

Listening With Courtesy: A Conversation with Tim Lilburn

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Article abstract

Tim Lilburn does not think of himself as a writer, but as someone who looks, or someone who engages in various contemplative acts. He uses essays to figure things out, to draw lines from one point to another, something the poem can't do, or would do quite awkwardly. Poetry, however, is necessary to the human condition, because without poetic attention, the world could become too clear, and this is dangerous. His most recent book, *Moosewood Sandhills* is full of imperatives and references to "necessity". Poetry is a "courteous" way of seeing, but for Lilburn, all writing is truth-telling, a response to the oddness and distance of things.

LISTENING WITH COURTESY: A CONVERSATION WITH TIM LILBURN

SCL/ÉLC Interview by Darryl Whetter

Born in Regina, Tim Lilburn now lives in Saskatoon and teaches philosophy and literature at St. Peter's College. He is the author of four books of poetry including Tourist to Ecstasy, which was shortlisted for the 1989 Governor General's Award. His most recent book, Moosewood Sandhills, received the Canadian Authors Association Award in 1995. As an essayist, Tim Lilburn edited the 1995 compilation Poetry and Knowing and is currently completing a book of essays on ecology and desire. He also serves as poetry editor at Grain.

Tim Lilburn was interviewed at the University of New Brunswick in February, 1996.

DW You write and speak about poetry as a "courteous" way of seeing. How does this notion of courtesy affect your work technically?

TL First of all, I don't think of myself as chiefly a writer. That strikes me as an empty category, it's an unfilled room — "writer." I think of myself as someone who looks, or someone who engages in various contemplative acts. That's my work. The writing is the sort of wake thrown by that ocular and contemplative momentum. . . . How does seeing what I do that way affect my work? The work has no shape before the look. The work is shaped by the contemplative exercise.

DW What about your attitude toward metaphor then? Let's consider that through the issue of rewriting: what happens there? You've had the contemplative response, it's announced a shape to you; in rewriting, are you perfecting that shape?

TL Lately I've been thinking of writing as truth-telling. So what is this thing that I'm trying to talk about *in truth*, what is the truest thing I can say about it? I find myself trying to think of the interiority of the thing. In January in Saskatchewan, for instance, in creek areas and swamp areas, the red of the red willow changes, takes on a kind of shyness or faintness. Well what is that *like*? I suggested to myself that the willow "goes in to the small room of its redness where there is no book."

DW You already started with a description of the redness as *shyness* and then moved to this image of the room. Is that movement part of the seeing gesture for you?

TL Well, maybe. I was also thinking of this redness as dropping its eyes when you look at it. It is an anthropomorphizing of the tree, though it's not an acquisition, or a wrenching, but a touching, or grasping, and a release. There's also something comical to me in that metaphor, there's a kind of hilarity. And somehow this hilarity feels like walking beside the thing.

DW Is "seeing with courtesy" a way to truth?

TL It is truth. The thing is more than your name for it and more than your ability to know it. It's more magnificent to you than your imagination of your advantage. It's just broader in so many ways so that approaching it — the river, the hills, the deer, anything — you are tempted to simply give up in front of it. But if you don't give up, can't do this, say, the thing has about it a kind of distance. Its sheer distance is a kind of violence; it thwarts what you pride most in yourself, your ability to comprehend, your ability to draw things toward you through language. All of these powers are humiliated as you approach the differentiated thing. And out of this humiliation comes courtesy. You are forced to give the thing back to itself and your ability to encase, hold, draw toward you, domesticate, is shaped; it is bent back on itself. So whether you put the thing down, letting go along with it a sense of yourself as central, or you have it torn out of your hand, you lose it. Eros is wooed by the thing and it hurtles forward; and wrapped around eros is language, comprehension, sense of order. Desire seems to be shaped by its own momentum and velocity, and as it moves along it just loses these very things, language and

so on, by which you thought it was constituted. Language, order, are stripped and impoverished by the wonderful distance of a thing in the world, as I say in one of the poems in *Moosewood Sandhills*, "Desire will be broken and will continue with a bright limp" [from "Restoration"]. I think that a sort of way-station for desire fairly well along into the erotic enterprise is humiliation, the sense of being impoverished. You may even welcome this sense, and this is the root of courtesy, a response to the oddness and distance of things.

