

# The Other Side of Utopia: The Opacity of Perception in the Poetry of the First Run of *Tish*, 1961-63

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# The Other Side of Utopia: The Opacity of Perception in the Poetry of the First Run of *Tish*, 1961-63

LANCE LA ROCQUE

TISH is articulate. Its poets are always obsessed with the possibilities of sound, and anxious to explore it meaningfully in relation to their position in the world: their stance in “circumstance.”<sup>1</sup>

— Frank Davey (13)

THE FIRST EDITORIAL RUN of *Tish* magazine, an impressive nineteen issues spanning 1961-63, is filled with ebullient, life-affirming statements about the role of poetry and the poet, about the possibility of community, and about recovering a non-appropriative relationship to the world. The manifesto-like statements made by the original editors, George Bowering, Frank Davey, David Dawson, Jamie Reid, and Fred Wah throughout the early issues of *Tish*, as the epigraph above suggests, reveal the poets at their most utopian, at least in intent. The original editors, and close associates David Cull and Lionel Kearns, collectively propose a new embodied poetic consciousness, illustrated by head editor Davey in the first issue of *Tish*:

I write poetry because I am alive — a mass of living sensation — and human — intelligently perceptive of sensation. Poetry is sensation. There is no such thing as an isolated image; poetry being sensation, image is omnipresent in a poem. *A successful poem is one into which the poet has put the most possible of his body.* (19: emphasis added)

This deceptively simple statement draws on the language of Black Mountain poets like Robert Duncan and Charles Olson. Olson’s conception of an embodied self — “Today: movement at any cost. Kinesthesia: beat (nik) the sense of whose end organs lie in the muscles, tendons, joints, and are stimulated by bodily tensions” (“Proprioception” 182) — offered liberation from a constellation of deeply interrelated threads. These threads include the mind/body divide begun by the ancients

— “We stay unaware how two means of discourse the Greeks appear to have invented hugely intermit our participation in our experience, and so prevent discovery” (“Human Universe” 163) —, the limiting territorialisation of the middle-class, post-war capitalist ‘individual’ (worked out, for example in *The Maximus Poems*<sup>2</sup>), and the technological repression of the flesh — “What we have suffered from is manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer and its reproducer, the voice, a removal by one, by two removes from its origin and its destination” (“Projective Verse” 153). Davey’s statement bears this political freight and its implicit politics, rejecting middle-class mores of Vancouver of the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>3</sup> The overall effect of *Tish* essays, statements, editorials, and reviews epitomizes the sense of hope for a more holistic body-self. This embodied sense of self arises out of and fits into an equally embodied sense of connection to place or what Olson called ‘locus.’ As Robert Creeley writes in “Charles Olson Over the Years,” “Olson’s immense use to Gloucester is the way he particularizes and locates the fact of Gloucester as a human community . . . Olson gives locus and name, and not just information but he particularizes; he lives here in the most actuating sense” “Panel”. The aim of the *Tish* editors’ poetry is to exercise a capacity to track, graph, or map, and relate intimately to the places out of which one emerges.

*The Maximus Poems*, as well as seminal essays like “Projective Verse,” provide a thorough template for *Tish*’s own commitment to recover the city of Vancouver, community, the magic of the body, the aura of everyday objects, and the electricity of language. And yet when examining the first run of *Tish* as a whole, or rather when one divides the poetry from the prose, the former seems to be operating in a completely different, far from utopian register. The mood shifts; perceptions and locus withhold their treasures, evoking a gloomy sensibility. This divergence between prose and poetry has not gained notice, largely because little serious attention has been paid to the poetry of the first run. These works have instead been dismissed as juvenilia, spoken of in general terms as ahead of their time, taken as derivative of Black Mountain work, or evaded altogether<sup>4</sup>. But the use that the *Tish* poets make of Black Mountain phenomenology is unique. Olson’s phenomenology demands a focus on the world as it actually appears, attention to the processes of perception (or more exactly: proprioception), and the relation of the body to language and the field. All of this was meant to open up the world and cre-

ate a whole self. But the *Tish* poets, rather than imagining a whole poet, do something more extraordinary and counter intuitive. Through the Black Mountain approach, they discover an unexpected and unsought-after truth: that the self is an effect of social organization not escaped by fiat, and that their particular social world demanded an atomized anti-communal self. Such an isolated being is defined by its inability to see larger relations, and, in fact, *Tish* poets inadvertently capture this limit in their poetry through emphasizing loss and blindness rather than giddy visions of freedom.

*Tish's* prose statements, registering the dramatic rise of post-war Vancouver,<sup>5</sup> offer an image of the locus as a vital environment, a subject in its own right ready to engage the embodied *Tish* poet. *Tish* poetry, however, is surprisingly unable to connect to this worldly 'field.' Olson, in a famous gesture meant both to bring the poet outside (off track) and to hook into the vitality in the encounter, wrote, "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader" ("Projective Verse" 148). But the promise of a readily available charged world appears short-circuited in the poetry. As the *Tish* self gains consistency, other people, structures, and things lose their energy and fade from view. The poetic personae find themselves disconnected from any meaningful social life.

### **Bowering's Car Space, Technology, Veils of Darkness**

The city is not a good place or 'polis' for the *Tish* poets, the negative effects of modernity more present than the promise of community. Critic Fredric Jameson would understand *Tish's* response. As far as the city goes, he suggests that it is simply not available, in any unified way, for perception; it

is above all a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves: grids such as those of Jersey City, in which none of the traditional markers (monuments, nodes, natural boundaries, built perspectives) obtain, are the most obvious examples. Disalienation in the traditional city, then, involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place. (Jameson, *Post* 51)

Olson's *The Maximus Poems* attempts such a reconquest. For the Vancouverites, though, the city remains alien and appears, if it appears

at all, as a series of illegible systems of technological fragmentation, producing what Sartre vividly names *seriality*, “a plurality of isolations” (257).<sup>6</sup>

