SEARCH FOR A STYLE

The Poetry of Milton Acorn

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"POETRY FETTER'D FETTERS THE HUMAN RACE." These lines of Blake still retain their freshness, their significance, as a source from which twentieth-century poetry may draw its vigour. For a time it seemed that lyricism such as that of Blake or Shelley had gone out of fashion: passionate song seemed out of key with the tone of *The Wasteland.* Yet Pound valued "music" above all else; Williams established the importance of rhythm as opposed to metre, with his "Down with the iambic pentameter!" On the ideological side there were many echoes of Shelley's revolutionary utopian vision in the poetry of the nineteen thirties. Now in the sixties we seem to be becoming somewhat fatigued by cerebral and mythopoeic poetry. There is a return to Imagism; and with that return lyricism inevitably canters alongside. "The consciousness of necessity" is not far behind.

Of all contemporary Canadian poets, Milton Acorn is most at home as a part of this development. A small town boy on Prince Edward Island, a building trades worker in the industrial east, a recruit for the Second World War, he is now, in his forties, devoting all his time to poetry and politics. His interest in writing began early, but he had no access to modern poetic directions. As he describes it, he grew into poetry the hard, unschooled way:

> I started to write in iambic patterns, taught by my brother who went to college. Iambic was theoretically based on the 'natural' rhythms of the English language, and I guess in the district where I lived this was more or less true. But among the great majority of people living on the North American continent the speech patterns (stress and rhythm) have changed. Iambic no longer fits.[1]

Acorn first began to break with the iambic pattern from listening to seamen talk:

> The way they used words, the way they condensed sentences, the way they dropped conjunctions, the way they used 'will' and 'should' in their elliptic form. . . . When I started writing I used the iambic metre because I thought it was popular, it would reach people; but I became uninterested in reaching people if I had to present my work in terms such as they didn't use themselves, in their own speech.[2]

His aim was "a line that flowed more in terms of their own natural idiom". In the light of that aim, it would seem worthwhile to examine in detail poems by Milton Acorn that reveal how he began to grow away from the iambic pattern, while yet maintaining a unity of structure based essentially on strong-stress (ballad) rhythms.

Linguists like Trager and Smith have described the English accentual system of speech as being based on four degrees of stress; but the average person's ear probably detects only three levels of syllable stress. In analyzing the poetic line, it is the position of the strong stress that counts; secondary or "weak" stresses do not give the line its beat. This is because there is always (in speech as well as in poetry) one strong stress between pauses (or junctures, as they are now called). Bearing this in mind, it will be convenient to look at one of Milton Acorn's poems on the basis of a three-level stress pattern. Here is a sample, "Charlottetown Harbour", from an early collection:

> An old docker with gutted cheeks,
> Time arrested in the used-up knuckled hands
> Crossed in his lap, sits
> In a spell of the glinting water.
> He dreams of times in the cider sunlight
> When masts stood up like stubble;
> But now a gull cries, lights,
> Flounces its wings ornately, folds them,
> And the waves slop among the weed-grown piles.

In this poem of nine lines we can reckon that each contains two strong stresses per line. These stresses occur isochronically; that is, the intervening syllables, whether secondary or weak, occur within the same time-beat, emphasized by juncture. Sometimes there is an "outrider", as Hopkins called it: an extra syllable or group of syllables, as in line two. Further variation is achieved in this line by the use of internal juncture (*Time arrested/*). In stanza one, the most effective juncture occurs in the line:

> Crossed in his lap,/sits//

and in the second stanza we have a somewhat parallel third line:

> But now a gull cries,/lights

A long rounded effect is achieved in the last two lines with a juncture on each side of "folds them"; followed by onomatopoeic rhythm as, "the waves slop among the weed-grown piles".

What other elements besides rhythmic stress and juncture are characteristic of this early poem? It is not a poem of action, loaded with verbs, but a "picture" poem; therefore the nominals (modifiers and nouns) are dominant. Notice how almost every noun has a qualifier: *old* docker; *gut*ted cheeks; *glint*ing water; *ci*der sunlight; *weed-grown* piles; and that rhythmically these follow a trochaic "falling" pattern which emphasizes the depressed, ironic mood. The few finite verbs, on the contrary, are single-syllabled, forceful, progressing from transitive to intransitive; from "sits", "dreams" and "stood" to the more active verbs "cries", "lights", "flounces"; with a sudden transitive descent, "folds them". As that action is completed the continuity of nature is insisted on: the waves "slop".

