

A REAL GOOD GOOSIN'

TALKING POETICS

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the Vehicule Poets

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Press**

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Much thanks R.T.

Louis Dudek: About all this new Montreal Poetry, the question is whether there are any new critical ideas behind the poetry. Are there any principles behind what you people write, or do you just churn it out without thinking?

Ken Norris: Well, I don't know if you could get everyone to stand under the same umbrella but all the Vehicule poets are working with a personal aesthetic; that's what varies, the particular approach to the problem. I'd have to say that all of us share certain post-modern biases; the old modernist tension between tradition and innovation is shot, there's no going back, this is the 20th century at last. & in the face of that I'd have to say that all of our work is celebratory, we celebrate what it is about life that we can find to celebrate. Eliot's revulsion in the face of the world / religious apotheosis is long gone. The Vehicule poets are something new in Montreal because they bring an experimental bias into an essentially conservative town in terms of poetry; & we're a strange wedge / aberration off the Black Mountain / bisset-nichol connection because our experimentation is not totally wide open; although our work has a certain amount of "research", as Steve McCaffery calls his work, there's also a concern for the poem as working entity. I'd also have to say that, although we've tended to emphasize the influence of poets like Bowering & the Black Mountain poets, our influences are really more widespread and at times rather amorphous. We believe in a democracy of "themes" and objects; supermarkets are as important as great cathedrals if you know how to look at them right. Peter Van Toorn sees us as being "messy" rather than "neat" in our writing and, again, I think that's a choice we've made about how to approach the poem and life, though again we do this to varying degrees among the ranks.

Stephen Morrissey: Personally, I just churn it out without thinking & then certain principles appear. But why must we have principles? What do principles have to do with writing poetry? I think that is a backward approach to writing poetry, to have principles first & then write. First you churn it out & then presto you have principles. And then the principles have to be negated or you have the problem of consistency to principles. When are we going to get over this academic dualistic approach to poetry?

Dudek: Aha! So the cat's out of the bag. First, this thing about "aberration form Black Mt / bisset-nichol": seems to me a major error now perpetuated beyond the 30-year mark; i.e., that poetry must be emitted (not *made*), as you breathe (not *think*). Mess is naturally the result. Who will remember the messes? Recently, a project out west, POETRY GOES PUBLIC, has put individual poems on posters. Really fine poems, set off beautifully, with artistic design. This kind of thing can change poetry, it will focus on the perfection of the individual poem, not on the plops, the flops, the pflux. Imagine the poem cut in marble, painted on silk, poured in Monel metal, then you will try to make a poem that's worth this expense of effort. A poem (art) is defined as something that *endures*, while everything else perishes. Look back over history and say where there was poetry; surely not where somebody belched creatively, but where they have left something you can still read. Now this is where Ken's "democracy of themes and objects" is also doubtful: There's a major confusion. There is no democracy of objects. All objects involve negative or positive affect: "bird thou never wert" is opposite to "turd thou never wert". And we make poetry, willy-nilly, out of this polarity. O yes, the "willy-nilly" is Stephen's point: which came first, the theory or the poem? Actually, if the poem just came to Stephen "without thinking", then probably someone else did his thinking for him, and he is just latching on to a line of poetics. It is true, however, that poems "just come" -- they'd better not come at all if they don't sometimes just come. But a poet is a man who "has thought deeply", as Wordsworth says. Great periods of poetry usually come just after or just as a new theory has been or is being worked out.

Andre Farkas: First about the 'principle vs the churn': I don't think it is as clear as that, at least not for me. It (the process that eventually is the poem) is constantly at work / play, touching / being touched by images, ideas, lines, flashes, etc. which in turn turn me on to consider certain *principles*. Other times it's vice versa and other times...

I do not have one unshakeable principle to which I mold my poems. To be a prisoner of one would be to condemn my writing to a uniformity of form, context & deadness.

I partially agree with Steve that principles of poetry & about life tend to come after the work (sometimes, because poems are revelatory, it happens at the same time). However I am also aware of the reality that I do formulate principles about writing but they are not rigid. They tend to be maleable, accommodating ideas that are poems first and principles after.

Wordsworth is right when he says that a poet is a person who has thought deeply but he should have also said that a poet does not think in a deductive, linear, philosophical manner but more in an intuitive, disjointed-connected manner. At least this has been my experience. And I am convinced that this is a valid 'deep thinking' experience.

At this point in my life & work, I feel that I am working the yin / yang world of chaos & focus; taking chances & from those encounters I choose elements & directions. One element is the world of the *everyday*. I often find myself staring at its goings on with awe. (Thus my appreciation of David McFadden's poetry) And when I am able to transcribe (not describe) that *aweness* into a poem then the subject can be birds or turds: it don't make no never mind. Blake & the romantics have taught us that.

And while on the subject of subjects - let's remember that there is a definite difference between subject and theme. One can write about Europe, Vegetables, Murders, Mattress Testing, No Parking & Etc. and definitely not be writing about europe, vegetables, murders, mattress testing, no parking & etc...

I also think that there is only one theme that my poetry deals with, (though I do not have this theme consciously on my mind when I write) and it is 'the journey'. Before I get N. Frye over the head I must differentiate between 'the journey' & 'the quest'. The quest has been a theme of literature ever since man wanted to know where s / he was going. It always implies a goal -a holy grail-, whereas the journey implies the process, the goal being aware of the journey and not consider it a necessary evil to get over. We *know* where we're going to end up. Let's focus on the chaos that is the journey and not see what that is. When I write I have no fixed destination but rather try to be open to the moments & visions that the poem reveals to me. "as the breath is the journey / I move..."

Now about this 'messy' business. Peter's remark was not in reference to our lack of care about our craft / the making of the poem, but to our use of the open form. In fact the so called 'messies' are probably more concerned with form than the 'neats' because they are using it as an integral ingredient in the making of the poem, whereas the 'neats' are using it as a paint-by-number outline to produce recognizable shapes rather than poems in the sacred sense.

