

NOTES ON ALDEN NOWLAN

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READING THE BODY of Alden Nowlan's work one begins to share his acute feeling for place. The ideal landscapes of Roberts and Carman, his literary ancestors, are the ones he avoids and de-mythologizes:

... here persistent misery endures;
growing thick-headed like a cow, it chews
thistles in mute protest against the rain
of innocence it cannot lose or use.

To get beneath a Maritime cliché the poet here brandishes a prudery he recognizes and undercuts a countryside he does not. Elsewhere he writes that water “the colour of a bayonet.../ glitters blue and solid on the page/ in tourist folders, yet some thirty towns/ use it as a latrine”; and while acid from “heaps of decomposing bark torn loose/ from pulpwood driven south” kills the salmon — in the summer “the stink/ of the corrupted water” fills the air. Yet the tourist pictures have not lied, says Nowlan: “the real/ river is beautiful, as blue as steel.” As he views it, the Real McCoy resides not in any Platonic folder, the *idea* of landscape, but in the stab of the river above and below the ice, in winter and in summer. If Beauty exists it arises from a comprehension ubiquitous and therefore poetic, not a romanticized abstraction which excludes pain and coldness:

Ours was a windy country and its crops
were never frivolous, malicious rocks
kicked at the plough and skinny cattle broke
ditch ice for mud to drink and pigs were axed.

Individual poems hint that in this world where “Spring is distrusted”, “Summer is not a season”, and “December is thirteen months long”, there can be no harking back to Tantramar for lost experience: any loss boils down simply to the absence of harshness, not to something that creates combustion in the mind.

While Roberts would rather remember his environment, the New Brunswick writer sees it for what it is:

Only the leaves of the thistle have retained their greenness
 even in the grave: they remind me of men,
 poor, ignorant, wise, who only shrug
 at each new effacement of history . . .

To my mind this consequence of calcified regionalism clutches Nowlan most noticeably. Because he prides himself on writing of what he knows the threat of piecemeal living seems never distant from his regional world. "I went to work when I was 15 years old, peeling pulpwood 12 hours a day" (he wrote in *The Canadian Forum*, January 1969). "Until I received my first pay cheque — two weeks after starting work — I lived on boiled potatoes flavored with vinegar." Thus in his short story, "A Call in December", where the narrator and an old man bring a Christmas hamper to a starving mother and baby, the hunger evident in "two empty sardine cans, their tops drawn back like the open mouths of crocodiles", appears stark and unpretentious. Nowlan chronicles himself and others via a milieu where the pain of his own experience contributes to much of his work, such as this widely published poem which takes its title from the first line.

When like the tears of clowns the rain intrudes
 Upon our ordered days and children chant,
 Like repetitious birds, their sexless shrill:

My heart crawls lean and lewd, a shrinking thing,
 To haylofts where, when I was ten and whipt,
 Tall horses swore fidelity and drummed
 As wolf-thoughts howled within my punished wrists.

There in the seasoned hay's unsubtle tang
 The lash of fleshly pride unleashed my lips

And in a dream I saw the meek bequeathed
 Their deep and narrow heritage of earth.

This poem counterpoints the tragi-comic, and juxtaposes pain caused by coming of age with a symmetry of images that is informed by the boy's rural, puritanical heritage; rather than a shaking-off of legacy, there seems a masochistic attempt to comprehend its influence. Certainly the poet's roots are painful to relate, for his parents are victims of a calcified conscience. In "Beginning" he writes,

From that they found most lovely, most abhorred,
my parents made me: I was born like sound
stroked from the fiddle to become the ward
of tunes played on the bear-trap and the hound.

Not one, but seven entrances they gave
each to the other, and he laid her down
the way the sun comes out. Oh, they were brave,
and then 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.

The outcome of parental degradation shambles through “Child of Tabu”, too, where children taunt one of their playmates “who was conceived so casually by strangers/ in the soft hay and the high noon”:

Begotten furtively in the marital night,
beneath the crush of blankets
and the long shame,

we avowed our ancestry
with the ruthless simplicity of children
offering our gods
a dripping handful of his heart.

