

Would You Publish This Book? Material Production, Canadian Criticism, and *The Theatre of Form*

Robert Lecker

Volume 25, Number 1, Spring 2000

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl25_1art02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Article abstract

The publication of Canadian literary criticism in its historically recognizable forms of academic discourse has dramatically decreased due to shifts in government funding policies and widespread changes in the book publishing industry. The cultural implication of this material shift in the sheer quantity of criticism published is significant: publishers are unreceptive to books about Canadian literature. Decreases in the production of Canadian criticism shift the cultural paradigms by substituting more broadly marketable cultural objects for more esoteric objects aligned with the discourse of nation as it is disseminated through critical acts. With funding from the Ontario Arts Council, the Canada Council and the Aid to Scholarly Publications Program, ECW Press published Ric Knowles's *The Theatre of Form and the Production of Meaning: Contemporary Canadian Dramaturgies* in 1999 at a financial loss. Most commentary on Canadian criticism does not consider the factors accounting for the material solidity, just as most academics really don't consider the issue of profit or loss associated with the production of the scholarly book as a central factor in the evaluation of the publishability of their scholarly work.

Cite this article

Lecker, R. (2000). Would You Publish This Book? Material Production, Canadian Criticism, and *The Theatre of Form*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 25(1), 15–36.

Would You Publish This Book? Material Production, Canadian Criticism, and *The Theatre of Form*

ROBERT LECKER

IN THE CONCLUSION TO MY 1995 STUDY entitled *Making It Real*, I argued that it would soon become increasingly difficult for publishers to invest in critical studies of Canadian literature, and that, as a result, professionals involved in the field would be forced to write on more popular topics and in less specialized language for wider audiences. Basically, I was saying that the publication of Canadian literary criticism in its historically recognizable forms of academic discourse was rapidly coming to an end due to shifts in government funding policies and widespread changes in the book publishing industry.

As I write, it is year 2000. What has changed? In an informal but fairly rigorous survey, I contacted large and small publishers across the country in order to determine what kinds of critical books had been published on Canadian literature over the past five years.¹ I was not surprised to discover that during this period there had been a dramatic decrease in the production of such works, especially over the past three years,² and that many companies had completely sworn off publishing Canadian criticism. For example, the two most active publishers of Canadian criticism — ECW Press and University of Toronto Press — had substantially decreased their publishing programs in this area, while the University of British Columbia Press had decided not to publish any Canadian criticism at all. Either academics are writing fewer books about Canadian literature than they once did because their interest is decreasing, or they are writing fewer books because they understand, whether implicitly or explicitly, that publishers are increasingly hesitant to publish such works.

The cultural implications of this material shift in the sheer quantity of criticism being published are significant: publishers are unreceptive to books about Canadian literature. Critics get the message and turn their

attention elsewhere. They develop new courses and research interests based on their pursuit of publication in areas that publishers are willing to support. Fewer courses are offered in the field of Canadian literature. Because fewer courses are offered, the topic seems to be more esoteric and specialized. General interest in the topic falls off. As interest falls off, course offerings are further reduced. It no longer seems necessary to make the study of Canadian literature compulsory, as it now is at many institutions. When it is no longer compulsory, the need for staff in the field decreases. As demand for specialists in Canadian literature declines the curricular areas connected with the study of Canadian literature come to be seen as a bad investment for graduate students in terms of their future job potential. The graduate students stop taking courses in the field and turn to other dissertation areas. Even fewer books of Canadian criticism are written. New book production in other subject areas develops in response to shifting market demand and follows the path of least material resistance.

These shifting patterns of production give rise to new discursive trends divorced from the ideological models and values conventionally associated with the basic act of creating critical talk about Canadian literature. It doesn't matter what the talk is ultimately about. It only matters that less talk decreases value. As value decreases, the topic starts to vanish. It is no longer talked about. Fewer resources are allocated to its sustenance. Its value as a cultural commodity diminishes further. Eventually, the field dries up completely, or is dramatically reduced in its perceived impact and importance. The bottom line? If there is indeed a relation between the study of a national literature (in whatever forms) and the perception of the nation, then the downturn in publishing of Canadian criticism will come to affect actual perceptions of the country and the actual expression of various forms of consciousness about Canada as a place, a context, a community, a confluence of signs. Decreases in the production of Canadian criticism shift the cultural paradigms by substituting more broadly marketable cultural objects for more esoteric objects aligned with the discourse of nation as it is disseminated through critical acts. This is the final irony facing the Canadian publishing industry, an industry that had its origins in the post-Massey Commission emphasis on the importance of developing an indigenous publishing culture that could support and disseminate national value.

I think most people who are involved in the study of Canadian literature perceive some shift in publishing patterns along the lines of what I describe above. But I don't think most understand the actual material

conditions that have caused this shift or how these conditions palpably affect the ways in which publishers evaluate the market potential of scholarly books (in this case, scholarly books devoted to Canadian literature). As Imre Szeman observes, an analysis of these material conditions of production would try “to understand the processes of literary and cultural transubstantiation: the processes by which an *object* composed of glue, paper, and ink, the product of printing presses, literary circles, and social machines of influence and reputation, all organized in particular ways given the social, historical, and political weightiness of every epoch, is mystically transformed from a state of material solidity into the *spirit* of the text with which criticism has alone typically wanted to commune” (3).

