

Many Goodly States & Kingdoms

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Artie Gold. *The Collected Books of Artie Gold*. Edited by Endre Farkas and Ken Norris. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2010. 304 pp. \$29.95 (paper).

By the time I got to Montreal in 1988, Artie Gold was already largely a recluse, a stay-at-home poet whose body could not withstand any foreign intrusions into his space because of the misery that the cat dander and dust brought from the outside world caused him. I was told that most of his possessions were in plastic bags or wrapped in Saran wrap. I think we did meet once, briefly, though I have forgotten the circumstances. But with John Glassco and Frank Scott, Artie was one of the legendary Quebec English-language poets whom I missed and was sorry for it. Many writers in those days, not least Ken Norris and Endre Farkas, the two poets who have edited this volume, spoke of Artie with respect, even reverence. Irreverence too, as that was part of his legend: the late-night telephone calls, the endless uninterrupted talk (often drug-fueled), the dumpster-diving, the curiosities he collected, the huge poetry library he had. Artie, as Endre Farkas notes in his brief Afterword to *The Collected Books*, was “the real thing,” indisputably a poet. He wrote constantly. Ken Norris has suggested privately that what is in *The Collected Books* is probably only a tenth of Artie’s output. The remainder, or at least what survives of it, is now safely in the Gold archive at McGill, and will presumably form the basis of a future book or even books. Gold published eight collections during his lifetime, three of them rather slim chapbooks and most of them issued during the 1970s, his heyday before drugs and disease ate away at his ability to have a “career” (a word he doubtless would have despised).

Several of Artie Gold’s books, including this one, sport prefaces by George Bowering, who had Artie as a student at Concordia University when Bowering taught there in the late sixties and early seventies. There is a sense in which GB discovered Artie Gold. Certainly his admiration and affection are strongly in evidence in the introductory pieces that he wrote for *cityflowers*, *The Beautiful Chemical Waltz*, and now *The Collected Books*. Unfortunately there is a certain tone in these pieces that is off-putting, not so much about Gold’s work per se, but about the Montreal poetry scene – a kind of *de haut en bas* dismissal of Montreal because it was not part of the cosmopolitan nexus that supposedly connected Vancouver with Toronto, Mexico City, Detroit, San Francisco and New York. (Detroit? With d.a. levy and Jim Lowell’s *Asphodel Bookshop*, I would have thought Cleveland a more likely node than Detroit.) In the 1990s, Bowering suggested, Montreal poets were still taking sides in the old John Sutherland-Patrick Anderson poetry struggle, at that point a dead-and-gone aesthetic joust almost fifty years old. Somehow I strongly doubt it, although with the historian of that literary period (Wynne Francis) teaching then at Concordia in the same department as Bowering, he doubtless overheard the names being uttered. “Artie Gold is not Arthur J.M. Smith,” Bowering put it in his preface to *Waltz*, bringing another Arthur into the picture. One would fervently hope not,

but that's no reason to make fun by inference of Smith, who does have a significant place in the history of Canadian poetry whatever one might think of his work. Bowering reads Artie largely through the Jack Spicer-Frank O'Hara spyglass, and while the influence of those two great American poets is undoubtedly to be found everywhere in Gold's poems – even the title of this book allies Gold's œuvre to Spicer's similarly named 1975 collection -- it is simplistic to state that the poems do not contain "reference[s] to [his] world of feeling & perceptions." Artie's feelings and perceptions are everywhere in The Collected Books:

Winter comes, unreasonably
I am stuck, here,
in the middle of my life

* * * *

There is a space in my life
a woman could walk into
and fill / if she didn't jiggle
tremble / fidget / shake

* * *

I have knapsacks full of knick-knacks
that spread beneath a tree
would suffocate a hermit

and a perpetual cough
that when I've had enough of-
I'll die from

Bowering's point, I suppose, is that the central focus of Gold's poetry is not his own consciousness but language itself, and in that contention he is right of course, despite Gold's frequent returns to the well of the self. "This crushed gentle poet," as he calls himself at one point (he's talking about O'Hara, but the inference seems clear), wrote "with a sense / of no industry / and constant partial loss." If there is irony directed at himself in those lines (no industry? he wrote thousands of poems!), there is also a key allusion to his psychic and procedural sources: loss helped to make him a poet, and being a poet was to be attuned to the words coming in from somewhere outside the self. Gold is always reticent about that loss ("I was playing solitaire / and I will not tell the world if my heart is broken or not / for now"), but it plays out specifically in many poems about failed or contestatory love relationships and more generally in his uneasy philosophical stance vis-à-vis the world ("the world / will never catch me with my pants down"). A surprising number of Gold's poems are about relationships, and although he never seems to find one that will persist, he remains extraordinarily cheerful about his failure. "Each time my heart is broken it makes me feel more adventurous," he says, and later, "away

from you / I become philosophical... / which is like taking off one's glasses to see." The excellent "R.W." poems (presumably Romantic Words, though Gold once joked that the initials stood for Ruby Wounds) chronicle the poet's asinine heavy-handedness at love, and they are full of beautiful asseverations and ecstasies, even in the midst of lovers who leave or will not accede in the first place. Only a true poet could propose that "the singular of caress [is] cares," as he does in "R.W. 2," and a thoughtful lover see the awfulness "if / your love for me is merely a weakness I prey upon" ("R.W. 25"). This series evolves towards simplicity and even the fragment, yet the final line is immensely touching: "Love is notorious!"

