Exile and Audience: Carmine Starnino and the Poetics of Engagement

by Katye Seip

Positioning the Anglo-Quebec poet as "distinct from both their franco-Québécois as well as anglo-Canadian counterparts," David Solway insists that the poet finds him/herself in the "literary wing of a twofold hostage community"—in a state of "double exile" ("Double Exile" 81). The Montreal poet, he goes on to say, "is doubly cut off from an appreciative, or at least available, readership since it constitutes only a tiny insular minority in the midst of a sea of five million French speakers (who pay little attention to works in the 'other' language)" (81). To complicate matters further, "French literature is itself a minority phenomenon surrounded on every side by a nation of twenty-five million English speakers (who, for political reasons, will subsidize its token presence but without understanding or familiarity—while ignoring the Anglophone remnant almost completely)" (81). For Solway, this exile has fortuitously resulted in the absence of the stifling national, regional, and even individual poetic influences associated with conventional poetic communities (81). Solway claims that having reaped "the benefits of ostracism…having absorbed the reality of exile into their inmost selves and consequent practice" the Anglo-Quebec poet has "developed a distinctive style and idiolect" that is not only resistant to the "co-optation of the collective" but is primarily identifiable by its "genuine originality" (81-82). For Solway, there is no doubt, that exile plays a primary role in the development of the Anglo-Quebec poet. Solway is not alone in this assertion. In an interview with *The Danforth Review*, Montreal poet, Carmine Starnino admits "that the words 'Montreal poetry' and 'neglected' have had a special relationship since the seventies" ("TDR Interview"). However, rather than congratulate his fellow Anglo-Quebec poets on their "genuine originality" in the face of such neglect, Starnino contends "that among the critic's most important duties is to bring accountability to the arbitrariness of that sort of indifference, to ensure that deserving, less visible reputations are given a fighting chance, a convincing claim on the reader's attention" ("TDR Interview"). Starnino has pursued his career as critic and poet in a manner that suggests he is up for such a task.

In "Michael Harris's Boo-Jhwah Appalachianna" Starnino acknowledges that although any discussion of regional poetics which attempts "to tie poets to place" can "from the perspective of a postmodern and peripatetic era…appear anachronistic" he "can think of poems by Montreal poets that do things other poems by Canadian poets don't" (233). Starnino argues, "it is something about the experience of living in a bustlingly mixed and bilingual city…a hot zone of linguistic impurity—that gives one access to ambitions difficult to feel elsewhere. To satisfy those ambitions Montreal poets have had to evolve new structures of volubility, [...] their poems bushwack an alternative path for readers and poets to follow" (233). Using such notable Montreal poets as A.M. Klein, Peter Van Toorn, Robyn Sarah, David Solway and Michael Harris as his examples, Starnino claims that this group "form a distinguished society" whose similarities are "best seen on the page, where their virtuosity carries impact by encoding itself in open, accessible, undeceptive ingenuities" and whose work furthermore reflects, "reader-friendly risk-taking – nudging words in new directions, opening possibilities up—founded on the awareness that someone is going to read [their poetry]," and consequently that it should be "shaped by the determination to therefore make sense" (233). If one acknowledges, as Starnino does in his book of critical essays and reviews, *A Lover's Quarrel*, that Canadian poetry as a whole appears to be "an utterly unwanted article of trade" (34) nationally and internationally speaking, then how are we to take Starnino's desire to create audience-driven poetry within the allegedly exiled and even-more-ignored sphere of English Quebec? Perhaps this audience-driven poetry represents the sort of ambition Starnino alludes to as one which is specific to a poet living in "a hot zone of linguistic impurity" ("Boo-Jhwah" 233). Starnino notes that this "hot zone" is responsible for "experimental" and "indigenously distinctive" linguistic arrangements, for example Klein's "double-melodied vocabulaire," a lexicon of Franglais featured in his poem "Montreal" from the 1948 collection, *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* ("Boo-Jhwah" 234). When examining the sample of Anglo-Quebec poets featured in "Boo-Jhwah" we see that Starnino shares many of the characteristics and ambitions found in the work of those he champions. His use of hybrid words and his ability to "nudge words in new directions" harken back to Klein's *The Rocking Chair*, while Starnino's precision in language and his unique lexicon are reminiscent of Michael Harris' poetry, which aims to give "language back its kinetic nutrients" ("Boo-Jhwah" 237). And yet, while the cultural convergence of English and French, and the position of "double-exile" may in fact play a primary role in Starnino's poetry, this

