

**Steve McCaffery**

***Prior to Meaning: The Protosemantic and Poetics***

(Northwestern University Press, 2001)

**Seven Pages Missing: Volume One: Selected Texts 1969-1999**

(Coach House Books, 2000)

**North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986 (second edition)**

(Roof Books, 2000)

Among the Language poets, McCaffery is distinctive in that he clearly identifies with, and hopes to make a contribution to, a particular intellectual and philosophical tradition as well as a poetic one. McCaffery doesn't just utilize the concepts that have been handed to him from Bataille, Derrida, Barthes, Deleuze, Kristeva and Levinas (to grab a few of the most cited), but envisions his theoretical writing in discourse with theirs, implicated in the drama of "theory" as cultural utility or whipping-post. In the process, McCaffery addresses what has been something of a nagging issue in postmodern literary discourse, which is the question of why American postmodern critics rarely write about the types of poetics one would think are closest to their interests, namely experimental poetry from the objectivist/projective/language tradition, much of which seems almost cut-out to prove or refute their ideas. After all, Kristeva and Barthes were part of the Tel Quel group along with poets like Denis Roche and Marceline Pleyne and novelists like Philippe Sollers, and Jakobson ran with the Futurists. Postmodern theorists, even of the postcolonial flavor, don't seem to address literature of any sort directly, but this specific oversight serves to dispel any sort of conspiracy theory about what postmodernism has done to the humanities. The poets don't appear to have been in cahoots with the theorists, as the theorists seem to have simply ignored them.

For McCaffery, who has investigated radical poetry from several modernist traditions -- sound poetry (solo and with his group The Four Horsemen), concrete and lettrist poetry (the *Carnival* panels), "paragrammic" writing (based on an extension of the principles of the anagram), "new sentence"-ish writing (*The Black Debt*, which uses commas/fragments instead of periods/sentences), the nouveau roman (*Panopticon*), the poetics of Wittgenstein's aphorisms (*Evoba*), to name a few -- this lack of attention by the theorists has been a quiet blessing. *North of Intention*, his first book of critical writings, covers mostly Canadian writers, and gives poets like Fred Wah, Bill Bissett, Christopher Dewdney, and bpNichol (one of the Horsemen, and with whom he collaborated as the Toronto Research Group on a number of

investigations into "the book machine") a type of theoretical attention they may never get again. Bissett, for example, is better known in the States as a sort of performance poet, a bit "back to earth," certainly very weird and radical but otherwise tied to an intuitive, almost shamanistic and certainly erotic, poetics, but not conceptual. McCaffery's take is concerned entirely with the "libidinal flows" of Bissett's language, of how it seems the excess of an expansive, always-voiding bodily economy:

What Bissett is seeking is a new body: the body of the scriptive or scriptional which is not book, canvas or page, nor the anatomical body of flesh, but a libidinal body, a body without form and receptive to the formless forces of flow and intensity. It is this search that lends peculiar focus to Bissett's remarkable schizoid gesture: the division of flow between performance and publication: the body of the artist and the body of the book. For libido seeks the betweenness and immanence of these body-forms and moves as a flow among them; it is the only way to explain Bissett's drives to both excessive performance and publication. The search for a body between the bodies of Bissett and the Book, an inter-text, an inscription of intensities upon, yet ultimately among, the stage and the book. For Bissett, there is no scene of the text, simply the undifferentiated flow between scenes. (97)

McCaffery eventually links Bissett's "erotic economy" to the Marquis de Sade's but notes that, whereas Sade is tied to the "uncontaminated corridors of classical representation" (i.e. that his descriptions are "realistic"), Bissett "affirms excess at the very margins of inscription," even equating the dried ink with the trace of bodily fluids, thereby insisting upon the dissolution of the "epistemological horizon" of writing (in which writing escapes to become the object of discourse) and bringing about the "demolition of the word." In McCaffery's theoretical paradigms -- which often view language as pointillistic nodes of experience flying along Bergsonian fluxions, influenced merely in terms of shape and direction by personal agency -- Bissett is engaged in an experiment with writerly horizons, as one who threatens to render moot questions of subjectivity and objectivity with a rupture of the very distance descriptive writing might be predicated on. That is, text does not recount, like speech, what has been seen in the landscape, but is part of that landscape *even as* is being read and written.

*Prior to Meaning* differs from its predecessor in one major way: it deals significantly with several pre-modernist figures, and is mostly concerned with creating some sort linkages with these figures -- some of whom are incredibly obscure (and are recognizable from McCaffery and Jed Rasula's *Imagining Language* anthology from MIT) -- and postmodern theorists; Samuel Johnson and Wittgenstein share an essay, as do Derrida and the obscure trio of Joshua Steele, Peter Walkden Fogg, and Mercurius van Helmont. This is a truly

interesting idiosyncrasy of McCaffery's thinking; he is a bibliophile who is enamored of the many unforeseen ways the elements – authors, ideas, publications – in his library will find connections across centuries, animating a sort of virtual, rhizomically structured universe of conversations; this sense of relations is never arbitrary, and suggests affiliations with McCaffery's poetic works that are based on other authors, such as Stein and Mac Low, and his interest in works like Cage's *Writing through Finnegans Wake*, which also predicated on this sharing of the same, theologically-inflected universe. What is remarkable is that McCaffery never settles into an idea of "tradition" – like T.S. Eliot, for example, a theological thinker who believed works of the present day *influenced* classics of the past, and Harold Bloom, who describes a version of the same thing in *The Anxiety of Influence* – but keeps this universe expansive, permeable and re-centerable by the eccentric contribution.

