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# Measures *of* Astonishment

POETS ON POETRY

*presented by the League of Canadian Poets*

University of Regina Press

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*To Jennifer Boire and Jacques Nolin—*
*whose generous support and vision turned*
*our Anne Szumigalski Lecture Series*
*from a wonderful idea to a respected annual tradition.*

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# Preface

GLEN SORESTAD

ANNE SZUMIGALSKI CLAIMED THAT AS A VERY YOUNG GIRL she knew that she was going to be a poet, that it was to be her goal in life and, indeed, that even at an early age she knew that she *was* a poet. By the time of her death in 1999, Anne Szumigalski was one of Canada's most widely respected poets, a Governor General's Award winner, an active force in the Saskatchewan and Manitoba writing communities, a strong influence on and a tireless mentor for a great many writers. Her home in Saskatoon became literally a poetic drop-in centre. Szumigalski, as one of the founders of the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild, was a strong champion of writing organizations and was also a long-time member of the League of Canadian Poets. How fitting then that the League should choose to name after Anne Szumigalski its inaugural lecture series by Canadian poets about the art and craft of poetry by Canadian poets, the Anne Szumigalski Lecture Series. This was done as a lasting recognition of the stature that Szumigalski held as a poet among her colleagues across the country.

Each of the lectures was initially given as an address to a poetry-friendly audience; however, the idea soon emerged of having the entire series to date appear in print in a single volume. It seemed the logical next step towards giving these valuable insights and reflections the

largest audience possible. Only one of the lectures does not appear in this volume: Dionne Brand was the second Szumigalski lecturer and apparently she gave her well-received address from a series of note cards and never did write a complete address that could later be published.

The first of the Anne Szumigalski Lectures was given in 2002 by Tim Lilburn to an enthusiastic audience of members of the League and guests in Saskatoon. Lilburn reminded us all that poetry "is the theatre of feeling" and that "poems are an amorous pull, a being in love, that plush, mine-shafty chaos, and sometimes this being in love feels like a sickness." Lilburn, with his lecture, got the series off to a rousing start and established the tone of lectures to follow. Since every poet views poetry through his or her own unique lens, Lilburn, by presenting *his* distinctive view of his art and craft, paved the way for successive poets to offer their own perspectives on poetry. So the lectures to follow are as individual in their approach as the poets who delivered them. They range in style from a more formal academic approach to a more casual and deeply personal approach. But what they all share and what readers will soon discover as they read the voices included here is that all of them deeply love the "sullen art" of which they have become practitioners and that all of them are also very deeply committed to poetry and its craft.

The Lilburn lecture was financed by the Saskatchewan Arts Board to honour Szumigalski's passing the previous year. This lecture was so well-received that the League determined to find a way to make the lecture an annual event, part of the gala evening at its yearly festival. Thanks to a generous donation from League member Jennifer Boire and her husband, Jacques Nolin, the Anne Szumigalski Lecture Series became a reality, with its second lecture delivered by Dionne Brand.

George Elliott Clarke reflected on how we must be very careful in our judgment of the true worth of a poet's work, especially poets who are part of an entirely different cultural milieu, warning his fellow poets that "the world is perverse in its bestowal of recognition and non-recognition," and that we all harbour misconceptions regarding popular culture, misconceptions that can obstruct our own understanding and appreciation of some poets. Margaret Atwood took a broad perspective of humanity and reminded us that "a society

without poetry and the other arts would have broken its mirror and cut out its heart." She saw poetry as an "uttering, or outering of the human imagination."

Mark Abley, who grew up in Saskatoon and who knew Szumigalski well, having been one of those young writers who regularly visited her home and who was influenced by her, speculated that had Szumigalski been forced to study poetry in school the way so many Canadians have experienced it, she would not "have loved poetry so fervently." Abley called upon his fellow poets to "not be afraid to demonstrate the energy of language and the sterling power of the human imagination." Both the energy of language and the human imagination are recurrent motifs throughout the lectures. Another common motif when poets discuss poetry is sleep and dreams; Anne Carson subtitled her address "A Praise of Sleep" and she delivered to her audience a classical and most erudite treatment of sleep, or as she put it, "to burrow like a mole in different ways of reading sleep and different readers of sleep."

