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The Choreography of Words

An Interview with Montreal Poet Endre Farkas

La chorégraphie des mots
Une entrevue avec le poète montréalais Endre Farkas

Interviewd by / Interrogé par Éva Zsizsmann

Preamble

By way of introduction I propose a game: I would like to ask you to match a short text to the photographs. Let's call it *ekphrasis* or mixed media, to honour your preoccupation with text-image correlations.





Corona

This one belonged to my poet/friend Artie Gold
 A Véhicule poet I travelled with.
 I took it without his permission:
 A remembrance of him
 A memento mori
 A beautiful piece of sculpture
 A reminder that words are made of letters
 And letters are concrete symbols of sounds

He painted poems with it
 The negative space as
 essential as the positive
 oh how he fought over spacing
 Oh
 how he fought for spacing ,
 for equality of space , the comma
 --The dash and the no
 period

I had an Olivetti Lettera 35
 and with it
 took pictures of my world
 like a poem proud papa

The typewriter made printers of poets
 who could now be mindful/eyeful
 of the final shape of their art
 design the page/the frame of mind
 of writer and reader.

I miss and don't miss the click clack,
 the stuck keys, the ink of ribbon on fingertips
 spilling black and red blood onto the white
 blank canvas
 the manual labour of the
 T Y P E W R I T E R.





Puttin' on the Ritz

I imagine myself. This is my fascination with masks and the costumes of who we are. I am the haute couturier, dressing the stars. I am the poet who sits in his underwear in the sweatshop of summer stitching together a *wardrobe* that I wear to my *wordpremiere*.

* * *

I first met Endre Farkas in April 2011, when he was touring Hungary and giving readings together with poet Carolyn Marie Souaid in Budapest, Szeged, Debrecen and Siófok. The poetry reading at the National Library of Foreign Literature in Budapest was more like a performance: they enacted excerpts of the video poem *Blood is Blood*, winner of the Berlin International Poetry Film Festival in the subsequent year. Dialogue, acting out conflicts, and saying the unsayable seem to be indispensable features of this poem. Breathing, rhythmic utterance, movement and gestures transformed print on the page into a choreography of words.

EZ Performance poetry or sound poetry has always been important for you. How do you see the transition from page to stage?

EF You have to remember that poetry originally was an oral art. So in a sense poetry first moved from stage to page. In prewriting times people would gather to hear the poet/storyteller. Later s/he would be accompanied by some form of music and, who knows, maybe even movement/dance.

The late nineteen sixties and early seventies were times of great change. Poetry was experiencing an escape from the universities where it was confined to the page. It was there that poems were being dissected to death. Young people wanted something more, a lively and relevant experience with poetry. Folk singers like Bob Dylan, Simon and Garfunkel, Leonard Cohen et al were combining poetic lyrics with music. Words in songs were important, relevant, mysterious and marvellous.

I saw what I started doing in the seventies as moving poetry back to its oral/stage origins. I was influenced by some of the readings I attended. Most of them were boring. Poets, usually, not the best readers, mumbled, bumbled their way through poems that were meant for a one to one private relationship (reader and poem). At the same time, I was also hearing poets like Allan Ginsberg and Ann Waldman (American beat poets) who sang, wailed and howled. I knew of poets teaming up with jazz musicians. Their poems were lively and performative. Canadian poets bill bissett and the Four Horsemen, sound poets/Dadaists, were chanting and performing.



My other influence was a place: Véhicule Art. I joined Véhicule Art gallery, an alternative art gallery run by young artists who created exhibitions that included performances, installations and modern dance. I was drawn toward the dance, especially Contact Improvisation.

My early off-the-page-onto-the-stage works were concrete poems. Working on concrete poems, I became conscious of seeing the page as a canvas and letters and words as the positive space. But I also wanted the letters and words to sound, so I began sound explorations along those lines. This included writing poems that had sound components, stretched words – e.g. “soooooo loooong/soooooo oooh/loooong” – and playing with bridge sounds – e.g. my poem “er/ah” – which was also a collage of chance and cut up text.

When I collaborated with dancers, I wrote modular texts such as, “as/the breath/is/ the journey/ I/ move/and it is/imperceptible/as/is/the breath/just/breathed/in/and/ out”. The performance began with stillness and silent breathing that became audible and then became the engine/verb that moved the dancers. This text was repeated at different times during the performance. Because of its occurring at different times, the text came out sounding relaxed at the beginning, more laboured in the middle and exhausted at the end, so the text gained layers of possibilities. I created other pieces for other dancers/collective and in the last one, *It Runs in the Family*, I was one of the dancers.



