

John Lent / WILFRED WATSON AND THE SHIFT FROM MODERN TO POSTMODERN FORMS IN CANADIAN POETRY¹

For my sister, Susan

1.

I begin with this poem by Wilfred Watson, written in 1966, and this diary entry by John Fowles, written in 1981, because there is a despair — in Watson's satire on the trendiness of art and the blindness of its contemporary audience, and in Fowles' attempts to hide the same sense of the futility of speaking out to a self-congratulatory, myopic liberal audience — that links the two writers precisely in that first artistic, organic wave of postmodernism that occurred in the decades during which Watson wrote most of his work, and which will help locate Wilfred Watson's voice in the aesthetic contexts of his own time.

What more did they want?

THEY MANAGED TO ENGAGE DANTE TO GIVE A VERSE READING AT
THE YARDBIRD SUITE

What more did they want?

IT WASN'T AS IF HE HAD JUST CROSSED THE OCEAN IN AN OPEN
ROWBOAT, SOMETHING WE DO ALL THE TIME

What more did they want?

IT WASN'T AS IF HE HAD JUST CLIMBED MT EVEREST OR
ESTABLISHED

A BASE CAMP ON ANNA PURNA

What more did they want?

IT WASN'T AS IF HE HAD BEEN WORKING AS A SOCIAL SERVICE
WORKER IN THE U.S. NORTH OR SOUTH OF THE U.S. NAVEL,
AMONG THE BLACKS

What more did they want?

DID THEY EXPECT HIM TO LOOK LIKE LEONARD COHEN AND
STAND BEFORE THEM NODDING A SILKEN UNICORN'S MANE? HE
TOLD THEM HE HAD SPOKEN TO FRANCESCA

What more did they want?

HE TOLD THEM HE HAD SPOKEN TO THAT MAN BERTRAN DE
BORN WHO CAME WALKING TOWARDS HIM CARRYING HIS HEAD

BY THE HAIR

What more did they want?

HE TOLD THEM HE HAD PUT HIS HAND IN THE MOUTH OF SATAN
WHO AT THE CENTRE OF HELL WAS CHEWING BRUTUS AND
CASSIUS

What more did they want?

DID THEY EXPECT HIM TO APPEAR BEFORE THEM WEARING THE
MAGNIFICENT LION'S HEAD OF IRVING LAYTON? HE TOLD THEM
HE HAD GAZED INTO THE EYES OF BEATRICE. HE DIDN'T SAY
WHAT HE SAW

What more did they want?

DID THEY EXPECT HIM TO LOOK LIKE THE PORTRAIT OF YEATS BY
AUGUSTUS JOHN? HE WAS PREMATURELY OLD

What more did they want?

HE TOLD THEM HE HAD CLIMBED DOWN LIKE A SPELUNKER INTO
THE HOT BELLY OF HELL. DID THEY EXPECT HIM TO LOOK LIKE
EDGAR ALLEN POE OR ROBERT CREELEY?

What more did they want?

I thought he looked like someone who had accomplished
something.

There were those who thought he looked more like an ex-convict
Than like a mystic.

WHAT MORE DID THEY WANT?

He had climbed up through purgatory. He had climbed up into the
Highest heaven of paradise. Did they expect him to look like the
Archbishop of Canterbury? He looked like a business man worn out
With business

WHAT MORE DID THEY WANT?

He looked old and tired. He was not an unqualified success. Still
Everyone agreed it was a good thing to have invited him to come
To the Yardbird Suite

WHAT MORE DID THEY WANT?

— "lines 1966," Wilfred Watson

This is not a happy year. For weeks and weeks now I have woken up
depressed, then gradually daytime 'normality' rescues me a little. . .
it's more biological than political, a deep feeling that it is the
selfishness of middle-class liberals that will finally end the human
race. For years I have hidden my feelings here from my friends, half
out of laziness, a quarter from never being able to argue on such
matters face to face, a last quarter out of friendship — not being
able to value truth above that. . . Most of them seem to me

biologically blind, there is no other word for it. Their lives, their views, their judgements, are all dictated by a deep longing to maintain the social and political status quo — that is, a world where ‘we’ and our friends still maintain our absurdly privileged status. Which is of course maintained and propagated ‘down’ from the elite, by all our media. All our ‘serious’ newspapers, the television channels, everything else (including the literary establishment) spread the same manure. . . or cultural hegemony.

