

Lola Lemire Tostevin Interview

Rachel Zolf: The first thing I want to do is to congratulate you on your new book. It's lovely; it's fabulous. I love how the book plays with dialectics of form, figure, language and landscape—human to cushion, bird to nest, snail to shell, pulse to stone, still image to moving image, etc.—the textures and sounds of these interrelationships. How would you say *Site-specific Poems* intervenes with its environments, conceptualizes and reconfigures them?

Lola Lemire Tostevin: This is a complex question. To me poetry is always about language. About half-way through the book, I realized that each section dealt with a specific site, and I started to play around with the notion of sites reconfigured through language. Site-specific art does this. It reconfigures the site where the piece of art is being displayed. If you think of Christo, for example—we could go down a long list of artists who do this—his work regenerates and reconfigures the site on which he works. So I tried to do this with language. While it appears that I am going back to places of childhood, they're not really places of my childhood, they have been reconfigured. Actually, I realized I was doing this when I was almost finished [small laugh].

RZ: I really like that. Thinking of those examples, I wonder if it's also true the other way around? Does the snail fit into the shell, or does the shell fit into the snail? Does the bird fit the nest? Which shapes which—the place, the form or the figure?

LLT: The final thing that shapes the poem is language. The poem builds the nest for the bird or the shell for the snail.

RZ: The book pays homage to many writers and artists, living and dead. Joseph Beuys, for one, is referenced a couple times (on speech as a form of sculpture and on site-specific art as living monument). Could you speak more about influences and intertextualities in your work—both with other writers and between writing and visual art?

LLT: Well, with this book especially, I felt I owed a debt to the people who had influenced my thinking while writing it. I had just traveled through Spain and seen much site-specific art, and I had become very aware of it. I didn't feel I could use this idea without mentioning the artists and writers who had played a part in it. So there is a section in the book that's really heavy on namedropping. I'm aware of it, but it is to pay homage to those people who played a part in my thinking when I was writing during that particular time.

This Interview took place in front of a live audience on May 12, 2004 as part of *This is not a reading series* at the Rivoli Club, Toronto. It was occasioned by the publication of *Site-Specific Poems*, Lola Lemire Tostevin's ninth book, by the Mercury Press. *Site-Specific Poems* can be read as a series of linked poems, as a book of longer poems, or as one extended poem that questions and examines various 'sites' of poetry: memory, paper, ink, geography, language, nostalgia, and the body.

RZ: I'm also wondering about the homonym site/sight—site (place) and sight (vision)—and its link to memory in this text, to the sense of possibility in present and future spaces. Of course, from this you get the interesting link with site-seeing and travel writing, an idea that you also explored in *Cartouches*, another text about the death of loved ones, memorializing, as well as concretizing the materials and act of writing—some similar concerns to *Site-Specific Poems*. Is this true? What, if anything, has shifted in the 10 years between books?

LLT: It just so happened that with *Cartouches*, I was traveling in Egypt and keeping a journal. I wanted *Cartouches* to be a book on how language developed around death but through the eyes of a “tourist.” The trip coincided with my father’s long illness and, ultimately, his death. I was very close to my parents, so that when they passed away, the emotions around those events took over. They kept interfering with the writing. The same thing happened with *Site-Specific*. The few days I spent in my dying mother’s hospital room shaped months of writing. In the poem “A Portrait” [41-51], the room became a site; the experience of a dying parent is beyond language yet it invades everything. The same with the death of good friends: the experience influences what you’re writing at the time. It remains at the forefront and won’t be ignored. I can’t, and won’t, simply brush it aside.

RZ: It is almost as if memory becomes a site, a physical as well as a psychic site in its phenomenological thingness. The memory games in the hospital room, the memorial trees for the dead writers—you’re playing with mimesis, mimetic traces, through the mother. I found it fascinating the way *Site-Specific Poems* embodied the vain attempt that we all make to contain these slippery elements of time, space, self, other, and language as well.

I want to ask a few general questions about your writing in case people haven’t read your other books. You chose to write mostly in English, though your mother tongue was French, and that mother tongue was itself multiple—spoken differently at home than at the convent where you went to school for seven years as a child, than the French spoken in Paris, where you also lived for a time, as well as various written forms of French. How did you come to write in “alien” English, when French was so multifaceted for you?

LLT: People often refer to me as a bilingual writer, but I don’t consider myself a bilingual writer. At least ninety percent of my writing is in English. Every once in a while, the mother tongue takes over, and I’ll write in French, but less and less so. It was never a matter of choice between writing in French or English. If I’d had the choice I would have

written in French—there’s no question about that—but I did not have the facility, the ability, because I live mostly in English. My education was mostly in English. Although I have a degree in French and Comparative Literature, English was always the major language in which I lived. The choice was between writing in English and not writing at all. For a long time, I mourned this and felt guilty, until I thought, enough. I’ll do what I can in the language that I can, and if it’s in English, so be it! [chuckle]

RZ: Some of your earlier poetry includes whole sections of untranslated French. In one of your essays, you used the trope “contamination” for how you describe the relationship between English and French in your text. I really like that image and am wondering what informed this decision to include French without translation—was it perhaps the desire to have the reader inhabit the same kind of in-between language space as you?

