ROGER FARR / Intervox: Three Questions for Louis Cabri

In November 2007, Louis Cabri visited Vancouver for three days, reading at Capilano University and Emily Carr University of Art and Design, and leading a talk/seminar on "the social" at the Kootenay School of Writing. Although the KSW session ran for four hours, the conversation showed no signs of ebbing, so I invited Louis to discuss some of his material further via email.

In this exchange, Cabri responds generously to three questions addressing some key issues in contemporary poetry and poetics: the relationship between language and commodification; the efficacy of avant-garde poetry as a mode of social critique; and the use of search engines as part of the process of composition. In answering these questions, Cabri discusses his own work, Flarf, Language Writing, and a number of other writers, such as Rob Fitterman, Roy Miki, Ryan Fitzpatrick, Rob Manery, Charles Olson, Louis Zukofsky, Clint Burnham, and many others. The text is followed by a selection of some of Cabri's recent writing, some of which is referred to in the interview.

Louis Cabri is the author of *The Mood Embosser* (Coach House, 2003), which was named 2003 "Book of the Year" by the Small Press Traffic Literary Arts Center, and the forthcoming —*that can't* (Nomados, 2008). An assistant professor at the University of Windsor, Cabri's critical work has included studies of Bruce Andrews, P. Inman, Frank O'Hara, Catriona Strang, Fred Wah, Ezra Pound, and Zukofsky, poetry's "social command", and the literary nonce-word. Recent work appears and is forthcoming in *Model Homes* and *Open Text: Canadian Poetry in the 21st Century* (CUE, 2008).

In his work as an editor, curator, and organizer, Cabri has been integral in helping to document the edges of "the present" in contemporary poetry and poetics. From 1990-1996 he edited, with Rob Manery, the journal *Hole*, one of a handful of journals in Canada committed to avant-garde and experimental writing. Between 1997 and 2001 he curated Philly Talks, a series of dialogues between contemporary poets from Canada and the US. In 2003 he organized the Social Mark series, "a public symposium and private think-tank on the relationship between poetry and the social." -RF

Q1 "If commodities could speak, what would they say?"

LC Well, if they'd only shut up, then what—what would we say?

In what world could such a logic (if…then …) be realized where an answer could be imagined? and who is "we"? and what would we say?

Meanwhile, Nissan Versa speaks, City of Toronto speaks… Commodity critique speaks…—although it's a legend of capital, according to Doug Henwood, that business schools teach *Das Capital*.

Marx's question implies there are two ways of "speaking." One is the way of commodities, animating things in order to make more capital—an unenlightening but sometimes "entertaining" way of speaking. The other way critiques the first, and is presumably an enlightening way of speaking about the commodity-form. Thing is, today, in poetry, they're often indistinguishable from each other: both ways tend to imitate their object. Daniel Davidson's *Product* imitates the discursive space of a mall and simulates the subjectivity of a commodity, with extraordinary vividness. That's an early example, from 1990 or so, and maybe not the best, because there's more going on in the text than imitation. More recently, Rob Fitterman's *Metropolis XXX* copies, by paralleling, two texts, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*—or its topical index, at least—and websites that depict the crazy reach of the commodity into the culture of, as this parallelism suggests we call it, the U.S. empire. Which way of speaking is this? an unenlightening way of commodities themselves, or an enlightening way of their critique? Is there a difference? Must one decide?

The role of critique in poetry is a problem for poetry, and it's wrapped in another old problem, that of imitation. Instead of "problem for poetry," which might imply that poets are seeking a "solution" to the problem, perhaps I should say "puzzle for poetry."

Another example: Do some of the key texts of what Steve McCaffery calls Language Writing symptomatically embody the very conditions of reification that they wish to critique, or do such texts perform reificatory critique? Again, must one decide?

One might try to imagine a largest historical picture inside which these "choices"—deciding between ways of speaking about the commodity—are revealed as *both* necessary and as a product of the very-same commodity logic.

Some have tried to see beyond the commodity form by going in the direction of imagining a daily world in which commodities have shut up and a "we" finally gets to speak. Tom Wayman's work-poetry anthologies and essays ideally aim in that direction, although a big topic in the poems remains—as if to confirm the very dilemma it's trying to distance itself from—work. Work is humanized. Nevertheless, some workplaces have been and still continue to be off limits for representation by even the most basic descriptive codes (as in, here's what I do, here's what's going on in this workplace, etc). Knowledge about the social is never not hard-won.

