

Robert Allen's Cantons de l'est *Encantadas*

by Andre Furlani

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The emigration of Robert Allen's family to Canada in 1956 when he was ten coincided with the appearance of Robert Conquest's *New Lines in British Poetry*, which hailed not novelty but retrenchment in "the cardinal traditions of English verse" (Conquest 16); Conquest's anthology extolled The Movement, including Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, and Thom Gunn: droll disdainers of Modernism in clipped and witty inherited metres. Almost a half century later Carmine Starnino, a graduate of the Concordia University creative writing Masters program in which Allen had taught since the mid-1970s, edited *The New Canon: An Anthology of Canadian Poetry*, in which "new" carries some of Conquest's old valencies: command of inherited metres and forms, intelligibility, coherence of lyric voice, and the sincerity of verbal precision (the notion, if not the style, borrowed from the Confucianism of Ezra Pound).¹

Conquest was intent to foster a Hardy native strain for which modernist poetics was an alien bacillus; Starnino, to foster a strain for which the bacillus was postmodernist. The new Canadian "canon" is thus akin to the American "new formalism." Both parties would repatriate territory partially annexed to that earlier new thing, "the new American poetry" of Donald Allen's maverick 1960 anthology, which was in part an exuberant riposte to Conquest's.

Allen was a teen in southern Ontario when *The New American Poetry* appeared. When at decade's end he entered Cornell University (then in an uproar of student radicalism) on a Ford Foundation grant to study first Medieval English literature and then creative writing, the reputations of its anthologized poets (e.g. Ginsberg, Olson, Snyder, Creeley, Duncan, Leverto, Guest, O'Hara, Ashbery, Spicer, etc.) were at zenith.

By the time Allen began teaching at Concordia University in Montreal, George Bowering, as writer-in-residence between 1967 and 1971, had recently established a Black Mountain beachhead at the school's previous incarnation, Sir George Williams University. Bowering's faculty committee had launched a reading series including among others Ted Berrigan,

Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Gary Snyder.² Poets associated with the Véhicule Art Gallery pursued experiments in kind with Bowering's Vancouver sodality of TISH poets. Andre Farkas's and Ken Norris's 1978 anthology of Vehicule poetry repudiated the perceived post-romanticism of Irving Layton's acolytes (such as his self-appointed successor David Solway) in the name of the conscientious liberty of the line: "The rigid approach to what a poem is that characterized Montreal poetry in the sixties has been rendered invalid; the poem has been established as an open and plastic form. This openness and plasticity, however, is tempered by an absolute precision in the use of language" (Farkas and Norris 44-45).

The poem may be "open" but the poet is not really free: failure to obey the Tablets of the Law Charles Olson brought down from Black Mountain ("Projective Verse") will render the poet "invalid."³ That appeal to "absolute precision" is a clangorous engineering imposition suggestive of compensatory tactics rather than of the unprejudiced engagement with technical matter and criteria. As a young poet in the radicalized circles of Toronto's erstwhile Rochdale College and Cornell (he offered a draft of *Valhalla at the OK* to Dennis Lee shortly after the latter had founded Anansi Press—it was eventually published in 1971 by Ithaca House), Allen had witnessed at close quarters experimentation suspicious of just such a mechanistic analogy. When over a decade later he began what he first called *The Voyage to the Encantadas*, the exemplary contemporary Canadian long poem was bpNichols' *Martyrology*, for which "precision" would be anathema. This New Canadian Poetry was the antithesis of the long meditative sequence that formed Allen's model.

Throughout his writing life in Quebec, Allen was within earshot of "formalist" and "open field" polemics. The distinction that structures this antipathy is between acoustic and visual convention; broadly, between a poetry of the tympanum and a poetry of the retina. They blend readily but, like the particle accelerator's work, their separation is a distinction of our age. (Starnino pointedly omits the visual from criteria of inclusion in *The New Canon*, which collects "the most aurally ambitious, lexically alert, and formally intelligent poems I could find" [Starnino 16].) While metrically traditional poetry explicitly derives from the musical settings of ancient epic and the direct address of Bronze Age Greek lyric (which the present meaning of the word "lyric" maintains), the postwar followers of Pound and W.C. Williams, whose instrument is more likely to be the QWERTY keyboard than the Mytilenian lyre, regard the page foremost as a visual unit and words as material signs. The former gives priority to

words in time; the latter, words in space. Their heraldic implements are, respectively, the plectrum and the chisel.

Allen brandishes both. He is a folkie Orpheus strumming his guitar in Terence Byrnes' author-photo to *Standing Wave*, which contains a selection of 38 of the "Sonnets from the Jimmie Walker Swamp" and the closing two parts of *The Encantadas*. Holidaying on the Carolina Banks in the latter, the poet has "No pen// to write; keyboard to key on" (Allen, *Encantadas* 127), so recites directly. As he tries to type ("I have a key") the image of a muse, half Venus on the half-shell and half reclining Manet nude *sur le herbe*, time alters and memory falters, and Part III visibly falters with it ("words/ fail" [100]) to a close:

It is frustrating—while I am working, painting you
like Botticelli, you are slyly slipping into Rubens, with a smile
recondite as silt below fast water. How can I even get the blue

eyes of you not to flow away on a river of forgetfulness. I need
a whole reprogramming, I guess.

you make me blue

I have a key
you make
me aster blue flag chicory blue stained

(98)

The result is a "corrupt" segmentation, "blue cantonment" rather than synthesis (99)—canton being also a part or division, as the 158 divisions of Allen's poem. Recognition of division and limit structures *The Encantadas*. Its sentences alternate between the prosaic cast of the "new American poetry" and the musical stave of tradition.