LLT: Maybe. Sometimes lines come to me in French, and sometimes whole poems do. There’s one poem in *Site-Specific Poems* written entirely in French dedicated to a friend, Alice. She’s French-speaking and we speak French when we meet. To have written a poem for her in English wouldn’t have made sense. In this case it was easy to write in French, for some reason. If it were always this easy, I would always write in French, but it isn’t. I like the idea of “contamination,” the idea that we contaminate one language with the other, one culture with another. Nothing is ever pure nor should it be. Purity is a dangerous concept. I like the fact that I contaminate my poetry with fiction, that I explore different ways of using language. This is very important to me. If I had to write the same sort of thing, in the same language, the same genre, I wouldn’t write. So yeah, I like the idea of “contamination” throughout my body of work.

RZ: I was also thinking that keeping it untranslated means someone who doesn’t know the language would then have to ...

LLT: ... then they should learn it ...

RZ: I was wondering if you’re exploring some power relations there, such as Anglophone/Francophone power relations, because somewhere in an essay you used it as an analogy for women’s relationship to language.

LLT: Yeah, well, twenty years ago, when I felt badly because I wasn’t writing in French, I blamed everything on men and the English language. I saw English as the dominant language that had buried my French mother tongue. It was too easy an analogy. It was important to me then, now I find it’s too easy an analogy. As I said, I do what I can in the language I can. I’m quite happy with that.

RZ: You are “quite happy”—is that what you said?

LLT: Oh yeah. Even as a good Catholic convent girl you can't go around feeling guilty all your life. [laughter; some applause from the audience]

RZ: Speaking of that—as a child in convent school, you were forbidden to speak except for set times during the day. I find this quite frightening and sad—it must have had tremendous psychic effects. You weren't even allowed to sing, a potentially liberating outlet ...

LLT: I'm tone deaf. Before leaving the house tonight my husband said, "whatever you do, don't sing."

RZ: [laughs] No one's tone deaf, I hate that, my Dad called me "tone deaf" too! [**LLT** laughs] "The hills are alive" [sings]. Um, does the sparseness of your poetic form, for one, your use of white space and silence on the page—the "amputated, truncated text"—reflect at all your relationship with silence? And how would you say silence informs your content?

LLT: I love silence. If I had believed in a personal God, I probably would have become a cloistered nun, [small chuckle] who never has to speak. I love silence and I wish I had the courage not to write. As a matter of fact I sometimes think, okay, this is stupid, why are you doing this, why not just enjoy the beautiful silence in your back yard, read a book ... I wish I had the courage not to say anything. I hate noise. Cacophony is the word I like the least in both English and French. A lot of good things happen in silence. If there is one thing about my convent days that I do regret, it's those long, silent periods when we were not allowed to speak. Of course, as a child you should be allowed to speak, but as an adult, it would be better if a lot of us just shut up. [audience laughter]

RZ: Have you thought of Buddhism, silent meditation ... ?

LLT: I've tried meditation, it didn't work very well for me ...

RZ: ... no it doesn't work for me too [**LLT:** laughs]. I was talking about how silence informs your form. For instance, I noticed that your short lines have grown longer, and more "extravagant" with each book, and I was wondering if your relationship to space and silence had changed at all in your poetry over the years?

LLT: Ahh, maybe I'm becoming more chatty ... I probably feel more comfortable with the longer line now than when I first started to write. I have trouble with the long line, one of the reasons I push myself to write fiction. Fiction is very hard for me, so it's more of a challenge than poetry. But even my fiction tends to be sparse. I like to capture a mood in as few words as possible. Give the reader a chance to build around those short lines and condensed images.

RZ: In your 1985 book *Double Standards* you say that; "the poem loses its way as it scribbles towards some equilibrium, while the story brackets lives, claims them for something it can recognize." Would this dichoto-



my between poetry and prose fairly reflect how you approach each form? You say elsewhere that “the genre carries the seed of who a writer is,” so I’m interested in why your approaches to poetry and prose differ so?

LLT: As I said before, it’s important that I explore language at different levels and different forms. I think we have a need to tell and hear stories. I think it’s innate. As a writer it’s more interesting to try different things, more challenging. Sometimes it fails, it’s not as good as it could have been but, that’s okay because it’s part of the process. I find it strange that people try to force writers into one slot, define writers by one genre, one form, and that’s who the writer becomes. A writer of that one genre. I remember a professor friend saying to me that a book of mine which had just been published was not a “Lola” kind of writing. I thought; “what the hell is that?” Of course, it was implied that it wasn’t as good, that it wasn’t up to a certain academic standing. It would be horrible to have to spend 30, 40, 50 years writing one “Lola” kind of writing. I have different readers—those who like my novels but don’t get my poetry, and those who like the poetry but not the novels. That, to me, is really interesting. I wouldn’t give it up for anything.

