

Existere: Keep's trying, not succeeding

New editorial policy belied by content: medical journal style maintained

Existere edited by C.J. Keep

By KEVIN CONNOLLY

It is likely that many will say that a review of a student literary publication is either a waste of time, or impossible to accomplish with both fairness and impartiality. If the criticism is predominantly negative, people on the inside will respond first by questioning the qualification of the reviewer (on the "you think you can do better?" system), then with a steady stream of self-justifications, blaming student apathy for a scarcity of submissions.

If one criticizes the publication solely on the basis of its contents, approaching it as one would approach any publication, people can be outraged by what they feel to be unfair or unrealistic standards. Some will damn the whole critical process, condemning the use of value judgements when applied to 'art', and in so doing provide a philosophical justification for all manner of self-indulgence and excess.

On the other hand, if one approaches the work with an altered standard, judging it in terms of student writing, writing that is almost by definition suffering from 'growing pains', many feel patronized or devalued because their work hasn't been taken seriously enough. But perhaps the most predominant belief is that a student publication (though the same thing applies to art exhibitions, drama and other student projects), simply because it is run by students, should be "supported", regardless of its quality. While there may be some truth buried in all of these reactions, our job, as reviewers, would be made impossible if we tried to accommodate everyone.

With this in mind, it is not hard to realize the problems that attend the yearly arrival of the first issue of *Existere*, which since 1978 has been Vanier College's literary magazine. Despite faculty encouragement, efforts to resurrect the old creative writing association have failed in the past few years, and over that period of time *Existere* has understandably become an important publishing forum for York's several hundred creative writing students. It should be judged accordingly.

Partly in response to the problems encountered by last year's editors, this year's *Existere* had a change in administration: the Editor-in-Chief C.J. Keep is now assisted by an editorial board in judging submissions and determining the future direction of the magazine. There were high hopes that under the new system, *Existere* would overcome some of its past difficulties and emerge as a more accessible, and hopefully improved publication. Unfortunately, this hasn't been the case.

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Bending the definition of 'semi-annual', *Existere* finally published this year's first issue in mid February, actually later than '84's volume 1, which was beset with all sorts of internal and technical difficulties. If the quality of the journal was more consistent, time considerations might seem a petty criticism, but under the circumstances, the five months deemed necessary to produce this issue stands as a major consideration.

It only takes one look at this *Existere* to figure out how most of that time was used: unproductively. From the confused editorial (which is really just a long-winded way of saying, 'Well, here it is.') to the clumsy layout, to the contents; which can be described as "uneven" at best, the current issue of *Existere* shapes up as its most disappointing effort in recent memory.

Still, there are some bright moments. Among the poetry, April Bulmer's "Wizard's Release" and "Earth Dance," and Laura Lush's "Siren," all show a good command of language and imagery. Though some of the formal aberrations in Gary Barwin's "choose from the set of all conceivable trees . . ." are difficult to justify (the use of parentheses for instance) the overall effect is quite powerful, with irrational and imagistic associations taking precedence over narrative considerations. Joanne Clark's pieces, particularly "this man has not spoken . . ." are effective because of their fresh use of imagery, their unique sense of rhythm, and their ability to derive poetic power from commonplace or incidental detail.

By and large, though, the biggest problem in the issue is that the poetry is either flat or poorly controlled. Pieces

by editorial board members Steve Reinke and Peter Alexander do little but compound the editorial inconsistency. Alexander's "Romeo Rap" and his diary-style piece both come across as specious and completely inappropriate for a "literary anthology," and there is nothing in Reinke's work to justify the rather extravagant use of three pages. It seems that what the editors call "diversity" is more properly a lack of editorial direction; there seems to be no recognizable standard by which these pieces have been judged.



At least the cover is 'accessible.'

The prose pieces, most notably the three short stories, are much more consistent, all revealing distinct styles and a rather advanced use of language and image. Keep's story works well with his photographs, and the smooth evocative language help contribute to a pleasant sense of strangeness.

