

# REPRESSION

## *The Poetry of Alden Nowlan*

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I AM A PRODUCT of a culture that fears any display of emotion and attempts to repress any true communication.”<sup>1</sup> In this statement, Alden Nowlan is pinpointing the thematic and emotional centre of a very considerable portion of his poetic corpus. The suffering born of repression (of more than one kind) and a divided mind characterizes his voice, from the poems of his childhood, through the love poems, to its final development in symbolic, “imagist” poems on the human condition in general. It is my chief contention, moreover, that the art of Nowlan attains its zenith only when he is uncompromisingly faithful to his feelings of spiritual repression and psychic division, that is, when his poetic delineation of these feelings is precise and piercing.

Such is the case with “Beginning”,<sup>2</sup> a minor tour de force which deserves and repays close critical attention. It refers the problems of the poet’s persona back to their first source — his parents and their relationship with each other. The poem is constructed thematically and technically around their ambivalent attitude toward the act of love, or more accurately, the act of sex, or “making” (the main verb of the first and last clauses). Whether there is love here is certainly debatable. The puritanical couple see intercourse as pleasurable (“most lovely”) but as shameful too (“most abhorred”), and the effect of this ruling dichotomy upon their son is immediately stressed: he is conceived in a moment of joy (“like sound/stroked from the fiddle”) only to become the inheritor of a legacy of guilt, fear and oppression, which is the fate of a hunted animal (“the ward/ of tunes played on the bear-trap and the hound”).

The poem continues to move in contrasts. After the frenetic activity of “seven entrances”, there is a moment of calm following the storm, when he lays her down “the way the sun comes out.” In broaching the disgraceful deed, they have had to be “brave”, but, once underway, they are “like looters in a burning town.”

Their mouths left bruises, *starting with*  
*the kiss/*  
 and *ending with the proverb*, where they  
 stayed;  
 never in making was there *brighter bliss/*  
 followed by *darker shame*. Thus I was made.

It is significant that they “stay” with “the proverb” (no doubt some pietistic or moralizing maxim of consolation) and the dark shame, for this is the tradition that shall be handed down to their son. We note further that the poem is in closed form — certainly appropriate to the “stifling” nature of the subject matter. The iambic pentameter is very nearly constant throughout. The alternate rhyme in each stanza permits the poet to emphasize the parallels between each set of two lines in the quatrain, since each set of two contains a pair of contrasting elements. In every aspect, this poem is a most impressive and polished work of art.

Partly on the basis of this initial discussion, I would now like to propose tentatively a pair of word-association lists for use as a working critical approach to Nowlan’s peculiarly dichotomous poetic landscape. To energy, freedom, spontaneity, fertility, sexual love, sensuous nature, laughter and life, let us oppose repression, bondage, regimentation, sterility, virginity, domestic-urban desiccation, tears and death.

And let us consider each term on either side of the “arena” to be the metaphorical equivalent of any other term on the same side (for example, freedom is natural sensuousness and repression is tears). Then, in a poem such as “Warren Pryor”,<sup>3</sup> after noting in the first three stanzas Nowlan’s clever irony in using the third-person singular pronoun as a not-too-opaque mask for the third-person plural (since Warren does not exist except in his parents’ eyes), we can easily appreciate the significance of the contrasting words and images in the fourth, where the poet focuses on the boy’s futile desire to escape the trap that has been set for him:

Hard and serious,  
 like a *young bear/* inside his *teller’s*  
*cage,*  
 his *axe-hewn hands/* upon the *paper bills*  
 aching with *empty/* *strength* and *throttled/*  
*rage.*

Our lists of word-association stand us in better stead yet when we examine a more subtle poem, “When Like the Tears of Clowns”,<sup>4</sup> one of a group on the

subject of child-punishment. Mention of "tears" and "rain" in the first line immediately signals an act of repression. (What the "clowns" represent is open to conjecture, though in Nowlan's universe it is very likely that they may be mocking, domineering gods; or the paradoxical "tears of clowns" might be vaguely hinting at a comic-tragic ambiguity which verges upon non-meaning.) Notice the words which suggest regimented monotony: "ordered", "chant", "repetitious". Significantly, the children's shrill is "sexless". The fourth line is rife with words connoting physical subjugation: "My heart crawls lean and lewd [in its original meaning: ignorant, vile, base], a shrinking thing . . ." At this point the images change.

