

MARVIN ORBACH, MERLE AMODEO: CANADIAN POETS, UNIVERSAL POETS

M.Sc. Miguel Ángel Olivé Iglesias. Associate Professor. University of Holguín, Cuba

Abstract

This paper aims at revealing universality in Marvin Orbach, an outstanding Canadian book collector and poet, and Merle Amodeo, an exquisite Canadian poet and writer. Orbach's poems were taken from *Redwing*, book published by CCLA Hidden Brook Press, Canada in 2018; and Amodeo's poems from her book *After Love*, Library of Congress, USA, 2014. Thus, the paper unveils for the general reader the transcendental scope of these two figures of Canadian culture. In view of the fact that they are able to recreate and memorialize their feelings and contexts where they live, and show their capacities to discern beyond the grid of nature, society and human experience, directly and masterfully exposing them, it can be safely stated that both Orbach and Amodeo reach that point where what is singular in them acquires universality, and in return what is universal crystallizes in their singularity.

Key Words: universality, Orbach, *Redwing*, Amodeo, *After Love*

Introduction

My connection with universal poetry began during my college years. I enjoyed great English and American classics so much that I even memorized many of their poems. It proved very useful later in my professional career, as I would read excerpts from poems to my students in class. Canada, and Canadian poets, had less presence on the curricular map at the time. Fortunately, I had the chance to become acquainted with Canadian poetry through the Canada Cuba Literary Alliance (CCLA), founded by Richard and Kimberley Grove back in 2004.

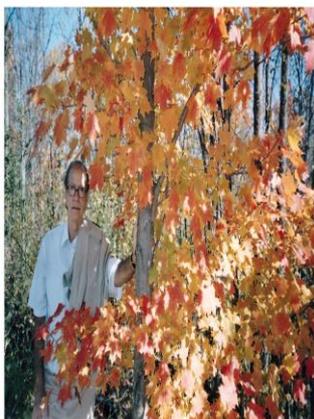
That is how outstanding classic and contemporary Canadian poets started to fill my bookshelf. Dorothy Livesay, Irving Layton, George Johnston, Anne Marriott, P.K. Page, Miriam Waddington, Louis Dudek, Margaret Avison, Raymond Souster, Simcha (Sam) Simchovitch, Elizabeth Brewster, Eli Mandel, James Reaney, John B. Lee, Al Purdy, Richard and Kim Grove, Leonard Cohen, Merle Amodeo, Milton Acorn, Brian T. Way, Margaret Atwood, Allan Briesmaster, Bruce Kauffman, Katharine Beeman, James Deahl, Pauline Johnson, Patrick Lane, Michael Ondaatje, Marjorie Pickthall, Janet Richards, Dorothy Roberts, R.D. Roy, Trish Shields, Russell Smith, Michael Yates, Graham and Stella Ducker, John Hamley, Raymond Fenech, K.V. Skene, Hugh Hazelton, Lisa Makarchuk, Heide Brown, Norma West Linder, Keith Inman, James Cockcroft, I.V. Iskov, Lala Heine-Koehn, Mar Ann Mulhern, Cornelia Hoogland, Kathryn McDonald, David Fraser, Becky Alexander, Glen Sorestad, Jim Larwill, Linda Rogers, Stella Body, Deborah Panko, Tracy Lynn Repchuk, Jim Christy, Paul R. Carr, Morgan Wade, Patrick Connors, Paulos Ioannou, Theodore Christou, Chris Faiers, Tara Kainer, Stella Preda, Sylvia Adams, Terry Ann Carter, Marvin Orbach, among many others.

There are CCLA non-members on the list, as is the case of Marvin Orbach. Orbach was a book collector of huge renown whose poetic works came to public life only after he died. A CCLA member is Merle Amodeo. This paper aims at revealing universality in both poets. It pays honor to Orbach through the review of some of his poems in *Redwing*, book published by CCLA Hidden

Brook Press, Canada in 2018; and to Amodeo with a review of some of her poems too from her book *After Love*, Library of Congress, USA, 2014.

Development

Marvin Orbach



Marvin Orbach



Redwing, front cover



*(right) Orbach's wife, Gabriella
(left) Orbach's daughter, Ariella
standing in front of his book collection*

Orbach was born in 1940 in Toronto. After obtaining a Masters in Library Science from McGill University in 1966, Orbach channeled his love of learning and of literature into a 39-year career as a reference and selections librarian at Concordia University. Orbach began collecting English-language poetry books at 17 years of age. His unique collection grew to over 5,000 books, chapbooks, manuscripts and correspondence by Canadian poets writing in the English language. The collection, Orbach has explained, was motivated by his love for Canada and his gratitude for the country's acceptance of his immigrant parents. Marvin Orbach died on February 8, 2015, at the age of 74. He was adding volumes to his collection until his final days. Known to be a very modest person, Orbach never told anyone about his own poems, which were found after his passing by his wife Gabriella.

