

STEPHEN SCOBIE

Biographical

Margery Fee

ACTIVE IN CANADA as a poet since 1966, Stephen Scobie has published ten books of poetry, including *McAlmon's Chinese Opera*, which won the Governor General's Award for Poetry in 1980. The "Chinese Opera" is the "long/high wordless toneless wail" that got the American writer Robert McAlmon thrown out of many famous Paris bars in the 1920's and 1930's. Scobie turns it into a rich metaphor, not only for McAlmon's failures, but also for art taken to the edge of meaning, and beyond. McAlmon's milieu — the decadent, complex, neurotic, and creative Paris of the American literary exile — consistently fascinates. But it is his voice — cynical, cold, and angry — that instantly compels attention. This voice speaks with the authority and immediacy of a revenant, its pain "screaming down / the airwaves of the long dead years." That Scobie's voice is completely unlike this — except perhaps in its conviction — adds to the impressiveness of the writing.

Scobie was born in Carnoustie, Scotland, on the last day of 1943. He remained in Scotland, honing his intellect, until he graduated tied for first in the Faculty of Arts of the University of St. Andrews. He began graduate studies at the University of British Columbia in 1965, receiving his Ph.D. in 1969. He married Maureen McHale in 1967. Between 1969 and 1981 he taught English at the University of Alberta; he came to the University of Victoria as a full professor in 1981. He and Douglas Barbour frequently collaborate: they were co-chairmen of the League of Canadian Poets between 1971 and 1973; they form the experimental sound poetry performance group Re:Soundings; they co-edited *The Maple Laugh Forever*, an anthology of Canadian comic poetry; and co-authored *The Pirates of Pen's Chance*. Scobie has been on the editorial board of several journals, including *The Malahat Review*, and is a founder and editor of Longspoon Press. In 1986, he was awarded the Association for Canadian and Quebec Literature's Gabrielle Roy Prize for his contributions to Canadian literary criticism. Best known in the academic community for his critical work in Canadian literature, especially for *Leonard Cohen* (1978) and *bpNichol: What History Teaches* (1984), he is also known in Victoria and Edmonton as a trustworthy and, when necessary, vitriolic movie reviewer.

MARGERY FEE: Why McAlmon?

STEPHEN SCOBIE: This goes back several years to an interest in Gertrude Stein, and radiating out from that, an interest in that whole period of American writers in Paris. And then to an intense love of the city of Paris itself. All of this coalesced in the spring of 1977 when I was giving a graduate course on that period, which used as its major focus volumes of autobiography. Everybody who passed through Paris in the 1920's wrote an autobiography, and they all appear as characters in each other's books, thus producing this marvellous, multi-dimensioned creation like a huge *Alexandria Quartet* in about forty different volumes. Among the books I was using were, of course, Stein's autobiography and Glassco's *Memoirs of Montparnasse*. I guess it was in Glassco that I had first come across the name of Robert McAlmon, several years before. One of the other books was *Being Geniuses Together*, a joint autobiography of Kay Boyle and McAlmon. It was while I was teaching that course that I began writing the poems and they began in classic form. Late one night, I was lying in bed, not getting to sleep, and Maureen eventually said "You're trying to write a poem, aren't you? Get out of bed and write the poem, otherwise you're going to keep me awake all night." So I stumbled into the next room without fully waking up and sat down in front of a piece of paper and started writing, and I was about half way through the first poem when I fully became awake and realized that this was Robert McAlmon speaking.

F: Which poem was it?

S: It was the first poem. It actually started "What I never wanted / was pity," and I really didn't know until I got to the last couple of lines — "Nine hours a day / at a dollar an hour / in 1921" that it was McAlmon.

F: Whose voice had taken over.

S: In fact that night I wrote the first three poems more or less as they appear in the book. There followed a period of about three months of intense activity, the closest I've ever come to being possessed. I was writing sometimes two or three poems a day, basically in chronological order, though not entirely. I was, partly for the course, partly for this book, reading everything on or by McAlmon that I could lay my hands on in Edmonton. I did not try to interview Kay Boyle or anyone like that, partly because I was a little scared of getting too bound up in the historicity of it. I wanted a lot of information, but on the other hand I wanted to be free to invent. So the second phase, which was quite long, almost a year, was a phase of going through the manuscript very slowly, very carefully, doing revision, which often came back to the original version. During that time I did talk briefly to John Glassco. I got a few things from him, though not all that many. He told me, for instance, that McAlmon had written a novel, of which he

(Glassco), was the hero, called *The Susceptible Boy*. I believe that the MS still exists, among McAlmon's papers, though I haven't seen it; I did use the title phrase, however. A couple of the things he told me I very deliberately did *not* use: there were things I already had in the book which he said weren't true, but which I decided to keep anyway. And a couple of my favourite stories, like the one that is ultimately used as the preface to the whole book, the filthy hand reaching in the window, and McAlmon putting his glass of whisky into it, Glassco flat denies. He said, "That never happened, and if you know the physical layout of that particular bar you know that it's impossible for it to happen." Still, the majority of the historical details are accurate.

f: You wanted to have a sort of framework to build on.

s: I wanted to have control. And I felt that there is a kind of authoritativeness in fact. One of the things that always interests me about any author is the sheer nerve of coming to you and saying "Listen to me, spend some of your valuable limited time upon this earth reading my book." I think it is an enormous demand, and that an author has to have some kind of authority — I'm playing with the different senses of *author*, *authority* there — and fact is one of them, to say: "I'm telling you a truth." And yet I can't be satisfied with someone who simply tells me fact. I want to see something done with it. I'm perfectly prepared in prose fiction to tell and to be told the most outrageous stories, but somehow in my own poetry, I'm very reluctant to invent, which, in my more personal lyric poetry, is a kind of limitation. There are certain things that I'm not prepared to do in order to write poems. I'm not prepared to go out and have five adulterous affairs and take drugs and spend a year in the mental asylum. I'm just not prepared to do any of these things in order to write poems and yet at the same time I am unable to write poems imagining that I'm doing them. I could, I suppose, as a sheer exercise, sit down and write a poem in which I imagine that I am carrying on an adulterous affair and write poems about the tortured emotions that evolve out of that, et cetera, et cetera, but it would be a false exercise.

