

# HP Sauce and the Hate Literature of Pop Art: bill bissett in the House of Commons

Ryan J. Cox  
Keyano College

The minister, the Government and its vehicle, the Canada Council,  
are weak and full of fear—fearful of not appearing avant garde,  
fearful of being labeled culturally illiterate.

*Robert Wenman, MP Fraser Valley West (PC), 13 December 1977*

they got a sause calld houses  
uv parliament for meat at th  
tabul hp sause it sure tastes  
shitty too

*bill bissett*

*“in nova scotia th peopul call shit houses housus uv parliament”*

**T**AKEN AT FACE VALUE, the bissett affair of 1977–78 seems rather mundane, hardly worth noticing. A group of mostly opposition MPs, headed by Bob Wenman, the Tory member for Fraser Valley West, attempted to take the government to task for, in their eyes, the fiscal irresponsibility of the Canada Council for the Arts, a semi-autonomous Crown corporation. This irresponsibility was evident in the fact that Canada Council was funding “what anyone in [parliament] would term as offensive and demeaning pornography” (Canada 1845) and, as Hugh Anderson, the Parliamentary

RYAN J. COX teaches  
English at Keyano  
College in Fort  
McMurray. His writing  
has appeared in  
*Canadian Literature* and  
the *Windsor Review*.

Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries, put it, “a degradation to the printed word in Canada” (Canada 4084). It had the potential for great political theatre, linking as it did excessive government spending and morality—Jake Epp, another Tory MP, falsely alleged that certain unnamed publishers, likely alluding to bill bissett and his *blew ointment* press, had received “in excess of \$100000 to publish poetry which ... the average Canadian would call pornographic”<sup>1</sup> (Canada 4989)—but the scandal never materialized and the stated goal of Wenman and company, the review of the Canada Council’s mandate, was never accomplished.

The bissett affair has all the hallmarks of a by rote political scandal. There is little new in the way it attempts to tear strips off the Trudeau government’s hide and gain votes, primarily in conservative areas of the country. The moral panic angle—the poetry of bill bissett at the centre of the scandal is described as “evil,” and Wenman suggested that the government had an “obligation to fight” this evil lest it negatively affect the Dominion (Canada 1845)—had been played numerous times before. In the late 1940s and 1950s, E. Davie Fulton—a Conservative MP for Kamloops—made his political bones by joining Dr. Fredric Wertham’s campaign to control the publishing of crime and horror comics on the grounds that they were a threat to the youth of the nation and lead to juvenile delinquency (Bell 94–98, Palmer 187). Fulton went on, partially in thanks to this crusading, to the position of Minister of Justice under Diefenbaker and eventually ran for the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party. Interestingly, the bissett affair wasn’t even the first time in the 1970s that a poet would become a lightning rod in the House of Commons. When bpNichol won his Governor General’s Award in 1970, it provided MPs with an occasion to remark on what they perceived as government subsidizing of Marxism, pornography, and obscenity, which, as Caroline Bayard establishes, is at its core a thinly veiled attack on the counterculture by the establishment (112–13, 304).

The other angle, focusing on government arts spending as misappropriation and waste, is also a common trope in Canadian politics. Wenman’s charge that not even “one half of one percent of the Canadian people would say [bissett’s work] is acceptable” and “Common sense judgment says that taxpayers’ dollars not be used to support such work” (Trueman), while allowing him to neatly sidestep the issue of censorship echoes the com-

1 Don Precosky estimates that bissett received at best a total of \$20,000 in personal grants between 1967 and 1979, with *blew ointment* getting a further \$21,050, for a total of just over \$40,000 across an eleven-year span (14).

