Lyric poetry is for heroes: it makes heroes

Roderick McGillis

One is hard pressed to find literary heroes in Canada. Indeed, one is hard pressed to find any indigenous heroes in Canada aside from hockey players and Mounties. The American vision of the R.C.M.P. has been touched with what we might call Fiedlerism: one 1930s Hollywood western begins with an aerial shot of the Rocky Mountains labelled "The Red River"; as the camera moves downwards to a pure mountain lake, we hear the hearty voices of men singing while they cavort nakedly in the clear water. A more recent American film, Arthur Penn's *Missouri breaks,* depicts the Mounties as red-clad spirits of the woods who protect the Northern wilderness and keep it free of riff-raff from the south. If Canada is a promised land to Americans, it is so because of the Force. As for Canadians, although we have never mistaken our forbidding country for the promised land, we have looked to the Mounties as a source of pride. The Canadian vision is of a solitary trooper who follows his man deep into the wilderness to maintain the law — or better, to preserve "le droit". The Mountie in his scarlet tunic and on his faithful horse is a sign of civilized man experiencing the wilderness with dignity. In short, the Mountie, like the hockey player, gives evidence that romance can flourish in an environment conducive to the ironies of winter.

What, you might ask, has this talk of the R.C.M.P., romance and winter to do with lyric poetry and heroes? Or more specifically, what does it have to do with poetry for children and subjectivity? The R.C.M.P., an heroic tribe worthy of a Northern epic, has moved into the lyric mode. To speak bluntly, I guess literary epic is pretty much gone; the forced marches and grand quests of epic have long since been internalized. Novalis is right: lyric poetry is not only *for* heroes, it also makes heroes. In children's lyrics, the modern literary hero clearly emerges: this hero is the reader, the child. This means that the poem's making makes heroes. Since the particular kind of verse I speak of is brought into being by the play of mind and language, what we have is an intensely subjective or intersubjective and liberating heroism: lyric heroism.

Transparency, or the clear uncluttered communication of messages or ideas, is not the point. In fact, there is no point to children's poetry if by 'point' we mean a place to get to, an end, or a statement. The poetic tradition in children's verse is a counter tradition in the sense that it has been at variance with the great tradition, the drive to socialize and to institutionalize. Ballad, nursery rhyme, four-stress and other accentual metre, and free verse are common in children's poetry. In this poetry, much of it what we think of as nonsense, "the coinciding reinforcement of abstract pattern and intonation puts the sound of the words before their meaning." It highlights form, draws attention to words as words and "openly celebrates rhythmic pleasure in work/play of the signifier."[1] This very primitive and pleasurable delight in language liberates the imagination from transparency and consequently from the contingencies we often assume must accompany transparency.

What I wish to do here is to approach two recent children's poems, one by Dennis Lee, the other by sean o huigin, in order to see and hear how Canada's most famous heroic character and his institution, the Canadian Mounted Police Force, have been liberated into lyric.

First, Dennis Lee's "Inspector Dogbone gets his man," a poem from Lee's 1977 volume *Garbage delight.*[2] I choose this poem because it is the more familiar, from a traditional point of view, of the two works I shall discuss. Briefly, "Inspector Dogbone" is a ballad of twenty-five four line stanzas which rhyme abcb and which have heavily accented two beat lines. As in any ballad, a story lurks in these lines. In the opening seven stanzas, the Inspector introduces himself; then he tells his tale which falls into two parts of eight stanzas each; and finally there are two stanzas in which the Inspector points out that what appeared to be his failure in the story he recounts, is in actuality his victory. The story involves the Inspector attempting to catch a "bad guy" who escapes by eating himself and scampering south. The Inspector is momentarily nonplussed, but he soon decides to arrest himself. He throws himself into the "old Don Jail" and there he sits rehearsing his tale.

Clearly, the story is a nonsense story and the poem, nicely capturing the hint in Dogbone's name, is close to doggerel. The story disappears into itself much as the bad guy in the poem disappears into himself. The story scampers south leaving Dogbone and his literary and language games in the true north strong and free. In other less felicitous words, signifieds recede and allow the poem to foreground its signifiers. The poem calls attention to language through a number of rhetorical and poetic devices. The first three stanzas play with children's lore and with literary allusion.

Inspector Dogbone
  Is my name
And catching bad guys
  Is my game.

I catch them hot
  I catch them cold
I catch them when they're
  Nine days old

I catch them here
  I catch them there

I catch them in
  Their underwear

The first stanza echoes the music hall chant of Champagne Charlie that dates from approximately 1868, and that children have incorporated into their schoolyard lore. The second stanza hardly requires comment since the allusion to the nursery rhyme "Pease porrige hot" is loud. The allusion in stanza three is to the famous refrain concerning Princess Orczy's damned Scarlet Pimpernel. Refrain, nursery rhyme jingle, and music hall drinking song: the allusions draw attention to song and form. But language itself is also foregrounded in these three stanzas. The proclamatory insistence of the Inspector derives from anaphora, the insistent repetition of the beginning of several lines — "I catch them". Later, at the beginning of the second part of Dogbone's tale, a reversal of this scheme occurs and we get a bit of exclamatory homoeoteleuton:

The case was gone!
  The case was gone!
The nose and the toes
  And the face were gone!