f: Well, maybe you need a character like McAlmon.

s: Yes, certainly part of the attraction of McAlmon was that I could write poems about taking cocaine and being a homosexual in Berlin in the nineteen-twenties . . .

f: And you didn't have to do it. Do you think you'll do that kind of book again? Or do you think that it descends on you, and can't be controlled.

s: I'm vaguely on the lookout for it, but I can't at the moment imagine what it would be, because it would have to be a subject which had as much appeal, as much richness of detail as McAlmon's life had, and yet at the same time it would have to be different enough so that it didn't look as if I was doing the same thing over again.

F: Scobie warming up McAlmon.

S: I think Ondaatje has been incredibly lucky to go on from Billy the Kid to Buddy Bolden. And he's got his whole family. But I can't at the moment see another figure that is equivalent to McAlmon, which raises all kinds of problems for me. What am I going to write about?

F: You'll struggle along. Has Kay Boyle seen the book?

S: Yes, and she hates it.

F: Why?

S: Well, various reasons. Mainly, she was upset by two things: by the book's departures from factual accuracy, and (which is connected) by my evident admiration for John Glassco. I don't think there was ever much love lost between Boyle and Glassco. Years ago, I came across in Toronto a presentation copy of *Memoirs of Montparnasse*, inscribed to Kay Boyle, with a very interesting note and poem by Glassco included in it — I quote it in full, and use it as a major source, in my article on Glassco.¹ But the point is that it was knocking around second-hand stores in Toronto less than two years after its first publication, so Boyle must have got rid of it fairly fast.

F: That's interesting. But she's not in that book. He never mentions her.

S: I think he does mention her somewhere, but that's just a blind. In this note he wrote to her, he goes to great pains to deny that she was the model for Diana Tree.

F: Bad idea.

S: And obviously she didn't believe him. I thought for awhile that Diana Tree was really Mary Butts, but the most recent research seems to confirm that she is Kay Boyle.

F: Did you buy this book?

S: No, I didn't at the time, and I've kicked myself ever since. It's now in the North York Public Library, and I acknowledge them whenever I quote it. So that was the one problem with Boyle. She also says that recent history should only be written by those who lived through that history — which strikes me as nonsense anyway, apart from the fact that I wasn't writing history. But I do think it's understandable that people who did live through historical events should be far more upset than other people would be by distortions or transformations of these events. Kay Boyle has always had a sort of proprietary attitude towards McAlmon; I'm sorry she doesn't like my book, but I'm not surprised.

I think it does raise a major and quite legitimate question: what *right* do authors have to *use* historical figures in this way? We are in a sense appropriating them for our own purposes, even for our own gain. It's a rather queasy moral point. All I can plead is that if we make something imaginatively genuine out of it, then that carries its own justification. But I can understand people who object, on principle, to the whole idea. The same problem comes up with Bowering's Vancouver, say, or Findley's Duchess of Windsor, or Heather Robertson's Mackenzie King . . . the list is endless. Ondaatje too; he lies all the time.

F: I wanted to ask you about the connection between your work and Ondaatje's.

S: It was very deliberate. There's always been a lot of contact and interaction between what I teach and what I write. I never see any contradiction between the two activities: they're just two manifestations of the same thing, a love of literature, a concern for poetry. Often I treat the same subject in both modes at once. At the time I was writing *McAlmon's Chinese Opera* I was also writing an essay on McAlmon's fiction and I've since written a major essay on Glassco. At the time I wrote my essay on Ondaatje's *Billy the Kid* I was also writing the short story, "Deputy Bell," about Billy the Kid, which appears in the first *Aurora*. One of the aspects of recent Canadian poetry that I've been very much interested in is the long documentary poem, for which the major prototypes in the modern period are Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*.

F: And there's the Livesay essay, of course.²

S: And then there's Gwen MacEwen's T. E. Lawrence poems: an absolutely fantastic book. So, the documentary poem was very clearly present as a model. But it's not particularly *Billy the Kid*; that's just one of the major examples. If anything, I suppose, *McAlmon* is slightly closer in form to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, in that it's in the protagonist's voice, it's divided into three chronological sections, and is a kind of retrospective. There are a couple of hints left in *McAlmon's Chinese Opera* that it was originally all intended to be spoken by him in the last year of his life to an interviewer. There are still a couple of hints in there where he says things like "You can sit where you like: / the chairs are all the same," and "You'll find / another bottle on the bookshelf there / propping up / some priceless first editions of / nobody's autobiography," which is a double allusion to William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein. Originally that was much stronger, but eventually I thought "That's kind of a hokey idea to pursue literally," so as a major idea in the book it got dropped.

F: I wondered, because I thought in the relationship between Billy and Pat Garrett, and then William Carlos Williams and McAlmon, there's a kind of parallel — two people acting against each other.

s: Well, that was inevitable, because in fact William Carlos Williams did make the comparison between McAlmon and Billy the Kid. He doesn't carry over into calling himself Pat Garrett, obviously. And I looked at that and I thought "This is too good to be true, I can't resist using that." And yet it must seem so totally gratuitous.

F: Well, it struck me as an allusion to Ondaatje, I didn't realize that it was real. You practically need a footnote there.

s: I know that a lot of Canadian readers will simply take it as that, which is fine by me. It works perfectly well that way. And I guess I put a lot of stress on the relationship to Williams all the way through, right from the very first poem.

