

Self selected/selected self: bill bissett's *Beyond Even Faithful Legends*

by Don Precosky

In 1980 Talonbooks published *Beyond Even Faithful Legends*, bill bissett's *Selected Poems*. bissett's career up to that point had spanned fifteen years and over forty books. Len Early provided an introduction, but the collection was edited by the poet himself. It is made up of nearly 120 poems drawn from twenty-four books, two anthologies, and several little magazines, primarily *blewointment*. Because bissett edited the book, it is fair to conclude that it contains those pieces he felt were most worth preserving. An examination of bissett's act of self-editing must focus on two important matters. The first is the changes bissett has made to the poems that appear in this book. The table of contents gives the book of origin of each poem, but many of the poems are different from the versions that appeared in those original books. I think it is important to make note of how they have been changed and to try to explain why. The second matter is the order in which the poems appear in the *Selected*. They are not arranged in chronological order. The book, therefore, does not read as an historical profile of bissett's development as a poet. Although there is no indication made by the use of headings or other signs in the collection, it is my belief that bissett has arranged the poems in a specific order for specific artistic purposes which I will elucidate later.

I

The changes introduced into the poems in the *Selected* range from minor alterations in punctuation to an almost complete rewriting of some pieces. To a reader familiar with bissett's work, changes are most readily detectable in some of the concrete poems. A number of the changes have been dictated by technological necessity. bissett is famous for his use of irregular page sizes and shapes, but for inclusion in *Beyond Even Faithful Legends* all poems had to fit on a standardized rectangular page. Many are reproductions of the originals that have been electronically enlarged or reduced to fit on the available space on the page. In some cases the change in size has no effect upon the impact of a piece, but in most it does.

Other concrete poems have been recreated in the standard typeface of the new book. They are not reproductions, and can be looked upon as new works. The change to them is significant because it involves a move from the non-proportional typewriter face that bissett favoured in his *blewointment* press publications to the proportional typeface used by Talonbooks. Their look is different.

As I hope to show, in most cases the non-concrete poems in the *Selected* have been arranged consciously in a certain order by bissett. I suspect, however, that some of the concrete poems in the *Selected* were placed where there was space for them. When there is a short poem or when the end of a longer poem has flowed over onto another page, a concrete poem has been fitted in. The size of the white space available may have dictated the degree of reduction or expansion undergone by some pieces. To me, this is an example of an unfortunate imposition of industrial standardization upon bissett's highly idiosyncratic concrete *œuvre*. When bissett first created these poems he was working in collaboration with typewriter technology, using the constant width of non-proportional fonts to create some stunning effects. With *Beyond Even Faithful Legends* that technology was no longer available to him. Ironically, the more "advanced" technology of electronic typesetting has cost him some flexibility in his means of artistic expression.

Examples of changes to concrete poems are plentiful. "aint no words forth taste uv yu" (62) from *MEDICINE my mouths on fire* and "konkreet vizual" (100), from *drifting into war* are larger than they were in the original. The former is an enlarged reproduction in which the typeface looks coarser than it originally did. In the latter, lines have been added to make the poem more rectangular and more suited to the shape of the page it is on. Both poems are also presented in a different orientation. The first is inverted with respect to the original. The second has been rotated 90 degrees to the right. Surprisingly, these changes have not caused serious distortion.

The same cannot be said for the changes wrought on "i herd ya laffin in the water" (64) by its recasting in a new typeface. In *drifting into war* the poem was done on a large page with a non-proportional typewriter face, while the new version is in the book's proportional face. The change is unfortunate because the original has a boldness which this new version lacks. The poems which surround it give expression to an energetic and exuberant sense of joy and the non-proportional version would have been more in keeping with the mood.

Another poem which has undergone a similar change in typeface is "and th green wind is mooving thru th summr trees" (66) from *awake in th red desert*. The original was wider and bolder because of the non-proportional letters. The new version is, perhaps, subtler because the letters are smaller. bissett has added five lines, altering the poem from a rectangle wider on the horizontal axis to one wider on the vertical. The "moovin" impression of the poem changes from one of side to side motion to up and down. He also alters the spacing of the vertical columns to give them an "S" curve which suggests trees as they are swaying in the wind.

The process of reduction has had a detrimental effect on several of the poems. "th pull tord th north" (99) is so reduced that it is virtually illegible and its meaning entirely lost. "th water falls in yr mind nd yu get wet toooo" (83) and "konkreet vizual" (89) from *drifting into war* also suffer a serious loss of boldness and impact. Both were meant to dominate a page, and by being alone on that page, to occupy all the reader's attention. Now neither stands out boldly and both are relegated to sharing space

with the tail end of another poem.

