

Self-satire rampant at poetry forum

By BARRY MCKINNON

Barry McKinnon has published a book of poems called *The Golden Daybreak Hair* and is included in an anthology of verse, *West Coast Seen*. He teaches English at the College of New Caledonia in Prince George, B.C. He here gives his impressions of a very tiring, rather uninspiring Poet and Critic '69 conference recently held on campus.

Plane lifts us out of Prince George on Wednesday, November 19, for Edmonton Poetry Conference. Swoosh. All over Canada the same is happening. Poets, critics, teachers boarding the musak jets on Canada Council University money to attend the Conference for all the repressed facts about poetry and criticism in Canada and Quebec.

"There is a crisis in Canadian poetry"—someone said later at the conference—and even later at one of the scattered/readings, Earle Birney read a poem he wrote on the plane coming in, and did not give us images of the "sleeping prairie", or "clustered lights and prairie jewels etc. etc."—but rather his poem was about the frustration of not being able to break the airplane's double glass vacuum window so that he could get out there on the wing and jump the 20,000 feet to the solid ear . . . an old man tumbling with grace in a 30 second swan dive to the land that raised us all. Dear critic: it was not a poem of suicide (he told us that). Maybe it was a prophecy about the conference to follow and how the double glass in everything designed to keep us in, keeps us in, save for the imagination where freedom joins itself with suicide, out of cruel necessity. To be human, turn off the musak—open all the windows. God let some air in here and let me crash to the real earth, or . . .

The Beginning

Ladies and Gentlemen, Poet and Critic, the conference has just begun and ended. I arrived part way thru the panel discussion with Eli Mandel, Margaret Atwood, a moderator, and Bill Bissett—who sat on the stage of the SUB auditorium with its soft seats and lights and excellent sound system—designed to make your boredom more tolerable. No.

The panel discussion was not boring because of the talk/words/poetic crazy energy generated by the naughty Bill Bissett, who spoke his illuminations without proper academic concern—which this concerned the organizers—who, feeling their sense of responsibility and organization on every level, cut the panel short so that people could catch an early supper in preparation for the faculty club readings. Thud.

People flow out the main door from one vacuum to another. The glass holds you in. The double glass. There are NO SMOKING and NO EATING signs on the way out. The ashtrays are filled with butts. I guess they figured that the 'real' poets wouldn't obey the signs anyway. The ones who smoked, didn't. There was no trouble. Bill stole an ashtray.

FACULTY CLUB:

Supper at Ken's with no trouble getting in (illegal keys)—then back thru a mile of university to the Faculty Club set amidst some trees with a special view of the river and city. Signs say—*TIES MUST BE WORN IN DINING ROOM* etc. What if a great Indian poet came wearing beads? Bill Bissett, did you have trouble? Mary Carpenter, Eskimo poet, are your ancestors chanting in the snow tonight while we rub noses by mistake amidst the gin and sherry and double whiskeys on the rocks and polite discussions regarding the muse and how to get all the great poems in Canada published by the big publishing houses with an introduction by a major poet?

The first day has been tense because of the panel and the general frustration of things not being right. She makes a big arc with her arms and says that despite the arguments and oppositions during the panel discussion, you are still poets and belong to the arc. She means we are all together. Don't fight; be together despite what has begun. Then she begins to read . . . love poems . . . in the faculty club . . . some glasses tinkle . . . then the silence after the poem broken by a man's loud voice near the bar. "That's bullshit—and you know it".

Charlie wheels around to me. Sure of his anger and sure of his respect for Dorothy, he rushes to the bar and asks dirty mouth outside. Dorothy reads. The arc is real brothers. Dorothy reads love poems while Charlie and poet are outside heard shouting whenever the door opens.

"Hit first Charlie", I think, then think, "Oh Christ . . . people are fighting over poetry. Thud. Scream. Give me a double. Wheel a polite jet up to the faculty club door and take me home. Those who agree rip up your poetry licenses. Thud. Rip. Bad vibes, as they say".

Charlie (old broken-lance Quixote) comes back alone . . . had refused to fight . . . felt bad. "It's ok Charlie" I said "you did a right thing".

Now Dorothy is finished and Irving Layton begins his reading with a washroom poem he found earlier that day (which indicated to all his followers that even POETS go to the washroom, that they are REAL, that the REAL is their business, though so far, no one is booking a flight home from the UNREAL conference. Bill Bissett said later that it was all so obscure he loved it.) Then Layton read "Bull Calf," another poem to his daughter, and new poems from recent Canada Council travels, and was well received. Clap clap clap. We're all safe again. Poetry lives. Exit.

