

Darren Wershler-Henry / VERTICAL EXCESS: *what fuckan theory* and bill bissett's Concrete Poetics

When considering the subject of bill bissett's concrete poetry, the first problem that arises is a major one, with both pragmatic and philosophical components. Where does the "concrete" begin, where does it end, and can it be isolated and described? bissett, a figure the late Warren Tallman was fond of describing as "a one man civilization" (106), has produced a nearly constant flow of art over the last thirty-odd years, and continues to do so without any signs of abating. Much of this staggeringly large body of work is highly visual in nature, and all of it defies conventional notions of genre: collages are paintings and drawings bleed into poems turn into scores for reading and chant and performance generates writing bound into books published sometimes or not. In "bill bissett: A Writing Outside Writing," Steve McCaffrey eloquently delineates the dilemma that the critic faces. In order to address the excessive nature of the libidinal flow that constitutes bissett's art without reducing it to a kind of thematics, "it is not possible to actually read Bissett [sic]. What must be adopted is a comprehensive overview, a reading beyond a reading to affirm the intensity of desire" (102). In other words, critical analyses of bissett's glyphic violations of grammar as ruptures "inside" the restricted economy of writing will inevitably repeat that economy's strategies to repress the gestures of the poems towards an impossible (but necessary) Utopian "outside."

How, then, can a reader or critic proceed? Fredric Jameson writes in *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* that since imagining Utopia is an impossible act by definition, "It is thus the limits, the systemic restrictions and repressions, or empty places, in the Utopian blueprint that are the most interesting, for these alone testify to the ways a culture or system marks the most visionary mind and

contains its movement toward transcendence" (208). bissett's experiments in poetic excess yield highly specific social, historical and technological information about the shape and boundaries of what constitutes the permissible in the milieu of contemporary poetry. This essay proposes the beginnings of a critical enterprise different from, but sympathetic to, McCaffery's essay on bissett: to read along the edges of bissett's writing, seeking the nodes where the poetry pushes itself to the point of collapse. This will not only foment discussion about what bissett's work has accomplished, but will also allow for speculation on what tasks his writing suggests remain for contemporary poetry and poetics.

what fuckan theory, a joint publication of bissett's own blewointmentpress and bpNichol's grOnk series, is one of the more interesting nodes in bissett's corpus because it accomplishes several things simultaneously. Not only does it test to the limit the Utopian possibilities that the typewriter held for poetry in the Sixties and Seventies, it also anticipates and presents a critique in advance of the fascination that the category of postmodern philosophy loosely referred to as "theory" holds for many contemporary poets. Both the typewriter and "theory" function in bissett's text as metonymies for the larger category of the *techne* (technology, technique), which *what fuckan theory* approaches as a "reactionary machine of language" that "linearizes and itemizes . . . excesses as a highly differentiated, articulated and quantified movement" (McCaffery 95). Its response is the attempt to dislocate that process of lineation and itemization through what McCaffery refers to as "vertical excess," an overprinting and layering of text and image that strives to destroy the utilitarian function of language through its own super-abundance (103). The result is not a destruction of the disciplinary limits that the technologies of language impose on the poet, but a shifting of the borderline that lies between the thinkable and the unthinkable. This shift in turn suggests the possibility of a different kind of poetic practice, a "concrete poetics" that would allow for the creation of art in restrictive circumstances through the wilful abuse of technology.

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From the earliest days of its history, the rhetoric surrounding the typewriter and its manifold uses has always been Utopian. *The Story of the Typewriter*, an early popular history of the machine, repeatedly insists that the typewriter “freed the world from pen slavery” (9). Charles Olson’s famous essay “Projective Verse” makes similarly enthusiastic claims about the machine for the specific case of contemporary poetry:

It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspension even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and metre, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work. (534)

Olson, like many of the poets whose work bridges the gap between the modern and the postmodern, operates within a phonocentric framework that privileges presence over absence, speech over writing, and specificity over chance. For him, any written text is the inferior notation for a legitimate oral version whose authority depends on a fully present speaking subject. While he sees the logic of the typewriter as restrictive, he does not question it, although he perceives it as ironic that the very machines that have alienated the poet from the poem will also provide what he sees as a corrective for that situation (532-33). Ultimately, Olson reinacts the classical argument about the relationship of writing to speech, mistaking something that has always been the case for a recent phenomenon (“the history of truth, of the truth of truth, has always been . . . the debasement of writing, and its repression outside ‘full’ speech”—Derrida 3). Despite the odd bits of aberrant typography that appear in texts such as *The Maximus Poems*, because Olson chose to write within the limits that the typewriter sets (“its rigidity and its space precisions”), the challenges that his “Projective Verse” poses for poetry were all too easily assimilated.

Caroline Bayard presents a similar argument about bissett’s relationship with the typewriter in *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec*.

Like Olson, bissett is interested in the new autonomy that the typewriter lends the poet, effectively turning him into a kind of mini-press. *what fuckan theory* in particular is a classic example of a pre-computerized small press publication, consisting of mimeoed legal-size typed manuscript pages stapled into a cardstock cover, and adorned with postal stickers and found art. But Bayard also refers to bissett's "predeliction for the typewriter and his quasi-total reliance upon its mechanical means," because of the "conscious and controlled use of the page-space" that it permits (58).

