Maoist Performativities: Milton Acorn and the Canadian Liberation Movement

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> If we Canadians, following the programme advocated by many, but most clearly by the Canadian Liberation Movement, seized the foreign-owned industries in our territory — and if the principal foreign owner, the American Empire, launched military operations against us; What are the odds? Would we win? . . . . A people armed with a modern Marxist-Leninist ideology is invincible in a defensive war. (Acorn, *More Poems* 102)

This militant assertion of Canadian revolutionary valor may be fairly typical of the rhetoric of the New Left in Canada as it worked its way through sectarianism at the close of the 1960s, but it is remarkable because it is the thesis of an essay included in one of the best-selling volumes of poetry in Canadian publishing history. Milton Acorn's 1972 collection *More Poems for People* sold some 10,000 copies in a country where the (statistically) average poetry volume sells less than 500.[1] *More Poems for People* marked the high point of Maoist sentiment in the field of radical culture in Canada, not just because Milton Acorn was one of the most highly regarded Canadian poets, but because his relative celebrity legitimized a small fringe party that called itself the Canadian Liberation Movement (and underwrote its publishing house, New Canada Press). Acorn was the iconic face of the CLM's strategy of popularizing a highly romanticized Maoist ideology of national liberation in the cultural sphere. But while his celebrity projected a façade of stability, it masked (and perhaps exacerbated) bitter internal contradictions in a movement that was described after its collapse in 1976, in language characteristic of the sectarian wars of the extreme left, as "a national chauvinist, social-fascist, absolutely degenerate organization" (Pickersgill 8).

This consideration of Acorn's role in the CLM and his subsequent theatrical reformulation of its principles begins with comparison of the performative and textual strategies deployed by the CLM and its

primary opponent, the Communist Party of Canada (Marxist-Leninist) as they vied to mobilize the "people" and construct a workable version of Maoist Marxism-Leninism that could adequately account for the cultural and historical conditions of Canada. Although three decades after the demise of the CLM the CPC-ML continues as a registered political party with an unashamedly Stalinist party apparatus, it seems clear in retrospect that the CLM's improvised, ideologically confused, and politically naïve activism was more successful in commanding public response, and through its program of recruiting highly visible legitimizing artists, some measure of support.[2] If the CPC-ML can be seen as a *simulation* of a mass party that mimicked the structure, rhetoric, and appearance of the Communist Party of China, the CLM in contrast can be considered an *improvisation* of revolutionary unrest. Both of these terms suggest a fundamental performativity, but they encode crucial differences. My usage is designed to suggest that a simulation follows a patterning script of a regulatory structure, whereas an improvisation enacts changeable, reactive structures.

In both of these cases, performativity refers to the relationship of political parties as signifying practices and the structures of reception they command. This relationship can be understood as spectacles of power played through texts constructed of icons, signifying behavioral codes (such as the dress and appearance codes for cadres demanded by both the CPC-ML and the CLM), and the public role of the leader. All political parties are performative insofar as they function in a field of image production and reception. The performativity of a political party is the activation of a complex set of legitimating relationships, internally with the mechanisms of power and capital that sustain leadership, and externally in the public sphere. The legitimation of a political party in this sense depends on the narrative of a public that is larger than the party that claims to speak for it.

As fringe parties whose boundaries of reception rarely exceeded their cadres, the CLM and the CPC-ML both depended on a cult of leadership to fill the absence of a legitimating public. Considered as practices that rely on the reciprocal gaze of spectacle, leadership cults are in effect political pageants, in which the moment of reception actualizes a sense of community. As a simulation—a party that played all of the signs of a mass party in the absence of structures of popular support—the CPC-ML presented leadership as the public face of the party. In the CLM, leadership was exercised in private, exclusive dramaturgies and reinforced by iconic figures of public support, leadership strategies for which the figure of Milton Acorn was particularly critical. In both parties, leadership was legitimized by the play of spectacle. Leadership must be seen to lead, and to be seen it must lead.

The CLM and the CPC-ML were the most visible of the Maoist tendencies in the Canadian New Left. Both arose out of the student movement of the late '60s; defined themselves against the politically paralyzed Soviet-client Communist Party of Canada

(which was mired in crisis, with an aging membership of Stalin-era loyalists, and no strategy of renewal at a time of increasing student disaffection); and flourished in the wake of the New Left's failure to establish a secure power base in a major political party. Although in style and rhetoric Canadian New Leftists seemed similar to those in the United States, they operated in a critically different historical context. The origins of the New Left in Canada began, as they did in the United States, with the peace campaigns of the early '60s, principally through two organizations: the Canadian Universities Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Student Union for Peace Action. The turning point, again as in the United States, was the Vietnam War, which radicalized a generation of students and rehabilitated as anti-imperialism the residual anti-Americanism that had been one of the formative principles of Anglo-Canadian nationalism since the émigré Loyalist settlements during the American Revolution.[3]

If, as perceived in Canada at least, the American New Left was activated by the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam war, and campus democracy, in Canada the major issues were postcolonial nationalism (in anglophone Canada and Québec) and American control of the Canadian economy and cultural production. In these issues, the New Left overlapped with the left wing of the New Democratic Party, which had its origins in agrarian socialism in the 1930s and, by the 1960s and as a consequence of a structural alliance with organized labor, had become a major presence in parliamentary politics (the labor movement for its part was divided between allegiance to "international" American and dissident "independent" unions). The NDP had governed in several provinces and was a potent opposition force in most others as well as in the federal parliament. In a sense, the Canadian New Left can be defined as the loose aggregate of issue-based movements that were impatient with the NDP's gradualism. This impatience was largely generational, exacerbated by the distrust of "redneck" labor that was as prevalent in Canadian as it was in the American counterculture. The major accomplishment of the New Left was the pressure it applied on the NDP to adopt a left nationalist stance.

