thus narrowly averted does not disappear, however, but simply, *momentarily*, withdraws. The "hot black flame" (2) bursts into human consciousness through love, through a passionate kiss, but subsides through the power of a rationalizing, ironic mind.

Of modernist writers, Yeats's tightly woven self-referential symbolic cosmology offers the best contemporaneous parallel to Brooker's own symbology. Yeats developed a theory of historical shifts and recurrences modelled after the gyre: while always advancing, time circled back on itself to echo and correspond to previous epochs. Yeats developed his comparative sense of history through various human epochs, suggesting cycles of approximately two thousand years. The great pattern of history was endlessly reproduced in the minutiae of experience: in the spiral of birds in flight, for instance, and in the development of the mental abilities of each individual. Like him, Brooker developed a more holistic sense that contained human experience, human history, and humanity's relationship to the divine. It has been well documented that Yeats's system evolved directly from traditional European mystical and secret-society conceptions (see Leon Surette's *The Birth of Modernism*). Brooker, for his part, utilized Richard Maurice Bucke's notion of evolutionary consciousness as his structural mystical-scientific underpinning. The evolution from simple consciousness (animal consciousness) to self-consciousness (human consciousness) entirely changed how humans behaved in and thought of the world. Brooker accepted that the emerging evolution from self-conscious-

ness to *cosmic* consciousness would similarly entail a total departure from contemporary conceptions of the world: "We must get rid, not only of this kind of society, total or democratic, but of any idea of society yet conceived — society, as we now think of the word, must go altogether. It is not in society that we shall find the seeds of the new life" ("Opening" 2). Like Yeats, Brooker used his poetry to illuminate the relationship between universal history and particular moments in commonplace human experience.

In both "The Ice Man" and "love," the surface world is ruffled to create gaps that combine the minuteness of conventional experience with the infiniteness of the ever-widening universe. The planets, for instance, sit just behind the display of cauliflowers in "The Ice Man," while the wrestling of demons is metaphorically embodied in a kiss in "love." As Yeats used realistic examples of the gyre to evoke his spiralling sense of the progress of history (see "The Wild Swans at Coole," where all of human history is echoed in the flight path of birds), so too did Brooker, in much more prosaic and direct manner, focus on precise and specific moments to evoke or symbolize the totality of experience. In "an artist," two friends sitting on a chesterfield try to savour good feelings but "the sun outside and the immense universe and / unimaginable reaches of time / are between them" (40-42). Distinct from the general trend in modernist verse, both Yeats and Brooker used symbolic imagery to formulate and depict the overall structure of history. Their use of this imagery went beyond metaphor, but was in fact a depiction of how they believed world history actually transpired.

Somewhat akin to Yeats's millennial, apocalyptic vision in "The Second Coming," Brooker repeatedly explored the trope of an individual arriving in the world to launch the next historical epoch. In both his novels, *The Robber* and *Think of the Earth*, a would-be spiritual-revolutionary leader grappled with the delusion of himself fulfilling such a historical role. The delusion was explicitly revealed as such in both cases. In the poetry, however, particularly in "The Destroyer," "I Have Uttered Arches," and "behind me the unbarred gates recede," Brooker indulged himself in exploring the conscious thoughts of such a figure unfettered from the weight of historical or narrative realism. "The Destroyer" explores the contrast between the consciousness of a cosmically conscious individual and the unenlightened population of the world:

> I have been
> where there is no evil
> and I have come back

and they who are around me look dark
they move around me like sleep walkers. (8-12)

The first-person narrative documents specific concepts abundant in the modern world that need to be corrected or "destroyed": such as the concept of "selves" (2), "law" and "sin" (15-16), "good" (23), and even "god" (34). The Nietzschean call to move beyond good and evil — a concept, of course, that long predated Nietzsche's own career — emerges in the Destroyer's desire to lead people beyond their sheltered conception of human affairs. Brooker explains the Christian parallel to this precept in his essay "Language and Life": "The Adam and Eve story is also a parable of naming. It is a myth of man's growing knowledge of good and evil, in a world that was formerly perfect — not divided into good and evil" (n.pag.). Brooker's novels and poetry consistently imagined the reversal of this foundational myth of good and evil. As he clarified, "My gospel, if you can call it that, is simply that Opposites do not exist" ("Mankindness" 2). The Destroyer figure seeks to lead humanity beyond religion and into an awareness of our place within cosmic infinity:

I have been
where there is no god
and I have come back
and all about me are believers
believers in this and that

propping themselves up with fancies

they cannot face existence alone
they cannot bear the responsibility
of being the cause of all they see

but we
the selves
are the only causes there are

we are the only creators there are

there is no creator
there is no creation
except our own creation

where I have been was not created
it is
always

> what have I to do with creating
>
> I am come back only to destroy. (22-53)

The web of human civilization, built by cords made of language, seemed to have formed a conceptual encasement around human consciousness that Brooker's "Destroyer" is eager to disrupt. The vagueness of language contributes to fallacies from empty religious creed to erroneous semantic conceptions. While other modernists saw hypocrisies and inconsistencies in Western metaphysics and ideology, Brooker looked beyond such criticism and recognized that even their straightforward rejection involved a participation in linguistically based, and therefore flawed, logic. A total revamp — a revolution, a distinctly spiritual revolution — was therefore necessary to upset the traditional dependencies.