ments of Prime Minister Stephen Harper about cuts to the arts in the run-up to the 2008 federal election. There Harper stated that “when ordinary working people come home, turn on the TV and see a gala of a bunch of people at, you know, a rich gala all subsidized by taxpayers claiming their subsidies aren’t high enough, when they know those subsidies have actually gone up—I’m not sure that’s something that resonates with ordinary people” (Benzie, Campion-Smith, and Whittington). Harper’s “ordinary working people” in opposition to the whining, rich, gala-attending arts community sets up a similar discursive structure to the one latent in Wenman’s 99.5 percent of Canadians with enough common sense to think that the government shouldn’t be funding bissett and his ilk. Artists, in this discourse, are elitists who work in opposition to the common sense of the typical Canadian and are rewarded financially for their flouting of social norms. Also present in this discourse is an essentially classist attempt to position the traditionally liberal or radical artist in opposition to the “ordinary working” Canadian by highlighting how the artists benefit from government largesse rather than working.<sup>2</sup> Wenman, just like Harper would thirty years later, uses arts spending to build a straw man that links the interests of fiscal and social conservatism and, as such, demonstrates the ideological basis for this discourse. What is apparent in Wenman and his colleagues’ attempt at scandal in the bissett affair is just how ordinary the whole thing is, just another attempt to scandalize the government—something that Wenman quite literally tried to do by

2 In a reply to Harper published in the *Globe and Mail*, Margaret Atwood skewers the image of the wealthy, leisurely artist. She writes:

His idea of “the arts” is a bunch of rich people gathering at galas whining about their grants. Well, I can count the number of moderately rich writers who live in Canada on the fingers of one hand: I’m one of them, and I’m no Warren Buffett. I don’t whine about my grants because I don’t get any grants. I whine about other grants—grants for young people, that may help them to turn into me, and thus pay to the federal and provincial governments the kinds of taxes I pay, and cover off the salaries of such as Mr. Harper. In fact, less than 10 per cent of writers actually make a living by their writing, however modest that living may be. They have other jobs. (“To be creative is, in fact, to be Canadian”).

This is underscored by Tim Carlson’s account of a brunch with bill bissett that opens with salt and vinegar potato chips, glazed doughnuts, grapes, and other food that bissett has poached from recent parties. As Carlson states, “An internationally respected, ground-breaking poet with a meager income and a maxed-out MasterCard has to have a few survival strategies in place” (33). The conservative image of the elite artist is an ideological construction with almost no basis in truth but provides a neat cover for attacking the Canadian left.

asking future Prime Minister and then Minister of Finance Jean Chrétien his views on “the disgusting and pornographic exhibits of Mr. Bissett’s” poetry that had been sponsored by the Canada Council and then asking the Speaker of the House if it would offend the House if he read some of bissett’s work into the record (Canada 1496, 1498), hoping to have the Speaker “recoil in horror and brand it as too vile for the ears of the people’s elected representatives” (Precosky 12)—and score votes back home as both a moral crusader and an economic populist.

Wenman failed to have bissett’s poetry read into the parliamentary record as the Speaker determined it was not of any particular relevance to the business before the House at the time. It is also clear that, at least in terms of his stated goals, Wenman’s assault on bissett and the Canada Council was a failure. Neither he, nor any of his colleagues in this matter, were able to force a review of the Canada Council’s mandate or explicitly affect the funding criteria or the jury system the council used to award grants. Furthermore, Wenman and his coterie of anti-pornography crusaders did not get the necessary support in the press for this episode to truly become a successful scandal with the *Vancouver Sun* running an editorial, “Life Imitates Smut” on 6 December 1977, that read in part:

If one really wants examples from Bissett’s poetry to boggle the standards, there are more obvious candidates than the eroticisms which we admit are present. His spelling for instance now there’s real subversion for you ... In the meantime Wenman and others looking for the real stuff should try those magazine stands on Granville Street that Mayor Jack Volrich has been complaining about. (quoted in Bayard 305)

The implication is that Wenman has both completely missed the point about what is dangerous in bissett’s work and is wasting the House’s time. He also faced significant blowback from the literary community that manifested as a full page ad in the *Vancouver Sun* signed by “an impressive number of Canadian writers,” a benefit for bissett at UBC in 1979, and a libel suit brought by bissett and Talonbooks at the suggestion of David Robinson (Bayard 305–06; Robinson ms).

