

versus F. R. Scott versus Eli Mandel

fighting

Mandel: Well in this particular country, for whom would you be writing? For this audience—do you define an audience in that way?

Purdy: Well, if this audience is interested, and I certainly hope they are, then I'm writing for them. But you write for the people who are interested. A great part of the audience, of course, is university people. What you are more or less saying is—what is the audience for poetry in Canada?

Scott: I don't think you write for an audience. When you're writing the poem, you're writing the poem for the poem. It's got its own demands. It wants to be a certain kind of poem, and you're struggling hard to make it what it wants to be. Then it may go, it may say something, but you've got this personal relationship with the thing—with what's coming.

Mandel: All right, you're all saying this. You're all saying you have an interior itch, and you're scratching, and this is the way you get the poem.

Scott: I don't put it that way at all. I don't itch. (Laughter)

Purdy: Neither do I. (Laughter)

Mandel: That was Earle who itches.

Birney: You've a more ethereal view of this than I have.

Mandel: You're all saying that the act of writing is a private act.

Purdy: Certainly.

Mandel: This is Al's point of view. Aren't the questions that Jon has asked really relevant? Is Canada a desert island, and therefore particularly apt for the private voices of poets?

Scott: It's only recently begun to be apt. I mean for the first twenty years when I was writing poetry, there was nobody reading it at all. You could have no more got an audience this size to hear, or look at, poets than you could have got them to hear a sermon from a dumb minister.

Mandel: (to Scott) There's a sense in which your whole life has been public. But you're saying "poetry is a thing I work on as a craft, an art, I don't care what happens to it—something will happen to it." Earle on the other hand has dedicated himself to poetry, to scholarship and he's caring about what happens to it.

Scott: I don't see any difference between anything I've done in my life. The root of the word poet is maker. The Greek root is maker—he makes things. Now you can make things in all sorts of different ways, and the physician is a poet in that sense. My public activities, for me, have been an attempt to make something in a social way. But it's making. It's a social poetry, if you like. There's no con-

flict in me with these various activities. Naturally if you put more time in poetry, you make more poetry, and you probably make better poetry. But it isn't a different kind of attitude towards life.

Mandel: I think we'll throw this open to questions now. We've gone a long way, and I'm sure that people want to find out more from their own particular point of view. Would you raise your hand when you're ready to . . . no questions?

Questions: All right, I'll start it off. I would like to ask the panel in general, if they feel that presently there are any current trends in Canadian poetry. That is length of poem, type of poem, free verse, and so on. And also the subject of poems.

Purdy: Well, the subject has now widened to such an extent that poets will now write about anything, whereas once they certainly would not. Length—this is how many epics are being written? How many epics are ever written? Birney's *David*, in the way of a long poem, is as good a long poem as has been written. But there are very few people can carry that off, and I think that the general length of Canadian poetry is the short lyric, of say a page, or a page and a half. As to the type of poems being written, in the last few years, certainly, poetry in Canada has been breaking away from metric, to a larger and larger degree. The first models were British poets, and later American poets. And there are all sorts of schools over here. No, that's wrong, there are reflections of American and British models. But now, one would hope, and I rather believe, that there is something coming out which has its own distinction without trying to name it or say what it is.

Mandel: Do you want to comment on that question, Earle?

Birney: Well, I was saying a moment ago, that a whole new movement is developing in Canadian poets under 20 that I think is quite important. And I think that it reflects whole new attitudes towards language flowing out of the science, or pseudo-science, of linguistics. Young poets, some of them, in England and the United States and here, are looking at words phonemically—they're looking to break single words down. They are interested in the way one word moves into another. Into root cousin words, and into some sort of surprising change. And you may see a poem now in which that one word dominates the page. And the type is broken up all over the place. It may be shaped in some kind of interesting visual pattern as well. The poem is at the same time an exploration of the magic of a word itself—the curious mystery of a word. Think of any



—Lyll photo

POET AL PURDY AT LITERARY SEMINAR

. . . 'it's a matter of communication with other people'

word enough, and you'll begin to think of a poem, in a sense. So it's doing that, and it's often visually interesting in a way that poetry has never been since manuscript days in the middle ages. All these are happening—there's partially a cycle going back to the old—and there are the new things happening. There is also what's called anti-poetry. I just finished reading the latest number of *New* magazine, which is a unique little mag, in that it calls itself *New*, a magazine of Canadian and American verse. This is new by the way, because it is the first time I ever think this has happened. There's a young American who decides that he thinks Canadian poetry is as good on the scene as the American. And he has an editorial commenting on the kind of verse that is coming in to him on both sides and he doesn't seem to feel that there is any particular time lag in Canada. But what he finds is that there is no longer any common ground of definition of what a poem is. That some people, flowing out of the Olsen, Charles Olsen, tradition—the projectivist race tradition—have got to the point where they say that anything you put down is a poem if that is your approach to it.

I mean if you think that I'm going to put something down because this is how I feel. I mean I'll put it down on the page this way, or that way, or around this way. And that's as good a definition of a poem as any other, according to some people. Now this is real anarchy in a sense.

Scott: This is what's happening in modern sculpture, and to some extent in modern painting. It reminds me of the sculptor in New York who phoned up Macy's and said "send me up a rectangular wooden box . . . empty." So they sent it, and he put his name on it, and he took it to an exhibition, and it was put up in a very prominent place. (Muffled laughter) And they looked at it and said, "this is a piece of sculpture." And the most creative act of all, I've heard of recently, is the man who took a beautiful Leonardo da Vinci drawing and spent three hours rubbing it out so there was nothing at all. (Laughter) Now you get this *reducio ad absurdum*, and a line going this way. It may be

that artists of all types realize the world is just about to be destroyed, and they're proving it is going to be destroyed. But I certainly don't think this line, in respect to poetry, is going to be a very fascinating line. You can read these poems, and the words are all over the page, you know—blink—one great thing about it is it cannot be read aloud. (Laughter) But I just don't think that out of that is going to come a very large statement of a great magnificent kind, or important kind, such as we have attributed to every great poet at some time or other in his life. It is an experimental and interesting form.

Birney: I think there's something—some healthiness—in the . . . what do they call them . . . the

nihilist attitude of let us make some objects d'art and then destroy them. Publicly destroy them. What they are driving at, some of them, is that we've got too much tradition, too much of a sense of duty, to know this, and to study this, and to get information about that. I mean, what's it all about? Supposing you destroyed it all? Look what happened in Florence—it was dreadful—but somehow the world staggered on despite the loss of a great deal of its art objects in Florence. And there are some who have a feeling that it might be a good thing for art, and for human beings in general, if they sort of wiped it all out and started again. This would be dreadful for universities, of course. (Laughter)

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