RZ: I mean that your poetry experiments with language, experiments with the page, while your novels are fairly structured in a conventional novelistic way. Your poetry is also very theoretical, steeped in readings of theory, though you do deal a little with the theoretical in the content of your novels. In *The Jasmine Man*, there’s one character who is a psychoanalyst, and there are these funny bits around him attending lectures in the 70’s by a Lacan-type figure. I was thinking that perhaps it is through content and character development that you enact in your novels some of the conceptual strategies that you enact through form and wordplay in your poetry?

LLT: I don’t think about conceptual strategies that much when I write. I know that with *The Jasmine Man* I wanted to write a story in as straight a narrative as I could. I wanted to see if I could do it, that was my conceptual strategy. *Frog Moon*, on the other hand, is not a straight narrative. Basically, I want to have fun, experiment and explore.

RZ: Right.

LLT: By the way, I’m not aware, when I’m writing poetry, that it is “steeped in theory,” I’m not aware of theoretical strategies when I’m writing.

RZ: I’m not suggesting that you write in one particular way, or that you’re only trying to mimic what theorists say. I’m saying that, in reading all your published work, including your essays, it seems you were quite heavily aligned with the late 80’s theoretical movement ...



LLT: ... yes, I was reading a lot of that then ... What you read informs what you write.

RZ: ... so I could see the crossovers ...

LLT: ... right ...

RZ: You explore absence and negation extensively in your poetry, particularly as these concepts relate to women. Much of this seems to be informed by theoretical readings—such as woman as lack, nothing, vessel, various philosophies of negation. In fact I much enjoyed reading in *sophie* the story of your confrontation with Jacques Derrida, linking the absence of God with the absence of woman, and positing, via Julia Kristeva, that amniotic speech could possibly be generative, recuperative. Could you comment on your relationship to absence and nothingness and how it informs your writing? In fact I see it comes back in the “stationary flit of nothingness” in the new book.

LLT: Yeah, it keeps recurring. It must be buried deep. I was so happy when I came up with the line, “stationary flit of nothingness,” but then I thought, “oh God, here I go again with this absence thing.” This is probably something that someone else would have to analyze. Woman as absence— it’s very Freudian, very Lacanian, but from their male point of view. It’s cultural too. I think many women are now making their place and not experiencing themselves as “absence.” For me, the whole subject of absence and nothingness is much bigger than “woman as absence”

[**RZ:** definitely, yeah], it encompasses everything, especially when you spend so much time writing and all you’re left with at the end of a project is that “flit of nothingness.” Maybe I’m Sartrean, I read a lot of Jean Paul Sartre early on and maybe I’m still imprinted with existential nihilism. I would love if someone would analyze it, but I don’t think I will [audience laughter].

RZ: You actually later in an essay mention that you no longer wanted to write from the concept of absence—around women. [**LLT:** um hmm] In fact the use of the image, the paradox of “stationary flit”—it’s similar to the snail to the shell, the dialectics of form and figure and how they’re uncontainable; it’s not simply one or the other, you’re not “in nothing” you’re not “in a site” [**LLT:** yeah] – you flit around.

LLT: Yes, I do love to “flitter” [audience laughter].

RZ: I like the self-consciousness of writing a suite of poems to end *Site-Specific Poems* all about the aftermath of writing a book, while still actually in medias res—a telling mark of a post-modern, post-structurally influenced mind. Has your relationship to theoretical writing (particularly French thinkers) as a source and ballast to your creative writing changed at all over the past 20 years? Which philosophers and theorists



are your muses these days? I'm using "muse" deliberately because I love that line—"the muse has learned to write ..."

LLT: ... "the muse has learned to write." There have been many influences over the years. If someone asks me, "what kind of music do you like?" I end up naming all kinds because I like all kinds. The same with writers. Rachel we have to wrap it up ... so if people want to know who my recent muses are, they'll have to buy the book [audience laughter]

RZ: I think we have one minute, I want to ask another question ... In both your novels and poetry, you often use the first person as the form of narrative address. You mentioned somewhere that this helps the reader inhabit the text as they read the "I" as themselves. In fact in Site-Specific Poems you say "The pronoun 'I' can be replaced by the reader's name," yet elsewhere you say, "How easily I misleads...when I falls from disguise." Readerly inter-activity is obviously very important to your writing, and I'm wondering if you deliberately play with your narrative personae, sometimes shifting voices abruptly from 1st/3rd person for one, to shift the way readers look at themselves, and to disrupt the autobiographical implications of using the "I."

LLT: The reader as writer of the poem, I like to play with that idea. Also, maybe because of my French/English background there's always that "doubleness." I'm aware of "I" as writer, but I'm also aware of "I" as teacher, mother, wife and grandmother. I feel a real split, as a writer, with my other life, and I'm always aware of that split, but I do like the "doubleness," that goes with it, the idea that there's the writer who constructs a world of language, and there's this other person who cooks lasagna for dinner. My next novel, *The Other Sister*, about identical twins, explores this idea of doubleness Okay, thank you Rachel, and thank you all for coming ...

RZ: Thank you.
Audience applause.