

tish

Introduction

Tish and *Open Letter* have been for me two continuous editorial projects — one short-term and emphatic and the other low-key and persistent. With George Bowering, Fred Wah, Jamie Reid, and David Dawson, I helped found the poetry newsletter *Tish* in the fall of 1961, and served as its managing editor. All of us in our early to mid-twenties, living mostly on student finances, we had no idea for how long we would have the resources to continue publishing. While in 1961 there were no public grants available to assist such ventures, there were also no rules about format, typography, distribution practices, or publication schedules, or pressures about who or what to publish. We surprised ourselves by publishing 19 crudely mimeographed issues in 19 months, in 400-copy editions circulated around North America mostly free of charge, before handing the newsletter over to another group of editors in the summer of 1963. I founded the journal *Open Letter* myself in 1965, with Bowering, Wah, Dawson, and Daphne Marlatt as contributing editors, on the funding of a Department of National Defence Arts Research Grant. The first nine issues were photo-offset from copy prepared on an electric typewriter, and also distributed mostly free of charge to those who wanted it. *Open Letter* is now in its thirty-sixth year, funded during most of that time by Canada Council and Ontario Arts Council grants. With the Canada Council and Ontario Arts Council grants have come increasing demands about format, typography, pricing, predictability and regularity of publication, payment to contributors, and demands about such things as the range — gender, region, age, ethnicity, sexuality, race — of contributors.

While public grants have to some extent made it easier to publish a journal, and possible to do so in a more durable format, they have also made it increasingly difficult to publish a journal that has aesthetic/ideological objectives that mainstream culture has not at least partly endorsed, co-opted, or mandated. All Canadian journals funded by arts councils are edited in part by the state, and obliged by cultural practice to carry out state ideological projects such as regional equalization, pluralistic multiculturalism, gender equity, and free market individualism (no matter how contradictory these projects may appear as a set) and to avoid, as council juries frequently remind me, the appearance of 'clique.' 'Clique' in this usage appears to mean a group that shares an ideology that is not identity-based. Generalist magazines under

this policy are acceptable, as are specifically focussed ones that appear to 'represent' constituencies which mainstream culture now considers historically under-represented. This state editing is not bureaucratically mandated. It is carried out by well-meaning arts administrators and arts community members who serve on juries and who have internalized the apparent rightness of state ideology. The ideal it implies – a journal whose contributors would 'represent' all possible constituencies in ratios that reflect their under- or over-representation in the past – is especially restrictive for journal editors who would advance particular aesthetic/political critiques that are not necessarily identity based, or that go beside or beyond such narrowly focussed politics.

The commercial business model insisted upon by almost all the arts councils is also extremely restricting. In this model, magazine issues are to be published on a regular schedule, rather than when the energies and social conditions of the editors suggest (I can imagine in some years wanting to publish six or more issues of *Open Letter*, in response to what I see as urgent issues, and in other years perhaps no more than one.) More copies are to be sold than are given away (yet for *Open Letter* those with the money to buy subscriptions are not necessarily those who wish to read the journal, and those who wish to read it – often students and artists – do not always have money. Getting my journal to the readers who will want to read it, and who may act upon what they read, has always been more important to me than getting it to readers who will pay.) Contributors are to be paid (yet *Open Letter* contributors, like those of many cultural journals, write and publish, by and large, in the hope of changing society rather than of earning money). Subscription numbers are to increase every year, and money to be spent on seeking new subscribers. Those who edit journals that do cultural work, like *Open Letter*, *Fuse*, *Writing*, *West Coast Line*, or *Tessera*, usually have little interest in 'marketability' or in changing a journal's content to attract additional subscribers. They are more interested in having readers than having subscribers. Most have no particular allegiance to global capitalism, and to publishing in the scale required to be sold by chain bookstores and their distributors, or to accepting growth as a measure of success. In proposing growth as such a measure arts councils interfere – naively, I hope – with a journal's construction of its audience.