The Anti-Conference:

I wander back to the SUB building where they are having the ANTI-CONFERENCE and think, ok now we'll have all the poetry they wouldn't let into the REAL CONFERENCE. Great. Let's hear the revolutionary screams and take our ties off, take our clothes off, throw our polite schedules and portfolios away, drink some honest wine, touch girls, etc. etc. But everybody's dressed except for a girl in a bathing suit getting her body painted. Everybody's come to see it happen. In another room there is a rock band, and folk singers, and in another, people dance interpretively in front of an egotistic video tape, and in the last room all the "failed" poets are trying TO READ above the groovy confusion. No one hears or sees.

A bomb wouldn't help it. Its already exploded on its own. Help. Bring the jets up to the doors with their real double windows and double scotches and musak dreams. Failure is no success so don't tell me its groovy. I begin to hate poetry and love the satire of it more. It's two o'clock in the morning and lonely to walk home. Ken and Charlie are up. Saved by friends on the 14th floor.

Day Two



EVERYONE CAME TO WATCH
. . . and nobody touched

We are moving into something out of control now. The organization is perfect. Now a panel discussion with French and English poets and critics. The French speak French and the English speak English. What was said, in French or English?

I went out and bought some Certs and ran into Bill Bissett, who has a little more trouble with French and everything else, like finding enough money to eat one meal a day and pay for grass fines and other real and psychic accidents caused by the legal mafia who bash your head in and throw you in jail for the crime of being a genius trying to organize your universe in your private mind and room. Bill and I talk and laugh and eat Certs and discovered weird principles. It was hard to satirize the the Conference because it was the satire. When you can't satirize the satire, in order to deal with it, you end up in a grotesque zone. "Bill are you a surrealist?" "Yes I am" . . . I'm not nuts, just crazy". I walk with him thru the crazy landscape trying to find a criminal outlet, something more than 10c phone calls and illegal keys. He leans over to a poet and says, "we need a bomb" and the poet asks, "what kind of a bomb? what do you mean?" and Bill says, "one that explodes". We are moving farther on now, trying to break the glass and squeeze our bodies onto the wing. Maybe we should wait until after dinner. Dinner

Before dinner I want to thank Eli Mandel for his Nixon poem and his suicide poem and the poem about his children and Earle Birney for his friendly and honest talk about poetry before the machine burnt his slides up, bringing it to an early close.

Macdonald Hotel for dinner. The foyer is crazy even for the starving. People are lined up for drinks while behind them the Progressive Conservative party is organizing P.C.'s for a Stanfield banquet. The ushers are dressed in fake frontier clothes. It must be their theme this year.

We finish our beer and head further into the banquet hall where one of the conference organizers is trying to give a speech about how the conference came about and how they thought it might be interesting to have poets and critics together as a kind of experiment . . . crash tinkle . . . "hey, aren't there any more chairs in here", Bissett yells out. Speaker interrupted. Tinkle, crash, confusion as more chairs are found, everybody settled now so speaker finishes speech and THEN . . . "Ladies and gentlemen would you please rise for the university prayer . . . (Bill starts to walk out: David Robinson stops him: Bill sits down) . . . THEN . . . the prayer . . . *nominus fobiscum universitas frateris puellam est pulchra, dominus nominus . . . etc. . . THEN everyone sits down . . . THEN another speaker comes to the podium and asks for the people to rise (ie. Canadian poets, critics and Quebec poets and critics) TO TOAST THE QUEEN!!* Crash, tinkle, swoosh. Bill leaves past the tables followed by David, and shortly after, another left, and then me because Bill is more my friend than the Queen and the people I had to sit next to (except for Charlie who stayed on the principle of a free meal). We sit in the Canadian Pacific cafeteria and talk and drink coffee while Bill tries to get a flight out, then Earle Birney comes down, just after a subversive waitress spilled wine on one of the women sitting next to him etc. Bill talked and ate a sandwich and missed his plane, and upstairs the Sacred government official discoursed on poetry as their most important product and how to sell sell sell Culture to the culpable, and poets squirmed preferring silent transactions, and Charlie ate his free meal.

Saturday

Over to the hung-over SUB for more papers on CP (Canadian Poetry) in other languages, but it is difficult to recall any important substance (except for an Icelandic-Canadian poet who wrote a book called *Restless Nights* . . . "and from the title we can see that he stayed up at night to write, after everyone went to bed . . .") and another paper on Indian poetry done by a Phd. in Anthropolgy (with a little undergrad psych thrown in too) who talked about "civilized" and "primitive" and more Anthro-Psych with its

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