

Peter Culley

BECAUSE I AM ALWAYS TALKING:
READING VANCOUVER INTO THE WESTERN FRONT

Poets should be more aware of docile audiences than hecklers - Gerry Gilbert

In the autumn of 1983, a benefit reading was held at the Western Front for the burnt-out MacLeod's bookstore, which had been the unfortunate and unintended victim of an attempt by Vancouver's absurd far right to inflict damage on its equally absurd far left. Book burning, for whatever accidental or stupid reason, must surely strike a nerve very near to the heart of any literary community, and a large crowd had turned out to support a beleaguered and threatened institution.

The evening proceeded smoothly, with the community's affection for the bookstore and its proprietors giving the evening an air of warmth and camaraderie. Kevin Davies, a Vancouver Island poet then in his early twenties, took his place at the podium. It was clear immediately, perhaps by the tight grip with which he held his manuscript, perhaps only by the mask of intense and preoccupied concentration on his face, that Davies's reading was going to be an attempt to subvert what could be perceived as the cozy assumptions of the evening. A fire, his eyes seemed to say, an arson had, after all, taken place.

The audience rewarded the new note that Davies struck in the proceedings with their best attentions, a tense yet indulgent expectation that may be partly explained by Davies's peculiar and paradoxical standing within the city's literary community. As a poet whose reputation stands in inverse proportion to the scarcity of his publications, Davies's few public appearances are lent a density and force far beyond that which by habit and inclination he would bring to them. Perhaps because of this, he announced that, owing to the length of the text he was about to read and due to the time limits that are de rigueur on such occasions, he would read very quickly, in fact as quickly as possible. But then, perhaps in an attempt to raise the stakes on his own apprehension, he invited the now clearly volatile and eager audience to heckle him. Whether meant facetiously or not – it is difficult at this long remove to tell – the audience responded to this half-implied challenge as if it were a glove cast upon the ground.

Davies began to read, as rapidly as advertised, but every word was clearly audible, filling the room. His poems of that era were as extreme in their content as they were in that evening's presentation, and might best be described as a series of more or less discreet statements designed to exact the maximum amount of terror and regret from their author. Their effect, especially when read aloud, was that of a long implosion of personality enacted for the moral edification of the onlooker. There was much in Davies's performance that night that was resonant of the more eccentric fringes of the Baptist church, in which the poet's vocabulary and rhetoric were steeped. Presented both with this virtuosic evisceration of self and a built-in framework of response, the audience was pleased to do just that, the air filling

with jeers, laughter and shouts of encouragement. It was a revival meeting of a most peculiar hue.

After about ten minutes, Davies, predictably and visibly, falters. It is as if some brutal hemorrhage had been staunched. Into this temporary void the audience rushed, overwhelming the poet with the raucous complexity of their response. Boos, catcalls, cheers and applause were subsumed within an almost libidinal din. Davies bravely attempted to begin again, to stare the crowd down, but his hesitation had undone him, his moment had passed. At some point, accounts vary, a shoe was thrown, and a manuscript was seized, but for my purpose the drama ends here.

Examining this event after almost a decade, I am struck less by Davies's performance (which has, after all, passed honourably into the poetry folklore of Vancouver) than by the singular character of Vancouver audiences that their response that night revealed. For as provoked and extreme as their behaviour toward Davies may have been, it was merely an extension, by degree, of the Faustian contract between reader and audience that has given literary life on the west coast much of its unique flavour. Davies's performance that night, along with any number of readings by other writers, demonstrates that the volatility and sophistication of Vancouver audiences might also be an insufficiently acknowledged factor in the astounding growth of the city's literary culture in the past thirty years. The fact that not only does a large audience for the spoken text exist in Vancouver, but that its demographic thrust might well be distinct from that of the audience for the printed text, throws a light on larger questions of origin and social formation. If any institution can be said to be near the centre of such a formation, it would be the Western Front.

The literary reading is one of the last survivors of a once thriving oratorical culture. The decline of such other oratorical institutions as the sermon, the public lecture and the political speech, and the concomitant emergence of such new forms as sound-bite rhetoric, rap music and stand-up comedy have given the literary reading an anachronistic, genteel air, one whose demands on attention seem to speak to another time. Even the simple act of reading aloud to loved ones, one of the most intimate experiences that literature allows us, has now sadly all but disappeared beyond the confines of the nursery, replaced by the competing schmooze of Arsenio and Jay. So why then, on any given Vancouver evening, do groups of people travel various distances, often in the rain, to hear writers read aloud from their work? Work that, often enough, does not offer the simple comforts of either lyrical or narrative flow?