Now about schools: School's out! Ken is really keen on trying to make a school out of the seven of us who can't even agree on where to eat let alone on poetics. I grant that we share certain attitudes about writing but I think they are shared by all good writers everywhere. The seven of us do share a community mindedness that the other English poets in this city do not. I think this stems out of the fact that we put 'the making of' before 'the making it'. And because of public activities, we have been labeled The Vehicle Poets -for better or worse-. But we don't have a collective manifesto or an 'ism' by which we live, write, or die. This I think is to our advantage as we don't feel hemmed in by a dogma which could limit our growth. It seems to me that 'schools' in this country (perhaps elsewhere too) are formed by writers who met in undergraduate / graduate daze and were being influenced by / rebelling against the same teacher (s). These writers were usually at the *tasting* stages of their careers. We converged *after* our school daze and owed no allegiance to any immediate teacher and when we met we were past *tasting* and in the *probing* stage. There is a definite difference.

We are seven individuals who happen to live & write in Montréal in a language that is of no interest to our own English community... "Poetry is a food that the bourgeoisie -as a class- have been incapable of digesting" Octavio Paz, nor to the majority of this province or this country. Perhaps because of this we, in a Canadian context, are seven hermetic poets whose mission is "To give a purer sense to the words to the tribe". And the tribe will remain lost until they come to realize this.

Of course our hanging out together may have some influence on our writing but I'm not so sure which came first, our individual attitudes or the collective. The two general areas where I find some similarities are 1) our concentration on the subject of the everyday and in its exploration we map / diagnose / sing / cry about the human condition. Tom may be the exception but he does use colloquial clichés in ways that give us fresh perspectives about them & their relation to our existence. 2) we tend to be celebratory... out of the realization that we have no choice.

Ken talks about being in the 20th century (21) and the no-going-back. In my poetry I tend to write about being alive and being very much influenced by this fact. It makes me very aware of the fact that I am alive / am dying and it is between those two realities that I project my verse / voice via the imagination.

Are there any new critical ideas behind the poetry?

Well, one of the definitions of poetry that I believe to be true is Wordsworth's 'poetry is charged language'. From this premise I have gone on to think about & occasionally consciously set out to write what I call 'kinetic' poems. By kinetic I mean a poem that does not rely on 'description' nor word as 'symbolic' but rather on language & form(s) that is active (more verbal than adjectival, more tonal than philosophic) and by its charge evokes the real memory in us.

Also in the last few years I have become involved with artists (dancers & composers) from other disciplines and working with them I have started to develop 'modular' poems. These are 'imagistic' short poems whose components can be permuted and this permutation creates echoes that are effective because of their resonance, not their repetition. Working with dancers & composers is also teaching me the important role that time & space have in a poem. This kind of work has given me an appreciation for the poem as a living thing rather than the poem as an artifact. I prefer working within an open form where the boundary is the imagination and not the theory or the past. Because words have meaning - words can never say - but a poem does - and because it is - it moves and us.

Tom Konyves: To be at the point where the instinctive feel for a thing becomes articulated as "principles"... even the necessity of the question you pose smacks of "which brand of soap do *you* use?"... that there are two attempts in poetry: the timely poems (wherein the style of a generation is held up to ridicule or some other such finger-pointing) and the timeless (a word whose letters have combined in a mystical timeless fashion to fashion a response like "to ease a burthened heart").

...I keep seeing there is no one there. The messianic man-god has not fully come, there are remnants of his garment among us all, his flesh we won't touch til we die, so we reach for the handle, insert the key, give it a turn, a kick and zoom!...it's the vehic(u)le. "What is man" principle "in my (our) poems?" "What is God" principle "what is life (death)" principle "society" principle

...or we have thought about it and decided aw, forget it, it's not worth the hassle, these problems are equally pressing, if we solve *these* perhaps we solve those, too. For myself, I keep seeing there is no one there. It's a dark area of the hall, I carry an evanescent torch. It seems that I either have too much time in my grasp, or not enough. Blake's proverb: "Enough. or Too much" refers to this incentive to writing.

Form and content are the left and right hand playing piano. The principles: do your deepest desire. edit those desires. for the deepest desires rarely edify when clothed with words and, moreover, the extent to which contraries abound nullifies any embracing statement which attempts to reveal the untold truth...

...m. harris in grace: "Life, Death: small things..." once they leave the hand, what do my (these) words do? visualizations of my inner processes, mostly anti-narrative, i.e. disturbing, disjointed in a careful form, a slow left hand. These words can do anything, I think let us go and find new things in there. We were in a cave of years, some of us, and we are leaving the cave now, our writings are on the wall, now perhaps we will resume our journey on the yellow brick road to a post-modern oz.

Dudek: Ken Norris traipsed in here today and we began talking about the permanent and the flux. I told him my line "You can't drown in the same river twice" - the flux must end somewhere. He said "You only disappear from the flux." I'd say it is because he believes there's nothing but change that the poems tend to become ephemeral, no better than any other transitory junk. "What arbitrary rubbish this world is" (Donne). The idea of permanence makes for the idea of permanence in poems.

I like the way you fellows descend into the chaos of the actual. I like your spontaneity. I like your experimental attitudes. I think the new POSTCARDS demonstrate a very consistent poetics. Casualness, colloquial speech. The shaping of an ephemeral moment into a significance. They are poems.

Let's get deeper into this. When I write a poem I am entirely different from the man who writes an article of a book review or a report. In a poem the words happen, they just come. I let them. Otherwise I wouldn't write. To interfere with what is happening is to distort the poem. Just a very small degree of intelligence and supervision is necessary. Very tactful. Any revision later that violates the text as it came, that begins rewriting the words, is fake. Is goddam writing skills. Is an intrusion.

What I despise in other people's poems is goddam writing skills. What I love is poems that happened. You can smell the difference a mile away.

In other words there's a word-assembler inside our heads. Under certain states of emotion and disturbance it starts sending out a ticker-tape of words, it goes automatic. Not that it's irrelevant or incoherent. In fact it's very well organized by its inner causes (whatever they may be) and it is sometimes as rational as Aristotle.