DW Is eros towards a thing an eros towards peace?

TL What's the telos? Paradise. Another way of thinking of eros is as a nostalgia for paradise. In *The Symposium*, Plato says that eros is simply a lack, it's the awareness of a lack. It is the product, he has someone say, of this illicit relation between contrivance and poverty. Eros is always aware of not having all that it needs; it's always hungry, and it's cunning. There is a sense that he says everyone has (because everyone is erotic) that one is incomplete. This is terrible science — this story he has Aristophanes tell of our being ceaseless — but wonderful psychology because it explains this ache that accompanies everything that human beings do. Now what is this larger body that we lack? I suspect that it's not simply another person but is the rest of the world. There's been a severing and it hasn't been a god that's done it; it has been philosophers of the new science, people like Descartes, Bacon, and Kant, who have segmented human consciousness from the world. We have this nostalgia for a homecoming, a yearning for a sense of being in the world as if it were home.

DW Yet you personally encounter this through isolation.

TL I don't think you ever encounter it. I don't think the shining world of union is achievable. A couple of the features of desire are that it's protean and never satisfied. This is the whole point — desire is never satisfied. To somehow note the shape of the desire is to come as close to the object of the desire as you will ever come. Gregory of Nyssa, a church-father writing in the fourth century, speaks of *epektatis*, which is the unsatisfiability of elemental desire. He says, and I quote this at the back of *Moosewood Sandhills*, "the desire to see God is the vision of God." Nyssa also

says that even in eternity the desire to see God will not be satisfied. This desire that we're talking about, whatever its term is (and it even seems presumptuous to name it, but let's propose some names: Paradise, God, Wholeness, Living In The World As If It Were Home) the satisfaction of this desire, its shape, is somehow the failure to ever satisfy this desire. That is what the satisfaction of the desire is. One of the products of this desire's inability to satisfy itself in the way it anticipates satisfaction is this business of humiliation, of being altered, brought to virtue. This thing that starts out as a desire to know and a desire to have transmogrifies in its development simply into courtesy or decorum. The project to know resolves itself into a stance that is always craning, always epektatic, reaching, reaching, reaching, but decorous and courteous because it is aware it has so little.

DW Where does the poem enter that reach?

TL It's the wake. It's also a way to be courteous. Often I see poems as the tip of delight. What we're talking about here is ravishment. The excitement of delight sometimes goes immediately into language; it's a cheering, or a praising, just happiness. Or else it's a kind of touching of the thing.

DW Is that touching facilitated better by the poem than, say, prose?

TL No I don't think so. There are sorts of prose that are fine vehicles for eros. There are other types of prose that are anti-erotic.

DW Such as?

TL Academic prose!

DW You write contemplative essays as well as poetry. Do the poems feel closer to desire than the essays?

TL The poems and the essays feel similar. The only difference would be that the essays feel a bit like taking time off from writing the poems, having some rest from doing that. Sometimes I use the essays to figure out things, to draw lines from one point to another, something the poem can't do, or would do quite awkwardly. Some ideas need plenty of room to declare themselves in certain ways and an essay gives you that room.

DW You refer to feeling shapes when you speak of metaphor. Do you have a stable metaphor or idea of the shape of a poem?

TL I've made big changes in form over the different books. There was a big change in form from the book which preceded this one, *Tourist To Ecstasy*, and *Moosewood Sandhills*, and there's been another formal change involved in the project I'm working on now. Twice it's happened as a sort of formal premonition, just a trace. Before *Moosewood Sandhills* I had an idea, "Wouldn't it be something to write more simply?" That wasn't a plan, it was more like a dream. Then I discovered my work, against my will (because I wasn't really interested in simplification), turning toward fulfilling the shape that this premonition suggested. I was fighting it all along because I thought writing this way was the failure of writing or was what writing no longer felt like for me. A couple of years ago I thought of writing a truly long-breath poem, a poem that would take days to recite, that had an endlessness to it, and then I've felt my work bending lately towards this. You might want to write one way but the work bends another and you think, "Well if I don't go with it I won't write at all." With *Moosewood Sandhills* it first felt like, "This is what not being able to write feels like." My original thought for this book was to make a box for the typescript and bury it in the land. I thought it was a failure, an embarrassing failure. It was only after showing it to some people and their really liking it that I thought of it as a book.