I also explored choral text for voices (2 to 7). I even collaborated with a composer who connected me to multiple microphones and EKG patches which were hooked up to a computer. My breath, heart beat, brainwaves and muscles were amplified. Along with a text I wrote. It became a symphony of the body called *Close Up*. This was my “theatrical” debut.

Stripped to the waist and hooked up, I looked like a modern Frankenstein, but for me, the transition was a natural one even though the performance and results were anything but natural. For me, it was not a transition as much as an extension of my idea what poetry/poems/poet could be.

EZ Is it possible to bridge the gap between poetry and the public?

EF The gap has been there for a long time. It was made especially big when it became the domain of the universities. Page poetry (written mostly by educated white males) had become extremely complex that needed the university laboratory (manned by white males) to be fully understood.

We live in post-literate times. The public is performance oriented. The RAP and slam poets have bridged the gap. They’ve reached a large audience because they perform their poems, their poems are very direct (no hidden meaning) and they’re rhythmic. They’re stars (almost) like rock musicians.



RAP, which stands for Rhythm and Poetry, arose from the American Black culture and experience. They took poetry back to its oral roots. Actually, the first RAP poets were Afro-Americans in prison. It was their way of expressing the social and economic injustices that they were experiencing. Unfortunately RAP music has degenerated into a celebration of misogyny, violence and greed. Fortunately, RAP poetry hasn't.

EZ A.M. Klein, one of your favourite poets, writes of Montreal:

Grand port of navigations, multiple
The lexicons uncargo'd at your quays,
Sonnant though strange to me

What are your memories of the Montreal of your childhood? What was interaction between the different social and ethnic groups like? St Laurent Boulevard, “the Main,” traditionally marks the division between the English and French part of the city. How about other divisions and stepping across the line(s)?

EF We arrived in December of 1956. My first memory of Montreal was that it was incredibly cold and white. There was more snow than I had ever seen. I didn't want to go out.

We lived on Park Avenue between Fairmount and St. Viateur about five blocks west of the Main. It was Richler country. The street used to be a classy avenue but by the time we lived there it had become an immigrant street.

I remember being a latchkey kid like most of the kids. A “latchkey kid” is a term that describes a child of working parents. I remember playing in alleys, exploring the streets on my own, looking in garbage cans for stuff, finding a toy cowboy pistol that elevated me from being an Indian to cowboy when we played Cowboys and Indians. I also remember finding and reading my first English book. *Candide* by Voltaire. Of course I didn't understand most of it but I loved the adventure story of the kid. I remember going to Fairmount elementary school along with other first and second generation immigrant kids. I remember going to Jewish school after school and getting kicked out for always forgetting my yarmulke. I'd rather have been playing soccer, so the forgetting might have been deliberate. I remember walking to the Fletcher's Field, opposite Mt. Royal, and playing pick-up soccer with kids of different nationalities.

Most of my interaction was with other immigrant kids, some with English-speaking kids and none with French until high school. Because of the educational set-up of the times, most immigrant kids ended up going to Protestant English schools. My high school, Baron Byng, the school of A. M. Klein, Irving Layton and Mordecai Richler, was 99% Jewish and immigrant. It was in high school I remember first encountering the French language. I remember being taught by a teacher from France who told us if we couldn't speak French properly then we shouldn't speak at all. So most of us kept



our mouths and ears shut. I remember failing grade eight because of failing French by one percent. I remember in grade nine, half the school was occupied by a French school, and the most beautiful and sophisticated girls I had ever seen. It was then that I tried really hard to learn French.

Most of our teachers were WASPS (White Anglo Saxon Protestants). There was really no attempt to be culturally or religiously sensitive. I remember Christmas Concerts. Imagine a 99% Jewish choir singing Christmas carols today. Nobody spoke out against it. In fact we were proud that our choirs usually won the citywide Christmas carol singing competition.

The division was language but it wasn't political as much as linguistic. Speaking it or not speaking it. Learning it was the bridge to cross the great divide between being Canadian or not being Canadian. The other divide was between those Hungarian Jews who came after the war and those who came in '56. The '56 immigrants were considered "greeners", a pejorative term for newcomers who didn't know how things worked here. I was too young to feel that divide but was told about it by my parents. Where I lived, there was a Chinese laundryman, a Polish milkman, Russian factory owners, Hassidic butchers and bakers. It really was a lexicon of Eastern European immigrants. The common language of the neighbourhood was Yiddish. Even the Chinese laundryman knew a bit of it.