"what we dew if thrs anything" (58) was originally a concrete chant poem done on a typewriter and arranged in three columnar stanzas. Stanza one is based on repetitions of "what we dew if thrs anything we dew is to take care uv th earth," stanza two on repetitions of "what wer heer for if its anything at all is to take care uv th earth" and stanza three on repetitions of "where we cum from if thrs anywher at all is to go on thru th earth." In the *Selected*, bissett abandons the words of stanzas two and three altogether, and simply repeats the words of stanza one, but in an entirely different configuration from the original. In place of rigid vertical columns created by unvarying horizontal spacing and reduced spacing between lines, he uses irregular left and right margins and irregular horizontal spacing to create waving vertical columns.

There is something almost unnatural about bissett's allowing himself to submit his concrete poems to standardization. When Peter Michelson wrote the following description of the typical concrete poet he could have been writing specifically about bissett:

In declining to let printing efficiency rule his poem's physique or in declining to let spatial economy determine its physical density, he grapples with the possibility of true organic form, form not controlled by the systematic efficiency of the printing trade. In short, as the poet becomes his own printer . . . he is at one with not only its symbolic but also its material form. He has demechanized the material cause of his poetry. His Dionysian will has scattered the printer's type, shattered his plates, unlocked his page frames, and given the inevitable finger to economy. The poet has thus become united with his poem in a way that he has not been since the troubadours. So much so that the concretist asks his "reader" to stand on his head if necessary to read it. For now the poem is closer than ever to his pure imagination; and it may be responsible therefore to its essential self, not to such esthetic irrelevancies as gravity or overtime. If industry's sensibilities---or those of the engineer---are dissociated, the poetic imagination has gone a long way toward putting body and soul together. Concretism, and the poetics of which it is a part, show us how we can come to humanistic terms with our technocratic ethos. When the bureaucrats have us up against the wall, as they always do, then simply deny their reality---write a round poem . . . , or a design poem . . . , or a pun poem . . . , or a sound poem.

(ix)

In the inevitable conflict between the individual creative will and the mechanized and commercialized side of the book trade bissett held his own for a long time. When he gave up self-publication in favour of the wider distribution that Talonbooks could give him he lost some of his freedom.

Aside from the concrete poems, others have been changed from

the original versions. Again, some of the changes are minor, consisting of one or two alterations to spelling or punctuation. I will not deal with them here. Other changes, however, are of a substantial nature and deserve mention.

bissett has shortened several poems, paring them down to their most essential parts. "OF TH LAND DIVINE SERVICE" (23) was originally a seven part poem designed as a religious service. Here he retains only the second part. He has performed similar excisions on "eet me alive" (131) of which only a small portion of the original appears in the *Selected* and "as th red circles shone ovr th valley we had reachd th inlet" (147) from which he has cut a large section and to which he has added a section from another poem in *S TH STORY I TO*.

Some older poems, including "BEYOND EVEN FAITHFUL LEGENDS" (28) and "i have evn herd uv thee" (74), have had alterations made to the spellings of individual words. The changes have made the words look more "bissettesque". "yourselves" becomes "yrselves," "belief" is now "beleef" and "of" changes to "uv." bissett has altered the physical presence of some poems upon the page. "th tempul firing" (46) was originally done in handwriting on a gestetner and looked like a graffiti scrawl. Now it is done in standardized typeface and loses its rawness. "LEBANON VOICES" (50-51) was, in its original, spread over several pages and had a sprawling look. Now that it is on two pages it has lost most of its extended grandeur. It was a big poem; now it is a diminished one. "in ths /forest" (68-69) has been expanded to cover two pages where it was originally on one. Again, the change is not good because the poem is meant to be read for its content and looked at for its shape and the page break, necessitated by the *Selected's* smaller page size, destroys its intended visual impact. Finally, "i / belong with th wind" (139) was originally done in red ink and is here, obviously, a less colourful presentation.

Some of the changes are simply a case of bissett's improving some flawed early works. "in nova scotia th peopul" (53) was originally fifteen very long, prose-like lines. In the *Selected*, it is thirty-three shorter lines, including five lines of text that are not in the original. The change in line length, and a few other minor alterations, transform the piece from a wordy, squat political statement into a more poetic political statement. He has found a rhythm that was hidden in the original and set it free by rearranging the line breaks.

