NEXT TIME FROM A DIFFERENT COUNTRY

Robert Gibbs

> *I prefer, as far as my own work is concerned, a language which is clear, straightforward, and with little adornment. I do not normally allow myself a word which I should not use in plain prose, and I normally also use the sentence construction of plain prose. I think of a good style, whether in prose or verse, as being rather like the lady whom Sam Johnson considered to be well dressed because he did not remember what she had on. Or perhaps as Yeats says of his later poems, the poetry is naked. (Crabbe speaks of poetry "without an atmosphere.") Nothing requires greater effort, or is more beautiful, than simplicity.*[1]

THE ABOVE, Elizabeth Brewster's own account of her first large collection, *Passage of Summer*, is a clear enough announcement. Reviewers who have commented on her work have generally remarked on the presence of the qualities she has so deliberately cultivated. George Johnston, in a review of her later collection, *Sunrise North*, calls Miss Brewster "one of the most reliable writers I know," who "declares her intentions and carries them out," but he warns us that although her poetry "seems transparent and simple . . . it is not quite either."[2]

Taken together, the two collections mentioned, one published in 1969 and the other in 1972, give us a substantial body of work by which to judge what seems and what is in her poems, and, taken separately, two distinct arrangements or gatherings. *Passage of Summer*, as she tells us in "Chronology of Summer" consists of poems written over a period of twenty-four years.[3] *Sunrise North*, though it contains a few early poems, consists almost wholly of work done after

Elizabeth Brewster moved to Alberta in 1968. In terms of composition then, the 1969 collection gives a long view in time, while the new collection gives us poems largely written with a sense of that behind her. In a conversation I had with Miss Brewster in 1970, she commented on her own feelings about the two collections, one just out and the other projected:

> I think that so long as I had quite a bulk of unpublished work, in a way it meant that I wasn't likely to make any particularly fresh break. The fact that it was published just at the point when I was also moving to Alberta meant that these two things came together, There was the publication of the book — the book was accepted in October — I moved to Alberta in September.... The new place and the new work were going to come together.[4]

To my question whether or not this change had affected her poetic principles, Miss Brewster replied, "Oh, no, it's a new viewpoint, a new window to look out of." So with the two books we have both old and new windows, differences in space and time and distance to consider.

Passage of Summer contains most of the poems of Miss Brewster's three Ryerson Chapbooks, *East Coast*, 1951; *Lillooet*, 1954; and *Roads*, 1957. The title poem of the first, "East Coast — Canada", is noteworthy from both thematic and stylistic standpoints. It begins:

> Lying at night poised between sleep and waking
> Here on the continent's edge, I feel the wind shaking
> The house and passing on:
> Blowing from far across fabulous mountain ranges,
> Far over the long sweep of the prairies...

The one end-rhyme, muted by enjambement, since it is the only one of its kind in the poem, has the effect of momentarily arresting the rhythm. It is a short hold-out against the force of the wind, which once let loose blows pretty freely through the poem. In the final stanza, there is another kind of resistance:

> Drown it out. Drown out the wind.
> Turn on the radio.
> Listen to the news.
> Listen to boogie-woogie or a baseball game.
> Pretend we belong to a civilization, even a dying one.

The injunction to herself and to her readers has urgency. It is perhaps the urgency of necessity, the necessity of keeping an isolating and obliterating force at bay. But the "boogie-woogie" itself, tonally, undermines the imperatives.

Conscious self-irony breaks in with "Pretend" and continues to assert itself to the end of the poem.

> Pretend. Pretend.
> But there are the woods and the river and the wind blowing.
> There is the sea. Space. The wind is blowing.

Ironic as the effort has been, it has at least served to control poetically the terrors out there. To see the full measure of that control, one needs to look at what has happened in the two stanzas between the first and the last.

> The wind travels where we cannot travel,
> Touches those we cannot touch;
> For few and lonely are the sentinel cities of the North
> And rivers and woods lie between.
> Far, few, and lonely . . .

