

# A Golden Hive

---

Stan Dragland, *The Bees of the Invisible: Essays in Contemporary English Canadian Writing*, Coach House, 1991, 196 pp.

---

One of my tasks as a Canadianist is the reviewing of books in my field, and as a feminist scholar, I'm usually asked to review works by and about women. But every so often I'm called upon to review a book by a man. I almost always find this difficult, for I need to respect the author's right to speak from his male point of view, yet I also feel obliged to point out the ways in which his work is limited by it. As I read through Stan Dragland's *Bees of the Invisible*, I realized that I was not experiencing that familiar ambivalence -- at least, not to any significant degree. (More about this later.) I think that's because these critical essays are at once intensely personal and thoroughly professional. This reminded me that Canadian literary scholarship is in transition, and that thanks to postmodernist and feminist theory we are still debating whether criticism is about the critic or about the literature it purports to illuminate. Dragland reminds us that it's about both, but he also demonstrates that the literary text must remain at the centre, while the critic must confine himself to the context within which the text is read. To my mind, as long as the critic can, on the one hand, remain honest about his subject position, yet on the other, refrain from allowing his self-disclosures to upstage the text, his gender (or, for that matter, his race or his class) will be a critical asset rather than a liability. In short, it's Dragland's intensely personal engagement with the literary text that appeals to me as a feminist, while his erudition and his knowledge of what Canadian criticism needs at this transitional point interests me as a Canadianist.

Readers of *Brick*, the literary journal founded by Dragland, will recognize the title of this collection, as it appears on every issue. The phrase originates in a letter by Rainer Maria Rilke about his *Duino Elegies* and reveals something about the critical process as it operates in these essays:

Affirmation of life-AND-death turns out to be one in the Elegies. . . . It is our task to imprint this temporary, perishable earth into ourselves so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its essence can rise again, "invisibly," inside us. We are the bees of the invisible. We wildly collect the honey of the visible, to store it in the great golden hive of the invisible. The Elegies show us at this work, the work of the continual conversion of the beloved visible and tangible world into the invisible vibrations and agitation of our own nature. . . .

Dragland quotes this passage in his essay on George Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies* because it illuminates the kinship between Rilke's poem and Bowering's -- i.e., both poets' fascination with the binary structures of language -- life/death, visible/invisible -- as a

celebration of the Heraclitean conflict of opposites. Dragland's criticism, like Bowering's poetry, is characterized by the acknowledgement of that tension between opposites. But unlike Bowering, who tends to privilege conflict, setting himself in opposition to anything that isn't postmodernist enough to suit his tastes, Dragland prefers the alternative of embracing whatever moves him, internalizing the "beloved visible and tangible" -- contradictions and all -- and converting it into "the invisible vibrations and agitation of [his] own nature."

Nowhere is the breadth of this embrace more apparent than in the unusual combination of writers whose work these nine essays treat: they include (in addition to Bowering) Leonard Cohen, James Reaney, Dennis Lee, Al Purdy, Chris Dewdney, and Daphne Marlatt. Dragland chooses these particular writers because he has "fallen in love with their work" (9). This is probably the best reason for writing literary criticism because it implicitly questions the validity of the theoretical yardstick many critics have been using to measure "objectively" the value of Canadian writing. Indeed, Dragland's approach to the mythopoeics of James Reaney is as subjectively engaged as his reading of Chris Dewdney's complex postmodernism. Dragland accounts for this kind of eclecticism by pointing out that the argument connecting all the essays in the volume is "a running, glancing engagement with the modernist-postmodernist 'dichotomy,' which I prefer to stretch into a continuum." This questioning of the false binary opposition of modernism/postmodernism lifts his work out of the theoretical debate that has plagued Canadian literary criticism over the past two decades. While Dragland is no particular lover of the thematic school as represented by Frye and Atwood and Jones, neither has he any "special place in [his] heart for postmodernism," nor does he have an interest in "fashionable difficulty" (10).

In many ways, Dragland's readings are an example of what feminist critic Adrienne Rich has identified as "re-vision -- the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (*When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision*, 1971). While Dragland can hardly be called a feminist critic, like much feminist criticism his readings begin from the personal rather than the theoretical; it's this as much as anything that permits him to question entrenched dichotomies. This is best explained in Dragland's own words:

I find BALANCE elusive. My mind wobbles, though it does gyroscopically embrace the poetry (and so entertains, as foundationally valid, the world view) of writers who'd squirm to find themselves in the same category. George Bowering and Jay Macpherson, for example: an unlikely couple? Reaney is often enough admitted, as by Bowering, to have escaped Northrop Frye's orbit, but Macpherson seldom is. I find her two long poems, *The Boatman* and *Welcoming Disaster*, at once satisfying and daunting. Running *The Anatomy of Criticism* through them would only be a beginning. I'm also a lover of Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies*, and have made a critical start on that poem. To me, obviously, the result of interrogating established forms and systems is not necessarily rejection of the writing they nourish. Working systems are as grains of sand on the literary beach. Some of the ones you can't sign your name to may still clarify the

world and your place in it. They can still delight.  
("Reaney's Relevance," 49)

The operative word here is "delight." By making his delight as a reader the constant, Dragland is able to acknowledge that many of the categories and dichotomies imposed upon Canadian writing are really contradictions internal to the critic. By laying claim to those contradictions, he is able to re-enter some long-standing critical arguments from a new and uniquely individual direction.

