

Unpublished review of Dennis Lee's Body Music

Dennis Lee, *Body Music: Essays*. Toronto: Anansi, 1998. \$19.95.

In 1972, Dennis Lee traced the shape of Canadian literature in a remarkable, and massively influential book, *Savage Fields*. The book was far more than an examination of Canadian literature: everywhere it gave evidence of the intellectual debt that Dennis Lee owed Northrop Frye; one piece of evidence was the (ultimately religious) conviction that a strong literature has its basis in a rich cosmology. That conviction guided Lee through a study that led him into the deepest levels of the Canadian imagination, and ended with Lee's demonstrating that a shared cosmological vision has formed the Canadian mind and determined the contours of Canadian literature, philosophy and social theory.

If Frye was important to the book, the principal figure that presided over Lee's *Savage Fields* was Martin Heidegger; the book was especially indebted to Heidegger's much read, much analyzed essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art." It was, in fact, one of the first Canadian works to exhibit, in high relief, features of the Heideggerian strain in Canadian intellectual life. What accounts for the appeal that Heidegger has exerted on those thinkers who maintain that aesthetic experience furnishes ontological disclosures? Such thinkers base their estimation of the importance of our encounters with works of art on the observation that modernity represents the nadir in experience; modernity disenfranchises valid ways of knowing and veridical ways of apprehending the world. And, these Heideggerian thinkers insist, modernity overlooks the savage, primal power that any great work of art draws upon—a primal power the capacity to experience which modernity has reduced to a vestigial state. All good commentary on art has to begin with an awareness of this primordial domain. The fact that the importance of this domain to artmaking is so little understood is a primary reason for the dreariness of much writing in aesthetics and criticism.

Artworks dwell in a dark zone, about which discursive reason has little to say. It is a zone that the hegemony of discursive reason has put under attack. Citizens of modernity resist this giving themselves to this darkness—and, if the critique of technology which has been such a vital stream of Canadian thought says much about Canadians ambivalent position vis-à-vis modernity, the powerful defence of this dark zone by Canadian literary theorists highlights that same tension. Indeed, the current battle-lines around Canadian culture, apparently between those waging a defence of Canadian culture as a distinctive cultural phenomenon and those who would bring artworks within the hegemony of the monoculture of the Disney world (which, as *Fantasia* did, collapses the distinctions between creative form and commodity) are really lines drawn between those who stand for the defence of the dark zone and those who advocate bringing all cultural products within limits discursive reason finds comfortable. All around us we see the evidence that modernity is consolidating its hegemony by rendering art innocuous and untroubling: conspicuous evidence includes the "politicization" of visual art (a code term for converting art into a form of discourse, to be judged by applying canons established by discursive reason); the commercialization of experimental film that has drawn it down from the still unassimilable work of, say David Rimmer, to the commercialized inanities of "Fringe Film" suitable for rave culture; we see it in the degeneration of Al Purdy, Gwendolyn McEwen, Dennis Lee and Michael Ondaatje's poetry into the (again "politicized") discourse practices of Marlene Norbese Phillips and Lillian Allen; we see it in the degeneration from a practice that marshalled rhythm, "babble" and elliptical phrasing to suggest the irrational processes into one that is judged by the effectiveness of its address to reason's ameliorist impulse, the degeneration from artwork that arises from a dark zone and resists being brought into the light to artwork that answers to reason's demands for distributive justice. In the public schools and high schools, the tendency is represented by the demands to replace poetry and singing and dance with applied

technology education—or, what is perhaps, the demand that students make films and photographs concerned with gender or ethnicity issues (as “art” students are now commonly asked to do).

Following Martin Heidegger, Dennis Lee, in *Savage Fields*, referred to this dark zone as “earth,” a term whose significance emerges through its contrast with “world.” World comprises everything that humans erect, as a coherent, structure, apprehended through reason, while earth is a primordial that is given to human be-ing, and is not of its own making. In this marvelous new collection of essays, entitled *Body Music*, Dennis Lee extends his meditation on the character of “earth” and the role that the “earth” has to play in shaping a poem. Lee shifts his terms in *Body Music*: he no longer calls this primordial domain, “earth” as he did in *Savage Fields*, but rather “cadence.” Here is how Lee describes his coming-to-awareness of cadence in *Body Music*:

Imagine you’re sitting indoors. Down in the basement a group with a heavily amplified bass is rehearsing. Nothing is audible, but the pulsating of the bass starts to make the girders and beams vibrate. And eventually the vibration makes a way into your body. You feel yourself being flexed by a tremor which you’re bound to acknowledge, whether or not you know what it is.