As an index of modern city sprawl, the automobile appears as part of a larger problem. Although often viewed as a symbol of the freedom of youth or a transformation of the “modern secular ego” into the “self-moved mover” (which James Hillman points out is “precisely what the word *automobile* means,” 177), for Bowering, Davey, and Kearns there is little of the exuberant pleasure associated with, say, Kerouac’s road trips in *On the Road*. Unlike the Beats, the *Tish* poets meet with no community or adventure. They express almost none of the joys of driving. Their experiences of the automobile are typified by Kearns’s “Highway” (*Tish* 4 86), with its angry expression of division:

Watch it Driver  
   there isn’t any road  
 there’s only the squeal  
   of tires in the night

You see Driver  
   you make it by burning it up  
   yeah  
   you and your horn  
 and your headlights jabbing into the black  
   — *that’s* the highway

But don’t bother to look  
   in the rear-view mirror  
   Driver  
   because it’s a trail of exhaust

The road divides people emotionally and physically. The car *destroys the clarity of perception* (“a trail of exhaust” clouds the road), and objects, like hallucinations, appear disconnected from any ground (no road, “only the squeal / of tires in the night”), all of which shows technology *producing* isolation.

Consequently, the *Tish* persona here resembles that self blossoming in the “age of the suburb or the megapolis or the private car,” as Jameson nicely conflates it (“Ulysses” 133), wherein the city steals the object and denies people all those “nodal points” and “pathways,” the concrete loci of embedded, collective memory “which make shared experience possible” (133). In other words, the individual perceiver does not

experience his freedom with godlike exuberance, but with despair and nostalgia. One might say that the position of the speaker is overdetermined: springing from various levels of overlapping and conflicting determinations (e.g., the naturalized phenomenological subject, rugged individualism, bourgeois individualism, “seriality,” romanticism, the formative background of the modern city, etc.), which come together, uncomfortably, in that imaginary self at the centre of the greater portion of *Tish* poetry.

Bowering’s “Motor Age” (*Tish* 4 80), the title pointing to a general, cultural quality, depicts the speaker as an isolated seeker, unable to attain his object:

Today I saw your famous bicycle  
 niched into the corner beside the cafeteria door,  
 steady there — all its bent fenders & haywire,  
 waiting for you to approach & begin the business  
 of hitching up for a ride  
Home where it will
 lean against a pile of wood, under its own roof.

Significantly, in these first seven lines, his lost object reminds him of something prior to city life, the autonomous ego (the “we”), adulthood and technology. The lost friend represents more pastoral times (“pile of wood”; “bicycle”; play — “how we used to ride / . . . in little races”), with a grounded, familiar world (“niched,” “famous,” “steady,” “home”). The rest of the poem captures the speaker’s fallen state:

It’s down in a poem — how we used to ride  
 our bikes in little races or lallygagging it  
 all along the road from the cafeteria to home.

Now — I drive my banged up car along the road,  
 seeking your two wheel shape, ready to pass,  
 but never seeing you, seeing only your bicycle  
 once or twice a week, leaning there — ready.

As the title suggests, Bowering indicates a series of shifts: from childhood to adulthood, community to isolation, bicycle age to motor age, presence to absence. The promise and presence of the bike, “leaning there — ready,” heightens the experience of the loss of the friend. Neither promise nor presence materializes, and the speaker loses his connection to the other, in the largest sense of that word. Bowering

places the lonely speaker behind glass in his “banged up car,” on the other side of Eden. In his present situation, the familiar vanishes (“never seeing you”). While the speaker searches for her from behind the glass (a mobile, detached “look” linked to the windshield), inside the wrap-around space of the car, she dwells, in his imagination, out in the open field somewhere, leaving behind only traces of a magical past.

Bowering’s “Driving Past” (*Tish* 4 89) even more pointedly depicts a desirous gaze entangled in layers of mediation that seem to devour the sought-after thing. The object of desire is ominously enclosed in the “dark house”:

Driving past your dark house  
 every night (in the rain  
 I look in the rearview mirror,  
 see bleared in the back window  
 the road I have been over.

She, presumably, recedes behind windows and mirrors or at best appears distorted (“bleared”). Inhabiting the same spiritual landscape evoked in “Motor Age,” the poem proceeds to reveal the speaker’s desperation (“I run the road every night, / speed a little / where I used to stop”) and blindness. The weather veils his course (“rain / reaches the corner of my windows / and blacks the road”), and the whole complex of car space-speed-roads-rain shows the driver cut off from the external details of the environment. It is not so much that the other is contained: the persona is imprisoned in his car space.

The car and technology in general disturb pastoral fantasies of play and suggest alienation. The car not only signifies modern mobility and the breakdown of relationships, but also the negative side of autonomy: ultimately creating a sense of disconnection from the earth. Caught up in a “fantasy that identifies the control of motion with the control of individual fate” (Hillman 177), one glides too quickly over the details of locus,<sup>7</sup> and communal indebtedness.<sup>8</sup> The result can be a lonely existential separateness — and that is essentially built into the design of the modern city, which revolves around non-centralized suburbs and the culture of the car, which militate against neighbourhoods and community.

The fact of loneliness appears frequently in Bowering’s work. In “Dark Around Light” (*Tish* 6 122), he writes,

lying here alone  
 the phone  
                           under my hand  
 a whole city of night  
                   between us.

While human beings are associated with light (“the sunrise in / that is in you”), the city is dark and estranging. Such a disjunction between the city and the human transforms the city into a skeletal husk devoid of authentic human energy. Even in his more positive images of life something comes between “us.” In “Red Lane” (*Tish* 13 264) the subject of the poem achieves a kind of pleasurable release (the last lines are “And you, man, / letting it ride”), a moment of freedom that depends upon separation:

You are on the road,  
 keys jingling in your pocket,  
 unlocking miles  
 between yourself  
 and the rest of us.

In this poem, the human scale is diminished, as the hero, Red Lane, not only speeds away from his friends, but also speeds past towns that seem reduced to moments of scenery: “Swung on the highway / pendulum of time / counted in towns.”