The very word *encantadas* preserves, via Spanish, a musical priority: Allen's 158 sections are little cantos or canticles; ultimately the title resonates with one of the earliest oral verse forms, the *carmen* or charm. The charm is illocutionary magic, apotropaic utterance warding off inimical forces. The primary of these in Allen's sequence are time and mortality. He casts these forces as compositional principles in *The Encantadas*, a poem begun in his early thirties and gestated over the entire course of his quarter-century career in Quebec. Intermittently publishing and always editing its parts, Allen was preparing the book for publication during treatment for the cancer that, shortly after its appearance, took his life at the age of sixty in 2006.⁴

Part of Allen's interest is that this English immigrant who left Toronto during the halcyon days of cultural nationalism to study and teach creative writing in the experimental milieus of the United States attended to these proselytisers without enlisting in their causes.⁵ Allen greatly admired Thomas Pynchon, an earlier graduate of Cornell, as well as Pynchon's professor there, Vladimir Nabokov ("*paradise wherever/ he alighted*," *The Encantadas* approvingly quotes John Updike [52]), as both his novels reflect, but he lamented in the 1980s the "postmortemism" that followed: a travesty yet self-indulgent and self-important mannerism. That consummately postmodern evolutionary aberration of *The Encantadas*, Ted the Galapagos dancing turtle,

prayed for a simpler age: more derring-do
& less Derrida. Paid no mind to the text, just loved the unrolled scroll
of hill; saw god not, but degodded nature. Wrote poems, dedicated

verses to Anne in suitcases under the bed, to Ruth who called this
work in progress *The Enchiladas*.

(70-71)

Allen's immigration should make him exemplary of what David Solway in a 2002 article curses and blesses as the "double exile" of the Anglo-Quebec poet (Solway 80). He impishly adopts Biblical terms of providential isolation, captivity, and election to describe this predicament. David McGimpsey, Allen's younger colleague at Concordia, dismisses as "self pity" (McGimpsey 137) Solway's characterization of Anglo-Quebec poets as "a twofold hostage community" (Solway 81). It may well be self-pity, but it is also self-aggrandizement. Solway hails the indifference of Canadian literary elites the way Wallace Stevens in "Sunday Morning" hails the indifference of God—these poets are solitary, unsponsored, free. Neglect ensures them against the debilitating temptations of passing academic fashion, philistine official patronage, and institutional blandishments.

Better to reign in Montreal than serve in Toronto? Allen, who as a tenured professor, magazine and book editor had plenty of sway, is named among Solway's exiles (80). The irony is that, unlike most of the poets Solway nominates, Allen could plausibly be called an "exile" of sorts (the child of economic refugees from the everlasting rationing of England). Solway will say only that he "appeared on the scene in the mid-seventies via Cornell" (80); from where he appeared Solway omits to mention, since Allen's emigration makes a gentle mockery of Solway's nomenclature.

Was then Allen a *triple* exile? He tactfully declined an honorific properly reserved for refugees from oppressive regimes; he could have met enough of them in Montreal to respect the difference. As a Brit whose family had relocated to Her Majesty's colonies, Allen had in a sense scarcely emigrated at all. And for most of the second half of his life he resided in Loyalist country, at Ayer's Cliff in Quebec's Eastern Townships. *The Encantadas* makes frequent allusion to the region (Jack is convalescing there on the family farm), upon which the title puns: Cantons de l'est. Exiled Loyalists had settled the region following defeat in the Revolutionary War, and Allen took pleasure in the convergence of his British, Canadian, and American selves in a topography that reminded him of the Bristol region. In the poem *l'est* also connotes racial and mythic origin, the Britain of his birth, of King Arthur, and the ancients:

Cantons de l'est—

Strange, the evocations, when he writes this. Avalon, Eden,

The Hesperides; not homely home, but home of the first
humans, or of half-human gods.

(4)

To Todd Swift, Allen is a "divided" ("canton") writer who successfully resolves the problem of "double exile" "by never being provincial, and yet always keeping one eye on the strategies of a local-voiced regionalist, (the other on the open, unbounded options of the unfettered internationalist)" (Swift 325). I suspect there was no such problem for him to solve, rather an opportunity to seize. Allen did not tend his *lares et penates* between Bristol, Toronto, Ithaca, Ohio, P.E.I., and Quebec. Ayer's Cliff was no second Troy. *The Encantadas* looks not to Virgil but to the circumnavigating New Yorker Herman Melville, writing *Moby Dick* and his own "Encantadas" in his snowbound Berkshire farmhouse rather as Allen had written much of his first novel, *The Hawryliw Process*, in P.E.I.: "each morning/ for five hours he wrote, while snow drifted level/ with window sash and chimney flu" ("Melville," in *Magellan's Clouds* 29). The farmhouse that Melville in a letter described as a whaler Allen calls "a landlocked ship" (31), just as in *The Encantadas* he calls his own Ayer's Cliff house a ship.