Lee's use of such devices asks us to look closely at his words and we find an abstraction turned concrete and the word "there" transforms easily into "their underwear." The word "catch" repeats seven times in the first three stanzas, and this repetition alerts us to an alliterative effect that coughs out nine uses of the same word and nine other instances of the alliterative 'c' in the first seven stanzas. This effectively draws our attention away from transparency and towards words as words, or things we may manipulate and play with. When Dogbone says that "From Corner Brook / To Calgary / There's not a cop / Can copy me," we catch the hint that "copy" means not only "to imitate" but also "to catch." Rhymes too illustrate this playfulness: "crook" and "hook" in the stanza "Cause every time catch a crook / I hang him up / On a big brass hook" remind us that hooks themselves are crooked and crooks are bound to get hooked. A similar effect is evident in the rhyme "old Don Jail" and "I'll tell my tale." Dogbone, appropriately, has a tale (tail), one he lengthens in the old Don Jail where he sits captive. Those who grasp the essence of tale telling (the Ancient Mariner comes to my mind here) know that the tale, like the jail, captivates.

"Inspector Dogbone gets his man" contains several more such rhetorical games: antimetabole and its close kin chiasmus, repetition, pun, and what W.K. Wimsatt terms the "tame rhyme" or bad rhyme.[3] The word is the thing wherein to catch the imagination of the reader. And for a Canadian reader, at least, perhaps the most secret joke in a poem whose secret mission is to undermine conventions of narrative and theme is in the title. Who is this Inspector Dogbone? No where does the poem mention for whom Dogbone works. Well, he is Sergeant Preston revisited, without King. Inspector Dogbone, like a true Mountie, always gets his man.

The source of pleasure in "Inspector Dogbone," then, is not the story or its message; instead pleasure derives from the treatment of words as things, from play with language — its sounds, rhythms, meanings, and associations. In *Poetry in the making,* Ted Hughes notes that most words contain a "little goblin" which gives it "its life and its poetry."[4] This little goblin frees us from a transcendent ego that many readers look for and bend to and call *Meaning.*

But "Inspector Dogbone" is traditional in its nonsense story and balladic form. It is light. A more ambitious work and one for older readers (children between 8 and 16) is sean o huigin's long free verse poem *the ghost horse of the mounties.* This sixty-eight page poem purports to be a fantasy based on the fact that in June of 1874 when the Northwest Mounted Police were first formed and when they first camped at Dufferin, Manitoba, there was a vicious storm in which the lightning flashed continuously from 10:00 p.m. until 6:00 a.m. During the storm, two hundred and fifty horses stampeded, and one was lost. Six men were injured, one seriously; according to the poem, this man died from his injury. In short, o huigin's poem announces itself in its title, its length, and its brief "afterword" as a narrative. But as in "Inspector Dogbone," a far more deeply interfused sense of the freedom of poetic space operates and subordinates, indeed negates, the narrative.

Rather than presenting an historical story for the reader's edification, *the ghost horse* asks the reader to create meaning, to experience emotions, and to participate in the poetic act. The free verse form aids in this since free verse intends, as Clive Scott says, more fully to "implicate the reader in the poem as a psychological or emotional event by withdrawing the substitute sensibility of an accepted prosody and by compelling him to create his own speeds, intonation, patterns and emphases."[5] One means o huigin uses to accomplish this is to break the syntagmatic chain, to present the reader with choice through parataxis.

and from the west
a breeze begins to stir
the prairie grass
begins a silent dance
. . . .
the rain has come
and drop by drop
it's falling from
the sky
and thicker comes
and faster
till you cannot
see the horse
beside you
cannot see the
tents or men

the young man goes
he races for the camp
he cannot see
and fumbles for his tent

In these lines, paratactic slippage renders one substantive — "prairie grass" — both object and subject, obscures the function of the pronoun "you," and forces the reader to choose where to end a loosely running syntactic unit. We may read these lines correctly in mutually exclusive ways; the choice is the reader's. Does the young man race for the camp he cannot see; does he race for the camp, arrive there, find he cannot see, and fumble for his tent; does he do all of these things — race, not see, fumble — in one frantic effort?

The invitation to participate in the poetic act is even more forthright. The opening twenty-two lines will illustrate much of the poem's drive beyond transparency to a discovery of language and its subjective, ahistorical power.

imagine if you will the empty plains
imagine if you will a sultry summer night
imagine if you will a brilliant edge of gold on the horizon
and a silence getting deeper all the time

listen now
the time is long ago
listen close and let yourself go back
imagine if you can that you're a young man
standing in the prairie grass
alone

it's summer's june
a june of heat and silence now
it's summer's june
in 1874

the northwest territories then
it's manitoba canada right now
a little place called dufferin
those days
and gathered there a group of men
who someday would be famous
round the world

The anaphoric beginning and repetition throughout suggest, less a narrative impulse, than an incantation. The ghost of oral poetry, as John Hollander has remarked,[6] never vanishes and it sounds here in this incantatory style. These words are to be heard, and as we hear our senses of sight, touch, and sound awaken. Place and time are more important than drama or plot. Even the sense of time dislocates into a number of words: "time" (twice), "now" (3 times), "then," "long ago," "go back," "those days," "someday." Singulars blend with plurals, past tense connects with present tense, and "now," in almost Wordsworthian fashion, means both now and then. This is not history, it is the imaginative moment which gathers time into the mind. The poem asks the reader to make an imaginative effort to enter the poem; the effort involves the reader understanding the subjectivity of the poem at the same time that she exerts her own subjectivity. The ability to imagine is an act of will: can and will interchange.