Drawing on the work of French philosopher Régis Debray, Szeman notes that materialist criticism focuses on “the structures that form the conditions of possibility of literature and culture in any given historical moment” (6) in order to show that particular cultural moments and values are the result of “a change in the system of manufacture/circulation/storage of signs” (Debray 19). For Debray, materialist criticism involves a process of “mediology” through which we see “the skeletal structure beneath the flesh ... the material bases of systems of inscription” (20). Debray explains this discipline of mediology another way when he argues that in order to understand the opus one must “look toward its *operation*,” and that in order to understand the operation, one must “look toward the *equipment* or *apparatus*” that allow the operation and the opus to function and gain or lose cultural value (26). To look strictly at the end-product of scholarly dissemination — in this case, books of English-Canadian literary criticism — is to miss the fact that the product itself is formed through material turmoil and is in many ways a metaphor of this turmoil: “There is conflict, sound and fury, not around or after, in the circumstances, but in the very process, informing it *from the inside*. ... Every transmission is a combat, against noise, against inertia, against the other transmitters, and even — especially — against the addressees” (45).

Most commentary on Canadian criticism does not consider the factors accounting for this material solidity, just as most academics really don’t consider the issue of profit or loss associated with the production of the scholarly book as a central factor in the evaluation of the publishability of their scholarly work. Yet it is precisely because of factors involving profit or loss and actual material risk that Canadian criticism (call it the spirit of the Canadian critical text) is declining. I think the editors of *SCL/ÉLC* wanted to focus attention on some of these material issues when they decided to publish a special issue entitled “Canadian Lit-

erature and the Business of Publishing.” I also think they were inevitably concerned with establishing what Szeman calls “a politics and epistemology that arise out of ‘an understanding of socioeconomic determination’” (5). Here Szeman is quoting from Peter Hitchcock, who asserts that “it is axiomatic that materialism begins from an understanding of socioeconomic determination in the production and reproduction of human existence” (22). Hitchcock is referring, in part, to the cultural reproduction of this existence through the materiality of texts.

Since I’ve been involved in exactly this kind of socioeconomic determination since 1975 as the co-publisher of ECW Press and co-editor of *Essays on Canadian Writing*, I thought it might be useful to set down some of my thoughts concerning the material conditions of publishing Canadian literary criticism today. I think it would be fair to say that ECW has probably published more books about Canadian literature than any other press. It is also true that we hardly publish any Canadian criticism these days. So what happened?

Instead of theorizing about this in some kind of abstract way, I propose a simple test. I am going to give you the details concerning a book that was recently published by ECW, and you can decide whether, if you were the publisher, you would also have published the book, in the end. Then we can discuss the implications of publishing or not publishing the title.

The book in question is *The Theatre of Form and the Production of Meaning: Contemporary Canadian Dramaturgies*, by Ric Knowles, who is also the editor of *Canadian Theatre Review* and *Modern Drama* and Professor of Drama at the University of Guelph. Ric has graciously allowed his work and some normally confidential financial details to be used for the purposes of this exercise, and I am grateful to him for this opportunity.

The story really begins with my sense of Ric Knowles as a scholar. I had been following his work off and on for years. When I came to edit *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value* (1991) I invited Ric to contribute an essay, and he wrote a fine piece entitled “Voices (off): Deconstructing the Modern English-Canadian Dramatic Canon.” So my editorial relationship with him precedes the conclusion I reached in *Making It Real* by at least five years. Another way of saying this is that we got to know each other at a time when Canadian criticism was still riding high, so to speak. And it is significant that the context for our first real editorial collaboration was a book on Canadian literary value published by University of Toronto Press in the early 1990s.

Over the next few years Ric and I talked about the possibility of ECW publishing his next book. So when he finally announced in June

1998 that he was close to completing the manuscript of what would become *The Theatre of Form*, I had to listen. It was apparently a study of how dramatic forms shaped social conventions. Ric indicated that he would examine Canadian dramatic structures in a wide range of contemporary plays, “with a look at inherited naturalistic and modernist forms based, respectively, on time and space.” I am quoting from the catalogue copy here, and, reading it over, it strikes me as a perfect example of the kind of language guaranteed to make very few people buy this book, because it keys into the kind of specialized discourse that prompts most people outside academia to believe they will not understand Ric’s work, which is in fact quite accessible. We must have asked Ric to help us write this catalogue copy, and, hearing an echo of some fading post-structural utterance, he must have penned these pre-millennial lines in order to address an imagined audience that had mainly ceased to exist.

Nevertheless, I was pretty happy that Ric had decided to send us his work. Or was I? I had been encouraging Ric for years, so I could hardly turn to him and say how much the climate had changed, and how reluctant we were to publish Canadian criticism because over the past few years it had turned into a major money-losing proposition. For one thing, government cutbacks had reduced library budgets; a major source of income for scholarly book sales had been dramatically hacked. Some universities allowed professors a certain book budget, but a lot of those allowances had been hit as well. And a major source of funding — the Aid to Scholarly Publications Programme (ASPP) — which was designed to provide publishers with grants to offset the high cost of publishing scholarly work, had tightened its eligibility requirements and had imposed a new cap on potential funding, so that publishers who did get grants were getting less money than they did a few years earlier.

Perhaps more important was the fact that fewer people were buying scholarly books, while the disappearance of small independent bookstores meant that the fate of scholarly titles was largely in the hands of buyers for the large chains — those few individuals who really had the power to decide how many copies of a title would be taken by the chain outlets across the country. How much did these buyers know about Canadian drama? They ordered what people would buy, but people could only buy what they were offered by buyers who claimed to know what people would buy — a vicious circle that left little entry point for studies of Canadian drama. If one of these buyers miraculously took an interest in Ric’s book and placed an order for, say, 500 copies for stores from coast to coast, we would be faced with a real dilemma. We would be reluctant

not to fill the order, because then Chapters or Indigo would say ECW was unresponsive to their needs; then they would be more cautious about placing their faith in us in the future. However, if we fulfilled the order in the hope that the buyer was right and the book would sell the copies specified on the chain store's order, we would have to print 500 copies more than I had originally anticipated printing, at an additional cost of about \$3000. If the chain store did not sell the books, it could simply return them and reverse its initial payment to ECW; we, on the other hand, would be stuck with a printing bill we had incurred to satisfy the demands of this buyer and with inventory we couldn't sell.³ Luckily, or perhaps unluckily, no such order was placed in the case of Ric's book.

