

LIVING IN A DARK AGE: MILTON ACORN AND MODERNISM

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WHILE CANADIAN LITERARY MODERNISM can be traced back to forerunners such as F.R. Scott, A.J.M. Smith, Leo Kennedy, A.M. Klein and Raymond Knister, all poets who in one way or another established the foundations for the new poetry, Milton Acorn¹ played a particularly important part in spreading literary Modernism throughout Canada during the 1960s and 1970s. Modernist theories, principally American, played a role in the development of Acorn's own poetics from the early 1950s on, especially following his move to Montreal.

Milton Acorn was born in Charlottetown in 1923, and wrote his first publishable poems as early as 1950. His initial poems were coloured not by Modernism but by the literary Romanticism of the late 1800s. And although his final poems were written in 1986, well after Postmodernism was established, Acorn never wrote a Postmodern piece. Despite the dates of his literary career (1950–1986), Acorn was a Modernist poet with strong roots in the Canadian poetry of the Romantic period.

Like all poets of his generation,² Acorn was initially inspired by the Confederation Poets,³ especially Archibald Lampman and Isabella Valancy Crawford, whose poetry he was re-introduced to by Dorothy Livesay, herself

¹ I will avoid citing long out-of-print books and chapbooks. His first three small publications—*In Love and Anger* (1956), *Against a League of Liars* (1960), and *The Brain's the Target* (1960)—were reprinted in their entirety in 1987 in *I shout Love and other poems*, ed. James Deahl (Toronto: Aya Press, 1987). The only collection of his poetry still readily in print is *In a Springtime Instant: The Selected Poems of Milton Acorn, 1950–1986*, ed. James Deahl (Oakville: Mosaic Press, 2012), which I will refer to where possible.

² This generation includes four key members of what might be called the “Acorn circle” of poets: Irving Layton (1912–2006), Louis Dudek (1918–2001), Al Purdy (1918–2000), and Raymond Souster (1921–2012). All of these poets adopted Modernist poetics of one sort or another.

³ The four chief Confederation Poets were Sir Charles G.D. Roberts (1860–1943), Bliss Carman (1861–1929), Archibald Lampman (1861–1899), and Duncan Campbell Scott (1862–1947), to which I add W. Wilfred Campbell (1859–1918) and Isabella Valancy Crawford (1850–1887), even if Crawford is a bit old for this grouping.

a major Crawford supporter. To a lesser degree, these Canadian poets were also influenced by the Georgian Poets,⁴ who were still in vogue, at least in Canada, when these poets began to write. Thus, Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian poets were highly visible role models when Acorn and his circle were in school, and a bit later when they started to learn the art of poetry.

Early Acorn poems such as “The Light Gold Days” (*In a Springtime Instant* 194), written in 1950, and “October Morning in a Factory Town” (*In a Springtime* 230), from 1952, show aspects of Romanticism. In the case of “The Light Gold Days” Acorn’s diction is somewhat old fashioned for 1950, and his rhyme scheme—a-b-c-d-b for all four stanzas—far too noticeable. In “October Morning” the poet breaks with his 4-syllable line twice, once each in the two final stanzas:

But, heard before you see them,
peals
the morning song
of workers’ heels.

And summer grins,
can still rejoice,
‘Good morning!’
in a worker’s voice.

This poem reads quite well out loud, but the penultimate stanza looks odd on the page with its one-word line. The “correct” form would be:

But, heard before
you see them, peals
the morning song
of workers’ heels.

Unfortunately, not all of his early work is as successful as “Light Gold Days” and “October Morning.” “The Sandwichmen” (*I Shout Love* 41) starts off with clumsy diction just to secure a rhyme:

⁴ The Georgian Poets were a group of British poets most active from 1911 until the start of the Great Depression, although their popularity began to fade by the latter part of the 1920s.

In fool's garb go the sandwichmen,
 No charity for these;
 Each fellow knows a man must work
 Tho his iron soul he squeeze.

Only two of the sixteen poems in his first chapbook (*I Shout Love* 27–41) are unrhymed, and his ability to work with rhyme varies greatly. This, of course, is a holdover from his longing to be a formal poet like Lampman, whom he admired above all other Canadian poets of the nineteenth century, and whom he sometimes attempted to emulate. By his next publication (*I Shout Love* 45–61), only fifteen poems this time, his rhymed poems work much better, but ten of the fifteen are unrhymed.

