

bill bissett: controversies and definitions

by Don Precosky

"I know who the great poets are . . . William Bissette of Vancouver. An Indian boy, Bill Bissett, or Bissonette" (Jack Kerouac, Paris Review Interviews, 4th series, 363).

"Everyone familiar with the subject has heard about the Bill Bassett affair" (Jake Epp, MP in the House of Commons April 28, 1978).

"Fey in a soft felt hat, a thin red bandana around his neck wearing a uniform of T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers, he chants and dances, shakes a rattle in shamanistic ritual." (Eleanor Wachtel, Books in Canada, June-July 1979, 5).

No Canadian poet has aroused more controversy, while receiving less understanding, than bill bissett. He has not sought notoriety. He avoids the hangouts of the publicity conscious artist — the op ed pages, political movements, or radio talk shows. Mostly he paints, writes poems, and gives readings and exhibitions of his works. His poetry and paintings are usually experimental and unorthodox. It is his radical, uncompromising unorthodoxy that has drawn controversy to him. The commentary bissett has received shows him to have been subjected to misdefinition and/or undeserved hostility. For most of his career he has been a victim of the preconceptions of those who write about him. It is only within the last decade that writing about bissett has become more aware of his stature as an artist. I have divided the written and spoken commentary about bissett into four slightly overlapping categories: academic reviews and articles, pieces in the popular press before 1980, statements about bissett by politicians, and recent (post 1980) assessments of him in the popular press. The academic commentary spans bissett's career, but the number of commentators is disappointingly small, as is the lack of detailed academic criticism. At the time of my writing this Len Early (on 2 occasions) and Steven McCafferey have written important extended articles; the rest of what academics have had to say is found in brief reviews, introductions to anthologies, and surveys of his generation of poets. Most of the popular press's coverage of bissett appeared in the 1977-1979 period when bissett was being damned in Parliament as a government-funded pornographer. The responses to him are varied. Many are favourable, though often patronizing in their depictions of bissett as a wide-eyed flower child. Some small town columnists and editorial writers, accepting verbatim what some politicians had to say, are hostile and personal. The Toronto *Globe and Mail*, through its "At the Mermaid Inn" column, while never mentioning bissett by name, is disdainful and dismissive of his "kind" of poet. Politicians set upon bissett in the late 1970's for the alleged pornography in some of his work. Since 1980 and the publication of bissett's *Selected* press commentary on bissett has taken on a testimonial aspect. He is presented as a writer who has come through a lot and who is now an established (though still unorthodox) artist with a record of verifiable achievement.

In the world of academic reviews and articles bissett has received a largely favourable reception, though it has been from a limited circle of commentators. He has never attracted the range of reviewers and critics that other major Canadian poets have. Those who like his work review him again and again.

Academic critics tend to respond with a favourite academic method: categorization. There has been a concerted effort to place him within a tradition, and words such as "visionary" and "Blakean" are most often employed, although lately "shaman" has become a favourite. Douglas Barbour puts it most succinctly in a 1972 *Queen's Quarterly* review: "Like Blake, Bissett is a visionary, mystic poet who makes his own rules of poetry as he goes along" (571). This is a nice synthesis. It places bissett within a tradition, thus orienting the reader, yet grants him a rebel status that explains his more extravagant experiments. But there is also something suspect in this assessment. It is hard to reconcile the *ad lib* qualities of a "mystic poet who makes his own rules of poetry as he goes along" with bissett's prodigious output. No writer can spontaneously cough up forty odd books of poetry. He must have some organized thoughts about what he wants to do and where he wants to go with his writing. Barbour's sentence highlights a widespread flaw in the academic criticism of bissett. There is a subtly superior attitude among many of his university-grounded critics, supportive yet a trifle condescending. He is regarded as a wondrous naif, almost an idiot savant, of letters. Al Purdy, though not an academic, in his review of *Nobody Owns the Earth* in *Canadian Literature*, our most academic journal in the Canlit field, writes that "the very naivete of his language and themes, the earnestness and complete personal belief he brings to poems — these make him oddly touching" (87). Frank Davey in *Canadian Forum* says "His vision is transcendent, static world, simple and hard in outline, paralleling our own complex and sordid one" (44). The "his" and "our" distinction is disturbing. While the general tone of the review is favourable, it places bissett on a shelf, away from "our" real world. In a way it castrates his poetry. The person of affairs [the academic] praises yet somehow diminishes the man of dreams.