The other divides were economic and religious. Both the English and French were suspicious of immigrants but for different reasons. The English were suspicious and wary of immigrants for fear of them moving into their neighbourhoods and class. It is for these worries that McGill put quotas on admission to certain departments (medicine & law) and clubs had a no Jews policy. The French were suspicious of Jews for religious reasons, reinforced by the Catholic Church. The Jews were the ones who killed Christ. The immigrants (Jews in particular, the ones I knew best) were suspicious and wary of both. Richler, Layton and Klein explore this relationship in their works. Of the three, Klein was the one who saw the connection rather than the differences between the Jews & the French.

EZ October 1970 marks the peak of the protest against English supremacy in Montreal, when francophone aspirations for independence were stirring. In the 1970s, English-language poetic focus shifted from Quebec to Ontario, Toronto in particular. As a member of the Véhicule Poets, what can you say about the English-language poetry scene in Quebec at that time? How does it connect to the second wave of Modernism in Canada, the poetry of Louis Dudek, Irving Layton and Leonard Cohen?

EF The shift to Toronto had a number of reasons. One of them was a reaction to the rise of nationalism in Quebec. It was matched by the rise in English nationalism in the Ontario literary scene with Northrup Frye's ideas in the poetry of Margaret Atwood



We seven poets did not appear as one but at once. We were very different kinds of writers. What we shared was the accidental coming of age together, the desire to write poems, the willingness to collaborate, and an interest in experimenting and Véhicule Art gallery.

We had different influences: Beat, New York, Concrete, Dada/Surreal and Jung. This variety of influences affected our styles and forms, which contributed to the revitalization of the Montreal poetry scene. Some members of the group had studied with Dudek, some had been influenced by Layton and most of us loved Cohen. But none of us wanted to be them. Dudek was the one we had the most contact with. He was encouraging, questioning, combative and saw in us the carrying-on of the spirit of his generation.

We started readings, magazines, presses, and experimented with the form and entered the multi/interdisciplinary world. The second wave poets were mainly page poets while the Véhicule poets were page, stage and video. We did create resentment among some of the other poets in the city, but I think that was a good thing as they began their own presses (Delta & Guernica), which got other poets to gather around them. We had very little interaction with the francophone poets at that time because they felt that association with Anglos was bad for their poetry business and they had plenty of things to do on their side of the divide. Later on, when tensions had cooled, there was interaction but most of it was initiated by us, the Véhicule poets (mainly Ken & I).

EZ You were the co-founder of Véhicule Press, founder of the Muses' Company committed to publishing emerging poets and curator of the Circus of Words. What was your motivation? How do you see these ventures in the ebb and flow of creative collaborations?

EF I wasn't a co-founder of Véhicule press but its first editor, along with Ken Norris and Artie Gold. I, along with Artie Gold, was running a reading series out of the gallery, and Simon Dardick, one of the founders of Véhicule Art gallery, was running an old printing press in one of the backrooms, printing posters and flyers. He was interested in starting a literary publishing house and asked me if I would be interested in being its editor. I knew nothing about being an editor so I said yes. On the condition that Artie and Ken would join me. He agreed. So it began. At that time there were no active presses in Montreal. We gave ourselves the mandate to focus on local poets, though one of the first poets we published was George Bowering one of the founders of *Tish* on the west coast. We did this for a few reasons; Bowering had been a visiting professor of poetry at Concordia University in Montreal, was a real fan of Gold's poetry and was a way in to the Canada Council funding program.

Our first books were by emerging poets (including ourselves) who were experimenting with content and form. *Vegetables* by Ken Norris was a series of poems about vegetables and had drawings of vegetables and a cover which included a seed packet



with seeds in it, *Honey* a book of sensual/erotic poems that had as its first poem/introduction “Advice to Poets / don’t leave the bed too soon-- / you can’t come with words” and *Murders in the Welcome Café*, by me; a series of 13 interconnected poems in the language of the hardboiled detective novel. We also put out the first English language poetry anthology in about thirty years. It introduced a whole new generation of writers to Montreal.

The Muses’ Company came about after I split from Véhicule Press over creative differences. I wanted to continue to focus on emerging, Montreal poets and experimental writing. I also wanted to hear the voices of the “other”. I published Mohamud Togane, a Somali poet, and Elias Letelier, a Chilean poet. Both were very fine poets and brought fresh perspectives to the Montreal scene.

