

TO CAPTURE THE SOUND OF WATER: SOME THOUGHTS ON A LANGUAGE DENIED

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Out of them. To where? As if I wasn't them.
To this I suppose. The choices fallen into
and unmade. Out of them. Out of shape
and glimmer and into hissing prose ... (Brand 1997: xii)

And who ever heard
Such a sight unsung
As a severed head
With a grafted tongue? (Old Rhyme)

Was that my body we saw down there Mr. B
Twisted in seaweed. Who am I? Who was I?
(Szumigalski 1974: 10)

SO MANY QUESTIONS. SO MANY ironies. So many questions. What is a poet's relationship to her own place, her own voice, the speaking voice of the people of her own place? If that relation is problematical — if the speaking voice of that place has been deemed *quaint odd picturesque non-standard inferior*, has been deemed by the so-called centre a voice that is essentially other — how is she to reconcile within herself the inevitable contradictions? What damage is done to the writing? Does she fall into silence?² How is it possible to explore the ambivalence and the struggle to utter in the cadences of a voice

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²That is, the silence which Tillie Olsen in her book *Silences* calls unnatural, as distinct from the silence of renewal; this silence is "the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to *come* into being, but cannot" (1978: xi).

denied, without ignoring the ironies and complexities involved and voluntarily walking into a soul-prison by casting oneself as victim?³

These questions preoccupy me because of my own situation, that of having grown up a Newfoundland in the post-Confederation era, part of an extraordinarily rich cultural entity which has found itself absorbed by a much larger geopolitical entity, one that seems to view Newfoundland as some sort of ne'er-do-well relation, in need of patronage begrudgingly given, a drag on the family because of her feckless ways. But these are matters "too ferocious and too complex" (Story 1997 [1972]: 107) to go into here. What I want to do now is simply to recall some moments which engendered a kind of alienation from the speech patterns of my own culture and some of the elements which enabled me to tap into those energies once again, allowing me to work within the past year on a long series of poems, currently titled "The Tall World of Their Torn Stories," in which various speakers allow free play to the poetic possibilities of Newfoundland English.⁴ By sending memory on this journey, I sense that I am venturing into dangerous territory, although I don't fully understand why that is so. But it is necessary to confront what has been for me and for many others a vital struggle since, as Janice Kulyk Keefer (1990: 162) puts it, "language is as important a constituent of self as gender." Other Newfoundland poets articulate the sense that a language denied is a wound to the self in their poems. I think now of Agnes Walsh's "The Time That Passes" (1996), Carmelita McGrath's *Learning About the Past* (1996) and her essay, "Touching the Language Electric" (1998), and Harold Paddock's "'Ow I Knows I'm A Newf" (1981), to name just a few.

But, having promised to, I must open the gates, remembering that an essay is, in Cynthia Ozick's words (1989: ix), "a bewitched contraction in the way of a story."

* * *

Before school, outside of school: the riot and ripple of language, as fluid as the music of fiddle and mandolin that spun from my father's hand, as the music in my mother's beautiful voice. The spit and sparkle of: *hair like a birch broom in the fits, a face like a robber's horse*; the dancing play of *johnny magorey* and *merrybegot*, of *ram's horn* (not what you think) and *devil-ma-click, galing* and *moldow*. The rhyming everywhere — set ones with certain chores, with games, all sorts of games. With card games, for instance:

³Anne Szumigalski explores the maze of ironies involved in our concept of victimhood in her poem "The Victim," invoking Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and her Mr. B. Annie Dillard (1987: 69) warns against the perils of donning the mask of victim in her essay "To Fashion a Text": "Writing in the first person can trap the writer into airing grievances." This essay has made me uncomfortably aware of the dangers and ironies surrounding the concept of the victim.

⁴These poems became the book *Merrybegot* (Dalton 2003).

Here is a very good ace for thee.
 And here is another as good as he.
 Here is the best of all the three —
 And here is Joanie-come-tickle-me. (Old Rhyme)

And always, in the speech in our part of Conception Bay (for there is a great variety of dialects in Newfoundland⁵) the rippling lilting watery music of Irish, flattening out the *th*'s, shortening the *ing*'s and doing glorious things with *l* sounds and with vowels. We swam in language in those pre-school and early school days. It was full of pleasure as water, as much of a natural element as water.