I considered these factors and then turned to our own operation. ECW was pursuing more and more trade oriented titles, not only to stay afloat (and even pay the owners a meagre, sporadic salary after no salary for 20 years) but also to make enough profit to support those works that were valuable but traditional money-losers: poetry and fiction. If we agreed to publish Ric's book, it would mean that some of our resources would have to be devoted to editing it, producing it, marketing it, distributing it, and generally keeping track of it.

There were a lot of questions to ask. Would it displace a book of poetry or fiction? Was it eligible for funding by the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council? Would it take our resources away from producing a more profitable book? Who would do the editing? (Scholarly works demand a certain kind of editor and a high level of specialization.) How much would the editor charge, and was anyone available? How long would it take to edit? Were there legal issues involved? Were there rights and permissions questions, and if so, had they been resolved? Where was the paperwork? How much would we have to pay for cover design? Who would do the design? Was there any way we could give this book a popular and less scholarly look? Would we have to buy artwork or illustrations? What would it cost? But here was the biggest question: What was this book really about?

I had only the vaguest idea. All I had was a letter from Ric, a brief outline, and hazy memories of various conversations over the years. No manuscript. Ric's own description of the book contained terms that made me wary as a publisher, terms like "dialogic monologue" and "quantum dramaturgy." Besides, some of the material had already been published in article form, and that could cause problems with the ASPP, who would not fund a title in which more than 30 percent of the work had been previously published. This was a strange policy that I never really under-

stood. It seemed to imply that because scholarly work was worthy enough to be previously published in article form, it was somehow not worthy of being funded if it became part of a scholarly book. Fortunately Ric knew this, and he cheerfully informed me that “My own assessment is that the total previously published in any form is well under 30 percent.” Well, that was hopeful. But still, we would have to deal with the ASPP, and that was always a very slow and cumbersome process. More on this later.

Normally, another question that had to be considered was whether the author would be a pain to deal with. I could tell you stories. However, I knew Ric would be fine. He still seemed relatively sane, although there was a sentence in one of his early letters that worried me. In describing the book, he had written, “I think the book would be of interest to anyone teaching or studying Canadian drama and theatre (it ranges widely over a large body of plays that are frequently taught), but also Canadian Literature more generally.” Here Ric indicated that he had slightly lost touch with reality. I tried to calculate how many people were actually teaching Canadian drama and theatre right across the country. Ten? Twenty? *Maybe* thirty. So was this the audience on the drama and theatre side? If it was, then we could expect sales of about five copies to this group. Although Ric thought the book would also be of interest to people teaching CanLit, I knew that it was also very difficult to get them to buy books of criticism, and especially difficult to get them to buy books about Canadian drama. Most Canadian literature scholars know very little about Canadian drama and show even less interest in reading commentary on it. I figured we might sell another ten copies to this group. Then there would be people (non-academics) who were generally interested in the topic, and they might buy another fifty. On top of those sales, I projected sales to university and high school libraries at about 100 copies, with another 50 copies going to drama groups and foreign sales. I added up my projected sales numbers and came up with a potential total sale of 215 copies and rounded that out to 250.

At this point I sat back and thought about how familiar this situation seemed. We had the opportunity to publish what I thought would be a very strong book by an excellent scholar on a topic that certainly deserved more critical attention. On the other hand, we stood to lose a fair bit of money if we went ahead and did the book without any kind of government or institutional support. Here’s how I costed the book without any funding:

I thought the market would bear a maximum price of \$19.95 in paper for this title. It would be of average length (about 250 pages), and

most buyers would start to express strong resistance over \$20, so I decided to cost it at \$19.95. The average bookstore discount was about 45 percent (\$8.37), which meant that every time one of Ric's books was sold our distributor (General Publishing) would receive \$11.58 after the discount. Then, the distributor and our sales team (Literary Press Group) would retain an additional 24 percent for sales, distribution, and shipping. That subtracted another \$2.77, which left us with \$8.81 ($\$11.58 - \$2.77 = \8.81). From this figure, we had to further subtract Ric's royalty payments, which in this case would be quite small: 7 percent of net on the first 5000 copies sold. Seven percent of \$8.81 would be 61 cents per copy, so that left us with \$8.20.

Now I had to figure out whether that \$8.20 would cover the cost of producing the book. I imagined the smallest possible print run — 500 copies — and went to several printers for quotations. The lowest price I received was from AGMV Marquis in Quebec. They wanted \$5.90 per unit, excluding taxes, if applicable (we don't pay QST, just GST, and it's refundable against other GST we collect, so I've calculated the tax at zero). I subtracted this figure from the \$8.20 I had been left with after sales and distribution, and came up with \$2.30 left per copy.

\$2.30. This was the amount that would have to cover the cost of editing, typesetting, proofreading, designing, and promoting the book. Since I figured I could sell 250 copies max, this meant that I had \$575 to cover all of these costs ($250 \times \$2.30 = \575). How did these costs add up? Just as follows:

Editing	\$2500
Typesetting	\$1500 (at 250 pages x \$6 per page)
Proofreading	\$350 (at 10 pages per hour x \$14 per hour, or 25 x \$14 = \$350)
Design	\$1170 (cover design \$650; cover scans/proofs \$200, artwork rights \$320)
Promotion	\$500 (a token amount)
SUBTOTAL	\$6020

To this subtotal, I had to add our overhead costs, usually calculated at roughly 30 percent of the pre-press costs.⁴ This figure is intended to account for all of those costs directly and indirectly associated with the book and the maintenance of the publishing business: couriers; photocopying; office supplies; office cleaning and maintenance; rent; telephone; postage; heat; light; taxes; insurance; accounting fees; legal fees; bank fees and charges; office staff salaries; plus web hosting, display, and maintenance

charges. So I took 30 percent of \$6020 (\$1806) and added it to that subtotal for a grand total of \$7826.