Where it is possible to perhaps credit Wenman with success in the affair is its effect on bissett’s finances. In the midst of the scandal, neither bissett nor ointment received Canada Council grants. It also made it difficult for bissett to obtain other money. In June 1978, six months after Wenman launched his assault against bissett and the Canada Council in earnest, bill bissett was attempting to negotiate a bridge loan with the

Bank of Montreal until he could secure an expected Canada Council grant. The branch manager was reluctant to grant the loan “on account of the political uncertainty” surrounding the grant. The politics surrounding bissett’s poetry in 1978 and 1979 hampered bissett’s ability to acquire the extravagant sum of “\$4,000 or \$5,000” on which to live until such time as he could secure a government grant (van Gert ms). However, if this was a victory for Wenman’s side—and in terms of making it difficult for bissett to produce and publish his supposedly pornographic poems, it can be read that way—it was a limited victory. Talonbooks published *Sailor* in 1978, followed by *Beyond even faithful legends: Selected Poems* in 1980, and bissett’s own blew ointment press published *th first snow* in 1979 and *Soul Arrow* in 1980, meaning that bissett was still able to publish even without government grants. bissett’s political toxicity, which may have hampered his ability to secure a Canada Council grant at the height of the affair, seems to have dissipated by 1980 when he was again awarded a grant by the Council. The controversy may have made it difficult for bissett, but, as Frank Davey pointed out in 1974, bissett had already been “ejected from cross-Canada trains, evicted by countless landlords, beaten, harassed by police, and arrested and sentenced to prison” (*From There to Here* 49) and managed to write and publish.<sup>3</sup>

The parliamentary attack on bill bissett and his poetry was a failure and, in terms of the Canadian political landscape, can be considered a mere blip. Wenman’s crusading did not help his political career as it did E. Davie Fulton’s, but nor did it really hurt him. He was re-elected four times following the bissett affair and retired from politics rather than being defeated in an election. But the conflict between Wenman and his supporters on the one hand and bissett and the cultural and literary avant-garde he stood in for on the other is metaphorically important. Regardless of the relative success or failure of the campaign against bissett and the alleged improprieties of the Canada Council, it is important to be cognizant of this event as a conflict between two very different kinds of power and what the conflict between these two powers represents culturally.

In real political terms, Wenman’s group can be seen as political outliers that are at a distance from the real centres of power in the House of Commons. This group consisted of opposition MPs and government

<sup>3</sup> Through both his blew ointment press and a number of other publishers like House of Anansi and Talonbooks, bissett had produced no fewer than forty-five collections of poetry by the time of his becoming a subject of parliamentary discussion in 1978. In comparison, Irving Layton published around fifty collections of poetry over his entire career that spanned from 1945’s *Here and Now* to 1992’s *Fornalutx*.

This authority, although derived from the body politic through the election process, is not available to be wielded by the average citizen.

backbenchers, not party leaders or cabinet ministers. They were not necessarily in a position where they would be able to shape or affect the cultural policy they were critiquing, and the Canada Council operates at an arm's length from the government to forestall just this kind of interference; they were, however, still Members of Parliament. This means that their speech is imbued with the authority of both the constituents they represent in Parliament and that of the Parliament as legislative and authoritative entity in and of itself.<sup>4</sup> They may not have been the primary shapers and wielders of political power in Canada, but they participated directly in the application of that power. There is a major discursive difference between a private citizen declaring that a given poem or poet is obscene to other people on a street corner or even in the opinion pages of the newspaper and a member of the House of Commons voicing this opinion on the floor of the House. When speaking on the floor of the House of Commons and acting in their official capacity, the voice of the honourable member by necessity participates in the government's power over the state's ideological and repressive apparatuses. Whether or not the member's ideas represent the views of the government or the Opposition or even their own constituents, there is an implied force of authority in their words because there are mechanics in place to translate those words into real policy and action; this authority, although derived from the body politic through the election process, is not available to be wielded by the average citizen. Thus, when Robert Wenman condemns the work of Bill Bissett as evil and obscene and implies those that facilitate the production and distribution of this work are complicit in that evil and obscenity, he does so with the symbolic power of the Canadian government as the