* * *

The corridor is cold and shadowy. The polished wood of the floor gives off a faint gleam. I am pacing in the corridor which joins the school to the convent. A tall statue of St. Joseph keeps me company. He looks wistful, as if something he hasn't quite expected or wanted has happened. I have a good deal of time to get to know St. Joseph; we share the cold corridor on many afternoons of late. I am practising my speech, "The Importance of Reading," for the public-speaking contest, studying the scraps of paper the teacher has given me after our last run-through. She has underlined the words that she wants me to say differently. Many of my consonants and vowels offend: *th*'s are double-scored, and *ing*'s, *o*'s are circled. Sometimes she puts in brackets beside the word how she hears what I say. *Now* has *naow* written beside it. I puzzle how to get the *a* out of *now* and I wish I was back in the classroom with the others. I can hear bursts of chatter now and then, and sometimes they're chanting together — Latin verbs, perhaps. Our teacher has told us about irony in English class, and I think of *this* irony: I'm shut out here with St. Joseph, because I'm the chosen one, the voice they want to speak for their school. But the voice doesn't make the right sounds; it must be re-shaped. I'm baffled without knowing exactly why. It feels as if something is being stolen from me.

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As in the later days of school, so in the early days of university. There were speech classes for those who enrolled in the Education Faculty. Following the lead of one Oswald Crocker who wrote (1959: 9) of the "general inadequacy of speech" in Newfoundland, teachers laboured to fix those pesky vowel sounds,

⁵More, as George M. Story, distinguished Renaissance scholar and one of the makers of the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Story, Kirwin and Widdowson 1982), has observed "than in any other English-speaking region of Canada" (Story 1997 [1957]: 19).

straighten out those diphthongs.⁶ Not all professors of Education bemoaned the state of Newfoundland English — some wrote articles praising its vividness, its variety, its liveliness. But the official stance was that the children of an oral culture which had produced a store of songs, stories, riddles, rhymes, chants, proverbs and curses as rich as any to be found in the English-speaking world did not know how to speak. They/we were taught that our accents were wrong and that our strange expressions belonged at home.

* * *

Let me quote Marilyn Dumont at this point:

the Great White Way could silence us all
 if we let it
 it's had its hand over my mouth since the first
 day of school
 since Dick and Jane, ABC's and fingernail checks.

(Dumont 1996: 54)

I read that poem of hers, "The Devil's Language," with a shudder of recognition.

* * *

There were antidotes to the poison we were sipping along with the fine brew of a liberal education. One of the strongest was laughter. In the roars and howls of laughter that filled the main theatre of Memorial University when Codco put on its first show there, *Cod on a Stick*, you could hear the jubilant relief of those who had been tortured by well-meaning teachers and professors with speech classes. In one skit, entitled "McJesusit" a Jesuit teacher terrorizes two boys, telling them how to pronounce their own names and insisting to one GeRÁRD McGrath (pronounced McGraw) that he is in fact GÉRard McGrath (pronounced to rhyme with *path*) (Peters 1992: 45-47). The Jesuit, played by Greg Malone, is depicted as a grotesque, a monster who collapses finally into demented babble. How we needed that caricature ... how it mocked narrow assumptions, opening a door for us.

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Eavan Boland, the Irish poet, says it plainly (quoting Adrienne Rich) in her book, *Object Lessons*: "Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves" (1995: 249). Coming to see imprisoning attitudes to language for what they were through laughter and through learning was the way out, the way back ... insofar as there is a way back. Through the essays of George Story on Newfoundland English and conversation with him about, say, Captain Froude whose sea journals (1983)

⁶Cynthia Ozick (1989) argues that would-be educators needed to focus on the classics of literature, on reading, and not on how the young shaped their vowels. (I thank Pat Jasper for drawing my attention to this essay.)

were, George Story told me, like Homer. And they are, these lines of the Newfoundland captain so little acquainted (or concerned?) with the world of the book and its laws that he spells his own name many ways. But there's no doubt he knew how to say his name and no Jesuit would dare meddle with him.

