Sharon H. Nelson / A JUST MEASURE: breath, line, body in the work of bill bissett

bill bissett is a poet of many passions. Although bissett is a poet of intense intellectual passion, his most abiding passion may be moral passion.¹ It is the thread that runs through his writing, that connects diverse styles, genres, and subjects. In bissett's poems, moral passion is tempered by compassion and moral outrage is tempered by humour. Via political analysis, moral passion and compassion undergird the dissentient political content of bissett's work.

bissett's moral passion is manifested in a quest for justice that is modified by compassion to a demand for social justice. The combination of compassion and moral passion leads bissett to propound political action that supports community initiatives and mutual aid. Simultaneously with compassion and moral passion, bissett's writing displays a self-deflating humour that camouflages, perhaps intentionally, the acuteness of the political analysis that informs his work. The humorous banter characteristic of bissett's performances, which occasionally enters the writing, diffuses and defuses the radical edges of his analyses.

bissett works in many genres and in several arts, including performance art, writing, and painting, so it is not surprising that his poetry displays many formal and visual concerns. Each of bissett's texts is a carefully constructed articulated body. Many are visually striking, but bissett uses visual elements, formal organization, and technical devices primarily for communicative rather than aesthetic purposes.

It has long been recognized that bissett's nontraditional spellings are intended to subvert and to signal the need to subvert the use of

¹ Kenneth Radu discussed moral passion as a motive force of writing in "Speaking Daggers: The Poetry of Sharon H. Nelson," *Matrix* 35, Fall 1991.

language as a tool of oppression.² In "why i write like ths poetree is for communikaysyun,"³ bissett points out that the presentation of language in agreed-upon symbols encourages standardization of responses and understanding, which "promotes th stabilitee/uv the state."⁴ One purpose of bissett notation is to discourage standard responses. Another is to disorient the reader. Disorientation encourages fresh responses to language. bissett notation visually disassembles complacency. It suggests that standard responses to words may be inappropriate or even dangerous. It sends a clear message that there is an immediate need to review the ways we perform the act of reading, that most basic of intellectual acts.

The political content of bissett's poetry often exposes the paradoxes and double meanings of political discourse.⁵ bissett notation signals a warning that all may not be as it appears. It alerts us that meaning is constructed and that language and politics construct it. bissett leads the auditor or the reader step by step to an understanding that each is a party to the construction, whether as questioner or collaborator. In a review of Jerome Bruner's *The Culture of Education*, Clifford Geertz discusses Bruner's move away from the Cognitive Revolution, with its emphasis on the mind as a machine, towards "Cultural Psychology" and "the entry into meaning." Geertz summarizes and contextualizes Bruner's arguments.

4 bissett, what we have, p. 84.

5 In "Dissidence and Creativity" in *The Dissident Word; The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1995*, ed. Chris Miller (New York: Basic, 1995), p. 155, Nawal El Saadawi proposes that we "need to discover new ways of exposing the paradoxes or double meanings in the many new and old words that are endlessly repeated."

² Len Early, "Introduction," in bill bissett, *Beyond Even Faithful Legends;* Selected Poems (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1980) p. 13.

³ bill bissett, "why i write like ths poetree is for communikaysyun," in *what we have* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1988) pp. 84-88.

To argue that culture is socially and historically constructed; that narrative is a primary, in humans perhaps the primary, mode of knowing; that we assemble the selves we live in out of the materials lying about in the society around us and develop "a theory of mind" to comprehend the selves of others; that we act not directly on the world but on beliefs we hold about the world; that from birth on we are all active, impassioned "meaning makers" in search of plausible stories; and that "mind cannot in any sense be regarded as 'natural' or naked, with culture thought of as an add-on" ... amounts to adopting a position that can fairly be called radical, not to say subversive.⁶