It was with much pleasure and reverence that I accepted the request by Richard Grove, publisher of Hidden Brook Press, to write a foreword to *Redwing*. The book was thoroughly and lovingly compiled by his daughter, Ariella, after his demise. As I stepped into the man and his work, the first thing that impressed me was that Orbach had never told anyone about his poems: it was his wife, Gabriella, who found them after his passing. Ariella herself said once that her "*dad was very humble*". That makes Orbach an even greater librarian, book collector, poet and person. His formidable legacy of books and his passionate poetry honorably contribute to the already vast Canadian cultural mosaic.

Orbach's book has been divided in the four seasons, in the order of Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. As a whole I found the book to be a fine collection of thirty poems whose center is light, sometimes witty critique about social issues, and nature. The poet's spirit transpires in ways that you will take notice of as you finish reading it, full. There is variety in theme, tempo and style in *Redwing*, and what such richness does is to contribute to the wholeness of the book. You can sense it; you can *see* it when you are lit by *True Happiness*, the closing poem, and then you are

carried back by *the very bird* to *Introduction*, the opening one. You will enjoy the back-and-forth flight, I assure you that.

Introduction is Orbach's showcase summary of his fondness for nature, which he describes with the depth of a connoisseur and the passion of a lover. You will be then confronted with the opposite in the next lines: Orbach's disapproval of those who spoil the beauty of the scenes he has just depicted. The imparting of the poet's understanding to the "*fools*" is related to their being unable to see the harmony of natural life and act senselessly. To the poet, however, that reality has been revealed, and he will powerfully present it to those *fools* in his poetry.

In the poem *What is Poetry?* Orbach likens poetry to what he admires in nature. He swiftly moves with an emphatic enumeration of colours and sounds to stir the reader's senses, and finally blends into a tender metaphor of birds and human hearts. The last stanzas are overlapping metaphors of soft and sharp images. As a reader I was taken aback by his last line; yet it is his choice – the liberty he himself proclaims in the poem! – to use phrases that will stick with us long after we finish reading his book. In *Initiation* Orbach moves from idyllic themes to more direct, intimate ones. He sings to the act of living and enjoying life. He is worried about others having a "*sour death*"; and he definitely does not wish to be one of them. He sings to his urges and wishes to be accepted. *Dalia* is simmering fire. I loved its movie-like depictions. The poet skillfully fuses the splendor of the meadow and the environment with the passion of love, sprinkled by poetic wording. Defied by things that weigh heavily on a human being, the poet remains a victor blessed by a "*light of life*". *Victorious* brings us a hymn to life.

My studies on Canadian literature unveiled for me the profound, unavoidable connection of Canadian writers and poets with nature, specifically with its extraordinary, varied, precious landscapes and creatures therein. This is a recurring motif in them, and by extension in Orbach. *Golden Spring Morning on my Naked Limbs* joyfully reminded that to me. Through repetition, this time at the end of each stanza, Orbach lets you know that the character in the poem is receiving all this gratification. This is a poem of optimism and both physical and spiritual satisfaction.

Softly Falls is a sustained metaphor that Orbach masterfully compacts into a haiku-like structure where the woman is a garden, the man is the nourishing rain. I loved it, as I loved *A Rebirth*, another well-embroidered metaphor that speaks of gratefulness. If you want to read a gifted writer compacting words into charming poems and elevating apparently down-to-earth objects to higher ranks, do not miss *A Piece of Sky* either. *My Love* offers metaphors deeply and irrevocably linked to nature, a theme that the poet cannot – does not want to – escape from, and certainly handles with his fully-fledged expertise in the field. Onomatopoeia, direct and indirect (*tingle, jingle, sleigh, bells, sweet, snow, frosty, winter's*), complements the poem.

The poet, like most tourists, takes photographs. *Coyuca Lagoon* is one; but he does not want to freeze it. He manages to hand-guide the reader with metaphors, epithets, personifications and onomatopoeia as precise expressive means aimed at producing desired effects. The onomatopoeic word "*chug*" is the perfect choice to oppose the two realities portrayed for the reader, "*serene stillness*" being on the other side. I appreciate the notion that the newly arrived are the ones absorbed by the place and the people, not the other way around: "*disturbing the serene stillness with our intrusion and yet becoming one with the melody, blending quietly...*". A respect to the origins and the contexts rises from these lines.

