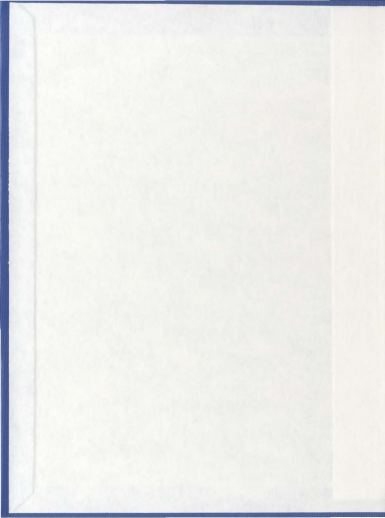


PRACTICING PLACE IN NEWFOUNDLAND POETRY
MARY DALTON, JOHN STEFFLER, AND
MICHAEL CRUMMEY

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Practicing Place in Newfoundland Poetry
Mary Dalton, John Steffler, and Michael Crummey

by

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A thesis submitted to the
School of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Humanities/School of Graduate Studies/English

Memorial University of Newfoundland

August 2010

Abstract

Practicing Place in Newfoundland Poetry: Mary Dalton, John Steffler, and Michael Crummey is an M. A. thesis that synthesizes the poetry of three poets with Michel de Certeau's cultural theory and interview material. This thesis offers a digest of existing scholarship on these poets as well as some of the existing work theorizing the uses of poetry. There is one chapter written on each poet drawing substantively on the poet's work, an interview conducted with the poet and other related scholarship. Dalton, Steffler and Crummey represent specific and energetic spaces within Newfoundland. They conduct this energy into language using metaphorical thinking. Mary Dalton conducts the energy of dialect into her poetry. John Steffler is transmitting the energy of the natural world into poetry. Michael Crummey's poetry conducts energy to his readers from the emotional landscape of the Newfoundland his parents grew up in.

Acknowledgments

This thesis is deeply indebted to the three poets it studies. Thank-you to Mary Dalton, John Steffler and Michael Crummey for so generously giving of their time and insights in the interviews. Thanks also to Dr. Rob Finley for his thorough dedication in supervising this thesis and urging me to do the interviews in the first place. Thanks to MUN radio for providing a space for students to make radio and me to record the interviews. Thanks to Sam Martin for his editorial help. Thanks to my parents Jim and Jo-Anne Minor for reading early drafts and of course my partner Stephanie Minor for her editing and patience throughout this process.

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Practicing Place in Newfoundland Poetry: Introduction

Introduction

Poetry (Marianne Moore)

I too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
 Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers that there is in
 it after all, a place for the genuine.

Hands that can grasp, eyes
 that can dilate, hair that can rise
 if it must, these things are important not because a

high sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are
 useful: when they become so derivative as to become unintelligible,
 the same thing may be said for all of us, that we
 do not admire what
 we cannot understand: the bat,
 holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under
 a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea, the base-
 ball fan, the statistician –
 nor is it valid
 to discriminate against "business documents and

school-books": all these phenomena are important. One must make a distinction
 however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not poetry,
 nor till the poets among us can be
 "literalists of
 the imagination" – above
 insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads in them, shall we have
 it. In the meantime, if you demand on one hand,
 the raw material of poetry in
 all its rawness and
 that which is on the other hand
 genuine, then you are interested in poetry.

Poetry is a medium of the imagination; it is an attempt to transfer elements from a poet's brain into language. Marianne Moore gives several good examples of this in her poem. In the real world one only needs to look at another person to see "Hands that can grasp". However, in the world of the poetic imagination the poet, according to Moore's argument, is charged with the task of creating these same hands with language. Northrop Frye asks, "What is the use of studying a world of imagination where anything is possible and anything can be assumed, where there are not rights or wrongs and all arguments are equally good?" (Frye "Educated Imagination" 464). This is the same question that Marianne Moore is dealing with. She realizes that there is a world beyond the world of the imagination: "there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle". While there are things that "are important beyond" poetry, there remains something vital in poetry that keeps people reading and writing it. Poetry is "a place for the genuine" and poets do strive to be "literalists of / the imagination". Not all the goals of poetry have been reached. It has not exactly produced "real toads". There is no way that language, a system of symbols, can remain language and become the things themselves. However, poetry, the world of the imagination, is a way that one can bridge the gap between the imagined and the real. It constantly strives to create "real toads". This is, of course, impossible. The toad that a poet constructs with words will only ever exist in the world of the imagination. However, poets can act as conductors of energy, transmitting something essential or alive from things they observe in the real world into language. By reading this language the reader has access to the energy the poet is transmitting.

Mary Dalton, John Steffler and Michael Crumney are conductors of such energy. These poets are allowing the energy that exists in the real world to be conducted into the

world of the imagination. They do this by focusing very closely on specific things and transmitting the energy of those things into language. The most common subject of Mary Dalton's poetry is the energy that permeates Newfoundland dialects. She conducts this energy to her readers. John Steffler conducts the power of the Newfoundland wilderness. Michael Crumney deals with the emotional terrain of the Newfoundland his parents grew up in. They all make gestures towards the specific. While all three are acutely aware of the limitations of language, they continue to use it to conduct the energy of the real worlds they live in to the world of the imagination that their poetry inhabits. "[P]oems will not really buy beers or flowers / or a goddam thing" writes Al Purdy in "At the Quinte Hotel". This is a frank and accurate observation. However, poems can conduct the energy of real things into the world of the imagination. This transference of energy gives poetry influence in the real world as it challenges norms. This is a political and cultural influence because it challenges the norms of the way that people live in and perceive the real world.

Very often, energy is transmitted through language through metaphor. Metaphor creates a space where the meaning of words is destabilized. Metaphors allow for a more complex understanding of the world because paradox is permitted. They are part of the world of the imagination where, to quote Frye once more, "anything is possible". Don McKay, in his Pratt Lecture "The Speaker's Chair", discusses how metaphorical thinking allows the energy of the real, while less flexible thinking limits it:

Sometimes an either/or situation has to be contrived for the sake of the ballot or the need to make a decision. In these cases we reduce the complex texture of reality to logic, but we need to remember that this is an artifice, not an actual

representation of the world...I want to champion a different, more flexible mode of thinking, one that – to put it broadly – puts “both/and” into play alongside “either/or.” The inclusive brand name I’ve attached to this project is “betweenity,” by which I mean not compromise, but the inclusion of both terms along with the energy of their interaction. (3-4)

“Betweenity” requires metaphorical thinking because it does not exclude the possibility of the moon being a disc of Roquefort cheese. Betweenity invites the energy that the interaction between the moon and cheese creates. Later in this same lecture, McKay says, “as a trope, metaphor is often taken as a synecdoche for poetry itself, or for poetic thinking” (9). Dalton, Steffler, and Crummeay are metaphorical thinkers and they invite their readers to join them as they “champion” betweenity.

Like maps, language has the tendency to skew reality. Both of these human technologies attempt to represent a complex three dimensional world in a two dimensional way. Inherent in this mission of representation is the potential failure to do it accurately. One strength of contemporary lyric poetry is that it has a very specific focus. Modern poetry has gone so far in its specificity as to feature “thing poems” by poets such as Francis Ponge and Charles Simic. These poems look very closely at an everyday thing and translate that thing into language. As Marianne Moore asserts in “Poetry”, poets must become “literalists of / the imagination”. For the most part, modern poets render smaller parts of the real world into the world of the imagination. Poetry is like a map with a large scale in which you can see very fine details. Poetry translates the world one specific detail at a time. This is why poets such as Marianne Moore or William Carlos Williams stand firmly by the creed “no ideas / but in things” (Williams).

Moving from the thinking of poets to the language of cultural theory, Michel de Certeau theorizes two different ways in which one can translate the real world into a world of the imagination. He makes a distinction between "place" and "space" which are two different ways in which people can observe the world and recreate it in their imaginations. Some critics and theorists call this process of observation and recreation of what is observed "production". The first method of production is what de Certeau calls "place" and he defines it with these words: "a determination through objects that are ultimately reducible to the *being-there* of something dead" (de Certeau 118). Producing the world as "place" is an administrating move, a way of simplifying large areas of geography and culture so that they are easily understood and managed. When we produce the world as "place" we produce a world that is "dead" and not moving. It has many similarities to photograph. It is a way of getting an overview or a small scale map so that general patterns can be understood. It is often used by those who would seek to manage a large area, like a government or business. The other way to produce the world is as "space". Perhaps the most helpful way to think of "space" is as "practiced place" (de Certeau 117). Instead of producing a world that does not move, we produce a world that is constantly in motion when we produce the world as "space". Perhaps we could think of it as an interactive moving. It is the movement of things and people within space that gives "space" its orientation. "Space" takes into account the complexities of the real world with moving operators inside of it, but generally looks only at very small portions of the world. Those who use "space" as their way of producing the world find that they must constantly adapt the world that they produce because things are constantly moving. Thus spacial producing tends to result in a more detailed view of the world. Dalton,

Steffler, and Crummev are particularly interested in the movement and energy of the real world. When they produce the world with their poetry, they are producing the world as "space". This project explores the notion that poetry gives its most energetic renderings of the real world when it produces the world as space. These poets produce the world as a space that is full of energy and movement; through metaphor, they honour the energy of the real world in language.

Note on the Interviews:

One challenge in exploring this topic is that little has been said about these poets beyond reviews of their work. These book reviews are helpful and there are also various interviews with the poets which have proven helpful; however, there is very little scholarship which attempts to situate any of these poets in relationship to literary or cultural theory. To make up for this shortfall in secondary sources, I took it upon myself to conduct interviews with each of the poets, in which I asked the poets themselves about how they see their poetry in relationship to "space" and "place". Each interview lasted approximately one hour and is transcribed as an appendix to this thesis. This process has given this project an interesting inflection. Before the section on each poet was written the interview was completed and transcribed. The form of the conversations very much impacted the form of the early drafts of this project. Through the process of editing, a more linear structure was placed upon the argument, but the argument is based on the very loose structure of a conversation. It is my desire that the poet's voice will be heard clearly because of this process and that the interviews will prove a valuable resource for future studies.

Chapter 1

Practicing Place in Newfoundland Poetry: Mary Dalton

The name that is given to something has a tremendous power over the thing it names, yet the name tells only a little about what the thing is. Mary Dalton's poetry takes names into account, but also observes things very closely so that the poetry shows more of what things are than a name could. She wants to break the spell that a name casts over a thing by conducting the energy from the things she observes to her readers. She notes in the first pages of her second collection *Allowing the Light* that the word "allow" has its roots in the Latin "laudare", which means "to laud" or "to praise". Her poetry is an act of allowing in this sense. She is permitting (allowing) the things she depicts to keep their energy, but she is also praising (lauding) them for their energy. Her poetry conceptualizes particular parts of Newfoundland as what de Certeau would call "space" and not "place". Instead of trying to understand Newfoundland as a totality she is animating moments of particular energy that she has witnessed for herself. Especially in *Merrybegot*, Dalton's poetry bears witness to the parts of Newfoundland speech that she grew up hearing and still hears today. Lyric poetry proves to be the perfect medium for her to conduct the energy from the world she lives in to her readers. Although the nature of language is a concern in many forms of writing, lyric poetry often focuses on the specific energy of a word or phrase without any extraneous content to draw the reader's attention away from the word itself. In all of her collections, Dalton resists the temptation to tell stories by focusing on language as material. She engages the power of the riddle and metaphor to transfer the energy of many common objects into language. Using these tools she is able

to break the power that a name holds over a thing and gesture towards the thing itself. Dalton is very concerned with the power of the natural world. This ecological strain in her collected poetry often gets overlooked. Although she is adamant that it is art first, her poetry effects a political change by bearing witness to specific things that are often not given much attention. In his lecture "The Redress of Poetry", Seamus Heaney describes the role of poetry as a balancing force. Poetry expresses ideas that are often marginalized. Dalton's poetry is indirectly political because it operates as a form of redress by transferring the energy from the world she lives in to her readers. She perceives this energy because she produces the world as spaces.

Using the illustration of de Certeau looking at New York from the top of a skyscraper, Ian Buchanan points to the moment when the differences between space and place become very clear. From the top of Signal Hill it is possible to understand St. John's and even to make a map of it. This is looking at St. John's as a place. However, this does not give the observer insight into what happens in the area this map depicts; the map is a static concept of the city:

The problem, de Certeau finds, is that the life of a city, the constellation of lives that make a city what it is, the actual experience of the city, in other words is not contained in the concept of the city. Lives cannot be mapped in this way – cannot be read – or even truly rendered readable by maps (though of course it is only through maps that they can be read): something always slips away. (Buchanan 110)

This paradox of maps (that a map is a way to understand a city but it also a substitute for understanding it) is not unlike the paradox of language. Language is only an attempt at symbolizing things. It names things but does not really tell us what the thing is, because words are only a concept of what the thing is. Like the city something slips away when we are given only the concept. The word is only a substitute for the thing itself. It is imperfect, yet it is not entirely impotent as it attempts to recreate the real world. Good poetry achieves what is almost impossible. It uses a crude tool to evoke what the author sees and imagines. Dalton resists the relatively easy task of essentializing Newfoundland as a place. Newfoundland is not a concept, and to borrow Buchanan's terms, it is "impossible to administer" (Buchanan 111):

The concept city is an administrative gesture akin to Said's (1991) notion of Orientalism inasmuch as it makes the city manageable. Meanwhile the experience of the city, like the people described as Orientals – but who do not identify with that label as such – is actually 'impossible to administer'. (111)

Dalton is not interested in administrating or conceptualizing even if it were possible. She realizes that Newfoundland is constantly in motion, and she wants to leave that energy intact. If she is to be at all accurate she must render her home as a space that is in motion.

Michel de Certeau is very specific in his definitions of "space" and "place". Essentially, "space" and "place" are lenses through which the world can be observed and then committed to the world of the imagination. In her poetry Mary Dalton produces her world as "space". Rather than using an essentializing view of nature, people and

language in Newfoundland, she operates on a specific ground level view where everything is animated and no short cuts or generalizations are made about the culture she is presenting:

In our examination of the daily practices that articulate [the experience of existing in the world], the opposition between "place" and "space" will rather refer to two sorts of determinations in stories: the first, a determination through objects that are ultimately reducible to the *being-there* of something dead, the law of a "place" ... ; the second, a determination through *operations* which, when they are attributed to a stone, tree, or human being, specify "spaces" by the actions of historical subjects. (de Certeau 118)

According to de Certeau's formulation, "place" is a way of producing the world statically. It is oriented by the static objects within it. Space takes motion into account and moves the objects around. When we produce the world as "place" it is like we are taking a still photograph. It shows where objects are. On the other hand, when we produce the world as "space", it is like taking a film or moving picture. Dalton's poetry wants to know what things are and it discovers this by studying how they operate in people's lives. Her poem "Summer Bird" is no exception. It opens with the line "A yellow warbler, was it" (*Red Ledger* 86). Dalton makes it clear that the focus of this poem is not the name of the bird. It is as though a bird expert has told this poem's speaker the name of the bird, only after the speaker has described the bird to her. Dalton wants to move beyond the name and transfer the notion of movement to her readers. Dalton shows

the bird "flitting down into goowiddy" (86). The symbolic role of the bird is also important:

small glowing avatar
of other fierce summers
when we burnt out of,
along one body, each
minute a node of gold. (86)

Dalton is not attempting to classify or study the "yellow warbler". She wishes to animate a specific moment of beauty. She wants the reader to see the bird in motion. In the spaces that Dalton creates there is no stasis. Things are alive and in a state of flux; they are engaged in a process of change. She is seeing/hearing things as they appear in specific, living contexts.

Dalton resists the administrative mode of conceptualizing place in order to make it easily manageable by choosing to show the particular energies of the things that surround her. Dalton writes the specific. In this way her poetry has a political influence. However, Dalton does not emphasize this aspect of her poetry as something fundamental. In her own words: "I think they have their power as poems first" (*Appendix 7*). She is a poet, not a political activist. Her work is characterized by the desire to delight the reader. In her first book she includes "A Litany". It is not a litany that one would find in any prayer book, unless it was a secular one. It is a supplication, mostly made toward flowers to grace "us" with their beauty: "Amaryllis / Tremble for us / Petals unfolding / Enfold us" (38). Like all of Dalton's poems that extol the beauty of the natural world, this poem is not trying to instigate any sort of political action. Still, the poem does have a

tremendous political power to resist the "administrative gestures" by dealing with specific things that cannot be easily administrated.

Michel de Certeau is very interested in the power that common everyday activities possess. These activities are things that everybody does:

Many everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.) are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many "ways of operating": victories of the "weak" over the "strong" (whether the strength be that of powerful people or the violence of things or of an imposed order, etc.), clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, "hunter's cunning", maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike. (de Certeau xix)

Everyday practices such as using language allow individuals to have power when forces from outside their culture attempt to manage their homes as places. These "everyday practices" such as talking are the focus of Dalton's poetry. She finds energy in the speech of her home and transmits that energy to her readers. This is a tactical mode of operation according to de Certeau. The poems are "joyful discoveries". They find energy in unexpected places and Dalton must repeatedly use "clever tricks" to transmit the energy from the thing she writes about to her reader. The act of Dalton writing poetry is an "everyday practice" that is not driven by any political purpose. Any impact that it may have politically is not necessarily intended and is a result of the poetry being tactical.

Like Don McKay, Dalton realizes that "even apt names touch but a tiny portion of a creature, place, or thing" (McKay 64). Dalton is concerned with the "portion of a

creature, place, or thing" that a name does touch, but she also wants to leave the energy of the thing itself intact. Dalton's poetry touches more of the creatures, places and things than a name alone possibly could because it also honours the operations of the thing that is being named. Names can be administrative gestures. When Dalton uses a name she ensures that the energy of that name is understood and transmitted along with the thing itself. She is able to do this because she writes in a tactical way. She honours the things she writes about by leaving them in their natural environments and is not transferring them to an "isolated environment" (de Certeau, xix), which she has control over. Dalton is employing what de Certeau calls tactic: "because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time – it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing"(xix). "Whatever it wins, it does not keep" (xix). Dalton is not taming or colonizing language. She works "on the wing" to allow the energies of language she remembers from her childhood; she shows that despite globalization, Newfoundland dialects remain potent and distinct:

Recently I've been spending more time outside St. John's, in the bay that I spent my childhood in. What I have found there belies the glib generalization about the passing of this and the passing of that. We're assured time after time that we've been assimilated, made part of a global culture. But the actuality is far more complex. The language of people in the coves and harbors is extraordinarily resistant to the homogenizing effect. (Lynes 106)

Dalton was working on the poems that would become *Merrybegot* when she made these comments. In that work she uses poetry very well as a tactic, capturing brief moments in an uncontrollable space, to show the resistant strain in the language outside St. John's.

Consider her poem "Cullage". As with many poems in *Merrybegot*, the sense hangs on words specific to the Newfoundland dialect. Dalton acknowledges in her notes at the back of *Merrybegot* that in some ways this is a found poem as some of the text is lifted directly from the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English (DNE)*. However, the importance of the dictionary has perhaps been emphasized too much. After all, Dalton has chosen not to gloss the words she is using. She is resisting attempts to standardize the language and making the "joyful discover[y]" (de Certeau, xix) that the language portrayed in the *DNE* is in no way standard or dead, but hybrid and alive. She is allowing the natural energy of language. To Dalton, the *DNE* seemed already to bear particular markings of poetry, but she has taken pieces from it and shaped them further into something that is not easily recognizable as an entry in a dictionary:

I do emphasize in the note as well as elsewhere that it is a living language that I am working with and not a language that is enshrined in the dictionary. What interested me about the dictionary citations was the fact that this was so vividly alive and I am a bookish person. In a sense the book took me back to the oral, so the materials in *Merrybegot* are drawn from speech, but they are shaped. Many of them are fictions. I think that many of the particular tensions are because this is a speech that is not standard speech. This is a vocabulary that is not standard vocabulary. (Appendix 5)

In her review of *Merrybegot*, Tanis MacDonald writes, "Much of the text's vitality issues from the many chances it offers for abrogated reading, a process by which the reader's ignorance of the language is incorporated into the reading experience" (MacDonald 79). In this review MacDonald emphasizes the role this book plays as a dictionary because many of the words are unfamiliar to her, but she also acknowledges the "vitality" of the text. This is the heart of what Dalton is doing with language; she is emphasizing it as a living thing. Dalton shapes something that was once a dictionary definition into this:

Not a bit of drite.
 Day after day of this mauzy old stuff –
 Now the fish is maggoty and it's slimy,
 And I got to get out on the flake again
 With small tubs and pickle and wash it.
 And rewash it and perhaps the weather'll
 marl on like this for a fortnight,
 And when 'tis all over I got nothing –
 nothing to show but a mess of collage. (*Merrybegot* 23)

She is not pinning a dead word down to the page by its wings. Dalton watches the word in flight and captures a moment of its life rather than its death.

One of Dalton's early poems, "Taxi Dispatcher Jaze", stands out as a piece that captures a snap shot of a very particular use of language. It shows how language can be thought of as space. This poem listens to the crackle of voices coming over a taxi's radio. "*Car forty-five, / Holiday Holiday - / gotta go to main door - / jutholdonforaminawillyah*" (*Red Ledger* 49)! This is not a kind of language that constructs narrative. We know that "*car forty-five*" is talking or at least being talked to on the radio by the dispatcher. However, there is no way to know for certain who is talking

or when. Neither can the reader decipher with any sort of certainty, the taxi dispatch code: "*Holiday Holiday*". Perhaps the taxi is at a motel or a bar or a restaurant? The narrative of this overheard language is hidden and even resisted when Dalton gives us only the fragments. To the reader, this language crackling out to the radio is less filled with meaning than it is with music. This music is "barking the pockets of the city" (49). It is "An irritable music, / authentic as fiddle, / as washboard, / as any / cigarette papers and comb" (49). Language can form a part of the landscape of any place. It may not operate as communication, or at least not to the person who overhears, but it does trigger an emotional response. This role of language, to be full of music rather than meaning, is an undeniable and important part of the way we hear language every day.

"*justbafakoforaminutewillyah!*" and listen for the music in the back of a cab. Dalton re-frames the words coming out of the radio as jazz.

This instance of sitting in the back of a taxi and really hearing the language that fills the air is one of many examples where Dalton pauses to transmit moments of energy to a reader that could easily go unnoticed. The jazz would continue whether Dalton was there to identify it or not, but by hearing it and allowing it she has transformed it. An unoccupied taxi, idling at a cab stand is what Michel de Certeau would call "place" or "an instantaneous configuration of positions" (de Certeau 117). Although it is loaded with potential, the taxi is motionless, waiting for its cue of someone getting in and saying an address. In a sense place is a place-holder, the action is frozen or waiting to begin. When someone sits down in that cab and gives the address of their destination the music can begin. Dalton wants her readers to hear this music; the cab is transformed into space. "Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it,

temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities" (117). For something to be called space, there must be movement inside it. While place is stable and it is possible to understand it as a totality, space takes into account changes that happen over time, movement and the action of operators. Space is like the street view of a city and place is like a map. De Certeau illustrates the transformation with this example: "the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers" (117). In a physical sense the speaker in the poem has transformed the passenger seat of the cab from place to space. However, the more substantial transformation that happens in this poem is the transformation of language from place into space. The words crackling over the radio that were unnoticed are considered. If we were to adapt de Certeau's example to this specific case it could read something like this: "sound defined by physics is transformed into space by listeners". De Certeau also writes, "Space is like the word when it is spoken" (117). Dalton is very interested in the words that are spoken out loud.

Dalton consistently transmits the energy of spaces to her readers through her poetry. De Certeau might describe this as an act of modern myth making. De Certeau describes how modern myths have moved from oral to written form and how they are no longer myths about how things come to be but how they are. "The origin is no longer what is narrated, but rather the multiform and murmuring activity of producing a text and producing society as a text" (134). While myths were once concerned with how things began and were delivered by one voice in a continuous narrative, they are now a more transparently composite process. Classical myths were certainly created by a community, but the many voices of that community are mediated through the bard's voice. Modern

myths are written down as opposed to spoken. The text allows many voices to speak at once and for the point of view to be constantly changing. "[M]ultiform and murmuring" is an apt way to describe a book such as *Merrybegot*. The poems speak amongst themselves, but are certainly not put together in such a way that constructs a single, recognizable form. They are a multiform collection of murmurings from all parts of Newfoundland that transcribe the language as it is spoken. Through collage, Dalton is able to deal with very precise instances of speech. The language that she is interested in happens on the immediate scale of inhabited and living space. This is a practice of modern myth making that goes beyond the practice of merely discussing origins, and takes into account the constant fluctuations of the present necessary to depict things that are in motion. It is a process of myth-making that bears witness to the way that things are, rather than how they came to be.

The fact that Dalton's poetry deals with specific animated parts of myth allows her art to be an exceptionally authentic account of Newfoundland. She speaks only to the things that seem most energized to her and she intentionally showcases as many voices as possible. "One of the greatest of Newfoundland's glories is an oral culture which has produced a store of songs, riddles, rhymes, proverbs and curses as rich as any to be found in the English-speaking world" (*Merrybegot* 71). Dalton sees a remarkable wealth in the spoken language of Newfoundland, so a large proportion of her poetry is dealing with "songs, riddles, rhymes, proverbs and curses". The poems are not big, all-encompassing stories. They are snap shots, capturing the wealth of Newfoundland speech. Dalton tells how she has intentionally structured *Merrybegot* to reflect this: "The alphabetical structure was in fact intended to thwart any sense of narrative" (*Appendix* 5). This

resistance to linear narrative is an important element in her writing. It allows her to construct word art without necessarily telling stories. Her art is structured like a mosaic or a collage:

"I wanted, in [*Merrybegot*], to honour the richness of speech of groups of people. It's not only Irish Newfoundland speech that's in there. There is English Newfoundland speech and there are varieties of English, it's not as if there is some kind of monolithic dialect here. I wanted many-voicedness." (*Appendix 6*)

Her poems are often published on their own or with one or two companion pieces in a journal or anthology, yet they also exist as collections. These collections are made up of many individual poems, but as the poems are grouped together they depict a much broader picture than they do individually. Dalton desires "many-voicedness" so that these poems are simultaneously important on their own and as a part of a collection. Like all lyric collections *Merrybegot* "attempts to listen - to remember - without constructing, without imposing a logical or temporal order on experience. *This, it says. This. And this. And this*" (*Zwicky Lyric 98*). It is up to the reader to piece together the different voices.

Some of these voices are fictional. Dalton says of one of the poems in *Merrybegot* that "the folkloric element in "The Waterman" is fiction, this is entirely an invention of mine" (*Appendix 4*). This is a poem depicting a man who would sometimes swim into the harbour of a small outpost town. He has "Salt crusted in his hair"; he is "Sleek. The eyes of a seal" (*Merrybegot 66*). When the people of the town hear and see this creature they run away. This character does not have a documented past in the folkloric tradition of Newfoundland. The name "Waterman" is first seen in this fictional

poem. However, it is a story very much like the tales of mermaids or fairies in Newfoundland. It is the type of modern myth that is murmured around kitchen tables. Dalton uses poetry to imagine culture beyond what is directly in front of her. She is animating the way that people tell stories and tall tales and has open ears to all sorts of different voices.

In *Merrybegot*, the documentation of language is very obvious; however, Dalton's fascination with language as material is evident throughout her work. From the very beginning of her writing, Dalton's poems have been animating this material. "Your observation that my work has always closely examined process is right on the mark. That is what unifies all my poems: the fleeting, kinetic energies of the voice; the equally fleeting energies of the earth" (Lynes 107). It is true that "little bursts, out-rushes of verbal energy" (*Merrybegot* 71) do characterize the poems of *Merrybegot*. However, the "energies of the voice" are apparent throughout Dalton's poetry. One of her early poems, "the thrift store", is entirely about "verbal energy". The poem captures a brief conversation held between a woman working at the thrift store and an older man who is looking for a pair of shoes. The woman starts talking about the weather: "what you needs is a little garden" (*The Time of Icicles* 28). The man replies:

i'll be getting a little garden soon
yes i'll be having a little garden soon enough now"

quick as he is,
the girl comes back,
at once meeting, avoiding:
"oh you won't be getting
that kind of garden
For a long while yet"

...

dressed in wry humour,
 taking Death's measure, mocking
 his rawboned solemnity,
 he repeats
 his green recognition:
 "yes I'll be getting a little garden soon" (29)

Witty, poignant conversations such as this are found throughout Dalton's poetry; she is constantly unleashing the power of language as it exists in everyday speech.