—John Fowles

Wilfred Watson was a Canadian writer, a prairie writer, who could, as evidenced in the poem quoted above, seize a Swiftian sense of his times knowing full well that this particular kind of satire — broad and unrelenting in its attack and allusiveness — would go virtually unnoticed in Edmonton in 1966, written off in that decade as the eccentricities of a restless curmudgeon overpaid by the University of Alberta. The complexities of the literary forms he was engaging in then, in his poetry and his plays, really did hive him off as a presence in many ways even though it is difficult now, looking back, to find a Canadian writer whose aesthetics, and whose articulation of such aesthetics, was as advanced as Watson’s, particularly from the point of view of where Canadian poetics would *go* in the decades after his major work was completed. As Stephen Scobie wrote in 1981, “There is no other poet in Canada who writes like Wilfred Watson, and there are few who write as well” (283). Watson’s is a ‘lost’ voice, in the sense that, with a few exceptions like Scobie, it was never fully appreciated because it was never fully considered. It was, I suspect, too difficult and demanding a voice. Fowles’ reference to “hegemony” in the last line of his diary entry, moreover, links the two writers in another, significant way: Watson’s direct and full treatment of Gramsci aside, his poetry and drama push literary conventions against themselves, struggle consistently to break beyond that hegemony, especially in the way they take modern poetic forms and reach beyond them into postmodern forms. This is the precise territory I would like to examine in Wilfred Watson’s poetry. I hope to demonstrate this shift from modern to postmodern — more narrowly, the shift from temporal to spatial forms in his work — by

examining a few poems that indicate this shift: one from *Friday's Child*, several from *The Sorrowful Canadians* and several from *I begin with counting*. It is in this movement in form — from the temporal, linear formalism of the early work in *Friday's Child*, to the spatial, hybrid a-formalism of the later work in *I begin with counting* — that one can appreciate, in retrospect, how Watson was a model for younger writers who needed the confidence to reach for what he called “modular constructions” that suggest “multi-environments” and “multi-voices”: more contemporary notions of self and community.

2.

As the afternoon staggered on, the three groups became one as exhausted delegates slipped away to the Faculty Club to refuel for the conference's final event, the performance that evening of Wilfred Watson's play, *let's murder Clytemnestra according to the principles of Marshall McLuhan*. [Studio Theatre, 18 November 1969] The play space was the old Studio Theatre in Corbett Hall, the director was Bernard Engel, the set was flanked by two banks of television screens, and the actors were mostly students. I assumed at the time that the director's inspiration might have included “The Performance Group,” which had received international press the previous summer in New York doing “Dionysus in 69,” a play featuring nudity and interaction with the audience. . . [because Watson's play] tried as much partial nudity and interaction as was possible in what was still Bible Bill Aberhart's Alberta. A character called Samuela, for instance, was accurately described as “wearing very little make-up and very little of anything else.” As might be expected from a weary, but momentarily topped-up audience of critics and poets, the reactions were audible, rude, and frequently obscene. Near the play's climax, the actors worked up a hullabaloo of chanting and dancing and they obviously were under direction to mingle with and engage the audience. It was, for this particular evening, a mistake. I remember the near terror in Samuela's eyes as she struggled to remain in character and yet elude the questing hands of poets and critics alike.

— Morton L. Ross

Typically, Mort Ross is so damn funny here. He is recalling the infamous Canadian Literature conference held in Edmonton in

1969, "Poet and Critic '69 Poete et Critique." Convened to honour Dorothy Livesay's fortieth year as a poet, it included the writers D.G. Jones, Eli Mandel, Earle Birney, Bill Bissett, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, Barry McKinnon, Henry Kreisel, Stanley Cooperman, Ted Blodgett, J. Michael Yates, Rudy Weibe, Peter Stevens, Lionel Kearnes, Elizabeth Brewster, Stephen Scobie, Douglas Barbour and many others, including young and naïve graduate students like myself. It was a wild conference, full of feuds and bombast, even a counter-conference, but nothing about it was as outrageous as the flight of theatre-goers from Watson's play.