In "rose th night nd th green flowr" (59-61) bissett makes similar important alterations to line endings. In the original, the lines tended to end on natural pauses, usually on nouns:

what we beleev is what we reaching thru th flowr
for th smoke again yr lungs full is that th place
is smoke again th hot coals n th rising smoke
is passing it back ovr th flame yu see

by is taking hold uv th smoke again

is what we are passing thru

In his revised version, bissett ends the line at places where one would not normally pause, such as between an article and its nouns or a form of the verb "to be" and its complement:

what we beleev is what we reaching thru th
flame for th smoke yr lungs full is that
th place is smoke again th hot coals n th
rising smoke is passing it back ovr th
flame we see by is taking hold uv
th smoke again is what we are
passing thru

The changes improve the poem. They create a new, unusual rhythm that breaks up the predictability of the original. The internal pauses suggested by the spacing that bissett adds within some lines also make the poem's rhythms more complex. There is just enough awkwardness to make the reader stop to notice what is being said, but not enough to make it a bad poem.

bissett does the same thing with "is cum ball" (119). The poem originally appeared on the front cover of *th high green hill*. There it was a long, thin (one word per line) column. Now, using the same words, bissett has created a two column poem with occasional groups of words crossing, like bridges, between the two columns. There is also a wavy line of words and a circle of words beneath the columns. Both poems employ a look that becomes prominent in his books in the 1980s.

In "i have evn herd uv thee" (74), in addition to spelling changes, bissett has removed all of the commas and uses spaces or line endings in their place, again updating this early poem to make it more like his later style. More importantly, he has changed the line endings to alter the poem's rhythms. The revised poem is twenty-three lines, two more than the previous version. On average, each line is one or two syllables shorter, so they read more quickly. But the changes have also eliminated those line endings which fell at a natural pause, so that now the reader, if he pauses at the end, will do so at syntactically unnatural places and begin the next line at another one. The result is to inject a tension between the tendency to go on with the syntax and the tendency to pause at the end of a line that was not present in the original poem.

"vaalee daancers" (71) is another interesting example of recycling. Its *Selected* version contains the same words as the original, but it is not the same poem. "valley dancers," the title used in *fires in th temple* has become "vaalee daancers." The words are, in fact, spelled several different ways in the *Selected* version. And the words are arranged on the page in an entirely different manner---in a far more complex and effective arrangement--so that out of his revisions bissett has evolved an entirely new poem.

In "ther may have been a tunnel thru which my train rolld" (101) bissett provides the first half of the original poem from *fires in th tempul OR th jinx ship nd othr trips* (1966), with the by-now familiar spelling changes, jettisons the second half of the poem, and adds ten lines not in the original. The change is definitely an improvement. The poem is a loose adventure narrative, beginning *in media res* and ending unresolved. The original second half was a bungled attempt at turning the point of view inside out, having the narrator describe from a distance his own activities, as if he were a critic reviewing a film. The new, much shorter, passage keeps within the dramatic context, and works.

When all of the important changes that bissett has made are taken into account, it is not surprising to find that many of those that were dictated by the necessities of commercial typography and not by his artistic instincts tend to weaken the poems. bissett, when he originally made his concrete poems, made each one individually and allowed each poem to dictate the physical space on which it was created. Now, with the restrictions of one set page size and typeface, these poems too often suffer a loss of power. All of bissett's books after the *Selected* have been done with Talonbooks in its standardized typeface and page size. But because they were created with a knowledge of the Talonbooks format they have been made to suit that format. Those changes which bissett has made for artistic reasons all seem to me to provide improvements and reflect bissett's more mature skills, particularly with respect to rhythms and line structure.

II

When a poet selects and arranges his poetry for a retrospective collection we must pay special attention, because he is probably telling us something about the way in which he views his work. While the revisions performed on certain individual poems are an interesting subject of study and conjecture, bissett's ultimate act of revision in *Beyond Even Faithful Legends* lies in his selection and arrangement of the poems for the book. In this book, the poems are not arranged in order according to publication or composition date. And, in those rare instances when consecutive poems in the *Selected* are from the same book, they were not in the same order in the original. The new arrangement that bissett creates is based upon opposites. To put it in very simple terms, he alternates poems about good things with poems about bad things. One group of poems about things he values can be followed by poems about forces that threaten them. Pieces about social evils are followed by works that suggest solutions. The poems, especially the non-concrete ones, have been very carefully chosen and arranged by bissett in order to create a desired flow of topics, moods, and images. bissett has reread himself, and has partially discovered, partially created, an order and pattern.