While Dalton's poetry bears witness to many voices, she uses voices that do not often appear in books. The distinctive energy of Newfoundland speech is very often the subject of her poems. If language is a window through which the world can be observed, Dalton is taking time to examine the window. We see the window every day, but seldom take the time to consider it. Dalton takes the time to observe speech that is not often found in literature. Like Seamus Heaney she is showing a world she knows well, but few outside her culture and even fewer in academia would know about. Heaney writes, "When I found "Spraying the Potatoes" [Kavanaugh] in the old *Oxford book of Irish Verse*, I was excited to find details of a life which I knew intimately – but which I had always considered to be below or beyond books – being presented in a book" (Heaney *Government of the Tongue* 7). This same excitement of finding something familiar from daily life is often relived when one reads Dalton's poetry. This poetry bears witness to Dalton's own culture, which among other things is a culture that bubbles over with the energies of Newfoundland speech. It celebrates the music of language. In the same essay Heaney says that "[poetry of inner freedom] is an example of self-conquest, a style discovered to express this poet's unique response to his universal ordinariness, a way of re-establishing the authenticity of a personal experience and surviving as a credible

being" (14). Dalton talks about this notion of Heaney's in *Words Out There* and says that this recreation of the language she knows best is part of "reclaiming vital aspects of self" (Lynes 106). Dalton reclaims the language that she grew up hearing as her own. Language which has been "considered to be below or beyond books" (Heaney *Government of the Tongue* 7) is always present in Dalton's work. For example, Dalton includes the poem "St. John's day 1987" in her first collection of poetry. This poem presents a scene directly out of daily life, advertisements and all: "Molson's offers a Beer waiters' Race. / Buy Molson's Gold - For the Big Brothers, Big Sisters Association / Of course" (*The Time of Isicles* 46).

Although the speech of Dalton's youth is a "vital aspect of self", it is not the only one. The culture that she speaks for is heterogeneous. "I'm a Newfoundlander, I'm a woman, I'm someone who was born in the middle of the 20th Century, I'm a university educated Newfoundlander. So, my culture includes the literature and the arts of the twentieth century. It's a culture that includes the global, so, I think that's reflected" (*Appendix* 10). The Pratt Lecture by Susan Gingell discusses the way in which Dalton successfully negotiates the various influences that have shaped the way she uses language. "[T]he noise Mary Dalton makes in *Merrybegor* as she textualizes Newfoundland speech is not the noise of dialect, and the poems manifest no divide between the "learned tongue" and the speech of ordinary Newfoundlanders" (Gingell 21). Dalton is not limited by such administrative concepts as a "Newfoundland dialect". The speech that Dalton is documenting is, simply put, the speech that she hears wherever she may find herself. For Dalton, the "vital aspects of self" are a fascinating hybrid of an academic and a colloquial world. Through the act of writing Dalton is able to resist the

indignities suffered by so many Newfoundlanders through the flattening of accents. She is able to speak with her own voice, which is a combination of the language of academia, twentieth century literature and her home town.

Dalton is not concerned only with the energies of the voice. She finds the energies of objects to be equally fascinating. However, the different strains in Dalton's poetry are not presented separately from one another. In her poetry, one is likely to find a poem concerning a turn of phrase next to a poem about something in the natural world. Information comes in a jumble, rather than a neatly packaged linear narrative. Jan Zwicky's book *Wisdom and Metaphor* argues that poets are among the "Unacknowledged thinkers" of the world and that "those who think metaphorically are enabled to think truly because the shape of their thinking echoes the shape of the world" (*Zwicky Wisdom and Metaphor* Foreword). Dalton's thinking echoes the shape of the world. She understands the way the world is because there is no limit to the ways in which she can see the world "as". "All genuine understanding is a form of seeing-as: it is fundamentally spatial in organization" (*Wisdom and Metaphor* Left 3). It is through producing the world as a moving space that Dalton understands the world. She uses metaphor to transmit the energy from the spaces she perceives into language. There must be some sort of transformation to move the energy of the real world into language and metaphor is this mediating agent. If we go back to the metaphor of the moon being a disc of blue cheese we see that that this is a way of "seeing-as". We know that the moon is not made of cheese, but the metaphor helps to probe our understanding. "Can I prove that the moon isn't blue cheese?" It forces our perception of the world into a state of suspension, if only momentarily. Dalton's riddle poems show how she thinks metaphorically. The word

metaphor comes from the Greek, meaning "carry across". Using riddles she carries the energy of the things she perceives, across to her reader. She coaxes her readers into the energy-charged world of "betweenity" (McKay "Speaker's Chair" 3).

Dalton has shown an interest in riddles recently in her writing. However, it seems that she has always been susceptible to the charm of riddles. Frye writes, "In the riddle a verbal trap is set, but if one can "guess," that is, point to an outside object to which the verbal construct can be related, the something outside destroys it as a charm, and we have sprung the trap without being caught in it" (*Charms and Riddles* 137). This is a source of energy that is rooted in tactics and space because a riddle puts the listener at a sort of disadvantage. It forces the reader to think entirely out of the realm of the things she knows. Dalton's 1993 poetry collection *Allowing the Light* features this epigraph:

"What's more magnificent than gold?"
 "Light."
 "What's more exhilarating than light?"
 "Speech."

— fairy-tale riddle

This riddle has the answers provided for us; the trap has already been sprung. However, it shows that she has had a very strong interest in the energy of riddles for most of her writing career. More recently she has been interested in the charm that an "unsprung" riddle has. In the riddles that she writes, she does not give the solution. To quote Don McKay once more, "metaphor has riddle at its heart" (McKay "Speaker's Chair" 3). The riddle at the heart of metaphor is not an "unsprung" riddle and this riddle is the main source of the metaphor's energy.

The riddle from which Dalton draws the title for her chapbook *Between You and the Weather* reads as follows: "A second skin- / my oily demeanor /between you and the weather" (*Between You and the Weather* not paginated). This is a very brief riddle, but it says much more about the thing it references than the name "oil skin" ever could. The riddle alludes to the fact that in a place where weather is as dramatic as it is in Newfoundland, a rain coat is in many ways "a second skin". However, it is also a metaphor. The jacket is not actually a second skin. It is not alive or a part of anyone. Although Dalton can gesture toward what a jacket is, she cannot actually make a real jacket out of her words. She uses the riddles to transmit the energy of the jacket into language so that a reader can access it.

Riddles and metaphors are very closely related. Riddles are a poetic device that forces the reader to consider the complex relationships between things in new ways. Robert Finley writes, "[o]ur reading of ... poems with all their difficulties engages and disrupts our habits of thought and speech about the world. By doing so, it frees us to a serious consideration of what the world is, opening again and again onto a broad plain of possibility" (Finley 8). Riddles are perfect tools to explore the relationship between language and objects because both the form and the subject are paradoxical. A riddle without a solution is a paradox. Dalton embraces puzzle, paradox and metaphor as ways of wondering at her world, because they do not provide any definitive answers. She includes this as an epigraph in *Red Ledger*: "I have a feud with my lifeline. / I take note of its crossroads and ditches. / - Charles Simic, "Solving the Riddle". Difficult riddles that do not provide solutions and complex metaphors might be dismissed by some readers and listeners as useless because they are paradoxical. However, being thrust into this state

of betweenity, entering into the feud, is the only way to solve a riddle. The feuding process might bring to light solutions we would never have thought of. Paradox allows us to "take note of [the] crossroads and ditches" that are a part of all cultures and people. Dalton is increasingly embracing paradox in her poetry.

Red Ledger and Between you and the Weather feature many riddles that admit the inevitable presence of paradox. These riddles are in the vein of the "poet-philosopher". The truths of Dalton's riddle poems are not expressed in the scientific fashion of modern philosophy, but as riddles. Riddles transport the reader, but it is always to a space of uncertainty. Dalton has set a trap and left it completely up to the reader to un-spring it:

I am a small paradox:
 I am a world in myself;
 I am just a beginning,
 I'm not the mammal's way,
 but I'm chockful of meat. (*Red Ledger*, 74)

There is no obvious or easy solution to this riddle. Even if some logical guesses are made, there is no way to be completely sure of the solution. While these riddles are "bursting to tell", they are also "mute" (80), waiting for the listener to make a move towards the teller. They have no resolution and remain unanswered questions. This sort of thinking almost always ends in a paradox; it asks the question: 'how can this be?' These unanswered riddles are not designed to give answers to philosophical questions, but to help listeners come to terms with paradox. The five lines give five clues to solve the riddle. Beyond that, we know that the answer will be some sort of every day object from Dalton's home town. One of the most distinctive clues is the line "I'm not the mammal's way". That would leave birds, fish and reptiles. It has to do with beginnings and you can eat it.

Perhaps it is an egg. An egg can be seen as paradoxical as it is both alive and dead. Yet, this is not a completely satisfactory answer. Northrop Frye writes, "[p]oem and object are very quizzically related: there seems to be some riddle behind all riddles which we have not yet guessed" (*Charm and Riddles* 141). This is very much the case with Mary Dalton's riddles. While there may be some answers that do unlock or unspring the riddle, there are always other options and riddles hiding behind. The point of folk riddles is not only to lead the listener towards a solution, but to cause the listener to go into a defamiliarized space in the imagination where anything is possible. Riddles have been popular and remain popular because they never seem to fully exhaust their energy. Even when they are answered there are still "riddles hiding behind". The memory of the state of paradox is still in the listener's consciousness.

While solving a riddle can be entertaining, Dalton's riddles should also be considered as carefully composed poems. The riddle discussed above employs anaphora: "I am [...] I am [...] I am [...]" (74). This poem echoes what is perhaps the deepest paradox of Judeo-Christian mythology. How can God explain himself as "I am"? How can something be, without being created? The wisdom of these riddles is that they are always coloured with ambiguity. "Listening not to me but to the Logos it is wise to agree all things are one" (*Herakleitos Quoted in Wisdom*, 33 Right). These riddles are not about Dalton keeping secrets from the reader. To quote Charles Simic "Ambiguity is the world's condition. Poetry flirts with ambiguity. As a "picture of reality" it is truer than any other. Ambiguity is" (59 Right). Poetry, especially riddle poetry, is in a relationship with ambiguous nature of the way things are. The riddle is one of the few ways that language can dodge the direct link between signifier and signified. Through the process

of solving a riddle, language is destabilized and words mean more than one thing. In the words of Northrop Frye: "[t]he real answer to the questions implied in the riddle is not a 'thing' outside it, but that which is both word and thing, and is both inside and outside the poem" (*Charms and Riddles* 147). Because the solution and the riddle exist in tension, the riddle is one of the most accurate ways that language can represent the real world. The meaning of the riddle is ambiguous, but the world is ambiguous too. To create an accurate picture of the world the form must echo the content.

The riddles Dalton writes ask the readers to think outside of their controlled places and employ tactics to solve them. In *Viv à Viv* Don McKay writes that, "[i]t is one function of art to provide safe defamiliarizing moments, when the mask of utility gets lifted and we waken to the residual wilderness without the inconvenience of breakdown or disaster" (McKay 57-58). McKay, at this point in the book, has already defined wilderness as "the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations" (21). These riddles are not useful in any traditional sense of earning someone money or producing heat or food. As Finley notes, they are in fact alienating and they force readers into a space that is unfamiliar and uncharted. Riddles send readers into the wilderness that remains in all things. Yet, this is an important function of art, to interact with this sort of space that is not utilized. Riddles induce the kind of mind stretching thinking that is not possible when things fit within "the mind's appropriations" (21). Riddles unleash the wilderness in all things.

Not enough has been said about Dalton as a wilderness or eco-poet. A lot has been said in reviews about "the fleeting, kinetic energies of the voice" (Lynes 107) that

Dalton so frequently depicts in her poetry. Less has been said about “the equally fleeting energies of the earth” (107) that pervade Dalton’s work just as thoroughly. This ecological strain in Dalton’s poetry is very important. However, it tends to get overlooked because her treatment of Newfoundland speech is so distinctive that it overshadows the ecological strain in her poetry. The poem “heat loss” is a fine example of Dalton making an ecological argument. She juxtaposes two very different types of space: “winter woods” and “the city” (*Following the Light* 31):

the body cooling
heat rushes fastest
from the head and the groin

in the winter woods,
hunting, his grandfathers
wore a codpiece:
a muskrat
or a rabbit

mazed in the city
he blocks
the flow of his heat
with rum and cigarettes (31)

As usual, she treats both of these settings as space by focusing on the actions of various operators that occur within them. She is focusing on specific actions. Dalton is showing that both of these spaces are wilderness beyond the control of people. She defamiliarizes these spaces so that it is clear that people and nature are not at odds with each other, but entwined in an ecological relationship. The “grandfathers, / wore a codpiece” to quell the flow of heat from their bodies in the cold of winter. Despite the fact that the protagonist is in a more contemporary urban setting he is still very much entwined with the elements.

Like his grandfathers, he “blocks / the flow of his heat” (31). The only difference is that he does this “with rum and cigarettes” (31) instead of a codpiece. There is an accommodation reached between these characters and the cold. In this way she models the ecological view of the world, where nature and people are in a complex and necessary relationship.

The poem where she expresses her strongest ecological sentiments is “Plastic” from the collection *Allowing the Light*. Dalton approaches environmental degradation from an ecological standpoint. The “woman from the city”, “comes to play / wants to play / among bone stone and shell” (*Allowing the Light* 58). This is an image of people and nature cohabiting. However, “woman from the city” finds that the beach is not as she has imagined it.

but the beach wants to tell
her: styrofoam,
beer nets, six circles,
bags from Dominion—
their red-and-white drift—
and tire rims rusting,
tossed in at the shoreline
(58)

The beach has been polluted. The woman cannot play in a natural setting anymore. The beach was once an ecologically pristine place. People could interact with the beach without impacting the systems already at work there. It was a natural playground where people could find respite. Now, the beach only tells a tale of the negative impact human waste has on the oceans and shore lines. We no longer live codependantly with the natural world, but in opposition to it. Dalton mourns this fact with these lines: “the sea

whispering: / why did ye shed yere hair? / can't ye make clothes from the reeds?"(58).

This poem mourns the loss of an ecological way of life in which people and nature could cohabit a space and actually benefit from each other.

"Plastic" is one of the few poems that is directly political in its implication.

However, all of Dalton's poetry has an indirect political impact because it authentically bears witness to Dalton's specific culture. Using post-colonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Graham Huggan, Paul Chafe argues that Newfoundland culture runs the risk of being misrepresented and that it has been misrepresented in the past. Like many places that are marketed to tourists, Newfoundland is often exoticized in literature. Huggan's phrase "anthropological exotic" (Chafe, 133) aptly describes this process of misrepresentation. There are several parties responsible for this misrepresentation. For the most part, the way in which the texts are received by readers who are not from Newfoundland must take a lot of the responsibility. Chafe discusses some of the controversy surrounding Wayne Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. "The novel has become something of a guidebook one presses upon another when Newfoundland is mentioned. [...] as if, after reading Johnston's text, first-time visitors to the island could effortlessly navigate their way through every cove" (133). In his article, which discusses the poetry of both Crummev and Dalton, Chafe notes that their "poetry is a vital part of the public culture of Newfoundland, for it reflects a reality not captured in tropes and clichés: a reality not defined by culture but lived by individuals negotiating their own space within that culture" (132). This argument is strengthened by bringing in the thinking of de Certeau. Dalton's poetry resists simple commodification because it is tactical in nature. It is not written for a government agency attempting to market the

tourism industry of Newfoundland and Labrador; it is an authentic individual encounter with the parts of Newfoundland Dalton knows best. Dalton is creating a space that denies managerial strategies and exoticism because it captures the speech of her home town while it is in motion. The space does not stay still for long enough to be changed back into place. This poetry is much like the character captured in "Devil-ma-click": "Stop and sit down, him? / He doesn't know how / To buckle his legs" (*Merrybegot* 24).

While Dalton is certainly opposed to exotic treatments of Newfoundland and ways of conceptualizing Newfoundland that essentialize it, she is not entering into a direct debate with exoticism. There is no body of literature that she is directly refuting. Instead, Dalton provides an alternative to exoticism. This is what Seamus Heaney would call the practice of "redress", which he defines as "poetry's instrumentality in adjusting and correcting the world's imbalances" (Heaney 7). The balancing function of poetry seems very applicable to Mary Dalton's art. As Chafe notes in his article, there are books such as *The Shipping News* which generalize and exoticize Newfoundland culture when they are not taken in context. Prose fiction tends to condense various aspects of Newfoundland into one story or town. Even Michael Crummey's novel *Galore* takes stories from all over Newfoundland and synthesizes them in one epic tale centered in the fictional village of Harbour Deep. Most novels set in Newfoundland imagine Newfoundland as place and attempt to give a sense of some totality, be it a town or the whole island of Newfoundland. Instead of trying to account for Newfoundland as a place, Dalton focuses on individual spaces within Newfoundland. Dalton conceives of Newfoundland as a collection of spaces and conducts the energy of these spaces through her writing. She is not trying to tame or manage the spaces in her poems. She says "I

have a sense of everything being animated. That's the first time I've ever put it in those words, because you're forcing me to think about it. There is an indwelling life in everything" (*Appendix 12*). Dalton is bringing crucial parts of her culture to life. Administrative gestures do the opposite as they slow down and simplify the elements of culture. They are attempts at taming the wildness of things. Dalton's poetry resists these administrative gestures by showing the life and movement in everything that surrounds her.

Another way that Dalton uses poetry as a form of redress is in the way that she finds balance within her own work. She is always trying to portray many points of view. In her poetry as a whole she desires to have a balanced vision of her culture. In her first book of poems she writes a poem called "Backhome Blues". She says, "there's only a partial vision in this poem. I find this poem rather arrogant" (Porter 34). When Vehicule expressed wishes to re-publish this poem in *Red Ledger*, Dalton was adamant that it be published alongside "the companion poem "Backhome Blues: Another Tune", which is a kind of rebuttal, it's a kind of rejoinder" (*Appendix 1*). These poems do not necessarily refute one another. They balance one another. The second poem corrects some of the hastiness in judgement of the first. Repeatedly, Dalton's poetry shows itself to be an extremely flexible instrument. It allows many voices to speak and to be heard.

"Backhome Blues" is an early poem of Dalton's that situates a speaker well acquainted with traditional Newfoundland in a suburban landscape. It paints a scene of wealth, but also of the ignorance towards the riches of the natural world and traditional ways of life. "Our relation to the land's / grown problematic" (*Red Ledger*, 50) writes

Dalton. The speaker is looking hard for evidence of the natural world in amongst the "Landscaped driveways", "smurf animals" and "street Lights". She does find some, "Still the land remembers; / the night releases its old smells: / dog roses, water and grasses" (51). But overwhelmingly this is a sad song about the "Resettlement of the mind" (51). It mourns the loss of land to useless houses that conform to the regulations of suburban by-laws. These are squat houses with homogenous landscaped yards, not the distinctive box houses, set near the shore, that one sees in traditional Newfoundland architecture. If the scene depicted in this poem is a suburb of St. John's, most of the people living there would have come from smaller outport communities and are only in the suburb because they had been resettled. The speaker misses the close relationship with the land that once existed. This is a poem that beautifully illustrates how poetry can be used as a political instrument, addressing and critiquing culture. As Janet Fraser points out, "Mary Dalton has achieved an intensely focused social and geopolitical take on Newfoundland such as has not been seen since the days of Percy Jones, Harold Horwood, and E. J. Pratt" (Fraser 1). All three of these writers were active during times of social upheaval, especially resettlement, in Newfoundland. This social and political concern is a strain that runs through most of Dalton's poetry. However, she is not limited to only one strain. There are many voices that must be heard in this collage and this variety of points of view is what gives her poetry the strength of showing culture as it is. The various points of view may be complicated, but they are also authentic.

"Backhome Blues: Another Tune" is on the page after "Backhome Blues" in *Red Ledger* and they offer quite contrasting points of view. If the first speaker is young and impulsive, the second speaker is more mature. The speaker of "Backhome Blues: Another

Tune" is not denying that the first speaker has a point; she is looking at the damage people do to the natural world from a more circumspect point of view. "You are just a blip, old trout" (*Red Ledger*, 52). "It's as if a dust mote / stood on its hind legs / and howled at / the injustice of gravity" (52). This speaker is arguing that the despairing view of the damage done to the natural world does not take into account the vast history that went into creating the moment in which anyone can exist. Through the poetry Dalton's voice can always be heard advocating for different points of view. The poems talk amongst themselves but they do not always agree.

The poems also discuss the political implications of Newfoundland dialect. In his review of *Merrybegot*, Shane Neilson writes, "Though she's using a shortcut—the rich dictionary of her home, and our unfamiliarity with that dictionary—Dalton's usage of exotic (to us) vocabulary is a harkening back to the real business of poetry, not the relentless creation of synthetic neologisms but a respect for actual language as it exists" (Neilson). Dalton is very clear that the role of the *DNE* is a paradoxical one and one that led her to a heightened awareness of the language around her. "The dictionary was a spring board. It's a paradox. It's a book which actually made me more acutely aware of the energies of the language being spoken around me" (*Appendix* 14). The dictionary was not really a short cut; it was the long way around to get back to the language Dalton experiences when she is around her home. While a listener from outside Newfoundland may consider this language exotic, it is anything but exotic to Dalton. Energetic and beautiful, yes, but most importantly it is an authentic sample of "language as it exists" (Neilson). She creates a space in her poems where the "learned tongue" and the speech commonly heard in Newfoundland can exist simultaneously and unapologetically. These

two are certainly in tension, but this is "the thin line a good salter walks" (*Merrybegot* 18).

Dalton is conscious of this role of language as a spell and also as a way to break these spells. As is by now apparent, she has a strong fascination with the *DNE*. Yet, her fascination is not what one might expect. It is not the fascination of a lepidopterist, capturing and pinning down the words like dead insects. Hers is the fascination of the rogue zoo keeper as she opens the gates for locked up words and setting them free, like wild animals, into their natural environment. As Dalton was beginning to write the poems for *Merrybegot* she wrote a brief article about the role of the *DNE* called "A Book to Break Spells". In this article we see once again her amazement at the power of spells and riddles to express the tangible world in a way that non-metaphorical language cannot:

For me the book is above all a subversive book. It has power to break the spell of books, to give back the key to the place of the singing spoken word. The book with its choir of voices reaffirms the living energies of Newfoundland speech, the rhythms and idioms of speech and story and song that have been muted by school, by books, by television – by all the forces that conspire to make lively ghosts of us. (Dalton "Spells"34)

While Dalton is not intending to make a political statement through her poems she is, like many of her Newfoundland poet colleagues, "engaged in a project whose effect is indirectly political" ("Hear Me When I Speak Yes" 1). Within the form of the riddle she is able to achieve the complexity and paradox required to "resist stereotypical and superficial versions of Newfoundland" (1). For Dalton "Poetry is a place to stand, to

speak yet to the particularities of a people's existence, to awaken an awareness of and a respect for every tradition; and thus it may lead to a healthier ecology of Canadian cultures than we have now"(2).

Dalton's poetry uses tactics to conduct the energy from things into the energy of language. It is very difficult to render specific objects into a system of language which, even at its best, can only vaguely point towards the things itself. Yet, Dalton continues on, riddling through the world as she knows it. Randall Jarrell theorizes the difficult situation modern poets find themselves in. "Since most people know about the modern poet only that [s]he is *obscure* – *i.e.*, that [s]he is *neglected* – they naturally make a causal connection between the two meanings of the word, and decide that [s]he is unread because [s]he is difficult" (Jarrell 4). It is true that Dalton's poetry is sometimes difficult and that it is often a puzzle created for the reader to solve. However, this is all the more reason that her poetry should be read. Newfoundland is complex and as Dalton attempts to render her parts of Newfoundland her poetry must also be complex. Her poetry seizes all opportunities to show the complex nature of the language of Newfoundland or of the relationships between people and nature in Newfoundland.

Newfoundland is represented as a series of spaces in Dalton's poetry. Dalton's poems are "multiform and murmuring", voicing the specifics of the world as she observes it. She takes note of words and phrases and transfers their energy to her readers ensuring that the vitality of the language is honoured in her art. She pays particular attention to individual birds and flowers, allowing them rather than studying them. These particular renderings balance out the generalized, stereotypical representations of Newfoundland

with living language as it is spoken. They balance out linear thinking about nature with a well rounded collage of people existing within nature and nature's inexhaustible energy showing through even the most urban settings. She is creating beautiful art with significant "indirectly political" ramifications asserting authentic spaces within Newfoundland culture. Names are important to her, but she also reaches beyond the names, leaving readers with riddle and metaphor so that we can get authentic glimpses of the Newfoundland spaces Dalton lives in. In the poems there is always a sense of life and animation. Things are moving and the poems are oriented by this movement. Dalton is able to transfer this energized movement into language, making each space she animates, real.

Chapter 2

Practicing Place in Newfoundland Poetry: John Steffler

Like Mary Dalton, John Steffler practices "place" and engages with the world tactically. He presents the living, natural world and conducts the energy of that world into language. Although Steffler is representing Newfoundland as a space, he represents different sorts of spaces in different ways than does Dalton. Unlike Dalton, he does think about Newfoundland as a place before he transforms it into space. He is not originally a Newfoundlander, so he is looking from the outside into a culture which he does not at first understand. He approaches Newfoundland with wonder. Stephen Greenblatt writes, "When we wonder, we do not yet know if we love or hate the object at which we are marveling; we do not know if we should embrace it or flee from it" (Greenblatt 20). Coming from away, Steffler does not yet know what he is marveling at when he observes the Newfoundland wilderness. He is careful because he does not know if it will damage him or he will damage it. For the most part his poetry is a practice of wonder, "a stilling of the normal associative restlessness of the mind" (20). As a wilderness poet, Steffler writes so that the mysteries of the natural world are highlighted rather than explained. He realizes that one cannot explain them anyway. He is not attempting to administrate the world but to defamiliarize readers from notions that people can enclose or dominate the natural world. Like Dalton, Steffler's poetry is accessing the energy of specific, carefully observed moments in the natural world. He also manipulates language through metaphor. He welcomes the friction between the two terms of a metaphor which allows the energy of the natural world to be maintained when it is translated into language. Steffler

perceives this energy with wonder. He allows the energy in the sense that it is both permitted and honoured without any judgment being placed on it. His poetry is a quiet "subversion of strategies" (*Appendix 23*). It is not overtly political, but by nature of what it is, it has a strong potential to question norms.

Steffler often approaches his subject by getting an overview of it. Some of his poems begin with an aerial view. This aerial view is very much like looking at a map of a place. However, Steffler always descends into the place itself after he has had a look at the map. Maps are very good at depicting "place", which "is an instantaneous configuration of positions" (de Certeau, 117). A map must be logical, but it does not always reflect the particularities of the place it maps. Furthermore, the generalizations that maps make can lead to misinterpretation. "Even maps of the familiar are not easy to interpret" (Finley, *Index*, 39). Any place can be rationalized, understood and controlled by maps because the subject is zoomed out too far to see the paradoxes that exist when it is looked at more closely. However, place does not take into account the things operating in the spaces that a map depicts and does not take into account the possibility of misinterpretation. "Space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables" (de Certeau 117). These are the events that we cannot see if we are looking only at the map. While he may begin with an overview of the place, Steffler is more interested in showing his readers "space", which can also be understood as "practiced place" (de Certeau 117). He is very interested in honouring the specific actions that orient space. For example, the moose in his poetry are moving rather than dead. This necessitates viewing the world as it moves and accepting the wildness and unmanageable nature of all things. "There is this paradox in language, which is a

technology that does represent the world in certain ways, to try to use language to try to subvert [...], to let in fresh energy and the real dynamics of the universe" (*Appendix* 19). Steffler is doing no less than trying to conduct the energy of "the universe" into language.

In his poem "I Didn't Know This Would Happen", Steffler begins with a conceptualizing view of Newfoundland. He begins this poem by gazing at Newfoundland as a place. He is in an airplane somewhere "Above Cabot Strait". There is some sort of map to get his bearings from. However, this map is quickly abandoned when the uncontrollable nature of the living/moving things below the airplane are taken into account. Place is transformed into space. The airplane is "screwing us deeper / into the pure Newfoundland" (*Ravenous* 4). Things are much harder to understand when they are in the raw and can be seen up close. It is "raw experience" (McKay *Fix à Fix* 65) that language has the most trouble representing. Authenticity through language can be achieved when very specific things are represented and when the wildness or rawness within them is conducted. Steffler enters space when he allows things to "elude the mind's appropriations" (21). As the speaker gets closer to home, the wildness of home begins to come into focus:

my awkwardness, my broken
 marriage, troubles richer
 than Voisey's Bay, my
 unexpected life off
 all the maps I'd ever imagined,
 the unfamiliar heart
 of where we all live. (*Ravenous* 4)

Steffler grounds the idea of flying over Newfoundland with the reality of what actually exists in the spaces that he is flying over. He faces the hard truths of "awkwardness, my broken / marriage, troubles richer / than Voisey's Bay". The speaker is not interested in looking only at the map where everything is organized and orderly. As he goes "off / all the maps" he shows that he is willing to engage with space and the actions that orient it, even though those actions are fraught with emotional pain. He is entering a wild space where he admits that he cannot appropriate the things that surround him. This poem shows the way that Steffler moves between place and space. There is much more negotiation between the two than there is in Dalton's poetry.