By the time his third short publication (*I Shout Love* 65–79) appeared in 1960, Acorn had started to write his major poems. The stilted Victorian/Edwardian diction that marred some of the poems of his first two collections had almost entirely vanished. He had more fully appropriated Modernism. This does not mean Acorn abandoned form. “At El Cortijo” (*In a Springtime* 14) is in 6-line, blank verse stanzas and “The Fights” (*In a Springtime* 17–18) uses alternating stanzas of 12 and 10 lines. But the poet is now willing to fully explore free verse in poems like “Libertad” (*In a Springtime* 22) and “Islanders” (*In a Springtime* 21):

Islanders

Would you guess from their broad greeting,
 witty tuck of eyelids,
 how they putt-putt out with lunch-cans
 on sea liable to tangle
 and dim out the land between two glances?

Tho their dads toed the decks of schooners,
 dodging the blustery rush of capes,
 and rum-runner uncles used wit-grease
 against the shoot-first Yankee cutters,
 they wouldn't be the kind to sail their

lobster boats around the world
 for anything less than a dollar-ninety an hour.

The lines have different numbers of stresses, vary greatly in length, do not rhyme, and no longer begin with capital letters. Non-formal diction is used. At times, the language is even slangy: “wit-grease.”

Acorn lived in Montreal during much of the 1950s. He had moved there from his home in the Maritimes for two reasons, one political and the other literary. First, he wanted to investigate the Communist Party of Canada. Although he would never join the Party, he quickly became a devoted fellow traveller, publishing poetry in the Party’s journal *New Frontiers*. His literary motive was to become involved in what is often called the McGill Group, and he especially wanted to meet F.R. (Frank) Scott, whose poetry he admired. Frank Scott and A.J.M. Smith had been the force behind *The McGill Fortnightly Review*, a student publication of the mid 1920s. After *The McGill Fortnightly Review* ceased operations, it was replaced by *The Canadian Mercury* in the late 1920s. Although this was before Acorn’s time, by the 1950s these two periodicals, however tiny and short-lived, had achieved legendary status. *The Fortnightly* and *The Mercury* had also helped established McGill University during the inter-war period as an important centre of the emerging—and Modernist—Canadian literature, a movement in part led by Scott and Smith, and a movement Acorn wanted to join.

Acorn had been impressed by Scott’s 1945 collection *Overture* as well as by his 1954 publication *Events and Signals*,⁵ and in Acorn’s opinion, Frank Scott was the “first of our poets / Because his whole life was a poem” (*The Uncollected Acorn* 40). In this same poem Acorn states that “A poet’s life is never wasted / Since all the poetry is left.” Thus, a poet like Scott will remain immortal, at least for as long as his poetry’s read.

After arriving in Montreal, Acorn was attracted to the work of poets who had been associated with John and Betty Sutherland’s magazine *First Statement*.⁶ Many of the poets who published in *First Statement* would influ-

⁵ Both *Overture* and *Events and Signals* were published by The Ryerson Press, which would soon publish Acorn’s *The Brain’s the Target*.

⁶ *First Statement*, published in Montreal, survived from 1942–1945. It had been established in opposition to another Montreal periodical, Patrick Anderson’s *Preview*. Both *First Statement* and *Preview* were small-circulation, short-lived journals. Nonetheless, they enjoy a legendary place in the history of Canadian literature.

ence Acorn: Frank Scott, Louis Dudek, Irving Layton, and Raymond Souster.⁷ Along with Al Purdy, whom he also met in Montreal, Layton, Souster, and, to a lesser degree, Dudek, would form Acorn's first and most important literary circle. Acorn was interested at that time in American Modernism as opposed to British Modernism, although he did like Spender (but certainly not Auden). Sutherland and the *First Statement* group shared this interest in the American *avant-garde*.

Although Acorn's poetry would have lost its tendency to rely heavily on end-rhymes, awkward word inversions, and late-Victorian rhetorical flamboyance—all common in the second-rate Confederation and Georgian poetry on which he had cut his teeth—his close association with Souster, Layton and Purdy advanced the process. Before long Acorn began publishing poetry in such leading magazines and reviews as the *Canadian Forum*, *The Fiddlehead*, *PRISM international*, *West Coast Review* and *The Tamarac Review*.