DW In your essay "How To Be Here," you use the idea of *haecceity*. Does *haecceitas* announce a specific form or image? In the "creation" of a metaphor, are you recovering or achieving or finding something of that *haecceitas*?

TL John Duns Scotus, from whom this phrase and notion comes, says that the thisness of a thing is unknowable (given the mind as it is now), but there. It's the highest expression of the thing, but it can't be known with precision or named.

DW I'd like to employ two crude poles: You and The Thing. When you have found a courteous metaphor, what do you feel that metaphor is closer to, You or The Thing?

TL I once had the idea that *haecceitas* was the thing as it

existed when it was loved. If that's so then the answer to your question is neither, the polarity that question proposes is false, there is this third possibility and there is a kind of Thing/Us. I like that idea because it makes a third possibility for consciousness. There's consciousness as thief, going in to this thing that's not it and taking stuff out; there's consciousness as stranger, never on the inside. But if this possibility is true there is consciousness as integral or necessary to the thing, participatory. Eros becomes part of cosmology: the tree in order to be this tree and no other tree needs me or you or somebody else to need it, love it, celebrate it. Then it becomes itself in the excitement of human consciousness. Somehow the term of the thing is in us, as delighted, ravished, etc., etc. But now, that idea strikes me as too attractive to be utterly true. But maybe the answer is roughly in that direction.

DW *Moosewood Sandhills* is full of imperatives and references to "necessity." Is poetry necessary?

TL There have been some awfully attractive people who wrote poetry, or people who became attractive as they wrote it. It would be terrible to think of living without poetry. I think of people like Osip Mandelstam, John Berryman, Louise Glück, Akhmatova, Tsvetayeva, Wallace Stevens — one is so happy that they wrote. I feel bulked as a person when I read what they wrote, somehow they did this beautiful thing that was difficult. Now, is this necessary? When you read Akhmatova, and Mandelstam, you get a sense that poetry is a kind of bread. Without this type of attention going on in the culture then things do become harder. And one way that you can tell that things are becoming harder, or more violent, is that things become clearer. Without poetic attention the world could become too clear — it's dangerous.

DW Do you think we live with a sense of necessity?

TL That's eros or what it can feel like. Eros is multi-form, sexual, intellectual, emotional — this is our beauty, our undermining, our oomph. Eros allows itself, or finds itself, being bent into form, then it becomes benign and lovely, as are the people that are shaped by it. But I think a lot of the things that our culture

regards as erotic are anti-erotic. I think our culture is interested in the denigration of eros.

DW You make persistent references to the sorrow of desire. What is the sorrow in desire?

TL It's that you never get what you want! Desire is epektatic, it is perpetually reaching and there's sorrow in that. The sorrow is, in part, being stripped of these images that desire fosters, these images of appropriation, "This is what satisfaction will be like." Gradually having to give up those images of desire or satisfaction is an experience full of sorrow, but even as you give up these things the momentum of desire remains. This is just one other language that desire casts off as it cranes towards what it would have, which is unhaveable.

DW Do you think then that naming can be a creation of artificial or provisional destinations in the journey of eros?

TL Yes. Maybe integrity is just feeling the ache of desire, not subduing it, you feel pulled on and you feel the inadequacy of names. Desire undermines itself — because it is the power that sets up the names as well as the power that erases them— and you go further. It's always possible though to step out of the flow of the dialectic and say this is too much, to become a statesman or a pornographer and to settle on *a* term of desire and struggle like hell to make this feel like *the* term of desire. But truly erotic beings, the real fools, those who can't be anything other than literal about desire, will go further, past the way-stations.

DW In "From an Anchorage," you use the phrase "the necessary apology," and throughout the book there are frequent invocations of the concept of sacrifice. Is an apology necessary to the world? And if so how can it be made?