Allen summons no Canaan, and only a few poems, such as the fifth of the "Sonnets from Jimmy Walker Swamp," conjures the storied historical strata of forsaken England (while shuddering at the cold and damp of a poorly heated five hundred year-old stone cottage [*Standing Wave* 17]). His wide travels were largely continental car trips, and he returned to Brit-

ain only once, to spread his father's ashes in 2004.⁶ Allen summons Melville because the exotic crew of the Pequod are made up not of exiles but "isolatoes," solitaires not by chance but constitution: "They were nearly all islanders in the Pequod, *Isolatoos* too, I call such, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each *Isolato* living on a separate continent of his own. Yet now, federated along one keel, what a set these Isolatoes were!" (Melville, *Moby Dick* 216) The single appearance of the word "exile" in *The Encantadas* fuses Melville to Darwin to ridicule the millenarian presentiments of 1999:

No second coming. How long to breathe
the pure air of exile, here in another's country? In one answer
life ends inside one billion years.

(56)

Exile is collective in this wry Gnostic parable ("Gnostics and Jews / for Jesus are making a revival" [56]) of universal displacement. All are isolatoes.

There is no return from exile into presence for Allen, whose Darwinism calls into question such a plot. Instead, there is a phlegmatic acceptance of singularity, of discrete instances and empirical facts. He pitches his conks with those who rally to D.H. Lawrence's call for a "poetry of the present" (Lawrence 71). "My element, the swift // chiming of today," Allen avers (*Encantadas* 108). His sonnets seek to record "the cadence of fortuity" that "blew all around my head" (*Standing Wave* 41). There is a parallel with John Ashbery, whose long poems *Flow Chart* and *Girls on the Run* literalize the tropes of excursus, whereby a poem might "run" on anything, idle thought processes becoming poetic objects without serial predictability or procedural logic.

Neither Romantic agony nor virile contempt of home and origins occlude the view in *The Encantadas*. The poet's three itinerant alter egos, the oceanographer Jack, Ted the tap-dancing turtle, and the wine-smuggler Dionysius do not generate exilic tropes or narratives. Jack's return to the Townships is compelled by a near-fatal rapture of the deep, not Odyssean nostalgia, and convalescence does not coincide with some spiritual breakthrough or—in contrast to Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*, in other respects a particularly relevant precursor of wryly mythologized verse autobiography—reintegration into community. In Allen's poetry these would be mere anodynes.

Rather than coordinating Allen along the vectors of homeland, expulsion, and the Promised Land, a Biblical field of force that did not attract

him, his distinctively transnational work might more profitably be situated interstitially. Allen was an English boy in 1960s southern Ontario, a Canadian in the late-1960s U.S., and, from the mid-1970s on, an Anglo in French Canada. He carried a British passport, a Quebec driver's licence, and an Ontario health card. His Ayer's Cliff house was perched just above the Vermont border. He was an urbane country poet. What Camlot and Swift characterize as a "cosmopolitan, anti-regionalist, de-territorializing stance" in contemporary Anglo-Quebec poetry is exemplified by Allen, a mentor to both poets (Camlot, "Introduction" 16).⁷

The author-blurb to *Ricky Ricardo Suites*, under Terence Byrnes' photo of the poet seated in gunslinger-dandy shades in his Vieux Port pied-à-terre⁸ declares him a wayfarer or troubadour: "He is English-born, American-educated, and now a Canadian, spending his time mainly in Montreal, Toronto, and The Eastern Townships of Quebec." Like Anne Carson's terse dust jacket biographies ("Anne Carson lives in Canada"), Allen's implies cosmopolitan mobility and deflected inferences of citizenship.⁹

Carmine Starnino, Allen's editor at Signal Editions,¹⁰ commends Allen's escape from what Solway dubbed the Standard Average Canadian of many of its English poets. "An excellent example to set against the monolingual state of much Canadian poetry—reductionist, imprecise, inarticulate—is Robert Allen's long poem *The Encantadas* where Canadian language seems to reinvent itself with every line he writes" (Starnino, "Michael Harris" 246-47). Starnino finds in Allen responsiveness to Montreal's "hot zone of linguistic impurity" that affords the poet "a way of placing the poetic self 'in between'" constituencies (233).

The form of *The Encantadas* occupies the Jimmie Walker swamp lying between the terraced fields neatly cultivated by so-called "formalists" (a local example is Mark Abley) and the open prairie grazed, for example, in Robert Kroetch's *Seed Catalogue*. Allen's tripled tercet form is a Lay-tonesque "fertile muck" as partially drained with tools patented by Wallace Stevens and modified by Allen's revered teacher at Cornell, A.R. Ammons. In the radicalized setting of Cornell, Allen recalled in a 1987 interview, stylistics was scorned: "I was lucky in that Ammons, the most influential of my teachers, was a stickler for the line and certain technical aspects of poetry that not too many people were paying a lot of attention to.... I remember him talking for ten or fifteen minutes just on why it's important to end a line on a certain kind of word, or begin on a certain word, or what effect you could get by doing one or the other" (Lanthier 53).

