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## TEN YEARS AFTER THE REVOLUTION--LOOKING BACK AT THE VEHICULE POETS

I think I was probably somewhere in Fiji when "The Last of the Vehicule Poets" reading was held at Concordia University in Montreal sometime in the winter months of early 1981. I don't know whose bright idea that reading was, but I've always thought it was a mistake. I think it created a "bad vibe" that it's taken almost a decade to dispel. The motivation for a public dissolution of the movement was probably the logical recognition that after the group comes the individual, that group solidarity could not last forever. Nevertheless, I think holding a reading in that spirit wound up driving a substantial wedge between the participants.

Two years before, Endre Farkas, Artie Gold, Tom Konyves, Claudia Lapp, John McAuley, Stephen Morrissey and I had jointly published *The Vehicule Poets* under the banner of McAuley's fledgling Maker Press. In his introduction Artie wrote that "I don't somehow feel people will understand the spirit in which seven of us have just upped and borrowed a tag none of us really wants to wear to the bitter end." Artie proved to be right about people in Montreal not understanding the spirit in which we'd banded together for a collective book. To my mind, we were only documenting the obvious: that seven poets in Montreal were interested in a *different* kind of poetry. But our dedication to "making it new" was often

mistaken for arrogance (okay, so we were a bit arrogant), and I got the impression that there was general rejoicing in the streets (in six feet of snow) when the Vehicule movement chose to self-destruct.

In the spring, when I got back from my travels, I heard that the reading had gone fairly well. Claudia Lapp and I had missed it (she was in the States), but Richard Sommer apparently did a bang-up job of reading my stuff, and Claudia had sent poems for the others to read which they delivered with varying degrees of comfort. But, to me, things now felt really different. The Vehicule movement in Montreal was over, had been officially buried. We'd already had editorial control of Vehicule Press wrestled away from us and so had lost our publishing power-base. But also, where there was once a great communal feeling between us, now no one seemed to be willing to talk to any of the others. Some weird kind of bad blood had developed. Maybe we were all just tired of one another's company; certainly each of us seemed to have grown more critical of the others. Thus began a decade of our former group living individual lives and focusing attention on writing individual books.

If you go and read the first series of Frank Davey's mag *Open Letter* you'll see that a very similar thing happened with the *Tish* poets. After a period of intense group activity, they drifted apart to their various lives and occupations, and for a period of about two years could do nothing but criticize one another. That's certainly what the early eighties were like for the Vehicule crowd: all acrimony and petty bitchiness.

To this day I still think of the Vehicule poets as Montreal's equivalent of the *Tish* poets. Both groups actually

had a central core of seven poets (in the case of *Tish*, Bowering, Davey, Kearns, Wah, Reid, Dawson, and Marlatt), and both groups were far more interested in postmodern American poetry than in the Canadian poetry going on around them. This certainly put the Vehicule crowd at odds with poets who were committed to working in the established "Montreal tradition," which seemed to us, at worst, dead, and, at best, passé.

The period from 1974 to 1980 was a remarkably active one for the Vehicule poets, a time when it was all happening. All of us published our first books at that time and somehow, in the process, discovered one another: kindred souls. Together we experimented, we performed, we videotaped, we chanted; we stretched poetry in every possible direction we could think of. There's a magic about the early books that will never be duplicated. Artie Gold's *cityflowers*, Endre Farkas' *Murders in the Welcome Cafe*, Tom Konyves' *No Parking*, Claudia Lapp's *Honey*, John McAuley's *Mattress Testing*, Stephen Morrissey's *The Trees of Unknowing*, and my own *Vegetables* are books that each cast a spell at the time of their publication; even now when I read them I enter a dreamtime. They are not necessarily terrific books, but they are *wonderful* books.

Of late I've been becoming aware of the fruits of the middle period; the books that a number of us have published as we've approached "almost forty" (they are Claudia Lapp's *Cloud Gate* (1985), Endre Farkas' *How To* (1988), Tom Konyves' *Ex Perimeter* (1988), Stephen Morrissey's *Family Album* (1989) and my own *In the House of No* (1991)). In isolation from one another, we've all been writing the same book: the book of growing up, the book of full adulthood.

These books are all very different, but they share a time of life, a coming of (almost) middle-age. They are haunted by a sadness that just wasn't there in the early work, but of course that early work was written when we all knew we were immortal. These later books are starkly aware of time and of mortality. Reading them I am reminded of Phyllis Webb's closing question in the poem "Breaking": "What are we whole or beautiful or good for but to be absolutely broken?" In their individual ways these books all document the tragedy of living and the romance of renewal. If we had some good critics of contemporary poetry in this country I think they'd be well advised to pay some attention to these books. As it is, I myself have felt the need to review two of them and am drawing attention to their existence here (Perhaps the one thing that *hasn't* changed in the past fifteen years is how little poetry matters to our society or, for that matter, to our cultural life).

For a while, in the middle eighties, I felt as though the Vehicule poets were truly history; apparently so did Tom Konyves--in *Ex Perimeter* he wrote:

There are poems and there are poems,  
we used to say, for we were defenders  
of the poems, then the guardians of the poems,  
and our habits changed and our families grew  
until we quite forgot what we were defending  
and we secretly relinquished the poem.

I think we probably all felt that way until the new books by the others started to appear; then we realized that things hadn't ended, they had just *changed*. Certainly anyone reading these new books against the backdrop of the earlier ones I mentioned will notice the disappearance of a surface radi-

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calism; these books of the middle period are, for us, conservative books, chastened books. It's amazing how well-written and *neat* they are (Montreal poet Peter van Toorn once classified the Vehicule poets, with their projective verse influence, as messy).

With Artie Gold making noise about doing a selected poems including new work from the past decade, just about all of us are back on-line. We no longer collectively run an art gallery or a literary press; we are now just seven writers who appreciate one another's work and share a few aesthetic affinities. I would say, however, that those affinities still carry the clout of a manifesto, and certainly Canadian poetry hasn't heard "the last" of us yet.

Bangor, Maine  
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