In one notable instance the rearrangement of original book order creates a new poetic situation with new meanings and significances. "back in th city" (148-49), a "written" poem, is followed by a concrete visual. The concrete poem is not given its own listing in the table of contents---the only full page visual in the book to be so treated. The arrangement and lack of table of contents reference suggests that together they form a single work.

Both are from *stardust*, but in that book they are not on consecutive pages. The poem talks about loneliness, and the visual contains details which support the message of the poem. bissett has cut out lines from the original of "back in th city" that disparage movies. He now wants to see in a movie a reflection of his own life, so he cannot undercut the medium.

The concrete visual is a collage made largely from images (most likely taken from a promotional poster) from the film *Royal Wedding*. In the poem, bissett tells us that he has been watching the film on television while nervously brooding over a difficult love affair. As the poem ends, its lines change from moderately long ones to a trail of one word lines: a narrow look that reflects bissett's "strung out" feeling:

evry
time
yr
not
heer

a
lite
burns
out

The collage shows Fred Astaire and Jane Powell dancing in a drawing room before an audience of well-dressed people. The "wall" of the room is made up of rows of densely packed typewriter "x's". In this wall of "x's" are white circles that look like holes made with a paper punch. The holes are the burnt out lights of the poem. They are flaws in the safe fantasy world of the movie, and are evocative of the anxiety of the poem. Furthermore, the holes are arranged to form long lines snaking down the wall. They are reminiscent of the shape of the poem and its anxious petering out (into the word "out"). They are also sinister, suggesting advancing tentacles or lightning bolts aimed at the unsuspecting dancers and their audience. One is reminded of a Breughel painting such as Auden refers to in "Mus閑 des Beaux Arts" or Plath in "Two Views of a Cadaver Room": "desolation, stalled in paint, spares the little country / Foolish delicate, in the lower right hand corner" (Geddes 403). bissett's method bears a strong resemblance to the "emblem" as it was employed by poets such as Spenser in "The Shepheardes Calendar." According to Holman and Harmon in *A Handbook to Literature* (fifth edition) an emblem "consisted of a motto expressing some moral idea and accompanied by a picture and a short poem illustrating the idea" (170). In bissett's case the motto is the title, "back in th city," implying cryptically the contrast between the city, which is reality, and the make-believe world of the film. The poem highlights the contrast between the escapist world of *Royal Wedding*, where the course of true love runs smoothly, and the real world of bissett's nervousness, where it does not. The collage, with its disintegrating background, makes the same statement. This deliberate act of re-arrangement by bissett is a miniature version of what he does in the *Selected* as a whole.

The poems begin---one concrete visual on the title page and

another facing the table of contents---before the table of contents. The unorthodox placement of the two initial pieces suggests the exuberance and fecundity of bissett's imagination. It is as if he cannot wait to get started. The collection is bursting with poems; they are spilling out of the regular book into the prefatory matter.

The first five poems after Len Early's Introduction serve as an introduction and invitation to the book. "yu sing" (21) is an imagined address by an audience to a poet. Such an eager and appreciative audience is the sort any writer would wish to have:

yu sing
of th time
when th story
wud amaze, nd
.
yu write about
th cumming dawn

th dragon,
dreeming,

In the course of the poem bissett lays claim to the ancient roles of singer and storyteller, and to the capacity to teach and delight. Though we do not yet know it, bissett is laying out the plan for the book: to teach, to entertain, to tell a story. And in the *Selected* he moves back and forth among these functions, balancing the serious with the comic, the didactic with the entertaining. Singing, telling stories, making pictures---it is a varied and engrossing show.

The next poem, "may / all thes blessings," is a call for blessings for the reader: "may all / thes blessings shine on yu" (22). Like the first poem, this one mentions dreams and has a religious quality to it. It serves as an answer to the initial poem. First the audience has called upon the poet, asking him to sing, and now the poet responds to this audience. It also illustrates bissett's serious attitude toward the writer's vocation. It is a priestlike, quasi-religious calling.

"OF TH LAND DIVINE SERVICE" (23) continues to build the feeling that there is something divine about poetry. It presents a figure, possibly the archetypal poet, in images reminiscent of Coleridge's inspired poet in "Kubla Khan":

and because of such strength well we wait

and th soul's light
and th body's light
and eye's light

and there is nothing
in his hand
but light

and th chorus

This build up, we must remember, is of poetry and "the poet" as a type and is not in any way an egotistical self-promotion by bissett. When he finally introduces himself as a person, in "i come from halifax" (24), bissett does not present himself as anything particularly wonderful. The detail is very spare. He tells us that he comes from two cities, Halifax and Vancouver. Both have many churches, but both "have trouble / with their visions and the world" and bissett admits to fear. This poem is our introduction to the two opposites between which most of the book moves: the ecstatic, visionary, holy and positive ideal that poetry aspires to, and the fallen, cruel, frightening world in which the poet lives.