From Ammons Allen learned to combine happenstance and deliberation, surprise and scrutiny. In the long poems especially Ammons is

demotic, informal, but also meditative and exacting. Consonance emerges out of accident without orphic intimations that hazard conceals a higher intent. Poems such as *Sphere* slowly gather and rapidly dissolve direction, cohered by a regular stanza and a flexible line. In *The Encantadas* Allen turns, via Ammons, to Stevens' poems of the act of the mind, especially the tercets of "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction," "Auroras of Autumn," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven."

Ammons calls one of his long poems *Garbage* because he wants "the shambles questioning the lyric // out of easy shape, and the lyric providing / intervals of symmetry in the jumbled enlargement" (Ammons 67). *Garbage* "brings up hauls of stringy gook which it arrays / with light and strings with shiny syllables" (108). Such a poetry refrains from the visionary; a post-humanist evolutionary perspective assumes that language cannot represent what Ammons calls "wholeness" (114). "As Ammons' poetic proposes to do away with forms except in motion and reorder the lyric tradition, so too does Allen borrow and build on such an adventure," Todd Swift notes (332).

By means of Ammons, Allen would resolve the antithesis between classical craftsmanship and postmodern caprice. For Solway, Starnino, and other Montreal poets (e.g., Michael Harris, who like Allen emigrated from Great Britain as a boy) perpetuating the formalist tenets of the New Criticism, "craftsmanship" equates consummate technique with moral agency. Kenneth Burke, invoking Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* 6.421 axiom, thus urged that "workmanship" is "a trait in which the ethical and the esthetic are one" (Burke 491).¹¹ In Ammons' terms, workmanship in *The Encantadas* and "Sonnets from Jimmy Walker Swamp" inheres in the elaboration of a provisional, elastic formal "symmetry" that contains "the shambles" without implying that design ultimately subsumes disorder or transmutes it into pattern. (These categories are often scrambled against expectation, so that the free verse couplets of H.D.'s *Trilogy* impose a transcendent order on catastrophic contemporary history where the blank verse sonnets of Robert Lowell's *Notebook* refrain from such an imposition.)

"Sonnets from Jimmy Walker Swamp" concludes, like *Garbage*, on the yearning to reconcile formal containment with the feckless informality of "open" composition. Allen's preceptor declares the primacy of the deliberated line:

the line,
the fire line, where passion and control waver

for the field, that is a line so difficult to
keep in the right degree....

(Ammons 121)

Allen, whose altar ego in the sequence “endures the stink / of kitchen garbage,” meanwhile oscillates between the discipline of “order” and the vitality of “anarchy,” “that/ precarious point of balance between recklessness and // responsibility”: “If I see only order around me / I will jump, be the childish Lucifer falling” (Allen, *Standing Wave* 46 and 48).

The tercets of *The Encantadas* “break the pentameter” (“that was the first heave” Pound, *Cantos* 538) without superseding formal imperatives. Even Eliot might approve. In “The Music of Poetry,” published in 1942 shortly after the completion of *Four Quartets*, Eliot states that “only a bad poet could welcome free verse as a liberation from form. It was a revolt against dead form, and a preparation for new form or for the renewal of the old; it was an insistence upon the inner unity which is unique to every poem, against the outer unity which is typical” (Eliot 37). *The Encantadas* constructs a new form by renewed use of old materials. Freedom is inside the form, and the form now is freely contrived to suit the matter rather than being inherited and imposed from without. Where Marianne Moore used idiosyncratic syllabic stanzas, Allen uses a looser tercet stanza.

Both the “Sonnets from Jimmie Walker Swamp” and *The Encantadas* recklessly adapt responsible forms without risking burlesque or pastiche. This is the subject of the concluding sonnet of *Standing Wave*, in which form represents “a respectable address” reflecting “a reputation for judgment,” even as the poet’s impulses within that form are “anarchic, dark” (48). Unrhymed, catalectic, and irregular, the sonnets arbitrarily divide into three quatrains (thus effacing the volta) before resolving in a mock-Shakespearian couplet—indeed, seven of the 38 even rhyme or slant-rhyme. In a 2006 interview Allen explained that, by the title *Standing Wave*, “I mean to suggest the image of a constant formal shape running through the energy field of the poems, drawing attention, I guess, to the fact that this shape—of ideas, images, concerns—recurs in both the ‘Sonnets from Jimmie Walker Swamp’ and *The Encantadas*” (Almon 9). The form supplies a secure minimum of compression, sufficient to pump the pistons of the lines, but the vital source of energy is, as in Blake, Satanic—the “childish Lucifer” or “Peacock Angel” that is the poet’s mischievous daimonion (*Standing Wave* 46-7).

In *The Encantadas* the phrases bound over lines, stanzas, and canticles. “An initial formal rule,” he explained to Bert Almon, “not strictly adhered to in the final version, is that no line, stanza, or section would coincide with

the end of a sentence” (Almon 8). The last sentence of part I ends only at the beginning of part II; section V begins in the middle of the third stanza of the last canticle of section IV. Revision jerked whole sentences forward, without regard to scansion. “I write a million drafts, carelessly // Breaking the sentences into separate lines, breaking the speech / of my life into manageable bytes” (81).