The Grey Islands shows how Steffler moves between space and place as well. In this book Steffler demonstrates his desire to have close encounters with the natural world that lead him "off / all the maps". Underlying all of Steffler's writing is an invitation to observe the things around us closely. "[T]he things you look at / look at well. / the plants and rocks and sea" (*the Grey Islands* 134). Steffler notes the tension that existed between Newfoundland and the rest of Canada when he arrived: "in the 1970s there was still a lot of prejudice against Newfoundlanders" (*Appendix* 21). Newfoundland responded to this prejudice by banding together in a very close-knit society that made it very difficult for outsiders to enter into. Steffler felt he "needed to do something dramatic to plunge into the place, almost as a rite of initiation" (*Appendix* 21). This is part of what brought about the research for and the writing of *the Grey Islands*. The excursion of the town planner character to the abandoned Grey Islands mirrors his own research completed while writing the book. For the most part, this was an exercise done to bring Steffler closer to Newfoundland, "as a rite of initiation" (*Appendix* 20). It is important to note that while

the town planner was in Newfoundland for years before he made the trip to the Grey Islands, it was this time of intense interaction with the land that allowed the town planner to practice this place. This was a dramatic gesture to move into the territory of the other and attempt to get to know it.

Michel de Certeau's concept of space is very much what Steffler is producing in *the Grey Islands*. However, the protagonist begins by imagining Newfoundland as a place. The protagonist is, after all, a town planner coming from away and trying to impose his will upon a town:

Town planner. Town joe-boy is what I've been. But whose fault is that? I'd find lots to do if this place meant anything to me. Or if the people wanted to change a thing. And I'm dying bit by bit, shrinking, drying up along with my dreams of the new Jerusalem, the four-gated golden city with market squares and green belts and pedestrian streets and old buildings restored and tourist money pouring in.
(*the Grey Islands* 27)

The town planner's first experience with Newfoundland is as a place. He is trying to conceptualize and administrate it. Only when he realizes that this is something that he cannot do, does he begin to come to terms with his life in relationship to the world that actually exists. He feels impotent and useless as the town planner, but when he finally commits to the island he is staying on:

day by day a power
coming out of the rock

my past a theory
my job, my dithering

belong to somebody else

...
I am this island now

strong, solid. (152)

The power of Newfoundland is accessed through engaging with the island as a space. He looks at the specifics and instead of finding ways to make them conform to his wishes, the town planner surrenders to what *is*. He has begun the process of seeing the value of the world as it is. It is in the realm of space where people must look closely and operate tactically if they are to survive.

The town planner learns this lesson in a rather difficult way. When he attempts what de Certeau would call strategy ("a calculus of force-relationships" (de Certeau six)), his actions are marked with failure. Near the end of the second section, the town planner reflects on the folly of attempting to control nature, especially in Newfoundland where the weather is very clearly in control. When he comes forward with the idea of planting the trees for the town he says, "I was in my power then, carrying the gospel to the hinterland, and even though the council boys were skeptical, they figured maybe I knew what I was doing" (94). As winter progresses, the town planner realizes the folly of his plan. "The council plough was out two or three times a day tumbling the five-ton boulders of snow over my trees" (94). Even with their destruction the trees "all went into use at least ... I saw a lot of them turned into nice hardwood handles for gaffs, the men taking them out on the ice to use on seals. The women got their share too, employing them to prop their clotheslines up" (95). When the strategy of planting maples on the West coast of Newfoundland fails, the town resorts to what de Certeau would call tactic

(the constant manipulation of events "to turn them into 'opportunities'" (de Certeau xix)) to make the best of the misspent funds.

It is essential for the town planner to learn how to operate tactically and take advantage of anything that this realm of the other has to offer when he goes to live on the Grey Islands. The battle with the weather requires innovation and the abandonment of strategy: "I keep warm burning / bits of a house" (130). Those things that were there as a part of a strategy to keep the weather out lose their importance in the face of going without a fire. The tactic becomes more important than the overall plan or strategy. It is also through these struggles that he achieves a close relationship with the people and the land. "I feel very near these people. Life's lonely effort so plain here" (135). Without acquaintance with the honesty and difficulty of the way that people live in this part of Newfoundland, the town planner would not have developed a relationship with them. He is dependent on their help and has no choice but to be grateful for any help that they can offer. By the fourth section of the book, the town planner has essentially stopped trying to impose his own systems of management on the land and is resigned to operating in a tactical fashion. When he is looking for fishing bait, the town planner is unsuccessful until he realizes that "My only hope is the house most recently used. I straighten my back, take my knife and jar and walk the half mile to Carm Denny's shack" (139). Here he finds some bait, "A kind of organic shadow of the man" (139). The bait for his fishing is not where he expects it to be or where it is convenient for him. It is clear that the town planner is not in control of his surroundings and must be flexible and inventive to get what he wants. Soon, he moves into Carm Denny's shack; he submits to the forces that he cannot control. He finds that living in Carm's shack is "like standing inside the head of

someone who knows the place" (146). Knowing in this sense is not dominating, but learning to adapt to the island and the way of life there.

The process that Steffler shares with the town planner is the process of making an unfamiliar place into a home. As Don McKay writes, "home makes possible the possession of the world, the rendering of the other as one's interior" (*Piv à Piv* 23). The initial step of inhabiting the world is important to Steffler's experience. A deep empathy for and knowledge of a space is needed to make it inhabitable, if we do not wish to destroy it. Steffler is cautious and approaches the world with wonder. The wild parts of Newfoundland are unfamiliar to him. He wonders at this wilderness because he does not yet know whether or not it is safe. Before Steffler can submit to the wildness, he observes it from a vantage point, a *Lookout*, to get some sort of strategy. Tim Lilburn writes that the "weight of everything, its home, where it is itself, lies beyond naming, lives outside the range of calculation, is not, to be is to possess a name" (Quoted in Zwicky, *Wisdom*, Right 53). This movement from the name possessing the object to the object possessing a name, for Steffler, means using a certain amount of strategy. Steffler comments, "I think of the idea of vantage point as gaining an overview of one's surroundings and one's life, not so much from the point of view, in this case of strategizing to control it, but to sort of see larger patterns" (*Appendix* 25). If people are to survive in the world without dominating it, they do need to take caution and approach it with wonder.

While careful observation is needed for the poet to hold specific things in his mind, he still must find a way to transfer that thing into a reader's mind. Language is the medium the poet uses. Don McKay writes, "language is not able to represent raw

experience, yet it must" (McKay *Via à Via* 65). Throughout his poetry, Steffler attempts to represent raw experience. This experience is mediated through language like any human thought. Wheelwright has this to say about the paradox of language and the real world: "Semantics and ontology are inseparable; the first is superficial without the second, which in turn is unintelligible without the first" (Wheelwright, 20). Poetry is a dance featuring the thing itself on one hand and the language used to signify it on the other. These two elements are in constant tension. The poet's job is to negotiate this tension and to manipulate language so that it can echo the ontological world. Steffler says this himself: "this constant, futile effort, to reach out and grasp what is not human and the impossibility of doing it with language is what drives the poet. It drives the poet crazy, but it does drive the poet on" (*Appendix* 22). Steffler is motivated to reveal wildness through his poetry. He is constantly looking for ways to represent "raw experiences" with language and negotiate the tension between semantics and ontology.

The raw experiences that Steffler most often represents are experiences with things that are not human, but wild. One of these non-human elements that Steffler attempts to grasp is the moose. Steffler notes, "living in Newfoundland, the moose became the great totemic animal" (*Appendix* 16). While the moose may seem to be a rather strange creature, being simultaneously massive and inconspicuous, paradoxically graceful and ungainly, it is an excellent example of how Steffler pays acute attention to the natural world, until it can open up in his imagination. "How Do I Know This?" is the first poem that appears in Steffler's work that is about the moose. Here the moose assumes the role of curious invisibility. While the people in the town "talk / on the phone or play cards in the kitchen" they "are always vaguely thinking about / moose"

(Ravenous 95). The moose, however, is not easily appropriated by the people's imaginations. The moose is a part of the raw and untamed wilderness. "Unseen / in the dark, the moose are only the slight / sound of twigs crunching" (95). As the moose walk around in the back yards of villages they are constantly smelling and observing more about the people than the people could possibly know. The people "think of moose stew" (95), but "the moose / enter the bedrooms under the closed / doors, seep under the sheets and wreath / the lovers in their own excited / smells" (96). Steffler tells the story of an encounter he had with moose in Newfoundland:

I remember on one occasion staying in a cabin up near Woody Point, just above the town in the fall and a couple of moose were mating or fighting. Doing something anyway, just outside in the dark. The whole building was shaking, the ground was shaking. It was unbelievable. We opened the door a couple of times, we couldn't see anything. It was pitch dark but there was this racket, this roaring and thumping going on out there. Then in the morning you could see hoof prints and a sort of wreckage out there on the front lawn. Then some friends came over to visit. They had this little lap dog with them that they carried with them everywhere. The dog got down on the ground and was so excited. It could tell that something had happened here. These great powerful nature gods had been present. The dog was rolling around in the footprints and was going wacky over the smell of the moose. The whole thing had been invisible to us. We could only hear it and sort of sense it. (Appendix 17)

The moose is emblematic of all in nature that is extremely powerful, but also invisible to people most of the time. Steffler is using his poetry to encourage his readers to open their eyes wider and make fewer judgements about the world. He advocates for a sense of wonder towards the moose, nothing more and nothing less.

One glimpse of the moose as a totemic animal is in the title poem of *That Night We Were Ravenous*. Using anaphora, Steffler makes explicit the power that the moose has to bring people very close to nature in the terrifying moment of intersection that happens all too often on the highway. Depicting the moose as it steps out onto the highway, Steffler writes, "trees detached themselves from the shaggy / shoulder and stepped in front of the car. I swerved" (*Ravenous* 116). The amazing size and power of the moose is captured in lines like these: "She was as strong as the Bible and as full of lives" (116). "She was our deaths come briefly forward to say hello" (117). Or "She was a high-explosive bomb loaded with bones and meat" (118). Yet "She was a spirit" (118) and "She was as insubstantial as smoke" (117). Steffler's poetry shows that the moose truly is a "totemic animal" (*Appendix* 16). The moose is loaded with energy that Steffler's poetry releases. The moose plays a very effective role in Steffler's poetry as a way of transferring the energy of the natural world into the reader's imagination. Like the moose, the island of Newfoundland is huge and yet inconspicuous because so much of its territory is truly wild and unsettled. There is no sense that he tries to domesticate the moose; quite the opposite is true. The moose is bursting "from the zoo of our dreams ... like a yanked-out tooth the dentist / puts in your hand" (116). Furthermore, because the moose is not indigenous to Newfoundland it is already decontextualized here. It is perhaps the best example in Newfoundland of the impossibility of the project of taming

or colonizing wilderness. Coming upon a moose is as decontextualizing as holding one's own tooth lying in his hand. Steffler shares a bond with the moose in that they have both made Newfoundland their homes; they have both adapted to thrive in Newfoundland's harsh environment.

For energy to be conducted from the real world into language, the parts of the world represented must be energetic. There is a distinct drive in both Steffler's and Dalton's poetry to show the world alive and in motion. This is an indication that both of these poets do indeed emphasize representations of Newfoundland as space. "Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities" (de Certeau 117). In Steffler's poems, nature is always alive and lively. It is conflictual and oriented by the operations of the various uncontrollable elements that comprise it. It refuses to stay still long enough to allow the poet to exert any sort of control over it. Instead, the poet is often placed terrified or wondering at the movement around him, over which he has no control. Nature is a riddle made all the more marvelous because no satisfactory solution can be given. In his poem "Lepidoptera" Steffler gestures toward the butterfly. Lepidoptera is the word that refers to the order of insects including moths and butterflies. A lepidopterist is someone who studies these insects, usually by gassing and collecting them. Steffler honours these creatures in a very different way. Instead of killing and classifying them, he admits the mystery they hold. His two part poem takes the form of a "who am I" riddle and it begins, "I have been here almost as long / as the sun and rock" (*IFreckage* 29). Of course he gives the answer to the riddle in his title. This poem is about butterflies. Yet, there are still many mysteries. There are thousands of

types of butterflies. This poem does nothing to explain how butterflies transform or fly. Instead it marvels at the mystery of these things. It captures the butterfly in motion and the paradoxes of flight and transformation:

for a moment I burn
 sun and flower: a small flame
 again I am alight
 again my ancient fires
 dance (30).

This poem denies that people can have any true control over nature, because it is ancient and infinitely more powerful and mysterious than we can even imagine. Steffler says it this way: “[i]t is very important to not be in control all of the time, or to think that you are. That’s insane” (*Appendix 24*).

Wonder is perhaps the most thorough form of observation because it pays attention to something as if it were the first time you have ever seen it. Wonder admits that you are not in control. It also keeps you at arm’s length from the thing you marvel at because you do not know if it is safe: “you do not know if we should embrace it or flee from it” (Groenblatt 20). Steffler says, “you constantly flit with submersion or dissolution in the world because you want that marriage, but you also want to stay alive, so I think you need strategy as well as tactics” (*Appendix 24*). Steffler is constantly moving from strategy to tactics in his poetry because he does not want to be injured by the world. However, his use of strategy is not so that he has control over the things he observes. Steffler wants the objects he marvels at to stay unharmed as well. He uses

strategy to get an overview so that he is not overwhelmed by the wilderness when he is immersed in the natural world left with nothing but tactics.

The world is not always as gently animated as it appears in "Lepidoptera". There is also the sense in Steffler's poetry that the natural world can be animated stubbornly and without compromise. His newest book of poetry often acts as a warning to hold our knowledge more loosely because the natural world is full of surprises. *Lookout* is both a vantage point and a warning according to Steffler. The poem "As if wind was blown into it" acts as a remarkable case study of the life that eludes human desire to kill. "Having brought the animal to the table, suspended by the tail, I killed it by chopping off its head, yet the mouth continued to open and shut and the eyes to roll intelligently" (*Lookout* 82). Despite the vigorous attempts of the speaker to kill this mysterious animal, it refuses to stop moving. The people boil the creature, which only makes it appear "as if wind were blown into it" (82). The heart "kept on beating until about noon the following day" (82). Language often attempts to make the world still and comprehensible. The best modern and contemporary poetry acknowledges the impossibility of doing this. Steffler does not try to manage or to kill the subjects of his poetry. Steffler tries to show the world alive rather than dead. Yet he knows that language cannot show the world completely alive either because language is only a system of signs. Things themselves are much more complicated and so, poetry must find a way to exist in between the living and the dead. "The danger is that you kill things in your own mind. You kill things by pinning them down and you can't discover new things about them. It's an old truism that poetry at its best returns to something of the child's sense of wonder at the world" (*Appendix* 28). This

is exactly the way that Steffler views the world, with wonder. Instead of deadening the world, he attempts to grasp something fresh and un-tamable with every poem.

As Steffler reaches for living things in his poetry, he is often reaching for specific things. Jan Zwicky defines "thisness" as "the whole grasped in the particular" (Zwicky, *Wisdom*, Left 70). Thisness is a good explanation for what all lyric poets achieve. While poets are dealing with particular things in their poems, these things resonate widely in the world. Poets are finding contact points through which energy can be transmitted. These points are quite specific. For instance, the particular moose animated in "That Night We Were Ravenous". Wheelwright has a very similar term. "Radical suchness is hard to represent in words; the difficulty might be likened to that of a painter who with only a few colors on his palette should try to represent nature as he sees it" (Wheelwright, 53). Wheelwright is concerned with the difficulties writers have when they try to represent what they observe with only the symbols provided by language. Steffler focuses on specific things. He focuses on the specific in each poem so that when they are collected they resonate with each other and show something of the whole. His poem "Early Photo of a Girl" is a good example of the very careful attention he pays to everything he writes about:

you would not hold your face so
wide open
for any woman or man

but for this machine
you stop
as though an angel parted the air
and whispered: *Girl!*

Show me your soul! (Wreckage 38)

A photo communicates with its viewer in a very direct and immediate way. A poem does not have the same advantage because it must deliver its information more slowly, over the time it takes a reader to read the poem. Steffler is transmitting the energy that he feels when he looks at this photo. Although language is a very different sort of tool than photography is, Steffler echoes the energy of the expression on the girl's face by using metaphorical language. He builds up the energy so that it is released in the short final line in a similar way that a photo transmits energy instantly.

The section "Colonial Building Archives" in *Lookout* is perhaps the best example of Steffler looking at several specific images and creating an album or collage out of them. It is a series of poems that are based on old photographs. Each poem takes its title from the archivist's number ("VA -38" or "B10-39" for example), followed by a brief description of what the photo is of ("Postcard: Paper Machine" or "Lee Wulff Fishing the Upper Humber"). These poems do give descriptions of the photo. "B10-39 Lee Wulff Fishing the Upper Humber" is described in this way: "That wart on what looks like a snakeskin is Lee" (*Lookout* 108). However, they also imagine the conditions that created the photos. The poems add some motion to the pictures, giving them a spatial orientation. The photographer is positioned in an airplane:

...The pilot

Dipped the right wing over Lee's Head
and gunned the plane around, dumping my face
down on the window – killing myself the whole

time, trying to focus the camera. Managed

one shot – oatmeal and sunspots. (108)

The poem ducks behind the lens of the camera and imagines why this blurry image is the way it is and how anyone could know that it is in fact "Lee Wulff Fishing the Upper Humber". The un-named photographer quips in the last line, "I added the caption and gave it to him framed" (108).

William Carlos Williams famously exclaims in his poem "A Sort of Song": "No ideas / but in things". He is not the only modernist to make this assertion, but the importance of this notion to John Steffler's poetry cannot be overstated. The goal of language, to render the real world into the world of the imagination, is an impossible goal. However, that does not mean that we should or do give up. Moving towards the thing itself moves us towards the possibility of using language to depict. A Steffler poem becomes an object. To him, the notion of creating a photo album is very appealing. With photos there is less chance of misrepresentation than in some form that constructs a coherent narrative like a movie. A photograph may have a relationship to other photographs, but ultimately it is only accountable for what it represents within its own borders. The comparison of a collection of poems to a photo album is a good one, because like individual photos, each poem is distinct, yet taken as a collection the poems resonate together as a whole.

Each of Steffler's collections shares similarities with photo albums. *The Grey Islands* is Steffler's most narrative book of poetry, telling the story of the town planner moving to the Grey Islands for the summer. Yet there are also things such as census results and sheet music in the book that operate photographically. As an example of the

Canadian long poem, *the Grey Islands* shows the value of hybrid forms. D.M.R. Bentley, a Canadian scholar who has written on the long poem, says, "a long poem is the record or chronicle of a cultural unit that exists in or beside a civilization and provides its constituents with a comforting sense of their identity and difference" (Bentley). This is exactly what Steffler is working towards with his long poem. He is extremely aware of his outsider status and he is chronicling his progression into that culture through his experiences with the land. The form of the book allows Steffler to chronicle very specific moments in the Grey Islands' past and present. These moments are not connected by narrative. For the most part these are isolated moments that give the people around the Grey Islands "a comforting sense of their identity and difference". In part I, Steffler says, "Four years and I'm still like a tourist here. I haven't even left the motel" (*the Grey Islands* 27). Not only does Steffler leave the motel, but he gets powerful snapshots of various characters and places. These snapshots seem much clearer in this hybrid form than they would with a constant stream of narration connecting them. The space around them (both literally on the page and figuratively) allows the moments to be highlighted individually. The form of this book is flexible, allowing Steffler to leave blank spaces in between the various elements in the book.

Another thinker on the Canadian long poem writes, "[i]f the epic poet strove to capture the united spirit of a culture, the long poet of the 1970s acknowledged the diversity of cultural voices that challenged a united national voice" (Saul 262). The context for this comment comes in an essay looking at some of the Canadian long poems of the 1970s which resisted being defined by genre and chose not to define the world through nationalistic lenses. Steffler echoes this non-epic sentiment: "I wanted it to have

a narrative quality. I suppose if it had a model it would have been Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, a kind of compendium with narrative strands. ... I wasn't thinking in terms of genre at all. I just wanted to be free of genre" (*Appendix* 18). It is this freedom that gives the book such authenticity. It is a book free from forcing a culture into homogeneous representation. It allows for the diversity of culture to be seen because the form is diverse. Through hybridity and tactic, this book is able to glimpse Newfoundland as a space. It accepts all the voices and does not ask them to conform to a strategic literary form. The form is built around the content. Literature has often played a role in forcing conformity upon cultures. This book conforms to the culture it represents. It transmits the energy of the characters on and around the Grey Islands as well as the energy of the Grey Islands themselves.

In *the Grey Islands*, Steffler asserts, "the things you look at / look at well" (*the Grey Islands* 134). This could very well be the mantra of Francis Ponge, who is most famous for his work *Le parti pris des choses*, translated as *Things*. Steffler is very interested in the specific things of this world, "the plants and rocks and sea" (134). He pays close attention to specific plants and rocks and parts of the sea in his poetry. *Things* is a book that focuses directly on common things and crafts poems that articulate the complex ways that they infiltrate people's lives. While Ponge's poems are not about plants and rocks, they show a similar fascination with the particular and seemingly insignificant. His poem "The Stoves" is a good example: "But how, to these modest towers of heat, give due expression to our gratitude?" (*Things* 20). This is a decontextualizing question. Generally people aren't concerned with expressing gratitude towards inanimate objects. Yet Ponge does try to understand his relationship with this

stove. "The relations of a man to his stove are quite far from being those of a lord to his vail" (20). In many ways the relationship between people can be much more estranged than that of a person and a thing. Like Ponge, Steffler asserts that there is value "in daily things" (*The Grey Islands* 107), such as old photographs or the physical surroundings and even plumbing (*Wreckage of Play*). He also believes that these things need to be observed without any sort of preconceived notions as to what they are. They need to be approached with wonder. It is Steffler's strong faith in the power of things to surprise the observer with details never before noticed that places him in an ecological relationship with nature. Mary Dalton focuses on language as a way into authentic representation of culture; Steffler focuses on wilderness. Repeatedly in his poetry he uses the physical surroundings to develop more intricate relationships with a specific space. The work that goes into this process is always apparent. For Steffler, the only way to enter into an authentic relationship with Newfoundland was to do something fairly drastic. He could not simply look at a map and attempt to rationalize the natural world as place, he needed to get into spaces and look at them with a certain detachment between himself and the context to really understand what they were.

Steffler uses poetry to get himself and his readers closer to the living natural world. As Tim Lilburn writes, "We are lonely for where we are" (Lilburn 17). While technology – language perhaps the greatest of all technologies – has sought to dominate and colonize the known world, poetry resists this domination. It works as a bridge, allowing the energy of the natural world rather than dominating or colonizing it. Poetry is contemplative, expressing a longing to know the spaces we live in more intimately. "Contemplation grows out of the wreckage of other forms of knowing" (12). For Lilburn

this sense of contemplation and of communion with nature is absolutely essential if people are to feel at home in the world. While language seeks to name, poetry un-names and illuminates *thisness* in the world. It reaches into particularities and renders them alive on the page. Steffler's poem "Little Wren" is an example of "*thisness, the whole grasped in the particular*" (Zwicky, *Wisdom*, Left 70):

My mother would kind of like to tell about
the spouse-swapping going on in their small
town, "Three families – two teachers and the
school secretary – they all just ..." but
my father looks sullen and wonders if that
little wren he sees out through
the window will stay around.

"Will they come to a feeder?" my mother asks.

"No," he says, exhausted and desolate,
"they only eat bugs." (*Ravenous* 53)

The father in this poem is expressing loneliness for the natural world, but in a very specific way. It is not birds or even wrens in general that he is lonely for, but "that / little wren he sees out through / the window". The word "that" is important in this poem. The father is not concerned with wrens in general but with a specific one. The father approaches this wren with wonder. It is a specific bird that resonates with the father.

The most significant way that Steffler transfers the power from specific things into language is through the use of metaphor. Northrop Frye's comments on metaphor are particularly useful when trying to grasp how a metaphor is at work:

As for metaphor, where you're really saying "this is that," you're turning your back on logic and reason completely, because logically two things can never be the same thing and still remain two things. The poet, however, uses these two

crude, primitive, archaic forms of thought in the most uninhibited way, because his job is not to describe nature, but to show you a world completely absorbed and possessed by the human mind (Frye *Educated Imagination* 446).

The metaphor can only truly exist in the realm of the imagination. It conducts the energy of a real thing into something that can be imagined, or as Frye puts it, "possessed by the human mind". As Frye points out, a metaphor is completely illogical. Yet, this tool finds repeated use in the hands of the poet because the poet is constantly reaching beyond the usual borders that language and logic construct to keep the energy of the world intact. Tim Lilburn writes that "Poetry is the rearing in language of a desire whose end lies beyond language" (Lilburn 9). The poet's job, certainly as it is manifested in Steffler's work, is not to "describe nature" but to gesture towards nature itself. Nature, as it is represented in poetry, can only really exist in the imagination. However, metaphor, as it contorts language to give it new meanings, allows the energy of the world to be reflected in language.

Paul Ricoeur theorizes that metaphor destabilizes the meaning of language. Only through this destabilization, or deviation, is metaphor able to achieve meanings beyond that of language. "As figure, metaphor constitutes a displacement and an extension of the meaning of words; its explanation is grounded in a theory of substitution" (Ricoeur 1). In this quotation, the notion of substitution is brought up. Metaphor is the art of finding similarities between things that are not the same and leaping over the divide between them, substituting one for another. A poem is a photograph; a moose is the "Prime Minister". "To affect just one word, the metaphor has to disturb a whole network by

means of an aberrant attribution. At the same time, the idea of categorial transgression allows us to fill out that of deviation, which seemed to be implied in the transposition process" (Ricoeur 23). Metaphor destroys the logic of language and places the reader in a zone of betweenness where "both terms [of the metaphor] along with the energy of their interaction" are allowed. Metaphor extends language so that it can more accurately deal with complexities, but it also destabilizes language so that the relationship between signifier and signified becomes more flexible. Metaphor is linked to space because it is defined by the movement and interaction of two terms. It is oriented by movement, so metaphor is a tactic.

The moose is a metaphor. Like all metaphors "it is quick, tricky, and, as we have seen, not easily domesticated to utility" (McKay, *Vix à Vix*, 71-2). This statement is fairly dense and it needs to be unpacked a little bit. There are several ways in which the moose acts quickly as it stands for the wilderness that resists appropriation. The moose is literally quick. The moose stepping out onto the road only takes a second. The swerving, the squealing of tires, and the impact all occur much faster than people can process. The moose is also quick because of its totemic role in the consciousness of Newfoundlanders. Instead of going on, trying to explain the concept of wilderness and how it eludes people's ability to understand and control it, the metaphorical moose can simply step out in front of a car and all of those associations are made, but with quickness. The moose is a way of "seeing as" and it gestures towards a feeling about nature that is not fully within the capacity of language. Using a common understanding of metaphor such as I.A. Richards', one would try to separate the metaphor into a vehicle and a tenor. Perhaps, the moose is the vehicle that transports the reader to a point of understanding about the

wilderness which is the tenor. "The wilderness is a cow moose". However, it could be the other way around too: "landscape doing a moose, a cow moose" (*Ravenous* 116). This is the trick, the paradox inherent in this deep metaphor. Through the interaction of these two terms ("landscape" and "moose") energy is released. Understanding the moose as a metaphor honours the real world encounter it depicts. It is an energized way of saying something as banal as: a "moose stepped onto the road":

It's a kind of paradox: you go into a language construct which is the poem on a page, ... and then almost in an Alice in Wonderland way the excitement of language in the poem reawakens the senses in your mind to the reality of the world around you and you surface from the poem, almost like you're breaking surface in water back into the world enlivened with a fresh awareness of the world, of its mystery and wonder and beauty and power and significance.

(*Appendix 21*)

Appropriately enough, Steffler gives us a simile to describe how language fails to set a static version of the world down on paper, but through metaphor we are alerted to the life around us. The energy of the metaphor mimics the energy of the real world.

