

pictures uv being: writing about bill bissett

Linda Rogers, ed. *bill bissett: Essays on His Works*. Writers Series. Toronto: Guernica, 2002. 134 pp.

During almost forty years of painting and drawing, and poetry in both print and performance, bill bissett has published almost seventy volumes of verse, recorded a number of cassettes of sound poetry, and painted hundreds of canvases. One would expect that so prolific a career would include at least one Governor General's Award or other such high honour. One would be wrong. Not that his extraordinary career has gone unremarked: he did receive the Milton Acorn People's Poetry Award in 1991 and the Dorothy Livesay B.C. Book Award in 1993; he has in that time also amassed an enormous following of devoted admirers and an enviable reputation as Canada's most electrifying visionary poet. He has been compared to William Blake, and like Blake makes official culture feel itchy; early in his career he was denounced in the House of Commons as a pornographer. More rational observers have described him as our national shaman and as a "one man civilization." He has not yet received, in my estimation, tribute adequate to his contributions, but giving bill bissett his due has clearly begun. In the autumn of 1997, *Capilano Review* celebrated its 25th anniversary by devoting an entire issue to writing by and about bill bissett; a bissett painting adorns front and back covers, and eight colour plates bisect the volume. In his Introduction, Capilano College's Bob Sherrin expresses the hope "that within the limited time and space at the review's disposal, we have made but one contribution to an ongoing process of recognition and tribute that others will carry further."

bill bissett: Essays on His Works, edited by the Victoria poet and broadcaster Linda Rogers, needs to be approached as one more step in this ongoing process. In Roger's own words, "[t]his collection of essays is an attempt by various family members to define a brother for whom brotherhood is the desideratum behind every brushstroke or utterance" (9). The sense of family—"bill bissett is family to everyone

who knows him" (9)— is evident in the affection that Rogers and the other writers display in essays and reminiscences that comment on his life as well as on his writing and painting. This equation of art and life is as it should be, for as Rogers notes in her Introduction, "bill bissett's *Molecular Dissolve*," few individuals have resisted compartmentalization in their lives as assiduously as bissett. **[Page 106]** These essays will confirm for readers who come to him fresh that bill bissett is still, as he was described so many years ago, a "one man civilization" who offers, through his shamanizing art, a cure for what ails us. Perhaps this virtue will compensate readers for the critical shortcomings of *bill bissett: Essays on His Works*. This is not to say I find nothing of value in this book, but I think readers should know what they are getting; equally important, they should know what they are not getting.

Measured against the Guernica volumes on Al Purdy (165pp.) and P.K. Page (173pp.), the first edited and the second co-edited by Rogers, *bill bissett: Essays on His Works* is a slight volume. It contains fewer substantial (in size and substance) analytical essays than the Page and Purdy volumes, and devotes correspondingly more space to brief (two- to four-page) reminiscences and anecdotes. While there may be some merit in this format for readers who come to bissett for the first time, readers already familiar with bill bissett's art and life and hoping for a volume of fresh commentary and analysis are likely to feel disappointed. Outside of what appears to be a centre-piece interview, this volume contains little of a critical or even biographical nature that bissett's fans do not already know or have not previously encountered. Of the nine articles in *bill bissett*, three, Jamie Reid's "th pome wuz a storee," Susan Musgrave's reminiscence, "When We Get There Can I Smoke," and a reworked version of Adeena Karasick's "A Writing Ouside Writing," are reprinted from the *Capilano Review* anniversary issue; a fourth, Scott Watson's "Preface" to *fires in th tempul*, is from the catalogue for bissett's one-man show at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1984; and a fifth, Tim Carlson's "bill bissett," is apparently reprinted from *Georgia Straight*. The remaining pieces include an interview with Karasick and tributes and appreciations by the Victoria poet and teacher Jay Ruzesky, the London critic and editor Joy Kuropatwa, and Linda Rogers herself. It would have been useful if, in her Introduction, Rogers offered a rationale for her choice of material. Why, for example, does she reprint, from the *Capilano Review*, Musgrave's short anecdote about a reading tour of England and France, but not Sharon Nelson's far more substantial and informative "A Just Measure: Breath, Line, Body in the Work of Bill Bissett"? And, as she chooses also to reprint Karasick's "Bill Bissett: A Writing Ouside Writing," why not also include Steve

