

## *Notebook Fragments 2007*

### Meditations on a Poetics of Relations and Things Being Various



Photo credit: Rishma Dunlop, 2007  
Diego Rivera's Study, Diego Rivera Studio Museum, San Angel, Mexico

On sabbatical leave, I am beginning to realize how the writer's studio becomes increasingly portable. My studio is wherever I have travelled: Helsinki, Paris, Glasgow, Stirling, and, most recently, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, for the annual poetry week including workshops with faculty members Glyn Maxwell, Paul Muldoon, Kathy Graber, Mark Doty, and Paul Lisicky. Poems are written on scraps of paper, bits of napkins in cafés, and even though poets often write in solitude, in worlds that are intensely private, the experiences of travel and writing within a community of writers make me appreciate the global nature of poetry. Struck by the infinite and various works of many other poets who take creative risks and commit to their art in a world rife with violence and insensitivity to art, I find a gift in the sense that community can exist in the world of poetry.



Photo credit: Joe Paczuski, 2005  
Suitcases

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Poetry addresses a need among us, a form of close attention, an acute listening to the world. “Poetry,” says Robert Pinsky, “involves two simultaneous kinds of knowing: through the vocal reality that comes out of the body and through an abstract or more disembodied kind of cognition.”<sup>1</sup> Poetry, with its capacity to evoke empathic connections, despite a Western culture that often impedes such connections, becomes a form of touching others. As a theorizing practice, poetry is a practice of thinking and a commitment to a historical responsibility to pose questions. The poet is called upon to think through the invention of forms so that “the possibility is concretized that the world could be other than it is.”<sup>2</sup> Poetry becomes a source of humanism in dark times.

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I am reminded of reading the news of the subway and bus bombings in London on July 7, 2005, and I am struck by how we turn to poetry when confronted with violence and terror. On *The Globe and Mail* front page, author Ian McEwan wrote in the wake of the bombings, evoking W. H. Auden’s famous poem “Musée des Beaux Arts.” In this poem the tragedy of Icarus falling from the sky is juxtaposed against life’s refusal of disruption. A ploughman goes about his work, a ship “sailed calmly on,” “dogs keep doing their doggy business.”

McEwan wrote:

In London yesterday, where crowds fumbling with mobile phones tried to find unimpeded ways across the city, there was much evidence of the truth of Auden’s insight. While rescue workers searched for survivors and the dead in the smoke filled blackness below, at pavement level, men were loading lorries, a woman sold umbrellas in her usual patch, the lunchtime sandwich makers were hard at work.<sup>3</sup>

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*Je te parle dans ta langue et c’est dans la mienne que je te comprends.*

*Poétique de la relation, Edouard Glissant<sup>4</sup>*

My students and I have been reading a range of poetry journals lately in which partisan debates about poetry are central concerns. While some partisan debates are useful and necessary, poetries that claim to be antithetical or in opposition to other poetries are not useful if their only claim is opposition. Diverse poetries and forms should and can coexist; one does not exclude the other. We do not learn simply from refutation and silencing. While the poet may work through perspectives and forms that displace and estrange the world, poetry and poetics do not remain literary, aesthetic, or institutional practices of discourse; rather, they bring us more closely into the world,

becoming events in consciousness and collective understandings.

In this regard, Martinican theorist Edouard Glissant's visionary ideas in *The Poetics of Relation* are vitally important. Glissant's reach for unconventional form includes a meditation on Antillean language, Creole patois, and an aesthetics of recognition of the Other. This sense of relation is not a panacea or utopia, but a poetics of relation that becomes a means of developing an expressive consciousness, a model of what Glissant calls the "human imaginary" that is Relation. This poetics is complex, rife with resistance against censors, colonization, and oppression, but it orients us towards coexistence and connection despite the struggle to speak across difference. Humanity and history continue to blunder on through disasters of war, famine, and political stupidity conjoined with failures of love, failures of the imagination. Through our past and present, from which we construct a history of carnage and a confused Babel, poetry can be a democratic location, a reality that is world embracing, a place for the voice of humane conscience.



Photo credit: Joe Paczuski, 2005

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All art begins in the locations where certainty ends. Poetry begins here, deeply rooted in the ambiguities, blood rememberings, human obsessions and desires that cannot embody ethics, but may be capable of measures of truth. Slippery words. Debatable distinctions. Scholarship and theory may help us envision ourselves in society differently, define ourselves as writers. But the place in which a poem begins, this is a dark margin, ambiguous, born of the imagination, of an impulse towards beauty, a way of knowing, unclaimable by any "ism."

I can expect a reader to feel my limits as I cannot, in terms of her or his own landscape, to ask: But what has this to do with me? Do I exist in this poem?... We go to poetry because we believe it has something to do with us. We also go to poetry to receive the experience of the not me, enter a field of vision we could not otherwise apprehend.