If you want to turn 180 degrees from the previous poem then go into *Forced Freedom*. From serene places to a speeding, naked poem that exposes the poet's style to say what he thinks loudly. The poet is lured by the mirrors of the soul then defiled by the spoken word; and acts accordingly. Orbach is touched by an instant's revelation in *Ephemeral*. He becomes one with the "*visitor*" and knows they are both "*sojourners in a world of hours*". The poet understands their

ephemeral passing through life and seeks shelter in optimism and the loveliness of things the "visitor" will not see.

Orbach brilliantly forged one piece that tells me of the cohesion among all the poems in the book: *I Die each Evening*. Even though the poem talks about dying each evening, I am convinced this poem has a before and an afterlife in his previous and his next poems. He loves the light of day, the open spaces and nature, so he might be dying every evening; but will be reborn again tomorrow when *his* sun comes up.

Redwing reveals Orbach as the environmentalist and birder that he is. It shows a mature critic to the excessive and unleashed drifting of man and "civilization" from what is natural and edifying to the soul. Man is sucked in by the whirlpool of modern life and his fear to feel. Orbach fraternizes with the bird and, as a true green, wants to go to where it sings in a "softer air". I wondered long why Orbach entitled his book *Redwing*. When I read the poem and finished the book, I came up with my interpretation: "His conk-a-ree is a proclamation of independence; a song of freedom that begs no favours; a song that floats unchallenged...". Isn't that the poet's "decree" in his poetry? Isn't Orbach daring, martial ("Look how he shows his epaulettes"), unstoppable in his saying? That, along Orbach's preference for those spaces the redwing covers and the bird's proud attitude ("He does not eat my offerings"), might give the readers a clue into the title if they disagree with me.

A poem that brings to us the echoes again of an environmentalist is *To a Butterfly*. Here is a poet in love with nature and the simple, subtle, beautiful things. Orbach contrasts the colorful butterfly with the grim world he describes to her. Once more he finds shelter in the open, in the forests and landscapes he has painted for us so many times. His daughter, Ariella, tells us that her father's poems "speak of the simple beauty of insects, of a tree, and of course, of birds".

A Pine's Tree Lament is the environmentalist's cry in a superbly woven poem. The descriptions pierce the reader's eyes and imagination. You can hear the ancient drums of alliteration in the words "branches", "brushing", "bushy". The idea that the group endures beyond the individual is transferred from the human to the natural world. The pine tree finds consolation in knowing its "brothers still live and endure...to drink and enjoy the ephemeral gifts of life". Despite the lament, there is recognition of life's gifts.

The poet embraces nature and the wild world around him in *Silverfish*. It is a truly heart-felt reflection. *True Happiness* ends the book as a vibrant, philosophical masterwork. Orbach's return to his playing with time: the yesterday-today-tomorrow labyrinth where he clings to "flashes of light". He realizes that life brings both happiness and sadness, and seems to have discovered a stopover where he "relaxes".

You will fly high and low with Orbach's *Redwing*. Like the bird, that takes flight or plummets to lightly touch the ground or the water, so does Orbach with his mighty verb and his sweeping descriptions in this pack of flapping poems carefully chosen by Ariella. The direct, sensitive poet has regaled us a world of movement, colors and sounds that we cannot freeze. His words are there waiting for us to open the book's pages so they can flutter and flee to Orbach's beloved nature where cormorants seem to "hold the answer to the great beyond".

Orbach's daughter has given us an outstanding compilation of her father's poetry. She put into it her love, insight and endless admiration for a man who chose to have a low profile, yet left for us a huge patrimony that shall not go unnoticed. His collecting and writing hobbies are treasures now.

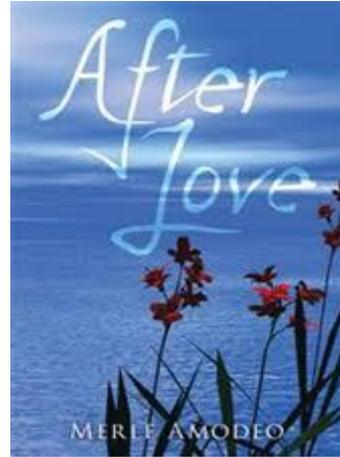
Do not forget to open the book always following his instructions to Ariella when she would sit and read from his collection: "not to open the volumes too wide". Ariella gives us the best closing sentence for this review: "When I look at the whole of his poems, I see in them all the lessons he taught me when I was a child, and that I carry with me and live by until today". There are lessons

in Orbach's poetry and life. Let's study them. That is his universality, his bequest, along with his book collection, which has been recognized as of "outstanding significance and national importance" by the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board.