So the triple tercets may appear strict, even hieratic, but the form disguises more elastic numbers. Terms like caesura and enjambment are misleading as applied to so fluid a metre, where sentences lap up on a loose tidal pattern. This is free verse serpentine through set stanzas, a current the poem’s three mariners sail. Like Walt Whitman, Allen imagined he had concocted a maritime metre for *The Encantadas*, only cogitative where *Leaves of Grass* aspires to chant. His note to the poem states: “Lines and sentences rarely end in the same place, as each long line throws itself into the next as in a succession of ocean waves” (Allen, *Standing Wave* 51).

The long irregular lines, which invite a breezy circulation of ideas, rescue the poem from the period style that dates some of Allen’s earlier lyrics, with their moralized nature, Georgian landscapes and paratactic Imagist condensation in aorist tenses (see, for example, “The Newt’s Song” and “Angleworm” in *Magellan’s Clouds*). In “April,” Allen runs metre and mortality together: “Level is the only thing to fear: the flat / Line; entropy” (Allen, *Ricky Ricardo* 80). *The Encantadas* intrepidly avoids “flat” lines. In his 1987 *Matrix* interview he explained that “each line throws you for a loop further into a world that has to be somehow understood and yet at the same time each line and each word has to be right” (Lanthier 65). Almost two decades later he replied to a remark about line length posed by Burt Almon:

You’re right about the long lines allowing adjectives back in, as well as all sorts of other elaboration and qualification. Part of this may just be getting tired of short lines and a poetic template that removes a lot of possible kinds of expression. I know that the poem, insofar as it may be criticized, will be for excess. It is naturally and intentionally excessive, a sort of operatic sea song, with lots of light operatic follies, digressions, observations, and citations; a bit of an ungainly sea monster perhaps. (Almon 9)

The preferred method is, as the poem’s title insinuates, by incantation. Poetry begins in charm and, for Ammons, remains “the enchantment” (Ammons, *Garbage* 56). The totemic owl Archie that hovers around the property in *The Encantadas* is named for Ammons’ enabling spirit: “More books written there than can be // counted, under the enchantment of the

old ghost owl" (130).¹² Like this Minerva, who wants "to command silence" (Ammons 59), Allen insists on the limits of expression: "I think that the most important things are inexpressible," he said in the 1987 interview (Lanthier 59). With Ammons he trusts only in oblique suggestions of the unsayable. The third of the "Sonnets from Jimmie Walker Swamp" cites both Wittgenstein's notorious *Tractatus* 6 prohibition ("Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent" [Wittgenstein 115]¹³) and the Frank Ramsey riposte that devastated the philosopher ("If you can't say it, you can't whistle it, either"):

It was said you can't say what can't be said,
nor dance it. But I am learning the language for it,
painfully, as if it were Mandarin or Khoi. I can talk

around it, catch its shadow flickered on the wall.
(Allen, *Standing Wave* 13)

In Wittgensteinian terms, the ineffable may be shown as shadow where it cannot be stated as sign. While drafting the *Tractatus* during World War I, Wittgenstein wrote on April 9, 1917 from his battalion to thank Paul Engelmann for Ludwig Uhland's Biedermeier poem, "Count Eberhard's Hawthorn": "The poem by Uhland is really magnificent. And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then *nothing* gets lost. But the unutterable will be—unutterably—*contained* in what has been uttered" (Engelmann 7).¹⁴ This is a formula of enchantment as Allen practices it. He talks "around" the inexpressible, marking the circumference of the shadow as though he were conjuring it.

Gazing at the sky and "metabolizing with a pen stuck in the corner of my mouth" (105), Jack reflects in *The Encantadas*:

All habitable places
are there, that's where snowy presciences lurk, proteins tangled up

with godly words, waiting to drift down on the shivering womb of
life herabouts, salty flow of spiral & semantic seaweed, spelling out
endless sonnets with just four dice.

(104)

Intimations of a presocratic logos, "godly words" immanent in biological process, leave a sediment just beneath the words on Allen's pages. (Here is one clue to his admiration for Nabokov, whose ingenuity consisted in the

manipulation and constellating of just such occult innuendoes.) Those four dice (the alphabet shorn of its two superfluous consonants?) are cast not by “the tyrant from Genesis” (56) but either by the amoral “purblind Doomsters” of Thomas Hardy’s sonnet “Hap” or, more likely, by Mallarmé’s agentless forces of “Un Coup de des.” The 31st “Sonnet from Jimmie Walker Swamp” hails the father of the Symbolists: “Rimbaud and Baudelaire and Mallarmé made me/ into the poet I am. They trespassed on the order/ I saw all around” (*Standing Wave* 41). Trespassed on the order, the sonnet continues, with the instrument of a higher order: “The holy/ word dropped as rain on my ordinary life.” Here is Heraclitus’ logos on the lips of Mallarmé, *une fleur* condensed from calyx to idea by enchantment, “l’absent de tous bouquets” (Mallarmé 239).