In the imaginary of the Canadian left, America had always been perceived ambivalently, at once family (in the figurative and often in the literal senses) and imperial threat. Canadian public opinion tended against the American intervention in Vietnam, and the Canadian government quietly eased the way for American war resisters to cross the border. In the late 1960s, anti-war sentiment eroded the continentalist sentiments of the 1950s and began to merge with cultural nationalism. Two of the primary sources of this nationalist sentiment came from bitterly opposed camps. On the one hand, the independence movement in Quebec, which sparked into terrorism and the subsequent suppression in 1970 of the Front de Libération du Québec, invoked a partner sense of an Anglo-Canadian nation. Most Left organizations in Canada accepted the necessity of an independent Québec and recognized the undeniable fact of Québécois nationalism (as many anglophones won-

dered, if Québec is a nation, what are we?). The countervailing source of cultural nationalism was the federal government itself, which under Pierre Trudeau advanced a program (including generous grants programs to arts groups) to build a Canadian national sentiment founded on bilingualism and multiculturalism. It was during the Liberal Party regimes of the 1960s and '70s that most signifiers of the monarchy disappeared from Canadian life.

From the perspective of the New Left, the NDP had bogged down in the soft center, and the federal government had appropriated the tide of cultural nationalism. In an attempt to move these forces together to the left, a small caucus of left nationalists in the NDP began a major effort to push the party to the radical left with its "Manifesto for an Independent Socialist Canada" in 1969. It was known famously in Canada as the "Waffle Manifesto" because, as one of its authors quipped, if the group would waffle, it "would waffle to the left" (Morton 92). The Waffle Manifesto was the most articulate statement of left nationalism. From its premise that "[t]he development of socialist consciousness, on which can be built a socialist base, must be the first priority of the New Democratic Party," it made the express point that "[t]he major issue of our times is not national unity but national survival, and the fundamental threat is external, not internal. . . . The American empire is the central reality for Canadians. It is an empire characterized by militarism abroad and racism at home" (Broadbent 1). The Waffle challenge was one of the messiest chapters in the NDP's history, because it enlisted considerable support from the younger membership. The battle lasted three years, ending on the convention floor in 1972 when the Waffle caucus surrendered. Following the subsequent purge, core members of the Waffle founded the Movement for an Independent Socialist Canada, which in turn fragmented into factions, the most notable being the Independent Socialists, one of the galaxy of Trotskyite organizations that continued the thrust of the student movement.

The defeat of the Waffle marked the failure of the New Left to capture a main party in the political arena, but at the same time it marked a moment of change that in the long run revitalized the party and opened it to the emerging issues of the social justice movement. From that point on, the left wing of the NDP would be the demarcation line of the "extreme" left. At the same time, the presence of a major left-wing party and the relative openness of the Canadian multi-party political system gave the extreme left more legitimacy, if not support, than in the United States.

Several years later, Tina Craig, writing in *Old Mole* (the newspaper of the Trotskyite Revolutionary Marxist Group), made the insightful, if disputable, comment that

> 1969 marked the real termination of the New Left. Socially the period was characterized by the relative apathy of the domestic working class; the escalation and extensification of the Indo-Chinese war; and the development of a youth and student radicalisation. The three components of ideological determination were

> (for these reasons) "culturalism," youth-vanguardism, Third Worldism. The form of Marxism that most "fitted" these conditions was Maoism, which absolutely permeated the New Left.

She was, however, less insightful in her concluding comment that "[a]fter 1969, the end of the Cultural Revolution and the right turn of the Chinese bureaucracy made Maoism less ideologically attractive."

The apparent failure of the New Left and the Waffle to consolidate in the NDP in fact brought Maoist alternatives out of relative obscurity to greater prominence. Two of these fragments become important to this account: in Toronto, a small proto-Maoist party, Progressive Worker (allied with the Progressive Labor Party in the U.S.), founded Canadians for the National Liberation Front to mobilize anti-war action, and can be seen as a precursor to the CLM; and, in Vancouver, Hardial Bains founded the Internationalists in 1963 (or as he later wrote, the Internationalists "rose in the thick of the revolutionary upsurge of the youth and students" (CPC-ML, *Documents* 23), and transformed it into the CPC-ML in 1968. In China, the Cultural Revolution was already mired in its bloody endgame, but it was just beginning its life as a cultural export (that China was turning the army against the Red Guards didn't much matter in Canada, because, as Hardial Bains would discover, even if China betrayed the revolution, there was always Albania).

Not far from the seedy inner-city tavern hotel that was Milton Acorn's Toronto home, in the heart of a Chinatown divided by political loyalties (between Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the PRC), the Great Wall bookstore supplied eager Canadian youth with the artifacts of revolution: Mao pins, Little Red Books, scripts, posters and recordings of the Revolutionary Model Peking Opera troupes. For most Canadian would-be Maoists, these images were the reality of revolutionary China (one of my treasured souvenirs of those days is a small envelope of vibrantly colored postcards showing scenes of ballet dancers *en pointe* with rifles in *The Red Detachment of Women*). The increasing appeal of Maoism and importation of its texts and artifacts in the early 1970s had been boosted by Canadian diplomatic recognition of China in 1970. One of the immediate consequences of diplomatic ties was the sudden recuperation of an authentic Canadian Maoist hero: when Canadian officials hosted Chinese diplomats they were mystified by requests to visit the birthplace of Norman Bethune, a name that few Canadians recognized. Mao's essay on heroic internationalism, "In Praise of Dr. Norman Bethune," began to circulate widely, and the Communist doctor from rural Ontario who had invented mobile blood transfusion units in Spain and died while volunteering with the Chinese 8th Route Army became an overnight national celebrity and the subject of popular stage, film, and TV biographies.

In the absence of informed accounts of the actuality of the Cultural Revolution, Maoism was reduced to the iconography of the Long March, Bethune, Red Guards, barefoot doctors, and

cheerful peasants. Sympathetic reportage such as Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China* and William Hinton's *Fanshen* popularized Maoism as communism that worked (*Fanshen* was adapted into a hit stage play in Toronto in 1972, three years before David Hare wrote his more famous version), and Maoist ideology was made known primarily through *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, which was a North American bestseller in its mass-market edition from Bantam. The Chinese Embassy in Ottawa happily provided free copies of *Chinese Literature*, with its reiterative articles on Maoist cultural theory and extracts from revolutionary operas, to anyone who didn't mind having the Royal Canadian Mounted Police open their mail.

