

Montreal's Signal Editions: The Making of a Series

by Julie Frédette

“Insight and revelation—clear evidence of life lived and then caught and transformed” (Harris 15). Michael Harris, the founder of Signal Editions, Véhicule Press’s poetry imprint, thus succinctly defines his criteria for inclusion in his poetry series. Part of a distinct and widely acknowledged tradition of English-language poetry publishing in Montreal, as noted by Ken Norris and Peter Van Toorn, in whose opinion “the most significant poetry to appear in the English-speaking world in decades” has appeared in Quebec (Norris, Van Toorn 19), Signal Editions has undergone some major changes since its creation in 1981. Not only has it broadened its editorial mandate, it has also redefined its relationship to Canadian poetry as a whole. Indeed, its editors have gradually attempted to posit Signal Editions as being a unique and prestigious poetry series within Canada, by publishing translations of (what they deem to be) the best of French-Canadian poetry alongside prize-winning poets with international publication profiles who have stood out in the field of Canadian poetry in English.

The story behind Signal Editions, founded by Montreal poet Michael Harris, is fraught with colourful details of quarrels, both personal and aesthetic, partnerships, and small controversies which make it a fascinating object of study. It is also a remarkable example of a small poetry imprint that has progressively acquired the symbolic capital, to use French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s term, and devoted readership necessary to be qualified as a series, achieving a degree of autonomy that is no longer synonymous with a mere publisher’s imprint in the context of Canadian literary publishing in the twenty-first century.

The distinction between the terms *imprint* and *series*, around which this paper is articulated, is an important one, and has been commented upon at length by researchers in book history and in the sociology of literature. John Spiers has recently defined the “series” as being “a set of uniformly bound, uniformly priced books issued under a general title” (Spiers 7). As such, it is more of a marketing strategy, designed to lead potential readers to the very books they are seeking, than a symbolic association between books and their status within a literary hierarchy. In fact, this definition would probably be more appropriate to the term “imprint.” The import of

a series indeed reaches beyond economic considerations. Again, according to Spiers,

[The series] is itself a cultural formation. It is a material artefact. It is a component of cultural hierarchies in the experience of reading. It is intricately involved with the problem of literary value, with ideologies of authorship, with the question of the cultural status of the literary, and with the complications, opportunities and compromises of the market. (Spiers 3)

Jacques Michon, one of Quebec's leading researchers in the field of book history, adds that a series is also a sign of prestige in that it "becomes the sign of the entrepreneur's commercial power and of his ability to innovate in a literary field dominated by a market economy" (Michon 158, my translation). As a result, the series "paves the way for a literary communication and acts as a representation, a transitional object or an ideological 'bridge' between the published work and its reader" (Michon 159). From a sociological point of view, this strategy can be seen as the accumulation of symbolic capital, that is, of non-monetary value, which will then lead to the establishment of a loyal readership, translating in the long-term into economic profits. Bourdieu indeed suggests that any small press must establish a "cultural capital [that is] perceived as inversely proportionate to economically defined capital [in order to be] translated into symbolic capital" (Doyle 84). This is precisely the role undertaken by the Signal Editions Poetry series, publishing for Véhicule Press those books which could potentially come to associate the name of the publishing house with literary prestige. Remaining faithful to Bourdieu's sociological approach to the concept of a literary "field," this paper will not offer a textual analysis of some of the poetry published by Signal Editions, but will rather examine the "agents," or key players, that have contributed, either by association or dissociation, to building Signal Editions up from an imprint to the most productive English-language poetry series in Quebec.

Véhicule Press, today Quebec's most important English-language independent press, was founded in the early 1970s, a decade in which the creation of small presses "became a concerted movement" (MacSkimming 245). In 1972, a group of artists established the Véhicule Art Gallery, a cooperative gallery in which all artists could exhibit their works and host a number of cultural events, ranging from dance and musical performances to poetry readings (Véhicule Art [Montréal] Inc. Fonds, Concordia University). After having received a printing press donated by Kenneth Hertz, publisher of Ingluvin Publications, the owners of the gallery began printing their own promotional materials. Soon, Tom Dean, one of the gallery's art-

ists, was printing his own periodical, *Beaux Arts Magazine*, in a small room adjacent to the gallery. When Simon Dardick, a Sir George Williams (now Concordia) graduate, wandered into the gallery in the summer of 1973, his main interest may have been visual arts, but he quickly gravitated toward the increasingly solicited printing press that had been bearing the name of Véhicule Press for some months and taught himself typesetting (Interview). Véhicule Press's earliest activities consisted of printing promotional items, catalogues and contract work from other Montreal organizations. As printing demands grew, the owners created the Coopérative d'Imprimerie Véhicule, and as a result printing and publishing became two separate activities related to the art gallery.