But it's from the inner compulsions, and so it's charged with the communicable emotions.

So far, I think you would agree with me. (Or would you?) Anyway, Ken Norris said that with the permanent (Platonic ideas) one tends to get too far into the stratosphere of the abstract. With the other extreme, right down into the garbage dump of actual life. Why do we have an imagination, that power which is behind the word-assembler of the poet? It is to seek for possible webs of unity, to organize the chaos of impressions, to create an order. That is, a permanence. At least a semblance of permanence.

Isn't this the key? That what you're doing when you just churn it out - with all those 'democratic' anarchic details - is hunt for a touch of solid ground, a point of rest, an affirmation, a glimpse of some permanent good thing? Think it over.

Artie Gold: "Pass..."

John McAuley: Poets by and large are self-educated, in fact all true education is a form of self-education; the difference between rote learning and natural assimilation is simple: rote learning is based on end gaining while self-education rests on a means whereby technique. Applying principles to the poetic process encourages end gaining or a kind of intellectual grasping for straws to the detriment of creative awareness. If anything typifies this group it's our honesty as far as intellectual bullshit is concerned. We don't ass kisseach other or our ideas about poetry.

Obviously, everyone works in a distinct and unique way, but not everyone keeps principles first and foremost in mind while writing. However I believe in the transmutation of revision as a strategy to get from virgin manuscript to book or reading draft. As I see it, revision is a byproduct of the invention of writing. Revision simply consolidated expression. I suppose oral poetry remains essentially virgin though I suspect mnemonic metrics employed by the oral poet lead to concision with repeated voicings.

Black Mountain poetics teach nothing in the way of principles but offer certain working methods which may or may not be used depending on the individual's inclination to formulate his line with respect to tradition. Several of these approaches are: whatever sounds beautiful has poetic buoyancy, therefore, trust the ear; distrust similes for they fall too easily; respect the pun and be sensitive to the narrative acceleration of metaphor.

We took no oaths like lawyers or doctors; yes, our identity is tribal though our markings are invisible. Yet none of us are writing the same kind of lines, our syntactical usage is as varied as our fingerprints. Each of us relies on the evidence of personal exploration rather than on shared principles and we are not writing interchangeable poetry. Louis, some of the things you've been saying sound like a sermonette; as if you are half way up Mount Sinai exhorting, "create order, create permanence... create a semblance of permanence..." What is this? A short circuited zen telegram? The seven of us do have one thing in common, we have all worked to keep this city on the poetry map for the past half decade or so organizing readings, doing magazines, setting up presses and distributing books. We have been keeping things going, we haven't been building monuments to ourselves.

I am a churner; what a fine powerful word "churning" is - sexual, almost breeds by itself, indicates sleeve rolling and perspiration, the actual working exploration. The breath is indeed important as tone leader of the narrative; using the breath keeps the ears open, liberates awareness gives a topos to language as *primum materia*; using the breath gives the poet a first rate kinesthetic tool. I remember the first time I discovered this one night eight years ago, I was baking bacon and onion bread reading Bowering's 'the Gangs of Kosmos' and wanting the book to go on and on, turning the pages, feeling as if my fingers had eyes.

You see following the breath is natural, as it carries the seeds of necessary inhibition: defined correctly by John Dewey and F.M. Alexander. Inhibition is the key to all integrative self-education and creative activity. Louis, I think your statement about the "error" of Black Mountain not only stinks with historicism, it also exposes a certain partiality on your part for poetry predetermined by the authority of principles.

Principles don't create poets, smart genes do; I'm not fooling, smart genes violate Mendel's Laws of Selection and explain why poets are born not made.

Churning is nothing like uttering spruious coinage; it is the stitching of words across the page with the rapidity of a table tennis game between the People's Republic of China and Taiwan. Churning involves a recentering of the consciousness into the hand from the mobile of the arm, the Surrealists were aware of this, Desnos and Breton were churners of the first water. However, their churning was a random, almost occult ideomotor technique, without the inhibitory guidance of the breath and that's the distinction between automatic writing and true poetic exploration. The unpredictability of churning, the very going where one knows not, is exhilarating. The old Friar Eliot pose is tiresome and boring. Churners represent a chorus of bullfrogs in Walden Pond. Churning should not be some kind of Mark of Cain,

neither should be experimentation, though both seem to be dirty words in Canada. Resurrect the bones of Bliss Carman of Wilson MacDonald and I'm positive you could draw SRO crowds; Canadian conservatism makes me sick; if this was Minneapolis rather than Montreal, we would get more respect.

There is a long history to fast writing. Thomas Heywood wrote 250 plays at the hazy height of the English Renaissance. He was a churner, he knew thinking takes care of itself. Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe" is probably the most popular book of all time, but Defoe's success didn't stop him from churning out hundreds of books; what about Samuel Johnson? Anton Chekov is another example of a furiously creative artist who made good. There is something sublime, forceful and obvious to the craft of churning which is not the thinking of words and the writing of them; it is the writing and writing of them.

All is fair in love and poetry. You won't find me coming to the poem with principles dropped on the table like a stake of pretty coloured chips. I am ready to palm wild cards and aces and I'm not going to worry about it one bit. Principles in relation to poetry are optional like suspenders which may hold up a pair of pants, but they aren't wearing. Kowtowing to principles has destroyed more poets than Plato could have ever hoped for.