Despite its usefulness in converting real energy into linguistic energy, metaphor is often very difficult to understand. McKay says, "as a trope, metaphor is often taken as a synecdoche for poetry itself, or for poetic thinking" ("Speaker's Chair" 9). For the most part people are more interested in hearing stories than puzzling over riddles. Novels and films can make a lot of money for their creators. The same cannot be said of poetry. Its importance must be gauged in other ways. Steffler argues "that poetry's special value in

our contemporary culture springs partly from its commercial uselessness" (*Uses* 2-3). He points out that in the same way that we set aside vast areas of land as wilderness reserves, it is "important to foster the intuitive, sometimes dream-soaked, contemplative, playful, word-obsessed, unregulated mental zones in which poetry proliferates, so that its energy can spread out through the surrounding culture, through the language's collective mind, into the lives of people to rejuvenate them and keep them in touch with the imagination" (2). Poetry is definitely not something that has an application in the economy of our daily lives. Its value is more understated and perhaps even more important than that. Poetry is one of the few ways to bridge the gap between people and the natural world. "This is perhaps the deepest dynamic of poetry: it is language that seeks and at times is able to heal the rift between human and natural and make thinking an activity of the earth" (23). Poetry is not an economic force but an art form that seeks to bring people closer to the natural world and heal our troubled relationship with that world.

Poetry shifts us out of working lives and into the realm of the imagination and the spiritual. This is often done through the themes that poems discuss, but more importantly it is the way that poetry takes time to contemplate some of the beautiful, but not necessarily useful elements of life. "A Visit on the River" depicts two young families taking the day to spend indoors in each other's company. "We kept indoors that afternoon, / chairs by the fire, our children / streaming costumes through and under everything" (*Wreckage* 51). This is a poem about taking time away from work, but it is also an exercise in the spiritual and contemplative. It delves deeply and metaphorically into images. "Your house was a house of windows then, / awake to the world" (51). Of course the house is not alive, but this is the way that it seems with so much happening

inside. This poem is a mnemonic marker of the rich and spiritual associations this house carries for the people who experienced that day: "the stored summers we stirred from the wood / under the house, / wood your father cut before he died" (51). The actions of the father when he was still alive are conjured in these final lines. This poem draws the readers out of whatever space they may be operating in and into a world where the spiritual and imaginative is the central focus. This poem operates in the realm of "commercial uselessness" and has the power to draw readers into that space as well.

In his book *Horse* Ted Chamberlin discusses the use of horses to the Navajo (also called *Dewé*, meaning real) people. "To the Navajo, a horse was not a convenience or a commodity but a covenant between fresh air and freedom to breathe, a ceremony of belief in beauty and goodness" (Chamberlin 10). The American government could not see the value of the horses they kept, calling them "useless horses". However, the value of uselessness is far too often overlooked. Poetry is also a sort of "ceremony of belief in beauty and goodness". It is certainly not just a "commodity". It is a space for contemplation where the urgency of the economic world can be left behind. The mind must have time and space set aside for contemplation and reflection on how the world is. Poetry provides this. It is another paradox: poetry is useful because it is useless.

One important advantage of poetry is that it is not a popular form that can be easily guided by public interest. Steffler believes that there is very little pressure on poets "to entertain the public, follow current taste, capitalize on society's current worries and fantasies" (Steffler *Uses* 3). He is able to be "as honest and natural" (3) as he pleases because he is not necessarily writing to entertain a public:

If it comes right down to it, I would have to say, and it sounds pretentious, but it's as though I'm writing for a community of dead poets or something like that. All the people that have tried to distill their sense of being alive and who they are into language, with the highest aspiration to do that seriously, I guess that's ideally who I'm writing for. (Appendix 22)

The lack of tangible audience means that Steffler is not swayed by a fickle group of people. Instead he is engaging in an ancient and lasting dialogue. He says, "I think I write for thoughtful readers, the people who turn to poetry or look for in poetry, mindfulness or awareness" (Appendix 22). This is certainly not pulp fiction. Philip Wheelwright makes a similar point. He notes how communication of all sorts can have many different intended audiences:

The communication may be with one other individual, or with few or many; it may be intended for human ears, or for the souls of poets dead and gone, or for a daemon or god, or for a transcendental Something-I-know-not-what. In some communicative relations the language may be of a secret and special kind, unintelligible to outsiders. (Wheelwright 44)

Poetry has a natural sort of exclusivity because it is often difficult to understand and it is not a form of mass media. This is one significant reason why it has the integrity that it does. Often, poetry is crafted for an audience that is no longer a part of the real world, the "dead poets". Yet it is also written for deep thinkers who seek out poetry.

Similarly to Dalton's poetry, Steffler's does have a political ramification, even if it is unintentional or oblique:

Aristotle defines [rhetoric] as the art of inventing or finding proofs. Now poetry does not seek to prove anything at all: its project is mimetic; its aim ... is to compose an essential representation of human actions; its appropriate method is to speak the truth by means of fiction, fable, and tragic *mythos*. (Ricoeur 13)

The poetry of John Steffler does not aim at dismantling governments or even convincing people of anything in particular. However, through its devotion to accurate representation, it does engage in a political project. It challenges readers to view the world metaphorically through the eyes of "fiction, fable, and tragic *mythos*". When such a view is accepted the *status quo* is inevitably questioned. It is the nature of metaphor to undermine traditional representations of a place:

Book Rock

If all the used cooled blood gathered
in thick pools and became rock, organic
iron ore, and we mined it to forge steel,
then girders and rolled plate would
buzz dense with anecdote as limestone
walls – warm stone, bonestone – inside,
a humming saunter still carrying on (*Lookout 4*)

This poem imagines alternative realities. It does not try to convince but to represent the world through things. It is imagining new things: "bonestone" and "organic / iron ore".

Poetry produces the world as space and infuses the world with wonder:

It's a subtle kind of subversion obviously. I wouldn't suggest that poetry can literally hurl grenades, tear up the streets or put up barricades, but I think that yes, there is an impulse to undermine, to subvert, to question, inherent in a lot of poetry and most really good poetry. I think that's one of the great things poetry

brings into our culture and into our lives is that stirring up of norms, subversion of strategies. (*Appendix 23*)

By giving authentic representation of a space that goes outside of language and off all the maps, poetry makes a political statement.

John Steffler's poetry represents Newfoundland as space, "practiced place". He shows the wild parts of Newfoundland and makes them accessible to readers through metaphors. He does not set out to set down a static version of Newfoundland in his poetry because he knows that this is an impossible task. The world does not stand still for the artist to depict it as if it were a bowl of fruit. Try as we might to kill the world so that we can study it, the world evades our attempts. Steffler knows he cannot fully bridge the gap between things and the language used to describe them, but through his use of metaphor, he extends the bridge further into that which is not human. The moose proves to be a very effective metaphor for this living wilderness, defamiliarizing the reader from the world they think they have control over. Steffler allows (lauds) in the same way that Mary Dalton does, even if he is allowing different energies. Steffler allows the wilderness in his poetry. Wild things are celebrated in this poetry. Allowing that which is so often tamed or killed proves to be a subversive and powerful project.

Chapter 3

Practicing Place in Newfoundland Poetry: Michael Crummey

Like Dalton and Steffler, Michael Crummey writes tactical poetry. However, he is transferring energy from different spaces in Newfoundland than the other two poets. Dalton accesses the energy inherent in the language she grew up hearing. Steffler conducts energy from the wild parts of Newfoundland. Michael Crummey is presenting the emotional landscape of the Newfoundland that his parents grew up in. He considers language to be an important map, and like all maps, this map is full of imperfections. Despite its imperfections, Crummey is able to use language to conduct the energy from historical events into language. He does this by presenting Newfoundland as a series of spaces oriented by the actions occurring within them. Crummey's poetry is at its best when there is a common task or object being described. It is poetry that depicts daily things. He focuses on a handful of characters in his poems and pays very close attention to what they are doing and the complex emotional landscapes they inhabit. His poetry allows the energy of the past to exist in the present by way of language. While he is able to render parts of the world his ancestors lived in, he is still frustrated by the way that language falls short of capturing the energy of things. He can only gesture towards the past in his poetry. Michael Crummey uses metaphor to make these gestures. Like Steffler and Dalton, Crummey is a metaphorical thinker and he uses the energy of metaphor to echo the energy of the real world. All the while Crummey resists the administrative gestures of the gaze of the outsider, which seek to define and render Newfoundland cultural history manageable.

Crummey chooses not to gaze at his subject from afar. The images he presents are focused and the characters are depicted intimately. This sort of observation requires reading glasses and a magnifying glass. All three of his major collections of poetry begin with closeups. *Hard Light* and *Arguments with Gravity* both begin with careful reflections on his father's hands. *Salvage* begins with a reflection on two moths perched on a desk. This seems very intentional. Crummey is talking about his own technique as a poet just as much as he is discussing the technique of cleaning fish when he says, "How everything begins with technique / with simple repetition / the way the old masters learned" (*Gravity* 10). Crummey is honing his skill so that he can access this world that is only available to him through writing. He says, "A hundred times now I've traced / that life and still I have not / set down what makes it important" (10). In Crummey's poetry there is a constant reach towards the point where he can be called a literalist "of / the imagination" (Moore). Crummey has no illusions about being able to do that:

I think every writer I know really struggles with the gap between what they have in their head, what that looks like to them, and what ends up on the paper. There's always a phenomenal sense of failure there. And it's partly because every writer has their own shortcomings, but also language is an imperfect tool. The best you can do is to kind of point towards something and hope that the reader can see it.

(Appendix 38)

On his own, Crummey is only able to gesture towards the things in his imagination. He is gesturing towards the energy of real things and hoping that the power and significance of these things will be transmitted to the reader. This is especially true of the common practices of every day; they hold tremendous significance, but are often overlooked and

not easily transmitted into linguistic energy. The poem "Apprenticeships" is about Crumme's relationship with his father. Crumme finds it hard to understand the world of his father because they do not share the same experiences. Crumme struggles to find a point of entry into his father's experience in the conclusion to the poem which depicts the effortless way his father cleaned fish:

Something too obvious to be said simply
 refused to rise to the light of the words,
 something as ordinary, as perfectly
 proportioned as my father's hands
 growing old. (*Gravity 10*)

This quotation starts with Crumme expressing the frustration at not being able to access the world his father lived in. The last three lines are powerful because they focus on specific details, the hands that did the work of a fisherman. They admit the ordinariness of his father's hands, but they alert the reader to the fact that the well of emotions Crumme has for his father is accessed when he looks at the hands that have completed a lifetime of hard labour. He has identified the hands as the point of conduction and expressed "something too obvious to be said simply":

[W]hen I started out, there was this huge sense of the possibility of getting something down on paper that would capture it. So I've since realized how futile a notion that is, you can't capture it. You can't. But there are still moments when you sneak up on it. I still get a thrill out of that moment when you feel like you're almost there. (*Appendix 38*)

The hands offer up a thrill for the reader; they are something tangible that symbolize all the work that Crummeys father has done. As Crummeys invokes these aging hands in the final lines of this poem he is sneaking up on something real: the experiences of his father.

Crummeys knows that he can only transfer the energy of real things is if he is given the opportunity to receive the energy in the first place. Especially with his poetry he cannot force inspiration. He is not in a position of power, so he cannot use what de Certeau would call strategy:

A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper* (*Propre*) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, "clienteles," "targets," or "objects" of research). Political, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model. (de Certeau xix)

Crummeys is not in control of his surroundings, nor is he attempting to objectively study them. He is allowing energy to be conducted through his father's hands, not constructing something out of them. The energy in the poem is very firmly grounded in the energy that exists in the real world. Crummeys is like a nature photographer in a very wild setting. He needs to be alert and quick to catch the shots that are most affecting. He cannot set up the surroundings so that his poems will be more affecting. The adjustments must be made from his side. "I've never been able to plan poetry ... if I don't feel like writing it, if I don't have a poem in front of me, in my head, then it's a waste of time to sit down" (*Appendix 31*). He does not have control over how poetry comes about. As he has said, he can write poetry only if the inspiration is in place; he cannot force the words to come or create exciting poems out of sheer will. As with Dalton and Steffler, Crummeys's poetry is

tactical. De Certeau gives this example of how one operates tactically: “[in] the supermarket, the housewife confronts heterogeneous and mobile data - what she has in the refrigerator, the tastes, appetites, and moods of her guest, the best buys and their possible combinations with what she already has on hand at home, etc” (xix). Like the woman in the supermarket, Crummey must take into account many things that he has no control over and make the best decision so that the readers will see something similar to what he sees when he writes a poem. He is not manipulating his father’s hands or the surroundings that they are in. Instead he is manipulating his own use of language so that as much energy as possible is conducted.

The prose poem that comes before “32 Little Stories” in Crummey’s second collection *Hard Light* is called “Rust”. This poem also focuses on a father’s hands and “the world his hands carry with them like a barely discernible tattoo” (*Hard Light* 9). This is once again an example of Crummey accessing the energy of an unfamiliar space by using tactics. The hands are examples of Crummey engaging the world as a metaphorical thinker, of seeing the world as. William Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence” begins:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
 And Heaven in a Wild Flower;
 Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
 And Eternity in an hour. (Blake 209)

Like Blake, and indeed like most poets, Crummey exhorts his readers to look closely at all things. Leading by example, Crummey sees the world in his father’s hands. “The faint blue line of veins rivered across the backs, the knuckles like tiny furrowed hills on a plain. A moon rising at the tip of each finger” (*Hard Light* 9). This is the only power that

a tactical operator possesses. It is the power of his own mind to make do with the language that is available to him. Crumme focuses on the details of what he has before him. Through metaphor, the energy of these hands finds an echo in the natural world.

Once again, in the first poem of *Salvage*, Crumme carefully observes small things. Like Steffler, Crumme uses Lepidoptera as a very powerful metaphor for how mysterious and wild the world can be. "Apparatus" situates two moths on the margins of a piece of paper lit by a desk lamp "like components of some apparatus / ancient and esoteric as poetry" (*Salvage* 5). Even though these moths are very small, they are "ancient". Although they are "both so watchful they seem / almost inanimate", they also possess a tremendous power and energy:

Touch the paper and they're up
 storming the bare light,
 nearly translucent against the glass
 and fierce
 fierce (*Salvage* 5)

"Fierce" is an unlikely way to describe a moth, but, yes, that is the way a moth is when it is trapped. To borrow McKay's words, the moth eludes "the mind's appropriations" (*Fix à Fix* 27); it is wild. Crumme compares these wild creatures to poetry and positions them: "in the margins of the text / like components of some apparatus / ancient and esoteric as poetry" (*Salvage* 5). Like poetry, the moth is older than we can comprehend and really only accessible to a few who study it closely. This careful observation is the best way for a writer to leave the energy of his subject intact. Like Steffler, Crumme realizes that truly understanding something as mysterious as a moth necessitates observing it in motion. A spatial understanding of things means that it must be in motion, "storming the bare light". This is one of the great uses of poetry. It focuses on things

themselves. Crumney notes that with poetry "there's more specificity. You're looking at things from closer up. Sometimes, I think it is easier to get inside that one small thing at a time" (*Appendix 34*).

Michael Crumney ponders over this paradox of poetry showing things as both space and place at the same time:

In most cases, I'm writing about particular things that are specific in terms of their detail, so in that sense it would be space. I'm thinking about, I don't know, "Making the Fish". There's all sorts of things in *Hard Light* which are just about what kind of space people move in. What was their day like? How did they do this particular thing? But, on the other side of things, when I think about *Hard Light* as a collection, in a way that was kind of a map I was trying to make of that time. I was trying to see it whole, by collecting these individual pieces together in a way that gave a sense of the entirety of that community and some sense of that way of life. So maybe I was trying to have it both ways there, I'm not sure.
(*Appendix 40*)

Poetry allows for the flexibility required to show the things that are very close to the quick of Crumney's emotional life. To be genuine about what he represents, Crumney finds that he needs to focus on things that are detailed and use a large-scale map. However, a collection of his poetry allows him to cover a tremendous amount of territory as accurately as possible. In "The Uses of Poetry", Steffler writes, "[a]lthough language is a technology we invented for pinning down, analyzing and manipulating things, poetry ... tries to use language as though it is not a human technology but a natural

phenomenon" (Steffler *User* 20). Once again, this is only an attempt, but by undermining the tendencies of technology to distort the natural world, poetry (a technology) shows itself to be a bridge rather than a barrier between people and the natural world.

While Dalton and Steffler strive to render a living world into language, Crumney's self-appointed task is slightly different. He is attempting to revivify the spaces of the *past* and render them into language before he loses touch with that world that was opened up by the generations of his parents and grandparents:

Certainly with *Hard Light* I set out to write a book about a time and place that my father grew up in and that he watched disappear in his life time. He felt like a last living link to that way of life and to that world. I was very consciously deciding that I was going to get as much of that down on paper as I can before we don't have access to it any more or before it is gone completely. In that sense it was pure salvage. (*Appendix* 35)

Saving things from the past is central to Crumney's work. However, he is particular about how he does this. He is not doing the sort of salvaging where he is stealing things for his own benefit. He is trying to give his readers a living sense of the past. Crumney conducts the lively emotions that artifacts and photographs can trigger. He is attempting to preserve the emotional impact that the images would have on people who can instantly recognize what they are. He finds points of conduction, like his father's hands, where readers can see and feel the past in their own imaginations. As he notes, this attempt at saving vital elements from the past is a significant part of his collection *Hard Light*.

Crummey is not interested in getting only the raw facts “down on paper”, but the ecological view of history that these facts can show us.

“Her Mark” uses a will as point of entry into the past. This poem is based on the last will and testament of “Ellen Rose of Western Bay in the Dominion of Newfoundland” (*Hard Light* 53). This poem uses language that is far removed from a standard will, filled with legal jargon. It very beautifully describes what is to be done with “a meadow garden situated at Riverhead, bounded to the north and east by Loveys road and leading country wards. Bounded above by the sky, by the blue song of angels and God’s stars” (53). Crummey is not Ellen’s biographer. He is interested in the specific legacy that Ellen Rose’s life has left, not an exhaustive list of the biographical details of her life. This legacy cannot be measured by what she leaves behind, because almost everything she had has disappeared. Ellen did not write and left only “her mark”. Crummey conveys the poignancy of a long life that leaves behind almost no written record. “Every word I have spoken the wind has taken, as it will take me” (53). He realizes, too, the futility of pursuing immortality through written words, even in people’s imaginations. “The day will come when we are not remembered, I have wasted no part of my life in trying to make it otherwise” (53). Crummey has this to say about the poem:

In fact, some time in the future we are all going to be forgotten. So, it’s kind of an acknowledgment that this whole project is flawed and doomed. But for me, my human impulse is to carry on any way even though I know how much is getting through the net, to say as much as I can say as well as I can say it, even though I know I’m failing. (*Appendix 43*)

The self-awareness in these comments is very affecting. Crummey acknowledges that language cannot completely account for someone's life. Crummey's poem only allows for some brief moments of Ellen's full life, yet Crummey sees this "failure" as all the more reason for him to carry on with his task of honouring his ancestors through writing. The poem evokes sadness at the almost undocumented life of Ellen Rose, but it also celebrates her life and shows her full of energy and wisdom.

Arguments With Gravity is Crummey's first collection of poetry. In this collection, Crummey explores the significance of common objects in various different ways. Crummey's second section "One of the Lives I Have Not Lived" begins with a quote from Al Purdy: "— to see everything and to realize the best and worst / of everything / is to love and not forget" (*Arguments* 27). Memory and love lie close to the heart of all of Crummey's poetry, especially when they deal with the love Crummey expresses for his family, which is what the poems in this section are about. Notable in this section are two sets of companion poems. There are two poems called "Cigarettes" and two poems called "Cod". In all four of these poems Crummey is using everyday objects as mnemonic triggers and symbols for events in his family's history. "Cod (1)" and "Cod (2)" deal with success and failure in fishing. "Cod (1)" depicts the times when fish are plentiful. "Some days the nets came up so full / there was enough cod to swamp the boats" (31). "Cod (2)" is the exact opposite. "There are no cod in the whole frigging ocean" (32). When cod were abundant villages thrived. The work was hard but living was relatively easy. Yet, the consistency of the fish supply was never certain. Sometimes the cod would be absent for years at a time and people would starve. Crummey chooses not to capture these conflicting images of abundance and scarcity in one poem. All the while,

Crummey shows specific images: "the silver-grey bodies of the fish rippling / like the surface of a lake" (31) or "the size of the fish years ago / big around as your thigh, / the thick shiver of their bodies / coming up in the cod traps" (32). Cod in abundance and in scarcity are both points, nodes where Crummey can access the way of life his ancestors lived. Although cod were the most daily of things in Newfoundland's history they still possess energy that Crummey transfers into language.

Both of the poems titled "Cigarettes" deal with loss, death and the associations that Crummey's father made between loss and smoking. "Cigarettes (1)" is a strong opening to the section dealing with the death of Crummey's grandfather. In this poem, we see Crummey's father reminiscing at the grandfather's death bed. The hard work of fishing is juxtaposed with the combination of guilt and pleasure associated with having a cigarette. Crummey depicts the action of jigging for cod: "repeating the rhythmic full-arm jig / as if they were unsuccessfully trying to / start an engine" (28). On the lunch break the grandfather "hid beneath a coat to give his son / a chance to sneak a cigarette" (28). When the grandfather asks for what would be his last cigarette, Crummey's father replies that "he had no cigarette to give him / which happened to be the truth, and felt like / a lie to them both" (29). That final smoke is something they are reaching for, but will not be able to grasp. "Cigarettes (2)" has Crummey himself sitting with his own aging father. It ends with this stanza:

Still, I have only a vague idea of what's been lost:
 my father is surrounded by more than
 the simple absence I can see here
 a life he's not quite finished with going on
 just beyond what he's able to touch
 like the impossible ache of a phantom limb
 or that craving, the automatic fumbling for

the cigarette pack he's forgotten is
no longer there (40)

Cigarettes have become a very effective metaphor for describing the craving that these men have at the end of their lives. "[T]he automatic fumbling" will not stop as the old man comes to terms with the fact that his habit of living will soon reach an end. It is an extremely poignant image of a man at the end of his life reaching out to satisfy this craving and not finding satisfaction. Once again we see that Crumme's poetry is grounded in the specific and accessing the living world of the past through daily things like cigarettes or cod. Daily objects act as conductors through which Crumme can transmit energy from the past. He bears witness to his ancestors and honours them by evoking even the most common of objects.

The form of *Hard Light* gives Crumme all the flexibility he needs to conjure up moments from the past. He is not working with a set form. Finding a vocabulary to describe exactly what *Hard Light* is, is not an easy task because, like *the Grey Islands*, this is a collection of many different things including prose poetry, lyric poetry, journal entries, statistics and photographs. They are connected thematically, but they do not create a narrative arch like a novel does. Even within the three sections that make up this book there is no sense that this could be anything but a collage. The stories that the collection tells complement and overlap one another. Max Black talks about the way language means in his work *The Labyrinth of Language*. "Even at its most lucid, discourse is inescapably linear, doling out scraps of meaning in a fragile thread. But significant thought is seldom linear: cross references and overlapping relationships must be left for the good reader to tease out by himself" (Black *Labyrinth* 17). Whatever one

calls *Hard Light* (be it long poem, short story collection or something more malleable like mosaic or collage) there is little doubt that it is ambitious in its aims at depicting the emotional landscape of the past. It has profoundly "overlapping relationships" and it is certainly demanding of any reader to parse out the many lines of narrative that intersect. It is "significant thought" on Newfoundland history. He is not documenting, but revivifying parts of Newfoundland history.

In each of the three sections of this book, "32 Little Stories", "Discovering Darkness" and "A Map of the Islands", Crumney shines his illuminating spotlight at a moving subject. Towards the end of "Discovering Darkness", which is based on the diary of Captain John Froude, the speaker observes:

The speed of light exceeds
 eleven million miles a minute,
 it travels through space
 for thousands of years after
 its star has collapsed;
 it is possible
 that all my life I have
 taken my mark by
 a body that does not exist. (*Hard Light* 98)

All of the poems in this book admit this possibility of pointing towards things that are no longer there. Things are not always what they seem, but we must still make do with the information we have. This is the nature of operating in a tactical fashion. When Crumney observes that Froude could very well be taking his mark from a dead star, he is not only talking about a literal star. He is talking about the points of reference that are used as guides. Crumney draws into question the things that are so often taken for granted and points out the shortcomings of signs. Sometimes the signs we use to perceive the world

are misleading. "Other than pointing and hoping, there are no rules, no algorithms, by which human perception of a gestalt may be facilitated" (Zwicky *Metaphor* Left 117). Crummey has the added task of attempting to facilitate complete perception based only on stories told by his family and historical documents. Zwicky also notes that "[t]he meaning of what-is is the live, metaphorical relation between things and the resonant structure of the world" (Zwicky *Metaphor* Left 86). Crummey allows the energy of the things he depicts to be reflected in the metaphorical thinking he does.

Metaphor is one way that language of imagination can begin to produce space. To create accurate, lively representations of the past, Crummey relies on – to borrow McKay's sense of the term once more – "betweenity" ("Speaker's Chair" 3). He becomes comfortable in the spaces where language can mean multiple things simultaneously. He becomes comfortable in the spaces between things and the language used to represent those things. "Neither mind nor language can exist or be conceived entirely apart from the object, the Otherness, which the mind implicitly seeks and which the language problematically signifies" (Wheelwright *Metaphor and Reality* 153). While we can admit the problems of language, what is perhaps more helpful is to see how language succeeds when metaphorical thinking is employed. The poet is trying to bring "the object, the Otherness" into the realm of "language". By inviting betweenity, Crummey allows the essence of objects to be transferred into language.

Crummey often uses cemeteries as settings for his poems. In these poems, cemeteries are spaces that hold a lot of significance and connect Crummey to his past. The poem "Loom" reinvigorates the metaphor that describes a person as being "cut from the same cloth" as his or her ancestors. This is a reasonably common metaphor describing

the way in which members of the family can be unique, but still share a deep commonality with the other members, like two different items of clothing made from the same cloth. Crumney enriches the metaphor by placing his speaker in a graveyard full of his ancestors. In the poem, the graveyard and the people buried there are the cloth that the speaker is cut from:

The meadow grass hemming
the gravesites is coarse as raw wool,
thickets of dry thistle
stand like needles clustered
in a pincushion; overhead
a shoddy bolt of cloud
gone ragged at the edges. (Salvoje 72)

In much the way that metaphysical poets do, Crumney uses this tailoring metaphor as his conceit for this poem. Even the flesh on the bodies in the graveyard is described as clothes: "Such slow undressing – / bones divested of flesh" (72). It is ragged, rough cloth that the speaker is cut from in this poem. There are two terms to this metaphor, tailoring clothes and raising a person. It is fairly easy to understand the steps that go into making clothes, but the development of a human being in relationship to his family and community is quite a bit more complex. Crumney uses the energy produced by the interaction of the terms of the metaphor to talk about familial love. "Even the love I bear these strangers / is makeshift, threadbare, fashioned by necessity" (73). Love is an intangible thing. Crumney uses metaphor to make it slightly more manageable in the world of the imagination. Metaphor echoes the energy of the real world so that when Crumney describes love as "threadbare" his readers have some idea of what this means.

Wheelwright's book *Metaphor and Reality* discusses how language must be manipulated to represent reality. "Perhaps truth, like certain precious metals, is presented

best in alloys. In that case the way forward will be through a guided succession of tentative errors" (*Wheelwright Metaphor and Reality* 173). This passage describes the process that Crummev goes through as he attempts to set "things down on paper" (*Salvage* 1). All three of his collections of poetry are hybrid attempts at presenting something from the real world. They admit that no one poem can capture any more than an isolated moment. Crummev strings his poems together so that they do form an "alloy" where the attributes of each individual poem add to the properties of the whole collection. This is particularly the case with *Hard Light*. John Steffler writes of this work, "[a]s a writer, Crummev approaches characters not as isolated individuals but as beings whose identities are inseparable from their landscape and culture; and culture for him is inseparable from the work people do, inseparable from the tools and routines they have devised to exploit the resources and ward off the dangers in the places where they live" (Steffler "A Piece of Hard Light"). In "32 Little Stories" four elements (four sections), "Water", "Earth", "Fire" and "Air", all come together like an alloy to create a stronger, more useful picture than could otherwise exist.

