

Notes from and beyond my Conference Reading

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[See table of contents](#)

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FRANK DAVEY

FOR MOST OF MY WRITING CAREER I have been seeking ways of writing a poetry that can overcome both the low standing of poetry in our culture and the suspect epistemology and ideology of the lyric poem, while also engaging the discursive underpinnings of some of the major political issues of our time. My poems have been both literary texts and theoretical probes.

Often it has seemed to me that poetry has become so generally discredited in public culture that the very name of the genre and the conventional appearance of a poem on a page have come to connote for most readers irrelevance and naivety, and that disguise — as prose, as popular song, as anti-poetry, as populist verse, as performance, or as ‘text’ — may be the only means for it to continue. Eighty years ago most poets — perhaps even Eliot — thought that *The Waste Land*, its fragments “shored” against its ruins, was an exception, and that they could go back to writing well-wrought urns or confessional epiphanies. But that poem has turned out to be one of the very few epistemologically credible poems of its period. In Canada, at least since Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* and Kroetsch’s “For Play and Entrance,” most serious poets have known that any linguistic statement is at best a proposition or a performance (and possibly little more than an example of a discourse) and that meaning is constructed as much by reading as by writing. What is (presently) a poem? In my second-last book, *Cultural Mischief* in 1996, a poem was a series of irreconcilable propositions, or it was a series of irreconcilable paragraphs themselves constructed of non-sequiturs and abruptly changed viewpoints, or it was sixteen sets of multiple, choice statements. In earlier books a poem was a postcard (*Post Card Translations*, 1988), or a travel guide (*The Abbotsford Guide to India*, 1986, which several bookstores stocked in their travel section), or fifteen theoretical frames for reconsidering a memory (*Popular Narratives*, 1991). While the sections of my most recent book, *Back to the War*, visually resemble what

is conventionally understood to be ‘poetry,’ almost all of those sections are constructed of conflicting statements and viewpoints.

The underlying structuring image of *Back to the War* is a child’s colouring book, which is why so many of the poems have generic titles — “The Battleship,” “The Alley,” “The Workmen,” and so forth. The actual colouring book I had in mind, and which appears in “The Battleship,” was a World War II colouring book, in which every page had an item of military hardware. In our culture childhoods have so often been militarized — there have been paramilitary ghosts in Boy Scouts and Canadian Girls in Training that have been only a step away from the child-armies that we currently lament in Third World countries. See the boy in his World War II sailor suit on this book’s cover.

I began the poem (I think of the book as one long poem) in 1977, and worked at it through 1979. Three or four much shorter drafts of it were published, under the title “War Poems,” in the Coach House Press manuscript editions of 1979-80 — an important Coach House Press experiment in on-demand printing. Eleven sections from it were included by bpNichol in the selected poems (*The Arches*) he edited for me in 1980. Two of these appeared in Margaret Atwood’s 1982 *New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*.

The poem’s beginnings were contemporaneous with the beginnings of Nichol’s prose poem sequence “Organ Music” that he eventually published as *Selected Organs*. He was the first reader or hearer of many of the early sections, and I was sometimes the first hearer of the early “organs.” It shared with bp’s book the mystery of how other people — and of course it’s always other people — used language. Both books were producing a child puzzling about how the world is said. Both were looking at how the everyday language through which a child learns is language always already-used, and at how that personal language is mostly public language — that is, part of public culture.

bp’s book was mostly indirect quotation — about the “they said.” Mine was mostly direct quotation, about how people say themselves, the “he says” or “she says” that become an overdetermined motif of the book (something which reviewers are almost certain to complain about). Both of them were also working with the prose line and prose paragraph as musical units, and using these recurring musical units to double narrative back upon itself, so that in what seems to be a narrative poem you come to the end and there has been no narrative.

Both bp and I were also concerned with what R.D. Laing had recently — 1969 — called the politics of the family. And how we ourselves were players in such politics. Signs of that politics accumulate throughout the poem, and are particularly evident in sections such as “Upstairs” (23), “Supper” (24), and “Grandad” (41). Laing was a major figure in the last century’s shifting of the family from the private (or the secret) toward the public. How this shift is done is also a problem in poetics, and concerns particularly whether the emphasis falls on the lyric or confessional subject or on larger matters such as institutions, language, public culture itself.

Finishing a book almost thirty years after it was set aside is in part a challenge of accommodating changes in one’s poetics, and reading the earlier work for prefigurings of those changes. My poetics in the past decade has been based on the concept of the proposition, specifically the proposition that language is for the most part propositional — offering more or less plausible constructions that are always alternative to other more or less plausible constructions. Physicists, chemists, geneticists, and other ‘hard’ scientists are accustomed to such a linguistic situation in their research, but — along with the rest of us — are often less accepting of it in personal life or in politicians or investment counselors — leading to a public culture in which many people are required to ‘lie’ or to persuade themselves that they are not ‘lying.’ My recent work explores heavily what happens when one juxtaposes in poetry various alternative more-or-less plausible propositions. You can see more thematized examples of this in my little gift to conference participants, the chapbook *Risky Propositions* that rob mcLennan at above/ground press has just published.