

FRANK DAVEY
Western University, London, ON

(Reading) Language as Visual Art

Keywords

parataxis
visual writing
Edwardian postcards
propositional poetics

Abstract

Poet Frank Davey demonstrates how paratactic syntax can be used in combination with visual images to create hybrid art works that occupy an ambiguous position between writing and visual art. The foundation of his work here is the Edwardian postcard with its often unlikely foreshadowing of 21st-century history. These postcard poems are part of his larger work in ‘propositional poetics,’ in which since 1982 he has been punctuating poems or composing them entirely of propositions which cannot all possibly be ‘true’ in a referential sense, but which create a field of contrasting or clashing meanings and assumptions.

Parataxis

Groucho had hailed two cabs.

Parataxis is the condition of things before interpretation. It invites interpretation. Words were not always arranged in paragraphs. Points are multiple – focal points, tipping points, sandpoints, debating points, starting points, talking points, melting points, vanishing points. An array or field of meaning is created rather than one story.

Lists. Layers. Burdens. Shards. Objects may be fragments or may be discrete in themselves. The image of an alphabetic symbol. A picture of a conjugating verb. A complex and internationally obscure Canadian jest.

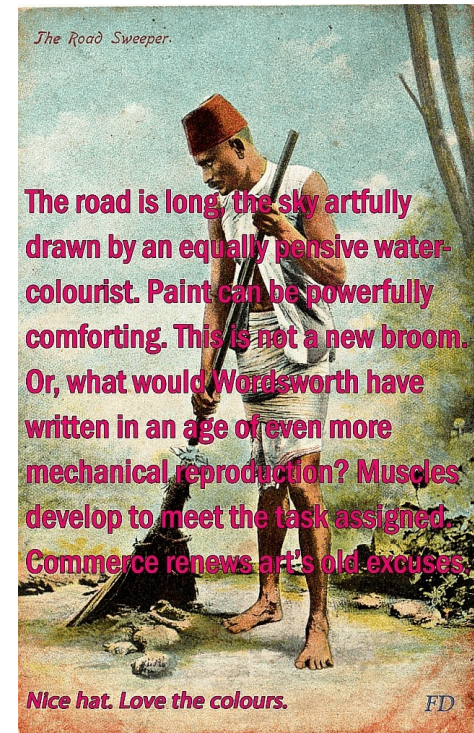
In 1985 I inherited a collection of about a thousand 1900-1925 postcards that my grandmother had collected, mostly before her marriage in 1909 and many from her brother in India where I had recently spent two months travelling. She had mounted most in three well-worn albums, four to a page, but left the hundred or so sent by my grandfather from various Flanders 1916-18 battlefronts unsorted in a box – creating two different forms of collage, with differing implications. Intrigued by the ideological messages carried by the images on the cards – stamps, postmarks, addresses, text, representation – I created a small postcard-shaped prose-poem sequence titled “Postcard Translations” (‘typeset’ on a Selectric typewriter) which was published in Toronto in 1988 and republished in Skopje in 1989 in a further translation into Macedonian. The translations merged the image and text sides of the cards and substituted keywords for the usual publisher detail.

March 25. The Post Office

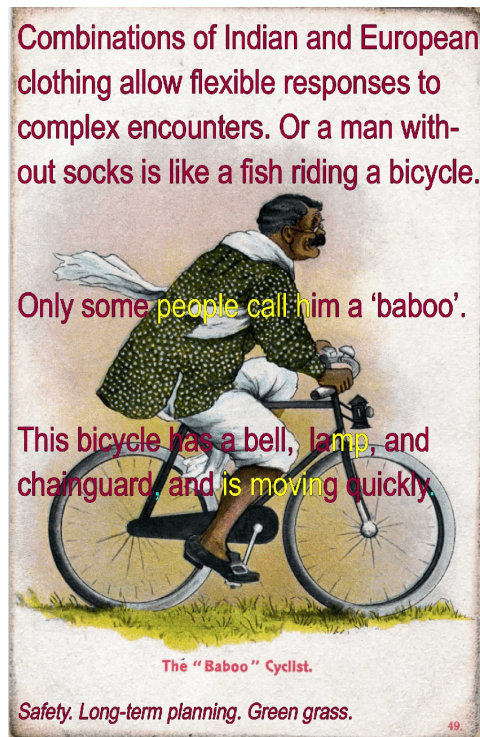
Efficient communication is an essential precedent for all advanced civilizations. Solid rock. In the nineteenth century various forms of ecclesiastical architecture, including domes, collonades, porticos, peristyles, were adopted for banks, post offices, museums and legislative buildings. Our trains also run on time. I miss you and the children very much, but I feel sure that you are looking after them well. Literacy creates the illusion of objectivity. No rain, no sleet, no snow. Writing is a seedbed of irony. During the 1880s, post offices sprouted up in every major city inexplicable splendours of Ionian white and gold.