This composite image of the Chinese revolution, like the Cuban, offered three great solaces for radical youth: it was perceived as modern and liberatory and opposed to the bureaucratized imperialism of the Soviet Union; Mao's call for cultural revolution seemed to validate youthful dissent; and most importantly for Canadian left nationalists, the theory of national liberation situated the analysis of Canada as a colony of an American empire in an international anti-imperialist context. Canada's subaltern status in North America was, for the first time, perceived as a point of pride; as the CLM would shout (in Milton Acorn's words), "Canada is the principal colony of the American Empire" (Acorn, *More Poems* 102). Canadian Maoists could imagine themselves on the front lines of the international struggle against imperialism.

On this, the programs of the CLM and the CPC-ML agreed, but they diverged in their analysis of nationalism, and it is in this divergence that their opposing strategies of leadership and mobilization—their fundamental performativity—differed. The CPC-ML offers an example of the most familiar structure of a revolutionary party, to the point where it may be in a sense considered a caricature of a Stalinist party apparatus. Its organization adhered to the Stalinist template, but in its rhetoric, public campaigns, and sloganeering, the CPC-ML consciously mimicked its Chinese sponsor, to the point of what appeared from the outside as fetishism (even its publications adhered strictly to the format and appearance of the ubiquitous pamphlets from China, with their red covers, yellow hammer and sickle, grainy photographs, lengthy slogans, and cheap paper). This mimicry was essentially a performance of heroic revolutionary struggle devised to sustain the appearance of mass support, and was activated by a cult of the leader clearly modeled on the international cult of Chairman Mao.

As national leader of the party (and founder of similar parties in Britain, India, and Trinidad), Hardial Bains emulated the rhetoric and posturing of the Chinese and, after 1978, the Albanian parties. His party congresses featured prolonged exhortations, mass recitations of slogans, and the familiar icons of Marxist-Leninist genealogy copied from Chinese banners, with their array of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. These simulacra served a purpose by defending a rigidly "internationalist" party template rather then allowing a "Canadian" style of organization and rhetoric which

would allow nationalist tendencies to obscure the internationalist class basis of the party. Whereas the CLM presented itself as an indigenous movement produced by the moment of crisis, Bains repeatedly announced that the CPC-ML was the only legitimate heir of the original Communist Party that had been founded in Guelph, Ontario, in 1921: "Only the CPC (M-L) has been organized at the call of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and grounded in the history and tradition of the communist and workers' movement of this country" (Bains, *Six Years* 10). Positioning his party as the vanguard of struggle and the custodian of revolutionary purity, he enforced a fierce Leninist conception of the party as "the general staff" of the revolution. At the "Fifth Consultative Conference" of the party in 1978, he made the stern point that

> [o]nce the Party is founded, then the Marxist-Leninist party cannot be consolidated without the Party actively, in a vigorous manner, with courage, without fear and vacillation, leading the class struggle against the reactionary bourgeoisie. […] The merit of our work lies in the fact that first we saw the necessity of disseminating the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tsetung, and Comrade Enver Hoxha on a large scale as a necessary stage of preparing the subjective conditions. We carried out these activities under the slogan: Leadership of the proletariat is absolutely necessary for revolution, build the instruments of working class propaganda, disseminate Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought on a large scale (CPC-ML, Documents).

Echoing Mao's famous remark that a revolution is not a dinner party, he invoked a bolshevik regime of dictatorial control "with courage, without fear and vacillation":

> A genuinely Marxist-Leninist party is not a debating society and it cannot be formed out of debates by speculating on Marxism-Leninism. A genuinely Marxist-Leninist party does not permit any speculation on Marxism-Leninism and does not permit any factions within it. It does not permit "freedom of criticism" and it does not permit any loosening of its iron discipline. It builds its unity of thinking and action in battle against the class enemy and it strengthens itself by opposing revisionism and opportunism of all hues (CPC-ML, Documents 21-22).

With this ideological puritanism, Bains reserved his most ferocious attacks on the "class enemies" on the Left: the revisionists, deviationists and opportunists, by which, of course, he meant the rival Maoist groups, and, above all, the Soviet-client CPC:

> These groups and sects which are taking the revi-

> sionist road pretend that they are "Marxist-Leninists," "genuine" Marxist-Leninists at that. But for them to say that they are "Marxist-Leninists" is merely to strike a posture, a frill, like adorning their hat with plumes, but in essence, they are the same — reformists, terrorists, anarcho-syndicalists — you name it. And their social base is petty bourgeoisie and lumpen proletariat (Bains, *Six Year* 8).

For their part, "the revisionists" countered with the same charges. Following the 1974 federal election in which Bains received a mere 60 votes in his own candidacy for Parliament, William Kashtan, leader of the CPC, wrote that "[t]he Maoists' pseudo-revolutionary phrasemongering serves the interests of reaction and must be thoroughly exposed in the working-class and democratic movements and in the popular movements of the people" (Kashtan 232).

The CPC-ML's moment of heroic crisis came with its decisive break with China in 1978. With the statement that "Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought belongs not just to the proletariat of China but to the international proletariat" (Bains, *Six Years* 8), Bains positioned himself as a custodian of Maoism even as he took his party into the orbit of his new sponsor, Enver Hoxha. Until the collapse of the Albanian Party of Labor, the CPC-ML and its affiliates were slavish in their devotion to Hoxha. Bains celebrated the new affiliation in hyperbolic rhetoric that reads like a parody of Stalinism: "The PLA has Comrade Enver Hoxha at its head, the great Marxist-Leninist. The Marxist-Leninist of the calibre of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao Tsetung. He stands at the helm of the International Marxist-Leninist Communist Movement. All glory to the PLA for such an outstanding Marxist-Leninist, Comrade Enver Hoxha, at its head!" (CPC-ML, *Documents* 78).

