

LINGUISTIC FRAGMENTATION AS POLITICAL INTERVENTION IN CALGARIAN POETRY

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ABSTRACT

This essay deals with how poets Jordan Scott and ryan fitzpatrick reject the conservative prairie representation in favour of a poetics informed by urbanity and Sianne Ngai's "poetics of disgust." Using fragmented dictions, Scott and fitzpatrick create unmovable interruptions to the consumable, constructing language which disrupts typical representations of rurality and geography. As Calgarian poets, they are constrained ideologically by the political emphasis on growth and oil exploitation and distance themselves from the Modernist urge to construct either structure or meaning.

KEY WORDS: Contemporary Canadian poetry, disgust, prairie, negative utterance, stutter, raw matter, urbanity, fragmentation.

RESUMEN

Este artículo trata sobre cómo los poetas Jordan Scott y ryan fitzpatrick rechazan la representación de corte conservador de las provincias de "las praderas" canadienses, y abogan por una poética de lo urbano y por lo que Sianne Ngai ha llamado "poética del desagrado". A través del uso de una dicción fragmentada, Scott y fitzpatrick crean interrupciones insalvables de lo consumible, construyendo así un lenguaje que desbarata las representaciones típicas de lo rural y lo geográfico. Como poetas de la ciudad de Calgary, se sienten constreñidos ideológicamente por el énfasis político en el crecimiento y la explotación petrolífera, distanciándose a su vez de la urgencia modernista por construir estructuras y significados.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía canadiense contemporánea, desagrado, praderas, expresión negativa, tartamudear, materia prima, urbano, fragmentación.

In the face of the conservative politics rampant in Alberta, and the cultural embracing of rurality, geography, and place, there is a coterie of poets in Calgary whose work rejects these aspects in favour of what Sianne Ngai categorizes as a "poetics of disgust" (98). These poets—as typified in the work of Jordan Scott and ryan fitzpatrick (and others loosely gathered around *filling Station* and *dANdelion* magazines¹)—push against the modernist tropes of "prairie poetry" in favour of a more urban, linguistically disruptive form in order to articulate their dissatisfaction with the politics forwarded in historically "typical" representations of Alberta.



In *Surviving the Paraphrase*, Frank Davey argues against poetry used as “a tool employed not for its own intrinsic qualities but for the expression of ideas and visions” (2), opposing a poetic based on “messianic attempts to define a national” —and in this case, a regional— “identity” (3). Davey’s 1983 essay continues to be a defining note in literary studies for Canadian poetry —or at least for poetics which continue to challenge nationalist and regionalist representations of “Canadianism.” Prairie poetry, a form promoted as representative of Albertan writing, concentrates, through lyrical humanism, on the rural experience, a dependence on geography and a focus on familial history as a means of concreting regional expression.

Despite Robert Kroetsch’s claim that Canadian poetry did not have a Modernist period —that it slid directly from Victorianism to Post-Modernism (111)— prairie poetry’s concentration on the romanticism of settlement and exploration, and on presence and narrative belies an underlining linguistic support of a type of manifest destiny. Kroetsch’s own poetry, as typified in *Seed Catalogue* and *The Ledger*, operates as an example of the constraints of a poetic discourse based on exploration, development and the primacy of the individual:

Shaping the trees.
Into shingles.
Into scantling.
Into tables and chairs.

[...]
(specimens of the self-made
men who made Canada
what it is.)
(Kroetsch 14-15)

To write of geography, “the lovely new land / where we now stand” (McKinnon 15) in Alberta, and especially in Calgary, is to endorse an ideological support for economic growth and expansion, and a reiteration of the dependence on oil and gas resources. Calgary —with an estimated population of 1.2 million— popularly represents itself through its rural ties (the white stetson, the Calgary Stampede, the Pengrowth Saddledome), by oil and gas revenue and by right-wing politics; all of which foreground Calgary as a traditional, conservative, basically *rural* environment. Despite burgeoning oil and gas revenue, the city of Calgary invests less in

