Of Poets and Hackers: Notes on Canadian Post-Modern Poets

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In "That Way, In Words," in his *Particular Accidents: Selected Poems*, George Bowering lists some of the unfair labels which have been pasted on him and his poetry: "& now I am a male chauvinist to them, to them a bourgeois liberal & to them an internationalist viper in our midst."[1] Truly new writers are often subject to such vilification. It takes time for the audience to catch up. Such has been the fate, in general, of the post-modernist poets in Canada. Major critics, who ought to know better, have dismissed the poets' work with inadequate generalizations. George Woodcock, in his introduction to *Canadian Writers and Their Work*, refers to "the post-modernists" as writers "who often seem devoted to experiment as an activity so autonomous that its results often pass far beyond the ever-refined precision demanded by modernism into realms of esoteric obscurity the modernists would have found repellent."[2] To Woodcock, Pound is not obscure, and the Sanskrit in "The Waste Land" is not esoteric. In a recent essay, Fred Cogswell claims:

> The post-modern critics, like their fellows in the degenerate days of Graeco-Roman literature, have abandoned the evaluation of literature in terms of content and function and now content themselves with assessing each work produced in terms of form alone. Since, until relatively recent times in the Western World, form had always been subservient to function in literature and had not been allowed to become a law unto itself, practitioners of literature in the traditional sense are apt to have short shrift at their hands . . . . Some of them, who are creators as well as critics, are currently assiduously re-writing our past.[3]

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[1] Ed. Robin Blaser (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1980) 104.

[2] Ed. Robert Lecker, Jack David, and Ellen Quigley, 20 vols. (Toronto: ECW, 1985) 7: 6.

[3] "Some Aspects of the Linear and Non-Linear Novel," *The Bicentennial Lectures on New Brunswick Literature* (Sackville: Centre for Canadian Studies, 1985) 47.

Cogswell and Woodcock are both guilty of a kind of critical pastoralism, using the good old days (the recent past in Woodcock's case, the Tradition in Cogswell's) as a touchstone by which to judge the new and find it wanting. Neither critic is by nature a reactionary. They have, rather, like many others before them, fallen into the trap of judging before understanding. The poets I am going to write about—Nichol, Bowering, Davey, Ondaatje, and others—do not reach unprecedented and unacceptable heights of esotery, do not ignore content and assess literature solely by form, and do not denigrate traditional literature.

In order to counteract misunderstanding of the sort outlined above, I propose to rely upon the Canadian post-modern poets and some critics sympathetic to them to supply a description and explanation of their assumptions and intentions. I also propose to use an extended comparison to clarify matters. The comparison is between post-modern poets and those computer hobbyists who are known as "hackers."

In *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984), Stephen Levy traces from its beginnings at MIT in the 1950s until the invention of the affordable personal computer in the late 1970s, the rise and evolution of a group known as hackers. He depicts them not as boring, machine-obsessed fanatics, but as "adventurers, visionaries, risk takers, artists" (ix). They saw in unpromising collections of wires and electronic parts a possibility for creativity and artistic expression. They were interested in creation for its own sake and not for some practical end. Just as George Bowering rejects the idea of poetry as something one puts to a use, when he says "I don't want to bring shame down on the language [by] . . . using language as a tool,"[4] so, too, hackers value "a project undertaken or a product built not solely to fulfill some constructive goal, but with some wild pleasure taken in mere involvement" (Levy 9). In hacking, as in poetry, "innovation, style, and technical virtuosity" (Levy 10) are the marks of the creative practitioner. Like the hacker, bpNichol "enjoys himself hugely, playing delightful games with language & form."[5] For hackers, and poets, the ultimate reward is the moment of discovery. Levy says it is "to discard the stale outlook of the best minds of earth and come up with a totally unexpected new

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[4] "14 Plums: An Interview," *Capilano Review* 15 (1979): 100.