Claudia Lapp (known as Cel here): Well, 1st, this is hard for me because i want this to be a letter to you all on Everything n i'm 'sposed to stick to Poetry. 2nd, it's been 2 and a half mos. since i walked along Sherbrooke St. By now, i have some perspective viz a viz you Montreal poetry *kalyanamitras* (Sanskrit - it means 'spiritual friends' - 'n' you all are). Looking back, without knowing for certain just where you all are at, but having a feeling of it from our April recording session & scattered conversations before i left (i keep hearing "Sunflower, Ken - i love it!) - what was / is most precious for me was the atmosphere of encouragement & support & tolerance of diversity in Montreal - and knowing that something was always *brewing* with us, that we were all churning & channeling & receiving & sharing. The form wasn't as important as our aspiration to evolve, to keep moving, not to get stuck at a comfortable place just because we got good at it (how we've changed our ways over the 8 or 9 yrs. we've been together, how we're still working to uncover - recover our Voices: Ken hasn't remained a Vegetables poet, Tom won't be a dada'ist forever, Cel's fantasies have become something else by now, etc. Our poem-ing a yoga in which we worked out our demons (or should i use *daimons* - that includes light & darkness). In that creative emerg-ency, which took the form of poem of Videotape or performance or Song, we express the demon - daimons of all hu-mans. We move - d, alone or collectively, often sympathetic to each other's blockages & neuroses (but not coddling them). We saw when we could act together, & when we had to be on our own (free from influences) - i liked that we helped one another but didn't smother each other!

9 / 16 / 79 suite... in August one night i'd leapt outta bed w / an idea of what to write for this linked letter (*great* idea) & it was essentially a list - of 'masters' of making - & it's important to list 'em* because they corona me at all times (we poets being a part of a chain of intense *transmitters* - "timeless" TK "poems that happen" LD)... so here goes: Bacho, Issa, Sappho (all thru translation, alas). Holderlin, Rimbaud, German Volkslied; e e cummings, W.C. Williams (esp. Patterson), Emily Dickinson, Ginsberg (last seen in Toronto using Australian song stick, singing Blake & Mexican City Blues on Harmonium(Robt. Bly (singing kabir & his own verse on dulcimer) Kabir, Rumi, Tagore, Richard Sommer (esp. for left hand poems) Penny Kemp, Anne Waldman, Daphne Marlatt, Gary Snyder, Kavafy (again in translation) - i'm cutting myself off here, the list's too long...!

Other *keynotes*: Troubadours *MUSIC* ("Respect the ear" / De la musique avant toute chose"). Ballads, blues, Middle English Cards, square dance callers, auctioneers melody-ing here in Appalachia are very much in my consciousness. Working on using dulcimer for my own songs & chants (a singer said to me the other day, once member of a fine group, "Trapezoid", the key to *Memory* is music... you can sing 43 verses with ease, but without the music to carry you it's impossible.)

Listening to the "new" Joni Mitchell (what a far-reaching Voice & Spirit), who's mingled w / Mingus, i said to myself - Yeah, now she's evolving her poetry, really using the music that's all around her, & all this while being a Superstar(whose times are numbered, i hope - i mean We can't afford to feed the Superstars forever... more important planetary work to be done).

CELEBRATION-well, that's always been my poetic stance.(doesn't only mean sensation - al / erotic). At 33, it becomes something else as well. Poems that heal (make whole) on a collective level. Poet as shaman / ecologist (Snyder)

POEMSTHAT HAPPEN are the only ones i really care about now. They come from beyond wanting them. Your whole life being is a preparation for them. They're clear, authentic, often time-less:

The following, from a Rosicrucian book, really says it about Song & Who we poets are: (Yeats would agree!)

In songs "the words of poetic sentences & the notes of musical phrases are blended into a strange magical alchemy by which the poetic word is intensified & the musical idea is made concrete.

Since tone is the archetype of sound & words are sequences of composited sounds the art of song is seen to be the archetype of poetic reading. The great singer... perceives intuitively the musical value inherent in the literary text & fuses these." AND "All creative artists are mediators between the divine & human." (Human: "Divine Mind")

More to follow... Love to You All; Cel.

Dudek: Words words words. Beware that we don't trip ourselves up on the mere words. McAuley writing against 'principles' demonstrates principles - his reply is full of ideas about writing, the right kind of writing. That's all I mean by 'principles'. The same is true about every other contribution here (except Artie Gold's "Pass"), they show what's behind your poetry...

But to continue my sermonettes, I see two parts of the writing process: a) the writing it down, and b) the working it up. Spontaneous expression, and then revision - but going a little further than John McAuley on revision. He says it "consolidates expression". Ok. But I would say this: a poet with a lot of gift will pour out rich raw material (see Claudia Lapp's statement just above). As the great Marianne said, if you want "the raw material of poetry in / all its rawness" / then "your are interested in poetry." But you may be interested in poetry and perish among the junk-heaps and slag-heaps of forgotten versifiers. What is required to turn your talent into that real poetry you are interested in is the critical sense, discrimination, a grasp of 'principles' which will make your revision masterful. Who was that character in Maughman's *Of Human Bondage* who thought of himself as a great artist and never did a bloody thing? Henshaw, I think. Remember Henshaw, Henshaw remember (if I remember him rightly). I.e., if a writer knows the difference between a good line and a bad one, a good phrase and a bad one, a good combination and a lousy mess, then he can revise, and he can make a poem out of his emissions, or missions. ('Emission Impossible' was the French translation of 'Mission Impossible'). In other words, to be a good reviser, you've got to know, to think, to read a lot. After the churning you've got to 'pull' the toffee. But hell, maybe we've exhausted this one. The purpose is to see what people think. I am impressed that there is a lot of consensus among your group, despite your denying that there is any. The fact is, a lot of people working together, in a time and a place, cannot help but be similar in ways they do not even realize. The critic will see this. The real problem is your relation to the society around you. Most of you deny having any audience. And theres the bigger political question in all this, the way that your poetry is steered by the relation you have to the world around you. You say you 'celebrate'; but you actually kibbitz. I.e. you are spoilers, anarchists, outsiders. There's your political dilemma. (by the way, I'm reading this good book, Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself*, which has a lot to say about this kind of postmodernism). How about going into postmodernism?

