Eric Schmaltz

"to forget in a body"

Mosaical Consciousness and Materialist Avant-Gardism in bill bissett and Milton Acorn's Unpublished *I Want to Tell You Love*[1]

In 1965 poet and painter bill bissett collaborated with staunch labour-oriented people's poet Milton Acorn. Together they completed a dynamic one hundred and nine-page literary collaboration entitled *I Want to Tell You Love*. The typescript consists of sixty-five poems (forty by Acorn and twenty-five by bissett) as well as ten hand-drawn images by bissett. The two first became acquainted at a meeting for the League of Socialist Action held in the Vanguard Bookstore at 1208 Granville Street in Vancouver. Ruth Bollock, a long time activist and the owner of the radical Marxist hangout, introduced them to each other, and there they bonded over a shared interest in poetry and current socio-political issues. There is nothing, according to bissett, that the two disagreed on. This surprising compatibility led to the creation of their unpublished collaboration.

By the time *I Want to Tell You Love* was completed Acorn had already published several poetry collections, establishing himself as a hard-edged modernist. Al Purdy defines Acorn's writing as "confident, even-paced and active" and explains that, "nothing is more noticeable in his poetry than its directness and an unfaltering certainty of opinion" (xii). In contrast, *I Want to Tell You Love* was created at the beginning of bissett's career, and documents the development of his voice into what would later be distinguished in criticism by its "excess and libidinal flow," unique orthography, and semiotic eruptions (McCaffery 93). Noticing these differences in 1966, J. A. Rankin, trade books editor for McClelland & Stewart, rejected the typescript because "[the] two styles seem to oppose rather than complement each other" (n. pag.). The typescript, bissett recalls

in an *Open Letter* interview on his collaboration with Acorn, was often rejected for this reason: "it was continualee being turnd down bcoz it was sd our styles wer 2 dissimilar" ("I want" 58).[2] Eventually bissett and Acorn gave up on their efforts to find a publisher, and since then the manuscript has been largely overlooked.[3]

Despite Acorn and bissett's resignation, their collaboration remains an important document for their careers and literary reputations. The typescript is not only evidence of an unlikely friendship and collaboration, but it offers a look at the development of bissett's poetic voice and a glimpse at Acorn's contributions to Vancouver's emergent countercultural and experimental literary communities. Many of the poems included in *I Want to Tell You Love* appeared later in other volumes. While they are important works on their own—effectively representing their separate aesthetic and political orientations—the poems dynamically perform within a collaborative context. Gregory Betts recognizes the significance of their collaboration when he notes the alliance between the aesthetic and radical political branches of the avant-garde within the work; he writes, "[bissett and Acorn] recognized a parallel in Acorn's radical politics and bissett's radical formal experiments" (68). Indeed, there are various modes of composition in the typescript including impure imagism, formal experimentation, and social realism (some of which will be explored in the following pages), but it is the authors' shared interest in radicalism that provides a provisionary rationale for the collaboration's creation. Building on Betts' insight and theorizations of radical writing, I note key points that distinguish Acorn's radical political verse from bissett's radical formal experiments: Acorn uses poetry to support social and political ideology and bissett writes in the belief that liberating form possesses the power to change and influence society. Some literary critics have de-emphasized verse by Acorn that supports social change and radical political ideologies such as Marxism and Communism. However, James Doyle identifies "Acorn's political radicalism as an important element in his life" (74); this element can be seen clearly in his explorations of social realist modes of writing. On the other hand, bissett's radical formal experiments have been identified as a distinguishing aesthetic feature of his work. His unique orthography and resistance to the standardization of syntax, grammar, and punctuation are aesthetic principles designed to resist what Steve McCaffery calls repressive "classical discourse" (94). The two positions parallel each other in a most fundamental sense: radicalism is a devotion to change with a belief in revolutionary possibility, and this is a commitment that both authors share.

In terms of aesthetics, the poems appear distinct; however, that is the point of their collaboration. It is in this seeming incongruity that an alternative socio-political vision becomes realized.