As the tide of Maoism receded in the popular sphere, following the suppression of the Cultural Revolution, the CPC-ML's overheated rhetoric appeared increasingly parodic in nature. Although Bains pointed out that Hoxha began the PLA with only 200 members (CPC-ML, *Documents* 77), a number roughly equivalent to the undisclosed membership of the CPC-ML,[4] his party never became more than its inner cadre. The entire party congress could fill one room, so that the vanguard was the mass that it mobilized. Bains' organization strategy was in this sense a simulacrum of a mass party without a mass, but it performed itself with the full panoply of power. As the Chinese and, later, the Albanian parties succumbed to "revisionism," the CPC-ML stubbornly clung to its Stalinist purity to the point where its own performativity operated as the authorizing script of "correct" Marxist-Leninism.

Not surprisingly, the CPC-ML made few inroads in the cultural sphere, although in the tradition of Great Helmsmen, Bains was said to be fond of poetry. After Bains's death, the noted poet and playwright George Elliot Clarke published a poetic "Homage to

Hardial Bains" in which he wrote,

> But you, Bains, you were the bane
> of Capital—that sadomasochism,
>
> and damned the shit that is money,
> and damned that shit called money,
>
> impeaching Nietzsche, and clawed
> off bankers' coldly horrifying masks,
>
> for you hated medieval-vile police,
> and let poems comfort you at night . . .

But this is the only indication of cultural interest within the CPC-ML, which held to an inviolate doctrine of socialist realism. The party's failure to attract artists (at least in English Canada; it had more success in Quebec) went along with its rigid adherence to the textual and iconic signifiers of Stalinism. This was perhaps one of the key reasons why the CPC-ML, despite the noise and acrimony it generated on the Left and in the mainstream media, was never able to overturn the public perception of an extremist fringe sect. The CPC-ML endorsed the theory of national liberation, but distrusted nationalism as "national and social chauvinism" (CPC-ML, *Documents* 86). Its optic was resolutely internationalist, seeing national liberation as a phase of the class struggle. Tactically, this was a position that failed to harness the tide of nationalism that characterized Canadian cultural production in the 1970s.

If the CPC-ML was a mass party without a mass, the Canadian Liberation Movement was a following without a party. Its structures were unstable, its leadership little more than revolutionary roleplay, and its ideology fundamentally incoherent, but its popular appeal was undeniable. The CLM catchphrase "Canada is a Colony" had substantial appeal in the late '60's and early '70s, resonant with romanticized images of heroic Third World guerillas (of whom Che, the most famous internationalist of them all, ironically became one of the icons of the new nationalism), and inextricably connected to a resurgence of populist localism. This was for the most part a sentimental fetish of "the land," and carried a host of signifiers of an unproblematized and unexamined "authentic" Canadianness. In this climate, the CLM prospered by turning nationalist sentiment into material cultural production. From the outside, the CLM appeared remarkably energetic, sponsoring rallies and poetry readings, publishing a newspaper, and publishing a list of titles designed to legitimize its position as an intellectually responsible movement. Its list included a number of titles from China's Foreign Languages Press, which was widely perceived as a form of indirect subsidy and approval — and as a sign that China was not giving exclusive endorsement to the CPC-ML.

The CLM was formed in 1968 out of the rubble of the student anti-war movement by activists who saw a need to transport the

signifiers of national liberation struggle out of the context of Vietnam and resituate them in the specific historical contexts of Canada (Barker, "Origins" 1). A core discussion group, which included two of the leaders of the Waffle (Mel Watkins and Jim Laxer) and a prominent University of Toronto English professor and peace activist soon drifted apart, leaving the proto-organization in the hands of Gary Perly. A former student anti-war activist at the University of Toronto, Perly was a systems analyst for IBM until the later '70s, after the demise of the CLM, when he took over the family's map-making firm. Perly established the group as the CLM, with himself as National Chairman. Though the CLM later imploded over a crisis of leadership cultism, it is a significant condition of the group's performativity that Perly was rarely identified in the movement's literature by name, only as "The National Chairman." His anonymity was the absence that Acorn's celebrity filled.

Perly built his organization much as Bains did his, from the top down, but without the regulating script of the party apparatus that stabilized the CPC-ML. The CLM was comprised of a National Executive, local clubs (mostly in Ontario), the publishing house, and organizing drives in the labor movement. The structure appeared to be one of democratic centralism; in practice, it was non-democratic and extremely centralized. The local clubs were inexperienced, young, and unreliable, consisting mostly of students (the surviving minutes of a branch meeting in Guelph record a stressed discussion about acceptable levels of beer consumption in the group). The National Executive was also the editorial and management board of the publishing house, which was also the certified shop of the syndicalist Canadian Workers Union, founded by the CLM, and whose principal organizer was a member of the National Executive and a major author of the publishing house.

Within this complex of virtual organs, the National Executive also comprised the Marxist-Leninist Caucus of the movement. While the Marxist-Leninist tendency of the movement was an open secret, the CLM's membership criteria were ostensibly non-sectarian, asking only that members be anti-imperialist, pro-socialist, and "not anti-Communist." The presence of the Marxist-Leninist Caucus was a destabilizing condition of the group's history, because it was the site of fierce battles and episodes of abuse strikingly similar to those associated with religious cults. The papers of former members of the movement, collected at McMaster University, contain testimonies of bullying, abuse, and torture that are sickening to read. They are important, however, because they expose the inner performativity of the movement, a performativity comprised of witnessed rituals of submission and privileged revelations of unmasked leadership. One National Executive member, and the author of the movement's anthem, wrote after the group's collapse,

> Congresses were week-long affairs with marathon sessions from 9 A.M. to 10 P.M. with 2 hour breaks for lunch and supper. They were held off in the back woods of Northern Ontario. . . . Another function of Congresses and the "Organizing Schools" which usual-

