

## A Blunt *Garde*: The False Politics of Honesty

**Phil Hall**

*Let's be honest. We're just talking here. Mano / Mano.*

*The straight goods. The hard truth. The simple, isolated story.*

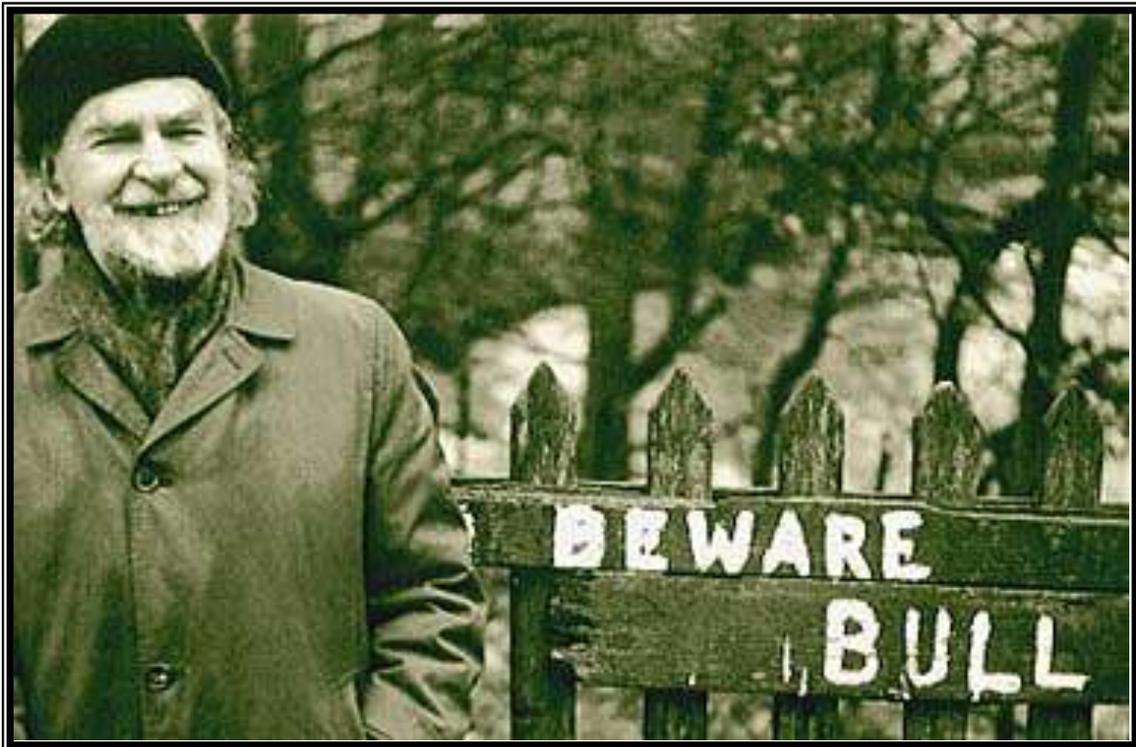
*The way it is. Real life. Working class heroics. Just the facts. No Bull.*

*We won't lie to you. No filigree. No long-haired convolutions of rhetoric.*

When such phrases are used or implied as a poetics, they expose a political brinkmanship—

a blunt *garde*—that is misguided & stultifying.

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*Beware Bull*, says the famous photo of Basil Bunting by Jonathan Williams.

I would stand by a gate that says *Beware No Bull*.

Whispering, *The pasture's empty...*

\*

I do not pretend to be good at anything but a poem—if I am *that*, sometimes, the gods willing.

To a poem I bring compulsion, devotion, humility, an ear, focus. To all else, anxiety.

\*

In our debated stances as poets, we don't have to be right.

We only need some warped logic as a way to justify trying.

This is a freedom poets have that critics may shudder at.

If being critically *wrong* makes a vibrant poem, then being wrong is good.

Poet, if being critically *right* causes silence, abandon rightness & speak.

\*

What does *no bull* mean?

*This you are about to hear will not be polite, it might shock you, it will startle you out of your bourgeois complacencies, it will be good for you, loosen up.*

We all recognize this stance & pitch. Irving Layton, for all his refreshing audaciousness, sold himself this way:

the strutting satyr with the big swinging dick.

