

The Poet Versus Society

An Interview with Artie Gold 1979

By Marvin Orbach:

Artie Gold is a Montreal poet who is presently studying at Concordia. His published work include *cityflowers*(1974), *Even Yr Photograph Looks afraid of Me* (1975), *Mixed Doubles* (1975), *Some of the Cat Poems* (1978), and a number of broadsides. His poems have been included in several poetry anthologies, and have appeared in many Canadian and American magazines. This interview was prompted by Mr. Gold's just published *before Romantic Words* (1979).

Marvin Orbach: You were once a student at Sir George Williams University. You dropped out, embarked on a career as a professional poet, achieved a degree of fame, and now you are a student again, at Concordia. Why did you drop out, and why are you back?

Artie Gold: I dropped out because I found I wanted to do too much with writing, which was a new toy for me then, to be able to keep up with a full course load.

MO: You wanted to write full time?

AG: I really wanted to plunge on ahead. I am back now because I feel there are areas I'm totally blind in, and just taking the odd course virtually is like learning another language for me. I feel it sharpens me and I feel the biology course I'm taking now offers something really exotic.

MO: You're not looking for a career?

AG: It's hard to say. I wouldn't mind making money through my poetry.

MO: Do you?

AG: Certainly not enough to live on.

MO: Being a full time poet, and not holding down the proverbial job, do you find that society is antagonistic to you? That is conventional, workaday society?

AG: Not really. I wouldn't really care because I do what I consider my own work and it requires more energy than I would have left if I held a nine-to-five or conventional job. I think for a writer a conventional job is to write.

MO: You're not concerned with what people think?

AG: I don't think I'd even hear them unless it was the case of an argument ad hominem.

MO: Are you writing now while you are studying?

AG: not a great deal. I do keep up a correspondence, and I constantly mull through half-finished and unfinished poems and scraps to see if I can have something rise out of their ashes.

MO: As a creative artist, what value do you feel you have for society?

AG: This is a difficult question. I was talking with John Newlove once. We were discussing how we were affected by various reviews we got, and we were also discussing one's own reaction to one's work—not necessarily how it's structured to meet the world, but whether it's a tool or just an analogue unit sent out for somebody to study and interpret.

So poetry may be a liturgy or it may be just an object, and I think that's in the hands of the person who tries to use it. I think any poetry able to hold a person's interest has something of value for that person. I don't use poetry as a proselytizing device. I feel it's important for me to write because I have an urge, because I find energy in writing and a certain kind of energy called voice.

MO: Artie, I find your poetry to be very much alive, whether you are writing about felines or sex at thirty one. Do you labour long and hard at your craft to achieve this vitality, or do your poems come spontaneously?

AG: I do both in combination thereof. Some poems I haven't been satisfied with. At times I fused two like poems together, seeing an identical music in each, and run one after the other, making each a stanza of a new poem, rather than two short poems in themselves. At times after having quite a session writing—writing twenty or thirty poems—I find I'm warmed up, and the next piece of work I do will have an evenness and a dynamism and seeing spontaneity that I couldn't achieve otherwise.

MO: To what extent may you be labeled an experimental poet?

AG: I think the poet who doesn't use a scheme of poetry which has pre-existed, like rhyme or sonnet, in a sense is an experimental poet. Because he is dealing with new structures he has to invent as he goes about expressing himself. Generally when one thinks of an experimental poet one thinks of a sound poet or a visual arts poet who paints huge things on billboards. These aren't experimental things. They are side excursions into shamanism. In fact they mix poetry with something that is not poetry.

One of the needs of poetry has is to be constantly revitalized, and it must aim at the centre and stay there. Probably only novelty is freshness, experiment is process. All experiments are the same in that they either succeed or fail, and they usually have a clumsiness to them. In fact the

experiment is the root experience which when proven to succeed should become the formula for the poem.

MO: Have you experimented with drugs, and if you have, has that fueled your work?

AG: Psychiatrists and pharmacologists experiment with drugs. I think you can only experiment with drugs on an unwilling G.O. or on a cat. I've taken them at times. I find that sometimes a chemical stimulus can be a channel into a deeper experience, and can engage one's language and one's mind in a spirituality which may not be there in the straight expressing of one's thoughts. Charles Bukowski is a person who happens to get blind drunk before he does any writing. It's hard to think of that as experimenting.

MO: David Solway has called you "perhaps Canada's most prolific poet." What percentage of your total output do you think worthy of publication?

AG: that's difficult to answer.

MO: What percentage do you publish?

AG: probably one in every fifteen poems has some appearance, mostly in little magazines. Maybe one in twenty becomes a poem in a book.

MO: You have been accused of being overly influenced by American writers, and not being a truly Canadian poet. Indeed, one can see the Americans, Jack Spicer and Frank O'Hara, in your poetry. What is your answer to this kind of criticism?

AG: It's usually not very polite. When I consider what's here and what's there, and step forward to decide on a mentor, I fully intend to take the one that will benefit me the most, and whose work I respect, and I can't think of any Canadian poets who can hold a benzene torch to Frank O'Hara. He's dead and they can write all they want, they still won't get there.

MO: Do you find the critics sufficiently receptive to your work?

AG: I don't think I've been on that butcher counter yet, or on that cosmetic assembly line.

MO: Do you find that friends pat each other on the back, in reviews?

AG: Friends should pat each other on the back in reviews. Essentially, they should provide each other's poems to other people. These reviews should really be introductions to work they like.

MO: Artie, what do you think of poetry workshops?

AG: I've gained a lot from one I was part of.

MO: Which one was that?

AG: George Bowering's.

MO: In Montreal?

AG: Yes. In 1968/69. I see them hurting potentially good writers and pandering to people who have no business sitting in front of a typewriter. A workshop cannot be of any use unless there is someone capable of transmitting something valuable to the people in that workshop, and there just aren't enough good poet/teachers to go around. I'm afraid the average poetry workshop is rather pathetic.

MO: Does your acceptance as a member of the League of Canadian Poets mean that you are now part of the Establishment?

AG: Certainly not. I'm in there to see if collectively individual poets can get a better deal from the arts/money sector, and I'm also in there personally to see if I can get a share of the money that they are always willing to give away to the figureheads of society like the League, but would hesitate to give to individuals. Canada Council does not quite trust themselves. They've made too many howlers. They would like to see thousands of mitts up in the air before they throw that one baseball.

MO: Does your Jewish background work its way subconsciously into your writing?

Gold: Only in that I feel guilty when I don't write, and guilt is a very Jewish thing.

MO: Artie do you feel that university libraries adequately support young writers like yourself?

AG: Not at all. The library has not allowed its space to be used for poetic activities. The library is like a museum of books. It really has no side activities.

I've been pretty annoyed at various libraries at various times, for not allowing me to take out books. It's kind of strange that at the Old Sir George library where I had three books, I couldn't even take out my own book.

MO: In one of your poems, you say you would not live your life over again. Why is that?

AG: That is in the context of the poem. It was comparing someone else's wanting to live her life over again, having thought she got a raw deal. I'm sort of content the way the blows have fallen. I might even have botched it more given a second chance.

MO: What do you want to do with the rest of your life?

AG: I would like to continue writing. I would like certain things to happen in my writing. They are vague now. If I could express them in words, I would probably be doing those things right now. You only get one chance at life, and it seems very important that you leave your peers,

and I don't mean when you die but during your life, a constant stream of enthusiasm and hilarities.