

Plague Days: Poetics in the time of COVID-19

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BOOK REVIEW

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By Louise Carson

Louise Carson has published eleven books, the two most recent in 2020: *Dog Poems*, Aeolus House, and *The Cat Possessed*, Signature Editions (the fourth in her Maples Mysteries series). Her historical novel *In Which* was shortlisted for a Québec Writers' Federation prize in 2019. She lives in rural Québec.

Reflections on Stephen Morrissey's *A Poet's Journey: on poetry and what it means to be a poet* (Ekstasis Editions, 2019)

By the time you read this, the first wave of the pandemic will hopefully be over and we will be reaping the harvest of our collective and individual reactions and decisions.

When I took on this project, I purposely ignored the poet's biography and bibliographical information at the end of the book. I avoided reading any of his poetry other than what appears in this book. I wrote this book review in early mornings and on rainy days beginning at the end of March and finishing in early May. One or two cats slumped on my lap; the dog asleep on the couch next to me; vanilla hazelnut coffee at my elbow. Wondering if today would be the day my daughter would bring CV-19 home from her part-time cashier job at Provigo.

A Poet's Journey is a collection of book reviews, essays, memoirs and poems plus a selection of concrete poems, all by Stephen Morrissey. As a fellow poet, I was especially interested to read the essays about poetics and practice, eager for insights. In one entitled 'Continuing Continuation, On Louis Dudek,' Morrissey chooses as his epigraph this quote: "... remember/ the paltriness of worldly claims,/ and the immensity/ that is always now." – Louis Dudek, *Continuation III*. In plague-day-speak, don't sweat the small stuff (such as running out of vacuum cleaner bags, how to get tax papers ready, driving on winter tires in the summer).

The brilliant essay that in many ways forms the core of the book is part two to 'Reading Louis Dudek's *Continuation*: An Introduction to a Major Canadian Poem.' Here are the poetics of one of Canada's most important poets, filtered, condensed and presented by his friend, mentee and colleague, who sums the work up by naming it "radical" as it goes to "the roots of poetry and

language.” This is a bold statement that I have no way of refuting, as I haven’t yet read Dudek’s *Continuation*.

Morrissey concludes this essay beautifully when he writes about the last poems of *Continuation III* written months before Dudek’s death. “In these final poems, Dudek returns repeatedly to the concept of time as infinity, he envisions an ultimate ‘shining’ that illuminates the darkness of ignorance with a kind of mystical perception of life.” And this concept is one Morrissey says has guided his own work.

The other major piece in *A Poet’s Journey* is the essay of the same name. Much in these fifteen or so pages resonates in me in reflecting on poetic practice. Points to consider include: Morrissey’s voluntary youthful self-isolation in order to survive; his definition of form as a container for content, with the two working together (Yes!); and confessional poetry, which he defines (quoting Frank Bidart) as being “... concerned with ‘the making of the soul.’” This is the definition of confessional poetry to which I ascribe.

Morrissey also makes a point of honouring the ancestors. His communicate most in winter in dreams or as ghosts. As do mine. Since early March, both my dead parents have been hovering around and my friend Dan, five years dead, appeared in a dream only to leave on an errand for me. So like him.

One of the few false notes (for me) in Morrissey’s system of poetics appears in this essay when he discusses male/female relations. “Marriage between a man and a woman – the expression of male and female energy – is a basic archetype of life. To deviate too far from the archetypes is to lose touch with what connects us to humanity, wisdom, and the eternal.” Huh?

I wish he’d given a wider interpretation of “the expression of male and female energy” to include individuals who see those energies in persons of the same gender as they, or as mingling and balancing satisfactorily in one individual. And, as a long unpartnered person myself, who saw her creative energies explode once freed of being partnered, we must agree to disagree not only on the definition of traditional marriage but on the whole concept. Or even (could we?) leave gender out of the equation altogether. But there it is.

Besides the poetics, I also enjoyed the concrete poems scattered throughout the book. “Regard as Sacred” takes the phrase “regard as sacred the disorder of my mind” (Rimbaud) and stutters its words into a cityscape above and reflection of same below by scrunching letters to form skyscrapers. Lots of depth here.

Another two poems – “amorphous space 1” and “amorphous space 2” – arrange the letters from sun, moon, stars and space into blocks that are arranged then carved out, leaving, yes, space, where the reader/viewer can wander. I like them.

Morrissey’s concrete poems were created in the 1970s, as was his essay “The Purpose of Experimental Poetry.” Here’s what engaged me from that piece. That experimental poetry communicates changing times while remaining timeless. That experimentation with form must come without preconceived notion. That “... poets don’t have merely one voice or style, but several over a lifetime ...”

Towards the end of the book is “Believe Nothing,” an author statement in point form. “I have lived the nihilist’s life: anonymous, introverted, and appalled.” “Believing anything makes people stupid.” Yeah!

There are other essays on craft: finding voice; confessional poetry; poetry as the voice of the human soul; visionary poetry. All are interesting to read. And in some of the memoirs and eulogies we find traces of history of the poetry circle(s) in Montréal over the last few generations. (For those of us who were not members of those groups.)

After spending a good number of plague days steeped in *A Poet’s Journey*, I now want to seek out more of Stephen Morrissey’s poems. Perhaps you may wish to do the same.