In this paper I will identify the alliance of the seemingly discordant voices of bissett and Acorn as a radical marriage that effectively rediscovers materialist avant-gardism—that is, a realization of the oft-theorized alliance of the radical political and aesthetic branches of the avant-garde which theorist Renato Poggioli has identified as distinct and discrete (1-15). Expanding upon Poggioli's critique, Matei Calinescu usefully describes materialist avant-gardists—Arthur Rimbaud, for example—as "advanced writers and artists who transferred the spirit of critique of social forms to the domain of *artistic forms*." These writers and artists sought "to overthrow all the binding formal traditions of art and to enjoy the exhilarating freedom of exploring completely new, previously forbidden, horizons of creativity. For they believed that to revolutionize art was the same as to revolutionize life" (112). bissett's aesthetic experiments and Acorn's political verse are married in this spirit. That said, materialist avant-gardism is not necessarily an end in itself; radical artistic action requires a program. Explaining the specific socio-political impetus that led to this alliance, bissett states that they were writing in response to the "manee taboos against aborsyun gay love sheltrs 4 homeless peopul repressive laws against marijuana whn alcohol was sew encouragd taboos against peopul wanting 2 n protesting against th war in Vietnam politikul writing all these n mor" ("I want" 61). The problems identified by bissett intersect with Fredric Jameson's characterization of a "modernity which is that of a worldwide capitalism itself" and its project of standardization (12). Indeed, *I Want to Tell You Love* is troubled by conditions of capitalist modernity: inequity, spectacular war (especially the Vietnam War), mass industrialization, oppression and "th culture uv sameness" ("I want" 61). The collaborators not only express discontent with these conditions, but also offer a radical response to these problems. Acorn alludes to their intent in his poem "Wouldn't it be dreadful" where he writes: "If for our own good they would one day relieve us / of what troubles us . . . Our consciousness?" (*I Want to Tell* 12-13). Here he suggests that the troubling socio-political conditions of global capitalism originate from consciousness—more specifically, as implied by this unlikely collaboration, notions of consciousness that perceive differences between individuals as points of repulsion that actively divide a community—differences that capitalist modernity seeks to efface.

By marrying the two branches of the avant-garde, Acorn and bissett's seemingly incongruous voices create a hybrid form similar to what Roland Barthes proposes in his theories of a text (as opposed to a work): a pluralistic entity that "cannot be contained by hierarchy" or "classification" (157), that resists notions of conformity and commodity, and most importantly, gestures toward a multiform understanding of consciousness, which I am here calling *mosaical consciousness*. This notion emerges from the work of Marshall McLuhan whose ideas had strong currency in Vancouver during the 1960s.[4] In his examination of Harold Adams Innis, McLuhan abstracts the concept of a mosaic to describe Innis' writing in terms of a "mosaic structure of seemingly unrelated and disproportioned sentences and aphorisms" (qtd. in McCaffrey, "Media" 89) that work together in "a mutual irritation" (89). Mosaical consciousness demonstrates an intense awareness of one's differences with the external world, but does not conceive of difference as an impetus for repulsion or target for standardization. Instead, it is an irritation, which I understand in biological terms as a stimulation or active response. Further, mosaical consciousness is a state of awareness resistant to what bissett calls "th culture uv sameness" ("I want" 61) and privileges difference as a stimulus for the mind and community.[5] This idea is most effectively communicated by this collaborative text's thematic preoccupation with love—another mode of managing dissimilarity to formulate alliance. It is the "mutual irritation" (qtd. in McCaffrey, "Media" 89) of bissett and Acorn's voices that demonstrates this alternative form of awareness that opposes capitalism's project of mass global consumption and homogenization. In the remaining sections of this paper I will investigate how the notion of mosaical consciousness is developed in the typescript through their rediscovery of materialist avant-gardism vis-à-vis the marriage of their incongruous poetics, which I will then follow with an attempt to find an alliance by situating their politics in literary history.

As illustrated by Rankin's rejection letter, the most striking feature of the typescript is its mosaical presentation: the appearance of disunity in bissett and Acorn's collaboration created by their dissimilar poetic voices. When they began their collaboration, Vancouver's flourishing modernist scene shared the city with an emergent postmodern experimental poetic. Vancouver was not only home to leftist modernists such as Pat and Roy Lowther, Pat Lane, and Dorothy Livesay, but also to radical counterculture poets such as bissett, Judith Copithorne, Maxine Gadd, and Gladys Hindmarch. Christine Wiesenthal usefully details the mentality that

separated these groups: "Younger student radicals differed sharply from their elder 'comrades' in terms of their embrace of a more individualistic ethos, among other things. . . . The old guard, on the other hand, Roy Lowther among it, viewed the openly hedonistic, hippy, drop-out and drug crowds with suspicion and moral disdain that united it with the far right" (225). While the differing ethos of these groups ensured distinction within critical discourse, Vancouver's seemingly divided literary community was unified by sensitivity to the turbulent socio-political conditions of the time. Acorn, having lived in the city for only a short while, recognized this and established numerous forums of political and cultural engagement in an effort to bridge the two communities. He organized readings that featured both the established modernists and the emergent experimentalists (including a young bissett) at places such as the Vanguard Bookstore and the Advance Mattress Coffee House where he also created forums for political discussion such as the "Thursday night open-mike 'Blab sessions'" (Gudgeon 125). bissett was given the opportunity to give readings at both locations and admits that his involvement with Acorn's series to be "a veree important part uv th road uv my poetree development" ("I want" 59).