That sensation is disorienting, because it collapses our familiarities of inner and outer, subject and object. You don’t perceive vibration; *you vibrate*. . . . During my twenties, I became aware of something comparable. It was not my body that was being flexed, or not primarily. It was my—what do I say? My imagination? my psyche? my spirit? I don’t know the right term, but the experience was unmistakable. I was imbedded, as plainly as I was in the earth’s atmosphere, in a space which was alive and volatile, and whose flexions governed the tension and pulse of my system. If I sat quietly, I would regularly become aware of this preverbal field of force.

That didn’t jibe with anything I knew, but eventually it was too immediate to deny. The term I seized on for the insistent tremor was “cadence.” And cadence—the direct experience of that energy, not my ideas about it—has shaped my writing since shortly after my first book appeared. (“Cadence, Country, Silence,” *Body Music*, 6)

Relating Lee’s idea of candence to Frye’s idea of “babble” highlights the defence that the strongest Canadian literary thinks have offered of this dark zone. Writing about the lyric mode in *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye stated

The two elements of subconscious association which form the basis for lyrical *melos* and *opsis* respectively have never been given names. We may call them, if the terms are thought dignified enough, babble and doodle. In babble, rhyme, assonance, alliteration, and puns develop out of sound associations. The thing that gives shape to the associating is what we have been calling the rhythmic initiative, though in a free verse poem it would be rather a sense of the oscillations of rhythm within an area which gradually becomes defined as the containing form. We can see from the revisions poets make that the rhythm is usually prior, either in inspiration or in importance, or both, to the selection of words to fill it up. The phenomenon is not confined to poetry: in Beethoven’s notebooks, too, we often see how he knows that he wants a cadence at a certain bar before he has worked out any melodic sequence to reach it. One can see a similar evolution in children, who start with rhythmic babble and fill in the

appropriate words as they go along. The process is also reflected in nursery rhymes, college yells, work songs, and the like, where rhythm is a physical pulsation close to the dance, and is often filled up with nonsense words. An obvious priority of rhythm to sense is a regular feature of popular poetry . . .
When babble cannot rise into consciousness, it remains on the level of uncontrolled association.

The idea that a primal domain underlies, indeed gives birth to, the world as we know it in conscious, focused awareness is one that has been formulated by many artists over the past century. What Dennis Lee calls “cadence” relates to what Jean-François Lyotard refers to as the matrix, what Julia Kristeva (following Heidegger following Plato) refers to as “chōra,” or what I, with splendid vagueness, call the “primordial domain.” To be sure, these writers conceive of this primordial domain differently; but the similarities among their ideas highlight a curious feature of Lee’s discussion of “cadence”—a feature that in fact distinguishes his notion of cadence from his idea of earth. All these other writers highlight modernity’s reason for anathematizing this primal realm: a destructive capacity arises from this primal realm, a capacity that disrupts gestalt order, that dismembers form, that liquifies all that is fixed, and that lays representation in ruins – this is as much in evidence in the poetry of William Blake and Christopher Smart as it is in the painting of Jackson Pollock. Or in the poetry of Dennis Lee. Just to make concrete what exactly I am claiming, I’ll take a simple example for one of Lee’s own books, *Riffs* (1993):

When I lurched like a rumour of want through the networks of plenty,
A me-shaped pang on the lam,
when I ghosted through loves like headline, a scrap in the updraft,
and my mid-life wreckage was close & for keeps—

when I watched the
birches misting, pale spring
voltage and
not mine, nor mine, nor mine—

then a
lady laid her touch a-
mong me, gentle then, for which I stand still
startled, . . .

