

The small press as class struggle *revisited*

By Richard Evanoff



In the winter of 1988 I started an alternative English language literary magazine in Japan called *Edge*. Here are some personal reflections on the current state of alternative press publishing based on my experiences with the magazine, especially regarding the prospects for trying to organize alternative magazines as cooperatives. I hope what I've written here not only sheds some light on the inner workings of small press publishing, but also contributes to an anarchist rethinking of what alternative press publishing is all about.

One of the major influences behind *Edge* was Merritt Clifton's *Small Press as Class Struggle*. The pamphlet documents the remarkable history of small press publishing in the United States from pre-revolutionary times to the revolutionary present. Not only was the small press the vehicle by which many important writers such as Thoreau, Whitman, and Poe first gained an audience, it has also played an important role in some of the most important struggles of U.S. history, from the American Revolution of the 18th Century to the Abolition Movement of the 19th and the various social, feminist, and ecological movements of the 20th. Clifton's basic point of view—that for the small press to remain independent it has to avoid both selling out to capitalist interests and succumbing to government control—resonated well with my own libertarian/anarchist leanings. Now that the collapse of Marxism has shown that a highly centralized, government-dictated, party-elitist system of state socialism was never really a viable alternative to the greed driven, 'free'-enterprise-dictated, corporate-elitist system of capitalism, perhaps it's time to let anarchism, with its emphasis on decentralized, grassroots, ecological community involvement, have a go at the revolution. Unlike Marxist dreams of a future millennium, the anarchists look at the revolution as something that begins right here and right now with our own small, but important efforts to begin creating a new non-exploitive and non-hierarchical society in the shell of the old.

Edge was originally conceived as a means of putting power back into the hands of the writers and poets—to put them in control of the "means of production" by creating a magazine of, by, and for the literary community. The idea was to create a community-based literary forum which would be run, not by editors whose only goal was making a profit of publishing what they person-

ally happen to think is "good literature" (typical of most litmags), but by the community itself. The magazine would be supported *creatively* by submissions from the literary community, *financially* by subscriptions from the literary community, and *organizationally* by volunteer labor from the literary community. On the first two points, *Edge* can claim a fair amount of success; it was the third that ultimately necessitated the closing of the magazine.

The numbers go something like this: In terms of creative support, literally *hundreds* of people were willing to send us their work for publication in *Edge*. While the vast majority of the over-the-transom contributors took absolutely no interest in the magazine except seeing their names in print, we nonetheless also received a lot of good material and actually ended up with more good work than we were able to publish. The irony, of course, is that we would have been able to publish more of this work if more of the people sending it to us had subscribed to the magazine: more subscribers = more financial resources = more pages. (A fair amount of the material we published was also solicited, of course, often from writers who were not subscribers.)

For each hundred people who sent us work, however, *only about 10* would subscribe—not a very high percentage, but enough to keep *Edge* financially in the black during its entire existence, something which is extremely rare for literary magazines. It was fairly obvious with some contributors that they would only subscribe if *Edge* recognized their "literary genius" by publishing their work in the magazine (a practice we avoided), but it was equally obvious that the vast majority of people who did subscribe had a sincere interest in literature and were willing to support a magazine both financially and with their readership.

Organizationally, there were numerous offers from people to 'help' with 'editing', but editing actually comprises only a small percentage of the total operating time of a magazine (like writing itself, putting out a literary magazine is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration). Most of the real work is administrative—soliciting material, doing layout and production, handling subscriptions, handling subscriptions, keeping the books, running promotional campaigns, stuffing envelopes, mailing out hundreds of copies to subscribers, finding bookstores to distribute the magazine, etc. The typical volunteer, however, is only interested in being

involved creatively with the magazine—"I'm not interested in the business side of things" is a chorus frequently heard from people who (quite legitimately) are afraid that an overconcern for the "business side of things" leads to a prostitution of art. On the other hand, however, this attitude also subtly embraces the elitist notion that 'creative' work is more important than clerical work—the latter is beneath the dignity of a truly creative person and should therefore be left to others (in the same way that immigrant labor usually ends up with the dirty, dangerous jobs natives don't find 'fulfilling').

