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**Review Article**  
**Beating His Life Into Words:**  
**The Poetry of Milton Acorn**

*I Shout Love and Other Poems.* By Milton Acorn. Edited and with an Introduction by James Deahl. Toronto: Aya Press, 1987. Pp. 96, paper.

*Dig Up My Heart: Selected Poems 1952-83.* By Milton Acorn. Selected by Al Purdy. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983. Pp. 221, Paper, \$12.95.

In his Introduction to *I Shout Love* James Deahl claims that “Acorn’s poetry is the most complex and varied body of work to be produced by a Canadian author in this century.” This hyperbolic pronouncement is less interesting as literary judgment than as one indication of the bardic stature Acorn achieved, and of the esteem, camaraderie and discipleship which adhered to him. The public persona of Milton Acorn, his personal impact upon others, and the facts and legends of his life, will be part of his enduring reputation. And the critic will have to disentangle the presence of this persona within his poetry.

When Acorn died in Charlottetown in August of 1986, the country lost one of its most colourful and outspoken artists. An Islander by birth and upbringing, he abandoned his early career as a carpenter for the vocation of poetry, spent most of his writing years in Toronto (with Montreal and Vancouver stints), and returned to P.E.I. in the early 1980s. He was close friends with a number of writers prominent then and now (and sometimes enemies, for Acorn could be combative)—a central figure in Canada’s poetry world for over two decades.

There are labels attached to Acorn and his work, by himself or others—radical, working-class, visionary. One label became official

when he was not awarded the Governor General's Award for his acclaimed *I've Tasted My Blood* (1969) and his peers honoured him in 1970 as People's Poet of Canada in a special ceremony. That label stuck, and he also did win the Governor General's Award for *The Island Means Minago* (1975). A measure of the regard for his writing, his role in Canadian literature and as a voice of social conscience, and his personal effect on certain writers, is the annual literary festivals and awards established in his name in Charlottetown and Toronto since his death.

Acorn's importance as a poet was recognized early in his career, at least among other writers, with the publication of his first three volumes: *In Love and Anger* (1956), *Against a League of Liars* (1960), and *The Brain's the Target* (1960). These texts, along with the 1958 and final 1970 versions of the long poem "I Shout Love," have been collected by Deahl in *I Shout Love*. The titles of these books are reminiscent of several Irving Layton titles from the 1950s (e.g., *Love the Conqueror Worm*, *The Long Pea-Shooter*). The tone, tactics, stance, rhetoric, and aspects of substance in these early three volumes suggest similarities with Layton's work in the 1950s. This is not to imply major influence, but rather a parallel energy and manner, and the fact that these two poets had more in common with each other than with most other Canadian poets.

Deahl writes, "Acorn wrote poems for six years, completely developed his poetic vision, and issued a chapbook." It is debatable whether any poet completely develops his/her poetic vision and whether this is desirable, if possible. *I Shout Love* is proof that Acorn's "poetic vision" did develop beyond his first chapbook. The tag "poetic vision" is a lovely but nebulous phrase, and to be of any use it must include the poet's sense (conscious and unconscious) of what a poem is and how each poem's language and meaning (or signification) is mediated. It cannot just mean content. In "Libertad" (*The Brain's the Target*) Acorn writes,

Libertad, the sculptor, teaches poetry  
to me:

"Freedom, my freedom  
composed of the stone's, the steel's  
freedom to find by me its form in  
this time, this I and it, this place."

This vision of the poetic process hardly suggests a complete or closed system of vision and composition. Rather, it suggests affinity with the poetics emanating from such writers as W.C. Williams, Charles Olsen,

etc.—“projective verse,” “organic form,” “composition by field”—a process of continual development in response to “this time, this I and it, this place.”

Acorn did not emerge full-blown from the head of the Muse. His first book, *In Love and Anger*, for all its toughness and energy and self-assurance, shows some of the ineptness and excesses of a maiden voyage in print: derivative and undistinctive metrical patterns, heavy rhyme schemes, colloquial quaintness, rhetorical overkill. Four years later, in *The Brain's the Target*, these problems are much less in evidence. In the 1956 volume, however, even when lines are clichéd—“So that he came to birth/ Hot from battles bitterly won” or “Must young men's lives, our country's richest store,/ be stubble for a parliamentary plow”—there is a passionate, sinewy, rigorous quality which makes this early work as lasting as the more elegant and refined work of some of his contemporaries.