This was not, however, a one-way street. Both Purdy and Souster learned from Acorn, who had discovered the poetry of Federico García Lorca⁸ quite early on. "Somnambule Ballad" (Lorca 65–69) inspired Acorn's "Green After Lorca" (*In a Springtime* 185) and "The King of Harlem" (Lorca 115–23). Indeed, the entire approach taken by Acorn in his "Lumumba Arrested" (*In a Springtime* 39–40), seems to owe something to "The King of Harlem." Acorn was among the first to introduce Spanish poetry, mainly but not exclusively limited to Lorca's, to his colleagues in Canada, and I believe he introduced this type of imagery to Souster.

Because Souster, Dudek and Layton were deeply involved with Contact Press,⁹ they had an immense influence on the development of Modernism in English Canada. As an adjunct to Contact Press, Souster organized the Contact Reading Series, which brought several leading American Modernists—Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley, LeRoi Jones (as Amiri Baraka was known then), Louis Zukofsky, Frank O'Hara and Cid

⁷ It should be noted that Raymond Souster had discovered American Modernism in 1939–1940 while on active duty with the Royal Canadian Air Force, well before he became involved with the *First Statement* group after the end of the Second World War.

⁸ Lorca was a Spanish poet executed by the Nationalists (Fascists) in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War.

⁹ Contact Press would publish books by many Canadian Modernist poets: Milton Acorn, Margaret Atwood, Leonard Cohen, Louis Dudek, George Ellenbogen, Eldon Grier, Daryl Hine, D.G. Jones, Irving Layton, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Eli Mandel, Kenneth McRobbie, John Newlove, Alden Nowlan, Al Purdy, Raymond Souster, Gael Turnbull, and Phyllis Webb among them.

Corman—to Toronto. (Of course, some critics consider Olson and Zukofsky to be Postmodern, not Modern.) Through this series, Acorn was able to meet and, importantly, *hear* these American poets.

Acorn wrote of his love for the poetry of Creeley, whom he met in Toronto via Souster, in his essay “My Philosophy of Poetry” (*Hundred Proof Earth* 51). In this essay he also writes of his love for the poetry of Allen Ginsberg and Souster (both *Hundred Proof Earth* 51) and, what will surely surprise some Acorn fans, Wallace Stevens (*Hundred Proof Earth* 51–52). In another essay, “Tirade by Way of Introduction” (*Jackpine Sonnets* 17), he praises Robert Lowell, whose irregular sonnets¹⁰ helped Acorn in the development of his own irregular “jackpine sonnet.”

Acorn read and learned from the poetry of Ginsberg through his City Lights chapbooks and Creeley through his even more obscure Jargon collections well before the publication of *The New American Poetry*,¹¹ which had a lasting impact on Canadian poets.

The drive to break from the poetry of Romanticism was not limited to the prosody of that former period. While the poets of Acorn’s generation desired to free themselves from the requirements of end-rhyme, stilted metre and other conventions, the more important shift was in content. The new poetry was to avoid excessive nostalgia, especially a pensive longing for a “simpler” past, the idealization of nature, churchy axioms, sentimental approaches to quotidian issues, and any striving for overblown “poetic” phrasings. There would be no more of the melancholic autumnal meditations, so favoured by the Georgians; rather, the new poetry was to be sharp-edged, concrete and, above all, realistic. Rather than formal metre and inverted syntax, poetry would pay attention to the way people actually spoke. Perhaps even more importantly, the people depicted in the new poetry would be regular people. In Acorn’s poetry we find a coal miner’s wife addressing us in “The Miner’s Wife” (*In a Springtime* 1), men forced to accept any job that came their way due to the dehumanizing poverty that attends prolonged unemployment in “The Sandwichmen” (*I Shout Love* 41), day-labourers in “Cynicism” (*In a*

¹⁰ See Lowell’s *Notebooks* (1969), *The Dolphin* (1973), *For Lizzie and Harriet* (1973), and *History* (1973) as well as his *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003) for the poems that inspired Acorn’s *Jackpine Sonnets*, especially Lowell’s collection *History*.

¹¹ *The New American Poetry*, ed. Donald M. Allen (New York: Grove Press), 1960. This anthology probably did more to introduce American Modernists to Canadian readers than any other covering the new poets of the post-war period.

Springtime 8), the retired docker of “Charlottetown Harbour” (*In a Springtime* 16), P.E.I. fishermen in “Islanders” (*In a Springtime* 21), and Belle, who gave birth to her son unaided in a pasture beside a mare (*In a Springtime* 15). And all those people appear in his initial three tiny publications.

