

## A Society of Solitaires: An Anglophone Literary Circle in Montreal

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### Article abstract

Quebec has been home to a rich and vibrant English-language literary community since the nineteenth century. The rise of the Canadian small-press movement in the 1960s gave way to a revival of the English-language publishing industry in Montreal, which had considerably dwindled at the turn of the twentieth century. Poets benefited greatly from this phenomenon, and literary coteries of poets were formed as a result, in particular the Véhicule Poets, associated with the Véhicule Art Gallery and with Véhicule Press in the early 1970s, and a group of poets who were associated with New Delta and later with the Signal Editions poetry series. This paper focuses on the ways in which literary circles are formed and how they might be identified, and uses the Jubilate Circle, a group of poets revolving around Signal Editions and consisting of Michael Harris, David Solway, Carmine Starnino and Eric Ormsby, as a case study.



# A SOCIETY OF SOLITARIES: An Anglophone Literary Circle in Montreal

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ABSTRACT

Quebec has been home to a rich and vibrant English-language literary community since the nineteenth century. The rise of the Canadian small-press movement in the 1960s gave way to a revival of the English-language publishing industry in Montreal, which had considerably dwindled at the turn of the twentieth century. Poets benefited greatly from this phenomenon, and literary coteries of poets were formed as a result, in particular the Véhicule Poets, associated with the Véhicule Art Gallery and with Véhicule Press in the early 1970s, and a group of poets who were associated with New Delta and later with the Signal Editions poetry series. This paper focuses on the ways in which literary circles are formed and how they might be identified, and uses the Jubilate Circle, a group of poets revolving around Signal Editions and consisting of Michael Harris, David Solway, Carmine Starnino and Eric Ormsby, as a case study.

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis le dix-neuvième siècle, le Québec compte une importante communauté littéraire anglophone. Celle-ci souffre considérablement de la migration des producteurs et artisans du livre vers Toronto au tournant du vingtième siècle, mais la montée des petites maisons d'édition régionales, dans les années 1960, favorise la renaissance de l'industrie du livre anglais à Montréal, phénomène qui bénéficiera aux poètes anglophones de cette ville. De petits groupes littéraires se forment, notamment celui des Véhicule Poets, sept poètes associés à la galerie d'art Véhicule au début des années 1970, ainsi que celui des auteurs publiés dans la collection de poésie de New Delta puis de Signal Editions. Cet article se propose d'étudier la formation et la fonction de réseaux littéraires par l'entremise du cas du Jubilate Circle, cercle littéraire gravitant autour de Signal Editions et composé de Michael Harris, Carmine Starnino, David Solway et Eric Ormsby.

The rise of regionalism in Canadian literature that began to predominate in the 1960s – with the rapid spread of the small press movement being one of its most tangible manifestations – prompted scholars to study literary figures in relation to their immediate environment and to those individuals and institutions that provided a daily influence. Because of its language and cultural barriers, Quebec's francophone literary society remained untouched by Canada's transition from a centralized nexus of cultural production to wide-spread, smaller-scaled regional enterprises, for it had been naturally segregated from English-Canadian letters for over a century already. Although a number of small presses did appear at approximately the same time as they began to be increasingly present in Canadian regions, the phenomenon was here motivated by nationalist concerns and a desire to maintain a certain level of autonomy in the French-language publishing and literary fields. However, an English-language literary community had also existed in Quebec since the nineteenth century, as Montreal was indeed the country's first cultural and economic centre, until the development of a road and railway network attracted many members of the Anglophone community to Toronto at the turn of the twentieth century. Despite this migration of artists, authors, printers and other tradesmen associated with the book trade, English-language writers and publishers have maintained a strong presence in Montreal, and its two English-language universities in particular have fostered the creation of several small literary coteries that are now renowned in Canada's literary history. The Montreal Group, for example, so dubbed by Leon Edel in the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (763) consisted of F.R. Scott, A.J.M. Smith, and those aspiring poets associated with the *McGill Fortnightly Review*. The literary magazines *Preview* and *First Statement*, established in Montreal in the 1940s, gathered poets who would later become central to the Canadian poetry canon, among them John Sutherland, Irving Layton, Louis Dudek, Patrick Anderson, P.K. Page, and several others. In the 1970s, a group of short-story writers began giving public readings in the schools and Cégeps of Montreal and its environs. As their popularity increased, they became known as “The Montreal Storytellers,” although Hugh Hood, a member of the group, carefully notes that they “did not think of [themselves] as in any sense a *literary movement*” (Hood 12, emphasis in the original). That same decade, seven poets became associated with the cultural activities held in the Véhicule Art Gallery on Ste-Catherine Street in Montreal and began collaborating in various public events showcasing performance poetry or

