

## John C. Goodman

“Our shared reality is largely a linguistic structure. We shape reality by the way we use language. As our language evolves, what we call “reality” evolves along with it.”

John C. Goodman discusses poetry, language and the e-zine **ditch**, with Kane X. Faucher.



**John C. Goodman** is the editor of **ditch**, an online magazine promoting avant-garde and experimental poetry, and the editor to Trainwreck Press which publishes chapbooks of avant-garde poetry.

He has published a novel, *Talking to Wendigo* (Turnstone Press, 2008). His poems, stories and essays have appeared in many magazines. He currently resides in St John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador.



**Kane X. Faucher** currently lives and works in London, Ontario. His activities span academic and creative enterprises, most notably in writing, continental theory, visual art, and music. He currently holds two degrees in philosophy and is working toward his doctorate in Theory and Criticism at the University of Western Ontario.

Kane X. Faucher is an FIMS/MIT Instructor; a freelance writer for *Scene Magazine*; co-editor of *The Raging Face*; co-editor of *The Drill Press*; and serves on the Editorial Board of *Mad Hatter's Review*.

He is the author of *Urdoxa* (2004) *Codex Obscura* (2005) *Fort & Da* (2006), *Calqueform*, *Astrozoica*, *De Incunabliad* (2007) and *Jonkil Dies*, *The Vicious Circulation of Dr Catastrophe* (2008).

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**Kane X. Faucher:** The byline of **ditch**, announces “poetry that matters.” Assuming here that you are being playfully essentialist, could you unfurl for us what you mean by matter? And, by matter, do we mean something “substantial” in the substance category, or of a different sort?

**jcg:** I do a lot of things on the spur of the moment. As I was setting up the website for **ditch**, it asked for a tag line so I typed in “the poetry that matters.” There was no more thought given to it than that, so it is deliciously surreal that it reveals deeper levels of unconscious meaning. In part it was a reaction to Carmine Starnino’s trashing of avant-garde poetry in the introduction to *The New Canon* and his hatchet-job review of *Shift and Switch*. I wanted to remind people that, in the face of aggressive conservatism, experimental poetry is important. It’s vital to resisting tyranny and oppression, to promoting personal freedom. Histori-

cally, it has always been the avant-garde artists, the innovators, that have mattered – no one remembers the run of the mill, middle of the road, mainstream academy artists.

**KXF:** Some would most likely and wrongly attribute to the byline some kind of arrogant largesse, but that is quite quickly dispelled by the way you produce the site – which seems one part register of emergent writers and second part lovely poetic sandbox. You certainly depict a vitalist sort of poetic tomography in your array of experimental elements. Do you think the current “distaste” for experimental work is tied to ideological shifts, or would you wager that there may be a few more reasons at play that have contributed to this “simplicity-over-all turn”?

**jcg:** Complex question. A full answer would require a far greater understanding of cultural dynamics than I

possess. As a perhaps superficial approach to a response, I think these things go in cycles. Once it was possible for writers like bpNichol and Nicole Brossard to win the Governor General's Award, but since then the world has grown more conservative. We even have a government in Canada which is openly disdainful of the arts. But striving for freedom is basic to our nature. Repressive regimes can't last. We are keeping the flame alive through these dark times.

I also think it has something to do with education. Appreciation of any artform requires learning something about it and I don't believe experimental poetry is adequately covered in the school curriculum.

It's funny, I never thought of the tag line as arrogant, I always thought of it as a pun, "ditch the poetry that matters," as an injunction to throw out all pre-conceived notions of what is important and venture into new territory. I suppose it could be perceived as arrogant in that "the poetry that matters" implies that other poetry doesn't matter, the way the title of the anthology *The New Canon* implies that it contains the only officially sanctioned work and everything else can be dismissed, or the way an anthology like *The Best of Canadian Poetry* implies that anything not in the anthology is mediocre or poor, or the way a journal like *Malahat Review* can bill itself as "Essential Poetry," implying that anything not published by them is inconsequential. But I believe that the work in **ditch**, does matter, it is important, it is showing us the way into the future.

The original idea behind the **ditch**, site was to have a place to showcase Canadian avant-garde poetry and make it more accessible. Canadian poetry on the whole has very poor international exposure – it is rarely included in international anthologies. A few Canadian poets have achieved international acclaim – Christian Bök, Steve McCaffery, Erin Moure, Nicole Brossard, among others – but for the most part the Canadian avant-garde is marginalized both at home and abroad. I wanted to provide a space where Canadian experimental poets could present their work to the world. That's why the site is schizophrenically divided into Canadian and International poetry, I wanted the Canadian work to stand out – not to imply that it was better than anyone else's, just as a way of raising international awareness of Canadian poets. So

the original focus was not on discovering new talent, but to show what was already being done. It's wonderful that along with the established writers I have been able to publish some dynamic new poets.

