From Wit to Plunder in a Time of War
Gregory Betts

Amatoritsero Ede's response[1] to the appropriative textual method of composition I call plunderverse – which is really just an exaggerated form of cento – indicates that he is much less concerned with the possibilities of the plunderverse method, or of what it might uncover, create, or insinuate, than he is concerned with its marked deviation from his preferred aesthetics. To clarify the difference, he begins his essay by dividing poetry into two tidy camps: poetry concerned with "'instrumentality and function' in matters of poetic expression" in defiant opposition to "the prosaic or rabid experimentation in contemporary poetics." Though it might seem contradictory to critique a textual *method* like plunderverse for lacking *instrumentality*, Ede fears that the form functions to deliberately equivocate, or rather prevaricate, when it should approximate. The revelation of linguistic ambiguity undermines the doctrine of reason that underpins Western society and literature. Undermining this underpinning, he cautions, emboldens our enemies. It is worth remembering that instability is on the same page of the dictionary as insurgency.

Given his defence of the reflective properties of language, and its connection to the "universal truths" that shape Western ideology, it is little surprise that Ede's first stop on his rhetorical rollercoaster ride is the British variant of the Augustan Age, the 17th and 18th century moment when reason was similarly felt to be threatened by the language of poets. The anarchy of form was at the time embodied in the epigram, a *gateway* poetic device of snappy, nippy playfulness that quickly led users from elevated aphorism to degenerate "puns and conceits" – the palest manifestations of false wit. Genuine English poetry, in contrast, "cultivated speech and 'universal truths' and [was] a part of the education of young men of class." He says nothing, of course, of Shakespeare's mastery of the quibble.

Evidently, connecting contemporary experimentalists with The Bard's humour was not Ede's intent. More to his point, the vilest forms of false wit of the Augustan Age have degraded yet another devolutionary notch to arrive at contemporary deconstructive strategies of textual engagement. Ede complains of the loss of the "organic unity within the poem," a loss that plunderverse is said to signify. It is a surprising way to begin and introduce his concern with plunderverse – and strange to the point that it raises questions of his understanding of the method. Plunderverse is a technique much like clipping a garden hedge into the shape of an exotic zoo animal. It uses a pre-existing "organic unity" to create the possibility of the illusion of a second self-contained "unity." It is less concerned with deconstructive acts against the source texts than it is concerned with attempting a constructive homographic writing. As in the garden, few ever actually believe that the bush is a baboon, but most are able to see both the original organic object and the organic unity of the illusion. This illusionism, to my mind, creating impressions through artifice, is a fundamental function of art – and the very reason Plato thought to

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[1] http://www.sentinelpoetry.org.uk/0706/index_files/page0002.htm

ban the poets from his Utopia in the first place. Plunderverse, in keeping the original text conscious while confronting a buried new creation, merely accentuates the process through which literature occurs: a cycle that Harold Bloom once likened to a series of perpetual shifts of a pre-existing order. Plunderverse evokes an ironic space built in between both poems – an ironic textual architecture that draws attention to the tools by which literary illusions are created – precisely what Ede would like readers to ignore and writers to bury inside the illusion of the text.

Ede returns to the prurient epigraph and finds his first direct target in my essay in a four-word bilingual poem by bpNichol that I offer as a rich demonstration of the minimalist form.

Catching Frogs

jar din

-- bpNichol

The short poem presents an echoing web of cultural and linguistic resonances – in just four words, a sum that includes the two-word title. For me, the poem demonstrates the power of tropic language, language that turns in upon itself and as if touched by magic, crumbles into a fragmentary beauty – like a face or a flag built of fireworks, tangible and illusory at the same moment. Like Ede's faith in universal truths, however, his criticism of my praise and bpNichol's bilingual poem highlights an entrenched cultural determinism. He says, and note the colonialist presumptions built into the quote, that "It would have served the poet's purpose better to construct the line such that the brevity is retained but not at the expense of the general reader." The general reader in this case, of course, being those English readers who have no wish or desire to be reminded of the non-English world – a fault he calls the "cultural opacity" of its Canadian maker. Ede, while grudgingly admitting the "brilliant ploy" of the poem, demands footnotes be appended to elucidate its four words before the poem can be said to work. The criticism is generously offered, but you will forgive me for taking pleasure in such an unusual and unlikely denigration – that the poem, that anything, is too shaped by its Canadian cultural context to be understood by a general reader.