Stephen Scobie has performed a similar operation in more than one journal. Reviewing *Poems for Yoshi*, a book he calls "Bissett's best," he speaks of "this randomness, this deliberate abdication of selectivity and control" (121). Though he later qualifies this to say that bissett's "lifestyle and aesthetic" have "an openness which seems naive but isn't" (122) he still leaves the impression that bissett is somehow an artless artist, one with "a purity of outlook which brings freshness to the most outrageously cliché situations and phrases" (122).

Scobie's comments on *The Wind Up Tongue* follows the same pattern of establishing bissett's apparent naivete and artlessness and of then taking it only half back. First he says that "the tone of Bill Bissett's poetry is one of innocence, of wide-eyed openness to experience, even of naivete" (42). He then adds "the appearance is one of naive lack of conscious control or shaping; but as with all minimalist art, the truth is that as the number of choices made by the artist decreases, the importance of each choice that is made increases" (42). He does not really renounce the impression that bissett is naive, he simply says that the few choices bissett does make are important.

Bayard and David in their introductory note to an interview with bissett in *Out-Posts/Avant-Postes* give similar impressions of naivete and artlessness, saying that "in so many ways he has held on to child-like values of naivete and emotional freedom" (52) and that "often criticized for not being a better editor of his own work, bissett's strength resides in just such a lack of selectivity" (52). bissett disproves this latter point in his self edited *Selected* and in his interview with Maidie Hilmoe in which he describes his painstaking process of writing, editing, and selecting.

This air of friendly condescension carries over into the comments on bissett's lifestyle (a topic more widely discussed by the popular press) that appear in some of the reviews. Scobie's ties the openness of his lifestyle to naivete in his review of *Poems for Yoshi*. Barbour, in the *Queen's Quarterly* review, comments on the alienation between bissett and "straight" society, attributing it to "his visionary life style [which] challenges all its rigid

ideals" (571). But it is Purdy who accounts for the condescension when he says:

There is a core of integrity about poet-prophet bissett one can't ignore.
The reason why one can't ignore him would be difficult to explain to (say) a
panel of fifty middle-aged English profs never entirely weaned from Chaucer,
Eliot and alcohol. ("The Woman of Barrie," 87)

bissett offends against traditional ideas of poetic and academic decorum. Even Purdy says "Bissett's screaming crying moaning caterwauling on lecture platforms I dismiss" (87). How can one trained to revere the Great Tradition not feel some difference, some discomfort with bissett?

Len Early's "bill bissett/Poetics, Politics, & Vision" in *Essays on Canadian Writing* is the fullest published assessment to date of bissett's work. It covers the many facets of his writing, granting it a complexity that it is not afforded even in the most laudatory of the reviews. It also is a breakthrough piece in that it grants him consistency and a theory of writing. Yes, Early agrees, bissett *is* a visionary, but he does have a method, though it is somewhat negatively defined as a method of avoidance:

Challenging all manner of authority, literary and otherwise, he has mounted an attack on convention that at times appears nihilistic to the point of stunting his considerable artistry. Nevertheless, there is a vital consistency in his theories, forms and themes. The most idiosyncratic and the most ideological of his poems reflect a visionary writer whose achievement is already an impressive one. (4)

Early puts his finger on the kernel of bissett's poetic when he says that "his methods of defying standardization seem inexhaustible" (6). bissett works at not falling into any of the currently popular categories, but he does have a method or methods which can be observed and commented upon. He works at his art; his poetry does not merely come to him.

There is a lot of sex and sexuality in bissett's poetry, yet few of the academic commentators mention it. One critic who does discuss it is Steven McCafferey in "Bill Bissett: a Writing Outside Writing" in *Open Letter* (Fall 1978). For him "sheer libidinal will to power" (7) is the force driving bissett's writing, which he describes as "intensely libidinal and violently anti-grammatical" (7), grammar being to language what puritanism is to social behaviour. McCafferey's essay, while challenging, detailed, and sympathetic is akin to most of the other academics' assessments in that it denies bissett a mind. Writing, he would convince us, is for bissett a form of orgasm, a "libidinal discharge" (12) upon the page. The article was written over ten years ago and has proven a poor predictor as bissett's poetry has become increasingly narrative and introspective. I have to wonder if McCafferey was not in part playing a joke upon the institution of academic criticism, writing a serious article while sneaking in some risqué humour in the guise of academic jargon. Take, for example, the following: "In the face of grammar's logic of constraint Bissett's reply is libidinal discharge: the indiscriminate circulation of excess" (12). The idea is plausible, the image bizarre: bissett comes in the face of "grammar's logic"?