[5] Douglas Barbour, "Strange Blossoms," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 16 (1979-80): 142.

algorithm" (31). For Frank Davey the reward is "to see more than can be anticipated. To be surprised."[6]

In his book, Levy outlines a set of rules which he calls "The Hacker Ethic." Some of them can be fruitfully applied to post-modern poets to reveal their method and purpose. The first and most important is "Access to computers—and anything which might teach you something about the way the world works—should be unlimited and total. Always yield to the Hands-On Imperative" (27).

This "rule" is based upon the principle of interactivity. Before hackers, computers were large appliances into which a technician fed punched cards. Inside the appliance something happened, and it eventually spat out paper with numbers printed on it. The user was distanced from the process. Hackers used the keyboard, plugged in a television screen, and the "hands on" experience was born.

This kind of "hands on" interactivity is important to post-modern poets in two ways: in the relationship between readers and poems, and in the relationship between poets and their acts of creation (i.e. in the writers' definition of what, precisely, writing is). Michael Ondaatje in his introduction to *The Long Poem Anthology*, a collection of Canadian post-modernist writing, says "These poems expect you to fill in the silences. In some cases you must step forward and dress yourself."[7] The relationship between the poem and its readers has always been interactive. Nobody stuffs the poem into the readers' eyes. But, for the post-moderns, the interaction is more than just the readers' finding and bringing back what the author has left for them. Readers share in the act of creation. As Stephen Scobie explains it (incoporating some words from Stanley Fish):

> as an event, meaning is dependent on the initiator of the event, i.e. the reader (and not the writer) . . . . The text "is no longer an object, a thing-in-itself, but an *event*, something that *happens* to, and with the participation of, the reader."[8]

This emphasis on the role of readers is one sign of the democratic, anti-authoritarian ideology which underlies post-

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[6] "The Language of the Canadian Long Poem," *Surviving the Paraphrase* (Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1983) 190.

[7] (Toronto: Coach House, 1979) 16.

[8] Scobie, *What History Teaches* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1984) 78. Fish, "Literature in the Reader," *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1980) 25.

modernism. As Terry Eagleton in *The Function of Criticism* puts it, "reader-response theory, with its stress on the reader's active construction of the text, redramatizes in the critical realm the democratic-participatory forces . . . unleashed (in the 1960s) in political society."[9]

The second area of interaction is between the writer and the writing. Again, it is obvious that there has always been this interaction, but it has generally been oriented toward the creation of a product. The writer sets out to create a certain kind of poem or to make a certain kind of statement. He or she works toward achieving a goal. Frank Davey says "I dont [sic] think you could write a serial poem if you were a poet who . . . had Something to Say."[10] A post-modernist poet does not begin with "Something to Say"—a message. At the heart of his view of writing is the belief that it is an act of discovery. His immediate attention is more directly focussed on process than it is on product. If the right kind of process takes place, then a suitable product will result, but poets do not guide their craft in the manner of mariners with their eye on a distant star hovering just above the horizon.

Writing of *The Martyrology* in *What History Teaches*, Stephen Scobie comments on the way in which Nichol creates saints' names out of common nouns. "Storm" becomes "St. Orm" and "stale" becomes "St. Ale" (with his wife "St. Alemate") (111). He points out that not all of the names were derived so easily. "St. Reat," for example, "is *not* connected with 'street.' His name emerged in the course of *Scraptures: Fourth Sequence* as part of a progression that went from 'a tree' to 'a treat' to 'as treat' to 'has treat' to 'HA!!!!!!! St. Reat.' Even more than others, St. Reat was discovered lurking in the corners of language" (111). Scobie is obliquely approaching a very important point about poetry as discovery. Very often the most important thing writers discover is not meaning (i.e. theme or statement of truth), but some unexpected knowledge about their medium. Hackers work to find out what is in a computer—what its make-up is and what it can do. Poets do the same thing with language; by writing, they discover unexpected things about it—about what it can and cannot do. As Nichol puts it, "how I personally can make it stronger or find out where the blocks are, if you like; what the things are that prevent it functioning the way it could."[11] By discovering new things

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[9] (London: Verso Editions, 1984) 93.

[10] George Bowering, "Starting at Our Skins: an Interview with Frank Davey," *Open Letter*, 4th ser. 3 (1979): 119.