The effect is expansive, a free opening of the poem to those distances and solitudes. But the expansion cannot go on without sheer terror entering and overwhelming the controlled voice —

> Space surrounds us, flows around us, drowns us.
> Even when we meet each other, space flows between.
> Our eyes glaze with distance.
> Vast tracts of Arctic ice enclose our adjectives.
> Cold space.
> Our spirits are sheer columns of lice like frozen mountains
> Dashed against by the wind.

Internal rhymes here have quite the opposite effect of the initial rhyme. They inflate the poem and serve to translate the view of a vast openness from outside to inside. But control, however threatened, however urgently calling for that imperative voice, "Drown it out," is still there, expressed as hyperbole, a rhetorical expansiveness answering to but also taking charge of the emotion. The whole poem moves as it should, loosely as if freed to the wind, but not as loosely as it seems, and the overt irony of the end is only a gesture in the light of the irony that contains the whole. Here is enough to see the deceptiveness of Elizabeth Brewster's "transparency".

To make the leap from this early poem to the last poem printed in her new collection may be instructive. The mood in "Advice to the fearful self" is still imperative, and perhaps more urgently so —

If necessary, go through madness.
If necessary, walk through a wall of fire.
Let the flames eat your hand.
Let your body shrivel like the top of a burnt match stick.

There is a nakedness here, an exposure to an inner necessity more terrible than that coming from outside, but the voice and the controlling irony are still patently Miss Brewster's own. Qualification, ritualization, hyperbole (in the light of these), contain the emotion. The expanding impulse I noted in "East Coast — Canada" is here, in the succeeding stanzas:

If necessary, drown.
Walk undersea like a deepsea diver
but without his mask or oxygen supply.
Let the waves close over you.
See above your head
the webbed feet of seabirds
flying in water.

The extremity of the injunction is kept from being really extreme by the unfailing decorum, by the positive resonance of undersea images, and by the heightened and fanciful upside-down view. What follows is the more stark by contrast:

If necessary, be buried live.
Let sand clog your nostrils.
Close your mouth on pebbles.
In the frozen ground
stiffen with winter.

The "frozen fountain" image of "East Coast — Canada" finds a counterpart here, but there is no relieving beauty about it. Only the continuity of the rhythmic and rhetorical design keeps the emotion bounded. The fusion that a good poem needs comes with the final stanza:

If necessary, be conceived again.
Swim in the river of the womb
till, cast up fishlike on dry land
you grow a mouth and scream.

If necessary, scream.

That scream, a release of what "East Coast — Canada" would have drowned out, gets through. There is not the same distance here between the necessity felt and the composing imagination. We are closer to that "fearful self". But the

rebirth image, the fish image, grotesque as it becomes, cannot but exert its power as the culmination of an ordered series, a power to contain, check, compose the emotional content. The ironic structure closes even around the scream. Elizabeth Brewster is not a "howl" poet yet by any means.

The tightly rhymed poem, "Peace", which appeared as the penultimate poem in *East Coast* and in *Passage of Summer* as "Peace: I", is almost a statement of poetic credo for such poems as "advice to the fearful self". The final stanzas are:

> Peace is pain increased
> Till it is numb,
> And a cry so shrill
> That it seems dumb.
>
> Peace cannot be shaken
> By death or strife,
> For it has swallowed both
> To make its life.

Explicitly, "peace" here is more than the undisrupted continuity of the rhetorical pattern, but considering the effect here as elsewhere of the formal constraints, the swallowing of all extremities is a matter of poetic synthesis as much as of experience. When the formal pattern is as tight as here, there is an almost grotesque effect (considering the content), and yet to the unwary the poem may seem simply to affirm courage and stoicism. "Peace", the poem, may finally leave one shaken, though the purely formal bridge over the chasm is steady enough.

WHEN THE DISTANCE is one of time rather than of space, nostalgia often overlays the ironic control. Consider the last poem of *East Coast*, reprinted as the second poem in *Passage of Summer*. "River Song" begins

> Where are the lumberjacks who come from the woods for Christmas,
> Drinking, fighting, singing their endless ballads,

and ends

> Where are the logs afloat on the wide river?
> Oh sad river,
> Sing a song of pain for your children gone,
> Oh glory gone.