Don McKay introduced his audience to the concept of "geopoetry," where he thought materialism and mysticism "finally come together, have a conversation in which each hearkens to the other, then go out for a drink." McKay reminded us that poetry is always subversive and political because it turns the tool of language against itself. Marilyn Bowering spoke of the form and nature of poetry making connections and of how each poet finds shapes and relationships that will be recognized as part of that poet's voice. Anne Simpson talked of how poetry begins in a concern for what is, but that it usually proceeds beyond to the world of the possible. Robert Currie discussed the role chance had played in his life and the lives of other poets, then spoke of what kept them coming back to poetry once they had begun to write; he felt it was the actual joy of working on a poem that brings us back again and again. A. F. Moritz used the image of the garden for the poem and told us, "It is a human beauty, part of a human garden, one that we carry within and manifest in poems." Lillian Allen presented an impassioned insight into the origins and nature of dub poetry in North America, its considerable contribution to the development and success of spoken word poetry from the 1970s to the present and its many contributions to poetry in general. By telling us the story of his aunt,

Gregory Scofield illustrated the sheer power of storytelling in First Nations cultures and revealed how his own poetry is a natural result of this need and this desire to create and to share in the forms of poems those stories, past and present, that must not be forgotten.

Each Szumigalski lecturer has brought something of his or her uniqueness as a person and as a poet to the act of sharing his or her thoughts about poetry. Reading this series of presentations will give any lover of language and poetry an amazingly diverse number of ways to view what poetry is, what it does and why it matters to us all.

# Acknowledgements

"No one grows rich by writing poetry, but that wonderful struggle to write the poem does enrich our lives," Robert Currie said during his 2012 Anne Szumigalski Lecture in Saskatoon. And every year, since the inception of the lecture series in 2002, members of the League of Canadian Poets have had our lives enriched during our annual Poetry Festival and Conference by brilliant poets sharing their wisdom about, and passion for, the art of poetry during the eloquent delivery of the annual Anne Szumigalski Lecture. The League of Canadian Poets is deeply grateful for the exuberance and hard work of all of our members who worked collaboratively to create and maintain the Anne Szumigalski Lecture Series and to publish this rich anthology.

Dave Margoshes championed the idea of the League having its own lecture series, in the manner of the Writers' Union of Canada with its Margaret Laurence Lectures. Paul Wilson suggested that our series be named after renowned Saskatchewan poet Anne Szumigalski.

Jennifer Boire and Jacques Nolin continue to be our dedicated financial sponsors for the lecture series. None of this would have come to fruition without their constant and much-appreciated support.

Andris Taskans, editor-in-chief of *Prairie Fire*, should be singled out for his splendid support of the Anne Szumigalski Lectures by seeing them into print each year, and for sweetening the compensation for the Lectures.

All the lecturers featured in this anthology have foregone any compensation for their work, and therefore all royalties shall go to the League of Canadian Poets to help continue to fund our various initiatives, including future lectures. Thank you to Gregory Scofield, Lillian Allen, A. F. Moritz, Robert Currie, Glen Sorestad, Anne Simpson, Marilyn Bowering, Don McKay, Mark Abley, Margaret Atwood, George Elliott Clarke, Anne Carson, and Tim Lilburn for inspiring us each year with your beautiful, thoughtful lectures, and for sharing your work in these pages.

The lecture anthology committee included Mary Ellen Csamer, Glen Sorestad, and Jenna Butler, who cheerfully dreamed, schemed, compiled, proofread, lobbied, and badgered despite their busy schedules, and finally found a home for our manuscript.

We are delighted that Bruce Walsh and Dave McLennan at the University of Regina Press were so enthusiastic about becoming that home, and appreciate the diligent editorial work of Donna Grant.