Theoretical Psychology apparently has caught up with bill bissett. In an ongoing performance, bissett demystifies the buzzwords of western culture, whatever they may be at any particular time. In many poems, he reveals the discontinuity between the words and meanings of political discourse as a first step in destabilizing the practices of oppression, which, as bissett is at pains to demonstrate, "is socially and historically constructed." bissett often draws the reader's eye to the discontinuity between grandiose political premises, ensuing promises, and actual effects. Thus he connects the use of language to unjust practices and to a failure to achieve social justice. bissett has long argued that art is not an "add-on" but central to human experience and an excellent navigational guide to life. His work develops as if narrative is a primary mode of knowing. bissett is an impassioned meaning maker who creates plausible stories and exposes the implausibilities of the stories we're told. bissett's texts perform complex communicative tasks. Their complexity is not a stumbling block for reader or auditor because of the clarity of bissett's reasoning and the way it is expressed. bissett is a poet of "incredibul control"7 whose

⁶ Clifford Geertz, "Learning with Bruner," New York Review of Books XLIV:6 (April 10, 1997), p. 24.

⁷ The phrase is from "love is th greatest gift," in bissett's *inkorrect thots* (Vancouver, Talonbooks, 1992), p. 78.

primary purpose is to create and communicate meaning. bissett notation is one of the tools he employs.

An immediately striking feature of bissett notation is that words take less space than standard spellings require on the page. The attenuated spellings stress the phonetic and aural. The peculiar shapes of words signal strangeness and create visual excitement. In his "Introduction" to bissett's Beyond Even Faithful Legends; Selected Poems, Len Early observes that bissett's work "crosses boundaries rather than closing them down, for an experimental poetics has never prevented his simultaneous and often skilful use of more traditional lyric and narrative forms."8 For instance, bissett's texts may be at the same time "abstract and representational," "non-narrative and narrative," "lyrical and polemical."9 Many of bissett's narratives are lyrical in their treatment of human suffering, while his lyricism often moves in and out of the ironies of politics. bissett's lyrics display an economy of language and a cleanliness of diction and of line made poignant and obvious by the attenuated spellings which determine that not a single letter is wasted. Each has a communicative purpose.

bissett notation expands expressive capability. It enlarges the lexicon by offering nuances unavailable in standard English.¹⁰ In bissett notation, *you*, *yu*, *u*, and *yew* are different words, different expressive forms. The meanings they signify, denote, and communicate differ from each other. Such usage at first may appear playful, which in some cases it may be. It is easy to see, however, that it is extremely useful to be able to distinguish, for instance, the "I" from the "i" from the "eye" from the "eyee" as a first person singular.

bissett notation is akin to the notation used in a musical score.¹¹ It combines verbal and visual wit and enables bissett to integrate diverse

8 Early, Beyond Even Faithful Legends, p. 12.

9 Writing of the paintings of Seymour Segal, Hugh Hood articulated these "oppositions" in *Scoring: The Art of Hockey* (Toronto: Oberon, 1979), np (16).

10 bissett, what we have, p. 85.

11 bissett, what we have, p.85.

formal and conceptual elements.¹² The auditory, the denotational, and the emotional are framed — or perhaps it is more accurate to say un-framed — by the alphabetic, grammatic, philologic, and visual interplay of words and letters, their positions and juxtapositions. bissett uses this notation in combination with the physical shape of a poem on the page to resolve some of the tensions between substance and form.

These tensions, especially for a writer for whom "poetree is for communikaysyun," are the tensions between intention and communication, where intention includes, among others, impressions, thoughts, reasoning, and feelings. In a poem, intention is approximated in expression. In the same way that the flesh embodies the spirit but the spirit is not entirely expressed by the body, though it is of the body, integrated with and inseparable from the body insofar as we are able to apprehend it, so a poem's form embodies the writer's intention, which is never fully contained by the form the poem takes. The problem for the poet for whom "poetree is for communikaysyun" is the tension between substance and form, intentshn and xpresshyun.¹³

bissett notation is but one of a host of technical devices bissett employs. Clear, logical argument and standard syntax are others. The thicket of peculiar shapes and forms created by bissett notation may preclude an awareness of just how carefully and syntactically constructed bissett's writing is. bissett displays a rigorous attention to form and technique. He provides for the reader a host of keys, from the regular, grammatical, expected ordering of phrases through internally consistent use of symbols to a clear narrative line, a logical structure of argument, a transparent process of logic that leads by steps to reasonable conclusions, all of which are of course interrupt-

¹² In *what we have*, p. 88, bissett identifies the "spiritual political vizual sound nature narrative romantic" that "all feed each othr."