[11] Daphne Marlatt and others, "Interview/bp Nichol," *Capilano Review* 8/9 (1975/1976): 316.

about the workings of language, the poet is "always out on the frontier going out a bit further" (138).

Mention was made above of interactivity as a manifestation of "democratic-participatory" forces. This anti-authoritarianism is also found in another of Levy's rules of the hacker ethic: "Mistrust authority—promote decentralization" (28). The avantgarde is always in rebellion against some existing authority—which it perceives as authoritarian—in its particular field of endeavour. For the hackers, this authoritarianism is represented by IBM:

> all you had to do was look at someone in the IBM world, and note the buttondown white shirt, the neatly pinned black tie, the hair carefully held in place, and the tray of punch cards in hand . . . the stifling orderliness, down to the roped-off areas beyond which non-authorized people could not venture. (Levy 29)

For the post-moderns, it is the modernist movement:

> The term "post-modern," so conscientiously inserted into Canadian criticism by Frank Davey—and supported by Bowering's . . . literary essays—signals a strong movement among important Canadian writers to separate themselves from certain characteristics of modernism. Their emphasis is upon the democratic and against the authoritarian, upon naturalness of language, and upon fragment-structures of thought and feeling without undue anxiety about the absence of reconciliatory and conservative structures of meaning.[12]

The "certain characteristics" of modernism alluded to by Blaser are its practitioners' right-wing political tendencies and its critical supporters' insistence upon the importance of meaning and theme. The reduction of literature to thematic statement has been particularly prevalent in Canadian criticism and has been brilliantly assailed by Frank Davey in his essay "Surviving the Paraphrase." Davey sees thematic criticism as having a bullying effect upon Canadian writers: "it serves to intimidate future Canadian writers into taking as its own the particular concerns that have been declared officially Canadian."[13] It is "reductive" because its ultimate end is to produce a

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[12] Robin Blaser, introduction, *George Bowering Particular Accidents: Selected Poems* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1980) 24.

[13] "Surviving the Paraphrase," *Surviving the Paraphrase* 6.

> paraphrase of the culture and paraphrase of the
> literature. The critic extracts for his deliberations
> the paraphrasable content and throws away the
> form. He attends to the explicit meaning of the
> work and neglects whatever content is implicit in
> its structure, language or imagery. (3)

Because each thematic critic (Davey cites Frye, Jones, and At-wood) has a system or vision of what a national Canadian liter-ature is and ought to be, "the literary work comes to have little significance outside the body of national literature. It can be va-lued not for its unique or idiosyncratic qualities but only for what it shares with the larger body" (4). The poet cannot be an indi-vidual voice. Ironically, things have come full circle, for the early Canadian modernists were themselves rebelling against this same authoritarian and anti-literary tendency in Canadian criticism (see F.R. Scott's "The Canadian Authors Meet"). Davey requests that, instead of lashing Canadian writers to their Pro-crustean bed, critics "deal with matters of form, language, style, structure, and consciousness as these arise from the work as a unique construct" (1).

A third tenet of the hacker ethic which is applicable to post-modern poets is "Hackers should be judged by their hack-ing, not bogus criteria such as degrees, age, race, or position" (Levy 30). If a hacker is to be judged by hacking, then how is a writer to be judged? By his writing, naturally. But what does this mean to the post-modernists? They correctly perceive that in-valid criteria have infiltrated Canadian criticism. Ondaatje and Bowering both make an attempt at cleaning house, and they offer similar explanations of what criteria should not be used to eval-uate a poet's work. According to Bowering in his introduction to *The Contemporary Canadian Poem Anthology:*

> Diverse as they are, there is one thing these
> twenty poets hold in common, that being the as-
> sumption or belief that the animator of poetry is
> language. Not politics, not nationalism, not
> theme, not personality, not humanism, not real
> life, not the message, not self-expression, not the
> nobility of work, not the spirit of religion, not the
> Canadian Tradition--but language. The centre &
> the impetus, the world & the creation of poetry is
> language.[14]

Introducing *The Long Poem Anthology*, Ondaatje runs through a similar list of negations:

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[14] *The Contemporary Canadian Poem Anthology,* 2nd ed. (Toronto: Coach House, 1984) 2.