4 The common view is that backbench MPs, those without a formal portfolio in either the cabinet or shadow cabinet depending on whether or not their party forms the government, lack the power to actively influence government policy. This is true to a degree. As can be seen in the Liberal governments of Jean Chrétien, a party with a clear hierarchy and a strong whip can, effectively, centralize power in the cabinet. However, there are mechanisms through which backbench MPs whether in the government or opposition can exercise power or affect the parliamentary discourse. These include private member's bills, service on parliamentary committees, and through the simple fact that the backbenches make up the bulk of the House. Liberal backbencher John Reid, as C. E. S. Franks cites in *The Parliament of Canada*, suggested that private members like Wenman and himself had numerous opportunities to actually legislate rather than simply toe the line. In 1978, Reid said that "For those members with a legislative bent (we do not all share that impulse), the opportunities are more readily available now than they have been in the past" (quoted in Franks 214). Wenman, during the Bissett affair, sat on the Standing Committee on Broadcasting, Films, and Assistance to the Arts.

elected representative of the people of Fraser Valley West (Government of Canada 1845). He may not be able to exercise this power beyond imbuing his words and ideas with the spectre of authority and legitimacy, but he is still speaking from the seat of power.

It is from this position of symbolic power that on 13 December 1977, Wenman, for a second time, brought the issue of bissett and the Canada Council to the floor of the Commons and delivered a speech that outlined his critique of the bissett's poetry and the Canada Council. He prefaced this speech by warning the present television cameras not to zoom too close to the pornographic materials he claimed to have brought with him, presumably the poetry of bill bissett and others, since it would "be offensive to the record as well as to the Canadian people to see it" (Canada 1845). He then began his speech proper:

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 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.

The material is evil in the broadest sense of the word and the government has an obligation to fight against this type of degradation rather than condoning, supporting and encouraging the production and distribution of it. The material is not art. It is not right. It is wrong.

The minister, the government and its vehicle the Canada Council are weak and full of fear—fearful of not appearing Avant Garde, fearful of being labeled culturally illiterate. I say that the granting of thousands of dollars for this material proves they do not in fact have the capacity to judge the line tolerance of either the will of this parliament or the will of the people of Canada. (Government of Canada 1845)

Wenman then continues on to raise the spectre of dictatorship and Communism should the Communications Minister be allowed to issue political directives to the Canada Council, this last point relating to a national unity project, apparently ignorant of the ironies of this argument. Both Wenman's theatrical warning to the television cameras and his inability to

grasp that he is effectively warning against the rise of a totalitarian state if political directives are issued to the Canada Council while attempting to intervene in the decisions of the Canada Council politically make it very easy to dismiss what Wenman is saying here. Don Precosky in his essay on the various controversies and attempts to marginalize bissett does effectively dismiss him, stating that “Much of this is confused ranting” before pushing Wenman’s comments aside with a series of rhetorical questions that illustrate equally the absurdity of the speech and futility of his aims (13). And while Wenman’s terminology is opaque and confused—Precosky highlights “the hate literature of pop art” as being particularly in need of definition—it is reductive to dismiss what he is saying. It is important to recognize that by virtue of the setting for this speech, Wenman’s words, regardless of whether they managed to compel Parliament to action or swayed a single voter to give Wenman their support, are coming from a position of power. Context is important here. Here is an attempt to force the state into direct intervention in the aesthetic sphere in service of an ideology; desiring the suppression of art that is “evil” and “wrong” in the name of nation is expressed as the “will of the people of Canada.” The exact ideology that Wenman’s words are in service of may be vague, thus making it tempting to attempt to pigeon hole it as totalitarian or authoritarian or—given bissett’s clear position on the left—fascist or even as simply confused to effectively silence and neutralize the implied threat of the speech. Wenman is, of course, none of these things. It may be fair to suggest, though, that he is scared. His accusation that “The minister, the government and its vehicle the Canada Council are weak and full of fear” has the feel of projection about it and reveals the most about his primary ideological motivation. bissett’s work represents a challenge and a threat to an established view of aesthetics and art as Wenman recognizes it, but this threat transcends aesthetics and art and becomes a broader threat to Canada and its people.

