

Endre Farkas Spotlited



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

Endre Farkas: I was born in Hungary. My parents fled during the 1956 uprising because in my village the cry of the revolutionary mob was “Kill the Commies! Kill the Jews.” My parents, Holocaust survivors, didn’t need to be told twice. We escaped just as the Russians were crushing the uprising. When we arrived in Austria, we were told that because we had relatives in Canada, we would be allowed to go there.

Because my father had a brother and sister living in Montreal, we were allowed to come to Montreal. I have lived in and around Montreal ever since.

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

EF: I didn’t know that Canadian poetry, let alone Quebec poetry, existed until I got to university and took an introductory class with Michael Gnarowski. He took us from Oliver Goldsmith to Leonard Cohen. I found it to be both an introduction to Canadian history and poetry. Only later did I find out that this course was considered the “mickey mouse” English. It was the course that engineers, commerce and other non-English majors took to fulfill their English requirements. Most of the English courses at that time were taught by Americans or Brits who didn’t think much of Canadian literature. I remember one of my American lit profs saying Canada had no writer worth studying.

Probably the first Quebec poet in that course that I paid real attention to was A.M. Klein. He had gone to the same high school as me, Baron Byng (also the Alma Mater of Layton and Richler), was a child of immigrants who had fled a pogrom and wrote about living in my neighbourhood. But as a child of the sixties, it was Cohen who first really made a lasting impression on me. He wrote in what I thought was a poetic voice...the melancholic dark lyrical mystical voice.

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

EF: Hungary is the land of poetry and poets. At least it was when I lived there. My mother once said that even the butchers in Hungary (she wasn’t only referring to literal butchers) recited poetry. It even has a national poem. Students started

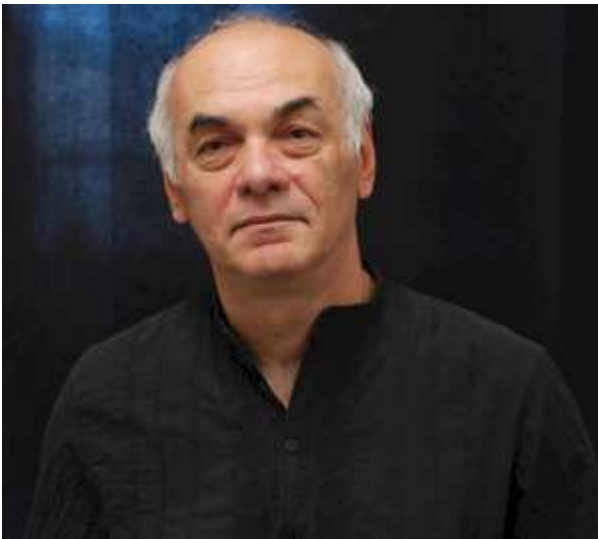
memorizing poems in grade one. I still remember parts of that poem. My mother also liked to read poetry. She still listens to recordings of poetry recitations. However, I only became (seriously) interested writing poetry after a friend in high school introduced me to the Beats, especially Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsberg. I liked their “yawping.”

PQ: What is your working definition of a poem?

EF: A poem, more than other written art forms, is about the awareness of language. When language is firing on all cylinders it doesn't matter what it is about. When I get the feeling that no other words, combination of words, line breaks, stanza breaks etc. will do, then I get a feeling and an awareness that I am in the presence of a poem.

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

EF: I used to have one but now I don't. I used to like writing late at night. I thought that it was the time for poetry. I believed that strange things happened under the cloak of night. Writing poems was one of them. But now, I believe that strange things go on 24/7, including the writing of poems. I used to like smoking cigarettes, usually after I felt that I had written a good line or two. It would be like a stanza break. I would light up, read the lines out loud and listen to how it sounded and what wanted to come next. I think smoking was part of the romantic image I had of a poet. I don't smoke cigarettes anymore. In one of my poems, “What you should know to be a Poet” (actually a collaborative piece with Gary Snyder's poem from which I took the title), I respond to his admonition to know “your own six senses, with a watchful elegant mind” with “I have stopped smoking cigarettes/find myself susceptible to colds//my taste buds are in bloom again./Makes it difficult to drink the water//though I still can't cut a straight line/I still intend to build a home//even now/I feel my lines breathe cleaner.”



