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Article abstract

Julia Kristeva's conception of "poetic language" can be useful in illustrating how the provisionality of language expands the poem into a dialogical poetics. Poetic language reveals the heterogeneity of not only desire but also the speaking/desiring subject. In the poetry of Daphne Marlatt, Robert Kroetsch, and Tim Lilburn, the heterogeneity of desire clearly propels the poem into what Kristeva describes as "metaphorical shifting" through which metaphors and episodes conflate and become "carnivalesque."

THE BIRDS, THE BEES, AND KRISTEVA: AN EXAMINATION OF SEXUAL DESIRE IN THE NATURE POETRY OF DAPHNE MARLATT, ROBERT KROETSCH, AND TIM LILBURN

Darryl Whetter

> You have become wise, like a god, Enkidu.
> Why did you range the wilderness with animals?
> *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

So Enkidu, Gilgamesh's wild-man companion, is asked by the courtesan who lures him out of the wild and into culture. Chomsky's theories of generative grammar and linguistic competence remind humans that our species is as hard-wired to acquire language as it is to reproduce in order to survive, while Shakespeare's Caliban (not to mention a May barnyard stroll) suggests that sexual desire is biological before it is linguistic. Since *Gilgamesh*, sexual metaphors and episodes in poetry have often illustrated the prelinguisticality of sexual desire and its comparability to the sublimity of nature. Julia Kristeva's conception of a "poetic language" — consisting in part of a "heteronomous space" in which "the naming of phenomena (their entry into symbolic law)" is brought together with "the negation of these names (phonetic, semantic, and syntactic shattering)"—can be used to illustrate how the ironic acknowledgment of the provisionality of language demanded by a *poetic* treatment of *prelinguistic* desires expands the poem into a dialogical poetics (Kristeva 70). By embodying a logic of "distance and relationship" (71), composed of linguistic heterogeneity, simultaneity, and "transfinitude," poetic language reveals the heterogeneity of not only desire but also the speaking/desiring subject. In the poetry of Daphne Marlatt, Robert Kroetsch, and Tim Lilburn, the heterogeneity of desire (indicated syntactically and/or

episodically) clearly propels the poem into what Kristeva describes as "metaphorical shifting," through which metaphors and episodes become "carnivalesque" (65). The logic of multiplicity and the implicit acknowledgment of the Other found in poetry of the carnivalesque suggests an alternate ontology in which being is (an always) becoming.

Several of the essays in Kristeva's *Desire in Language* propose attributes to "poetic language" which should be paraphrased and clarified to establish this essay's crucial belief in a non-binary poetic logic. In "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," Kristeva states:

> A literary semiotics must be developed on the basis of a *poetic logic* where the concept of the *power of the continuum* would embody the 0-2 interval, a continuity where 0 denotes and 1 is implicitly transgressed.
>
> Within this "power of the continuum" from 0 to a specifically poetic double, the linguistic, psychic, and social "prohibition" is 1 (God, Law, Definition). The only linguistic practice to "escape" this prohibition is poetic discourse. (70)

Kristeva is quick to point out that this escape is not a "libertine" transgression, but rather one in which the "poetic logic is that of the carnival. By adopting a dream logic, it transgresses rules of linguistic code and social morality" to establish "another law" (70-1). Poetic logic's operation by "non-exclusive opposition" creates indications of "distance and relationship" (71-72) reflecting "heterogeneity, simultaneity, and *transfinitude*." Georg Cantor, from whom Kristeva borrows this latter, nearly paradoxical, concept of localized simultaneity, describes transfinite numbers as "not being equal to any finite number," yet "allowing only a single imaging on themselves [at one time]" (Cantor 104,115). Thus the metaphor involving A, for example, by its very linguistic success, not only indicates A and not-A (as suggested by binary logic), but also that which distinguishes A and not-A. These significant distinctions between binary and poetic logic are most easily noted in poetry concerned with the energy (psychological *and* linguistic) of desires or what Kristeva calls "instinctual drives." In "How Does One Speak To Literature?," Kristeva claims that "Desire causes the signifier to appear as heterogeneous and, inversely, indicates heterogeneity through and across the signifier" (116). This heterogeneity is a principle of both the object of desire (in this case sex

or nature) *and* the speaking subject. In "From One Identity To An Other," Kristeva states:

> If it is true that there would unavoidably be a speaking *subject* since the signifying set exists, it is nonetheless evident that this subject, in order to tally with its heterogeneity, must be, let us say, a questionable *subject-in-process*. (135)

This carnivalesque ontology of becoming is easily indicated in poetry that addresses nature and sex as instinctual drives.

