

Theoreographic Metawriting: The Ballad of Isabel Gunn

by Peter Jaeger

In *Signature Event Context* (1989), Stephen Scobie points out the importance of Dorothy Livesay's proposal of the term "documentary" for the generic description of several Canadian long poems. Scobie claims that Livesay's essay "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre" (1969) was among the first critical texts to focus on the genre by underlining its concern for a "dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective feelings of the poet" (Livesay 267). While I acknowledge Livesay's importance to the development of critical thought about the documentary poem, I find it useful to think about the relationship between history and imagination in Scobie's *The Ballad of Isabel Gunn* (1987) in terms of M.M. Bakhtin's formulation of dialogic relations, rather than as a dialectic. Dialectics imply closure in the synthesis between two antithetical elements, while dialogic relations imply an ongoing process in which the representation of history consists of an organic continuum between any number of voices.

The Ballad of Isabel Gunn enacts a dialogic relation between historical documents, the humanistic ideology that the individual self is the source of meaning, and several streams of poststructural thought about language and subjectivity. Poststructuralism is an expanding and multi-dimensional body of thought, however, for the purposes of this discussion, I am using the term as a short-hand designation for the notion that human subjectivity is a product of language, since subject positions are defined through signifying practices. In contrast, humanism posits the origin of meaning in the individual psyche of the speaking subject; Descartes's dictum "I think therefore I am" assumes that individual consciousness predates its construction in social interaction. Bakhtin diverges from both of these positions by asserting that language is always a two-sided experience, since on the one hand it is the product of a speaker, while on the other hand it is processed by another, who must evaluate and reply to it. The speech act, for Bakhtin, is a specifically social phenomenon in which concrete units of speech, or utterances, are delineated as separate from one another by a change of speakers, and dialogic speech occurs through the response of one speaker to another in a particular social context. However, Bakhtin distinguishes in his later writings between dialogic *speech* and dialogic *relations*. Dialogic relations are definable as two or more semantically related utterances, such as may be found in surveys of the history of any scientific, philosophical, or literary question. A dialogic relation arises through convergences of meaning such as a partially shared theme, opinion, or point of view, and may occur between two utterances which are separated from one another both in time and in space (*Speech* 124). Importantly, the understanding of entire utterances and the dialogic relations between them is also of a dialogic nature, for in the act of comprehension the observer participates in the dialogic process. As Bakhtin writes, the "observer has no position *outside* the observed world, and his observation enters as a constituent part into the observed project" (*Speech* 126). The theory of dialogic relations is applicable to *The Ballad of Isabel Gunn* and the documentary poem in general because it accounts for the writer's observations, perspectives, and creative participation in the process of re-writing historical data.

What are the distinctive features of the dialogic relations in Scobie's text? Beginning with formal considerations, Linda Hutcheon has coined the term "historiographic metafiction" to describe a poetics which is "at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of both the events and the texts, the contents and the forms, of the past" (History 169). For Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction is marked by a meeting between "fictionalizing" and history (*Canadian* 168), a relationship which is somewhat analogous to Livesay's characterization of the documentary poem, since both perspectives focus upon the synthesis between source materials and imaginative creativity. *The Ballad of Isabel Gunn* clearly fits into the poetic stream of historiographic metafiction, for it employs both the content of historical documents and the poetic form of the ballad, albeit in a highly adapted fashion. Scobie's designation "ballad" is significant inasmuch as the poem carries on the traditional ballad's continuous narrative structure, while simultaneously expanding that form to include prose texts quoted verbatim, lyric verse, and visual reproductions. The formal structure of the ballad mirrors the actions of Isabel, for just as Isabel crosses genders, Scobie adapts his text to straddle conventional and contemporary forms.