As always, the League is grateful for the continued support of the Canada Council for the Arts, as well as for the commitment and ingenuity of our staff, especially Joanna Poblocka and Ingel Madrus, who gamely helped the committee with the cat-herding involved in turning thirteen lectures into a cohesive submission for a publisher.

*Dymphny Dronyk, Past President, League of Canadian Poets*

# Poetry's Practice of Philosophy

TIM LILBURN

*Anne Szumigalski Lecture • Saskatoon, Saskatchewan • June 8, 2002*

> How dear to her is the journey of the mind,
> flying from dwelling to dwelling,
>
> Her feet scraping the tops of the
> forest trees as she floats on by,
>
> Exchanging one language for another,
> never quite sure of her bearings,
> counting the chimneys on unfamiliar roofs.
>
> —Anne Szumigalski, "Theirs Is the Song"

SOME WOULD SAY ANNE SZUMIGALSKI SAW IT WRONG: THE life of the mind simply is not livable in the poem. And some of those saying this would be poets. The poem is the theatre of feeling; the poem is the pool of light where passion stands and sings its termagant songs. They might concede that intuition could sit snug and happy in the poem, imagining this as a sort of feral knowing, somatic, far closer

to empathy than dialectic. So not thinking, never thinking: the poem is where you go for haven from the tyranny of abstraction. The people who say this might be surprised to find they had what looked like allies among the philosophers, who would declare that poetry is subjectivity to its very bottom. But they shouldn't be fooled by this appearance of alliance: there will be no free meals for them from this source. Philosophy doesn't love the poem construed as the house of subjectivity: it holds it in the same contempt as it holds metaphysics, while recognizing its utility: here is the isolation ward of hysteria.

While philosophers may have such private views of poetry, they almost never have gone on record with them. I can think of two exceptions to this near total silence. Martin Heidegger, of course, seems to refuse the norm, offering poets priestly status in the temple of being, but the even more famous example is Plato's expulsion of the poets from kalipolis, the beautiful city, the city of philosophy. I think we misunderstand these two philosophical utterances on poetry, Heidegger's and Plato's, well-known though they may be; and I further think that by unravelling these misunderstandings, especially the one concerning Plato, we'll come to a fresh comprehension of poetry that will show it not antipodal to philosophy, but sitting alone in front of philosophy's hearth, tending the fire.

Poetry and philosophy. I can imagine few prominent, mainstream philosophers who seriously think *Leaves of Grass, Lyrical Ballads,* or even the *Divine Comedy*—to say nothing of *Life Studies* or *The Beauty of the Weapons*—are philosophical books, places where you might look for light into the darkness philosophy explores. In fact, to so believe is to accept marginal status in the world of professional philosophy. It is now far from obvious that poetry, religion and philosophy are linked in any way—their split is virtually an article of faith: one way of thinking of the last four hundred years of European thought is to see it as a focussed effort to detach these three endeavours, and to denigrate two of them, poetry and religion. But Homer didn't see things this way, nor did the person or persons who wrote the long poem of the descent of the goddess Inanna to the underworld, nor did Haida poets Ghandl and Skaay—in the work of all of these, the three undertakings go on

simultaneously; indeed, they make a single doing powering the poetry. I think Ghandl and the others were right: poetry, philosophy, religion come from and return to the same place in the psyche: contemplative attention.

Listen now, for a moment, to Julian of Norwich on prayer. This is from some middle chapters in her *Revelations of Divine Love*. The religious language may be a shock to the ear, but try to hear the form of what she says, try to take in with the seeing ear its erotic shape.

> For prayer is the means by which we rightly understand the fullness of joy that is coming to us: it is true longing and sure trust too. Lack of the happiness which is our natural lot makes us long for it. Real understanding, love, and the recollection of our Saviour enables us to trust. Our Lord sees us constantly at work at these two things. It is no more than our duty, and no less than his goodness would assign to us. It is up to us to do our part with diligence, yet when we have done it, it will seem to us that we have done nothing . . .