"speaking speaking" (25), the last of the introductory poems, is a chant about inspiration. Everything is speaking to him; all of existence is a source for poetry. It introduces a favourite theme--oneness with nature ("th eagle / talks")---and a favourite method--synaesthesia ("th eye is / speaking").

This introductory movement then ends abruptly when we come to "tarzan collage" (26). "tarzan collage" plunges the reader into a world of violence. It depicts Tarzan fighting with two alien looking creatures, one of whom is apparently screaming, and moves the reader into the next group of poems, one that continues to "POST RESURRECTION CITY BLUES" (32-33). They deal with violence, oppression, social problems, and the ideological contradictions hinted at in "i come from halifax."

bissett identifies with the oppressed, and asks time and again why oppression exists. "OUT ON TH TOWN JOY RIDIN" (27) focuses on police violence toward prisoners in the Vancouver city lock up, and probably grows out of personal experience. It poses, but does not answer, the question "do most peopul live in such fear"? The question implies a caring that goes beyond concern for just himself. This concern for others carries on into the next poem, "BEYOND EVEN FAITHFUL LEGENDS" (28-29). In it, bissett rhetorically suggests that "we cud cease to care so much," but the suggestion is meant to be rejected because, he says, we would have to "give / to go on living . . . to go on living / with our broken hearts, batterd heads." In other words, if we were to "cease to care" we would still have to "give" (i.e. pay) for the right to go on suffering. Surrender will only make oppressors bolder.

"anodetodalevy" (31) is dedicated to one such victim of oppression. Darryl Allen Levy (1942-1968) was an American poet with whom bissett could identify on many levels. Like bissett, Levy used only lower-case letters to spell his name, was arrested on drug charges, and was harassed for publishing allegedly obscene poems. He described himself as a "passive anarchist". In 1968, at the age of twenty-six, he killed himself with a .22-calibre rifle (*Contemporary Authors* 2:313). Like any good elegy, the poem is both mournful and triumphant as its subject transcends the mortal world to acquire a power and significance that he never held in life:

he moves out from th librarie into yr sleep
 into th night into th secret known alla over th
 world high worlds within worlds light on

 da levy praise him stay with
 him we are all with him ther is much to
 laugh about we are much to laugh about we
 are th nights eyes th bright eyes d a
 levys eyes are everywhere ya better
 believe it now laughter is so sweet
 clapping yr hands is so sweet
 praising d a levy is so
 sweet . . .

(31)

bissett follows this ode up with "POST RESURRECTION CITY BLUES" (32), which contains an example of oppression from his own life. Like Leacock's little man in "My Financial Career," bissett feels "rattled" by a banker:

(i cud see him thinking,
 my god, what if peopul like this
 were able to buy houses, th whole
 structure of society wud change)

(33)

Mister Mustard, the bank official, typifies the middle class's mistrusting and dismissive attitude toward artists. bissett's voice suddenly hardens and what seemed to be a simple personal anecdote becomes an indictment of society's undervaluation of its creative people:

. . . be romantik, in
 the tradition of good chocolate box
 covr designs, dont get anything,
 lose everything, tell us, th ownrs
 about loss, Aunt Jemima, Louis Armstrong,
 Bessie Smith, be religious nd hungry
 to ease our consciences on our way
 to th Bank

(33)

The poem's ending, with bissett reminding Mister Mustard that he too could die, suggests an important change from the helplessness of the prisoner in "OUT ON TH TOWN JOY RIDIN" whom the "big bull" can force to crawl across the lockup floor, to the defiance of one who can remind an authority figure of his mortality. Throughout the body of his writing there is an implied refusal to give in to or be intimidated by people with power.

The next several poems, from "TH GOLDEN DAWN" (34) to "dawn" (42), turn from the bureaucratic impersonality of Mister Mustard to more intimate and personal experiences. "TH GOLDEN DAWN," "HEAt MAKes TH HEARts WINDow" (35), and "SHE CALLS ME ADONIS" (36-37) are all upbeat poems focusing on private moments of love, security, and, in the last, joyful kidding around. The happiness is shortlived as forces from the greater world menace the fragile security of his little world.