While it is not possible to get outside of one's contemporary

cultural formation any more than it is possible to get outside of culture, it should be possible to contest, dilute, hybridize, or fracture that formation without undue hindrance from 'arms-length' arts institutions. Global capitalism consistently intrudes on the work small journals like *Open Letter* do. The small bookstores that sell such journals are being put out of business by bookselling chains that favour journals that publish in much larger press runs than most of us aspire to. Our library subscribers are more and more ordering through distribution agencies that demand discounts, a situation which in turn pressures us to raise subscription prices to cover the discount. The agencies themselves are becoming ever larger and more impersonal through the effects of corporate takeovers. In the last few years the Faxon agency of New Jersey has been taken over by the Dawson agency of Britain; and the relatively small Serials Management Systems of London, Ontario, has been taken over by Dawson/Faxon. Dawson/Faxon in turn was taken over in late 1999 by Massachusetts-based Rowecom. Many of *Open Letter's* Canadian university subscriptions are now purchased through newly giant Rowecom, through Blackwells of Oxford, or through Ebsco of Birmingham, Alabama. Clerks from these agencies phone or fax *Open Letter* expecting to find a receptionist and a subscription department and are amused to find only me, who tends to answer their inquiries only once or twice a month. They send claim notices by the dozen whenever the journal is not published on what they imagine is its publication schedule – notices that I cannot afford the time to answer. Assuming that all journals are published in annual volumes, they regularly misunderstand *Open Letter's* practice of publishing in three-year nine-issue series.

Open Letter's Canadian distributor, the Canadian Magazine Publishers Association – an institution set up decades ago to assist small Canadian magazines – recently sent me a survey in which the 'small' category was defined as \$1 million annual gross revenue. They have also begun insisting *Open Letter's* covers carry bar codes – and offering as a bribe a doubling of Chapters' standing order.

Arts council policies, particularly those of the Canada Council, are currently not that far away from the expectations of such agencies. They assume regularity and professionalization. They assume a roughly homogenous audience of monied literary readers. They assume that editors will wish to 'expand their markets.'

They favour professionalized literary journals, whose aims are to develop the careers of their contributors and to reach a supportive middle-class readership that enjoys seeing itself affiliated with the arts. Their politics are vaguely humanistic, their pious cultural expectations increasingly similar to those of the 'literati' of F.R. Scott's *The Canadian Author's Meet*. In this they reflect the growing professionalization and commercialization over the last two decades of the Canadian arts community – with the growing tendency to equate accomplishment with sales, prizes, international contracts, and media coverage. The writing I have preferred in *Tish* and *Open Letter* has been skeptical of humanist presumptions and of artistic and other individualisms. It has viewed the commodification of culture, art, education, and language as impassable for creativity. It has been suspicious of cultural pieties and enthusiasms, including those newly established.

Despite my co-founding in 1985 with Fred Wah of *SwiftCurrent*, Canada's first on-line journal (itself supported by the Canada Council), I have been primarily a print editor. The current rapid commercialization of the internet suggests to me that electronic publication may soon carry ideological constraints very similar to those of print. Already we see an electronic literary publisher like Coach House beginning to become dependent on arts council support. With dependence comes the seemingly innocent 'arm's length' panopticon of the state, in the form of administrators and juries that have been unknowingly co-opted by whatever has become the current common sense of government.

Especially when grumpily composing one more implicitly resistant grant application to one of our councils, I often think of returning to the production and distribution models of *Tish*, or of bill bissett's *Blew Ointment*, or even of Louis Dudek's *Poetry Mailbag*. The contemporary Canadian arts scene has moved far from the irregularity and openness of those models, and carried many of us with it. *The cistern contains, the fountain overflows*, writes William Blake. I think he was having a vision of bar codes and *Tish*.

Frank Davey

Ars Noetica

Steve McCaffery

... God also maintains an aesthetic beauty

open it. in the 3-voice wrapper round its sonnet of ports.

Each line reads "could be a line" (a spider winds up something
or smashing a friend in the fries

... what is this cry? progressive if responded to? (the poetic act?
the event named the poem?

cluster-warp of dinghy message teaching you to read
the candlesticks in office buildings

the puke having printed it

a desultory prerequisite for monosyllable adhesion
(Cynwulf to Bunting)
churn spree pin push it to me with a led lit set it up
tuning in next page to the phrase defence

... why is this cry of conscience likened to
a stranger's voice (Hesiod to Spicer) ?

alterity sounded from within the outside
folding the drive toward taking in

"concern"?