Brooker's concept of language blended and merged with his conception of evolution: that through or with language, we evolved into self-conscious. Brooker believed that "many now alive may live long enough to see" the next stage in the evolutionary ladder ("Opening" 1). Believing that he stood at the end of the modern period, Brooker recognized that our relationship with language would also have to end and be born again. In his unpublished essay "Action," Brooker outlined a philosophy of the verb that identified why we must look beyond the broken contract between language and world:

> We owe much to words. Without them we never could have made the long ascent from savagery, or from an even more primitive state. But the written word, since its invention, has had an almost hypnotic effect on both thought and action. The Bible was once held in such awe that any uttered truth that was not found in it became a matter of suspicion and persecution. Complete faith in the 'Sacred Word' was often considered more important than works as a means of salvation. ("Action" 11-12)

Brooker quickly reversed the Western formula to declare that works were infinitely more important than faith in the 'Sacred Word' as a means of salvation. He liked to quote Confucius, and did so in a number of documents, saying, "A gentleman is ashamed that his words are better than his deeds" ("Action" 3). The idea Brooker espoused of "deeds" or "works" or "action" reflected both the Christian sense of good deeds and one's behaviour in society, but also carried the further connotation of how those deeds were carried out and experienced by the actor. For Brooker, it was

a difference in consciousness: being aware of oneself doing versus simply doing with one's awareness consumed by the activity. The closer we get to simply doing, the further we move beyond the realm of human conceits and human technologies (like language). The further we get from language, the closer we are to the universal source of life.

In his "Two Modern Dances," Brooker describes a spectacular performance by Kalinova by mapping the colourful choreography of her dance. As the performance reaches its climatic frenzy, Brooker's description of the event dissolves into a circular string of verbs, adjectives, and adverbs — but no nouns and no indication of self-consciousness:

> stately joyous light parading
> strutting suave erect imperious
> sweeping circles
> circles wheeling
> stately joyous light parading
> strutting suave erect imperious. (67-72)

In the dance, in the act of moving the body without self-consciousness, the dancer embodies the ideal of Brooker's philosophy of the verb. Brooker, in fact, in a later essay, defines his ideal artist as one "who discards the straightjacket of conventionality with all its inhibitions and its ridiculously sophisticated notions of what constitutes 'red-bloodedness,' and who lets his body become creative — lets it respond to the energy it feels within it. The dance is precisely the most natural outlet of energy" (SA 12 Oct. 1929). The two dance poems attempt to mirror this proprioceptive value through sensually engaged language:

> surging … swaying
> one another one another
> approach the fountain
> scarves tossed high
> surging swaying
> beat beat beat beat beat beat
> scamper backward
> away
> surging swaying prancing
> attitudes of ecstatic obeisance. (34-43)

The resultant "riotous" poem, with its participatory incantation, offers an early foreshadowing of the ecstatic Beat poetry that would emerge in the

1950s. He was attempting to resuscitate language so that it might more authentically represent genuine — ecstatic — experience. With specific concepts like nouns (or, as in "The Destroyer," the concept of "selves") erased, the language begins to paradoxically reflect genuine extra-linguistic experience.

Brooker's desire to move beyond the constraints of language, however, left him confused about the function of his own art. On the one hand, he recognized himself as a prophet and a model for the coming spiritual revolution that would bridge the space between human consciousness and the cosmos: he wrote of himself, in the third person, "His final conception is a long growth and struggle up out of weeds and tares, and since this same struggle is what he figures humanity will have to go through, to reach his conclusions, some hint of this struggle must be conveyed" ("Opening" 10). On the other hand, Brooker recognized failure in his attempt to realize a new relationship between humanity and its language — an ambition that echoed the nostalgic fascination of ur-languages, first languages, and perfect languages held by numerous thinkers throughout the development of Western civilization.[9] Many of Brooker's characters, either consciously or groping blindly, sought to reclaim a form of the Edenic language that sustained an authentic and absolute connection to the world it described. As Umberto Eco discovered, however, the common religious motif of the nomothete, the name-giver, the creator of language, hinged upon an a priori link between human language and the nature of the thing named (8). Such a perfect language could only have attained its perfection by descending directly from the same supreme maker that fashioned the world. Brooker, however, did not believe in God or gods. As he wrote in "The Destroyer," "we are the only creators there are" (45). The best we can do with language is move past it, he wrote, and let it no longer stand between us and the environment in which we dwell: "'The possible' we talk about will come about from a distrust of words — clichés — a rediscovery in the future of the freshness of life in nature, before names and labels invented" ("Truth" 6).

