

The Heart Still Singing: Raymond Souster at 82

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Article abstract

Poet Raymond Souster looks back over almost seventy years of poetry, discussing his very early development as a poet, his involvement with literary magazines, and his work as an anthologist. He discusses his relationships with Irving Layton and Louis Dudek, their work together, and their attempt to institute a new Canadian poetics. Souster speaks of the critical reception to his work, and argues that philosophy has no place in poetry.

The Heart Still Singing: Raymond Souster at 82

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY TONY TREMBLAY

IN 1935, A YOUNG POET NAMED RAYMOND SOUSTER started appearing in Toronto newspapers. Almost seventy years (and some fifty volumes) later, he is still active. Oberon Press will be bringing out his newest collection, *21 Poems*, in the spring of 2003. In the span of those sixty-eight years, Ray Souster has been intimately connected to many of the major developments in modern poetry in this country, and he has known and published most of the major poets in North America.

He was on hand to witness the first waves of literary modernism hit the shore in the pages of *New Provinces* (1936), reading Robert Finch, F.R. Scott, and A.J.M. Smith as an admiring teenager. He was also present, this time more integrally, when John Sutherland, Louis Dudek, and Irving Layton carried the modernist project further with the publication of *First Statement* (1942), Canada's first truly avant-garde literary magazine. He was so impressed with Sutherland's magazine that he started his own, *Direction* (1943), the first of four. A few years later, he became one-third of the second-generation modernist triumvirate in Canada. With Dudek and Layton, he appeared in the pages of *Cerberus* and launched *Contact*, a magazine and small-press initiative that revolutionized Canadian poetry, publishing most of the major poets of the 1950s and 1960s. During those decades, he also introduced Canadian poets to the larger world, opening vital channels with the Black Mountain and City Lights poets appearing in Cid Corman's magazine *Origin*. At the close of the 1960s, he became a founding member and the first chairman of the League of Canadian Poets. In seven decades as poet, editor, publisher, anthologist, and advocate, he has become one of the elder statesmen of Canadian literature.

Yet for all his activity and production, he has received little attention from critics: fewer than half a dozen serious treatments. Considering the impact he made and the fresh verse forms he introduced, the neglect

is shameful. That a poet of his stature (or Dudek's, for that matter) would not make the pages of Oxford's *New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* (2002) says much about the revisionist project in this country. Despite these setbacks and failing eyesight due to macular degeneration, Souster continues to write poetry. As he wrote in "Good Fortune" in 1964, "life isn't a matter of luck / of good fortune, it's whether / the heart can keep singing / when there's really no reason / why it should at all." I met with Ray at his home in Toronto in the spring and fall of 2002.

TT One aspect of your life that critics know almost nothing about is your early schooling. Can you tell me about that?

RS I went to Runnymede Public School in West Toronto in the Jane Street neighbourhood where I still live. It was uneventful, really, except for the fact that the boys and girls were almost completely separated. I was a model kid, went to Sunday school and the Runnymede United Church, and did my homework. I wasn't a daring, adventurous type. Baseball was my passion. When it was time for me to go to high school, however, my mother panicked. She'd heard a lot of stories at church about students who got in with girls and got them pregnant. All gossip nonsense, of course. I don't know why she was worried about me because she never had any cause. The prospect of my going to the public high school so frightened her that she eventually sent me to UTS, the University of Toronto School. My great-uncle Jim offered to pay my tuition if I got accepted. UTS was an interdenominational school for boys run by the University, and had loose affiliations with the Ontario College of Education next door. Every year about 40 of 400 kids who wrote competitive examinations got into UTS. I wrote and was selected, though I had to repeat a year because they only had places in the Lower Fourth Forms. There were about 500 students at the school. It was run like an English school with houses and teams for each form and prefects in charge of the classrooms. Because I was a little older, I was elected by the students the first two years as prefect, so I had to keep order when the teacher was out, a hell of a job. I never sought that kind of authority again. I started off well academically, but got progressively worse as my interest in poetry and writing increased. My homework took a back seat. Eventually I transferred to Humberside Collegiate to finish my final year of high school. It was the first time I ever had girls in my classes. I couldn't do math so

I took languages: Latin, French, German and Greek. It was too much, and though I did graduate, my educational career ended with a whimper.

TT You've said elsewhere that your apprenticeship as a poet was through reading, specifically that you were a reader first and a poet second. Can you elaborate on that?

RS Yes, it all started with the influence of my father. He was a great reader, which, in turn, I became. He read mostly true adventure stories and detective novels, so I started on those. Once I started, I couldn't stop. I read everything. I remember reading Arnold Bennett, being quite taken by the "Five Towns" trilogy. I also liked the stories of G.A. Henty, whose books I inherited from my uncle Syd, another reader. From Henty, I acquired my love for history and military campaigns, a love I still retain. My father never bothered with military books, partly because he went through World War One in the artillery. He had seen enough. But Henty interested me with all the heroic adventures that would appeal to a young boy. One of my favourites was called *With Lee In Virginia*. The hero was a Confederate spy who was going north. Funny, I still remember that book vividly. My introduction to ancient Egypt, to the South African War, and even to Canada came from Henty. I remember enjoying *With Wolfe in Canada*. Sad that I had to read an Englishman to learn about my own country.

