

ANYTHING BUT RELUCTANT

Canada's little magazines

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HISTORICALLY, LITTLE MAGAZINES have sprung up whenever new, animated, and serious writing cannot find a market. Thus these magazines are usually managed and edited by writers — writers who are anything but reluctant to publish their own works. The annoyance that gets such writers into the magazine business is, of course, that in any period both the commercial outlets — whether “literary” mags or publishing houses — and the glossy-paged scholarly quarterlies cater chiefly to established writers. A new group or school of writers cannot possibly get a sufficient quantity of its work published to make its presence felt. Some of the semi-professional literary quarterlies, such as Canada’s *Tamarack Review*, tend to become coterie magazines, depending for almost fifty per cent of their material on a particular fixed circle of writers — again writers whose reputations the magazine knows are safe and established. Which is, of course, a sensible commercial policy, particularly in a country which has tended to be a graveyard for literary magazines.

Little magazines, on the other hand, never have to depend on “name” writers, their mimeo expenses being low enough to keep their losses at a minimum. But this is only a minor difference. The major one is still that little mags are published by *engaged* writers, not by semi-interested onlookers. Whereas the commercial magazine or glossy-paged quarterly usually reflects one man’s desire to be an editor, or a group’s wish that their town, university, or whatever, have a “literary” mag, the little magazine nearly always reflects genuine writing activity and interest. While the editors of the *Tamaracks* and the *Prisms* seldom have any new work of their own to exhibit, seldom are engaged in creation with any excitement or persistence (but rather go altruistically or parasitically to those that are), the

editors of little magazines are usually so absorbed in and dedicated to their own writing that they feel they *must* found a mag — in order that their work may receive at least some attention and criticism. Often, if not always, the little magazine reflects the presence of a group of writers of similar interests who are meeting, arguing, fighting, writing, almost every day — a group charged with literary energy that seems to keep continually overflowing into and out of their mimeograph pages.

One could take the founding of Vancouver's *Tish* as an example of the birth of a little magazine. All of its five editors had been writing for some time; George Bowering had been getting poems published in eastern Canada — though, he says, never the ones he wished to have published. With two visits from the U.S. poet Robert Duncan their bi-monthly meetings to discuss their own work became weekly meetings of intensive study of Charles Olson, Duncan, Creeley Pound, and Williams. In no time literary theories and poems began filling the air, covering the desks, and some quick and dependable outlet for quantities of material had to be found. Even the established magazines willing to publish some of this work could not be relied on; they were too slow, and by the time one's poems were published one wished to disown them, ideas had changed so. Thus *Tish*, Vancouver's poetry newsletter, was born, and the energy, the intensive literary study and creation that began it show no sign of abating. If it did, of course, there would be no reason for *Tish* to continue, for, in order to be worthwhile, any little magazine must have this inspiring energy. Evidence of such energy is perhaps the prime criterion for judging its value.

Magazines with no energy whatsoever are, naturally, one of the other minor but important causes of the founding of little magazines. In Canada there are a large number of very low-energy literary mags with no particular policy; for example, *Prism's* often nondescript collections, *Canadian Poetry Magazine's* usual dilettante sprawl, and *Fiddlehead's* custom of printing so nearly an equal number of bad poems to good ones that a writer begins to doubt the value of publication there.

All of which will tend to make the new little magazine editor angry and belligerent. He will be so proud of his strong direction and sense of development that he will often make a point of countering the petrified standards of the professional outlets with work initially as shocking as important. He will counter the nebulous — if even existent — editorial policies of the *Fiddleheads* and *Prisms* with an editorial line or bias strict enough to exclude almost all of the — to him — mysteriously-established establishment. It can almost be said that, to be true to the

energy that has got him writing and publishing, the new little magazine editor must be of necessity rebellious — else have his magazine redundant.

Again historically, such ventures have often been successes. Writers such as Hemingway, W. C. Williams, Pound, and Aldington, to name a few, all began their careers in little magazines that have now either disappeared or evolved to unrecognizable forms. Since the last war little magazines such as Canada's *Combustion* and *Contact*, and the U.S.'s *Black Mountain Review*, *Origin*, *Migrant*, *Measure*, and *Yugen*, spawned most of the writers now finding recognition in Grove Press and New Directions publications and in professional magazines such as *The Outsider* and *The Evergreen Review*. At present in the States Robert Kelly's *Trobar*, Cid Corman's second series of *Origin*, and Le Roi Jones and Diane Di Prima's *The Floating Bear* are carrying on the fight for the acceptance of new writers, the last with undoubtedly the most vigour.

IN CANADA TOO we are witnessing a new crop of little magazines. In the last two years *Moment*, *Mountain*, *Evidence*, *Cataract*, *Tish*, and *Motion* have all appeared. In Vancouver alone three new ones are projected: *Recall*, a new non-commercial mag of *Kenyon Review* tastes, *Spasm*, one probably in the "beat" tradition, and *Q*, "a quizzical monthly of satire and other social criticism." University magazines, such as Waterloo's *Chiaroscuro*, U.B.C.'s *Raven*, and Acadia's *Amethyst*, continue, but only as "student" publications — seldom with any attempt at absolute excellence.

Of the new and ambitious little magazines Toronto's *Evidence* is the only one to get above the usual mimeo format. Alan Bevan, the writer-editor, says that it "was born out of the conviction that there is a good deal of serious writing being done for which there is no adequate outlet in Canada." This is, of course, the best and only excuse for the founding of a little magazine, and so far Mr. Bevan has been able to find interesting writing. There have been frequent weaknesses, especially in the critical articles, but *Evidence* has still been superior to *Tamarack*'s seemingly endless issues of unexcitement. Bevan's magazine can be lively — see No. 3's provocatively accurate article in marijuana — but, in order to counteract its cold, almost malicious reception by the Toronto establishment, should become even more boisterous and militant, and its editor should take a more prominent part in its revolutionary trends. *Evidence* does not seem to be

the product of an active group; it looks like a one-man job, and, unless Bevan himself gets more lively, I foresee a dull future for his magazine.

