Conversation with Flood Editions

Over the past seven years, Flood Editions has become one of the most widely respected independent publishers in the U.S. Known primarily for poetry—of writers such as Ronald Johnson, Lisa Jarnot, Pam Rehm, Jay Wright, Tom Pickard, and others—they have also published, to date, a collection of stories by Fanny Howe; a new translation of Sophocles' Ajax *by John Tipton; a new edition of Robert Duncan's* Letters*; and a translation by Thomas Meyer of the* Daode Jing*. Of the four titles they published in 2007, two were selected as finalists for the National Book Critics' Circle Award.*

The following conversation took place over email in March and April 2008 between Martin Riker of Dalkey Archive Press and Devin Johnston and Michael O'Leary, co-founders of Flood.

Martin Riker: How did Flood start?

Devin Johnston: The idea of starting a press emerged slowly, over many conversations (in some ways, Flood Editions remains an extended conversation). Michael and I had been close friends for years and lived near each other on the west side of Chicago. We would meet at Scruffy's Diner on Division and spin out absurd schemes for funding it. At that point, the spring of 2000, I had just ended my stint as poetry editor of *Chicago Review*, and Michael edited *LVNG* magazine. So we were aware of some terrific poets with unpublished manuscripts. Ronald Johnson had died two years before, leaving Michael's brother, Peter, as his literary executor. We were dismayed by the fact that no publisher had expressed interest in his final work, *The Shrubberies*. So the press was partly hatched to give that book a home.

Michael O'Leary: Devin, are you sure the first stirrings of Flood didn't start in 1999? I can't remember exactly—I almost forgot about Scruffy's, an Irish diner serving up huge wedges of cabbage—but I conflate quite a few of those early conversations about Flood into what I remember as a defining moment. We were at a barbeque at Rick and Pam Wojcik's house and Devin was thinking about moving to San Francisco in search of a publishing career. Tired of losing so many friends to the coasts, I suggested or agreed that we should start our own press. I recall it as almost a dare between us, nothing serious at all. The conversation moved on, but a few days later the idea came up again. I had edited and published *LVNG* magazine with my brother Pete and Joel Felix since 1990 so I knew what it took to be a half-assed publisher. Devin had loads of experience editing the *Chicago Review* and making it my favorite poetry magazine in the late nineties. I had just returned to school to pursue a degree in civil engineering and was speechwriting part-time, so while I didn't have a lot of time, I had more flexibility in my schedule and perhaps more importantly, open chunks of time during the breaks when I could work on Flood. At any rate, I remember a conversation with Devin shortly after the barbeque in which we realized that we might actually be able to make a run at it. Then came Scruffy's and some truly absurd schemes about how to make money selling books.

MR: I think I actually met both of you that year: 2000. Devin was on a panel with me at the Chicago Public Library, is what I remember. And I remember the first book, *The Shrubberies*, which is a beautiful thing—what a book to launch from—but what I don't remember is my sense, at that time, of where you'd go from there. You both struck me as serious people, people who would do what they set out to. But I don't remember what I thought you were setting out to do, exactly. Did you know? It sounds like you had some plan. Was the plan anything like what you've ended up doing?

MO'L: By the time we published *The Shrubs* I think we had settled down a bit and had more realistic expectations about what we could do. There was actually a time that lasted more than a laugh when we considered publishing cookbooks! Neither of us had a clue about cookbooks, but we knew that Ron Johnson had written cookbooks and somehow we imagined that cookbooks would fund the poetry side of the press! At any rate, after we published *The Shrubs* and Pam Rehm's *Gone to Earth* we had a better idea of what we were capable of. It seemed unlikely that we would be able to make a living as independent publishers and it was unclear how much revenue we could generate from book sales. We knew we wanted the books to look decent (so many didn't at the time) and we had Jeff Clark's guidance and support (he is now design director for Flood Editions). Given those circumstances, we committed ourselves to publishing four or five well-designed books of poetry a year. The only criterion for the poetry is that it has to be interesting to both of us. If there was ever a plan, that was it: publish good books and don't skimp on the time or the money it takes to do so.

MR: The cookbook idea really interests me. I'm wondering what a Ronald Johnson cookbook would include. As an independent publishing model, too, it's not unheard of: Godine, for example, has published many different sorts of books—including cookbooks. I don't have any sense that he prefers the literary to the culinary, or that the purpose of the culinary is to pay for the other, but he must be happy to be able to publish something that sells enough copies to give him options, publishing-wise.