Parallel to this printing activity was an event of an entirely different nature being held at the gallery. Michael Harris, an English professor at Dawson College, poet and one-time publisher of *New Delta*, a small poetry press operating in Montreal in the 1970s, paired up with fellow Montreal poet Claudia Lapp to host "Books and Bagels," a literary reading series held within the space of the art gallery. Dawson College students were given the opportunity to hear some of Canada's emerging poets read their poetry in this urban setting, and the event quickly became a very popular one. Although "Books and Bagels" was short-lived, it did inspire a group of young, interdisciplinary poets to continue with the poetry readings, which became a regular event held in the gallery. These poets—Ken Norris, Endre Farkas, Stephen Morrissey, Artie Gold, Tom Konyves, John McAuley and Claudia Lapp—would later dub themselves the "Vehicule Poets," significantly dropping the acute accent and performing their poetry every week at the Véhicule Art Gallery, in many ways foreshadowing the Spoken Word movement which would hit Montreal and the rest of Canada in the next decade (Frost 167). The poetry readings held by the "Vehicule Poets" ran from the mid-1970s to 1981; an anthology of their work, *The Vehicule Poets*, was published by McAuley's Maker Press in 1979, and Ken Norris, the group's most vocal advocate, published an anthology and book of reminiscences with Montreal's NuAge Editions in 1991.¹ Although these poets have also published separately, and with various presses, their poetry was intimately linked to Véhicule Press's first few years.

As the printers became increasingly busy with both personal projects and external printing contracts, efforts were made to legitimize the press and turn it into a viable publishing venture. Dardick, who was by the mid-seventies Véhicule Press's sole director, began considering potential Canada Council grants. In 1976, he redefined the press's purposes and objec-

tives: three of the Vehicule Poets, Ken Norris, Artie Gold and Endre Farkas, were named poetry editors for Véhicule Press. Predictably enough, the Vehicule Poets remained a strong presence in Véhicule Press's earliest poetry list: five books of poetry written by some of the Vehicule Poets (Endre Farkas, John McAuley, Stephen Morrissey and Artie Gold) and one anthology, *Montreal English Poetry of the 70s*,² edited by a member of the group, were published by the small press between 1974 and 1979. In 1980, however, Dardick decided once again to move his press into a different direction and concluded that only one poetry editor was needed. Although the poetry being published by Véhicule Press in the mid-1970s was trendy and of regional interest, Dardick opted for publishing books (prose and poetry alike) with a broader focus, books that would sell beyond the city of Montreal and beyond the 1970s in general, and that were distinct from the dominant experimentalist aesthetic of the 1970s. Becoming more and more tied up with editing and administrative duties since the press had begun publishing short stories, essays and even art books, Dardick invited Michael Harris, who had acquired significant poetry publishing experience at New Delta, to become Véhicule Press's exclusive poetry editor. The change of editorship was an acrimonious one: the poetry Harris wished to publish and that written by the Vehicule Poets were diametrically opposed, and Véhicule's poetry list changed radically over the next few years. Even today, Endre Farkas's reminiscences of this period remain grim as he says that "while [the Vehicule Poets] weren't looking, [Dardick] brought in Michael Harris and wrote [them] a 'nice' fuck-off letter" (Farkas "The Vehicule Poets"). Several of the Vehicule Poets decided to retaliate by founding their own presses in order to continue publishing their poetry: John McAuley created Maker Press (1979-1985), Ken Norris founded CrossCountry Press (1976-1983) and Endre Farkas established The Muses' Co. (1982-).³

When Michael Harris founded Signal Editions, he did so because he wished to create a publishing venue for those poets who were already publishing in the world's most influential literary journals—*Atlantic Monthly*, the *New Yorker*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, for example—but who were being largely ignored by the main publishing houses in Toronto. These were poets such as David Solway—the first Signal poet—and Don Coles, who wrote what Michael Harris describes as "mature poetry," (Michael Harris, Interview), poetry that is formally complex and lexically rich. With regards to the physical aspects of the books, Harris continued with the formula established at New Delta: slim volumes of poetry, published in paperback format, with individually-designed four-colour covers,

