

ALDEN NOWLAN

*Interviewed by
John Metcalf*

METCALF: What are your working methods? How much rewriting do you do?

NOWLAN: Well, almost everything that I write goes through two phases. Usually I do the first version of a poem almost as an exercise in free association except that it's tethered to the point that brought it into being. Sometimes I think of these first versions as first drafts and sometimes I think of them as notes toward a poem. Some of them never go beyond this phase. The rest I throw into a drawer and periodically I dig through a bunch of them and pick out those that appeal to me at the moment and then I work at them as objectively and coldly as possible, almost as if they were somebody else's work. Then when I'm preparing the manuscript for a collection of poems I make further changes in almost every poem that goes into the book, not to make them conform to any theoretical principles but according to Robert Graves' dictum that a poet ought to handle his lines and images and words like a housewife separating the good tomatoes from those that are under-ripe or spoiled.

METCALF: What have been the main poetic influences in your career? To what tradition do you feel you belong — the British or the American?

NOWLAN: I think perhaps I belong to the first generation of Canadian poets to be influenced most by other Canadian poets or maybe I should have said: to be influenced most directly by other Canadian poets. I believe Margaret Atwood says that her most important influences were Canadian. None of the older Canadian poets could have said that. Every previous generation turned to England or the United States for models. And as for the younger Canadian poets I doubt if many of them could name even one of their English or American contemporaries. The more I think about it, John, the more I feel that this question is ten years out of date.

METCALF: Have there been any particular poets who have influenced you?

NOWLAN: Oh, there have been dozens and dozens of poets that have influenced me either a little or a great deal at various periods. I've been writing poems and stories ever since I was eleven years old. It would be easy for me to declare that I didn't begin to write seriously until I was twenty-five and then mention some of the poets I happened to be reading when I was that age as being major influences — but that would be essentially false. One of the important influences on me when I got to be reasonably mature, say seventeen or eighteen years old, was D. H. Lawrence. And it's curious. I think someone reading my work would be very unlikely to find echoes of Lawrence but only recently I was intrigued to discover that Lawrence also had a great influence on Orwell. And reading Orwell you wouldn't guess that Lawrence had had any influence on him at all. Lawrence was much more of a romantic than Orwell was or than I am, and so if all three of us were using the same instrument we'd none of us be playing the same tune. Quite often people look at a writer and glibly reel off a list of the people that he resembles who lived prior to his time and say that they were his influences. I've had reviewers say that of course I was influenced by so and so — and it was somebody I'd never read beyond a few things in an anthology, perhaps.

METCALF: I remember your saying to me once that Robinson was a great influence.

NOWLAN: Yes, Robinson was a big influence on me when I was about twenty-five — but I'd come to him through Fred Cogswell, you see, just as I came to the Black Mountain people through Layton and Souster.

METCALF: From your early books to your latest there's been a progressive loosening of form — an abandoning of metre and rhyme.

NOWLAN: That's come about through an almost purely intuitive process. At intervals over the years I've looked back over my work of, say, the previous six months and I've suddenly realized that I've been writing differently. The important thing to keep in mind about the process of development as it applies to me is that my whole intellectual life, the whole growth of my mind, for the first twenty-five years of my life took place in a solitude that couldn't have been greater if I had been living alone on an island. That's so odd that people find it impossible to understand — they think they understand, but they don't. Because

it wasn't necessary for me to verbalize any of the reactions that I was having or to justify any direction that I was taking — because there was absolutely nobody, nobody at all for me to talk with about such things, many of these processes remained on the non-verbal level that we call intuition. I think that's what intuition is: non-verbal thought.

METCALF: What's been the influence of Olson and Creeley and Duncan? Had they anything to do with your formal development?

NOWLAN: Oh, yes, very much so. You see that just as I went from Cogswell who had influenced me directly to Robinson who had influenced him directly, so I went from Layton and Souster and Dudek to their direct influences, which included either Creeley, Olson or Duncan or the people, such as Williams, who had influenced Creeley, Olson and Duncan. There was Kenneth Fearing, for instance, who must have had an enormous influence on Souster. And I like Kenneth Patchen — but I could never write like that. I think it's important to find the right influences, the influences that are sufficiently congenial to be useful. There was a time when like everybody else in those days I read and re-read Dylan Thomas, but it would have been fatal for me to have developed a Dylan Thomas kind of style — simply because we're such different people. You have to begin with your basic nature. There are certain facets to my mind and my manner of expressing myself that are as inescapable as the fact that I'm six feet three inches tall and have blue-gray eyes. And that's true of everyone. I've also been influenced by the Irishman Patrick Kavanaugh. But none of this conflicts with my earlier statement that my most direct influences were Canadian. I came to English and American poetry later.

