

correction line, Dennis Cooley

Agorareview

this is our country
it is here we fall
into place

In his new poetry collection *correction line* (Saskatoon SK: Thistledown, 2008), Winnipeg poet, editor and critic Dennis Cooley works deeper and more overt through considerations of family and geographic tracings, highlighting hearth and home through poems that work through his own beginnings in Estevan, Saskatchewan (he dedicates the collection to his mentor, the late poet Eli Mandel, also from Estevan, as “first Estevan poet”), and through his family to his two young daughters, who have long moved out of the family home. Even from the beginnings of his published poetry, Cooley was working through prairie histories, prairie geographies and considerations of family, well back to his first collection *Leaving* (1980), that dealt with the death of his father, to *Irene* (1999), writing on the death of his mother, but two examples of one of the many threads that have worked through his poetry over the years.

In *correction line*, he sees both the line as one to be reworked, corrected, just as he references the actual lines of correction that line their way through his geographic prairies. As I’ve said before, to consider the poetry of Dennis Cooley is, among other things, to reconsider space, as well as the vernacular voice, and twisting of the language through bad jokes and puns, taking each further than any other poet would. For Cooley, one of his essential movements is through the line, correct or otherwise, given best voice through his magnificent essay on line breaks in his collection of essays, *The Vernacular Muse* (Winnipeg MB: Turnstone Press, 1987). In the title poem he writes, “it was at the correction line / they made their mistake / big mistake you might say,” continuing a narrative of geographic surveys in poetic form, Cooley writing his poetic surveys over the same terrain, fielding out his lines from all points in, out and between his Estevan and Winnipeg. Or, in another piece, referencing both geographic lines and the poetic line of American poet Charles Olson, writing:

/an O pening
of the field/

*Reviewed by rob mclennan

Prairie Books Now (Fall/winter 2008)

As defined by the Dominion Land Survey, a correction line is a device used to compensate for the curve of longitude. It’s also the name of the latest book by poet, theorist, and teacher Dennis Cooley.

The poetry collection continues Cooley’s interest in balancing wit, form, and reminiscence.

Of the poems, Cooley says that “quite a few of them play with notions of creation, of how we might shape things, what it means maybe to write in ways that respond to the Prairie, yet are informed by what has been happening in poetry and literary thinking over the last 30 or 50 years, or more.”

The collection is filled with place, “place all over the place,” Cooley admits. “Geography emerges quite a bit in *correction line*, partly because of that central symbol, the surveying lines that laid out the Prairies and that figure in our experience of the place ever since.

“But yes, place and family - they’re there quite a bit, aren’t they?” he adds. “These are terms largely by which we know the world and ourselves in the world.”

Like much of Cooley's work, many of the poems in *correction line* draw on his family history, a source that's responsible for some of his most emotionally compelling work.

"Often the family poems are deeply personal for me, personal and emotional," he says, "and in selecting what went into *correction line*, I was trying to gather bits and pieces that circulated around southern Saskatchewan, where I grew up and came into dreaming, and that brought into the mix my parents' generation and my generation, who lived in the area, and then more recently my wife and daughters who now have lived for many years in Winnipeg," he says.

"These are worlds that haunt me and in many instances that have been burnt into my brain from the time I was a little kid."

The poems in *correction line* are arranged in all sorts of ways on the page. "ploughing," for example, resembles a farmer's field with its gap running down the middle of the page, sometimes even splitting words in two.

"I take pleasure in seeing the sprinkle of ink on the page," he adds, "what formation it takes visually, and with what effect. I suppose the move is motivated by a sense that words are not simply semantic, referring to something else, but they (and even letters, of course) are materials you can move around graphically.

"So the spreading of letters might emulate a certain topography, or it might bring the reader into a series of confoundings and reopenings; it might create guesswork and adjustment along the line, an active and creative reading if you will."

Cooley has never lost his impulse to play.

"There's a real love for the ludic in me. For nonsense, some might say – and I may agree with them." – Quentin Mills-Fenn

Prairie Fire Review of Books, January 2009

Some writers begin their books with an epigraph. Not Cooley. He begins by citing a lengthy portion, if not the entirety of, Eli Mandel's poem "Life Sentence." But then Cooley has done the unorthodox throughout his writing career. He didn't get started writing poetry until somewhat later, but then burst onto the scene with two book-length poems and a chapbook within the space of about two years. And there is motive – two motives, actually – behind his citing this poem which, as he indicates, is by the "first Estevan poet." The first is that he wants to remind us that he is the second. The second, which should perhaps be first, is that the title for this book came from a line in Mandel's poem, reinforcing the image of Cooley as the second Estevan poet.