Beyond such a fleeting affirmation of Canada's cultural independence – and by a Brit, no less (if not in nationality, in the orientation of his cultural chauvinism) – the appeal to denotative fixity in the form of footnotes highlights the assumptions upon which Ede's critique of plunderverse is based. For him, meaning in language is "delimited by rules of communication" thus negating any "structuralist fallacy of eternal arbitrariness." For Ede, any literary form that functions with fragmentation, or faltering logic, or fantasy, or formal self-awareness is fraught with the fallacy of falsity. He decries the pun, ridicules the lipogram, and declares plunderverse the extreme manifestation of Augustan literary narcissism. Such devices draw attention to the mechanisms by which writing, indeed language, presume to function. They question the structure of the system of human knowledge – a structure Ede believes has been sound since Shakespeare, our champion

punster. But for Ede, humans know, can know, and can express universal truths that exist and can be shared across cultural and linguistic divides. The mysteries of the world recoil before the perfection of the human mind. This sense of certainty, this faith that there are no mysteries, is the conviction that the avant-garde, and in its own way plunderverse, has consistently tried to draw into question. To do so, to threaten one's own store of knowledge and illusion, is a profoundly humbling experience. As the French Surrealist Jean Cocteau once wrote, "It is a serious error to take conventionalism for a kind of humility. God will not stand for any kind of lukewarmness … Heaven would shock the Earth … Our crusade will be to shock out of love." But Ede, yet another wizard behind the curtain of language, resents such an eruptive call. The mere act of looking at the instabilities of language, he decries, makes the language unstable.

The implications of introducing this instability into the world are not insignificant. In a remarkable but all too familiar twist in his essay, Ede points the mighty finger of blame upon the avant-garde investigations of the subjectivities of language for the general malaise in the world at present. Such enquiries, he decries, in "an age of war" not only initiates "cultural decay" but gives comfort to the enemy by allowing political speech writers to create such ambiguous but effective propaganda as the phrase "the Axis of Evil" – which he offers as a damning example. Though it was certainly not my intention with the Ontario small-press publication of my plunderverse manifesto to cause or contribute to the invasion of Iraq, I am relieved to note that Ede was not aware that the term "Axis of Evil" was coined by speechwriter David Frum, born in mine and bpNichol's hometown of Toronto. Had he known this unambiguous fact, surely the chains of the conspiracy would have been wrapped inescapably tight. The Canadian avant-garde scheme to oust Saddam Hussein through nefarious language games and distorted rhetoric are cleanly met and exposed in Ede's own rhetoric-free exposition of world politics: unacknowledged legislators no more!

To return to his more grounded speculations, Ede's binary of "functional" poetries in opposition to "experimental" poetries is deeply unsatisfying on many levels. First and foremost, the distinction is false: all poetry, all ink that has been shaped into language, is functional, regardless of how banal or personal or physical or obscure or even deliberately obtuse that function may be, just as all can be said to be experimental in trying, however tepidly or naively (including even exact repetition as Borges proved in his brilliant story "Pierre Menard," the second author of *Quixote*), to effect novelty. Furthermore, writings he calls "experimental" – such as plunderverse – all emerge from and alter preceding literary forms in a way comparable to that of non-"experimental" forms of confessional, lyrical, and other kinds of reflective and mimetic verse. The terms of his distinction become almost instantly meaningless. I hasten to add that plunderverse is intimately based upon a literary form, the cento, that predates Shakespeare by more than a millennium, and one that was once used by the fledgling Christian Church to claim the poetry of Homer and Virgil for their own movement – by extracting the overtly pagan references. So what is now considered dangerously "experimental" by Ede was at a different point in time considered extremely conservative, in the literal (not the political) sense.

But Ede's linguistic assumption, that language is sufficiently "delimited by rules of communication," is worth testing. Almost one hundred years ago, Ede's proto-theory of linguistics was contested by Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein in his masterpiece *Tractatus Logico-Philosphicus*, wherein he declared that "The name means the object. The object is its meaning" (3.203). Like Ede, Wittgenstein's nomenclaturist theory accepted no dislocation between word and world; the sign may be arbitrary, but the concept, the thought, remains fixed and attached to the thing through language. The problem was that Wittgenstein found significant ambiguities in the language of the world, especially in the language of philosophy. *Tractatus Logico-Philosphicus* was the only work Wittgenstein published in his lifetime, and in it he sought to sharpen the rules of language so as to overcome these misunderstandings in communication – linguistic shiftiness be damned. His posthumously published lectures prove, however, that he grew weary of this kind of thinking. As he himself came to admit, "At the root of all this there was a false and idealized picture of the use of language"[2]. There are many ideas, he realized, that only exist within a system of language. The number two, for instance, has no objective correlative, or in his vocabulary no "ostensive definition"[3]. Furthermore, he realized, meaning and understanding are less attached to the world than they are to the rules of the linguistic system. He compares, for instance, the ability to use the word "yellow" in the proper context to the ability to use the king piece in chess properly. We operate within the parameters of the rules, the grammar, of the system without recognizing the social and discursive nature of such a "language-game." For Wittgenstein, and for those interested in the world beyond the warping influence of the human perspective, this limitation poses an important problem.