Sade will reappear strongly in *Prior to Meaning*, as an entire essay is devoted to his relationship to "writing and modernity." Unlike most of the other essays in this new volume of criticism, the Sade essay approaches some sociological issues through the figure of the "libertine", escaping the seemingly recursive circuit of the interrelations of texts. McCaffery would probably not respond to Bourdieu's critique of the "scholastic" tradition in *Pascalian Mediations* -- that this "pure" thinking is impure by its very divorce from everyday realities -- as an anthropology of the everyday, the study of how cultural events operate in the world and are rendered impure by the plays of capital, and ethical pragmatism (ethics in response to singular "observable" instances are over a description of abstract ethical) are not components of his thought, as much as he might acknowledge "pragmatism" and contingency as rich linguistic concepts (in his essay on Wittgenstein). McCaffery is very interested in determining an "ethics" of the poetic text, and the final chapter of *Prior to Meaning*, dedicated to the thought of Levinas, attempts to elaborate this, but it is only in the Sade essay that strong terms such as "monstrous" appear, and where certain issues of politics -- Sade's republicanism, for example -- are related to writing. Social detail, and any of the "realism" that graced the cover of *In The American Tree* (in which McCaffery was not included), the mundane (as opposed to luminous and scholarly) products of the vicissitudes of Dame Fortune, is nearly not present in at all. What is there instead are often breathtaking, if somewhat citation-heavy, descriptions of how language operates subterraneously, beneath what normative syntax presents to us.

This sets McCaffery apart from some of his Language peers -- such as Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Lyn Hejinian, and Ron Silliman -- who seem to insist on language from "daily living" as the source of socially progressive texts. The pragmatism of the American poets finds a generative pool in the wealth of found texts that appear in the "real" world of language

(social detritus as source), while McCaffery seems to prefer this generative pool in the substructures of a single closed text (any text, perhaps), for example in its paragrammic or punning potential (he was highly inspired by Kristeva's early Tel Quel essay "Towards a Semiology of Paragrams").

The paragram (which in its rhetorical manifestation includes acrostics and anagrams) is a fundamental disposition in all combinatory systems of writing and contributes to phoneticism its partly transphenomenal character. Paragrams are what Nicholas Abraham terms figures of antisemantics, those aspects of language that escape all discourse and that commit writing to a vast, nonintentional reserve." (13)

A "non-intentional reserve" stands at the other end of a conception of language as being the cross-textual, heterological "tales of the tribes." McCaffery even explored, for a time, something he dubbed the "post-semiotic" poem, that which doesn't use words but nonetheless engaged the reader in readerly activities (several of these works, which seem whimsical and hardcore at the same time, are included in *Seven Pages Missing*). From a pragmatist's standpoint, the question is posed: can a post-semiotic poem really be of ideological value in an ethical system that relies, for its animation or accessibility, on observable social and political events, or will it always serve a conceptual purpose, a sort of ambient alterity that runs counter to dependencies on epistemological assurance? Do these works engage in the flow of the everyday, or are their flows – their ludic qualities, their libidinal exchanges -- merely cultural counters to the perceived stagnation of culturally sanctioned text as we know them?

What also sets him apart is his sense of progress through his thinking; only McCaffery of the Language poets, it seems, has made any effort to offer public correctives to prior aspects of his thought, as if he were a scientist developing a thesis and having to defend it. This is clear in many of his descriptive texts that accompany his early books (collected as appendices to *Seven Pages Missing*), but also in the following paragraph, from "Voice in Extremis," an essay that covers the history of sound poetry and ends by addressing the work of The Four Horsemen. He describes their performances as "paleotechnic," aimed at the creation of a breakdown between performer and auditor and toward the creation of temporary communities on the fly. But he asks:

Do we write off the paleotechnic as yet another failed utopia in poetry? The precise realization of a body-in-process unavoidably involves an absolute decommissioning of the body politic -- and a scream can never be a social contract. [...] Ernst Cassirer maintains propositional speech is unique to humans, configuring the world for us in permanent, stable forms "with fixed and constant qualities." As an interjectional poesis, the sound poem renounces this unique attribute. [...] This hesitant poetics of

negative presence faltered at its inability to specify the exact purpose of its energetic expulsion. (186)