F: Well, it's one of the themes; you want to find out what happened between them, because McAlmon's so vicious at the beginning of the book as an old man, yet they had been great friends.

s: It's one of the great mysteries of McAlmon's life: I've read and re-read the page in Williams's autobiography which McAlmon took such violent exception to, and it's hard to see what exactly hurt him so much. I suspect that more than anything else it was simply the entirely casual tone that Williams uses to describe McAlmon's marriage to Bryher. Williams sounds as if he's saying this is a funny little joke that H.D. managed to play.

F: And the marriage was McAlmon's major emotional focus.

s: It was the ruin of his whole life.

F: Do you really think so?

s: I don't know. I feel that it must have been, because there is very little in the biography to suggest that his emotional life was, up until then, anything other than normal and healthy, although he certainly had a fairly disordered childhood. But there is a kind of emotional deadness in the later McAlmon which does seem to set in around the time of his marriage. He was clearly bisexual, and I think also that Bryher was lesbian, and as far as I can tell, the marriage was never consummated. But the marriage is such a mystery. Bryher, in a 250-page autobiography, devotes one half paragraph to it, and McAlmon ostentatiously begins *his* autobiography on the day *after* the wedding, so both of them blatantly refuse to talk about it. I've written a story about it from Bryher's point of view called "A Marriage of Convenience."³

F: Which it was, except for McAlmon, and I suppose it did him more harm than good in the long run.

s: Yes, it did.

F: I instantly thought of Ondaatje's poem "White Dwarfs" when I read *McAlmon's Chinese Opera*, and I thought "Aha, here's one of those so-called failed artists who yet is a success because he's withdrawn into a transcendent silence," and you took violent issue with that. I wonder if you could give your reasons, because I think other people would make that connection too.

S: Well, I don't know whether I would take *violent* issue with it.

F: Mild issue.

S: The point where I would not accept the connection is that it does not seem to me that McAlmon would ever have committed or even considered suicide. The White Dwarfs, beautiful losers, that whole Ondaatje-Cohen-Phyllis Webb connection . . .

F: All your favourite writers . . .

S: My favourite writers, yeah. . . . They are talking about very self-destructive personalities for whom suicide is always a possibility, and for many of them an actuality. That's what I don't see in McAlmon at all. He was self-destructive in many ways. He certainly had a gift for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time and he certainly had this marvellous aptitude for offending potentially useful people.

F: Publishers.

S: Publishers, mainly. I mean the famous story of how he went to New York and had lunch with Maxwell Perkins at Scribners, and Perkins was seriously considering publishing him. McAlmon, attempting to ingratiate himself with Perkins, spent the entire lunch telling him that Hemingway was a drunken homosexual who beat his pregnant wife, which may or may not have been true, but which certainly did not endear him to Maxwell Perkins.

F: Who was Hemingway's publisher, right?

S: Yes. Hemingway was the blue-eyed boy at the time.

F: But I thought suicide was not the only way out; people just stopped writing for one reason or another.

S: Well, McAlmon never really stopped writing, either. He kept on writing, and even as late as about a couple of years before his death he left California and came to New York for six months and tried to get some kind of recognition. So that really flamboyant self-destructiveness, that idea of going out in a blaze of glory — "after such choreography what would they wish to speak of anyway" — that isn't there in McAlmon.

F: He never had the glory, for one thing.

s: He never managed the parade. I have a tremendous interest in the figure of the failed artist.

F: Why did he fail?

s: It's very difficult for me at this stage truly to distinguish between talking about the historical Robert McAlmon and the McAlmon who emerges in the poems. One of the key things is certainly this kind of emotional deadness that sets in, which leads him to a kind of sterility. And yet, even in my poems, he never gives in. He never finally admits his failure, and he persists in saying that all he really wants is a fair judgment. Right to the end he's repeating:

Montparnasse in the first light of dawn
has a kind of hard-edged honesty
it makes all judgements lies

That whole thing. In my poems, he still believes right to the end that he was a greater writer than Hemingway.

F: Do you think he was?

s: Yes. Oh, yes. I do have to be careful here: I mean, there's always the possible confusion between the McAlmon who "really" existed and the McAlmon whom *I* created. The McAlmon in my book expresses certain literary views which, by and large, I share, and which, I think to a lesser extent, the historical McAlmon shared. I'm sure we *all* share the belief that he was a greater writer than Hemingway! But my McAlmon is kinder to Gertrude Stein than the real one was, so in some places the Scobie biases creep in. And I certainly played up the anti-Hemingway aspect because it was such fun for *me* to do!

The historical McAlmon had in his writing this whole ideal of contact which he and William Carlos Williams jointly formulated around 1920, which was a reaction against what they saw as the excessive literariness of Eliot, who was, at that stage, the major target. And I think Hemingway became the major target later. What they wanted was a very flat, realistic literature of direct contact with American life, which called for a kind of absolute honesty, but also for an almost total lack of artifice in the presentation. Now what this produces in McAlmon's writing, in the historical McAlmon's writing, is some astonishingly good short stories, especially the stories of *Distinguished Air*, because he had an honesty and an ability to accept absolutely anything nonjudgmentally which I think goes way, way beyond anything Hemingway ever achieved. The crucial thing, I guess, is the whole issue of homosexuality. Hemingway just curled up in embarrassment and took refuge in all these terribly phony macho ideals of the real man, et cetera, et cetera, whereas McAlmon just sailed right into the Berlin nightclubs of the mid-nineteen-twenties and produced in *Distinguished Air* a series of astonishing stories about homosexuals, transvestites, cocaine addicts, whatever. And he just

accepts them all, nonjudgmentally; he's not fazed or embarrassed, even when he's writing long monologues in the persona of a man called Mary, he doesn't have to prove anything about his own sexuality, his own ego. That's the "contact" ideal at its best: it enabled him to look clearly at people who were, in one sense, the dregs of humanity, and to see them simply as human; to present them that way, without posturing, without moralizing, without evading.