McCaffery's "Bill Bissett: A Writing Outside Writing," to which the Karasick essay is in large measure a response? This emphasis on reprints suggests that the intention of the volume (and of the Writers Series as a whole) is not so much to advance our understanding of the artist's critical reception as to summarize the progress made to date. If this is, in fact, the intention, then [Page 107] *bill bissett* would be a better volume if it included such other seminal essays as Len Early's "Bill Bissett: Poetics, Politics & Vision" or Jack David's "Visual Poetry in Canada: Birney, Bissett, and bp." Interviews by Barry McKinnon and Caroline Bayard, among others, and Karl Jirgen's work on "ecstatic yunyun" also come to mind. These cavils aside, there is some old material in this volume that readers will be glad to have available in this format, and Karasick's interview does hint at new developments.

The first essay in the collection is, fittingly, Jamie Reid's "Th Pome Wuz a Storee nd Is th Storee: th Erlee Daze uv Blewointment." Here, Reid recalls his first meeting with bissett in 1959 and the strange exhilaration that came from meeting an "embodiment of the truly hip, a real Ginsberg, a real Kerouac, right [t]here in Vancouver" (15). This is somewhat qualified by his later assertion that "bill was the product of the original Vancouver bohemia, the one that was rooted in downtown Robson Street, the real early bohemia, not the American-media-created bohemia, the so-called 'counter-culture' of Fourth Avenue that emerged after the middle 1960s, though bill was raging at the centre of that later movement, too" (16). Throughout the article, as much memoir as critique, Reid deftly positions bissett's biography inside Vancouver's social/cultural history, its jazz scene as well as its community of poets, and in relation to other movements, Dada for example. Readers who remember the "ragged, improvised, ink-smearing" quality of *blewointment* will be astonished to learn how many of Canada's more established, mainstream writers, from Margaret Avison and Earle Birney to Robert Zend and Carolyn Zonailo, published in that periodical, "the product of bill bissett's vision and engagement with his own social world, his effort to sponsor creative efforts of all kinds within the living context of the city and its artistic community"(23).

Tim Carlson's lively memoir, "Bill Bissett," fills out the biography of bissett's Vancouver years and moves forward to his years of residence in London, Ontario, where he was writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario (1985-86) and "where [in 1987], in his late-forties, he joined his first rock band, Luddites"(41). It also further adumbrates the history of *blewointment*, as both literary magazine and press. Carlson is particularly good at recalling for us not only names

and dates but snippets of conversation which give his memoir an extra sparkle. Four other short pieces, Rogers' impressionistic "Bill Bissett dans la Maison Lumière," Musgrave's anecdotal "When We Get There Can I Smoke?," Ruzesky's "To Protect the Earth: Bill Bissett's Drawings," and Kuropatwa's deceptively titled "bill bissett's Aesthetics of Composition" (really a short bio-bibliography [**Page 108**] rather than a commentary), help to round out the portrait of the artist even as they show how impossible it is, in bissett's case, to separate the myth from the reality.

Although all of the writers in this volume mention bissett's paintings and drawings, and Ruzesky makes them the focus of his memoir, the most thorough treatment of his artwork comes in Watson's Preface to the catalogue for the 1984 *fires in th tempul* exhibition. It is not clear why, given its provenance, this essay should be the penultimate piece in the collection except, perhaps, that it forms, with Reid's essay, a kind of bookend for the other selections. Watson, who is at present the Director/Curator of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery in Vancouver, situates bissett's painting in the context of the modern reaction to decor and "designism," and is worth quoting at length:

The search from Rousseau to bissett is for culture before civilization, and for experience before culture; thus the intense interest in childhood throughout the modern experiment. As Kandinsky put it: "There is an unconscious and enormous force in the child which manifests itself here and which puts the work of the child on an equally high plane (and often much higher!) level as the work of the adult." The magical world of the child, with all its libidinal precociousness, is what bissett is after in his paintings, which come from a shaman-like personal cosmology. (116-117)