Construction techniques. Courtship. Two-dollar bills.

Most of the original cards displayed considerable text and image – text that often seemed to exceed its apparent denotative function,¹ and images which ongoing history had curiously recontextualized, but in the 1980s it was difficult and expensive to reproduce such images in poetry books. I included four crude halftone images in *Postcard Translations*, but was envious of the use of displayed fragments of text in the paintings of the DeLaunays and Larionov, and more recently in Greg Curnoe’s rubber-stamp paintings such as his enormous 1968-69 triptych *View of Victoria Hospital, first series*.



1. The captions on the cards from India often implied that the person depicted was representative of a class, profession or religion. Those on Canadian cards often used the phrase “typical Canadian scene” or “a Canadian”



2. I also was coming to postcards differently, from text publishing, and without any quarrel with galleries or curation.

There was an additional layer of non-lexical signification possible in such work, one that wasn't apparent when a text is inscribed on a page or surface but became visible when the page itself or signboard or poster or postcard was itself represented and displayed. Part of that additional signification was that excess of meaning which ostensibly denotative words could carry. Another was the initial act of creating that cited text, usually invisible, but which citation could imply or even reveal. Another part was the extra remove from that act which the viewer was placed in by the painter's own act of citation – the viewer looks at a representation of a representation of words and can be simultaneously aware of agency of both the painter and that of the constructor of the text the painter has depicted. The displayed text signifies in both the past and the present, sometimes in more than one past – visual citation and juxtaposition creating a suggestively vague seriality. These are irreducible meanings that are beyond paraphrase but not necessarily beyond translation as representation.

In the mid-1990s I began working with various Windows typesetting programs to place scanned postcard images behind a text – now envious of the watercolours of phrases that Louise Bourgeois was exhibiting as multi-panel collages. My first constructions imprinted the image on the page as a monochrome watermark over which I could key-in the text. Converted to pdf, these were easy for magazines to publish in black-and-white but usually dull visually.

I also experimented with PowerPoint, but returned to the watermark technique to create my 2004 Derrida memorial, using only text taken from the back cover of his *Aporias* and the image from a 1900 postcard. Here I actually wanted to use grey tones, in addition to radically fragmenting and shifting the implications of the cover blurb. I initially printed this poem in a 24" x 30" art print format, with the text in red, and later published it on my website.

In 2000 I moved most of my India postcard work to Photoshop despite it having, as did Powerpoint, limited typesetting resources, such as no characters with accents. I sometimes projected the results behind me as I gave public readings, creating random juxtapositions. I exhibited them as 17" x 22" prints at the Université de Paris III and at the Simon Fraser University Art Gallery in Vancouver. I printed many of them as new postcards – a kind of 'back formation' – and both mailed them to friends and gave them away at my readings. The colour range of Photoshop enabled me to arrange text in shapes such as India's flag.

Mailing my renewals of old postcards was also a renewal of forgotten histories, including that of the postcard as a communications genre – and a reminder of how short the popular and political lives of histories can be. At present the early role of the postcard is filled by Twitter and Instagram, through neither encourages senders to (though of course they may anyway) to accompany the message with a prepackaged ideological image. I was also mailing them some 60 years after the heyday of correspondence art,² at a time when much of that 'mail art' community was migrating from the postal system to the internet. My work is similar I suppose in being mostly given away – on the internet, as books, or as postcards; posters, and far prefer to be creating rather than distributing.