> ly followed them, was to suppress any opposition to the Perlyite line. The unreal pressure-cooker atmosphere of them facilitated this.
>
> One of the more disgusting examples of this was the 1974 "Organizing School" held at a farmhouse near Carnovan, Ontario. National Chauvinism and social-fascism were the main themes. The Chairman of the Victoria (B.C.) Club, who was originally from the US but who had taken out Canadian citizenship, was the main target. . . . Gary Perly decided to make an example of her as an "arrogant Yankee." She was denounced as a "CIA agent," a "saboteur," a "scab," etc. At one point, the members of the "Organizing School" pounded the table shouting "Yankee go home." She was beaten and her hair was cut short to humiliate her. . . .
>
> [I] and one other comrade who didn't like what was happening were denounced as "cowards" and "Yankee-suckers." I was goaded by Perly into starting a fistfight with the Victoria club chairman "to prove that I wanted to fight imperialism," while she tried to put a paper hat with the word "Yankee-lover" on my head (at Perly's suggestion). . . . a good many members, on other occasions, suffered worse mistreatment, particularly dissident caucus members, one of whom was forced to live in a closet for over a month, allow hot-tea to be poured on her and turn over a sizable portion of her income to Gary Perly to "prove her dedication" to the cause! (Floznik)

Horrifying as these emulations of Red Guardism seem, the papers include worse, in the form of abject "self-criticisms" written in a template that seems to be taken from a cursory reading of Mao's *On Contradiction*. There is a visible strain of masochism in these formulaic reports, in which members denounce themselves and identify their primary and secondary contradictions. In one case, the principle theorist of the movement wrote after a meeting with a right-wing worker at a shop he was trying to organize, "My collaboration was a base betrayal of all my comrades in the Movement, as well as the people in general, but especially of the members of this caucus. I should therefore be physically punished by the members of this caucus, to make sure that I understand the seriousness of my crime."[5]

Even more abject is a 40-page document, written in various hands, including shorthand (which suggests it was dictated, which again suggests a public ritual of humiliation) and then compressed into an edited typescript by the woman who had been abused at the "Organizing School," in which she states,

> I don't like being a rotten Yankee agent. I don't want to be continue in my evil deeds, manipulating, lying, covering up, creating false images and impressions, splitting and wrecking, serving myself, being sectarian,

> opportunistic, arrogant. I want to fight for Canadian liberation, to be a CLM member, to be an anti-imperialist, to become a Canadian, to use my abilities and skills for the Movement, to care about people, for people to care about me not because of false images but because I want to change, for my comrades to help me change.

In the same file, there is her promissory note for $4800 written to a member of the National Executive "for value received." A conclusion of financial coercion is not unfounded. In the self-criticism of another member of the National Executive is the statement that,

> [a]fter my suspension, I began to realize that my refusal to write a self-criticism—my refusal to criticize myself before the members of the Movement—was also a continuation of my splitting and wrecking activities. . . . Right now, my finances are under the control of the National Office. This was appropriate to dealing with the enemy—to confiscate (in a sense) property. I myself proposed that I receive $200 per month from my salary for my living expenses . . . .

All of this suggests that the CLM was indeed a "a national chauvinist, social-fascist, absolutely degenerate organization." Certainly, the signs of cultism are ugly and disturbing and they suggest the unwritten reasons for the revolt of the Toronto branch and the National Executive against Perly in 1975-6, which expelled him for "gross sectarianism." Unlike Bains, who consolidated his leadership cult with the same self-discipline he demanded of the membership, and whose lengthy writings demonstrate a genuine erudition in the literature of Marxist-Leninism, Perly appears to have ruled by force of personality alone. It may be that the CLM's courses on Marxist-Leninist theory (complete with written exams) intensified contradictions within the group. Milton Acorn, the movement's only real veteran of the left, hinted at this in his valedictory remarks to the membership:

> I have a suggestion to offer to those comrades who want to declare the movement Marxist-Leninist. Don't contribute to splitting in the Marxist-Leninist Movement! Join the CPC (ML) or the Marxist-Leninist League. Struggle there to reform their sectarianism. The rest of us will wish you well. . . .
>
> Now back to the causes of sectarianism. It wasn't because Gary Perly was a bad man. It wasn't because we over-emphasized the role of leadership. It was Perly himself who over-emphasized his own role and gathered a claque around him. Again, what was the cause of this? Internal contradictions are primary, there is no escaping our personal responsibility for what has happened to our movement. But internal contradictions are often set off by contradictions in the external world.

(Anon. 4)6

The CLM struggled against "Perlyism" but could not survive Perly; when he was expelled, the movement collapsed. He was the central actor in what appears to be a fundamentally unplanned (as opposed to programmatic) improvisation, and although he depersonalized his centrality as the unnamed "National Chairman," the apparent stability of the movement was in fact centrifugal and it spun out of existence when he left. We can only guess at the damage and at the conflict within the group that brought it to crisis, but on the basis of the evidence of the self-criticisms, the psychological pressures within the group must have been extreme.

From the outside, however, all of this was invisible. NC Press put the CLM logo in all of its books, ensuring that it would reach thousands of readers in libraries across the country. In 1974, it made a bid for discursive legitimacy with the publication of Barry Lord's *The History of Painting in Canada*. Despite the widespread condemnation of the book, it is important in this account because, although it is the most developed expression of the CLM's theoretical principles, its critical failure—measured against Acorn's no less tendentious success—reveals the extent to which performativity rather than ideology legitimized the movement. The CLM's intellectual and a member of the National Executive, Lord was a prominent art historian and former editor of *artscanada* magazine who had held a number of senior curatorial and administrative posts, including the directorship of the Vancouver Art Gallery and a stint as Education Director at the National Gallery of Canada. While many agreed with his thesis that Canadian art had been marginalized by the hegemony of the "imperial" art world, his over-the-top rhetoric ruined the effect. Writing in *Labor Challenge*, Ian Angus (who went on to become a respected communications theorist and academic) summarized the book succinctly when he wrote, "It is terrible because his entire approach is rooted in the mixture of crude Canadian nationalism and Maoism-Stalinism that passes for political thought in the CLM."

The History of Painting in Canada reads like a party pamphlet, a reading confirmed by the inclusion of the CLM anthem as a preface and a full-page recruitment ad for the CLM at the end. Lord's expertise is impressive, but his critical theory reiterates the CLM's fundamental incoherence on the relationship of colonialism and class. Whereas the CPC-ML was insistent that the national liberation struggle was an historical stage of class war, the CLM sought to identify class structures by their national allegiance, proposing as the principal enemy the "comprador class" that served American economic interests in Canada. As one former member of the National Executive wrote in 1976, "Class struggle, apart from its particular manifestation in anti-imperialist struggle, hardly existed in CLM's view of Canada" (Faier).