If you are following this calculation, you will see that even before the book was published, even before we accepted it for publication, I knew that it had the potential to lose \$7251 (\$7826 - \$575), and that was with a very low allowance for overhead. Obviously if we went ahead and published every book submitted to the press under these circumstances, we would soon be bankrupt. What was the solution?

This is where the Aid to Scholarly Publications Programme comes in. This organization, which is run under the umbrella of the Humanities and Social Sciences Federation of Canada, receives annual funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). Its mandate is to help offset the high costs associated with publishing scholarly books such as Ric's. The ASPP has in place an evaluation process that assists in the determination of which books are of sufficient scholarly merit to warrant funding. Merit is assessed through vetting of the completed manuscript, which can be evaluated only after the ASPP has determined that it meets its eligibility requirements. In some cases, the publisher is also permitted to submit an evaluation from an external assessor to the ASPP, and this evaluation is considered along with the reports commissioned directly by the ASPP.

This important grant, which currently provides a set subsidy of \$7000 per title, used to be even more important since previously it was based on production deficits, and there was a higher ceiling (which was \$9200 up to April 1996). This reduction in the maximum grant means that publishers have to be even more careful about costing their books and about taking on scholarly projects that might demand more editing (or higher production costs) than usual. Perhaps more ominous is the fact that the base funding provided by SSHRC to the ASPP was gradually phased out starting in 1995 (because the federations supporting the ASPP were identified by a government policy as lobby groups and therefore ineligible for operating funds). This reduced the base funding from \$633,300 in 1995-96 to zero in 1998-99, a situation made even worse by continuing cutbacks to the ASPP administrative funds. As a result, the ASPP finds itself with a much smaller budget than it had in 1994. It has had to introduce a system of funding quotas, thus reducing the number of titles that can be funded each year, and it has had to decrease administrative staff, resulting in longer delays in terms of assessment, payment, and so on. The negative impact of these changes on the ASPP directly

affects the publication of scholarly books and inevitably makes publishers more hesitant about supporting them, since there is less chance of obtaining higher funding today than there was five years ago; yet the cost of producing books has risen.

Regardless of the reduced fortunes of the ASPP, I could see that if Ric's manuscript could swing that grant, it would virtually eliminate my projected deficit of \$7251. So I did what the majority of Canadian publishers do under the circumstances: I told the author that publication would have to be conditional upon receipt of an ASPP grant. Ric agreed, and we prepared ourselves for the arduous process of submitting the book for ASPP funding.

At this point you may be wondering why we would bother doing this, since you have seen that even if Ric did get the grant, we would still not make a profit. We would only break even. Why then would we even bother proceeding? Well, one factor not taken into account in calculating the potential revenues for the book would be other sources of government funding. Since ECW benefitted from its participation in the Block Grant programs of both the Ontario Arts Council (OAC) and the Canada Council, it could hope to receive about another \$3000 in compensation for publishing this title.⁵ This meant that even if we published ten such titles in a year, the entire profit from the enterprise would be \$30,000 — hardly enough to keep the business afloat, and certainly not enough to support all those other titles that were not eligible for ASPP grants — the poetry and fiction that we had to publish in order to be eligible for participation in the Block Grant programs in the first place.

This was an interesting kind of Catch-22: in order to get government funding for publishing culturally valuable books, one had to engage in the business of publishing what were almost always money-losing books. If one stopped publishing those culturally valuable works and concentrated on producing more commercial titles, the Canada Council and the OAC would withdraw their funding and so imperil the publisher for pursuing commercially viable titles, just as they would withhold funding from books with high print runs, on the assumption that such print runs were an indication of potential commercial success (even though the publisher might just have been optimistically gambling on success). The ASPP has a particularly interesting version of this rule: even if a book is ruled eligible for funding, it will not be supported if the publisher prints more than 3,000 copies. Think about that. You could print 7,000 copies of a scholarly title that might actually sell well and bring attention and

credibility to its author, but you know that by doing that you are killing the grant. So instead of publishing the real number you think the book can sell (which of course involves taking a considerable risk) you only publish the maximum number allowed by the ASPP because you know you will certainly get in funding what you might have gained in sales. But who gets hurt by this? The author, who is losing out on royalties on all those extra copies that might have been sold if the ASPP did not have this kind of cap on print runs.

In any case, Ric's book was a very intelligent and committed book, but it was not going to sell a lot, and we needed that grant. He submitted the manuscript to us in June 1998. It was a study of a variety of dramatic forms, held together by Ric's interest in the material conditions of the production and reception of those forms as sites "for the social negotiation of cultural values," or what the title of his book called "the production of meaning." I found it interesting that in many ways Ric was exploring — through dramatic structures and performative modes of exchange — many of the questions concerning the relation between material and cultural value that I had had to raise in considering his book for publication. He was asking what cultural work was done by different dramatic forms, and I was asking what cultural work would be done by publishing *his* scholarly form. Ric quoted from Herbert Blau in his attempt to clarify the relation between form and meaning as "a deeper contestation with the ideological powers behind the text" (17).

One of the ideological powers behind most Canadian scholarly texts is the conception of eligibility — and a parallel notion of scholarly value — embodied in the structure and process of manuscript evaluation and funding carried out by the ASPP and other funding agencies (see Lecker, "Canada Council"). In our quest to obtain this funding, we entered into the ideological process and had to manage Ric's manuscript according to the ASPP's established form of manuscript submission and assessment. The very necessity of engaging in this process of *submission* indicated that we had become involved in a formal relation that was primarily concerned with the evaluation and transmission of textual power as a displaced form of social and institutional authority. This is why Debray asserts that cultural products such as books can be seen as "personified social organizations, historically structured" (45).