> But when our Lord in his courtesy and grace shows himself to our soul we have what we desire. Then we care no longer about praying for anything, for our whole strength and aim is set on beholding. This is prayer, high and ineffable, in my eyes. The whole reason we pray is summed up in the sight and vision of him to whom we pray. Wondering, enjoying, worshipping, fearing . . . and all done with such sweetness . . . .

So, prayer as desire, as, more specifically, erotic passivity, a doing nothing with implacable resolve, the what-is-not-the-self stippling in. Waiting, and something coming into the waiting that is not molded by anything, not even anticipation. Here is the doppelgänger of the poem that is mere obedience to what presses the tongue, in which one writes best by doing the least with a strenuous, an elegant, commitment.

Let me stray back to Plato. I'd been saying that we don't really understand what he says in the *Republic* about poetry. We read it usually, as Iris Murdoch did, as sharp-toothed antipathy between Plato's cerebral puritanism and sensuality of all kinds, poetry's in particular. We're wrong, I think, to come at it this way. Another reading of what's going on in the *Republic* around poetry shows that poetry and philosophy are one.

Bear with me; let's walk down the basement steps of the dialogue into the cavern of the book; it's badly lit with a poor fire; you smell mouse shit and wax from guttered candles as you dip your head and enter. It is, of course, night. People are talking; the room floats on a living wave of talk; the talk is sometimes rhythmic, sometimes jerky, like the movements of a large, possibly dangerous, animal. There are, say, ten people in the room: some are in love with one another, some soon could be in love. Socrates, Plato's teacher is here, so is Glaucon, Plato's brother. They're in a room in a seaport not far from Athens—the rotting sexual smell of the sea enters and falls apart around them. The air, if we could see it, would be darkly green, slowly growing. Socrates and Glaucon have just taken in a religious festival, horses ridden hard on the beach by men carrying fire; the room twitches with noumenal energy. Dionysus is on patrol here; be careful, keep your eyes open.

Glaucon is the man of the hour; the talk all eventually flows toward him. He's an interesting specimen: he likes disputation and has a taste for political grandeur—if he were alive today he perhaps would have a job in the Bush White House; he's imperial, eristic; he loves war. His name might be David Frum. He's a rather dangerous personality: charming, ruthless, charmed by his own limitations. He got all of this from poetry. Poetry's ruined him: the erotic deformity of his soul comes from an entranced reading of a particular poem, the *Iliad* of Homer—the giddy ferocity of the assault has stained him—and when Socrates hammers away at poetry in Book III and later in the dialogue, he's trying to free him from this book and the fascism it's nudging him into. Suppose he succeeds—he doesn't, but suppose he does—and Glaucon suddenly feels the ax-cleave of shame for his political hubris, what's left for him? Well, aside from mathematics and astronomy, there's that other book, about one of the fighters at Troy

and his return home. In the ruin, the kenosis, the romance with the celestial lover, the descent to the dead, the apokatastasis found in the *Odyssey,* Glaucon would read of the shamanic path of Odysseus and the pattern of philosophy, and he might even internalize and begin to enact this pattern. His eros then would unbend.

Just what is philosophy? I'm not that great a fool that I would attempt to provide a full answer to this question. But I can chatter away for a while about what it roughly is in the *Republic*: there, philosophy is a particular unfolding of desire: a sorrow awakens eros in the non-desiring man; a lavish self-emptying goes on; there are tears, a perpetual disposition to tears; there is the travel below the ground and a final homegoing. A turning around of the soul, as Socrates puts it, entirely erotic, entirely resisted, entirely desired, utterly refusable; it is a turning of the soul so that it finds itself loving the things that return it to itself. The work of philosophy here is a close version of the ceremonial work of Odysseus—intensely private, yet altruistic; psychic, political. This is what is advertised as philosophy in the dialogue; no one really takes it up there, but it's on view in the shop window. It is a journey replicated in foundational poems from many places, as I've said—"The Descent of Inanna," Skaay's "The One They Hand Along"—and it's reproduced, in the ancient and medieval world, in contemplative philosophy in dialogue after dialogue, and in tract on mystical theology after tract on mystical theology.