But equally, of course, the aesthetic that he was working with, also implied huge stretches of very dull writing, precisely because he rejected any ideas of literary artifice and didn't like to revise or anything like that. So the result is that when he's on, he's good, but when he's off, he's terrible. OK, so I'm very interested in that kind of writing, especially in the very long poem, and it seems to me that McAlmon was anticipating the things which were achieved with much greater success by William Carlos Williams, by Pound in the *Cantos*, by Olson in the *Maximum* poems, and, to some extent, by bpNichol in the *Martyrology*. There's something in McAlmon's aesthetic which leads into that whole strand of modern writing, which he himself never managed to accomplish. As he went on, he became more and more embittered, and the good patches in his writing became fewer and fewer. That bitterness sets in which I think destroys him, both as a man and as a writer. So in that sense, to get back to the poem, the poem does emphasize this and comes back several times to the idea of contact, to the idea of abundance (which is the word Stein applied to him), the reaction against the fake posing of Hemingway and of Eliot. So McAlmon's a failure. But he's a peculiar kind of failure, because at least part of the purpose of the whole book is to assert he wasn't really a failure, that right in there was a perception, there was a vision, fitfully realized, which was real and which got lost somewhere.

F: And that's the failure, the losing . . .

S: And the failure is that he got lost.

F: Given all these relationships — Robert McAlmon and William Carlos Williams, Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid, what about you and Douglas Barbour?

S: It's certainly not a Pat Garrett-Billy the Kid relationship.

F: No, no, no. I shouldn't imply that. Which one of you is going to get shot!

S: I think we work together so well because we are so different. We like the same kinds of thing, but we both have a very wide eclecticism in what we like. Certainly over the years we've influenced each other. He's introduced things to me; I've introduced things to him. It's never been a relationship of conflict; it's always been complementary. I think the peculiar thing was that for twelve years there, all the way through the seventies, there were the two of us in Edmonton, and we were really the odd men out in prairie poetry. If you look at the images of prairie

poetry in the seventies, there was Suknaski, and there were people like Glen Sorestad; a whole thing grew up of prairie poetry as anecdotal and realist and . . .

F: Horizontal.

s: Horizontal and conversational and all the rest of it and then off in this odd corner in Edmonton were Scobie and Barbour who clearly didn't have anything to do with that, whose connections seemed to be either to Talonbooks in Vancouver or Coach House in Toronto, who kept on talking about people like Phyllis Webb and bpNichol. Somehow, when people talked about prairie poetry they never included us.

F: You didn't fit the pattern.

s: There were nice generalizations to be made, and we didn't fit in.

F: Whereas other people, like Elizabeth Brewster, who isn't from the prairies at all, fit in so well.

s: There are ironic twists here. One is that I've just edited and introduced Suknaski's *Selected Poems* — an odd choice. And there is the whole question of Kroetsch. During most of the early seventies, Kroetsch was in Binghamton, and I don't think that people thought of him as a prairie poet. But when they try to write an account of prairie poetry that does include Robert Kroetsch, they're going to have to bring in Doug and me as well.

F: Because of the postmodernist slant.

s: And because there are connections between us, especially between Doug and Kroetsch. Doug is probably closer to Kroetsch than I am, in poetic practice, if not in theory.

F: I wanted to talk about your story "Streak Mosaic" and the whole idea of regionalism. In that story, which I found a very good one to teach students in a western Canadian literature course, you're taking the whole "prairie" thing and making fun of it. Yet I think it's also a very good story, and a story that does lead into the tradition.

s: A lot of my short stories, of which there are not many, play with a conventional form, or a conventional set of ideas, and push them just a little too far, so they can't be taken completely seriously, yet they're not so totally burlesqued that they fall over into mere parody. I like hitting that line where they still work if you take them at face value, and yet it's done also with that edge which says "I know this is cliché, I know this is a ritualistic thing." "Streak Mosaic" is every cliché that you can possibly think of, about the prairies, and yet it's true. I've written a spy story set in Victoria, which involves some weird plot machinations. The plot keeps

getting more and more horrendously complicated, and the events succeed each other faster and faster so that by about the last six pages of the story, plot twists are following each other about once every two paragraphs. So the reader cannot take it completely seriously as a spy story; it becomes a kind of parody of the genre. And yet it has to work. If you stop and figure out all the twists in the plot they are all logically worked out, and the plot does hold together, and there is a plausible explanation for everything that happens, but in a twenty-page short story there are more events than there are in a two-hundred-page novel.

F: You should add water and put it on the *New York Times* best-seller list.

s: Well, that's the point. As a prose fiction writer, I'm very lazy. I can't be bothered. I think I got corrupted years ago by Borges, who said he was too lazy to write novels.

F: Talking about prairies and regionalism and so on, does being from Scotland put you at a disadvantage? Do you think people overlook you?

s: I don't know why people don't pay as much attention to me as they should! [Laughter.] I'm regionalist, in the sense that I always have a very, very strong response to landscape, and the sense of place is always very important to me. On the other hand, I've got, oh, at least four or five different places. There is Scotland, and I can still respond very emotionally and directly to the Scottish landscape; there are the years and years on the prairies, so I have some kind of feeling for a prairie landscape; and I love the west coast. And there's the European thing, centring on Paris, so that you can't call me a regionalist from any one region.