Derrida 2004

Would be properly mine. Derrida has repeatedly. Be an appropriate question. Various ways. The analytic of death. "My death – is it possible?" Have and account for. Between singularity and generality. Would be properly mine. That is the question. The whole of his work. The analytic of death. A new frontier. How is this question. The apoetical obligation. Theorizations of death. Must take place. More properly mine. Histories of death. The trans-national trans-cultural law. A figure of death. An analytical tour de force. The aporia of "my death." Must take place from now on. Without compromising it. Broached the question. The corresponding necessity. And yet to respect. And death. One of the aporetic experiences. Nothing closer. "My death." How and by whom. How this figure. How is this.

I hope you are having nice weather. The crypt is not a natural place but the enduring history of an artifice, an architecture, an artefact. Murder on the Orient Express. The dreadful well marked by a few boards. Glad uncle is better. Designed by the Italian sculptor Marochetti. White was of course the necessary symbol. Especially on Mondays.

THE OUT SIDE MEMORIAL WELL, CAWNPORE

je me souviens
tu te souviens
il se souvient
nous nous souvenons

A MEMORY OF
OLD QUEBEC
ORIGINAL 'CHEN-DOR' HOUSE QUEBEC

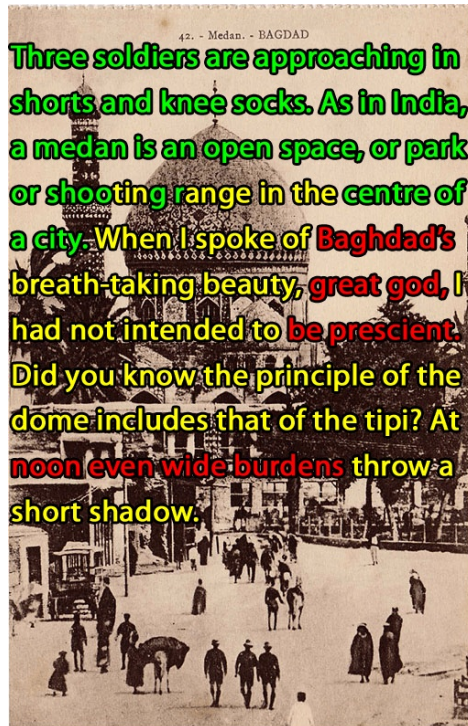
FD

Paul Peel
Nancy Huston
Mavis Gallant
Jean-Paul Riopelle
Anne Hebert

GRAND RIVER STREET NORTH—PARIS, ONTARIO, CANADA

FD

PA 3



Propositional Poetics

All of my major recent poetry work has concerned “propositional poetics,” which I first envisioned while writing parts of my *The Abbotsford Guide to India* (1986) 1982-85, and developed further when inserting cryptic statements of apparent fact into the narrative poems of my 1991 collection *Popular Narratives*, which included an elegy to bpNichol and a history of Bavarian ‘princess’ Agnes Bernauer (versions of both are currently on my website). The statements punctuated the narratives as stand-alone textual events that offered possible context or qualification or complication without necessarily elaborating the story. By my next book, *Cultural Mischief* (1996), I was constructing poems entirely out of seemingly factual propositions that were not necessarily true or false, and often only syntactically related to one another. These often resembled the propositions of multiple-choice exercises. The concluding poem of this collection was “Multiple Choice Games for Hiroshima Day,” currently viewable online (<http://www.theeastvillage.com/tc/davey/p1.htm>).

When the invasion of Afghanistan began in 2002 I began haunting eBay to add to the few old Afghani postcards that were in my grandmother’s collection. The invasion generated so much text that I could overlay the images entirely with found sentences either from the events or elsewhere, displaying each sentence again as an act or proposal rather than discursive information.