Merle Amodeo



Merle Amodeo



After Love, front cover

Amodeo was born in Toronto and now lives in the Beaches area of the city. She remembers writing creatively as soon as she could form letters into words. She taught at elementary schools in Toronto and Oakville and at Durham College in Oshawa for more than 30 years. Since her retirement in 2004, she has published two chapbooks of poetry, "Let Me In" and "Because of You," and a novel, "Call Waiting," with Hidden Brook Press. In 2011, ten of her poems were published in Spanish and English in *Taste of the Rainbow*, a Canada Cuba Literary Alliance (CCLA) Bridges Series book by SandCrab Books. Merle is a member of the CCLA, the League of Canadian Poets and the University Women's Club, Toronto.

I first read Merle's poetry in *Taste of the Rainbow*. I was impressed. Merle and I could "e-meet" later thanks to CCLA President, Richard Grove, and we started a welcome poet-admirer relationship. I told her she reminded me of Cuban poetess Carilda Oliver Labra when it came to themes but mostly when it came to expressing feelings – in their own rightful powerfully direct styles – around love and sex and the everydayness of life and loving.

I was so into Merle's writing that I consulted reviews of her poems. To my pleasure, I discovered that my preliminary approaches to her poetry had points of coincidence with the reviewers'. Sensitive, qualified, heartfelt comments was what I read all the time.

Ronna Bloom, for example confesses that Amodeo's poems are "honest, hot, sexy, heartbreaking love poems". She admits "At times I found the poems' truths unsettling: that visceral description of a woman going through those inner acrobatics of desire".

Sarah Mayor describes Merle: "Quick witted, agile, she crafts her words". Also: "These poems are full of love and laughter... she reminds us that she knows about love and adversity".

Gail M. Murray offers these emotional views: "... the reader is invited to discover the many facets of love... Merle's precise language, definitive humour and lush sensuality are a hallmark of her writing... This collection has wide appeal not only to readers of poetry but people who can appreciate universal themes and good writing".

Terry Walker says that in "... a collection of tender and often witty poems of love and love's loss, Merle Amodeo shows us her mastery of the language of everyday experience... her poems tell little stories about abstract but ordinary things made concrete in images that seem cinematic... They

carry us into the human experience of the story". The reviewer goes on to tell us that "... the most impressive fact of Merle's poetry is the way it can take simple insights, the memory of plain pleasures and gentle imagery and have them define the space of the reader's imagination comfortably but with intimations of things that run deep in the human heart".

Under the spotlight of so many remarks and praise of Merle Amodeo's poetry, I could only attempt at describing humbly how I felt in reading her poems: *My Apologies*. I found it sweet in phrases that she used: *You need your sleep, The world counts on you, Longed to hear your voice, Longed to be cheered by your laughter*; funny in the *anatomically-impossible suggestion and the try-it-yourself invitation*; euphemistic (and funny) in *I've studied biology and know it is anatomically impossible to do what you request*.

Standing in is a witty mixture of love without pride and jealousy, well disguised in phrases like "Kiss your body... till you shiver", "Make you forget who you're with the way you forgot me". Passion burns high in the last stanza: the urge of the body, the willingness to stand in and replace her. *No, not exactly* is a dialogue that reveals the woman's aching in her replies. Honest answers confessing how present he really is for her and the fine irony because she "wasn't exactly thinking of him"; the "not exactly" that actually means *exactly* what she feels; but cannot (or should not) and the sudden turning over the question to him, as an elegant, skilled player would do passing the ball to his "opponent's" court. Curiosity? Need to know? Defiance?

All is forgiven. Again the lover with no pride asking for a comeback. True feelings that somehow hurt anyway as they pour out in the enumeration of his mistakes and faults. Then the open confession of a woman who can't forget him, can't eat, can't sleep, can't dream without him. Why not say what one feels after all? *Loving you*. A thoughtful poem. The idea of love that hurts. The notion of love that mutates, unfortunately, or is "called away", or vanishes as we grow. Wonderful, for me extraordinary, similes: "I have seen love grow hard as a frozen brook in winter" and "Happy children grow to adults that stand as lonely pines in the forest". Distinctive opposition of happy vs. lonely, likening children to pines that are given human characteristics by attaching *lonely*. The poet loves; but that loving pains her.