One of the most common types of metaphor that Crummev uses is navigational metaphors. Perhaps the most important of these is the understanding of poetry or even language in general as a map. The final section of *Hard Light* is dedicated to this metaphor. He says of maps:

I think the reason that I was so interested in it is because maps are a kind of language and maps are fraught in the same kind of ways that language is fraught. They give the impression of being the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, when in fact they're just one take on the world and that someone else's map

of the same location often is completely different and I was very aware during that trip of how many different cultures and societies had existed in what appeared to be this completely uninhabited land. (Appendix 42)

Crummey begins this section of the book with epigraphs from two books that deal with maps. One is *The Power of Maps* by Denis Wood, the other is *How to Lie with Maps* by Mark Monmonier. While both of these books show that maps have many important uses, they also emphasize that maps are very easily manipulated. They have many of the same inadequacies that spoken language does. They are also skewed by the map maker.

Monmonier writes, "[i]n showing how to lie with maps, I want to make readers aware that maps, like speeches and paintings, are authored collections of information and also are subject to distortions arising from ignorance, greed, ideological blindness, or malice" (Monmonier 2). Crummey also shows an awareness of his own ability to skew the details he is representing. Monmonier describes the cartographer's paradox: "to present a useful and truthful picture, an accurate map must tell white lies" (1). The same is true of the poet. He must present as truthful a picture as possible, but often there are omissions that must be made.

"Cain" tells the story of two brothers, one of whom is Crummey's father. The two brothers are in some sort of a dispute, and Crummey's father stabs his brother in the leg with a pocket knife. There are several details that are clear and vivid: "a dark spatter of blood on his fist, / the three inch blade in the leg coming out clean" (*Hard Light* 116) or the look of the brother, "bug-eyed as a cod jigged into a dory" (116). Yet there is also the

admission that parts of the story have changed over time because of the shock at being able to commit such an act:

But it's the brother he identifies with now,
 the boy with the knife so far behind him
 that he can only marvel at the darkness
 and how quickly it swamped him,
 his face caught on the same hooked-fish
 look of incomprehension when he reaches
 the part about lunging for the thigh
 and stabbing...
 as if someone he thought
 he could trust had turned on him,
 as if he had been the one with
 his back to the knife when
 the blade struck home. (116)

Memory has emphasized some of the events. Nobody in this poem can remember what caused the incident in the first place. Instead, it is the incident itself (the spatter of blood, and the shock of the stabbing) that are brought to the forefront. To capture the most important part of this encounter, Crummeley selects the most vivid parts of the story and lets some of the other details fall away. These omissions are white lies that help to focus the poem on the most energetic parts of what it depicts.

Hand in hand with mapping is naming. Crummeley's poem "Naming the Islands" lists many of the notable names of Newfoundland and Labrador. The poem lists names under several different headings. Through the use of these subtitles Crummeley is able to make some very important comments on the names in a very concise and witty fashion. The section "No Comment Necessary" lists names which quite accurately, and without elaboration, describe the place they name. "Island of Ponds, Bay of Islands" (*Hard Light* 107). The next subsection, "You'll Know It When You See It" works in a similar way. It features names such as "Conical Island", "Spear Head" and "Table Island, Square Island,

Narrow Island" (107). Both of these sections present names as fairly accurate tools for talking about something specific, but they marginalize many details. These names are essentially caricatures of the places they name. They emphasize the most obvious features of the area they are naming and use those as the unifying feature of the place, like a drawing of Napoleon which highlights his big head and small stature. While this method of naming is not particularly misleading, it does oversimplify the place. Even these fairly accurate names fall short of communicating the essence of the island or bay they name as a space. However, in the other subsections of this poem, Crummev shows that names can tell bigger lies than lies of omission.

The section "*Mostly Wishful Thinking*" highlights names that are misleading. "Comfort Bight, New York Bay, / Paradise" (107). While some people may consider "Paradise" to be just that, it is far from what would commonly be described as a paradise. This suburb of St. John's is regularly pummeled by the same crippling winds, rain, sleet, fog and snow that the city is. If a paradise is somewhere people can live off the land with relatively little effort, like the Garden of Eden, then this town certainly is not it. Similarly, "New York Bay" has almost nothing to do with the city of New York and "Comfort Bight" is a particularly isolated area in Labrador. Each of the names in this section is laced with a dose of irony when it is categorized by the author. The names are points of entrance for Crummev. He pokes fun at their fallibility, but like all caricatures, he takes the time to poke fun at these names only because they are important to the people who know them. This poem shows Crummev's awareness of the inadequacy and humour of names. Crummev knows that names are unable to transfer all of the energy of

a space and is constantly reaching beyond names to give more accurate and lively representations of spaces.

The poem "Kissing the Dead: A Disclaimer" acts as a sort of epigraph. In this poem Crummev once again shows that he wants to represent the world as accurately and richly as possible. The poem questions what the point of writing is, given all the possibilities for failure inherent in representing anything using language that has no choice but to tell lies:

What was the point of that?
 she wants to know,
 and he can't fashion a sensible answer
 or shake the feeling he's just
 setting things down on paper
 to leave them there
 gaping like potholes (*Salvage 1*).

Crummev is extremely self-reflexive and critical of his role as a poet. This aspect of his voice is demonstrated in this quotation. He is asking one of the most haunting questions that writers ever ask: "What was the point of that?" Crummev has set out to make a world of memory and imagination into something tangible through his writing, but he knows that he cannot fully succeed. Despite his most vigorous attempts at "setting things down on paper", there is still something missing from his poems. He is not yet a literalist "of / the imagination" (Moore), but his writing still has a "point". He is at least showing the potholes and drawing attention to the imperfections of writing. Margaret Avison's Pascal Lectures delivered in 1993 are entitled "Misunderstanding is Damaging" and "Understanding is Costly". If we cannot arrive at understanding, and perhaps nobody ever does through language, we are at least obliged to limit the damage of

misunderstanding. Crummey admits he is not able to fill in the potholes, but is mistaken if he thinks that pointing them out is useless.

The notion of pointing out the potholes in our understanding is helpful when we ask what poetry is doing and how it does it. If writing literature is like mapmaking, then poetry is a specific kind of map. The difference between prose fiction and poetry is generally a difference of scale. With poetry "you look at things from closer up" (Appendix 34). The scale of the map is much larger, allowing more attention to be paid to each detail. Of course this has the disadvantage that these closeups can often seem out of context. But like any system of maps, language needs to have the ability to zoom in and out of its depictions of the world. Monmonier writes, "in the sense that all maps tell white lies about the planet, small-scale maps have a smaller capacity for truth than large-scale maps" (Monmonier 6). A small-scale map is a map that represents a huge amount of actual area using a small map. A large-scale map would use the same size of map, but represent much less actual space. Individual poems allow for the same sorts of detail that large-scale maps do. They resist administration because they show the unique details of what they depict. However, when we begin to piece them together, they begin to exhibit some of the advantages of small-scale maps. As collections, poems show the shapes of communities and not just individuals. This is de Certeau's distinction between space and place. To understand a community, we need to look at it as both space and place, yet the poet always seems to emphasize looking at things as space. While poetry imagines a community as space, reading many poems together gives a smaller scale map.

Like Steffler and Dalton, Crummey does not intentionally set out to create a political change with regards to how Newfoundland is depicted in literature. However,

this is one major benefit to the authentic glimpses of Newfoundland culture that Crummev gives his readers. He is not particularly concerned about the way Newfoundland is represented in literature by people not from Newfoundland. While some people are very opposed to *The Shipping News*, claiming that it misrepresents Newfoundland, Crummev is not so vehemently opposed to the book. He sees it as a Gothic novel that just so happens to be set in Newfoundland. "She's [Annie Proulx] a Gothic writer, so her depiction of Newfoundland is a Gothic depiction of Newfoundland and anyone coming here looking for that place is out of their mind. But her depiction of the United States is just as Gothic." (*Appendix 33*). He does take some exception to another novel called *The Bird Artist* by Howard Norman. This novel claims to be set in Newfoundland, but disregards many parts of the culture that do not fit into the story. Newfoundland was made to fit the story. For instance, "[h]e has a Beothuk Indian driving the mail boat. So to me that's not giving any respect to the culture that you are cherry picking from" (*Appendix 33*). Crummev is not strongly opposed to this novel, nor does he think that it is a bad or particularly damaging novel. He thinks that it is disrespectful to Newfoundland culture. Meanwhile, Crummev works hard to get it right in his own work.

Far from creating a fictional Newfoundland that fits the sorts of poems and stories that he wants to write, Crummev looks closely at what is in the culture already. He does all that he can to represent these things accurately, thus breaking the spell of misrepresentation. The poem "Fog City" is an example of this. It does not distort the realities of the way of life in St. John's. It takes a pair of relatively mundane images and combines them to create quite a beautiful image. The speaker is "Running the Quiddi Vidi loop in mauzy weather, / alone on the trail but for the vague outline of a retriever trotting

ahead" (*Salvage* 32). Across the lake, this runner observes a ball game in progress, "blunted *chink* of the metal bat making contact" (32). The images are clear and instantly conjure up something familiar. It is almost certain that this speaker is Crummev and that this poem is something that he observed on a run. He is present in this moment. He gives us the image of the recreational ball player in the outfield trying to catch the fly ball:

and I can feel the contours of
his solitude clear across the lake,
a loneliness made worse by company,
by the encouragement of others (32).

This poem does a fine job of finding something engaging in a relatively mundane situation. Crummev makes a real connection with the outfielder. This poem shows Crummev in his role as a conductor of energy from the real world into poetry.

Part of the controversy that Crummev and indeed most writers are a part of is the issue of who is allowed to speak to and for certain experiences. A certain amount of damage can certainly be done when an author takes on the voice of a group that s/he is not a part of and misrepresents them. However, empathy is also an extremely important part of good writing. Crummev approaches the representation of groups to which he does not belong from a position of empathy. When he takes on a voice of a character, he is respectful of that character. He is especially careful with his depiction of women:

I have always been interested in women and I have always been aware that their experience with the world is different from mine and I've always been interested in that difference. How do they see the world? What is their experience? And the writer in me, long before I ever knew I wanted to write, has been taking notes.

(*Appendix* 43)

One of the prose poems where his depiction is particularly poignant is "Bread". This poem is from a young woman's point of view and the first part of it depicts the loss of her first child. She is married to an older man who has to work in the Labrador. Despite the poignant opening of this prose poem, this is a story about love finding a way to exist through hardships. In the first paragraph the husband says, "[t]wo people should never say the word love before they've eaten a sack of flour together". These are the words of a man who has been hurt and does not want to give his love away too freely. After the loss of the first child we're told "I was pregnant again by November. I baked a loaf of bread and brought it to the table, still steaming from the oven. ...That's the last of that bag of flour, I told him" (*Hard Light* 27). The love has survived their first bag of flour. While this poem could have been written from the man's point of view Crumme specifically chooses to tell the woman's story. This is another piece of the map that helps to give us a living picture of the past.

It's not only women that Crumme speaks through. He makes a conscious effort to create books that are as polyphonic as possible:

Hard Light, I think, is an exercise in the appropriation of voice, the whole book.

One review of that book said that it was a book that the author is almost completely absent from. I really liked that because my whole plan was to speak in the voices of other people and for me not to be there as much as possible.

(Appendix 41)

Perhaps the only time that Crumme speaks in his own voice throughout that book is in the very first poem, "Rust". The rest are poems that look to the past. He appropriates the voices of many people who have died and cannot speak any longer. While this is a

dangerous thing to do because he could misrepresent any number of the people he writes about, Crummey honours them throughout this book. Tim Lilburn writes, "[t]he gaze is best, most authentic, when rooted in a posture of deference and attention. This stance must be cultivated. Such cultivation is asceticism and it is one with knowing. It involves submitting to be disarmed and taking on the silence of things, the marginality and anonymity of grass, sage, lichen, things never properly seen" (Lilburn 22). Just as Steffler takes on the silence of the land, so Crummey takes on the silence of characters that are now gone. Crummey considers this extreme empathy to be the greatest success of *Hard Light*, a collection which many consider to be his best book.

Just as his ancestors worked hard to survive in Newfoundland's harsh environment, so Crummey works hard to depict and honour that culture. Despite the imperfections of language as it attempts to render the energy of this world into language, Crummey does as much as he can to carry on the cultural legacy of his parents and grandparents. "I don't know how much of a culture carries through ... I think we carry more of it than I ever considered possible, that cultural legacy, even after the physical conditions that created the culture are gone that cultural legacy carries on" (*Apyewfik* 35). In his poetry, Crummey depicts the spaces of his ancestors' cultural legacy. He uses large scale maps to focus on specific moments so that he can be as accurate and precise as possible. Through awareness of his own fallibility, Crummey limits the damage that his own misunderstanding does. He knows that he can only really honour very small things like his father's hands or Ellen's mark on a will. This is why his depictions of Newfoundland sound with such authenticity. Like Steffler and Dalton, Crummey is depicting a large picture of Newfoundland culture, but he constructs this collage/map by

creating many small pictures of the places he is connected to. This is an inadvertently political move that claims his culture as his own. By practicing place, the truest ontological understanding of Newfoundland is made possible.

Afterword

These three poets are fascinated with different sorts of energy and yet, they transmit this energy in very similar ways. The first step that each of these poets takes is to approach the world with wonder: "a stilling of the normal associative restlessness of the mind" (Greenblatt 20). They approach the world with an open mind and a willingness to see what is actually there. They are allowing (lauding) the energy of all things in their poetry and attempting to transmit this energy from the physical world into the world of the imagination. In the terms of Michel de Certeau these poets see Newfoundland as a "space". This space can only be seen when the movement and energy within it are taken into account. As these poets emphasize Newfoundland as a space they resist the administrative gestures that seeing Newfoundland as "place" implies. The maps they make of Newfoundland are dynamic and large-scale: transmitting energy from language as it is spoken, the natural world as it exists and history as it was lived. While entire collections of their poems can depict many characters and images to create a collage that speaks volumes about Newfoundland, individual poems focus on the specific.

The most effective way that these poets have of allowing the energy of things to be transmitted into the energy of the imagination is through the use of metaphor. Like Don McKay these poets "champion a different, more flexible mode of thinking, one that – to put it broadly – puts 'both/and' into play alongside 'either/or.' The inclusive brand name I've attached to this project is 'betweenity', by which I mean not compromise, but the inclusion of both terms along with the energy of their interaction" ("Speaker's Chair" 3-4). These poets use the energy created from metaphor to mimic the energy of the real

world. They thrust their readers into a state of betweenity. This is a place where the real and imagined are side by side. It is "a place for the genuine" (Moore).

...In the meantime, if you demand on one hand,
the raw material of poetry in
all its rawness and
that which is on the other hand
genuine, then you are interested in poetry. (Moore)

Poetry's most important strength is that it allows the energy of the real world. Poetry conducts a particularly raw energy from the real world into an imagined one. Dalton, Steffler and Crumney produce genuine, energetic spaces in Newfoundland. They "practice place" and by doing this they honour the dialects, wilderness and history of Newfoundland.

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Poems First

Mike Minor and Mary Dalton in Conversation – 11 December 2009

MM: I'm joined in conversation today by Newfoundland poet Mary Dalton. She has four major collections of published poetry, as well as many poems published in scholarly journals in Canada and around the world. She has read her poetry internationally and often at home as well. She is a professor here at Memorial University in the Department of English. I'm tremendously pleased to have her here as part of research that I'm doing and also as a chance to let her chime in on some of the different issues that have been raised about her writing throughout the years that she has been writing and publishing poetry.

Her most recent collection of poetry (major collection that is) is *Red Ledger*. And in some ways this fourth collection has come full circle. It features several poems that you have published in previous collections or scholarly journals. There is a particularly good representation of poems from your first collection of poems that came out, *The Time of Icicles*. Why have you chosen to publish these poems again?

MD: It's good to have a chance to talk about that, Mike. About twelve poems out of sixty-odd poems (I haven't counted recently), but when the book was coming into being I was conscious of this. This wasn't my choice; this was my editor's choice. His thinking was that some of the poems in *The Time of Icicles* he thought were very strong poems, he liked very much. And it was his notion that perhaps *The Time of Icicles* hadn't had the kind of national exposure that *Merrybegot* had had with the press he edited for, Vehicule Press, so he chose poems that he wanted to be in this book, *Red Ledger*, that he thought fitted thematically and that were technically strong. And in most cases I didn't object. We did have a bit of a tussle, however, over a couple of poems, because of course one isn't set in time. One's sensibility develops and changes. So there were a couple of poems that I was really resisting reprinting, because my sense was that the perspective in the poem was in some way limited, as I saw it now. Finally, wanting to reach a compromise, I suggested to the editor that I would let him print those poems if I could include companion poems. "Backhome Blues" is one such poem. In an interview in *Books in Canada* I had commented on my sense of the limitations of that poem – in its vision. I'm not speaking about technical aspects here. I'm glad to see it in *Red Ledger* now, only because it generated the companion poem "Backhome Blues: Another Tune", which is a kind of rebuttal; it's a kind of rejoinder. It's as if you have two speakers, each in the different poem.

MM: I noticed some very subtle changes in the second printing. "Backhome Blues" is almost identical to the way it appeared with some capitalization and things changing. But there is a difference in the poem "What Sort of Woman Would You Fancy, Nelson", that I thought was quite interesting: the addition of, well, it's almost an epigraph at the start of the poem. It says "For Jazz Piano". Why have you made some of these small changes in your work?

MD: Well, I think that small changes can be matters of technique. Here I think that

what I'm doing in that dedication is foregrounding what the nature of that poem was for me in any case, which was creating a kind of free-form improvisation, a jazz-like movement. It is also a tribute to a very fine piano player. I think of Auden though, for whom a poem very often seemed not to have been finished. Writers often make changes because they see that one word might work a bit better if they changed it. I think of Paul Durcan, the Irish poet, who has given me copies of his books from time to time. In the books he often crosses out a word when he has decided that a new word might be better.

MM: I'm interested in those changes, but I'm also wondering, whether the actual words of the poem change or not, do you find that time changes the poem? Do they feel different to you now reading them in *Red Ledger* than a poem that has the same words in it did in *The Time of Icticles*?

MD: As I say, unless I had particular difficulties, I don't think so. I liked this poem ["What Sort of Woman Would You Fancy, Nelson?"] when I wrote it. I felt I had captured a certain kind of music and certain kind of quality that I jokingly call *machisms*, in some interview somewhere. It's a kind of Cathy Jones's Babe Bennett; it's a kind of Mae West voice in this. It feels the same to me. It worked then and it works now, you know? Another one I wanted to write a companion piece to — not because I felt that the first poem was somehow limited — but I just thought a companion piece would work well was the poem "Lies for the Tourists", in which I mock sets of stereotypes about how perfect Newfoundland is. That's fine to mock Newfoundland stereotypes, but then I thought a companion piece called in here "Lies For the Newfoundlanders, The Labradorians" could have a go at mocking less than generous spirited notions that other Canadians have articulated about Newfoundlanders. So it was to counterbalance "Lies for the Tourists".

MM: And I think that seems to be largely a project that you are working on here. You were much younger when you were writing *The Time of Icticles* and usually people say with age comes wisdom and a balance perhaps. So many of these poems seem to be bouncing off each other. Whereas you have "Backhome Blues" presenting one sort of an opinion, one sort of a tune, now you're looking for ways to see it from another angle, to express another voice besides earlier ones.

MD: Well, "Backhome Blues" has an authenticity and a coherent music, I think. It is an authentic expression of a feeling that someone can have when observing changes not all for the good to one's community. If I thought it was an absolutely simple-minded and weak poem it would not be in the book. As I say, it's a matter of taking a longer historical view. I think that's what happens with those two sets of poems.

MM: These don't necessarily negate each other. They're not saying, "what I said before was wrong". It's "another tune", another way of looking at things. They're just saying that this is also a possibility. This is also authentic in the same way. I think that this does credit to some of these earlier poems to say that, you know, this still holds true and this still has a resonance and a need to be discussed, even if from a different point of view later on.

MD: I wouldn't say, though, that the book comes full circle, because, as I say, the set

of poems in there from *The Time of Icicles* is a small percentage and my editor wanted them. That's a whole other aspect of the book. I think that sometimes when we read a book, we don't think about the interaction between author and editor. I should say that my editor's judgments often prove to be right, but we of course have to have our conversation about these matters.

MM: No book comes to being in one person's imagination. I think it's also true that the work is never done. That's the sense that I'm getting. You know the old story about the writer — I'm not sure if this is attributed to someone specific — but the writer who spends the morning deciding to take out the comma and the afternoon putting it back in. That's the sense that I got looking at these poems printed a second time. The changes are very subtle and imperceptible, but there had very clearly been a significant amount of thought put into deciding whether you are going to capitalize the first letter of the line or not. Or whether it is a comma or a period or a semicolon or whatever the case may be. I think it shows that the poem continues to live.

MD: In at least one place changes had been made because there had been an error introduced in the original printing of the poem, so that lineation had been altered. The thing is that it's hard to generalize because every poem has its adjustments for different reasons.

MM: Well, let's move on then. Or, I guess, backwards in time by three or four years, to your book *Merrybegor* which was very well received and won several awards. It also appears in several different forms. It appears as the *Véhicule* publication and a chapbook by *Running the Goat*, which was the first to appear.

MD: With about a dozen of the poems.

MM: So it was significantly smaller, by no means the complete work.

MD: It was a chapbook, yes.

MM: Then there is the *Rattling Books* version, the audiobook with trumpet, flugelhorn, and song included. How do you feel about the recording as compared to the written versions of the book? Are they terribly different for you when you go back and look at them?

MD: Well, no, I'm not sure that I've done a lot of comparing. I'm listening to other people's CD's more than my own. You know, Anita Best has a very beautiful voice and I like the playfulness of Pat Boyle's use of the flugelhorn and the trumpet. What I especially like about the audiobook is the wonderful renditions of two of the poems. Anita has made songs of them; she sings them as well as reads them. You know, that's a very gratifying thing for someone who's interested in the musicality of language. To actually have one's poem take flight in the voice of someone like Anita, you know, actually become a song. I enjoyed that. Obviously, these are different mediums. You can drive along listening in your car to the audiobook. But the relation between lyric poem and song, of course, is complicated. The musicality of a poem has to be in the words. In a song the musicality doesn't have to be in the words. There's the melody. You've got that whole layer. You think of some songs that just

have one phrase repeated.

MM: Well, some of the oldest songs are one sentence repeated over extended periods of time, like bits of the mass.

MD: You're thinking of the polyphony.

MM: I'm also curious to know your opinions of Anita's choice to sing those two songs. Is there something specific about "Old Holly" and "The Waterman" that makes them prime candidates to be turned into a song?

MD: I can't speak for Anita of course, but I think it's just that those two appeal to her and, by whatever mysterious alchemy these things happen, a melody came to her. I could say that maybe with "Old Holly" and with "The Waterman", there's a folkloric element in both of them, even though the folkloric element in "The Waterman" is fiction; this is entirely an invention of mine. And there's a kind of haunting quality that Anita likes, I believe. I observe this in some of the songs she chooses, but this is purely my impressionistic response.

MM: Now, something else that's an integral part of *Merrybegor* is its relationship to language and its depiction of language. Do you think that poetry as a medium is an effective way to examine language and look at the colloquialisms within language?

MD: Some people say...who says that "poetry is the best words in the best order"? It's a big question, Mike. It's a good medium for any sort of exploration of language or the rendering of the poetry of colloquialisms, of the vernacular, if that vernacular is extremely vivid or extremely rich in metaphors. There is a natural relation because poetry lives by image; it lives by vivid and striking metaphors. So it's possible to render that sort of speech without going against the grain of what poems do. But ultimately, it's the mind; it's the technique of shaping of the individual artist of any poem. It's not that there are some language aspects that are more conducive to poetry or not. I don't know if it seems I'm going back on it, I'm just saying that colloquial materials can work. They can also be absolutely awfully used. They can be used in absolutely stereotypical ways and they can be used so that the living rhythms of speech are drained right out of them. Or they can be used so that it just seems like a sociological document. The poetry aspects that exist are set up in the lines; in the relations of the lines to one another.

MM: I don't think we can ask you to speak, necessarily, for poetry.

MD: I sure can't speak for poetry. *(laughs)*

MM: You can speak for the way in which you write poetry.

MD: For my understanding of what it is I think I'm doing. And even then, you know there is an intuitive moment and there is a grounded-in-the-moment element. Here I'm being analytical and that is what I do in one area of my life. However, it's the same as if you're getting painters to talk about what they do when they make a painting. They're in a very different state of being when they make a painting than when they

talk about the making of it.

MM: I'll try to rephrase the question a little bit. Do you find that colloquial speech you hear, when you're at your home or walking downtown St. John's, do you feel that you can transform that into poetry more easily than you could turn it into, say, a short story?

MD: The poem is what I want to write, and what I get extreme enjoyment, aesthetic satisfaction, out of, so I want to be marshaling language in lines. Do I transform it into poetry? I guess that's for the critics to decide. *Merrybegot* in particular draws on the energies of living language, and "living language" I would emphasize. Some reviewers overemphasize the importance of the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* in the making of *Merrybegot* because in an interview at some point I did talk about this and because I have a note at the back of the book acknowledging the importance of the dictionary. However, I do emphasize in the note as well as elsewhere that it is a living language that I am working with and not a language that is enshrined in the dictionary. What interested me about the dictionary citations was the fact that this was so vividly alive. I am a bookish person and the paradox is that in a sense the book took me back to the oral, so the materials in *Merrybegot* are drawn from speech, but they are shaped, many of them are fictions. I think that the particular tension is that this is a speech that is not standard speech; this is a vocabulary that is not a standard vocabulary. But the same types of questions need to be asked when you are using a standard vocabulary; the same kinds of shapings have to go on. It's just because this is a strange, raw material for people that are outside Newfoundland, maybe, that emphasis is being placed on the content. And maybe matters of onomatopoeia and assonance and consonance and anaphora and stanzaic structure are of much more interest to the maker or the poet than to the person who wants to write about the poems to whom sometimes it seems as if they are footnotes to sociological or political considerations. It's not to deny that poems can be approached through this way of thinking; it just seems to me that a lot of the discourse is primarily from that angle and not recognizing the nature, the essential nature of the thing.

MM: I think that's one of the things that the recording does very nicely. It gets us away from the notion that this is something to be dug up, that you have to go and research each and every one of these poems. At the heart of these poems is a sound, the sounds that you hear around you. You're not always approaching the poem from a really scholarly place, but from a wonder and from amazement at the sound.

MD: The poems are poems of many voices. There are men speaking, women speaking, young people, older people. When you look at the collection of the whole, then you have a community. But poem by poem I think of them as musical structures.

MM: I have a question about the structure of the book itself, *Merrybegot*. I just noticed this recently; I don't know why I didn't notice it earlier. All the poems are alphabetical in their order and they do seem to fit together, to tell a story of a place. It's more of a mosaic, you are getting very specific pieces and they can all stand alone, but they can all stand alone. Has this work been informed by your interest in the Canadian long poem?

MD: When you use the image of a mosaic, I think that's quite a good one, or a collage. The alphabetical structure was in fact intended to thwart any sense of narrative. There's an arbitrary alphabetical structure, so that there's not a linear narrative. Another lesser purpose is a little glance toward the dictionary which was the springboard, by using the alphabetical principle.

MM: Has this been informed by the long poem

MD: O, you know, which came first? The chicken or the egg? I wanted to — in that book — honour the richness of speech, of groups of people. It's not only Irish-Newfoundland speech that's in there. There is English-Newfoundland speech and there are varieties of English; it's not as if there is some kind of monolithic dialect here. I wanted many voicedness. I wanted that kind of, what does Bakhtin call it?

MM: Heteroglossia?

MD: Yes Heteroglossia. I also wanted that kind of carnivalesque element which is very much in the liveliness or sometimes danger of some of the material. I suppose you could talk about this as a sort of long poem. In some of our other conversations we've talked about the varieties of it or the ways in which the long poem is informed, hybridized by fictional forms. But when you're writing I think you're more like the star-nosed mole. You feel your own way into the particular...well it's not so much the particular material, because particular material might manifest itself in one poem and then it happens in another poem. It's the same with the riddles. Did I know when I wrote riddle one that I would end up writing; I don't know, I guess I have fifty-odd now. It may sound like obfuscation or mystification, but it's really not. There are layers of your mind that make decisions for you. It's not always a matter of will.

MM: We've already discussed a little how your poetry is a tool for the representation of language. I believe that it takes words that can seem somewhat clinical, or can at least in the *DNE*, and brings them to life. Through this interaction between the written and the real it breathes a sort of usefulness into the language and definitely a lot of energy into the language which is so remarkable in this part of the world. However, you also seem to be working on other projects than the representation of language in your poetry. There seems to be a political agenda in many of your poems. Do you agree that you write some of your poems with a political sense behind them? I notice environmentalism or feminism in some of your poems. Is this something intentional on your part?