An unexamined corollary to the nationalist thesis was the question of the suppressed Canadian cultural tradition and its relationship to multiculturalism, at a time when Canadian society was fast becoming one of the most culturally diverse national communities

in the world. The CLM's position on nationalities was derived from classical Stalinism, and it forms the first paragraph of Lord's book. He begins by defining a nation according to a set of criteria that include historical stability, a common language, "a common economic base," "a common culture" and self-awareness of nationhood. He makes the clear point that "If a group has some of these things in common but not all (like the Italian-speaking community in Canada, for instance), they form a *national minority*" (22). Following this principle, Lord's examination of Canadian art excludes any reference to cultural minorities, except for an uneasy consideration of pre-contact aboriginality. Whereas the CPC-ML had distinct success in recruiting among immigrant and minority cultures, the CLM sidestepped the issue. Its insistence on a historical tradition of a "founding culture" Canadian nationhood seems xenophobic, if not racist, thirty years later.

In the CLM's writings, the working class virtually disappears, replaced by an anti-imperialist mass struggling against the "comprador" agents of US capital. Lord transferred this structure intact into the field of cultural production by substituting artistic form for capital and championing social realism against the "decadence" of his particular *bete-noir*, abstract expressionism. Glossing a painting by Jack Chambers of a landscape of a truck on a freeway, he combines formal analysis with a formulaic ideological assessment:

> 401 Towards London is national, enhancing the dignity of Canada's places and people as the subject for major painting. It is scientific, realistically portraying the very guts of the economy of southwest Ontario. And it is democratic, extolling a common scene from the daily life of work and travel of the masses of the people. As our national liberation struggle was growing, our new-democratic artwas also moving a step forward (Lord 235).

Lord was a serious and reputable critic, but his book was received as an aberration. In contrast, Milton Acorn, who held the same convictions, was received as an authoritative voice whose political principles enriched his poetry. The 10,000 copies of *More Poems for People* may have done more to popularize the CLM than all of the rest of the movement's efforts together.

And so we return to Milton Acorn who, in the mid-'70s, was a familiar sight on Spadina Avenue, Toronto's equivalent to New York's Canal Street. Acorn was one of the most famous of Canadian poets, but most people who passed him on the street would likely have dismissed him as a derelict from the nearby Salvation Army shelter. Then in his fifties, he lived in a shabby room above one of Toronto's seediest taverns. A communist since his youth, a WWII army vet, and a laborer from the small Maritime province of Prince Edward Island, Acorn was Canada's most celebrated working-class writer. His poetry was angry, passionate, intensely lyrical, and popular. In 1969 he was short listed for the Governor General's

Award, Canada's highest literary prize, for his collection *I've Tasted My Blood*. When he was passed over, an angry group of fellow poets who believed that Acorn had been shafted by an American-born member of the judging panel invented "The Canadian Poet's Award" for him and named him "The People's Poet."

A short time later, according to various apocryphal accounts, Acorn was walking by the CLM office, popped in for a quick look, and joined on the spot. His membership in the CLM was a stroke of luck for Perly, but his support was a mixed blessing. To have the People's Poet as a spokesman and as a best-selling author for NC Press reinforced the CLM's bid for cultural legitimacy, and his long history on the Left (he had joined and quit several parties, including the CPC and the Progressive Workers Movement) brought political experience and a touchstone to historical tradition. But Acorn was also a complex and demanding personality—he had, after all, quit every party he had joined—and he required care and tact. Perly seems to have been understandably ambivalent about the presence of an older man who, if he had the cultural capital to legitimize the movement, could by the same token destroy it. A CLM newsletter in 1972 registers this ambivalence:

> *Milton Acorn in Thunder Bay*
> In addition to getting considerable creative work done, he has found time to be a valuable temporary addition to our Club here, helping with New Canada sales and other mass work, taking principled unliberal positions in criticism/self criticism sessions, visiting with contacts and taking an active part in meetings and classes. We have found that we have much to learn from Milton's past political experience, and that, contrawise, Milton has much to unlearn. . .
> Milton is not yet convinced that his CLM membership should be publicly known across Canada. Til he, in consultation with other members, makes a definite decision, this information should be kept within the organizatio. (Newsletter, 1.2).

Acorn allowed himself to be outed in *More Poems for People* in that same year. He was an active member and participated in the Marxism-Leninism course in 1975. Acorn's communism was reinforced by a knowledge of dialectics and theory but it was built on long experience in struggle, and he was by nature an anti-authoritarian maverick. At the same time, he believed in the possibilities of the CLM and appears to have tried to mediate a solution to its final crisis. As he told the membership at the end, "Our basic line is correct. The conditions of membership are correct. What we need now is a constitution, and a preamble to that constitution, stating our aims. In time we must write and publish a Canadian Manifesto" (Anon. 4).

The CLM could not heed this advice nor could its fundamentally improvisational character be concretized in a manifesto. As far

as the CLM was concerned, Milton Acorn *was* their manifesto. After the movement disintegrated, Acorn helped revive NC Press with the nationalist critic and poet Robin Mathews as Steel Rail Publishing. He then proceeded to write his manifesto in the form of a play, "a real gunpowder play … Dry and fresh in the pan" (Acorn, "Road").

Terry Barker calls *The Road to Charlottetown* "the clearest expression of . . . Canadian nationalist Marxism" (*After Acorn* 18). Acorn wrote the play in collaboration with Cedric Smith, a folk singer and actor who had been on the fringes of the CLM, and was best known as founder of the group Perth County Conspiracy (Does Not Exist), for whom he had set some of Acorn's poetry to music. Acorn was an iconic figure for Perth County, as he was for the CLM. His poetry spoke fire, his life embodied struggle, and his demeanor was a self-performance of rough working-class masculinity.