It is not just the grief of the individual that impacts us—here the conventional forms of language are under attack. Indeed, our common experience of the phenomenon that the form of the self and surety of language are felt to dissolve together makes this passage so moving. The traces of something terrible that rises up against the sureties of language are everywhere: “lurch like a rumour” —our expectations concerning the form of language are exploded, as we are left wondering why Lee likens his lurching to that of a rumour. Of course, we do come to partial resolution of the defiance of that unexpected phrase – rumours do travel fitfully, and to destructive effect, careening this way and that, and then arresting themselves, only to veer off in another unexpected direction—but it is that the resolution is only partial that makes the passage poetic. For something of the defiance of the phrase remains even after we have unpacked some of the significance of the phrase’s use—an element of “babble remains to testify to the undoing of “good form.” “[L]ike a rumour of want”—another defiance of expectation: rumours are generally about something disreputable, so what is this “rumour of want?” The phrase arrests

us, though of course soon enough we realize the poet is suggesting that his neediness is felt to be disreputable, or worse, to make him disreputable. And again, “a rumour of want through the networks of plenty”: here again our expectations are sabotaged. We ponder and realize that the contrast between abundance and need generates this compelling expression; nonetheless that understanding doesn’t completely allay the sense that the poet’s despair is disordering language. And so it continues: the phrase “I ghosted through lives like a headline” also rises against our expectations, as though impelled by some dark force beyond our understanding. Given sufficient space, I could show how the shifting, syncopated, jazzy rhythms of the passage defy our expectations regarding metric regularity.

The violence that the primordial domain exercises against gestalt form explains why great works of art seem to be nearly misbegotten, to come so close to being ill-formed, awkward, ungainly, risible, to be so strange, odd, unusual, different, unique, weird, out-of-the-ordinary, so filled with strange ideas, developed in wild forms, that provoke such exotic experiences. If this seems hyperbole, consider the coarseness of Picasso’s *Le Demoiselles d’Avignon*, or the repetitiveness of Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans*—that makes Stein’s writing so easy to parody (as great artworks often are). A great work of art is never merely pretty, or merely elegant; it also has truck with something elemental, something that threatens to disrupt order, to liquify all that is fixed, and to lay representations in ruin. This commerce is what Abstract Expressionist artists of the 1940s and 50s used to refer to as risk: they understood that a work of art brings about a dynamic accord between forces that create order and forces that promote disorder, and they had the sense that their great achievement was to have managed to balance a unprecedentedly large quantity of disordering forces—a quantity of such magnitude that it threatened constantly to leave the work a shambles. Nonetheless, to tame those forces would utterly deplete the work one was making.

Dennis Lee recognizes that the primordial lays waste to emerging order. He writes, “[A] poem can change the inflection of its voice five times in thirty lines. It can rage, state, noodle, cavort, then shudder with grief. Polyphony in writing is the art of orchestrating successive voices across a work. . . . [T]o be a meditation at all, a poem must embody in voice the way its experience of the world is initially focused—and then proceed to envoice *another* focusing; and then *another*. To live its way to deeper and more complete knowing, which is what a meditation does, it must move from one vocal embodiment to another.” (“Polyphony,” sections 6 and 8, p. 54). It is common for artworks to elicit a sense of an emerging order, and then to depart from it, only to return to it in the end. The departures from the regulative pattern are generally understood to engender tension (by defying our expectation) and then to provide satisfaction as the expected order becomes re-established. Lee seems to share that understanding (at least his commentary of the nursery rhyme “Jack be nimble. . . .” suggests that he does). But I believe there is more to it than the traditional explanation allows—I believe that the deviation from the expected order is not felt simply as an accidental disordering of the established pattern, as a random deviation might be. Rather the deviation is felt as motivated: it seems to disclose the operation of a force that would undo established pattern. The thrill we feel as the emerging order is dismantled is a delight in the discovery of a *motivated* disordering factor, which puts all order in peril. This disturbance to convention, I suggest, is the very *raison d’être* of art.