MD: I might balk at the word agenda, but that might be just taking up a word. I'm just trying to remember the poem called "Plastic", for instance. That would be one. There's definitely a grief in some of the poems about the damage we're doing to the earth and to the land. This poem expands that consciousness from a moment on the beach to a larger consciousness, so yes there is an environmental strain and as you've mentioned earlier in this conversation a feminist strain. If that means a preoccupation with matters that pertain to the life of a woman, well again I am a woman, I do walk on beaches that are polluted and I am conscious of the world around me. That works its way into the poems. I think in the poems I'm trying to render through image and

through sounds a kind of lived experience, a kind of felt experience. Can those poems, do those poems become a part of a larger political conversation, or cultural conversation? They can, yes, they are part of a larger conversation. Again, perhaps I'm stating the obvious and don't need to state it to you who are so interested in the way that poetry works. But I think they have their power as poems first. But can poems be very powerful in that discourse? Yes. Can paintings? To go a very long way from the modest little poem "Plastic" — to "Guernica", I think my resistance sometimes in conversations to speaking this way about my work is that I think that the emphasis has been so much on the content. As someone who makes art I'm hungry for more conversation about the nature of the art-making. Hey, all conversation is welcome!

MM: I think that's an interesting way of looking at this issue. People so often want to dive into a poem and figure out what it means first and foremost. I think you very cleverly dodge that in some ways with your riddle poems, because that's exactly what you're supposed to do with the riddle poems. With other sorts of poems, you can trample them when you worry too much about what the poem means and what it's "trying" to say and whether or not it is trying to make an argument, when first and foremost, like you say, it is poetry first. And it needs to be...

MD: to be experienced. To be lived with and to be heard. To be thought of in the same way, maybe, as people find it easier to think of music and art. Although I realize that visual art with a strong social content will inevitably be talked about in those terms.

MM: Another form of art that you talk about in your poetry and in conversation is the novel. Specifically here, you mention *Gaff Topsails*. You mention this in your poetry, in "Backhome Blues: Another Tune". You mention *Gaff Topsails*; it seems to me, as a sort of short form. This novel represents something much bigger than just a story. What does it represent for you; what is the significance of this novel?

MD: Yes. Well, in "Backhome Blues: Another Tune" I am creating a counterview, to the view in "Backhome Blues". In "Backhome Blues" there is a lamentation about change, physical changes, and sociological changes in a community. The voice in "Backhome Blues: Another Tune" is a critical one, exhorting the speaker of the first poem to be conscious of the long sweep of history. The final stanza is simply "you've read *Gaff Topsails*, / Yes? / Then open your eyes wider / and wise up." It is a way of alluding to the view of history in that book. It is a way of saying: see this community in the light of vast history, including pre-history, which *Gaff Topsails* in its extremely ambitious way attempts to record. *Gaff Topsails* is very much showing change through time and continuity through time. So I'm trying to invoke the central ideas of that novel, but doing it in an allusive way by naming the book.

MM: You mention that the novel is ambitious. Do you think that the novel is more ambitious than the poetry that you write?

MD: When I was speaking of *Gaff Topsails* as ambitious I was meaning that it sets out to incorporate all of Newfoundland history and it is an astonishing book. It is, of course, informed very much by Joyce's *Ulysses*. I guess it's part of language of talking

about big fat novels. Maybe it could be a big fat novel and have a very modest aim, but this book attempts to include in itself the folklore of Newfoundland, the colonial history, the geology and it does so. It has the same kind of really, really large intentions as does Joyce's *Ulysses*. But "ambitious" in and of itself is not a positive word; it's whether or not you think a book has achieved its aims and I think Goff *Topsoil's* has done a mighty fine job. It's not a possible comparison to make. If you look at poetry it is trying to do something in a very different way.

MM: It's apples and oranges, with completely different goals.

MD: I think so. Yes.

MM: Where you're saying that you are resisting narrative in *Merrybegot*, that's almost the whole point of the novel: to construct a large sweeping narrative, one that can really pick someone up in an immense swell of a story.

MD: Of course, Goff *Topsoil's* is highly patterned through interwoven imagery as well. It's got strong poetic elements. The different genre allow for different sorts of possibilities. It's not about one being inherently more ambitious than the others.

MM: Why then do you choose poetry as the genre which interests you?

MD: But did I choose it or did it choose me? I enjoy it; I get pleasure out of it. That's what I like to do. I write essays, I write reviews, I do other sorts of writing, but insofar as I practice a literary art, that's the one that I absolutely love doing. Why? Part of the satisfaction is the playing out of sound and syntax over a grid of lines. With poetry the emphasis is very much on sound. This is not to say that sound is no element of the play or in the novel. Especially within the short lyric form, there is more pressure put on the individual word. Why does someone work in watercolours, someone work in oils? It's that they get particular satisfactions. Isn't it scandalous just to do something because it gives you more pleasure?

MM: I don't think it's scandalous at all.

MD: How hedonistic is that?

MM: Well, I think if everybody chose what they loved best, things might be done a little bit better. We've talked a little bit about some of your poems being based on fact, on history and some of them as well being based on imagination, on fiction. This topic of conversation especially has been very interesting to me. I've just been reading Northrop Frye's essay called "The Educated Imagination" and he has a question...

MD: It's a beautiful piece of thinking and writing.

MM: I could only read a couple pages at a time, because he would always leave me with plenty to think about. But he has a question here after he has just built up his case for how literature is the world of the imagination. How it isn't real and cannot be, but he's asking 'what is the purpose of it if it's not real, and there are all these other sorts of thinking and writing that are real?' He poses this question: "So, you may ask,

what is the use of studying a world of imagination where anything is possible, anything can be assumed? Where there are no limits, no rights or wrongs and all arguments are equally good?" Do you have any sort of an answer to that?

MD: If I have here a Russian spoon, you know, with a carved bowl. It's lacquered, it's got gold and red and black on it and it's got all these sinuous swirls. You can't use it to eat with; you can't use it as a soup spoon. It is a thing of beauty. It gives the eye pleasure, you can hold it, it's beautifully balanced. When you speak about purpose you may not mean that everything must have a utilitarian purpose. I was just reading a Northrop Frye essay myself, "The Culture of Interpretation" and he was talking about what he saw as a way of talking about art in the 19th century in Canada. What he saw as being informed by mercantilist notions and a notion of existence where only the mercantilist exists is kind of a horrifying one. So, when I hear purpose, there's directness, there's an aim to it. Cannot the purpose of some things be to be beautiful, to speak to the aesthetic sense? There's a lot of science, as well as a lot of philosophy about what makes us human. You know a poem like "Plastic" could be read at a meeting of an environmental society and it could move people. It could be read at a high school and it could move children to think about the litter on the beaches and think about how plastic is connected to the destruction of the dolphins on the St. Lawrence seaway. So, any piece of writing can be used in different ways. You know I suppose you could take a piece of writing and wipe up a spill on the floor. How does Frye answer his own question?

MM: He says that it increases tolerance. He says that when we suspend our disbelief, and just read something in the world of the imagination we become more willing to accept things that may not seem real.

MD: It is a very big and very difficult subject. I mean, Hitler wanted to be a painter. Hitler had an appreciation of art. You know, some of the most monstrous, monstrous people in history have had an appreciation of the arts. I don't know if the arts makes us more tolerant. All reading can broaden our horizons somehow, but I don't know if it has any moral effect.

MM: I guess this is one of the things that it is really hard to pin down and to say, what is the good, what is the use of it.

MD: The use is in its own nature; does it have to be used for the moral improvement of mankind?

MM: Your first answer, I think, is what I tend to agree with: because it is beautiful.

MD: As I say that, it sounds reductive, as you point out, my own poems reflect in them a social consciousness. A poem can do anything, so that's a part of what it can be. If it's doing that, if it has a social consciousness, is it any good as a poem? I'm just saying that those are two different questions. There is a social consciousness in my poems, because I, the collectivity that is me, am making these poems and I think about these things.

MM: Let's move on to a different topic. It's related but it's a quotation from Boyd

Chubbs on his introduction page to his most recent book of sonnets called *Feral Domesticity*. He writes this about his speaker. He's out speaking these sonnets to a very cold and inhospitable, wintry city. He writes "There's absolutely no evidence of a listener, he knows words emerge into failure, but he's compelled to continue". Do you find any resonance with this? Do you find that you have a compulsion to continue?

MD: Well, first of all, I don't find that there is absolutely no evidence of a listener. I have all kinds of evidence of listeners, all kinds. That quotation by the way sounds pure Beckett: "I can't go on, I must go on." That's a direct quotation from *Waiting for Godot* but in one way or another many of Beckett's characters are saying that. That's something of an overstatement. If it's meant to say if I'm going to be reading some poems on a Tuesday night I'm unlikely to fill the Arts and Culture Centre or Carnegie Hall, that's not no evidence of a listener; it's just that this is not a mass media phenomenon. There are people reading poetry. There are people out there doing statistical studies who are interested in measuring this, but that's only one way of examining it. It would be theoretical to say: "would I write if there was absolutely no-one who ever read anything I wrote?" I don't write and I think most serious practitioners of their art don't make their art because they're thinking of reception. They're thinking about the making. Nonetheless, there is a conversation, a going back and forth. I'm not compelled to continue. All of this is overstatement for me. I mean, Boyd is speaking for himself. I am continuing, I like to make poems.

MM: I'm also interested in some theory of Michel de Certeau, where he talks about the importance of naming. Naming Newfoundland, for instance, and being in that place can turn it from a remote spot on a map, that's just a coordinate, into a home. Would you agree that your work is part of naming? Are you naming the things and places that you love?

MD: I think yes, and if you haven't had a chance to look at a long interview at a fairly early stage, maybe in the 80's, I'm not sure, with Bruce Porter in *Tickleace* I think you'll be very interested in it. The conversation there speaks to what you're asking. Am I naming a place? I'd say yes, but it's not a direct aim. You represent your culture because you have no choice, because it's your element. You're immersed in it. "What ish my nation?" A quote from Shakespeare. I'm Newfoundlander, I'm a woman, I'm someone who was born in the middle of the 20th century, I'm a university-educated Newfoundlander. So, my culture includes the literature and the arts of the 20th century. It's a culture that includes the global, so, I think that's reflected. We tend to talk about the traditional aspects of the culture that I am rendering in the poetry. But I think also of one reviewer who asks, what is the relation to culture of one who writes a poem dedicated to the filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder, a filmmaker whose works I absolutely love. But yes, one very big dimension in the poetry is naming and literally naming places. That's a big tradition in Irish poetry; there are poems that are actually naming places poems. You see this in the work of Seamus Heaney when he writes the poem "Annahorish", when he thinks about the name "Annahorish" itself. Was it T.S. Eliot who said that poetry is the most nationalistic art because there is to some degree a speaking voice and you're speaking in the rhythms of your place. Even though Newfoundland's language which we are talking about is highly distinctive, every place has its own language, its own rhythms, its own variations. I don't know that you could bear witness to anything besides your own culture. What would that

mean? It would have to mean that your poetry was somehow inauthentic. Now that we're all part of a global village you might ask, is all culture homogeneous? It's not so. When you look on the ground it's not so. But naming, I like that. I like the notion that one is bringing into language the specifics of one's own place.

MM: It seems to me that it is the first thing that happens ever in a culture. For a culture to exist, or for a person to exist one of the first things that happens is that that person gets a name. It seems like a good thing for a poet to be doing, to be naming. Thank you very much and I hope we can continue this conversation in some way, shape or form again.

MD: You're very welcome.

Interview continued

12 February 2010

MM: Now it's about a decade ago, Mary, that you did an interview that had excerpts published in the *Pottersfield Portfolio*, but the whole interview got published as part of an anthology on Atlantic women's writing: *Words Out There*. There you make a comment about your poetry being a close examination of process and that that's the thing that unifies your poetry. To quote you, your poetry captures the "fleeting energies of the voice and the equally fleeting energies of the earth." There's been a lot done about the fleeting energies of the voice and how that's relevant to your work, especially with regards to *Merrybegot*, which is very much about the fleeting energies of the voice. But I'm interested in the energies of the earth and the energies of the land in Newfoundland that you are working with. Do you feel that this is a strain in your work in criticisms and conversations about your poetry?

MD: I think yes, there hasn't been as much focus on that. Even in *Merrybegot* there is a very strong sense of the natural world and of course the people working in, with, against the natural world. Even in there the focus is the individual speaker, the way in which they give voice to their preoccupations. The reason for that is probably clear. Many writers engage with the natural world. People writing about the book were interested in the newness, to them, of my writing about the Newfoundland vernacular. But that strain has been present since my first book. I'm not sure if you know a sequence of poems published in the *Fiddlehead* called "Waste Ground". These are riddle poems, but essentially I've given what the solution to the riddle is in the title, so the reader is not asked to unravel the nature of the speaker. In those poems the speakers are plants. In particular, plants thought of as weeds. I mention that as an instance of preoccupation with that strain. I'm also working on riddles. They will probably accumulate into a book. I'm working as well on a poem form called the cento which incorporates lines from other poets. This is an ancient tradition. Often the cento was a tribute to a particular author by means of weaving together lines by that author. But I notice, looking at some of the centos recently that there is a sense of the natural world in those poems as well. The social world as well. The ways the poems work are not the ways of rationality and logic, but still what emerges from them is a motif of nature.

MM: I'm really interested that you brought up rationality and logic because that is something that I think your poetry is really resistant towards. You seem more willing to embrace paradox in nature. I want to read a couple of quotations from Don McKay's book *V's à V's* and test them out against your poetry to see if they resonate with the things you are doing in your art. The first one is addressing this paradox about poetry and representation. Don writes "poetry comes in here because language is not able to represent raw experience, yet it must", he's talking about the inadequacies of language there. Still it is given the task of doing the impossible. Another one here is "it is one function of art to provide safe, defamiliarizing moments when the mask of utility gets lifted and waken to the residual wilderness without the inconvenience of breakdown or disaster". Do you think there is paradox in your writing about the wilderness?

MD: I think I might be able to respond better to that if you were to mention particular poems.

MM: Perhaps "Downtown Haiku", where you are looking at downtown St. John's. When I think of downtown St. John's it doesn't seem like a wilderness. But you are finding moments and things in that downtown environment that seem out of place, things that one wouldn't necessarily notice in a downtown setting.

MD: In that set of haiku, there is a sense of process. There is a sense of nature and the city. There are marks of the urban and the streets, but then the pot holes are marks of erosion and flux. The nature of the making of poetry and the mental operations involved are very different from the nature of the mental operations that allow us to generalize about it and analyze it. So, I need to go back into the poem itself. I suppose the manifestations of nature are apparent to me all the time in the city. That's partly my eye. Someone else might be much taken something else. But I do think of the fleeting energies of earth, of the city and of flux of nature — the starlings in wild staves — the quick shifting wind, I'm thinking of a poem in here admitting a kind of wildness. "Salt Mounds / St. John's Harbour". It's very difficult to analyze the nature of one's own imagination. I'm much happier analyzing the nature of other people's way seeing, but it seems that I have a sense of everything being animated. That's the first time I've ever put it in those words, because you're forcing me to think about it. There is an indwelling life in everything. Where does that come from? I don't know. I think back to nursery rhymes. Humpty Dumpty is an egg and he becomes a person. It's in aspects of Catholic ritual. There is this indwelling life, certainly in the tradition of the writers one reads. The poets, both ancient poets, the makers of haiku or someone like Wordsworth. Again, I won't say that this sets me off from the rest of human beings, but it occurs to me that there is a sense of indwelling life in "Salt Mounds St. John's Harbour," I'm bringing to life the salt mound who is a kind of woman, who is a spirit of winter and spirit of sterility and yet has this strange wild energy. I would maintain that you don't consciously set out to make a poem like that. It certainly has something to do with all that goes into one's own way of seeing, the notion that everything has its life and if you stop and give it a chance it will speak that life. So, when I read someone like Ponge (I think I'm pronouncing his name correctly) it's like meeting an old friend. His attention to a wasp or a mouse. I know that he has attended to wasps. I'm sure that in the pasture of his imagination a paper clip would

speak of all the mining and everything that went into bringing it into existence. I'm sure I'm circling around your question.

MM: This is all very interesting to me and it is making me think of the lenses through which I've been reading your work, which is Michel de Certeau's idea of "space" and "place". What I've seen time and time again in your poetry is that often you will start with some sort of an aerial view. You can start, say, by looking down off of Signal Hill onto the city. You start with some sort of a map and you've made comments about this before, that the Newfoundland-centered map is sort of your starting point. That's always just that, a starting point. What really interests you is not conceptualizing or generalizing the whole place or as a grid of streets, but actually getting down and walking among those streets, talking to people, hearing their voices. The phrase that comes up in *Words Out There* is "reclaiming vital aspects of self".

MD: Yes, I don't know that I... I know I spoke about the map as a way of readjusting notions. These are very tired concepts, the center, the margins. The map is just to image it in a really vivid way. Every writer has to find out where they are: where they are culturally, geographically and the rest of it. But I wouldn't say that I would start out with the map. That does imply linearity. I think if anything authentic is to be said about my writing, it has to be about the place of tradition, the tradition of English literature has to be taken into account. I'm steeped in it. Also the possibilities of language. I talk about animation, but what could be more fluid than language itself. We are talking about something like content, aspects of the city, but also animation in language, words and how they shift and how they can be woven together. I mentioned this to you before that I am working on two projects currently. Some people might say that they are so different from one another... these surreal poems that are coming through the cento forms and the riddles. Yet in a way they are both exploring the mysteries of language. I guess what I'm trying to say is that it doesn't cover the nature of my writing to say that I begin with the Newfoundland-centered map.

Let me just tell you this. When I was growing up I had two favorite books, two books that I read over and over again. One was *Alice in Wonderland* which I very much loved. Many people were terrified by that book. The other was *48 Days Adrift* which was an account by a captain, Job Barber, from Newtown, Bonavista Bay about their ships coming from St. John's getting supplies for the winter and they are blown off course. They are on the ocean 48 days before they end up in Tobermory Scotland. Now, that is a very bizarre book for a child to be fascinated by. What I'm trying to say is that one is very Newfoundland and one is universal and is a delight because of its language and because of its play with logic.

MM: I would happily concede that this Newfoundland-centered map isn't a starting point. But what I am interested in is the notion that when you see a map (and you also refer to the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* as a map of the language) you are not satisfied with it. The map itself is not enough to understand Newfoundland English. You went in and started creating poems and instances of really specific uses of the speech within Newfoundland, bringing it to life, animating it. It strikes me that there are two very different things. You can look at things as a map where they are inanimate, but your impulse time and time again is to animate it. You ask what's happening in the map? What's happening in the streets? Downtown St. John's? Who's speaking and who's acting?

MD: I've just written a note to myself to try to find a little piece that I wrote for the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*. The dictionary was a springboard. It's a paradox. It's a book which actually made me more acutely aware of the energies of the language being spoken around me. So about twelve of sixty poems can claim to have had their beginnings in the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*. But the rest had their beginnings in scraps of conversations I heard, invented scenarios incorporating the language that didn't come from the dictionary. I think I've said this before and I'm going over old ground, but that is a distortion that I see in much of the writing about *Merrybegot*. People seem to misunderstand. Even though I make this point in the afterword, they seem to misunderstand the role that the dictionary played. I'm not for a second downplaying its importance, but people think that this language is not vital still and they think that it's coming out of the dictionary. Well, that's just not so.

MM: It's not coming out of the dictionary; the dictionary is leading you to the place where language is still alive.

MD: Well it made me aware, not leading me in terms of particular words. It just made me listen more carefully. Again, you could see that as a little irony, that it's a book that took me to the spoken.

Allowing Wilderness in Language

Mike Minor and John Steffler in Conversation — 24 February 2010

MM: I'm joined today by John Steffler at the Crown Pub in Perth, Ontario and we're going to be talking about his poetry and also how poetry in general can represent a space and place, especially a space such as Newfoundland which is somewhere John is intimately entwined with. The first question I want to ask is a little bit about wilderness poetry as a genre. I know you are good friends with Don McKay and are familiar with some of his thinking. He thinks a lot about wilderness poetry. Do you think of yourself as a wilderness, or a nature poet?

JS: Yes, I think I do. I've come to think of myself that way. The truth is that I don't really think of myself in terms of categories. I often just want to take an experience or an idea and explore it in language or explore language at the same time that I explore something that is important to me. I have come to recognize that some of the issues that drive a lot of my writing really do fit into that category of wilderness writing. It is true that my allegiance, although I don't really subscribe to schools of writing, but my allegiance tends to be towards a rural one. I love what cities have to offer, but I find that I can't really live in one. I always sought to live in the country side or at some remove from big cities. That's where my cultural orientation is and where my writing belongs, I suppose. It is in that camp of nature and wilderness writing.

MM: Don writes in his book *Fit à Fit*, and I just want to test this out, he writes that wilderness is "the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations". Do you find that poetry is a particularly apt form for eluding the mind's appropriation?

JS: Human values and human constructs are things that we can become so habituated to that we can lose the energy that we rely on — that comes from deep within our psyches and from what I have learned to think of as wilderness. I think of it as all things that humans have not constructed. I think there is a very interesting demarcation between what humans have made and what we haven't made. That includes not only the world that we think of as nature, you know the world of trees and water and sky and so on, but it's everything we can't control that belongs in this category of wilderness. That includes the process of aging. It includes accidents and surprises of all kinds. It includes our sleeping minds, our dreams, the things that we don't have rational control over. This all interests me deeply and I think this is what drives my writing: the interface between the human, culture if you like, the human world of technology and this vast surround of which we are part, which pre-exists the human and which will go on beyond the human. I might refer to this as God. I suppose that mystery and that power is something that humans have always interacted with. We do draw our energy from that otherness and that untamed, uncontrolled power. It's where our energy and where our power comes from. Poetry is especially suited to exploring that thing, that power, that wilderness. Here's a kind of

paradox. Poetry uses language which is a human technology (it is a human construct) in which we apply a human set of values — a panoply of human concepts to the world around us as we see it. It is our perspective that is reflected in language. But poetry seeks to use language in fresh ways which undermine habitual ways of thinking or a sort of deadening of perception in language. So, while poetry uses language it also flirts with language as a wild thing. I think the roots of language go back to a time when humans lived closer to the wilderness or to the uncontrolled world in the same way that animals continue to do. I tend to see the whole Genesis/Garden of Eden myth in terms of that separation of the human from the animal. Where we once belonged to a community of creatures who were part of the natural world and separated ourselves through a kind of knowledge that we invented for ourselves. We created language which separates us through this kind of separation between through this symbolic system we can encompass the world around us by naming it. But language goes back to sounds and impulses and songs that predate a lot of rational constructs. Poetry seeks to rediscover in language a kind of commonality with other living things. This is how I see it.

MM: Speaking of living things, the moose seems particularly prominent in your poetry. Not that you have lots of poems about the moose or that there are lots of poems about moose in general, but there is awe associated with this huge creature that is so invisible at times. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the moose as a figure in your poetry.

JS: It's true. I'm almost embarrassed because at different times people have said that I'm the *moose poet*. It seems kind of odd, I'm an outdoor person in many ways but I'm far from that lumberjack character. I suppose living in Newfoundland the moose became the great totemic animal. Elsewhere it might be the polar bear or the buffalo or something like that. But it seems to me that this great mythic being lives very close to the human world but in a kind of parallel universe. It is often invisible, but out there in the woods. Living there unboxed all winter and all summer. It's fascinating because of that. Occasionally people have these extremely violent encounters with moose on the highway. That intersection between the very narrowly focused, tight wound human world of the highway and the automobile, people pressing on in their vehicles, maybe hurrying because they are late for something and then *bang* encountering a moose, often getting killed in the encounter. It just seemed to me to be a very powerful metaphor for the wilderness. Or that uncontrolled natural world around us that we are so often able to ignore.

MM: Every time I read a poem about a moose, I always think of Elizabeth Bishop. I wonder "why isn't there more poetry about the moose?" They are such miraculously huge creatures. When you see a picture of one it's one thing, but when you see it actually there in the flesh, it is hard to comprehend how this can be lurking in the woods. We know that there are six hundred collisions a year with moose in Newfoundland, but you hardly ever see them, except in that violent context.

JS: One of the things that draws me to the moose, is that they are both beautiful and very ugly from the human point of view. It is one thing to love deer, which are equally mysterious and magnificent animals, but the deer have a kind of classic

beautiful that adheres to human aesthetics; there is a kind of symmetry a sleek quality. The moose has a sort of surprising ungainliness about it and yet is incredibly graceful and beautiful when you see one in the wild. It sort of confounds human values and human expectations in and of itself.

MM: I really love this description you have in the poem "That Night We Were Ravenous:" "She was a high explosive bomb / loaded with bones and meat". That encapsulates our most common interaction with moose, but it is juxtaposed all the time with the incredible spiritual power that they have. This is one way of seeing, "the bomb", "the meat", the blood and the gore of a collision.

JS: What can be released, yes.

MM: But earlier in the book, you have the poem where the moose is walking around, unbeknownst to the people. There may be a broken twig here or there, but meanwhile there is this seven foot tall, four legged "monster" tip-toeing around the back yard.

JS: Exactly, they can sort of slip through the night and be very close to us without our knowing it. I remember on one occasion staying in a cabin up near Woody Point, just above the town in the fall and a couple of moose were mating or fighting, doing something anyway, just outside in the dark. The whole building was shaking, the ground was shaking. It was unbelievable. We opened the door a couple of times, we couldn't see anything; it was pitch dark but there was this racket, this roaring and thumping going on out there. Then in the morning you could see hoof prints and a sort of wreckage out there on the front lawn. Then some friends came over to visit. They had this little lap dog with them that they carried with them everywhere. The dog got down on the ground and was so excited; it could tell that something had happened here. These sort of gods, these great powerful nature gods had been present. The dog was rolling around in these footprints and was going wacky over the smell of the moose. The whole thing had been invisible to us. We could only hear it and sort of sense it. It was really interesting.

MM: It is an incredible thing. I want to steer us into a discussion of the differences between the poetry and prose writing. This is a quotation I drew from a book of interviews by Anne Compton, called *Meetings with Maritime Poets*. She quotes the novelist, poet and playwright, Elisabeth Harvor, who says "the ability of landscape to offer up image is so much more useful to a poem and can even be the life of the poem, whereas narrative and scenery can sometimes get in the way of the story." Now, you are a novelist, you've worked in that medium, but principally your work has been in poetry. Do you agree with this observation that narrative might get in the way of imagery.

JS: I think I agree with it and certainly I get the gist of the statement. In fiction setting tends to be a kind of back drop, within which the characters interact and generate the story. Too much focus or too much time spent on the setting, which is how the landscape might be treated in a novel, often seems like a diversion. It is like prying too much attention to the wall paper or something like that. At the same time, even in fiction, landscape can be a motive factor which can drive the lives of the characters to some extent. You do get this in Canadian fiction to a degree, certainly in older

Canadian fiction in which land or their struggles with the environment. The setting is a sort of driving force. I think it can enter prominently into fiction and generate symbols, a kind of mythology as well. But I think that it is something that is more directly explorable in poetry. The poet doesn't have to (and typically doesn't) set up a narrative or introduce characters in the same way. So the poet's interaction with a landscape can be directly the subject of a poem. I know in my own writing, in what little fiction I've written really, I tend automatically to invent characters who, though they may explore or reflect some aspect of myself, aren't really me at all except very broadly in their cultural position. In my novel *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* I certainly think of Cartwright as this sort of cultural ancestor. I've often said that I think of him as though looking through an old album of family photos and seeing a great-great-grandfather or something. When I read Cartwright's journal's I felt like I was seeing a remote ancestor of my own. Having said that, Cartwright isn't me. When I write poetry I do tend to write much more out of personal experience. Even when I'm writing about landscape or writing about Newfoundland culture and society, it tends to be about my interaction with the place. I don't pretend to have a completely objective overview of Newfoundland — I don't — So poetry is much more personal for me, almost autobiographical. Fiction has been just the opposite.

MM: So, would you say that the ability of poetry to get straight to the issue of landscape is a reason that *The Grey Islands* is not a "traditional" novel?

JS: Yes, when I started *The Grey Islands* I thought in terms of an album of photographs of the arctic or something like that. Where I imagine the photographer being invisible but implicit in the views chosen I tried to be objective as possible. I wanted to write a series of very objective, sort of magic realist takes on the Grey Islands, in terms of technique at least. Only gradually did I introduce more of the narrator's, Martin Hoffman's, life. What he was doing there? What took him there? This town planner who had come from Ontario to Newfoundland with certain marital issues and a family background of a certain sort. More and more I introduced those human elements and also more to do with the society and culture that lives there. It accumulated more of the social as I worked on it. I didn't think of it as a novel, but I also didn't really think of it as a collection of poems. I wanted it to have a narrative quality. I suppose if it had a model it would be from Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, a kind of compendium with narrative strands. I wanted it to be able to embrace fake essays, recipes, songs census statistics and so on, to be a sort of *omnium gatherum* as well as a book of poems. I wasn't thinking in terms of genre at all. I just wanted to be free of genre.