Allen’s poem is a Cantons de l’est incantation of the Galapagos islands conjured out of the eastern Pacific voyages of Darwin and Melville. The scientist of *Voyage of the Beagle* and the moralist of “The Encantadas” offer Allen a cognate vision, empirical and imaginative, combining a Malthusian biology—Darwin’s full title was *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*—and a Calvinist excursus of “the enchanted isles,” extinct volcanoes “looking much as the world at large might, after a penal conflagration” (Melville, *Billy Budd* 131).

Allen’s poetic “rapture of the deep” rhapsodizes mythic, historical, geological, evolutionary, literary, and private wraiths. While Jack, the convalescent victim of that rapture, is a Melville mariner familiar with “The Isles of Ash,” “enamored of the breakers, of life/ at the brink” (151), and Dionysius a rum-running poet with a catty, recalcitrant muse, Ted is “the Antediluvian Vaudevillian” (59), a tap-dancing Galapagos tortoise in whom comically merges the poles of Darwin’s and Melville’s obsessions. Melville was horrified by the sterile “heap of cinders” and unvaried equatorial climate of the Galapagos; Darwin was stimulated by the diversity and variation of its species. Where the tortoises, their shells distinctive from isle to isle, suggested to Darwin evidence for evolution, to Melville they were “strangely self-condemned,” leading him to conclude that “[l]asting sorrow and penal hopelessness are in no animal form so suppliantly expressed as in theirs” (Melville, *Billy Budd* 135). He recounts the superstition that “all wicked sea-officers, more especially commodores and captains, are at death (and, in some cases, before death) transformed into tortoises; thenceforth dwelling upon these hot aridities, sole solitary lords of Asphaltum” (135).

Ted is more likely the reincarnation of a music hall entertainer, and what he releases into the poem is just that Ovidian delight in, and Apuleian horror of, metamorphosis that any skilled vaudevillian hones. The book's brightest pages are *tours de force* of Jack's reptilian alter ego, the associations giddy and sad, from New York's Ithaca to Odysseus':

He got there
In a mere ten years, chugging along through the Aegean. But

Got there, slew the zootsuits, then crewed his barque westward
to death's knell, after a few happy years with Olive and Sweet pea.
Or is that another story I got wrong, adrift on the winedark sea...?"
(72)

Allen invokes Darwin and Melville to elaborate themes of biological accident (such as consciousness itself), descent (Jack now resembles his dead father), "Time's baleen jaws" (125), the extinction of races, species and families, the illusions of coherent selfhood, the mortifications of conscience, and the grandeur of the supreme fictions, now defunct, that once affronted such facts. There is no Burnt Norton, no "still point of the turning world" for this poet, only the fatal rocks of *The Dry Salvages* (Eliot, *Four Quartets* 15); no confidence in redeeming absolutes. No more than Ammons does Allen share T.S. Eliot's conviction of a providential moral order, nor, for all the richness of their encounter with Stevens, do either share Stevens' commitment to creating confidence in the world and what in "A Collect of Philosophy" he calls the "poetic belief" or "belief beyond belief" (Stevens 864, 867).

The kinds of order *The Encantadas* intimates are tentative and as mischievous as the Peacock Angel of the sonnets. Allen is cautious not to impose intuitions of some larger pattern implicit in his formal choices or immanent in the poet's consciousness. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," for all its relevance, remains only a distant relation.¹⁵ *The Encantadas* is neither a complete flight from the internalized quest romance of the Romantic lyric, nor a complete flight towards the performative postmodern poem that negates the dream of transcending the material of language and world. In contrast, for instance, to the language poets, Allen is not prepared to surrender expression of subject, and for all its fractive alter egos and discontinuities, his long poem is not disjunctive. His Darwinian materialism however militates against metaphysical nostrums ("Earth will become Mars" [127]). Jack's rapture of the deep is poetry certainly and may be visionary gleam, but it is first and last a medical condition:

Now take
my own submersion: half-dozing in blue-light, I sank into the deep.
Hearing nothing. The heart beat on. Small plosives of sugar and oxygen,

depth charges. Nothing in the lizard brain rebelled. Nothing tried
to wake me, though I thought I glimpsed the soul, oblate with pressure,
ascend in a white bubble crown (up the down staircase which I

descended). Later they diagnosed narcosis, told me I'd no right to be so
unconnectedly happy. But even then I don't think I'd lost my knack of
weighing
one state against another, not even shot up with narcotics.

(37)

This has analogies to the inebriated state of Hugh MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, but the Scottish Modernist's attempt at a reconciliation of Darwinism and transcendentalism, both in this long poem and in "On a Raised Beach," does not detain Allen. As in Don McKay's poetry (e.g. *Varves*), there is in Allen a kind of elation at the implacable anti-millenarianism of geological time; it provides a satisfying specialized vocabulary, respite from history, and a commanding counter-argument to the self-satisfied Christian piety that justified the politics, deeply offensive to Allen, of American republicanism from "Reaganomics" to "rendition."