The Circus of Words les Cirques des Mots was a public expression of my interest in interdisciplinary collaboration. Carolyn Marie Souaid and I invited francophone, anglophone and allophone poets to work with artists from different disciplines to create 15-minute performance pieces. I had a few goals in mind. One was to present poetry-driven performance pieces. Another to bring together artist from the three solitudes (English, French and “other”) writers in a multicultural evening. Finally, to expose students (I was teaching at a CEGEP) to a world of poetry/performance that they had not been exposed to before and may never again be. It was a continuation of the early Véhicule poets’ spirit of experimentation and collaboration.

EZ Signature Editions is the publisher of the video poem *Blood is Blood* (2010), *Language Matters* (2013), the collection of interviews with Quebec poets and your recent novel, *Never, Again* (2016). You seem to have a long-time collaboration with them. What was the starting point, the spark, and how do you see the role of editors and publishing houses in shaping an author’s literary career and the literary scene in general?

EF Signature Editions was originally NuAge publishing, begun in Montreal. Karen Haughian, now owner, was one of its cofounders. She and I became friends around the time I started The Muses’ Company. In spirit, she reminded me of me when I started The Muses’ Company except she wasn’t a poet and had a business sense. She was also tech-savvy and helped me out with my Luddite approach to the computer age of publishing. We also collaborated on a couple of projects, were co-presidents of the English language publishers’ association, presented briefs to the Quebec government, organised book fairs and spent many long nights in phone conversations about promoting Quebec English-language writing and bitching about the difficulties of being an English-language writer and publisher in Quebec.

As for the second part of your question, good editors are essential in making writers better, better writers good and good writers great. They keep you focused, grounded and honest. Good editors are your second critical eye (your own being the first).



Literary publishing houses are your access to an audience and the millions of dollars you won't make. They are the unsung, overworked, underfunded heroes. Small (literary) presses are the ones who take chances on unknowns; they are the foundation of a country's literature.

EZ You mentioned that researchers interested in avant-garde poetry and the story of Véhicule Poets approach you from time to time – what do you think about interconnections between literature (poetry or creative writing) and academic endeavours?

EF Well if there were no writers, there'd be no jobs for academics. (Of course we're talking literature.) Academics are like senators in a parliamentary system. They are the chamber of sombre second thought. Creators deal with that first fierce fire of creation. Academics are slower to dive into the fire. They usually wait till it cools or the author is dead. They are the reflectors of the embers. They poke around in the product that was forged in the smithy of the author's soul & mind. They are also bridges between the public and the creator. They reflect upon a work of art in serious tranquility and aid the reader to get a full understanding of the work. They give it context. One other important difference between artists and academics: academics get paid for their work.

EZ *Murders in the Welcome Café*, one of your earlier poetry volumes has recently been turned into a videopoem/film. What is the idea behind adapting a chapbook or book-length poem into a film noir set in the 1940s?

EF *Murders* was written during the time of my reading of Raymond Chandler's novels. He was the father of the hardboiled detective novel. His novels were set in the 1940s. I loved his hardboiled language, sentence structures and his detective's too-tired-to-care-but-cares-passionately tone. His hardboiled language and imagery became the tone, colour and sound of the poem. And the private eye became the voice. As a poet, I felt an affinity to a loner private eye trying to unravel a mystery. *Murders* was first a theatre/performance piece and then a video. It was the perfect metaphor for the loner poet trying to unravel the creative process. The poem was perfect for performance. It had characters, dialogue and plot. And besides I loved trench coats and fedoras and Veronica Lake.

EZ How do you relate to mixed media and returns to earlier works?

EF Mixed media is nothing more than the idea that you shouldn't be tied to one medium. Some poets are content to work only on the page. I'm not. I like to incorporate all possible forms that make the poems live. I also believe that a work is never finished until the creator is dead. Maybe not even then. So I have no problem going back and reworking or recycling my earlier work.



EZ Your book of poems *Surviving Words* was also adapted into a play, *Surviving Wor(l)ds*.

EF Again, it started out as a collection of poems. I wrote it around the 50th anniversary of the Holocaust. I wanted to write a book that celebrated my parents' survival of that horror. After its publication, I was approached by a theatre producer in Montreal who asked me if I had something that they could mount. I was intrigued. I had never written for the theatre. I adapted the poems for a seven-voice chorale. The director liked it but she felt that it was not a play. She worked with me and after many rewrites I converted the chorale into a theatre piece that used the chorale, dance, and dialogue. This is when I started to call my performative pieces the "Theatre of Poetry." It also became the basis of my novel *Never, Again*.