Then there are those modernists who also tried to imagine a daily world outside the commodity-form. Doing so did not guarantee good politics. Pound built his own furniture, wore earrings and mismatched socks in stuffy genteel London society before the First World War, wrote about communal land practices and love throughout his life, roamed around somewhat itinerantly—and wrote his *Cantos* to bring forth a new fascistic society.

Q2 "The role of critique." In terms of contemporary writing practices, those that "imitate [the] object" of critique aim to reproduce (and perhaps heighten) the experience of capital "bearing down." While I understand that this practice is aimed at making our current social conditions both apparent and intolerable, I wonder why so many of us focus on the culture of the commodity, rather than the culture of anti-capitalist resistance? Both produce discourses and affects worthy of "documentation"—so why choose the one we've already engorged ourselves with, the one that is "winning" at the moment? In Marx's famous 1848 letter to Ruge, he writes: "nothing prevents us from making criticism of politics, participation in politics, and therefore real struggles, the starting point of our criticism, and from identifying our criticism with them." Is this "starting point"—ie. "real struggles"—not a viable option for the avant-garde?

LC Writing that imitates its object of critique might embody experiences of capital "bearing down," as you say. Such writing might also embody experiences of capital "lifting off," floating the signifier, hollowing-out the experience of "experience." The stuff about postmodernism. And Google does the hollowing-out for us now. And reality TV. The media generally.

The giddy exhilaration one sometimes hears in use of Flarf techniques, cannibalizing language—"as is"—on the internet, then recombining, could be said to imitate the object itself of the critique. When this technique is made into a sizeable project—as in K. Silem Mohammad's *Deer Head Nation*—one might fancifully wonder whether the writing doesn't capture a snapshot of the system of reproductive technology itself—the search engine—or at least a pathological swab of how it's used. Nevertheless, the status of critique in Flarf remains problematic for some readers. If you google Drew Gardner's "Chicks Dig War," for instance, you'll see that many readers react to the reduction of women to "chicks" who "love war." To be crude and totalizing about this, that "we're on the same side" is taken for granted in Flarf, is its *premise* rather than reflexive point at issue—the issue, namely, of the social—in the writing. By "same side" I mean that the social seems to be treated in an undifferentiated way as all one, and not divided up by power into gendered, class-based, and racial categories, and so on. Articulating and differentiating the social substance is not an aesthetic priority of Flarf's poetic form—I say this not because I want to "dismiss" this work I love as part of poetryworld, but because I want to understand how it singularly works and what it's doing. Not all poetry will have the same relationship to the social. In the case of some Flarf, the social is not reflexively addressed in its imitation and recomposition as a literary object.

Ryan Fitzpatrick's *Fake Math* balances the provocations of what he has flarfistically found on the internet, with an epigraph from Marx, to signal to the reader, if it's not already there in the title, that the text's calculations, or "real intentions," shouldn't be taken at face value (except, *how* to interpret those "real intentions" is exactly what is in question in Flarf techniques—with the caveat that of course this is the case in all kinds of poetry, to importantly varying degrees). The reader is helped along to not take the text at face value: the book is made to be called "poetry," and is read at events called poetry readings, to relatively encouraging audiences. Ryan is a friend

of mine, from Calgary days. Listening to him read in Windsor, I did nonetheless physically react to some of the more offensive lines. A Flarf counter to my reaction would be: But this is really what someone wrote online! etc. These are "real struggles…"—"real fantasy."

I'm reminded of a brief response-essay by Michael Davidson to a set of questions posed by editors Phillip Foss and Charles Bernstein of *Tyuonyi 6/7: Patterns / Contexts / Time: A Symposium of Contemporary Poetry.* Davidson asks: "Is it possible to write *within* the news while creating perspectives on it?" That's, in a nutshell, a problem for the role of critique in poetry, and not only of the Flarf kind of imitation. And it's culture-wide. I've wondered why the premise of Stephen Colbert's TV personality on Comedy Central is so "successful" in the sense that it's on TV. Is it that, at the level of television media these days, a culture of resistance is not even ontologically imaginable or conceivable—imaginable or conceivable enough, anyway, to be parodied with a stereotype? All Colbert can do, it would seem, is imitate the object itself of his critique. He has to defer critique in order to first establish a credible imitation of the object. He has to hope, in doing so, that imitation in itself will be enough to communicate as critique to his viewers. But when Bill O'Reilly genuinely identifies with Colbert and thinks of the Colbert show as a clone of his own show—in other words takes Colbert imitating a rightwing position at face value as *emulating* The O'Reilly Factor—I'm shockt n all *aw…!* at the power of neocon ideology to condition and relentlessly reproduce perception. Same with neocons and fundals with *The Simpsons*—ratings suggest they love it… If the imitation is done well, superficially it will seem to ideologues and censors to contain nothing objectionable. But so much for critique… That's what I mean by a text that does not reflexively address the social.