**KXF:** Certainly! The method of marginalizing our Canadian poets has seemingly taken on the polite garb of exclusion-by-indifference or a patent antipathy to promoting the burgeoning stock of cultural producers either at home or abroad. Some would feign to shift accountability for this bottleneck of production to the ideological landscape and the convenient excuse (never explanation) of decreases in arts funding. But, if anything, your efforts with **ditch**, seems to prove that the promotion and dissemination of emerging contemporary avant-garde poets can happen without being bankrolled by arts councils. Providing the plethora of great and inventive poets in a venue kind of makes you a symposiarch, but not in any heavy-handed way. But, in your estimation, why do poetry vehicles like *Malahat et al* insist on portraying an essentialist and elitist face upon Canadian poetics when we simply don't sell that well abroad? It seems counterintuitive to rely on closed shop policies and inner circle politburo tactics when nationally we don't seem to prosper by imposing these artificial and highly subjective divisions between what these editors decide is "good" and "poor." What are some other ways current Canadian poets can better get exposure? And, of course, since you've probably been in the poetry racket for longer than I have been alive, could we ask you for some anecdotes on what Canadian poetry used to be compared to how it is now?

**jeg:** Actually, I'm not well known in the poetry world. When I started **ditch**, I was concerned that I would be brushed off as a nobody, but on the whole people have been very welcoming and supportive. The advantage of being a nobody is that I stand outside all cliques and movements and schools and so can publish a wide range of writers without focusing on any particular aesthetic. Hopefully this comes across as presenting a broader view rather than making the magazine seem scattered and unfocused. I don't aspire to be a purveyor of taste, just to show what is out there.

As a culture, we are pretty obsessed with competition and the "best." It's important to win gold medals, to win the Stanley Cup, to win the Griffin Prize, to win

Governor General's Award, so it is not surprising that it seems so important to class poetry as "good" and "bad." And traditional tools of literary analysis promote such judgements – in *The New Canon*, Carmine Starnino repeatedly refers to "good poems."

Canadian poetry on the whole is pretty dull. Not that we don't have accomplished writers, we have many excellent writers, but they are predominantly mired in the typically Canadian quietest, introspective, syntactical, narrative, nature imagery mold. Part of the problem with why Canadian writing is given such short-shrift internationally is that it is largely derivative and imitative of foreign sources. In a review of *The New Canon* (PoetryReviews.ca), James Pollock points out that even the "best" poets in that anthology are imitative and derivative of international poets such as James Merrill, Elizabeth Bishop, Amy Clampitt, Marianne Moore, John Ashbery, Robert Frost, Sylvia Plath, and Philip Larkin.

While Pollock mentions debts to Canadians Al Purdy and Daryl Hine, where is the influence of Milton Acorn, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Leonard Cohen, Earle Birney, Dorothy Livesay, not to mention bpNichol, David UU, Robert Kroetsch, Joe Rosenblatt or the host of other brilliant Canadians?

This isn't to say that there is anything wrong with international influence; on the contrary, it is essential to our continued artistic growth. But from these external influences we have never crafted a Canadian voice. It's like we've been buying Scotch whiskey, watering it down and trying to sell it back to Scotland. It's not surprising that no one is interested.

Government funding is essential to the development of the arts, but funding is inadequate to the task of reaching to the fringes of artistic expression. So we have to seek alternative methods of marketing. Canadian poets seem to have been slow to embrace the internet as means of promotion and career advancement; we are still very much a print culture. I think Canada needs to catch up electronically. I also think that we have to invest more in critical exegesis and education, informing people how to approach avant-garde poetry. Ever since the early twentieth century there have been those who have complained about the obscurity of modern poetry and I don't think enough has been done to make avant-garde poetry accessible.

In *The New Canon*, Carmine Starnino dismisses avant-garde poetry as a "zoo of rampant esotericisms" whose "embrace of...nonsense" leads to poetry that "always looks like a random trawl through an information-processing textbook."

But the question to ask is, why would a poet write something that appears to be nonsense? On closer inspection we find that there is a reason behind the rampant esotericisms, that the poet is telling us something about the limits of language to convey meaning and how language can be used to convey meaning in ways beyond the scope of conventional syntax. There is intention behind the nonsense. Carmine Starnino is an educated and erudite scholar, so one would expect him to understand the concepts behind experimental poetics. The fact that he appears not to indicates that, although we have been producing the work, we haven't been backing it up with the critical literature necessary to have it taken seriously in the broader culture.

