

Mary Dalton. *Hooking: A Book of Centos*

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provinces remained on the sidelines. Even he admits that Term 29 “prepared the grounds for a splintering of regional cooperation as a political strategy” (131). Newfoundland Premier Joseph R. Smallwood, however, attempted to invent Term 29 as Ottawa’s promise to Newfoundland to inject more money into his province. That promise had never been made and when he appointed the Royal Commission required in Term 29, Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent warned his cabinet that Smallwood would demand more than Ottawa could possibly deliver. The powerful federal bureaucracy had already become worried about Smallwood’s management of Newfoundland’s fiscal resources and it was those same officials who recommended to Prime Minister John Diefenbaker that he reject Smallwood’s demands over Term 29.

The book does not explore what Smallwood thought of the notion of an Atlantic Canada. He did not turn to the Maritimes premiers for help in his fight with Ottawa over Term 29, and he quit the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council and the Atlantic Premiers’ Conference in the 1950s over the licensing of regional air carriers and quarrel with them over a number of other interests. He wanted to deal with Ottawa on his own terms and not as part of a regional entity. Once the prospects of oil became apparent on the east coast, all of the provinces began a long and protracted quarrel over boundary demarcations. There were more items creating divisions among the provinces in Atlantic Canada than uniting them.

Slumkoski offers a useful and interesting overview of the reaction of the Maritime provinces towards Newfoundland’s entry into Canada, but his attempt to show how that event invented Atlantic Canada is less satisfactory.

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The cento, a poem made up of quotations from other authors, is often relegated to the status of a learning exercise or polymathic crossword puzzle. Mary Dalton’s new book goes some way to rescuing its potential. Her title plays on

two senses of “hooking”: hook a mat, hook a fish. An apter metaphor may be weaving, because the collection’s best poems have the denseness and durability of a piece of Harris tweed. This stands to reason since Dalton is the ablest Newfoundland poet since E. J. Pratt, and arguably an abler one.

Hooking’s 38 poems, whose quotations are drawn from hundreds of poets and testify to an immense breadth of reading, each average about 25 scrupulously credited lines, often divided into three-line stanzas. Making compilation more arduous, or possibly easier, she keyed each poem to a particular line number so that “Cross-Stitch,” for example, is compiled from the second lines of source poems. Thus she combines the charms of randomness with reason and intuition.

Her choice of poets could function as an index of her taste, except one supposes that occasionally she did not particularly like a line, but found it nicely suited for a cento. One of this reviewer’s lines (“he was composing totems with a chainsaw”) turns up in “Filaments,” keeping good company with lines by Ted Hughes and John Berryman. Dalton’s favourite sources are, among non-Canadian poets, Wisława Szymborska, Simon Armitage, Don Paterson, Michael Longley, and Elizabeth Bishop. Among Canadians (who tend to cluster in a few poems), they are P. K. Page and Anne Simpson. Overall, Dalton manages to cover the international waterfront without neglecting her own.

The lines are so smoothly blended that even a famous one like Ezra Pound’s “The ant’s a centaur in his dragon world” doesn’t seem extraneous or intrusive. They are almost exclusively of the twentieth century; we are mercifully spared Shakespeare. So smoothly and aptly does she quote it’s as if she could pluck Edgar Guest’s “It takes a heap o’ livin’ in a house t’make it home” and incorporate it coherently and cohesively. Given such varied sources, it’s remarkable how natural, connected, and consistent, though not monotonous, the lines are in mood and treatment — and notable how often their rhythms approximate her own work.

Although never explicitly named, the poems’ locales often hint at Newfoundland. In “Cloth”:

*The fog won’t lift tonight —
but now we are alone with it and know
a piece of cloth was lost beyond the line.*

In “A Hand” we see “the lighthouse, and the boat on the beach, and the two shapes.” Often an apocalyptic bad dream, not quite bad enough to be a nightmare,

is laconically depicted in the way it sometimes is in the work of Al Moritz, which itself derives from John Ashbery, one of Dalton's favoured sources. In "Shattered Hand":

*Until finally —where the ice cracks
a vault, reaching into darkness
like the x-ray image of a small, shattered hand —
the time comes to resist, facing
more than the usual army.*

In "The Old Masters":

*Here is the wolf. He slips in with the dawn.
Idling on some compulsive fantasy,
they give each other extravagant aliases,
original to the cataclysm and the dark.*

Such grim situations are treated cerebrally, not viscerally, or as "Descant" says, "a scene made-up by the mind" or while "Imagination is off paddling among the rocks." The poems often dwell on metaphysically framed questions, as in "Delta." Referring to names, it asks:

*To make music with them, or conversation?
And this sea-spider's web
like a smashed-up centerpiece decanter?
Appearing in the form of ragged clouds,
birds darken the sky. Is it enough?*

This reviewer identified with the observation in "Blue Ink": "Bumper-to-bumper all the way to the horizon, / lexicographers burned their stringy eyeballs black . . ." Lines like these deploy a not always welcome half-satirical quasi-surrealism. In "Braid":

*Omega's long last O, memory's elision
jostle the vessel he cannot refill.
Even now she does the snake-hips with a hiss,
like a furious pink rabbit from a hat.
She buys up all*

*the notion of what his whiskers would feel like —
smack! Oh, attaboy, attaoold boy.*

Occasionally the surrealism seems forced or wayward, as in “Gauze”:

*On the half hour at the commercial break
the muzzles of the microphones
describe the green after an accident.*

*Strutting like fat gentlemen
they dance on the surface among the flies
and apes and peacocks.*

Dalton is at the stage of her career when we no longer judge her work in terms of skill, which can be taken for granted, but within broader internal categories like voice, tone, vision, and theme or, externally, its public reception, how a book fits within a body of work, the poet’s reputation. *Hooking* likely won’t become a prize winner because awards jurors and reviewers won’t know what to do with it: they’ll ask, “Who’s the author here?” Dalton’s erudition, command of local idiom, barbed satire, and acute perceptions, above all her originality, characterized *Red Ledger* (2006), her best book so far. Yet *Merrybegot* (2003) might have risked overdependence on written sources, since it heavily drew on the splendid *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, a reference work amply demonstrating that Newfoundland diction and speech is the dialectally richest in English Canada. To some, *Hooking* may seem to double the risk.

Yet *Hooking* implicitly poses interesting questions — aesthetic, ethical, linguistic — about the fraught concept of originality. Every good poem is a web of influences, which is what keeps literary scholars in business. Would it not be more honest for a poet to quote directly, as Dalton does here, as Pound and T. S. Eliot often did, or as Brahms quoted Bach? This consideration may be irrelevant to *Hooking*, which in effect creates, not a medley of individual voices, but a poetic metalanguage. It’s rather as if Dalton has dipped a pail into the running stream of poetic speech and into language itself. Yet the success of this book relies on the fact that she knows how to dip her pail — and where.

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