All that's poetry isn't poetry isn't a thought worth thinking

Fred Wah

cat's cradle

For myself, I realize the cradle is where I want to be. Despite the threat - and this is central to the torque of infancy - to erase temporal discriminations of difference, I desire the potency of training, the buzz of the tracks under the wire, the fusion of this fision, the unsettled and dissonant noise outside the hypocrisy of permanence and purity. The community of the cradle is, for me, not a lonely place to be. As I said, the homogeneous insistence of the continuous string will not contain my cradleness simply to define its own obsessions for clarity and univocal meaning, i.e. its tyrannical demand for symmetry. Patterning is multiple and I've discovered, through the elimination of the ladder, this rejection of paradigmatic experience by the young (but not only the young: 'urban Indians' and Asian tourists, skinheads and family breadwinners alike are affiliated) that there is possible a kind of coalition of free-floaters, those of us who wish to cross over on the opposite side once in awhile. And we are not like those cartoon characters of our childhood who can walk on thin air as long as they don't notice it; we realize, once we experience this, that falling is necessary for dexterity. Both infancy and history have insisted, through the hierarchies of a knotted string, on the dynamics of improvisation - very simply, how to fake it, how to make it up. Allies in this configuration of the gap have been artists, carpenters, and fishermen - both taut and loose - who, for their own reasons, have also occupied this disturbed and disturbing site. Through a substantial psychic reality of desiring objects, I long ago felt the need to contest my so-called "mother cord" - its dominance, authority, power. Another important ally in disturbing the nor-

mal tightening of the reins - that it is only a sometimes disposable reflex between two intentions, pure ones at that - has been the discourse of the chalk line, a volatile and stained venue that in the last thirty years has challenged how its productive agency has only been granted, according to our neighbor Bob, through an act of colonial line-snapping. But what's certain in this rope-a-dope debate is that you can't always get it just right. The desire for the perfect simply produces another object, a *fait accompli*, the repetitive delirium of rusted strands of wire cable, the invisible knot in a piece of sewing thread, the tattered and exploded end of a shoelace, a cauterized umbilical cord. This is not at all an antithetical polarization. We see that the ligament, like transcendental silk, is what remains of the tension when, at the end of a long haul, it is stripped of all its strength and fiber. The nexus of this spiritual experience of the line as a trace of thought has been described by an Arab mystic, Al-Ibn: "the string is the string, nothing else; the string is the string, all of it...the string is the pure subject of the verb." This framing of the cradle does not mean that you can't read it. The sub-muscularization of the braid can be interpreted as caught within the progressive dynamic of Tourette's Syndrome where motion and action by a sort of sensorimotor mimicry involves, in the words of Giorgio Agamben, "a staggering proliferation of tics, involuntary spasms and mannerisms that can be defined only as a generalized catastrophe of the gestural sphere." (*Infancy and History*, 136). This string is no cyborgian extension of the body. It is itself, its own nervous system allowed to talk back through the permutations of an ever transmorphic screen saver. Metaphor is not easy to come by in describing this locus: binding twine, floss, packthread, leader, hamstring, lace, and so forth. Caught in the velcro. Catgut is tempting as a forceful interpellation. But who will answer? We can find no spider's ethic here. What is held by the two hands is not meant to measure,

particularly the fingers. I think we need to get wounded, down to the nemo-fibers, the ciliolum, the yarn, the thong, the rigging, the ribbon, the bandage. Yes, the wound. The interstitial space of a stage, a balcony, the trace, finally of a scar that has borrowed its outline from an imprint of the domestic. This is a track, for me, not to the realm of the spiritual (what an illusion) but to an inheritance heretofore stifled by the intentions of sacred or economic models. I want to be free to use the crumbs and scraps for the crumbiness and scrapiness in them, for nothing else. Time is, etymologically, according to Heraclitus, "a child playing with dice. If this is true, that is, if this is true for the cat's cradle (and mine), that string is a yoke to the spinal marrow, to the breath, to the body and its threaded thought. Those threads are diachronous and I want to be there in the heat of their trans- crossing, why not, through the residue of m

CHAPTER O

Christian Bök

(FROM *Eunonia*)

for Yoko Ono

Loops on bold fonts now form lots of words for books. Books form cocoons of comfort – tombs to hold bookworms. Profs from Oxford show frosh, who do postdocs, how to gloss works of Wordsworth. Dons, who work for proctors or provosts, do not fob off school, to work on crosswords, nor do dons go off to dormrooms, to loll on cots. Dons go crosstown, to look for bookshops, known to stock lots of topnotch goods: cookbooks; workbooks – room on room, of how-to books for jocks (how to jog; how to box) – books on pro sports: golf or polo. Old colophons on schoolbooks from schoolrooms sport two sorts of logo: oblong whorls; rococo scrolls – both on worn morocco.