You two found a different way to insure that you have options: you both work outside Flood, and as far as I know, neither of you draw any salary from the press at all. Is this the ideal model for you? If given the chance (if you knew the books would sell enough), would you be interested in publishing full time?

DJ: I would recommend Ronald Johnson's *The American Table* and *The Aficionado's Southwestern Cooking*, both in print. Ron worked much of his life in the restaurant business in San Francisco. His cookbooks take a sophisticated interest in American cuisine with an emphasis on what's local, just on the cusp of what Alice Waters was cultivating across the Bay.

I am happy to enjoy those cookbooks without worrying about how they are selling! Michael and I sometimes talk over the idea of making Flood Editions a full-time enterprise. You know, opening up a shop, sweeping the sidewalk each morning. As it stands, Flood has no paid employees, and so the work gets done when it can (nights, weekends). But this arrangement has tremendous advantages: our overhead is extremely

low—consisting mostly of production costs—and so most of our titles break even (or better).

Employment binds with briars many joys and desires. The stuff that draws us would never offer a steady living, and if Flood were to be a feasible commercial enterprise, I imagine we would have to give up some aspects of bookmaking that we value. I can't think of many trade publishers that use sewn binding on paperbacks, for instance.

We will always daydream of an endowment, left by some good-for-nothing son of a shipping magnate or beer baron. But for now, we have a great deal of freedom in what we do.

MR: Okay now I'm going to ask an "interviewy" question. In Robert Dana's intro to *Against the Grain: Interviews with Maverick American Publishers* he writes: "So it has been the small presses, 'little' presses, which have kept before our attention fresh standards of quality and the shape of the new, which is never anything more or less than the shape of our own intentions, *in*-tensions, tendencies, where—perhaps especially where—the art itself creates the life. Thus, those publishers chosen for inclusion in this collection of interviews earned their place by virtue of a certain recklessness. They insisted on cutting against the grain of both business sense and received literary opinion. Their first concern in almost every case was for the publication of the unpublishable, of the not-yet-published, and for the shape of what they believed to be the future."

Pretty large claims and I'm curious what you think about them both in terms of your own press and in terms of "little" presses in general.

DJ: When it comes to editorial decisions about poetry, I'm not sure there is any essential difference between small and large presses, independent and trade. Nobody publishes poetry for profit. Nobody allocates huge resources toward it. In that sense, it all cuts across the grain of business sense.

I do think the most lively poetry gets published through the individual taste of editors rather than committee decisions, and through enthusiasm rather than a heavy sense of responsibility. In those respects, small-scale enterprises often prove more successful, but not always.

What do you think, Michael?

MO'L: Poetry certainly goes against business sense for any publisher, regardless of the size and honestly, I don't know what the received literary opinion is. Whenever I talk to people directly I often find that their tastes are somewhat unpredictable. And I don't think we've ever seriously considered a book that we thought was unpublishable, let alone the shape of the future! Our model is simple: we publish poetry that we find clear or surprising or both because we enjoy doing so.

Regarding Robert Dana's claims specifically, I have to agree with Devin. I don't think small presses necessarily keep the standards of quality fresh. But when there is little money or prestige involved, why do anything unless you love it? Love and enthusiasm are what keeps everything fresh.

MR: I confess I put the Dana quote out there expecting neither of you would see yourselves in it. I wasn't sure what you would say in response, but I was pretty sure you wouldn't raise the flag of the righteous maverick above your city, and I am interested in why I felt confident about that. I've been thinking this through for the past couple of days and I think it is partly to do with Flood and partly to do with the cultural moment we live in. In general, it seems to me smaller independent publishers are less concerned these days with having a Poundian mandate (is that fair? to call Dana's claim a Poundian mandate?)—the way in which publishers think and talk about themselves, or in which others think and talk about them, strikes me as very practical, more in line with a punk aesthetic of do-it-yourself than a modernist "make it new."

What is interesting to me about this in relation to you two is that I think in some ways Flood is a throwback to those publishers Dana interviews in *Against the Grain*. In how you present yourselves, in your attitude toward literature as it manifests in your list (your "aesthetic" in a non-limiting sense), you strike me as closer kin to Jargon Society than to, say, Wave or Fence.

Do you feel affinities to particular presses of the past? To particular presses of the present?

DJ: As you say, I think we do feel more affinities with presses of the past. Jargon would represent the sort of artisan traditions Michael and I admire (connecting back to Kelmscott, Cuala, and others), though we are essentially a trade press.