Wenman is essentially marshaling what power is made available to him to counter a perceived threat from another power base, one that represents a direct threat to what Wenman understands as good and therefore must be evil. The aesthetic critique of bissett’s work divorced from the rhetoric motivated by fear can be reduced to the following:

It is in my view neither creative nor beautiful, it is not even grotesque or 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. (Government of Canada 1845)

This response is, of course, coupled with a distrust of the avant-garde and a suspicion that the government supports this activity because they effectively wish to look cool. Wenman's critiques that the work of Bill Bissett and like-minded poets is not creative or beautiful or erotic but, rather, vulgar and degrading to the human experience in a way that recalls bathroom stall graffiti but sinks much lower amounts to a concern that this art doesn't do what art is supposed to do. Poetry should be creative, beautiful, uplifting, and fulfilling, and, for Wenman, Bissett's work does not meet this standard. This is an articulation of a very specific view of art generally and poetry specifically. Wenman desires an art or cultural system, clearly, that functions as an "imagined satisfaction of individual needs that are repressed in daily praxis" ((Bürger 12)). By his allusion to the ideas of beauty, passion, eroticism, and the human experience, there is a sense that he desires, as Peter Bürger suggests in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, that "Through the enjoyment of art, the atrophied bourgeois individual can experience the self as personality" (12–13). This bourgeois experience of art that Bürger describes and that seems to be at the core of Wenman's invective is essentially that of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" where the linking of beauty and truth is intrinsic in the urn and through the experiencing of the urn as an objet d'art becomes transcendent. Art serves as a medium through which the individual can achieve a form of totalization, and when art or culture cannot or willfully does not perform this function it represents a loss of use-value and usefulness. Any art that represents a challenge to this paradigm, especially if it moves the experience of art out from the realm of the ritual and sacred, could easily be read as a degradation or vulgarizing of art.

This bourgeois theory of art that seems to be underscoring Wenman's assault on Bissett's poetry makes it very easy to parse the threat Bissett poses to Canada. The invocation of the avant-garde becomes the key to the speech. Wenman's use of the term is on face value the most absurd part of his argument, as there is no evidence that the desire to appear avant-garde played a role in Canadian cultural policy. It stands to reason that once something gains the approval of a government it loses its revolutionary quality and ceases to be avant-garde. However, this invocation must be read not as a comment on the way the Trudeau government conducted itself on cultural matters but, rather, as a reference to the historic avant-garde and its disruption of bourgeois social relations as articulated through the institutionalization of art. As Bürger asserts,

The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in a bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men. When the avant-gardistes demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that works of art should be socially significant ... Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect works have as particular content. (49)

The disruption of the institution of art in a bourgeois society, at least in terms of the historical avant-garde, has resulted in a disruption of the highly individualized relationship with art that the bourgeois subject experiences. Individual transcendence through interaction with the external sublime or auricular object is problematized if not eliminated. This response is, of course, largely a matter of aesthetics, and while it may concern itself with the “life praxis of men” aesthetic realignments are unlikely issues of debate for liberal democracies. The threat that Wenman makes clear by invoking the avant-garde in his speech to the House of Commons is that what starts as an aesthetic issue expands into the political. For the historical European avant-garde, the two issues overlapped. A rejection or critique of bourgeois views of art seemed to necessitate a generalized rejection or critique of bourgeois society, culture, and politics, evident in the revolutionary sympathies of the Surrealists, Futurists, Lettrists, and Situationists. Aesthetics equals ideology, and so an avant-gardist aesthetic, as Wenman quite correctly identifies in bissett’s poetry, is also ideologically dissident.