Some of the reasons, as I have stated earlier, and to which I will return, are social and structural, but other reasons must surely be located in the phenomenology of the experience itself. Without venturing too far into anyone's theoretical minefield, let us presume that reading and listening are qualitatively different experiences, and that nowhere do these differences present themselves more clearly than when brought to bear on an identical text. The previously considered reading by Kevin Davies offers an example: on the page, Davies's poems of that era underwent a distinct shift of tone, the understandable loss of intensity foregrounding an overall unevenness of content and conception. But neither is reading aloud

necessarily a hyperbolic heightening of dramatic affect. The built-in diffidence and hesitancy that a writer like Fred Wah brings to his readings, for example, serves to subtly underscore those very qualities in his poetry. The absence of affect is in itself an intensification.

My point here is simply that during the act of vocal transmission, written work is subject to a variety of effects and transformations, both conscious and unconscious. Many writers ignore or underestimate such effects, acting as if their work truly 'speaks for itself', as if their larynxes and voice boxes were acting as the transparent medium of their written intentions. An insistence on inscription as the final arbiter of a text's reality makes not only an unsupportable claim on the nature of an audience's attention, but badly underestimates the demonic power of speech. Who dares assume that a listener, having heard a writer, is thereby somehow obligated to read the writer's work, or that this reading offers a necessarily deeper or more profound experience? The most successful literary readings are those that insist on their ephemerality, their manifest existence as discreet events in time. The contract between listener and writer is fulfilled within the act of listening. Vancouver audiences know this, and attend readings less as parishioners in the church of print than as wary flaneurs in search of exotic left-brain stimulation.

It might be reasonably argued that the difficulty and discontinuity that characterize so much recent writing can only be compounded in such a freewheeling intellectual environment, but I would argue the opposite. Habits of reading are conservative and hard to break; many intellectuals for whom the innovations of Bracque or Duchamp exist in dim prehistory still have difficulties with the literary avant-garde of the turn of the century, and any assumptions that a writer could once have made about the shared literary background of his or her readers have had to be abandoned.

Serious writers today often have to address an abyss of ignorance regarding literary matters not seen among educated people since before the invention of moveable type. It is an abyss, however, that many seem eager to bridge. The difficult and continuous task of reclaiming a place for writing within the larger community is, paradoxically, often left to the 'still, small voice' of the writer and the willing attention of the listener. Luckily, the ear, freed from the eye's relentless semantic habit, is able to absorb the difficult news of avant-garde literature in radically different ways, disclosing levels of meaning and patterns of usage over which the eye might have hesitated and stumbled. The story of the literary avantgarde in Vancouver is the story of the ear leading the unwilling eye into the future.

Poetry is a vocal art - George Bowering

Warren Tallman opens his 1973 essay, 'Wonder Merchants: Modernist Poetry in Vancouver During the 1960s,' with a detailed account of a reading at the University of British Columbia in February 1962 by the American poet Robert Creeley, following polite, lukewarm reactions in Portland and Seattle:

Vancouver was different, a pleasantly rickety lecture hall, an overflow crowd, mostly students... prolonged surges of laughter when the poems were humorous ('Ballad of the

Despairing Husband'), muffled, scattering giggles when they were wry... a felt attentiveness when they were compelling, ('The Door'). This en masse spontaneity held through an hour of reading, pause, another half-hour of reading, pause, and another half-hour of audience-poet conversation... 'It's been a long time,' Creeley told them, 'since I've experienced such energy and attention, and I'm very, very grateful'... All of which spells out one starting point for the exceptional activity in poetry in Vancouver during the 1960s. (1)

Having used a reading as the signal event on his still definitive history, Tallman goes on to consider the nature of Creeley's audience that day:

Of the several hundred decidedly un-academic persons listening not more than twenty-five knew Creeley's work in any meaningful way. For Love wasn't published until the next month and Creeley's other volumes were very fugitive indeed. More, a good many of the poems in For Love are not so simple as to provide instant access on first hearing. Then, as now, his brilliant syntax is often formidable. Yet the audience's responses were not only enthusiastic, but intelligent, appropriate gestures at appropriate moments...they were ready for Creeley's modernism...The students were open, receptive, could perceive the man. So they went along willingly, with a fineness of attention to the poems. There was a kind of reversal in which they were as actors in an impromptu drama providing an outstanding performance for the gratefully impressed audience of one. (2)

This reading, and the subsequent visits to Vancouver by nearly the entire vanguard of American letters, culminating in the massive U.B.C. conference of 1963, are most historically significant in terms of their powerful effect on a generation of writers. But as Tallman's account indicates, their concurrent effect on the development of a sophisticated listening culture, a free-floating audience whose interest in the declaimed text was more spectatorial than professional, is equally important, if more evanescent and harder to track. The point of convergence for writer and listener was the centrality of voice, of the body as the true seat of the intellect, coupled with an aversion to the print-based strictures in which the linguistic expression had become mired.