Growing up in Winston-Salem—a business address for the Jargon Society—I picked up some of those beautiful, oddball publications in the local bookstore (not so much the poetry, but books of photography and drawing). I was vaguely aware of Jonathan Williams as a local presence, and heard him give a talk on outsider art when I was in high school. He was wearing a double-breasted suit, as I remember, but flashing images of these wildly inventive constructions. Following up on his hints with my sister and friends, I drove around to visit local "outsider artists" (then a burgeoning industry). We befriended James Harold Jennings in Pinnacle, North Carolina, who responded sweetly to our curiosity. His best work involved wooden cutouts of huge Amazon women cudgeling little men. These were connected to bright whirligigs that rose up from the old school bus in which he worked. I hadn't met many adult artists, so this seemed interesting.

These memories have little to do with publishing, except that Jargon connected me to treasures hidden in the landscape. In that sense, a good publisher brings things otherwise lost to light.

Later, the Jargon Society introduced me to Jeff Clark's marvelous design work. A copy of Tom Meyer's *At Dusk Iridescent*, published by the Jargon and designed by Jeff, arrived at the *Chicago Review* offices in 1999. In the design and production of that book—as well as the content—I immediately recognized shared affinities.

MO'L: The first poetry books I read were mostly published by New Directions and City Lights. I loved the Pocket Poets series even when there wasn't much to love. If there were ever a romance to publishing for me, it was City Lights in the fifties and sixties.

And *Blast*. I've tried to tell myself that an aspect of punk pamphleteering influenced *LVNG*. And to a certain degree it did, but mostly to the extent that *Blast* anticipated a punk aesthetic. I vividly remember seeing Black Sparrow's reprints of *Blast* 1 and 2 when I was still in high school and I would just pour over those pages. Something about the idea of just putting together a magazine and acting like it mattered made a very strong impression on me. I suppose I might have been what they call "an angry young man." At any rate, I was troubled. When I published the first issue of *LVNG* in 1990, I stamped each issue with a made-to-order *LVNG* rubber stamp along the diagonal of the cover in homage to *Blast* 1.

Aside from the fact that Ginsberg and Kerouac were enormously influential on my adolescent poetic sensibility and still are (to a lesser degree), City Lights appealed to me because I somehow imagined all of those people were friends.

And finally, Jargon Society made a big impression on me. In the winter of 1988, my older brother Pete, who was a junior in college at the time, asked my mom for a copy of Mina Loy's *Last Lunar Baedeker* published by Jargon. My mom drove all the way out to the west side to Borders, when it was still a Michigan chain, just to pick up a copy of the book for Christmas. It turned out that they had two copies, so she bought one for me. I was a senior in high school and I was totally floored. I was as mesmerized by that book as I was by the *Blast* project. Not only was the poetry unlike anything I had read before, but the sumptuous assemblage of poetry, photos, and manifestos evoked a world I had never encountered. It remains one of my favorite books.

Although I don't see Flood as a particularly cranky press, I do think it follows in the tradition of Jargon and early New Directions in the sense that we are primarily motivated by what interests us.

MR: I wonder if in looking back at those groundbreaking publishers, in particular Wyndham Lewis and City Lights, we tend to overemphasize the political stance and underemphasize the sheer creative excitement of their publishing practice. Maybe that's what I see as the throwback in Flood, the enthusiasm that manifests itself as risk and care.

On the other hand, I never would have pictured Michael O'Leary—or Devin Johnston, for that matter—as an "angry young man" (I myself wanted to be an angry young man, but what came out was always more of an overly self-conscious frenetic young man) and so let me ask about that, too. About *LVNG*, Michael, and Devin, about *Chicago Review*

and before. (What was before *Chicago Review*?) It seems to me there's a whole layer of Flood's aesthetic that is embedded somewhere in the list, the selections you make, and in the way you proceed as publishers, but that is not made explicit in a City Lights-Wyndham Lewis way.

DJ: We generally take things "one book at a time," hoping Flood Editions as an identity will mostly recede behind the poetry. Unlike modernist precursors, I don't think our press pitches itself "against" anything in particular, in a cultural or political sense.