See him shirtless with Greek medallion on the cover of *Lovers and Lesser Men*. He tells it like it is. (For whom?)

Many poets have been praised thus as non-academic rough-necks. Remember how, in the 60s & 70s, a cover would brag a list of the humblest jobs, even if the poet was an academic:

*worm picker, lighthouse keeper, farm hand, stevedore...*

(In some ways, Sharon Olds represents this same *honesty of product*. She will say the harder, deeper truths, & that is honest poetry.

Well, it can be.)

\*

I used to cheer the blunt. I was a believer. A *compadre*.

I said, *Invented lives are insults to our life stories*.

I wanted to be real & believe in myself as folk, to make progress happen by making poems be tools.

I don't believe in myself as much anymore. Or progress.

But I believe in my poems more, as they widen.

They seem more political now that they espouse nothing beyond the making of themselves.

With reverence, into the intricate democratic decorum of sound...

Texture not topic intrigues me.

\*

When Layton says (in the last line of "The Bull Calf"), *I turned away and wept*, he is flaunting an emotional, sexual, poetic, & political superiority.

He is pointing to his own larger, freer, feeling. It is theatre. Not truth.

I was doing the same when I wrote, *I should have shot my father*.

I thought I had broken through the sentimental into a raw & beautiful truth.

The unsayable zinger. Being bad. It feels like health. Refreshing.

Startling, quotable, epigraphic. But the truth is always more complicated.

Or sight-to-the-blind simple. As in Basho's *plop*.

\*

Oh, Truth is Theatre. *The Theatre of Innocence*.

Oh, Innocence is Surprise (*First Thought* without invoking Ginsberg's *Best Thought*.)

Beware studied innocence: the perpetually zany teenager-voice from the small-press man in his 40s; the spiritually-correct coastal *trill* with tenure...

Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, for all their wonder—are lessons.

\*

Where the Blues is not a kit,

where Basho's heart, startled, leaps as frog, with frog...

there, what's true is without institution...is not charity or advice or imitation...but *compulsion*...

& the simply stated is an urge (not a thought),

not a technique / but a jerk-response / of, of, almost...

\*

Years ago, I wrote to Clayton Eshleman. I sent him a couple early books of mine. He wrote back to say, *Get your face off the covers*.

Which hurt. But now I take him to mean, *This isn't about you, but through you*.

Or, as D H Lawrence says, *Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me*.

\*

Viscerally, there are blunt subjects that bother me. We have a history, certain crudities, & I.

Critically, it is not a *subject* but a *method* that bothers me—& the implications behind certain methods.

A blunt *garde* uses sincerity & *the unsaid* in advertisingly & preacherly ways.

Subject itself becomes a way to lie about complexity.

\*

If a poem is not in your face, where is it?

If it is not *slammed* into your face, where is it? Behind your back?

If it's not in your face, is it overly polite? Is it too long or complicated to read out loud to an audience? Is it two-faced?

\*

The metaphor referred to by the French term *avant garde* is one of military advancement.

One has to believe in progress to trust that.

Let us trust more in a widening from a central Compulsion, Olson's *Push*, some core force.

To loom outward in a spider's fashion.

\*

There are Pop Art roots to the poetics of a blunt *garde*. Here's what Octavio Paz says about Pop:

Unlike Dada and Surrealism, Pop Art from the beginning was a tributary of the industrial current, a small stream feeding into the system of circulation of objects. Its products are not defiant challenges of the museum or rejections of the consumers' aesthetic that characterizes our time: they are consumer products. Far from being a criticism of the marketplace, this art is one of its manifestations...a mannequin rather than a true apparition.

Paz is warning us against art constructed from or for popular culture.

The simple sentence (the sound-bite, the cut-line) is now popular culture.

*See Dick run*, has been sucked up into the ironic. It is a commodity.

Robert Frost is now a stuffed *Frost*. A Colonel Sanders figure. Despite a lifetime of ambition & craft, only a couple of his lines as sound-bites have use now.

William Carlos Williams's wheelbarrow is a stuffed wheelbarrow toy. It is almost impossible to revisit the revelation of the glaze of rainwater on its red paint.

This is what Nicole Brossard & Robin Blaser mean when they make so hard (so wilily) to have the words revive from their scab hollowness.