video poetry; the group then took to hosting poetry readings at the gallery itself. These poets called themselves the “Véhicule Poets,” significantly dropping the original acute accent in the gallery’s name in order to highlight their belonging to the English community of Montreal.<sup>1</sup> Out of the Véhicule Art Gallery arose Véhicule Press in 1973, a publishing cooperative associated with the Coopérative d’Imprimerie Véhicule. The small press, soon led solely by Simon Dardick, published the poetry of the Véhicule Poets in its first years, but by the late 1970s and early 1980s decided to diversify its publishing program, and the press and poets parted ways. Several Véhicule Poets indeed founded their own presses, the most successful of which was certainly Endre Farkas’s The Muses’ Co., and these two decades saw the creation of dozens of small presses, several specialized in poetry publishing, of which only a handful survived beyond their initial two years.

The city’s tradition of welcoming various English-Canadian literary groups did not end with the twentieth century however. In 2002, Montreal poet David Solway wrote the following statement in reference to English-language poetry in Quebec in an essay published in *Books in Canada*<sup>2</sup>:

There are really two Montreals in competition with one another: the burgravial, agenda-dominated camarilla of movers and shakers connected with Blue Metropolis as well as with a cliquish outfit misnomered as the Quebec Writers Federation and the party of excellence associated with Signal Editions and the *Jubilate Circle*, the one denying the condition of exile and the other exploiting it.

Solway, “Double Exile” 64

It is this provocative claim to the existence of a so-called “party of excellence” that I propose to examine in this paper. What is “excellence”? How is it defined by the members of this group or “party”? The creation of the Signal Editions poetry series (Véhicule Press’s poetry imprint) has indeed led to the formation of a new literary circle, in which it can be argued that four poets, Michael Harris, David Solway, Eric Ormsby and Carmine Starnino, form the nexus. More specifically, comments written in their various works of criticism and given in interviews suggest that being Montreal poets is indeed a factor that segregates them from the poetry fields in the rest of Canada, to their great delight. David Solway indeed claims that

to live in Montreal is now tantamount, for the best of [its] poets, to moving about fully and jubilantly in the language they explore, construct, reassemble and ultimately dwell in. Where you live has in [this] case become what you say and how you say it: locality disappears and re-condenses as a dialect of thought.

“Double Exile” 61

This desire to remain marginal may have led these four poets to regroup and, perhaps, to form the modern equivalent of a cenacle or literary circle. It would therefore be relevant to ask ourselves just how exactly we can proceed to identify a literary circle or network, that is, a group of individuals evolving within the literary field in which one can identify a group, a leader, a theory and a publishing venue (Aron et al. 80). Finally, a careful examination of Solway’s, Harris’s, Ormsby’s and Starnino’s professional activities as poets, critics and publishers will be taken into account in order to determine whether these four poets do indeed form a literary circle within Montreal’s English-speaking literary community.

## Converging Trajectories and Critical Discourses

A brief overview of Harris’s, Solway’s, Ormsby’s and Starnino’s academic, professional and social trajectories highlights the personal and professional relationships that these four poets have maintained since the founding of Signal Editions in 1981, and also helps to illustrate the intricate formation of a long-standing English-language literary network in Montreal. However, instead of a literary magazine or an art gallery, it was the small press movement in Montreal, noted above, more particularly Véhicule Press and its poetry imprint, Signal Editions, which became the cultural manifestation around which these poets gathered and became associated with one another as a group. In order to retrace the genesis and evolution of this literary circle, however, one must go back to the early 1960s, during David Solway’s days as a student at McGill University, where he was taught and inspired by his English professor Louis Dudek. Following in the footsteps of Leonard Cohen, who had published his first book of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, with Dudek’s McGill Poetry Series in 1956, Solway ventured into the field of poetry under the guidance of his professor with his first chapbook, *In My Own Image* (McGill Poetry Series, 1961). In time, however, Solway would come to reject the poetic style practiced and encouraged by

Dudek. He would instead turn to more formal poetry, a type of verse he was sure his early mentor judged “disablingly conservative and neoclassical” (Solway “Louis Dudek” 77). Solway laboured to create poetry that was informed by the English poetic tradition, by attention to rhyme, meter and *le mot juste*, as he distanced himself from Dudek’s style of poetry, which he eventually described as a “poetic cul-de-sac” (Solway “Louis Dudek”, 77). By doing so, though it might have been a solitary effort to create a personal style, Solway was actually setting the tone for what the future members of his “Jubilate Circle” would come to see as truly accomplished poetic form.