MM: That's something that I think is very clear. That any time you try to define *The Grey Islands* it says: "but wait there's sheet music in it or there are census statistics or there's an essay" or all the different things that defy the ability of the critic to define exactly what it is. I studied it first through the lens of the Canadian long poem, which is one of these omnivorous forms that eats and encompasses everything. It's a great form to get people over the question of "what is it?" It's a book, it has words inside of

it and you read them.

JS: Exactly. I think this is one of the things that drove me to write something like *The Grey Islands*. It was just my second book and the first one was a very typical collection of poems written over a span of years. But it seems to me that to not make use of the nature and structure of a book which, has the dynamic of narrative pull. The forward momentum is something that I had wanted to inject into my next book. Which is probably why I had wanted to go on and write a novel after *The Grey Islands*. When I started *The Afterlife of George Caribright*, I thought I was going to write a bunch of poems. I didn't know it was going to turn into a prose work. For the longest time I refrained from calling it a novel. I just called it a "thing". Only after the fact did it get published as a novel did I accept that that was what it was. I began with the assumption that I don't know how to write a novel; I don't have a clue how to begin, so I didn't even try. I just wrote this "thing" that turned out to be a novel, so that's how I continue to work.

MM: That seems to go along with what you're talking about with regards to looking at things with awe or wonder. You get into the material and write it and what the critics want to call it is their business.

JS: Exactly, I think you've put your finger right on it. There is this paradox in language (which is a technology that does represent the world in certain ways) to try to use language to try to subvert these categories, to let in fresh energy and the real dynamics of the universe. This is kind of a paradox: to say you're going to write a fixed form poem about a fixed idea seems to subvert the whole exercise from the outset. This is also why I try not to write in fixed forms as well. It seems to me to go counter to what I want to do in writing which is to release something or to explore something fresh.

MM: We talked a bit about your poetry being autobiographical. I'm wondering if the town planner character is autobiographical?

JS: Only obliquely, because I was an outsider. This is one of the important things for me and one of the important things about my writing about Newfoundland. I was very aware when I moved there that I was a come-from-away, that I was an immigrant and that I was a foreigner. I didn't really know Newfoundland. I think Newfoundland has changed a little bit since then. I think it has become somewhat more integrated into Canadian culture. It is still very distinct and I don't mean to say that it has lost its character or that it has been domesticated or tamed. But it was a very strong sense that it was different from the rest of Canada. In the 1970s there was still a lot of prejudice against Newfoundlanders and a lot of "Newfie" jokes. There was a sense that Newfoundlanders were parasites on the rest of Canada, or something like that. There was a lot of anger in Newfoundland toward the rest of Canada, a kind of

Newfoundland nationalism was at work. When I moved there I was aware of all of that and I felt that I needed to do something dramatic to plunge into the place, almost as a rite of initiation. I needed to claim for myself the right to be there and to write about it, not something heroic exactly, but I had to make a commitment. That's what the expedition to the Grey Islands was in part about, that sort of plunging into the place head first. I had the good fortune to meet very articulate Newfoundlanders. Al Pittman became a very close friend of mine and his family as well. From them I got such a strong sense of the old Newfoundland through them. They were from Marasheen Island in Placentia Bay. They were evacuated essentially. I got such a strong sense of Newfoundland as perceived through their eyes. They were looking at this whole business of how place is seen as space by people as they occupy it. I wanted to do something that would help me get closer to that vision and understanding. I wanted to go to one of these abandoned places and roam around amongst the wreckage: the abandoned cemetery, the abandoned church, the abandoned school, all the abandoned houses and try to get a feeling of all that happened there.

MM: I think you've accomplished that. You've accessed the sense of Newfoundland as a space; you are living there, interacting with the people and the land. One argument that I heard last year for the first time — and that has begun to grow on me — is the idea that the relationship with the land is somewhat like a marriage, at least in *The Grey Islands*. There are a couple of quotations from *The Grey Islands* that really bring out an almost erotic relationship, but not only Eros. There are also notions of a more all encompassing love. From page one thirty four "and always the background pull / an aching inside you: / home". Page one forty six now, "it's like standing inside the head of someone who knows the place", as you're standing in Carm Dery's shack. Then one fifty two "I am this Island". Finally and probably where the allusion is clearest is in the dream like marriage scene with Jewelleen. "I've given my body, not only to Jewelleen, but to all of them, to the whole place, to the whole place, the way they have done". Did you ever conceive of this as a marriage?

JS: Not really consciously, but yes. I guess I think this has always been true of cultures where people live closer to the land they occupy and I've always been attracted to places where I feel that there is a high level of culture and a simplicity of technology going together. It's something that has attracted me to the 'old' Greece. By that I don't mean Classical Greece but I mean Ottoman Greece, Byzantine Greece, 19th Century Greece, early 20th Century Greece. When I went to the Aegean island of Naxos, for example I was struck by what a sophisticated attractive culture was there. It was rich, and yet simple. People manage to live very close to the land with olive groves and goats and sheep and simple farming. They built their houses out of stones that they gathered from the fields. Naxos had very simple technology and a very sophisticated culture. I felt that this is what old Newfoundland was like also.

People could fix and make everything right where they were. They built their own boats, they built their own houses, they were poor, yes, but they had a remarkably rich and sophisticated culture. You see this in the way Mary Dalton explores incredibly sophisticated culture, a very sharp and fascinating culture through the language they've invented. I think she's really hit the nail on the head there. This marriage between people and place is something that has always existed. I think now we've tended to lose that in our urban and more highly complex technologies. Technology that is beyond the comprehension of the people who use it. We don't know what these gadgets are that we rely on now. We can't make them; we can't fix them. We don't even understand how they are put together. I think that kind of marriage becomes broken in this kind of technological culture that we've entered into, but it is very present in recent Newfoundland.

MM: It seems that we're coming around to an idea of the "Uses of Poetry", which was your Pratt lecture from two years ago. That's something that I'm very interested in, because poetry is often seen to be (and is) a less populist art form, but I'm wondering what uses poetry has, how you use it perhaps or whether it needs to have this sort of pragmatic use.

JS: Exactly, it doesn't need to have a use at all. When people turn to it, they turn to it for a reason, they're looking for something in it. While fewer and fewer people do turn to it now, maybe there are other things that supply something of what poetry used to supply to a larger number of people, I'm not even so sure about that. I think one of the strong uses for me is that through language there is a reawakening of the world (that's always a thing that comes up again and again in my writing and that draws me to certain kinds of poetry). It's a kind of paradox: you go into a language construct which is the poem on a page, typically, it may be something you're hearing rather than reading. But you go into a language construct and then almost in an Alice in Wonderland way the excitement of language in the poem reawakens the senses in your mind to the reality of the world around you and you surface from the poem, almost like your breaking surface in water back into the world enlivened with a fresh awareness of the world, of its mystery and wonder and beauty and power and significance. Also, an enlarged awareness of your own life story, not only as a living entity in the moment, but a person with a past, a story going somewhere connected with other lives. Not just your family, but friends and neighbours too. Poetry tends to reawaken us to the world, to the human community and to the self. That's the thing that I look for again and again in poetry when I take up a book of poems. It's a kind of mindfulness or awareness, re-energization of the spirit. Yes I will read poetry for recreation as well, just for the love of play in language, but again and again, it is this spiritual experience that I look for.

MM: It's a way of coming back from the world by getting away from it.

JS: In a way, yes.

MM: Something that I keep thinking about is the paradoxical nature of language. In *Viv à Viv* McKay talks about the job of language. It is the job of language to represent the world, but it can't do that. Yet it must. But it can't.

JS: That's the paradox.

MM: There's a compromise there that you do the best you can with language. Poetry embraces this paradox by breaking free of so many conventions and getting to the wildness of language (which I think is a really useful way of thinking about poetry).

JS: Don's poetry and thinking, as you say, comes back to this grasp, this reach of language, and the impossibility of becoming one with the other. This constant, futile effort, to reach out and grasp what is not human and the impossibility of doing it with language is what drives the poet. It drives the poet crazy, but it does drive the poet on.

MM: I'm wondering about how you perceive your poetry in relationship to audience. A lot of it is set in Newfoundland, some of the biggest works are set there. You spent most of your life there. Do you think that this makes it more relevant in Newfoundland than elsewhere in Canada?

JS: I never wrote with that thought in mind. In fact I'm just trying to answer some questions now in another interview that I'm writing, but the same kind of question about audience. I think I write for thoughtful readers, the people who turn to poetry or look for in poetry, mindfulness or awareness. People who want to sit down with a poem in order to go deeper into themselves or deeper into the world around them through language. Those people can be anywhere and perhaps beyond that, I'm writing almost just for poetry itself. It sounds almost like an art for art's sake kind of argument, which is a language poet's approach to poetry, but on some fundamental level it's the same for me. If it comes right down to it, I would have to say, and it sounds pretentious, but it's as though I'm writing for a community of dead poets or something like that. All the people that have tried to distill their sense of being alive and who they are into language, with the highest aspiration to do that seriously. I guess that's ideally who I'm writing for. Whether I'm talking about Dylan Thomas or Dante or Homer. I feel that there's this legacy or ancestry of artists in general and poets in particular that I would like to think have guided me in my approach to poetry. Not that I'm a great poet like that, that's not what I'm suggesting. But if I think of anybody looking over my shoulder it would be the distilled universal poet, or poetry, the muse is what I write for.

MM: I think that's true of most poets because it is really hard to anticipate yourself—

when you sit down to write poetry — becoming a bestselling author. There aren't any Canadian poets that are bestselling authors, at least by the standards of novels. Because of the attention required to read a poem, especially a modern poem with so many other poets looking over the shoulder, it is a very specific or perhaps rare kind of reading that appreciates the work that goes into the creation of poetry.

JS: It's been said by many poets and many people that one of the best things going for poetry is its uselessness, that nobody's going to get rich on it, so there's no motive in the mind of somebody going to write a Hollywood movie script setting out to target it for a particular audience, for a particular taste or for producers. Poets are able to be honest, I think, and to explore the fears and weaknesses in their lives and in the society around them — also in very abstruse, arcane ways. That's one of the great things about poetry. It's not driven by economics and nobody's going to make a buck on it.

MM: I'd like to steer us into a discussion specifically on "space" and "place" two terms of Michel de Certeau. I have a little something here that I'll read. Michel de Certeau talks about two main modes of existence. One he calls strategy and this depends on having control over your surroundings. Strategy is matched with place and it involves looking down from a conceptualizing view, an aerial view, a view from a tower. The other mode of existence he calls a tactic. This one cannot depend on having control of the space in which it operates. You have to be adaptable and flexible and be willing to embrace wilderness to use tactic. Based on the uses of poetry that you've already talked about in your lecture, I think we've established that you probably have a more tactical approach to your writing, that you're interested in tactics, perhaps, more than strategy. You say near the end of the Pratt lecture "The words of the poem are grafted onto the things they speak of and carry us into encounters with those actual things". Is there a political ramification for your poetry? Is it a form of undermining or resistance perhaps?

JS: Yes, very much I think, but it's a pretty passive kind of politics. It's a subtle kind of subversion obviously. I wouldn't suggest that poetry can literally hurl grenades, tear up the streets or put up barricades, but I think that yes, there is an impulse to undermine, to subvert, to question, inherent in a lot of poetry and most really good poetry. I think that's one of the great things poetry brings into our culture and into our lives is that stirring up of norms, subversion of strategies. It occurs to me that the approach of the guy in *The Grey Islands* is to learn a place rather than to make it conform to his will or to a life plan, and yet in an overriding way, there is also a life plan there and he did have to strategize his time on the Grey Islands and how to get there and get away again. I think there's a kind of dance that goes on between tactics and strategy. I know that I've been brought face to face with that here, having moved to this new place in Ontario. It seemed to me at first to be a house that was largely complete and set up very nicely for living in. But now it has been about two years that

I've been involved in my own strategies to make it my own, to fix it up in different ways. Just recently I've been wrestling with the wilderness through building a boardwalk across a swamp. The winter is the time to do it. I chop dead cedar trees to make posts, then I drive holes in the ice and drive these posts down with a sledge hammer, then put cross pieces and connect posts and cross pieces with long two by fours. I'm building the board walk on the swamp, so I can get across to the river. This is not accepting the wilderness, but imposing my will on it, adapting it to my needs so that I can go and dream on a kayak amongst the Lily pads on a river. I realize there are all kinds of contradictions here I'm not just living in the swamp like Caliban, webbed feet and hands, half frog. I'm very much a human, wedded to our clean technological way of living in the world, and yet I want to get beyond that. I want to get close to nature in a very immediate way. So this is the situation with the guy in *the Grey Islands* too. He has to stay warm and fed to stay alive, but he wants to open himself to the past, and to the experience of human loss, to that whole human culture that was wiped off the Grey Islands. I think there needs to be a bit of both. I think this is something that is in Don McKay's poetry very often. He flirts with self annihilation so often. Wanting so much to join with the bird for example — the dark waters into which the Eider Ducks are diving — he longs for that lost union but he has to stop short if he wants to remain a human being with a name and an identity. So you constantly flirt with submersion or dissolution in the world because you want that marriage, but you also want to stay alive, so I think you need strategy as well as tactics.

MM: That's definitely something that I agree with and that de Certeau says too. It's not a static thing. You're not always using strategy or tactic; you go back and forth. But there is a general trend. I think this is something that I've observed in your poetry, that it often begins with a strategy. Like you say, he has to get to the Grey Islands, but then the encounter with the wilderness is usually (and eventually) submitting to the wilderness — living as you can or living on the fly to get by. This is after some of the strategic approaches have failed.

JS: It is a part of my personality to need to have things out of the way and organized so that I can let go and forget about the worries and pressures. Until I have a certain amount of organization in place I can't do that letting go. Another type of person might be able to let go from the outset, but there is often then a racing to repair things after the fact. To catch up in life when things get to out of control. Again, there is that kind of dance going on between control and abandonment. It is very important to not be in control all of the time, or to think that you are. That's insane.

MM: There are a couple of poems in your most recent full collection, *That Night We Were Ravenous*, where the speaker is in an airplane. It comes up on the cover-photo of *Helix* as well, this airplane view. Can you relate the aerial view to tactics and strategies?

JS: What you're introducing here is very interesting. I haven't thought about it in those terms before. I have a new book coming out this March. I called it *Lookout*, intending a kind of play on both the idea of a vantage point but also as a sort of caution. It's like in the Bob Dylan song: "look out kid you're going to get hit, don't know what you did but you're doing it again". A lot of the poems in that book do have to do with wilderness in the form of unexpected calamity or wreckage. Everything from marriage breakup, to illness, to death of family members and misfortunes of different kinds do play a part in that. I think of the idea of vantage point as gaining an overview of one's surroundings and one's life, not so much from the point of view, in this case of strategizing to control it, but to sort of see larger patterns. One thing that is important from that perspective is to see more historically and to see the connection between person and place or between society and landscape or culture and land. I think that we need a certain vantage point. It's not so much a distancing of the self. Maybe it is more of an entry into what you would call space that would lead to that awareness of that kind of continuity, cause and effect influence. As I've gotten older I've become more aware that the things around us are the things which we inherit. They are things that we haven't made. But even things that are human made are things that we inherit, like language for instance. We inherit this vast history of human heritage in the language that we speak going back tens of thousands of years embedded there in our mouths. We change the language as we use it. For political reasons we've democratized language, especially in our generation, the changes we've made to do with gender and race. This is valid and valuable modification to the language we handle and we will pass that on and allow it to be shaped in that way by future and coming generations. It's an ongoing process and I think that the vantage point allows us to see that. The landscape we occupy, especially in parts of the world where the land has been heavily populated for hundreds of thousands of years, itself encodes and embeds human usage which then shapes the lives of the people who are then born into that landscape. We're sitting here in Perth. The buildings around us were in many cases built in the mid or early 19th Century and that leaves a kind of mold or a template into which our lives are then poured so our legacy goes on. I've gained a much more acute sense of this kind of continuity or flow to our lives. I think of individual lives as being not so much bounded by our birth and death dates or the skin that closes our bodies, but I think of ourselves now as being more extended entities beginning long before our actual births and extending through our influence beyond our deaths. They extend beyond our bodies into our culture and our physical worlds. I think a vantage point provides that sense in my experience. That's what I'm interested in when it comes to vantage point. It's not so much strategy, it's more knowledge or awareness.

MM: I'm also curious about the Eastern thinking influence that may or may not be in your work.

JS: It is very much.

MM: I know it's a part of this 'new wave' of people like Tim Lilburn and Don McKay as well. I couldn't help but be a little bit jarred when I read "The Price of a Bullet". It's set in China while most of your work is set in Canada. Is this part of a strain of Eastern thinking and Eastern philosophy in your work.

JS: It's interesting that I have included almost none of my reading and thinking about Eastern philosophy and literature and art in my writing overtly. It's kind of surprising in a way that I haven't and I don't know why I haven't. I come to it (it's a very large category, Asian philosophy) very early on in my life. Long before I ever met Don McKay or Tim Lilburn, I started reading a certain amount of Eastern philosophy when I was in my teens. I went to the University of Toronto and entered the English Language and Literature program and in those days it was very rigorous program that defined every course that you had to take and you had to take a course in philosophy every year. I started taking a course in philosophy that was then offered. It was Logic and Linguistic Philosophy, which struck me as being absolutely arid and useless, so I went over to the department of East Asian Studies, they had a very good department of East Asian Studies then and they probably have an even better one now, and I asked if I could take a philosophy course there. Then I wangled permission through the dean at University College to be allowed to do this and have it accepted as my philosophy unit in the E.L.L. program. I think I was the first person to do anything like that in this program. So that was the beginning in my undergraduate years. I studied Buddhism, Taoism, the various branches of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism and I also studied Japanese literature in translation. I actually wrote an essay on Yashinara Kawabata's *The Sound of the Mountain*, it was actually translated into Japanese and published while I was still an undergraduate. Then I started to study Japanese language and began an M.A. I actually had at one point a Mombusho Scholarship which was going to pay for me to go to Japan and study in Japan (all expenses paid for two years). Then there was this big turning in my life. I was living in Toronto and my wife was pregnant. I had taught a couple of courses in St. John's for Memorial the previous summer and then had to make this decision, what were we going to do? I applied for a position in Newfoundland at Grenfall College and got that job, so I bailed out of everything, bailed out of Japanese studies and went to Newfoundland. I was very interested in Japanese Literature, Chinese Philosophy and Buddhism.

MM: It seems very curious to me that quite a few Canadian poets and perhaps people who practice eco-poetics more generally have become interested in that philosophy. Is there something fundamentally different in Eastern philosophy as opposed to Western philosophy that attracts people who are thinking deeply about nature and about wilderness?

JS: Yes, I think it's very different and I'd have to think about it to really formulate a concise answer. But, just for example: the Genesis myth. The relationship between Adam and the rest of the creatures and plants in creation is diametrically opposed to the notion of Tao in Taoism, "the way". That sense of being a part of a flux or flow of life and life energy which is diametrically opposed to the Genesis myth. Even in Buddhism, which is different than Taoism, there is still this sense of the human being succeeding as a result of merging rather than domination. Christianity seems to have become linked to a culture of domination, and that doesn't seem to be the case in traditional Eastern religion and philosophy.

MM: You mention the difference between living energies and domination or dead energies in relation to the power of naming. One poem that makes me curious from *The Wreckage of Play* is the two part poem "Lepidoptera". You are studying the life of butterflies, the light and fire surrounding them. Lepidopterists are pretty famous for pinning them down.

JS: Gassing them and pinning them, yes.

MM: Why are you focusing there on the living energies? Is this a sort of subversion?

JS: Well, Lepidoptera is just a sort of classification, a type of butterfly. I just take that word to mean butterfly in general or a specific species of butterfly. This sounds like a cliché but it's ability to fly raises that amazing question of how does a thing begin, in terms of evolution, to fly? What adaptation is it in a creature that gives it an advantage and allows the next one to further develop that advantage and develop this propensity for what becomes flight? It seems to me an amazing thing. I'm not arguing for creationism here or anything like that. I believe in evolution, the way it is depicted to us in science. I think undoubtedly that is the way that life has evolved on the earth. But nevertheless it is a pretty wonderful thing to think: how does a thing begin to fly, how does it get going. So there is that. Then the whole process of metamorphosis — the business of spinning a cocoon and changing of state from caterpillar to this flying creature. That's really all I was marveling at in that poem and trying to project a human consciousness into that range of experience. I suppose, implicit in that is that all language tends to do what the lepidopterist does which is to kill and pin down. Poetry, I think, is among the most harmless interventions going. You can speculate about the world and marvel at it without really interfering too deeply in the freedom of the creature you are observing.

MM: Capturing as much of the life of the creature rather than killing it in the process.

JS: The danger is that you kill things in your own mind. You kill things by pinning them down and you can't discover new things about them. It's an old truism that poetry at its best returns to something of the child's sense of wonder at the world. For

each of us, as a child, there is this sort of first experience of certain things. The first cow that we see or the first pine cone we touch or whatever it may be. It could be anything, even ice cream that we eat or television that we look at and then once that has passed. The second fourth fifth time we see something we then become inured to it and we take it for granted. Poetry has the ability to defamiliarize and return us to that sense of marvel.

MM: I was really fascinated with the position of Parliamentary Poet laureate that you held and I was wondering how you defined that role when you were doing it?

JS: On one hand it was a great honour. I almost think of it as a great temptation that I didn't have the guts to resist. It came at a time when I welcomed or maybe needed the affirmation, so I said yes. Who'd of thought, looking back to my early years that I'd become Parliamentary Poet Laureate of Canada. So, I said yes. I was actually very uncomfortable with the job the whole time that I did it and felt really relieved when it was over. I worked at it very hard, not only in traveling a lot and talking about poetry and meeting workshops and poetry groups, trying to encourage young writers in classrooms, but I organized events in Ottawa and I maintained a poem of the week program on the website. I had no power really but tried to encourage the National Library of Canada to start a national poetry archive of Canadian poets reading a small selection of their poems so you could go to this national library website and then download and listen to our poets. I thought this would be a great resource. The big problem with that kind of a thing is copyright permissions. You have to get people to agree to release the use of a recording of them reading for all times and all people's everywhere. That turns out to be a big stumbling block, but they're working on that. I tried to do things like that. I tried to do some good for poetry and literature in Canada. But having said that, I did very little writing of my own in that time. I always felt uncomfortable that I wasn't doing enough and that I wasn't able to have more political clout or just have more influence. In some ways I felt as though I wasn't really cut out for it. It's a position where they're willing to set up a pretty substantial budget for someone who really wants to go at it hammer and tongs. In half my mind I kind of wanted to escape from it and be out in the woods instead of in Ottawa. Ottawa isn't really my favorite place. This confirmed that to me. I went into it bright eyed and bushy tailed. Why not go in and do something like *The Grey Islands* right in center block, why not go in there with a note pad and wander around there like I did the Grey Islands and naively, open eyed recording my impressions as they come — that idea of the almost neutral photographs of what is. But I found I couldn't do that. I found I disliked the place too much. I found it rankled in too many ways. I couldn't overcome my desire to flee practically every time I was there, so I couldn't really write about it, not in an honest way.

MM: The role of the poet laureate has always seemed a little strange to me. The Parliamentary Poet Laureate is obviously not required to write poems for events or

the Queen's birthday or anything like that. That's very problematic and I can't imagine having the energy to do that sort of a job. Yet, having this sort of official representative for poetry seems to me to go counter to so many of the things that poetry is supposed to do. You can't contain poetry and force it to do as you wish.

JS: I was invited on several occasions to write poems, often for memorial services for dead generals and that sort of thing and I just couldn't do it. I told them right from the beginning that poetry isn't yard goods, I can't just reel off a poem and snip it off there and say "here's your poem". I often felt that there was this dissatisfaction around my unwillingness to do that so I tried to encourage poets in general and maybe succeeded to a certain extent. But I have to agree with you that this is a sort of paradox. A lot of municipalities now are appointing poet laureates, the town of Cobourg for example or where ever. On the one hand that's a good thing, it brings attention to poetry and suggests that poetry does have some use in the modern world but the flip side of that is that people expect that poets are agents somewhat like tourist promoters. You have the department of tourism and sports or something like that and they want the poet laureate to promote the town or whatever sort of incorporation the poet is supposed to represent. So really it is almost seen as something like public relations and advertising. The poet is supposed to be a booster for the chamber of commerce or whatever it might be. It seems to me that that goes against the idea of what's good about poetry.

MM: Thank you very much.

JS: It's been fun talking Mike.

Gesturing With Language

Mike Minor and Michael Crummey in Conversation — 24 March 2010

MM: I'm joined today in conversation by Michael Crummey, the award winning and bestselling author from Newfoundland, and we're going to be talking a little bit about his poetry. He began as a poet and continues to be a very fine poet. I'm very interested in what he thinks about his poetry now that he is three novels in and well on his way to becoming one of the great Canadian novelists. One of the quotations that I drew from some of the research I've been doing on you came from the Newfoundland Heritage site, where you, in a conversation with Stan Dragland you said that "poetry is the one place where with honesty, and something approaching clarity acknowledge my love for my family, my friends and lovers, for the world I live in. Love is the best of who I am". This was done a while back, when you were writing mostly poetry. I'm wondering if you still agree with this quote today.

MC: Probably not. That's probably because I feel like I have changed how I live in the world from those days. I think there was a time in my life where the only place that I allowed myself to express particular parts of my head was through the writing. It often came out in ways that I wasn't aware of; it wasn't a plan to bring this stuff out. It was just what happened when I sat down to write. I would like to think that I am much more conscious of the place those things occupy in my life now and that I am more proactive about actually letting people know how I feel, for example. And, also, I write hardly any poetry anymore, so if that's the only place it comes out, I'm in big trouble.

MM: Do you think your other writing has been able to fill in those gaps. Is writing still a place where (maybe not the only place) but a place where you can acknowledge the love for family and friends?

MC: It's a different kind of process, because writing the fiction, of course, there's a distancing that goes on between your own thoughts and feelings and the characters that you are writing about. Of course tonnes of me comes out in that process, but also, I'm writing about particular characters and how they feel about the world. So, I take full responsibility for all that is in those books of fiction, of course, but I'm not writing about the world in the same direct way that I have through the poetry. It's a slightly different process. I think part of the reason that I write less poetry than I used to is because the fiction is such a huge undertaking. The novel takes up so much mental space that it just swallows everything. You know so...

MM: It's an omnivorous form that doesn't leave to much extra space.

MC: It's like a black hole that sucks up everything. So, I'm no longer walking around thinking... "there's a poem in that" or "there's something there that can be written about in the form of poetry". Everything that I take in now as a writer gets used — if it gets used at all — in the fiction.

MM: Do you plan to be doing any more writing of poetry in the future?

MC: I've never been able to plan poetry, and I think that's part of the reason I'm doing less of it. With fiction if I have an idea that I'm working on, a novel, there are days that I get up and I don't feel like writing, but I can sit down and hammer out five hundred words, regardless of how I feel. With poetry if I don't feel like writing it, if I don't have a poem in front of me, in my head then it's a waste of time to sit down really, because it inevitably doesn't work. I would love to write more poetry. It's still in some ways the kind of writing I love to do most, it feels meditative in a way that fiction often doesn't. I lose time when I'm writing poetry whereas I'm always aware of time when I'm writing fiction. I'm thinking "can I quit now?" "have I done enough today?" I don't feel that way when I'm writing poetry at all. The question of how much time has passed doesn't even enter the equation. So, I would love to do more of that. But it doesn't feel like something I have a whole lot of control over.

MM: You referred to fiction writing as "heavy lifting" in an interview several years ago, do you still feel that it's this heavy lifting, this notion of work?

MC: Yeah, it feels like a job. And it's a job that I love some of the time, but you know, there are days that I would rather be doing something else. But the more I do it the more I realize that each project has its own particular character. I think that quote was after I had finished *River Thieves*, which was my first novel. And I hated writing that book. I really, really hated it and I wasn't sure that I'd take on another novel, because I disliked that particular experience so much. The most recent book I wrote, *Galore*, for example, that was the most fun, that I ever had writing. My wife will tell you that not every day was fun, but for the most part I couldn't wait to get at it every day. The same rule applied that it was work and three or four hours was as much as I could manage in a day. After that, my head stops working and I'm tired. But the doing it, the sitting down every day and moving that story ahead an inch or two was a blast. I loved doing it and really, really missed doing it when I was finished. That was a new thing. The first two novels, when I was finished, I was just relieved to be done.