Monks, who vow to do God's work, go forth from donjons
of monkhood, to show flocks, lost to God, how God's word
brooks no crooks, who plot to do wrong. Folks, who go to
Sodom, kowtow to Moloch, so God drops H-bombs of
horror onto poor townsfolk, most of whom mock Mormon
proofs of godhood. Folks, who do not follow God's norms,
word for word, woo God's scorn, for God frowns on fools,
who do not conform to orthodox protocol. Whoso honors,
no cross of dolours nor crown of thorns, doth go on, for-
sooth, to sow worlds of sorrow. Lo! No Song of Solomon
comforts Job or Lot, both of whom know, for whom, gongs
of doom doth toll. Oh *mondo doloroso*.

Crowds of Ostrogoths, who howl for blood, go off on foot, to storm forts, to torch towns. Mongol troops, grown strong from bloodsport, loot strongholds of lords, known to own tons of gold. Goths, who lop off locks on doors of tombs, spot no strongbox of loot – no gold, no boon – for Goths confront horrors, too gross for words: gorgons from Mordor, kobolds from Chthon. Bold sons of Thor, god of storms, hold off, sword for sword, mobs of Mor-locks – trolls, who flood forth from bottommost worlds of rockbottom gloom, Orcs shoot bolts from crossbows. Lots of potshots, shot off from bows, mow down throngs of cohorts, most of whom swoon from loss of blood.

Profs, who go to Knossos, to look for books on Phobos or Kronos, go on to jot down monophthongs (*kof* or *rho*) from two monoglot scrolls of Thoth, old god of Copts - both scrolls, torn from hornbooks, now grown brown from mold. Profs, who gloss works of Woolf, Gogol, Frost, or Corot, look for books from Knopf, *Nostromo*, not *Hopscotch* - *Oroonoko*, not *Ronwrong*. Profs, who do work on Pollock, look for photobooks on Orozco or Rothko (two tomfools, known to throw bold colors, blotch on blotch, onto tondos of dropcloth). Log onto Hotbot dotcom, to look for books on who's who or wot's wot, for books of *bons mots* show folks strong mottos to follow. How now brown cow.

from *Pollen*

Peter Jaeger

No sooner does an impasse establish itself than plagiarism is likely to set in. Ambition ruins reading. As long as we stay with specifics we can only accumulate. A wandering hand may see itself as playing fair by announcing its target in advance, but a true landscape will not emphasize short-term precepts over long-term mull. All books have their sky. Epigrams should not mean but be — O.K., but meta tends towards selection. Most of us can barely even envisage the hints of a plus where warmth once won. A selection that alleges increase is easier to know than anorexic leisure, for the former insulates the arms of public tags, while the latter merely poses them as lore. The mimic is clothed with infinite purpose. Even when smoothness quivers, there must be something in it that calls out this feeling in us...which is to say, flat shares affect. Most prospects are apt to regard secrets as not really touching their own aspiration, but as something exclusive and solitary. On a slogan a waver perches. An intentional structure appears most bearable when divided. Whoever has a gift for compilation ought to be able to learn driftism like any other mechanical art. Nice people make bad collaborators. The pantomimes of critical culture no longer exist — but in compensation, all pantomimes now resemble critical culture. Conflation construes; assumption sums. The foremost way to read theory or poetry is to skim it without considering too much...that way tone predominates over incarceration. The constant factor (as well as the most fruitful aspect) remains in the animations of fine print. One should only consider gun-metal breath from the safety of advantage. Abundance always chooses an in-transit position from which to watch itself march towards fulfilment. Some approach pliancy, but fail to see the setting. Better the author who stands when she writes than the one who sits when she reads. A pattern founded on rank has to maintain itself on plot. To teach with kindly stealth, not to lose one's cover, to glisten at the hermeticism of others — these are the energies of tolerance. A theory marches on its examples. The hidden assumption of surrender is that there are claims and there are exits, and that we always remain permissible. Some select a kinder weight for looking. Fettered to steer, believing what the lank perceive, the vast majority list at glamour. And yet we've just begun — true, although the ends are underfoot. Demand is both valuable and easily understood. In these circumstances, I would be shirking if I confined myself to a string of reliance; it was my intention to throw light on retrieval. From our perspective, benefit merely migrates through sanctions. Structuralism was the difference between words and woods. There are many people who are too tender