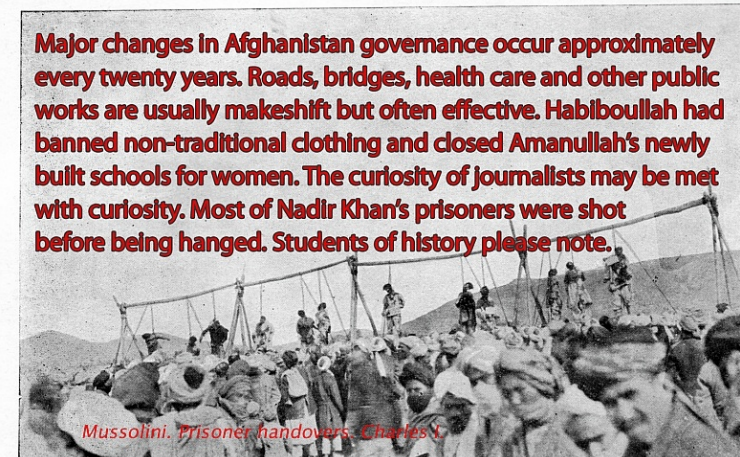
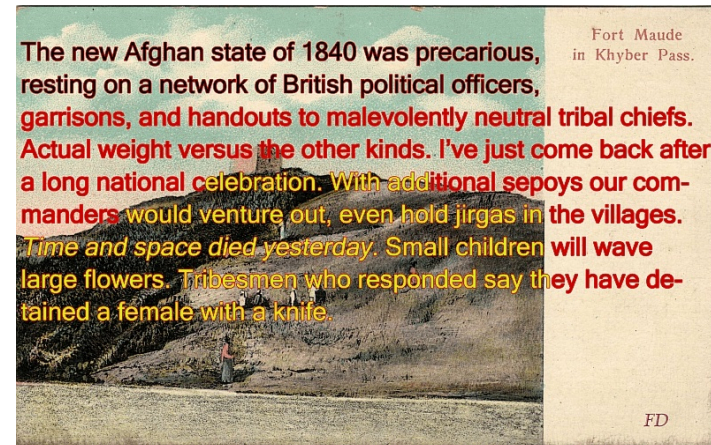
No hierarchy among propositions.

I published some of this new work in *The Capilano Review* but could not find a book publisher willing to undertake an expensive poetry book in colour. So I eventually printed the series myself as part of a chapbook (*Afghanistan War: True False – or Not*) of propositional statements and gave it away as a seasonal gift to friends and put a pdf of the book on my website.

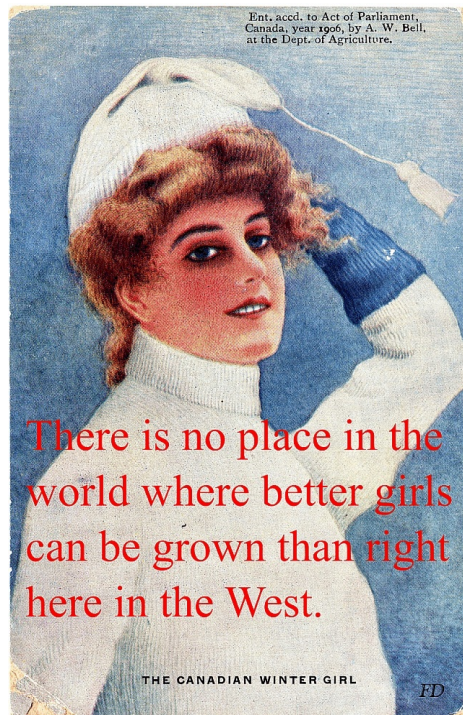
Serial Concurrency / Concurrent Seriality

I realized during making this the Afghanistan book that I was actually blending collage and seriality. We never avoid seriality – we are born before we die. We start a book and later stop work and declare it ‘completed.’ The book form is a machine that forces its pages into sequences. We start a war and later someone declares completion/victory. But my postcard images and the overlaid texts were also juxtaposing rather than discursively connecting with those on the other cards. Interwoven actions have interwoven consequences. The pages one after the other were amplifying more than they were continuing. Implying seriality, I put the crossing of the 1918 Afghan ‘boundary’ card (above) at the beginning and a Battle of Maiwand card at the end – the losing battle which had marked the British declaration of victory in 1880. But in doing this I was also collaging three separate invasions.