The depiction of sexual desire as a Kristevan "instinctual drive" (articulated with heterogeneous signifiers) in "Life Cycle," "Ghost," and "Work," (from Marlatt's *Steveston*) bites a thumb at poststructuralism and suggests that desire is prelinguistic. Marlatt's clear suggestion, that desire toward sex or nature is an instinctual drive, permits a carnivalesque logic of multiplicity within the idiom and episodes of the poem while subtextually advocating an ontology of becoming. The unacknowledged epigraph which opens "Life Cycle" commences a carnivalesque conception of desire based on instinctual, not socially ordered, drives. The structural gesture of Marlatt's refusal to attribute an author persona to the epigraph within the poem (such an attribution does occur at the book's close) focuses the reader's attention purely on the instinctual desires depicted in the epigraph. This avoidance of the author persona commences a shift away from literature's traditionally Aristotelian/Husserllian conception of the author as transcendental ego (wherein name *can* be attributed to thought) towards a more carnivalesque polyphony in which ideas preexist ego. Marlatt's naked epigraph, as textually distinct, still participates in the voice of authority an epigraph can provide, while also clearly marking the poem as containing multiple voices. In addition to this structural commencement of polyphony, the content of the epigraph initiates a depiction of sex and nature as locations of instinctual drives:

> after spawning they are exhausted, greatly
> emaciated, & soon die, their bodies sinking
> to the bed of the stream or lodging in the
> drift at its side. (Marlatt 79)

This quintessential example of *un petit mort*, with its graphic suggestion of death as the terminus of sexual desire (for salmon?),

initiates a conception of sex as *becoming death*. This entrance into the carnivalesque logic of simultaneity (A [sex] as at least A + B, where B represents becoming death) is founded on the irreducibility of the salmon's instinctual drives. Marlatt notes, "Against all odds they home in, to the source that's / marked their scales first birth place," (13-14). This dramatic extension of the carnivalesque logic of simultaneity which characterizes the epigraph's depiction of the salmon drive (the simultaneous drive for reproduction and death) to an additional term (the return home) reiterates the importance of this logic within the poem while implicitly encouraging Marlatt's metaphoric heterogeneity. The third verse paragraph's nearly equal devotion to the subjects of the river and the spawning instinct makes a duality of the unqualified antecedent "It" which commences the fourth verse paragraph. This carnivalesque simultaneity of subject ("It" as not simply river *or* spawning instinct, but rather *both*) is fractured still further by the multiple imaging (including the expansive use of an ellipsis) of "what slips by, the spore, / the spawn, the mark that carries on . . . like a germ, like violence / in the flesh" (19-21). Within the poem's idiom of simultaneity, the spores, spawns and marks could be both matter and metaphor, e.g. the spawning of the fish and the spawning instinct which the poem suggests we share with the fish. This sharing (with salmon as Other) is further indicated by the interrupted series of brief verse paragraphs consisting of one central simile which begins at line 22, and the association that their bareness and structural similarity invites. Within this invited attention, the repetition of "burn" in lines 22 (about "salmon") and 32 (about "us") further consolidates the poem's citation of the instinctual spawning drive in both salmon and people: "As if, 'outside,' a white fire *doesn't* / ring us, earth flicker its own circuits we, transparent, burn within" (31-32). This emphasis on an alternate rule of simultaneity and heterogeneity suggests that we, like the salmon who "don't re-enter time," are composed of prelinguistic, unfinished desires.

In "Ghost," the early suggestion of sexual desire as an instinctual drive prompts a carnivalesque logic characterized by metaphoric heterogeneity and an awareness of the Other. The carnivalesque treatment of desire is most easily indicated from the commencement of the seventh verse paragraph onwards:

> But still, at night, tied up in some dark harbour,
> it's the cries of women in orgasm you hear echoing, with the slap of water against your hull, coming in, coming in, from far reaches of the infinite world. (34-7)