Notable in this poem is the lack of overt emotion and the absence of metaphor or symbol. We are presented with a still-life painting in the Imagist tradition. Generally Acorn's early work seems to follow this Imagist pattern of minute detail, enclosing an internal movement which is created by the use of phrasal rather than clausal utterances. Yet Acorn is a poet unable to sit still for long: man interacting on scene is what really interests him. In a recent unpublished poem, for instance, he states:

> Description isn't for poets:
> Poetry demands an exactitude that defies description,
> liken the soul to an electron.
> When you say 'like' that implies 'not quite'.
> Or drop that word! But then
> you're speaking of something else entirely
> going on in the nucleus.

Even in his first book it is apparent that Acorn's poetry is beginning to eschew description, or even simile and metaphor, in favour of a more dramatic presentation. The landscape is now acted upon, as in the poem, "Old Property":

> past that frost-cracked rock step
> twist yourself thru
> skewjee trunks and old coat-hook branches;

> ground once dug and thought of and
> never intended for those toadstools.
>
> in the shade past the cracked robin's nest,
> past that spilt sunlight, see
> his grainy grip on
> a hatchet keened to a leaf,
> a man in murky denims
> whispering curses at the weeds.

The sentence structure here is still phrasal but the arrangement of the two finite verbs — "twist" and "see" — emhasizes their imperative nature, stresses action. There is no internal juncture and even end-juncture is disguised by run-on lines:

> twist yourself thru
> skew-jee trunks
>
> or
>
> his grainy grip on
> a hatchet

The effect is to emphasize word or phrase at the *beginning* of the line. From now on, this will be one of Acorn's chief technical devices. With "whispering curses" he extends himself farther than imagism, into symbolism. And from there on he questions, questions. An example in the early volume of this leap from the declarative statement ("Charlottetown Harbour") to the imperative ("Old Property") and on into the interrogative, is found in the poem "Islanders."

> Would you guess from their broad greeting
> witty tuck of eyelids,
> how they putt-putt out with lunch cans
> on seas 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 couldn't be the kind to sail their lobster
> boats around the world
> for anything less than a dollar-ninety an hour.

This poem shows a significant development from the two previous ones (and whether it antedated them or postdated them is not the point) because of its

dialectic. The utterance pattern is no longer dominantly phrasal. There is a balance now between nominals and verbals, with strong, vivid verbs taking over: *putt-putt, dim out, toed, used, sail.* After the first five lines, in a rhythmic pattern of three strong stresses to the line (all ending in a trochee), the rhythm suddenly gets stronger and tighter with four beats to the line, for four lines. The last two lines, however, open out into an expanded iambic speech rhythm, long and sinuous and hard-hitting. The exciting element in this poem is the way that the developing rhythmic pattern corresponds to the developing content pattern. The first five lines carry straight description (though couched in a laconic question); the next four lines are dramatic narrative, a reference to the past behind the present; and the final breakthrough is more than ironic comment, it is the dialectic "jump" to a new synthesis. Acorn's mind works in lightning flashes.

Several deductions can be made from the above analysis. The first one is that there are three aspects to Acorn's style, evident in both his early and his late poems. These are: vivid imagery, rhythmic progression, and the ability to create a synthesis of what has gone before.

> But similarly I liken a soul to an electron:
> give it a charge and it jumps to a new orbit.
> Therefore I praise the jump before it happens —
> which makes the kids say I tell lies
> and so I do
> but *my* lies make things happen.

Said another way, the poet works on his material, activates it and re-creates it into a new synthesis. He successfully integrates form and content. What he himself has to say about this process is worth noting. I quote here from a conversation:

> My work since 1960 has been greatly influenced by Olson — not his 'formal' theories, but theories on voice. I do not agree with him that form must always be nothing but an extension of content. I think there is a continuous dialectic interplay between form and content; that anything is conceived as a form in the first place.[3]

Again, he says

> My favorite painter is Picasso. I love him because he is conscious of form, of the approach. Like him I am very deeply interested in various methods of presenting the content of my poetry — I find myself almost incapable of writing two poems with the same formal idea. I'm always looking for new forms. Each new poem is an experiment in form to me.