influence is demonstrated through Starnino's creation of an "anti-exile," audience driven, communicative aesthetic; an aesthetic which attempts to annihilate and not enhance the Anglo-Quebec poet's sense of exile. By using the technique of direct address in a manner that welcomes the reader into the poem, by encouraging reader participation through interactive poetic genres such as the riddle poem, and finally by his attempt to be precise in his use of language with the aim of making his poetry accessible to a wide-ranging audience, Starnino creates a non-regional, perhaps internationally accessible poetry.

When examining Starnino's poetry in *The New World*, *Credo* and *With English Subtitles,* one is overwhelmed by the manner in which Starnino's use of language is indicative of the poet's desire to construct and connect with a community of readers through a set of poetic tactics that I have termed Starnino's "communicative poetics." This poetics is defined by an explicit attempt to create poetry that will be accessible to some conception of a wide-ranging audience. Like Starnino's sample of Montreal poets, Starnino's own communicative aesthetic in all three of his monographs is typified by "accessible, undeceptive ingenuities…reader-friendly risk-taking—nudging words in new directions," a type of poetry that is not only founded on, but is nearly reliant on "the awareness that someone is going to read it" ("Boo-Jhwah" 234). To achieve his communicative poetics, Starnino relies heavily on the use of direct address, strategically colloquial diction, interactive and invitational poetic genres, and a challenging yet ultimately accessible lexicon. Although these poetic choices are arguably symptomatic of a poet suffering from exile or "double exile," Starnino uses these techniques to forge his way out of poetic exile and into an imagined community of receptive readers.

In approaching Anglo-Quebec poetry it is worthwhile remembering that there are cultural and political factors intrinsic to Quebec which may in fact incite debate concerning reader reception and the limitations of communication for the Anglo-Quebec poet. In their "Introduction" to *Montreal: English Poetry of the Seventies*, Andre Farkas and Ken Norris note the simple fact that "language is the most powerful of all political realities in Quebec" and therefore it is arguable that "to write in English is to take a political stand" (45). Farkas and Norris' claims are backed by decades of political discourse surrounding the Quiet Revolution and subsequent language acts that followed, and may also be considered in relation to concepts of minority integration such as the "moral contract" between the Quebec citizen and the nation of Quebec. Alain-G. Gagnon and Raffaele Iacovino note that the nation of Quebec expects all citizens, both

immigrants and settled minorities, to participate in a "moral contract" (375). This "moral contract" forwards both a message of pluralism, (although arguably private), as well as the public "participation and the contribution of everyone," in "a society in which French is the common language of public life" (Gagnon and Iacovino 375). Although the citizens of Quebec reserve the right to conduct their private lives in their language of origin, or language of choice, all public contribution and participation must be made in "the common language of public life" (i.e. in French), and "this is seen as an essential condition for the cohesion of Quebec society" (375-76). Gagnon and Iacovino explore the tension surrounding such a "moral contract" noting how some critics deem governmental "measures in areas of language acquisition and cultural adaptation" as "an affront to liberal principles of individual rights over society" (374). However, the contract is careful not to "imply in itself the abandonment of a language of origin," and furthermore—for egalitarian reasons, and for the sake of utility—"the development of languages of origin is considered an economic, social and cultural asset" in Quebec (Rocher qtd. in Gagnon and Iacovino 377).

One may wonder then, if the literary production of the Anglo-Quebec poet is acceptable for the sake of its utility as a cultural asset of a pluralist Quebec. From one perspective, given that it is written and published in English, it can hardly be seen as a public contribution. Although the contract is careful not to expunge the use of minority and origin languages, and though many Anglo-Quebec poets do not consider the highly charged language politics of Quebec as explicitly influential upon their poetry, the simple fact remains that when one writes in English in Quebec, one is writing for an English audience. This may allow the poet access to the larger Canadian market, but it certainly alienates the Anglo-Quebec poet from the majority population of their immediate province of residence.