I

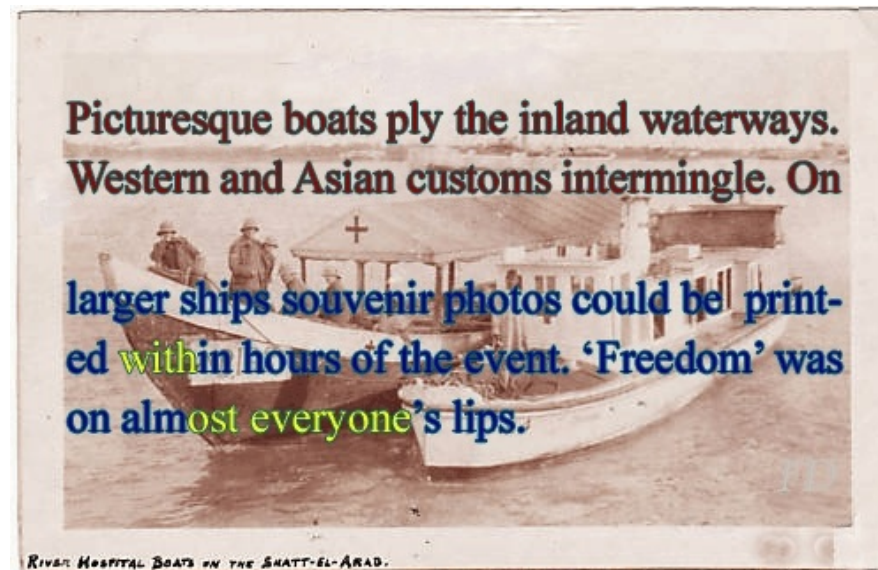


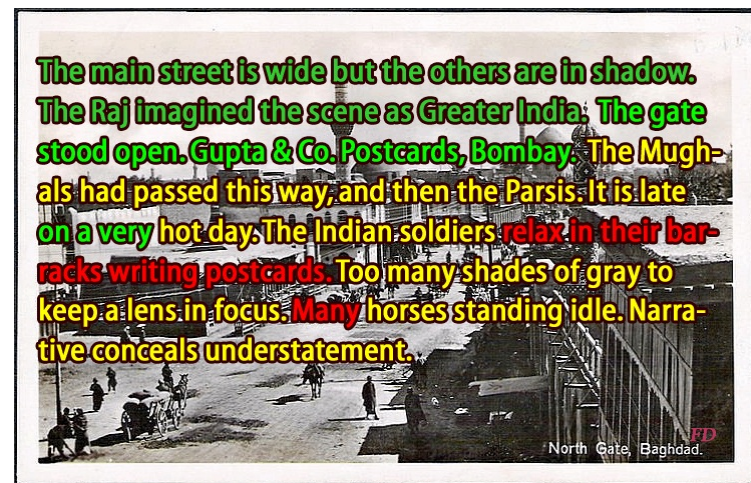
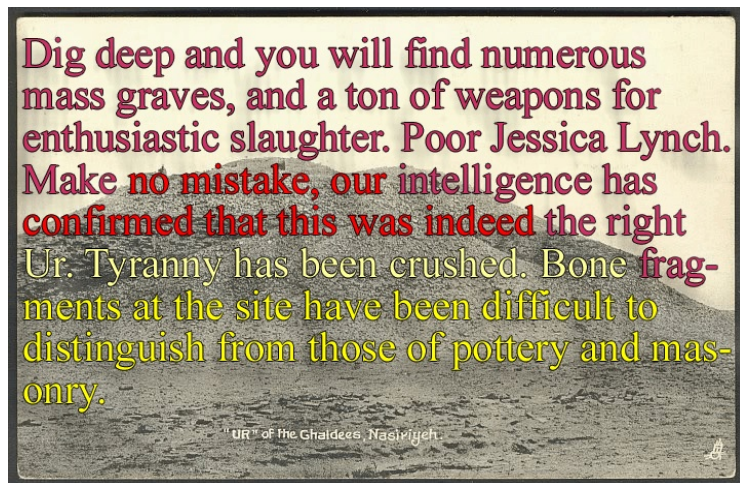
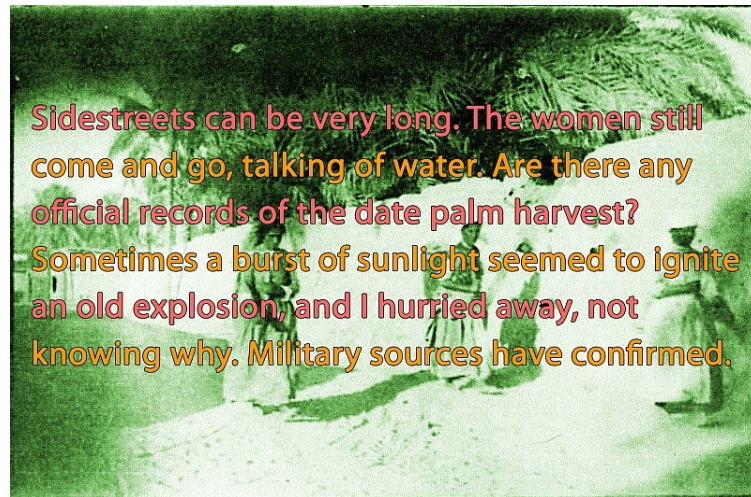
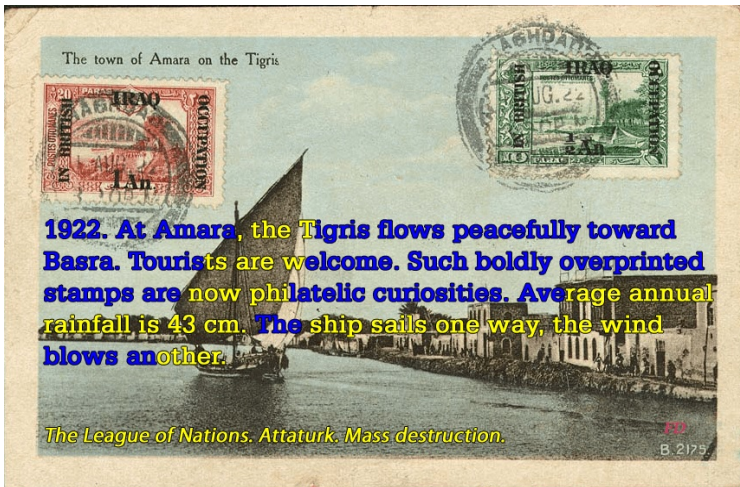
Habiboullah et ses ministres suppliciés.