Scobie claims in the acknowledgements at the end of the ballad that readers of Malvina Bolus's article entitled "The Son of I. Gunn" (1971) "will best be able to judge the extent to which I have extended the meagre documentary record with fictional speculations." The ballad follows a trend which has gained increasing currency in Canadian writing, as exemplified in such works as Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), and Scobie's own *McAlmon's Chinese Opera* (1980). The rewriting of historical material in these poems is distinctly different from the use of non-assimilated historical texts in fictional or poetic narratives, such as in Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue* (1977), a text which Hutcheon cites as an example of poetic historiographic metafiction (*Canadian* 168), and which D.M.R. Bentley in *The Gay] Grey Moose* (1992) claims "incorporates rather than subsumes" raw historical materials (97). Although Scobie incorporates one of Alexander Henry's 1797 reports verbatim (49), the ballad is predominantly constructed of re-written, integrated, and subsumed historical data. However, even though Scobie demonstrates the recent proliferation of documentary writing in Canadian literature by listing numerous contemporary examples of the genre (*Signature* 120-21), Susan Glickman points out that the tradition of the long documentary poem is not particularly new, nor is it specifically Canadian. Robert Browning, for example, in *The Ring and the Book* (1868), writes, "fancy with fact is just one fact the more" (l.464). According to Glickman, Browning writes about historical materials which must be transformed by the poet's imagination to create something new (107). Furthermore, the imaginative use of historical material may be traced in Canadian literature beyond its recent manifestations in the long poem or novel to at least Oliver Goldsmith's *The Rising Village* (1825). Gerald Lynch remarks that lines 81-86 of the poem, a passage which describes the "savagery" of natives at war, may be based upon the elder Anglo-Irish Goldsmith's "account of General Braddock's futile expedition against Quebec in 1775" (51).

The Orkney men are described in the ballad as fiercely loyal: "[o]f course there were those who knew, and kept silent: / the men from Stromness, who joined around us / conspiracies of kin" (18). The passage alludes to Peter C. Newman's *Company of Adventurers* (1985), a text which Scobie acknowledges in the ballad. Newman cites the writings of the Hudson's Bay Company explorer Samuel Hearne, who led a group of men from the Orkneys inland to establish Cumberland House. Hearne writes in his journal that the Orkneymen were "the slyest set of men under the sun," and that their "clandestine dealings of every kind, added to their clannish attachment to each other" made it impossible for "any one Englishman to detect them" (qtd. in Newman 180). Another source acknowledged by Scobie is Walter O'Meara's *The Savage Country* (1960). In the ballad, John Brown's letter to John Fubbister informs him that John Scarth has "taken" a native bride: "a `country wife,' we call it, `a la façon du pays'" (30). O'Meara writes that:

It was a rare Nor'wester to have an Indian or metis girl for a wife. . . . Had there been a priest handy, there is no reason to believe that many of these marriages a la fa^{çon} du pays would not have been celebrated in proper form.

(108-09)

Scobie engages with O'Meara's historical report by directly inserting the phrase "a la fa^{çon} du pays" into the ballad. A comparable assimilation of source material occurs in the poem during the Nor'westers' drinking celebration. O'Meara remarks that trader's rum was not really rum at all, that it was instead:

a concentrated form of alcohol, generally called high wine, which was carried in nine-gallon kegs and diluted with water just before drinking. . . . Whatever the mixture, it had a devastating effect on the Indians who drank it.

(104;

emphasis added)

The Nor'westers in the ballad tap "a cask of fine old rum (not that / vile 'high wine' mixture that we feed to Indians, / barely diluted, that rots their eyes)" (45). Scobie also acknowledges Malvina Bolus's description of the voyage of a party which included Scarth, Fubbister, and James Brown up the Albany River to Henley House with trading goods and winter provisions. Bolus remarks that "Brown and Fubbister must have been well acquainted for Brown received a sum of 1-4-0 from the latter in the same year" (24). Scobie's expands Bolus's article, turning the historical documents into a series of letters between the three parties. In one of these letters, Scarth tells Isabel that Brown has lost three of his toes to frostbite during the journey from her camp, and the sum of money accounted for by an actual historical document is re-written in the ballad as "a shilling for each of his toes" (30).

Scobie's allusions to Hearne via Newman, to O'Meara, and to Bolus's accounts of historical events illustrate the Bakhtinian notion that the transmission of information is always simultaneously an appropriation and a transformation---that is, the words of a speaker become the words of another during the communication process (*Dialogic* 341-42). The continuum of historical voices between the eighteenth century and the present in the text illustrates the unfinalized character of historical discourse, for the ballad participates in an ongoing re-interpretive process, rather than being the final product of a dialectic between history and imaginative creation. Historical texts are used ironically throughout the poem to expose the racist and sexist ideologies of eighteenth century explorers and merchants in North America, and his narrative technique is therefore analogous to Bakhtin's description of novelistic practice, wherein the novelist "does not strip away the intentions of others from the heteroglot language of his works," but rather he "compels them to serve his own new intentions" (*Dialogic* 299-300). Several voices intermingle and interact in the poem, thereby gaining meaning in relation to one another. Scobie dialogues with the voices of the past and uses them to create a moment of textuality that is specifically engineered to the discussion of contemporary social issues.