My next reading tutor was "Bunny" Baird, the UTS librarian and an English teacher. He was a little guy so we called him Bunny. He was the coach of the junior basketball team and had in the library many books on modern literature: the modern English and American poets and novelists, Yeats, MacLeish, Hemingway, Joyce, Woolf, you name them. With his help I graduated from reading adventure stories to literature at the tender age of fifteen. Because I didn't know any better, nothing was too difficult for me — I consumed all the poetry and modern prose I could. I read John Masfield, encountering narrative poetry for the first time in his long poem *The Everlasting Mercy*. I also was taken with Edwin Arlington Robinson, as most adolescent boys are. Penguin had just published Hemingway's *A Farewell To Arms*, a book that became key for me. I started imitating Hemingway: his style, subject matter, even his forms. I also read Joyce's *Portrait*, another book that had a great affect on me because my school situation at the time, though not Jesuit, was otherwise similar. After Joyce, I started to write stream-of-consciousness stories. Bunny'd get one of these stories as my homework assignment, call me up in front of the class, and proclaim that it was the best story a student had written, but, because the sentences didn't have subjects or verbs, Souster

would only get 60/100. That's what imitating Joyce got me. When I had read every book of interest in the UTS library, I went through the library of OCE next door. When I exhausted that library I went on to the Main Public Library downtown, now the new University of Toronto Bookstore. The Main Library had a basement full of poetry. So I began to read whole collections of Robert Frost, Ezra Pound and Stephen Spender. Frost was another big discovery in my life: I imitated his unrhymed monologues and incorporated his idea of place into my own scribbles. I had read all the early Pound — I think there were thirty cantos at the time — before I was eighteen.

TT So previous critics of your work have got it wrong in their inference that Louis Dudek was the one who introduced you to many of these early modernist poets?

RS Well, that's true. I introduced Louis and Irving [Layton] to more than a few, but having said that, they introduced me to a few too. Louis introduced me to Creeley and Olson, having come across *Origin* in New York. We were all at his grandmother's farm at Charlemagne on the Little Jesus River having a picnic one summer. Louis threw two issues of *Origin* down on the table and said, "here's what the nuts in New York are doing these days." I could see that he didn't think they were much and so I skimmed through them there and half-heartedly agreed. About a year later I got back to them, this time more carefully, and found them a revelation, especially Olson. Here's another Robert Frost, I thought, a poet of place. While I'm at it I also have to credit Louis for bringing me to William Carlos Williams. He gave me Williams's *Collected Later Poems* one Christmas, and it was tremendous, really knocked me out. The idea that a full-time doctor was able to write all these poems in his spare time between patients when working half the night with house calls was astonishing to me. As someone with a full-time job, I could relate to what the man accomplished. He inspired me.

TT There's something else I'd like to explore in asking about your early reading, and that is your first experience of poetry as something to be written, not just read. Louis, since we've mentioned him, told me about his first experience of reading Whitman in Louis Untermeyer's anthology. He knew at that moment that poetry would be his vocation. Do you remember reading any poet in particular whose work was purposeful to you in that way, whose work was not just something to be admired but something to be emulated, a stimulus?

RS To answer your question I have to go back to an anthology I had as a child, *Shorter Poems*. I wasn't much beyond grade school at the time. It is a book I still have, and which I consider a gold mine. My boyhood scribbles are still in the margins. It was published by Timothy Eaton and Co. Ltd., believe it or not, in 1924. My first memory of poetry as something I could do, or at least imitate, came from reading Archibald Lampman's "Heat" in that old school anthology. I still think that poem is unsurpassed in our literature. My first attempts at poetry began as imitations of Lampman's sonnets, then I moved to doing the same with Marjorie Pickthall and Charles G.D. Roberts, probably because I detected similarities in their work. I wasn't very good, but my father didn't seem to know that, which was fine for me because his pride in my achievement actually launched my poetry career. There was a column in the 1930s on the editorial page of the *Toronto Star* called "A Little of Everything." And that's what it was, literally: smart sayings, light verse, humour. After I wrote one of my knock-offs of Lampman, my father was so impressed that he copied it out in better hand and sent it in. They published it as "In Winter" on 26 February 1935. So my first publication was in the *Star* when I was fourteen. My mother cut it out and pasted it in the family scrapbook. Seeing my verse in print like that was both thrilling and embarrassing, but it did point me in a direction. In the next three years I published almost forty more poems in *Toronto* papers, the *Star*, the *Mail and Empire*, the *Globe*, and the *Globe & Mail*. It was from roughly that time that I started to write seriously, not necessarily for publication but to explore my feelings through words.

TT Those mixed feelings you describe are very common. Young poets often write about having to overcome the shame of declaring their true intentions toward poetry. For many, working up to this public declaration is a painful process. Were you any different, and to whom did you declare your intentions?