We began to look for an external assessor, whom we found in July. By August, we had the necessary copies of the manuscript collected and the ASPP registration forms completed. We made our submission to the

organization on 22 August. On 8 October, the ASPP acknowledged receipt of our application. By the end of 1998 we had received our reader's report, and in January of 1999 we sent it to the ASPP.

Understandably, Ric wanted to know what was going on, as did we. So in January 1999 we wrote to the ASPP to ask about the status of our application. We were told that the evaluation was in process. The readers' reports were sent to us later that month, and Ric responded to the three readers' reports, which were all positive. Then, in April 1999, we received notice that the ASPP Committee had approved "in principle" a publishing subsidy for the work, and were told that the grant would be paid when six copies of the printed book were sent to the ASPP with a formal request for payment.

Now we had to commit our resources to the production of *The Theatre of Form*. We signed our contract with Ric and entered the production phase immediately. The book was published in December 1999. The actual printing cost was \$6.13 per unit (a bit less than I had projected) but the typesetting bill was higher (\$2188 versus \$1500 because the book turned out to be 288 pages instead of 250 and because it required some unanticipated corrections). In the end, then, printing was \$354 less than I had projected, but typesetting was \$668 more, so the total I had to add to my deficit was \$314 (\$668 - \$354). I added that to the original calculation of my deficit (\$7251) and came up with a final deficit figure of \$7565. This was the figure I would have to receive from the ASPP if I hoped to break even, but because their cap was \$7000, I knew that I would be losing at least \$565 from the start, and that was a best-case scenario.

Meanwhile, we had to pay our bills, even though we had not seen any money from sales or any funding from the ASPP, who received their six required copies on 3 February 2000. They acknowledged receipt of the book on 14 February and wrote that "editors have been generally pleased with ASPP's new procedure of processing payment of books every two months compared to three times a year in the past." Since it was early February, this led me to assume that we might actually see the funding by the end of April 2000. But there was also a caution in the ASPP letter: "New fiscal year funds are never made available by SSHRCC, to us, before the month of May. Please be assured that your file will be forwarded to our committee in the first batch of approvals for the fiscal year 2000." Because we had been told that payments were made every two months, I didn't think about this warning much; I just assumed that payment would reach us some time in April. When that didn't happen

by the end of April, we wrote to the ASPP to inquire about the status of the payment. The response was as follows: “Normally you would have received disbursement by now, however we are still waiting for our funding from SSHRCC.” The ASPP representative noted that payment within two months only happened “when funds are made available.”

The month of May passed. By the middle of June, I was really pressed for the money, since other bills had come up in connection with other new titles that had to be produced.⁶ At this point, I wrote to Professor Judith Herz, the president of the ASPP management board, and outlined my concerns. On 28 June she responded by saying, “the money from SSHRC that was supposed to get to the Programme in May will arrive within the next ten days and ECW will get its cheque within a few weeks of that date. As for the larger issue: the Programme operates within the SSHRC fiscal year, which means that a press has a better chance of getting paid quickly if its invoices are submitted before Christmas, and, of course, nothing can be paid until the press submits a copy plus invoice. Since yours was submitted in February, the delay is not really 19 months, but, assuming you’ll get the payment in mid July, 5 months.” Technically, Professor Herz was correct, but the bottom line was that by July 2000 (as I write) 23 months had passed since the manuscript was originally submitted to the ASPP.

I’ve spent a considerable amount of space on this ASPP business in order to point out some of the real cash flow problems faced by Canadian publishers even in connection with scholarly titles that are fortunate enough to be funded. As I pointed out in my letter to Herz: “If I had known that funding would be delayed in this way, I would not have published the work.” I added that “ironically, the people the ASPP is there to help (the scholars, the scholarly publishers) are being hurt by the delay in funding, not aided.” Of course it is not particularly surprising to discover that a quasi-government agency has bureaucratic regulations that make it slow-moving and less responsive than might be desirable in the best of all possible worlds. The point is that our understanding of this level of response does nothing to alleviate the situation faced by publishers, who must either pay their bills or go out of business.

Meanwhile, there is the author. How has Ric Knowles been served by this process? He’s a pretty savvy scholar, and he more or less knew what to expect. For example, when we asked him to obtain permission to reproduce eight lines from John Krizanc’s *The Half of It*, published by Anansi and controlled by Stoddart Publishing, Ric diligently wrote to request permission. Stoddart responded by requesting \$50 in licensing

fees. Ric's answer to this request sums up many of the arguments I have been making. He wrote to Stoddart:

I wonder if it might be possible, for the following reasons, to waive the \$50 fee in this instance:

- 1) As you know, mine will be an academic book with a relatively small print run (500-700 copies @19.50), and the passage quoted takes up a very small (less than 2-page) portion of the book's 290 pages. As you can work out from this, the total royalties from sales, if any, will be significantly less than the \$50 fee.
- 2) In addition to this, of course, the book will be used in designing courses on Canadian Drama, and therefore will most likely have the effects of increasing sales for the plays it discusses and quotes — including *The Half of It*.
- 3) Finally, and perhaps more significantly, I wrote the Afterword to *The Half of It*, at Stoddart's request and that of the author, for which I was not paid a fee or given royalties.

Ric concluded his letter to Stoddart by observing that “if I were charged such a fee for every passage I quote in the book, the book could never have been published.”