METCALF: You have written a poem on the death of William Carlos Williams and I wondered if you'd studied any of his or Olson's theoretical writings on poetry.

NOWLAN: Yes, I've read Olson's projective verse essay that old Williams liked so well that he included it in his autobiography, and I've read a lot of Williams' critical pieces. But I've always had the suspicion that with Williams at least the criticism was only a kind of unwilling justification for the work, that he only bothered putting that kind of thing down on paper because he felt that he had to do it in order to obtain critical respectability for his work and work like it. Bertrand Russell said that every philosopher ought to first publish a book written

in jargon that no layman could understand, and once having done that he wouldn't have to bother with such jargon any more. And perhaps a poet ought to begin by publishing a book of criticism with all sorts of high-sounding phrases — adumbrate is a very big word with the critics — and then he wouldn't be expected to waste any more time with that sort of thing, he could simply write poems, which is what a poet ought to be doing. But I think Pound's critical writings are valuable — I keep recommending them to students. I wrote to old Pound when he was in St. Elizabeth's Hospital and he sent me a note saying, "I tray-sure yer replies," whatever that meant.

On this continent and in our lifetime it seems that to justify yourself as a writer you must first proclaim a critical theory and then proceed to demonstrate it. If Shakespeare had been required to do that he'd have spent his whole life in some obscure place writing a critique on literature that nobody would remember and he'd never have found the time to write any of his plays. But, of course, Shakespeare, as they liked to point out in the 18th century, wasn't an intellectual. He broke all the rules. He's been stuffed and mounted for so long that we tend to forget that. One thing that I've come to feel more and more strongly is that because so many North American poets are professors there's come to be a confusion of roles. Take the questions after a poetry reading — I find that 90 per cent of those questions are questions you'd ask a professor, not questions that you'd ask a poet. Now, if it happened that I was a professor as well as a poet I'd slip automatically out of my poet's laurel wreath and into my academic gown and answer as a professor without even being conscious of changing from one role to another. If most of the poets were motor mechanics there would be the same confusion of roles, I suppose, and during the question period after a reading people would say, "Mr. Layton, I'm having transmission trouble. What should I do about it?" Acorn, Purdy, myself, and Newlove, are about the only Canadian poets of my generation that aren't also professors.

METCALF: I'd like to ask you another question about form — about the line divisions in your work. Are they sense units, breath units or purely typographical?

NOWLAN: They're many different things but above all they're attempts to find a typographical substitute for the purely visual and oral things that play such an important part in a conversation — facial expressions, gestures of the hands, intonations of the voice. I might end a line in a certain way in an attempt to create the typographical equivalent of a shrug, for instance. Then, too, some of the divisions are intended to make the reader slow down — to read certain words

in units of five instead of units of ten, for instance. And sometimes the break adds an additional level of meaning in that the reader is led to believe that I'm saying one thing and then an instant later he finds that I'm saying something else which doesn't supersede the first thing, but amplifies it, or modifies it. The thing that he thought I was going to say and the thing that I did say are both there, one strengthening and supporting the other. There's a deliberate instant of ambiguity, you see, which reflects the ambiguity of life.

Now, I have no intention of giving you specific examples — of pointing out how that works or is intended to work in individual poems. That would be like a pitcher walking in before the pitch to tell the batter what kind of a ball he was going to throw him. Somewhere years ago, I forget where, I read the objective of the poet, like the objective of the pitcher in baseball, is to make the batter understand — too late. I was immediately struck by the truth of that.

METCALF: When you give public readings, the enjambment often doesn't follow the printed text of the poem.

NOWLAN: Right. The dominant tradition in poetry written in English has always been that poetry is heightened conversation, an oral art. But the people who carry the Black Mountain theories to their ultimate extreme — and anything becomes absurd when it's carried to its ultimate extreme — they seem to forget that fully literate people don't move their lips when they read. And they also forget that the eye takes in as many as, oh, say, twenty-five words at a glance — whereas when you're listening to somebody reading aloud you hear the words, one by one, in succession. The line divisions on the printed page are for the reader — but if I'm there in the flesh and come to a point on the printed page I used certain line divisions to indicate a shrug — well, I simply shrug. Mark Twain when he was reading his stories in public didn't *read* them at all, he simply *told* the same story. Then there's also the fact that I'm not an actor. I don't have the dramatic ability to indicate verbally the equivalent of, say, a semi-colon, and so possibly I insert another word — an extra word that a professional actor might not need to use. Some of my poems now have one printed and one spoken version. Sometimes I change entire lines in them when I read them before an audience. At first I worried about that and I used to feel that I ought to make the printed poem conform to the spoken poem, the poem as spoken by me, and I'd rewrite them — but I found it weakened them on the page. Now you take someone like Allen Ginsberg who is constantly reading to large audiences. Now when he writes a poem he knows that he's going to read it in an auditorium

and there are going to be an enormous number of distractions there — such as lightbulbs breaking and doors slamming, people coughing, and of course people will be thinking about other things, wondering if their wives are being unfaithful, if they can pay the rent, worrying about the pimple on their earlobe. Now if you were reading the book you could close it and go back to it later. You can't do that at a reading and so to express something you need only hint at on the page you may have to repeat the same word or line several times.

