

## Ted Byrne / NORTH ATLANTIC TURBINE

*North Atlantic Turbine* was the title I chose when seeking British Council funding for a series of three readings and talks that took place at the Kootenay School of Writing (KSW) in the Fall of 2005. At the time this title seemed irresistibly effective to me, and yet somehow dishonest, like a flag of convenience. Its naive intention was to signal the fact that the KSW's ongoing reception of British writers should be seen in the context of a productive exchange that began in the sixties, and has as two of its several terminals Ed Dorn and Jeremy Prynne. Those two veterans of the poetry wars visited Vancouver together in the early seventies. They arrived in the shadow of Charles Olson but left their own distinct traces. Dorn gave a storied reading of the whole of *Gunslinger*. Prynne gave a lecture on Olson, which was meticulously transcribed and published in *Iron*, a magazine edited by students of Robin Blaser. When Dorn died a few years ago, the KSW devoted an evening to his memory. In recent years, many of the British poets who have visited the KSW have been associates or former students of Prynne.

If *North Atlantic Turbine* suggests a crossing, an exchange, it also suggests a turbulence. As I listened to the five poets who participated in the series, and as I subsequently read more deeply in their work, I began to see a commonality that had initially only been wished upon them, a commotion among their works that derives, perhaps, from capture within a common vortex. When such poets visit, they bring with them a multitude of others, from their own locations, and from their wanderings. In this case, to mention just a few of their ghostlier companions: Franz Fanon, Paul Celan, Frank O'Hara, John Wieners, Francis Ponge, Marcel Duchamp. This is common transatlantic baggage. We had put Andrea Brady and Colin Browne together because of their mutual interest in the poetry of the English Renaissance. And Wayde Compton was paired with D.S. Marriott because of their work in black history. But Brady, with her street smart attitude and critical anger, could have read just as comfortably with *The Contact*

Zone Crew (Wayde Compton and Jason de Couto). And Browne, with his enduring attention to the devastation of modern times, the names of the father, could as easily have read with D.S. Marriott. Caroline Bergvall, who handled the final event on her own, could have kept company with any of them, having music, image, gesture, wit, and concept all under control. Their congregation here, in *The Cap Review*, is a welcome coda to the series.

It may appear that I'm attempting to impose coherence on a slogan chosen for expedience. I'd rather think that I'm trying to explore the intuition that inspired the choice. However, the well circulated notion of a shared tradition and community based on a poetics can quickly wear thin. In fact what draws poets together and drives them apart, as with any group, is politics, not poetics. The *North Atlantic Turbine*, in its use as a slogan for this event, and particularly if understood in the terms sketched out above, raises a number of troubling political questions. For instance, what kind of alienation turns us toward the North Atlantic when we're situated on the Pacific Rim, or, as is often announced in this neck of the woods, on unceded Coast Salish territory. Doesn't *North Atlantic Turbine* indicate an orientation toward a pre-millennial colonial axis? Isn't this the information age, and no longer the age of steam?

The *North Atlantic Turbine* is not a metaphor. It's a synecdoche of the real. The turbine is a massively productive power and a terrible disturbance, yes, but what Ed Dorn had in mind with this phrase was the productive power of capital, or "trade," as the motor of the ever increasing exploitation of life and resources necessary to its expansion, its "freedom."

Trade revolved and revolves  
it remains the turbine  
the atlantic turgidity  
defines still our small era  
that's the exploitation people  
mean  
when they say they  
hear a symphony.

*The North Atlantic Turbine* (1966)

We *are* still in the steam age. At the end of the information highway the carcasses of mammoth freighters lie derelict, rusting and toxic where capital abandoned them, or pile up in the immense scrap yards of Asia, where the salvaging of their parts causes irreparable damage to the environment and to the workers who slave in the bowels of the permanent industrial revolution. The old colonial axis has been reconfigured as “the coalition of the willing,” the new tyrant and his benighted advisors plot global hegemony through expanding webs of state terror and managed warfare. As I write this, we’re in the last days of an election campaign in which we will elect a party whose leader’s fortune is tied to a company, Canada Steam Ship Lines, that profits from the avoidance of tax, safety, and labour regulations, and whose government has implicated us deeply in the criminal and murderous police action in Haiti; or we will elect a party whose leader would have led us to war in Iraq and would lead us further, and faster, into the deregulated and privatized “New American Century.” Either way, Canada is surely “a remix b-side chorus in the globalization loop” (Compton).