RS No, I was no different than the rest. I was a baseball player, loved the game, and would have had no trouble at all declaring baseball my vocation if I thought it had been. But it wasn't; poetry was. Only when I got to UTS was I ready to show someone of authority my work, and, I suppose, announce to the world that I was a poet. The person I chose was my history teacher, Mr. Daniher, a man who later became a professor of history at OCE. I left a little scribbler of poems in his office with a note asking him to kindly look it over and offer advice. I didn't know if he knew anything about poetry, but he was a hell of a good history teacher, so that was close enough. After about a week he said, "you have the poet's eye, but you've

got to learn about rhyme and rhythm,” and so he sent me to Bunny Baird, his colleague. It was at that point, with Bunny’s help situating me in the library, that I started studying poetry with a mind to writing it seriously. A few years later, when I thought I had advanced from my boyhood beginnings, I started sending my work out to real journals. Earle Birney accepted my poem “Nocturnal” for *The Canadian Forum* in 1940; however, it was Winfield Townley Scott, a poet who was literary editor of *The Providence Sunday Journal* [Rhode Island], who would become my first professional editor. The year was 1941. He was known to have a contributors page, for which he paid handsomely. So I submitted a couple of poems, and he took one, “Twentieth Century,” sending me \$10.00, a huge sum back then — you could buy two or three books for that. I kept sending poems in, and he kept publishing them, even after I started at the Imperial Bank. Around that time he asked me to do a survey of contemporary Canadian poetry, which I called “Report From Canada.” He paid me \$15.00 for it. Needless to say, that was very encouraging. I had heard about the Gotham Bookmart in New York, the famous avant-garde bookstore, so I wrote and asked for a catalogue. When the catalogue arrived I ordered Morley Callaghan’s first novel, *Strange Fugitive*, for \$5.00 and then Kenneth Patchen’s *First Will and Testament*. Patchen was one of my gods at the time. With my next few cheques I bought a number of Kenneth Fearing’s books. The point is that getting paid for my work brought me into the circle of the wider literary community. I started thinking of myself as a poet and doing the things that poets do.

TT I have a few questions about your involvement in literary magazines. One of the old chestnuts of Canadian literary history is that you mimeographed your own little magazine, *Direction*, on RCAF paper while you were stationed at the Air Force Base outside of Sydney, Nova Scotia. What is not as widely known is that you named the magazine after James Laughlin’s *New Directions*, the U.S. publishing house that was printing the line of books you were buying from the Gotham. What was the impulse that prompted *Direction*, a somewhat unusual undertaking at a military base?

RS When the Air Force decided to set up a radar detachment in Sydney, 150 operators from all over Canada came in to run it. One was Bill Goldberg, Irving Layton’s nephew. Irving told him to look me up. He greeted me with the latest copy of *First Statement* under his arm, one that had my poem “The Hunter” in it. He was a likeable fellow, a big strong Jewish guy with a nice even disposition. We hit it off immediately,

partly because of our common interest in poetry. I had lots of poems to publish and Bill had a girl in Toronto he was pretty hot on who he was writing poems to so he was working hard at writing too. We soon met David Mullen, a talented artist and a poet also. Basically, we needed a forum and a cause, so the three of us decided to start a little magazine. It wasn't very long afterward that we decided we were going to use the magazine to rebel against traditional Canadian poetry. David did a few cartoons lampooning the old garrison poets of the 1920s and I wrote an editorial doing much the same. Before the year was out, though, the Air Force dismantled its radar unit in Sydney and my new friends were all posted elsewhere, Bill to Port-aux-Basques, Newfoundland, and Dave to an even remoter location farther north. Bill got friendly with the officer in charge at his new base who allowed him to continue the magazine as long as he kept it quiet and didn't write anything crazy in it. So Bill continued to publish it and we contributed from afar. I managed to get into its pages some excerpts from Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, a book banned everywhere then. Irving contributed, Miriam Waddington sent us a short story that we published, and I even persuaded Kenneth Patchen to send us a couple of poems. But nobody really saw the magazine. We printed 100 copies of each issue and gave them out to friends.

TT Well, you must have enjoyed the venture because after *Direction* came *Enterprise* and then *Contact*, a magazine that took on *Northern Review*. Were you trying to reach wider audiences with these later magazines or just continuing your cultural work under different editorial conditions?

RS I did enjoy the magazines; they were little centres of energy. Small in the greater scheme of things, but important to many who were looking for a place to display their work. You must remember how few outlets there were for poets at that time. After I got out of the Air Force, I went back to work at the Bank, but in order to make a little extra money, I became a publisher's distributor, sort of a sales agent. At first I was distributing magazines, mostly American college quarterlies like *Sewanee Review* and *Yale Review*. Nobody had ever thought to bring those magazines to Canada. I sold them at Roher's Cigar Store on Yonge and Bloor in Toronto. There was really no money in it but the work put me in touch with other magazines and editors and instilled in me the importance of publicity. I called the little business "Enterprise Agency," from which the name of the magazine *Enterprise* came. That was around 1948. After about three years of that it was time for a change, some growth, and so *Contact* emerged, named after the well-known literary magazine in the States in the 1920s. Louis heard