The fee was waived. The book was published. We held a small launch for Ric at Theatrebooks in Toronto and sent out about 30 copies of the finished product to several publications for review. In May of 2000 Ric received his first royalties for *The Theatre of Form*. For the period ending 31 December 1999, he received \$175.12, based on a sale of 209 copies. This would represent the shipment of all back orders on hand for this title at the time of its publication in late 1999, so the figure is not really indicative of how the book will do on a long-term basis. To determine that, one has to turn to the life-to-date sales figures for the book, those that calculate its sales from publication to the present. As it turns out, Ric's book has sold a total of 382 units, or 173 copies between January and June 2000. This is actually not too bad, and it now looks like we might almost break even on this title in the end. The idea would be to sell out the run of 500 copies, which could happen in this case. But you have to remember that the figure of 382 units sold is still prior to returns. In other words, the bookstores that are currently stocking Ric's book may decide to return copies, and such returns would reduce the overall sale number, further increasing our loss.

Now you are at the point where you can answer my earlier question: Would you publish this book? Most people with any eye for the bottom

line would immediately refuse it, for truly there is little profit to be made, and when one considers the time spent on all the details, it really begins to look like a debatable project. Still, ECW published this because we believed in the author, believed he had something important to say, and because we come from a tradition of publishing books about Canadian writing, even if we are doing far fewer now than we once did. But it would have been very easy to tip the balance against publishing *The Theatre of Form*. The major factor here would be any shift in Canada Council (or Ontario Arts Council) eligibility requirements concerning titles published with ASPP funding. At the present, both arts councils will still consider books funded in this way to be eligible. However, they recognize that this is a kind of double funding, and have raised the prospect of ruling such titles ineligible for submission. If this happens, the roughly \$3000 I had earlier indicated as revenue from these two sources would disappear, and the deficit would rise accordingly. Such a shift in funding policies — which to me seems inevitable — would have a dramatic impact on the business of scholarly publishing in Canada, for it would have the net effect of reducing the ASPP grant — now capped at \$7000 — by a further \$3000. Another way of saying this is that without Canada Council funding the ASPP subvention of \$7000 would simply not be enough to cover the costs of production.

One might argue that the problem with my observations here is that they are based on an outmoded model of book production and marketing. Why shouldn't Ric just publish his book on the web? Why do we have to spend so much time and money making the book look nice? Why don't we ask the author to assume the responsibility of submitting typeset galleys, as they often do in the sciences?

First, if every author published his/her book on the web, there would not be much use for bookstores. It's bad enough that the chains have displaced the independents, but if the web displaces the chains, then what will we have to hold? The bookstores will disappear, and we will be in virtual bookland. There are strong indications that such disappearances will increase over the coming years as e-books begin to replace paper books, but that doesn't mean I have to contribute to this demise.

Second, yes, we could have cut corners in making the book. But a press has to maintain certain standards of quality if it is going to be recognized by buyers and potential authors, not to mention the fact that, once again, the press is dependent on arts council funding, and one of the factors considered in the evaluation of publishing houses is the excellence of their book editing, design, and production. So cutting back on the cost

of Ric's book would have resulted in a shoddier product, which would have reduced our funding and compromised the future of the press.

Third, we don't ask authors to assume the responsibility of submitting typeset galleys because that would be considered financial contribution in kind, and might likely affect our eligibility status with the funding agencies, not to mention the fact that in the humanities, at least, typesetting your own pages is still tinged with the idea of vanity publishing.

In the process of preparing this article I asked Ric a number of questions concerning his own view of the book's history. I asked him if he had considered other publishers, and why he had initially come to ECW. He responded:

I sent inquiries (while still writing the book) to the major theatre publishers outside Canada (Routledge, Cambridge UK, Michigan), in full knowledge that they couldn't care less about things Canadian, but on the principle that they should. They all sent very nice letters back saying that it wouldn't fit their list, but that I shouldn't take this as a comment on the substance of the proposal, which they thought was excellent. (Incidentally, I was already under contract with Cambridge UK to write another book that, because it *isn't* on a Canadian topic, was obviously considered to be ok: they approached me, not the other way around.) I then brought the book to you because a) you had told me at one point you'd be interested; b) I thought you'd do a good job—I like the production values of ECW books; and c) I thought you'd do it quickly (vs., say, U of T Press, who had also asked me if they could see it). All three assumptions turned out to be correct.

Ric pointed out — accurately I think — that even larger publishers such as University of Toronto Press “are working with a set of material constraints that is similar [to ECW's] but possibly even more confining.” Some of these constraints cause delays in the production process, and, as Ric says, “my book is about *contemporary* drama (and theatre), and the ASPP timetables and other refereeing processes such as those at U of T almost guarantee that a book will be out of date by the time it appears.”

I asked Ric what he would have done if we had not been able to secure the ASPP grant. He said that “Playwrights Canada told me that if you couldn't publish the book they would. I don't know how they would have paid for it, but they seemed to feel the book was important enough that it should appear.” He made some crucial observations about the ASPP evaluation procedures:

I have a number of concerns about the ASPP process. The main concern is that unlike my colleagues who don't work in Canadian, it is not possible for me or other Canadianists to publish as a book a collection of previously published articles, since no publisher can afford to produce scholarly books on Canadian subjects without ASPP support, and ASPP has limits to the amount of previously published material that can be included. (This is in many ways ludicrous: "previously published" in the case of Canadian Theatre scholarship could well mean publication in a journal with a circulation of 200, maximum.) It isn't entirely incidental that the book I'm now under contract to write is with a non-Canadian press on a non-Canadian topic (though I'll be trying to slip in as much Canadian content as I can, under the watchful eye of the Cambridge regents).