In an early poem from his first book, *cityflowers* (1974), Gold began by stating in a Spiceresque mode that he wanted "to make the space around the poem / real," and by calling for his muse to "be a neighbor with / a street address." Aesthetically this could as easily be Raymond Souster as Jack Spicer, but its seeming unidimensionality gets ramified by other knocks at poetry's door in the same book. He describes himself at one point as "safe inside / Fort Poetry . where I do drink from its preserving grace," a complicated bit of speech that combines the demotic (Fort Poetry) and high diction (I do drink) with a liturgical overtone. If it seems excessive to invoke the Eucharist here – and as a reader one is always hyperconscious of Gold's dismissal of critics in a poem in even yr photograph looks afraid of me as "secret moral puritans" – one can point to an earlier line in this same poem in which Gold refers to himself as "negotiating sanctum." He may have simply meant privacy, but the word "sanctum" inevitably invokes a religious context.

Inside *Fort Poetry*, Gold was free to do many things. He could write a poem as, well, as folksy as "Folk Poem," a short soliloquy about how his cats have wrecked his life ("They know damn well in spite of they ain't / saying nothing"). He could write a love poem that rides delightfully on the breeze of the moment like "alison," in which he tries to make the poem wake up a girl because at that very second "the clouds / above your house are doing a dance." He could write "R.W. 2," which ends with this complex and beautifully articulated verse:

We think we have stumbled on the sudden and secular secret that will
just for us unlock worlds, well, won't it? the morning runs off
and like an oxbow lake small life is stranded in these stagnant pools
the blood in our minds, goes stale while the salt of life without /
even becoming precious, concentrates to burn us where we've chosen
to make our stands.

There are also whole poems and parts of poems that are hard to follow, not just in sense but in music too, and I suppose these represent the drugs talking. Gold called it "the beautiful chemical waltz," in a poem of that title, where he also more mundanely alluded to "the mechanics of junk." Whatever poets need they ought to have. Who's to say otherwise? The results can be obscure – witness the final verse of an early poem:

wandering over flapping apple green

spume coxcomb to gentle pastures
so far from travelled ocean routes that
yes I was walking ridge sun glint [etc.]

Maybe this is just Gold's version of surrealism, a state of literary mind which he embraced; Bowering lauds him in one of his prefaces for understanding the concept in a deep way. (In a poem, Gold playfully calls himself The Archbishop of Canadian Surrealism.) The results privilege language over any controlling force of personality, which in principle allies the technique with Spicer's aesthetic, but in practice leaves the language strewn rather inelegantly over the page with no real things in evidence anywhere. If there is surrealism still remaining in the last poems in this book, it has a changed focus and is much more successful as poetry:

when the clocks begin to mambo
gold's bad algebra crystallizes
the system he uses to understand women.

The vocabulary here may be on the wild side, but unlike the preceding excerpt, the architecture is clear.

There is a strange and sometimes discomfiting feeling of "something missing" in Artie Gold's Collected Books. The kookiness arises from his own semi-comic dismissal of his feelings, which is an almost rote psychological ploy for him.

and I am dragged off stage to be replaced
by some other idiot. It's cosmic,

more pockets are rifled
than merely mine.. yet-

am I to not take it all personally somehow ? this loss /
my failure.

"I am no bargain" he says elsewhere in an untitled poem. He even apologizes to his muse in an untitled poem from before Romantic Words, "for the difficulty / with which I am drawn." No apology was needed, Artie.

my life seems full of holes
that come together only in sadness
it is as a blindman
will sell pencils, rethrush chairs
that I write poetry , Intuitively ,
joylessly

(I don't find "rethrush" in any dictionary. It seems to be a mistake for "re-rush" which means to replace the cane on the seat of a wicker or rattan chair, a kind of chair which is,

after all, also full of holes.) The discomfiture arises from the constantly repeated idea that the poet's life was a deep disappointment to him, and that poetry didn't help at all. How else explain the closing lines of "I for Kina"?

all there is to regret in this world occurs to me, the
Easter Parade of our sad miscalculations, all the
things we never got and kept wanting marching beside
all the things we thought would be worth having and weren't.

That's bare and unradical enough, I suppose, as a criticism of things happening in the middle of a life; and Gold's final question, at least in this book, in a poem from 1977, is if anything even more gentle:

does the part of an iceberg
that is found
underwater, belong?

Poets figure these things out for themselves, or they don't, and the poetry that is left is what matters most to us. Artie Gold's poetry encompasses a deep recognition of the power of the world and of language to embody that world. With his smutty muse and his "juices of the soul's water" he made some of the great poems to come out of Montreal in the second half of the twentieth century.