Considering the lack of a formidable English-speaking reading public in Quebec, one may justifiably ask if this reality has had an impact on the style and themes of the Anglo-Quebec poet. For Farkas and Norris the influence is noticeable in the Anglo-Quebec poet's "use of language" (45). They contend that "because of the politics of language in Quebec, the Montreal English poet recognizes the potential volatility of the misuse of the language in which he is writing" and therefore his/her work "is tempered by an absolute precision" (Farkas and Norris 45). Such an assertion is easily applied to a description of Starnino's poetic diction. When examining the reviews of Starnino's work, one consistently encounters commentary on Starnino's "use of language" (Fitzgerald). The term, although

initially vague, is characterized by Starnino's "careful structure," "controlled tone," "understated imagery that resonates meaning far beyond its surface simplicity." Overall, critics agree that Starnino's poetry consists of a very "economic" and "forceful use of language" (Bowling 11). Of *Credo*, Starnino's second collection, Derek Webster finds "a conscious revel in language and individual words, that has swelled at the core of this poet's work and transformed it into a truly new world.... His language moves with eyes wide open to possibility: not restricted, like the speaker whose home language is English...Starnino is on a journey to the heart of language" (20). Webster's description seems to echo Solway's assertion that the autonomy of Anglo-Quebec poets has allowed them the freedom to "build their home *in the domain of language itself*" ("Double Exile" 81). Starnino takes this directive one step further: where Solway views the establishment of a new poetic terrain as due to linguistic exile—a perhaps dubious assertion given the very clear stakes he holds on such terrain—Starnino is more concerned with ensuring that these innovations in language do not strand his reader on exilic shores. For Starnino it is of the utmost importance that the reader join him on his path-hewing journey. Therefore, Starnino's poetry often features the presence of a "direct unself-conscious address" which conversationally engages and welcomes the reader, and guides him or her through this new linguistic landscape (Webster 20).

The use of direct address is present in all three of Starnino's monographs, but to varying degrees and in varying incarnations. The address may be humorous or serious in tone; it may be delivered in an inconspicuous manner, accruing slowly as the poem progresses, or it may be implemented more flamboyantly as the driving force behind the poem. The first example of this technique in Starnino's published work can be found in the poem "Heritage," from his first collection *The New World*. Here we find an example of a less overt, yet nonetheless persistent, address to the reader. In "Heritage" Starnino depends on the pronoun "this" to connect with his reader in a poem that appears at first to be "nothing more than a loving list of intimate details drawn from the narrator's memories of his grandparents" (Bowling 11). "This" is repeated twenty-one times in a twenty-four line poem. It functions as a rhetorical device that implores the reader to consider the presence and the particularity of the images described. The reader not only absorbs the pertinent details needed to understand and connect with the speaker, but due to the constant repetition of "this" a tone of intimacy develops between the speaker and the reader. It is as if the speaker is physically in the room with the reader, providing a running commentary

of the images the reader encounters: "This is my grandmother testing the hot iron with a spittled finger. / This is the hiss. This is the stroke that seized my grandfather / working alone in the fields. … / […] / … This is the apple tree / … / the early evening / lavender among its dark branches" (Starnino, *The New World* 13). "This" not only pinpoints visual images, sounds or smells as found in the example above, but also attempts to make the ineffable tangible, as in the lines, "This is ten years / … This is the fever / that, one morning, kept me in bed" (13). Starnino makes an arduous effort in this poem to reach out to the reader, to express the personal specificity of the particulars in his poem in a manner that makes them relevant beyond his personal experience.

By relying on the repetition of the pronoun "this" Starnino attempts to express the particulars and connect with his reader without relying on potentially obfuscating metaphor, which, typically "brings out the thisness of that" (Burke 503). By avoiding metaphor, and instead, relying on the direct address of the pronoun, Starnino ensures two things. First, the reader is only exposed to Starnino's precise frame of reference when describing his images. Second, by not relying on his reader's imaginative capability of conjuring up a likeness between the thing Starnino describes and the metaphor he might use to describe it, this restraint in the use of metaphor ensures that all his readers have equal access to the image he describes. In effect, Starnino levels the imaginative playing field. Therefore, his precision and the use of "this" ensure a certain kind of accessibility. Such techniques demonstrate a mindfulness of audience that is indicative of Starnino's attempt to break free from an ambiguity surrounding the reception of his poetry that might be due to an exilic writing context. The methods used to make "Heritage" an accessible poem demonstrate Starnino's desire to connect to a wide audience and to assemble a community of listeners. The question that inevitably arises and remains without answer is whether or not such a desire is indicative of the marooned consciousness of the Anglo-Quebec poet.