METCALF: So, if the poet writes with a live audience in mind he writes less purely than he would were he writing for the eye of the reader.

NOWLAN: Oh, yes. You see I don't write poems for an audience. An audience is a crowd. I write poems for one person at a time. I distrust the kind of thing that can be shouted to a crowd. At the end of that road I see the spellbinding orator. I'd rather talk with one person than speechify to a thousand.

METCALF: Your poems seem to split into two major divisions — poems that are descriptions or lyric (and some of the descriptive poems become poems of total metaphor) and then there are discursive or philosophical poems. There's a third, smaller group of satiric poems. The descriptive and lyric poems seem to belong to the earlier books in general. And the discursive, philosophic and satiric poems to be increasing in your later books.

NOWLAN: Well, I suppose I'm what Neruda would call an impure poet, in the sense that I feel that almost anything that can be experienced can be turned into poetry — and I suppose that most of us tend to become more philosophical, if that's the right word, as we get older. Possibly one reason why I now publish more poems of ideas is that earlier on I didn't have sufficient experience and it didn't come off, I mean that the poems of that kind that I attempted didn't come off. As for the satires, well, Bernard Shaw said that if you told people the truth you'd be well advised to make them laugh, because then they'd be less apt to kill you. But mostly I think of the satires as a type of light verse.

METCALF: You say you didn't have enough experience earlier to write more philosophic poems yet some of the descriptive poems, and certainly those that become total metaphor, are just as sophisticated and possibly even more profound.

NOWLAN: Yes. Yes, I think I may have phrased that very badly. Some of the earlier poems which were articulating ideas were doing so at a non-verbal level

— no, what I mean is, a non-abstract level — because that’s how my mind was working. It goes back to what I said about working out my ideas in isolation. In those days I *thought* in total metaphor to a greater extent than I do now and so inevitably I wrote in the way I thought. The ideas were expressing themselves not only on the page but in my mind almost wholly through *things*. You know, William Carlos Williams said, “No ideas but in things.” You must remember that I was born and grew up in a very primitive society. I suppose in some senses I’m like one of those 18th century Tahitians that were brought to England and thrown in among the London literary men. Even when they learned Greek and Latin they couldn’t change what they’d been, don’t you see?

METCALF: In seemingly simple poems like “Hens” and “Palomino Stallion” they work simultaneously as pure description and pure metaphor. There is a total fusion. Did you see these poems from the start as metaphor or did the fusion come as you were working from the thing seen?

NOWLAN: Well, the thought came from the thing seen and the poem came from the thought that had been provoked by the thing seen — and in another and maybe truer sense it all happened at once. [*Pause*] There was a time a few years ago when I had this worry, and it was a very real worry at the time, that I had no inventiveness. Not no imagination, but no inventiveness. In other words some people can sit down and invent an incident to illustrate an idea, but I find it almost literally impossible to do that. I’m a born liar, but that’s different. Born liars don’t invent things, they simply can’t bear the unvarnished truth — or I ought to say the naked fact, because there’s a great difference between a fact and a truth. I’m sorry to be blathering around so much but I have to keep hesitating to think — which is what prevented Stanfield from winning the last election. The poor bastard stops to think when he’s asked a question and then he looks like an idiot because nobody does that any more.

METCALF: In some of your later work as the forms have moved further from the traditional, it seems sometimes that the colloquial — that speaking voice you were talking about earlier — falls into the prosaic.

NOWLAN: It’s one of the risks you have to take. To be a writer you have to run the risk of making a fool of yourself. When I run the risk of sounding prosaic I run the risk deliberately — just as I sometimes deliberately run the risk of sounding sentimental. I think you have to risk sentimentality if you’re going to write

anything that matters because after all sentimentality is very close to the things that *genuinely* move people — it's not a falsity but simply an exaggeration.

METCALF: "Ypres 1915", which you've said is one of your favourites among your work, is a poem that plays on the edge of sentimentality the whole time.

NOWLAN: Sure. That poem is essentially a dialogue between the brain and the guts, the cerebral and the visceral. The tension between the sentimental or the near-sentimental and the cynical or near-cynical is deliberate. Which reminds me that I wrote a poem called "He Raids the Refrigerator and Reflects Upon Parenthood," and because the emotion that evoked the poem was a maudlin one (for we all of us *do* feel maudlin at one time or another, provided we're human, and to be a poet is to express what humans feel) — I actually began the poem with the words, "Nowlan, you maudlin boob." I feel now that I should have entitled it "A Maudlin Poem", because there was one reviewer who said, "Unfortunately, Mr. Nowlan has one maudlin poem in his book called 'He Raids the Refrigerator'." And so this particular reviewer didn't know enough to know that the poem was *supposed* to be maudlin even though I'd said so in the poem. But then I don't suppose he'd read the poem. Many reviewers don't.