In keeping with its shamanic nature, bissett's cosmology leads to—in fact demands—"an almost frightening insistence on the primacy of the 'paradisal' condition" and the articulation of "an asocial body, liberated from socially conditioned structures of desire, a body whose very language must be prior to our own" (118), and a "biological alphabet which would allow the free circulation of desire without the strictures of grammar and syntax in language (and thus the world)" (118-119). What makes this essay so satisfying is Watson's ability to bring together all the seemingly disparate dimensions of bissett's work, his paintings and drawings, his concrete poetry, his chanting and sound poetry, and his phonetic texts with their admixture of visionary philosophy and playfulness. This is the kind of overview one expects from a volume subtitled "Essays on His Works." It is

penetrating, thorough and, above all, readable. The same claim cannot be made, unfortunately, for Karasick's "A Writing Outside Writing," although her interview with bissett at least partially makes up for what I perceive as the essay's shortcomings.

Over the last decade, Karasick has acquired an international reputation as a language-centred performance artist and poet, and as a deconstructive [Page 109] cultural theorist with particular attention to semiotics, feminist and Jewish issues. Since 1988, she and bissett have countless times shared venues at poetry, sound and videopoem festivals in Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, and Seattle; have been part of the same European reading tour; have made at least one cassette of sound poetry (*Liquid Waze* 1990) together; and have corresponded when Karasick spent time in Malawi in 1997. Most recently, both appeared at the Seattle Poetry Festival in 2002. Given the longevity and closeness of their association, one would expect that Karasick might offer insights into bissett not vouchsafed to those who have had fewer contacts with him. Perhaps she does. The problem, for me at least, is in her jargon-ridden manner of expression: Karasick out-Derridas Derrida, and at times her writing verges on the unintelligible. Her thesis is straightforward enough, and is articulated in her first sentence: "[t]hrough a re-politicization of socio-linguistic structures, bill bissett engages in a writing praxis which inscribes an unofficial, outlawed discourse"(50). What follows as Karasick elaborates her thesis is anything but straightforward. There are instances, as for example her discussion of "how the physicality of sublexical units contributes to an ever-expansive mode of meaning production" (51), when her prose seems to descend into an associative freefall. Her discussion of the sememe SA is a case in point:

So, as in sa n th monkey or sa n th crystal ball, SA as sublexical unit, signs and re-signs as Soul Arrow or 'Savoir Absolu,' the trace of SA sacrificed, circumcised remains in avowal, as a sublime vocable, as trope or ellipsis that accumulates swells into "ciseaux, scie, si (if) si s'il [. . .] is put to work, ça, ci" as SA salient, signifies, soars on the threshold of la sememe, the sublime circumscission of SA stretches, separates. Folds into a memory confessed as SA the signature signs, assigns between the signans/signatum; as enseign sein desseins designs and resigns dasein in a countersignative insignia resurrected "on the skin of [t]his language . . . [these] syllables". . . . (51-52; the quoted phrases in this quotation are taken from Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida's *Jacques Derrida* [1993])

Readers already familiar with bissett's concerns will at least dimly

intuit, if they do not immediately recognise, that this is an attempt to address issues apparent in his work as early as *Seagull on Yonge Street* (1983)—see especially "image pool"—and very strongly in evidence in recent work such as *Scars on th Seehors* (1999). New readers are not likely to learn much. The recombinant verbal play here may testify to a certain intellectual heat, but it is unlikely to produce much light: as commentary, this is more baffling than illuminating. In other instances, Karasick's deconstructive [Page 110] approach becomes almost [self-]parodic. Consider, for instance, the following excerpt from her discussion of bissett's relationship to language:

if according to Saussure, "language is always received, like the law," and according to Derrida, "every law finally communicates with an absolute out-law, which would be in a 'transcendental position' with respect to any given legality, and which we have called the gift of the law of the promise," bissett (as out-law or bi-law) acts as law (in the being-law of the law) and exceeds the law, or in Cixouvian terms, blow[s] up the Law . . . tears the law apart," re-marks a law that is before the law and exceeds the law; a law which allows itself to bind itself maiintin [sic] itself while dividing itself in the proess, [sic] and becomes the letter of the law that is never given but is never given, but is always already analytically entailed by the force of the repetition, contamination, difference.
(66-67)