Beyond the important fact of the road, *Tish* writers are particularly sensitive to features of modernity that diminish the human scale. “Telephone Metaphysics” (*Tish* 5 95) describes technology’s destruction of intimacy as the speaker tries to connect with his lover from a lonely “gaslit phonebooth”:

Most times you are a  
                                   voice made tiny by a telephone.  
 You must tell me what you look like,  
 the way you are sitting, what you are wearing  
                   & you cannot  
                   tell me the look of your eyes  
                   because  
                   that does not come thru a talking machine.

The desired “voice” is strung out across an infinite (telephone) line,



caught in a cultural “machine” that diminishes a human scale (“made tiny”). Bowering creates an intense sense of the lost physical reality:

You are really there  
 when my eyes can go out &  
 tell it back to my hand & mouth/  
 the texture & the turn of you.

Ironically, in light of poems like “Motor Age,” and “Driving Past,” conceiving of intimate space, the speaker evokes the automobile as a possible refuge:

You  
 sitting beside me in my car/  
 your face  
 made real  
                                   by the light / from a lamp post

Your eyes  
 touching your light on me  
 :things you could never tell me on a telephone

But standing in a gaslit phonebooth  
 I still ask you to tell me how you are wearing your hair  
 You are not really there  
 but I push against the margins of my mind.

But in this context, Bowering’s dark mediated ideal of the couple in the car mirrors the voice strangled in the phone, and the isolated man in the street. In other words, even the fantasy of togetherness lapses into an image of containment within the car space, or the “carapace” as Marshall McLuhan calls it, that “protective and aggressive shell, of urban and suburban man” (224). Within this shell, the speaker hopes, the couple might form a fleeting union, holding out against the surrounding darkness. But Bowering never brings her into his floating “carapace.” He emphasizes how the speaker cannot grasp an immediate presence of human style and detail (“the texture & the turn of you”), cannot piece her together as a unified being (“you cannot / tell me the look of your eyes”); she has been ground through a depersonalizing machinery. So, instead, he experiences only an impoverished intimacy, heightening his sense of her absence (she is “not really there”).

## Scientific Apparatus, Davey's Bridge Poems

Significantly, Bowering and the other *Tish* poets are not just concerned with the lost *human* other or with lost love. In "Literary Criticism" (*Tish* 3 58-59) a companion piece to Davey's "No Vision But in Things: 10," Bowering, while "writ[ing] a paper / on the Bronte genius," observes disturbing traces of animal experimentation at his and Davey's shared office space at UBC:

there are still  
the signs of severed brains  
along the sinkboard.

Last year  
this was a laboratory  
where ape cerabella [*sic*]  
were sliced.

Davey also writes of the "previous occupants" (59), which turn out to be the "remains" of lab "monkeys." Both poets effectively connect dismemberment with smell. Bowering writes of "severed brains," "sliced," "the scent." Davey writes of "the odor," "the stains," "the smell." These elements tie the scientific operations to the death they inflict on the primates. The two poems, under the heading "Two Poems for the Critic," conflate academic criticism with scientific dissection: both of these disciplines destroy some sort of life force: the "Things" of Davey's title, animal life, the creative human spirit. Davey in particular underscores the strangeness of the neurological lab world:

In this room of mysterious pipes and fixtures  
now my office  
the odor of the previous occupants  
remains

The drain below  
the two massive scientific-looking taps  
is plugged  
and the stains along the sideboard  
seem to have an existence

independent

of the human arm.

The scientific world appears as a "mysterious" system, separate from a more human scale and at the same time caused by the human world

(“of the human arm” also implying belonging to). Even more than Bowering’s comments on the social world, Davey’s vision, especially in his “bridge poems,”<sup>9</sup> rages against the cultural gridwork for destroying the presence of authentic community and objects.

Davey’s “bridge” might not be a direct reference to Hart Crane’s “The Bridge” (1927),<sup>10</sup> but the poems nevertheless can be productively compared. Crane’s poem, in the tradition of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, condenses in the image of the Brooklyn Bridge a celebration of industrial society, the culmination of American history and myth, and the possibilities of collective communication:

O harp and altar, of the fury fused,  
 (How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!)  
 Terrific threshold of the prophet’s pledge,  
 Prayer of pariah, and the lover’s cry, —  
  
 Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift  
 Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars,  
 Beading thy path — condense eternity:  
 And we have seen night lifted in thine arms. (Crane 46)

For Crane, mythic America produces no alienated labour. The socio-cultural work done in the US is available to everybody (“And we have seen”), as symbolized by the presence of the Brooklyn Bridge. Crane’s visionary fusions of spirit and matter, culture and nature, rich and poor, insane and sane sew together disparate regions of his environment. He unifies the vicissitudes produced by industrial labour as it writes over nature, history, myth, aboriginal peoples, classes, and more. Davey’s bridges reveal a very different landscape and intent. In his prose statements, the natural self and ideal community fit snugly into an orderly cosmos, but such a vision apparently cannot be mapped onto Vancouver. Davey’s metaphorical bridge operates more as an anti-bridge, a metaphor for the failure of metaphor, in that it creates distances rather than spanning them, and destroys rather than embodies meaning.

With his bridge poems, in accord with his prose statements, Davey tries to get to the other side: the side of the other, the real thing. But as with Bowering and Wah (in “Little Girl,” *she* is “a distance ’cross the inlet,” a “blurred smile/in the distance” *Tish* 8 172), the desired image resists coming into focus. The bridge of “Bridge Poem” (*Tish* 5 106) does not bridge any communal gaps, and the messages from the radio only heighten the speaker’s alienation:

Going up the approach  
 Mountains High ahead and  
   on the radio . . .