about *Contact* from Irving, liked the name and the vision I had for the magazine, so he came along. But, though we shared the larger vision, we differed from the start. Louis wanted to keep it Canadian, for young writers, but I was more interested in finding established writers in the States and in other languages in translation. I saw *Contact* as part of my broader education in poetry, an education that Louis had already had formally in New York and at the feet of Pound. My interest in that outreach eventually led to the connection with Cid Corman and *Origin*. I started by encouraging him to contribute and then asked him if we could have some of the overflow from *Origin*. So from him I got a lot of translations in different languages, and learned along the way. One other thing about *Contact* that bears mentioning is the format I invented, really out of financial necessity (I couldn't afford anything else). We would type the content on mimeograph sheets of legal paper, 9 x 14, fold the sheets in half, put a couple of staples down the middle and the address on the outside, and put it in the mail. There were no envelopes and no fancy covers, and we could produce an issue of 200 for about \$50.00, which is all the money I had. *Tish* copied that format along with more than twenty American magazines. So *Contact* was the granddaddy of that particular format.

TT The discussion of literary magazines, *Contact* in particular, is the appropriate time to ask you about your long friendships and working associations with Louis and Irving. The three of you formed the second-generation modernist triumvirate, sharing the pages of Contact Press, *Cerberus*, *Unit of Five* (at least you and Louis), and, as Louis said, cleaning out the cobwebs of staid Victorianism in Canadian verse. Can you tell me about your first encounters and associations with those two?

RS I met them around the same time, in the early 1940s. They were working on John Sutherland's *First Statement*, editing and distributing it. Irving wasn't much for printing. John and Louis were the ones who got stuck with that. With Bill [Goldberg] acting as go-between, Irving wrote to me in Sydney and invited me to come to Montreal when I had leave. So the first leave I had, I went up. Irving and Betty [Sutherland-Layton] were on University Avenue, close to the old Bonaventure Station, in a run-down building that had a repair shop of some kind on the first floor. They had one room on the second floor and a bedroom on the third. I arrived in the early morning after spending all night on the train from Cape Breton, and they were just about to go to work. John and Audrey [Aikman-Sutherland] were there, and Irving and Betty. They were proofreading at the Montreal *Star* — working a

half day there and the other half on their literary concerns. They gave me some breakfast, made me comfortable, and went off to work. I slept the rest of the day and saw them later that night. The next day John took me to a Hungarian café to meet Louis. He was on leave, too, from his studies at Columbia. I thought Louis was fascinating. He immediately started to tell me how to write poetry. He had definite ideas and didn't mind voicing them. The talk was very stimulating. The following summer we all met again at the Dudek farm on the Little Jesus River — John went skinny-dipping. Louis, as was his custom, gave me lots of advice, telling me not to be in a hurry with my writing and publishing. You see, he hadn't broken with John yet, but he was close. He was quarrelling with John, wanting him to be less colloquial, open up *First Statement* a bit, but even that early John was going in the other direction. He was becoming conservative and nationalist, we all saw that.

TT How did Louis's and Irving's editorial temperaments differ from yours, and how did you assert your own editorial preferences in the middle of two strong personalities like theirs?

RS Well, I'll have to answer in terms of Louis because he was the one most intimately involved in the editing process. Irving was always around, but he had other fish to fry. He didn't bother much with editorial politics. If you read Louis's *East of the City*, you'll see that our poetic temperaments were basically the same. He may have been a little more serious than I was about social conditions at the time, but I soon toughened up. We both viewed the city as not altogether evil but lacking compassion for the masses. Things were really rough then. There was no welfare, no old age pension. People were left to their own devices. An awareness of that injustice allied Louis to Pound, who was obsessed with similar concerns, only larger in scale. Our editorial temperaments followed from that. We were for the underdogs, whether forgotten citizens or neglected writers. Of course, we differed on particular writers, like all editors do. To give you one example, I really liked the work of W.W.E. Ross. Louis and Irving weren't as enthusiastic. I was fascinated with Ross's World War One background, his work as a geophysicist, his self-education as a poet, and the fact that he was really our first home-grown Imagist. He was publishing in *Poetry* (Chicago) and *The Dial* in the 1920s for God's sake. After he died, I edited and published his collection *Shapes and Sounds* [1968], the first collection to have his name on it. His earlier books were published privately, and without his name on the covers. He didn't even give them away he was so afraid about himself. That nervousness endeared him to me and we became close friends.

I, too, was nervous, and for years had to fight migraines every time I read in front of an audience.

TT Maybe you can help clear up what has become a point of contention in Canadian Studies, namely the accuracy of Louis's representation of the reach and aims of the *First Statement* group. Louis's take, which Brian Trehearne challenges at the end of his recent book *The Montreal Forties*, is that you young buckaroos were seeking to supplant A.J.M. Smith and F.R. Scott, the elders, and institute a new poetics of *les jeunes*. What is your take on this?