I Want to Tell You Love documents the development of bissett's radical aesthetic experiments that readers, editors, and scholars recognize today—notably his unconventional orthography, his destabilization of conventional reading practices (left to right, top to bottom), and his general distrust of language as a means of individual expression. Noting bissett's artistic emergence, Warren Tallman suggests that bissett finally begins to find his voice in "1966, the year of the [Michael] McClure visit" which he recalls as the time "when bill bissett moves into word-mergings, soundings, [and] chantings" ("Wonder Merchants" 66), a development that coalesces just after the completion of *I Want to Tell You Love*. Prior to this moment in 1966, bissett experiments with various modes of writing, which indicates his search for a voice, but also foregrounds the shifting nature of his poetics. In 1962 bissett's first published poems appear in *PRISM* magazine. In part, the poems reflect bissett's struggle to create a poetic voice. The first poem of this sequence (which is untitled) opens with the lines: "i want to scream out to everyone help me / poet goes to psychiatrist / doubts about his career" ("3 poems"). This clearly stated opening presents a facetious image of a poet struggling with his art. Following these lines, however, the speaker's language becomes frantic with violent, corporeal images such as "pellets of rotten stomach" and "twisted lung" that defamiliarize the body. bissett seeks

to destabilize notions of the body and mind as singular entities as further suggested in the line "head tooth CRACKD OPEN," which foregrounds his interest in opening up new forms of human consciousness. In these poems, bissett stops short of explicitly illustrating the effects of opening the body and mind in this way. However, the poem's shifting, frenetic composition and ambition to rethink conventions of the body and mind recalls the Surrealist practice of automatic writing—another mode of composition that explores states of consciousness in response to early twentieth-century modernity.

Similar experimentation can be observed in *I Want to Tell You Love* in the poem "when and how over high mountain into high dream out" where bissett frees both the reader's body and mind—the movement of the eyes and cognitive functions—from normative practices of reading and writing. Most of the poem consists of columns of words that can be read vertically and horizontally, shattering grammatical order. The reader, then, is permitted to proceed autonomously, unimpeded by the determinism of conventional left-to-right reading practices. The eyes can move from left to right to create a sequence of words like "know takes returns has" or top to bottom to create "know / next / week / passes / plays / resembles / returns" with many other possible permutations of the reading sequence. As a result, bissett creates an excess of meaning that depends on the individual reader's process of working through the words on the page. In addition, unconventional, yet for bissett signature, spellings begin emerging in the typescript where "you" is contracted to become "yu" and "the" becomes "th." Punctuation is omitted and unstable grammar disrupts the poem. Both of these poems present experimental methodologies, which ideally destabilize singular notions of the body, text, and authorial voice.

Further disrupting bissett's voice within the typescript and contributing to its mosaical presentation, these radical formal experiments emerge alongside some of bissett's more conventional-looking poems such as "The Body"—a free verse poem consisting of standard verse paragraph breaks, left aligned margins, and mostly standardized punctuation and grammar. "The Body" is remarkably unlike the radical aesthetic experiments that would characterize much of bissett's later writing. Indeed, and considering the alliance of their voices in this collaboration, "The Body" more closely resembles Acorn's radical verse. This type of shift between modes of writing disrupts the consistency of bissett's poetic voice and offers editors a provisionary rationale for the typescript's rejection. However, "The Body" thematically parallels bissett's previously mentioned experimental compositions that reimagine the

when and how over high mountain into high dream out

know	takes	returns	has
next	takes	is	goes
week	tells	has	is
passes	thinks	is	must
plays	does	is	must
plays	doesn't	spends	does
resembles	calls	spends	is
returns	time	takes	is
	introduces	knows	marries
laughs	studies	knows	gets
leaves	goes	knows	marries
laughs	is	knocks	falls
week	hears	is	is
night	has	intends	loves
last	has	gets	looks
lacks		leaves	leaves
	does	has	asks
takes	reads	enters	asks
sings	leaves	goes	asks
sang	leaves	has	Charles
has	admires	is	is
first	admires	reads	arrives
listens	asks	come	approaches
feels	interprets	does	has

and
and it's really quite exciting sometimes its nice to have a stick not
just any stick but one like that i will construe to thee all th happy
charactery of my sad brow yu can reflect in my basket glory i dont
give a damn for yur nonchalence a lot od that is bullshit in th
middle of nowhere its only natural woodshed th moon is float
is gaze thru yur every astral body cums to glow outward yes she
will
turn
right a
round
nd cum to
to to to
blank nd
in this cornur wham whap ba
zoom tulipgrowsing watchful
mercuries tickey taoldsurupp
shall we now dissembul to be
gin at th centre we move
out from shining luv to
do that aftur all
shup oobur da
d a bobobies
glow o do
they
thread yur
way thru th compass jack off baby in th bau hoot th orange o an th green
single stripes will follow yu th butter wud melt in any more an pourd it
yur eyeball in marah a rejoice scene comet into daco ourselves going out