Acorn's subjects and concerns in this early period can be traced forward through his entire career. His devotion to nature is evident from the start, both in the poems focused specifically on nature—“I Must Go Back,” “November,” “Trout Pond”—and in the recurrent nature imagery of so many poems:

I must go back to those good springs,  
the cleansing springs that flow from toil;  
to heal my hands in soil,  
know peace, which labour brings.

(*In Love and Anger*)

Birds were a particular source of inspiration (he was an avid bird-watcher) and are central motifs of “November,” “Winter Boarders” and “Hummingbird.” Later in his life, crows and ravens became totemic figures for the man and his writing.

In his nature poems there is reverence and wonder, and there is no doubt that he discovered in nature a refuge, an alternative to the greed, cruelties and injustices of the social (especially capitalistic) world. But this refuge is not often spelled out through explicit comparisons with society: it is implicit in the beauty, wholeness, rugged energy and serenity he finds in nature. There is certainly also an urban ambience to many of his poems—for he did grow up in a small city and spent so much of his adult life in metropolises—but there is no romancing the cityscape; his urban imagery is not as strong and effective, as a rule, as his nature imagery; and the city is not made as vivid as nature.

His nature poems are saved from romanticization by his energetic cadences, the vigour of his diction, brusque and muscular sonic values,

and imagery which is fresh. It is important to know, too, that he was not an urban poet escaping into nature. An Islander, even one raised in Charlottetown, is conscious of sea and soil, farms and woods. This part of his writing was integral, not sought-out.

The early political poems, and some of the later ones, may draw the criticism that they are dated, heavy-handed, quaintly “proletarian” in their rhetoric, or didactic in a way that embarrassingly reminds us of bygone socialist sentiments. The old argument that political poetry usually fails the test of time because poetics are sacrificed on the altars of message or ideology. These criticisms and this argument could interfere with an open and ranging receptiveness to stanzas such as these:

Like maggots thru whip-streaked flesh  
cars crawl the streets, and  
on sidewalks the unemployed  
shuffle in circles, remembering  
the brave days when  
they scuttled frantic as ants.

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Who says money ain't everything?  
Money's love; money's dignity;  
money's joy and comfortable religion.  
It flows thru society's veins  
like green juice thru a bug-eyed monster.

(“Poem for ‘59’-60” / *Against a League of Liars*)

I would agree that not all Acorn's political poetry is of lasting aesthetic interest or of enduring poignancy for our social concerns. But it would be a grave mistake to dismiss Acorn's political poetry with the contention that he is a better poet of nature, love and the Island—indeed, such a dismissal might well be a sign of the aesthetic and political biases which Acorn's work opposed, and which have been increasingly opposed by many Canadian poets from Livesay, Purdy, Birney and Layton through the generations which include Atwood, Patrick Lane, Erin Mouré, Gary Geddes, Alden Nowlan, Nicole Brossard and other feminist writers, and so on.

Canadian poetry has steadily become less ‘apolitical’ from the 1950s onward. By this, I do not mean more ideologically committed, rather that two changes are occurring. First, poets are writing more often and more directly about issues we call political or social or socio-economic. For many poets—whether they be feminists, Tom Wayman and the Vancouver Industrial writers Union, or the looser informal “networks” of poets engaged through their writing with their communities, their social-political milieu—there is a corresponding consideration of

the viable language and structure for these concerns. Second, poets are far more aware that there never has been "apolitical" writing: writing without deep premises of value—political, economic, moral—values to be found in text and sub-text, presence and absence, and under the lacquer of aesthetic theory. Overtly political or social poetry, and poetic language which does not receive the critical establishment's Imprimatur, could be judged aesthetically inferior according to criteria which themselves are socially biased.