Dorn’s vision was sometimes more misanthropic than anti-humanist, and it led him to some nasty contentions. His pessimism pronounced “The earth has been destroyed. Only a / few people know that.” But he goes on to say, “What must be destroyed is / the present circus of the earth and / the place to start is the North / Atlantic turbulence.” By “circus of the earth” he points to spectacle and excess on a global scale. The geography of the North Atlantic Turbine was always global, does not refer to a place but to a time, a geo-political, bio-political mess we still inhabit.

I haven’t asked permission to lay all of this on the poets of the *soi-disant* North Atlantic Turbine. They are in no way responsible for anything here but their effect on me, and certainly not for any of my persistent preconceptions. Obviously this overheated metaphor, this ramped up metonym, can’t carry the burden I’ve placed on it. But each of these poets provides a reading, in a very profound register, of our dark times. I do believe that theirs is a politically charged poetry, engaged both with everyday life, praxis and parapraxis, and conscious of how that life unfolds within the structures of the state. It is a deeply thought, critical poetry, a sombre, comic, and hopeful

poetry that brings us what we most value. "You cannot know what you have wanted, / but you will not get it" (Brady, "Disappointment"). "I want to be given everything so as to know what to demand" (Marriott, "Names of the Fathers").

D. S. Marriott's work has been accumulating in fascicles and pamphlets over the past fifteen or twenty years. It has a grand consistency of mood, of affect, of purpose and vocabulary, and yet seems to trace a trajectory toward a more and more direct, and less forgiving, encounter with the darkness that inhabits it, from *Airs & Ligatures* (Prest Roots, 1990) to the last piece in *Dogma*, "The Ligatures" (Barque, 2001). "To live with hatred as our most intimate possession, becomes then, the truly difficult task of our dreams" (*On Black Men*, 2000). A long needed collection of his work is forthcoming from Salt Press in the next year or so. In the meantime, I'd suggest that you try to get your hands on *Lative* (Equipage, 1992) and *Dogma*, which includes his most recent work, "Notebook of a Return."

Caroline Bergvall's new book, *Fig*, is just out from Salt Press. It includes the masterly sequence *8 Figs*, earlier published by Equipage as a stunning black and white booklet designed by Merit Münzberg and the author. Bergvall's work occurs in that place, pioneered by Mallarmé, Duchamp, Ponge, where the book is called into question, where it comes apart as a result of its own antinomies, or is elevated to another dimension of book work, of writing outside the frame of the book, or of "theatre" in the Mallarméan sense. At the same time, it's located firmly within the contemporary fields of performance and installation art, or "sited textwork." In some cases this vexes the reading of it, as one has to rely on the description of the event and then imagine it as one reads. However, in other cases the work has two lives, as poem and as performance. "16 Flowers," "Flèsh," "About Face," and "8 Figs," for instance, are perfectly readable. However, the embodiment of these texts, in performance, still opens them up beyond what the experience of reading them can offer. "About Face," for example, incorporates "physical and verbal impediments," including an indeterminate "accent," as does other of her work when heard, and these, like Joyce's "Irish," can only be approximated by reading aloud.

Andrea Brady's work, on the other hand, has its strongest effect in the reading of it, which is hard but well-rewarded labour. It is so compacted and poetical (or anti-poetical) that a hearing has to be an understatement, powerful as declamation but leaving one gasping after sense. The sense of it comes slowly, in accumulated readings, like the contemporary world itself with its surplus of information. Most of her writings could be characterized as elegies or satires, or perhaps elegiac pub songs. But there is an erotic charge that brings across a realization, mid-poem sometimes, that one is reading a sonnet, a lyric, with its hyper-limited syntax: first person singular pronoun / verb / second person singular pronoun. *Vacation of a Lifetime* (Salt Press, 2001) gathers together work from her twenties, including the fifty page series *Liberties*, which is as fine as just about anything I've ever read. It entangles pronouns like limbs in an amorous struggle. It dresses itself in colours and numbers that break and tumble, in elisions, caesurae, and enjambments, from the ecstasies of "hyper-yellow" and "true white," of iambics, to the abject of "excremental" white and speech. It works out a personal politics surprisingly not all that different from the more formal politics of the elegies. Since *Vacation of a Lifetime*, she's published two more collections, *Cold Calling* (Barque, 2004) and *Embrace* (Object Permanence, 2005).

I won't say anything about our crack home team, Wayde Compton and Colin Browne, since readers of *The Capilano Review* will be familiar with their work, and I don't feel I owe them the same extended courtesy as our guests. Compton's *Performance Bond* (Arsenal Pulp, 2004) and Browne's *Groundwater* (Talon, 2002) are both fully realized books and necessary reading. They can be found at Duthies. The Salt and Barque books mentioned above can be ordered on line from the presses. If you haven't got the coin, can't wait for the Royal Post, or want to read earlier out of print books by any of these authors, they can be found in the KSW reading room.