If poetry was to concern itself with beauty, truth and goodness, the beauty was harsher and less benign, the truth more complex (and far less certain), and the goodness conflicted. Let us consider Acorn’s religious poetry. He was a life-long Anglican who valued the poetry of George Herbert, yet in “What I Know Of God Is This” (*In a Springtime* 151) Acorn could write:

What I know of God is this:
That He has hands, for He touches me.
I can testify to nothing else;
Living among many unseen beings
Like the whippoorwill I’m constantly hearing
But was pointed out to me just once.

Last of our hopes when all hope’s past
God, never let me call on Thee
Distracting myself from a last chance
Which goes just as quick as it comes;
And I have doubts of Your omnipotence.
All I ask is ... Keep on existing
Keeping Your hands. Continue to touch me.

Even less orthodox, but curiously still Christian, is “Jesus Acclaimed” (Deahl, 7) in which the newborn Christ child is depicted holding a sphere with a golden and bejewelled cross on it, prefiguring His own eventual crucifixion. And his celebrated “Ode to the Timothy Eaton Memorial Church” (*More Poems For People* 50–51)—originally built as a Methodist church, presently a United church—begins with the irreverent “You get up on the cross / This time Brother ...”

In “At Saint Michael’s Hospital” (*Whiskey Jack* 19) Acorn seems to question Christ’s birth, death, and mission:

Jesus Christ, wood-carven on the wall
With the tight lips of a desperate criminal
Desires that we all be free and equal

Or at least get a nod before nightfall.
 Why was he born? For what offence
 Was he hung up for all to observe?

And in “I, Milton Acorn” (*Dig Up My Heart* 148–49) the poet explains his odd relationship to, or understanding of, his Creator:

Lord I thank Thee for the enemies
 Who even in childhood tempered me.

I beg pardon, God, for the insult
 Saying You lived and were responsible
 ... a tortuous all-odds-counting manner
 Of thinking marks me an Islander.

The fault is Acorn’s own “tortuous all-odds-counting manner / Of thinking” and not a failure on the part of God. But isn’t most religious thinking in our post-faith era “tortuous” when compared to the culture in which Acorn grew up during the 1920s and 1930s, a culture in which people were less inclined to question the existence of God? Acorn was an Islander, but his problem with modern thought goes beyond the fact that he was born and raised on Prince Edward Island. Indeed, his religious thought truly became “tortuous” only after he left the Maritimes for Montreal and the Communist Party.

Finally, and even more unexpectedly for a believer, in his poem “The Flowery Man” (*I’ve Tasted My Blood* 101) the poet puts these words into the mouth of Jesus: “Judge that you shall not be judged!”—a poem in which Acorn admits his own words “jumble and cross as in a puzzle.” No Confederation Poet could write these lines, but a Modernist poet did.

The poets of twentieth-century Canada, Acorn among them, had to negotiate the modernist dilemma. They had to balance faith and doubt, perhaps for them more sharply felt than for the poets of the past. The Confederation Poets, who inspired many of Canada’s earliest Modernist poets in one way or another, lived and wrote in an era of order. By the close of World War II when Acorn began to write, uncertainty had replaced the sense of order in all fields: science, religion, philosophy, education and the arts.¹² This dilemma

¹² For a full discussion of order versus uncertainty in all fields of life, including visual art, music and literature, see David Bohm and F. David Peat, *Science, Order, and Creativity*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2000).

continues into the twenty-first century, and now serves as the basis for most current writing.

Acorn was one of Canada's finest nature poets, but his nature poetry is as conflicted as his religious poetry. Likewise, in his love poetry, where love is not the permanent and happy-ever-after state envisioned during the high Romantic period of the nineteenth century, and even in his political poetry (for many years he was *both* a Communist and a Christian), where he is willing to question the workers' ability to govern, we find a poetic ideal every bit as compromised as we find in his Christian poetry. Nothing can be as clear and as definite for Acorn as it was for most of the Victorian poets he admired and, at first, emulated; contradiction and doubt are given full voice. Once received wisdom is questioned, where does uncertainty stop?

The matter is debatable, but Canadian Modernists tended to view the pre-Modern poetry of their country as not especially relevant to life in the twentieth century. Like the American poets they so admired, they took it as their duty to question the conventional thoughts and beliefs they were taught to accept by their parents and grandparents in their homes, at school and in church every Sunday: the religious, political, philosophical and literary wisdom of the nineteenth century. In this endeavour, poets like Acorn and his friends Purdy, Layton, Souster and Dudek, helped to lead the way to a Modernist (and eventually, Postmodernist) Canadian culture.