In *The Encantadas* myth and metaphor do not acquire suprarational force. Where, by contrast, Ronald Johnson in *ARK* presents an Emersonian cosmological ethos, a fundamental unity and isomorphism gained by subatomic physics, Allen sees only the statistical, random, and unpredictable. There is no one "intelligence" immanent in nature, as Emerson's associate, the Harvard naturalist Louis Agassiz urged against Darwin's theory. The galactic and geological perspective affords no neo-Kantian revelations of the priority of mind. With Swiftian relish Allen likes to juxtapose Lilliputian human affairs with Brobdingnagian chronologies; Jack thus recalls "one muggy afternoon in / the Late Cenozoic Age (it was Bastille Day, I think)" (47), the age of existing animals and the Age of Revolution coextensive.¹⁶

Consciousness is in *The Encantadas* a happy accident of evolution (136), something to make poems with but not an escape from biological fiat. Allen respects the fossil record, is no poker-faced poet holding a metaphysical trump card to his chest; he intuits no higher unity or divine will. "I am second last in a line of bipedal apes," writes the unillusioned father of one offspring (154), awaiting not Tir Na Nog but only "an avalon for my

ashes" (123). A natural fact is for him poetry, but unlike Emerson Allen does not reduce natural objects to psychological symbols or exalt them to hermetic symbols.

The poem's Homeric motifs meanwhile neither organize nor subvert the varied materials of *The Encantadas*. Dionysius and Persephone (Coré) are neither mediums, as in Pound's *Cantos*, for the restoration of ancient beliefs or primary values, nor springboards to camp. They are figures of cultural and finally genetic recurrence in a wizened world without originals (viz. 118), "as all of us have lived before" (112). The poem thus has affinities with Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* (written in Montreal while Allen was drafting *The Encantadas*) and with *War Music*, Christopher Logue's exuberantly anachronistic paraphrase of the Trojan War. All concatenate classical elements (Carson, the fragments of Stesichorus's lost epic of the Geryon myth) with comic impropriety yet endeavour nevertheless to preserve intact certain classical conventions. All three, for instance, depend ultimately on the romance elements embryonic in the *Odyssey*. They do so without implying hierarchies of aesthetic taste or moral value in the manipulation of classical materials. The result avoids both neoclassical filiopietism and postmodern irreverence. Logue of course has Homer to do his plotting. With no defining crisis or revelation towards which to mount, *The Encantadas* can rely only on its powers of self-perpetuation. Appropriate to a work concerned with Darwinism, it places its faith in invention and variation. With its fixed metres, plot, and omniscient self-assurance, classical epic could become monotonous or marmoreal. Like Derek Walcott in *Omeros*, Allen envies Homer most his apparent lack of antecedents: "a poetry young as you'd wish, with / no cliché yet spoken" (111). The epigone's lament? "As Dawkins said, there are few // ancestors and many descendants" (22)—as indeed said Harold Bloom of literary tradition.

The expansive scope of epic may conceal exclusiveness of content, but when, in the wake of the *Cantos* and *Paterson*, open field poetics promised to vary the genre, the results (e.g., Olson's *Maximus* and Duncan's *Pas-sages*) could look diffuse and brackish, their variety indiscriminate and curiously self-involved. Louis Dudek, an *eminence gris* of Montreal Modernism whose DC Books, under the proprietorship of Steve Luxton, published Allen's *Ricky Ricardo Suites* and the novel *Napoleon's Retreat*, lamented this development. In a 1990 interview for the Montreal literary journal *Zymergy*, he cautioned that the long poem "cannot be a digressive, expansive, boring exposition. It is really made up of very sharp, Imagistic, quintessential poetic elements. Every rift, you know, is filled with ore"

(Schrier 43). Allen's insight in *The Encantadas* was that the very expansiveness might be compressed into a loosely isometric but regular stanzaic structure. He condenses long looping sentences into tripled tercet canticles. The brevity of these implicitly reply to Edgar Allan Poe's notorious denial of the feasibility of the long poem. Allen gets some of the "intensity" Poe demanded of poetry from the nine-line canticle without sacrificing spontaneity or a broader receptivity.

In 1987 Allen said, "The American style of long poem that I came into contact with tends to be very elliptical; it changes tone a good deal and tends to ramble and meander. It's chatty and has an American, especially American Southern, kind of verbal structure: very dense and very interwoven" (Lanthier 51). He felt himself well-suited to this form, as "I think that basically I am an essayist" (56).

Paul Muldoon, author of the elegy "Incantatas," defines the long poem in *The End of the Poem* as one that "resists coming to a close, or drawing its own conclusion.... My theory is that, as it comes into being, the poem is marking and measuring itself against a combination of what it might now be and what it might yet become" (Muldoon 299). The process of composition and revision over a quarter century suggests *The Encantadas* measuring itself anew, phrases altered and displaced onto different lines and stanzas in constantly renewing combinations. The end of the poem continues to resist its end. The closing canticle is a snapped, "tap-dancing" (158) pair of hemistichs and a blank patch where eight lines should be. Ending at canticle 158, the poem spites its larger triplet structure ($53 \times 3 = 159$). These asymmetries join others, thematic and narrative, to form a hieroglyph of inconclusiveness. As in the sonnets, Allen adheres to "a foolish, burning purity, to say no / to the heat death of my own small universe" (*Standing Wave* 48).