For example, in "James Reaney's 'Pulsating Dance in and Out of Forms,'" an article on the *Donnelly Trilogy*, Dragland addresses the widely held assumption that Reaney is exclusively a creature of Northrop Frye: "The connection with Frye can be overplayed. . . . [T]he connection with McLuhan has almost as much to say about the nature of Reaney's art as does the influence of Frye" (30). "The way Reaney uses Frye is every bit as important as what he uses. To oversimplify the matter, we might say: Frye for content; McLuhan for technique, if McLuhan is allowed to stand for all that is exploratory, unfinished, daring in Reaney's work" (32). This calls into question the definition of Reaney as a rigid formalist and refocuses attention on his work as remarkably experimental. Similarly, in his essay "On *Civil Elegies*," Dragland addresses the way in which Lee's poem has been dismissed by sulky regionalists because they cannot identify with the poem's theme of cultural impotence. Speaking as an Albertan in origin, Dragland writes: "Lee didn't undertake to speak for me. . . . At an early stage of thinking about this article, a victim of thematic thinking, I considered detaching myself from Lee's vision of Canada. . . . But immersion in *Civil Elegies* yielded the realization that it's nowhere imprisoned by the impotence that is part of its subject. So the poem does not perpetuate emasculation, . . . it moves through and beyond that . . ." (88). In other words, as with the work of Reaney, Dragland shifts old dismissive arguments onto new ground and opens up Lee's poem to the re-visionary process.

While space doesn't permit many examples here, I'd like to point out that Dragland submits Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* and the poetry of Al Purdy to a similar process of liberation from critical dogma. By contrast, the work of Bowering and Dewdney requires no such liberation. In his approach to both poets, Dragland recognizes the necessity of letting go -- of relinquishing the desire for some control over the text. What seems to fascinate him about these two poets is their elusiveness, the way in which each promises a path to the referent and then detours the reader back to the language on the page. Dragland's readings are themselves very much like poems, yet unlike many readings of postmodernist works they don't compete with the texts they address. Rather, they are more like archaeological digs where artifacts are disclosed and identified but not necessarily interpreted.

No short review of a volume of critical essays as complex as *Bees* can do it justice, and a reviewer has to make choices. But as a feminist critic, I can't overlook the fact that the volume closes with not one but two essays on the work of Daphne Marlatt. Marlatt's work has been of central importance to feminist writing in Canada. Most male reviewers and critics have taken her postmodernism for granted, lumping her in with writers such as Fred Wah and even Chris Dewdney. But as Dragland points out, "there is a drive towards meaning in

Marlatt's work, a desire to put things together "qualities not especially postmodern; moreover, Marlatt "never toys with a reader, like her contemporaries Bowering and Kroetsch" (164). Yet Dragland recognizes her style as process, and even mirrors it in his essay on *Touch to My Tongue*, Marlatt's remarkably powerful collection of lesbian love poems. Dragland's essay is entitled "Creatures of Ecstasy" and is an excellent example of criticism as process. It opens with his 1986 review of the book as originally published and then goes on to "re-vision" the review, thus "letting the process of rethinking show -- even, perhaps especially, when it exposes some embarrassment" (157). The source of this embarrassment is not unique among those male critics of feminist poetry who feel compelled to pay tribute to the feminist text by dropping their masculine pose and letting their vulnerability show. In the original review Dragland had written about Marlatt and Cheryl Sourkes, whose photographs accompanied the text of Marlatt's book: "No man can agree with them about the indisputable value of the feminine without feeling a touch lonely, implicated by maleness in the oppressive system, shut out of sisterhood" (153). Feminists are by now used to this image of the male critic as a boy with his nose pressed against a candy-store window, yet often we still feel some ambivalence in response to it. On the one hand, we're gratified that men are finally recognizing that not everything worth reading and writing about happens in the male universe; on the other, we wonder if we're not simply being patronized in a new way. But Dragland seems genuinely moved by Marlatt's work: he has immersed himself in it, and in some of the most important critical commentary on it as well. He concludes that "*Touch to My Tongue* is not a system created to exclude male readers, and maybe there's no need even to see it as a system designed to circulate almost entirely within a female economy. Why not just assume that these love poems were written without designs on the reader, with no external agenda, that they are merely bathed, drenched, in the light of the lover? Love is notorious for its transformative effect on perception" (167). Whether or not we read this comment as something of a defense against the anxiety of exclusion, there's little doubt about the sensitivity and richness of Dragland's reading of Marlatt's poetry. Both "Creatures of Ecstasy" and "Out of the Blank," his reading of *Ana Historic*, are essays which feminist critics of Marlatt's work will want to consult -- if only for the purpose of arguing with them.

All in all, this is a satisfying volume of essays. It's also an important book, for as I've attempted to show through a few examples, it goes a long way in breaking down those critical categories which no longer serve Canadian literature well. Moreover, thanks to Dragland's wide-ranging knowledge of the work and criticism of international writers, the book helps to locate contemporary Canadian writing within the web of twentieth-century literary traditions. And finally, for those who appreciate books as objects, like most Coach House publications, it's a handsome volume, printed on high-quality paper and featuring an appropriate cover image from a painting by James Reaney. I'd like all Canadianists to read this book, not because it contains "definitive" readings of important works for of course it doesn't but rather, because it models one of the ways in which a critic's personal experience and professional knowledge can work together to enrich our understanding of Canadian writing.