¹³ The spelling of *intentshn* preserves the physical representation of the word *intent*. The spelling "intenshun" is a closer approximation to the phonemes we speak, but in this instance it would be contradictory to include the notion of shunning in the construct of *intentshn*.

ible by asides, stage whispers, and parenthetical information.

Of all the technical devices bissett uses, the most important are those related to breath. In many of bissett's poems, the technical devices that control the way the poem is read, such as the line breaks and the spacing, are controls of breathing. A poem's musicality often is constructed in relation to breath. In Old Testament usage, there is a single word for breath and spirit. In the Book of Genesis (2:07), the divine breath (*ruach adonai*) inspirits matter, and human life begins. Thus in the Old Testament creation myth, and through the ages in Judaic theology, breathing joins matter and spirit. Conceptually, breathing references not only respiration but inspiration; it is through the breath that we live *as human*.

There is an obvious parallel between the formation and inspiriting of matter and the formation and inspiriting of text. In Genesis, the Old Testament deity creates by naming, an act which suffices to call into being whatever is named. This literary tradition frames the use of language in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic cultures where to use language is to act powerfully; language is the first creative principle, and the creative use of language parallels divine action. In a second stage of the process, what is human is separated by inspiration from the rest of what has been created, literally a process of breathing spirit into matter.

bissett has made continuing use of the breath as creative principle, image, and metaphor. In "it tuk 80 milyun," ¹⁴ bissett writes

it tuk 80 milyun

years 2 develop ths moment th line for th eye n th lid n th brow breething out from th blank papr ium drawing on

¹⁴ bill bissett, inkorrect thots (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992) pp. 36-37.

Here, as in other of bissett's works, breathing is associated with vision, creation, and delineation. The process of drawing is associated with the process of calling into being and references the breath as well as the line. The present moment is associated with the prescient moment and with momentary presence. The line is associated with the "i," and both are extension and expansion of the eye. Vision is associated with personal development: what we see around us creates who we become. These components are placed in history which provides context and continuity for the acts of breathing and drawing, and human creativity is placed in the context of a natural progression. So creativity is, as the cliché has it, as natural as breathing.

As in Genesis, breath is infused into substance: the paper is blank, but also, "th blank papr ium." The act of creation is not an act of ego, as we see from "ium." As Scott Watson wrote in his discussion of bissett's work in *fires in th tempul*, the catalogue Watson prepared for bissett's 1984 exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, bissett's art "asserts that the point of view of consciousness from which art is made is the soul, not the ego."¹⁵ The act of creation in this stanza is an act of generosity, an act of giving in making; it is a "breething out," a "drawing on." The tone is one of wonder. The artifact rather than the creator is the focus in this description of an act of creation.¹⁶

bissett's poem, "tell me what attackd yu,"¹⁷ shows how bissett uses the breath and extends its symbolic connections and content.

16 This is a revised version, a reversed vision, of the language-based Hebrew creation myth.

17 bill bissett, Beyond Even Faithful Legends; Selected Poems (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1980), p. 44; rprt. from where is miss florence riddle (Toronto: Fleye Press, 1967).

¹⁵ Scott Watson in bill bissett, *fires in th tempul* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1984), np. (5). This is the closing line of Watson's discussion of bissett's oeuvre.

the green broom i criticizd him

most peopul have been led to believe by th emergd middul class, that art and politikal involvment greet each othr only across sum imponderabul chasm, the middul class sz yeah its a good pome but what use is it, th professors lift up our hearts, in repudiation of that, to th credo that art transcends use, either view is nowhere, art is all use; only th technicians of a fragmented society,

interested in propagating such a nightmare encourage us to believe in realities that split our breath into filing cards, p for politiks, a for art — th full breath is what knowledge is, is human, is wholly real, includes what is in all things