TL Yes. If you listen to a piece of music several times, part of your hearing is a sense of what will come next; so the shape, you are sure, to fulfill itself, will move in this direction. I think a lot of people feel that the shape, or spirit of the age we're living in, will next move to here: to compunction, to apology, tears, sorrow. This is what we're bending towards.

DW For what are we apologizing?

TL All of these imperialisms that we've engaged in. This foolish sense that we were and are entitled in an unlimited way.

DW Is the prolonged writing of poetry a naming and renaming of yourself for yourself? Is naming your desires a way to you?

TL I sometimes think it's as if there's a singing in things that I am so far from being able to know that I'm only guessing that I can call it "singing." What I would very much like to do (why? I have no idea) is to come alongside that and sing with it. In a sense that's what I think I'm doing, singing alongside this unsingable, perhaps-not-even-song. One seems to know this in different ways at different points in one's life. My singing doesn't have to make any sense, or be beautiful, or publishable. When you think of writing as a business, going to stores and buying it, this image of singing alongside something seems ludicrous. The whole issue of audience is not as important to me as it is to other poets. The important relationship is between the singing you are able to do and this sub-terranean singing, or flux, that eros keeps wanting to know like a setter that keeps pointing. That's where you have to be immaculate; that's where integrity is demanded. If you screw around there, forget it, you're disqualified. That's what's important, what ever happens after that, publication, awards, reviews, is completely incidental. Who cares what happens. This thing, that's important. People who start writing by thinking about publication are, I think, grabbing the stick by the wrong end; the task, it seems to me, is just to move up close to whatever it is that you will speak. Everything else will solve itself, even if it solves itself in ways that don't look like solutions.

DW In "Contemplation is Mourning," there is a suggestion that "You will be shaved and narrowed by the barren strangeness of the/ deer, the wastes of her oddness." Is it important for us to be so shaved?

TL No. That's coming at it the wrong way; you just *are* shaved if you look long and deeply without presumption. That's a large part of what looking is, the refusal of presumption or caricature. Otherwise what you're seeing is simply yourself; you're looking in the mirror everywhere. Being shaved is just the realiz-

ation that all of your notions of power and centrality are stolen or made-up, it's stolen fire. Hard looking can relieve you of this.

DW That bespeaks a confidence that everyone will react that way. Is that confidence part of getting close to the singing of the thing?

TL I think this is the way human beings are made and this is what looking is and does. It could be I'll learn or have to admit later on that humans aren't made this way, but like Charles Wright says, "You have to sign your name to something." And provisionally I'm saying this: humans have an emotional spine, this eros for the world that prompts us to try to live in it as if they were home.

DW Do you feel connected to others through that?

TL Yes, I think that's what we all want.

DW In *Moosewood Sandhills* there are references to the "bones of the land" and the boniness of things. Is there a distinction to you between the otherness of a thing and an animal?

TL No there isn't, all things strike me as distant and unlike. Augustine speaks of that world one enters when one prays as "the land or region of unlikeness." I think everything is the region of unlikeness. Everything is distant, far, discrete, itself, non-representative, ultimately non-colonizable, wild. In its wildness it also feels like infinity, it has the unspeakability of infinity. When you encounter that you're left with courtesy; you can't name it so you bow to it, give it regard. Regard replaces language.

DW Is to not treat the world with courtesy a moral wrong?

TL Yes, it's immoral, it's unwise and it's unattractive.

DW Do you think of evil as a shunning of beauty?

TL Yes, a lack of beauty, or grace, or simplicity.

DW Is sorrow necessary for knowing?

TL I think the project to know comes to sorrow. It has these different shapes that it takes as it moves toward what it senses will relieve it of its restlessness and a later shape it takes is sor-

row. The desire to know and one's moral life are not discrete understandings. They are shapes of the same thing, shapes that one thing — desire — takes.

DW If sorrow is part of eros, part of living, is there an abatement or beauty in knowing?

TL The beauty takes other forms; some of these, initially, are terrifying. Eros is epikatatic, it is unsatisfiable, it doesn't come to term. The satisfaction of eros doesn't feel like satisfaction and so there's always momentum.