Louis Dudek put an end to the McGill Poetry Series’ activities in 1966 in order to invest in new publishing ventures. He had long been committed to publishing new voices in Canadian poetry, however, and to that effect he had created a little magazine entitled *Delta*, which he ran from 1957 to 1967. The venture had been a successful one, and following this experience Dudek was increasingly convinced that small presses would pave the way for the next generations of Canadian poets. Among the numerous offshoots of *Delta*, he created, in collaboration with Glen Siebrasse and Michael Gnarowski, a publishing company called Delta Canada, founded in 1965. For more than ten years, Delta Canada published poetry chapbooks by Canadian poets out of La Salle, Quebec, and launched the careers of many first-time poets, among them Michael Harris, whose chapbook *Text for Nausikaa* was published by Delta Canada in 1970. Dudek, Gnarowski and Siebrasse ended their partnership in 1976 and went their separate ways, each staying within the publishing field: Louis Dudek founded DC Books<sup>3</sup> with his wife Aileen Collins, Michael Gnarowski moved to Ottawa and founded the Golden Dog Press, and Glen Siebrasse continued publishing poetry in Montreal under the Delta Can imprint. Siebrasse was eventually replaced at the head of Delta Can by Richard Sommer, who renamed the press New Delta and published Michael Harris’ second and third collections of poetry, *Sparks* (1976) and *Grace* (1977), respectively, before inviting Harris to join him on the editorial board. Harris and Richard Sommer, at the helm of New Delta, recruited new poets to publish, among them Harris’ friend David Solway, who published *The Road to Arginos* under the New Delta imprint in 1976. Solway’s poetry, along with that of nine other Montreal poets, had already been published in a short anthology entitled *Poetry Readings. 10 Montreal Poets at the Cegeps* (1975), edited by Michael Harris; the verse of other future Signal poets – Peter Van Toorn and Bob (Robert)

McGee (who translated Michel Garneau's *Petits chevaux amoureux* into English for the Signal imprint in 1985) can also be found in this anthology.<sup>4</sup>

In 1980, Michael Harris collaborated with Véhicule Press publisher Simon Dardick to found Signal Editions, Véhicule's new poetry series. The first poets published by Signal were some of the New Delta poets, among them David Solway, who would go on to publish several books of poetry with the series. As director of Signal Editions, Harris would also publish his former Dawson College student Carmine Starnino (*The New World*, Signal Editions, 1997). Starnino would soon prove to be an iconoclastic new voice in Canadian poetry and an active member of its literary community, writing criticism columns for *The Gazette*, *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post*, and acting as associate editor for *Books in Canada* (with Solway) and contributing essays for several poetry journals and periodicals (among them, *Ar, Matrix*, *The New Quarterly*, and the *Montreal Review of Books*). In 2001, Michael Harris stepped down as Signal Edition's director and was replaced by the young Starnino himself; that same year, Starnino slated *Araby* for publication, a book written by the American scholar of Islamic studies and McGill University Professor Eric Ormsby, highly recommended by Solway, who had participated in a jury which awarded Eric Ormsby's *Bavarian Shrine and Other Poems* (ECW Press, 1990) with a QSPELL (Quebec Society for the Promotion of English-Language Literature) prize for poetry. The four poets would eventually meet at a dinner hosted by Michael Harris, and have continued their personal and professional associations since.

Over the years, the four poets have claimed that they distrust the notion of literary groups (frequently naming the West-Coast TISH movement as an example of a type of literary collaboration that is best to avoid). The discourse is largely one of the solitary poet, publishing poetry in which his own voice is easily recognizable. Michael Harris, for example, has claimed in an interview with Sonja Skarstedt that he has "great difficulty working with 'schools' – the school-oriented poets [...]" (Skarstedt 72). Likewise, according to Solway, "true, interesting sensibilities come from people who have a unique vision of things and so they [the Signal Poets] [represent] a range of poetries written by people who have something unique to say," adding that "there isn't any particular 'voice' that Signal has" (Skarstedt 72). Eric Ormsby claims to Carmine Starnino that he doesn't feel in any way part

of the Canadian poetry scene, and yet “no longer [seems] to fit” in the American poetry scene either (“Going Down to Where the Roots Begin” 204-205). Finally, in his essay entitled “Double Exile”, Solway claims that “nothing can be more *different* one from the other than the verses of Ormsby, Harris, Sarah, Sibum, Van Toorn, Allen, Hussey, Taylor and Starnino<sup>5</sup>, all of whom *as poets* could just as well be living on different planets” (Solway, “Double Exile”, 82, emphasis in the original), although he immediately adds, provocatively, that “some of them, it must be admitted, are fellows of the *Jubilate Circle*” (Solway, “Double Exile”, 82). He makes the following comment to Sonja Skarstedt: “there is no sense of ‘school’ in this town and I think *that* is its great strength. A Montreal phenomenon: we know one another, very often we don’t like one another; we are part of a community, but not part of a collective structure. There is no identifiable Montreal ‘voice’” (Skarstedt 34). Despite these claims of rigorous individuality, the critical writings and interviews given by the poets (often with one member of the group interviewing another) seem to point in an altogether different direction. These writings undeniably reveal the extent of this literary friendship. They praise one another and name each other as the proper representatives of the highest quality of Canadian poetry. References to each other in essays, interviews, and, in one case, even in verse, are abundant. A few examples reproduced here help illustrate a phenomenon that is in fact very much present in their respective writings. In *Director’s Cut*, Solway states that