Scobie observes that visual materials such as paintings or photographs may function as documentary sources, and that the appeal of documentary material is in its "*authoritativeness of fact*, to a category of reality which exists outside and independent of the text" (Amelia 266). His observations are consistent with Bakhtin's thoughts about monologizing, authoritative discourses, because for Bakhtin, "[t]he authoritative word is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher" (*Dialogic* 342). Scobie includes several reproductions of paintings and etchings from Bolus's article in the ballad, such as an image of the ship *Prince of Wales* on which Isabel and Scarth voyaged from Orkney to Canada, and a representation of the *Hudson's Bay Company Post at Pembina*. These visual images are interspersed between contemporary photographs of historical sites of the Orkney Islands, and the photographs function in a manner similar to the paintings and etchings, in that they represent objects which were in existence during Isabel's lifetime; both types of images strengthen the link to the factual events upon which the narrative is based. However, Scobie's inclusion of images which legitimate the historical basis of the story also reinforces the centrifugal relationship between history and fiction. Like the recasted speech of Hearne and the Nor'westers that is broken down and interspersed throughout the ballad, the reproductions of paintings and contemporary photographs of historical sites pull against the fictional, de-authoritative tendencies of the writing. Instead of the monologizing tendencies of authoritative discourse, which the reproductions would facilitate in a purely historical report, their inclusion in the poetic narrative creates a dialogic relationship between contemporary and historical utterances.

The ballad contains a verbatim passage from Alexander Henry's 1797 account of the birth of Isabel's son, in which Henry comes to the realization that Isabel is not a boy, but an "unfortunate Orkney girl, pregnant, and actually in childbirth," who "opened her jacket, and displayed a pair of beautiful, round, white breasts" (49). The prose of Henry's report is juxtaposed against the lined verse of Isabel's fictional narration as she responds to his journal entry:

. . . men
haven't got the guts to write the truth
of what a woman suffers, no, all he can see
is "round, white breasts," a pretty picture
indeed, as he runs from the room, and thank
the Lord Jesus, an Indian woman
is there in his household to see me through,
her name was Ke-che-cho-wich, I'll set it down
because he doesn't in his diary.

(50)

The relationship between Henry's verbatim report and Isabel's fictionalized verse provides us with a key example of dialogized speech, since Henry's eighteenth century utterance is disrupted by Scobie's contemporary response. The context of Scobie's discourse transforms and de-values Henry's words, and instead of the monologic authority of an eighteenth century report, his utterance gains meaning in relation to the larger, "novelistic" or centrifugal orchestration of the text. Jay Johnson finds Isabel's description of the birth inappropriate in that Isabel has been previously presented by Scobie as completely illiterate (128), and while I agree with Johnson that this passage may be problematic in terms of historical credibility, Isabel's claim that "men haven't got the guts to write the truth" illustrates Scobie's recognition of the difficulties and impossibilities in his project. By emphasizing Henry's negative response to the birth, Scobie exposes his own gender's history of repression and dominance.

If *The Ballad of Isabel Gunn* belongs to the poetic stream of historiographic metafiction in that it "fictionalizes" the contents, events, and forms of history, it is also "*theoreographic* metawriting" in that it performs the same operation on the topics and texts of contemporary literary theory. Scobie employs several of the theoretical speculations of Jacques Derrida to discuss the documentary poem as a marginal form that deals with "limits, edges, overlaps" (*Signature* 121), a perspective which is clearly evident in *The Ballad of Isabel Gunn*. Orkney is described by Scobie as a minimal land with "all ornament chiselled away, all supplement denied" (7), and as a landscape which has lost the "writing" of "some trace / of the hand of man and the guidance of God" (19). For Derrida, the notion of

"supplemental" meaning the free play of referrals, deferrals, and allusions in language, brings about "traces" of other words and other meanings, and Scobie uses the Derridean framework as a model for Orkney. In *bpNichol: What History Teaches* (1984), Scobie clarifies his understanding of Derrida's term "writing" by defining the term as "that which is *repeatable*, or *detachable*, from its presumed 'source'" (25). Detaching Orkney from the presence of an original point of meaning isolates the landscape from the eighteenth century discourses of "man" and "God"---that is, from the historical Isabel's symbolic construct---while paradoxically reinscribing and repeating the erased writing of Orkney in a contemporary poetic framework. In effect, the landscape echoes a pattern undergone by Isabel as she moves to the New World, where "by putting on men's trousers," she becomes "unnamable" (53). Scobie claims that the poem "lays particular stress on the forged signature" (*Signature* 122), a strategy which marks Isabel as a marginal character whose name shift parallels the sliding signifier of poststructural *différance*.