The blissful love of the tabu parents contrasts vividly with an ascetic condition that comes “bordered” (in another poem) “by the rumpled quilts/ And children bred from duty as the soil/ Was ploughed to hide the seed and not for joy.”

A short story, “The Glass Roses”, demonstrates that regional parents will never tolerate imaginative encounter. Stephen’s father tells him that if he is to learn the ropes of pulp-cutting and manhood he must disown the Polack and his alien sensibilities; for lumberjacks, as Nowlan the poet acquaints us elsewhere,

are the men who live by killing trees —
their bones are ironwood, their muscles steel,
their faces whetstones and their hands conceal
claws hard as peavy hooks: anatomies
sectioned like the men in the Zodiac.

In “The Migrant Hand” the calcified working man arrives shut inside “the last ten hours of blackflies and heat,/ the last two hundred barrels of potatoes.” Yet

the regionalist at his best canalizes attention toward the aggregate experience of this individual, the Everyjoe who has served all masters in a *universal regionalism*:

For how many thousands of years, for how many millions
of baskets and waggonloads and truckloads of onions,
or cotton, or turnips has this old man knelt
in the dirt of sun-crazy fields? If you ask him,
he'll put you off: he's suspicious of questions.
The truth is that Adam, a day out of Eden,
started him gathering grapes: old Pharoah
sold him to Greece; he picked leeks for the Seljuks,
garlic for Tuscans, Goths and Normans,
pumpkins and maize for the Pilgrim Fathers . . .

By and large, then, Nowlan, like the preacher in "The Young Rector" — fascinated with indigenous spirituality — cannot help but witness that the abject people he intuitively loves "are dead/ all they need is someone/ to throw dirt over them./ Passionless, stinking, dead." For this writer (fortunately, his admirers might add) both Eden and Tantramar are gone; only his struggle against asceticism and the nitty-gritty remains where "farmers maddened/ by debt or queer religions winter down/ under the ice".

WHILE REVIEWS of his early work praised Nowlan for the accuracy of his images, they also admonished him for flatness and failure to experiment much with form. A tendency not to whack home more forcefully a poem's potential also came under fire; what his poems of the early sixties needed more of was the expansive yet integral conclusions of his later ones, which exhibit an adroit control. In *Under the Ice* (1961), his fourth and final chapbook, one discovers him finding his range, adjusting his sights, but shooting erratically nonetheless; even some previous poems are decidedly better than the ones which now describe his middle period. "The Egotist" from *The Rose and the Puritan* (1958), for example, explores a favourite theme of violence with more sophistication than the later "Bear". The earlier poem clinches its simple but electric statement superbly.

A gushing carrousel, the cock
Revolved around the axeman's block.

Sweet Christ, he kicked his severed head
And drenched the summer where he bled.

And terrible with pain, the scream
Of blood engulfed his desperate dream —

He knew (and knowing could not die)
That dawn depended on his cry.

“Bear”, on the other hand, lacks as much voltage because its conclusion is bathetic. In the first stanza a she-bear comes crashing down with rifle-fire; the second stanza pictures a bear cub chained beside a highway restaurant in order to attract tourists. While the bloody death of the mother appears a high point climactically, it does not imagistically; the second verse requires at least a sustaining image, or as in “The Egotist”, one of an ascending kind that survives as part of the resolution.

Concerning his poetic endeavours at this time Nowlan could rationalize all he wished: “If all life is to be the stuff of poetry, and it should be, poetry will be banal occasionally”, he wrote in review of Irving Layton (*Fiddlehead*, Spring 1960). Banality, of course, merely concocts an excuse for stuff that would be better left alone or written up in prose. Ironically enough, he was criticized for this identical weakness in a review of his *A Darkness in the Earth* (1959) in the very issue of *Fiddlehead* his own review appeared: “When he fails”, commented the reviewer, “the failure is usually in the subject matter itself which is badly chosen, partially perhaps because of a desire to explore through poetry almost anything which he feels or with which he comes in contact.” In *Under the Ice* Nowlan reveals limitations, not because a number of titles read like a rural *Who’s Who* (“Jack Stringer”, “Charlie”, “Georgie and Fenwick”, or “The Flynch Cows”), but because the poems themselves often forfeit neat contours of structure and perception (a notable exception is “Warren Pryor”). Verse like “Georgie and Fenwick”, for instance, assembles tattle that makes better fiction. Nowlan realizes his use of local folk in the short story “The Execution of Clemmie Lake” much more effectively; the gossipy nature of the inhabitants of Larchmont, New Brunswick, who watch Clemmie hang twice because the rope breaks once, and who whisper “Clemmie messed in his pants when his neck broke” — the writer cauterizes in authoritative fashion that gains perspective when he retraces the story of the unfortunate victim through eye-witness accounts of his hanging on October 18, 1923. Not that Nowlan’s fascination with the insecurity which gives rise to this need for gossip really diminishes in