EZ You were eight when you left Hungary and, as you said, had only sporadic contact with the capital city or any other part of the country besides Hajdúnánás and the immediate surroundings. When did you first come back to Hungary, what were your subsequent visits like?

EF I first returned in 1965 or '66 with my mother to visit family. My only previous contact with Budapest was the Western train station. I remember arriving there when we were escaping in '56 and being amazed at the crystal palace of trains. When we arrived in '66, we had to rush through it to catch another train and as I was hurrying I kicked over and broke a "paraszt's" (I don't have an English equivalent for that word) bottle of wine. I turned and said "sorry" in English. The farmer yelled at me, "Not only did you break my bottle but then you shit on me"! ["sorry" sounds like "szar", the Hungarian for "shit" - EZ]. So that's my two remembrances of Budapest.

My subsequent visits to Hungary were filled with a mix of emotions. My early visits were during Communist times. The first thing that struck me during those visits was the very visible presence of soldiers. Coming from Canada, where there was no conscription and where I had hardly seen any soldiers (except during the October crisis but that was later), the feeling I got was not one of security but of being watched. Not of being served and protected but of being controlled. I also sensed this when I had encounters with family and friends. There was genuine welcome but they seemed to have a self-censorship mechanism. I got the feeling that they felt that they were being constantly watched. I was scared.

Post-Communist times were also interesting. It was when I was first invited to read and lecture. I had feelings of sadness and revenge. My family fled in '56 because we were not wanted and now I was being honoured and welcomed. It was also the beginning of new friendships and new beginnings. I liked that but it was also scary to see how intensely Hungary was becoming a hungry capitalist country. I was sad to see that. The last time I went back was in 2016 to observe the 60th anniversary of



the revolution. I didn't like the rhetoric that I heard. It had the feel and smell of the anti-other that my parents and I experienced in '56. The good thing was the sense that there seemed to be opposition (a bit splintered) to the xenophobia.

EZ What is your experience of today's Budapest?

EF Budapest is a beautiful city, a world-class city, a busy-busy city but too much like every other tourist city.

EZ What does home mean to you, how do you relate to the concept of home country?

EF Home is a place where you feel comfortable: physically, emotionally, spiritually and creatively. It is a place where you understand the language. I don't mean just what people are saying but how and why. It's a place where you feel safe getting angry, feel you have the right to complain and a place you want to contribute to. It is also a place you feel comfortable being buried. Having said all this and believing it to be true, I also feel that my nation is my imagination and at the same time I've always felt that my home has been exile.

EZ *Never, Again* is your first novel, set during the Hungarian Uprising of 1956. I find it fascinating the way you describe gestures, situations, the scent of time, as we could call it. The voice of a young boy interweaves with the perspective of the parents, Holocaust survivors. How did the novel come into being?

EF It started with my parents, mainly my father, constantly telling stories of the old country and their experiences before, during and after the war. Of course my own first seven years of my life was also something I drew upon. In a way, I started to write it when I wrote my first book of poems, *Szerbusz*, published in 1974 after my second trip back. *Surviving Words* – and of course *Surviving Wor(l)ds* – also dealt with themes and topics that became part of the novel. So it went through a number of metamorphoses. It seems to be part of my creative pattern. Now if only someone would turn it into a movie or an opera.

EZ It is always fascinating to listen to Hungarians who have long left their home country and preserve various stages and variants of the language, enclaves or layers of a palimpsest. How do you relate to your mother tongue, what does “language-influenced” mean to you?

EF Some of my writer friends have told me that I write Hungarian English. By that they mean that sometimes my sentence structures and rhythms don't seem to be naturally English. I was seven when we left so my fluency in Hungarian ended at that



point. After that came a learned language in which I am now more fluent than in my mother tongue but Hungarian words and phrases still pop into my head before their English equivalent. I am not sure how one has affected the other but I don't see how it could not. I do know that there are certain words in Hungarian that I find more authentic to the situation. For example, I have not yet found an English equivalent for "csikorgás" and "persze." I do know their English equivalent but don't find it as evocative or as "real". The same goes for "anyu" and "apu". My parents will always be "anyu" and "apu," not mother or father.

ÉVA ZSIZSMANN / completed the English and American Literatures and Cultures PhD Programme of the University of Szeged. Her field of research covers Postcolonial Studies, Canadian Literature as well as place and memory in contemporary Canadian fiction, with a special focus on Alice Munro's short stories. In 2012 and 2013 she was a doctoral research fellow at the Wirth Institute, University of Alberta, Edmonton. She currently teaches ESP (English for Special Purposes) and translation at Corvinus University and the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, both in Budapest.