The river is still wide, but not as those ballads seem, endless, in either dimension. The sense of looseness, reinforced in verbs like "slopping", "shovelling", and

"churning", remains through the diminishing lines. The feeling is beautifully contained, controlling and controlled within the rhetorical frame. But the sense of distance predominates, and the isolating force of time is no less than that of space in "East Coast — Canada".

An early poem which works quite differently from any so far examined is "In the Library". The tense is present, and the ordering of the emotions allows for immediate drama. The effort appears to be to realize a moment of dissolution in the self.

> Believe me, I say to the gentleman with the pince-nez,
> Framed forever with one hand in his pocket,
> With passion, with intensity, I say it —
> Believe me, oh believe me, you are not I.
> Making my chair squeak on the chilly floor,
> Catching up my pencil, I say —
> But of course I am myself.

There is interplay here between the sure control of the composing imagination and the Woolfian sense of the elusive moment and the tenuous continuity of personal identity. The drama so far, however, is not so much played as reported being played "with passion, with intensity". The narrator-observer is still in charge though the distance diminishes and a more dramatic urgency breaks through —

> The minutes ripple over the varnished tables.
> This is June, I say, not yesterday or tomorrow.
> This is I, not Byron or Vanessa. I am not in the moon.
> I must differentiate my body from all other bodies,
> Realizing the mole on my neck, the scar on my hand.

But the truth once given in to is not so terrible as the fear of it was. The merging of the speaker's identity with others' is perhaps no worse than Keats' experiences of empathy. That yielding, allowing other selves to invade and merge with and perhaps obliterate the self, calls out another kind of control is evident from the final lines:

> The elastic moment stretches to infinity,
> The elastic moment, the elastic point of space.
> The blessed sun becomes the blessed moon.

For all the dramatic slippage the poem has taken us through, it ends with the control surer than at the outset. The orderly withdrawal from the experience is such that the merely personal becomes universal. The last line states, without

perhaps meaning to, the transmutation that has occurred from dramatized dissolution to imaginative and rhetorical stability. What has appeared more and more as one kind of experience miraculously turns out to be quite another kind, essentially the experience of making a poem, stabilizing while dramatizing an experience which outside of art would seem to be unsettling.

That Elizabeth Brewster should be doing such things with language is not surprising, considering that all art is an ordering and abstracting as well as a dramatizing process. The acting out, though, that constitutes the rhetorical, formal synthesis differs widely from poet to poet and can be defined only by the poems themselves. When a poet works as Miss Brewster most often does with matters that appear to be those of undisguised, unadorned experience, the effect is very different from what happens in more openly fanciful or mythopoeic poets.

Passage of Summer is not only a collection of poems, it is also an arrangement, a larger composition, as Miss Brewster herself has pointed out in her chronology:

> My first two sections are, in a way, related to psychoanalysis, dealing as they do with early memories and with dreams.... After the two highly personal sections at the beginning, I turn to the world of external objects and then to the section of "Portraits." Most of the poems are based on real remembered people, many of them remembered from my childhood.... The section which seems more objective and impersonal, "Pilgrims," may be after all, one of the most personal in the book.... Restlessness, whether physical or spiritual, is one of my commonest states, and it is reflected in "Explorations" and in the religious poems.... The concluding section of "Poems for All Seasons" once more brings in the theme of time. I also wished to end, in the classical manner, with a serene, anticlimactic poem.[5]

Miss Brewster here admits to seeming other than she is in her poems and to restlessness while insisting on the classical manner of serenity. Her book moves out from what is apparently most personal to what is possibly more personal (but more detached) and back. The whole is encompassed by the distancing effect of time. The opening stanza of the first poem, "Past as Present", establishes the manner Miss Brewster has said she wanted to end with —

> Walking these streets so often walked before,
> I almost feel as though my feet could find
> Their former path, reach one familiar door
> And enter to a world long left behind.

She does enter that world with measured steps but does not allow it, by any means, to assume control —

> The fried potatoes and the apple sauce,
> The still warm loaf, the doughnuts sugared white
> Would vanish from the table. Ancient jokes
> Would circle ghostly in the encircling night.