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

EF: All of the above. Sometimes (rarely) it comes in one fell swoop from what might be called inspiration, the mystical phone call that comes at the oddest and rarest of times. Sometimes out of that mystical message comes the structural. *Murders in the Welcome Café* is an example of that. One night walking through Chinatown, I passed the Welcome Café and had a “déjà-vu that murders had been committed there. Out of that momentary infinitesimal lag in the

operation of two co-active sensory nerve centers that commonly function simultaneously, (two years later) came a 13-poem series that became a hardboiled detective chapbook. The social/political poems come from a reaction to a realpolitik issue. Most of the time a poem comes from me showing up, sitting down and working.

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

EF: Having come of poetic age during the turbulent times of the 70s and 80s in Quebec, having friends who were ardent nationalists, I could not but be affected. I knew I was writing in the language of the “oppressor.” Even though I knew being an immigrant and coming of age in the sixties had very little to do with being the oppressor, having experienced being oppressed, I had sympathies for their aspirations. However, not being a *pure laine*, I was told I was one of “les autres.” Also having gone through the English school system, I could not help feeling that I was on the wrong side. When I ran the Vehicule reading series with artie gold, I approached a francophone poet about doing bilingual readings. I was told that it was politically impossible for them to participate in such a project with “us.”

I was conscious of the situation and wrote about it, wrote out of it. In my poems *Face Off*, I have a poem (Habs 6 Bruins 1) about the conflict. “Dryden vs Larocque/we used to argue about percentages/but now/accents.” However, it was in the poetry performance piece *Face off/Mise au Jeu* that I explored the language/cultural debate. It was a commissioned piece by a dance company who had English, French, American, Jewish, Protestant and Catholic (lapsed) members. It was during the time of the 1980 referendum that the piece was performed. It was bilingual and dealt with the conflict on personal, cultural and political levels. I have also written other poems that deal with this theme, most of the time in a satiric vein: “Love in Quebec” and “Language Cops” are two examples. I have also incorporated French phrases into some my poems not because it is politically correct but because they were the right words/les mots juste.

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

EF: Yes I think it is. It is because the Quebec nationalists make it so. Quebec has a language bill that makes it so. It exempts the written arts from the rules and regulations of Bill 101 but that very exemption makes it political. It implies that writing poems, stories and plays are allowed by the grace and magnanimity of the majority. I am allowed to write in English. Most English language writers in Quebec aren’t conscious of this reality. I am. Maybe because my parents’ history and what they went through because of right wing nationalism and then living under occupation of a foreign power (Russia) and having friends who have lived under dictatorships that I am more sensitive to it.

PQ: Why do you write?

EF: I don’t know why I started to write. I started in high school for the fun of it. The other kids thought it was cool that I could invent stories and poems. And it was easy. I remember a history teacher giving us an assignment of writing about being an early settler coming to Canada. He gave us the option of writing it from the immigrant’s perspective, in the form of a letter to family back home. I enjoyed the idea of being someone else, imagining what it might have been like. I also write because I have no choice. Now, it’s second, if not first nature. Through writing “it”, I better understand the world and myself. In a sense I write, therefore I am.

PQ: Who is your audience?

EF: First it's me. Then the "audience of one" (the other), the ideal reader who isn't me. The reader who appreciates the work that went into it. Then the millions who are eagerly waiting to read it. And finally those who are yet to be born.

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

EF: If I am brutally honest, then I have to admit that there is no audience for poetry. When I am less brutal, then I admit that there is a small audience. But the real question is why do we (humans) write poems (make art)? In the Darwinian sense, creatures do what they do primarily to survive and propagate the species. They adapt to do that, they grow bigger/shorter wings, sharper claws, thicker fur, etc. One of the appendages that humans evolved is their creativity. The writing of poems is one form of this. So it's not about audience, it's about survival of the species. Also having edited PQ and seeing 300-500 people online at any one time, makes me think that there is an audience.