Beyond the rather subtle use of the direct address found in *The New World*, Starnino's subsequent books, *Credo* and *With English Subtitles* feature overt and conversational modes of direct address. In the poem, "What My Mother's Hands Smell Like," which, in both content and form, is reminiscent of "Hertiage," Starnino makes a second attempt at the direct address; this time in a more overt manner. The poem starts in media res with the line, "Right now it's obviously garlic" (*Credo* 33). The poem engages the reader as if s/he is an interlocutor, in mid-conversation with the poem. By using direct address, signalled with such words as "right now"

and "obviously," Starnino immerses the reader in the reality of the moment enacted in the poem. The poem aggressively positions the reader as a participatory observer, sitting in the kitchen, watching the mother chop away at "three cloves / and three fillets of anchovies" (33). Starnino then relaxes the poem's direct involvement with the reader by moving into a detailed description of the father's favourite meal "*pasta con alice*" and the clean up that follows. However, the direct address is again used at the very end of the poem, when the reader is asked to bring the mother's hands "to your face, breathe deeply, / and somewhere, worked into her red knuckles" we will find the smell of "the cool stowed in a pile of sheets just off the line, / is the scent of one's soul in a dry dwelling-place" (33). It is here, in these last lines, where the reader may stumble. Starnino has used the direct address to coach the reader into imagining the visceral experience of smelling the mother's hands, but the smell Starnino wishes the reader to experience walks a fine line between being tangible and intangible. We can imagine, or have perhaps experienced the cool smell of "sheets just off the line", and therefore have access to the smell of the mother's hands, but "the scent of one's soul in a dry dwelling-place" is a much tougher idea to access (33). These final lines test the strength of Starnino's direct address. Has the reader had access to enough concrete particulars? Do they feel welcome and well situated enough in Starnino's poetic landscape to follow the poet through to this final moment and embrace this less tangible image? When successful, the earnest nature of the direct address should make the reader feel as though s/he is fully integrated into the reality of the poem, with no image beyond his or her grasp.

Although he is not willing to compromise his diction by making it overly simplistic, Starnino is aware of how isolating poetic language can be. Frequently, his deployment of direct address functions as a way to invite the reader to reconsider the very images he puts forth. "Homemade," a poem that poeticizes the making of cherry preserves, is a perfect example of the tension in Starnino's work between the creation of an accessible image, on the one hand, and an adherence to his own unique poetic sensibility, on the other. The unique sensibility in question, and its poetic method, is epitomized in the following lines:

> …Sugar goes soggy
> from sunlight's glassed-in excitation,
>
> conjugates into something spumescent,
> weather churned, barely-seeable-into.
> (Starnino, *With English Subtitles* 46)

In these lines, Starnino creates new hybrid words while resuscitating older, more uncommon words in an attempt to make his overarching image accessible. Reviewers have repeatedly praised Starnino for his "clarity of diction and sharpness of purpose" stating, "one of Starnino's strongest points is his exact use of language" (Fitzgerald). Starnino's choice of an uncommon word like "spumescent" instead of "foamy" or "frothy" to describe the cherry preserves in "Homemade" is significant as an example of his motive as a poet to communicate something specific and unique to the experience he is communicating.

In his essay on Michael Harris, Starnino addresses the significance of diction stating that there is a "trend in contemporary Canadian poetry [...] to regard words as cosmetic, useful for the simulation of sagacity, rather than as substance with their own weight and temperature" ("Boo-Jhwah" 237). Starnino argues that Harris avoids the sort of "brittle" poetry that comes with "language pillaged of its spoken density" (237). Instead, Harris "replenish[es] language [...] giving language back its kinetic nutrients", and in doing so, Starnino says (here using the words of Seamus Heaney) that Harris achieves "the accuracy of words 'founded clean on their own shape'" ("Boo-Jhwah" 237). According to Starnino, not only does this sort of linguistic particularity produce sharper, more comprehensible poetry, it can be understood as an important element of the poet's goal (237-238). In much of Starnino's poetry we see the poet follow in Harris' footsteps, searching for ways to "repair...Canadian speech—using tiny touches, minimal modifications—a more interesting 'English' (245). In this way, his precision of language, compound words and elevated diction may prove to be one of his most communicative poetic tools.