F: Which is the way it should be, I think. It's true that people write about the place they are in, but they don't have to be in one place forever. I think that's the unfair part of it; people insist: "You're from Scotland, so you can't ever be a Canadian writer." That's silly.

s: I guess there's a suspicion that you're skimming the surface. That you haven't *earned* the right to write about Big Bear.

F: Yeah. Well, phooey to that. I thought "Why McAlmon," and then I thought "Why Cohen?" because you and Cohen don't seem to be that closely connected. If I thought "Who would Stephen Scobie pick to write a major book about," the answer certainly wouldn't have been Leonard Cohen.

s: In the first place, I arrived in Canada in 1965 at the height of Cohen's popularity.

F: Cohenmania.

s: He visited Vancouver in April 1966. He was probably the first major Canadian

author that I met. I read *Beautiful Losers* when it first came out and was completely bowled over by it.

F: Like everybody else.

s: So for that period, 1965-66, Cohen was the major avant-garde author in Canada. And secondly, there's the whole business of the songs. One of my continuing and abiding interests is in the poetic use of the medium of pop songs, which began for me with Bob Dylan, and which fascinated me in Leonard Cohen. In 1966 when he came to give a reading at U.B.C., *Beautiful Losers* was just out and none of the records had appeared. Nobody knew he was a singer. He arrived to give this reading and there were about 250 people there, all clutching copies of *Spice Box of Earth* and waiting to hear this marvellous romantic poetry. He strides into this huge auditorium at U.B.C. carrying a guitar, and instant freak-out all over the audience, "What is this?" I had no notion at that time that Cohen had that kind of interest, not knowing then about the Buckskin Boys and all his early exploits. So he gets up there and reads a couple of dutiful poems from *Spice Box of Earth* just to get us all happy, and suddenly plunk plunk plink on the guitar and he starts "Suzanne" which at that stage nobody has ever heard.

F: What was the reaction?

s: I don't know what the general audience reaction was, but I was knocked out by it. I thought it was just fantastic.

F: You have the art of being at the right place at the right time.

s: And he sang also, "Wasn't it a long way down, wasn't it a strange way down"; lines that echoed in my head for days and days afterwards. I was sold on Cohen as a singer from very early on. Next, Judy Collins's album that had "Suzanne" on it came out and we all rushed out and bought that. It was *the* album that spring. So that's why Cohen in the first place. Then, I guess, the more I became interested in Cohen critically, the more I also realized that he was completely different from me.

F: Another thing that comes up is your fascination with the arbitrary, the random, the cryptic, things that happen accidentally, anagrams, word play. I wondered where you got that interest.

s: Part of it is just a games-playing attitude. My parents were both great cross-word puzzle addicts, and I am too.

F: Do they play Scrabble?

s: Yeah, they play Scrabble.

F: Corrupted at an early age.

s: I am fascinated by chance happening, not just at the level of language, but odd things happening.

F: Do you call them synchronicities, rather than coincidences?

s: Well, I'm very hesitant to ascribe any inherent purpose or meaning to them in themselves. I think that the purpose and meaning are what the writer brings to them, in the very act of choosing them. A lot of people talk about chance as an ideally *impersonal* medium, as a way of escaping from the demands of the ego; you can get quite mystical along these lines. A lot of the theorizing about abstract art, you know, is very musical — Kandinsky, say, or Malevich — and it's not something I've ever been very happy with. If I had to put a philosophical name to it, I suppose I would use "existentialist": that is, the significance is not inherent in the material, the artist brings the significance *to* it, largely in the choice — which is in some way the existentialist "authentic" choice — of saying OK, this is a poem.

F: Is that what lies behind *The Pirates of Pen's Chance*?

s: Well, I don't think that Doug and I ever talked it through in quite these terms. In fact, a lot of our attitude was much more pragmatic: the technique is here to use, let's see what happens. And the composition of that book was, in a friendly way, quite competitive: I'd try out a method and get a poem, then I'd run down the corridor to Doug's office and say "Ha! Look at this!" and then he'd have to go me one better, and so on. I guess we both believe that this kind of poetry is there to be found, but you still need a poet to do the finding. And this happens not just at the level of language, of found poems, homolinguistic translations or whatever, but also at the level of events. A lot of my more anecdotal poems, when I do get anecdotal, are based on curious things that happen, things that people tell me, events that I stumble across.

F: Another area of fascination of yours that I find interesting is all these . . . borderlines . . . between various genres — sound poetry, concrete poetry — and also nonacademic interests that you bring into academia like song lyrics and films and horror movies and so on. Is this just eclectic taste, or do you have some kind of poetic theory that inclines you towards these areas of art that are not considered central.

s: It's partly eclectic taste, it's mainly a fascination with what bpNichol calls borderblur. In my introduction to my book on Leonard Cohen I say something like "There are people who define a circle by its centre, and there are people who define it by its circumference; people who define a thing by looking at the middle of the road, mainstream examples of it and people who define things by going to

the limits, and if necessary, going over the limits in order to find out where the limits really are.” In that sense, I suppose I’m like Cohen in that I really like looking at things at their outer edges. I’m fascinated by the areas where different art forms interact with each other, cross over to each other, where poetry becomes painting or music, or whatever, much more so than by a really mainstream, middle-of-the-road thing — the tradition. I’ve always had this interest in movies and in pop songs, and I just keep adding. One of my closest friends in Edmonton got me hooked on opera, another obvious borderblur area. Then, partly because of my interest in Paris, I became hooked on Cubist painting. Borderblur again. So I keep on adding interests. So far I haven’t taken a great interest in ballet, but I’m sure it’s coming. I think it’s the same thing even in my interest in Canadian literature.