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

EF: When I did have one (teaching) it gave me the financial security and freedom to give myself over to the arts, to writing. It also allowed me to be in the company of other people who believed that poetry was important. I was fortunate to have such a day job. It also made me feel that I had the responsibility to write because it was not only a private, self-indulgent act but a public, social and political responsibility. This sounds pompous and self-aggrandizing but again the writers (from dictatorships) I associated with made me realize the importance of the role of the writer as a loudmouth witness.

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

EF: I've been accused of over-editing, over-revising. But it's not over doing it but the time it takes. I may revise only five or six times but that's over a three- or four-year period. My rhythm has been a manuscript/book every four or five years. I am also not averse to changing a poem even if has been published. Just because it is published doesn't mean that it's set in stone. A poem is an organic and living entity. And as humans change over time, I think a poem may as well.

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?

EF: Right from the start, I "grew manuscripts." It wasn't a conscious decision. My first book *Szerbusz* grew out of a return visit to Hungary. I just wrote poems while there and when I came back I saw that there was that arc. The arc was both through the topics and the form. I noticed that there was a strong use of repetition. This has stuck with me over the years and I have used it in various ways. Although poems are individual entities, as they accumulate, I begin to see a thread of a thematic or structural narrative. Once I begin to see that, which sometimes happens early on, other times much later, I become schizophrenic in seeing the poem as a poem on its own and seeing the poem in the grand scheme of a manuscript.

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

EF: The start. The blank paper. The middle, finding it. The end. Hearing the “that’s it!” However, on the whole I haven’t really had what is called “writer’s block.” On the whole, I’ve found writing a pleasurable pain.

PQ: What is your idea of a muse?

EF: Life. Death. Everything in between.

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

EF: As I mentioned earlier, I used to like writing at night. I still do but no longer only then. As to place, when I am “away” I like to sit in a café and write long hand (what a strange expression). At home, I keyboard peck.

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

EF: I don’t like to travel. I like being in different places but not the getting there, especially if it means flying. Being in different places is good because it dislocates me. This dislocation also dislocates my writing. I write differently. I am more disciplined than when at home. I keep a journal and write by hand. I’ve been doing a series “Proemcards from...” One series that has been published is *Proemcards from Chile*. It’s my postcards to friends and myself. I don’t know too many people who send postcards anymore. I also think of them as my photos.

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

EF: A.M. Klein and artie gold. I think Klein was Canada’s first urban poet. He was the first Canadian poet to map a Canadian city (Montreal) poetically, see its topographic, cultural, linguistic, political and sacred geography. He wrote about his cultural heritage in a regional and cosmopolitan manner. He experimented with language, mixing French, English and Yiddish. He wrote sympathetically of the “French canadien” unlike the spoofing Dr. Drummond.

artie gold was the first true Canadian “hipster.” He was also a city poet. He shot the city into his veins and it flowed from his pen. His first book *cityflowers* is a wonderful ode to living here. I also was and continue to be in awe of the way he makes jumps and connections. I also like Jean-Paul Daoust. My reading of French is limited but his “urbanity” and performance/readings are engaging and lively.

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

EF: I think Quebec is not only a place but a state of mind and all that that implies. It is a condition and it’s about language. And perhaps because of that I am more aware of the “not juste” in a poem. My Quebec, tends to be Montreal, a city that has been inspiration to both English and French. It’s a city-state that is vibrant, a pain in the ass, an addiction and a lover. Yes. Oui. I write “out of” Québec/Kweebek. How can I not? I live here. Je me souviens.

Endre Farkas is a poet, playwright and an editor of Poetry Quebec. His latest book/video *Blood is Blood* is a collaboration with Carolyn Marie Souaid, won 1st prize at The ZEBRA international Poetry Film Festival in Berlin.