On a local level, "But still" and "echoing" imply past action as well as shifting new attention to the ensuing action (the slapping/crying). Taken with the tone of preexistence which pervades the poem and much of the book, "But still" and "echoing" also suggest a continuousness or relentlessness to this slapping/crying aural rewriting. The suggestions of natural, prelinguistic desires which commence in this emphatic beginning are furthered by the speaker's extension of the act of desired listening to the "far reaches of the infinite world." By invoking the concept of infinity (with its inherent pointing beyond the speaking subject), the speaker quickly associates the extralinguisticality of the subject's desires with the physical salmon: "the endless hand over / hand flip of the fish into silver pen—successive, infinite" (41-42). The reiteration of "infinite" extends the desire for the (seeming) infinitude of physical salmon to the linguistically unrepresentable (e.g. infinity) through direct association. This sense of an expansive desire concerned with the extralinguistic is also easily associated with the uncontainability of nature itself. Still speaking of sexual desires rewriting the slapping sound of the water, the speaker notes, "And still, at sea, boundaries give way: / white women, white bellies of salmon" (37-38).

Associations, Kristeva claims in "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," are the hallmarks of carnivalesque logic: "the dialogism of Menippean and carnivalesque discourses, translating a logic of relations and analogy rather than of substance and inference, stands against Aristotelian logic" (85). The speaker's association of "white women" and the "white bellies of salmon," contributes to this carnivalesque logic through both its associations and its invitation of multiple, simultaneous conceptions of "boundaries" (geographic, racial, sexual, cultural). The geographic conception is furthered by the subsequent line, "There are no territories," with its suggestions that any place is all places (39). This carnivalesque transgression of order is furthered by the speaker's doubt over the rule of navigation: "What do the charts say? Return, return. Return of what doesn't / die," (43-44). By emphasizing hete-

rogeneous conceptions of "returning," (as act/verb [navigational] and as event [reappearance]) Marlatt suggests a transfinitude of salmon in which one may die but none die. The carnivalesque sense of a transfinitudinal unity to the salmon also participates in Marlatt's persistent concern with the aggregate, instinctual *desire* of the salmon as species: the individual spawning salmon dies, the desire does not. This focus on the prelinguistic, instinctual drives enables and empowers her closing image of the human possibility of return in which you "find yourself disinherited from / your claim to the earth" (47-48). In "Ghost," the prelinguistic is not only seen, it is revered.

The treatment of the obvious provisionality of the object of instinctual drives in Marlatt's "Work" contributes to a carnivalesque logic in which being is becoming. The female speaker is able to recognize the sexual desires of the fisherman as being both provisional and part of larger instinctual drives:

> Vision. Seen by them
> as sexual obsession? Who, hands on the wheel, are driven by
> the *necessity* of fishing. . . . (30-32)

The speaker's attention to the instinctual drives found in fishing is also indicated by her observations, "It's the power to motion, to *move* . . . ," and "[the fisherman] Cut, with a powerful motion, thru the weight of all that / surrounds them, on out to sea . . ." (23-24; 28-29). These instinctual drives provide the poem, and its scenes, with an undeniable energy which in turn provides fuel to the self-sustaining order of the carnival (as opposed to the heteronomous rule of Law). Again Marlatt reveals the implicit transgression of such heteronomous law through scenes of carnivalesque logic, "(so are you married? no? how's this? / patting my crotch)" (25-26). Kristeva's stipulation that the carnivalesque and poetic language operate on "a logic of *analogy* and *non-exclusive opposition*, opposed to monological levels of causality and identifying determination," suggests that being does not consist of a discrete identity (Aristotelian teleology), but rather a perpetual *becoming* of identity/identities (Kristeva 72). The speaker's abrupt shift (emphasized by a line break) from reporting the fisherman's questions to narrating his action provides a quintessential example of the non-causality of carnivalesque logic:

"(so are you married? no?": *if not A* [not-married]
"how's this? / patting my crotch)": *then B* [pat crotch]

To regard the above as illogical is, I suspect, unavoidable. Such a regard is also, however, a manifestation of the rule of law which carnivalesque logic transgresses. As an act, an actual patting, this illogic would embody the 0-1 principle of *law anticipating its own transgression*. But in a poem, the event (as provisional, as removed, as *linguistic*) embodies what Kristeva distinguishes as "*transgression giving itself a law*" (Kristeva 71). The speaker realizes that the provisionality implicit in this desire for her implies that such a transgression is a duality: "No, it's an old / dream my hair, my body happen to fit: the incarnate goal of all / that's *out there*" (37-39). The instinctiveness of these drives reveals their presence (desire for her) while simultaneously indicating their absence (desire for anyone). This simultaneity is capable of providing momentary connection with the Other: "But for the dream that surfaces /when the young woman from *out there* walks in, with whom, momentarily, / over a hamburger & a glass of water, he connects" (57-59). The momentariness of this connection with the Other, made possible through the interrogation of instinctual drives, again illustrates Cantor's concept of *transfinitude*. The sexual desires observed by Marlatt's speakers are simultaneously present in the moment (the finite) and irreducible to the moment (trans). Within such a transfinite existence, being may occur locally while simultaneously existing as an irreducible process of becoming.