By taking words back to their sources. By repeating words until they regain strangeness. By packing words in odd, careful syntax so they catch our ears with all their layers of gills again.

\*

Punk Music also has affinities to a blunt *garde*.

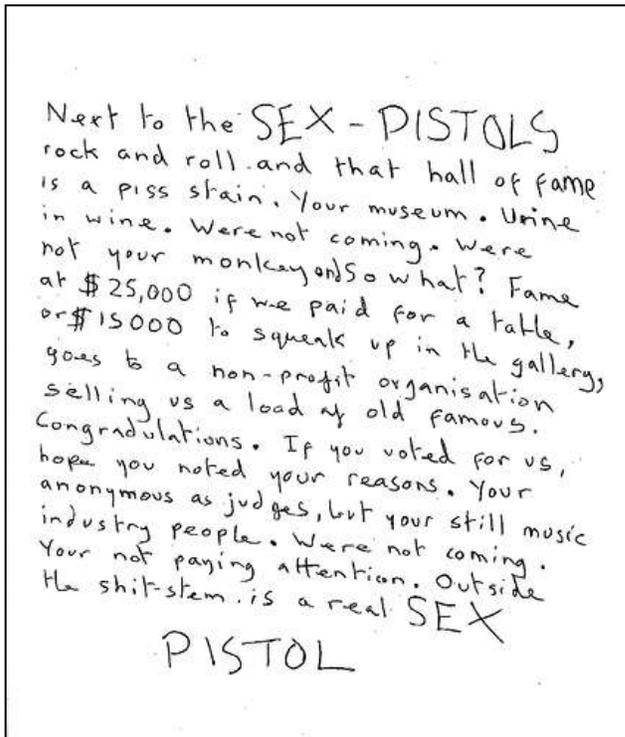
Punk Music had the same goals as Pop Art:

to counter as roughly as possible the mannerisms that had gotten entrenched as norms.

(If you say loudly enough what isn't being said, is it art?)

Since swearing can still keep you out of the galleries, academies & concert halls, perhaps anger is art.

Look at the almost incoherent letter The Sex Pistols scrawled & sent in 2006, refusing to attend the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame ceremonies where they were to be honored.



Next to the SEX - PISTOLS  
rock and roll and that hall of fame  
is a piss stain. Your museum. Urine  
in wine. Were not coming. Were  
not your monkey on) So what? Fame  
at \$25,000 if we paid for a table,  
or \$15000 to squeak up in the gallery,  
goes to a non-profit organisation  
selling us a load of old famous.  
Congratulations. If you voted for us,  
hope you noted your reasons. Your  
anonymous as judges, but your still music  
industry people. Were not coming.  
Your not paying attention. Outside  
the shit-stem. is a real SEX  
PISTOL

As a drawing of defiance it is beautiful.)

\*

George Orwell & The Sex Pistols agree. Though Orwell wouldn't have gone as far as Sid Vicious.

In his working class pose, Orwell wrote his important & influential essay "Politics and the English Language" (1946).

The Queen's English, he says, has gotten clogged by fluff phrases until it comes forth as high falderal, in verse, in prose, in news.

Fluff with power, the worse kind.

(Orwell was convinced that the straight, simple sentence could fix all gobbledygook.

It won't. Plain English is just another propaganda-costume.)

\*

Sure, sometimes a blunt *garde* serves to pry open locked windows. We all breathe easier.

In the late 70s, when the politicians in Ottawa found out that bill bissett was getting Canada Council monies to type 3 letters—C-U-M—onto a page

into the shape of an erect penis, there was a fervor in the House!

Bill got mentioned during Discussion Period!

And in Toronto we have the notorious example of my friend, poor, lovely, doomed Dan Jones—Jones—whose most famous poem is as crude and whimsical as it gets:

*Things I Have Put Into My Asshole*

Saliva & semen & butter & baby oil,  
tongues & thumbs & fingers of women,  
the cock of an old man,  
the cock of a Mexican boy,  
the cock of my sister's boyfriend,  
my hand,  
candles & felt marking pens,  
cucumbers & carrots,  
Sandra's mother's vibrator,  
the intersection of Bathurst & Queen,  
Honest Ed's Warehouse,  
Hamilton Ontario,  
& just today the CN Tower:

I came all over Bay Street,  
as the world's highest disco  
rotated upon my prostate.  
YOU ARE FREE NOW TORONTONIANS!  
It lies limp on the frozen surface  
of Lake Ontario.  
You can barely see the tungsten bulbs  
through the film of K-Y jelly.  
GO FREE TORONTONIANS!  
The small sacrifice  
of a very large asshole.