Scobie explores the relationship between the writer's name and textual meaning in his critical study of the documentary poem by suggesting that "signing yourself away" is a positive act, "if what you are signing away is a position of hierarchical dominance, within the symbolic order that Jacques Lacan calls 'the Name of the Father'" (*Signature* 118). The ideas of Lacan find their way into the ballad through Scobie's allusions to several Lacanian terms and theories. For example, he writes that the landscape of Labrador "refuses the human gaze" (19), thereby evoking associations with the term "gaze" introduced by Lacan to signify one of the processes by which the subject is "inserted" into the symbolic order (*Four passim*). Scobie's personified landscape remains outside of symbolism through its refusal to be defined by the gaze of the Other, thereby mirroring the historical Isabel's refusal to conform to the textual conditions of her culture. The erasure of Isabel's name, followed by her subsequent re-naming as John Fubbister, "a strong and sturdy lad with a quiet voice" (13), provides her with a subjectivity which is entirely different from the role prescribed for her within the Orkneyan symbolic order. Scobie writes of Orkney: "It is a land where the men go to sea / and the women wait, and the women grow old" (11).

Kenneth Hoepfner remarks that while Scobie is aware of contemporary theories about the play of referentiality, that "we are all orphaned in language," Scobie is also aware of the need to struggle against such an orphaning (136). The notion that the subject is "orphaned" in the play of referentiality---that is, in the socio-linguistic constructs of the Name of the Father---is contested in the poem through Scobie's presentation of Isabel as fully able to function in the role of a man in the rigorous conditions of the Canadian north. Isabel works with the "best" of the men, "paddling / or hauling the Henly boats over a rough portage" (26). Similarly, Isabel joins in with the men's social activities by sitting "inside the great dark . . . singing our boisterous songs" (26), the plural pronoun "our" indicating a sense of inclusiveness as Isabel "identifies" with the men. The great dark which encloses Isabel may be read as a sign for concealment, since she is simultaneously inside and outside of her male community; she both joins in the activities as one of the men but also conceals her gender from them. However, after the birth of her child Isabel is refused permission to return to work on the boats, for the Hudson's Bay Company men claim that because she is a woman she is "far too delicate" (52) to work. Isabel responds:

I laughed, and said I had worked for a year,
no man complaining I'd not done my share,
but they smiled at my foolishness, and told me
it was not becoming for ladies to argue.
(52)

Despite Isabel's ability, the Hudson's Bay Company denies her the position of her choice, and she must work at the fort as a laundrywoman and nurse rather than being allowed to return to work on the boats. She is orphaned from the Name of the Father as a "freak" and the "object of salacious stories" (53), and therefore her shifting identity within the socio-linguistic constructions of her era supports Lacan's claim against "the illusion that the signifier answers to the function of representing the signified" (*Ecrits* 150). Not only is Isabel able to perform the heavy labours of the Hudson's Bay Company men before she is discovered, but her inclusion in male society illustrates the position that gender roles are cultural and linguistic constructs, and therefore contestable.

What are we to make of Isabel's encounter with a native family, when she wanders inland alone, pregnant and longing for Orkney? Isabel describes the meeting, where she sees:

three Indians standing motionless and dark
against the half-light bleeding from the east:
the man was a hunter, the knife at his belt
stained black and red: his son beside him
repeated his father's pose, a shadow
carved into stone: the woman understood my
sickness
but made no move to come towards me.
(39)

The half-light which bleeds from the direction of the Old World illustrates a shift in Isabel's circumstances, for she is now neither fully enclosed by darkness, nor fully exposed in the light, and the setting illuminates her semi-uncovered condition as a pregnant woman hiding in the guise of a man. Moreover, the narrator's description of the native hunter, with phallic knife as a symbol of patriarchal power, is repeated exactly in the stance of his Oedipalized son. The two figures form a single image signifying the patriarchal Name of the Father which Isabel has defied and disrupted. Isabel smears her face with mud "like warpaint" and utters the name of her home "Stromness!" to the natives, who respond by turning away in silence and fading "into the dawn" (39). And even though the woman understands Isabel's symptoms, she remains fixed within her own cultural complex and makes no move to aid her, for just as Labrador refuses the gaze of the Hudson's Bay Company, the native family refuse the *word* of Isabel.