Precisely to avoid having too many editors and not enough administrative workers, the basic principle from the beginning of *Edge* was that no one could become a full editor unless he or she was also willing to learn the entire operation of the magazine, including "the business side of things." If someone is willing to assume editorial control over parts of the magazine and offer advice about contents, design, layout, etc., the person should be equally willing to assume full administrative responsibility. In the space of two years, however, there was *not one single person* who learned all the magazine's administrative procedures, despite opportunities to do so. Had there been such people, we would have been able to make *Edge* into a full-fledged cooperative, with completely shared editorial and administrative decision making. As it turned out, however, *Edge* remained a hierarchical organization with the final power and responsibility concentrated at the top.

So the end result is that while there were literally hundreds of poets and writers with a desire to "express themselves" and see their work in print, there was only a relatively small percentage with sufficient interest in reading other people's work to actually subscribe to a magazine, and few if any who are willing to commit themselves to the organization, business, and administration of a literary magazine. If there are any other would-be editors who think they can put out a quality, self-financing literary magazine on these terms, it can in fact be done, as I think *Edge* has proven, but only if they're willing to sacrifice the lion's share of their free time in pursuit of this goal, including their own writing time. I, for one, was never interested in doing this. My original goal was not just to "put out a magazine," but to find a group of people who were willing to share not only in the creative input, but also in

the full responsibilities of the project, so that each participant still had enough time for his or her own writing. *Edge* was never intended to be a one-person show.

I still feel that small press publishing is something that should never become the ultimate responsibility of a single editor working to the point of burnout, but should rather be the responsibility of the entire literary community—not only because it's incongruous to leave one person with the bulk of the administrative work while everyone else is out having a good time being 'creative', but also because it unavoidably leads to an unhealthy hierarchical and dependant relationship between editors and writers. Once writers abdicate their responsibility for making the small press work from an organizational and administrative point of view, they also give up their ability to have a voice and influence in what gets published. If writers have no interest in learning the publishing and business skills necessary to put out a magazine, they are left to the mercy of those who do. If poets don't even subscribe to a single literary magazine themselves, how can they complain about how underpaid poets are (let alone editors)? The goal of trying to empower writers by teaching them publishing skills is not only so that they can "share the work," *but also so that they could assume control, both editorially and administratively*. My experience, however, is that most writers are less interested in learning the ropes of publishing than they are in finding someone else to do the publishing for them, believing that if someone else assumes control for publishing, this will leave them totally free to pursue their "creative interests" as writers. But exactly who, then, is going to assume final control for publishing? Commercial publishers who are only interested in making profit? Literary editors who only publish work that fits their own arbitrary definitions of 'quality'? Or even worse, editors who primarily publish their own work and the work of their acquaintances?

The notion that we can have individual creative freedom without being willing to assume collective organizational responsibility simply doesn't wash. The ultimate irony, of course, is that writers themselves sometimes come to look at organizational work not as a means of empowerment, but as coercion. Editors are good guys when they recognize and confirm a writer's 'genius' by publishing the writer's work on the writer's behalf—

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but editorial Hitlers when they don't. The real dictator, of course, is not the one who advises you to carry your own load, but the one who offers to carry it for you. It's much easier to abdicate responsibility to 'leaders,' whether they be politicians, corporate executives, or literary editors, than it is to take the responsibility on ourselves and create the kind of world we would really like to live in (or the kind of magazines we would really like to read). It's much easier to get cynical when we don't like the decisions others make "on our behalf" than it is to get up off our butts and make these decisions for ourselves. Passivity and dependence on 'leaders' to do for us what we are unwilling to do for ourselves permeates our entire culture, from government to the arts. Yet, how can we expect accountability and responsibility from our 'leaders' when we do not even expect it from ourselves? The fact is, it is we who are being Hitlers when we expect our lead-

Further Notes On Bartleby The Scrivener

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right do you have to stay here? Do you pay the rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this property yours?" His thoughts become crowded with "dark anticipations" of how this homeless apparition might somehow outlast him and "claim possession of my office by right of perpetual occupancy." He resolves to rid himself of this "intolerable incubus."