Ben Friedlander posted a chart made for a non-U.S. audience recently, "In the American Database." Flarf and Google appear prominently as structural features of the contemporary textual space available to poets to construct their world.

Whether read as capital "bearing down" or "lifting off," by default the commodity presents itself as "new"—new words are invented for the products, relations, etc., of capital, even when the status of this so-called new is bogus (from a certain poetry vantage, the more bogus it is, the better!). The commodity isn't only a subject matter

or theme either, but dynamic form (Marx's analysis is of a hyphenated concept, commodity-form), creating and destroying (as he said of the new bourgeoisie class as a whole), which can therefore be imitated to varied ends; that is, its *form* propels the commodity inside our lives and gives it an internalized psychologic and an externalized logic, and which makes of it a living articulation of social substance: form is the imitatable part of the commodity, and its language is perhaps why commodity-form is of interest to some poets.

Countering commodity-form, but analogously wondering about form in relation to critique, one might well ask what are the *forms*, not merely the themes, that resistance takes and has. On the latter question, Rob Manery's poetry-book title is apt in its reminder that unless one at least raises the question of form's relation to critique *It's Not As If It Hasn't Been Said Before*: narratives of class warfare and oppression have been reproduced, appropriated and routinized by the media before and continue now, and resistance-nodes have narrated their counterclaims with a hortatory didacticism and repetitiousness of idea and of emotion that can be equally brain-numbing. What makes Rob's treatment of the Winnipeg General Strike "new" in a non-bogus way is its language of (to borrow Michael Davidson's word) unsayable trauma. Historically, socially, the Strike is, and should remain with insistent scholarly and critical vigilance, far from discursively "unsayable," of course. Even so, CBC online overviews, with footage, the Strike. Good. But the Strike is unsayable in the form it takes in Rob's syntactically minimalist stanzas. "Bloody Saturday" starts:

> turned murderous
>
> line determined
>
> beside exact
>
> expression

It seems to me that the concision here can barely contain explosive, collective anger of revolt and violence. The language is almost beside itself, but at the same time is not that way at all: it is precisely the opposite: it is "beside exact / expression"…Davidson goes on to ask in the same brief essay: "How can historical information be recycled so that it retains its contextual specificity while at the same time releasing it for analysis?" Rob's *It's Not As If It Hasn't Been Said Before* is *one* way, *one* example. My

point is that a thematic "documentation" of poetic engagement with social themes is not necessarily enough; if one wants to document, then there also has to be, in the poem, an engagement with the forms and history of documentary, of modes of representing documents and "documentarity," so that "the social" is not reduced to the representation of sociological categories. Bowering's slim chapbook *Fulgencia* (Nomados 2008) strikes me as a far more complex engagement with historical materials than Edward Sanders's multi-volume *America* (nonetheless, Bowering's work shows a great debt to Sanders's ideas about the importance of taking an "investigative" approach to poetry in the world).

On both sides of the poem, then, the formal side, the social side, poets try to puzzle out, to their own particular ends, problems that come with critique and imitation in poetry.

In *La Chinoise*, Godard has the French communist philosopher and former Algerian resistance member (and, behind that, former French resistance member) Francis Jeanson ask a young female revolutionary, but do you represent a majority? Are we on the cusp of a generation-defining moment—April 1968—in which the present glimmers of a culture of anti-capitalist resistance foretell deeper transformations of social logic coming into view—just as *La Chinoise* in 1967 structurally anticipated events transpiring the subsequent year? To what extent is it, in terms of critique worked out in the form of a poem, "unsayable"? On the commodity front, this year a Jeanson biography has been published and Godard's film released on DVD. But I'm learning to be optimistic. An art or poetry that builds into its forms a sense of timing, of the time (singular tense), as does *La Chinoise*, is an extraordinary thing to me, one of the greatest things any art can do, and offer, because doing so builds worlds as they are, as they were, collectively lived, whether it is an "April 1968 of the mind" or not.