body as a heterogeneous, mosaical entity. Verse paragraphs three through seven begin with variations of the phrase "One of THE BODY" which leads into a description of the different roles this body fulfills, i.e., "an artist," "businessman," "leader," and so on. To challenge notions of singularity, bissett plays on the ambiguity of the word "body," which can denote both a singular and plural subject position. The penultimate verse paragraph meditates on the relationship between the two:

> The largeness of THE BODY would increase
> and diffuse hopelessly the initial self-
> betrayals invited aroused to sustain it.
> As a consequence, the belief in self,
> in character would drop away behind
> the larger movement of the General Body. (51-56)

As if meditating on the consequences of homogenization and singularity, this section of the poem alludes to the loss of a "self" (54) and "character" (55) as "the General Body" (56), a large force that effaces qualities of the self, overtakes "THE BODY" (51—a problem this collaboration generally responds to.

In what appears to be a contrast to bissett's frenetic, disruptive, and rapidly shifting aesthetics, critics such as Purdy praise Acorn's poetry for its singular voice, precision, and stability. Acorn's aesthetic can be grounded in the traditional critical orthodoxies of Imagist modernism. Dorothy Livesay aligns Acorn with the Imagist tradition in her analysis of Acorn's "Charlottetown Harbour," a poem published in *The Brain's the Target* (1960), which she calls "a return to Imagism" (33) and "a still life painting in the Imagist tradition" (35). Louis Dudek usefully describes this mode of writing as "liberation in the direction of contemporary reality, toward the reality of images" (10) and further conceives of "modernism specifically as a line of technical development, in which the image is used as the basic unit in a construction kit" (10). This concern for the image as the basic unit of construction accurately describes Acorn's aesthetic preoccupation. Unlike bissett, whose poems are disjunctive and often sprawl across several pages, Acorn often strives for poetry characterized by precision and an image-based focus. "The Schooner," as it appears in *I Want to Tell You Love*, is composed in free verse, consisting of two verse paragraphs with left-aligned margins, and conventional spelling that effectively illustrates Acorn's aesthetic:

> Keen the tools, keen the eyes,
> white the thought of the schooner

lined on a draughting board,
fine the stone that ground the fine blind
and skills, the many fingers
that stroked and touched it surely
til, intricate delicate strong,
it leans poised in the wind. (1-8)

The language here is economical; he uses very few conjunctions and adjectives. The poem is driven by verbs that propel the poem, condensing the construction process of a sail-ready schooner into eight brief lines—from "draughting board" to "the wind." Preceding his collaboration with bissett, Acorn had published four collections, all of which largely employ this singular, consistent, and less overtly political voice. However, in his collaboration with bissett, Acorn does not remain fixed to a single mode of writing. Instead, Acorn shifts into more explicit polemic poems through which he explores his radical socialist politics.

Though there are some exceptions, critical discussion focusing on the radical politics of Acorn's poetry has largely been truncated.[6] Scholars perhaps have been led by Al Purdy's anecdotal introduction to *I've Tasted My Blood* in which he regrets deviations from Acorn's pure modernist signature into a social realist mode of writing. Purdy writes that Acorn's "[p]oems written from 1964 to 1968 . . . changed in style and somewhat in content from the earlier poems. . . . In a way I regret these stylistic and thematic differences" (xiii). Colin Hill's *Modern Realism* assists to define the social realist mode of writing that Acorn sought to explore "as a form of modern realism with a predisposition for a particular subject matter" (144). A synthesis of Hill's definition of modern and social realism describes a writing that uses "direct, immediate, contemporary, idiomatically correct language" and works "toward a mimetic representation of a contemporary world" (7) with a specific focus on economic, social, and political conditions (143). Acorn makes numerous contributions in which he attempts to capture and critique the socio-political conditions of his time. "One Day Kennedy Died and So Did the Birdman of Alcatraz" references the historically significant deaths of John F. Kennedy and Robert Stroud, and longs for a utopic "heaven of birdsongs"; "The Damnation Machine" describes hell as a place where innocents are disarmed and consequently unable to defend themselves; and "Ernest Void" questions morality and what it means to be free. These efforts emerge most strongly in his "Detail of a Cityscape" in which Acorn describes a "cripple" who "struggles / onto the bus" and picks the closest and "most uncomfortable seat; / because if he tried for another / the surge of the bus