If academics unconsciously condescend to bissett because of his apparent artlessness, there is in his work a quality with which they can identify and support: earnestness. Purdy praises his "earnestness" and "integrity" (87). Jack David in *Open Letter* describes him as "determined to record his own 'vishyun'" (107). This is the most important contribution of the academic critics to bissett's reputation. They do not doubt that he means what he says and does, though they may not always like it. The popular press and the politicians express doubts and even scorn about his commitment to his art. When he was under attack in Parliament and some editorial pages it was the academics, particularly Warren Tallman, who

led the counterattack and gave his defense credibility.

Considering his unorthodoxy, bissett has drawn very little hostile comment in print from academic critics. Individual books have been panned, but his general way of doing things has not been broadly attacked. Two such attacks do deserve mention. One is Robert Lecker's review of *Sailor* (a generally well-received book). It goes against the general trend of praising bissett's integrity and comes at a time when bissett was under attack in Parliament and the press as a scam artist profiting from lush Canada Council grants. Lecker says:

in battling the Establishment, bissett has fought himself into a very well established niche. *Sailor* is just more evidence of our willingness to forego quality at the expense of keeping our most radical poets happily occupied, busily published, constantly named, and publicly tamed (46).

One wonders who the antecedents of the first person plural pronouns are. Since *Sailor* (issued by Talonbooks) carries the acknowledgement "published with assistance from th[sic] Canada Council" on the back of its title page perhaps they are the righteously indignant taxpayers of Canada. Lecker himself is well enough inside the literary "Establishment" to know that Canada Council funding does not "keep" anyone very well.

The most extended attack on bissett comes from the pen of Dermot McCarthy. It is long on vituperation and *ad hominem* argument and short on example. McCarthy levels charges of elitism, shallowness, insincerity, and American colonialism against bissett:

Bissett's poetry and that of the blewointment coterie is meant to sound like street language, the language of the people in the street, albeit the severely limited vocabulary of a narrow-minded and elitist neighbourhood. Indeed, bissett's [he's reviewing a bissett book, along with several others, all from bissett's blewointment press] and the others' poetry sounds like the talk of people who would be the least interested in the written word — ill-educated, arrested adolescents suffering from imaginative fatigue and an OD of imported second-rate American plastic. What is so ironic about bissett's Anti-American rhetoric is that he is one of the most American poets that we have in his obsessions and approaches to poetic technique, and with his warmed up left-overs of 60's American counter-culture. Reading bissett and his gang is like sitting down to a meal of Coke and cornchips. (88)

"Coterie" and "gang" are fabrications. There is no school of bissett. McCarthy's image of the threat to real poetry by Americans, adolescents, and the ill-educated plays on a variety of snobbisms and prejudices and reflects an outdated theory of decorum. The elitism of bissett's poetry is never elaborated on.

In the popular press bissett is often treated less as an artist than as a story for coverage. This is, issues peripheral to art (and often involving the issue of decorum) enter into play: clothing styles, Canada Council funding, spelling, and pornography. Press responses to bissett have been varied. There are those writings which specifically attack him as obscene. There are portraits of him written because of the notoriety caused by the accusations. (Interestingly, every writer who draws upon direct interviews with bissett is sympathetic in portraying him.) There are also less direct attacks, aimed at his "type" of poet without ever naming him or the others with whom he is lumped. The *Globe and Mail* is the prime source of these.

Three "At the Mermaid Inn" columns in the *Globe and Mail* in 1977-78 carried shotgun attacks on a certain type of poet — the kind bissett happens to be. These attacks came during the period of the criticism levelled at him in Parliament, and can be seen as a part of a

backlash against experimental trends in poetry. John Glassco on November 12 1977 makes his opinion clear in the title of his piece: "The poet as performer debases his art" (6). Bissett is not mentioned by name, but he is obviously one of the targets. Glassco uses the common ploy of trying to freeze Bissett in time — "Back in the Sixties these recitations seemed no more than an amusing novelty, a passing fad, a concession to the illiterate, not to be taken seriously" (6) — dating his experimentation as arrested sixties foolishness. (I doubt if Glassco ever made concessions to the illiterate or ever found poetry readings "amusing".) Such denigrations fail to answer two questions: what is wrong with performance readings, and what is it that makes them popular? Surely the illiterate can find more amusing pastimes.