Exactly, why take the winning side? Because of majoritarian "common sense"? Pathetic rule. But still. And then, "but" again. I feel that a contradiction has emerged and now operates between the social and the formal in recent poetryworld, when once they were somewhat homologously united in critique. A particular understanding of the social as a critical space of transformation (not the social imagined as acts of sociability—after readings, say) has separated from formally-innovative practices and each has gone in separate directions. A particular

understanding of form, as enactment and articulation, has done the same. What conditions are causing this split to happen? One momentous condition: the World Wide Web. You see this shift in how the word "social" is used, when in the 80s just the word evoked second-nature critique, whereas by the late 90s it began to be used in a neutral way, so that in the new millennium the social is pretty much a taken-for-granted medium that is always "there" and always the same (viz Flarf's assumption that we are all on the same side). That is, the project of immersing the poetic word in the social substance, and of conceiving of that substance as resistant, seems to have gotten dislocated from formally innovative transformations in poetry. —Is any of this true? Affectively, anyway, that's what "I need to work through," given my responses at various times since 2001 to events, in poetry and out. I have questions not "about" but coming *from* both sides, both being "sides" that I believe poets must occupy at once. Instead of "social formalism" (Barrett Watten's mid-1980s term for when social critique is worked out at a formal level of the poem), there is, on the one side, social poetry, which *as poetry* (to me) sometimes falls back on its pole of social realism, comparatively indifferent to form, and, on the other, formal poetry, which sometimes falls back on a pole of aestheticism, indifferent, if not hostile to, social substance. Both poles date to two centuries ago; so much for changing the past! But on the other hand, there's plenty of change, a proliferation of trammeling, and of huge excitements as well, on both sides of the poem, when I read from these poles at once.

Q3 Speaking of Flarf, could you talk about how search engines inform your own writing practice, using, say, "With Locations Including Bourne Woods," as an example? And in terms of your critical work, when you were in Vancouver last November doing a talk at KSW, you made what I thought were some interesting methodological moves, using Google as a kind of heuristic to read some "unreadable" lines by Clint Burnham. Could you develop that a little here?

LC As for the first question, I had a plan, soon abandoned, of making a sequence of poems from "daily news" using a search engine to help construct each text. I was missing the larger picture of how search engines had structurally altered poetry's relationship to the world. At the very moment when a large-enough mirror has been constructed to hold up to the world, its referent had disappeared and become

"information." This internet effect is something like the effect upon the ancient city of Paris of Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann's modernization (and in those late prose poems of Baudelaire's)—the Haussmannisation of social space, as I called it once, the laying down of a digital grid to create the effect of a seeming smooth and homogenous totality of social space that now presents itself as information freely accessible to, traversable by, any viewer. On this level, I lost interest in the "news."

Information has been a taboo word: language shouldn't be instrumentalized as a conveyance for information alone, etc. Information is without attributes and qualities, amorphous.

> whatever you have to say, leave
>
> the roots on, let them
>
> dangle (Olson, "These Days")

Information is "content" *without* roots. Information is "debased," because recyclable, yet "clean" also, because this media technology has completed the conversion of socially-situated statements and propositions about the world—"roots," in Olson's sense, or "referents"—into bytes of transmissible, transcodable data. One thinks of information as a "content" communicated without regard for its medium, let alone for its words—in this respect, no wonder information has been decried. That quote from Zukofsky's *A Test of Poetry*, the epigraph to *The Mood Embosser*, "poetry is information," is a faux quote because Zukofsky's actual sentence continues. I don't think anyone would say Zukofsky asserts that poetry is information, if one gives to the word "information" the post-Norbert Wiener understanding of a transparent communication. The (false) statement "poetry is information" nevertheless works, for me, and something like the word "referential" has in the past. In the early reception of Language Writing, the word "non-referential" was used to describe linguistic opacity; but Mac Low objected, rightly I think, that even language that seems to refer only to its letters, to its sounds, to the relational fact of itself to itself in its medium (page etc), to its opacity or transparency, even such a language is referential—referential to itself as language. Language Writing is, then, hyper-referential, not non-referential. I prefer "information" to "referent" because, on the up side, the former term strikes me as having stepped beyond the modernist dichotomy between art and event, around which a hierarchy of values (with its social analogues)

has been established, where art is "high," separate from event, in its own world, and is kitsch where "low" and inextricable from the event (of production) out of which it came. Acknowledging that poetry has a dimension to it that is informational is also in part to disturb the encoded social accents and sources of literary tradition, including diction. (I'm thinking of Bourdieu's excoriating little book on Heidegger's euphemistic language—his "poetic" philosophical diction that deliberately masks political contexts and commitments.)