Although there is much to say in praise of Starnino's particular diction, Starnino still relies on the voice of the guide, or the direct address, to attempt to ensure the reader's full comprehension. For example, Starnino closes the poem "Homemade" with the lines, "I spoon up a few. Here, you taste too" in order to ensure that the sensuousness of the homemade cherries—those "ossified-pale pink...whow-balls"—is experienced to the full (Starnino, *With English Subtitles* 46). Such use of the direct address can be understood as a way of insisting on the reader's interaction with the poem. If the reader felt him/herself alienated by the poem's diction, this use of direct address as an unequivocal invitation to experience the cherries may encourage the reader to re-read the poem and perhaps upon rereading obtain the intended, precise meaning of Starnino's particular vocabulary.

Direct address is not the only tool Starnino uses to engage with his readers. His communicative poetics is further demonstrated by his engagement

with the "reader-friendly risk-taking" interactive and invitational literary form of the riddle poem, Starnino flirts with in *Credo*, and develops further in *With English Subtitles*. Defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* as "a puzzlingly indirect description of some thing, person, or idea, framed in such a way as to challenge the reader to identify it"; the genre of the riddle poem demands the reader interact with the puzzler, in this case Starnino's poet speaker. In "What do you call this?" Starnino artfully combines the genre of the riddle poem with the theme of bilingualism. Here, the mystery object, a pocket-knife, is described through simple non-puzzling biographical references, "My grandfather kept his in his pocket, / [...] / , ...used to sheer away / a bit of cheese, a chunk of bread, / [...] / , ...And me, what / do I use it for? To sharpen my pencil" (Starnino, *Credo* 14). Although Starnino means to challenge his reader to engage with the riddle of his poem, baffling the reader is not Starnino's aim, and therefore it is not surprising that "What Do You Call This?" ends with the speaker naming the object. However, the object is not named before the speaker documents his own inability to remember its name in Italian. Fumbling his answer, the speaker calls the pocket-knife, "this doohicky sickle, / this whatsit scythe" before successfully saying, "*Rongetta.* Ron-get-ta" (14). The speaker's initial inability to name the object at the end of the poem suggests that the reader is not the only one engaged in unravelling poignant objects as riddles. The experience of unravelling a poem is presented as a collaborative, shared experience, and again underscores Starnino's desire to connect to his reader.

In *With English Subtitles*, Starnino moves from the longer riddle poem format of "What Do You Call This?" to a collection of six, four line riddle poems, referred to only as "Six Riddles." Although these poems are much more condensed, lacking both the overt question "what am I?" and the answer found in "What Do You Call This?" these riddles are even more inviting to the reader. There is a playful nature implicit in Starnino's shorter riddles. For example, "Riddle V":

> Fleshy and cartilaginous, I can fetch smells
> of soddeness after rain, or the stink
> of your own sweat. When sick, I leak.
> Many play with me in private.
> (*With English Subtitles* 42)

It is obvious that we are hearing from a nose in this poem, and the quite easy and straightforward solutions to Starnino's riddles, as compared to, say, a dense contemporary riddle poem like Craig Raine's "A Martian

Sends a Postcard Home," or even most of the *Exeter Book* riddles, must be understood as yet another strategy of poetic accommodation. These riddles are not designed to baffle or frustrate the reader, a strategy that would hinder Starnino's overall goal of reaching a large audience. Starnino's use of language in the poems is very controlled and economic, which not only results in a thoughtful description of the mystery object, but an automatic inference of the question "what am I?" and the ability of the reader to call out an answer upon finishing each poem. These riddle poems capture the reader's attention and encourage interaction, and therefore function as another means of attaining Starnino's goal of communicative poetry.