his later work, but the treatment of it in *Bread, Wine and Salt* (1967) proves more consequential. "Small Town Small Talk", by its title, foreshadows a measure of irony that articulates in a few lines the isolation of two people, so the dreary procession of busybody verse as in *Under the Ice* vanishes; or from the same volume, "Every Man Owes God a Death", the irony expressed by the crafty narrator-cum-gossip again provides a double edge when the attempt to construe his landlady's niche in capitalism makes universal the shame peculiar to them both as Calvinists. With *Bread, Wine and Salt* Nowlan commands a hearing with such poems as "Sailors", "O", "Footsteps in the Dark", and "The Fresh-Ploughed Hill" where, instead of petering out, his images accelerate sufficiently to spurt past the banal and overtake the significant.

The fresh-ploughed hill slopes down to the sky.
Therefore, the sower,
broadcasting his seed, runs
faster and faster.

Bounding like a stone
the skirts of his coat
straight out behind him.

See how he falls, clawing
at the earth —
nor will let go
but still clutches
dirt in his fists, rolling
into the bright depths of the sun.

I
N THE PREFACE to *The Things Which Are* (1962) Nowlan reminds himself to "Write the things which thou hast seen and the things which are" (The Revelation of St. John the Divine). Consequently one perceives in a good deal of his writing the importance he attaches to a theme like coming of age. As observed in "When Like the Tears of Clowns", a fearful encounter is responsible for the transition toward some measure of maturity and the presence of "A Night Hawk Fell With a Sound Like a Shudder" in the same volume, his first, leads one to suspect that it too traces unexpected growth. Here the poet feels suddenly "lonely and cold", foreseeing his own death perhaps, when the winged predator descends upon some field rodent. In Nowlan's third chapbook, *Wind in a Rocky Country* (1960), the poem "Partner-

ship” again picks up this image of the hawk and uses it to describe a boy who, taught by an old man “about mermaids”, “filches/ bay rum and tonic” for his teacher. The boy’s attainment of any maturity hovers ambiguously, however, because — only “half-certain he’s seen a star/ fall like a hawk and roll in the dooryard” — he senses no apprehension as does the figure in the previous poem, nothing to jar him from an adolescent and debilitating naïveté. Coming of age crops up in short stories like “Hurt”, “A Sick Call”, “In the Finland Woods” (all from *Miracle at Indian River*, 1968), and reappears trenchantly in the later poem, “The Wickedness of Peter Shannon”, where fourteen-year-old Peter suffers humiliating guilt for his masturbation. Here shame and inferences of an austere heritage obstruct the course of maturity by creating tension which adumbrates epiphany; but while the analogous poem “When Like the Tears of Clowns” emits a Calvinist flavour, this one echoes an Irish religious orthodoxy. With such exclamations by the boy as “Oh, God, God, God,” “ohhhhhh,/ Jesussss”, and “my cheeks/ burning as though Christ slapped them!” the poem establishes a cyclical guilt that nestles as deeply within Peter Shannon as within Stephen Dedalus. And the myth of Daedalus is not remote from at least one recent and personal poem by Nowlan.