City of greasy bridges  
 I am always going over them  
 bridges  
           toll bridges

          I hear a  
                           truck-trailer jack-knifed  
           on one today  
           crushing  
                           one family  
                                   one car  
           “the baby . . .  
                                   not expected to live”

The speaker displays a fragmented consciousness, with repetitions, line breaks, and ellipses mirroring radio static, perhaps. As the poem proceeds, it suggests that such disjointed thoughts emerge from the infrastructure of the city. On the theme of the bridge, the speaker reflects:

So this one  
 across the inlet  
 There is supposed to be a difference between  
 sea and land  
 city and mountain . . .

beneath are ships I cannot set foot on  
 water I cannot walk on  
 driftwood from another world  
 moving  
    going  
 at odds with me

The *Tish* self, often an idealized image of individualism despite its claims to the contrary, here retains its separation, its autonomy, but simultaneously this very autonomy seems to be an effect of the alienating cityscape. Unlike Olson in his heroic Maximus stance, the Vancouver writers do not fantasize transcendence. Rather, they register from within how modernity brands their bodies. One way of looking at *Tish's* return to *first things*, to a pure ‘body self,’ would be to see this as an enabling fiction which allows them to measure and resist the relentless claims

(specializing, homogenizing, mapping, branding, etc.) of the city upon their loci and their bodies.

The *Tish* writers in general inhabit a psychic space caught between two divergent impulses: valorizing a small-h heroic individual against the big city, embodying modernity, and a keen awareness that it is precisely the fragmentation of the modern city that produces such an individual. Like Jameson's vision of an opaque cityscape that obliterates human scale, the "monuments, nodes, natural boundaries, built perspectives," the city for Davey *is* unnatural, an artificial boundary. It destroys the numinous immediacy of experience that the prose manifestos demanded. Like inherited poetic devices, the bridge obstructs its own aims: to transparently transport one being to another. Davey's abstract and unstable bridge pushes the world away from the speaker, impoverishes his experience: "beneath are ships I cannot set foot on / water I cannot walk on." The speaker finds himself "at odds" with his connection to the cosmos: the bridge forces the signs of nature ("driftwood from another world") to float away, ensnaring him in an apparatus as psychically destructive as the scientific apparatus of "Two Poems for the Critic."

The city "of greasy bridges" is associated with death, itself emerging out of the modern form of travel and communication. Moreover this destruction has become normalized, filtered through "the radio," as much a symbol of reified communication as the bridge. The network of roads and bridges lifts one away from the ground onto a dead machinery that robs the world of its promise, a fact Davey emphasizes with dramatic pause: "the baby . . . / not expected to live." If most of the poem sketches out the feel of the driver literally isolated from ground, nature, a healthy city, the last section powerfully captures the loneliness of the "I":

at the end here  
 a man who communicates  
 thru an orange piece of cardboard  
 which I've paid for  
 and ahead people  
people  
 person  
 I can never get thru to.

Like Bowering, Davey dramatizes a situation concisely described by Sartre's term "seriality," wherein the atomized self lives among others but feels locked in his own space, organized not communally but programmatically, according to the dictates of some external source. Communication is reduced to homogenizing devices: money, a ticket, forms which make abstract qualitative connections. His bridge poems represent an obstruction to the smooth running of the world, or of human relations (ie., relations on a human scale). Davey's "Bridge Force" (*Tish* 13 269-72) expresses both the futility of action as domination and the blockage of communication. If Hart Crane's "Brooklyn Bridge" marks a point of arrival for all Western history, for Davey this "romance of the remote" is futile. The first part of "Bridge Force" undoes the seriousness of Crane-like myth building, reducing all the "great" historical and mythic quests, including the speaker's own, to clichéd tales of love:

The lights  
                                   the torches  
 the girl across the inlet  
   the bay  
 Gatsby pacing the sand,  
 I  
   driving nightly along this beach,  
 Magellan  
                   may have loved the girl next door,  
 de Lesseps  
                                   a maharani —  
 de Fuca  
   Quadra  
                   Valdez  
 all  
   compulsively squawmen  
 brought even to these  
 shores  
                   (who loved  
                   if who was Burrard?  
 led by Leander  
 Paris  
 Menelaus

back and forth too  
 across gray waters —  
 it is the bridge force  
 romance of the remote  
 lights made many  
 by the luring dance of waves:  
 the push  
     breast stroke

hammer stroke

pike staff or sword  
 out  
 and on.

Davey elevates the speaker's mundane desires, juxtaposing "Gatsby," "I," "Magellan," and so forth, but more significantly, he slyly reflects upon and undermines mythic and historical heroes. Echoing Pound's attack on the West's "compulsive mobility,"<sup>11</sup> for Davey "bridge force" names a mad desire devoid of content, drawing the heroes merely "back and forth." Although the objects of desire might live in the neighbourhood, "next door," these heroes are driven away. Crudely obsessive, they are all "compulsively squawmen" brought to distant shores.

For *Tish*, and for the Black Mountain tradition generally, the restlessness of desire is not an absolute psychic structure; it is a historical development,<sup>12</sup> a matter of political struggle. Consequently, Davey connects this restless desire to historical forces. This is made clear in his choice of 'heroes' or rather exploiters, his observations about alienation on the road ("burning the world's oil / presenting its cardboard to be punched"), and his sense of bridges and roads as signs of the colonization of everything in section two. Bridges and roads set him on a track much like the rigid tracks of inherited verse forms and channel him away from authentic regions of experience:

I will reach you  
 Lover please come back  
 I've been travellin over mounds  
 miles  
     mountains  
 inlets and mountains without end  
 I'm travellin over  
                         over  
 and will do it over

I try bridges  
 I try bridges  
 here  
     there  
 all over the city  
                             bridges  
 toll bridges  
                             tickets for punching  
 bridges —  
 suspension  
                             arch  
                                     cantilever  
 ‘the can’t you leave here alone  
 bridge’  
     he said —  
 random bridges  
                             everywhere  
 the world must be an obstacle.

The clipped pace of the short lines and the repetition of the words “mountains” conjoined with “mound,” “over,” and “bridges” enact a kind of manic searching for something. But the motorist, like the explorer, never arrives, discovering only more roads. The car moves too quickly, steering consciousness away from whatever lies beyond the overly familiar, narrow limits of the pavement.