F: It is. And you teach a course where you spend more time on bpNichol than on Margaret Atwood; now that it not a typical course.

s: But also, even there, even Canadian literature is an area that is, as yet, undefined. I’d much rather deal with contemporary literature than with the great tradition. I enjoy reading Shakespeare, I enjoy teaching Shakespeare to undergraduates, where it is new for them and where obviously I’m not trying to say anything vastly original about *Hamlet*; I’m just trying to get them to understand what’s going on.

F: If you teach so as to get students to understand, what are you doing reading Derrida?

s: I’ve become interested in Derrida specifically and in critical theory generally fairly gradually over the past four or five years. I guess I’d first heard of Derrida years ago, from Steve McCaffery long before Derrida was the household word he is these days in American academe. Steve was doing this marvellous poem called “Of Grammatology,” where he scattered alphabet cereal all over the floor, and rolled around, simultaneously eating and pronouncing them. He would climb up to the top of a stepladder and pour them on the floor and then get down and wallow around in them, munching them up and reading each one as he picked it up with his teeth off the floor.

F: Did you tell Derrida about this when you met him?

s: There was a project to have Steve and the Four Horsemen perform in front of Derrida this June in Toronto, but it never came to anything. It’s a great regret to me; I would have loved to see Derrida’s reaction. But it was in connection with that piece that I first heard the name Derrida, in 1973-74.

F: That early?

s: Yes.

f: That's a weird way to hear of Derrida, I must say.

s: McCaffery has this voracious appetite for strange theories of all kinds, and was heavily into Derrida very early. So, I'd been aware of Derrida for awhile. But I read a lot more Barthes. I read *The Pleasure of the Text* when it first appeared in English translation without at that stage understanding half of what was going on in it. I'm not sure I understand half of it now.

f: Does anybody? [Laughter.]

s: I've read Barthes for years; I read *Elements of Semiology* and *Writing Degree Zero* back in the sixties, in fact quite shortly after *Elements of Semiology* first appeared. But it was only a few years ago, when I read Christopher Norris's book, that I began to understand what Derrida was talking about. This is just accident. I don't think Norris's book is necessarily the best introduction to Derrida. Now I would say that Culler's *On Deconstruction* is the best general introduction. Then in Toronto in June 1984 I spent a month at the ISISS⁴ symposium and actually heard Derrida, and certainly he's a very impressive man. He has a presence. He has all the things his theory says he shouldn't have.

f: Authority.

s: Authority, presence, charisma, the self-present word and all that kind of stuff.

f: He should stumble and mutter and throw Alphabits about, really.

s: Yes. His theory, at least implicitly, denies, puts into question, tends to qualify quite severely his own presence.

f: He should take Steve McCaffery with him wherever he goes as a kind of alter ego.

s: So over the last two or three years I've become increasingly interested in critical theory. And I'm aware that this is some kind of bandwagon, some kind of fad. But I think that there are genuine reasons for this, that is I think that theory is genuinely exciting and interesting, that the fact that everybody in North America is doing it now obviously does have undesirable consequences, that it does come to seem merely fashionable. But look at it positively, it does show that the theory is meeting a genuine need and is giving to many people a new and different way of looking at literature and revitalizing a study of literature that had, I think, become very tired and stale. Many of us were floundering around doing the usual theme studies, biographical studies, studies of image patterns and all the rest of it.

f: And it was getting boring. You could do that.

s: Do I really want to spend the rest of my life writing about image patterns?

f: Did it change your teaching, or will it, do you think?

s: It's difficult to know exactly how it will change my teaching. I did try in a graduate course I gave last year to use at least some poststructuralist or deconstructive ideas, but I was dealing with bpNichol's *The Martyrology*, which invites it, and mentions it, and necessitates it. I was dealing with graduate students, but even there I couldn't assume they knew anything about it, and indeed, some of them didn't know anything. I think what will be really interesting will be when you get to the stage when there are regular courses on literary theory and you can go into a course on Canadian literature and feel that you can say Derrida and they're not all going to look around and say "Who?"

f: It'll be awhile yet.

s: Not necessarily all that long. Just talking about the University of Victoria, we have several people on staff now who can and will be teaching these courses. So that will change. How it will filter down to freshman teaching, is difficult to predict, because obviously you can't go into a freshman composition class and offer them a course on deconstruction. On the other hand, it seems to me that a lot of the stuff I've been reading in say, reader-response, narratology, reception theory focused on the act of reading is very useful, and does provide a systematized basis for teaching. The last time I taught freshman English I presented students with a highly simplified scheme of authors, narrators, readers, in about three stages. Next time I'll probably offer them a diagram in about seven or eight stages, which is much more sophisticated, but which I think I could teach at the freshman level.

I think that theory operates at two levels; first, there is the theory in and for itself. You get carried away with the beauty of the theoretical construct. And to a certain extent if you read a lot of Derrida you don't get to talk about the text. The theory just exists for its own sake. But that seems fine. And second, it does work, where you turn and apply it to texts. It works in different ways. If you're dealing with highly traditional, hierarchical texts, then you are basically looking for ways in which these texts work against themselves, fall apart under a certain kind of scrutiny, and there's a danger there which the critics of deconstruction very often bring up, which is that you end up saying exactly the same thing about text after text.

f: Oh, look, this is another logocentric text.

s: Let us take apart the logocentrism of this text. Here is another based on the hierarchy of speech and writing, let us take this apart. Certainly there is that danger.

f: Or in discovering that your favourite authors are all secretly deconstructionists. Every essay says, ah he, unbeknownst to anybody . . .

s: Or, you can turn the theory of contemporary experimental texts, which to some extent do deconstruct themselves already or do work with these ideas. When you're working with McCaffery or Nichol or with other people like Fred Wah, these are the people who read the theory themselves and are already beginning consciously to use that kind of idea. *The Martyrology*, book 5, is scattered with references to sliding signifiers, and obviously, bp knows all about Lacan.