bissett’s poetry, like that of other avant-garde poets, is a critique of the bourgeois system of art and the cultural and ideological systems that derive support and validation from that apparatus. Also, like other avant-gardists, this dissatisfaction with bourgeois artistic values is coupled with a rejection of bourgeois social and political institutions; this is evident when in *What Fuckan Theory* the resistance of meaning in language because it serves as a control spills into a prayer “that th imperial fors dissolves in brotherly nd sisterly love” and later an admonition that North America is becoming increasingly fascist despite the presence of “liberals” (np). Here is the threat bissett poses to the Canadian people. His aesthetic and political positions, as we shall see, reveal a “total mistrust of industrial technology, political institutions, conventions, and rules of any kind” (Bayard 59) and advocate in place of these things unity and freedom—“indescrībābul silvr” as bissett describes it in “why dew magazines lie”—achieved through

“our physikul / love ball fuck cum th fire” (*Plutonium Missing* 28). At stake in bissett’s rejection of bourgeois culture is the rejection of a narrative construction of Canadian identity. Canada’s political and cultural institutions and societal norms—which bissett’s poetry rejects both in the micro and macro—create an ideological image of Canada the good, the responsible, and the civil that are essentially bourgeois and Victorian in their origin. The fact that bissett’s poetry is in any way supported by the government, even if only through arts grants awarded at an arm’s length from Parliament, can be read as legitimizing the critique of bourgeois institutions latent therein. Literary objects are thus a threat to a way of understanding Canada and the world, and, from Wenman’s position, they could be read as an evil threat to the collective Canadian good.

Bissett’s poem, “in nova scotia th peopul call shit houses housus uv parliament,” can be read as just such an assault. Not only does it participate in the non-orthodox orthography that typifies bissett’s work, it specifically engages the scatological—explicitly recalling the “funky graffiti written on the back of washroom doors” that Wenman remarks on in his speech—while simultaneously making a joke at the expense of one of the key symbols of Canadian civil society. The poem can be broken into two parts: the first is the sneering joke of the title in which Parliament is metonymically connected to the outhouse. By suggesting that Nova Scotians refer to the places that they shit or at least where poorer Nova Scotians shit as “housus uv parliament” or the “hp,” bissett is showing contempt for Parliament, the Government of Canada, and the interests that they serve. The poem disrupts the conceit that Parliament or “th pigs in the big shit / house in Ottawa,” serves the Canadian people as anything more than a repository for shit or, when the joke reasserts itself in the second stanza by bringing HP steak sauce into the mix, as a mechanism for those in power to get the poor to eat shit (*Beyond Even Faithful Legends* 53). The ideas that are contained in this joke, and that are stated explicitly in the more direct critique of the second part of the poem where bissett invokes imperialism, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and suggests that the debates on national unity are merely a tool to distract the people from their own exploitation, stand in direct opposition to one of Canada’s foundational myths, Responsible Government. This idea that the government is responsible to Parliament and Parliament is responsible to the people leads to Canada’s independence in 1867; it is at the core of the Canadian social contract and as such is tied directly to the bourgeois image and construction of the nation. By critiquing and deconstructing this idea in what is clearly a provocative way and one that has obvious roots—at least in poetry—in the European

At stake in  
bissett’s  
rejection of  
bourgeois  
culture is the  
rejection of a  
narrative  
construction of  
Canadian  
identity.

avant-garde movements that Wenman is so suspicious of, bissett is assaulting one image of Canada.