I still remember that exodus in detail because I could not understand why everyone was so upset. In his Modern Theatre class, Watson himself had introduced us to the work of Ionesco, Beckett, Sartre, Camus, McLuhan, Brecht, Durrenmatt, Frisch *et alia*. What he seemed to be trying to achieve in the play was admittedly absurd but definitely *in* the context of the parallel absurdities practiced by the writers mentioned above. I remember at the time thinking maybe the eighteen TV screens as vaginas was a bit over the top, but . . . the bottom line was the exodus itself, how deliberate it was, how mad everybody seemed to be. In retrospect, I think Ross provides the key: everyone was pretty loaded from the Faculty Club beforehand, and you don't want to witness the future in such a state. Visceral reaction had always followed Watson's work, so this exodus from his play would not have seemed unusual to him. Even his Governor General's Award-winning first volume of poetry, *Friday's Child*, selected by T.S. Eliot and published by Faber and Faber in 1955, had a blurb on the dust jacket that elicited a response from Northrop Frye. He noted that the blurb contained "the faintest trace of polite surprise that lyrical tones more highly organized than a buffalo's mating call should come from the windy plains of Alberta" (cited in Scobie). Isn't that great? Don't you love it? That's the way it *was* back then. That's what writers were up against in poetry, drama, even fiction.

Three years before I witnessed this generation of Canadian writers fleeing Wilfred's play, Watson had published a curious, hybrid piece on aesthetics in *Canadian Literature*, "The Preface: On Radical Absurdity," followed by his poem, "I Shot a Trumpet into My

Brain.” What fascinates me about his preface is the way in which, though Watson is focusing on the composition of his plays, he attempts to articulate this shift from the temporal to the spatial in narrative mentioned earlier, and, by extension, how this shift anticipates a move into what would later be identified as post-structural aesthetics.² He begins by arguing — out of his close association and collaboration with Marshall McLuhan — that artistic form is simply an “extension” of human consciousness, like a stick in a hand, a pair of stilts, a trumpet. He goes on to talk about what is radically different about twentieth century humankind — that is, the newly perceived complexity of all these extensions in consciousness itself. He refers to newly perceived “modes of consciousness” and calls these “a freedom not enjoyed by any previous civilization . . . so terrible a freedom that we don’t like looking at it . . . a freedom radically unlike any that mankind has yet known.” (“The Preface On Radical Absurdity” 36). He sees his own involvement in absurdist constructions as attempts to “celebrate” that freedom by building extensions of it that mirror its new complexities. Those constructions attempt to seize what Watson refers to here as “multi-environments” as opposed to the linear or temporal qualities of realist drama and poetry. He goes on to explain his method more precisely: these multiple environments are “collaged together.” He believed that constructions of this kind, built upon a recognition of the incredible play in modes and variables in human consciousness or subjectivity, and propelled by some notion of collage work (likely inspired by his and Sheila Watson’s fascination with the early work of Kurt Schwitters, 1887-1948), could create artistic forms, or extensions of consciousness, that would move the artist past what he saw as an impasse in modernist aesthetics:

I have perhaps given enough excerpts by way of example to suggest that the collaging together of two or more milieus makes possible a treatment of an absurdist theatre not altogether unlike but by no means identical with that modern theatre movement dominated by Camus’ sentiment of the absurd, where men and their questionings are answered by the blank meaningless world.
— “The Preface on Radical Absurdity” 41

What I believe Watson is urging here is a more *direct* treatment of those “modes of consciousness” — the “wild body” of multi-consciousness — through the re-creation of the “multiple environments” of consciousness delivered by the juxtaposition inherent in collage, rather than the realist “sentiment” of those modes, only pointed at by “modern” constructions. In this shift towards a new kind of spatial composition, in his understanding of the principles of juxtaposition as the kinetics of narrative rather than the linear propulsion of conventional realism, Watson breaks into the notion of the spatial rather than temporal narrative, not unlike parallel breaks that would follow him a few years later: Margaret Laurence’s fierce struggle towards collage in *The Diviners*, Kroetsch’s wild and absurd canvas of juxtaposition in *The Studhorseman*, Ondaatje’s breakthrough use of it in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Listen to how prescient Watson is in this next paragraph about these issues of form; remember, too, he is writing this in 1966, long before the work of Barthes, Genette, Derrida, Foucault had been hauled into the discussion of these issues in North American art:

As I understand the new freedom, multi-media man has many worlds and many modes of awareness — as many in fact as he has media; and the significant thing is, these modes of consciousness are not unified by language, whether spoken, written or printed. This fact must, I believe, force upon us a new concept of the absurd. Formerly man could reason in a mode of awareness which was given him through language, but today man has many kinds of awareness, and to an increasing degree no two men are likely to have the same mix of the multi-consciousness available. Professor McLuhan has spoken of modern society as being without centres. Modern man has no centralized consciousness, he is off-centre, eccentric in a radical new way.

— “The Preface on Radical Absurdity” 41

Watson concludes by suggesting that this new field of multi-consciousness can be uniquely explored by “artists of great talent,” even claiming that “the social order of tomorrow will depend” upon them.

Looking back, I see that Watson captures in this short preface so much that would become the artistic battlefields of the decades of the '80s, '90s and this decade now, especially the key concept of the juxtaposition of panels of narrative as the central principle of composition in artistic attempts to represent or extend fields of consciousness, multi-consciousness, the infinite complexities of what Wyndham Lewis recognized as the "plastic" of subjectivity. Certainly, the progression of artistic forms in Watson's own work in the '60s and '70s, mirrors these concerns and methods directly.

3.

In 1980, Stephen Scobie wrote what still stands as the most illuminating gloss on the movement of forms in Wilfred Watson's poetry. "Love In The Burning City: The Poetry Of Wilfred Watson" was published in the Summer/Fall issue of *Essays On Canadian Writing*.³ In his consideration of Watson, Scobie isolates the long shift from the mythopoeic, image-dominated poetry of *Friday's Child* to the surreal, multi-voiced, and generally experimental forms of the work in *I begin with counting*. Scobie is writing this essay at the end of the '70s, however, and does not have the benefit of the even further hindsight we have now. As a consequence, though he is so accurate in pin-pointing the shifts in question, he hesitates over where Watson is intending to *go* in his experiments, a hesitation we wouldn't have now. After examining carefully the "packed images" and mythopoeic, Frygian aspects of Watson's poems in *Friday's Child*, Scobie finds himself having to *defend* Watson's move into more open, experimental forms in the poetry that follows. He says, "In both Watson's subsequent books, however, the formal aspects are the first — and too often the last — things to catch the casual reader's attention . . . [they] run the risk of distracting attention from the poems themselves . . . they may seem like gimmicks, but in fact they're not . . ." (287). In order to draw his readers into an understanding of where Watson was attempting to go in these newer poems, Scobie raises three intriguing notions about composition: (1) he uses the word "modular," (2) he speculates that Watson writes "poems [that are] deployed spatially rather than temporally," and (3) he proposes that Watson develops "[poetic elements that]

interact as in a collage.” Each of these notions, as we can see from Watson’s “Preface,” is precisely correct, and we need not hesitate now in saying that Watson’s move towards spatial constructions in his poetry after *Friday’s Child* is simply his own artistic extension of the craft of poetry beyond the imagism and formal limitations of the modernist poem and into the multi-voiced, spatial constructions of postmodern poetry.

Let me begin by examining Watson’s poem, “Emily Carr,” from *Friday’s Child*. Note, as I’m reading it, its tight, incurled formality, its careful interweaving of Biblical and mythical allusion, its compressed, rhythmical phrasing, its boldness in attempting to complement the modernism of Carr’s vision. No wonder T.S. Eliot was drawn to these poems:

Emily Carr

Like Jonah in the green belly of the whale
overwhelmed by Leviathan’s lights and liver
imprisoned and appalled by the belly’s wall
yet inscribing and scoring the uprush
sink vault and arch of that monstrous cathedral,
its living bone and its green pulsing flesh —
old woman, of your three days anatomy
Leviathan sickened and spewed you forth
in a great vomit on coasts of eternity.
Then, as for John of Patmos, the river of life
burned for you an emerald and jasper smoke
and down the valley you looked and saw
all wilderness become transparent vapour,
a ghostly underneath a fleshly stroke,
and every bush an apocalypse of leaf