f: Has it affected your writing? Has it affected your poetry?

s: Some of the recent poetry, the sequence called "Rambling Sign," which is in the book *Expecting Rain*, certainly uses signs in its vocabulary and as a large part of its subject matter. I've written *about* that kind of thing. I'm not sure that I can yet break the patterns of my own writing radically enough to be able to say that what I'm writing is deconstructive poetry. Some of the sound poetry and some of the poetry in *Pirates of Pen's Chance* does seem deconstructive.

f: Even destructive.

s: Yes, I think *Pirates of Pen's Chance* is a book that could be described precisely in terms of dissemination. In terms of my own critical writing, that's another problem. The major example so far is an essay entitled "Surviving the Paraph-raise."⁵ There's a very strong theoretical, ah, bent, to that essay. There's a long section in the middle of it which is practically wall-to-wall quotations from Derrida. But I was fascinated by that essay because I found that what I could do, by starting from some highly theoretical ideas in Derrida, circling around the notion of the signature, was to say things about the poetry which I could not otherwise . . . there was no way I could have got to that kind of commentary I offer on Wah, Webb, and Nichol, if I hadn't used theoretical ideas, or been starting from theoretical ideas. The essay is, for me, the first major instance in my own critical writing in which I have been able to take this interest in post-structuralist theory and really use it to say something about poetic texts. At the same time, I wrote it originally to deliver as a lecture at Edmonton. Part of my mischievous intent was that I would go back to Edmonton and prove to everybody there that I had finally gone completely crazy.

f: That they had gotten rid of you just in time.

s: And therefore I allowed myself in that essay a certain amount of self-indulgence which I haven't previously allowed myself in academic essays. There's a pun on every page. The entire essay is based on, and grew out of, a pun: the paraphrase/paraph-raise. That pun was the starting point of the whole essay. So the style

throughout the essay is very playful, it invites puns, rather than trying to avoid them, and at various stages in that essay, the argument is carried by puns.

F: Which in fact is what you enjoy doing in your poetry, there's a lot of that kind of language play there too.

S: And some of my recent poems have used that kind of highly convoluted word play as the basic generative devices for the poem.

F: So there is a connection between your critical and your poetical writing, then. Does this theory allow you to integrate your interest in various kinds of media — songs and films — in a way that your earlier academic criticism couldn't?

S: The theoretical certainly embraces them all. There have been several gestures towards a deconstructive theory of film. In the sense of conventional narrative cinema as perfected by Hollywood in the forties and even fifties, film is an eminently deconstructable medium. It sits up there and begs for this kind of analysis, and especially a feminist analysis, such as that carried out in Teresa de Lauretis's book *Alice Doesn't*. The attack on the structure of narrative film is a semiotic attack and a feminist attack. The subtitle of de Lauretis's book, *Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, is very interesting because it speaks to that kind of total interconnection. Obviously deconstruction works straight into a kind of feminist criticism with, at this point, a major footnote, caveat, warning, modification, call it what you want, that Derrida himself, although he provides, I think, the tools for a lot of feminist discourse, is obviously a very ambiguous figure for feminist criticism insofar as he is an extremely powerful male, subject to extreme adulation from people like me. [Laughter.]

F: Have you touched the hem of his garment?

S: I have shaken the master's hand, I have my signed copy of *Of Grammatology*. It's very hard, I think, for feminist criticism to use the insights that Derrida provides and yet at the same time to steer clear of Derrida himself as this kind of totem figure. And a great many of the bigger guns of deconstruction, which is an unfortunate metaphor right there, are in fact male. You start in on this stuff and you've got Derrida, Barthes, Lacan, Eco.

F: Kristeva's really the big name who's a woman.

S: But Kristeva's not entirely sympathetic to feminist criticism. You have to go off into people like Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. It's really noticeable that in the whole flood of translation of French critical writing that we have, very little feminist writing is available. Everything by Derrida is available. A great deal of Lacan, absolutely everything by Barthes, absolutely everything by Eco. These people are all available in English translation, even Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-*

Oedipus is around in translation. But Cixous and Irigaray were until very recently practically unavailable, a few essays here and there.

F: You have to be able to read French.

s: You have to be able to read deconstructive feminist French! It is a cause for tremendous concern that the pattern of translation of avant-garde French theory is at the moment very heavily male-oriented. There is a desperate need for feminist critics to be translated. Their influence in Canada is almost entirely through Quebec.

F: Through people like Nicole Brossard, Barbara Godard . . .

s: And Louky Bersianik, Louise Cotnoir, people like that, who are obviously reading and quoting from Irigaray, in French, but not any other way. It seems to me that there are very strong connections between deconstruction as a philosophical project, semiotics as a study of the social function of signs, and feminism, and that these concerns have focused upon narrative rather than poetry, and even within narrative, they have tended to focus on film largely, I think, because of the work by de Lauretis and Stephen Heath. And so much of it came out originally in *Screen* magazine in England, people like Laura Mulvey. In books like Stephen Heath's *Questions of Cinema*, and Kaja Silverman's book on semiotics and Teresa de Lauretis's *Alice Doesn't*. I'm fascinated by everything that Heath says about visual space and the construction of visual space, because that feeds into painting. And it feeds into everything that I want to say about Cubism. What I'm trying to do at the moment is to get back to a long-standing interest in Cubism and literature which has been on the back burner for about the last ten years, and trying desperately to shove it onto the front burner. Derrida is on the front burner —

F: And he won't get off!

s: But once I do get him off, I can say quite simply that what I have to do is to deconstruct Cubism.