¹ *dANDELion Magazine* has been published in its current form by the University of Calgary since 2000, and *filling Station*, a volunteer-based non-profit magazine has been independently published since 1993. Both magazines are based in Calgary and are key areas of exploration for younger, emerging poets who challenge the hegemony of the humanist, confessional poetic voice. *dANDELion* and *filling Station* are both named ironically —a dandelion is an obsequious weed rampant in Calgary, and a filling station is where travelers can fill the gasoline tanks of their vehicles, thus participating in the oil and gas revenue prioritized by the province.

arts and culture than other major cities. Alberta defines itself not in terms of a cultural growth, but in terms of potential (and realized) economic growth.²

Turning with disgust from this trend, some Calgarian poets emphasize left-wing social politics, radical linguistic structures and an inner-city urban environment as compositional and theoretical frameworks for poetic discourse. For this inner-city community “[t]he only cure [...] is dismemberment” of traditional, conservative forms, where, as Julia Williams writes, “city grows here *despite* / scale and weed” (83, emphasis added). In this community of writers, the defining node is no longer the writing of geography and the landscape; rather the community is more unsettled and outside of geo-economical structures. There is a tacit refusal to participate in “established” economies (which in Calgary means fossil-fuel development and dependence), the social majority as it is formed in Albertan politics, and the rural, industrial-based models of social history. By refusing these tropes, these poets have carved uniquely urban, non-“prairie,” fluid spaces composed of what Louis Cabri refers to as “Words / outworn / outwards [...] to / city / folk / with / no / cowboy / lore” (76).

The political emphasis on growth and exploitation in Alberta places ideological restraints on poetic response, for as Sianne Ngai states in “Raw Matter: A Poetics of Disgust,” “the bourgeois morality endemic to capitalism imposes a limit on our ways of expressing outrage [and] *has the effect of deliberately curbing any potential to articulate our abhorrence to it*” (98, original emphasis). Unwilling to “discover, to trace / the lineage, to claim [...] innocence” or to “inherit this earth from their journey” (McKinnon 54), the response by poets like Jordan Scott and ryan fitzpatrick is to distance themselves from the Modernist urge to *construct* either structure or meaning.

In *blert* —a manuscript in progress (and slated for publication by Coach House Books in Spring 2008) published to date primarily by micro-presses³ —Jordan Scott engages what Ngai, once again, refers to as the “negative utterance” (103) as a means to articulate a poetry of the body, the voice, and geography. *blert* is Scott’s “articulate expression of his [...] own inarticulateness” (Ngai 104), cleaving a space outside of the normative constructions, where to speak means participating in the “interac tracheal / soundtrack” of capitalism and conservatism. Incorporating a vocabulary of biological and geographical language, Scott resists normative constructions of narrative, and “thwarts close reading” (Ngai 102) by engaging

² Calgary’s investment in the arts is only \$2.56 per capita —far behind Toronto (\$6.42), Vancouver (\$4.01), Winnipeg (\$3.88) and even Edmonton (\$3.88) (“Arts Granting”). The provincial Heritage Fund —built from taxation on oil and gas revenue now stands at over \$4000.00 per capita (at \$14.4 billion) (*Heritage Fund*)— is kept in reserve, while the provincial debt and deficit have been completely eliminated. Alberta’s government currently ranks last among Canadian provinces in per capita arts spending, and has recently built upon that record by reducing the provincial arts budget from \$70-million in 2006/07 to \$65.9-million in 2007/08 (Hirsch 38).

³ As both *blert* and ryan fitzpatrick’s *hounds of love / lost leaders* have been published solely in unpaginated editions by small press, all references to those texts will also be unpaginated.



with a “jaw arctic” eliding his “poetics of the stutter” with the capitalist limitations on the articulation of abhorrence. Throughout *blert* the vocabulary becomes unhinged from a narrative construction, and lines like “bladderwracked glottal / woofer snorkel / the syllable pinballed” work as unmovable interruptions to consumable, constructing language. Ngai argues that “despite cultural limitations, poets do have recourse to a language for articulating disgust” (104), that obscenities and outbursts work to point ambiguously to unanchored signifieds: “[o]ort cloud blort oompah. Oospore bore b-boy, boomboxed”.