The lawyer conjures up the ultimate rationalization as a way girdling Bartleby's motives. He confers on him not a "lustrous coat" but a straightjacket, concluding that his employee has strayed beyond the edge of reasonable assumptions and is demented, "the victim of innate and incurable disorder." Yet unconsciously, in the substratum of his being, below the encrusted layers of character armor, the lawyer senses that the *Terra Incognita* which Bartleby inhabits, which is also the *Terra Firma* of his rebellion against the scorched earth mentality of Wall Street where bricks are held in place by human mortar, is also a "common ground where all

ers (and editors) to "take care of the business side of things" while we retreat to our creative cocoons.

If writers believe in the small press enough to want to have their work published in it, they should also believe in it enough to be willing to support it with both their labor and their financial resources. Writing has to be more than merely the narcissistic desire to see one's name in print. Ultimately we have moved beyond the masturbatory preoccupation with "self expression" to a notion of art as *communication* (i.e., intercourse!), which can only take place in the context of a *community* of people who are interested in more than just the ego-satisfaction of "being writers." (Paradoxically, in working with *Edge*, I've found that the more famous poets really are, the humbler they tend to be. A dogmatic concern for 'quality' is the sign of a myopic amateur.)

Moving from narcissism to community was one of the ideals I had tried to realize with *Edge* and the fact that the larger 'social' project was ultimately a failure, certainly doesn't mean the magazine itself was a failure. Judged by the usual standards of small press literary

people—even the individual who insults and oppresses others—have a natural community" (Camus). This distant shimmer of land, hardly more than a mirage within himself, is what unsettles the lawyer and although this is something that he "never understands. That is why he puts up with Bartleby's insubordination" (James).

But enough is enough. Bartleby's quiet resonance begins to act as a tuning fork, evoking sympathetic chords; the word 'prefer' involuntarily seeps into the vocabulary and "in some degree turned the tongues, if not the heads" of those around him. When bribery fails to dislodge him and the absurdity becomes overwhelming, "It is because he will not be a vagrant, then, that you seek to count him as a vagrant," leaving Bartleby behind. Even this, however, fails to hold him accountable for Bartleby, who "persists in haunting the building generally, sitting upon the bannisters of the stairs by day, sleeping in the entry by night." The lawyer is pressured into attempting one last ploy to bring Bartleby back in line. He offers Bartleby the opportunity to work as a clerk, a bill collector, even as a young man's companion on a European excursion

magazines, I feel *Edge* was a sparkling success, both in terms of the quality of the work it published and in terms of the audience support it actually received. *Edge* was indeed the collective achievement of many, many people—while an editor may sometimes feel like the hinge holding up the door, the editor is not the door itself. Full credit should go to the writers, editors, production workers, envelope stuffers, *et. al.*, who put vast amounts of time and energy into *Edge* and ultimately made it a success. I think we should also be (collectively) proud of the fact that we were able to produce a quality literary alternative to the mainstream press without relying on either corporate or government funding, grants, or subsidies. Let's face it, the mainstream press simply isn't going to take serious literature seriously until a writer has proven his or her 'marketability', thus limiting the opportunities for experimentation; corporate sponsors are only going to support noncontroversial content that doesn't question "the system"; and government grants inevitably raise the specter of state censorship. Besides, it's something of an indignity for sensitive

artists to be reduced to begging for support from insensitive corporations and government bureaucracies. If what we're doing is truly valuable, people will support it. Instead of groveling for money and commodifying art, we should come to regard our artistic productions as *gifts to be shared*.

Rather than becoming dependent on corporate or government support, we should be getting on with the project of creating a viable alternative press by ourselves, on our own terms, with our own energy, and through our own financing. We should be working not at creating a mass, faceless audience for our work, but personal audiences of people who can respond in personal ways. This cannot be an individual effort, but must be the collective effort of everyone with a genuine concern for literature and a concern for a genuinely *free* press. "Freedom of the press to those who own one" means that writers will only be truly free when they themselves own the means of literary production (and learn the procedures!).