F: You can say it quite simply, but to do it is another matter.

s: Yes. But the way I'm going to do it is by taking a lot of what the cinema people have to say about the construction of visual space, and the ideological implications of the construction of visual space and to apply that to painting. It becomes a narrative medium. Cinema came along, and one would have imagined . . . let me step back a bit. The whole Renaissance tradition in painting and the visual arts generally was to build up this very unified and coherent visual space which was organized by linear and aerial perspective, and a static point of view, and produce this whole sense of a coherent spacial world. Now when the cinema

came along, what one would imagine the cinema would do would be entirely to break up that space, because the cinema implies a moving point of view, a multiple point of view, and a film can be edited, et cetera. But in fact what happened is that as narrative cinema evolved in Hollywood in the thirties and forties, what they did was to construct again a coherent visual space, which was hierarchical, and secure in all the old ways. I'm drawing very heavily on Stephen Heath here, although I think I'm inflecting it differently. But I think what happened, against all odds and expectations, is that cinema took over the role of classical painting. And the deconstruction of the visual space that went on in Cubism, happened in painting, at around the same time that the thing that it was replacing was beginning to establish itself in cinema.

F: So you just got the theory in time.

s: The whole thing would have been very different five years ago. It would have fitted into a very much more stable kind of discourse than I can now give it. It's obviously going to be a much weirder book that I ever thought it would be.

F: Well, that's all right.

s: What it then comes down to is a question of belief.

F: Do you buy the implication of deconstructive theories?

s: Yes: that, as Hamlet said, is the question. Is it simply a set of ideas that you can use or is it something that you ultimately believe in. If Derrida's position is taken to its logical conclusion, it's not simply a way of saying funny things about literature. It's a rethinking of the whole philosophical tradition that deals with the nature of the way we see the world.

F: To see the world the way Derrida does, you have to change everything.

s: You have to change, or at least you have, to use his phrase, to be able to place things under erasure. That is, they're simultaneously there and not there. Everyone accepts that you do not live every moment of your life at the plane of ultimate philosophy. In daily intercourse, in buying groceries, you obviously make certain pragmatic assumptions about the way language works and the degree of stability in the meaning of words. If I go into a butcher's shop and order beef . . .

F: You expect to get beef.

s: Right. At the day-to-day level we work on the basis of pragmatic assumptions, and Derrida does that the same as everybody else. So obviously there's a sense in which questions of ultimate belief operate in daily life in suspension.

F: But isn't it more than just a linguistic theory? This is the problem. It is attacking some of the sources of religious belief, as well as describing the way language

works. It's not just privileging text over voice, it's also attacking God as the ultimate source of authority.

s: That depends on how you define religion. Insofar as religion is connected with a system of hierarchical authority, in which you have a god who is the ultimate authority, the ultimate origin, and the ultimate father, then obviously everything that Derrida says goes to take apart that whole system of beliefs. In deconstruction you cannot attribute any meaning to a god who is the authority, the origin, the father. He takes apart most of conventional Christianity, Judaism . . .

F: And a few other religions!

s: But if you define religion as a much more general belief in a religious or spiritual dimension to human experience without attaching it to this kind of hierarchical authority, then I'm not so sure. Derrida himself is very interested in Christian mysticism, in what is called "negative theology."

F: Religion comes up in only two, maybe three, of your poems and yet it comes up in fairly dramatic ways. How did you deal with religion when you were growing up? Were you religious?

s: I was intensely religious until the age of about twenty, or twenty-one. Probably to begin with simply without thinking about it at all, because my father was a minister of religion and every male relative in the past three generations on both sides of the family was. And when I was very young I think that I just assumed that I would do the same without even consciously deciding on it.

F: Do you think you write because your father wrote the Sunday sermon?

s: It has connections, yeah. In the first place I was brought up in an intensely literate household where people read and where people wrote and where there was even a certain kind of rhetorical tradition which probably carries over to a lot of my writing. I have written several poems about my father who is a man I intensely admired as well as loved; quite apart from anything else I just straight out admired him.

F: Did you lose your faith?

s: To say I lost my faith makes it sound much more dramatic and melodramatic than it is. But partly because I understand so much about what a religious life can be, because I lived so close to such intense examples of it, I'm probably much more demanding with myself about what true faith would involve.

F: So you can't compromise.

s: I can't drift along. So I would have to say that for the last ten or fifteen years of my life, I've been essentially nonreligious, agnostic, certainly not atheist, cer-

tainly not anti-Christian, because it still seems to me that as an intellectual scheme Christianity has not only a coherence, but a certain kind of moral grandeur. Again, thinking mainly of my father, I've seen at first hand the workings of that faith in the life of the best man I've ever known. So I can never reject it or discard it, never be blatantly anti-Christian in any kind of propagandistic sense, and yet in my own life, for the moment at least, I can't embrace it. I make no conclusions.

NOTES

- ¹ "The Mirror on the Brothel Wall: John Glassco, *Memoirs of Montparnasse*," *Canadian Poetry* no. 13 (Fall/Winter 1983), 43-58.
- ² Dorothy Livesay, "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre," in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, ed. Eli Mandel (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 267-81.
- ³ "A Marriage of Convenience" in *The New Press Anthology #1: Best Canadian Short Fiction*, ed. John Metcalf and Leon Rooke (Toronto: General, 1984), pp. 201-16.
- ⁴ International Summer Institute for Structuralist and Semiotic Studies.
- ⁵ Forthcoming in *Open Letter*.

FLYOVERS/STOPOVERS

Robert Gibbs

i

— Ein zwei drei — the boy beside me
counts — four five six Ich wurde

in Hong Kong geboren — Then his two tongues
are still His mother keeps watch lovely her

Hanover eyes open to the long night The
breeze swizzles and keeps us breathing

A boy and his mother are flying home to Perth
thirty hours downunder from

English and German grandmothers Through
my headset unendingly coming round