In his short poem "being," Brooker depicts the waitress Miriam experiencing a flash moment "where meaning has ceased / and there is only just being" (12-13). She loses consciousness of herself as a coherent, self-contained noun, for the more intangible presence of being a fluid, interconnected verb:

herself living
yet not herself
for her self is ever concerned with moving
and thinking
something under her self
continuing
being. (27-33)

The poem explores Miriam's experience of a total connection with the world as it overwhelms and consumes her 'self' into its perpetual motion. Even still, the moment is fleeting: "it has lasted only a moment" (35). The world, especially the harried world of a diner waitress, continues to contradict the spiritual connection natural — but now abstract — to human life. While discussing a related topic, Brooker explained, "These occasions of experience are the really real things which in their collective unity compose the evolving universe, ever plunging into the creative advance, process and reality" ("Whitehead" 3). The luxury and the role of the artist, like the dancer, is to take that plunge into "the creative advance," while others are forced to compromise.

Brooker's deep dissatisfaction with language and conventional conceptions of selfhood and individuality led him to experiment with alternatives. In Brooker's unpublished series of poems "Fiddler at the World's Burning" (1926-27), he attempted to connect his apocalyptic imagination with his holistic conception of humanity and the universe. The series begins with a quote from Blake's "A Vision of the Last Judgement" hailing the burning world that will set forth truth and eternity. Brooker's own first poem depicts the same final apocalyptic moment:

deafening
through shattered space
the blueness
strikes

roundness splits

all roundnesses crackle

earth-roundness
and thought-roundness
and roundness of will. (6-14)

In the return to "blueness," all self-contained circles are ruptured and splin-

tered. Everything is recontextualized outside of itself, dissolved into the universe "returning on itself" (16). The third piece, a surrealist prose-poem, recounts "some cataclysm — perhaps a dream — or perhaps a half-chemical, half-mystical bust-up — emerging from which I see the universe burning." As spectator to the apocalypse, Brooker's narrator is joined by "a fiddler fiddling" who proceeds to guide him across a galactic terrain until "a colossal body, larger than a continent, larger than the sun and of a blinding light lies stretched out before me, flaming.... He will tell me it is me." They enter the body, and witness its transformation into a universe of its own. The poem was obviously intended to be a parable of the interpenetration of the body and the universe: a universal Möbius strip linking the particular to the universal. In this more overstated and hurriedly composed work, Brooker hoped to align the human body and the infinite universe as the basis of a poetic object.

Bertram Brooker's poetry unambiguously explored mystical terrain, a topic that modernist scholars and Canadian ones in particular have been consistently hesitant to broach and explore. Brian Trehearne, in his important discussion of early Canadian modernist poetry, discovered a similar hesitation among Canadian scholars to admit and/or recognize the influence of European aestheticism and decadence. He defended his own project by claiming that "it may be that we have arrived at a point of cultural security at which we will not be afraid to discover the influences that have shaped us, a point at which we can seek and take pride in the ways our artists have seized upon and adapted with their own efforts, the traditions of other countries and of foreign artists" (9). While previous studies of Canadian literary modernism have tended to try and prove the existence of literary activity of value, his argument suggests that it is now both possible and important to advance that discussion by considering the diverse and complicated influences operating in and through the small pockets of activity in the country. Mysticism was particularly pronounced in Brooker's Toronto-based arts community. Centred around the Arts and Letters Club, the Hart House Little Theatre movement, and the Theosophical Society (as well as a dozen or more literary clubs and gatherings), Toronto's mystical modernists like Lawren Harris, Merrill Denison, Roy Mitchell, Herman Voaden, W.W.E. Ross, and hundreds of others explored the possibilities of Bucke's spiritual evolutionism and other esoteric notions. Collectively, they left behind a remarkable body of literature and visual art

that has (excepting only the Group of Seven) been broadly neglected or dismissed. A holistic study of this group as a group has yet to be produced, though artists like Ross, Harris, Denison, and Voaden — primarily for their non-mystical work — have all been integrated into the general history of Canadian aesthetic development. Bertram Brooker's art and writing belongs within the ideological parameters of this paratradition of Canadian modernism. In this paper, however, I have left the contextual environment aside in order to concentrate on the integration of mystical and linguistic concerns in Brooker's poetry. By and large, his broad and tightly knit social and artistic community shared both his mystical apperception and his optimism that "a possible life for man-as-he-can-be … is burgeoning already" ("Opening" 1).