RS Well, that's a tough one because, in a sense, both those perspectives are true. What Louis wrote about the period is accurate, if sometimes embellished. I don't fault him for that. He was the one who wrote it all down, and in that sense became our spokesman. When we disagreed, we quarrelled, and those quarrels are on the record. Louis got it right in emphasizing the abundance of energy and enthusiasm we had, and maybe those emotions got mapped onto our mission in Louis's telling. In that regard, Trehearne is closer to the truth as I experienced it. *New Provinces* was my Bible when it came out in 1936, so much so that I read everything else I could find on each of the poets displayed there. I thought Scott's satires were tremendous and, though he was quite classical for me, I liked and learned from Smith. The others felt much the same. Now, if you are asking about the extent to which our small magazine and press work was political in an activist way, I'd have to say "Not much," even though that might contradict some of the things that have been written about our group. I remember the four of us [Sutherland, Dudek, Layton, and Souster] as individuals voicing our despair about social conditions and the state of the world. When we started out we weren't formally affiliated with any party and we never did intend to get mixed up in politics. We liked *The Canadian Forum* and were certainly socialist in our sympathies, but that was really the extent of our politics in the beginning. But we were pretty smart about politics, you know, even as young guys. We were well aware that *New Provinces* sold even fewer copies than *Unit of Five*, about thirty copies. Can you believe that? Tells you something about how well the avant-garde is received, no matter how mainstream it may become.

TT Are you sure you are not being revisionist in your remembering there? I'm thinking of your manifesto-like prefaces, your commitment to the poets of the 1930s, your more-than-passing interest in the fellow travellers, some of whom set up shop in your own city. Many of the in-

tellectuals you admired were socialist, some openly communist when it was still okay in the west to be such a thing.

RS Well, you are right about the Toronto I grew up in. Spadina Avenue, the old garment district, was a hotbed of communism in the 1930s. During the 1920s there was a huge immigration of Russian and Polish Jews into the district. Rich and poor, educated and illiterate, worked on the sewing machines. A famous Yiddish poet who I helped translate into English some years ago repaired and made shoes at the corner, eked out a living there all his life, yet he was admired in his community and abroad as a brilliant man. There was a heavy Marxist feeling that grew from the injustices in that place. The communists started organizing the garment workers in the States, and it spread to Canada, coming to Spadina in Toronto. Even Emma Goldman, the notorious anarchist and revolutionary, actually lived in Toronto after she lost her American citizenship for being denounced as a spy. She died on Spadina Avenue. She gave a series of lectures here, and these immigrants, wanting to better themselves, attended in droves. They assembled to hear her speak at the Yiddish Theatre at the corner of Spadina and College, all these suffering, hopeful people. So, yes, my sympathies were certainly with them because I admired their strength of character and their fierce loyalty to language and culture. When I was in Sydney, I was invited to join a communist cell. I gave it serious consideration, thinking, at the time, of Spender and Day Lewis and J.S. Woodsworth, the first leader of the CCF. He was my personal favourite, a hero; his social gospels were riveting. He was the only one who voted against World War One. When it was introduced in the Commons, everybody voted for war except him, yet he got up and spoke passionately, eloquently, for a whole hour without a single note in front of him. When he travelled around, he would always go by coach. He was respected, a leader like none today. I went to one of the communist meetings in Glace Bay, thinking about all this. But I never did join. I didn't want to get involved in politics, not after what they did to Woodsworth.

TT To get back to your cultural work, I want to ask you about your activity as an anthologist. You became an avid and important anthologist, especially of school texts. You brought out ten of those texts, and reprinted the poetry of almost that many other Canadian poets (Campbell, Lampman, Scott, Carman, Sherman, etc.). For a poet of the evening hours, as Wallace Stevens once called himself, that kind of yeomanship is very selfless. What motivated that activity?

RS I got to know a fellow named Dick Woollatt. His father had been a United Church minister up in the Peace River area and had moved his family in and out of many of the little towns up there. Dick was raised everywhere; he was a patchwork of places. He ended up becoming a very unorthodox high school English teacher, quite ahead of his time. He used to tell me about the fights he'd have with principals. When the curriculum said he was supposed to teach a Shakespeare play, he would agitate to do a Canadian play instead. He read my poetry and wrote to me, and became my connection to the world of anthologies. You see, he could never find the material he wanted to teach, nor the material his students wanted to read. So we set out to produce books that the average kid would enjoy instead of having to suffer through. The first one, *Generation Now* [1970], sold widely, so we produced another. Macmillan brought out that one, *Sights and Sounds*, in 1973. It was probably our most successful, going into three or four printings. Gee, we made about \$3000 each on that one. We just went forward from there. We'd stuff them with all kinds of interesting and eclectic things: English and concrete poetry, ballads, and, of course, our favourite poets (that's how I got Elizabeth Bishop and Kenneth Patchen in). Folk singing was big in all the coffee houses here in the early 1970s, so we added Gordon Lightfoot and other folk singers to the mix. The kids with long hair loved it; we, in turn, got them reading poetry. At one point we had an idea for a *World Poetry Anthology*, but nobody would bite on it. I typed out hundreds of pages. I was a demon in those days.

TT In the late summer of 1966, at Ralph Gustafson's home in North Hatley, Quebec, you and Louis and Ron Everson and Frank Scott sat down to map out a charter for a new League of Canadian Poets. You were the first elected Chairman of the League. Why was such a league necessary?