Thus the role of form is not so much to reconcile this deviant element to a fixed order; rather, it is to prepare us to experience the deviation—to open us to the destructive element, and to immerse us in it. Form allows us to sense the violence of that which defies form, and is impelled to lay form to waste. The conventional way of considering form takes the pattern that is departed from and returned to as normative—that is, though it may disavow the fact, it takes the order embodied in that pattern as the ideal, and deviations from that pattern as negative factors (though the temporary disturbance they create is discovered, in the end, to contribute to the reinforcing that order). I suggest, to the contrary, that we consider the impulse to deviate from

that pattern as having primary value, and the pattern itself a way of opening us to that deviation. Lee, however, continues to think of form as normative, and the deviations as a means of producing “kinaesthetic play” within this normative structure. Thus, in a later essay, “Body Music,” (1996/8) he asks what determines syncopation (another sort of deviation from the norm) and responds with what seems to me a weak answer: “Finally, all you can say is that some deep, spontaneous delight in improvisation configures the micro-rhythms.” (p. 205)

It is, I believe, more than that—the impulse is driven by an elemental violence. The impulse to undo form, to liquefy all that is fixed, to deform syntax and dismember gestalt construction, and to lay representation in ruins goes a long way towards explaining the phenomenon that I referred to above, that make great works of art seem to be so nearly misbegotten—to come so close to being ill-formed, awkward, ungainly.

The most evident mark of the importance of this force towards disorder is the refusal of great works to be contained by a single gestalt, a tendency that Lee calls “polyphony.” Lee recognizes, of course, that literary construction known as parataxis is a construction whose appeal for poets such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot was that it allows meter, rhythm, tone, and vocabulary to change phrase by phrase. Lee’s remarks on Pound’s fashion of “collocating” items to form “a phalanx of particulars” indicates how far Lee goes in maintaining the traditional notion of good form (a notion of form as containing and limiting potentially disruptive and destructive forces):

At the macro-scale, the syntax of rhythm devised by Pound was that of parataxis, or discontinuous form—“vorticism,” as he termed it. The basic technique was one of jump ellipsis between “rhyming subjects: (in Hugh Kenner’s phrase): between members of a governing analogue class. This provided an alternative to classical, linear logics for relating parts within the whole.

Pound’s approach to macro-rhythm has been adopted by many modern poets, and extensively analyzed by critics. *It is my conviction that as a syntax of major form, it engenders problems which it cannot resolve.* However the subject is so far-reaching that I won’t try to address it here. (“Body Music,” p. 224; italics mine).

One is left to speculate as to Lee’s objection. But, the phrase “as a syntax of major form” makes one suspect that the problem that Lee sees with Pound’s poetics is that unleashes too powerful disintegrative forces. But that it does so is, for me, exactly one of its strengths. Along with the Italian *Novissimi* of the 1950s and 60s, I believe that Pound’s compositions, based on paratactical construction, opened up a radically new conception of poetry, one not inclined to disavow a poem’s complicity with violence. Parataxis is the most potent device poets have constructed to dismember language.

Understanding the role that a disordering impulse plays in aesthetic experience would dispel a conceptual quandary that Lee finds himself in. At a crucial point in *Body Music*, Dennis Lee seems discomforted by the fact that his claim that a poem mimes the gestures of cadence might make it difficult to give an account of how form evolves. A voice of doubt surfaces in “Polyphony,” to plead: “But there’s one thing I don’t understand. When I read a description of an “open” poem, I can’t see why anything has to occur exactly where it does. Or even why it has to be in the poem at all. What governs all these leapings-about that you’ve described.” (pp. 58–59). Lee seems leary about offering his reply, “Hunches. Trial and error”; and this is primarily because he continues to maintain that aesthetic form is organic (v. p. 59) and to conceive form in a traditional way, as a principle imposed on words from outside, to hold them back from their tendency to go asscatter. Again, in his wonderful tribute to Bronwen Wallace, he ponders how a form can maintain its integrity even when it accommodates radical diversity—as though diversity

impels words to realize their drive to go as scatter.

The most radical response to the issue that confronts Lee is to reject the idea that poem is a perfected harmony that brings conflicting elements into accord in such a way that each found its ideal place, and any change in the form would unbalance it by shifting the vector of some tension so that it was not perfectly countered by a contrary vector. I think that rejection is justified, because I believe that traditional conception overemphasizes the regulative function of form. The traditional view seemed attractive when harmony and order constituted the paradigm of value. "But," a traditionalist might retort, "the form of the work of art furnishes the basis for assessing that work's aesthetic value. If you propose that the traditional view overestimates the value of form, what do you suggest as an alternative basis for assessing the value of a work of art? Or do you want us to accept moderns' answer, that value assessments are nothing more than statements of preference."