Michael Harris’s *Grace* and *In Transit* represent the kind of work that Ted Hughes would have wanted to write had he been able to [...]. *For a Modest God*, as has been noted by more than one reviewer, displays the verbal gemminess of Hart Crane and the meditative sweep of Wallace Stevens, but it is entirely Eric Ormsby: it stands as one of the major poetic achievements of the decade in English-language poetry. His latest book, *Araby*, is perhaps even more impressive.

“Double Exile” 61

In turn, Eric Ormsby, with his usual eloquent and elegant prose, singles out David Solway’s poetry as being worthy of the highest praise. In an essay on Solway’s book of poetry entitled *Bedrock*, Ormsby claims that

*Bedrock* is as metaphysical a book of poems as has been written in Canada and perhaps in North America, at least

since the death of Wallace Stevens. [...] The first impression the reader new to *Bedrock* receives is one of great and commanding brilliance. [...] Utterly simple in language and diction, [the poem's] phrasing and cadences give it a Wordsworthian intensity.

“The Dark Regime” 107, 108, 113

Carmine Starnino will follow suit by claiming these poets’ excellence on several occasions in his book of essays entitled *A Lover’s Quarrel*. In his discussion of the sad state of Canadian poetry in the book’s introduction, Starnino comforts himself and his readers by stating that “with poets like Moritz, Outram, Avison, Page, Bringhurst, Wiseman, Harris, Solway, Ormsby, Coles, Sarah, Dalton and Van Toorn we are not exactly being overrun by mediocrity” (Starnino, “Introduction” 27). He later substantiates his claim by describing those qualities which raise his acolytes above all other poets:

Eric Ormsby, David Solway and Michael Harris are three Canadian poets whose respective bluffs seems [*sic*] to be operating on another level – in fact, they seem to be playing a very different game altogether. They are poets who have grounded their work in a tradition that they understand, and who, to borrow another line from Kinzie, are in ‘a flexible and fruitful conversation with the whole available language of poetry’. What does that mean? It means they know the exact valence of each word they choose [...] and are able to inch those words closer to an unhampered agreement between motive and manner. Their poetry is a vindication of achieved form: where the poem’s voice, in its texture and sound, is able to acoustically ‘mimic’ its assertions.

“Canadian Poetry as a Busted Flush” 163

Tradition and form: Starnino thus succinctly summarizes what would make up the core of this group’s aesthetic programme, should such a programme ever be identified. The four poets, however, have never formally declared their belonging to any literary school, as demonstrated above. A closer reading of their discourse nevertheless gives us a glimpse of a potential cenacle. Indeed, it is in their critical writings and interviews that a tight-knit relationship among these four poets is truly revealed. One can even find signs of this literary friendship in the verses themselves, as in David Solway’s *Modern Marriage*, in which the poet directly refers to Michael Harris

in a sonnet: “Some need the stubborn nacre of the shell; / and still others like our friend, Mike Harris, / would wish to be ‘among the essential kissers of all time’ [...]” (Solway, *Modern Marriage*, 16), or in Carmine Starnino’s latest collection, *This Way Out* (Gaspereau, 2009), in which a series of sonnets is constructed as a postcard correspondence written from Rome to Starnino’s friends: three of these nine sonnets are addressed directly to “Michael,” “David,” and “Eric,” and the others, we may surmise, are destined to other poets and friends, many of them from Montreal. Harris, Solway, Starnino and Ormsby also never fail to note to interviewers external to their literary circle the influence that these friendships have had on them and the respect they all hold for one another’s work. Although they do remain critical of each other’s works, the praise they have for their colleagues seems to be bountiful: Carmine Starnino opens an interview given to Susan Briscoe for *The Danforth Review* by claiming that “[he] honestly [didn’t] think [he] would be writing poetry today if it weren’t for Michael [...]”, that Michael Harris is indeed “an impossibly good poet, one of our most accomplished”, and closes by confidently stating that Harris’s *Grace* is “one of the very best books of poetry published in this country” (Starnino, TDR Interview). He then repeatedly names Michael Harris, Eric Ormsby and David Solway (along with a roster of other poets) as being instrumental in his own development as a poet (Starnino, TDR Interview). Solway, in turn, mentions to Sonja Skarstedt that “Michael Harris [is] among the two or three finest poets writing in Canada today” (Solway, “Interview with Sonja Skarstedt” 35). Then, when prompted by Carmine Starnino, in the *Matrix* interview, to justify a statement published in *Random Walks* claiming that “the success of language in drawing attention, not only to the world but to itself... restores a significant portion of the world and the intrinsic stratum of our existence to our attention”, Solway replies that the claim is not only a defence of his own poetry, but of that of Michael Harris’s, Eric Ormsby’s, James Merrill’s and Richard Wilbur’s (Starnino, “Interview with David Solway” 154). Carmine Starnino introduces a question on Canadian poetry to Eric Ormsby by stating that his poetry, “in its robust verbal alertness, has much in common with Canadian poets like E.J. Pratt, P.K. Page, Tim Lilburn, A.M. Klein, Peter Van Toorn, David Solway and Michael Harris” (“Going Down to Where the Roots Begin” 204). It would seem, in light of these examples, that these poets are not as isolated as one would be led to believe.