starting / would upend him." The poem reflects the larger sphere of socio-political issues confronted by *I Want to Tell You Love*. Acorn presents a social struggle that occurs within public space: the "cripple" helplessly struggles against his designated position. In response, the poem's diction implores sympathy through words like "aimless," "flopping," and "poor," revealing an implicit socialist agenda that recognizes the "cripple's" tenuous and alienated position, prompting readers to rethink the structure of society and positions of individuals within it. Acorn's movement toward a social realist mode of writing contrasts his less abstract, "impure-imagist" poems. The juxtaposition of these two modes of writing, imagism—being harder, more precise, and less explicitly political—paired with these polemic social realist poems, formulates a mosaic of poetic styles, just as bissett juxtaposes his own conventional verse against his radical formal experiments.

Acorn and bissett establish the mosaical configuration of their collaboration as a step toward intervening into contemporary socio-political affairs. Not only do their poems describe the turbulence and homogenization created by the conditions of modernity, but they also create art in response to it. The title's singular pronoun "*I*" acknowledges the collaboration's aspiration to present a mosaic of their voices and indicates their socio-political program. In using the singular (as opposed to the plural) pronoun, bissett and Acorn depict an ideal vision in which seemingly different individuals conceive of a means of being together without dissolving their being in accordance to a society characterized by mass production and standardization. The urgency of this vision emerges in the title's unique syntax. bissett and Acorn do not want to passively offer this vision, they do not want to talk about or account for love, but they want to achieve the active transference of their vision to the implied reader: *to tell you love*. Instead of writing a collection of poems that presents the vision of their utopia, they create what they believe to be utopia itself: a space in which differences can coexist, a space defined by love.

Love resonates with the notions of mosaic explored thus far: a plethora of distinct pieces that, in interplay, formulate a whole. Usefully, Georges Bataille's complex writing on love and eroticism helps to highlight the importance of love to bissett and Acorn's socio-political agenda. In *Eroticism*, Bataille sees eroticism and love as disruptive forces, specifically provoking a disruption of the singular notions of individuality; he argues that eroticism enables us to grasp a "conscious refusal to limit ourselves within our individual personalities" (24) and leads "to the blending and fusion of separate objects" which is seen most readily in poetry (25). The fusing of separate objects has been explored in

various historical literary contexts. In Bataille's own lifetime, the surrealists sought to transform notions of an individual's consciousness through the merging of conscious and unconscious minds so that surreality may manifest itself in all aspects of life. However, this agenda to expand consciousness was also manifested earlier in the work of the Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley who, like bissett and Acorn, reacted against what can retrospectively be considered as early stages of modernization.

Accounting for the revolutionary efforts of these Romantic poets and their resistance to modernity in their own time, M. H. Abrams traces a preceding reorientation of the individual and their relationship to separate objects with a particular focus on how consciousness can be reinvented by radical notions of love. Abrams argues that "[t]he vision" sought by these poets is to "[consummate] a holy marriage with the external universe, to create . . . a new world which is the equivalent of paradise" (28). Complementing bissett's previously mentioned *Open Letter* interview on his collaboration, Abrams' reading of the Romantics suggests that they reacted against "industrialization, urbanization, and increasingly massive industrial slums; of the first total war and postwar economic collapse; of progressive specialization in work, alterations in economic and political power, and consequent dislocations of class structure; of competing ideologies and ever-imminent social chaos" (292-93). The realm of Romantic politics is a fruitful context in which to situate bissett's and Acorn's politics, offering a sense of their cosmic idealism, but it also assists in grasping the radical connotations of love as a means of uniting the world and spirit, mind and body that they were working towards. Most important, this historical connection draws out the Romantic basis of the avant-garde with which the politics of *I Want to Tell You Lov*e can be aligned.

Acorn and bissett have both been regarded as poets with connections to the Romantic spirit. When Purdy notes Acorn's shift toward overtly polemical social realist poetry, he describes these poems as "diffuse" (xiii) and "utopian" (xiv). Purdy's descriptors characterize Acorn's political poetry in a way that is commensurate with Romantic-era politics and he admits that Acorn is "somewhat romantic in the best sense" (xii). George Bowering has also acknowledged the Neo-Romantic aspects of Acorn's political poetry; he writes, "[h]is politics are as much a poet's communism as Shelley's were. He's a romantic radical, looking to awaken or 'find outside the beauty inside me.' He has the romantic sense of man's perfectibility" (85). Acorn's "Poem for a Singer," which Dorothy Livesay has identified as an exuberant representation