For Davey, this network of modern passages and compulsive movement evoke a will to power, a force of domination that uproots community, and destroys both the numinousness of perception and the natural environment: in section three he condemns the bridge, or rather the *bridge force*, howling “**FUCK YOUR DISTANCE**” (*Tish* 13 271); in “Bridge Force IX” the lost object (“stars”? “some summer day”?) hides behind “midnight curtains of rain,” “across distances / and distances.” The mythic heroes’ questing desire leads to a destructive, but futile, will to power, which Davey links to the rise of modern cities and centralizing technologies. In this sense, the everyday world obtrudes; it ceases to work, a fact which draws attention to breakdown and crisis, at least from the viewpoint of the individual subject.

The world appears as “an obstacle” to perception, especially the sort of charged perception and charged landscape connected to the ‘numinous.’ Although the concept of the ‘numinous’ is prevalent in *Tish* and



Black Mountain writing (especially in Robert Duncan's theorizing), it is not exactly clear what this term means. On the face of it, 'numinous' suggests spirit or aura. But I would like to suggest, in keeping with the political current in *Tish*, that the 'numinous' is nothing less than a metaphor for recovering one's own work or of having a non-alienated relationship to work, and that a non-alienated relationship to work and the environment would mean engaging with it in a more vital way. Olson offers a broad concept of work and also suggests that the commercial world robs the self of the capacity to perceive properly — one becomes alienated from one's own body-as-source, as he states in the first song of Maximus: "colored pictures / of all things to eat: dirty / postcards / And words, words, words / All over everything / No eyes or ears left / to do their own thing (all / invaded, appropriated, outraged, all senses / including the mind, that worker on what is" (*The Maximus Poems* 17). For him, environment, perception, the activity of the body, and poetry are work, and by recovering one's own body, perceptions, and art, one encounters the world in a more vital, non-depressed way. 'Numinous' needs to bear these more political resonances and move beyond the spiritual.

### Heavier Atmospheres, Liquids, Sludge

Many *Tish* poems, instead of detailing a finely articulated field, depict obstructing amorphous veils. Ironically, such veils function as a kind of privileged object or non-object, just as absence and distance operate as palpable objects or non-objects in the poems examined above. It is as if the speaker in all his solidity comes to an edge and confronts a point of dissolution of himself, his objects, and his objectives. In other words, many *Tish* poems thematize an ambiguous environment resistant to the very sharp-eyed apparatus of perception and solid self that the *Tish* poet is supposed to embody. The things of the world shrink or recede from the speaker, as in David Dawson's "sometimes the skies are" (*Tish* 2 37), which might serve as an emblem for this discussion:

sometimes the skies are  
 sad and sullen  
 and twilight lingers  
 in wasted eyes  
 each like the last:

sometimes men are  
 shapes in the fog  
 and a sunless day is  
 an endless thing  
 each like the next.

Dawson's images are sharply drawn. The language is crisp and precise. Indeed one of the key tensions growing out of the poem is between this sharpness of language and a vagueness of object. He draws on his imagist/objectist heritage, but his is an imagist/objectism with a twist: one that attempts to name a void, a distorting smoke, a veiling of the object. A certain opacity inhabits the eyes themselves.

It is not that the senses have escaped the new, fragmented environment so much as that they resist being ensnared in the rationalized boxes of the modern and resist the seduction of the given order and its promises of a nirvana of goods and services. And as if it were the object of these eyes, the object of perception, the social other, appears or disappears: "men . . . shapes in the fog." Dawson turns our attention to an in-between point, a visual viscosity that clouds the phenomenologist's dream of transparency and depresses the spirit. Arguably, these homogenous human shapes are images of dehumanization and the unavailability of human contact. People are just out of reach and fading away. The "sunless day" that clouds the visual field oppresses precisely as it swallows up distinctions, visual and temporal ("each day like the next").

Ironically, given the expansive postures of the prose statements, in Davey's "Clouds" (*Tish* 12 245) the ego rapidly retreats inward after three brief lines of staring out into the night: "Standing high in a building / alone / watching the dark rain flash down." Withdrawing from a sense of oppression in the external world, the speaker discovers the inner I / eye's impotence, as he recalls "the childhood storms" he "could not start":

and then that last one  
                                     when,  
 (huddled in a ditch-spilled car  
     with three feet of the stuff)  
 implacable clouds of hand-sized flakes  
 kept coming down.

Davey's speaker, contained within the building (icon of an "I"), a lone consciousness, underscored by the isolation of the word "alone," recedes within the architecture of his body, struck by the image of the "dark rain." "Clouds" seems to parody some of the phallic poses or fantasies of the *Tish* self as well as the poses of modern architecture. The poem dramatizes a psychic retreat, a captivation in an inner space, one shared perhaps by many disconnected souls, as numerous, at least, as the windows in a high building. The persona stands "high in a building / alone," caught between two storms: a remembered snowstorm (with its "implacable clouds") from "childhood" and the "dark rain" pouring outside the building in the present; inside his imagination he is contained in a "ditch-spilled car," which is itself contained within parentheses. It is precisely this atmosphere that drives him inside (the building, his mind, the car), this "dark rain," "clouds," "flakes."

Many of Davey's poems make of the weather a palpable obstacle to perception, such as "Bridge Force IX" (*Tish* 15 301-02) with its "midnight curtains of rain" blotting out a view to the future, or more significantly his "Today" (*Tish* 8 174), which captures a fading of the other within the thickening mists, as does Dawson's "sometimes the skies are." Davey writes that "The fog more sure / creep[s] further inland," and that "all over the lower mainland / Men and women / wander among shadows"; the lights are "dim," and the streets "almost invisible." Like Dawson's poem, "Today" teeters on a kind of ambiguous "twilight," a suicide, "out here in the fog / at the edge of things" (175), where social relations or objects get veiled. Kearns's "Levitation" (*Tish* 8 169) also focuses on a deadened, deserted city space. He writes of the "viscous shadows of city vacant newstands [*sic*] dead neon tubes," a "dark cafeteria / / ghostly hands among my gut." And Bowering's strange "Thru My Eyes" deals with the ambiguity of perception, speaks of veiling "haze[s]" and distorted objects, forms that "meld and swell / surge into moving outlines" (*Tish* 18 382-83).