Charles Olson, who read at the U.B.C. conference and was to become teacher and mentor to a number of Vancouver writers, expressed this new sensibility in a dictum that became one of the defining formulae of a generation of writers:

Let me put it baldly. The two halves are:
the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE (3)

It stands to reason that a text written with such criteria in mind cannot help but have a significant life beyond the confines of the page, and that hearing a succession of such texts, over time, might constitute a kind of education. The 'innocence' of the audience that Tallman describes – though the precise nature and constitution of that innocence is subject to extremes of variation – has persisted since at least 1962, both in the willingness of listeners to

allow the voice and bearing of a reader to contribute to the terms of his or her reception and to allow the detail of that reception to form the basis of judgment.

Some of the reasons for this openness must also reside in the social dynamic of the literary culture that encourages and sustains it. Because Vancouver historically has had no effect on literary establishment, energy that in a more 'sophisticated' literary centre would be devoted to defeating rivals for power and maintaining free-masonic levels of exclusion, was able, when it finally emerged, to percolate immediately to various levels within the larger community. Likewise, the systemic structures of class and ideology that maintain the illusion of writing's autonomy did not have to be laboriously broken down, having been erected haphazardly in the first place. As the sixties proceeded, the decentralization and fluidity that resulted from this made it hard to tell where the literary culture ended and others began. Cut off by its eclecticism from the CanLit mainstream, Vancouver writing managed to remain both peripherally active in and centrally important to the life of the city itself.

An exemplar of the fluid, shifting tendencies within Vancouver writing in the sixties is Roy Kiyooka. A painter by training, he had attended the Emma Lake workshops in Saskatchewan, and had taught at the Vancouver School of Art from 1960 to 1965, and became a leading figure of the West Coast branch of the 'hard-edge' school. For him, as for so many others, the 1963 U.B.C. poetry conference was a watershed –

It was amazing, just amazing, because you felt that you were an audience to the most intelligent, scrupulous, vivacious use of language that you had heard. (4)

The concrete outcome of Kiyooka's astonishment was contact with Robert Creeley, who stayed on in Vancouver for a year after attending the conference to teach at U.B.C., and through Creeley the organization of a series of readings at the Vancouver School of Art. The eventual outcome was a seismic shift in the parameters of Kiyooka's career. While it would be easy enough to say that Kiyooka had given up painting and taken up poetry, photography and eventually video, the reality was a great deal more complex, part of a vast reassessment of accepted formulations of the real that was occupying the entire culture. It was not categories that were in question, but the whole notion of 'category' itself. In the maelstrom of the sixties, what was held on to mattered less than enthusiastically surrendering to the flow.

Kiyooka's introduction of readings to the V.S.A. was among the first attempts to place writing against the background of these radical recontextualizations; it would not be the last. Virtually every 'event' in an event-centered milieu included literary performance of one sort or another, though it might often have been scarcely recognized as such. Such venues as the Vancouver Art Gallery's Special Events Program, the Sound Gallery, the U.B.C. Festivals of Contemporary Arts and any number of more ephemeral 'happenings' testify to the pivotal place accorded the spoken or performed text during this era. The categorical informality within which the texts of such writer / performers as Kiyooka, Maxine Gadd, Judith Copithorne, Gerry Gilbert, Bill Bissett, Ed Varney and Al Neil were included was made most concretely manifest by the foundation of Intermedia in 1967.

The details of the rise and fall of Intermedia have been recounted elsewhere, (5) and need not concern us here: suffice it to say that in Intermedia the vital place of literary performance in Vancouver culture was formalized as an aspect of a larger practice, both interdisciplinary and social. Coincidentally, 1967 was also the year in which the Canada Council's readings program was initiated. A happy by-product of the Trudeau government's Marcusean program of 'repressive tolerance', the program paid Canadian writers travel costs and honoraria which enabled them to read their works in classrooms, libraries and church basements throughout the country. The concurrent rise of Intermedia and the Canada Council reading program would together have seemed to ensure a rosy future for literary performance within the interdisciplinary context. And so, for a time, it was to be.