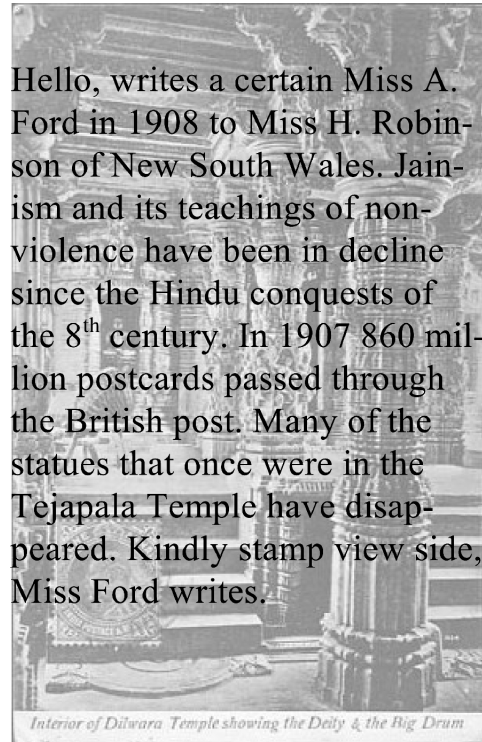


Seriality is probably for most writers today the default mode. Certainly it is the popular mode – the news story, the background story, the feature story. And a popular academic mode – the empowering of once-abjected individuals to tell their ‘stories,’ the encouraging of “life-writing.” Then there’s the short lyric poem, both popular and academic. And essays in literary criticism which are often narratives of an interpretation or narratives of the posing of a question or of the solving of a problem. In Canada only poets such as myself or Robert Kroetsch have created modular or sharply juxtapositional literary essays, his “For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem” probably the best known. Such models are usually dismissed as one of those odd things that poets do. When I write them I imagine I am writing a group of prose poems. In Toronto in 1983 poet bpNichol shuffled the pages of one of his essays, as if it were a deck of cards, before presenting it. The shuffling I thought symbolized the labour that writers must undertake to avoid the too easy, overly focalized, and distortingly concentrated narrative.