This is a strong, certain, closed set of images, delivered in an Eliot-like, Yeats-like, Dylan Thomas-like voice that moves towards that final, breath-taking but closed image. Its construction is tight, measured, sure; its voice absolutely certain of the cadence of its relentless direction — all journeyman-like aspects of British modernism in the lyrical poem. Now, watch these very features collapse and morph in “lines 1967,” the opening poem in *The Sorrowful Canadians*, written ten years later.⁴

lines 1967

THERE WILL BE NO MORE MONEY FOR YOU

There will be no more money for you

If snow be white, why then her breasts are dung

THERE WILL BE NO MORE MONEY FOR YOU

You will be one of the managers of automation

You will have no leisure at all

THERE WILL BE NO MORE MONEY FOR YOU

Scarlet ornaments for me to profane, her lips

But yet

THERE WILL BE NO MORE MONEY FOR YOU

You will sit at your desk trying to remain in

Charge

Est-ce tant que la mort?

But your function will be superfluous

THERE WILL BE NO MORE MONEY FOR YOU

There will be no more money for you

There won't be any credit cards, either

THERE WILL BE NO MORE MONEY FOR YOU

You will try to write scholarly articles in a

Popular style about the need to teach the

Dispossessed how to enjoy leisure

But

THERE WILL BE NO MORE MONEY FOR YOU

YOU WILL SIT AT YOUR DESK TRYING TO REMAIN IN

CHARGE

GAZING AT THE REPRODUCTION ON THE WALL OF

CHAGALL'S HORSE EATING A VIOLIN,

Tu ne mangeras plus.

The form and voice and vision have changed dramatically from the first poem. There is still a strong, rhythmic repetition or cadence in the voice, but otherwise, what we have here is almost hybrid. Aside from Watson's diabolical sense of humour, made relentless and obvious in the repetition itself, we have a poem that does not run on images, is not incurled, is not closed, but rather, has moved to a multi-levelled collage of situations and voices, of certainties and uncertainties, a crazy, almost surreal mix of the vernacular and the imperative — a poem as loose, as whimsical in some ways as Chagall's painting, a poem that is attempting to seize a vision that is more

complex, fragmented and/or eccentric than the vision the first poem moves towards. Here, moreover, the only logic that can be carried away from the poem is a logic driven by the gaps caused by the juxtapositions of voice and situations. The reader can't sit back and let the tight imagery wash over him or her as he or she might have in the first poem; here, the reader must engage in the juxtapositions and the field of logic those juxtapositions create. That is the true energy of this piece. Note the parallel effects in the title poem from this volume:

The sorrowful Canadians

The radiant grief of the owners of so much

Snow

THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS

Appals me

— THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS

MAKES ME INTO A SORROWFUL
CANADIAN

To have so much world in a world where men

Have so little

THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS

And to be grief's pig

THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS

And always blowing their noses

The sorrowful Canadians

With their bleeding fingers

North south east and west

In the bushes

THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS

Ou grouille une enfance bouffonne

THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS

Their flame

Gutted, gutting, leur chandelle triste

THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS

Lopsided, more tallow than wick or skin

THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS

What are they good for?

What have they done wrong?

Where did they get lost?

So much earth,
Comme un excès de sang épanche tous les mois,
THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS,
What have they done to deserve this?

Here again, the juxtaposition of voice, tone, image, language, syntax and the strong rhythmic repetition of the title, present a multi-levelled, multi-voiced, multi-effects piece that is striving, again, for a satirical vision found only in the field of juxtaposition it has created. There is a sly informality in the voices, in the humour, that indicates a shift in Watson's poetry towards the vernacular, the informal, the playful, the eccentric: the postmodern.

This shift compounds itself in the poetry of *I begin with counting*. In this later volume, Watson breaks past the playfulness of *The Sorrowful Canadians* in two significant developments: first, he invents a way — beyond the graphic manipulation of fonts in *The Sorrowful Canadians* — to seize multiple voices by inventing what he calls “Number Grid Poetry,” and second, he moves farther and farther into the colloquial and intimate textures of everyday life by discovering a much more natural, ‘vernacular’ voice, reminiscent of the kind of voice that propels Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue*, or the playful, laid-back voices that fuel some of the work of Dennis Cooley and bpNichol. These developments are startling if they are set against the form and voice that dominate *Friday's Child*.