Montreal's *Cataract* is certainly militant. Which is perhaps the best thing one can say about it. Militancy is fine when one has something to be militant about; *Cataract's* most obvious trouble is that its writer-editors seem to spend more time thumbing their noses than they do writing poetry. Irving Layton's "Open Letter to Louis Dudek" in No. 2 shows more concern for Layton's own waning reputation (see his defensive and high-schoolish "To a Lily" here too) than for Dudek's. But *Cataract* is the product of a group intensely active and outspoken in writing; it has a distinct direction. And it has had good poems (ignore Avi Boxer); Sydney Aster has had several lucky hits, and K. V. Hertz and Henry Moscovitch have consistently shown much talent and potentiality. *Cataract* is certainly not a pretentious magazine — it even belabours its non-academic roots, and is definitely worth "bothering" with.

Moment is a Toronto mimeo poetry magazine at one time edited by poets Milton Acorn and Al Purdy, now edited by Acorn and his wife, Gwendolyn MacEwen. Like *Cataract* it is squarely in the little magazine tradition of being founded by coöperating poets to publish poetry that might not be accepted by the established markets. The poetry of Miss MacEwen is often "poetic" and esoteric, and at times beautiful and real; Acorn's is rougher, probably less poetic by anyone's standards. The outside poetry is diverse, both in quality and manner, and, with the lack of similarity between Acorn and MacEwen, the magazine thus appears to have little unity of policy. It is probably held together more by marriage than by literary interest. From what I have seen *Moment* is not dull and not lively, not consistently experimental and not quite reactionary, not sufficiently discriminating and not actually careless. It does have its triumphs, though — such as the Al Purdy poem in No. 6. A Toronto magazine.

David McFadden's *Mountain* from Hamilton is probably in one way the most ambitious and comprehensive little magazine in Canada. Its purpose seems to be not so much to announce something new, as to bring together and re-announce all of the new things that have happened recently in Canadian poetry. A sort of poor man's *Evergreen Review*, although one cannot call Pádraig Ó Broin's poetry new, or John Robert Colombo's lines poetry. Still the first issue of *Mountain* marked the first time a Canadian reader could see together in one place most of his country's important new writers. With possibly only two exceptions, all of the writers were under twenty-seven years of age.

McFadden announced in No. 1 that "*Mountain* has very definite and rigid

editorial standards, but they change from day to day," and they must in such an eclectic mag. The only demands McFadden appears to have made of his writers are youth and quality, and even these he has very clearly lifted at times. In the next issues perhaps some direction will become apparent, maybe not from Hamilton activity but from McFadden's consciousness of the energies of young Canadian poets as a group. A long hope, but still, even as merely "a lively review of current poetry," *Mountain* is indispensable.

Tish and *Motion* are the two Vancouver mimeo "newsletters". *Tish*, the poetry newsletter, is now in its twelfth issue, and seems to have crystalized its determination to re-make poetry a natural and spontaneous human occupation and rid it of the obscure and obviously "poetic" creations of would be "artists". Man not art, and the universality of human experience, are two of its battle-cries, and battle-cries they are, for its editors seem to have made a fetish out of belligerency. A lot of their poetry seems weak and irrelevant, yet some of it is powerful and does show that their attempts at "natural" poetry have enabled them to write skilled and complex poems with the craft totally submerged and unobtrusive.

Motion, the prose newsletter, seems also to be working in favour of unpretentious style and subtlety of effect. However, with only two issues out the question is still whether *Motion* has work that should be published despite the rejections of established magazines, or merely would like to think it has. Either in Canada or the U.S. I know of no magazine with which to compare *Motion*; the idea of a monthly prose newsletter seems to have been totally neglected, possibly because of the large amount of work necessary to provide sufficient material.

There is one other mimeo little magazine in Canada: another Toronto one, Pádraig Ó Broin's rather harmless *Téangadoir*, now in its 39th issue. It claims to be a magazine of current Canadian poetry, and is, exactly, and is thus all over the map. Ó Broin himself will never pretend to be experimental, yet side by side with his own traditional lyrics he will publish even such uncontrolled ones as those by G. C. Miller. *Téangadoir* is an interesting little magazine, but not a vital one. There is obviously no group of fermenting young poets behind it; most likely it is a hobby to Ó Broin, who does not seem to have much difficulty getting his poetry published elsewhere.

These little magazines really comprise most of what is happening in Canadian poetry. The so-called "quality or mass magazines", the established glossy literary quarterlies, continue to grind on, but most of the changes that slowly but eventually occur in them are generated elsewhere between the rollers of someone's rusty Gestetner. Canada is fortunate to have such a large number of little magazines

that the commercial literary outlets are never allowed the peace to become permanently stultified. What is sad is that most of these mags do not take sufficient advantage of their unique position — no one asks them to be responsible, and money is never available enough to be an objective — to further shake up the commercial world and speed the evolution of writing. As I said before, a little magazine must be either bold or redundant. *Cataract*, *Mountain*, and *Tish* are each in their own way somewhat brash, but *Evidence*, *Moment*, *Motion*, and especially *Téangadoir*, could all stand acquiring some reason for additional chips on their shoulders. An affable little magazine cannot help but be worthless.