The whole rhetorical process is one of approach and withdrawal. The "still warm loaf" must here vanish in favour of ghosts from a distance anterior to the distance established at the beginning. The lost world of childhood, though it assumes a presence in the poem, keeps a distance, entering clearly as memory or dream.

The poem ends by expanding the vision to include history and myth, not so much to universalize the poet's particular experience, as to bring the larger human background within the same range and under the command of the serene, stabilizing imagination.

> Those who drank hemlock or were crucified
> Live in the triumph of their desolation.
> Orpheus, though torn to death, remains untouched
> To play his lute to a new generation.

There is no faltering here. The control is such that Orpheus and other sufferers remain distant and fixed against the poet's assertions about them. Serenity costs this. But considering the poem's function in relation to the book, the carefully measured pacing out of distances is needed for the stable frame. The poem encompasses what the book encompasses.

The last poem in *Passage of Summer*, "Saint John River in October", though it is really more serene I think than "Past as Present" (not having to insist so much on stabilizing), is a no less calculated closing of the frame.

> It is late afternoon
> In mid-October.
> The smell of brittle leaves
> Is in the air.
> I walk by the river
> By which I have walked many times
> And I remember . . .

The movement is not quite the same as that of "Past as Present", which begins by reaching back and as a whole purports at least to bring the past forward. The outward movement within that movement forecasts the designated movement of the book. Here the process is similar. The present, though, from the very first has the taint of the past, and once the poet has established her distance, the "I

remember" lines become the means both of keeping it while bringing the past at least into view. The last stanza fixes the dual perspective:

> And I am surprised that all that time has gone,
> That life has flowed away with the river,
> And all the tears, humiliations, hopes, quarrels
> Have gone into the soil like dead leaves
> To be buried under another winter's snow
> Or feed the root of next spring's pussywillows.

Effectively all experience, all that the book has memorialized, reflected upon, dramatized, finds its place here in the present consciousness, which encompasses the dimension of time serenely and tidily.

That final adverb may indicate a patness or complacency in Miss Brewster that only an insensitive reader would take at face value. Open *Passage of Summer* to any page, as I have done to pages fourteen and fifteen. What is here is the conclusion of one poem —

> Tomorrow, I remember is Pascal's birthday,
> Puritan and gambler
> On the game of faith.
> And I remember
> The girl in my office
> Who plays bingo every Tuesday.
> "Some people always win," she says
> "But me — I always lose.
> But I go all the same."

The game of imagination is like enough the game of faith for Miss Brewster to keep a nice imbalance in such conversations with herself as "Alone in Hotel Bedroom". Also on these pages is "What I Want Is Stone", a declaration of principle, an allying herself consciously not just with neo-classicism but with the past. Yet the declaration is as "maliciously" ironic as it wants to be —

> I want to open a new novel
> And find it was written by Jane Austen.
> Civilization should tame barbarism,
> Decorum should control passion,
> The will subdue the act.
> Humanity should be a statue
> Senatorial, calm, with a Roman smile
> Ironic, wise, malicious, and Augustan.
>
> What I want is stone.

Miss Brewster is here having what she wants imaginatively, that decorous, hardened stance, but her smile, necessary to the accomplishment of that end, is directed at herself and any reader who might be taken in.

Sunrise North is not without design, but its design is less an enclosing than an opening. It begins with the conscious facing of a new landscape, and that points its direction. "Rising from Winnipeg" keeps the ever shifting view from the air before us; it records the movement of an eye over what it cannot reflect upon. The metaphors for the landscape are inconsistent, trite, but occur as what first occurs to an observer not familiar enough with what she sees to compose the experience. As a single poem, it is not one of Miss Brewster's best, but as a tentative feeling-out of the unknown land, it is a good beginning. Similarly, the second poem, "Moving Day", records the still unformed world of the poet's living-room being formed. The poem is the deliberate process itself acted out.

> There will be a chair in that corner,
> I think,
> and above it a painting
> of red on blue.
> There will be books
> and on the desk over there
> which is not yet over there
> I shall put a vase
> for chrysanthemums
> or for the first daffodils
> of next April.
>
> I have not yet decided
> how I shall arrange
> my visitors.