Many of these poems create a mood that is in part depressing and anxious. But Wah's exemplary "Of a City" (*Tish* 8 166) perhaps most thoroughly explores the seductive nature of the amorphous fog and the intimate connection between culture and nature. This poem examines the fascination with gases, bodily incapacity, the desire for flight, and the experience of time as a distressing drag. "Of a City" analyzes the

relation between cultural excrement (“smoke”) and the processes of nature. The “smoke” symbolizes the speaker’s inability to incorporate or expel cultural products. Here the amorphous, omnipresent cultural object seems to dramatically undercut *Tish*’s claim (if not its desire) that consciousness can fix — or “preserve,” as Wah says in the prose *Tish* 123 — “reality,” uncover a purer order of world and word. I quote the poem in its entirety to capture the graphic effect of the line breaks:

a black smoke stack  
sticks straight up  
silently  
the white smoke  
escapes into the gray sky  
does actually  
become the cloud  
for me  
or  
acts with the wind  
on the wind  
floats over some drab buildings  
disperses . . .  
which is peaceful  
to watch  
the unheard billowing  
broken down  
into the dull day  
un  
exciting  
way of the mind  
acts on the mind  
useless . . .  
silence  
broken  
by the silence  
I shiver  
and yawn at the fuming structure  
with  
with  
\*  
no end to it  
that continual  
smoke

drifting

drives the man  
 into himself  
                                 and also then  
 to the water

With its initial articulations of the phallic smoke stack, "Of a City" contradicts the solid, hard *Tish* self and the imagist's (objectist's) demands. For while the poem begins with energetic precision, etching the smoke stack with sibilants, gutturals, and dentals, it then drifts off entirely into the fluid "L"s (liquids) and airy "W"s (vocalic slides), reaching, towards the end, a depressing loss of breath with the repetition of "with." In opposition to the incisive aura of the "black smoke stack," the smoggy environment both invents and mirrors the speaker's psychic state: isolated and drifting. The poet's voice is muted and poisoned, a useless "yawn" instead of Whitman's vigorous "yawp," or *Tish's* idealized *breath*. Wah's is a vision of depression and paralysis.

The line breaks of "Of a City" make substantial use of the poem as field, mimicking a sort of textual geography. And unlike Olson's paginal fields made up of networks of documents, geographies, commercial signs, proper names, and technologies, all suggesting the substance of a renewed city landscape (see for example "*Letter. May 2, 1959*" from *The Maximus Poems* 150), Wah's landscape lacks concreteness, except for the "smoke stack," and "drab buildings." His vision signifies an undoing of Olson's specificity, as well as Pound's desire for clean, transparent edges. Wah's world "disperses" and is "broken down" into a tangible nothingness: "gray sky," "white smoke," "wind," "cloud." It is unable to breathe life into the fantasy of the vital *polis*. Instead of Olson's seductive articulations of a field of luminous objects, Wah presents an absorbing veil of homogenizing smog.

Such amorphousness is *the* primary object or anti-object of his landscape. One can easily read this blanketing of the field as Wah's face-to-face confrontation with the very social reification that Olson heroically tries to rewrite. As the title reminds us, Wah's speaker remains within a cityscape that veils social relations. One is, for example, reduced to "silence" and "useless[ness]"; "man" is driven "into himself." Evidence of technology's power to destroy, clouds of smog fascinate and corrupt perception. We are told that the seductive play of pollution and wind over the dull buildings "is peaceful / to watch." Indeed, here the corroded

environment invades and informs consciousness, “acts on the mind,” penetrating *Tish*’s organicist, autonomous ideal of selfhood.<sup>13</sup>

### Elemental Poetry and its Other

Even away from the road or the city, any numinous nature pales before a disturbing intuition of dissolution. The shape of the object appears veiled, and the self constantly loses ground, falling off the earth, sinking into the mud. Nature, in the strongest of these poems, represents not so much a phenomenological record as a mapping of the speaker’s psychic stress. Sometimes, then, the focus shifts from the fading objects to the self’s awareness of its own limits, its fragmentation from the centre.

James Reid’s “Autumn Again” (*Tish* 3 42) attends to the lone speaker experiencing a powerful feeling of fragmentation. Like Bowering’s and Davey’s work, Reid’s demonstrates a keen sense of the presence of absence:

rain —

fall

Autumn.

and the wind,

slashing the leaves!

again.

**If YOU WERE HERE.**

If you were here,

my hands would be stretched toward

like leaves

### **AS IF CONTINUALLY MISSING THE POINT**

I’m lucky we have an Indian summer this month

I don’t think I could bear

the fact that the wind tears at your heart

as it has done mine at mine.

Mimicking rainfall, Reid creates a sense of fragmentation in the line break and in the halting syntax. He recreates the stammering brought on by a feeling of incapacity and stress (“If **YOU WERE HERE.** // If you were here”). The speaker’s self-presence lost in the turbulence for the most part, except for the straining of “my hands . . . stretched,” finally

solidifies only in the final stanza as the unsettling drama of the wind, rain, and derailed syntax fades. In keeping with the theme of the self as disconnected from the ground, it is worth noting that Reid's comparison of the self to the tree, or more accurately to the branch and leaves at the mercy of the wind, imagines the psyche as somehow suspended above the ground. Like Davey's bridges, Reid's persona's hands fail to connect to their objects. They "would be stretched toward you / like leaves / **AS IF CONTINUALLY MISSING THE POINT.**" In fact, there are two levels of distance. There is absence of the person spoken of, and then the statement that even "if" that person were "here" he would not be able to reach her.