Is she waving or drowning? Do we really need Saussure, Derrida, and Cixoux in a single breath to say that bissett defies linguistic convention? The reverential name-dropping and the mantric repetition of deconstructionist catch phrases throughout this essay is likely to strike most non-specialist readers, and even a good number of specialists, as obscurantist self-indulgence, although some in both camps may find it interesting in a pataphysical sort of way. Contributing to the unreadability of this article is a lack of diligent editing. Spelling mistakes occur throughout the essay, not only in Karasick's prose (as in the quotation above) but also in quotations from bissett—"langwanga" for, presumably, "langwage." Even the title of the article is misspelled; rather than "A Writing *Outside* Writing" as it appears in the *Capilano Review*, we get "A Writing Outside Writing," replicating exactly the title of Steve McCaffery's far more informative "Bill Bissett : a Writing Outside Writing," in *Open Letter* (1978). Given the phonetic nature of bissett's verse, misspellings can be more than usually off-putting. There are also uncited quotations, some fairly lengthy, many repeated phrases, and other such annoyances which testify to a rather careless approach to editing. While

responsibility for this lies ultimately with the editor, Karasick should have been more diligent in submitting clean copy, or at least proofing the copy before it went to print.

Much better than her essay is Karasick's February 2000, interview, which was an unusually collaborative project, inasmuch as bissett's replies to her questions are written in his typical phonetic script. This is not true of any of his earlier interviews, but it is quite appropriate because it solidifies our sense of the man whose art has been speaking to us in this [Page 111] way for all of his adult life. The other value of this interview is that, because it is so recent, it offers us bissett's most recent thinking about the issues that have dominated his work and life. What we discover is that, unlike some of the hippy generation such as Jerry Rubin, bissett still practises the gospel he preached so long ago, and remains uncompromising in his vision. In her first question, for example, Karasick asks him to distinguish between his notion of the "molekular dissolv" and the process involved in his "more language-focussed writing." His reply—"yes sew xciting th paintings n th writing both flames uv th same n different fires same nd diffrent each" (73)—confirms for us that, however disparate the forms of his expression, the sources of it have remained uniquely singular and personal. Karasick's questions are generally (but not entirely) free of the deconstructionist jargon of the essay, but one gets the feeling that this would not have mattered in any case because bissett's answers are sometimes only tangentially related to the questions asked. As he himself notes at one point in the interview, "yr qwestyuns ar sew brilliyant i don't know abt my answrns at all yu know what can i say" (84). Contrary to what one might expect from a conversation between a visionary poet and a Derridean theorist, the result is not a duet of the deaf, and does offer those willing to make the effort insights about developments in his most recent work.

bill bissett: Essays on His Works is not as impressive a volume as one might wish. I would especially have liked more space devoted to commentary, and less to brief anecdotes about his life, especially as the main outlines of that biography have long been available. Aside from Rogers' offerings, the most recent works in this volume are Karasick's interview, conducted in February 2000, Kuropatwa's short essay, and Ruzesky's work, which is dated June 2001. The latter two are, unfortunately, too short to offer much by way of fresh insight. Unlike the Purdy and Page editions, *bill bissett* does not contain a page of Acknowledgements indicating where reprinted articles were first published, nor does it include an adequate bibliography (I say 'adequate' because bissett does supply a selected bibliography of sorts, but I think that as editor, Rogers bears responsibility for filling out the

skeletal one provided by the volume's honoree). For all its critical shortcomings, *bill bissett: Essays on His Works* does have its redeeming moments; it is the first book devoted to writing about bill bissett and should be welcomed as such.

J.M. Zezulka
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