Clues pointing to the existence of the cenacle are not limited to textual references however. In 1997, Eric Ormsby signed the preface to David

Solway's first book of essays entitled *Random Walks* (McGill-Queen's University Press); in turn, David Solway dedicated his *Andreas Karavis Companion* to Ormsby. Carmine Starnino dedicates his collection *Credo* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000) to Michael Harris, and Eric Ormsby dedicates his book, *Araby* (Signal Editions, 2001) to David Solway. In 2001, Carmine Starnino edited a collection of essays on the works of David Solway for Guernica Editions's Writers Series (the book reprinted Ormsby's essay on *Bedrock*, which had originally been published in Ormsby's *Facsimiles of Times*); he also published, in *Language Acts: Anglo-Québec Poetry from 1976 to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Véhicule Press, 2007), edited by Jason Camlot and Todd Swift, an essay on the poetry of Michael Harris. Finally, as noted above, interviews are an equally notable way of shedding light on this group of Montreal poets who, as they readily admit, have gone generally unnoticed by academics and by Canadian readers of poetry (Starnino indeed informs us that "certain exemplary works by Montreal poets have failed to properly circulate" ("Michael Harris's Boo-Jwah Appalachiana" 233). However, in this case, the poets of the "Jubilate Circle" interview *one another*, feeding their friends and colleagues questions which will highlight the qualities that *both* seek to find in poetry, touching upon elements they knew would contribute to ensure that their verse was read properly, in an informed manner. Thus David Solway interviews Michael Harris for *Books in Canada* in 2001; in 2002, Carmine Starnino interviews Eric Ormsby for a collection of interviews with Canadian poets edited by Tim Bowling; he also interviews David Solway for the 51<sup>st</sup> issue of *Matrix* and Michael Harris for the 55<sup>th</sup>. Ormsby, Harris, Solway and Starnino therefore share more than a common geography (Montreal): their poetics, influences and literary adversaries all point to elements of commonality that indicate the existence of a literary circle.

And so the so-called "party of excellence" seems to live on, although in recent years the poets have parted ways, geographically and, to a certain extent, ideologically. Nonetheless, all four poets studied here are indeed very vocal about what constitutes fine poetry: Starnino, Solway and Ormsby by publishing critical essays on the subject, and Harris and Starnino by more actively selecting the manuscripts they deem publishable. They also do not hesitate to identify (some more vociferously than others) the poetry produced in Canada which they judge to be of inferior quality, writing criticism which is, in Solway's and Starnino's cases, a blend of erudition and

outright provocation. As such, the members of the “party of excellence” are self-crowned; however, none of them has been acknowledged outside the circle with the degree of praise that they have received from within. As Starnino notes, “unaccountable neglect is, of course, a frequent theme in the lives of Montreal poets” (“Michael Harris”, 235). He makes up for this external neglect by taking it upon himself to place his compatriots in line with Montreal’s literary ancestors, “a coterie of poets whose ideas were forged in a line that has continued uninterrupted for nearly eight decades” (“Michael Harris” 234). These poets are nevertheless well aware of the politics of literary networks; Solway’s reference to the “Jubilate Circle” is a good example of how poets can use networks to position themselves within the literary field. Interestingly, no such “Jubilate Circle” actually exists, nor ever has. In reaction to the existence of the League of Canadian Poets, Starnino had proposed the possibility of starting another literary circle, the “Jubilate Circle”, in which people would be invited to join upon receiving a gracefully-worded letter, although its other members would remain anonymous (Starnino (b), “Interview”). Only those poets judged to be “deserving” of this honour would be invited to join, regardless of their nationality. The notion caught on, although the plan was never carried out. Solway has nonetheless often referred to this “Jubilate Circle”, dedicating his book entitled *Director’s Cut* to its members and referring to this group in his essays. This can be perceived as an element of provocation: if there is a new, self-proclaimed literary group on the Canadian poetry scene, why does it remain unknown? Is it so exclusive? Who is a part of it (and, an author might ask, why wasn’t I invited to join?) The group itself is formally non-existent, yet an idea persists: this group is made up of those poets who openly admit that they don’t belong – to the Canadian canon, to regional pockets of literary politicking, or to professional associations. A “society of solitaries” (Starnino (b), “Interview”), a puzzling expression, might nevertheless be more appropriate.