of Acorn's "social revolutionary" spirit (40), best represents a Romantic mode.[7] The poem, which is featured in the typescript and separately published later, is unlike Acorn's mostly shorter and terse contributions in *I Want to Tell You Love*. Livesay notes that the poem is an "affirmation and belief in humanity's struggle . . . in the tradition of Blake and Whitman" (42) and in it sees "the phase of the conscious, social revolutionary poet defying the sickness of capitalist society" (40). Livesay's assessment finely articulates the spirit of the poem including its political goals; however, because she is examining the poem outside of the context of *I Want to Tell You Love*, her analysis can be expanded to address its contribution to the typescript as a whole. Livesay notes that the poem "ends with his [the speaker's] complete identification of himself with the singer" (41). In "Poem for a Singer," as it appears in *I Want to Tell You Love*, Acorn's speaker not only identifies with the singer, the speaker wants more than that; the speaker cries out, "Let me be the song" and then again, "Oh let me be the / men and women of her song," striving toward empathy for the singer, the workers, the song itself. When expressing his desire to "be" the others, the speaker is expressing a desire to move beyond the restrictions of bodily materiality and to merge with the others. In this way, the poem compares with bissett's "The Body," in which he too plays with notions of bodily singularity. Acorn's speaker strives toward a more mosaical form of being, thinking, and seeing that is "necessary / : for the standing up proud and hopeful way, the / way expressing the truth of our lives [sic]" ("3 poems"). In essence, "Poem for a Singer" demonstrates the various complex notions of mosaic as well as the radical social politics that are at the heart of the typescript.

On the other hand, while bissett's writing can be discussed within a discourse of radical aesthetic experimentation, it is useful to note that critics such as Tallman have—as Purdy and Bowering did for Acorn—connected bissett to a Romantic tradition. In his "Statement for bill bissett"—a statement that was written to persuade the Canada Council for the Arts to award bissett funding in 1978—Tallman compares bissett's spirit to that of Percy Shelley. Tallman writes, "I think that Shelley set the standard for a romantic striving after a 'wisdom and spirit of the universe' which, in his own contemporary Canadian way, bissett has so steadfastly sought in his visionary poems" ("Statement" 99). bissett's poem "a carriage that were green" illustrates a Neo-Romantic sentiment that reacts (as did Shelley, Wordsworth, and others) against industrialization and other manifestations of modernity. The poem criticizes the municipal government, "th mafia

boys" as bissett calls them, for tearing down houses in Kitsilano—including bissett's own home—and replacing them with shopping complexes; bissett writes,

> o if ever
> there were
> a carriage
> that were
> green,
> mushrooms
> and banners
> flow
> from behind
> stops for
> lunch on
> orange
> toadstools
> blue sky
> above, all
> green
> clear, below.

While this poem is remarkably different from any poem by Shelley—especially in its formal approach—bissett's speaker here, in a quintessential Romantic spirit, longs for life in a natural world without industrialization and excessive consumption.

These Romantic associations and their shared revolutionary spirit provide useful entry into the discourse of avant-garde modes of theorization. Calinescu argues that the "concept of avant-garde in radical political thought" (101) emerges in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the beginning of what is generally acknowledged as the Romantic period for arts and literature. Calinescu describes the characteristics of a Romantic avant-gardism that includes following an "anti-elitist program" and acknowledges that "life should be radically changed" (104). These attributes most certainly inform the collaboration's creation. However, bissett and Acorn's collaboration does not at first glance appear to be a resolutely avant-garde text. Charles Russell describes "the avant-garde writer" as one who "frequently explores limits of the creator's freedom to disrupt syntax and to use new patterns of linguistic association" (36). While some of the disruptive patterns are clearly exhibited in bissett's poems, the collection does not completely fit Russell's conception. *I Want to Tell You Love*, then, offers an expansion of Russell's definition since it is not purely avant-garde

in its syntactical disruptions, but in its pairing of seemingly incongruous aesthetic approaches that disrupt conventional understanding of a book as a product created with singular aesthetic and political values. Instead, bissett and Acorn envision the book as a mosaic. As evidence of the more common and commercial desire for singularity, Rankin, as consolation for rejecting the typescript, expressed an interest in producing individual selected volumes of what either bissett or Acorn considered to be their "best work" (n. pag.). However, the unusual alliance of bissett and Acorn provides the type of disruption necessary to create a sense of "disorientation" (Russell 35), which in turn allows the audience to "experience states of abruptly expanded consciousness" (35) and it is accepting this expanded consciousness that leads to material change within the socio-political sphere.