This was an image that he himself wrote into *The Road to Charlottetown*. The title of the play encoded a double meaning, referring literally to the roads blocked by tenant farmers who rebelled against British absentee landlords in Prince Edward Island in the early 19th century and gesturing metaphorically to the Charlottetown Conference of 1864, which hammered out the details for the confederation of Canada three years later. Acorn's thesis was that Confederation was a political betrayal of the working classes, handing the country to agents of imperialism who were no different than the land agents who oppressed the tenant farmers of his island home. Confederation was simply a modernization of imperialism designed to improve the capitalist system, as described by a politician in the play:

> We mustn't limit the extent of the capitalist system to fit your own small conceptions. Let it expand fully . . . Let the Islanders build mills and hire each other and fire each other and you'll see it's the grandest system of exploitation ever devised by man . . . In other systems, slaves are unwilling, they sabotage everything they do, only capitalism makes people into willing slaves (68).

The Road to Charlottetown developed over two years in several different versions. Originally, Acorn wrote it as a cabaret performance of episodic scenes, poems, and songs. It was performed with four actors and began its first tour by playing in prisons in Ontario. It then played briefly in Toronto, where it was reviewed enthusiastically by *The Globe and Mail*, and in the summer of 1977, after revision, opened in Charlottetown (this is the version that was finally published twenty years later). In 1978, a rewritten version with six actors opened at Theatre Passe Muraille, advertising itself as "a toe-tappin' Maritime musical about Landlords and Tenants," to mixed reviews. *The Globe and Mail* wrote that "[t]his is a hell of a show. The story of the island in the 1840s crackles with a zest and fidelity as palpable as red mud on your boots. The best of the

humor packs a lovely ironic wallop. And the music ranges from rambunctious rallying cries to touching, simple songs of a very special beauty" (GM 19 Nov 78). This view was endorsed by the Communist Party's *Canadian Tribune*, whose theatre critic Oscar Ryan (writing as Martin Stone) was a veteran of the workers theatre movement of the 1930s. He wrote that it was "rollicking fun," a "boisterous outpouring of folksongs, sketches, satire, and farce abetted by singing actors and acting instrumentalists—all bristling with irreverent protest and popular defiance" (20 Nov. 1978). In marked contrast, the tabloid *Toronto Sun* dismissed it as a "sophomoric revue" filled with "mawkish folksongs and bucolic clog dances . . . based upon limping meters and dissonant rhymes from doggerel written by a self-proclaimed P.E.I. poet named Milton Acorn" (13 Nov. 1978). That a critic in the *Sun* would not recognize Acorn's name would surprise no one; what is of interest here is the likelihood that familiarity with Acorn's poetry may have conditioned the more literate reviewers to view the show as culturally "authentic" although it was performed by a cast of Toronto actors.

The central character of the play is named either Milton Acorn or Old John Acorn, depending on the version (Old John in the published text):

> I, Old John Acorn, not at first aware that was my name
> And what I knew was life,
> Came from an island to which I've often returned
> Looking for peace and usually found strife,
> 'Til I came to see it was no pocket in a saint's pants
> While outside trouble reigned . . . and after all
> My favourite mode of weather's been a hurricane
> (Acorn and Smith 13).

However named, he is clearly the author retrofitted into his history as a falstaffian rebel determined to fight against oppression with his fists and his words. A typescript in the Passe Muraille archives contains a passage that expresses this explicitly:

> *Mary*: So ye thin ye're saying to write a play, Milton?
> Let's see where ye'll start it.
>
> *Milton*: No I didn't say I was going to write a play.
> They play's in my head. It'll come out in time
> but not to raise idle fancies, hopes that are too
> far ahead, like Canada when we began.
> It'll come out when people can dig into it
> then dig out of it, dig something
> Out of it.
> It'll be a real gunpowder play,
> Not to get mouldy. Dry and fresh in the pan
> I'll explode with maximum force.
> Maybe one of my great-grumpedty-granph
> Grandchildren will write it.

Mary: There's always been a Milton Acorn,
Long as our traditions go
And no doubt there'll by [sic] many more
Maybe another Milton Acorn'll write it
Let's see where you'll start it (Acorn, "Road"

After five years with the CLM, Acorn's decision to turn to the stage to synthesize his political ideas followed logically from the performativity of his iconic role in the movement. As a best-selling poet, he could have easily, perhaps more easily, published the play as a cycle of poems; it would have been received in a wider field of critical reception and it might even have made money. The choice to do a play that few people would actually see seems curious, until considered as an extension of his public role in the CLM. Even though it never mentioned the CLM, *The Road to Charlottetown* was the theatrical rehabilitation of the movement and a recuperation of its principles. In these terms it is not particularly important that relatively few people actually saw it (the box office records from Theatre Passe Muraille indicate a total audience of 1,935 over five weeks). By transforming the argument of the CLM into theatre, Acorn transformed political improvisation into activism in and of the public sphere, and he freed himself from the ambivalence of his iconic position in the movement. In *The Road to Charlottetown*, Acorn historicized himself as author and subject, announcing, "All days are those days, even the days we're living in; because history doesn't stop, not for an instant it's carving us, and we're carving it, right now" (Acorn, "Road" D3-4). The show was in effect an avatar of Acorn, which distributed his public face among a community of actors. The public figure of Milton Acorn became quite literally a collective.

Carved by history and carving a history, Acorn appears to have realized that the struggle for socialism in Canada required an approach freed from the political culture that continued to fragment the Left. It was this culture that he sought to mythologize in *The Road to Charlottetown*, and this may offer another explanation for his decision to express himself through theatre on a platform where history speaks through the plural bodies of actors rather than the texts of political doctrine. Doctrinal texts lead to variant readings and sectarianism, but texts played through the naturalizing bodies of actors may manifest consensus.[7] In his final address to the CLM, Acorn appealed for an end to sectarianism on the Left with the warning that "time lost may mean that the Canadian phase of the World Peoples struggle for Liberation and Socialism may be fatally crippled and a permanent scar left on history, having after-effects lasting for thousands of years" (Anon. 1). It may be that Acorn saw the theatre as the road through sectarianism.