The mood changes in "WHATS HAPPINING/OZONE CUM BACK WE STILL LOV YU" (38) when his private happiness is threatened from without by industrial pollution. In "why dew magazines lie" (39) the threat is a kind of pollution of the intellect: "ther attempt to frustrate us." Finally, in "NUCLEAR CIRCULAR" (40-41) there comes the ultimate threat---destruction of himself and all that he loves. He asks

can my precious littul love
.
reach those peopul
who printed this circular
which robs me ofmy peace
which carries to those few
i have with me i love

(41)

These poems illustrate the preciousness of private life and the impossibility of separating it from the bigger world.

From such examples, it is a small step to a realization that political involvement is an inevitable part of being a poet. The next several poems, from "th konkreet pome is on its hed" (43) to "how we avoid prayr" (47) touch on poetics and politics.

In "tell me what attackd yu" (44) bissett makes his attitude clear

most peopul have been led to believe
by th emergd middul class, that art
and politikal involvment greet each othr
only across sum imponderabul chasm,
th middul class sz yeah its a good pome
but what use is it, th professors
lift up our hearts, in repudiation of that,
to th credo that art transcends use, either
view is nowhere, art is all use; only
th technicians of a fragmented society,
interested in propagating such a nightmare
encourage us to believe in realities
that split our breath into filing cards, p
for politiks, a for art---th full breath
is what knowledge is, is human, is
wholly real, includes what is
in all things

Politics and poetry are connected. To separate them would be to fragment the creative process---to allow it the traditional role of delighting through the verbal creation of beauty "in," as he says in "POST RESURRECTION CITY BLUES" (32), "the tradition of good chocolate box / covr designs." But to deny its teaching (analytical) function is to remove from the poet the ability to alter his world through his vision. The act of separating art from politics is a grab for power by "th emergd middul class" and "th professors." Both groups are among "th technicians of a fragmented society" who would chop life (symbolised by bissett as "breath") up

"into filing cards." But for bissett "breath" cannot be subdivided into categories. Wholeness of being is what makes one human: "th full breath / is what knowledge is, is human." The attempt to separate art from politics is an attempt by a few to gain control by fragmenting human experience. bissett is a poet of wholeness and will not allow his poetry to be defused by having its political function removed.

Having explained the political nature of his poetics, bissett continues in the political vein. The mood turns darker as he focuses on what it is like to be marginalized. In "whilst waiting for" (48) he identifies with the villains of horror movies. He does not see them as evil monsters, but as the victims of the intolerance of "normal" society. Vampires suffer at the hands of religious bigots: "to / have to put up / with those / christians / impoverished phony / symbolism how they / use our existence to / keep their pockets / full." "Hand" (49) is a song of the marginalized and a plea to be allowed to pursue happiness without harassment. Material comfort, or even mere acceptance by society, seem too much to hope for:

. . . let
all th mad creatures freely love what
cums to them without success but
being

Let us dance entwine our
thighs round our dreams

His speakers even find an internal, though muted, triumph in the midst of an uncaring society: "we cum out uv th richness / uv our poor dreems." Once again, bissett refuses to be defeated.

"LEBANON VOICES" (50-51) continues the thread of spiritual or subjective triumph, speaking of "the mysteries of th night" (50) and the "green hope" (50) of dreams, culminating in a vision of a dance of triumph:

. . . in
bliss to th stars they were dancing, th
creatures n flesh, of one mind n body
(51)

Just as quickly as the mood rises to triumph in the magical night of dreams, it falls to the pain of real life. "feed th prisoners now baby" (52) is a chant of suffering and defiance, while "in nova scotia th peopul" (53) heaps contempt upon the political institution for exploitation, poverty, and selling out to foreign-owned big business:

nd th peopul cant b unified if
we dont own what we do our own
resources food cultur ideas
media

But real life is not all gloom. With "rose th night nd th green flowr" (59-61) the book enters into what may be the longest

stretch of beautiful, peaceful, and joyful writing in modern Canadian poetry. There is not a trace of false sentimentality in it. The predominant theme is harmony---with self, others, and nature. "rose th night nd th green flowr" presents an Edenic setting with two lovers at one with each other and with nature: "what yu hold / what engulfs yu frees yu / ths flowr opening takes yu" (59). bissett explores sexual relations as a road to harmony in "aint no words for th tast uv yu" (62)---the pairs of right-and wrong-side up lines suggesting sexual congress, and "konkreet vizual" (63) from *drifting into war* with shapes suggesting an erect penis and a dove of peace.

Several joyful chants give voice to his sense of oneness with nature. They include "what we dew if thrs anything" (58), "i herd ya laffin in th water" (64), "and th green wind is mooving thru th summr trees" (66), and "vaalee daancers" (71).