What is not yet there is there. The poet cannot escape her arranging, but she can stand off from it enough to mock herself. The saving grace of irony is still here, just as the window was there in "Rising from Winnipeg", as her chief metaphor of distance in these poems.

The third poem in *Sunrise North*, "Dwarf highrise," records a later stage in the progress. The eye from the window no longer lightly falls on whatever is the handiest metaphor; it forms the world out there and enters its interiors, then withdraws to its own ironic distance —

> Inside are people
> also small,

> so small I can't see them.
> They walk around behind the lighted dots,
> fiddle with the minute knobs
> of toy television sets.
>
> They cook, eat, make love, do pushups
> with precise cardboard motions.

The precision is the poet's but the diminishing she effects is nicely turned back on herself caught in the very diminutive act she sees —

> Maybe someone has even
> taken a sheet of paper
> from a doll's house desk
> and sits imagining
>
> a Lilliputian poem
> smaller than a speck.

There is immediacy here, a palpable imaginative process, but not so strong as to erase entirely the "malicious", Augustan smile.

By the time Miss Brewster gets to her "Cold Spell", three or four poems over from this, she is ready to extend the imaginative process. She begins "walking the zero street", observing, sensing, composing. She returns to her "twelfth floor" to "stand by the window", and from that distance and with that insulation take in the street she has just left. Abruptly, in the final stanza, her attention moves across time and space:

> What is the weather like in your country?
> I would like to be a magician
> who, by gazing through my window,
> could bring you
> from wherever you were
> into this cold landscape.
> Suddenly you would appear walking
> past that house with the blue roof

Is it memory working here? The effort is for magic, the power to translate the far to the near and finally to the close —

> I would have to warm
> your cold hands with mine.

Starting from where these poems start, the effect of regarding distances is very unlike that nostalgic irony that sang "Oh glory gone", in *Passage of Summer*.

This summoning of the far from the near and making the two one results in some very moving love poems — "September twilight", "On awakening at night", and "November Sunday". The poem which best illustrates perhaps the unforced magic of such poems is "Thirty below". The perspective chosen is familiar and the impulse to pull together widely ranging associations there from the start. The poet is looking and listening through "frosted windows" to the wind and the snow. But her view is not confined to the street below, for she thinks " . . . how deep/ all over the country now/ snow drifts . . . "

> A solitary man walking
> wraps his face in a woollen mask
> turns his back sometimes
> so as not to front
> this biting, eye-smarting wind.

Here the view focusses on the solitary figure, but the wider range has prepared for the dramatic translation that follows:

> Suddenly I see my dead father
> in an old coat too thin for him,
> the tabs of his cap pulled over his ears,
> on a drifted road in New Brunswick
> walking with bowed head
> towards home.

The mood that has summoned and prepared for this vision does not take anything from its startling clarity and the abrupt sense it brings of distances giving way to simultaneity.

So distances remain but the sharpening of the senses to engage with the new landscape has reduced them. This is not to say that the individual poems in *Sunrise North* are better than those of *Passage of Summer* or that the book is a better book. What comes strongly through is the sense of a poet's having done one thing well in collecting and arranging one set of poems and now moving on to something else, a new way of ordering experience.

Dream poems have an important place in both books. A dream itself is an abstraction, a composition of psychic experience. The memory of a dream represents a further abstraction, and a poem that records such a memory must be at least three removes from whatever impelled the dream. Miss Brewster's dream poems, though filtered through these distancing lenses, retain the strength of

experiences vital to her imagination, and especially to that very composing and abstracting impulse so evident in *Passage of Summer*. The dream poems of *Sunrise North* take their character from the impulse of the book as a whole to reduce distances. The dreams become more dramatic as the voice becomes that of one recording things as they happen. The dream process becomes, as recorded, the composing process, the making of the poem.

> In a square classroom
> with a pointer in my hand
> I stand explaining my dream.
> There is a blackboard
> on which I make notes
> with white chalk.
> My explanation satisfies others
> but not myself.

Here in "Round Trip", as always, the ironic sense of the self within the composing process keeps the result from conclusiveness, keeps for the poem, that is, a necessary dramatic uneasiness.

> I am not sure
> whether it is good or bad
> to have come home again
>
> or if I intend to stay.

