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## HOW THE TISH POETS CAME TO INFLUENCE THE MONTREAL SCENE

The history of the Vehicule Poets has been told in various places (see, for example, my *The Little Magazine in Canada 1925-80* and Caroline Bayard's *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec*). Suffice it to say that these seven poets all became associated with one another at the parallel gallery Vehicule Art, and that most of them published their early books with Vehicule Press circa 1975-80. They shared an interest in hip American poetry and in experimental European art movements. Within the parameters of the Canadian scene, the poetry that made the most sense to them was being published by the Coach House--Talonbooks nexus, which built upon the innovations of the *Tish* group.

The West Coast *Tish* poets were not only an important aesthetic influence and reference point for the Vehicule poets of Montreal in the mid to late seventies, but for several members of the Vehicule crowd--Artie Gold, Tom Konyves, and John McAuley--George Bowering provided actual instruction in his years at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia). As it flowed eastward, the *Tish* influence provided a small group of Montreal poets with the means to see beyond Leonard Cohen and Irving Layton, something the Montreal poets of the sixties could *not* do.

I was a rather late arrival to the festivities. I moved back to Montreal in January of 1975 after spending two years in New York. It was early in 1975 that I got to know the various

poets who shortly thereafter constellated into the Vehicule group.

What I know of the years of George Bowering instruction I have been told by the various persons involved. After dropping out of the Colorado School of Mines, Artie Gold is rumoured to have one day dropped into a Bowering creative writing class and had his life forever changed. This would have been, I believe, in the last years of the sixties. Bowering exposed Artie and his friend Dwight Gardiner to the work of two American poets he was particularly interested in at the time, Jack Spicer and Frank O'Hara; the rest, as they say, is history. At the age of twenty Gold started to instantaneously produce some truly remarkable poetry. McAuley and Konyves, who would not start to publish work until some time later, registered various affinities and resistances. After George returned to the west (and started teaching at Simon Fraser) his springtime east coast readings in Montreal were a source of great joy to this group of poets (I remember organizing one at McGill during the mid-seventies, at a time when *A Short Sad Book* was still in notebook form).

Perhaps an important point to make is that Bowering and David McFadden (followed shortly thereafter by Lionel Kearns) were the first "established" poets to recognize the existence of the Vehicule poets in any kind of meaningful way. At the time Montreal was still recovering from its sixties hangover and any attention the Vehicule poets garnered in Montreal was usually negative. Sixties holdovers David Solway and Michael Harris were at that time still working on their Layton and Cohen impressions, which generally met with favorable results. Bowering and McFadden validated the existence of the Vehicule crowd by taking us seriously.

We were all very aware of the fact that the *Tish* poets had produced their own newsletter, had taken over the means of production. This set the example for us (somehow the Dudek/Contact Press example occurred to us later), and Stephen Morrissey's *what is* and John McAuley's *Maker*, both concrete newsletters, employed the *Tish* method of circulating to an exclusive mailing list. The official "organ" of the Vehicule poets, *Mouse Eggs*, adopted the in-group air of *Tish*. Its purpose was to give a public airing to the work of the Vehicule group. Rather than circulate by mailing list, it was sold exclusively (for 35 cents a copy) at The Word bookstore.

Looking back on the Vehicule years what I find so incredible is the number of things we had going at the same time. The Vehicule poets helped to run the art gallery, ran a battery of magazines (*what is*, *Maker*, *Mouse Eggs*, *Cross-Country*, *Hh*, *Every Man His Own Football*, and *The Montreal Journal of Poetics*), administered the reading series at the gallery, and edited books for Vehicule Press. Bowering, Kearns, and Marlatt were all brought in to give readings at various times. We were all enormous fans of George, and if you were to go back and read Vehicule poets work from that period you would probably find traces of George everywhere. Lionel's impact was also quite immediate, particularly when it came to myself and Endre Farkas. The wonderful humanity of the work that was published in *Practicing Up to be Human* was clear to us the first time we heard it, and exposure to Lionel's poetry certainly changed my own.

Our response to Daphne Marlatt's work was really quite curious, and again I best remember my own and Farkas' reaction. Daphne came to give a reading at Vehicule Art in, I believe, 1978, and I remember myself and Endre both quietly

withdrawing from the gallery space and talking about how we couldn't get into what she was doing *at all*. At that time we just weren't ready for it. By 1980 we were both absolutely entranced by Daphne's writing. Poems like Endre's "Oral History" (in fact, most of his chapbook *From Here to Here*) and my own "Here/There" and "Heaven" all emerged out of Daphne's method.

As a publishing house, Vehicule Press in the early days thought of itself as Montreal's Coach House Press in potential. (Since the rift in the early eighties that saw the Vehicule poets exit from Vehicule Press, the publishing house has gone in a completely different direction.) Claudia Lapp's first book, *Honey*, and my own *Vegetables* were almost spontaneously produced by the ambience of the gallery, the poets, and the fledgling press (being run as a cooperative print shop out of the back of the gallery) all sharing the same space together. Shortly thereafter an "official" editorial board was constituted, composed of Endre Farkas, Artie Gold, and myself. Up until that time books had been produced out of small parcels of cash and print shop labour. As the press began to announce itself with a greater flourish, we also decided to cut our teeth in terms of obtaining Canada Council money. Trying to secure a manuscript that would be guaranteed to be funded we turned to George Bowering; what resulted was *The Concrete Island*, the first bonafide, government-funded Vehicule Press title.

Even at the time it was not lost on me that Vehicule Press was establishing itself by publishing a book that was, in many ways, a put-down of Montreal. *The Concrete Island: Montreal Poems 1967-71* contained what Bowering, even at that time, was calling "my last lyrics," stray poems that had been written in Montreal during the Sir George years.

Bowering had entered his "symphonic period" (this was the time when he was composing *Geneve and Autobiology*), and these poems were occasional squibs in which he was often knocking the east and longing for the west. It wasn't a great book. It might not even have been a good book, and we all had mixed feelings about it. We, too, had grave reservations about the mainstream Montreal poetry scene, but it was still our city he was knocking. In the end a few poems were excised and the book came out in an unusual, small format. But George *had* succeeded in securing for us that first alluring Canada Council cheque.

These are some sketchy reminiscences of an earlier time, when we were all much more willing to be influenced. The Vehicule poets stopped being an official group in the early eighties and, like the *Tish* poets, have all gone their separate ways while remembering to keep in touch. Most of us still write to George on a semi-regular basis and hear from Daphne and Lionel every now and again.

This piece by no means exhausts the subject, and if any of the others were writing this they would certainly be telling it differently. There are certainly plenty of other stories. For instance, Lionel Kearns once lent me his winter parka. This was on one of my trips to the South Seas. I'd stopped off in Vancouver for a few days, it was unseasonably cold, and I hadn't brought a jacket or anything so Lionel lent me his coat. I don't know exactly how tall Lionel is, but he is a big man. I am 5'5½". David McFadden thought I looked very funny.

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