Norris: Having never been an extensive reviser I think I'll just let that one roll by me, and actually that point *has* probably been beaten to death, or at least discussed at length by you and McAuley. I talked to Tom before and asked him if he thought that we were really "spoilers, anarchists, outsiders" and he said "Sure", so I guess I won't even argue with that too much. I *try* to celebrate life in my poetry, even if there are things I have criticisms of. I recently saw a quote of Purdy's somewhere in which he said something to the effect that "All poems are love poems" and that's an idea that I've always carried around myself, feeling that to write poetry requires a real act of love, that feelings of love are only things that get poets moving.

But to get on to the more pressing question of "postpostmodernism" or where all of this fits in, what's going on in the writing. I think it's important to talk about the writing itself after having hashed over so many pages of principles. I'm not as committed as you are, Louis, to a poetry of permanence; in fact I'm quite suspicious of poetry that's made with permanence in mind. It has the smell of the academy. A recent thought of mine is that Art is short for artificial and that isn't a notion that really appeals to me. You yourself have always strived for a poetry that would wed life and art. I also remember talking in the past to you, suggesting that there's nothing real about realism. It *is* all artifice I suppose, but that's something I'm not really willing to admit to and a lot of my energy in writing these days is aimed towards defeating the imperialism of art. I suppose that's also reflected in the Graff book as an element of postmodernism.

But to move on to the writing at hand, I am really excited by the writing that I'm seeing going on around me, the potentiality I see in it. I know this is probably going to raise some hackles, even among the members of the group (if Artie will allow me to say that there *is* one), but I'm just now starting to see a real possibility for something new, a new phase, a real post-modernism.

& it'll be something that isn't a further elaboration off of Modernism but rather something that runs counter, that takes us out of aesthetic dead ends. For a long time I've been looking at post-world war II poetry, Black Mountain, the Tish guys, bp Nichol, as post-modern, but I'm starting to realize that it's just been a convenient way of talking about Modernism's later stage, and to call it "post" is to take into account the changes and shifts. But so much of it is really just a continuation of Modernism and, in Canada, catching up with the elements the guys in the 20's and 40's missed, that's the 60's. Interesting stuff like Bowering's *A Short Sad Book*, Nichol's *Alpha Beth Book*, Steve McCaffery's language texts, all that investigation of the medium, that's Modernism. I'm not so sure about bp's *Martyrology*, something significant is going on in that, there's the seed of

something. And I see other things starting to bubble up, some among us, others out there somewhere. It's something totally new, and right now we're caught in the last stages of transition. And that's a sign to me of something important happening, a writer in transition, just stepping off from what's become the safe ground of the 20th century, the investigation of the medium, into something else. That's why I get so excited about David McFadden's work, he's come out of the 60's group and constantly been evolving till he's finally, I think, hitting it. *The Poet's Progress* and *I Don't Know* are real transitional works, the last gasps of an old poetry falling away with the seed of something new contained in it which finally blossoms in *A New Romance*, which I think is one of the first bona-fide post-modern poems in existence. Even although we see guys like Williams kind of pushing it around, I think Pound actually *got* the hard classicism he wanted, but what a classicism, broken images, jagged reality. There's been a real hardness, dryness, a real cutting edge to that, the cutting edge of reality. I think something running counter to that is finally starting to make its presence felt, and I'm afraid to say that it's bringing some of the impulses of romanticism back with it, but it's true. I think further fragmentation in the arts is just the death rattle of Modernism. And the impersonality of Modernism has also got to go, Eliot's platinum plate catalyzing the formation of acid. That's why I'm currently starting to see an essay such as O'Hara's "Personism: A Manifesto" as representing more of an accurate and real direction than Olson's "Projective Verse" essay. And O'Hara seems to me to be more of a lead into the area where we should be going than Olson, even though, as O'Hara suggests, what he's doing may just lead us to the end of literature. Anyway, wandering back, I think there's a real possibility for that something new in the work of some of us. I really see it in Stephen's work; *Divisions* is a kind of working through, those last few pages, to me, point in the direction of a new poetry. Artie, in his new intimacy and in the motive power of the heart in *before Romantic Words*, is pushing up against the gates of something really significant. I suppose I'm beginning to see an organizing principle of coherency in this work, even if it's just a willingness to submit to the mystery or to the forces of life.

It was really important for me to write that poem "Maclvors Point" and to realize that even if I couldn't bring a new measure into being I could finally see the absolute limitation of the world of particulars. I see Stephen's *Divisions* working through sensibility as it's working through life and I see that going on in my own *Report*. *Divisions* and *The Book of Fall* (book two of *Report*) both stem out of the same place and they share that incredible degree of intimacy and confessionalism. Stephen succeeds where I fail however, he at least gets to the point where "the poem becomes a written thing," while I'm still wandering around blinded by the reality of the blank page. But I think by book three I'm finally starting to walk out into something, it's a, no it's not, I was going to say that it's a different world than the one we come up against at the end of *Divisions*, but it's not, both of us wind up confronting the ocean in fact, it's where you dropped us off in *Atlantis*, Louis. Stephen gives us:

& to be alone
 by the ocean
to stand by the shore
 the sand hot
 beneath one's feet
& watch the waves
 the ocean the moon
the constant expansion & contraction
lie down on the beach & watch the clouds
forming on the horizon forming
into a whiteness over yr head
the sea spray becoming a drop of rain
the poem becomes a written thing

In the last section of book three I come up with *cold* sand, the moon, the ocean, also a lighthouse thrown in for good measure, but I drop us off with this:

The ocean is peaceful tonight,
there's not a cloud in the sky,
nature has perfected itself
in a moment that's occupying your senses,
and you have become the perfect lens
for the world to look through
in order to be able to see itself.