Finally, I asked Ric whether he felt there were more or fewer books published in his area of expertise these days. In many ways, his response confirms the central point I have attempted to make in this paper:

There have never been many book-length works about Canadian drama and theatre, and there still aren't (though there are quite a few plays published). If there is a decline in numbers, it is probably attributable primarily to two things: 1) the loss of a generation of scholars to cutbacks (we don't have junior or even mid-career people with institutional support to edit our journals, much less publish books); and 2) the loss of any kind of governmental or cultural interest in or support for Canadian publishing, especially scholarly publishing.

That's more or less it in a nutshell . . . Except for the call to the bookstores. At this point in my writing of this paper I decided to see how Ric's book had fared with the one independent local bookstore committed to CanLit, the local Indigo and Chapters, and their online stores. After all, the reception of *The Theatre of Form* by the actual marketplace was perhaps the best indication of its current material status and value.

First, I called the Double Hook, a store that has almost single-handedly preserved the independent selling of Canadian literary titles in Montreal for many, many years. Spoke to a nice woman who asked me if the author was Canadian and added, "I should know, but there are a lot of them you know." It turns out that the store had the title in February but didn't have it now (July). However, she offered to reorder it and promised it would come in about ten days. Then she added a comment about Ric's book: "It's rather particular. It's not a wide audience kind of thing, but people want them anyway."

Second, I called Indigo. Got a recording. Pressed 1 for English, and then 0 to speak to a staff member. Someone answered immediately. I made my request. She consulted the computer. “Hold the line, we may have one copy in stock.” Muzak. Another person picked up. I repeated the title. She had to check on the shelf (the computer was showing only one copy in the store). Muzak. She came back. “Can you hold again? It’s way down at the other end of the store, I think.” Sure, I’ll hold. She returned: “Sorry, it’s just not around. It may be in the back, or it hasn’t been processed by our computer, or whatever.” Hmmm. Whatever.

Third, the call to Chapters. Line busy. To be honest, I expected this. I have never found this line *not* busy.

Fourth, Indigo online. I found it there, but there was no information on the title, and they are selling it for \$17.95, a discount of \$2. This is hopeful, but wouldn’t potential buyers want to know something about a book they couldn’t see or touch?

Fifth, Chapters online. Yup, Chapters has it, but they say their regular price is \$30.95, and their “sale price” is \$26.30, for a “saving” of \$4.65, even though the book was published at a list price of \$19.95, which is clearly printed on the book. So, you can buy it at Chapters for \$8.35 more than at Indigo, but don’t forget to add taxes and shipping. With regular shipping and Goods and Services Tax (GST) the final Indigo price is \$24.50. With regular shipping and GST the final Chapters price is \$31.88.

I like the way Chapters calculates my “savings.” First, they jack up the price of the book by more than 50 percent, then they give me a “saving” of \$4.65 on the jacked up price, even though that price is still 25 percent over the list price of the book. Then they charge me shipping and taxes based on that inflated price. I wrote to Chapters about this. My message to their online customer service department read: “I see that you are selling this book for \$30.95 less a discount of \$4.65 for a sale price of \$26.30. Is this price correct? I have a copy of the book in front of me, and the price printed on the back cover is \$19.95. Please explain the discrepancy. Thanks.” I received no response.

You will recall the pains I was at to price this book competitively, knowing that it had to stand out and be inviting to a limited audience in terms of quality and price. Well, Chapters had pretty well blown that strategy away. But the bottom line was really this. Short of heading off to a local library to see Ric’s book, I would be very unlikely to find it in any bookstore in the Montreal area, and this says something about scholarly publishing in Canada today. The case of Ric Knowles’s *The Theatre of Form* — in all its material glory — is really a metaphor of what is hap-

pening to the business of publishing Canadian criticism today. Other such stories abound.

To get an even more immediate sense of how much has changed over just the past year, at least for ECW, it might help to close with a brief description of a manuscript that we are currently considering for publication, one that is very similar in size and sales potential to Ric's book. A few months ago Professor W.J. Keith sent us a study he had completed on The New Age series, Hugh Hood's twelve-volume novel epic about Canada and its coming of age, an epic that is certainly the Canadian version of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* or Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time*. ECW had several obvious interests in supporting this critical title: 1) we had published Hugh's own short fiction, and had published a number of volumes in the New Age series; 2) Bill Keith had written many articles on Hugh's work, and he was one of our most prominent author-critics; 3) somebody had to recognize the importance of The New Age series, especially because this was the year in which this monumental project would be completed; 4) I myself had written about Hugh's work when I first started out as an academic, so I felt a certain allegiance to his project, tied to personal nostalgia; 5) my partner, Jack David, also had a strong interest in Hugh's work, and had represented him in several business transactions over the years.

Jack sent me the manuscript and asked me what I thought we should do. I reminded him that we had still not received the grant for Ric's book, and asked if he was willing to go through that again. I could sense the hesitation at his end, but also his own desire to satisfy what he saw as ECW's historical responsibility to two of its longest-standing authors. Meanwhile, other books and book proposals were being submitted to the press in the same week as Bill's manuscript arrived: a novel for ten-year-olds about Sony's new PlayStation2; a celebrity biography of Regis Philbin; a biography of Sarah Jessica Parker; a proposal for a book on DJ culture and turntablism; a list of potential writers to complete a book-length profile on sports talk show host Jim Rome; an offer to grant us distribution rights for a full-color picture book on the wrestling babe called Sable; research for a book on female gladiators; the signed contract for a book on a Jewish Elvis called Schmelvis (with the promise of a movie tie-in); another proposal for how robots will become part of our daily lives; a thriller about NASDAQ subterfuge; a proposal for a book-length interview with Kid Rock; a biography/archive of Jimi Hendrix. In the same week, I was working on a book of fan stories about the Dave Matthews Band, a biography of Tom Waits, the cover design for a photo bio of the Dixie

Chicks, photo selections for a book on Jennifer Lopez, and a travel guide to Ottawa. This is all true. At the same time, the press was evaluating submissions of poetry and fiction manuscripts at the rate of about three a day. We had a strong sense of future growth, but we also had some short term cash flow problems, mainly because the money-making titles we hoped we were developing now would not really produce revenue for eight months to a year. If we undertook to publish Bill's book ... Well, now you know the pros and cons.