* * *

In 1982 a massive book came out, a subversive book, one that I have described in a recent essay as "a book to break spells" (Dalton 1998: 33-38). That book is the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*. The *DNE* is much more than a magnificent work of lexicography, although it has been praised as such by scholars everywhere; it is also a portrait of a living language, a culture, a history. Several quotations accompany each word, and these quotations have been culled not just from newspapers and books but also from the spoken word archives. The *DNE* lets in our speech without its having been earlier mediated in print. It is a dazzling affirmation of the vigour and singing beauty of the vernacular. For me it has been a major factor in being able to hear again the voices of my place, the stories they tell, the cadence of their commands and questions. It has given me a revived sense of a language that various institutional and social forces have worked to erase.

* * *

The dictionary can fortify, as can the essays, the studies, the satirical depictions of the speech police. But the living speech of the place has its home in the mouths of the people. I have been able to spend time again in the coves and harbours of Conception Bay and to hear again the music of that speech which is as essential to me as water. In matters of language, the divided self will continue to be my state; I recognise too well the way of being which Luc Sante describes in writing about his lost Walloon language:

I suppose I am never completely present in any given moment, since different aspects of myself are contained in different rooms of language, and a complicated apparatus of air locks prevents the doors from being flung open all at once.

(Sante 1998: 65)

But at least what I consider the truly vital part of my being has not fallen irrevocably silent. The poems make their way up out of the depths, somehow merging the world of the book and the world of speech.

* * *

There are, of course, no sudden transformations, no mass epiphanies. The stifling goes on; the imprisoning notions are everywhere. How they underpin so much, how they creep in in unlikely places — as in the brochure for The League of Canadian Poets' Annual General Meeting at which this essay was first presented, where someone assumed that I would be talking about "the traps of dialect" and "how it limits your readership." And at the St. John's airport when I

was waiting to board a flight to travel to that gathering, this is the exchange I overheard between two prosperous-looking fellows in their fifties, say, outside the gift shop. Their speech placed them in Ontario; perhaps they were businessmen or salesmen. Their tone was a mix of amusement and self-congratulation, rather like something you might attribute to anthropologists off-duty having a laugh at the customs of some odd little tribe they've stumbled upon:

"And they call — they call —" the first one chortled, "a pond is a large body of water." "And a lake is a la-a-a-ake in your boots. A lake is a leak."

The second speaker laughed; the first speaker laughed. How they enjoyed the topsy-turvy lingo of the natives. How secure they were in their own little view of the universe. There was *their* way and the wrong way. And their attitudes to language are reflective of dominant assumptions in this country. Marilyn Dumont knows that. Dionne Brand knows that. Louise Halfe knows it. In their poems the task of the woman and the task of the poet are often seen as one: to hew true to the living energies of their own language. In this they are part of a process which George Story has insisted is necessary for the success of Confederation, a process of realizing Canada as an "ecology of cultures" (Story 1997 [1978]: 134).

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The two laughing men at the St. John's airport are in a prison house of their culture. Against them and their condescension I would invoke the voice of Ovide Mercredi replying to the neo-conservative Andrew Coyne's attack on the notion that traditional languages and cultures ought to be fostered in Canada:

You'll never survive on this land unless you assimilate to our society. Speak like us, dress like us, think like us? This is what is called individual universality. There's other names for it, like cultural genocide and racism ... I live different from you. Not that I hate you. But because I like the way we live ourselves, a people. The future must be different.

(Abley 1998: 49)

And, thinking of an economy and culture deeply damaged by politicians and bureaucrats far from the people whose lives they have thrown into upheaval and whose fishery their policies have destroyed I would invoke the voice of Paulette Jiles:

What really moves me are those Tuareg women, women I saw and camped with in the Sahara, even though their culture and economy are being destroyed by famine, still singing of prodigious lovers and vengeance and camels, exalting, refusing to give up their song power. (Jiles 1990: 162)

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