Even in as comparatively glossy and mannered a bissett book as *Soul Arrow*, a perfect-bound picture-book consisting largely of typewriter concrete poems, bissett's "reliance" on the typewriter is never "quasi-total." Although there is no connective text surrounding and linking the typewriter concrete pieces in *Soul Arrow*, they appear alongside more conventional poems, paintings, collage, photos, drawings and mixed-media work. For bissett, the typewriter is only ever one of several means to the same end: the striving for total flow, the abrogation of control. To assert that bissett's interest in the typewriter stems from the ability to use it to consciously control page-space, though, would require the reader to ignore the interruptive and excessive roles played by overtime, hand-written corrections, magic marker lines, tipped-in images, letraset, and text bleeding off the page. If the typewriter imposes an invisible orderly grid onto the page, bissett's sensibility desires to invade and overload it, to push it to the point of breakdown — a riot in the prison-house of language.

This is not to say that bissett's work lacks care or control, or even that it entirely succeeds in its revolt against *techne* (a point to which I will return shortly). However, bissett is never as proscriptive as Olson about either the act of writing or reading, and does not share Olson's proprioceptive poetics, i.e., the assumption that the reader will (re)construct meaning according to the writer's intent. If anything, the opposite is true. Even on the level of semantic content, *what fuckan theory* claims that any given poem presents infinite potential for interpretation:

as say "concrete" whr did yu
 put th air what yu cant enclose yr tongue yu cin put lettrs on top uv
 lettrs dreams millyuns uv tiny bubbuls endlessly on all sides thr is no
 side ideally but what is that
 what move tord yu what moves in front uv yu th
 sound like th feeling nd yu at th same time
 each time different so also th
 spelling but that not just like sound but picture how it looks to carve it
 put
 down to carry for othrs to see what yu take with yu neon fusilage karmik
 relaxashun not
 always leading to sum thot
 inescapubul conclusion what pool
 uv letters on top uv letters yu cin swim in

bissett's text revels in the play of semiosis, recognizing that each reading or performance of a poem will in effect produce a new work. Moreover, it suggests that the degree of inscription resulting from vertical excess ("letter on top uv letters") — the "concrete" — renders oral attempts to "enclose" the poem through a sanctioned pronunciation highly problematic.

What bissett achieves in texts such as *what fuckan theory* is the creation of an idiosyncratic manner of reading and writing that calls into question the binary oppositions between writing and painting, theory and practice, and concrete and "straight" poetry. Taking into account Charles Bernstein's dicta that "Poetics is the continuation of poetry by other means." Just as poetry is the continuation of politics by other means" (160), one might say that what bissett has produced in texts such as *what fuckan theory* is a concrete poetics, a continuum of image and text informed throughout by a leftist and queer politics. As this essay has contended from its opening, to isolate and privilege any one element, such as the concrete aspects of bissett's text, would be to miss the point entirely. When bissett reaches the limits of possibility in one medium, he switches to another, often in mid-production. In this light, it is significant that typewritten text disappears from *what fuckan theory* several pages before the end of the text; the final pages consist of collages of drawings and Letraset concrete work. By the end of this

early text, bissett has already reached the limits of what the typewriter will do for him, even though he works it harder than most poets ever have. Still, he never arrives at the point that Paul Dutton does in *The Plastic Typewriter*, where the destruction of the machine itself, and of its attendant logic, becomes the engine that powers the writing of the text. What is important to remember about bissett's writing is that the effect is dialogical, in Bakhtin's sense; it is the sum total of many often-irreconcilable styles and approaches that results in the bootstrapping of the entire textual body to another level.

What remains is the question that bissett's text itself poses: *what fuckan theory?* Its title evokes a text that may provide some answers, Michel Foucault's "What Is An Author?" Foucault's essay ends with the same question that begins it, "What matter who's speaking?" (115, 138). His point is that even in an age of "dead" authors, the author continues to have a discursive function "in that it serves as a means of classification" (123), allowing a reader to make sense out of the otherwise undifferentiated mass of literature. The answer to the question posed by bissett's title is similar in that his questioning of theory has itself evolved into a kind of theory and attendant practice, i.e. his "concrete poetics." The most problematic aspect of bissett's work, in fact, is that his poetics have not changed much in over twenty years. Since the closing of blewointmentpress and bissett's subsequent move to publish with Talonbooks, the format and content of his texts have slowly stabilized. The drawings, paintings, and typewriter concrete poems still appear, but have a sanitized feel within the perfect-bound, desktop published, properly literary digest-size confines of Talon's editions. Although his writing has been comprehended by a computerized environment, bissett has not continued to push against the limits of that field in the same way that his earlier work pushed against the limits of earlier publishing technologies (the typewriter, lettraset, mimeographs and small printing presses). Even his idiosyncratic, never-quite-phonetic spelling has become systematic to the extent that it is not only possible to read it as a signatory style ("this looks like a bissett poem"), but also in that it has become an affectation among many younger poets to imitate that style without regard for its implications. In its current incarnation, bissett's writing is the canonical anticanonical text.

The last question that this essay poses is what constitutes the new Utopia, the project that bissett's project suggests lies beyond itself. In the contemporary Canadian poetry scene, the writer that comes closest to the spirit rather than the letter of bissett's work is John Barlow. His *OVERSION*, "the magazine of post-Raphaelite poetry and correspondence," is an ongoing torrent of text and images produced by Barlow and others that strains the capabilities of the photocopier and computer to unprecedented degrees. It should come as no surprise that bissett's poetry and poetic sensibility is a constant touchstone in Barlow's work; the rhizomes of the former extend into the latter, which, as Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* suggests, is always the goal: "To reach, not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I. We are no longer ourselves. Each will know his own. We have been aided, inspired, multiplied" (3).

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