The *Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis* —which argues that linguistically “the structure of our language in large measure effects the way that we perceive the world” (Trask 63)— is a useful tool in exploring the problematic of Scott’s poetic, and some of the larger concerns within Calgarian poetics. Sapir argues against the inarticulate statement as language (and thus, as poetry), where “under the stress of emotion, say of a sudden twinge of pain or of unbridled joy, we do involuntarily give utterance to sounds that the hearer interprets as indicative of the emotion itself” —as speech (and one could extend that resistance to poetics), as, “there is all the difference in the world between such involuntary expression of feeling and the normal type of communication of ideas that is speech” (Sapir, n. pag.).

Charles Olson’s 1950 essay “Projective Verse” —a key document in North American poetics— argues in favour of a voice-based poetic which could more accurately reflect an American process of mechanistic economic development. To Olson, if poetry is to be of “*essential* use” it must “catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well of his listenings” (239, original emphasis). Olson’s emphasis on the breath-line and “the workings of his own throat [...] that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings [...] where [...] all act springs” (249), while meant to be liberating, is in fact isolating and alienating to Scott and Fitzpatrick.

Unchallenged Olsonian poetics —“the necessity of a line or a work to be as wood is [...] to be as shaped as wood can be when a man has had his hand to it” (247)— supports (through the use of continued metaphorical construction of poetry as harvest and industry), consumption, patriarchy and a dominion over landscape and geography. Olson links landscape and geography with a narrative drive: “By landscape I mean what “narrative”; scene, event, climax, crisis, hero, development, posture; all that meant —all the substantive of what we call literary [...] you say ‘orientate me’ Yessir! Place it!” (Olson 252).

“Projective Verse” — and in particular Olson’s theory of “composition by field” (239) as a tool and poetic is implicitly tied with consumption and industry —a poetic defined around “force” (240), “use” (240), “process” (240), “machinery” (241), and the fall of the “hammer” (240). While Olson suggests that “it is time we picked the fruits” (245), this expansionist, frontier-besting poetic —a poetic linked to narrative— when written in Alberta, politically supports the status quo of unlimited growth. Olson’s industrial vocabulary compares poetic innovation with mechanistic growth, poetry is equated with a capitalistic expansion.

In direct contradiction, therefore, with Charles Olson’s poetic demand to “get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, [...] speed [...] the whole



business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen” (Olson 240), Scott arranges syntax to purposefully interrupt Olson’s poetic drive for (and semantic expectation of) “energy-discharge” (240) in favour of the awkward, the mal-formed and the tongue-tied. Scott assembles lines around the very syntax which is most difficult to pronounce by an adult stutterer —thereby directly linking a political alienation with a bodily interruption of Olsonian “Projective Verse.” Ngai categorizes this kind of unmovable syntax as “raw matter, at times flowing and at others deliberately obstructing flow —yet always insistent” (112), so that turning away from Olson’s drive to “USE USE USE” (240), towards a “[p]rofanity of [f]ormless ([n]on-representational) [l]anguage” (Ngai 104), Scott proposes to “rehearse in verse. horn spat. rest. speedbag glottal. rise. bumblebee yodel [...] again.”

While Jordan Scott’s *blert* confronts geography and writing of the body in a means which both is politically astute and fraught with his own stutter, ryan fitzpatrick’s manuscript in progress *hounds of love / loss leaders* articulates a poetic based around industrial-waste and an economically marginalized community. fitzpatrick’s poem *cum* manifesto “A Quick Note on Poetry” consists entirely of the statement: “I Will Not Bring Beauty Into The World,” a position taken up in both the form and the content of fitzpatrick’s *oeuvre*. Jordan Scott’s awkward syntax forms around his engagement with an inability to physically speak in confrontation with the breath line, geography and economic marginalization; fitzpatrick’s fragmented lines form around his engagement with the language of marketing, consumerist expectation and, once again, economic marginalization. By turning away from “Beauty” as a classical trope of poetry and artwork, fitzpatrick politicizes language by interceding into what constitutes proper grammatical construction:

Fan	nub
Nex	homusch
Apprais	catalo
stack plasma.	

fitzpatrick’s earlier suit of poems, “The Ogden Shops,” interrogated the development and degradation of urban landscape by re-imagining it through a narrative which explored the Canadian Pacific Railway’s heavy repair facility in South-East Calgary. Having written a more normative long-poem suite with “The Ogden Shops,” fitzpatrick has since transitioned to shorter poetic lines consisting of fragments of consumerist language —“[e]gg spread sale rain”— juxtaposed against fragments of recognizable words —“lectric ergie sire samp creen.” fitzpatrick’s reply to consumer choice is a poetic of dispersal, fragmentation and disruption of meaning:

letter an ouring
rope evange
dash wood
jell lustrate



vocate tonque
corps on comp

By working with fragmented language, fitzpatrick obstructs the construction of normative meaning in favour of a disjointed “negative utterance” (Ngai 103) which wedges between the typographic and the “useful;” an attempt to “Diefinbox pipdream stifle” the power in consumerist language. As Charles Bernstein notes in “Optimism and Critical Excess (process),” there is no way of assuming an authoritative voice, no way to work to swerve without reproducing and furthering that linguistic oppression (153). Through the use of fractured language détourned from normative spelling, fitzpatrick’s poetic is “laming claim” on the “micro custom” of “buy[ing] direct.” Consisting almost entirely of “raw matter” (Ngai 112)—quite literally so, as fitzpatrick continues to explore the boundaries of ‘meaning’ in this unfinished manuscript—*hounds of love / loss leaders* has no accumulated normative meaning except that of constant interference.

While the poet cannot control how the reader will approach—or even perform a text—fitzpatrick and Scott step away from semantic ‘meaning’ in these poems in order to further complicate the exchange value of poetry. While ‘value’ and ‘commodity’ are never completely escaped, its transferal can be troubled by the removal of the fluid semantic transferal from the communication equation:

Communication ‘occurs’ by means of a sole instantaneous circuit, and for it to be ‘good’ communication must take place fast—there is no time for silence. Silence is banished from our screens; it has no place in communication. Media images [...] never fall silent: images and messages must follow one upon the other without interruption. But silence is exactly that—a blip in the circuitry; a minor catastrophe, a slip which [...] becomes highly meaningful—a break laden now with anxiety, now with jubilation. (Baudrillard 13)

The performative “minor catastrophe” operates as an economic *clinamen*; a swerve away from the normative creation of a spoken text.

Ngai suggests that one of the articulations of disgust is the “inarticulate sound” where “[n]o words are used in the expression of disgust and thus the question of what words ‘mean’ is simply irrelevant to this particular type of utterance” (Ngai 103). Both *blert* and *hounds of love / loss leaders* treat language as “raw matter” without a reinforced referent as a means to briefly interrupt capitalist exchange-based signification by “insisting on the disappearance of the referent while at the same time refusing to defer to other terms. It won’t coagulate into a unitary meaning and it also won’t move; it can’t be displaced” (Ngai 114). The ‘inarticulate sound’ ultimately expresses a poetics of disgust and exclusion, where its language “only covers a space; the reader cannot fix it metaphorically, assign a concept to it, nor send it on a metonymic voyage along a chain of other terms” (Ngai 114).

Ngai’s “inarticulate sound” can be linked to Lev Vygotsky’s differentiation between inner and external speech, where “inner speech must be regarded, not as speech minus sound, but as an entirely separate speech function” where “[i]ts main distinguishing trait is its peculiar syntax. Compared with external speech, inner



speech appears disconnected and incomplete” (Vygotsky, n. pag.). Vygotsky’s description of inner speech provides an apt approach to these fragmented, disjunctive forms of poetry which “[show] a tendency toward an altogether specific form of abbreviation: namely, omitting the subject of a sentence and all words connected with it” (Vygotsky, n. pag.). He categorizes external speech in terms of a capitalist, growth-oriented structure, as “the turning of thought into words, its materialisation and objectification.” But, in describing the language acquisition process, Vygotsky once again uses words which are tied —much like Olson— to terms of production: “[s]emantically, the child starts from the whole, from a meaningful complex, and only later begins to *master* the separate semantic units, the meanings of words, and to divide his formerly undifferentiated thought into those units” (Vygotsky, n. pag., emphasis added).