opening on a full-page photograph of the poet, and printed at local printing cooperatives or companies. In terms of style, Harris carefully avoided the experimental, Tish or Black Mountain-influenced or “language” poetry that had been associated with his predecessors and chose to swim against the current by returning to a more formal and structured verse, at a time when this was seen as a rather outdated practice in poetry, in Canada and elsewhere. As Harris’s successor, Carmine Starnino, wryly notes, “the sixties and seventies witnessed the rise of poets who at no time in their careers laboured with prosody” (Starnino, *The New Canon* 19). At first publishing only one or two titles a year, Harris never published more than five books of poetry in a single year (nonetheless a considerable number of titles in the context of Canadian small-press publishing), and chose these according to his own very exacting standards. Harris also innovated by reaching out to French-Canadian poets and publishing them in translation in his series, thus, willingly or unwillingly, becoming one of the rare Canadian poetry imprint editors to do so, and giving Signal Editions the seal of a true Anglo-Quebec poetry series, great regional credibility, and identifying the translation of local poets as an important component of an Anglo-Quebec poetry series. His criteria for selecting Francophone poets were as strict as those used for the Anglophones; he sought out those poets, like Michel Garneau, Gérald Godin and Marie-Claire Blais (whom he translated himself) whose verses showed what he calls “mastery of craft” (Michael Harris, Interview) and contracted translators who could render the poets’ sensitivity and artfulness into English.

This effort to give Signal Editions an aura of prestige appears to have been successful. Approximately fifty percent of the books published by Signal Editions between 1982 and 2000 were written by well-established poets, poets who had already received national or international recognition, a significant achievement for a new series which was still in the process of accumulating symbolic capital. A brief glance at the awards and publication profiles of the Signal poets published since the creation of the series is telling: almost all have published internationally, and some have won important poetry awards, notably the Governor General’s Award for Poetry, Canada’s highest award in this field. Indeed, six Signal poets or poetry translators have won at least one Governor General’s Award,⁴ and other prestigious awards include the Ingram Merrill Foundation Prize for Poetry,⁵ Quebec’s Prix Athanase-David⁶ and the Order of Canada,⁷ as well as several QSPELLs, today known as QWF Awards, awarded by the Quebec Writers’ Federation.

In 2000, Michael Harris stepped down as editor of Signal Editions and was replaced by Carmine Starnino, a young poet, critic and essayist also living in Montreal. Very present on the Canadian poetry scene, Starnino was also one of the associate editors of *Books in Canada* (along with fellow Signal poet David Solway) before that journal folded, and is a regular contributor to Ottawa's *Arc Poetry Magazine*, directed by Anita Lahey, one of Signal's newest poets. Starnino chose to maintain Michael Harris's editorial policy, favouring structured verse written with skill and precision and staying faithful to those poets who had been publishing with the series for several years already. In his own way, however, he has rejuvenated Signal Editions by turning more and more to younger, brasher poets, and by turning his gaze eastward to the Canadian Maritimes to recruit Signal's newest bards. As a result, the new Signal editor has redefined Signal Editions as a key and necessary link between the Maritime poets and Toronto, Canada's publishing hub. According to Starnino, being in Montreal allows him to keep a finger on the pulse of the Canadian publishing scene while being sufficiently distanced from it to remain free of the mass market and its overarching aesthetic concerns. Due to his geographical location, Starnino feels he is able to publish poetry that might otherwise get lost in anonymity if sent to a Toronto publishing house (Carmine Starnino, Interview). He has therefore succeeded in closing the geographical gap between the Atlantic poets and Toronto, by providing greater exposure to Atlantic poets, somewhat isolated from a large market. In doing so, he has given Signal Editions a fresh and unique outlook on Canadian poetry. Like his predecessor, Starnino avoids poetry that "draws on letters of the alphabet, [with] add-ons [including] visuals, photographs, paint, ink, pencils and cartoons" (Starnino 27), which, in his opinion, ultimately leads Canadian poetry to becoming "a zoo of rampant esotericisms" (Starnino 27).

Like Harris before him, Starnino also publishes some of Quebec's French poets in translation, notably Pierre Nepveu, whose book, *Mirabel*, won a Governor General's Award for Poetry in its original French version and whose English translation earned translator Judith Cowan a Governor General's Prize for translation. Thus, by selectively hand-picking the new Signal poets and by publishing, like Michael Harris, renowned and well-established poets, Starnino attempts to bring a more formal Canadian poetry to light and posits Signal Editions as the forerunner of Canada's future poetry canon.