As I write, no final decision has been made about Bill's book. But one thing is clear: it comes at a time when the press is forced to turn toward more popular books in order to stay afloat, and in order to support the annual publication of about seven works of poetry and fiction. Ric's study was the only book of criticism we published in 1999. Has the business of publishing Canadian literature changed over the past five years? You bet.

EPILOGUE

The first draft of this article was completed on 20 July 2000. A few days later, I went on a two-week vacation. By the time I returned on 6 August, two significant things had happened. First, Hugh Hood died. In many ways, his death brought me full circle to the origins of ECW Press, since the very first book we published was a collection of critical essays on Hugh's work entitled *Before the Flood*. Hugh was an astute businessman, and he understood the predicament of Canadian publishing in ways that few people could rival. This essay is for him.

While I was away, I wrote to the ASPP to ask about the Knowles cheque, since we had still not received it, and it was now August. I received this response on 3 August: "Your cheque is being mailed tomorrow without any further delay. There were unforeseen circumstances prompting the delay of payment. Please accept our apologies." The cheque is in the mail, apparently. Today it is 8 August. Still no sign of it. I called the ASPP to find out what was going on. "The cheque for \$5806 was mailed to you on Friday," I was told. \$5806? Now if you've been following me, you know what I said next: "Why \$5806? Isn't the book eligible for the maximum grant of \$7000?" There was a brief shuffling of papers at the other end. Well, yes, it would indeed appear that ECW was eligible for the maximum award. What happened? They didn't know, but they would get back to me. "But of course you understand," the ASPP representative

said, that even if we do send you the additional funding, it will probably take two weeks to issue to cheque. “Yes,” I said, “Of course. I understand completely. Thank you.” Goodbye.

NOTES

¹ I also consulted book reviews of English-Canadian critical works published in the *Canadian Forum*; *Canadian Literature*; *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews*; and *Essays on Canadian Writing*; as well as listings of critical publications in *Canadian Books in Print*, *Quill & Quire*, and several online sources. For the purposes of this exercise, I defined “critical works” broadly to mean books devoted entirely to Canadian literature, including critical studies of authors, texts, dramatic works, themes, ideas, literary periods, and genres; reference works devoted to Canadian literature; anthologies of criticism and edited collections of critical essays; edited collections of correspondence between literary critics; biographies of writers; memoirs authored by literary critics; interviews with authors; and literary histories. Of course there are other works published that have a Canadian component within a wider comparative field

² I counted 32 critical works in 1997, 15 in 1998, and 7 in 1999. At time of writing this paper (July 2000) I count one critical title to date, but the information for this year is of course incomplete.

³ Recently, Chapters has taken to returning unsold titles before any payment is made for books that are actually sold. This results in a debit to the publisher against sales revenue from the publisher’s distributor, which means that even if the publisher had earlier titles that had done well, the revenue from those titles would be offset by the debit resulting from the return, a situation which inevitably creates cash flow problems for publishers who have no way of predicting which titles will be returned, at what rate, and when.

⁴ ECW usually calculates its overhead in the 30 to 35 percent range; however, it is not uncommon to find this calculation in the 50 percent range. As far back as 1986, the ASPP calculated a reasonable overhead allowance to be 53 percent (Carley).

⁵ But such funding would by no means be guaranteed, since both Councils determined the amount of grants to be disbursed to publishers according to a formula that awarded bonus points for regional representation, elements of editorial excellence and design, cultural value, and marketing efforts, as well as the publisher’s apparent commitment to supporting first-time writers. Although Ric’s book could hope to achieve base funding from both arts council, the bonus point allocation that would be assigned to his book could never be determined in advance. For a more detailed commentary on the implications of the method of calculating the base and bonus grant components in the Canada Council’s Block Grant Program, see Lecker, “Canada Council.”

⁶ One of the people who read a draft version of this paper responded to this sentence in these words: “Really? It seems too small an amount to be really pressed for.” The fact is that \$7000 would have paid off an overdue printing bill that had been sitting in our files too long, and we had to pay that bill, since if we didn’t, the printer would not proceed with another job that promised to provide us with much-needed revenue, even if it was true that we would not see that revenue for about four months, since that was how long it would take to go from the printer, to the distributor, and then to the stores, and for the stores to send the distributor the money so that the distributor could eventually send us our portion. And this was all as-

suming that bookstore returns would not cut into that delayed revenue; but in fact, they might well eliminate it completely.

WORKS CITED

- Carley, Michael. "Recommendations of the Black-Herz-Carley Committee." Memo. Ottawa: Aid to Scholarly Publications Programme, 31 July 1986.
- Debray, Régis. *Media Manifestoes: On the Technological Transmission of Cultural Forms*. Trans. Eric Rauth. New York: Verso, 1996.
- Hitchcock, Peter. *Oscillate Wildly: Space, Body, and the Spirit of Millennial Materialism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999.
- Knowles, Ric. *The Theatre of Form and the Production of Meaning: Contemporary Canadian Dramaturgies*. Toronto: ECW, 1999.
- Lecker, Robert. *Making It Real: The Canonization of English-Canadian Literature*. Toronto: Anansi, 1995.
- . "The Canada Council's Block Grant Program and the Construction of Canadian Literature." *English Studies in Canada* 25:3-4 (1999): 439-69.
- Szeman, Imre. "Introduction: A Manifesto for Materialism." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 68 (1999): 1-18.