RS Well, that's a good question. It all started with preparations for the Centennial Year. The federal government decided they wanted to do an anthology of Canadian writing and the only organizations they could find that spoke for poets were the Canadian Poetry Association and its French counterpart. So those associations got the contract for the Centennial Book, and a guy who was working on the *Farmers Weekly* out of Montreal at the time edited the thing. It was a large book of prose and poetry in English and French. He didn't do a bad job, but I thought some of the writers he contacted and later included were not representative of what poets in Canada were doing in the 1960s. I also thought it was a shame that a more repre-

sentative body didn't exist that would be able to carry the momentum of that initiative, press the government for money for writers, and provide a voice for the rapidly increasing number of poets toiling away in Canada. We persuaded Frank, who was a bigwig in the halls of federal power, to raise the idea of a permanent League at the Canada Council. He did, but what they ended up doing was getting behind the idea of a World Poetry Conference instead, with Louis at the helm (they wanted a Montreal poet, and Louis was the natural choice). Louis invited Ezra Pound, who didn't show up, and, well, the story is well known. I wasn't invited to it, and I had no intention of going anyway. It was kind of a debacle in the end. What it meant is that the League was on its own, which was just as well. We didn't do too badly; this year will be our 37th anniversary.

TT I'd like to switch gears again to ask you about your own poetry. Much has been made by critics and reviewers of your interest in the subject and your disinterest in form. I'll start with the latter. Is this "disinterest in form" a fair assessment?

RS I think a lot of my poems have form. I have a group now of about 250 short poems, many written in meter. The form depends on the subject of the poem, of course, what form suits it. I never thought of myself as being averse to form; in fact, I always felt that I had a natural rhythm in my lines. In the *study* of form, though, I was influenced by two Italian modernists: Eugenio Montale and Giuseppe Ungaretti, the famous World War One poet who started writing poems in the trenches. I studied Ungaretti especially closely, first from Cid Corman's translations in *Origin*, and then in the original. He relied on lines that were very short, stripped right down, quite different, actually, from Montale's babble or "half speech" as it was called. In poems like "Face of a Man," Ungaretti challenges the traditional form that he inherited from the Italian (florid and Romantic) and writes what I think of as a more representative modern line. Ungaretti and Montale were keys to me finding the natural rhythm that felt right. When I started writing, I was writing in sonnet form and regular pentameter. Slowly, over many years, and with the help of other poets like [William Carlos] Williams, [W.W.E.] Ross, and these Italians, I found the unrhymed rhythm I was searching for. To me, that rhythm is form.

TT What about the critical emphasis on your "interest in the subject?" Does this emphasis reflect your own sense of what you write about or does it lead to some misdirection?

RS Well, as we've already discussed, I feel very close to what might be called "the man on the street" or "the ordinary citizen." Ordinarity and human struggle have always interested me much more than ideas, which seem to be the currency of academic poets these days. The average person you see on the street — well-dressed and going to work — what can you write about him from that outward show? Well, you can write about comfort and maybe conformity, perhaps his secret or buried life, but that becomes clichéd pretty soon. On the other hand, people who are having a hard time, sleeping in the bus shelters or outdoors in packing cases through the winter, as 200,000 are now in Toronto, these are the more interesting people to me. I want to know what brought them to where they are, who injured them or broke their spirits. I recall one lady at Queen and Yonge who'd wrap herself in cellophane and stand in the doorway all night, refusing to go to a shelter. I wonder what her story is and why she stands in the cold refusing the pleas of the Salvation Army Officer who wants to take her inside. Some of these people are being let out of institutions and shouldn't be on the street, but the greater number, I believe, are independent people, gamblers and alcoholics and wanderers who are lonely or loveless or living out the consequences of a series of bad breaks. To watch them is to understand that you just have to keep on with life, that you can't give up, no matter what. The sooner you learn that, it's easier to live.

TT What we are talking about reminds me of something that Northrop Frye wrote about your poetry: that you incorporate the "unpoetic" into your work. He was no doubt referring to poems like "Search" and "City Hall Street" and "Roller Skate Man." I can't think of a poet before you in Canada who was as deliberately "unpoetic," perhaps with the later Lampman being the one exception.

RS Well, that's true of the epic that I'm working on now, which, curiously is about Lampman, a poet I admire very much. I've taken a selection of his letters and put them into verse form. If you read his letters you can see the dilemma of the poet in Canada and how that carried over into his life. Many people live quite happily by denying the ugliness around them. Poets live deeper lives than that. Lampman had to work as a second-class clerk in Ottawa for \$6.00 a day. He produced great work while living in very difficult circumstances. In order to be honest to him — to his idealism, really — I can't deny that, nor can I deny the ugliness that is as much a part of the world as the beautiful. They co-exist. But there is something more that needs to be said here about beauty and ugliness, and that is that they are not absolute. Often plainness is beautiful

and beauty is quite ugly. The movement of my poetry has been toward this realization. My early work was pastoral in its focus on the Humber Valley and High Park, then I started writing poems about the backyard: discovering a Queen Anne's Lace in the grass and weeds in the far corner of the lot, up against the fence. I didn't realize how beautiful they were, and they'd been there for years, right under my nose. What people say they like about my poetry is that I've revealed to them things that they never really considered to be poetic.