The poem opens with an image and a statement of relationship in which ideas are shared. The introductory image is followed by a proposition of the sort we might find in a book of Euclidean geometry. The proposition, as is often the case in bissett's work, is directly and openly political: "most peopul have been led to believe/by th emergd middul class, that art/and political involvement greet each othr/only across sum imponderabul chasm." The discussion makes explicit the notions and relations implicit in the proposition. The poem addresses a central theme in bissett's work, the denial for political purposes that art is useful and a powerful political force. This denial maintains a social organization that fragments human society and drains individuals of energy. The fragmentation of our breath is the fragmentation of our being and of our society. Being human is related to knowledge. Crucially, individual identity is inseparable from social and political identity.¹⁸ The poem concludes with "th full breath" as a unifying image by which being human is defined: "th full breath/is what knowledge is, is human, is/wholly real, includes what is/in all things."

The poem that closes bissett's 1980 *Collected Poems: Beyond Even Faithful Legends*, "th breath," is a bissettian creation myth that reiterates the symbolism related to creation, creativity, and breathing.¹⁹ The breath

is continuous is how we move holds th seas within of our moshun is the same as th eyee opening all the worlds of green snow fold inside th heart...

our desire moves thru our lungs

not to speek this time th silence inside letting each line roll out to its

return

each flame brightr th sparks of th log th creature moves tord us upon th same breath th same endless wave . . .

18 Cf. El Saadawi, "individual identity or individual responsibility is inseparable from social identity or social responsibility," p. 164.

19 bissett, "th breath," in *Beyond Even Faithful Legends*, pp. 153-156; rprt. from *th high green hill* (Vancouver: blewointmentpress, 1972).

what also yu cannot say cums to yu turns into yu is part of yu yr spirit being dancing in th fire each petal of th flower opening to th light th warmth for th opening seed th ice all around th breath moves . . .

th breath

cums to yu is yu for a

while

is evry part of yr moving flesh

The beat of breath and beat of heart, which are "nevr measured," develop in rhythm with the beat of ocean tides, and waves are both ocean waves and light waves. The poem moves its actors syncretically toward

> th same changed shore wherin it was too dark to write and th cries of each limb were all mercy bathed

> > inside th great breathing waves

The poem culminates in an image of

th fire burning its song thru yr blood

of all th peopul animal plant creatures dancing along th flames of all th colors shapes expressions fierce loving and nameless

th one blood stream

In bissett's poems as in the Old Testament creation myth, language is the creative principle and breathing is the crucial act that enlivens. For bissett, as for a number of poets, a poem serves as an invitation to breathe. The attentive reader breathes the poet's rhythm, breathes with the poet's lungs. In effect, the reader experiences the poet's breathing and the poet's body. It is almost as if one were inside the poet's body, breathing with and through it. At the same time, the poet's breathing rhythms control those of the reader, who shares the experience of the creative act of breathing the poem. It is as if the apparatus of breathing is shared. That is a powerful physical experience and one that parallels sexual experience. Our conscious experience of sharing someone else's body is almost wholly sexual. Sexual excitement changes the rhythms of breathing, and the sounds of rhythmic breathing are used to suggest sexual excitement.

In his "Introduction" to *Beyond Even Faithful Legends*, Len Early observes that bissett's poetry "implies a powerful vision of enduring spiritual forces associated with sexuality and with the radiance of nature."²⁰ In Scott Watson's words, bissett's "is an art of polymorphous eroticism and spiritual tension."²¹ In many of bissett's works, erotic, spiritual, and natural forces connect or intersect in the breathing body. In both paintings and text, luminousness is a key image that signifies a spiritual dimension. In bissett's work there is often little distance or difference between the luminous and the numinous. Dancing, an important metaphor, references the spirited and inspirited movement of bodies. In "th breath," the image of "th fire"

²⁰ Early, Beyond Even Faithful Legends, p. 16.

²¹ Watson, fires in th tempul, np(2).

links sexual passion and spiritual passion which burn together as "song thru yr blood," an image that links language to passion and the imagery of respiration and oxygenation to poetry. The world is peopled by spirits made manifest in flesh and by "magik animals" who dance. While dance primarily signifies expression, song, which references poetry, primarily signifies communication. The sexual and the erotic are expressed and link in dancing and singing which, like breathing, are integral to being human: "our desire moves/thru our lungs" and "th breath/cums to yu is yu for a/while/is evry part of yr moving flesh."