“I, Icarus” recounts “a time when (he) could fly”, navigating himself through his bedroom window “above the pasture fence,/ above the clothesline, above the dark, haunted trees/ beyond the pasture.” Nevertheless the poet’s transcendence, an imaginative release accompanied by “music of flutes”, requires considerable effort for his flight outside. As a result the artist implies a falling-back at dawn into what he cannot overcome — as Icarus fell into the ocean when he flew too near the sun that melted his wings. The inside-outside motif, suggested here, carries through Nowlan’s poetry of the past decade, and receives an obvious statement in his first volume (as Milton Wilson noted, *The Canadian Forum*, June 1959) with such poems as “Sparrow Come in My Window”, where the outside which invites escape remains cut off by a window that isolates the narrator and the bird he wishes to share his loneliness within. This confining window image continues clear in later poems like “Warren Pryor”, “Party at Bannon Brook”, “Jane at Two”, and in “Wasp” where the poet discovers “a thorned phallus” inside his car windshield and — experiencing a “sudden pity/ for him, myself and every other being/ beating at unseen walls” — he rescues himself by grabbing the insect with his fingers and flinging it outside,

Like a hot coal
grasped in the naked hand!

Foolishly happy,
exhausted, licking my sore paw like a dog,
I sit here, thinking of glass
and the jokes it plays in the world.

The nature of glass makes it difficult to distinguish what is real, a difficulty observable in the second paragraph of "The Foreigner", a short story set in an asylum and indicating Nowlan's interest in the insane:

Every day we spend an hour in the exercise yard. The yard is bordered on three sides by a high board fence and on the fourth side by the red brick wall of the hospital. Things that will grow anywhere, grow here: daisies, dandelions, thistles. There is even a tree, a maple about twice as tall as a man. And we smell the earth instead of iodoform and lysol. But it does not seem that we are outdoors. It seems that we are in a huge room with a dirt floor and a window opening on the sky, such a room as one might find in a dream. And perhaps what we see is not the sky but a plate of tinted glass. How can we be sure, since we cannot reach it?

What escapes the entrapped patients here — what eludes the boy narrator in another story, "At the Edge of the Woods" — is a foothold in either the real world or the unreal. "To be a stranger is enough, to be a stranger/ in two worlds: that is the ultimate loneliness." Nowlan himself seeks familiarity with both worlds to understand better the real one, but its price exacts the shut-in seclusion required to create art.

While the confined sparrow of an earlier poem returns briefly in "Homecoming" ("a wild bird/ flying from room to room" in a deserted house with "the windows blind"), so all the birds vanish — together with the artistic inspiration they represent — from inside another house in "Poem".

A silence like a lizard on the tongue,
quiet that is not peace stalks through the mind,
searching for words in all the empty rooms,
birds that no wicker cages have confined.

Grim is the shadow of wanton despair,
icy the rooms where not a bird is crying.
Stop at the window, motionless as mute,
even the hawk may come, when you've ceased trying.

Here the repetitive hawk again suggests itself antithetical to life (this time imaginative life), while the possibility occurs of artistic fulfilment deliberately pur-

sued in an inside world. But for the artist this world must balance ideally with its counterpart (the outside): or else asceticism, a condition of calcified regionalism, will grip the poet — seen as Time Traveller in “The Eloi and The Morlocks” — as it has the squatters observed as Morlocks who “venture no farther/ than their murky doorways”, “shielding white faces” from the light. The hawk as one creature of prey bears close watching, but it is the Morlocks and their peculiar human severity that seem more to resemble those regional woodsmen who aim to chop down Stephen’s imagination, stomp all over his glass roses.

The inside may afford temporary relief, but inevitably this solace confirms loneliness: as it does for the Puritan whose abstemious condition within his “cubicle” contrasts keenly (if unsuccessfully) with the predatory beasts that roam beyond its walls (“The Rose and the Puritan”); for the poet who occasionally desires “a world no bigger than the coupling bodies/ of two clockless strangers” (“Sometimes”), but experiences “beginning pain” when passion subsides and his lover crowds him “toward the wall” (“Porch”); also for the woman who every morning salvages twigs from the night wind in order to warm her windy shack (“The Gift”); and even for the cat that instinctively enjoys “the crackling stove” then shortly “stiffens/ and shies away” from the outside winter — one of its eyes “a hideous crust of blood and pus” (“The Cat”). Nowlan’s regional sphere squats as an inherently unbalanced one where winter “that we share,/ shut out and young or shut away and old” (“New Brunswick”) bespeaks an existence not only lonely but precarious. His artistic appeal for harmony attempts to re-unite God and devil (“The Drunken Poet”); it proposes an inexorable search for the real world where security is not cramped but universal. Meanwhile this search, in the context of isolation, death, and redemption — the fundamental upshots of down-to-earth living — presupposes certain ironies.