Ngai’s formulation of the “inarticulate sound” works outside of this narrative of mastery and domination. Where she does align with Vygotsky —and where the poetry of Scott and Fitzpatrick also align with him— is around his summarization of Frederic Paulhan’s idea of the fluidity of meaning:

[t]he sense of a word [...] is the sum of all the psychological events aroused in our consciousness by the word. It is a dynamic, fluid, complex whole, which has several zones of unequal stability. Meaning is only one of the zones of sense, the most stable and precise zone. A word acquires its sense from the context in which it appears; in different contexts, it changes its sense. Meaning remains stable throughout the changes of sense. The dictionary meaning of a word is no more than a stone in the edifice of sense, no more than a potentiality that finds diversified realisation in speech. (Paulhan, qtd in Vygotsky, n. pag.)

While *blert* explores the “bottlenecking of the physical body —the stopping of words and syllables in the throat of the speaker” thus undermining Olsonian poetics— Fitzpatrick’s *hounds of love / loss leaders* works at the moment of “emotional strangulation” (Fitzpatrick, correspondence with the author). Subtitled as “notes towards a selective mutism,” *hounds of love / loss leaders* is an attempt to communicate the moment where the speaker is at a loss for words, where language fails to articulate the anger and disgust at the “sum of all the psychological events aroused in [his] consciousness by the word” (Vygotsky, n. pag.). Fitzpatrick’s writing foregrounds the Paulhanian “zones of unequal stability” as language is othered inside ingrained pathways, what Fitzpatrick refers to as “a language of schizophrenic flow, of arrested development, of fear, of misunderstanding” (Fitzpatrick, correspondence with the author). In Fitzpatrick’s obstruction of normative grammar, a rejection of Paulhan’s declaration that meaning is “the most stable and precise zone” of sense, the “utterance is indeed instinctive, but it is non-symbolic; in other words, the sound of pain or the sound of joy does not, as such, indicate the emotion, it does not stand aloof, as it were, and announce that such and such an emotion is being felt” (Sapir, n. pag.). As language has been co-opted by a power-dynamic which undermines Fitzpatrick’s political position, this “schizophrenic flow,” “[s]erve[s] as a more or less automatic overflow of the emotional energy; in a sense, it is part and parcel of the emotion itself” (Sapir, n. pag.).



The fact that for Sapir, once again, these inarticulate exclamations “hardly constitute communication in any strict sense. They are not addressed to any one, they are merely overheard, if heard at all, as the bark of a dog, the sound of approaching footsteps, or the rustling of the wind is heard,” further marginalizes fitzpatrick’s work. The extra-semantic exclamations in *hounds of love / loss leaders*, like Scott’s in *blert*, are categorized as animalistic and abject; but also under threat from the “approaching footsteps” of semantic expectation. As exclamations “convey certain ideas to the hearer, it is only in the very general sense in which any and every sound or even any phenomenon in our environment may be said to convey an idea to the perceiving mind” (Sapir, n. pag.) and “[b]reath is man’s special qualification as animal. Sound is a dimension he has extended” (Olson 248), poets who work outside of semantic sense, eschewing this “special quality” become “merely overheard” —not participating directly in a linguistic exchange.

Both Olson and Sapir reinforce the superiority of normative syntax, and marginalize the non-semantic as sub-human. N.S. Trubetzkoy, in his *Principles of Phonology*, theorizes that language also includes a series of phonemes which “occur in interjections, onomatopoeic expressions, and in commands or calls directed toward animals. Words of this type do not have a representative function in the proper sense” (208). Scott and fitzpatrick move their phonemics towards the “alien character” and the lack of “representative function in the proper sense” of these animalistic sounds, and, as Trubetzkoy reaffirms, even these non-semantic exclamations contain a “special familiar expressivity” (208).