Stephen gives us those two beautiful object transformations, the sea spray becoming a drop of rain, the poem becomes a written thing, and I transform subject into object, self becoming lens, the self as totally transparent and clear and something to look *through*, rather than *at*. & all this I see as being somewhere totally different from the perceptive self of the proprioceptive self. And whether anybody else gives a damn, *this* excites me. And to move on, Tom's work is quite incredible in it's recognitions. Beyond the nihilism, the surrealism, the dadaism there are a couple of key insights and, I would suggest, affirmations. That crazy poem of his, "Words Can Never Say" embodies a key problem in its title and after that he can write anything to prove his point, which he does. And whether or not you like the tricks and rhythms of "No Parking", the absolute realization of being "in the middle of things" I think is tremendous. These are the things that immediately strike me, I haven't really gotten a handle on specific things I can point to in Andre, Claudia and John at the moment, though the significant work has started to show: Andre's *Murders* is more than just an interesting stroll through the detective genre, I haven't really come to grips with it yet, Claudia's eroticism just knocks me out and I'm really taken with her poem "The Cosmic Hooker", and John's *Mattress Testing* is one of my favorite all time books of poetry. Where I think we're blowing it right now is simply by still being in transition, there are still the old influences to get clear of, & a few personal awkwardnesses to overcome, but I'm really starting to believe in the significance of the work and the incredible possibilities of breaking new ground. By 1977 I felt like we all finally knew how to write, i.e. could get out a good poem although we always could backslide into writing something really bad; by now, the end of 1979, I'm beginning to see what I think is important work being done and I'm stunned by what *could* happen in anybody's work at any time.

Farkas: Before we rush into the streets declaring ourselves to be the new post modern poets of Canada, we should first locate ourselves and find out what street we're on and what we are & how we got there and what are we doing there.

Something has been / is happening and I think we are a vital part of it but am not sure if we are aware of our role. Investigation and analysis are essential but not because of the vote result; rather because we must understand how we, the important English writers, have coped, survived and flourished in conditions in which the opposite is expected. You know, we just might be the way for the new English-Quebecker. It is in this light that I want to discuss 'post modernism'.

In our intro to Montreal English Poetry of the 70s Ken & I said that the English writer in Quebec doesn't have an audience and to write in English is to commit a political act. I still feel very strongly about those statements but feel that they need elaborating: especially the relationship between minority rule, the means and manner of that rule and how they affect the role of the artist in that community.

- Prelude - The New World / Canada was discovered by accident & developed solely for the profit of various colonial powers
- The ownership of Canada was decided on Abraham's field between England & France
 - In wars, spoils go to the victor
 - The French military, administration & the rich go home leaving behind the majority of poor French
 - The new colonial power replaces the old & sets up its version of the minority ruling group / military / bureaucrats / business

Thus begins the minority's political & economic rule.

It is important to remember that this ruling group was very much apart from the majority of English. However, because of its power, it claimed to speak for the English community. They appointed themselves moral guardians, trend setters and cultural dictators. And in cultural matters, they followed their business aesthetics; they favoured the bought, the imported, the safe & familiar. Their models were from out there. Conversely anything made here was not considered desirable for the very same reasons.

In the English milieu, in Montreal, the first 'poetic' voices of dissent came from within this ruling class itself: Scott & Smith. They also looked to other places for inspiration & direction but for different reasons: they saw the worthlessness of the examples being offered up by the ruling minority as desirable culture.

Scott & Smith got turned onto the modernist influence of Pound & Eliot. They incorporated these influences into their poems of satire which were directed against the rich exploiters. But *the rich* were a faceless abstract as were *the poor*. Neither Scott nor Smith dealt with the reality that was at the heart of the matter; the issue of minority rule. This may have been because both Scott & Smith had come out of that minority.

Klein on the other hand did not. His immigrant background ensured him of a more intimate involvement and maybe because of his Talmudic influences he was more sympathetic to the French-Canadian's aspiration on the individual & cultural level. In *The Rocking Chair* he writes in an empathic tone about their history, their politics and their modernization of Québec. He saw the exploitative process destroying their culture & this is what he lamented. He saw industrialization as the problem & maybe because of his English affiliation he, too, could not focus on the real issue of minority rule. The following generation focused on new poetics & new realities. Dudek, Layton, Souster have working class backgrounds. Their political concerns seem to have been the workers' movement; solidarity / comrades building a workers' paradise on earth & social satire about urban problems. I don't see 'minority rule' being an issue. Louis, maybe you can respond to this.

As for us, we didn't know any other way to look at it but as majority rule. We were very acutely aware of that but I don't think that it was our previous generation of writers who made us aware. It was our francophone contemporaries and common sense. The bitch that we inherited was that we didn't have an audience. Not at home anyway. That's always the case with the new, innovative and interesting, but when there is nothing there before and out of it comes readings, I presses and books and these things are still ignored then I wonder. We and the majority of the English have very little in common. We have very little to say to them that would please them, I make them comfortable, or allow them to continue living their illusion. This illusion has been shattered for good. The ruling group, as a concept, has moved and, with it so has the bought culture. With this leaving, I the falseness of the desired culture was revealed and caused panic & chaos.

One of the essential ways that a people gets to know itself, articulate its fears, aspirations and name itself, it through its art. We have seen the importance of this relationship both as idea & as reality in the Francophone-Québécois society. Here the artists (writers especially) have been in the avant-garde & have been a true mirror to their society. The Francophone-Québécois culture couldn't have developed without facing up to its minority position in a North American reality but by refusing to live only by that definition. The English writers in Québec operate out of a similar awareness. This is partly because we recognize that we have more in common with the Francophone-Québécois than with the English in Canada - North America. We don't deny our larger world but know that it is from here that we are working to out there, not vice-versa. The new English-Quebecker is beginning to realize this. And s - he must start to look at the local work of local artists seriously, to look into their mirrors; not to separate themselves from the rest of Quebec but to identify themselves within it.

Our audience is awake now and we owe our contemporaries much thanks.