A (belated) sense that how one might approach "information" has radically altered with the fact of the internet is what led me to consider, in that KSW talk last November, Clint Burnham's recent book, *Rental Van. Rental Van* appears formless. It is, then, "like" information. Then I noticed something about how the text is made. Its opacity—you know, Opacity, that key word of aesthetic and political resistance— often dissolved into a Lake Louise of transparencies soon as I googled some of the text. I found this sleight-of-hand remarkable, and refreshing. I called this reading method "geaging," because it combined acts of googling and reading, to suggest how the search engine might be used as a reading tactic in approaching any text, but especially those that display a certain kind of textual opacity. Geaging, and the internet, gave Clint's text form. In the case of *Rental Van*, it also seemed that that is how some of the text was combined or written. But geaging needn't be an exercise in truth-finding. It shouldn't matter, really, whether the transparency that one discovers is "really" what the author intended, "really" the method that the author used to construct the text. If there's a truth, it has to do with the World Wide Web as formalized social space, and, as Nicole Markotić reminded me, the lack of access to it by the majority of the actual world. Nevertheless, the search engine allows for one to render a text transparent, legible, via close reading, and that's what's incredible to me. This transparency enriched Clint's book for me.

I try to do several things in that talk, which references Clint's work, but also, to different ends, Brian Fawcett's, as well as the French critic Jean Paulhan's. In the case of Paulhan, I finally discovered a complex argument for an a-social poetics, in his book-length essay, *The Flowers of Tarbes: or, Terror in Literature.* Years ago, you asked me a question that I was asking myself as well, how any poetry could show in its formal choices an indifference to the social, could be, in other words, "a-social." I was thinking of Bertold Brecht's tri-partite schema of social, anti-social, and a-

social. Social and anti-social poetics were conceivable, but a-social? For Brecht in the thirties, an a-social work of art would be one that doesn't reflexively stake itself in the social, so as to explore it, but instead joins itself to an a-political stance in literature along now-overly-familiar lines that literature and art are about enduring states of emotion and form that transcend history, accident. Paulhan's extraordinary argument, made under exacting historical conditions, was in my view against what I've elsewhere called "the social command," after Mayakovsky's and Brik's coinage by the same name, which introduced into aesthetics a Marxian concept of the social for the first time. Those historical conditions in France under which it was written are crucial to understanding Paulhan's somewhat notorious text: when the social command has been reduced to, and deployed as, a mode of exercising "terror" over literary production. After the collapse of positions once issuing from a posited structural homology between the social and the formal, the social command to me became stripped of substance, a kind of internalized shock-and-awe. That, coupled with a sense of how poetry's relationship to information had altered due to the internet, has led me back to the unanswerable but necessary question to continually ask: what is poetry anyway?

For this retroactive narrative I'm concocting here for you, I quickly glanced through the selection of poems that make up *The Mood Embosser,* and I noticed how they are often written so that there is a continual push to reach out for an extra-literary context of presuppositions. Rereading it I was reminded of Andrews's idea of concentric circles of social information spreading out from the literary text and governing it usually in a hidden way. But what are the implications for such a tactic, if poetry's relation to social space, and to social information, has altered? What if what one is reaching out for—"context"—is already there, established, "content" in a searchable database? As the writer, I'm determining how "context" is read in a poem, so context in poem and context in database are not by any stretch "identical." Nevertheless, what if what I formerly understood as context is a kind of illusory horizon now that it can be made present, in less than a second online, that easily? There's a bottoming-out of use of the negative—and the negative has been so crucial to a certain mode of how social critique has entered poetry. The phrase "bottoming-out" regrettably sounds like a negative judgment made upon the present, but really what I'm after in all this is a schema for understanding what the "positions" are that are available for poetry.

To call "With Locations Including Bourne Woods" search-engine-based is a stretch, for while the poem uses googled language, in that I did source the Internet Movie Database (imdb.com) for a vocabulary, the database is not necessarily constituted through the internet, and were the database available in print instead, I could have used that. The internet makes finding such language easier. In this case, I took one sentence from each description of the eight-or-so movies listed as having used Bourne Woods as a location since around 2001. The words of those sentences became the lexicon of the poem. The sentences I made bear no resemblance to their sources, except for the two that identify film glitches, and the opening ones about the present-day Bourne Woods themselves. The epigraph recombines words by Carlos Williams— Williams's line as, by now, a kind of rustic "stable" for worn-out free-verse poetic feet, and recognizably a "stable foot," when in these movies, Bourne Woods, an "ancient woodland," is unrecognizable for what it actually is. In another piece, "Versa," I used search engines to cobble together phrases trolled from the first fifteen-or-so Google-hits on that word, for a range of examples of current usage.