**KXF:** There is indeed a strength in emerging as anonymous, to become as Deleuze and Guattari say, "clandestine" – which is the end result and purpose of faciality. It makes you emerge as CanPo's "dark horse candidate" in some ways. But when poetry is reduced to matters of taste, certainly this cannot stand as a critical assessment of literary production since taste is...well...not very precise since all it can gain as a question is to determine what one likes and dislikes without any rigorous qualification. But this derivative quality – much a process of emulators doubtless trying to get some form of attention, and so we cannot be too severe – is troubling. It makes Canadian poetics look like a one-trick pony, the bastion of serial repetition. And, indeed, we are in agreement that any poet worth the time and effort of their productions is not attempting to "trick" the establishment – or anyone else – that drivel is equivalent to some poetic meaning. Starnino seems to have some company with Alan Sokal who lambasted continental theorists like Derrida as writing gibberish (we leave alone here the anti-European prejudices). But I think – and this is where my question reposes – we need to reassess what is even meant by "nonsense": is it the case that all that is not rendered intelligible according to certain logical and reductionist discourses should be given this label just because it cannot fit it into its silly dialectic of progress? That would be patently stagnant

modernist in appearance. Are those who label what avant-garde poets are doing as nonsense actually trying to grant a favour to them by marginalizing them, attempting to position them in a discourse of (intelligible) rebellion? That would be a shrewd and back-handed publicity stunt (that fails).

There may be no sense in kicking the stuffing out of Starnino, in the end, if only because he seems to appear as a recurrent type in the history of poetry. Every poetic leap forward of any experimental and provocative nature has been attended by a legion of nay-saying critics, and those who from the safely sinecure positions in tradition fear the new. What is not engaged has no chance of being understood; what is not understood becomes an object of dubiety or suspicion; suspicion breeds fear; fear breeds indifference or contempt; contempt breeds the very people who, when confronted with why they hate poet x, repose on some empty blandishment which is really masking the ugliest thing of all: judgement as purely a matter of taste.

But let's shelve all this negative jangling – especially since what you are doing is very much a positive affirmation of what poetry and poets can do as the avant-garde once again is within mere strokes of achieving parity (one hopes). I'd like to uncork a few more questions. What is next for **ditch**, and Trainwreck Press? How can poets spread the word? And, could you say something about your experiences in developing this sleek-and-chic chapbook series under the Trainwreck imprint?

**jcg:** I don't think opposition to the avant-garde is an artistic issue, I think it's an emotional and psychological issue. People get entrenched in ideas and no amount of logic, persuasion, pleading or justification will sway them. We can see the same kind of resistance to new ideas in religion and politics, to mention only two areas. People frame the world in a certain way and can't cope with the psychologically uncertainty and emotional upheaval of changing it.

Ultimately we don't have any choice but to change because our language is transmuting around us. Blogging, texting, posting are changing the way people write, spell, use syntax – how words and meanings are linked together. Language is a shifting sand.

Our shared reality is largely a linguistic structure. We shape reality by the way we use language. As our language evolves, what we call "reality" evolves along with it.

Since you and I have never met, in your reality I exist only as language, I am a linguistic construct. So I don't think that we need to redefine nonsense, just reframe it, provide a relational context that allows reference within the linguistic structure to show that, bound by a given set of constraints or intentions or parameters, it isn't nonsense at all. Meaning is contextual – somewhere within all these words I actually exist.

As for the future of **ditch**, things are pretty fluid. I don't have a set programme so the magazine can develop in many directions. I am limited by time, energy, depression and finances so any expansion would require taking on other editors. The thing I would like most is to pay contributors, but that requires expertise in grant writing and would also involve another level of accounting and accountability, so I would probably need a financial wizard on board to look after that end of things. I would like to publish more on poetics and some book reviews. But, of course, my real ambition is to start a rock band and go on tour.

Again, with Trainwreck Press, I am limited by available resources. I have been overwhelmed by the demand for chapbooks. There is a real need there to be filled and I hope more micro-presses spring up to get more people into print.

How can poets spread the word? A significant number of visits to ditch, are through links on blogs and personal websites, so establishing a webwork of links is an important part of marketing. With every new poet added to the site, a potential new network of friends and supporters is tapped, so continuing to post new writers is crucial. Every time someone submits the site to Stumbleupon there is a huge increase in visitors, but whether they are actually interested in poetry or not I don't know. We really are dealing with a fairly small target audience and because of that, word of mouth seems to be the most effective way of promoting the site.