Dudek: Very interesting. In fact you all fascinate me. But can we get on a bit to the actual technics of poetry? What ideas do you have about rhythm, layout on the page, shape? Personally I think that rhythm is your own identity, it is the way you shake the words out - as different from anybody else. Recently I noted in my book: *Style is the gimmickry.* But that is critical of the many styles of modernism, especially in the novel. Real style is not gimmickry but soul-rhythm. My advice to the young poet is "Start to babble, go into the lulling stage of infancy again, make long strings of internal monologue... then try to throw them into lines on the page... improvise unpublishable private dribble... open the sluice gates of the verbal black box... discover the full powers of the language centers of the mind, in relation to emotion, to sex, to vision, to smell, to touch, to memory, to fear and desire and expectation..." Some bits of this may actually be poetry. But just bits. Don't publish this stuff. Take out the bits that look promising - and start working on them. But now, as you work, remember that the rhythm is sacred, it is the message. Lay it out on the page to preserve the rhythm, and to intensify it. Here, I believe every poet tends to develop, over the years, a secret system of his own. We don't need to discuss this. You either lay down the lines as they are rhythm'd - to interfere is sometimes trivial - or you obstruct the natural rhythm by line endings and breaks, I to intensify the rhythm (this has to be done with care), and you work toward a final satisfying shape. (If you don't do this final shaping and polishing, frankly I am not interested in your work - and nobody else will be interested in the end.) How about the *sound*? Do you want to work for 'special effects' of sound?

Ralph Gustafson, following G.M. Hopkins, puts all the stress on sound-values - "otherwise it might just as well be prose," he says (see last week's *Globe & Mail*, Dec. 8 / 79). Perhaps this is true for some poets. It wasn't necessary for the Sermon on the Mount, so far as I know. Perhaps it depends on what you have to say. My own conviction is that when you come to the heart of poetry, or great meaning, the language simplifies. At other times, wandering in the dark wood - or playing marbles - you can make a certain amount of noise for its own sake. As for the *shape*, it is the sense of a completed form, of a new form, of a lovely shape in the air - like good pottery (if you cannot tell when a vase has a good shape, nobody can help you). Recognizing, or making, a good form is part of the gift of poetry. Let's recognize, too, that the gift of doing all these things is either there or it is not there; and it is either great or it is moderate: we can only use as much gift as we have.

KONYVES: Where, if anywhere, does our poetry differ from the poetry written in the 40's, 50's, 60's? The phenomenon of "Vehicule poetry", as far as I see it, is largely due to the nature of the centre of our activities (as group). i.e., the Gallery. For those who became disenchanting with the administration of Vehicule Art, any reference to the "space" arouses anger, frustration, ill feeling. Nevertheless, my experience locates us, if not at the center, on the fringe of experimentation, the calling-card of Vehicule Art. The first poets of the gallery, Artie and Claudia, may have thought of the gallery as "free space" for readings, as did the second generation, Andre, Stephen, John. My point is that no matter what we all expected from the gallery in terms of "free space", we received more. We couldn't have walked in the rain and not got wet. We did not meet in a library, we did not get to know one another in classrooms or bars. While the poets read, I believe, "free-form" visual and plastic art, hung on the walls, suspended from the ceiling, spread out on the floor, documented with leaflets lying about on ledges next to poetry books we were selling - the new art began flowing through our veins, more or less.

In other words, the decisions we were making in our poems, where to put what, was, to some extent, affected by what we were seeing around us - literally, our visual influences, the poetry of post-modern art.

Therefore, the technics can be partially attributed to new-art making: collage, mixed-media, dissonance, minimalism... What appeals to me most is that we began writing art, not literature. We have all written poems that look and speak like poems written by almost anyone in the English-speaking world. But we have also written poems that could *not* have been written by anyone else, anywhere else. These are the poems poured into the crucible of art, with words; these are the poems painted and layered onto unique surfaces, with words; these are the poems sung, with words; these are the poems spoken by many voices in dialogue; these are the poems that remain silent, beyond words. Ken's poem entitled *Poetry ends...* "Plain trickery / This thing we call / Art."

Playing At Jacks - The Argument

Playing AT JACKS

A ndre mesmerized the sound of it
T om visualized it

J ohn-john collaged it, on paper.

A rtie passed. He read it, staring down.

C laudia celebrated it.

K en liked it, didn't like it, etc.

S tephen initiated it.

What is it?

The question is: the depth and (2) journey. The depth is the degree to which the poet is aware of the rhythm of his "soul". (Why do poets date some poems?) Aware of the rhythm of his soul while composing the poem. "Oh good foolishness" cries Artie, in his poem V. For while we sit here, cozy in the womb-talk of poetry... a man somewhere slips and falls and you know how a certain pain in the ribs can out-last a winter. In my poems, I can't forget what a myriad of wondrous shapes surround the little poem, so words begin to search out different associations from the ones necessitated by their syntax. The poem, as vehicle, becomes jet-propelled (when it works).

Before I wrote the video-poem *Sympathies Of War* I wrote the line, "Words magically happily dance between the curtains of stop." I churned it out. Then I recognized the principle. In *SOW* the form became "words between the curtains of stop". It was to be more than a mere telegraph poem. Stopping, the cessation of motion, reduction to zero, etc, was becoming the "world of the poem", a good reflection of (or metaphor for) the myriad of co-existing forces revolving about the narrative, what you call "great meaning" and "simplified language". For me, great meaning was nothing without "little meaning" at its side. Andre would understand this in terms of 'negative space', the Zen of "what is not there is as important as what is". Giving life to the paper the poem is written on. The power of "nothingness", which gives dimension to "somethingness" or existence. (In one of the issues of *Mouse Eggs*, our mimeographed magazine, I wrote one poem called, "Poem By Ditto," permitting the very paper we were using to "speak").

The danger of all this is that if there's too much "little meaning" and not enough "great meaning", the poem does not work. Too much darkness vs. too little light, etc.

Therefore the depth of *Sympathies Of War* was achieved with "curtains of stop". These were the means of drilling. The matter (the drill) was even more complicated. Using a Hebrew dictionary (specially designed to refer to Talmudic passages) I discovered that there were no less than seven (!) different ways of saying "stop". I began to gather the imagery offered by this text and proceeded to compose the poem, using the dual method of narrative / found poem.

The means of drilling is the form. The drill is the content.

The journey of the poem is a significant concern, to all of us. Andre astutely differentiates it from the "quest," implying it's the how not the what. Perhaps this is the point where we and you differ, Louis. The how is the principle of having no principles (Tzara). It is the poetry for poetry's sake. It is the celebration of the form, the new form.