So the first poem in *Correction Line*, which is actually the second, is titled "on the way to estevan" and begins:

thistle in ditches
wait with dirt of the thirties
 silent
as children when they listen
 in winds
 on water from run off
sun & sounds
 trapped
 as march is
in nails of winter (9)

This is Cooley at his best. One must listen carefully to his words and his line breaks, because hidden within are immensities of meaning. Take "run off," for example. If he just wanted to refer to the water leaving the land, he would have spelled it as one word, "runoff." So, is this Cooley in a remorseful moment, castigating himself for having left the place of his birth? Note also the littering of rhymes, "dirt of the thirties," "run/sun," and the assonance in the first line, almost a rhyme —"thistle/ditch." The ampersand is a remnant of Cooley's fondness for the Black Mountain boys — Olson, Creeley, Duncan — the last of which was the subject of his PhD thesis. Note the freshness of the imagery "trapped/as march is/in nails of winter." Do you see in your mind's eye icicles hanging from the rims of houses? Cooley packs a lot into a very short space.

"grampa wilson fishing" is a lesson in line breaks, *The Vernacular Muse* remaining not just a memory but an active part of Cooley's present incarnation; for example, the break between the first two lines of the opening stanza:

the 3 jack 2 small 1 larger my grampa
wilson pulls 38 years out of the souris
slow bend at Possum's even then must
have been sour with heat and sludge though I
remember it as sweet (12)

As the first and last words of a line receive the most emphasis and, thereby, become the most important words of that line, Cooley has doubled the importance of his grandfather through the line break. He leaves us hanging as to the implications of the "38 years." Are we to take it that Cooley has returned in his memory to a time when he went fishing with his grandfather? Is he the "boy" referred to later on? Or is this Cooley's father, which would be more in line with the "38," in which case Cooley is fashioning an image? The "we" seems to imply the former but this is impossible, with the dangling "38" creating some difficulty for the reader. The second line break, which is brilliant, occurs in the last stanza of part ii:

& later/ preparing supper
when we are scaling
one of the little jacks

starts swimming
the slow & muddy water
in my mind (13)

This is one of Cooley's treats — the line that does double duty, the pivot upon which the poem depends — "one of the little jacks" both swimming and being scaled at the same time — and we don't question its rightness, it just fits.

The poem "ploughing" is a masterpiece, but impossible to cite. It is just right, and must be read to be believed, particularly the homage to bpNichols's *Martyrology* hidden within the words. And then there is the reference to Ashbery hidden within "cringe of morning": "in gravel & surprise & a truck" (26), the surprise of three unrelated things crashing into each other in a surreal pileup.

In "schemes of meridian," Cooley has taken everything he's ever written and perfected it, accelerating words into orbit. This poem is the pinnacle of his career. There are new things, techniques never tried before that leap from the page into the fluorescence of mind. Take this long litany of words:

cactus thistle practice epistle cat tails coat tails red coats talis man
tall men some bearded some apostles white men wade through
light nearly mire in sloughs under grasshoppers that thud against (35)

This is an eruption, the advent of a new volcano — and it works, all makes sense in a brilliant outspilling of the essence of the prairie — "yeah, talis man," tell us of your place of birth, images of the prairie coalescing in the mind — history, landscape becoming one within the words of Cooley.

To say that the writer is a fan of Cooley's is an understatement. The playfulness, the exuberance of his poetry is captivating. The joy with which he springs his words free is a thrill to the senses. Cooley has carved out his own niche in Canadian poetry, and this is his best book yet. — John Herbert Cunningham

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for *Malahat Review*, *Arc*, *Antigonish Review*, *Fiddlehead* and *The Danforth Review*, in the U.S. for *Quarterly Conversations*, *Rain Taxi*, *Rattle*, *Big Bridge* and *Galatea Revisits*, and in Australia for *Jacket*.

The Globe & Mail

... Dennis Cooley's *correction line* provides readers with an infinitely rewarding repository of both personal and pan-universal connections to "our country/ it is here we fall/ into place" and, for the gifted Estevan, Sask., poet (in his tribute to an equally blessed writer whose work continues to hold its own, Eli Mandel), "there is no beauty here only/ somebodies story corrected in red" (*cenotaph*). Still, Cooley's powerfully moving and stunningly evocative long poem renders memory mutable and the future a possibility looking for a reason to be recalled through the prism of the past-imperfect (since, for Cooley, time exists only when it paradoxically ceases to do so, a fact that speaks as much to his layered linguistic experiments as his effortless achievements as one of the truly profound "language poets" this country proudly calls her own). From *album*:

*pool of electricity fallen
from the bulb the arm
brown and soft
hairs where it's broken
the paper, the light
that would have been
the colour of albumin
there & not there
open the book falling
light falling out opens
scraps of light
scraped off faces
determined as wood
& cornered there
pages of the
mall the solemn faces
staring into eternity*

— Judith Fitzgerald

Judith Fitzgerald is at work on Points Elsewhere, a new collection of poetry to be published next year