

bill bissett's Queer Orthography

Transcript of a talk given at the Kootnay School of Writing's "I'm In You, You're In Me" reading series on February 9, 2013.

To begin with I should make clear that I make no claim at being an expert. Unlike some (here) I can't claim to be a peer or real acquaintance of bill bissett's (though I've been hugged exuberantly by the poet named bill bissett). Instead I'm speaking from the privileged position of being a "fan" and thus assume no need to qualify or cite what I offer by any measure or source other than my own fascination with the text and the author.

What I want to invite into today's gathering is a space for considering the remarkable ORTHOGRAPHY of bill bissett. Technically, it is a *defective orthography* but as we know, it is hardly faulty. It is a conscious refusal of standardized and prescriptive ways of writing language which merges with various poetic practices and politically charged positions. My hope is to present some possible understandings of the meaning of bill's unusual spelling and to invite you to add your own.

Let us begin with a poem.

"we suspekt eech other uv nowing how to spell the word informashun"

aftr i didnt want to see th
moovee on tv abt fall out sheltrs nd th ll
points for survival aftr nuclear attack n
we wer writing our M L A s in victoria n
ottawa

we watchd a show on th trident on channul 10
wch advocatid that th beleef b promotid that

th existence uv nuclear weapons b considerd
a crime against internashunal pees ths made

sens to us until we faut abt th spelling in
th lettr thn yu in yr room n me in mine i

think i know why thr ar nuclear weapons
or is it th xistence uv th weapons themselvs

that creates ths pressur i dont want to spell
correctly for me thats anothr tyranny for yu

its xciting to spll th way th words ar in th
dictionary bcoz yu dont know how so thats an

adventure for yu for me th adventures spelling
them how they sound or feel at th time to dew

that bcoz i had correct spelling up to heer
in school n i think it causes a lot uv hed

problems n inhibishuns with xpressyun nd also
its for me too uniform thats only what i

feel 90% uv th world dusint spell correctly
so why ar they calld illiterate its only

anothr way to spell now
aftr sum yeers uv spelling so calld incorrectly

it hurts my hed to try it correctly i really
have forgottn it alot uv it i can remembr

sum uv it if i have to but it hurts ths

is fr sure anothr weird problem now what

dew we dew lets keep talking with each
othr n get th letttr writtn ok ¹

To start with, bill's spelling is **phonetic**. Simple. He is a cantor, a vocal "rager" and his poems are written as they sound.

As well, of course, he is a **concrete** poet and even in his more recent and constrained work there is a constant acknowledgement of the visuality of letters as symbols and ecstatic shapes. His deviant language provides moments of visual symmetry that wouldn't be possible in the constraints of normative spelling.

dew we dew

We can say his tendency is a **cultural** product of it's time - descended from the beats and e.e.cummings. He clearly read and understood Kerouac's *Belief & Technique For Modern Prose* :

Rule #13 - Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition²

¹ bill bissett, *Sailor* (Talonbooks, 1978)

² Jack Kerouac, *Belief & Technique for Modern Prose*, <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/kerouac-technique.html>

His spelling is a **symptom** or an **illustration** of madness, head trauma, hallucinogenic inebriation or mystical experience. It is not a product of naiveté nor is it simply a tactic for being hip. It's lucid.

These things lay on the surface - they're the gesture.

Beyond these things is something more intense. In this poem, bill gives us a clear line of argument - an explication or laying on the table of his own take on language...

I don't want to spell correctly... for me that's another tyranny.

What comes to us here then is another meaning of bissett's intervention in written language. Within the very notion of "correct spelling" is the disciplining authoritarian menace of the police, the RCMP, the CIA and nuclear war. While bissett seems to embrace the more ethical logics of socialism and expansive potentials of capitalism in principle,³ there is something far more Anarchistic in the intensity of his hatred of authority. In this poem, authority is invoked in varying degrees through the television, his MLA, the teachers who harassed him, the tyrannical 10% who claim to be literate and of course the government which perpetuates the possibility of nuclear war.

bisset's response is to write. Even here he is under attack: the police in the head - the spelling police - are tearing his relationships apart and undermining his political agency.

bisset's misspelling is an act of decolonizing his own mind, overthrowing the normative regimes that ultimately inhibit creativity, expression and imagination and perpetuate violence.

In his theoretical text *RUSH: what fuckan theory*, commissioned by bp nichol in the early 70's, bissett situates poetry as a common ground of contradiction and conflict:

poetry has bin use to make peopul kill each other love each other
give each othr see each othr tenderize each othr enarge each othr is
seen as territory by sum th printid page th vehicul th wheels poets
arint paid very much or less than nothing if a poet dusint print his
or her own work has littul fukan chance evn tho poets arint paid or
less than always are still suppressed as if they are

are herdid into school if they don't watch out into stanzas into
kritikul apprisals sonnets narrative pomes epic song chant concrete
how it suffrd whn th rick amerikan style mags nd expensive
university catalogues discovered it to really just try to stamp it
ou harprs bazaar discovers it reports on it meaninglessly nevir aftr
mentions it again or changes its linear boring exposure its spelling

³ "the pure mind had blood running thru its mouth: an interview with bill bissett [2012]," bill bissett, *RUSH: what fuckan theory: a study uv language*, derek beaulieu & Gregory Betts, eds (Toronto: Book Thug, 2012) pg 107-112

or anything in other word tellin us th language is safe and still
correct nd teachabul backd up with troops by the fort knowx⁴

To put it simply, bissett believes that the destruction or salvation of the mind and soul is enacted in poetry and in writing, just as the body is confronted by war, poverty, oppression and the violence of the state.

I only want to expand this view of bissett's writing as a form of political resilience one step further by suggesting that we can (in the contemporary sense) understand bissett's orthography to be a **queering** of language. By this I'm not merely alluding to the excess of embodied and erotic imaginary which flows through all of his books - though I would believe that he takes endless pleasure writing lines such as this one from *Pomes For Yoshi* spelling "come" C-U-M:

*whn yu cum
into my hed is ths
yu doin it to me
or me lettin myself
feel yr vibrashuns
see yr face ⁵*

I am thinking more of the radical disorientation that Sara Ahmed speaks about when encountering a *Queer Object* - a phenomena that she describes "as the becoming oblique of the world, a situation which is both interior and exterior."⁶ She says that "To make things queer is to disturb the order of things"⁷ such that we are continually unsettled. While there is something holistic and even natural seeming about bissett's spelling, it never fails to disturb the page and all other writing that is near it. It only becomes normative in its own domain. In fact, it is a deeply disorientating intervention in language that continues to maintain its oblique relationship to authoritarian spelling. Its refusal of dominant systems at the level of conjoined letters is both an overt act of resistance and a seductive reaching out for affinity, opening its text to the reader and inviting a multitude of angles for entry into intercourse.

⁴ *ibid*, pg 39

⁵ bill bissett, *Pomes for Yoshi* (Vancouver: Talon Books, 1977)

⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006)

⁷ *ibid*, pg