For those not interested in the world outside of the warping influence of the human perspective, of course, this realization was deeply annoying. Not only did it undermine the positivistic core of liberal humanism, but it revealed a significant Western failure to question the basis upon which conventional assumptions become – linguistically at least – true. In literature, this easily translates into testing the traditions and conventions upon which aesthetic judgements are based. And though linguistic playfulness and experimentation long predate Wittgenstein's contribution, his idea of the "language game" with its rules that Ede accepts without question is, in fact, an urgent call for more and not less awareness of what we are saying and doing when we speak or write.

bpNichol worked from Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy, and often parodied the insistent focus on functional utility in art and science, especially through his engagement with Alfred Jarry's "Pataphysics. Nichol, however, also recognized that his work remained within a closed network of value. As he once playfully wrote, "all that signifies can be sold." Nichol took the idea of the language game as a means by which to test and reveal the construction of authority, of truth, as a self-contained and self-affirming system. The language game was one of his principal tools in questioning this authority. Rather than creating the conditions ripe for political manipulation, language games are in

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[2]   "The Rejection of Logical Atomis." *The Wittgenstein Reader.* 1994. Ed. Anthony Kenny. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. 31-45. 38.

[3]   "Meaning and Understanding." *The Wittgenstein Reader.* 1994. Ed. Anthony Kenny. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. 70-83. 75, *passim*.

fact a means by which authority can be questioned. For as Wittgenstein once said, "Lying is a language-game that needs to be learned like any other one"[4]. Despite Ede's contention, better illusionism in and through language does nothing to question or reveal political manipulation, it merely shifts one complex illustration for another. Language games, in contrast, poke holes in the canvas – creating a pattern on the surface that opens art to the world outside the system. Plunderverse, in this way, is not a conventional "theft" of another artist's work – it is an acknowledgement of the economy in which we artists work, signalling and acknowledging previous artists that have been influential and, yet, at the same time, participating in the creative economy. It is hoped that the results of the method reveal something about the systemic nature of the process – and the technique should be judged on its ability to do so. While Ede would have us continue the shell game despite knowing the shill, in a world rife with illusions and after a century of shattering literary experiments and linguistic developments, a more prescient alternative would attempt to work from what we have learned and not ignore it so perilously.

[Note: from a paper delivered at the AWP 2007 conference in Atlanta, GA. The original Plunderverse essay can be found at: http://wordsters.net/poetics/poetics05/05betts.html.]

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epc.buffalo.edu/authors/betts/

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[4]   *Philosophical Investigations*. 1953. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2009. 96.

P L U N D E R V E R S E   Gregory Betts

O Canada (Robert Stanley Weir)   ➝   **I: Oh Can (We)?**   **II: Can (I?)**

O Canada! Our home and native land!   Oh can   me a native
True patriot love in all thy sons command.   our naïve   in command
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,   patriot command it?   with wing, art
The True North strong and free!   song and
From far and wide, O Canada,   Hear, see the rue
We stand on guard for thee.   or song –   om
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.   I'd stand, pour   on a fort,
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.   sand, stand on.   God and I
                                                                         can and do
                                              Can sand
                                              guard thee?

The Star Spangled Banner (Francis Scott Key)   ➝   **I: Her Angled Banner (ran)**   **II: Ars Led (c_c)**

O say, can you see, by the dawn's early light,   Oh Can . . .   can you see
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming,   the
Whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the perilous   your   lights as
                                              fight,   red glare   roads
O'er the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly streaming?   bombs sting   *ars perilous*
And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,   our flag, ill.
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there;   the art we
O say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave   Oh does that angled   were, am
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?   banner yet ve-   there are
                                                         er
                                                         and heave?   sing air
                                                                                   rough, rough
                                                                                   as the
                                                                                   sad that
                                                                                   led me