The symbolic grouping of father and son is echoed in David Spence Jr's letter to John Fubbister. David invites Isabel to join him in the South, where "a man could set up shop . . . start / a business that his father could be proud of" (41). Since the love affair between Isabel and David is entirely invented by Scobie (Hoepfner 136), David's Oedipal route towards a socially mediated mode of success reinforces the centrifugal character of the narrative. On one hand David represents the Name of the Father and the symbolic construct of patriarchy, an effect of discourse which Lacan claims has existed "from the dawn of history" (*Ecrits* 67). On the other hand, David's love for the imposter Isabel calls into question the primacy of the symbolic order, inasmuch as David disregards his culture's suspicion and negative valuation of a woman in the guise of a man. David mirrors Isabel; both characters are complex sites of dialogue between the ability to choose a mode of individual subjectivity, and the confines of their cultural situation. At this juncture in the poem, the structural opposition between individual and textual subjectivity is unresolved and unfinalized, and therefore both philosophical positions are de-stabilized. Furthermore, the couple's fictional liaison illustrates the unequal relationship between historical data and the imaginative use of that data, for in this instance the familiar literary device of the double carries more weight than the source information. Instead of Livesay's characterization of a synthetic union between objective

and subjective elements, the ratio of imaginative to historical material fluctuates in an organic dialogue throughout the poem.

After the birth of her son, and her subsequent re-naming as a woman, Isabel is rejected by the men of the Hudson's Bay Company. Her transgression of the rigid gender roles set down in the language of her culture mark her as an outsider, and she becomes a "thing, to be written about / in all their journals" (53). Isabel's stigma follows her back to Orkney, where she finds "no kin to receive me . . . and every eye closed on me like a door" (57). In the Old World, Isabel identifies herself with universalist mythical women from the ancient past:

women who crossed the horizons of dawn
women whose bodies enfolded the flame
women whose anger first scattered the stars.
(58)

As David Halliday remarks, Isabel finds her dignity when she realizes the ties between herself and "all the women who have gone before, linking herself to the eternal" (23). The poem's evocation of an essentialist "universal woman" is clearly antithetical to poststructuralism's emphasis on subjectivity as a product of language, and by sympathetically portraying the (super)natural over the cultural, Scobie subverts his own theoretical sources. Isabel ruptures the power of the historical Name of the Father and claims her identity in response to the pre-historic myth of the mother, a shift which is exemplified through an image of rebirth:

At the midwinter solstice the rising sun
strikes down the tunnel of the Maes Howe mound
and lights its dark interior, like a womb.
The world turns over
and the dragon smiles.

I am not unnamable. I am Isabel Gunn.
(58)

Isabel's re-appropriation of pre-historic mythology contests the hegemony of her culture's linguistic fabric, and the text produces a clash between the language of an individual, de-authoritative consciousness and the language of patriarchal authority.

Apart from the afterword, Isabel's rebirth as a speaking self is the last voice we hear. Scobie's completion of the poem at the (fictional) moment when Isabel speaks her own name pushes the text towards closure, a position which is surely unfriendly to deconstructive thought. Yet the ideologies of textual subjectivity and individual consciousness co-habit the same text; along with questioning authoritative historical discourse, the ballad questions the grounds of meaning and subjectivity, including the deconstructive enterprise with which Scobie is involved as a critic. Scobie's observations and transformations of historical data implicate him in a dialogic relationship with the past, for the text is not simply the finished product of a dialectic between history and the imagination, but rather it participates in the on-going process of re-inscribing and re-orienting history according to contemporary ideological perspectives, and the ballad is dialogic to the extent that it is produced through an interchange of philosophical, historical, and mythological-religious languages, which gain meaning in relation to one another. The selection of a historical character who has transgressed the gender codes of her society upsets the idea that subjectivity is entirely a product of impersonal and abstract discourse, because Isabel de-stabilizes the opposition between the poststructural formulation of the subject as an effect of dis-embodied discourse, and the humanistic ideology that meaning and self consciousness precede language in the individual psyche.⁷

Notes

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