In striving toward this expanded consciousness, they formulate a mosaical model: Acorn's imagism and social realism and bissett's radical formal experiments march together. Within the context of their poetic mosaic—the "mutual irritation" (qtd. in McCaffrey, "Media" 89) of their voices—bissett and Acorn formulate a materialist avant-gardism. This mode of avant-garde practice is also attributed to Arthur Rimbaud in whose work the "the two avant-gardes, the artistic and the political, tended to merge" (Calinescu 113) and who, in "A Season in Hell" recognizes that "love must be reinvented" (Rimbaud 229). In Rimbaud's thinking, a poet should strive "to reach the *unknown*, to invent an absolutely *new* language" (qtd. in Calinescu 112). In bissett's contributions to the typescript this attempt to reinvent the semiotic system is certainly present. However, this reinvention is not the central mandate of their collaboration. Instead they seek to invent an alternative approach to the semiotic system in their disruption of conventional reading practices that expect regularity. *I Want to Tell You Love*, then, offers a means of rethinking our positions in the face of the project of capitalist modernity and all of its aims. Acorn and bissett offer an example of how discursive differences can correlate and present how they can co-exist within the same space in a way that suggests opposition, but is unified by politics, by a desire for love—a salient metaphor to heal a turbulent world.

I am left, then, with the problem of materiality. The material aspects of my effort face the same obstacle that Acorn and bissett confronted when seeking to publish the collection: the typescript remains unpublished and its energies have yet to be unleashed. This is not to say that they did not re-discover materialist avant-gardism or develop a multiform consciousness. Nor does it mean that the typescript and its artistic political agenda are

valueless. In part, this paper's recuperative project seeks to draw attention to the typescript's value—beyond that is speculation. Had it been published and received an optimal reception, *I Want to Tell You Love* would have served as a radical literary model of awareness and community during a globally turbulent period of history. The typescript and its mosaical formation of consciousness offers a mode of opposition to capitalism's homogenous and destructive project and seeks a more equal and peaceful means of life. Locally, the typescript would have been significant to Vancouver's cultural and political formation by offering a bridge between its distinctive communities, which, had they been unified, could have amassed enough energy to seek change and political action on a grander scale. That said, the world has changed significantly since 1965, and for now, the typescript participates in a resurgence of interest in two of Canada's most influential writers. Just recently a new selection of Acorn's work entitled *In a Spring Time Instant* has been published and scholars are beginning to return to and reproduce some of bissett's earlier work such as the recently re-issued *Rush: What Fuckan Theory. I Want to Tell You Love* is not only textual evidence of an intersection of interesting vectors of Canadian writing, but it also offers a glimpse at Canada's radical literary history.

NOTES

1 Thanks to the generous support of Mary Hooper of the Acorn Estate and bill bissett, I am currently working on an edition of *I Want to Tell You Love* to be published by Toronto's BookThug.

2 According to material in Acorn's archive at Library and Archives Canada (LAC), the typescript circulated among publishers and editors like Rankin at McClelland & Stewart, Raymond Souster at Contact Press, and Fred Cogswell at Fiddlehead Press, but it was never published. Notes on the typescript are also held in The Very Stone House series of Seymour Mayne's archive at Library and Archives Canada. These notes were made for a volume of a selection of Acorn's poems being prepared by Mayne for Very Stone House. Like *I Want to Tell You Love*, this volume was never published. A copy of the unpublished typescript eventually arrived at LAC in 1988, from William Hoffer Books of Vancouver.

3 See *Milton Acorn: In Love and Anger* by Lemm*, novel* by bissett, and *Avant-Garde Canadian Literature: The Early Manifestations* by Betts for brief mentions of bissett and Acorn's relationship and collaboration.

4 McLuhan's thinking greatly influenced Vancouver's art and culture community in the 1960s; he lectured at The New Design Gallery on Pender Street in 1959, and later the 1964 Festival of Contemporary Arts was nicknamed "The Medium Is The Message" (see Turner's "Expanded Literary Practices"). In bissett's first published collection, *We Sleep Inside Each Other All* he writes, "Marshall McLuhan sz we are poisd between the typographic individualist trip th indus trial revolution & th electronic age" (n. pag.) effectively suggesting that bissett was familiar with McLuhan's writing.

5 This appeal to a mosaic-like structure anticipates Canadian cultural politics in the 1970s and the notion of a Canadian cultural mosaic, which sought to characterize a nation by its difference.

6 See "Acorn and the Revolutionary Mind" by Deahl, "'For My Own Damn Satisfaction': The Communist Poetry of Milton Acorn" by Doyle, and "Vehement Radical Obfuscation: The Political Poems of Milton Acorn" by Neilson for some critical discussion of Acorn's politics.

7 This poem was published in 1965 in an issue of *The Literary Review* (and later in *I've Tasted My Blood)*.

WORKS CITED

Abrams, M. H. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature.* New York: Norton, 1971. Print.