On the 2003 invasion of Iraq the internet and airwaves were filled with a thousand new scraps of unwittingly propositional discourse. Cascades of juxtaposing news ‘stories.’ More concurrent serialities. I gathered postcards, most of them – ironically – from the often disastrous British invasion of 1915-18. Scenic tanks and ruined corpses intermingled with confident voices on television screens. Meaning could be layered line upon line. Quotations could be coloured or puzzling.







Hello, writes a certain Miss A. Ford in 1908 to Miss H. Robinson of New South Wales. Jainism and its teachings of non-violence have been in decline since the Hindu conquests of the 8th century. In 1907 860 million postcards passed through the British post. Many of the statues that once were in the Tejapala Temple have disappeared. Kindly stamp view side, Miss Ford writes.

3. The “Grand River Street” and “Original Chien d’Or House” cards reproduced here earlier are also from that gift book.

The limited edition chapbook that I printed and gave to friends that year was titled *How We Won the War in Iraq*.

RELIABLE UTTERANCE

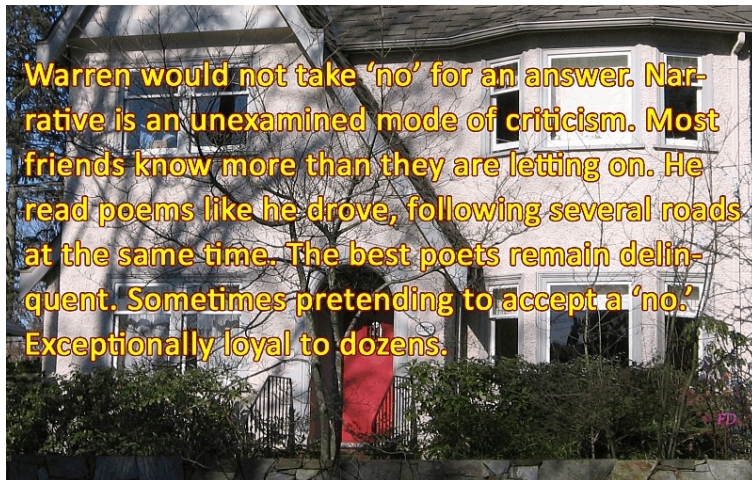
Every sentence uttered or printed can be mistrusted or may indeed be provisionally reliable. Often the handwritten messages on postcards attempt no reference to the accompanying image. Those messages don’t always reach their intended recipient but the images always do. When the eye focuses on one piece of text or image it may be quickly drawn away by another. There may be no place to stop and none to relax or rest. “Those detours on the path to death may well be what gives our present picture of the phenomenon of life” (Derrida 79)

Heavily publicized events help organize images and words into issues, books, slide shows, websites. The name or image we have for something may be precisely what fails to capture it. I make propositions about myself and try them out against one another. *Risky Propositions* was the title of a book I published in 2005.

Placing text with image suggests ‘caption’ which can be intriguing text in itself and be itself (put) on display. The word ‘caption’ is reductive and relational. Multiple captions can be propositional. The propositions at best become part of the image or array of images. Propositions can precede the image without the image becoming illustrational. I recently made a visual poem for Warren Tallman, my 1960s mentor, by photographing his old home and overlaying it with proposed recollections.

This was part of my 2011 gift book, *Canonical Canadian Literature*, in which for the first time I mixed my own photographs with historical postcards, overlaying text on each. “The Canadian Winter Girl” card reproduced on an earlier page here is also from that series, overlaid with a slightly altered quotation from a Robert Kroetsch poem.³ Below are several more from that series including a postcard published by the newly built Canadian Pacific Railway around 1900, a period during which they were paying displaced First Nations members to camp beside the line and display their culture – creating a commercially useful juxtaposition. Among the quotations in this poem that some readers may recognize is a phrase from singer Gordon Lightfoot’s “Canadian Railroad Trilogy.”