It is as an experimentation with form that Milton Acorn's poems are particularly satisfying. In his great variety of presentation (well over one hundred poems already published) there is no repetition; neither is there an amateur dilettantism. Rather, soaring through a variety of approaches a human search is evident: the search for enduring life. "The Fights" is a good example: [4]

What an elusive target
the brain is! Set up
like a coconut on a flexible stem
it has 101 evasions.
A twisted nod slues a punch
a thin gillette's width
past a brain, or
a rude brush-cut to the chin
tucks one brain safe under another.
Two of these targets are
set up to be knocked down
for 25 dollars or a million.

In that TV picture in the parlor
the men who linked to move
in a chancy dance
are abstractions only.
Come to ringside, with two
experts in there! See
each step or blow pivoted
balanced and sudden as gunfire.
See muscles wriggle, shine
in sweat like windshield rain.

In stinking dancehalls, in
the forums of small towns,
punches are cheaper but
still pieces of death.
For the brain's the target
with its hungers
and code of honor. See
in those stinking little towns,
with long counts, swindling judges,

how fury ends with the last gong.
No matter who's the cheated one
they hug like girl and man.

It's craft and
the body rhythmic and terrible,
the game of struggle.
We need something of its nature
but not this:
for the brain's the target
and round by round it's whittled
till nothing's left of a man
but a jerky bum, humming
with a gentleness less than human.

This poem depends more than most in its rhythm, to create unity and strength. The natural speech units, the breath groups, have been "distorted" so as to lay strong stress beats on each line. This creates the over-all rhythmic pattern. To illustrate how it works, we have only to arrange the same poem in its normal phrasal pattern on the page. Here, as in all straightforward prose, the phonological elements (breath groups) coincide with the syntactical arrangement. Let us look at the first paragraph:

> What an elusive target the brain is! Set up like a coconut on a flexible stem, it has 101 evasions. A twisted nod slues a punch a thin gillette's width past a brain, or a rude brush-cut to the chin tucks the brain safe under another. Two of these targets are set up to be knocked down for twenty-five dollars or a million.

In this version it will be felt at once that the impression is prosaic, communicative rather than expressive. It lacks the excitement created when the poet distorts the natural utterance to obtain rhythmic effects. In the original version, strong stresses occur in every line of the first and second stanzas. The rhythmic pattern is compulsively (almost convulsively) established. In the third stanza there is some variation. The first five lines have two strong stresses each, but in line six we have a shortened line with one strong beat, "with its hungers", thereby heightening the tension. Similarly there is dramatic effect in the delayed juncture between "honor" and "see", followed by a contrived juncture at the end of the line (it is contrived because it goes against the syntax). The last two lines have an odd effect because they revert to iambic:

No matter who's the cheated one
they hug like girl and man.

The last stanza of "The Fights" reverts to strong-stress isochronic beat. The imposed junctures effected by end-stopping must, together with the intonation

pattern, set up a counterpoint to the normal stress pattern. This again heightens the effect, intensifies the meaning of the poem, which is more metaphorical and symbolical than the other poems we have been considering.

There are further elements in "The Fights" which create tension. True, the paucity of verbals as opposed to nominals (nineteen verbs to forty adjectives) would be a weakness, but the nature of these noun modifiers is worth attention. Eleven of these modifiers are past participles. Thus, although the poem lacks clausal balance, its phrasal proportions are heavily weighted and they are rooted in action. The tone of the poem is not "sublime" (as so often in Shelley), but classical, balanced, vigorously ironic. It could be a commentary upon our whole way of life in the twentieth century. About man's aggressiveness it says little explicitly; yet it says all.

More Blakeian in style is the poem "For a Singer".[5] Here is a poem that carries to completion the process begun in "The Fights" and developed in "I Shout Love". Although far from being the end of Acorn's development, "For a Singer" seems to mark a phase complete in itself: the phase of the conscious, social revolutionary poet defying the sickness of capitalist society. Of its shape — that of four-line stanzas in a four-beat, strong-stress measure, Acorn has remarked:

> Tonally it is a unique experience for me in that it is a chant, an invocation. It depends not upon the natural flow of the voice, but upon the distortion of the stresses and intonation. And you'll notice the distortion in my voice as I read it.