Uprooted, sometimes the *Tish* signifier is playful. A leaf is not always a leaf, not always an accurate depiction of Vancouver, as it lifts off the ground, hangs in the wind, drowns, or finds itself lost in the snow. Nor, of course, is the autumn of "Autumn Again" only a season: it is death, helping institute a mood that disturbs the smooth operations of the unified self. If Reid expresses physical uncertainty, psychic vulnerability and separation, using metaphors of nature, David Dawson goes further into the skin of the leaf in "theme 3" (*Tish* 2 37):

movement of leaves in ocean	
	silent
sweep of crisp fragments	
	bronze-burnished
browned autumnal leaves	
in the lordly flow of tide	
high along the water line	
leaves of red and brown	
clog the smooth expanse	
of sun-blached beach	
rioting colors among the kelp	
but on the sea	
	isolate
fragments from the land	float
silent	
intense	

Here Dawson seems to record the cosmic in nature, rediscovering the object's aura, "captur[ing] the effect of immediacy" (Mitchell 69). For Beverley Mitchell this sort of imagistic presentation of the "poet in

relation to his locale” (70) most deeply characterizes both this poem and *Tish* poetry in general: for her, all *Tish* writers strive to capture an accurate, immediate presence, to discover the aura in both the object and the language. She argues, writing on this poem, that Dawson accurately captures “Vancouver’s tree-covered beaches” (70). Echoing *Tish*’s prose theories, a literal description leads to a deeper mystical relation to nature:

Dawson’s recognition that ‘isolate fragments’ although ‘silent’ are, at the same time ‘intense,’ applies quite literally to the leaves in the water in terms of their movement and colour. Moreover, the implicit idea that silence may be the result of intensity has an application beyond the poem, and there is an indication even here that Dawson will respond to the hidden and the mysterious — the ‘silent’ yet ‘intense’ — elements of his locale, to the ‘secrets objects share’ which Olson suggested. (70)

Mitchell’s sympathetic portrayal of *Tish*’s intentions mirrors *Tish*’s opponent Keith Richardson’s understanding of *Tish* writing. Richardson adds that *Tish*’s desire “to find magical realization in the most prosaic” (23) aspects of experience was part and parcel of its broader “defiant literary posture” against the overly aesthetic practices of Canadian poetry (23). While Mitchell praises *Tish*’s prosaic, literal records of experience for their immediacy and sense of sound, Richardson finds them merely banal descriptions.

But instead of taking Dawson’s *elemental* poem at face value as the depiction of aura, one can see how “theme 3” also invites the reader to identify with certain key words; and in this way, the poem does not deviate so much from Davey’s or Bowering’s poems, which register subjective desolation and articulate a distance between self and city. Here Dawson privileges that little island floating away from the mainland. The drifting leaves, described as “bronze-burnished,” are paradoxically heavy, solid. The image of polished metal (“burnished”) gives the leaves, at least temporarily, a corporeal integrity to counter the power of the sea. They are “crisp” — the brittleness of which is, again at least temporarily, countered by the bronzing of them — as if they were impervious to the corrosive effects of salt water. In other words, the leaves on the ocean are not “submersed” or “submerged,” to use some key *Tish* words. And, as individual entities, they ride the cosmic wave. By identifying with



these leaves, the reader is invited to experience a pleasurable “sweep of crisp fragments . . . in the lordly flow of tide.”

In addition to the seductive images of autonomy, the pleasures of distance, the “isolate” leaves as they drift over the sea stir feelings of depth and intelligence. The signifiers “silent,” “isolate,” and “intense,” words visually separated from the body of the text, evoke the fantasy of the romantic genius. It is worth noting that one of the poems preceding “theme 3” also imagines the sea as a source of mystical power. In “who is more than certain” (*Tish* 2 36), Dawson’s speaker, this time more passively, contemplates the sea, or, more accurately, that which rises out of it, death:

he has come from the sea.

i know

by the sound of his feet on suspended air,  
the still sound of a profound silence,  
everpresent and dark.

from the ocean.

he is antiquity; he is posterity.

a mother-child, lover he

whose eyes are open

unlike man

whose ways, decisive

unlike man.

Here the wonderful image of bodily unity transfers over to death, who is described as “warm and final / necessary and complete unto himself.” The speaker’s consolations are two fold. First, “Death,” not at this point so unlike “man,” appears more comforting, taking a human shape, a shape with a unity that the speaker can vicariously enjoy through a submissive contemplation. Second, the speaker’s understanding of the world becomes limited but decisive; in accord with the Cartesian solution to uncertainty (“I know”), the speaker can cling to a moment of certainty: “before him / I can only whisper ‘death is more than certain.’” In “theme 3,” however, the ideal of unity is less alien. What appears alien is the social world.

The individualized leaves, representing consciousness floating over the elemental deep, contrast with those leaves crowding together on land. These latter are the social leaves: a sloppy multitude that “clog[s] the smooth expanse.” These leaves operate within a language that

destroys the satisfaction of the fantasy of individual impermeability, of body unity: “clog,” “blanched,” and “rioting.” And yet despite the social action suggested by “rioting,” the mass of leaves lies stranded and waiting to dry up. “theme 3,” then, presents not merely a phenomenological record of experience but an expression of the tensions between the individual and a certain kind of social world. The *Tish* self here and in general occupies an in-between space. Such a self cannot really survive alone. But nor does it want to disappear into a corrupt, indistinguishable “mass” culture, for it must maintain its bodily senses and the enormous potential of the ‘body self.’ Remarkably, Dawson’s “theme 3” captures numerous tensions. It presents an idealized image of individuation, yet one that captures a certain vigour of the body, and a retrieval of the sensuous self as “bronze-burnished” leaf in liquid. The echoes of the romantic genius perhaps go too far into fantasy, but the images of *brittleness* (no matter how metallic!), *silence*, and *isolation*, however tied into a kind of hearty masculinity, simultaneously foretell disintegration, madness, and drowning. Once again, the *Tish* poem and self act as organs registering selfhood in various states and its impossibility; the potential for a finely articulated sensuousness; one’s own share of the cultural work, as I have suggested; and culture’s homogenizing drain, an authentic ‘body self’ and mere atomization.

