



# Chaudiere Books

2423 Alta Vista Drive, Ottawa, Ontario Canada K1H 7M9  
chaudierebooks.com / chaudierebooks.blogspot.com

## A short interview with Andy Weaver

*this interview was conducted by rob mclennan over email, June 2015*

Q: What was the original impulse for *this*?

A: I've been working and thinking a lot on theories of the sublime in relation to contemporary poetry. Specifically, I've spent a lot of time over the last few years working through Jean-Francois Lyotard's theorizations of the immanent sublime. Basically, the sublime is something we can encounter or think of, but we can't present an example of it to our minds—"the present" is one that Lyotard thinks about a lot. *this* is an attempt to work through "this-ness" in the sense of an immanent sublime; something we know exists, but something we can never really understand. So, I was trying to think about this-ness, not in the sense of "this present" or "this idea," but "this *this*," whatever that might be, and how that idea could be represented and worked through in language.

Q: Your work has been increasingly geared toward an exploration towards language itself. Why do you think this is, and whom have your models been? I know you've spoken of earlier influences such as Mina Loy and Robert Duncan, for example.

A: Yes, there's definitely been a growing focus toward investigating language as language in my work. I don't know that there's a simple answer for why. My scholarly work has moved more in that direction, and there always seems to be a direct link between my creative and scholarly interests. I guess it's just what has captured my attention. Certainly, a lot of the people I've been reading over the last ten years or so have elements of investigating or highlighting language as language. Robert Duncan is a good example of that, though he's also very careful not to go down the rabbit hole, so to speak. All of the Black Mountain writers walk that line, and they all work as influences in different ways, especially Duncan and Creeley. John Cage is also there. Daphne Marlatt and Fred Wah are both important to me, because they receive but also work to modify that Black Mountain influence. Erin Moure's work, especially how she manages to reinvent herself as a writer, is always in my mind. And I tend to spend a lot of time reading work by Harryette Mullen, Juliana Spahr, Lisa Robertson, Susan Howe, and Robert Kroetsch. I'm probably forgetting a lot of names. I've been reading a lot of H. D. and Charles Reznikoff over the last year, though I don't know that they will directly influence my writing. I've read a fair amount of Language Poetry in the past, and they were really important to me when I was writing *were the bees* and *gangson*, but they weren't direct influences on *this*. Adam Dickinson is a close friend and essential sounding board for me, and I love reading his work. That's a wide-ranging list, but I think they all share an interest in the workings of language itself, though not always to the same degree or in the same ways.

Q: Your list includes a number of poets who utilize and engage with theory throughout their poetry, from the more overt poem-essay by Spahr, Moure and Robertson, to far more subtle explorations. Separate to your specifically scholarly works, where do you feel your writing fits along the nebulous spectrum of the poem-essay, and what do you feel your work can bring to larger conversations on form?

A: I don't think of my work as very essayistic, but I do think my work is very idea driven—I guess it shares that with a lot of poem-essays. I've been reading Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, which is absolutely astonishing. That book maneuvers the divide between poem and essay in a way I can't. Phil Hall's *Killdeer* exists at that divide, too, though in a very different way. I think a poem-essay tends to work through ideas in the body of the poem, in a meditative way—it documents the process of working through an idea. My work tends, I think, to enact a thought, but with little meditation in the poem itself. Meditating is something that happens outside the poem for me, and the poem works as a process of enacting a thought, rather than meditating on a thought.

As for the conversation on form, I don't know that I have anything very new to offer. Robert Duncan always referred to himself as a derivative poet, by which he meant that he was an amalgamation of the poets who influenced him; Duncan is very much the central influence on my writing and thinking, but—as he did—I try to adapt and string together different, sometimes seemingly incompatible influences. So, I try to write in a way that acknowledges the work of those writers who have influenced me: Black Mountain, *TISH*, Language, while being open to outliers (A. R. Ammons, for instance, or H.D., Charles Reznikoff, Moure, or even someone very stylistically different, like Alden Nowlan). I like to think that my form is an amalgamation of those different elements, along with whatever idiosyncratic aspects I might bring to the mixture.

I think one of the things that often frustrates me with more conventionally lyric poems is that they're written as though they don't have a form, or as though form is a natural, secondary concern to the content. I tend to like poetry that is consciously very aware of that writing a poem is a very formal activity, one steeped in artifice. In my mind, there's nothing natural about writing a poem.

Q: I've always been curious about your attachment to Robert Duncan. What is it about his “writing and thinking” that has so deeply influenced your own?

A: I have a lot of favourite poets, but Duncan really does stand above the rest for me, and he has since I first encountered his work in the late 1990s. I think he had one of the great ears of the century—his work is beautifully crafted at the level of sound and rhythm. But there are a lot of poets with great ears out there, and lots that write interesting stuff. I think why I always return to Duncan is that his politics and his aesthetics are so rich and generally agree with mine. I feel that I write as a derivative poet in the same sense that Duncan always stated he was a derivative poet—meaning that he wrote by reading, he wrote by engaging with other texts. I love how he views the world as an organically interrelated whole, and how his notion of rime plays with that. Politically, I love his anarchism and his arguments against hierarchies. I love how he argues that syncretism, the gathering together of disparate ideas, beliefs, and elements, is the basis for writing and a basis for ethics. I love that Duncan always viewed aesthetics as political. So, his writing gives permission to engage with the world on physical, textual, ethical, etc., levels in a way I find extremely productive.

Having said all of that, Duncan had a strong mythical/spiritual side that doesn't really agree with my worldview. I sometime get a bit lost or uninterested by his writing when he moves firmly into those elements. But I generally try to remain engaged with his writing even then, and work to struggle through to see what engaged him about those elements. I think that challenge is a big part of why I love Duncan: for all of the things I love about his work, there are still elements that I really don't agree with, and that mixture always intrigues me.

Q: The work I've seen of yours since the appearance of *Gangson* (2011), including *this* and *Concatenations* (above/ground press, 2014), have engaged more obviously with sound, meaning and visual play, resulting in pieces that look far less like traditional "poems" than the work in your first two books. What might have prompted this shift in structure, or was it always on the horizon?

A: One of the things I've been thinking a lot about since *Gangson* is the role of artifice in poetry. Some writers want to downplay it in favour of a more "natural" expression, but throughout *this* I wanted to emphasize artifice in many ways, and sound and visual play was a major part of that. Emphasizing artifice was important to the work because it focuses on such an abstract construct, this-ness. The work is an attempt to imagine this-ness, which for me is tied up intricately with the presentation of presentation itself. In order to imagine this-ness, it's important to defamiliarize it as much as possible. We live inside the this and so we can never really conceptualize it; all we can offer ourselves are examples of what different this-nesses were (different present moments) once those this-nesses have past. We can't truly understand an experience or moment while we're inside it, so this-ness is always something we're retroactively working to understand. That's all artificial, and so artifice is necessary in the work in order to emphasize that all attempts to present this-ness are necessarily artificial. For example, "Concatenations" is a series of 26 poems, each made up of 26 alphabetical words, each poem starting with a different letter. The challenge is to say something while dealing with the artifice of language—but that artifice is always there, there's nothing natural about language, and the poems are just more obviously artificial. The spacing on the page, where words are placed according to visual cues (letters line up vertically), is just another example of artifice structuring our thought and expression.