In reaction against his punishment, the child seeks alliance with the world of sensuous nature: horses swear fidelity and drum out an accompaniment to the "wolf-thoughts" that "howl" within his wrists; the odour of "the seasoned hay" is raw and ripe; his "fleshly pride" unleashes a protesting cry. But there follows a startling about-face in the last two lines — bitter vision of the meek and "their deep and narrow heritage of earth." From fantasies of freedom, the poet suddenly plummets to thoughts of the ultimate "repression", the grave. All the major elements of this poem reappear in miniature in "Refuge at Eight":<sup>5</sup> the reactionary awareness of sensuous nature ("Darkness, the smell of earth, the smell of apples"), the dream of death, the "wolf-thoughts" of childish revenge, and tears — the final reality which here parallels the vision of the grave; the personal reality from which Nowlan's persona can never free himself for any considerable length of time.

As well as the rather insidious (because psychological) repression which parents inflict upon children, there is the repression of brutality and hatred, recorded in "Britain Street"<sup>6</sup> (which is less a poem than a social document) and the repression of poverty, recorded in "And He Wept Aloud, So That the Egyptians Heard It".<sup>7</sup> Here the poet skilfully develops the metaphorical association between the flies and his youthful poverty in phrases like "playing . . . football", "skim-milk-coloured windows" and "leap-frogging", until its significance becomes inescapable in the lines, "catching the bread/ on its way to our mouths,/ mounting one another/ on the rough deal table." The identification is openly made with the mention of "Baal-Zebub [literally, 'lord of flies']/ god of the poor and outcast" and of the fact that the flies did not appear until the protagonist's arrival. The poem's movement follows the pattern we have thus far noticed: Nowlan's persona is being tyrannized; he strikes out in some way against the "numbers and persistence" of the repressive force, for which act he feels guilty

("I... wanted to beg... forgiveness"); and his revolt ultimately fails ("the flies rebuilding their world").

We have already remarked that, for Nowlan, death is the ultimate repression. In "Aunt Jane",<sup>8</sup> the child receives a lengthy education in death. The surface humour of the diction, the playful rhymes, and the sing-song rhythm all create an uneasy offsetting to the macabre subject. In "Two Strangers",<sup>9</sup> the now-grown man can derive no thrill from the hunter's "climactic kill"; the only reality he knows is "the *child-like* scream of death", "his tightened breath", and the voice which "had died, had died." Nowlan is also, however, quite capable of raising his voice in protest against the forces of death which so often hold his spirit in bondage. "God Sour the Milk of the Knacking Wench"<sup>10</sup> is a vividly vindictive condemnation of all life-destroyers. His demand that the knacking wench be sexually mutilated, even as she mutilates the bulls, is the furious outcry of a man too long frustrated and penned-in. And just as this poem is the man's reaction against the experience portrayed in "Two Strangers", so "I, Icarus",<sup>11</sup> a repressed imagination's dream of escape and release, is the child's reaction against the experience portrayed in "Aunt Jane".

NOW THAT WE ARE acquainted with the basic elements of the poet's psychic and spiritual make-up, let us turn to his love poetry. One reading of "The Grove Beyond the Barley"<sup>12</sup> is all that is required to unmistakably identify it as the work of Alden Nowlan. For the poem is, to a great extent, a self-portrait, since the girl is little more than the female counterpart of the male protagonist. This is not properly a "love poem" at all.

In the terms of our word-connotation lists, the atmosphere is immediately established as being "repressive" through the use of the words "too secret" and "murder" in the first line. The speaker comes upon a girl's "white body" and "naked limbs", but he does not think of her in sexual terms; he sees her breasts, but his only comment is that they "move like the shadows of leaves/ stirred by the wind." Her nakedness is her purity; like him, she is innocent and virginal under the crushing hand of the world. In harmony with both the particular setting and the repression with which we have elsewhere seen Nowlan's persona to be imbued, he approaches her with timidity: "I do not know you, therefore have no right/ to speak of discovering/ you...". Her limbs are in "disorder", "the arms outstretched/ like one crucified, the legs bent like a runner's..." — surely the poet is presenting an icon of his own suffering. This would seem to be