> The stories within the poems don't matter, the
> grand themes don't matter. The movement of the
> mind   and   language   is   what   is
> important . . . . We are not dealing with poetry
> whose themes are hardened into stone, into a
> public cultural voice. (12)

The only valid criterion of judgment is a writer's use of lan-
guage, in the same way that the only criterion by which to judge
a dancer is his/her movements on the dance floor. Language is
a key matter to both hackers and poets. The set of instructions
with which a programmer controls a computer is called lan-
guage. Hackers have come to appreciate "a certain esthetic of
programming style...[and] innovative techniques which allowed
programs to do complicated tasks with very few instructions"
(Levy 30-31). They have found that "the code of a program held
a beauty of its own" (Levy 30). To the post-modernists, language
has become a great buzzword. It is almost a god—a source of
power and wisdom. Says Bowering, "I believe in the language.
When it's coming over all right, I can tell when it's OK. It's been
around a lot longer than I have. I'm the one who had to learn to
talk, the language knows how to talk already."[15] This concern
with language and the rejection of usefulness, theme, and so on,
not surprisingly leads to a charge of "unreality" against the
hackers and the poets. Levy says that:

> while the mastery of the hackers had indeed
> made computer programming a spiritual pursuit,
> a magical art, and while the culture of the lab was
> developed to the point of a technological Walden
> Pond, something was essentially lacking. The
> world. (142)

Scobie, in his book on bpNichol, readily admits that "language
becomes self-reflexive . . . the movement of words is directed
back at the nature of language itself as much as it is directed
outwards, in a conventionally referential way, towards the ob-
jects and ideas of a supposedly external world" (10). Given the
number of things Bowering and Ondaatje reject (see above) as
being relevant in post-modern poetry, it is not surprising that it
turns back on its own medium as subject. It is not that poets write
about language exclusively, so much as that they write in order
to find and to show what language can do. "What language can
do" as a subject becomes what the writers *show*, not what they
tell.

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[15] Interview, *Out-Posts/Avant-Postes*, ed. Caroline Bayard and Jack David (Erin: Press
Porcepic, 1978) 89.

Both groups are interested in "mastering the technical details of a craft" (Scobie 10). *The Contemporary Canadian Poem Anthology* reminds me very much of a computer manual with the general information (in this case, the poems) at the front taking up most of the space and the weightier technical matters at the back. In place of schematics and parts lists there are essays by Bowering and Phyllis Webb on line breaks and a joint effort by Nichol and Davey on "The Prosody of Open Verse."

Among the post-moderns, one direct result of this attitude toward language is the emergence of the long or serial poem as their major form and the corresponding rejection of the lyric as an important vehicle. Bowering has been the clearest in his announcement that the long poem has replaced the lyric and that this enhances both the break between poetry and life, and also the primacy of language as subject: In "14 Plums: An Interview," he states:

> the commonality that runs through these later poems, is that the language tends to be more about itself, and that has left what I take to be the lyric impulse . . . you're attesting more to the poem having an existence, whereas a lyric poem . . . gives itself to the occasional all the time and verifies that out there is the real and therefore the beautiful. (2)

The lyric is a short poem derived from individual episodes in a person's life. The long poem is a more major and more thoughtful statement. It does not rely upon an emotion the way lyric does. How could one sustain an emotion over four books (to cite Nichol as the most extreme example)? Bowering says of his recent work:

> It's more meditative, there's no ruckus of the body anymore, it's none of that disturbance . . . . What I'm writing about now is not any quieter when you hear it being read, but it's more quietistic during the composition. So the subject becomes philosophy too, actually, very often. (*Out-Posts* 96)