In the second part of the poem, where bissett moves away from the joke working at either end of the text and into more direct critique, the assault on the notion of Responsible Government in Canada is inverted. The people in the poem are the people who were “squeezd by th british nd / rite up the throat by th amrikans” and by their own rich who plan on making them “into 1984 robot creeps” (*Beyond Even Faithful Legends* 53). They’re also inevitably abandoned by their country when this exploitation leaves them victims. The people bissett identifies in this more explicit critique in fact are assaulted by the same apparatuses that maintain the idea and images of responsible government. The poem’s move from the discussion of the metonymic linking of the two Houses of Parliament to the more direct speech of the second part of the poem connects the conditions that created the joke with the government’s complicity in the oppression of the people. bissett writes that the joke comes from “whr thr isn’t any indoor / plumbing” and that “kind uv says it rite thr” before making his complaints explicit. These two lines tie the two concepts together. The Houses of Parliament are shit houses because they shit on the people who can’t afford to have indoor plumbing. Furthermore, the current system divorces the people from the things they produce like “resources food cultur ideas / media.” This second section of the poem argues that the civil society that produces the Canadian version of parliamentary government estranges the lower classes from the products of their labour and dehumanizes them.<sup>5</sup> The poem even goes so far as to perform this dehumanization and estrangement in the final three lines of the first stanza: “th pigs in th big shit / house in Ottawa say we they / say we who we.” The ability of the poem’s speaker as they decry the established order to express themselves, to have access to speech, fails. The final line drops off before it can finish, leaving the word “are” or any other defining verb unspoken. The speaker who appears to be searching for a statement of identity—we say who we are, who we love, who we follow—has their self-expression disrupted from without; the “they” that asserts itself at the end of penultimate line repositions the potential for self-definition as moment of control. The joke of the poem, which returns to the poem after this collapse of speech, then becomes a rebuke, an assault on the civil establishment and the machinery of power by those who are victimized by it, “th peopul squeezd by th

<sup>5</sup> The critique in this part of the poem is as close to an orthodox Marxist critique as you will see in bissett’s work.

british nd / rite up to the throat by th amrikans,” those that are mourned in Daniel Coleman’s description of white civility.<sup>6</sup> Declaring that hp sauce tastes shitty, the Nova Scotians of the poem and poem’s speaker refute the power of Parliament. Parliament is no better than an outhouse and its product tastes to the people like shit.

“in nova scotia th peopul call shit houses housus uv parliament” is a dissident text and a radical text, but more than that it represents a rejection of an ideology. bissett places himself at odds with the mechanisms of state, the ruling class, British and American imperialism, the branch plant system, capitalism, private property, and the politics of national unity. The poem even demonstrates, as does everything he writes, bissett’s rejection of Standard English through his employment of an idiosyncratic orthology and spelling. bissett, as a writer, is suspicious of the ideological content of language—meaning, as he asserts in *What Fuckan Theory*, is an abridgement of the freedom and possibility inherent in the utterance and lexeme akin to “th imperial fors” or “enslave/ment” (np)—and, in an attempt to avoid these mechanisms of indoctrination, he steps out of sync with what he rightly perceives as the language of power. There is no doubt that language serves those who control it and that moves to standardize a language are an attempt to silence dissident voices, and, of course, standardized language by enforcing meanings and the importance of context—language as means of communication and exchange bordered by the needs of understandability—is likely to inculcate the speaker with the values and ideas of a given language community. As Foucault states, in “the Middle Ages, a man was mad if his speech could not be said to form part of the common discourse of men” and the cure then, as today, was silence (231–32). Power works to suppress and silence dissident voices and one mechanism for resisting this silence, as bissett asserts, is to make a noise outside of the restriction of standardized and controlled language, which bissett does by deploying techniques like chant and concrete and sound poetry in addition to his orthological manipulations. In the rejection of English/American language systems, engines of the white civility

6 “For Canadians, the performance of civility is a way to manage our traumatic history (a complex history usually involving the lower classes, first of Europe and later of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, being displaced from their homelands and in turn displacing Indigenous peoples in North America from their traditional lands), and this process means that behind, or within, the optimistic assertions of civility, we often find a different cherishing of evil memories, an elegiac discourse by which Canadians demonstrate their civil sensibilities through mourning the traumatic, but supposedly necessary, losses that were inevitable along the path of progress” (Coleman 29).