—Adrienne Rich<sup>5</sup>

*Someone is writing a poem. Words are being set down in a force field.*<sup>6</sup>

... someone writing a poem believes in, depends on a delicate, vibrating range of difference, that an "I" can become a "we" without extinguishing others, that a partly common language exists to which strangers can bring their own heartbeat, memories, images. A language that itself has learned from the heartbeat, memories, images of strangers.

—Adrienne Rich<sup>7</sup>

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For every poet it is always morning in the world. History a forgotten, insomniac night;  
History and elemental awe are always our early beginning, because the fate of poetry  
is to fall in love with the world, in spite of History.

—Derek Walcott<sup>8</sup>

On certain days as a teacher, I envision the classroom as a location of light and beauty. Teaching poetry becomes a reaching for empathic and compassionate connection with others. I am searching for words that are morning-stirred. I want my students to feel Derek Walcott's notion that for poets it is always morning in the world. This idealism inspires but is difficult to convey to students. Let us all feel this way, dawn-flushed and renewed by the sensibility that education itself can be an openness to beauty, and that this recognition can change us. No apologies for my idealism. It is linked to Oppen's "marvel of the real" in which

Poetry is related to  
music and cadence and therefore to the  
force of events.<sup>9</sup>

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Photo credit: Rishma Dunlop, 2007  
Doorknocker, San Miguel, Mexico

Back in Toronto in my office at York University, my sun-filled sabbatical weeks in Mexico collapse into fragments of memories. Drinking hot espresso in the courtyard of El Jardin with Paul Muldoon, discussing the teaching of poetry and Yeats' call for the "hard and clear" in language. The waiter, Ernesto, at Bougainvillea Restaurant reciting the menu list of *agave* tequilas like a poem. Eating deep-fried quesadillas stuffed with hibiscus flowers and *sopa de flor de calabaza*, squash flower soup with floating strips of tender *nopales* cactus. Buying fresh papaya dipped in lime and chile and wrapped in paper from the street vendor. Talking about writing with poets Katie Kingston, Jamie Ross, Cliff Dillhunt, LeRoy Sorenson, Linda Buckmaster, Jennifer Clement, and many others. Heated debates about the merits and drawbacks of the poetry workshop structure, over tequila and *sangritas*.

Travelling through small towns from San Miguel to Mexico City by bus. A Hollywood movie is showing: "In Her Shoes" in English with Spanish subtitles. The dyslexic character played by Cameron Diaz is resolving her life crises by reciting Elizabeth Bishop and ee cummings.

Reading C.D. Wright's *Cooling Time: An American Poetry Vigil*. Wright's words:



If I wanted to understand my culture, my own for instance, and if I thought such an understanding were the basis for a lifelong inquiry, I would turn to poetry first. For it is my confirmed bias that poets remain the most “stunned by existence,” the most determined to redeem the world in words...<sup>10</sup>

At the Casa de los Poetas in Mexico City, listening to UK poet Glyn Maxwell read his poem “The Snow Village”: “In the age of pen and paper, / when the page was a snow village, / when days the light was leafing through / descended without message.” And the haunting last lines as we follow the stranger walking: “though the snow erase all traces / of his passing through the village, / though his step become unknowable / and the whiteness knowledge.”<sup>11</sup>

The contemplation on snow and whiteness and knowledge seems appropriate back in Canada. My sandals have been exchanged for winter boots. The snow is falling softly against the windows, covering the university courtyards. Students walk to classes weighed down with book-filled knapsacks. And through this snow globe scene, I read the diversely rich poems and essays in this issue of *Studio* by Meena Alexander, Judith Arcana, Annie Finch, Jason Guriel, Alicia Ostriker, Russell Thornton, Priscila Uppal, Yvonne Murphy, Steven Heighton, Ray Hsu, Miltos Sachtoúris, Evan Jones, Tanis MacDonald, and Mark Yakich. The works form a poetics of relation, speaking through linguistic forms that include haunting, lyric meditations, considerations of poetic forms, translations, poems about pedagogy, poems of wry humour, poems of witness. The range of subject matter and stylistic approaches is vast and marvelous. I take pleasure in the various, a pleasure eloquently expressed in Louis MacNeice’s poem “Snow”:

World is crazier and more of it than we think,  
Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion  
A tangerine and spit the pips and feel  
The drunkenness of things being various.

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1. Robert Pinsky, Poetry and Education: Robert Pinsky on the Future of Poetry, *The Poetry Porch* 3: *Poetics*, <http://poetryporch.com/pinsky.html> (accessed February 5, 2007).

2. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 138.

3. Ian McEwan, “Attack on London,” *The Globe and Mail*, sec. A-1, July 8, 2005.

4. Eduoard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 122.

5. Adrienne Rich, “Someone is Writing a Poem,” *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 85.

6. *Ibid.*, 86.

7. *Ibid.*, 87.

8. Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), 79.

9. George Oppen, “The Mind’s Own Place” (1963), *Selected Poems of George Oppen*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 2003), 173–82.

10. C.D. Wright. *Cooling Time: An American Poetry Vigil* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2005) 55.

11. Glyn Maxwell, “The Nerve,” *The Nerve: Poems* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002 / London: Picador, 2002).