TT What you said about the movement of your poetry toward the celebration of the unpoetic leads me to ask you about what Bruce Whiteman wrote in the Souster chapbook that he put together in 1984. He said that your poetry, when taken as a whole, has no systematic body of ideas, meaning that there is not a philosophy that emerges from your work. From what you've said, I assume you disagree with that overview?

RS It's not a matter of agreeing or disagreeing. Put simply, I don't think philosophy has any place in poetry, and that's where I differ from Louis. I agree with the person who said that there was never one good idea expressed in a poem. I would also argue that prose and narrative are the better mediums for ideas. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche wrote in prose not poetry. When a poet tries to philosophize, he's in trouble. Granted, Louis was able to handle ideas in his work and so was T.S. Eliot. Pound clearly was not. His *Pisan Cantos* are so good because they are poetic, not his usual dogma. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Louis's *Atlantis* work as poems because they incorporate ideas without pushing those ideas down your throat. Lyricism remains central. Robert Lowell was also able to handle ideas in his early work. His poems about Catholicism are both profound and poetic. So, sure, there are ideas in my poetry (how can language ever divorce itself from ideas?), but I never set out to incorporate them in any systematic way. Poetry is in the pith; ideas in the husk. Wilfred Owen believed, as I do, that war is terrible, but he just didn't come out and say that in a poem. Instead, he showed a guy who was blinded or fellows in the trenches. He showed the horrors of war without preaching. Do you know my poem "Somalia"?: "In the time it takes / to say Mogadishu, / a five-year-old / playing in the mud / has both arms blown away. / The militiamen call him / Little-One-Who-Can't-Fly." Or do you know my lines that Robert Fulford is so fond of quoting?: "The historians say / Mr. King saved Canada / As for Steve / he gets a pension / and may learn in time / to walk without a cane." Well, that's what I want people to know about war. Don't ask me to explain it; there it is.

TT About your poetic process, do you write a poem rapidly?

RS Yes, usually. Depending on circumstances, I start with an idea or the first half-dozen lines. Often in the middle of the night I'll get an idea for a poem, then work on it the next day. One night about three months ago I got up no less than eight times and wrote a poem. That's eight separate poems in one night. I often find myself with a blank book that needs filling up — the blankness challenges or motivates or maybe scares me. Friends know this and give me little books that cry out to be filled. Over the course of my writing career I must have filled hundreds, maybe thousands, of these. It's my little quirk, you might say. I also revise poems, but not endlessly. When I feel I've got a poem right another poem will come to me, so there is some kind of cycle at work there. Of course, if I'm in the middle of a long docu-poem, which I am more and more these days, the little poems intrude. So the cycle or process is by no means neat and tidy. As far as the collected poems that Michael [Macklem of Oberon Press] has been bringing out since 1980, I only revised the first two volumes. After that I figured I had done all the revising that could be done and left them as they first appeared.

TT Being a Maritimer, I have to ask you about Alden Nowlan. You published one of his early books, *The Things Which Are*, in 1962, and, more importantly, you had a profound influence on his work, from his subject matter to his formal structures. He even discovered William Carlos Williams through one of your magazines. Can you tell me about publishing and knowing and corresponding with Nowlan?

RS I was always strong on Alden. Shortly before we published his book with Contact Press, I had been invited by Des Pacey to read at UNB's Convocation, so Lia and I went to Fredericton. (He got me a couple of hundred dollars for that, a lot of money, so we went.) There was a nice reception at Des's house beforehand, and Des's wife made one of her "tremendous trifles." It was well-laced with wine and accompanied by still more home-brew. There was a large audience for the reading, but I was feeling pretty good when I got there. The wine had dissipated my nervousness, and so it went off well. At the end, someone requested that I read my infamous poem "Fredericton." It wasn't very complimentary of the place, but I suppose they wanted to show me that they could take it. Some took it better than others. After the reading, a fellow came up to me and said "I'm Alden Nowlan, I've driven all the way from Hartland to meet you. I've never met a poet before." We talked that night and from then on we kept in touch. He felt isolated in Hartland, I guess. Fred Cogswell, his closest friend, was

in Fredericton and so he didn't have anyone he could talk to about poetry. When he had enough material for his next book, he sent us the manuscript. We liked the poems — it was unanimous — and began organizing ourselves to publish them. The poems were down to earth, sort of in my vein, so I was put in charge of the editing. We kept in touch off and on after that. The other thing you should know about my relationship with Alden is that, shortly after I gave the Convocation reading, I got another letter from Pacey telling me that they were going to start a poet-in-residence program at UNB, the first in Canada, he claimed. He also told me that the job was mine if I wanted it. By then I had been with the bank for so many years I couldn't just walk away. In those days I would have lost my pension; it just wasn't worth it, so I declined. What I did, though, was recommend Alden — very enthusiastically, I remember — and he got the job. Being from down there, he really deserved it more than me anyway.

TT Another poet outside the *Cerberus* circle that you had considerable contact with was Cid Corman. You've said elsewhere that Corman opened you up to Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, poets who you later brought to Canadian readers. How did those American poets differ from what the second-generation modernists were doing in Canada, and why did you think they were needed?

