

Tom Konyves Spotlited

PQ Staff

Poetry Quebec: Are you a native Quebecer? If not, where are you originally from? Why did you come to Quebec?



Tom Konyves: I was born in Budapest, Hungary. My parents and I escaped during the revolution in '56 by crossing the border to Austria on foot, in the middle of the night, in winter. In Vienna, we applied for visas to immigrate to Canada or the United States. Visas were granted if relatives in those countries would sponsor us, so we arrived in Montreal because our Montreal relatives were the first to respond. I often think of how my life would have been different had we been sponsored by our

New York cousins...

PQ: When and how did you encounter your first Quebec poem?

TK: Probably through Leonard Cohen's "Flowers for Hitler". As an English major at Concordia in the late '60s, I should have been more familiar with Canadian poets, but the "period survey" courses focused on and abruptly stopped with the British and American Modernists, Eliot, Yeats, Pound, etc.

PQ: When and how did you first become interested in poetry?

TK: I remember "analyzing" Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" for a grade 8 assignment at Strathcona Academy:

*"What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?"*

...

*"Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter;*

Was it the "urgency" in his lines or the mysterious power of poetry to penetrate one's very being?

PQ: What is your working definition of a poem?

TK: It's actually Lionel Kearns's definition. "To trick words into saying something else." (I may have added "else.") I believe that what the poem "says" is only one layer of the

poem.

I emphasize text rather than poetry because it seems to me that the best poetry is always more than the syntax, metre, sound and signification of the words in a poem. Poetry is what *results* when text is used to express multi-sensory experiences that are grasped and yet not fully grasped. The "not fully grasped" is the best representation of poetry in our time. Because we know more than ever before, we know that knowledge is limited, not only because we are limited beings but because knowledge today includes the acceptance of the existence of unrelatedness and mystery around us and in us, the awareness of the many eternal unknowns.

PQ: Do you have a writing ritual? If so, provide details.

TK: Until recently, I wrote with a fountain pen.

PQ: What is your approach to writing of poems: inspiration driven, structural, social, thematic, other?

TK: If I like the first line, I continue writing.

PQ: How did your time in Montreal/Quebec affect your poetry and poetics?

TK: I was fortunate to be interested in poetry at a time (mid-'70s) when poetry readings began to move away from the universities and the bookstore launches to the cafés and alternate galleries. Encountering experimentation in these alternate spaces aroused something that had been hibernating in me throughout my years in academia.

PQ: Do you think that being a minority in Quebec (i.e. English-speaking) affects your writing? If so, how?

TK: Not since the late seventies. At that time, I had a dark, comic streak in my writing that thrived on the Quebec situation.

PQ: Do you think that writing in English in Quebec is a political act? Why or why not?

TK: I think that's a question for the francophones to answer.

PQ: Why do you write?

TK: I suppose it's because I found some words, some phrases, some lines that reflect a vision of language as an instrument of discovery, especially the relationships between words and what they represent, as well as what they suggest to each other, through their syntax, their rhythms, their positioning on the canvas of paper.

PQ: Who is your audience?

TK: Those who read my poems while pacing the floor.

PQ: Do you think there is an audience, outside of friends or other poets, for poetry?

TK: Of course there is! The silent minority.



PQ: Does your day job impact on your writing? How?

TK: I once worked in a warehouse as a receiver. I worked when a container pulled up to the dock and the guys began emptying the load of boxes. The rest of the day I sat alone in an office, reading and writing. Here's one that resulted from the job:

Leonard Found Poem

*Leonard found a quarter in the yard,
embedded in ice.*

*He said
"Get something"*

I did.

PQ: How many drafts do you usually go through before you are satisfied/finished with a poem?

TK: Sometimes it's perfect as it first appears on the page. At other times, I just keep revising until I am satisfied or I decide it's just not worth it.

PQ: Do you write with the intention of "growing a manuscript" or do you work on individual poems that are later collected into a book?

TK: The latter.

PQ: What is the toughest part of writing for you?

TK: The first line.

PQ: What is your idea of a muse?

TK: She understands and acts upon my desires.

PQ: Do you have a favourite time and place to write?

TK: Hours behind me, hours ahead of me, in some public place.

PQ: Do you like to travel? Is travel important to your writing? Explain.

TK: I enjoy traveling, yes. Sometimes, depending where I am, I will see, hear, feel, taste or touch something that will move me to write. It doesn't mean that where I am now, at home, I will not see, hear, etc. Is it different when I am away from home? It sure is!

PQ: Do you have a favourite Quebec poet? If yes who and why?

TK: I like a lot of Leonard Cohen's poems because he so often makes me aware of *his* awareness of the inner workings of the poem.

PQ: Do you write about Quebec? If so, how and why? If not, why not?

TK: I did when I lived in Quebec. I have felt estranged from the province since I left. Once in a while, I would read that another “language issue” has flared up and I would think that if I were still living in Quebec, I would have something to say, something that would be prompted by a car’s alarm somewhere on my block.

PQ: You were one of the pioneers of “video-poetry.” You coined the term. Can you elaborate on this form of poetry?

TK: Videopoetry is one word, it is not hyphenated or separated. As one word, it indicates that a fusion of the visual and the verbal has occurred.

It is a new genre of poetry, issuing directly from the technological advancements of the last hundred years, specifically the recording of moving images and sound. It integrates three of the most powerful media of creative expression: text, image and sound. The new genre does not illustrate the text with corresponding images or digetic sound; it uses unexpected juxtapositions to create works in which poetry is not simply one element of the work but the *result* of the measured juxtapositions of all three elements. Of course, works which publish popular poems (voiced or displayed on the screen) in video format are to be commended for bringing a new audience to poetry, but – and this “*but*” motivated me to publish [Videopoetry: A Manifesto](#) . I have always rejected their use of imagery as embellishments to (if not direct illustrations of) the text, their preference to employ narrative over self-reflexive sequences, their rejection of contrast, fragmentation, the incongruous and the dissonant, prevent these works from being considered as models for the development of a new genre of technology-assisted poetry.

PQ: What turned you onto video poetry?

TK: I put myself in charge of documenting the poetry readings at Vehicule Art in the late ‘70s. Screening them later, I became convinced that the product of these recordings were very one-dimensional. I had already noticed that the other arts were becoming more “multi-disciplinary”, borrowing not only methods but the materials of the other arts. I asked myself, “Why not poetry, then ?” As far as I could tell, the medium of video was not being challenged or explored by poets.

I began with recording a performance of a poem, [“Sympathies of War”](#), using images of traffic signs and scrolling text as the “setting” or background for the piece. Unlike the poem on the page, I was able to unravel the poem at my own chosen speed. This, in itself, was a giant step forward for poetry.

PQ: You were probably, of all the Vehicule poets, most involved with Vehicule Art Gallery. Why did you get so involved in a mainly visual art gallery?

TK: First of all, Vehicule Art’s institutional status enabled me to access funding for my projects: *Poetry on the Buses*, *Art Montreal* and the *Concrete Poetry/Mail Art Exhibition* were all made possible by grants to Vehicule. But I was mainly “obsessed” by the potential of poetry as a means of exploring contemporary artistic expression and media – specifically video and performance art – and there was no better space, no better collaborative milieu, no better access to this new technology, than Vehicule, the alternative artists’ centre that fueled the fire of “anything is possible here”.

Tom Konyves, one of the original *Vehicule Poets*, a pioneer of videopoetry, teaches Visual Poetry at UFV and lives in White Rock, BC.