That aspect of Flood Editions may reflect its time and place, emerging from Chicago in the roaring nineties. *Chicago Review* and *LVNG* were casting nets wide, but also disconnected from any sort of scene or orthodoxy. I hardly knew more than a half-dozen poets in Chicago, and I almost never saw them together. So these were quiet if intense activities, at the edges of what got talked or thought about even among friends. More of our friends were musicians, or intelligent listeners who worked at Reckless Records or Dusty Groove, or something else altogether. They tended to be eclectic in approaching music, putting together historical elements in new and exciting ways. But little of it was counter-cultural or ideological, and people tended to be suspicious of pretensions in that regard. Not much blasting or bombardiering, but a great deal of enterprise. Maybe Flood partakes of those attitudes. Rarely pugnacious or aggressive. A little proud and shy at once, and so reluctant to make declarations.

MO'L: Just for the record, I was not, in fact, an angry young man. Confused and obnoxious, but not really angry. I don't think I was alone in being drawn to *Blast* and City Lights. The manifesto side of modernism resonates with the adolescent need to stake one's claim, especially if you have any artistic inclinations. I studied Latin because I loved Peter Whigham's Catullus translation. Once I took Latin I figured I should probably learn Greek and read Homer. Nevertheless, I do think I had an authority complex unique to my own circumstances. Starting *LVNG* offered a way to address a complicated relationship to cultural and intellectual authority. In other words, instead of seeking the approval of the authorities, why not try to become your own authority? But again, I think this is in line with literary modernism as well. Doesn't matter if you're writing in Gloucester or Fort Atkinson, you can make it happen. Chicago seemed especially suitable in this regard. Although when I arrived in Chicago in 1993 there were plenty of things going on poetry-wise, it was free of any dominant school or scene and certainly of any authority. The few local readings I went to then tended to be at Columbia College, where Paul Hoover was inviting people to read. But it wasn't anything like New York or San Francisco. I was absolutely free to publish *LVNG*, in part, because no one was watching.

Devin gets at something else in his last comment. The six or so poets we knew in Chicago formed a reading group in the mid-nineties along with a few artists. It was generally a modernist avant-garde reading list, but not exclusively. At that time, my tastes were fairly orthodox modernism: Sappho and Catullus up to Zukofsky. I did have a soft spot for Lowell, but my taste was fairly predictable. That reading group opened my eyes as a reader. People were engaged in a lot of different traditions and my poetry interests

became decidedly broader and more dynamic. I just couldn't see the value of sticking to one tradition any longer. Why not just read the good stuff, wherever it comes from? In fact, I might even say that's when I first started to learn how to read.

DJ: Michael's mention of Whigham's Catullus made me think—Catullus might be as good a patron saint as any to characterize the aesthetic of Flood Editions (or at least one dimension of it). His vivid persona and vernacular, his sharp sense of form and smooth elastic meter, the force and brevity of his poems, these are all close to our hearts. We have certainly published terrific books that don't share these qualities. But Catullus might characterize our beginning point as readers, and as friends we have talked about his poetry a great deal. Nobody feels more modern to me, with an immediacy untouched by historical distance.

MR: Jumping back to this idea of a publisher's identity, which Devin mentioned in passing. It's interesting that you want it to recede, Devin, because as a reader of your books, it's one of the things I most cherish. I think really interesting publishing houses have a personality of their own that is both as predictable and as fluid as a human personality and that is always growing and changing as books are added, but which also retains integrity as a recognizable thing. When Flood published Thomas Meyer's translation of the *Daode Jing*, my first response was "weird choice," but almost immediately my mind adjusted to the idea that this book, too, is part of the Press's personality; in fact there then seemed something obvious about it—the book had reset my ideas to such an extent that it now, as a choice, seemed obvious.

But this is my readerly response. As a publisher, I would never want Dalkey Archive's "personality" to impinge on one of our books. As a reader of your books, though, it means a great deal to me. Each book is like a new facet to Flood's personality.

At any rate, we're approaching my deadline for this little discussion, so, in the great tradition of interviews everywhere: What's in store for the future? The books, the plans.

DJ: The future holds a crumbling economy, endless wars, and some good books from Flood Editions. In the next two years, we will publish new books of poetry by Lisa Jarnot, John Taggart, Andrew Joron, Jennifer Moxley, and Graham Foust, as well as a novella by Fanny Howe called *What Did I Do Wrong?*, told from a stray dog's perspective. We will also be publishing a collection of photographs by William Wylie, something of a new venture for us. The book, *Route 36*, follows an old highway through Kansas, with beautiful images of its towns and spaces along the way. We hope to do a few more books of visual art in the coming years. Other than that, we have been planning a reading tour for Tom Pickard for September of this year: San Francisco, St Louis, Chicago, New York, Providence, Maine, and many places in between.