Both the "call and response" relationship present in Starnino's riddle poems, and the use of direct address as discussed above, indicate Starnino's overwhelming desire to actually connect to, if not converse, with his reader. In *With English Subtitles*, Starnino makes further attempts to forge a conversation with his audience through a playful series of poems referred to as, "The Worst-Case Scenario Poems." With titles ranging from "How to Escape From a Car Hanging Over the Edge of a Cliff" to "How to Survive a Volcanic Eruption," the reader is placed in fatal scenarios and is then given poetic escape plans. In all five poems, Starnino provides detailed instructions to his reader. Although occasionally the detailed instructions become overly elaborate—for example, in "How to Climb Out of a Well" the reader is instructed to "Houdini-hug the sides like an upright / L-Shaped wedge… / […] / make like a bubble in water" (*With English Subtitles* 16). These occasions are followed by instances of vernacular direct address, like the admission in the same poem, "Okay, so / the trick's tough" (16). Overall, the poems are dominated by a conversational and vernacular rhetoric. "How to Escape From a Car" even ends in Starnino's acknowledgement that if the reader makes one misstep in exiting the vehicle, "you're fucked" (15). Although these poems are very playful they also seem aimed at implying a more intimate relationship with the reader. By relying less on an overtly elevated poetic vocabulary and more on a conversational tone, these poems can be seen as prime examples of Starnino's attempt at a communicative poetics.

But is there something else at work here? Starnino prefaces the "Worst-Case Scenerio Poems" with the following quote from Robert Frost:

> There are no two things as important to us in life and art as being threatened and being saved. What are ideals of form for if we aren't going to be made to fear for them? All our ingenuity is lavished on getting into danger legitimately so that we may be genuinely rescued. (*With English Subtitles* 14).

Of course, through the medium of these poems Starnino does not actually endanger the reader or genuinely provide a sense of rescue, so with Frost's quote in mind, one begins to wonder who is actually entering into dangerous territory and who is in need of rescue? The "Scenario Poems" are a prime example of "reader-friendly risk-taking." However, are these poems examples of poet-friendly risk-taking? The linguistic choices Starnino makes, whether they involve the resuscitation of antiquated forms or the use of direct address, are dependent on their reception by an audience the existence of which Starnino is uncertain.

Although I have argued that Starnino takes great steps to ensure his poetry manifests a communicative aesthetic, it is important to note that he does not ignore the tensions surrounding the communicative limitations of language. In *Credo*, Starnino's investigation of the limitations of language to communicate is centred in the sixteen-part poem "Cornage," a poem in which Starnino investigates the expressive powers and inherent opacities of medieval English (Webster 20). In Part I, Starnino defines the ancient word "Cornage" as "the duty of every tenant / to alert his distant master of approaching invaders" stating, "I have thereby stationed this poem on a tout-hill, where, / in time of danger, it will blow a horn as warning" (*Credo* 47). These lines in "Cornage" appear to echo David Solway's poem, "On Learning Greek," in which the poet articulates the culturally protective and exclusionary nature of language, stating "language is the longest wall in the world and the strongest. / [...] meant to keep out the barbarians" with "tunnels of grammar hopelessly insoluble / as if by plan" (Solway, "On Learning Greek" 36). Both poets engage with the issue of language's penetrability, but Solway suggests that language is a guarded wall, while Starnino's "Cornage" seems to suggest that languages' wall can be breached. In "Cornage" Part II, the persona discusses the thrill of pronouncing the unpronounceable "Horshwoil," that

> ...steeped in the tidal
> shhh of its own pronounciation, is, for some,
> inescapably brinked on the drop-off and plunge
> of the unsayable. But getting it right brings
>
> a peculiar giddiness, the sheer exhilaration
> of a threat circumvented. Like an eleventh century convict
> pardoned by a neck-verse. The test? The first part
> of the Fifty-first Psalm. The catch? Reading it in Latin.
>
> (Starnino, *Credo* 48)

Starnino jokingly equates the achievement of pronouncing a long forgotten and completely foreign word with escaping with one's life, and even as the joke stands, the reader is left with the feeling that Starnino means to emphasize that this acquisition of language implies admittance to a manner of cultural currency. Starnino's 'Fifty-first psalm' reference is crucial even when comical, as it speaks to the power associated with the acquisition of language, the cultural bridge, and the sense of community the acquisition can provide.