Any poet who deals with the emotions that move some people to tears is going to be accused by some people of being sentimental because sentimentality is by definition an excessive emotion and what to one person may seem excessive to another may seem perfectly normal. Thomas Hardy was also accused of being sentimental. I happen to be a very passionate person who is very readily moved to both tears and laughter and if I denied this I would be false to myself. Now I assume that T. S. Eliot was a very cold person, but he was also a very great poet. That coldness was natural to him, presumably.

But by God! I'd rather have spent an evening with Charles Dickens or Thomas Hardy than with T. S. Eliot.

METCALF: Your poetry is far more visual than oral. Is the musical element in poetry unimportant to you?

NOWLAN: If you mean by "musical element" what I think you mean — the use of pleasant sounds merely for the sake of using pleasant sounds — I try not to put anything into my poems that isn't functional. And, then, too, it's not entirely a matter of choice. I suppose the music that I respond to is very simple, unsophisticated music — the visual equivalent would be Norman Rockwell. In so

much criticism and in so much of the pretentious bosh uttered by writers when they're discussing their craft there's the unspoken assumption that **everything** you do as a writer is the result of choice or in accord with some critical theory. In reality, of course, a poet born tone-deaf is going to be an entirely different poet from a poet born with perfect pitch. You have to work within the limitations of what God made you. A moose might prefer to be a butterfly but he'd be a damned foolish moose if he wasted any time feeling sorry for himself because he wasn't one.

METCALF: *Things*, their physical appearance and texture, dominate a lot of your poetry. Is this a religious position? Do you believe in immanence?

NOWLAN: I have a very strong, almost primitive, sense of the sacredness of objects and things. Animals. Someone once pointed out to me that in all my poems there wasn't a single animal called 'it' — they were always 'he' or 'she'. In my poetry I try to tell the truth. It's a losing battle because there are so many truths you can't really tell but I try to show the thing as it *is*. That's the reason why I named one of my early books *The Things Which Are* after St. John the Divine being told by the angel to write 'the things which thou hast seen and the things which are'. (I think *now* it was a rather bombastic title — but at the same time it was trying to express this devotion to the truth of things.) There is a kind of truth in a beer can, you know. If you say, "There's a beer-can" that's something everyone can establish. They can go and see if it's there. But if you say "The ineluctible Providence is shining down upon you," you don't know whether it is or not. Yes, I believe in immanence very strongly.

METCALF: Yours is a sophisticated and "high" art, yet I've heard you quoted as saying that you write for truck drivers. Were you drinking that day or just annoyed by someone?

NOWLAN: As I remember, about that truck driver business, I said to someone who later wrote a newspaper thing that *if* there comes a time that truck drivers read poetry, mine will be the poetry they'll read, and I think that's quite true. I hope that you're right when you call my poetry "sophisticated". I like to think it's *elegant*. But it seems to me that the very greatest literature has all sorts of levels. *Huckleberry Finn*, you know. The biggest risk a person runs who tries to write as I do is the casual, superficial glance. "Oh, that's all there is to it", you know. I'm always quoting Mailer who quoted Gide, who probably quoted somebody else —

“Please do not understand me too quickly”. That’s one of the things I’ve always been frustrated by, so much so that sometimes I’ve been tempted to introduce deliberate obscurity — and that seems the one valid argument for self-conscious obscurity — to make the reader read it more carefully.

METCALF: How would you justify yourself, then, for practising what is essentially an elitist art?

NOWLAN: I don’t feel obliged to justify myself. If I were called into court like that poet in Russia and charged with wasting my time I’d probably come up with some arguments in my own defence — but otherwise why should I bother? I don’t think of myself as an elitist, but even if I did, and even if what I’m doing is absolutely useless — like Oscar Wilde saying, “all art is utterly useless” — even if that were so, I don’t see where my elitism and uselessness would matter to anyone else. I have a friend who is a painter, Tom Forrestall, and one day I asked him what he’d been doing that afternoon, and he said, “looking at windfalls.” He’d spent the whole afternoon simply sitting and watching the changing pattern of sunlight on apples. Now the president of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce would probably consider that a useless act. But who knows? Maybe there is a God like the god described in the Old Testament and he saw Tom Forrestall looking at the windfalls that day and decided that on second thought he wouldn’t destroy the world. Maybe the whole show will fall apart if there ever comes a time when there’s nobody left to look at the windfalls.