Before examining several poems from *I begin with counting*, I need to draw attention to a typed key Wilfred Watson gave me and which he personally stuffed into as many copies of the NeWest Press edition of the book as he could get his hands on, worried as he was that readers would not be able to understand his number grids. Reading the key both illuminates the composition of these poems, but it also sheds light on their composition:

HOW TO WRITE NUMBER GRID POETRY

Traditional metrical verse counts syllables. Number grid verse counts words. The structural unit of traditional metrical verse is the “line.” The structural unit of number grid verse is the “number grid.” The number grid, like the line of traditional verse, can be varied endlessly.

I have developed a number grid using the numerals 1 to 9 with seventeen words according to the following rules:

Rule One: the numerals 1 to 9 are arranged to compose a grid like the ones in this book.

Rule Two: each numeral has two slots, except 9, which has one.

Rule Three: to compose verse, a word or compound word is placed in each of the numbered slots.

Rule Four: a poem can consist of one number grid or as many number grids as desired, the numerals 1 to 9 being repeated in each grid.

Rule Five: poems for two, three, four and sometimes five voices can be constructed by using double, triple, quadruple or quintuple grids.

HOW TO READ NUMBER GRID POETRY

It's	1	very		
easy	2	to		
read	3	number		
		grid	4	poems
much	5	easier		
		than	6	learning
to	7	swim		
		or	8	to
9	ski			

Watson's new Number Grid constructions are astonishing in the play and flexibility they offer the writer, especially in three key ways: first, they allow the poet to whisper — (and here I have to say this is just me as another poet sounding out and reading Watson's voice . . . but it seems to me that the quiet, jocular whimsy of his voice has acquired the vernacular tone of softness, the way we'd talk to one another late at night over a beer . . . maybe it's the graphic presence of the numbers . . . maybe Watson simply grew his poetic voice past the theatrical voices in his plays . . . I don't know . . .) — second, they provide a spine of order and repetition that anchors the chaos of the material the poet is working, and finally, and most astonishing, they allow Watson to stack voices so that he can achieve what he must have thought of as the *impossible* previously: that is, juxtapositions

that occur *simultaneously* in the eye or ear — most successfully in the ear — of the reader/listener. This compression of the juxtapositions affects the spatial quality of these pieces directly in that it amplifies the *acoustics* of the poem so that the range of its multiplicity occurs unconsciously at first, rather than consciously in the mind of the reader/listener. This is, of course, difficult to explain. Let me try to demonstrate these effects.

In this first poem, “the theatre of the absurd of Adrienne Clarkson,” Watson meditates upon several issues and presents this meditation uni-vocally; there is no stacking of voices in this construction. But I hope you will hear both the urgent quiet quality in the voice itself, and register the acoustics of the elements that Watson has juxtaposed:

the theatre of the absurd of adrienne clarkson ⁵									
	march	1	fifteen						
	1978	2	0607						
	hrs	3	wednesday						
				the	4	most			
	beautiful	5	water						
				is	6	often			
	only	7	a						
				stone	8	deep,			
9	or								
	calibrates	1	a						
	fractured	2	bed.						
	portrait	3	of						
				adrienne	4	clarkson,			
	the	5	noctambulist						
				beauty	6	of.			
	portrait	7	of						
				adrienne	8	clarkson			
9	as								
	a	1	one-armed						
	macbeth-lady	2	trying						
	to	3	rub						
				out	4	the			

spots	5	on			
			her	6	hand,
which	7	are			
			hers	8	and
9	ours [...]				