Perhaps the most beautiful of this group of poems are those concerning children, in particular his daughter Ooljah. His "SONG FOR OOLJAH" (67) is a wonderfully pure-hearted and gentle poem that expresses his love in such a way that every child's purity is captured:

into an emerald dream tree
th littul girl of gold sang
of love so strong nd free
th flowers unfold to hear

In "Circles in th Sun" (70) he realizes the fragility of this innocence:

o love past play past memory
let th children be
let th children be

And in "SOLACE IN WORDS" (72) he finds what every parent knows: that some moments are so perfect that they cannot be analyzed; they can only be described:

watching
our baby
 daughter sleep,

undr th blue
eiderdown, her
 features,

 th eye
 lids curve, th
 curve of her nose,

 her mouth, her
 fingers curving
 into her hand

curvd above th
blue blanket, perfect

angelically
transformed
in sleep

The optimism of this group of poems culminates in "i have evn herd uv thee" (74):

th spirit uv th godes is in th
beet uv our blending in is in us in our
love.

Like Donne, bissett can see a mystical significance growing out of the act of making love.

Just as we are, perhaps, falling into complacency because of the warm glow of all this happiness, bissett suddenly jerks the book back into the oppressive world of jails, contracts, and law courts, beginning with "THE / INDIANS / WERE / WELCOMED / AS BRIDGEBUILDERS" (75-77). The bleakness is somewhat tempered in the next poem, "treez" (78), which talks about harmony and peace, but only as things dreamed of and not as states already achieved.

The idea of a dream continues in the following three poems, but the dream is really a nightmare in disguise, for it is the false "dream" of what life should be as it is fed to the populace by the mass media. In "th tarot match covr uv th lovr" (79) bissett says that "all th / music cumming thru th / speekrs bleed [s] us" and adds that the endless watching of television "had to / altr his / view / uv any / world." Television is the subject of "keep on th grass" (80). The title suggests support for marijuana use as an alternative to television viewing, and the poem itself focuses in on the illusory world being served up by the tube:

telvishyun is so much brain washing xcept for
th in concert show tonite with anne murray cumming

from saratoga springs new york th spinners
with her shes weering tite white lethr
rhinestones sparkling 10,000
peopul raging with her following
her song

In "evry whun at 2 oclock" (81) it is newspapers that are attacked for spreading a false view of things---specifically about nuclear weapons: "th vancouver / sun newspaper sz N-blast / successful and safe only it / isnt an all th peopul know." The net effect of the mass media is to substitute an illusion for reality in order to keep the citizenry pacified and unaware of the dangers and evils that the politicians have created.

From the specific social problem of the mass media bissett moves on to other, somewhat more abstract concerns. In "th north aint easy to grow food in" (82-83) the problem is basic survival in a harsh climate: "yu got a coupul / cans a food only nd th canyun clod / th big mamadaddy transport trucks / cant cum in" (82). In "th water falls in yr mind nd yu get wet tooo" (83) it is more a case of emotional survival in a post-Fall world where Adam is apt

to find himself "sittin cryin undr a tree" (82). Alienation plays an important part in several of the poems in the next dozen pages, including "ode t frank silvera" (88-89), "th lonliness of literacy" (91), "KILLER WHALE" (92-93) (in which bissett is, like the whales, trapped inside someone else's system), "yu know th creaturs are ourselvs" (94-95) and, possibly his finest narrative, "TH EMERGENCY WARD" (97-99) in which the forces of caring and gentleness embodied by the "beautiful neurologist chick" and the forces of alienating, impersonal bureaucracy represented by "th shrink" battle for control of bissett's body and his mind. Luckily for him it was "an intr / cerebral bleed" and he escapes electroshock treatment at the hands of "th shrink," who seems to want to punish him for being an artist.

The political theme takes an odd, and at first baffling, twist as the book goes through a series of poems that allude to conspiracy or mystery or spying. "ther may have been a tunnul thru which my train rolld" (101) mentions spy activity at a railroad station, involving high tech gimmicks, false identities, and violence. "th / missyun" (104-05) also has spyish intrigue, including diamonds, camels, and a mysterious "trading stashun" (104). On a more comic note there is "th tomato conspiracy aint / worth a whole poem" (109) which mocks paranoia and conspiracy theories, but which is based upon a commercial fact--- that chemicals *are* used to enhance the colour (and sales value) of fruits and vegetables. The secret agent/spy/conspiracy motif serves as thematic reference to bissett's theme of political marginalization and alienation. The "spy" poems dramatize the state of being on the outside and not able to live as oneself, while the political poems show the causes and conditions of the alienation. There is, in fact, a rhythm to the *Selected* of always moving back to the political theme from other subjects, as if political marginalization were the one constant factor, while joy or love or dreams or harmony with nature are only temporary releases.