In this way, Brooker used his art to advance the possibility of a new episteme — a postmodern episteme, in the literal sense — to be characterized not by the irony we understand it has become but by the transformation of the human species through an evolutionary mysticism. His poetry rushed forward from this belief to explore the semantic limitations of modernism and to grope towards a correction. He was searching for a role to play in the cosmic revolution, trying to overcome both the disappointment in realizing that he would not witness the new era and the lingering doubt that he had ultimately failed at his task. As he wrote in a third-person autobiography,

> he is himself an intellectual, and knows it, and has been fighting most of his life against it, to get back to pure feeling … . He is convinced that within a hundred years or less the intellectual, the thinking man, will be despised or pitied, as being either arrogant about a tiny and diseased part of the human organism, or as being one who cannot throw off the scales over his eyes, bred of thinking, scepticism, materialism and the rest, and hence cannot see and enjoy the world. He feels that he himself is one of these despised people. ("Opening" 7)

His methods, and many of his conceptions, were notably eccentric in Canada — even within his Toronto mystical community. His poems, imbibed with and reflective of his philosophy of the verb, remain some of the most unusual, strange, and original examples of writing to have come out of the country between the wars.

NOTES

[1] For example, Brooker painted hundreds of full-sized canvases, published three novels, wrote hundreds of articles of literary criticism and art commentary, wrote almost a dozen arts manifestoes, edited two collections of essays, wrote and directed and performed in dozens of his own plays, and wrote more than a dozen films that were produced in New York.

[2] Between 1928 and 1930, Brooker wrote eighty-six weekly columns under the title "The Seven Arts" for six Southam newspapers across the country. Articles from the column are hereafter referred to by the initials SA. All dates refer to *The Winnipeg Tribune*.

[3] All references to Brooker's poetry are taken from *Sounds Assembling* unless otherwise noted.

[4] In his novel, *Think of the Earth*, Brooker's protagonist undergoes strange mystical experiences that also take him into an "unsubstantial blueness" (31). There existed a broad consensus amongst mystical artists of the nature of the colour. Wassily Kandinsky, for instance, wrote, "The power of profound meaning is found in blue, and first in its physical movements (1) of retreat from the spectator, (2) of turning in upon its own centre…. Blue is the typical heavenly colour" (38).

[5] The Theosophical Society, founded in 1871, was an international organization devoted to overcoming the limitations of empirical science through the study of esoteric theology. Theosophy was only one occultist manifestation in Canada amid a broad field of activity during a period that included a dramatic rise in the public activities of the Freemasons, the Rosicrucian Order, the Foresters, and countless other smaller, more or less esoteric societies, cults, and applied study groups. Many of the most prominent modernist artists in Canada and abroad turned to the Theosophical Society for its applied study of esotericism. While Brooker was closely associated with, and supported by, the members of Toronto's Theosophical Society, including local luminaries such as Lawren Harris, Merrill Denison, and William Deacon, he did not become a member. Despite claims by scholars like Sherrill Grace and Michele Lacombe, Brooker turned his back on the Theosophical Society, as well as on other occultist and mystical groups active in Canada. Anti-institutionalism, just like anti-nationalism and anti-factionalism, was an important element of his universalist aesthetic, which also involved a distinctly anti-intellectual and anti-literary tendency — his principal point of difference from Nietzsche. The phenomenon of losing oneself into joy or into life, as he often said, can never be adequately expressed for the experience captures the whole body, the whole being, and not just the linguistic capacity of the individual: it is literally beyond language. As he writes in a third-person autobiography, "The idea that life could be explained, that riddles were solved, sickened him of science and of the world-as-cosmology. He wanted to feel the world-as-experience…. As mystic again impatient with both labels and superstitions ("Connor"). He had little interest in affiliations or closed religious cosmologies.

[6] This idea is developed most fully in *Keats and Shakespeare* and *William Blake*.

[7] Brooker reviewed Murry's *God* for *The Canadian Forum* ("Mysticism Debunked"), and frequently cited him in his "Seven Arts" columns. Intriguingly, Brooker also cited Murry in many of his advertising articles — positioning him as "One of the greatest of the British literary critics" ("What Should" 144).

[8] Bucke's close relationship with American poet Walt Whitman was documented in the CBC dramatization *Beautiful Dreamers* (1992).

[9] For an account of the quest for a perfect language, see Umberto Eco's *The Search for the Perfect Language.*

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