Purdy may find a visceral integrity in Bissett's poems, but to Glassco there is no integrity, only excess:

Such excesses, though probably self-corrective do underline the direction that poetry recitations may well be taking: that is, toward the idea of poetry as a mindless emotional release, a kind of pentecostal 'service of witness' — with the poet as priest or shaman — or, what is almost as bad, simply as pseudo-cultural vaudeville, a form of 'showbiz' (6)

Unconscious social biases pop out, attitudes toward pentecostals and shamans being the most obvious. Interestingly, academic reviewer Douglas Barbour praises Bissett as a "shamanistic figure in his performance" (Review of *Plutonium Missing, Poems for Yoshi*, and *Sailor* 129) and Ann Mandel describes Bissett as "certainly Canada's poet of the tribal dream" (Review of *Northern Birds in Color* 150). Glassco also seems afraid of / troubled by the deep emotions Bissett touches on. The "mindless emotional release" that he decries is the libidinal flow that McCafferey sees as at the core of Bissett's power. Glassco, like McCarthy, is practising the garrison mentality in criticism: lock the doors and keep the ruffian hordes out. Their sense of decorum out of which their image of proper behaviour by a poet grows is class bound and comes at a time when such stereotypes were breaking down in Canada and had been long abandoned in the rest of the world.

Less than a month later "At the Mermaid Inn" published a similar essay, this time by Don Crossley (*Globe and Mail* December 3, 1977). Once again the title is revealing: "Poet or peacock? Exhibitionist clowns ruin things for serious artists" (6). Crossley confesses that "At times I grow reluctant to admit to being a poet after reading about some nitwit haranguing crowds at City Hall with unprintable obscenities under the guise of poetry" (6). One wonders what upsets him more: that such nitwits use naughty words or that they draw large crowds? Both apparently are sins in his eyes: "serious" poets use chaste language and attract no attention. It is doubtful that people gather in large crowds simply to hear someone use rough language. If they do, why is he upset over the "serious" poet's loss of such an audience? Crossley's complaint also goes back to the problem of decorum. Performance poetry, as done by Bissett, offends someone's serious and restrictive sense of decorum. It must be excluded. Circle the wagons. Could it be that "ruins things" means "causes loss of funding across the board"?

Alfred Rushton rails against what he terms the conceptual school of concrete and sound poets in the "At the Mermaid Inn" column of the September 23, 1978 *Globe and Mail*. The "concrete school" has "scant respect for the printed word or the book which binds the word. Too traditional. Too confining. Perhaps even too demanding" (6). This objection is simplistic but not offensive. Rushton then goes off the deep end: "Instead the words which once were used to communicate are used as a code. The code is only supposed to be understood by the writer — and perhaps his wife, if she behaves herself" (6). The secret code theory is absurd and contradicts his own jibe that traditional writing is perhaps too demanding for the concrete school. Surely inventing and writing in code is more demanding than writing in plain English. And what is this about the poet's wife? Can only men be poets? And do male concrete poets really enforce some code of good behaviour upon their

mates?

Sound poets also come in for their share of lumps:

The sound poets are also making a name for themselves in the conceptual school. They believe they were born with immortal tonsils. Triggers for cavemen yells, guaranteed to curdle the very wax in your ears if not impair hearing well into the next generation. What's even worse is that these poets, along with the concrete school take themselves oh so seriously. (6)

At least he will grant that they are serious artists, although what he means is that they are conceited and self important, unlike artists who refer to themselves as serious. He then moves in for the kill: "They expect the Canada Council to pay them cash on the decibel and they get it" (6). Rushton is pandering to popular prejudice: the image that there is big money to be made from Canada Council grants — and what is worse, money without work, every Puritan's nightmare. This is not arts commentary: it is pure Philistinism. At a time when an artist was being harassed by individuals without the least respect for poetry or poets it is sad that Canada's national newspaper would become the soapbox for such reactionary commentators.