Human bodies regenerate constantly via the processes of respiration. bissett conceptualizes art as systemically regenerative in the same way that respiration is systemically regenerative; art is the oxygen of societal organism. Regeneration via inspiration is as necessary for human *spiritual* process as regeneration via respiration is for human physiological process, and both are essential for human social organization. Thus a number of the oppositions posited in Western culture and Western philosophy resolve in the breathing body, which serves as locus, symbol, and metaphor in bissett's texts. Spiritual energy and physical energy become a single regenerative force that flows in and through the body as it flows in and through the universe. bissett conceptualizes the flesh and the breath, substance and spirit, as indissoluble in reality, regardless of how we theorize them. Erotic energy is defined as regenerative, a wellspring that, like breathing, revitalizes us as fully human.

In bissett's work, bodies connect and relate to their environment and to other bodies as well as to their own and other histories. The body is the locus from which social and cultural commentary flow and a symbol by which the personal is extended into the historical and political. For bissett, the body breathing "th full breath" cannot be disintegrated, nor can it be socially, culturally, politically, or historically isolated. bissett's insistence that "poetree is for communikaysyun" simultaneously threatens and subverts the notion of aesthetics as separable from social organization and politics. bissett insists that art grows reciprocally out of and into the personal and the political and that aesthetics cannot be separated from social, cultural, and political life. At the same time, and in parallel, the body as a metaphor grows out of and simultaneously impinges on the development of the personal and the political. It signifies the meeting-ground of private and public. The body serves as metaphor for the human totality, and the denial of the body serves as a metaphor for the denial of the soul. Breath is the thread and fire is the image that connects the sexual with the spiritual. Similarly, song is the thread and dance is the image that connects the breathing body with others in processes of expression and communication. Breath symbolizes the integrity of spirit and substance and also references human relations and connection. In many of bissett's poems, the breathing human body, its hungers and its pains and how it is abused or loved, is both a key image and a central metaphor that references human connection.

In the exploration of relations among bodies, and especially the sexual dimension of relationship, bissett explores the moral dimension, for the ways sexual relations are structured mirror the ways that other kinds of relations are structured. In bissett's work the body symbolizes the possibility of an integrated human existence, one that is "fully human" and inspired. Sexual expression extends the sphere of the fully human from the individual to the relational. Thus sexual acts integrate the physical, spiritual, and relational aspects of human existence. The structures of sexual relations and especially of sexual politics mirror the structures of political relations and provide an image of and metaphor for them.

bissett often uses his own body and images of his own body as a focus and a reference point in poems.²² He adopts a pseudo-confessional mode and apparently offers the details of personal experience, but he does so to make statements about "the universal particular" which can be defined as "th sweeping meta/physics byond th calling out from th specifik particulars."²³ Thus although bissett's poems abound with the personal, the personal is used for political purpose.

23 bissett, what we have, p. 84.

²² Just as the body of the text is an artifact, the body in the text is an artifact. The body in the text is no more the body of the poet than the persona is the person.

Scott Watson has suggested that bissett's art is part of a West Coast "tradition in which the calligraphic and the painterly gesture are subsumed in one another."²⁴ To quote Scott Watson in a changed context, in bissett's work the colloquial and the literary, the personal and the political "are subsumed in one another." bissett's work, his entire oeuvre in all forms and genres, questions categories.²⁵ It blurs boundaries and attempts to subvert the making of categories, "all those imposed/separations" that isolate people and fragment communities.²⁶

bissett's poems sometimes achieve a political dimension by means of developmental and dramatic actions and the inclusion of a commentary about them which sometimes is explicit and sometimes appears as an aside or a parenthetical remark. bissett's texts abound with quotations and "conversations" in which the voices of those around him speak directly to the reader and thus are granted full artistic "reality" and mythic existence. Many of bissett's poems are as rich as novels in their portrayal of character and dramatic action.