In the third poem of Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue*, the carnivalesque rebellion prompted by a poetic interrogation of instinctual sexual desires suggests a multiplicity to being. The metaphorical shifting of the speaker's first comments on love initiates an idiom of heterogeneity:

Love is a leaping up
and down.

Love
is a beak in warm flesh. (3.5-8)

The play created by the distancing of these two definitions of love (with their 'logical' incongruity) and their linking through proximity and shared concern, shifts the poem into an idiom of heterogeneity or Kristevan "poetic language." The structural placement

of this metaphorical shifting between two "Seed Catalogue" 'excerpts' about the Hubbard Squash associates the speaker's concern for love with that of his concern with growing and nature.[1] The association is made explicit following the second 'excerpt' when the speaker asks, *"But how do you grow a lover?"* (13). This well-introduced association of the instinctual drives of growth and love commences the poem's movement into a carnivalesque logic in which lovers may be grown and from which typical attitudes towards love (Law) can be critiqued. According to Kristeva:

> Figures germane to carnivalesque language, including repetition, 'inconsequent' statements (which are nonetheless 'connected' within an infinite context), and non-exclusive opposition .... Disputing the laws of language based on the 0-1 interval, the carnival challenges God, authority, and social law; in so far as it is dialogical, it is rebellious. (79)

The tone of Kroetsch's ensuing diction and metaphors embodies such a challenge to Law and God. The preludial statement, "This is the God's own truth:" is emphasized by its repetition at lines fourteen and twenty-five where it occurs as an opening line in the respective verse paragraphs, and by the double entendre of "the" as both definite article and adjective. Given the prior shift into the carnivalesque, this attention quickly becomes scrutiny. In transgressing social law, the voice of the carnivalesque assumes a position from which to mock and undermine that law by the simple virtue of its linguistic attention. The adjectival use of "the" also works to foreground the provisionality of "God's own truth," a truth seemingly beyond such pettiness as human construction. The fixation on ownership of this supposedly holy truth ("God's own") undoes the 0-1 notion of truth and logic by suggesting that God's truth is somehow private and, by extension, subjective. The provisionality of this private truth is further indicated by the necessity of its announcement:

> This is the God's own truth:
> playing dirty is a mortal sin
> the priest *told us*, you'll go to hell
> and burn forever (*with illustrations*) (14-17; emphasis added)

and

> This is the God's own truth:

> catechism, *they called it.* (25-26; emphasis added)

The naturalness of the carnivalesque order, characterized by multiplicity and union, under which the speaker and his lover operate, further critiques monological rule. Through a little bawdy attention, the speaker's narration shifts the reader's allegiance from monological rule into the carnivalesque:

> the boys had to sit in the pews
> on the right, the girls on the left.
> Souls were like underwear that you
> wore inside. (27-30)

The explicit transgression of monologism (wherein souls and underwear would never meet) indicated by the comedic success of this metaphor strengthens the carnivalesque logic of multiplicity throughout the whole poem. Such a multiplicity invites a poetics of ambivalence in which the done is always undone. Within such a poetics, the repeated usage of the colloquialism "playing dirty," undoes the values through which the act was condemned (Order) and restores positive values to the words "play" and "dirty" while continuing the poem's idiom of multiplicity (33,47-48). The speaker's subsequent announcement, "This is the truth," is empowered by a poetics of multiplicity and simultaneity in which "the paper from the sacks" is also the "smooth sheets" of the lover's conjugal bed of "soft wheat" (38-39). The physical simultaneity of objects is followed and extended by a carnivalesque simultaneity of identity: "Germaine and I we were like / one" (40; R.K.'s space; no break). Kristeva locates this union as key to the carnivalesque experience:

> A carnival participant is both actor and spectator; he loses his sense of individuality, passes through a zero point of carnivalesque activity and splits into a subject of the spectacle and an object of the game. (78)

Within the poem's clear idiom of carnivalesque simultaneity, the lover's union is both physical and psychological, intentional and unavoidable. This union; Kroetsch is quick to point out, is ended by a monological rule of pronouncement. The priest "had named it he had named / our world out of existence" (44-45).[2] The return of monological order within the episodic strain of the poem ("Adam and Eve got drownded [sic]" [57]) coexists with a final

linguistic interrogation of the instinctual drives of love and nature: "But how — . . . . *But how do you grow a lover?*" (54,58; R.K.'s interruption). The question is simultaneously rhetorical, genuine, and moot. The speaker's incrimination of the falsity of monologism and his placement of love within the carnivalesque suggests that a lover could be grown. That same carnivalesque, however, can offer no explanations as to how such growing might take place.