This same sort of erotic unfolding happens in certain sorts of contemporary poems too—not necessarily long poems either, though it doesn't fear length. The work is partly about the long walk of unsatisfiable longing—epektasis, the endlessness of desire, as Gregory of Nyssa called it. The poetics of the poem I most admire and which I wish to write are really a philosophical therapeutics, an ascesis.

I've said it comes down to contemplative attention: this is what's at philosophy's heart, at the heart of poetry, the centre of religion. Philosophy, of course, doesn't do this sort of thing any more, and religion, for the most part, is transfixed by cosmology and television. Poetry alone, as I've said, still visits the old fire site. But what is contemplative

attention? It is what happens to you when you are knocked to the ground by some astonishment. You go very still at some point in yourself and become entirely eye. What can do this to us, hold the attention in such a way that the Odyssean transformations are required, quickened, that the interior travel—the tears, the descent—begins? Lovers, sex, landscapes, God (I think of Pier Giorgio Di Cicco's new work), great horror (I think of the work of Peter Dale Scott, especially *Coming to Jakarta* and *Minding the Darkness*). And when you look hard at such things (at political horror, at sex, at God)—as you must if you truly see them—your life comes apart, just as it begins to drift together. You are entering the cloud. And not only do you break up, but language begins to do so as well. It becomes besotted like you, woundedly drunk.

Here are two sections from a long poem called "Kill-site." The man you will meet in the first section, Henry Kelsey, was the first European on the plains. He took a two-year walk in the last decade of the seventeenth century from Hudson Bay that brought him as far west as the Touchwood Hills, about 250 kilometres east of Saskatoon.

**Kill-site**

The animal dreamed of me,
a brown gust separating above its head;
this was below snowhumps on the creek,
ice fog up the towers along
the valley sides, blood on the snow,
estrus marks, the water frozen a yard down.

When Henry Kelsey died or left
Hudson Bay, there's a rumour he continued
        walking under the ground
in the highest part of his voice, down the west hip
        of the Porcupine Hills,
a pythagorean thrum in his eyes.
Because all this was a new music, uncooked ratio,
        a machine of smoke.

And he thought *Let the will sleep here 400 years.*
*Let the will sleep here 400 years.*
Only some song would turn the lock.
He was looking for the deeper Crees, Naywattame, the Poets,
people sleeping
along the rock ledges behind their eyes, someone to put something
in his mouth.

And because he was under the ground, everything came to him—he saw a face of wheat, a face
of mineral beam, nipples of stones, a face
of winter in things, face of what is
at the back, the watery, the alto part of the mind,
showing through skin.
(It rose to the skin
for its hump to be seen, then moved back into the trees.)
Only a song would turn the lock.
He kept walking, wanting and fearing
the freezing of rivers.

---

Sandhills in a light, likely-daylong rain, looking off
to the left, grass that's not going anywhere, September—everything walks
toward you; it undresses and comes
toward you with its small bright hands
and the downwind smell of your father's mind
and his shoulders in the early summer of 1964,
he's working two jobs, post office, moving company; right
now he's not wearing a shirt, a hundred and forty-five pounds,
but still less under the name of his lower-in-the-throat citizenship,
where he's not saying a thing, living in a cave two
thirds up a cliff line, how
did he get there, swallows heaving in front of his face, the hole
trench-shovelled into clay sides lifting over the Milk River, north of
the Sweetgrass Hills, cattle clouding off infinitely

to the east, feathers
and bones hung from string at the mouth of the cave,
pale green feathers smooth out long and speechless from his tailbone.
Things climb out of the elms of their names and themselves
and they come forward, moving their tattoed, Fulani hands.
They smell of your father's voice, his
one
black
suit.