Morrissey: I feel that form (& by extension all poetry) is closely connected with being, with the attempt to express the truth of one's being. The difficulty is that we are always changing and therefore one style, one form, isn't adequate. I see my own poetry moving through a variety of forms, clusters of expressions of being. Isadora Duncan writes: "My art is just an effort to express the truth of my Being...It has taken me long years to find even one absolutely true movement."

Where form was a revelation in my own work was in writing the poem "Divisions". I tried to write that poem for ten years, the material was there but the form wasn't. And without the form the vehicle for carrying the content was absent. A number of things coincided to allow the writing of the poem. One of those was reading the work of Clayton Eshleman, whose early poems I had been reading and identifying with. Finally the poem was written in a three day period, and the finished poem required very little editing. "Divisions" was a turning point for my writing. Now I could write something that was true to my being and not reject it two days of two months later, as had been my experience. "Divisions" was a great liberating leap forward for me personally; I felt free of the past, for the past had at last assumed a form through poetry that I was able to deal with, rather than the amorphous mass of confusion that had previously existed.

I agree with Ken Norris that "art is artifice" but it is also a spiritual exercise, or can be; it is my way of understanding my life, and there is nothing artificial about that. Without form there is no poetry, but form should ideally be invented coincidentally with content. Without thinking things over, creating a foundation for one's work, then form is an empty vehicle, a writing that is stylistically pretty but otherwise empty and meaningless.

After writing "Divisions" I wrote long poems for several years; there is a spaciousness to the long poems that seems almost a part of this country. The open spaces, the fact that the land is uninhabited in many areas. However, there is also a spaciousness in the haiku form and it was through writing haikus and concrete poems that I feel I taught myself how to write. I suppose the form of "Divisions" is close to Olson's projective verse, at least it *looks* that way, "looks" because I have not yet studied Olson's work thoroughly. In my other work I have found the two line stanza, which is really a development for me from haiku very easy to work with; it has an openness (spaciousness) that seems to move complementary to the content of the poem; that complementary aspect of form and content is essential.

I try to use form as notation indicating how the poem should be read (either silently or aloud). This also brings in Pound's "musical phrase", the music of the poem, the metre. I agree that "rhythm is your own identity" and that "real style is...soul rhythm". At this point much of my work is a kind of free-form improvisation, writing a lot and then, as Tom Konyves says "finding the poem in the poem". There must be a spaciousness of being, an openness of being, without that I don't think any poetry is possible. That spaciousness comes across in the poem. It is the open mind and the caring heart behind the poem. The form reveals and is a part of these qualities. So any rigidity, any preconceptions about writing are really superfluous and detrimental to writing. For me writing has become a spiritual exercise in which form is a revelation of being. The poems must come spontaneously, and thus form is the appearance of that spontaneity; the poem must scan well, read well. I agree with Keats when he writes "That if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all."

If I may return (however reluctantly) to the discussion of principles for a moment there is one principle that I do follow, and that is to never censor myself when I am writing. There is enough censorship without it being added to poetry. Our burden today is self-consciousness and I feel that poetry is one place where we can begin to free ourselves of this. My objection to principles, again, was based on the fact that whenever principles become preconceptions and rules then poetry begins to atrophy. Just as poetry atrophies when form indicates a preconceived and recognized way of writing "poetry". This is the death of poetry. In reading what the others have said I can see that we are riddled with principles, but then why not? we wouldn't be human if we didn't have ideas, beliefs, preconceptions. The difficult thing is not to rest there, but to continue to explore and investigate and feel and think. Today most people's thinking has been done by other people. This is a failing of the school system; the schools do not teach people how to think for themselves; we have become second hand people. (Wasn't it T.E. Hulme who said that most people's original thoughts would fill about half a page?) But this is in part why I write poetry (not only because I love to sit and write and find a great joy in the act of writing): it is to lay a foundation, to create myself, to create a new form of living that can move sanely and wholly through this life.

Dudek: Dear friends, This is just to say that I've enjoyed carrying on this dialogue with you, and in closing, to thank you for coming out so frankly and for putting this conversation off record. Also, I want to apologize a bit for being professorial and didactic at times - it's a habit of thirty years that's hard to shake, but you've been very tolerant.

Most of all, I want to round it out by saying how I now see your poetry much more clearly. The word for everything - made clear in the last two statements, by Tom Konyves and Stephen Morrissey - is openness. Your poetry, your attitude to life, your feeling for each other - and even for oldies like myself - is open, free, welcoming all possibilities. (In this, like Frank Davey's Preface in the general guide *From There to Here*.) In the poem especially, this is an aesthetic that needs to be understood. You do not want the poem contained in a structure. You want the structure, so far as it emerges, to correspond and somehow to grow out of that openness to many-sided experience, that sense of the world as an open continuum, and that strange inwardness which moves out of infinite possibility into multiple reality. The poem as a symbol or representation of this open state - often with comic or slipshod

effects - is really a projected image of modern reality and consciousness. I believe something similar is happening in Toronto and Vancouver, and perhaps elsewhere, with a local difference wherever poets breathe a different air. A wonderful compilation of this kind of poetry is *The Body*, which just came to me the other day, brought out on the West Coast by Tatlow House (1902 Tatlow Ave., North Vancouver, B.C. VP 3a3) (Obviously, people like McFadden, Bissett, Nichol are doing something similar in their way in the Toronto area (the double number of *Impulse* in 1974 (Vol. 3, No. 3-4) was a good cross-section.) (Box 901, Station "Q", Toronto M4T 2P1. The public hasn't yet understood what this new poetry is about. We need critics who will do a little explaining and defining, maybe even praising, since a lot of the poetry is already available. (See *The Long Poem Anthology* edited by Michael Ondaatje.) Perhaps then discrimination and enjoyment on the part of a bigger public will follow.

A rivederci.

January 9, 1979 - April 15, 1980