In the first part of Tim Lilburn's "From An Anchorage" (*Moosewood Sandhills* 20), the speaker's instinctual desires indicate the operation of a carnivalesque order characterized by metaphorical heterogeneity and a logic of multiplicity. As a partial explanation of his/her presence in the desert, the speaker announces, "I am looking, I am obedient" (3). The correlation between desire (the looking is already in process, therefore something is being sought) and piety ("obedience") creates an intensity to desire which initiates the suggestion of their instinctualness. Desire, while not overtly sexual within this poem, is a central concern of Lilburn's and one which is almost always considered with such intensity and piety: the word "desire" appears in eight of *Moosewood Sandhills*' thirty-three poems. In "From An Anchorage," the quick suggestion of the instinctualness of desire leads to a rejection of monological order:

> Something in us, not the banquet or shapely light of consciousness, not the stone-brothered body, call it the swallowed animal, call it the cloud or a glowing sleep. (5-7)

The speaker's series of refusals for the ordering of desire ("the banquet" as ordered hunger; consciousness and body as falsely shaped) clearly propels him/her into a mode of metaphorical shifting indicative of a poetic logic of simultaneity. The "calling" of the "something inside," the "swallowed animal, cloud or glowing sleep," suggests an inability or impossibility of monological specification. Speaking in an interview, Lilburn says:

> Eros is wooed by the thing and it hurtles forward; and wrapped around eros is language, comprehension, sense of order. Desire seems to be shaped by its own momentum and velocity, and as it moves along it just looses these very things by which you thought it was constituted.

The location of this multiple "thing inside" within additional metaphors of preexistence and desire evokes a sense of (unfinish-

able) becoming. After multiply imaging his/her "swallowed animal," the speaker describes how it:

> now hears the faint tune of a story in the opulent night around us,
> in the forests of our desires and begins to whistle it into the future,
> bearing us along with it away from ourselves
> floating. (8-11)

The location of the other within the speaker's desires and a preexistent story ("now heard") is indicative of a dialogical language skeptical of ownership. The suggestion that such a preexistent desire "bears" the speaker "away from him/herself" and into "the future" emphasizes the absent-present (future, past, other). This linguistic fixation on multiplicity and simultaneity strongly suggests language's separation from the infinite, a suggestion furthered by Lilburn in interview:

> Everything is distant, far, discrete, itself, non-representative, ultimately non-colonizable, wild. In its wildness it also feels like infinity, it has the unspeakability of infinity.

Within this "unspeakability of infinity" the constancy of desire (although surely not its location) renders being an always becoming; our search is infinite, its name provisional, carnival, crazy.

It strikes me as no accident that the first signs used as examples in the *Cours de linguistique générale* of Ferdinand de Saussure are of nature: *arbor, equos*. Nature preexists language and this preexistence is more than chronological. The schism is as wide as any human—thing versus word. This schism, however wide, is not fixed. Given sufficient stimulation, we break down linguistically: do and should. Such stimulation (an insufficient word if ever one existed), perhaps from nature, perhaps from sexual desire, constitues an instinctual drive which can be both manifested in, and transcendent from, language. Such manifestations and transgressions can be found in poetic language with its carnivalesque logic capable of suggesting simultaneity, heterogeneity and transfinitude. When instinctual drives do prompt such a conflict of preexistence and language, as in these examples from the poetry of Daphne Marlatt, Tim Lilburn and Robert Kroetsch, the mode of being implied within this confrontation is one of (an always) becoming.

NOTES

[1] Note: the speaker's gender has been inferred as male from the referred to "peter" at line 52.

[2] An interesting comparison can be made to the following lines from Kroetsch's *Studhorse Man*:

> It has often struck me that in the act of naming we distinguish ourselves from the other unfortunate animals with whom we share this planet. They seem under no necessity to deny the fact that we are all, so to speak, one—that each of us is, possibly, everyone else—. (129-130)

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