Viewing a world close to the earth, as “Comparison” does, exposes its grotesqueness and judges its humanism with images that are violent.

Comparing pigs with cattle, Jack the butcher
says he likes cows and understands them. They
go where they’re sent and stand until they’re struck
by his great hammer, then bleed drowsily.

Pigs, on the other hand, disgust him; running,
darting and leaping and befouling him
with blood that spurts out of their backs because
they won’t accept the axe like gentlemen.

For Nowlan there are two ironies: (1) an ironic violence as displayed in this poem and another like "In Our Time", where a newspaper captions the kicking to death of a Congolese rebel, "*the shoe is on the other foot*"; as well as (2) an ironic humour which undercuts situations not violent themselves but still hostile to our credibility. In the short story "Miracle at Indian River", for instance, the author weaves a hilarious tale of how a puritanical pastor of the Fire-Baptized Tabernacle of the Living God takes it upon himself to allot marriage partners to those who refuse to acquiesce to more gentle persuasion. Or another story, "The Innermost One", hitting squarely at the recent penchant in North America for seeking out meditating monks of the Far East for spiritual inspiration: where we see Martin Rosenberg, the American poet who receives an audience with The Innermost One, "roughing out in his mind" the poem he will write of his encounter — until His Holiness asks Martin, since he is from California, whether he knows Larry, Moe, and Curly-Joe.

"Larry, Moe and Curly-Joe," echoed Martin, in bewilderment.

"They call themselves The Three Stooges," The Innermost One explained.

Obviously an extension of regional boundaries creates a sort of pop mythology that still permits humour the irony of local colour. "The Anatomy of Angels", for example, maintains that while angels of love songs are mere sprites, the seraphim "that up-ended/ Jacob had sturdy calves, moist hairy armpits,/ stout loins to serve the god whom she befriended". And who would suppose that an unattractive woman who avoids the indecent sun like the Morlocks, had the night before danced in a tent with "God Himself, the Old One," kissed the sweaty Christ — "the smell of wine and garlic on his breath" — and spoken "the language they speak in heaven!" as result of possession by the Holy Ghost ("Daughter of Zion")? Saving grace for his characters, apparently, leads often to the author's tongue-in-pen engagement with their eccentricities. Ironic overtones thus provide an individual like Francis who laughs insanely and wears winter clothes in the hot July sun ("Francis"), with a simple logic — "what keeps out the cold, she'll keep out the heat" — evidently required of those who would redeem sanity and reality from climatic extremes of their local microcosm.

Dedicated honestly and humbly to his art, equally at home in more than one *genre*, Alden Nowlan furnishes an unhip, thoroughly non-academic world with splashes of exquisite insight. A Grade 5 dropout, he has taught himself that the archetypal image ("oh, admit this, man, there's no point in poetry/ if you withhold the truth once you've come by it") is not necessarily a sacred

cow, but a local breed that he might wryly milk in order to construct a more truthful image of a rural

silence broken only
by the almost inaudible humming
of the flies rebuilding their world.

If I have emphasized his poetry at the expense of his short stories it is because themes attendant to both are illustrated more felicitously by the poems. Yet as a fiction stylist he discloses an equivalent delicacy and intuition, apparent upon a reading, say, of "Anointed with Oils" or "The Girl Who Went to Mexico". Of course his unashamed simplicity in everything he writes best accounts for the scale of his experience: a tide of magazine publications, seven books (three more in various stages), an already wide anthologizing — his work reveals relentless growth, while his regional qualities continue to endure. And these last do serve to remind a country often reluctant to acknowledge them, of the perspective of its heritage and the roots of its contemporaneity.