What finally eroded writing's place within the interdisciplinary project was the concurrence of the 1972 collapse of Intermedia with increasingly categorizing tendencies from funding institutions, including the Canada Council. But both were perhaps symptomatic of the larger collapse of the Utopian ideals of the 60s that had brought them into being. From the ashes of Intermedia, however, arose an institution which, through the 70s and beyond, has zealously protected and encouraged the interdisciplinary ideal – the Western Front. That it has survived twenty years indicates a Utopianism of unusual tenacity.

The reading culture that was engendered by the Canada Council was in many ways at odds with the one that had developed independently in Vancouver. Now that any published writer was de facto a fully qualified disclaimer of his or her work, the reading as event lost much of its meaning. Many authors were encouraged to embark on extensive public careers whose work might have been better served had they remained at home. Likewise, venues were more often neutral, academic spaces that privileged the tones of the classroom over those of the performance. While the Canada Council reading program laudably opened literary performance to many who might not have otherwise been exposed, the eventual dilution of the experience by successions of monotonal automatons hard-wired to the text was its inevitable grim by-product.

The very eclecticism of the Western Front's mandate, and the fact that in the early stages readings were primarily organized by such Intermedia-associated figures as Gerry Gilbert, Dwight Gardiner and Mary Beth Knechtel, tended to discourage the worst excesses of CanLit from taking very deep root in its reading programs. Moreover, the strain of neo-Marxist literary nationalism that was so damaging to Canadian writing during the seventies was generally counterbalanced by the Western Front's relentlessly international outlook, reinforcing the empowered provincialism that was and is Vancouver's great strength.

The literary progressivism of the Western Front was present at its creation, especially in the person of Eric Metcalfe, who, having studied at University of Victoria's English Department, knew just how hidebound and reactionary CanLit could get. It is therefore logical that Metcalfe's idiosyncratic yet savvy sensibility would lead him to entrust the Front's early reading programs to such figures as Gilbert and Gardiner, who were far from CanLit's mainstream. Metcalfe's wide interest also led him to Toronto poet Victor Coleman, in those

days a frequent visitor to Vancouver, whose dandyism, excruciating wit and Hollywood obsessions so closely paralleled Metcalfe's own. Much of the sort of ironic eclecticism associated with the Western Front found its Toronto counterpart in Coleman's multifarious activities in that city.

Central to the position of literary readings within the Western Front aesthetic is the notion of an intensified social space for art, where arcane rules of decorum are operative. The particular physical space this created for literary performance is both more formal and more decorative than most writers had come to expect. Such lapidary attention was as rare in the funky seventies as it is in the nasty nineties. The reading area is itself opulent: there is no better place for literary performance in Vancouver than within the dark and wood-lined walls of the Lux theatre. The importance of the strictly-adhered-to values of proper lighting and amplification can hardly be overstressed. Thus the speaker, dropped into a quasi-theatrical environment, faces an audience whose expectations are likewise heightened.

The concurrent assumption that writing forms an integral part of a larger enterprise, one that is impressed to one degree or another upon all literary performances at the Western Front, is an idea worth keeping alive, and one to which most readers respond. But it must be added that, from the 70s on, this was most often a response from within writing as a now immutable category, of which the performative aspects were a minor, if professionally useful, part. This reconstitution of writing's supposed autonomy was perhaps inevitable given the real maturity and depth of the community, one that felt it no longer needed to tug on the apron strings of other media for attention. That this often meant no attention at all was a condition many writers were willing to accept for the sake of a newly assumed purity and isolation. Many even welcomed this self-imposed exile as a conveniently close-to-home symptom of larger political disengagements. Even those who pushed against the boundaries of this autonomy tended to do so from within bureaucratically constituted categories or historically established careers. Two writers who emerged in the seventies to successfully counter such tendencies were Billy 'Zonko' Little and Steve McCaffery. Although this pairing might seem arbitrary, both the Yorkshireman, McCaffery, and the New Yorker, Little, shared the tendencies of the best kind of expatriate toward reforming the institutions of their adopted country. Throughout the late seventies and well into the Reagan-Bush-Mulroney era, Little's activities as poet and unpaid agitator were relentless. Eschewing conventional forms of publication, his writings emerged as pamphlets, posters, broadsides and graffiti, but his preferred method of dissemination was the public reading. Dissatisfied also with conventional venues, Little poured out his scabrous and often terrifyingly funny jeremiads wherever time and an audience went begging: Little's reading at Operation Solidarity rallies mark high points in the history of oppositional rhetoric in Vancouver.