Over the next several pages bissett presents us with a number of "cum" poems. "Cum" is one of bissett's power words. Orgasmic ecstasy is presented as a means of overcoming alienation and achieving oneness, not only with another person, but with all creation. Playfully, he includes poems such as "TH DAY MAY CUM" (118) and "i was just cummin" (126-27) which have "cum" in the title, but which are not about sex, but are, instead, about oneness. Other of these "cum" poems are "jed bi kor benskt trik" (117), "cum cum cum cumly witchcraft i know you care" (124), and most blatantly the "konkreet vizual" (123) from *space travl*, which features a representation of a man with a prominently erect penis.

bissett also explores attainment of a type of oneness beyond social cohesion between physical and spiritual through mystic vision. "wer they angels i didnt know" (128) talks about trumpet-blowing angels "lifting th sun up ovr th horizon." Puckishly, he chides the reader for his naivit : "yu think th sun cums up [by itself?]." "th lifting hands" (129) is a chant about lifting up hands, eyes, and fingers to hail the sunrise.

Like a Donne or a Leonard Cohen, bissett forges a link between sex and mystical experience, as is evident in poems such as "eet me

alive" (131), "LIVING WITH TH VISHYUN" (132-34) and "yu want th music" (135). In the last of these he writes

. . . yu want th lafftr th sun in
yr hand yu want th earth turning watr thrut th eye
yu
ar grace cum flesh hair uv jeweld bird thru th
watr

He also arranges a group of poems about his relationship with the land. Again, the ideal goal is a self-transcending oneness. The poems include "canada" (136-38), "i / belong with th wind" (139), "bringing home th bacon" (140), and "TH MAGIC LURE OF SEA SHELLS" (141). "bringing home th bacon" expresses his theme most succinctly: "horse nd rider along th rivers bank merge / with th revolving suns."

Then, after all of these poems about various aspects of merging and oneness and coming together, he reverses his line of thought in "THE BODY" (142-43). The title could more accurately have been "THE BODY POLITIC". The poem is a political allegory (always back to politics) about the development of individualism and about how people came to be parts of the larger social body, with each part having its own specialized function. The development of such individualized roles is associated with corruption and discord:

Out of THE BODY was to
be artist to steal the dreams of each of
the rest to make his to make believe
that only he dreamt

and

A stream of THE BODY was
to be famly, that the self-betrayal of each
of its members might be absorbed in
a general rancour.

(142)

and

. . . Our sense
of hope has been permanently altered or
damaged through our involvements with
THE BODY

(143)

This idea of oneness between people and nature is answer to the fragmentation that he sees as both a spiritual and political malady in our society. Loss of oneness causes the unhappiness of individuals and creates the state of individual vulnerability that allows unjust political systems to wield power.

The last ten pages of the book consist of mostly individual, unrelated poems with "th breath" (153-56) providing an upbeat envoi to the collection, a celebration of the wonder of being:

yr spirit being dancing in th fire each petal of
th flowr

opening to th light th warmth
for th opening seed th ice all
around th breath moves

.
of all the peopul animal plant creatures
dancing along th flames of all th colors
shapes expressions fierce loving and nameless

th one blood stream

(156)

III

Beyond Even Faithful Legends is bill bissett's self-edited retrospective presentation of himself, and constitutes a summation of his career up to that point. It is an opportunity for him to update some of his older writing and bring it into line with his more mature abilities. In the ordering of the poems bissett has created a unified work with a newly created flow of thematic statements. Although the general pattern is one of alternating opposites, with a group of poems about positive things being followed by another group about negative things, bissett does not merely describe the eternal battle of good and evil. Running through all of the poems is a tremendous life affirming energy. bissett writes about good in order to support it and about evil in order to defy and undermine it.

The *Selected* also marks a major turning point in bissett's career. Beginning with this book and continuing to the present he is no longer a self publishing poet whose works appear in basement printed booklets, but a member of the stable of a nationally distributed commercial publisher. Although there is the observably negative effect of the infringement of mainstream publishing methods upon the exuberant style of some of the concrete poems, bissett's association with Talonbooks is a good one for him because it leaves him free to concentrate upon the writing of poetry, and leaves the tasks of production and distribution to others.

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