Writers of the world unite!

but, although Bartleby is not 'particular' he would prefer to do something else. The lawyer finally offers to take Bartleby into his own home, without success, causing him to flee in disarray like a fugitive.

At ropes end now, the police are summoned. A "compassionate and curious" crowd of bystanders accompanies Bartleby through the maze of streets. He is taken to prison where, preferring not "to dine," he dies.

III

"Endure!—no—no—defy!" —E.A. Poe

Bartleby "the inscrutable scrivener," neither his words nor his actions fall within the tidy circumference of reasonable explanations. Unlike Turkey, who salvages what he can of his life by bottling it up, or Nippers, who exercises a "diseased ambition" trying to ape the lawyer's practice, Bartleby wants neither of these permissible permutations of the pattern. He no longer craves to prolong a meager diet of poverty and exploitation, by-products not of Wall Street's degraded operation but of its optimal functioning. Despair and misery will impel people to riot, but for a person to

revolt requires that these raw elements be infused with a vision not just of change, but of actual difference. This inner illumination is what gives Bartleby his calm intensity.

When the living do not recognize the contours of their own death mask, the dead can not be expected to haggle over the grounds of their interment. Asked why he believed in the *Bible*, Tallyrand, Bishop of Autun, replied, according to Poe, "Because I know nothing about it at all." Innocence has many guises but this is not one of them. Bartleby's role goes beyond playing a deadpan foil to a questionable inquisitor. His dissidence though unheard of, doesn't fall on deaf ears. Bartleby embarked on his odyssey of rebellion without illusions. When Melville has him say, and without hesitation, "I know where I am" his words are magnetic. Like the needle of a compass, they serve as a guide for those who would follow in his wake.

An edited version of this essay will appear in the forthcoming *Zero-Work: The Anti-Work Anthology* to be published in 1992 by *Autonomea* (POB 568, Brooklyn, NY, 11211).

The Revolution of Everyday Life  by Raoul Vaneigem

Mediated abstraction abstracted mediation

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trates the masses and becomes a material force. Even when it is co-opted and turned against its original purpose, poetry always gets what it wants in the end. The "Proletarians of all lands, unite" which produced the Stalinist State will one day realize the classless society. No poetic sign is ever completely turned by ideology.

The language that deflects radical actions, creative actions, human actions par excellence, from their realization, becomes anti-poetry. It defines the linguistics of power: its science of information. This information is the model of false communication, the communication of the inauthentic, non-living,

There is a principle that I find holds good: as soon as language no longer obeys the desire for realization, it falsifies communication; it no longer communicates anything except that false promise of truth which is called a lie. But this lie is the truth of what destroys me, infects me with its virus of submission. Signs are thus the vanishing points from which diverge the antagonistic perspectives which carve up the world and define it: the perspective of power and the perspective of the will to live. Each word, idea or symbol is a double agent. Some, like the word 'fatherland' or the policeman's uniform, usually work for authority; but make no mistake, when ideologies clash or simply begin to wear out, the most mercenary sign can become a good anarchist (think of the splendid title that Belle-garigue chose for his paper: *L'Anarchie, Journal de l'Ordre*).

Dominant semiological systems—which are those of the dominant castes—have

only mercenary signs, and, as Humpty-Dumpty says, the king pays double time to words that he employs a lot. But deep down inside, every mercenary dreams of killing the king. If we are condemned to a diet of lies we must learn to spike them with a drop of the old acid truth. This is just how the agitator works: he invests his words and signs so powerfully with living reality

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that all the others are pulled out of place. He is *subversive*. In a general way, the fight for language is the fight for the freedom to love, for the reversal of perspective. The battle is between metaphysical facts and the reality of facts: I mean between facts conceived statically as part of a system of interpretation of the world and facts understood in their development by the praxis which transforms them.

Power can't be overthrown like a government. The united front against authority covers the whole spectrum of everyday life and enlists the vast majority of people. To know how to live is to know how to fight against renunciation without ever giving an inch. Let nobody underestimate Power's skill in stuffing its slaves with words to the point of making them the slaves of words.

What weapons do we have to secure our freedom? We can mention three:

1) 'Information' should be corrected

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