\*

Notice in passing how important the list is to this kind of writing. The list is a crowd-pleaser.

Because, elemental in its procedures, easy to follow, the list's accumulativeness resists rebellion like a campfire. It's military rhythms anticipate Progress.

(It takes a poet like CD Wright to subvert the list as form. She lets introspection drift sideways through its columns.)

\*

But a blunt *garde* is unfortunately also a component & supporter of *Quietude*.

The righteous impulse to say the unadorned & the unsaid—quickly becomes aligned with art that is careful, accurate, simple—*good* in a school-bookish way.

The blunt & the correct use the same elementary syntax, the same rules of order.

For both, editing & revision become exercises in deletion—instead of invitation.

\*

*It's Not Acceptable to be Fatso*. Says Aase Berg, the young Swedish poet:

I hope for poetic expressions that are aggressive, baroque and esoteric; I prefer ridiculous and embarrassing to perfection. On the literary market, which is dominated by the aesthetic and social ideals of the upper middleclass, it is unacceptable to be excessive in any way – one adjective too many and you're out. There's a stubborn cliché that the sober, quiet and elegant, the so-called "simple" is categorically more informative than the noisy. The fleshy, screamly and overdone, the vulgar, desperate and pathetic are so taboo in our culture . . .

\*

The academies & writing factories have turned Orwell's important warning against fluff & mannerism into a doctrine of propriety.

The mood-drenched simple-sentence ending (*I turned away & wept*) has become a law of closure.

A mask of truth.

\*

Innocence is lightning.

It has no mood except surprise.

It can be invited but not built.  
It stops blog-wallow cold.

The manufacture of innocence is a drawing of a light bulb.  
We have been taught to read as light the straight lines coming from the icon.

Lest: *Hey, the Emperor's naked!*

Lest: *Frog plop!*

\*

When I lived in Vancouver in the early 80s, I taught one course at the Kootenay School of Writing. It was a Work Writing course.

I was a member of the Vancouver Industrial Writers Union, & a member of the Men Against Rape Collective that fundraised for the Rape Relief Shelter.

I took poetry on the road, to the masses. With Tom Wayman & others, I toured Vancouver Island for National Book Week.

(A woman I met while walking around Golden said, *Oh, yeah, National Bug Week!*)

I didn't want to put anything into a poem that my uneducated (dead) father couldn't understand. (*Though I should have shot him . . .*)

Anecdote was King. The I was me, or the I was a political cartoon, like Wayman's *Wayman*.

The Kootenay School hosted two important colloquiums during those years. One was on *The New Work Writing*; the other was on *The New Language Writing*.

I was invited to the Work Writing Colloquium. But I missed the other Language Writing Colloquium, willfully.

I thought, then, that such writing was intellectual and apolitical.

The Kootenay School showed great width of vision to sponsor both enquiries.

\*

Fine poets associated with the Kootenay School—Colin Browne, Jeff Derkson—and Fred Wah who earlier helped found Writing magazine at David Thompson University in Nelson—have each taught me much by their works since then.

Also, I have shut up & listened carefully to many experimental gay & lesbian poets.

Robin Blaser, Nicole Brossard, Frank Bidart, Erín Moure, Natalie Stephens, Robert Duncan, Garcia Lorca, etc.

Plus the brave & astute critic Marjorie Perloff. It was she who convinced me that the political *avant* exists not by advance or bluntness, but by a digging in to language, into tiny vowels.

Now I am listening for that *other voice* Paz (again) speaks of:

What does the *other* voice have to say?...if a new form of political thought were to emerge, the influence of poetry would be indirect: reminding us of certain buried realities, restoring them to life, preserving them...poetry can respond in no other way. Its influence must be indirect, intimidating, suggesting, inspiring...

The subverting of syntactical structures  
is an *indirect* version of what students did in Paris in 68—

they made the thoroughfares impassable  
so that dialogue could be re-invented, revitalized.