The conjunction of Hardial Bain's party congresses and the CLM's private rituals of power together demonstrate the failure of the Maoist Left in Canada. As a simulation of a mass party, the CPC-ML in the end became little more than a reiterative performance that continued to rehearse its script of revolutionary purity; as

an improvisation of a political movement, the CLM could not survive its own Red Guardism. In *The Road to Charlottetown*, Acorn attempted to resolve this contradiction by historicizing ideology, liberating politics from the authorizing scripts of the failed revolutionary past, and by embodying a Marxist-Leninism rescued from iconic cults of leadership. His transformation of his own celebrity into a collective theatrical community was his most articulate critique of the Canadian Liberation Movement.

Notes

[1]Frank Davey notes that Canada Council figures show in 1985 (the first year for which figures are available), the average press run of a volume of Canadian poetry was 935 copies, with average first-year sales of 365 copies (2).

[2]Canadian political parties are registered if they meet the stipulations of Elections Canada, the federal regulatory body. Registration allows candidates to stand for Parliament under the name and logo of the party, and be identified as such on the ballot. They are also entitled to issue tax receipts for donations, and are allowed to purchase prime broadcasting time for campaigning. In order to qualify, a party must field a minimum of 80 candidates (in a total of 265 ridings, or electoral districts). Consequently, parties that have no hope of winning any seats will field candidates in order to gain access to party privileges. In the 2000 federal election, the CPC-ML, registered as the Marxist-Leninist Party, received a national total of 0.1% (12,000 out of 13,000,000) of votes cast, trailing the Marijuana Party (0.5%), and neck-to-neck with the Natural Law Party, whose platform of Transcendental Meditation featured televised displays of "yogic flying."

[3]Although Canada, as a member of the International Control Commission, resisted American overtures to participate in the war, a significant number of Canadians joined the U.S. forces. Estimates of the number of Canadians serving in Vietnam range from 3,500 (Shand) to 20,000 (Levant). But of far greater impact was the flood of American war resisters to Canada. Although this figure is hard to pin down, *The Canadian Encyclopedia* suggests 20,000 draft evaders and 12,000 deserters (Levant). This constituted one of the most influential waves of immigration in Canadian history: as a whole, the war resisters were highly educated, politically sophisticated and culturally active. Their arrival had a particular impact on the cultural sphere.

[4]Although the membership is undisclosed, the scale of the CPC-ML's operations today can be discerned from its audited statements submitted to Elections Canada following the 2000 federal General Election. The CPC-ML spent a total of $2088.43 to field 84 candidates, and held total assets of $2098.52. In contrast, the governing Liberal Party incurred expenses of $12,485,417.00 to field candidates in all of Canada's 301 federal ridings (www.elections.ca/fin/rep/; www.elections.ca/pol/exp/). On the other hand, the statistics also suggest that the CPC-ML was far more

effective than the Liberals, spending 17 cents for each of its 12068 votes, as opposed to the Liberal's $2.32 for each of its 5,252,031 votes.

[5]The self-criticism documents are all signed and dated, and are held in the Canadian Liberation Movement fonds at the McMaster University Library. However, I have chosen not to identify the authors.

[6]Acorn's valediction is an unattributed document listed in the CLM fonds as by an unknown author. However, internal references to his writings and the unmistakable language clearly belong to Acorn.

[7]The notion that texts played through the naturalizing bodies of actors manifest consensus is a recurring observation in discussions of collective creation, particularly in analyses of the collective documentary movement that had a formative impact on the development of Canadian theatre in the 1970s. See Nunn; also see my own discussion of *The Farm Show* in *Collective Encounters: Documentary Theatre in English Canada*.

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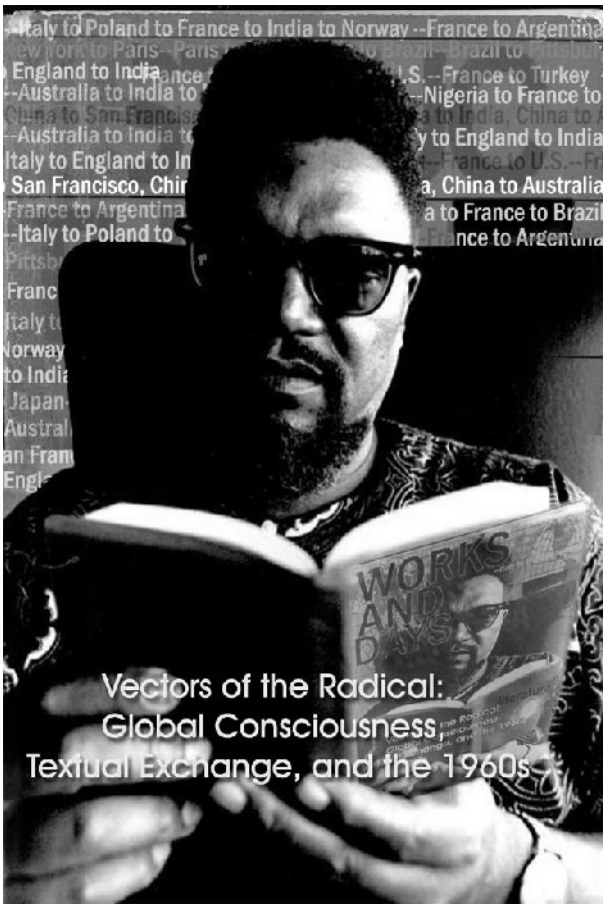
Vectors of the Radical:
Global Consciousness,
Textual Exchange, and the 1960s

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ABSTRACT:

1960s Argentina was a period of intense cultural and political turmoil. The authoritarian Peronista regime gave birth to a period of enormous creative energy and international cultural exchange that in turn gave birth in 1966 to the first in a series of neo-fascist tyrannies. The essay examines drama, the cultural politics of the Instituto Di Tella, and the editorial policies of the review *Mundo nuevo* throughout this period to illustrate the shifting nature of cultural radicalism in Buenos Aires as well as the insurmountable limitations nested in its ideologies, especially relating to sex and gender.