My answer would be: we now understand the aesthetic richness of a poem, or of any work of art, to depend on its vitality—on its capacity to unharness sensations that overturn received modes of experience, to dismantle conventionalized ways of thinking, and to put us in touch with the source that, because it is prior to language and representation (or because it is the residue that is left over when perception has imposed order on that manifold of experience) strives to undo order, to dismantle syntax, to lay representation to ruin. A work of art has a twofold existence. For every work of art is a contention between two impulses: towards form and against form. These are reflected in the two fold character of the artwork, as structure and as process. Every work of art exists simultaneously as a disciplined structure, whose order evolves out of a inner sense of the need for harmony and as a process that exceeds all boundaries, refuses all containment, that dismembers syntax and destroys form. Lee understands this, for he says as much—or, rather, *almost* as much: "[A] poem, in my sense of it, wants to exist in two ways at once. As a teeming process which overflows every prior canon of form (or is prepared to, and can when it chooses). And simultaneously as a beautifully disciplined structure, whose order flows outward from the centre of its own necessity, and doesn't miss a single checkpoint along the way. . . . And those two ways—the energy of unlimited process, and the shapeliness of content living outward to the limit of its measure—have been coinciding all along. If the poem is any good they will go on coinciding with it" ("Cadence, Country, Silence," p. 5).

So Lee finally comes down on the side that maintains that a successful work of art reconciles the strife between ordering and disordering principles; and he does so by showing that order contains and limits disorder. This is exactly what I deny: I maintain that form operates to channel our attention in a manner that allows the violence of the primordial domain to impact our consciousness. Form, I believe, acts to create an opening for the violence of the primordial, so that violence might liberate us from our customary ways of perceiving and can reshape our thinking. It is that privilege of enabling violence that I insist now must be protected against the cultural forms that would limit it by steering it towards that which reason can tame. Ours is not a time that cherishes any violence, whatever its end.

Why should I want to maintain that labile forms, forms that shift and change with every phrase, are a sign of destructive element? For doesn't such lability contribute to a greater formal richness and complexity? My reasons for asserting that the primordial domain perpetrates violence against language lie in the analogy between the capacity of the unconscious to disrupt and dismember speech through what Freud (using the word differently) described as "parataxis" and the capacity of primordial domain to lay simple gestalt form to ruin. Most readers will be aware of Freud's commentary on the way that the unconscious can disturb everyday speech, dismantle intention and speak another, unrecognized truth. The examples (from Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*) should be familiar: A man invites his wife to join him, by taking the Lusitania (instead of the Mauretania); a wealthy man is greeted "famillionarily" or better, the story of Ferenczi blaming himself for having committed a technical error in a patient's

psychoanalysis, so he stumbled several times as he walked along the street (a representation of his *faux pas* in his treatment of his patient). The effects that the disordering force of the primordial has on gestalt form are analogous to those which the unconscious has on language and behaviour: it dismembers language and lays good form to rubble. And, just as the unconscious is that which lies under repression, and is refused representation in consciousness, so the primordial element is the residuum that cannot be represented in language—and so it rises against language and representation, to undo them.

The time when we could confidently assert that we assess a work of art by its gestalt form has passed. That was the old conception of art, and it has wasted itself in its constant effort to repress the dynamic element left over from perception, to hold at bay that excess of unrealized possibility, to ward off the return of that which passes into nothing as a thought is configured, that which language consigns to silence; and to expel from sensation that excess which rises against language, against thought, and against representation, to destroy them. That view has exhausted itself in the constant passivity required of it (and remember, such quietude is a theme of Lee's *Body Music*) in the face of the violence that is characteristic of the revenge of the repressed. That conception of art is spent; it has had its day. We must now measure the power of the work of art by its capacity to mime the character of the dance of the primordial. We must come to understand that form has two basic roles, one material and one regulative. Form serves first to embody the play of tension that imitates the dance of the primordial and, secondly, through its regulative function, to focus thought in such a way as to create an opening that enables us respond to the violence the primordial unleashes. But it is the accuracy with which it conveys the gesture of the dance that is the key—that, after all, is what we mean when we say that a poet has “a good ear,” that he or she listens attentively enough to the murmuring of the primordial to hear it well.