The effort of these opening lines, an effort extended throughout the poem, is to draw the reader into the poem, to direct her attention to language.[7] The near pleonasm of "summer's june," the internal rhyme of "imagine if you can that you're a young man," and the paratactic effect of "a little place called dufferin / those days" are some of the devices o huigin uses to accomplish this decentering of narrative and meaning. Repetitions of these and other devices (such as paradox, chiasmus, juxtaposition, synecdoche, assonance, synesthesia) direct attention to the play and the possibilities of language. The poem is full of sounding signifiers.

Paradox, juxtaposition, past and present, sight and sound, choice through parataxis: these and other aspects of the poem set up binary oppositions. This structuring principle also accents signifier at the expense of signified. Once we identify the play of opposites, we can see the poem as a network of oppositions: horse/rider, up/down, west/east, listen/look, black/white, can/will, day/night, fact/fantasy, rest/restlessness, the individual/the group. Rather than being a sequential narrative recounting an incident in the history of the R.C.M.P. and early western Canadian settlement or even a narrative concerning the loyalty of man and horse, the poem is a play of opposites. The theme may well be that poetry resolves contradictory things. True opposition is poetry and the poem triumphs over the rule of meaning and ideology. In poetry all things are possible.

We have already seen this blending of opposites in the conjoining of "will" and "can." Horse and rider also join and the reader, imagining himself the horse, participates in the joining:

a whispering of words from
over there
the sound the young man's thinking
in your head
that special wind that blows
from you to him
and back

Night and day, dark and light also join in the "night of light," the "black night" when "all the lightning ever thought of / anywhere / illuminates the / land." Here the "ever thought of" and the "anywhere" connect time and place, and it is perhaps this connection that is most strong in the poem. At the climactic moment, the horse and rider blend with prairie spot to become a spirit of place, a *genius loci,* crossing time. The reader, through her act of imaginative participation, becomes inspirited: "your spirit rises on its / cloud legs." Finally, reader and poem join in heroic gesture to salute generations of readers who will join in similar gestures.

Neither of these two poems is about the Mounties in any objective, social, or historical way. Neither speaks with the voice of a transcendent ego with a design upon us. Neither desires to intimidate us with the voice of authority. Instead, these poems offer a playground for the liberated imagination. They teach us about poetry, which is to say, about language as free manipulation, as play. These poems invite participation in an oral community. They should and may bring us together the way a communal art always should. I spoke earlier about *the ghost horse of the mounties* triumphing over ideology, and of course I meant this. I meant this knowing full well the impossibility of such a triumph. But despite the fact that ideology is inescapable and that all language is manipulative, the poetry I present here and much children's poetry in general does not ask the reader to take sides in any political, social, or economic effort. Manipulation here is not a question of mastery; Humpty Dumpty's either/or opposition is happily scrambled and both reader and poem mutually dominate. The poems have no designs upon us and readers need only share the poems' delight in the free play of imagination. When poem and reader come together the only true gesture results; the gesture of mind sharing with mind across time and beyond place. In the best poetry for children, as in all great poetry, human possibility and human community appear free of the hectoring and false rhetoric of the market place and the hustings. If the hero creates a better world, if he or she represents humane values, if language can be heroic, then the reader of children's poetry has the opportunity of becoming heroic.

NOTES

[1] Antony Easthope, *Poetry as discourse,* London: Methuen, 1983, p. 74.

[2] Dennis Lee, *Garbage delight,* Toronto: MacMillan, 1977, pp. 24-27.

[3] W.K. Wimsatt, *The verbal icon,* London: Methuen, 1970, p. 160.

[4] Ted Hughes, *Poetry in the making,* London: Faber and Faber, 1982, p. 18.

[5] Clive Scott, "Free verse," in *A dictionary of modern critical terms,* ed. Roger Fowler, London: Routledge & Paul, 1973, p. 80.

[6] John Hollander, *Rhyme's reason.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981, p. 4.

[7] o huigin has written about poetry as a means to encourage people "to see language as something that can be picked up and felt, thrown in the air, tossed about." And he also speaks of the need "to make each person interpret for themselves the way the poem is read. . . to talk of all the many things a poem can mean." See "Poe-tree: a simple introduction to experimental poetry," in *Well, you can imagine,* Windsor: Black Moss Press, 1983, pp. 47, 48.

Roderick McGillis *teaches children's literature at the University of Calgary.*