A cursory review of these four poets’ trajectories has revealed that they have rallied, at some point or another in their careers, around the Signal Editions poetry series, although it is interesting to note other points of convergence between these four. That they all adopted Montreal or its surroundings for their homes is certainly significant. Solway’s views on the peculiarities of the binary culture found there and its rich potential for the poet is later echoed by Carmine Starnino, who notes that “Montreal poetry holds open a

deracinated space in the national consciousness; a conjoining of terrain and tone that betokens a way of hovering, a way of placing the poetic self ‘in between’ – close to Canada, but not touching it, alert to its ideological trappings, but free to escape” (“Michael Harris” 233). The role played by Montreal in Canada’s literary development over the last two centuries is not an insignificant one, and these poets are acutely aware of the heritage and history that lies behind them. As wordsmiths, these poets owe much to the ghosts of Irving Layton, F. R. Scott, A. M. Klein and A. J. M. Smith, who not only create expectations but hold up what they deem to be standards of excellence (Starnino (a), “Interview”). Here Harold Bloom’s concept of “anxiety of influence” is particularly telling. One could assume in reading critical texts by Solway and Starnino that contemporary Montreal poets live in the shadows of their predecessors and acknowledge their greatness all the while struggling to surpass them. Attempting to distinguish themselves as what Bloom calls the “strong poets,” these poets will discuss and contest the work of Layton, Milton Acorn, Louis Dudek, A. M. Klein and others. In their essays, however, they will display such an acute poetic sensibility, a complex, erudite and lexically rich prose that a reader may discover an altogether new reading of an already much-discussed poet, and might be led to read the author/critic’s own work and see how it compares to the high standard of criticism that has just been encountered. Poets like Starnino, Solway and Ormsby will therefore employ their prosodic skills and sharp and sometimes controversial criticism in order to highlight their own potential as up-and-coming literary masters. They will also admit that such criticism effectively keeps them on their toes as poets, keeps them from falling into a pattern of complacency and self-sufficiency (Starnino (b), “Interview”). These standards of excellence have defined the editorial guidelines that Michael Harris established with the Signal Editions poetry series. They have remained the principles around which these poets have rallied: “seriousness of content, [...] flair and precision of structure and diction” (Starnino, *The New Canon* 21). Indeed, David Solway qualifies the Signal Editions series as one of “enlightened editorship” which has indeed become “home for a select group of poets who have nothing in common except an abiding passion for a rigorous Muse and a refusal to share an aggregate, homogenizing poetics” (“Double Exile” 63).

## Symbolic Value of a Poetry Series

We cannot overestimate the significance and symbolic capital a well-established poetry series (or any other kind of literary series) can have for a poet, who in turn reciprocates, in a kind of symbiotic relationship, and contributes to augmenting the symbolic capital of the series and of its other poets. John Spiers has claimed, in a study of British and American series, that

[the series] is itself a cultural formation. [...] 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 complicities, opportunities and compromises of the market. It is important in studies concerning literary work, with regard to the writer's relations to society – towards the reading public and the publishing economy which conditions those relationships.

Spiers 3

The Signal Editions series – or rather, its director – has tried from its very beginnings to cultivate an aura of prestige, favouring a more formal style of verse and maintaining a large distance from experimental poetry. It also established itself as a dominant force in Montreal's English-language literary landscape when the series was formed as the result of a small “coup” against the Véhicule Poets. In fact, these poets will take great care to dissociate themselves from experimental, language, spoken word or any other kind of poetry they deem inferior. It is interesting to note the full weight and significance of the word “select” when Solway states that there is, in Montreal, “a select group of poets who have nothing in common except an abiding passion for a rigorous Muse and a refusal to share an aggregate, homogenizing poetics,” (“Double Exile” 63,) or that of the word “coterie” used by Starnino when referring to the same subject (Montreal can boast “a coterie of poets whose ideas were forged in a line that has continued uninterrupted for nearly eight decades” (“Michael Harris” 234]). In other writings and interviews, the four poets will reinforce the notion that an imaginary gulf separates the members of their group from the other English-speaking poets in Montreal and Canada. In reference to the Véhicule Poets, Harris states that they were inconsequential, merely “a blip on the radar, collectible by university archives” (Ravvin, “Imaginary Traditions” 120). Starnino and Solway, who have both written books of