confirmed by his “novel”; what else is the story of the husband in black (“worn at his *wedding*”) and the hired man in rooster-comb red but a parable of the poet’s parents’ relationship as it is depicted in “Beginning”? The forces of death, puritanical guilt and repression interact for a moment with the forces of life, sexual love and energy, and the result is “an axed colt”, or “the ward/ of tunes played on the bear-trap and the hound”, or a stanchioned and maimed bull. The speaker’s fear lest she awaken or cry out is entirely characteristic, as is his cautious retreat with idyllic wishes on his lips. The poem derives its power, I think, from the tension between the lyric beauty of the state of virginity — the pastoral attractiveness of being “a gentle satyr” — and the implication that such a state is emotionally unsatisfactory, mainly because it is linked to repressive impulses.

This tension is highlighted and depicted in masterful style in “A Poem for Elizabeth Nancy”,<sup>13</sup> one of Alden Nowlan’s very finest creations.

Here the protagonist has managed to escape his oppressive past to the point of physical consummation of his love for a woman, but the question the poem asks is, whether he is as free as he thinks he is. The first three words are resonant with meaning. The speaker may be considered literally “emptied” by the act of love; the word also has the sense of “discarded”, “expelled”, or “(unceremoniously) dumped”. The important point is that he sees Eden as synonymous with Virginity and Innocence, “the fall” being occasioned by sexual intercourse; and this automatically implies a measure of guilt which lingers on from the puritanical ethic which has been the inheritance of the Nowlan persona. Just as we would expect from our knowledge of this poet’s word-associations, the “post-lapsarian” world is one of extraordinary fertility and natural sensuousness: the beloved’s eyes are “like caves behind a torrent . . . blue-green valleys where cattle/ fatten on clover and grow drunk on apples . . .”. But the words “fatten” and “grow drunk” make us stop for a moment; is this excess to be approved of? In the second stanza, the protagonist returns to Eden, the House of Innocence, “this house of candles”, which is now, of course, empty. It is asleep, with “all the curtains/ skittish and white as brides (even the wind/ meeting their silence, whispers) . . .” (compare “The Grove Beyond the Barley”, lines 16, 17). He is an intruder; his hands “*stink* from milking” (again, sensuous nature), his feet on the stairs sound “like laughter” (as opposed to the “tears” of repression), and he does “not much” care that his lover is not there. The point is, though, that he *does* care to some degree — perhaps more than he realizes. Why else does he state *twice* that he knows there is no-one in the room? Why does he return to

the house at all? Why does the poet devote only the first stanza to "the post-fall" and the last two to "the pre-fall"? It is clear that the repression to which we have always seen Nowlan's persona subjected has now insinuated itself so inextricably into his spiritual fibre that, even after "vanquishing" it, he must look back upon it with nostalgia and a sense of loss.

I would stress again that both "The Grove" and "Elizabeth Nancy" come alive because of the poet's faithful attention to the dialectical tension of opposing forces, a tension which, in the former poem, is implicit, and in the latter, overt. On the other hand, when the dialectic is absent, the poetry suffers appreciably by comparison. "For Claudine Because I Love Her",<sup>14</sup> like the last stanza of "Elizabeth Nancy", expresses a lover's feeling of abandonment as he stands in an empty house; but because it stands alone as one isolated experience, it cannot achieve the exquisite poignancy that the last stanza of the earlier poem attains in relation to its *first* stanza. Thus "For Claudine" can be little more than one of the world's many unremarkable "sad memory" poems. Another defect of Nowlan's later "more personal, confessional poetry"<sup>15</sup> is that, lacking the steady influence of a taut framework of ideas (which more often characterizes his early work), his poetic language sometimes tends to become rather shabby. Hence in "Another Parting"<sup>16</sup> (one of a group of "lying sleepless" poems), we find such unfortunate lines as, "[I] feel only my pain/ flowing into/ an all-encompassing sadness . . .". In short, to the degree that Nowlan loses sight of his immediate and most effective poetic "irritant" or stimulus — namely, repression, and its counterforces — his work correspondingly diminishes in quality.