David Solway's histrionic claim that Anglo-Quebec poets reap the "benefit of ostracism to build their home *in the domain of language itself*" (81) might resonate for an English emigrant, but again, the language of prosecution and preterition repelled Allen. *The Encantadas* notably does not culminate in alienation or homecoming, but with expeditions: Jack is drawn by renewed calls from "the Sirens' island" (155), Ted is set adrift, and Dionysius continues to sail from Corfu to Bristol with a twin cargo of inspiration (wine and musing girlfriend). These triune narratives end *in media res*, just as begun. Like Dante's and Tennyson's Ulysses, his mariners will not retire; unlike them, this is neither fatal hubris nor strained romantic posturing. Dionysius's arrival is not depicted, because Allen is not interested in culmination and consummation—the 158 canticles of the

poem stave off arrival.¹⁷ For more than a quarter century Allen triumphantly staved off completion.

Notes

- 1 "Sincerity, this precision of terms is heaven's process": so Pound renders the Confucian ethical formula in part XX, section 18 of *The Unwobbling Pivot*; the ethical subject must "arrive at precision in his own terminology, that is, sincerity, at clear definitions" (part XXIII, Pound, *Confucius*, 167, 175). See especially the Chinese *Cantos* and *The Pisan Cantos*.
- 2 See Geoff Hancock, 66-79.
- 3 David Solway, one of Farkas and Norris's "sixties" poets and unlikely to accept disqualification, returned fire on "the Vehicule school of pseudo-demotic poetics. Affecting the open-ended poetics of the Black Mountain bunch as it filtered through the West Coast anagrammatic Tish movement, a byke of these early Vehiculists unleashed what seemed to many observers a veritable hemorrhage of forgettable books" (Solway 83).
- 4 The author blurb to volume one of *The Hawryliw Process* announces in 1980 that the novelist has been writing *The Voyage to the Encantadas* for two years. In 1984 a version of Part I appeared in *Wintergarden*; a revision of these first 54 canticles appeared in 1990 in *Magellan's Clouds: Poems 1971-1986*. Canticles 55 to one hundred (containing all of parts II and III) were published in *Ricky Ricardo Suites* in 2000, and the concluding 58 (parts IV and V) in *Standing Wave* in 2005. Further revised, the complete poem appeared in 2006.
- 5 Between 1973 and 1974 he even taught at Kenyon College in Southern Ohio, shortly before the death there of a key figure in the New Criticism, John Crowe Ransom.
- 6 His fellow expatriate and collaborator (on *Late Romantics*, with Mark Teicher), the poet Steve Luxton remarks on the "westerling-trending" of a writer "brought by his parents from narrow British streets to a continent of reputedly open horizons and opportunity. As his oldest close friend, my own background was similar. Small, iron-fenced parks and smudged yellow brick. Only once in his life: just a couple of years before his own death, to spread the ashes of his father, did Rob go back. When he and I car-wandered North America, we were like two boys who had slipped through a fence hole from a region of tight closes into some huge, only nominally owned country estate, one almost wild, exhilaratingly free" (Luxton 16).
- 7 Camlot and Swift dedicated *Language Acts: Anglo-Québec Poetry, 1976 to the 21st Century* to the memories of Allen, Dudek, and Layton.
- 8 The poem "April," collected in *Ricky Ricardo Suites*, describes "snow-clouded cones of light in *Vieux Montreal*" (80).
- 9 The second of the "Ricky Ricardo Suites," a sardonic jeremiad, calls Canada "a jumble of barren staked-out tracts, to each of us his own, and to each his narrow bed" (*Ricky Ricardo* 21). He almost envies the United States its violent cataclysms: "We are living proof that what the generals, revolutionaries, visionaries and frontier marshals did to the great republic to the south, an army of clerks and bankers can do as well" (*ibid*).
- 10 Starmino was responsible for the division of *Standing Wave* into the selection of sonnets and the concluding two parts of *The Encantadas*.
- 11 "Ethics and aesthetics are one": "Ethik und Aesthetik sind Eins" (Wittgenstein 112).
- 12 Jason Camlot's "Owls," one of the 38 "Adios Sonnets" eulogizing the poet of the 38 "Sonnets from Jimmie Walker Swamp," doubles the paternity of Archie by linking to

Allen's father

the snowy

owl you trapped with your father
on December 15th, 1963? Archie
the owl, you named him, kept him
alive, with your father, together, by feeding

him sparrows whole, watching his eyes darken
as he gave the little birds interminable warmth.

(Camlot, *The Debaucher* 95)

- 13 "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen" (Wittgenstein, 115).
- 14 "Das Umlandische Gedicht ist wirklich großartig. Und es ist so: Wenn man sich nicht bemüht das Unaussprechliche auszusprechen, so geht *nichts* verloren. Sondern das Unaussprechliche ist,—unaussprechlich—in dem Ausgesprochenen *enthalten*" (Engelmann 6).
- 15 One sign of kinship is in Coleridge's construction, in the 1817 recension of the poem, of a palimpsest of historically situated hermeneutic models.
- 16 Allen borrows the phrase from the title story of his 1995 collection of short fiction, *A June Night in the Late Cenozoic* (Oolichan).
- 17 A detail in Part I confirms that Dionysius ultimately reached England with the wine, but since the "little craft" (the Dionisia) "rots somewhere / in a coast guard shed" (47 and 48), the contraband must have been impounded. This is one way the poem mocks or trivializes narrative telos.

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