McCaffery suggests, in this passage, a problem with the relationship between the "post-semiotic" and its relation to social aspirations, which is the lack of specificity the alternative text -- the text which engages the reader in the experience with alterity or that which cannot be assimilated into the self -- can provide when it is not engaged in "propositional speech." The ultimate chapter in *Prior to Meaning* describes a "Levinasian" poetics, in which he discusses literature that works along "Abrahamic" lines -- texts which don't "return" like Odysseus to an assimilation into the Same but remain unidirectional, always in the outside ("beyond interpretation," to use Susan Sontag's phrase). "The poem as gift or liturgy, as the Said of the Saying, goes to the other as a radical generosity without anticipated profit of return. As an ethical economy, this act of saying must be received by the other with ingratitude, a radical nonreciprocity whose necessity is explained by the fact that gratitude involves 'the return of movement to its origin'". This sort of gift (or "potlatch") economy is viewed by McCaffery as corrupting of the logic of capital (accumulation, exchange, accounting). McCaffery, thus, rather than describing the play of language with the indifference of a geologist studying lava flows, in fact credits much of the movements of language -- intentional or not -- with ethical implications that he understands as all-consuming.

Though McCaffery goes a long way in "civilizing Dada" (a term coined by the Scottish concrete poet Ian Hamilton Finlay, who chose a very different route for doing so), his case for an ethical dimension to his magnified readings of the subterranean life of letters can seem hermetic. There is an overwhelming confidence that having an "experience in language" of the sort in which he is interested engages one in an relationship that is -- specific or not -- a socially progressive interaction. Some may find this hard to accept, especially since avant-garde activity in the arts has become a type of experience that one can learn -- master, control the excesses of, consume -- which is to say incorporate into the system of competing economies within one's lifestyle. It is in these instances that the Bourdieuesque critique of the role of the arts (which is equally Bergsonian in its surrender to "flows," and is equally critical of epistemology) is important. The Levinasian poetic experience then becomes self-contained, losing much of its "rupturing" capacity -- at least, without the "monstrous" eroticism of a Sade or the "monstrous" generosity of the everyday of a John Cage at hand. This is why it is interesting that the project of Cage's that McCaffery writes about, the reading through *Finnegans Wake*, is concerned with a circuit between Cage's piece and its dedicated "source" -- the physics of one text sucking meaning from another. An ethical pragmatist might be more

concerned with the earlier mesostics based on his diaries, texts which engage with the problematics of "life" experiences, very "open" texts that didn't point to any known source text and did not project a scholastic ring. These were texts predicated on accidents whose source texts were accidents themselves, radically outside the theologically encoded confines of a closed circuit of communicating (often culturally sanctioned) texts.

In the present decade, when the spectacle of digital, globalized exchange, in which geography itself has ceased to have a determining factor and all architectures are virtual, even social ones -- the temporary platform of the propositional, the pragmatic, the intentional, even the "transparent" and waxing lyrical, have a certain capital of their own that place their own bandages on the potlatch nature of the "new economy," in which capital is capital to burn. But even if McCaffery is not interested in this facet -- which may seem "retro" to him as it does to many Language poets -- his importance for poetry now is probably greater than most of his peers for one reason, and that is with the rise of web poetics.

Web poetry -- or "cyberpoetry" -- comes in several flavors, such as the animated graphic poem (usually done in Flash), the networked text (relying on personally programmed "spiders" that seek out and manipulate text on the fly), hypertext (linked "lexia"), artificial intelligence programs (Rapter), and moos and muds; its practitioners include John Cayley, mez, Kenneth Goldsmith, Loss Glazier, Darren Wershler-Henry, Jennifer Ley, and Patrick Herron among many others (these are mostly those who might name themselves "poets"; many text artists don't). For all the theory that has been produced to describe this phenomenon, however, little of it seems to go beyond the terms explored by McCaffery in *North of Intention, Prior to Meaning*, and his TRG work with bpNichol (collected in the book *Rational Geomancy*). Poetic works, much of which is collected in *Seven Pages Missing*, like *Panopticon* (a "graphic novel" of sorts about the hunt for Pauline Brain), "Lastworda" (a "text-dump" piece of sorts that moves, word by word, back in time), *Evoba* (a poly-genred romp through the thought of Wittgenstein), and his graphic poems including *Carnival* -- a concrete poem of Wagnerian proportions -- anticipate many facets of web poetry, sending the horizons wide for anyone who would choose to explore where they end. McCaffery himself seems to have only marginal interest in the use of computers and poetry -- the cover of *Seven Pages Missing* is an image of an IBM Selectric type ball, bragging of his attachment to the materiality of text -- which seems strangely reminiscent of Marshall MacLuhan's hostility toward media culture. But these three volumes (along with the anthology of deviant linguistic practices *Imagining Language* and the writings on the "book machine" in *Rational Geomancy*), taken together, are a cornerstone for a library on digital poetics. They are probably the most advanced thinking that has been done on

how language operates “non-intentionally” yet poetically, and shed light on the practices of much of the “progressive” work being done in cyberpoetry today, evening making much of it seem old-fashioned or naive. While McCaffery's prose style can be daunting, the combination of the work and theory engages the "reader" in a triologic project -- McCaffery poet, McCaffery theorist, and reader -- of thinking that is unavailable elsewhere.