Jordan Scott states that his engagement with language was troubled by his physical inability to even state his own name. Scott’s stutter fractures his proper noun, making his semantic position within narrative ineffable. Words become markers of non-being, “improper sense” and inappropriate action. *blert* as a poetic project is formed entirely out of language used inappropriately, for “[t]hey learned to mumble —not to speak— and it was only after paying attention to the increasing noise of the century, [...] that they acquired a language” (Scott, personal interview). As fitzpatrick believes that language has been completely co-opted by production, so Scotts argues that language was only possible after listening to “the increasing noise of the century.”

fitzpatrick works at the edge of emotional strangulation, exploring the English language’s *duality of patterning* —the manipulation of smaller “meaningless” elements into patterns of meaning. While Sapir argues that a “definition of language, however, that is so extended as to cover every type of inference becomes utterly meaningless,” it is precisely that extension of meaning, and the exploration of the fragment as compositional unit which is the focus of *hounds of love / loss leaders*.

W.J.T. Mitchell states that “[l]andscape is an exhausted medium, no longer viable as a mode of artistic expression,” and that “[l]ike life, landscape is boring; we must not say so” (5). When fitzpatrick does refer to landscape, the vocabulary of reference is unhinged through an alienating context: does a “rivat river rival” geographically drain into, or flow from, a “[f]orce serv trict / ducat lake?” By noting the “hold and discourse” inherent in the “boring,” fitzpatrick finds a way to “say so”



through “unanchored” signifiers. His words —fragments, neologisms and nonce words— are recognizable as pieces of language, but only pieces. They are semantically reminiscent. This unanchored language works both as a criticism of “boring” landscape and the “boring” life of consumerism.

The poetic ontological “boredom” of fitzpatrick’s *bounds of love / loss leaders* troubles the relationship between speech, thought and language —just as spam email includes a vocabulary purposefully inserted to out-manoeuvre filtration programs, fitzpatrick’s poetry avoids censure by capitalist morality by evoking a vocabulary outside of normative construction. His texts may bear resemblance to familiar constructions, but *bounds of love / loss leaders* is a “[n]eon suite / poem [...] fake” that dwells in the elision of the (un)familiar —alienating language from itself, and the reader from the language of meaning through the “[p]rofanity of [f]ormless ([n]onrepresentational) [l]anguage” (Ngai 104):

intime struct
paper stroke

digits lost
umble

Jon Paul Fiorentino (himself a prairie writer, having been born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and the co-editor of *Post-Prairie: An Anthology of New Poetry* in 2005 with Robert Kroetsch, whose very involvement in the collection creates both a cultural caché and a discourse between the established representations of prairie and younger voices who are attempting to trouble traditional representations) argues that

[t]he inability of many readers and literary scholars to see an emerging poetics of a new prairie, the post-prairie, should not be surprising —there is a reason the prairie is thought of as the domain of the rural, the wheat field and the grain elevator. [...]the persistence of this imagery [...] has something to do with cultural capital —that is, there is a marketplace-based reason many people continue to think of the prairie as a fixed notion of “traditional” landscape (Fiorentino and Kroetsch 9).

Jordan Scott and ryan fitzpatrick actively attempt to disrupt this “cultural capital” (9) by abandoning the narrative-drive in order to critique the conservative politic in Alberta. This linking of narrative and consumerism does, as Bernstein notes, limit the options available to articulate “disgust.” By favouring the awkward and refusing to “[b]ring [b]eauty [i]nto [t]he [w]orld,” Scott and fitzpatrick —like many poets currently writing in Calgary— distance themselves from the traditional tropes of “prairie,” finding an “articulate expression of [their ...] own inarticulateness” (Ngai 104). With marketplace-driven culture rampant in Alberta, Scott and fitzpatrick turn with disgust to the “negative utterance” (Ngai 103) —for “[h]ow can these institutionalized logics *not* make stomachs turn?” (Ngai 98). Like other members of the collectives working on *filling Station* and *dANDelion* magazines —and their circle of contemporaries— fitzpatrick and Scott use the fragment and



other non-normative poetics as a means of eschewing the cultural stranglehold “prairie poetry” has upon perceptions of Albertan writing.

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