The long poem bears certain strong resemblances to "Adventure" games favoured by the hackers. An adventure game is a computer simulation in which the player "use[s] the computer to assume the role of a traveller in a Tolkienesque setting, fight off enemies, overcome obstacles through clever tricks, and eventually recover treasure" (Levy 132). The long poem, too, is an adventure, a voyage in search of "surprise" (to use Davey's words). Kroetsch calls it "The poem as long as

life."[16] Scobie says of *The Martyrology* that "it is possible to ar-
gue that its fundamental structural principle is sheer
duration—extent in time and space, for its own sake" (107). And
Nichol himself sees it as an affirmation of one's faith in life: "it's
a tremendous leap of faith to even start one, to even think 'hey
I'll be alive long enough that this form seems the best way to say
what I have to say'".[17] Finally, Robin Blaser sees the long poem
form as a way of learning and of extending knowledge (as op-
posed to teaching, which broadcasts the known): "Since form is
always the reach of content, rhythmical and musical, the serial
structure has allowed me to imagine the indeterminate nature of
what we are beyond finitude and other small dead ends."[18]

The popularity of the long poem among post-modernists is
consistent with their elevation of process over product. A poem
is a voyage of discovery, and language is the territory to be ex-
plored. The experience of the voyage is more important than the
destination. Indeed, Scobie points out that the open-endedness
of a long poem such as *The Martyrology* precludes the arrival
at a conclusion: "its structure is now one of such radical open-
endedness that, while it may come to an ending, it can never
come to a *conclusion*" (106). Says Nichol, "certainly some faith in
process pushes me on" (*Long Poem Anthology* 337). Introducing
the best collection of long poems yet put together in Canada,
Ondaatje says:

> These poems show a process of knowledge, of
> discovery during the actual writing of the
> poem . . . The poets do not fully know what
> they are trying to hold until they near the end of
> the poem, and this uncertainty, this lack of pro-
> fessional intent is what allows them to go deep.
> The poems have more to do with open fields and
> quiet rooms than public stages. (*The Long Poem
> Anthology* 13)

Elsewhere, Davey and Bowering make similar observations
about their own writing. Says Davey, "my sense of poetry gen-
erally is the process of discovery, so that I dont [*sic*] know what's
happening. I simply have a concern or an area of engagement,
and I start writing and the writing helps me to find that area of
engagement" ("Starting at Our Skins" 118). Bowering says,

[16] Robert Kroetsch, "Seed Catalogue (Note)," *The Long Poem Anthology*, ed. Ondaatje 337.

[17] "some words on the martyrology march 12, 1979," *The Long Poem Anthology* 324.

[18] Robin Blaser, "The Moth Poem (Note)," *The Long Poem Anthology* 324.

I'm not interested in the results of the thinking, I'm interested in the process of thinking itself . . . I don't believe in the business about 'emotion recollected in tranquility.' In fact, I actively distrust that procedure. I don't believe in art as a product or an artifact or any of that business of polishing it. (*Out-Posts* 87)

The aesthetics of post-modernism require an immediacy that polishing or slickness might take away. Douglas Barbour, for example, criticizes Frank Davey's "Sam" because it "contains two poems that appear to be too planned; the careful use of sexual imagery, for example, is just too careful."[19] The most graphic example of poem as process that I can find is Barry McKinnon's *The Death of a Lyric Poet*.[20] Facing many of the printed poems are reproductions of the handwritten originals. Many of these "final" printed versions have black "improvements" pencilled in over the text, or additions and comments written in the margins. This presentation gives readers an image of McKinnon's continuing the writing process up to the moment when readers tear the book out of his hands. The pencilled-in corrections and so on are not polishing: the book has the appearance of a working manuscript rather than of a finished product. What McKinnon has done is to bring readers as close to the writing process as is humanly possible without their becoming the writers themselves.

We hear and read a lot about the high technology revolution that is transforming industry, communications, and education. There is a similar revolution transforming our poetry. Both were launched by innately curious and daring individuals driven by a need to discover and to create. The post-moderns are not a group to be viewed with alarm. They are doing what all good poets do: exploring the world of language, extending the boundaries of the known, and planting the flag on behalf of us all.

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[19] Douglas Barbour, "Frank Davey: Finding Your Voice: to say what must be said: the recent poetry," *Brave New Wave*, ed. Jack David (Windsor: Black Moss, 1978) 70.

[20] Barry McKinnon, *The Death of a Lyric Poet* (Prince George: Caledonia Writing Series, 1976).