for theory, and too dignified for poetry — a tangible proof of standards. The government of homilies is rooted in the family. We always come back to the question of neo-linearity; if we follow causality, variation remains forcefully removed from engagement. Many concepts are like the sudden meeting of two workers at the end of a long shift. The deflection of spectacles modifies struggle. The gaze is a sort of domination bent from genitives. One should attempt to classify control only in relation to the consumption of ordinary problems. Every theory of language that excludes the phrase “cool, daddio” must be incomplete. When a form doesn’t know what to answer, it is usually the result of an accident rather than a conscious action. Believing in currency and always straining at the virtual; frenetically marginal and proudly dependent; awkward at weather but a genius of tedium; dumb with acumen — can you guess to what type of pornography these traits correspond? If we distinguish between *deluge* and *flood* as two different products, the question of right or wrong remains unanswered. Undoubtedly, process is no longer merely a twin of verb. The best way to copy is to re-use referents with pseudo-antediluvian textures. The only zero coordination is that which also coordinates the gap that separates it from nothing. She that finds the split of conversation gains an unspecific consolation. “Oranges” equal absence makes the heart grow formal. Brilliant achievement is the achievement of achievement. Instructions drug us into genre. We’re not really cynics...were just channels for derision. Handy is the truce of platitudes. Unpredictability is not easy, and doubt is hit or miss. The defenders of constraint will only accept a critique based on statistics. Does not allegiance feel about the uniqueness of its reverence just as I feel about the uniqueness of mine? In a crucial sense, function is a testimony to imperatives. All theory constantly aspires towards the condition of example. The miraculous regulation, formed of an inconceivable number of independent parts, has evolved to a degree of supply capable of the surplus needed for supposition. Examples are always more efficacious than we are.

George Bowering

A Small Hand

There is a small hand in the purple

Really, I saw this just before All Saints Day

I don't care whether I get Coke or Pepsi

Late at night reading the sky for pins

My father did this, his occupation showing

Thumb nails together staying out of Hell

So I will never visit there again

That path winding when it did not need to

How Odd Men Are, Really

Women
take off their rings
and leave them on shelves,
tabletops.

Their legs below dark coats
cross intersections
in the rain.

And we wait in automobiles
for news from distant quarters.

Unlikely Childhood Transculturation

I was always
reading de Maupassant
to Obasan.

She was
an Okinawan
from the Okanagan.

Sometimes I

Sometimes I look at the world
and sometimes I pass it through my body.

Sometimes I have paint on my hands
and sometimes my stomach oozes.

These conditions led me in my youth
to look for a woman I could mistake for poetry.

Whether I succeeded is left for loving critics to decide
while I pick at the steep sides of this hole.

The world seems not to notice my intent
as I pass through it, quarter by quarter.

It is the earth, not the world, you dolt
she told me while I only gaped through lidded eyes.

Years after I began this nonsense I returned
only proving that I'd grown stupid over the years.

The first of these is the fact that the system is not self-sufficient. It is dependent on the external world for its raw materials and for its energy. This is a fundamental flaw in the system, and it is one that cannot be overcome.

The second of these is the fact that the system is not self-regulating. It is dependent on the external world for its control and for its feedback. This is another fundamental flaw in the system, and it is one that cannot be overcome.

The third of these is the fact that the system is not self-organizing. It is dependent on the external world for its structure and for its function. This is a third fundamental flaw in the system, and it is one that cannot be overcome.

The fourth of these is the fact that the system is not self-replicating. It is dependent on the external world for its reproduction and for its survival. This is a fourth fundamental flaw in the system, and it is one that cannot be overcome.

The fifth of these is the fact that the system is not self-aware. It is dependent on the external world for its knowledge and for its understanding. This is a fifth fundamental flaw in the system, and it is one that cannot be overcome.

The sixth of these is the fact that the system is not self-motivated. It is dependent on the external world for its goals and for its aspirations. This is a sixth fundamental flaw in the system, and it is one that cannot be overcome.

The seventh of these is the fact that the system is not self-responsible. It is dependent on the external world for its actions and for its consequences. This is a seventh fundamental flaw in the system, and it is one that cannot be overcome.

The eighth of these is the fact that the system is not self-compassionate. It is dependent on the external world for its feelings and for its emotions. This is an eighth fundamental flaw in the system, and it is one that cannot be overcome.

The ninth of these is the fact that the system is not self-loving. It is dependent on the external world for its self-image and for its self-worth. This is a ninth fundamental flaw in the system, and it is one that cannot be overcome.

The tenth of these is the fact that the system is not self-fulfilling. It is dependent on the external world for its meaning and for its purpose. This is a tenth fundamental flaw in the system, and it is one that cannot be overcome.