Martin Heidegger said ontology was first philosophy; all thinking grew from an account of Being. Emmanual Levinas, his student, sensing a threatening Hitlerian inflation in the tone of this project, nearly losing a wife and daughter in the Holocaust, losing relatives, said no, no, ethics was the originary thinking: everything grows from the dumfounding before the other; a profound courtesy is the residue of this astonishment. I have an idea for a third possibility—erotics, mystical theology, as first philosophy. I suggest this standing before the spectacle of the failure of dogmatic theology, the mammoth racial arrogance it has underwritten, the hubris of a particular culture. What is elemental, quintessentially desirable, is beyond knowing, speech—to presume to know is to begin a colonization of the feral world, to pay the world the great compliment of likening it to yourself. Who can say the large thing which desire wants, wants, wants? But we can watch eros as it cranes for it, see the poses it takes in this reaching: these shapes are adequate ideograms for what cannot be said, and reading them doesn't ossify behaviour, but builds it, plucks it.

I'll come right out and say it, the thing that roils beneath all this attempt at explanation: poems are an amorous pull, a being in love, that plush, mine-shafty chaos, and sometimes this being-in-love feels like a sickness. So poetics is erotics, is mystical theology. Where's the poet in this? He's keen and useless; he's passive, ready for anything; he's ignorant and busy with the heavy labour of opening, which is, in part, a refusing, a divesting.

A word of caution. One given over to eros's doings likely will become what those who followed Socrates called atopos; that is, unlike,

discreditable, laughable, possibly feared, significantly weird—her eye is caught helplessly by, sequestered by, the out-of-range. But then this liminality draws a certain darkness, slant, commodiousness into the poem that is otherwise not available to writing.

In Heidegger, or at least in the essay "The Origin of the Work of Art," the poet is the passageway through which the world speaks its truth, the poet is the single priest of Being. If the heroism of high Romanticism, the heroism of the Heideggerian poet, strikes you as implausible; if the narcissism of this figure seems repellant, what can you think happens as the poem appears? The way I see it, the poem is far more than the writing of it, and the best language to talk about this far-more comes from contemplative philosophy or ascetical theology. You fall apart before some arresting thing, some terrible beauty, and you empty. If you stay low, this thing may come toward you like an animal from the forest. This permeability before astonishing otherness, and what this astonishment makes you do, is also philosophy. Such language—the language of rapture, of psychagoguery—has no standing, though, in modern philosophy, as I've said throughout this talk; it has not had for many, many years. It appears there as delusion, the betrayal of the four-century, pan-cultural project of reason which has brought us democracy, the MRI machine and more television than you can shake a stick at. Poetry conceived this way, as contemplative attention and availability—a life given to this—seems a dangerous backsliding in relation to this project. Poetry isn't marginal; it must be made marginal: it speaks heterodoxy—just by the way it goes about its business. Good for it.

I want to return, finally, to Anne Szumigalski. Here is the whole of the third section of "Theirs Is the Song."

> How dear to her is the journey of the mind,
> flying from dwelling to dwelling,
>
> Her feet scraping the tops of the
> forest trees as she floats on by,

Exchanging one language for another,
never quite sure of her bearings,
counting the chimneys on unfamiliar roofs.

One day she hopes to understand progression
how it has no end and no beginning,
how nothing precedes or succeeds,
how time is a disc that wobbles
as it spins.

The melody is an old one
played again and again.
All night she's aware that it scuttles
over the pilllows like a louse on a holiday.

Waking she hears it emerge from her nose,
a hum like paperwasps.

"But that's just the tune," she says,
"tomorrow on my way I'll write the words."

How lucky we were to have Anne Szumigalski's mind, her eye, with us for a while. Her life was a rare visitation, one of the few things we can hold up to someone who might step from the horror Europe has inflicted on the New World, who might step from capitalism's eating of the planet and demand an accounting, one of the few things we might be able to present to a possible survivor and say, here, this was done well.