Closer to home in Vancouver, newspaper writers did not refrain from mentioning bissett by name. The Parliamentary debate concerning the Canada Council's funding of bissett's allegedly pornographic poetry flowed over onto the pages of Vancouver's two daily newspapers. The B.C. Arts community placed large ads in the newspapers listing the names of those who supported bissett and decrying the abuse of him in Parliament. This statement of support in turn drew the ire of Vancouver *Sun* columnist Doug Collins who mounted an attack of his own, not merely on bissett, but on the entire local arts community. Collins disposes of bissett in one sentence: "I think he's bloody awful" (6). He then goes on to promulgate a type of conspiracy theory concerning those whose names appeared in the ad. After questioning the ad's motives: "On the pretext of preserving the 'ahts', the ad was a plea from a mutual admiration society for continued state aid for Canada Council welfare bums" (6), he claims that "obscure literary magazine[s]. . . most of which have university connections, are subsidized by ye Old Council, and take in each other's washing" (6). It is a claim which might have some truth to it. But then he goes too far. He points out that a large number of the signers have connections with UBC's departments of English, Fine Arts, and Creative Writing, which he says gives them a vested interest in Canada Council business (6), an interest that would undercut the validity of their concern. The logic is weak. Experts in any field are more likely to respond to problems in that field more quickly than are members of the general public. Doctors raise concerns about health care policy, businessmen protest changes in tax legislation, and newsmen are more sensitive to threats of censorship than is the layman. Their concern is not necessarily invalid.

The "ahts" comment reveals Collins' philistinism. The kind of poetry bissett writes is irrelevant. That he writes it at all and is supported by UBC professors is enough to earn him scorn. Collins also points out that two of bissett's supporters are wives of members of UBC's English Department. We are, I suppose, to conclude that they signed because told to by their husbands. Finally, Collins cannot resist bringing the argument around to money:

No one would deny lower-case bill and his friends the right to write all the dopey poems they like. But that's not the argument. The argument is whether, year after year, publish money should support such people in their bad ways. Hell, some of them could even try going to work. That way, they might even find something worth writing about. (6)

Like Rushton, he panders to the prejudiced image that poets make big money from the

Canada Council and the mistaken impression that bissett was on some sort of gravy train of continuous Canada Council grants. He also betrays the philistine belief that writing is not work (strange coming from a writer), and that writers who receive public support are bums who do not give back anything of value.

Smalltown newspapers also took an interest in bissett during this period. For the most part editorialists seem to have accepted uncritically the claims of those MP's condemning bissett's work. The Association of Canadian Publishers *Notebook* for July 1978 quotes from the March 15 1978 Tweed, Ontario *News*. The *News* took the view that there was a school of which bissett was one leading member (again the conspiracy theory). It condemned "the filthy works of these perverted writers" (8), depicting them as "nothing more than a succession of gutter language, usually not even in sentence structure" (8). One wonders if "gutter language" in "sentence structure" would have been more palatable.

In the Prince George, B.C. *Citizen*, columnist Jan-Udo Wenzel stressed the link between money and pornography. As he bluntly puts it: "The federal government is paying for the publication of pornography" (9). He informs his readers that "there is such a thing called the Canada Council and it's [sic] sole aim seems to be to get rid of as much of [sic] public money as possible" (9). He objects in particular to the financing of "Bertrant [sic] Lachance and Bill Bissett" (19) which, he says, "borders on the criminal" (9). He argues that the relatively small Canada Council budget should be redirected to other areas, to save the economy: "Here we are in economic problems as never before [sic] and instead of cutting payments to so-called artists and the likes [sic], the government keeps on being very free with our money" (9). In bissett's case, as we shall see, the government was not "being very free" with its money.

Not all of the press was hostile. In fact, larger circulation newspapers and magazines were generally very kind during the funding/pornography squabble. Allan Twigg in two *Quill and Quire* pieces in 1978 stresses bissett's vulnerability, including his health problems, his difficulties with the law, and his unconventionality. He quotes bissett — "If I was actually writing pornography, I wouldn't need grants" ("B.C. poet faces critics," 27) — and perceptively comments that it is bissett's disregard for money, not his quest for it, that could make him seem threatening to some: "Any poet who claims 'ium not afr anything' and so obviously means it is going against the grain of our profit-motivated society. If his popularity continues to increase and a Pied Piper reaction sets in, what's going to happen to our Gross National Product? This bill bissett character is either a saint or a fool. So he must be dangerous" ("Poetry's bad boy bill bissett" 30).