The poem sets a strong rhythm going at the outset:

> Let me be the mane that swings
> (clouds tossing, lightning shot)
> about the singer's muscled face,
> caressing and letting it go wild
>
> Or let me be the oar's pulse
> throbbing through that figurehead
> to the heroic Argo, that woman alive
> who sang against the crash of spray
>
> over her nipples, her chin,
> and every love-wrought pore of her,
> against the flattening calm, visions
> washing up and down her spine.

From these images, startling in their unexpectedness, yet objectively viewed, the poet turns the camera inward to reveal his own feelings: the effect the singer is

having on him. Then he moves, more strongly, to show the effect she has on the audience:

> She sings in a crowded coffee shop
> smoke curling amongst tenuous ghosts
> of the living. "Love!" she cries.
> They scratch at love with palsied hands.

But at each emotional cry (almost a beseeching prayer) for "Sorrow!" "Courage!", the audience fails to respond; for they are the people who

> feeling nothing but death for themselves
> desire the death of the entire world, because
> even the imagination of life
> is forbidden by all their teachers.

The vision of what she is saying passes back then from audience to poet. "Let me be the song!" he cries. "Take me. . . . like/ a firebird above the last cloud/ of the last/ dark planet." Finally the vision ends with his complete identification of himself with the singer "with her guitar/ crossed like a shield over her heart/, perched on this bomb of a world, every instant/ ticking . . . ticking . . ." His final identification is with "the men and women of her song" who stood up against oppression. The last stanza, a synthesis, is one of passionate personal conviction:

> . . . . This heart
> is necessary; even in the shadow
> of Mount Death, it's necessary
>
> :for the standing up brave and hopeful way, the
> way of asserting the truth of our lives,
> we ought to die
> is the only way we might live.

Although the syntax here might be criticized as being too elliptical, the lines pound their way home. Indeed, the most interesting aspect of this poem is the fact that its dialectical development, moving from a sense of post-Hiroshima despair towards a Utopian revolutionary optimism, is bound together structurally by unrhymed tetrameters, a free-flowing ballad rhythm. It is a poem built up, not on finite verbs and clausal structures, but on phrases; therefore we expect neither metaphysical intricacy nor classical balance, but fervour, incantation, excitement. What verbs there are are not verbs of action but of *being, feeling, seeming, exist-*

ing. Yet movement is created by the rock-a-bye effect of participles used as descriptive modifiers. Even to itemize them is interesting: *clouds tossing*; *lightning shot*; *caressing*; *throbbing through*. These and many other "ing" verbals rock out the rhythm of the poem. They are ongoing and lend themselves to chant, declamation, prophecy. Whilst they give an impression of motion, they do not move except as the ocean's floor may be said to move. The singer does not act, she seems to be caught up in the poet's vision, singing eternally on the brink of destruction. She is not a metaphor, but a symbol, proclaiming life.

This poem, "The Singer", a poem of affirmation and belief in humanity's struggle, is in the tradition of Blake and Whitman. Its metaphors of the Moloch worshippers "teetering on the last rung" in juxtaposition with the "firebird on the last cloud" emphasize the prophetic tone. That tone, though Marxist by implication, avoids didacticism and sentimentality. As the poet himself warns, in a recorded conversation:

> Don't congratulate yourself on detecting the naïveté of this poem, because the naïveté is deliberate.

Acorn's aim is to bring objects, life itself, back into perspective so that we may look on them freshly, not cynically. Obscurity and mystification are not a part of this method.

From the foregoing examination of Milton Acorn's work, however arbitrary having been the selections, it should be clear that he is a poet who never stands still. Perilously near as he seems to come, sometimes, to a precipice of emotion too dizzying to be borne, miraculously he swings around. He marches on, laughing and crying, turning his back on clouds of glory to consider the internal, mental life of the dreaming man.

FOOTNOTES

[1] From a tape recording made by the author, Vancouver, 1964.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] Ibid.
[4] Milton Acorn, *The Brain's The Target*. Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1960.
[5] *The Literary Review*, Canada Number, Summer 1965, Vol. VIII, 4. Fairleigh Dickinson University, Teaneck, N.J., U.S.A.