Warren would not take 'no' for an answer. Narrative is an unexamined mode of criticism. Most friends know more than they are letting on. He read poems like he drove, following several roads at the same time. The best poets remain delinquent. Sometimes pretending to accept a 'no.' Exceptionally loyal to dozens.



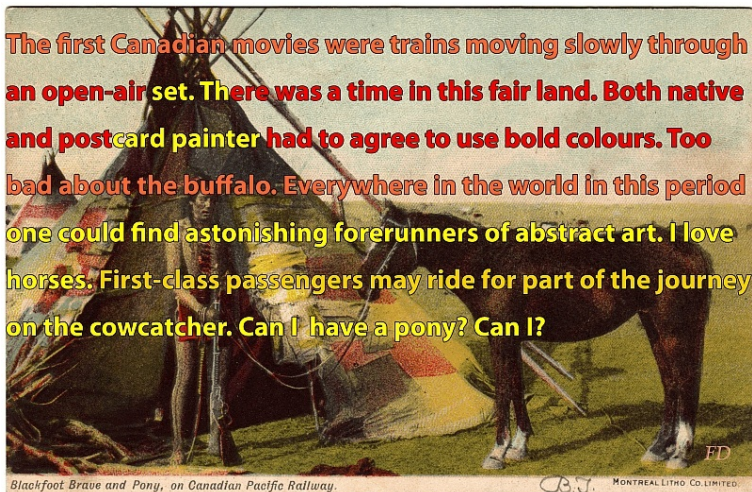
A Blue Ribbon Prize Winner in Canada.

Even in its first decades the new nation makes its mark: Too big for the young woman and too small for the bull, the cup pointed to one of the incommensurabilities of Canadian agriculture. Many prizes have been won for a lot of bull. Blue ribbons were awarded to dogs, pigs, ocean liners and coffee beans.

Milton Acorn. Martha Ostenso. Canadian bacon.

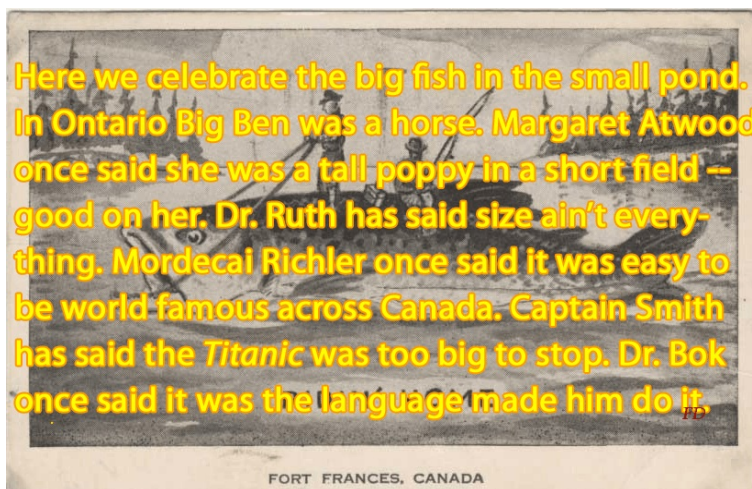


The first Canadian movies were trains moving slowly through an open-air set. There was a time in this fair land. Both native and postcard painter had to agree to use bold colours. Too bad about the buffalo. Everywhere in the world in this period one could find astonishing forerunners of abstract art. I love horses. First-class passengers may ride for part of the journey on the cowcatcher. Can I have a pony? Can I?



Blackfoot Brave and Pony, on Canadian Pacific Railway.

Here we celebrate the big fish in the small pond. In Ontario Big Ben was a horse. Margaret Atwood once said she was a tall poppy in a short field -- good on her. Dr. Ruth has said size ain't everything. Mordecai Richler once said it was easy to be world famous across Canada. Captain Smith has said the *Titanic* was too big to stop. Dr. Bok once said it was the language made him do it.



FORT FRANCES, CANADA

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