Joanne Clark's piece has a similar tone, though it has been butchered by an unforgivable assembly error, which cuts the story off in mid stride, repeats pieces, and completely garbles the last third of the story. It is inconceivable how such an error could go unnoticed; This, combined with the other typos and poor layout decisions in the rest of the issue, contributes to an overall impression of indifference on the part of the editors. Poems are boxed off mercilessly and/or stranded in the middle of the page, crooked lines run all over the issue, and the use of white space and type size is totally inconsistent. If none of the editors have done layout work, why didn't they seek the advice of someone who had? With the right content, these technical problems might be easier to overlook; as it is, they are just another symptom of editorial disinterest.

While it is true, as Keep points out in his editorial, that *Existere* is "dependent for its contents on the quality of its submissions," it is also true that the editorial board can do much to encourage general interest and stimulate submissions. Even assuming that the editors are above reproach on this score, it could hardly have taken five months to assemble this collection, particularly when nearly half of its contributions come from people listed in the editor's box. Such contributions account for 13 of a possible 30 pages; not very impressive for a project in which objectivity should be a major consideration. While it would perhaps be unfair to suggest that all of the editors make themselves intelligible for submission (though it might be an idea for the editor-in-chief to consider) the editors must realize how all this appears to the average reader, and the effect it could have on future submissions.

With all this editorial involvement, how are we to take Keep seriously when he suggests that the current issue of *Existere* is "a representative cross-section of the creative writing happening at York?"

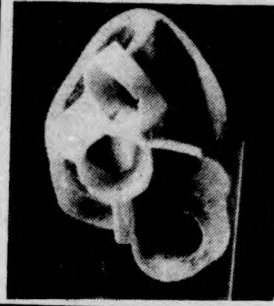
Looking back at the editorial, Keep can be taken to task on virtually every point. His new term, 'existeresque' might well be redefined as "uninspired"; as it stands it is just a blanket term which seeks to excuse an overall confusion in editorial standards. Aside from the front cover (which does appear refreshingly accessible) the so-called "medical journal" approach is as much in evidence as in past issues. One only has to look at the woefully inappropriate hand study on page six to be reassured on that point. The by-lines, the inexplicable internal divisions, and type style are exactly the same as in last year's issue; so where's the big change?

We can only hope that Keep will regroup with his editors after this issue and learn from his mistakes, before the future of *Existere* becomes a matter of complete indifference to even more of the student population.

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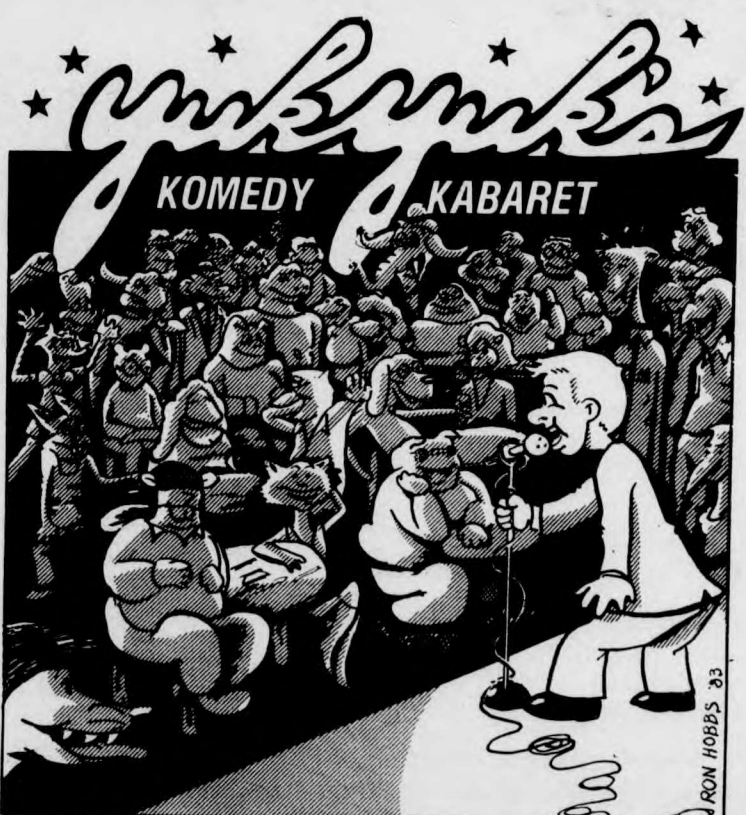
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