In Absentia is a confession of how much his company means to the poet. Beautiful ways to contrast what his presence means to her: silly stories making sense only to them, stories which become a part of their intimate complicity, their own mark in their lives when they are together; the meaningless character of the days and the events without him; the void felt by the poet, who is now "incomplete", unfulfilled, a "stranger to myself". No sensitive, sensible man can resist that. *After you go* is the lover "haunted" by her lover, the little things that make him linger even when he is gone. Vivid memories lingering in her skin, in her senses, in her writing. The erotically recalcitrant traces that remain when he leaves and that make her tremble in remembering.

Let Morning Never Come is my favorite one. The Juliet allusion is a *tour de force*. Those who have loved do know what Amodeo refers to. What bliss to wake in someone's arms; what fears because someone will have to go! What a comfortable hyperbole to say how much she wants the man to stay: "Hold you forever in our hideaway".

Let me in. Wow! Superb lines: "Caress me gently the way you touch a loved poem with your eyes". Amodeo honors Shakespeare in other poems, here there is also honoring as I remember his "To hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit". Another great line by Amodeo is "Let me be your poetry". It is a poem of wishes, tender, surrendering; firm though. Well-knit "commands": *sit down, caress, slow down, let your heart open, give me your soul, let me be*. These are verbs of a physical-spiritual appeal that will certainly make the fortunate man listen to and follow!

Loving Sagely. Amodeo reminds me in this particular poem – also through all of her poetic work – of the great Cuban poetess Carilda Oliver Labra. Both are eroticism and technique at its highest. “*Let me be your host*” sums it all, “*Lose myself to find myself in you*” tops it all.

Ode to Poetry. Amodeo gives us uncontested arguments in favor of poetry. She brandishes fresh, clincher definitions. She invites – and is really qualified to do so – to plunge headlong (and *heartlong!*) into a poem and discover “*What spring does with the cherry trees*”.

Not a poem. The poet’s expert mind and hand play with words that become – “against her will” – poetry anyway. The second stanza is so significant in its apparent simplicity; it is the heart of a poem which *is not a poem*. This is Merle Amodeo. It is reassuring to know first-hand that there are poets like Merle in every culture. But even if there were not, she would significantly leave an evident literary legacy with her fine poetry. Merle’s singularity in theme and style is what makes her universal.

Conclusions

The paper presented aimed at unveiling for the general reader the transcendental scope of two figures of Canadian culture. In view of the fact that they are able to recreate and memorialize their feelings and contexts where they live, and show their capacities to discern beyond the grid of nature, society and human experience, directly and masterfully exposing them, it can be safely stated that both Orbach and Amodeo reach that point where what is singular in them acquires universality, and in return what is universal crystallizes in their singularity.

Marvin Orbach and Merle Amodeo rise above their time through their lines. Shakespeare was epigrammatic in saying that “*When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st, So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee*”. Their poetry and their achievements give them life.

References

Amodeo Merle. *After Love*. Library of Congress, USA, 2014.

Bloom, Ronna; Sarah Mayor; Gail M. Murray; Terry Walker. Reviews on Merle Amodeo. Downloaded from www.google.com

Orbach, Ariella. Quotations taken from her opening words in *Redwing*. CCLA Hidden Brook Press, Canada, 2018.

Orbach, Marvin. *Redwing*. CCLA Hidden Brook Press, Canada, 2018.

Shakespeare, William. *Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Volume XIII. Sonnet Section. David McKay Publisher (year not available).

Appendix

Poem *Redwing* by Marvin Orbach

Most city people are stupid;
of that I am sure. They would
scare away that redwing that sings
at this moment in my poplar tree.
Look how he shows his epaulettes;
a fresher red I have never seen.
His conk-a-ree is a proclamation
of independence; a song of freedom
that begs no favours; a song
that floats unchallenged in a
decaying city, deaf in both ears.
I love this bird, with a love
that is beyond love. He does not
eat my offerings, and still he
comes, bringing his cooling
marsh aromas. I drink to you
friend, with a heart that is
now lighter. But before you
leave for your nest among the
cattails, tell me that one
day I may come to you, and
together we'll sing in a
softer air.

Poem *Let Morning Never Come* by Merle Amodeo

What bliss to wake beside you,
your arms entwined in mine.
My lips still moist from yours,
my ears attuned to your heartbeat.
Like Juliet, I fear the lark's song
and softly hum to cover its tune.
If I knew a conjuring trick,
I'd seal your lids
to hide the garish sun
that will divide us.
Bolt the doors
to keep intruders out,
Silence the voices
Calling us today.
Hold you forever,
in our hideaway.