Acorn, Milton. "The Idea of a Poem: An Interview with Milton Acorn." By John Pearce. *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* 21 (1987): 93-102. Print.

—. *In a Spring Time Instant: Selected Poems.* Ed. James Deahl. Oakville: Mosaic, 2012. Print.

—. *I've Tasted My Blood*. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1969. Print.

—. "Note for 'Memoirs of a Total Stranger' By Way of an Introduction." Library and Archives Canada. Seymour Mayne Fonds: Very Stone House Series. MG31-D252: Vol. 14, Folder 5.

—. "Poem For a Singer." *The Literary Review* 8.4 (1965): 511-13. Print.

Acorn, Milton, and bill bissett. *I Want to Tell You Love.* Libraries and Archives Canada. Milton Acorn Fonds. MG31-D175: Vol. 53, Folder 1.

Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill & Wang, 1975. Print.

Bataille, Georges. *Eroticism*. Trans. Mary Dalwood. London: Penguin, 2012. Print.

Betts, Gregory. *Avant-Garde Canadian Literature: The Early Manifestations.* Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2013. Print.

bissett, bill. "3 poems." *PRISM* 3.2 (1962): 48-49. Print.

—. "I want to tell you love: Interview with bill bissett." By Eric Schmaltz. *Open Letter* 15.1 (2012): 58-63. Print.

—. *novel*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2011. Print.

—. *Rush: What Fuckan Theory.* Ed. Gregory Betts and derek beaulieu. Toronto: Bookthug, 2012. Print.

—. *We Sleep Inside Each Other All.* Toronto: Ganglia, 1966. Print.

Bowering, George. "Acorn Blood." Rev. of *I've Tasted My Blood*, by Milton Acorn. *Canadian Literature* 42 (1969): 84-86. Print.

Calinescu, Matei. *Five Faces of Modernity*. Durham: Duke UP, 1987. Print.

Deahl, James. "Acorn and the Revolutionary Mind." *Cross-Canada Writers' Quarterly* 8.3/4 (1986): 13-58. Print.

Doyle, James. "'For My Own Damn Satisfaction': The Communist Poetry of Milton Acorn." *Canadian Poetry* 40 (1997): 74-87. Web. 15 June 2011.

Dudek, Louis. *The Theory of the Image in Modern Poetry.* St. John's: Pratt Lecture, 1979. Print.

Gudgeon, Chris. *Out of this World: The Natural History of Milton Acorn.* Vancouver: Arsenal, 1996. Print.

Hill, Colin. *Modern Realism in English-Canadian Fiction*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2012. Print.
Jameson, Fredric. *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. London: Verso, 2002. Print.
Lemm, Richard. *Milton Acorn: In Love and Anger*. Ottawa: Carleton UP, 1999. Print.
Livesay, Dorothy. "Search for a Style: The Poetry of Milton Acorn." *Canadian Literature* 40 (1969): 33-42. Print.
McCaffery, Steve. "bill bissett: A Writing Outside of Writing." *North of Intention: Critical Writings, 1973-1986*. Ed. Karen MacCormack. New York: Roof, 2000. 93-106. Print.
—. "Media and Cultural Change." *The Essential McLuhan.* Ed. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone. New York: Basic, 1995. 89-96. Print.
Neilson, Shane. "Vehement Radical Obfuscation: The Political Poems of Milton Acorn." *Books in Canada* 32.3 (2003): 29-30. Print.
Poggioli, Renato. *The Theory of the Avant-Garde.* Trans. Gerald Fitzgerald. New York: Icon, 1971. Print.
Purdy, Al. Introduction. Acorn, *I've Tasted My Blood* vii-xv.
Rankin, J. A. 1966 (March 28). Letter to Milton Acorn. Clara Thomas Special Collections. bill bissett fonds. Box 1976 - 002/005, File 140.
Rimbaud, Arthur. "A Season in Hell." *Collected Poems: Arthur Rimbaud.* Trans. Martin Sorrel. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011. 210-59. Print.
Russell, Charles. "The Theory of the Avant-Garde." *Poets, Prophets, and Revolutionaries.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985. 3-38. Print.
Tallman, Warren. "Statement for bill bissett, September 20, 1978." *In the Midst: Writings 1962-1992.* Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992. 95-102. Print.
—. "Wonder Merchants: Modernist Poetry in Vancouver during the 1960s." *boundary 2* 3.1 (1974): 57-90. Print.
Turner, Michael. "Expanded Literary Practices." *Vancouver Art in the 1960s. Ruins in Process.* Comp. Charo Neville. Ed. Lorna Brown. The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery & Grunt Gallery. Web. 1 Mar. 2011.
Wiesenthal, Christine. *The Half-Lives of Pat Lowther*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2005. Print.