## Conclusion

While the *Tish* editors begin with the idea, best expressed in the prose, of a utopian self, embedded in a utopian environment, open to the treasures of some post-capitalist world, their poetry marks a certain impossibility: namely the impossibility of simply shaking off the effects of late capitalism. While utopia fails, *Tish*’s phenomenological approach allows them to register the stickiness of their situation. The *Tish* poets relentlessly document the effects of their corporeality as it encounters a bleak modernity. Formally what is remarkable is how the poems can contain and underscore contradictory moments. If the object disappears and the self remains isolated, then *Tish* photographs the persona’s face pressed up against the glass, the object of desire in retreat. The poems capture a set of social relations, possibilities, impossibilities, and modes of social containment. Instead of facilely celebrating a rugged American individualism (Richardson) confronting the riches of immediate perception, the poems more often present impressions of loss: the failure

of the self to cope with or even find the social world, simultaneously questioning the meaning of its disappearance. In this way, the rugged individual, in its various guises, deeply connected to nature and free from the dictates of the city, suddenly finds himself motoring around a fragmented and fragmenting “serial” landscape; the very shapes of his consciousness appear to hinge not on the clean, physiological organ but on a profound immersion in the confusing productions of the city.

Not surprisingly, the “objects” presented most forcefully and immediately are, ironically, the prominent images of veils, fogs, smoke, rain — sharp images of opacity. Despite the celebration of the idea of locus, the writers most decisively express the difficulty of finding solid ground, place, and history. Locus fades away. The automobile glides over it too quickly, without rest, exhausting the psyche, creating great distances between self and the texture of the environment. Or else, the details of the ground (locus) are covered over by an alienating systematicity: i.e., programmatic “device” and “artifice” encroaching at several levels, from inherited poetic form to formalistic academia to the city’s overgrown, alienating infrastructure.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from the first editorial period of *Tish* are taken from *Tish No. 1-19* (1975).

<sup>2</sup> The whole effect of *The Maximus Poems*, with its six hundred plus pages of non-linearity, fragmentation, typographic play, etc., undercuts any single track for the reader. For a detailed look at this resistance, see Charles Bernstein’s essay on Olson, “Undone Business,” in *Content’s Dream*.

<sup>3</sup> I have argued elsewhere that the Cold War Canadian context and its heightened ideology of the individual (policed and produced by the state, media, and conservative interests groups) provide a context for *Tish* transgressions. See “Resisting Orders: Inassimilable Spaces and Elusive Beings in *Tish*’s ‘confused thinking and execrable prose’ 1961-63.” (Forthcoming *Essays in Canadian Writing* #88).

<sup>4</sup> There are very few significant studies which examine the meaning of the style. Beverley Mitchell’s “A Critical Study of the *Tish* Group, 1961-1963” (1972) and Keith Richardson’s *Poetry and the Colonized Mind: Tish* (1976) both, from opposite positions, discuss the group as a group, which makes sense, given *Tish*’s immersion in a shared vocabulary, history, and emphasis on community over individuality or humanism. Other studies or collections tend to emphasize the individual careers of *Tish* writers (of which there are many) or emphasize the theory and Black Mountain context over the poetry (e.g., Ken Norris’s excellent chapter on *Tish* in *The Little Magazine in Canada 1925-80*), or as in C.H. Gervais’s collection of articles and interviews, *The Writing Life*, discuss the *Tish* phenomenon but without much, if any exploration of the work from the first run.

<sup>5</sup> Recent cultural geographers have shed much light on the constructedness of Vancouver as well as its exceptional growth during the 1940s and 1950s. See for example, Barnes, Edgington, Denike, and McGee.

<sup>6</sup> Sartre's classic example of such alienation imagines people waiting at a bus stop: "To begin with, it should be noted that we are concerned here with a plurality of isolation: these people do not care about or speak to each other and, in general, they do not look at one another; they exist side by side alongside a bus stop. At this level it is worth noting that their isolation is not an inert statute (or the simple reciprocal exteriority of organisms); rather, it is actually lived in everyone's project as a negative structure" (256). For Sartre, despite their experience of being fragmented, these people really are a group, but a group that fails to recognize its own elements and that cannot grasp or visualize the overall plan uniting it.

<sup>7</sup> James Hillman's view of "locus" shares much with the *Tish* view. Unlike Jameson, he argues that people do carry inner maps of the city, but that such maps destroy concrete relations to the world. Hillman writes, "The loss of regional embeddedness makes us forget that cities rise from the earth, from land with local produce. Map thinking favors long-haul trucking, neglecting what belongs right here at hand" (176).

<sup>8</sup> For Hillman, the fantasy of the modern secular ego as self-moved mover involves shifting attention away from the social infrastructure (i.e., communal taxes, attending to "street lighting, street signs, and street repair"); this fantasy cannot conceive of transportation as "a service required by the community, much like justice and education, fire protection and public safety." For Hillman, transportation is too often "imagined . . . from a private viewpoint" (177).

<sup>9</sup> See especially "Bridge Poem" (*Tish* 5), "Bridge Force" (*Tish* 13), and, less explicitly, "Daniel at the Lion's Gate" (*Tish* 1) and "Bridge Force IX" (*Tish* 15).

<sup>10</sup> Crane is included in Allen and Tallman's *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*.

<sup>11</sup> This is how Paul Morrison characterizes Pound's critique (18).

<sup>12</sup> For Pound and Olson such negative desire starts with the Greeks, with the disconnection of the word from the body and the thing.

<sup>13</sup> This threat to solidity repeatedly appears in Wah's work. Elsewhere his personae or their objects similarly teeter on the brink of solidity and fluidity. In "Isabella: 2 thoughts," for example, the speaker is "at the edge / falling" (*Tish* 9 191); in "A Testimony" (*Tish* 7 152), rain washes tears "into the sea," streets dissolve into "fog," and earth melts away: "the death of the land / going down to the sea / to the sea / beginning again"; or in "My Horse" (*Tish* 18 376), where the speaker's fantasy object, a horse, is simply "not there," even in fantasy.

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