In the second poem, “peter kent smiles beautifully,” Watson has written the piece for three, stacked voices that present certain lines simultaneously according to their position on the grid. Of course, Watson is levelling his satirical eye on the misrepresentations and power of the television media, as he was as well in his portrait of Adrienne Clarkson as Lady MacBeth — that is the content of the poem — but here there is also a wonderful vertigo caused in the eye and ear of the reader/listener by the stacking and its simultaneity — the form of the piece. That vertigo, I suspect, is caused by an amplification of the acoustics of the poem intrinsic in the stacking:

peter kent smiles beautifully

		1	of			
		1				
the		1	snow			
		2	the			
death		2	smiling			
white		2	smile			
deadly		3	white			
		3				
of		3	peter			
				the	4	white
				death	4	smiling
				kent	4	
deadly		5	smile			
its		5	beautiful			
the		5	snow			
				of	6	peter
				bleached	6	bone
				white	6	teeth
kent		7	the			
white		7	grinning			
of		7	peter			
				beautiful	8	white

		peter	8	kent
		kent	8	smiling
9	teeth			
9	smile			
9	at			

Watson pursued his number grid poems in a wonderful and hilarious text, *Mass on Cowback*, published in a limited edition of 600 copies by Longspoon Press in 1982, and in the ‘riddles’ section of NeWest Press’ *Wilfred Watson: Poems Collected / Unpublished / New* (1986). As he pursued them, I believe he became more and more relaxed and confident in his methods.

4.

Wilfred Watson played an enormous role in my own life as a young student, scholar, then writer. Through his classes, then his plays and poetry, Watson inspired us to be skeptical about the fixedness of received literary forms, and the dangers of falling victim to the then powerful imperialist influences of both British and American literatures. He had a much more European sense of aesthetics which was outrageous for the times we were living in because he himself was breaking new ground, not only in his plays and his poems — as obscure or demanding as they always were — but also in his collaborations with McLuhan, especially in their jointly written book, *From Cliché to Archetype*. I’m not sure that the ground he was breaking has ever been fully appreciated or recognized, and from that point of view I think of other Canadian prairie writers like Sinclair Ross and Howard O’Hagen who finally did receive the close scrutiny their work demands of us as a community. It is interesting lately to witness the rehabilitation of McLuhan in the light of post-structural theory. Maybe Watson will benefit from some of that interest. And other developments have been taking place that suggest interest in other quarters, too. In 1995, at the University of British Columbia, Stefan Haag completed a dissertation entitled “Allegories of the Postmodern: The Work of Wilfred Watson and R. Murray Schafer.”⁶

When I think of myself as this young, pathetically eager prairie student in the mid-sixties, Wilfred Watson was one of our most

exacting mentors in Edmonton, a person who *did* give us a confidence we might never have had without him, a confidence to venture into what we could call, only later, the ‘wild body’ of postmodernism. When I last visited Wilfred and Sheila Watson at their home in Nanaimo by the sea a year before both of them passed away, Wilfred took me on a tour of his patio where, everywhere it seemed, he’d hung these primitive masks that moved like soft chimes in the wind off the harbour. Right to the end, he was at play.

In closing, I would like to point out that NeWest Press in Edmonton produced two comprehensive anthologies of Wilfred Watson’s poetry, then plays: *Wilfred Watson: Poems Collected/Unpublished/New* (1986) and *Wilfred Watson: Plays at the Iron Bridge, The Autobiography of Tom Horror* (1989).

NOTES

¹ This paper was delivered at the University of Manitoba Conference, “The Prairies Lost and Found,” 23-25 September, 2004.

² It is worth noting, though, that the terms “postmodernism,” “structuralism,” and “post-structuralism” were not being used in the literary criticism of his time yet. He is writing this in 1966.

³ It is worth noting, too, considering the people gathered together at this conference, twenty-four years later, that the other contributors and/or subjects of this issue of ECW included Dennis Cooley, Robert Enright, Peter Thomas, Robert Kroetsch, Peter Stevens, David Arnason, Eli Mandel, Patrick Lane, Andy Suknaski, E.F. Dyck, Alexandre Amprimoz, Daniel Lenoski, Patrick Friesen, Wayne Tefs, Douglas Barbour, Paul Denham, Lorna Crozier, Laurie Ricou, Don Kerr, Lyle Weis and others.

⁴ I need to say that the text alternates in its fonts and the use of capital letters, and was hand-typed by Sheila Watson on an IBM Selectric, then published in the basement of the Watson’s house in Edmonton.

⁵ For typescript information and emendations by the poet, see <http://bursar.sunsite.ualberta.ca:9030/cocoon201/archives/WWatsonb.series2>

⁶ A dissertation on postmodernism, allegory and melancholy.

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