If McCaffery's activities were less overtly political, they were no less unconventional. Of all the writers who have visited the Western Front, McCaffery is the one who has made the fullest and most consistent use of all its social and technical permutations. There is virtually no area of activity connected with the Western Front in which McCaffery has not enthusiastically engaged. Such insistently various activities might seem randomly constituted were it not for the range of the intellectual system in which they are included.

McCaffery's work, in all its forms, is a testing and questioning of language itself, of how it operates through history, of its dense materiality, of its dark relationships with power and domination. That he attacks these questions on a number of fronts can seem, in these terms, only reasonable.

In strictly virtuosic terms, McCaffery is one of the ablest practitioners of the oratorical arts we have. Years of practice at the extremes of recitation and sound poetry, grafted onto the glottal music of the North Country, have left him with an utterly unique instrument. McCaffery is also keenly aware of the voice's ability to make clearly apprehendable complex literary conceits. An extraordinary instance of this ability was his performance of one of what he calls 'sedimentary texts' – in this case the translation of the prologue to the 'Communist Manifesto' into Yorkshire dialect, read by McCaffery through a ventriloquist dummy. Various layers of signification – the revolutionary sentiments that stirred generations, the autobiographical journey into the voices of McCaffery's boyhood, the Miltonic syntax and rhetoric of the English Revolution so present in Marx and Engels – became so actively present and alive in McCaffery's voice that his reading had the intellectual density of a text festooned with kabbalistic footnotes.

The institutional encouragement of such extremes of literary practice was a mantle that throughout much of the 70s and early 80s the Western Front carried alone. Revolutionary figures of international stature such as Kathy Acker, William Burroughs and Jackson Mac Low made pivotal Vancouver appearances solely at the Western Front's behest. The local writing community's response to such figures reached its full fruition only in the mid-eighties with the establishment in Vancouver of the Kootenay School of Writing, and the flurry of new literary activity around it. The response of the Western Front to this new activity was immediate and supportive. The Western Front became an important supplementary reading venue for KSW, one whose institutional clout could help get out-of-town writers into Vancouver, and whose built-in demographic eased KSW's redrawing of the city's literary boundaries. Readings at the Western Front by such luminaries of the so-called 'language' school as Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe and Bruce Andrews, writers whose work had a decisive influence on KSW's evolution, were crucial in contextualizing that influence for Vancouver audiences.

In the wake of increasingly conservative literary presses and institutional indifference, readings regained their absolutely central importance to the literary life of the city. Once again, readings became a distant early warning signal for new modes of practice, a charged field into which increasingly disparate materials could be thrown. Writing's strength in Vancouver is in its volatility, its refusal to let orthodoxies boil down into certitudes. The Western Front's strength is that it is able to stand slightly apart from this vortex of activity, while simultaneously offering institutional support and stability within a coherent historical context.

Another way in which this stance – at once nurturing and ironic – asserted itself was in the direction taken by the Western Front's monthly magazine. Primarily a schedule of Western Front events, to be mailed out to members and left in gathering places of the cognoscenti, it

became increasingly literary around the beginning of the 1990s, culminating in the appointment of Lisa Robertson as literary editor. Robertson, an accomplished poet and critic, also ran a small bookstore, and was thus keenly aware of the possibilities of circulating new work to a large audience that such an opportunity afforded. Avant-garde writing had not had such a wide circulation in Vancouver since the days of the Georgia Straight Writing Supplements. The results were entirely successful, if reckoned only by the palpable increase in attendance at Western Front readings by newly curious art world refugees. By presenting experimental writing comfortably nestled within the context of a range of activities, Front magazine acts as a miniature model of the Western Front itself, re-aligning categorical assumptions in a playfully disruptive way.

The steady future course of the Western Front is perhaps best exemplified by the responsive and astute inclusion in its structure of a figure like Judy Radul, who is, as of this writing, poised to take over both general editorship of Front magazine and (temporarily) the Front Gallery. Like many of the best artists of her generation, Radul has survived for a number of years without categorizing her activity in any terribly rigid way. Emerging from the sturm und drang of performance practice into the rich linguistic possibilities of a newly reconstituted writing scene, Radul has worked out a zone of activity wholly her own, one that traverses difficult issues of gender and representation with real toughness and wit. Having performed at the Western Front in a number of incarnations, Radul seems well placed and well prepared for a long-term exploration of its structural possibilities. Her love of genre-busting gamesmanship, combined with an intuitive grasp of the creative aspects of institutional politics, puts her in a direct line of influence with the Western Front's founding principles, which is just as well, as the uniquely thorny project of the Western Front becomes millennial in its implications.

from: Wallace, Keith. Whispered Art History, Twenty Years at The Western Front.
Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, Press, 1993.

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