MM: I think it definitely shows. Of your three novels, *Galore* was the one that I couldn't put down and I think there were times in *The Wreckage* and in *River Thieves* where it seemed like work. It seemed like it didn't trip off your tongue in the same way. I'd read your poetry at that point and I was wondering where you were. "Where's this voice that I'm so used to hearing". *Galore* seemed like a very different novel than either of the other two.

I've read and heard about the influence that John Steffler has had on your writing, especially early on. Could you talk a little bit about that and how reading some of his work when you were an undergraduate affected your choice to write?

MC: I think I had already started writing before I discovered John. I heard him read at the Writer's Alliance annual general meeting and I was living at Bowater House at the time, back when it was a male residence, and the Writer's Alliance meeting was taking place across the street in Peyton College. I was still pretty deeply closeted as a writer. No one knew that I was writing. I would sneak over and there were just a couple of public readings that were a part of the meeting and John was one of the people that read. I remember thinking how bizarre the stuff that he was reading was. I think the one that I remember was called "My Latest Invention" which was about a

bomb that came and destroyed everything except for people and plumbing. It was hilariously funny and I think that at that time I had it in my head that poetry wasn't supposed to be funny, so I didn't know quite what to make of him. But I went over to the library and I found *The Grey Islands*. I think that book had a phenomenal influence on me in terms of the kinds of things you could write about in poetry, and also the fact that a poem didn't necessarily have to look like a poem. A lot of that is written in short prose pieces. I think that had an influence particularly on a book of mine called *Hard Light*. I remember saying to John that I read *The Grey Islands* years before I wrote *Hard Light* and then I didn't read it again until years after I'd written *Hard Light* and it wasn't until I read it afterwards that it really struck me how much I stole from *The Grey Islands*. It was not a conscious decision on my part, but so much of that book had stayed with me.

MM: I wonder if it is not so much stealing, but just that these are two books that depict similar things. These books give a rural experience of Newfoundland. One similarity that strikes me between *Hard Light* and *The Grey Islands* is the fairly detailed descriptions of cleaning fish that also comes up in other poetry too. It's so ingrained, so embedded in the culture here. When people are writing set in an outport town, it is pretty hard to avoid it.

MC: I wasn't thinking as much of those kinds of things. I think when I was writing *Hard Light*, I was writing about a culture that I am one step removed from because my Dad grew up in that world and so did my Mom, to a certain extent, and I did not. I grew up in a mining town. So part of what I was trying to do in that book was to try to get inside the culture. So, in that sense it's unavoidable. Writing about the fishery was so much a part of that book because the culture is built around it. There's a piece at the end of *Hard Light* called "The Change Islands" and it details the products made by a particular company made by a company on the Change Islands in nineteen-forty-something, and then it details the products...

MM: made when you were writing the book ...

MC: which are none. So you have this list and then the categories with nothing listed. I remember John was reading in Kingston, where I was living at the time, and I happened to have a copy of *The Grey Islands* in my hands which I was flipping through and he had this census at the beginning of the book, where he lists the people living there and the census, which just categories with zeros except for the crazy writer of course. When I saw that I thought "I stole that" that's the change islands exactly. I didn't even remember that piece, but it's clear to me that that's where I got the idea.

MM: Census results seem to happen fairly often in Newfoundland literature. Wayne Johnston, in *Custodian of Paradise*, talks about the census results at the beginning of that book. Trying to find an actual uninhabited island for Sheila Fielding to go and live in. I would contest that it is actual stealing of his idea. It's a really effective way of showing the change — the way that there was such a productive life. On the Grey Islands there was a hundred and something people, making fish and now there is just one loony writer. The same thing with the Change Islands piece. Once upon a time there was this incredibly productive company and now there is nothing. It's just faded

away. I'm really interested that you've thought about this because it brings me to the question about coming from outside of a culture and speaking about that culture, trying to become a part of it. Steffler comes from Ontario originally and part of *The Grey Islands*, his process of writing, was so that he could engage in the place, with Newfoundland. He was very aware that he was not from Newfoundland, that he was a come-from-away. Is this something that you're aware of when you read his poetry?

MC: That he's a come-from-away?

MM: Yeah.

MC: I suppose so because that's a point that he makes over and over again.

MM: Does it bother you, perhaps? how do you feel about people coming from away and then writing about your culture?

MC: I guess it depends on how people do it. I think there's a respectful way to do that and a disrespectful way to do that. And, certainly with John's coming from a place of, first of all, identifying where he's coming from and secondly, everything he writes about the place comes from a) wanting to understand it better and b) it's clear that he loves place and wanting to honour the culture. This is a place where he has made his home. I think that's a completely different situation than someone who looks at Newfoundland and thinks "there's an interesting, odd place and I can write a book about it."

MM: "Let's go spend a month or two and see what kind of funny things people say, so I can include that."

MC: I know a lot of people, including my mother hate *The Shipping News*, personally I had no problem with it. The way that the story is framed, it's about an outsider coming to place he knows nothing about. She's [Annie Proulx] a Gothic writer, so her depiction of Newfoundland is a Gothic depiction of Newfoundland and anyone coming here looking for that place is out of their mind. But her depiction of the United States is just as Gothic. So there was an artistic decision that she made there that fits what she is trying to do in that novel. The novel has a goal. But there's another book called, *The Bird Artist*, by Howard Norman which is supposedly set in Newfoundland at the turn of the twentieth century. And I've met Howard Norman and he seems like a nice guy. *The Bird Artist* is a good novel, it's a good story. But it feels disrespectful to the place because he was picking and choosing what worked for him and he was ignoring what didn't work for him in ways that were disrespectful to the place and to the people. You know? It's set in Witless Bay in the early nineteen hundreds and all the characters spend their free time at the local restaurant. Now, I thought, Early nineteen hundreds, outpost Newfoundland, people barely were able to feed themselves.

MM: People were barely sleeping.

MC: So, to have these people hanging out at a restaurant means that you don't give a shit about the place. He has a Beothuk Indian driving the mail boat. So to me that's

not giving any respect to the culture that you are cherry picking from. So, anyway, that's enough about that. Certainly with John's stuff there's no hint of any of that. He has a profound respect and love for the place. Even when he recognizes that parts of this place are ridiculous or whatever. He's willing to poke fun at the place as well.

MM: He's spent more of his life here now. He made this place his home.

MC: And he became a Newfoundlander.

MM: A part of his writing is asking: "how can I access this place, how can I get an authentic glimpse of what's going on". I mean he went out to live on his own on an island in the middle of the North Atlantic. That's pretty drastic. Paying your dues I guess.

We're talking about poetry and prose and you mention a couple of novels that are fairly controversial in the way that they represent Newfoundland. *The Shipping News* especially has had a lot of very good press outside of Newfoundland and in Newfoundland, it's had almost nothing but bad press about how it's misrepresenting and appropriating culture that is not properly understood. I'm wondering if poetry is a way of getting around this sort of appropriation, does it access parts of culture that novels cannot or novels do not?

MC: No, I don't think so. Let's look at Steffler again. I think *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* is another example of his ability to place himself in a culture that is not his, but he is able to (mostly through hard work) but also through empathy he is able to place himself in a place where by rights he has no business knowing about. I think that that is just as successful an example of doing that as *The Grey Islands*. So, I think it's about the writer, really. With a novel, there's more opportunity to get it wrong because you're trying to create a sense of an entire world and all you have to do is screw up one or two details and it undermines the entire thing. When you're looking at a collection of poems or a sequence of poems, you have to get it right in each poem, but that's a smaller undertaking in some ways. Just in terms of getting a sense of a place. In that sense it's a little easier to enter.

MM: Well, it's dealing with more specific things. With a novel, everything needs to be connected. Generally, a novel has a narrative arch where everything ties in. If you can pull out one little thread, everything starts to unravel. With poetry...

MC: there's more specificity. You're looking at things from closer up. Sometimes, I think it is easier to get inside that one small thing at a time — by looking closely at something one thing at a time. Maybe in that sense, yes.

MM: Along these lines of what poetry does... a couple of words that come up in your work are "wreckage" and "salvage". I've noticed the word "wreckage" in John Steffler's work as well. But you also use the word "salvage". This word has a lot of resonance in Newfoundland culture. There's the notion of what can be saved from a big mess. There are lots of fires and disasters and things that go deeply into Newfoundland culture. Would you describe your writing as an act of "salvage".

MC: Certainly, and in particular cases, I would say that both *Hard Light* and *Galore* were both active salvage operations. I was dealing with the remnants of a culture that have pretty much disappeared over the last generation. Certainly with *Hard Light* I was deliberately setting out to write a book about a time and place that my father grew up in and that he watched disappear in his life time. He felt like a last living link to that way of life and to that world. I was very consciously deciding that I'm going to get as much of that down on paper as I can before we don't have access to it any more or before it is gone completely. In that sense it was pure salvage. There were bits and pieces that I could cobble together and try to make some sense of a whole out of it. And again with *Galore* that was the same sort of process. I wanted to write a book about a culture that is in the middle of a sea change. The world that my kids are growing up in was completely unimaginable to me when I was growing up, in the same way that the world I was growing up in was unimaginable to my father. So, on the other side of that, we are going to be different. I'm not sure in what ways and I don't know how much of a culture carries through regardless of the changes and my sense of it is changing as well. I think we carry more of it than I ever considered possible, that cultural legacy, even after the physical conditions that created the culture are gone that cultural legacy carries on for a long time I think.

MM: Look at yourself, as much as you were living in a completely different world, so much of your writing focuses on the world of your parents and before.

MC: What made me who I am was the world that made my parents who they were because my parents made me who I am and the people around them. I've just been reading *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell. He talks about cultural legacy in that way. The reason so many Asian kids are good at math is not because they are naturally better at math, it's because they work harder at problems and the reason they work harder and longer at difficult problems is because they grew up in a wet rice culture and a wet rice culture is labour intensive in a way that western culture farming is not. He says that even though none of these kids grew up wet rice farming and most of their parents didn't grow up wet rice farming. That culture created a particular approach to the world that is going to be carried on from generation to generation. I think that's going to be true here as well. That salvage process is something that happens in each generation. Those things are cobbled together and passed on. Every parent does that for their kids and every community does that for the next generation.

MM: You title a whole collection of poems *Salvage* and a whole novel *The Freckle*. These ideas seem to come up time and time again. It's something that seems really remarkable in most Newfoundland literature, how the past is being written. The historical fiction going back and drawing a line through the history.

MC: Newfoundland is interesting too because part of the sea change that's taking place is that it's going from an aural culture to a written culture. So this explosion of writing about the past, part of the reason it's so striking here is because a lot of these stories are being written down for the first time. At least as consciously as it's being done now. I think that's something that will taper off. When I look at my contemporaries I'm one of the few people doing it. You look at Michael Winter or Lisa Moore or Joel Hynes or Ed Riche, these are people writing about Newfoundland

today, their lives now and the past is the past for them. I think that that's a healthy thing. I think that's part of — for lack of a better term — a national literature goes through certain phases, and it normally covers hundreds of years and what we're seeing in Newfoundland is this speed-it-up process because things are changing so quickly here. I'm already the old man who wrote about the past, even though I'm the same age as these people who have found different models and things that interest them. They are completely cutting edge in terms of the kinds of things that they are writing about. That's definitely where we are going. I'm already a fossil.

MM: It's strange to hear you talk that way because in the group that I'm studying now of Newfoundland poets, you're still the new kid on the block.

MC: In terms of age.

MM: Yet your poetry doesn't seem all that much different from theirs. For Mary Dalton and John Steffler are two other people I'm studying. Mary grew up in the same world as your parents, just about. In a lot of ways she still sees the old world in Newfoundland. She's constantly talking about language, that's her biggest interest. When she goes back home she says something like "people say that everything is being absorbed into a global culture. I go back home that's not true. It's just not true. I go and I talk to people and they talk using the same words that were written down in the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* thirty years ago and their using these words, things are changing but it's not being absorbed."

MC: I really had to change stance on Newfoundland's place in the world and how it responds to influence from the outside world. Dale Jarvis is a folklorist and I've been quoting him for a long time on this so I really hope it's him who said it. He says that Newfoundlanders have always been modernists and that anything that washes up on the beach, if they can use it, they use it and then it just becomes part of Newfoundland culture, it's incorporated into the place instead of changing the place itself. I think what we're seeing now of course is that there is so much washing up on the beach. When I look at the world that my kids are growing up in and the myriad influences on them, it's hard to see how that is not going to change the culture itself. But I'm starting to feel less and less concerned about that. It feels like the culture is stronger than we realize and that the interaction between those influences and the local culture is far more complex than I ever realized. So, it will be really interesting to see what happens. In twenty years from now how will my kids see themselves and what kinds of things will they be passing on to their own kids?

MM: It's one thing to talk about Lisa Moore, Michael Winter and Ed Riche writing about St. John's, but even if you go back and you read *Rare Birds* that's already got a historical context. It was written in the late nineties and Newfoundland was tremendously different then. The effect of the fisheries collapse is still very present in ninety eight when the book is being written and that seems really evident in the book, but then you look now and St. John's is a very different place. You're not finding all these sorts of people that used to work in the fishing industry and had to go and start a business when the moratorium came in. Now there's the oil industry here, things are changing very quickly. It's very interesting to see people writing about contemporary

St. John's. In twenty years, at the rate at which things are changing here, even in the two years I've been here. It's going to be very fascinating to see what happens.

MC: I should say too, just to clarify, I'm not at all suggesting that the kind of writing that Michael and Lisa and Joel and those people are doing is less Newfoundland. The really interesting thing to me is that the models that they are using are all international and the kind of writing that they are doing is, to me, cutting edge international quality writing, those books couldn't have come from anywhere else. Newfoundland is a huge part of what makes those books so interesting and so unique. I think that will continue to be true for a long time.

MM: Your family plays a very significant role in your poetry, a very direct role. In *Hard Light* a lot of these stories are drawn directly from your own experiences. Is there a reason why they don't play as direct a role in your prose fiction?

MC: It has something to do with narrative arc and I'm not sure what that is exactly. Even when I start a story, like some of the stories in *Flesh and Blood*, I start with family stories. But there is something about writing a fictional story, about creating a narrative arc about creating fictional characters that inevitably leads away from whatever fact was the starting point. You take a story like "Serendipity" which starts with this guy walking into the wrong house in a company town because he has mistakenly turned onto the wrong street and all the houses look alike. He walks into the wrong house. So, that's a true story. My grandfather was out at the bank houses drinking and walked into the wrong house, thinking it was his own. So, when I'm writing poetry, when I have a moment when I think, "I can use that". What ends up happening, if that was a poem for example, my grandfather would be my grandfather. Part of the process of writing the poem would be writing about him and what that moment means for him or me or something like that. It's a very personal process. But when I take that and say "there's a story, that's a great starting point for a story", my grandfather disappears. What happens is, I have to create a story that starts at that point and has a narrative arc to it that works as a piece of fiction. So, I'm not interested in my grandfather, I'm interested in "how do I make a story about that with a narrative arc?"

MM: Instead of taking a snapshot of a moment you have to role the film a bit.

MC: It becomes something else completely. I have friends who are fiction writers who are constantly using the people around them and events from their own lives in their stories in ways that are very recognizable, which has caused them no end of grief of course, but that's part of what interests them. Part of writing fiction is dealing with things from people's lives, but that holds no interest to me for some reason. When I'm writing fiction I'm making stuff up and when I'm writing poetry it's a very different thing. I'm writing out of a different part of myself and it's a way more personal part of myself.

MM: Do you think it's a more real part of yourself, or a more literal part of yourself?

MC: Maybe more...no not even more literal, because when I look back at the novels, I can find myself all over them in ways that I was not aware of when I was writing

them. So, I come out regardless of whether I plan to or not. I do think that if you are writing honestly and writing about the world as it is, then you're going to appear there whether you want to or not. I had once heard that everybody's first novel was about themselves, and I thought "not me, that's not happening."

MM: "I'm going to go and find someone very far away."

MC: Well, I figured I would write a book about something that happened two hundred years ago and when I look back at the novel now I can find myself all over the place in those characters and in particular events and that was completely unintentional. So, with the poetry it's much more conscious, writing out of my own life and writing about my own life and the people around me. In the fiction when that happens it is completely unconscious.

MM: I have a little section from a poem, the disclaimer, which is the first poem in *Salvage* "Kissing the Dead", It says

What was the point of that?
 she wants to know,
 and he can't fashion a sensible answer
 or shake the feeling he's just
 setting things down on paper
 to leave them there
 gaping like potholes

The question that seems to be being asked here of how can language or how can any system of signs show the real world when reality is so complex? That's something that I think comes up very often in your poetry: this grasping. You know there's something there, but to say it with language is so hard. Do you have an answer to this question? Is it possible to grasp the thing itself, reality, these emotions, love, your family with language?

MC: I suppose it's possible, but it's accidental when it happens. I think every writer I know really struggles with the gap between the gap of what they have in their heads, what that looks like to them and what ends up on the paper. There's always a phenomenal sense of failure there. And it's partly because every writer has their own shortcomings, but also language is an imperfect tool. The best you can do is to kind of point towards something and hope that the reader can see it. If you talk to enough readers you will see that they are often getting something that you didn't intend or that looks completely different than you have in your own head. A reader plays as big a role in the whole process as the writer does. That's the conclusion I'm coming to. Part of what I was doing there in that piece is sort of questioning what the point of writing is. "Why am I bothering?" And I'm not sure why. I still don't have a good answer for that other than "I have nothing else that I can do with my life at this point". But when I started out, there was this huge sense of the possibility of getting something down on paper that would capture it. So I've since realized how futile a notion that is, you can't capture it. You can't. But there are still moments when you sneak up on it. When it's there and I still get a thrill out of that moment when you feel like you're

almost there. And also, language is all we've got. Winston Churchill said that democracy is the worst form of government ever devised except for all other forms of government ever devised and language is kind of the same thing. It's the only tool that really works at all. It's imperfect and it inevitably doesn't quite get there, but it's the only thing that comes that close.

MM: The idea of pointing is something that I'm finding useful because that's all that language can do. To make a gesture towards and say "look at this, this isn't the thing itself, but it's as close as I can get to getting it out of my head and on to paper."

I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the role of naming in your poetry and your writing. Do you usually use the real names of places and people in your writing?

MC: It depends. In *Hard Light* a lot of the names are real names and certainly place names are. That was very important to me in that book. I was writing about a specific place and I wanted to use their names. When I'm talking about where in Labrador they are or particular parts of Western Bay, you know, Riverhead or Southside or whatever. All of those are the real ones. But there were moments where I changed names because I wasn't sure how flattering a portrait I was giving of somebody. These people have families and some of them are still alive and I didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings. So, in that sense I pick and choose. In a book like *River Thieves* I really struggle with whether or not to use the real names of those characters. The Peytons are all around and they feel very connected to that story still.

MM: That family has written about that story too.

MC: I was making up a fictional story that created personal histories for these characters and personal stories for these characters, motivations that were completely false. I thought, "how can I do that and use these people's real names"? I thought of changing the names of the Peytons to p-a-y instead of p-e-y but I realized that with that book in particular because it was about particular events that it would have been in some ways more disrespectful to change the names. It would have been like setting the Beothuk story in Nova Scotia or something. It was about particular historical events and particular historical things and particular tragedies and I felt that it would be disrespectful to mask that somehow, but there's a moment in that book where Peyton got somebody to steal David Buchan's Journal (this is the guy that's investigating the murders) because he thinks that he will be able to protect his family. But he realizes once he gets it that there is no way to protect his family. He realizes that they are inextricably tied to this tragedy and that for time immemorial they are going to be judged. He remembers his father picking up a Beothuk skull and sort of miming using the jaw and putting words into the mouth and what a desecration that was. He has this moment where he realizes that the same thing is going to happen to them, that 200 years from now, some stranger is going to pick them up, pick up their bones and start talking through their mouths. And that's me he's talking about. I don't know if I could have published that book without that moment because I wanted to give the Peyton's at least that much. I wanted to point outside the book and say "this is not me talking, this is this guy". So, it's a complicated thing this whole naming process. It's complicated to say how the relationship is to a) the characters you're writing about and b) the people behind the characters.

MM: It's such a powerful thing to do, naming. A name starts to collect all of the things. The Peytons have one of these names in Newfoundland where they are collecting so much baggage or things said and written about them. It's a lot of power that you hold in your hand when you decide to write about them.

I'm going to shift gears a little bit to a notion of authenticity. I want to talk a little bit about Michel de Certeau, who makes very particular distinctions, especially between two terms. One is "space" and one is "place". Basically, these are two different ways that you can interact with the world. There's a certain amount of fluctuation between them in practice, you're not stuck in either place or space, but, place is basically some form of map making. It would be like looking at St. John's from Signal Hill and trying to understand the city as a whole. Space, deals with the very specific actions that happen on street level. So if you're walking down on Water Street you take into account all the construction and the people present. Do you think that one of these two modes is more relevant in your poetry?

MC: I suppose, it would be the street level view of things. In most cases, I'm writing about particular things that are specific in terms of their detail, so in that sense it would be space. I'm thinking about, I don't know, "Making the Fish". There's all kinds of things in *Hard Light* which are just about what kind of space people move in. What was their day like? How did they do this particular thing? But, on the other side of things, when I think about *Hard Light* as a collection, in a way that was kind of a map I was trying to make of that time. I was trying to see it whole, by collecting these individual pieces together in a way that gave a sense of the entirety of that community and some sense of that way of life. So maybe I was trying to have it both ways there, I'm not sure.

MM: I think that's very often what happens. It's the same thing I see in any poetry; poetry exists simultaneously as one poem and in relationship to poems on either side of it. Poems at the beginning of the collection and at the end of the collection. That's something that is very different from novels. With novels, unless they are a trilogy or something, you don't look at one novel and hold it responsible for something that was said in another novel by that same author. With poetry it's different. The poems act as a mosaic or a collage. Each poem is individual and stands up on its own, but it's also related to in a fairly complicated way to the rest of an author's poems.

MC: That's really interesting. *Hard Light* was written to stand one beside the next. As I was writing them I was thinking of them in the context of the pieces in a larger whole. With *Salvage* or with *Arguments with Gravity* that was just sort of what I had on hand. I tried to look at them as a whole and I tried to group them together in ways that made sense, but in the end they were written completely independent of one another. In that sense there was no sort of map intended.

MM: I want to ask about writing from the perspective of women, which is something I think you do very well. Some of my favorite poems of yours are little sketches of Newfoundland women. I'm thinking of "Bread" or "Her Mark" especially. I have trouble getting through them without getting choked up. Are you hesitant to write in the voice of a woman?

MC: Less and less. The whole notion of appropriation of voice is a really interesting one and it's something that has changed a whole bunch over the last twenty years. I think there was a time in my life where I wouldn't have dreamt of writing in the voice of a woman and it seemed like every community was drawing lines and saying "we can write about this but nobody else can". And there were reasons for that. You know when you look at the aboriginal community or the black community or the gay community or on and on and on... I think these were communities that felt like they didn't have a voice and to have someone from outside come in and say "I'm going to write about you guys" and they haven't been given the chance to speak from their own experience that just felt like a violation. I think that was true in Newfoundland as well. That was part of the reason Newfoundlanders got their backs up about people coming into the place and writing about it. "Why the hell can't we do it? Why is this person doing it when we haven't had a shot?" I think what I've seen over the last twenty years is that all of these communities are finding their own voice. Each of these communities can point to people and say "these are the people speaking for us." So, people become way less protective. There's less of a sense of violation for someone to write from that experience. It's still a dicey thing because it's so easy to get it wrong, so I think the point that most people are reaching now is that they are saying "anyone can do it, but we're sure as hell going to point out when it's done badly."

MM: I think that's really fair, we're at the point now where St. John's has got to be one of the most written about cities per capita in the world. There are so many novels set here. There needs to be some room for appropriation of voice so that a variety of stories will be told.

MC: *Hard Light*, I think, is an exercise in the appropriation of voice, the whole book. One review of that book said that it was a book that the author is almost completely absent from. I really liked that because my whole plan was to speak in the voices of other people and for me not to be there, as much as possible. In each of those cases where I'm writing out of someone else's experiences it comes down to trying to empathize with other people's experiences and trying to see out of someone else's eyes. That is fraught with difficulties, but with women in particular, I have always been interested in women and I have always been aware that their experience with the world is different from mine and I've always been interested in that difference. How do they see the world? What is their experience and the writer in me, long before I ever knew I wanted to write, has been taking notes. So, I'm not hesitant to write in the voice of women. I'm terrified of it because it is so easy to get it wrong, but I'll do it, sure. Why would I cut myself off from fifty-one percent of the world. Even when I'm not writing specifically in the voice of a woman, like in the novels for instance, I'm constantly writing from behind a woman. The third person narrative voice allows me to move around and dip into the heads of all these characters. So, even when I'm not saying "I" in the voice of a woman, I'm often writing from behind their eyes.

MM: I'm also interested in the idea of maps which comes up in *Hard Light*, once again. It comes up in the final section "Map of the Islands". You have a couple of great quotes from a couple of books about map making and the possibility of lies in map making. Could you talk a little bit about the paradox of maps and why you were interested in them in this instance?

MC: Partly because it was because that trip involved so many maps. It was a trip down the coast of Labrador. It was somewhere I had never been before, so my only experience of it in the lead up to the trip was seeing it on maps. Maps are a kind of language and maps are fraught in the same kind of ways that language is. They give the impression of being the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, when in fact they're just one take on the world and that someone else's map of the same location often is completely different and I was very aware during that trip of how many different cultures and societies had existed in what appeared to be this completely uninhabited land. Their sense of the place was completely different and how any map that they would draw of the place would be completely different from anybody else's. So it seemed to me like an interesting way into writing about some of those different cultures and the way that they existed there and what remains of them in that place and at the same time pointing to the fact that even though a lot of that stuff is told in the first person in this book, there is a map maker behind it all and that he is not to be trusted. I wanted to be as transparent about that as possible. I guess in the same way that I wanted Peyton to talk about me speaking through the skulls of the dead. It was another way of pointing out my role in making that map and the fact that I was bringing my own biases and my own goals and that that ended up there in what was said about them.

MM: It's really good to hear about how aware you are of your own ability to skew things.

Something that I've been thinking a lot about is wilderness poetry. I've been coming to think about it more as, not poetry that is about "the wilderness", but poetry that lets wilderness exist, or poetry that lets things not be colonized or appropriated by the text. It is looking at something with wonder or awe and saying "I don't really know what this is, but it's beautiful" or something to that effect. In *Vís á Vís*, Don McKay defines wilderness as, and I really like this definition as, "the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations". Do you think this is part of what you are doing? Would you consider yourself a wilderness poet or a wilderness writer in that way.

MC: No not consciously. Don takes on the relationship of humans and the relationship of human writing to wilderness and that has been a real revelation to me. They are ways I've consciously thought about what I'm doing and how I'm making use of my material. I think that part of Don's project is finding ways to allow wilderness to elude the mind's appropriations, that there's something of a violation in our attempts to set everything down and to bring the entire universe into the colonization that is language. For Don, part of what he loves about the wilderness is that it exists outside of all of that and that there is no way to get it all down. He's trying to find a way in language to allow wilderness to escape language. It's a fantastic project and I think that that's part of what makes him, probably, the best poet writing in the country now. It's that incredibly unique take on the relationship between language and the world we're writing about. I think for me, there may be some of that in my writing but it was all unconscious in the sense that I was more dealing with the inability of language to colonize, I wanted to colonize, I wanted to get the world down. You look at a piece like "Her Mark" where this woman says that "the day will come when we will not be remembered, I've wasted no part of my life to

try to make it otherwise", which is kind of an acknowledgement that this whole project is doomed, that any sense of trying to hold onto the past is impossible. In fact, some time in the future we are all going to be forgotten. So, it's kind of an acknowledgement that this whole project is flawed and doomed. But for me, my human impulse is to carry on any way, even though I know how much is getting through the net, to say as much as I can say as well as I can say it, even though I know I'm failing. Don has taken it one Taoist step further and recognized the impossibility of success. It is kind of Zen. The next step is to let go of trying. The next step is to go beyond that point where you allow failure to happen. To realize that there is some kind of triumph in letting that go. I'm not there.

MM: You've got years before you have to be. You're still a young man.

MC: (laughs) But there is a fine line to be drawn from recognizing the failure of language, recognizing the project of language first, it's inevitable failure and then moving past it to wherever it is that Don is heading.

MM: Well, you need to get on with your day. I thank you very much for taking the time to talk with me. I wish you all the best and I'm a big fan.

MC: Well thank you, thanks. And good luck to you as well

MM: thanks.