critical essays on Canadian poetry, are merciless. Starnino attributes a “rented-from-the-Beats bohemianness” to this group of poets (Starnino, “Michael Harris” 234) while, Solway, never one to mince words, adds that “the Véhicule school of pseudo-demotic poets [who affected] the open-ended poetics of the Black Mountain bunch as it filtered through the West Coast anagrammatic Tish movement [...] unleashed what seemed to many observers to be a veritable hemorrhage of forgettable books.” (Solway, “Double Exile” 83). Such words are evidence of a territorial, perhaps ideological, battle between two literary groups, with Harris, Solway, and Starnino striving to establish and maintain their dominance in Montreal’s (and Canada’s) literary field. One can conclude that their efforts were successful: Signal Editions, with over sixty titles, is still an active and highly successful series, whereas the Véhicule Poets effectively disbanded in the early 1980s.

## **Signal Poets or Jubilate Circle: Is There a New Literary Group in Montreal?**

But what exactly does a literary circle consist of? Boasting a common, or similar, cultural capital (that of writing and publishing in Montreal) and publishing in the same series is not sufficient to define a literary circle; however, it certainly is a good start. Paul Aron and his team inform us that the term literary circle, or “cénacle”, can indeed apply to any group of men or women of letters, and can even be synonymous with a literary school (Aron et al. 80). In this informal group of poets, no leader can be identified, although Michael Harris does frequently open the doors to his home and hold dinners that unite such clusters of literary figures that one may feel he is creating the twentieth century’s version of nineteenth century *salons littéraires*. Moreover, no manifesto has ever been published, nor have the members of the group ever been formally identified. However, as has been shown, the four regularly refer to each other, be it publicly, in writing, or even within their poems. By openly associating themselves to one another, they are publicly fabricating an identity, one that shows that the poet is part of a collective, a network, and that the members of this network are not insignificant. Michel Lacroix comments on the writer’s (or poet’s) public construction of his identity through the power of a network, and states that

les sociabilités, littéraires ou non, contribuent  
puissamment à la construction des identités, individuelles

comme collectives. La participation à un groupe, l'établissement de frontières entre réseaux sont, en même temps que des enjeux en termes de capital social ou symbolique, des choix identitaires, des choix basés sur la perception des affinités et des différences. [...] L'identité se joue dans l'échange, mais ne se mesure pas.<sup>6</sup>

Lacroix, 109

Lacroix goes on to add that openly showing one's belonging to a certain group can amount to a form of labelling, be it aesthetic, political or social, and can influence one's cultural capital and position in the literary field (Lacroix, 109). This might indicate that the books of essays published by these poets as well as the symbolic value of Signal Editions are not to be taken lightly, and that they inform the reader of far more than one individual's opinions. They are in a sense the fruit of discussions, debates, and disagreements held by the members of this group, often around a common meal or in an informal gathering, and are born of what Starnino calls "a respect for each other's work and, frankly, a kind of withering honesty at times" (Starnino (b), "Interview").

The assumption that a tightly knit literary circle has been created around the Signal Editions poetry series is therefore not so farfetched. The identification of such a network and the study of its cohesiveness and influence (of the members on each other and of the group on Canadian poetry as a whole) still pose a challenge. In her study of a literary network operating around one of Quebec's most important literary figures, Henri-Raymond Casgrain, Manon Brunet sets the ground rules for a methodology that would facilitate the study of literary networks. Although she states that there is an added difficulty in that one cannot identify a true beginning or end to a literary network (Brunet, 228), she nonetheless proposes an in-depth study of a large corpus of epistolary exchanges as they might be seen "from above" (Brunet, 220). The present study on the members of the "Jubilate Circle" is so far limited to some of the critical essays published by three of the four poets, as well as their informal meetings and more formal professional collaborations. Archival research, particularly the correspondence and manuscripts found in the David Solway papers and Eric Ormsby papers (both held at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto) will later enable this research to be conducted according to Brunet's methodology.