In some of bissett's books, as in some of his series of paintings, works are organized so that themes, characters, and images develop and move through the texts. The images that occur through a series of poems or a group of paintings can be read in much the way a novel can be read, with attention to development of character and plot. No single image is completely readable or communicates fully in isolation from the others that extend and support it, and individual poems in a series may refer to, comment on, or extend the meanings of others. These techniques extend the novelistic and dramatic qualities in

24 Watson, fires in th tempul, np. (2).

25 The subsumption of one gesture into another and one form into another may be described usefully as category crisis. See, for instance, Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (N.Y.: Harper Perennial, 1993).

26 Sharon H. Nelson, "Because of Everything; dissolving critical distance: bill bissett's iconography *dansing magik animals hearts n rings* acrylic on canvas 18 x 24 inches, 1991," unpublished.

bissett's texts, the range of bissett's discourse, and the resonance of his politic.

In *inkorrect thots*, for instance, bissett addresses apparently diverse issues such as queer-bashing and trade policies. He translates political obfuscation into understandable terms and reveals how the political actually is personal, how, for instance, trade policies and systemic homophobia impinge on our daily lives through policies that affect fiscal 'envelopes' which define health care budgets, which translate into the health of individuals, which translates into the quality of the lives and deaths of people we know. In these expositions and explanations, bissett's rage about what happens to people in an increasingly inhumane political culture is matched by his tenderness and caring for individuals who experience the political as part of the pain of their lives. In many such poems, the body becomes the locus of the action.

"Timothee sz/ther is no death," one of the concluding poems in *inkorrect thots*, exemplifies the synthesis of moral passion and compassion, lyric and narrative, rage and gentleness in bissett's work. In eight dense pages, bissett traces the deterioration of Timothee's body but not of his spirit in response to AIDS. Intense, emotional, caring, political, analytical, this biographical novella integrates social, cultural, and political perspectives in the portrayal of a single human life. It is as if one of "th peopul animal plant creatures/dancing along th flames of all th colors/shapes expressions fierce loving and nameless" had been named, a representative human who signifies "th one blood stream." The essential component in this work is compassion: "and th cries of each limb were/all mercy bathd/ / /inside th great breathing waves."

Scott Watson, proceeding from an argument by Robert Kroetsch about Canadian poetry, suggests that Canadian artists have failed "to create community; solitude and isolation have been our art's major themes."²⁷ In numerous ways, bissett's work addresses, contradicts, and attempts to ameliorate the "failure to create community." Against solitude and isolation bissett sets a vision of community that includes community of purpose and community of action, each of which serves

²⁷ Watson, fires in th tempul, np. (1).

as a theoretical construct parallel to issues-based politics and issuesoriented political coalitions. For bissett, art is essentially communicative rather than expressive, and consequently it is communal and cultural; we do not see, exist, envision, or survive, nor, as theoretical psychology now tells us, do we create meaning or understanding as solitary beings. Against art as the production of the solitary ego, bissett offers the idea of communication in a living, breathing universe where compassion and moral passion together would define the rules of human relations and thus community. So in bissett's texts, the embodiment of poetics and the embodiment of politics are inseparable.

bissett's lifelong work in communicative arts, like his constant travel on behalf of poetree and on behalf of communikaysyun, is a way of connecting with and building a community. bissett's politics and the political substance of his writing imply and assume the existence, or at least the possibility, of a community. One tension in bissett's work is between the human need, on the one hand, for communal support and action and, on the other, for solitude. bissett posits within a democratic community a solitude that does not isolate or alienate.

bissett's "dansing magik animals" and the characters who people bissett's works themselves constitute a community. When all else fails, they are a cast of companions who with the writer and the reader constitute a community of purpose. Thus bissett's oeuvre denies solitude and isolation and promotes and creates involvement in community. The form, substance, spirit, politics, and poetics of bissett's work deny the notion that solitude and isolation are necessarily human fate. For bissett "the entry into meaning" is an ongoing and essential human process, and we are all "active, impassioned 'meaning makers'" for whom narrative, in the broadest sense, "is a primary . . . mode of knowing." Communikaysyun is a primary means, if not the primary means, by which we construct culture and organize society, and "poetree is for communikaysyun."