Let us now turn to what one might call Nowlan's poems of cosmic despair. In taking an overview of all his work, I think that we must inevitably regard these as the final fruits of his repressive germ, since they generally deal with such familiar subjects as loneliness, purposelessness, misunderstanding, and of course death. The technique of "July 15"<sup>17</sup> is comparable to that of the last two love poems discussed: brief poetic analysis of one isolated feeling or experience. And, even as "nothing is happening" metaphysically, so nothing is happening poetically either.

More successful is "Dancer",<sup>18</sup> in which Nowlan reverts to a compact, closed form and restores a sense of dialectical counteraction through light-dark contrasts: the girl "bolts in and out of darkness . . . stumbling in the shadows, scalded blind/ each time she whirls to face the sunlight . . .". Some very adept imagery makes the significance of her plight clear: the spotlight-"sun" has her "netted" and "woven" into a "mesh"; she is literally up against the wall. She hurls the

ball “against the darkness, venomously” and it is hurled back, “all human purpose stript/ from its wild passage . . .”. “The Execution”<sup>19</sup> is a chilling vision of doom (admirable especially for its parable-like economy) in a murderous world in which all communication and understanding have broken down. As one of the blackest of Nowlan’s “black” poems, it must be ranked alongside “Fly on the Blue Table”,<sup>20</sup> which is in some respects even more despondent. The poet first draws our attention to the familiar phenomenon of the “dance” of the fly’s legs, “quick and purposeful/ yet going nowhere.” It is “like walking on water”, which, as everyone knows, is possible only “in a movie” on “plastic water/ under perpetual static lightning” (i.e., the lifeless, never-changing “movie props” of human existence). This passage is a bitterly sarcastic mockery of man’s pretensions to godhood. The hard truth about his condition lies rather in the picture of “the blind actor/ testing the air with outstretched tremulous hands” — an image at least as old as Céline, but still powerfully evocative.

And all of this is nonsense  
because I cannot describe your world  
in which I only exist as a mountain or a rose  
exists in my world.

In these shocking lines, Nowlan appears to be despairing of his very function as a poet — to affirm the spiritual bond between all men by “describing” all aspects of the reality which is common to all men.

As the poem concludes, it focuses upon an appropriate symbol of Evil or Death (or even God); the spider watches the man-fly, which the poet depicts in a manner that does little to disguise his contempt for the obscene creature: “. . . your striped ripe pimple of belly/ jerking over the blue table.”

Since it would be unfortunate to have to close the essay on such a bleak note, we might find some consolation in “The Mysterious Naked Man”,<sup>21</sup> a piece in which Nowlan’s colloquial style and wry humour are at their very best. Here for a moment he manages to detach himself from his obsessions and rise above them. Thus society (the voice of moral authority) is no longer repressive, but only laughable and ridiculous, is not allowed the dignity of being a reactionary life-symbol. However, if one were morbid enough to look beyond the pleasant satire, one might discover a vision of contemporary life which is almost as pessimistic as the four preceding poems.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Gary Geddes & Phyllis Bruce, eds., *15 Canadian Poets* (Toronto, 1970), p. 285.
- <sup>2</sup> *Under the Ice* (Toronto, 1961), p. 1.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- <sup>6</sup> *Bread, Wine and Salt* (Toronto, 1967), p. 17.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.
- <sup>8</sup> *Under the Ice*, p. 2.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- <sup>10</sup> *Wind in a Rocky Country* (Toronto, 1960), p. 13.
- <sup>11</sup> *Bread, Wine and Salt*, p. 3.
- <sup>12</sup> *Poetry of Mid-Century, 1940/1960*, ed. Milton Wilson (Toronto, 1964), pp. 222-223.
- <sup>13</sup> *Under the Ice*, p. 1.
- <sup>14</sup> *the mysterious naked man* (Toronto, 1969), p. 17.
- <sup>15</sup> Geddes & Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 287.
- <sup>16</sup> *the mysterious naked man*, p. 9.
- <sup>17</sup> *Bread, Wine and Salt*, p. 42.
- <sup>18</sup> *The Things Which Are* (Toronto, 1962), p. 59.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- <sup>20</sup> *Poetry of Mid-Century, 1940/1960*, p. 221.
- <sup>21</sup> *the mysterious naked man*, p. 1.