\*

My other guiding critics in this circling outward are Guy Davenport and Edmund Jabès.

If Paz argues for indirection & the surreal suggestion, Davenport explains how  
*Every Force Evolves A Form*.

Every force evolves a form. That sentence explains itself well by its exact verb.  
The evolving force.

This is Olson's *Push* (again). Lorca's *Duende*. What I call *Compulsion*. A focus  
on what *has to be* written.

\*

Another title. The Egyptian / French poet Jabès's *The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion*.

(To proceed by gathering into curio cabinets various samples that seem to relate, with the conviction that they *can* relate. How could they not, then?

*Beyond surprise & repetition everything seeks everything...)*

\*

So before us now is Paz's word *indirection*, Davenport's word *evolve*, & Jabès's phrase *unsuspected subversion*.

*The indirect evolution of unsuspected subversion.*

This I would offer as a counter to Punk & Pop & Work Writing & the machismo devotion to bluntness that stunts centripetal discoveries.

\*

A blunt *garde* would have us be shocked & impressed in a vacuum.

But an un-provincial responsibility for literature—in all languages—over all textual times—The Written—the weight of that huge dark Babel-Chorus—

sure dilutes the punch of solemn protectionist one-liners.

It has all been said before. Only the methods & the textures of the intricacies can be new.

It's just not as simple or as noble as crying when the calf dies. Never has been. Never will be.

*No longer shall a story be told as if it were the only one.* John Berger.

\*

Or what I am saying may be as simple as:

When a river is young, it runs straight, fast, loud. As it ages, it slows down, gets crooked, roars less.

\*

Rimbaud, Lorca, O'Hara—all three young gay men—& many others like them

(though perhaps none before Rimbaud in the Romance languages)

wanted to shake up the world & establish room plus legitimacy for their voices  
among the corrupting muddle, middle.

They did this by leaping sideways head-first  
into the darkness & disorientations of the Word.

\*

Because I have shifted my politics / poetics—

I am awakened not by sexy, harsh or risqué topics—but by typos!

A period in a list of commas—or a *though* that was meant to be *thought*!

I float & quicken where, reading, I feel uncomfortable.

I wait for the ajar to pulse & wave me in.

The period among commas is a full stop among flows. I read the poem as  
musical notation, a placeless map.

Where *though* has been set instead of *thought*, I see a good hesitation instead of  
knowing.

A hesitant *though* is inside *thought*. It has been there all along.

Play? Or the whole Golem?

\*

Here's an analogy:

The dog is on the porch.

You can see the dog through the screen-door.  
You watch the dog. You write a poem called *The Dog*.

You have seen the dog through the screen, which is language.  
The door is locked—you cannot see the dog except through the screen.

Realizing this, you begin to notice the screen.  
Not the dog.

Now you see only the screen.  
You write a poem called "The Screen"

"In poetry meaning is inseparable from words. The experience of the poet is above all else a verbal experience. What a word refers to is another word." (Paz)

The dog gets up & comes through the little door in the door.  
*What!*

He is all covered with language. *What!*  
He is a new kind of dog.

Maybe he is not even a dog now.

*Mow nay beg hod a veto sin net.*

\*

Against this analogy, the false politics of honesty.

We are back to Layton's bull calf.

To me saying, *I should have shot my father.*

To the thousands of poems that get pared down to thin polite columns of memory in writing workshops every summer.

To a literary journal industry of domestic *enjambment*.

To the little ego as big director of a docu-drama / home-movie.

To denial or dismissal of the screen in the door . . .

\*

Some translators, for *realism*, put *emotional fascism*.

\*

To leap away

from sincerity, from blunt truth, is essential.

If Dan Jones could have crawled past the confessional Punk animations of *things I have put in my asshole*,

he might still be alive.

\*

I no longer believe that *invented lives are insults to our life stories*.

Our arts of invention are the sustaining organs of what hope we have left.

If Scheherazade stops telling her stories, the hooves will fall off the word.

\*

As long as frost keeps writing Urdu in the asphalt . . .

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Phil Hall

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Phil Hall's chapbook *Ghost Gum* is out this month from Beautiful Outlaw Press, and in April 2010 his new book *The Little Seamstress* will be published by Pedlar Press. He lives near Perth, Ontario.