RS There's no easy answer to that question. Louis knew of Cid in New York (from Paul Blackburn, I believe), but Cid's home base was the working-class Dorchester district of Boston. He was hosting a weekly poetry program on radio there and living at his parents' house. He slept all day and worked on *Origin* at the kitchen table all night, answering mail mostly. My first contact with him was when Louis threw down the copies of *Origin* in 1951. When I picked up *Origin* again a few months later I immediately started a correspondence with Cid, one that broadened my horizons like no other. You see, there was nothing in Canada like Olson or Creeley or the other poets Cid was featuring in *Origin*. They had a fresh idiom, fresher, I have to say, than Cid's. Cid was writing a very formal verse when I first encountered him, obviously influenced by John Crowe Ransom. After his time in Paris and Italy his verse became sparer, and his subject matter more mundane, a change for the better, actually. I started to see this change and asked him about it. We wrote a lot of letters back and forth, and he recommended people I hadn't heard of — the French modern poets, the City Lights group in San Francisco, and dozens of others. As Cid grew, so did I, learning some of what he knew about Chinese and Japanese poetry, and gaining much from his translations of works from the Spanish, Italian

and German. He was my contact with the wider world. A kind of whirlwind surrounded him. I brought him up to Toronto twice to give readings in our Contact Reading Series. It was that Series more than the magazines that had, I believe, the greatest impact on Canadian poets of the 1960s.

TT Why was the Series so important?

RS Because it brought the world to us. When the fledgling Canada Council gave us money for the Series, we were able to bring some of the best poets in the world to Toronto. I really admired Denise Levertov, who had just appeared through *City Lights*, so we brought her up in 1960 as our first American reader. Margaret Avison happened to be in the crowd that night and was nearly transformed by her. They became quite close after that, to the point that Levertov published her second book of poems. Margaret eventually gave a reading herself in the Series and was featured in a later issue of *Origin*. Gwendolyn MacEwen and many other well-known Canadian poets were regulars at the readings as well. We could almost see the influence happening. Olson closed the Series that first year with a powerful rendering of the *Maximus* poems. He had polished off a bottle of scotch beforehand, but it didn't seem to bother him. He was eager to come back when he discovered that Cutty, the whiskey he drank, was a dollar cheaper in Canada. He thought Canada was great. I'd like to relate something about Olson that might explain why contact with these people was so important to us. Olson, you see, was a brilliant scholar at Harvard, so much that he went right from there to work for Roosevelt, who was running for another term. Olson was such a good organizer that Roosevelt put him in charge of getting the foreign vote in the US — this in exchange for the job of Assistant Secretary of State if Roosevelt won. Olson's job was to travel around the country and goose the candidates. He'd wake up in the morning after a night of drinking with these candidates and find hundred dollar bills stuffed into the pockets of his suit. People had asked him for favours, you see, and paid in advance. Roosevelt, of course, ended up betraying Olson, offering his position to some crony. The point of the story is that these Black Mountain and *City Lights* people were avenues to the wider world of human intrigues. Toronto and Canada felt restrictive and parochial by contrast. When they started to come, our own poets started to change. It was like flowers germinating.

TT I have two more questions before we conclude. First, you've been writing poetry for almost seventy years. Looking back, would you do anything differently as a poet?

RS No, I don't think so. People have always asked how I was able to balance working in a bank with being a poet. My pat answer is that T.S. Eliot said that the best time of his life was when he worked in the bank. But, in truth, I wouldn't do anything differently, which is not to say it was easy. It wasn't. I think that if I had been a journalist or a teacher, though, I may have become too close to poetry and grown sick of it. As it worked out, poetry was always fresh for me. My days and evenings were always different. Unfortunately today, the only refuge for poets seems to be the university, where they can teach and have time off for their work. But that, too, has its limitations, as I've heard. Personally, I don't think I could have been both an academic and a poet. When young poets ask for advice, I tell them the truth: that you have to be committed or crazy to write poetry. That there are things much more practical and less nerve-racking. The emotional investment is especially hard and the work is never-ending. Then I tell them with equal honesty that I wouldn't do anything differently.

TT How would you like to be remembered and regarded by readers of poetry?

RS Oh, I don't know. For me, poetry is like a religion I guess. It has been much more than a vocation; it has been part of the life I've lived. Louis said the same thing: so did Irving and John and Cid. Look at Louis, for example: how could he have done what he did, printed all those books, helped all those young poets, made all those sacrifices? I remember hearing from him after his basement had flooded and he'd lost hundreds of Contact books. It was for poetry that he went through that kind of nonsense, for nothing else but poetry. What he did was very selfless. We were the same in our own ways, giving our free time, our money, the best years of our life to publish and promote others. We did it because we believed in poetry. Yes, we published the odd book of our own when getting started, but we weren't ashamed to do that. Most of our books were published by other presses, and our own presses published mostly other poets. So I guess I'd like to be remembered as someone who gave his life to poetry, but in no greater a way than some of my friends. What do our accomplishments mean in the greater scheme of things? That's for others to decide. In my case, as in Louis's and Irving's, there are lots of poems to pick from. I still have a whole drawer full that will take a while to get published, if they ever do. What I hope is that people will continue to read our work and continue to fight for poetry. For me, it has been a good life and a good fight.