Hence, Acorn's "The Island" and "Charlottetown Harbour"—masterful but politically innocuous poems—are well-known and praised, but not "Incident from the Land Struggle," "The Figure in the Landscape Made the Landscape" and "1837-39," all from *The Island Means Minago* (1975) and each of them powerful poetically as both historical pieces and texts of immediate social value. The task, then, is to read Acorn's political poetry and to decipher its language on its own terms, not merely with reference to his other work. Readers may, indeed, find political poems of aesthetic interest *and* enduring value: "Our True/False National Anthem" (1977), "One Day Kennedy Died and So Did the Birdman of Alcatraz" (1969), "The King Rains" (1969), "Knowing I Live in a Dark Age" (1963), "Poem Scrawled on the Ruins of a Fallout Shelter" (1963).

There are a number of poems in *Dig Up My Heart* with the Acorn persona front-and-centre: "Pastoral" (1963), "I'd Like to Mark Myself" (1969), "Lifeblood Soliloquy" (1963), "Self-Portrait" (1969), "I've Tasted My Blood" (1963), "I, Milton Acorn" (1975). Readers looking for autobiographical material will be disappointed. These poems and others with an "I" narrator do include strong evocations of feeling—anger, joy, grief, love—and what appear to be forceful self-perceptions. But these are not attempts to reveal the "self." They are expressions of *ways of being in the world*, ways of responding with passion, doubt and conviction to events, to the circumstances of one's life, to the fact of being human within nature, society and the hell history and its villains often make of our potential for beauty. (And it should be noted here that Acorn is no myopic worshipper of the "masses": he can see how the "people," the "working-class" internalize oppression and take it out on each other; he can also see clearly his own inadequacies, sometimes with painful insight.) Acorn is as much a philosopher in his poetry as any contemporary, and this quality is central to the "I" persona.

Just as his political sensibility informs so many of his poems, and just as nature imagery is a constant pattern of signification, his philo-

sophical commentary (discourse) recurs with impressive timing, aptness, cohering force, and illumination. Acorn was a prolific and serious reader throughout his life, and those unfamiliar with his work, who assume he is a colloquial street-tough poet, are mistaken. His readings of history, poetry, mythology and biology inform his writing:

The crows mobbing the blinking, sun-stupid owl;  
 wolves eating a hamstrung calf hindend first,  
 keeping their meat alive and fresh...these  
 are marks of foresight, beginnings of wit:  
 but Jesus wearing thorns and sunstroke  
 beating his life and death into words  
 to break the rods and blunt the axes of Rome:  
 this and like things followed.

(“Knowing I Live in a Dark Age)

And Acorn did write some of the finest love lyrics of our era: “You Growing” (1963), “Live With Me on Earth Under the Invisible Daylight Moon” (1969), “The Girl Realized as Beauty” (1969), and “Lover That I Hope You Are” (1969). There are also memorable expressions of non-romantic love for men and, without gender reference, for people: “Joe Dying” (1969), “Kiss” (1969), “I’ve Gone and Stained With the Colour of Love” (1969), “Jim” (1975). Finally, there are the poems for family: the “Letter to My Redheaded Son” (1960) with the possible background of the son Acorn conceived in his early adulthood, a son he never knew; the exquisite “Poem” (1969) about his mother with whom he was close until her death not long before his; “Daddy” (1975) and “To My Little Sister About Her Illness” (1956). In these poems there is a bittersweet essence, a dialectic of joy and pain which is a hallmark and strength of his writing.

A review of Acorn’s early and selected poetry must not exclude mention of the satire and humour in his work. In life he was often a great wit, sometimes delightfully and edifyingly so, sometimes scathingly. The poetry, too, shows the range of his wit: dark humour and Swiftian satire, gentle mockery, even playful wit in “The Natural History of Elephants” (1969)—an unjustly ignored poem which could be a companion piece to *Magic Animals* by Gwendolyn MacEwen (to whom Acorn was briefly married in the 1960s) and Lorna Crozier’s recent “The Sex Life of Vegetables.”

I have said nothing specific about *Dig Up My Heart: Selected Poems 1952-83*. This is because the book, published in 1983, is out-of-print, a collector’s item, with only a few remaining copies available from Ragweed Press of Charlottetown (which bought the remaindered

copies) and scattered in bookstores. Al Purdy was the editor and made a knowledgeable, superb selection.