The publication of poetry anthologies has also formed a part of Signal's engagement in the practice of strategic canon formation. Michael Harris's publication of the *Signal Anthology* in 1993 has contributed significantly

to Signal's image of prestige and has symbolized the transformation of the *imprint* into a *series*, in that Signal Editions, although not exactly a Canadian household name, was henceforth associated to a very specific sound and style of Canadian poetry, and that inclusion in the series would become an honour coveted by many—and granted to few. The anthology united twenty-eight seemingly disparate poets in a single book which displayed “an eclectic array of extraordinarily interesting poets” with subtle continuity (Harris 15). By regrouping the best poems published by Signal Editions over the course of its eleven years of existence, Harris clearly defined the editorial stance which characterized his series by highlighting the quality of the poems and by presenting these poets as a group whose combined efforts seemed to take Canadian poetry into a new direction of formal poetic expression. Included in this anthology are the translations of French poems written by some of Quebec's most renowned poets, printed next to their original French versions. This consideration on Harris's part not only gives English-speaking readers the opportunity to read and appreciate the poetry produced by their francophone neighbours, it but is also a sign of the respect and esteem that the editor holds for his French-speaking colleagues and friends. Signal's readers therefore have the opportunity of discovering the poetry of Marie-Claire Blais (translated by Michael Harris), Michel Garneau (translated by Robert McGee, a former New Delta poet), Gérald Godin (translated by Judith Cowan) and Robert Melançon (translated by Philip Stratford), along with poetry by Robert Allen, George Ellenbogen, Susan Glickman, Richard Sanger and Rhea Tregobov, to name but a few.

In 2005, Carmine Starnino, Signal's new editor, followed with a similar project when he edited an anthology of Canadian poetry entitled *The New Canon*, and published it under the Signal Editions moniker. In this anthology, Starnino argues for a new aesthetic in Canadian poetry, one that is in many ways in line with the aesthetic favoured by the Signal poets. The words Carmine Starnino uses to describe the poems of his anthology can in fact be applied to Signal Editions poetry as a whole, in that “it gathers together [...] aurally ambitious, lexically alert and formally intelligent poems” (Starnino 16). Although Starnino's anthology does not exclusively represent Signal poets, it must be said that eleven of the anthology's fifty poets (all born between 1955 and 1975) have published with Signal Editions. Boldly defining his vision of Canadian poetry, Starnino suggests that poets in Canada (indeed, in North America) should not ignore the European models of the past, but innovate in forms, styles and themes even as they acknowledge the work of their predecessors. The result, Starnino

argues, is the creation of poetry that is “at once linguistically speculative and emotionally moving, poetry that fashions its experiments from the rib of tradition and converts those experiments into the skiddings and veerings of conversational speech” (Starnino 36). With this anthology, Starnino positions himself (and, consequently, Signal Editions) against poetry which ignores the importance of form and rhetoric and which in his opinion does not succeed in uniting maturity of content with skill and command of the craft. The publication of *The Signal Anthology* and of *The New Canon* have, to a certain extent, attempted to attribute a certain canonicity to these poets and have featured them as models of Canadian poetry in general, eliminating from the “new canon” those very characteristics and styles that both editors have so adamantly condemned. The imprint thus acquires the autonomy and symbolic capital evoked by Bourdieu to become qualified as a true series, one that is almost independent of the small press from which it originated.

From the moment of its creation, throughout its steady growth and assertion of its identity in Canada’s literary field, Signal Editions has sought to publish poetry that reflects skill, lexical and structural precision and originality of content. Through their careful selections and their subsequent anthologizing, both Michael Harris and Carmine Starnino have attempted to elevate Signal Editions to the status of a Canadian poetry series of national and international significance, yet one that is still strongly associated with the city of Montreal, and its small press movement. The symbolic capital the series has generated is valuable, and, in the long-term, may translate into economic profit, loyal readership and the kind of recognition that comes with institutional sanction. Publishing in a series is indeed a part of canon-making, as Starnino’s anthology fittingly suggests; it is what John Spiers calls “a temple of many columns, both of renewal and remembrance” (Spiers 4). A poetry series is almost invariably created with posterity in mind. When studying a contemporary series such as Signal Editions, one is left with the curiosity of knowing where this Anglo-Quebec series and its poets will come to stand in Canada’s future literary canon.

Notes

- 1 Ken Norris (ed.) *Vehicule Days: An Unorthodox History of Montreal’s Poets*. Montreal: NuAge, 1991.
- 2 Andre Farkas (ed.) *Montreal English Poetry of the 70s*. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1977.

- 3 Winnipeg's J. Gordon Shillingford Publications purchased The Muses' Co. in 1993 and has kept it as its poetry imprint.
- 4 Marie-Claire Blais (1968, 1979, 1996), Robert Melançon (1979, 1990), Stephen Scobie (1980), Stephanie Bolster (1998), Pierre Nepveu (1997, 1998, 2003) and Judith Cowan (2004).
- 5 Eric Ormsby (1992)
- 6 Marie-Claire Blais (1982).
- 7 Pierre Morency (2000).

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