The ad in support of bissett brought comments in the Vancouver *Sun* from columnists Alan Fotheringham and Christopher Dafoe. Fotheringham chastises the "yahoos and the woolhats" (*Sun* September 23, 1978, B1) who have been harassing bissett and says that the ad marks a turning point against them. Dafoe also applies the image of the yahoo to bissett's tormentors and links it to the old image of Canadian philistinism:

When times are hard, the frustrated and the feeble of mind invariably look frantically around for someone to kick. In this country the toe of the boot is usually applied to the artists. The frontier mentality prevails. To some people, the idea of a man having the cheek to call himself a poet is intolerable. Who, after all, needs poets? What do they contribute to the GNP? (B3)

After summarizing the yahoos' definition of poets as "limp-wristed parasites, free loaders and probably perverts who deserve . . . a swift kick in the arse and the present of a shovel with which to perform honest labor" (B3), Dafoe admits that he does not care for bissett's poetry, but, he points out, "I'm not prepared to take part in a campaign to stamp out what I don't understand or appreciate" (B3) and he supports the idea of grant allocation by "somebody who knows something about the poetry" (B3).

Politicians' definition of bissett can be shortened to two words: pornographic freeloader. The political flap began, as is often the case, outside of politics, this time with a Vancouver radio talk show host named Ed Murphy. Late in 1977 Murphy put together *A Legacy of Spending*, a collage of newspaper stories, government statistics, and poems. It is ironic that he would use a method so dear to bissett. Page four of the collection prints all or part of four poems by bissett under the scornful heading "Your Tax Dollars Paid for this Artistic Talent/Budding Young Poet on the Way to Fame". Three of the four poems contain possibly controversial words such as "fuck" and "shit". But one, a concrete poem which combines the word "MIX" with other words, does not. It does, however, contain phrases such as "MIX race", "MIX color", and "MIX creed". That Murphy would select it for reproduction could suggest to some that he had problems with the ideas these word combinations express.

Murphy's book was something of an underground success, sold in downtown department stores such as the Bay and Woodward's and sent by mail all over the country as requested by the curious. The fact that it was purported to contain "dirty" poems probably boosted its sales. bissett and Bertrand Lachance, whose poems were in the book, received no money for what probably was up to that point the widest distribution any of their writings had received.

Stories of government mismanagement of funds are commonplace and make good headlines. The Auditor General's annual report always lets loose a flurry of them. The questions raised by Murphy's compilation were soon picked up, first by Opposition Conservative MP's who used bissett to criticize the government, and later by Liberal backbenchers who attacked the alleged bureaucratic mismanagement of the Council while standing up for decency, morality, and real art.

Bob Wenman, Conservative MP from British Columbia, first raised the issue in Parliament on December 2 1977 when he asserted that "the Canada Council is supporting, with public money, individuals to write what anyone in this chamber would term as offensive and demeaning pornography" (1487). He moved, unsuccessfully, to have funding for the Council reviewed by Parliament. He then distributed what he termed "unfortunate pornographic documentation" (1495) and asked the Minister of Finance, Jean Chretien, his views on "the disgusting and pornographic exhibits of Mr. Bissett's published works, sponsored by the Canada Council" (1496). Finally, he asked the Speaker "would I, as a member of Parliament, be offending the House of Commons and my privilege as a member by repeat ing this kind of garbage in the House of Commons" (1498)? His strategy was to have Mr. Speaker recoil in horror at the poetry and brand it as too vile for the ears of the people's elected representatives. The Speaker, however, ruled that "it would not seem to be very relevant to any particular matter before the House at this time" (1498) and the poetry reading did not take place.

Wenman reintroduced the issue into Parliament on December 13, 1977. Once again he attempted to use titillation and shock tactics. He claimed to have allegedly pornographic material with him and he "urge[d] the television cameras not to zoom too close to it because I think it would be offensive to the record as well as to the Canadian people to see it" (1845). He then launched into an attack on its alleged vulgarity:

this material, supported and masquerading in the name of art, is a demeaning degradation of human experience. It is in my view neither creative nor beautiful, it is not even grotesque or [sic] ugly beautiful, it is neither uplifting nor fulfilling, it is not even passionate or erotic; it is simply vulgar degradation of the human experience — vulgar and demeaning at a level well below that of funky graffiti written on the back of washroom doors. This type of vulgarity deserves to be placed in a category of the hate literature of pop art and should not be censored

but rather branded as unfit for human consumption and discarded on the rubbish heap to rot in its own vulgarity. (1954)

Much of this is confused ranting. What does he mean by "the hate literature of pop art," for example? But it does raise a matter of deepest concern for those who care about the arts. Are aesthetic principles a matter for legislation? Can Parliament debate and rule on what is or what is not art? In matters of the arts is an MP's opinion superior to that of an expert in the field serving on a Canada Council jury?