Brunet informs us that literary networks can indeed be informal, semi-formal or formal and do not necessarily have to be attached to a given institution (235). Solway, Harris, Starnino and Ormsby would probably then form a semi-formal literary network, in that while they do have professional collaborations, as poets within a series, holding common book launches or sitting on common editorial committees for various periodicals, they also meet informally, hosting meals which may also include other friends and colleagues, and which seem to be opportunities for these agents (to use a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu) to meet, discuss, and form new relationships. These informal gatherings are also an occasion in which more seasoned authors or poets will welcome younger poets, new to the trade, and offer them the support of their network. This, according to Brunet, is one of the primary goals of any network, formal or informal:

Que les regroupements soient formels, semi-formels ou informels, les échanges littéraires existent pour reconnaître des liens d'appartenance au réseau, pour faire circuler de l'information, pour apporter de l'aide, pour mobiliser du capital social, pour relier les agents littéraires entre eux et pour contrôler les politiques littéraires, les six raisons d'existence d'un réseau selon Vincent Lemieux.<sup>7</sup>

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Starnino's claim that Michael Harris "is his own man" (Starnino, "Michael Harris", 233), or Solway's contention that "the Montreal writers have worked in substantial isolation [...] from *one another*" ("Double Exile", 81, emphasis in the original) are perhaps auctorial strategies of representing the romanticized image of the solitary poet rather than a reflection of the actual truth. These poets support each other, inspire each other, nourish one another and ensure that their coterie will live on by opening their doors to a select few, like the young poet Asa Boxer, for example, who will keep their poetic tradition alive.

Ultimately, belonging to a literary network and cultivating such relationships is a quest for legitimization, professional recognition, and support. The members of this literary circle really do have a symbiotic relationship, one of mutual help and support, as well as one of genuine admiration and literary affinities. Michael Harris will publish his friend and his student, Solway and Starnino, respectively. In turn, they will ensure that Signal books and poets

feature prominently in publications that they govern, like *Books in Canada*; Starnino will publish Ormsby, who in turn will write a preface to David Solway's book of essays entitled *Random Walks*. Carmine Starnino will then edit a book of essays entitled *David Solway: Essays on His Works* for the Guernica Editions Writers Series and invite Eric Ormsby to contribute a piece.<sup>8</sup> Despite certain signs of “literary incestuousness”, to use Starnino’s own term, this network is based on more than “a kind of careerist tit-for-tat” (Starnino (b), Interview). As Michael Harris colourfully puts it, his network of literary friendships is based on “greed: the greedy desire to associate with the authors of poetry [he admires, to share ideas with men and women he respects]” (Michael Harris, Interview). The city of Montreal has played a significant role in the creation of this particular literary network, characterized by an unfashionable frankness and honesty. Paradoxically, despite having established themselves as a dominant force in Montreal poetry, these poets still remain marginal, a “society of solitaires”, in the field of Canadian poetry.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth study of Montreal’s small press movement in the 1970s and of Véhicule Press in particular, see Julie Frédette, *Étude de l'édition littéraire anglo-qubécoise de la Seconde Guerre mondiale à nos jours*, M. A. thesis, Université de Sherbrooke, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> This essay was republished in David Solway’s collection of essays entitled *Director’s Cut*.

<sup>3</sup> DC Books is said by some to be an acronym for Dudek/Collins, but it has also been suggested that it is a vestige of Delta Canada.

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<sup>4</sup> Significantly, of the ten poets published in this anthology, four are Vehicule Poets (John McAuley, Artie Gold, Andre Farkas – who would later become known as Endre Farkas – and Claudia Lapp), those very poets whose aesthetics Michael Harris emphatically repudiated in the early 1980s.

<sup>5</sup> Although these are all contemporary Montreal poets, not all have published their poetry with Signal Editions. Nevertheless, archival records show that these poets have maintained a certain (though often irregular) correspondence, have reviewed for one another, and generally uphold similar views on poetry. Solway, Van Toorn, Sarah and Taylor were all active on the Montreal English-language poetry scene as early as the 1970s; Charlotte Hussey's collection *Rue Sainte-Famille* was published under the Signal Editions imprint in 1990. Finally, although Norm Sibum arrived in Montreal in the past decade only, archival records show that he quickly established contact and maintained a lengthy and regular correspondence with David Solway, Carmine Starnino and Eric Ormsby, and publishes a collection of poetry, *Girls and Handsome Dogs*, in The Porcupine's Quill's poetry series under Ormsby's editorship.

<sup>6</sup> “Socialisation, be it literary or otherwise, powerfully contributes to the construction of individual and collective identities. By participating in a group, the establishment of borders between different networks are choices pertaining to identity, as well as issues of symbolic or cultural capital. These choices operate on perceived affinities and differences. Identity is negotiated in these exchanges, but cannot be measured by them” [my translation]

<sup>7</sup> “Whether the networks are formal, semi-formal or informal, literary exchanges exist so that a sense of belonging to a network may be established, so that information may be shared, so that help may be given, so that social capital may be mobilized, so that literary agents may come into contact with one another and so that literary policies may be controlled” [my translation].

<sup>8</sup> Note, however, that the essay on Solway's poetry published by Ormsby in Starnino's *David Solway: Essays on His Works*, is the same as that published in Ormsby's collection of essays entitled *Facsimiles of Time*.

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