Starnino continues to investigate the communicative limitations of language in "On the Obsolescence of Caphone." The poem investigates the extent to which the speaker's use of English, as well as his poetic nature, isolate him from his Italian relatives. Asa Boxer remarks that the poem itself exemplifies the flaws of Starnino's poetic style. He states that there are lines that "seem wincingly aware of their author's most unfortunate flaw: 'Le parole son femmine, e i fatti / son maschi—words are female and actions are male, / and they thought me femminiello, a bit faggoty / in my careful, English talk'" (Boxer 34). Although Boxer is not claiming Starnino's aesthetic is "faggoty," he does suggest that there is something "disquieting about some of Starnino's new poems" due to their "careful" or "precious" nature (34). As Boxer notes, the speaker in the poem wants "a homemade vocabulary, tough-vowelled and fierce" something entirely separate from his original poetic aspiration which featured the desire for "an eloquence like St. Ambrose's, / unblemished and discreet, lapidary and fluent" (*With English Subtitles* 29). These lines are of particular interest when considering Starnino's attempt to establish a communicative poetics. We have seen the poet balance between a unique, arguably highly poetic, use of diction while we have also seen the poet rely on an overtly vernacular approach to language; noting the advantages and disadvantages of both. The reference to St. Ambrose addresses the balance between the two approaches. "St. Ambrose" eludes to Augusta Treverorum, the Bishop of Milan whose "literary works have been acclaimed as masterpieces of Latin eloquence" (Brown 1). By desiring an affiliation with this romanticized icon of high Italian culture, the speaker distances himself from his real Italian roots which are referred to throughout the poem as working class. However, it is the speaker's actual working class Italian heritage that appears invaluable now within the poem, particularly for its linguistic imprint, the visceral and real "ratatatatat" of his relatives' language (Starnino, *With English Subtitles* 27). Unfortunately, for the speaker, he finds himself in linguistic purgatory unable to fully access his relatives' language and yet unsatisfied with his former notions of romanticized dic-

tion. Although the speaker mourns his isolation in "Caphone", the linguistic hybridity present in the poem suggests that when two languages exist within a community their hybrid linguistic imprint is inevitable. In "Caphone" this inevitability suggests that an "unblemished" poetic aesthetic is impossible to achieve. The Italian and the English coexist in the speaker's mind. While this fact of linguistic hybridity might be viewed positively, understood as the celebration of a "joined double-melodied vocabulaire" as it is in Klein's "Montreal," Starnino's poem does not necessarily posit it this way (Klein 78). Instead the poet is left "to answer noise with noise, to hit upon / subtitles that fit the gist of what I hear," musing to himself, "I always / thought of myself as an airborne assumption, / spored here from some other place, now I realize / I'm whatever comes across in the translation" (Starnino, *With English Subtitles* 29). The poem offers no quick fix to the speaker's isolation and yet by stating, "I'm whatever comes across in the translation" the ultimate message of the poem is affirmative of communication, even if the medium of communication will inevitably distort (29). In positing such an affirmation, "Caphone" confronts the very limitations that Starnino's communicative poetic aesthetic aims to challenge.

It is arguable that Starnino's preoccupation with a communicative poetry is a direct result of the isolation he experiences as an Anglo-Quebec poet. In *The Danforth Review* interview, Starnino does acknowledge the neglect surrounding Montreal poetry, and the duty of the poet and critic to give "less visible reputations…a fighting chance" ("TDR Interview"). However, he also asserts in the same interview that he is not motivated by regional pride ("TDR Interview"). This claim may seem surprising as Starnino has been all but crowned the "true heir to the Montreal tradition of poetic excellence" (Heft). His bio alone documents his vast involvement in Montreal's literary scene as the editor of Véhicule Press's Signal Editions poetry series, associate editor of *Maisonneuve* magazine, noted critic and reviewer for the *Montreal Gazette*, *Matrix*, *The Montreal Review of Books*, and finally as the recipient and award nominee for many reputable Canadian poetry awards, including the 2004 QWF A.M. Klein Prize for Poetry. Although I have argued Starnino's aesthetic could be seen as directly related to Anglo-Quebec exile, it could also be argued that a communicative aesthetic is ultimately Starnino's answer to Canada's state of poetic exile. In *A Lover's Quarrel*, Starnino quotes Edward Hartley Dewart's introduction to "the first-ever anthology of Canadian poetry, *Selections from Canadian Poetry*" in which Dewart states, "there is probably no country in the world…where every effort in poetry has been met with so

much coldness and indifference" (34). In Starnino's eyes not a lot has changed since Dewart's time. As a nation we not only suffer from national indifference, but international indifference. In effect, the Canadian condition may justifiably be classified as one of "double-exile." Perhaps then, classifying Starnino's poetry as either Anglo-Quebec or Canadian lacks precision. Starnino's aim to eradicate this sense of exile, on a regional and national front, is really about the desire to establish a general audience for poetry.

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