Other MP's jumped in. The next was a government backbencher, Hugh A. Anderson from Vancouver Island, on April 3 1978. He too attacked the Canada Council for funding pornography, focussing particularly on bleointment press works, which he called "a degradation to the printed word in Canada" (4084). But he went beyond Wenman to raise new issues. He attacked the Canada Council jury system whereby applications for funds are judged by panels of recognized artists. He proclaimed that "in appointing people who have a knowledge of the arts something has gone wrong" (4084) and asserted that "if publications such as the one I mentioned by the Blue Ointment Press [sic] of Vancouver are published as a result of government funding, I suggest that a thorough examination should be made so that culture rather than Canadian pornography is advanced" (4084).

Even more distressingly, he hinted at a need for censorship: "material which should not be published is being published under the auspices of the Canada Council" (4084). And went on to suggest that "our society needs more skilled people" and that students considering "faculties of education or faculties of general arts . . . should be told that their skills may not be needed" (4084). Big Brother is watching — deciding which books deserve to be published (even without government funding), and what courses of education are socially useful.

Next came Conservative MP Jake Epp. On April 28 1978 he spoke of the "Bill Bassett affair," accusing him along with unnamed publishers of receiving "in excess of \$100,000 to publish poetry which I am sure the average Canadian would call pornographic" (4989).

The implication that bissett was making a good living on government handouts for "merely" writing poetry is absurd. Funding for bissett would have been of two sorts: money for him, to sustain him while he devoted his time to writing, and money for his publishing venture, bleointment press, to pay for printing and distributing books that the press published.

bissett received his first Canada Council grant in 1967-68, a bursary of up to \$3,500 (exact amounts are not published in the Council reports). He received the same bursary in 1968-69 and 1969-70. In 1970-71 it rose to \$4,000 and he also received a short term grant of \$1,350. There were also short term grants of unspecified amounts in 1974-75 and 1976-77. This was all he received up to the period of controversy in 77-79. At best he received a total of \$20,000. Furthermore, up to 1985-86, the year of the most recent Canada Council report available to me, bissett has received no senior arts grants even though he has published over 40 books.

The money for bleointment press, called block grants by the Council, was given out in the following amounts:

1972-73	1500
1973-74	2500
1974-75	3000
1975-76	4500
1976-77	9550
1978-79	0

Notice that in 1978-79, when attacks on bissett in Parliament had been going on for two years, blawointment received no funding and bissett himself received no Council grants that year. At most, bissett as individual and publisher would have received just over \$40,000 in funding in an 11 year period. Of Council funding, bissett has told Barry McKinnon in an interview:

From 72, although all of the money I earned that I didn't need to eat with, or buy my own art supplies with etc., went into the press, so it wasn't totally paid for by the Council — probably 50% and then the debt that was left was all mine. The Council didn't pay the debt or one cent of it, but it's not to be expected that they would. So I viewed it as a partnership between me and the Council, and a lot of it could never have happened without the Council money and the Council support. (79)

bissett may be grateful but he is not pampered.

Wenman and others had been copying and distributing bissett's "obscene" poetry, apparently through the Murphy selections, and "Bissett and Talonbooks decided to fight back. They filed suit in the Supreme Court of B.C. on June 23 [1978] charging 8 mp's, including Ellis and Malone, 7 newspapers, and 13 others with libel and infringement of copyright law" (ACP *Notebook* July 1978 7). In response to this suit Wenman rose in Parliament on June 27, 1978 to move on behalf of himself and the other MP's who

are being sued for comments made while performing their duties, particularly in their attempt to make the government accountable and responsible for repulsive and outrageous Canada Council grants and inadequate financial documentation of the council . . . That the government state its policy on payment of fines for MPs convicted of slander, libel and the like while in the performance of their duties (6767)