It is still,  
however, a kind  
of power.

and muscular Christianity that Daniel Coleman locates at the heart of the English Canadian literary project, bissett takes the ultimate iconoclastic position and attempts to place himself beyond the realm of control.

The irony of bissett's attempt to free himself and his readers from the forces of repressive power through his poetry's move outside is that it, in itself, can be interpreted as a demonstration of power. It may well be the power to bend spoons as bpNichol lamented (*Canadian Literary Power* 1): a major act of social resistance built on little more than an aesthetic exercise that while subversive can only symbolically realign the mechanisms of power or create a parody of the image systems that re-enforce the way those mechanisms operate. It is still, however, a kind of power. How literary power is deployed, who may make use of it, and how can it be checked are at the centre of the bissett affair and are what makes important Robert Wenman's speech to Parliament and the scandal he and a few of his colleagues attempted to generate. This event was not simply a matter of fiscal irresponsibility by an arm of the government or an attempt to embarrass the prime minister and his party in order to enhance their own future parliamentary careers and election chances. There can be little doubt that these types of calculations played a role in the affair, but that hardly makes it significant. The bissett affair is different because these MPs attempted to use the power afforded to them by the body politic to restrict bissett's ability to exercise literary power. Poetry was, at least to Members of Parliament in the late-1970s, a dangerous enough thing to the Canadian way of life that it was necessary to symbolically—if not in reality—bring the force of the Canadian government to bear on bill bissett.

## Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. "To be creative is, in fact, Canadian." *The Globe and Mail*. 24 September 2008. Web.
- Bayard, Caroline. *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec: From Concretism to Post-Modernism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989.
- Bell, John. *Invaders from the North: How Canada Conquered the Comic Book Universe*. Toronto: Dundurn Group, 2006.
- Benzie, Robert, Bruce Champion-Smith, and Les Whittington. "Ordinary folks don't care about arts: Harper." *Toronto Star*. 24 September 2008. Web. 1 May 2010.

- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1969. 217–52.
- bissett, bill. *Beyond even faithful legends: selected poems 1962–76*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1980.
- . *Plutonium Missing*. Vancouver: Intermedia Press, 1976.
- . *What Fuckan Theory: a study uv language*. Toronto: Gronk; Vancouver: blew ointment, 1971.
- Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Trans. Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Canada. House of Commons. *House of Commons Debates: Official Report*. 30<sup>th</sup> Parliament, 3<sup>rd</sup> Session. 6 vols. Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1977–78.
- Coleman, Daniel. *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006.
- Davey, Frank. *Canadian Literary Power*. Edmonton: NeWest, 1994.
- . *From There to Here: a Guide to English Canadian Literature since 1960*. Erin: Press Porcepic, 1974.
- Franks, C. E. S. *The Parliament of Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987.
- Foucault, Michel. "The Discourse of Language." *The Routledge Language and Cultural Studies Reader*. Eds. Lucy Burke, Tony Crowley, and Alan Girvin. New York: Routledge, 2000. 231–40.
- Palmer, Bryan D. *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.
- Precosky, Don. "Bill Bissett: Controversies and Definitions." *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* 27 (1990). Web. 30 June 2009.
- Robinson, David. Letter to bill bissett. 6 April 1978. TS. bill bissett Fonds, Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections. Scott Library, York University, Toronto.
- Trueman, Mary. "MP says public pays pornographic poets." *Globe and Mail*. 3 December 1977. Web. 1 May 2010.
- van Gert, D. Letter to bill bissett. 14 June 1978. TS. bill bissett Fonds, Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections. Scott Library, York University, Toronto.