In the 1980s Acorn began composing frequently in sonnet form (loose and conventional). Some of these are included in *Dig Up My Heart*, and others appear later in *Captain Neal MacDougal & The Naked Goddess* (1982) and *Whiskey Jack* (1986). His interest in this form might be partly attributable to the heritage of Maritime poetry and the fact that sonnets and other traditional forms continue to attract certain Maritime poets (e.g., Fred Cogswell, John Smith). Although there are certain intriguing features of this later work—for instance, Acorn's interest in the myths, motifs and spiritual presence of the Goddess—the poems, on the whole, do not have the distinctiveness of those collected in *Dig Up My Heart*. Unlike the sonnets of PEI poet John Smith (*Midnight Found You Dancing*) with their intellectual, syntactical and associational inventiveness, Acorn's sonnets seem confining, almost backsliding into trodden ground of diction, cadence and sense. Still, Acorn was working intensely on poems during his final years, leaving several unpublished manuscripts, and we must wait for all these papers to be edited and published.

There may be a tension in Acorn's work between that self-image of the people's poet and the self-educated writer whose language is often elevated, for instance, above the usual diction and phrasing of his New Brunswick counterpart, Alden Nowlan. In a strictly textual sense, it may be Nowlan who deserved more the title of "People's Poet" (heresy as this may be to some of Acorn's followers), with his directness and (deceptive) simplicity. An Acorn poem may present readers with convolutions of syntax, with phrasing and imagery which hark back to pre-modern literary influences, not to his Island background or proletarian affinities. This tension in his work is often successful, but is sometimes a source of archness and uncomfortable density. In the background of this is the fact that Acorn was not, and did not claim to be, of working-class origins: by the standards of Charlottetown, his family was moderately middle-class. His "poetic vision," then, and his poetry, emerge from the paradoxes of his own social being.

Deahl is right to use the words "complex and varied body of work" for Acorn's poetry. Those who know Acorn as a political voice will find rewards in his nature and love poetry, as well as poems such as "What I Know of God Is This" (1977) which embody his spiritual or philosophical sense of life. In "Ashaye Dancing" (1963) there is an awareness which might fairly be called "feminist" and which might help balance the tough-guy stance which can seem "masculine." In

many of his poems, the tender and vulnerable heart is quite visible under the weathered hide. He is not a macho poet with the maudlin underside of Rambo types. Rather, there is the dialectical drama of the need to be strong in this world and the fact of our fragility, resolved in the desire to be gentle without being destroyed. As for his language, prosody and structural strategies, he is a sophisticated and literate poet, a disciplined craftsperson, and not a rough-hewn intuitive genius.

James Deahl must be commended for compiling the text of *I Shout Love* and providing adequate bibliographical information. It is also wonderful to have the two versions of "I Shout Love," a deeply moving document which makes me think of "Howl" by Allen Ginsberg, an admirer of Acorn—with the exception that "I Shout Love" balances outrage at human iniquity with passionate celebration of life.

Although Deahl's Introduction offers worthwhile biographical information and insights into Acorn's work, it also has a number of glaringly questionable statements and exaggerated claims. He writes that "*I've Tasted My Blood* (1969), stands as perhaps the finest single volume ever produced by a Canadian poet." "Acorn's spiritual quest, apparent in his earliest poems, puts him in the company of the finest poets of the Romantic tradition: Shelley, Blake, Yeats, and Lampman," Deahl asserts. He is entitled to such opinions, but should know that they sound like acolythate special-pleading in a printed introduction to a writer not yet canonized. They are simply unnecessary. As well, several of Deahl's statements are banal: "Like all great poets, his poetry sings the cosmic song of truth, or at least his interpretation of it," and "...one might say that he learned much about the modern world in which most people live."

The strongest claim for Acorn's importance as poet and as voice of conscience is the poetry Deahl has brought back into print, letting us judge for ourselves when Acorn says

I shout LOVE to you, flesh humming thoughts, blood's rhythm,  
 intricate bonework, hair played in by wind,  
 and your words jostling, seeking  
 things growing or still, people mysteries, yourself  
 with your soles touching the grass for instants.