In short, he wanted Parliament to agree to pay for any judgement brought against him and the other MP's named in the suit. The motion did not receive the required unanimous consent of those present in the House and died. Wenman's move raises more interesting points. Can a lawmaker's doing his duty involve lawbreaking? Wenman, who had been complaining about bissett's access to public funds, was seeking assurance of access to those funds to give them to bissett should the poet win his suit. Beyond the concern for money lies the business of photocopying and giving away bissett's poems. The MPs' actions betray an attitude that poetry has no value. It can be copied and given away with no payment to its creator. It is an attitude poet John Pass attacked in a letter to the editor of the Vancouver *Sun* Sept. 16, 1978:

By even the most mercenary yardstick, productivity, bissett has been a bargain. Over 15 years, for less than he'd have been given on welfare to do nothing, he's produced more of lasting interest and value than Collins and Murphy are likely to produce in their lifetimes. (A5)

The final futile Parliamentary hit at bissett came in December 10, 1979 when Arthur Malone (who had been named in the suit) rose to move "that this Parliament urge the Canada Council not to announce a final decision respecting extended grants to Talonbooks Ltd. [then about to bring out bissett's *Selected Poems*] until such time as both the council and the publishing company have appeared before the Standing Committee on Communications and Culture" (2170). The motion failed to receive unanimous support and died.

Thwarted in the House of Commons, the politicians carried their attacks against bissett to the Standing Committee on Broadcasting, Films and Assistance to the Arts, the body responsible for deciding on funding for the Canada Council. The July 1978 ACP *Notebook* contains excerpts from the minutes of the meeting of March 8 1978. The tone of some of the comments is disturbing. There are the now standard attacks on the alleged indecency of the work being funded by the Council — "it is disgusting and it is offensive to anyone with even a shred of decency" said Liberal MP Ursula Appollonia (2) — and Wenman moved to suspend the Canada Council's giving of grants "until adequate response structures can assure full accountability to the people of Canada through their members of Parliament" (2). More sinister attitudes and aspirations also appear. Mr. Herbert (MP) questioned "why we have to be so hung up on what you term 'censorship'" and objected to giving funds to "these weirdo groups, extremist points of view, and so on" (4). Mr. Raines (MP) says "if we did abolish the Canada Council, something else smaller and better controlled might spring up in its place for these expenditures of money" (5).

Michael Belanger, Vice Chairman of the Canada Council, cringed before them, defending the jury system but adding that "in this particular case there are obviously not proper results . . . I am not particularly happy that this be published . . . I cannot find any literary quality to it" (3). The MPs' pressure tactics met with some success for, as mentioned above, the 1978-79 Canada Council report mentions no grants to bissett or *blewointment*.

In an interview with Alan Twigg in *For Openers* bissett succinctly replied to the politicians' attacks, pointing out the absurdity and futility of what they sought to impose on Canada's cultural life:

So shame on me for writing what I feel. Why do they get upset about writing?
We're going to have erotic literature as well as any other kind of literature.
We're going to have a culture that includes a whole range of experience. (76)

Despite the academics' condescension, the parliamentary harassment, and the public controversy bissett did the proper thing: he went on writing. Today he has come through and is, if not venerable, at least recognized and appreciated. Now, instead of moral condemnation he is more apt to receive testimonials to his achievement. Mia Stainsby in the Vancouver *Sun* encapsulates bissett's current status when she says

Bissett's work is featured in several Canadian poetry anthologies and is taught in university. He was a writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario [in 1985] . . . and has given innumerable poetry readings. Invitations for readings have increased — the territory has expanded from Canada and the U.S. to include Europe and Japan. (C11)

Len Early, in his Introduction to bissett's landmark *Selected Poems*, points out that "his best work has always been charged with the energy and formal ingenuity of enduring art" (11) and adds that "by now, the number and stature of bissett's admirers ought to guarantee his reputation against literary traditionalists, outraged parliamentarians, and other institutional agents." (12)

With the arrival of the *Selected* (1980) and the two-volume retrospective of *blewointment* one might fear that bissett is settling down upon his laurels. But nothing could be further from the truth. He continues to write at a dazzling pace.

bissett deserves the last word on bissett:

I think artists are really strong. Look at what we all put up with or endure or bypass or let go of to keep going with the art. It doesn't make us better, it just

means we're determined, Most people do things because they have some level of dedication and love for what they're doing — curiosity and excitement. (McKinnon, ed. *Open Letter*, 86)

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