At several points in the book, Dennis Lee acknowledges that what he calls cadence exerts itself first in the body, that it is felt as an exchange of corporeal energies.

It is through something very fundamental in the body's character that “cadence” emerges. He writes that you can feel cadence in

. . . the heft of the cells in you arms, your neck, your sexual centre—you feel your hopes and forebears straining to reach those articulate gestures of being. You can't compell them. But once you find the flow, once you enter the jostle and hover and rush of the right full carnal gesture in words there is such a de-kinking, such a deep sense of release into what is quick and still and implacably there, that it nourishes you utterly. And for a time, at least, you don't understand what other calling makes sense. (“Polyphony,” pp. 62–3)

And it is felt as dynamic. Lee's emphasis on the body's agency in revealing cadence leads him to a view close to that of that great advocate of embodied poetics, Charles Olson, for he avows that the sensation of cadence impels the poet to recast his or her understanding of what a poem is, to transform it into an active thing that “enacts” a mediation.

Lee is surely correct that there is something elemental in the character of a poem, or any work of art, that reveals itself through a corporeal sensation that closely resembles kinaesthesia. This is a key difference between discursive “poetry” and the lyric poetry that Frye so elegantly commented on—lyric poetry offers not so much propositions about life than a feeling of life — of some *élan vital*—surging and throbbing in our physical being. That is what makes Marlene Norbese Phillips and Lillian Allen so much less satisfying: great poetry, like all great art, concerns something troublingly indefinite and unparaphrasable—*i.e.*, a poem is not a composition of statements, but a dynamic field, a sequence of shifts in activity of the language and of changes in pace, rhythm, of fluctuations in pulse. A poem is more a set of gestures that

conveys the dynamics of the primordial than a set of propositions about it—indeed, of the primordial there is almost nothing that can be said.

Oddly, the conception of form that Lee clings to—that a poem is a product of a will-to-order is one that associated the belief that benefits accrue to their practice when artists learn to exert formal control over each and every element of a work of art. Yet that is a conception of *poiesis* that Lee rejects: “the only analytic language for talking about [cadence] is the modern one—the poem as product of technique, the creative artist fashioning order from the raw material of the world or his own subconscious. I don’t believe a word of it.” (“Polyphony,” *Body Music*, p. 65). Though he rejects the conception of *poiesis* as *techne*, recognizing it as belonging to the modern paradigm, he nonetheless continues to maintain the conception of form as harmonious construction associated with that conception of *poiesis*.

Perhaps the reason for this oversight lies in Lee’s fundamentally Heideggerian understanding of the state of being that must be attained in order to achieve even a rudimentary sensation of being (or what Lee calls cadence). Lee seems to understand this statement strictly in terms of a form of attunement which leads to cherishing the gift of appearances, and this cherishing, in its turn engenders a mode of being that Heidegger calls “letting-be” (*Gelassenheit*), through which we understand the reciprocity in human being (*Dasein*) and objects’ coming-to-be. Thus Lee speaks of meditative writing as “a letting-be” and expounds on the need for cultivating a form of passivity (“Polyphony,” section 25, or again, section 27: “Cadences is something given, far greater than my own mind or craft, intimate, other, and which compels my awe” 65). Lee remains within the Heideggerian framework that takes true thinking to be patient, loving attention toward all that is—a quiet listening, chary of the tendency to impose upon things and vigilant not to disturb the given order. I suggest, however, that perception is at once an act of violence and of charity, and Lee overlooks the savage dimension of perception, and the savage dimension of a work of art. I suggest that were Lee to consider the violent aspect of perception, that he might reject that traditional and (dare I say it?) hidebound notion of organic form that accords so poorly with his notions of *poiesis*.

In these remarks, I have offered a numbered detailed points on which my thoughts on the primordial (which is the term I use to refer to what I take to be the principal topic of Lee’s book) depart from Lee’s own conclusions, to indicate just how profound that topic really is—and how important it is to creative practice. I have not intended them to read as a critique of the limitations of Lee’s position. I consider Dennis Lee’s *Body Music* to be a signal contribution to poetics. In fact, I cannot think of any book on poetics ever published in English in Canada that can rival it in importance. It is also the most clear-headed and elegantly written work on book on the difficult issues of poetics I have ever read.