Within the dream the drama of this book is enacted; the "Round Trip" becomes a kind of exemplum for the larger composition.

In "Poems for psychoanalysis", the dreaming, composing, interpreting functions are removed from the individual psyche and dramatized through various personae: the psychoanalyst herself, the patients collectively and individually. The poet as "I" does not enter these poems; she has become an ironic, detached, and self-effacing observer of the whole tragi-comic play of interacting psyches. This self-effacement in favour of immediacy and drama appears elsewhere in such particularly fine poems as "Conversation between friends, largely unspoken" and "Gatrey Ketcheson". To move into psyches outside her own and render their memories, dreams and terrors with as much clarity as her own is a kind of triumph over the framing and distancing impulse, yet one that involves its own kind of distance.

Similarly the religious poems, which in *Passage of Summer* for all their ironic tension compose together a testimony of faith, have in *Sunrise North* a more

clearly dramatic character. "Good Friday performance" is itself a play with voices and actors, with the poet detached yet participating, with priest and congregation, with the bird beating against the rafters. As the dramatizing impulse comes to the fore, rhetorical continuity breaks —

> The cross . . .
> Suffering . . .
> Lift up your heads, O ye gates.
>
> Let him loose.
> Let the caged spirit free.
> The bird flits distractedly
> here and there.
> He cannot find the way.

The poem does not stay suspended and discontinuous. The poet's ironic awareness of the ambiguities of her faith draws all the elements together in a very strong conclusion:

> Be patient, be patient,
> they will try to let you out
>
> unless you fall first
> crumpled, beaten, crazed,
> the broken victim
> on the altar
>
> with the other Victim.

So in *Sunrise North* two impulses find play and interplay, the composing impulse, so strongly controlling *Passage of Summer*, and the dramatizing impulse that pushes against the insulating glass. The second of these impulses is the stronger for the interplay, itself a dramatic force in the poems. "Advice to the fearful self", which ends the book with a "scream", has a clear counterpart in "To a friend on the verge of breakdown":

> I cannot break the glass.
> You must smash your own hand
> through your own protection
> and save yourself by blood.

The act of poetic creation has for Miss Brewster come close and closer to being such an act.

I described the design of *Sunrise North* as "less an enclosing than an opening." This is true not just of the beginning. The book takes us through seasonal cycles, much as *Passage of Summer* did, but it ends less serenely. The unsettled character apparent in "Moving day" is far less settled in "Moving day again", which comes near the end of the book. Images of spring and rebirth, even the painful and grotesque rebirth of "advice to the fearful self", predominate in the final poems. This restlessness is not, however, even at the end, uncontained, just as the "scream" remains a verbal enclosure of the scream as well as an expression of it. Serenity reasserts itself again and again, as in "Under a plane tree", placed third from the end —

> Ah, yes, again you prove
> (doubt though I often may)
> that love and language conquer death.

If Miss Brewster takes an explicit position, it is usually on the side of decorum. She is self-aware, which means that she is aware of limits which she cannot cross or which she does not wish to cross as a poet.

> I come from a country
> of slow and diffident words
> of broken rhythms
> of unsaid feelings.
>
> Next time I am born
> I intend to come
> from a different country.

One can sense the malicious, Augustan smile closing round this poem, in which Miss Brewster drinking her "rum and hot water" has concluded that she cannot join the free chant of the "gold man". She is taking her place as deliberately as she planned the serene conclusion of *Passage of Summer*. But self-awareness is not all. The mock intention of the final lines is not (in the light of what has occurred in this book) as impossible of realization as it appears to be. As a poet, Miss Brewster moves on, from season to season, from landscape to landscape, closing distances and opening for herself new possibilities. Each beginning is a rebirth. In some very important ways, the Elizabeth Brewster of *Sunrise North* has come "from a different country".

NOTES

[1] Elizabeth Brewster, "Chronology of Summer," The Humanities Association Bulletin, XXI: 1 (Winter 1970), 38-39.

[2] Quarry, XXI: 3 (Summer 1972), 55.

[3] Elizabeth Brewster, 34.

[4] Transcribed from tape in possession of author.

[5] Elizabeth Brewster, 37-38.

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