

# THE OLD FUTILITY OF ART

*Knister's Poetry*

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**M**OST CRITICAL STATEMENTS about Raymond Knister's verse insist upon the vividness of his portrayal of Ontario farm life and the imagist nature of many of his poems. Early in his career Robert Finch "thought highly of these bare unmusical imagist verses" (*Memoir* by Dorothy Livesay) and in *Canadian Literature No. 6* (Autumn 1960) Milton Wilson presents him as a "writer of pastorals and herald of imagism". There is no doubt that many of Knister's poems comply with what the imagists decreed in their famous manifesto was the best kind of verse, "hard and clear, never blurred and indefinite". In that key document of the imagist movement, *Speculations*, T. E. Hulme defined the new classicism in revolt against the sloppy romanticism of the verse of his day. This new verse had to be "strictly confined to the earthly and the definite", it had to be a poetry of "the light of ordinary day, never the light that never was on land or sea". Knister uses this hard precise manner in much of his poetry, which, as Leo Kennedy pointed out in *Canadian Forum* (September 1932), is a "bald expression of events" achieving its effects "without benefit of spangles". He singled out "Feed" as a good example; other poems using this straightforward objective imagist manner well are "The Hawk", "In The Rain

Sowing Oats" and this passage from "After Exile":

The corn like drunken grenadiers  
Topples tarnished  
Whispering  
At the hooting train.

Knister in his reviews of some long-forgotten volumes of poetry showed his concern for accuracy of observation and spare lean expression. He commended a poet for a "Spartan plainness which in itself is at least never a liability" (*Poetry*, October 1924), and he was suitably amazed when he found "nothing lush" in some poems about Hawaii (*Poetry*, May 1925).

In articles for various periodicals in the nineteen twenties Knister applied these ideas about poetry to some Canadian poets. He shows a keen appreciation of Lampman's poetry, but he complains that he (Lampman) did not always "keep his eye accurately on the object" (*Dalhousie Review*, October 1927). In reading this review, one can sense how Knister must have felt a certain affinity to some elements in Lampman's poetry. In particular, he insists on the importance of nature and the natural scene in Lampman's work:

Man was to turn to nature not because he was so much man that he was kin to all creation, but because he was tired, sick with being man, and desirous of rest and a forgetting within a serene impersonality, a soothing power to which he could moreover assign his own tempers.

Although Knister was not really a descriptive poet of Lampman's kind, there is a suggestion that Knister feels in the other poet the sense of a separation between man and nature. Knister's verse itself often suggests this lack of kinship between man and the natural creation. Man wrestles with the seemingly insurmountable problems set by nature, whereas the creatures of nature are undismayed and unperturbed by them. This is what creates the tension in Knister's best poetry, the poems in which he allows the details to speak for themselves, not those poems in which he brings in a more or less overt moral comment. It is a lack of tension, according to Knister, that kept Lampman from greatness; there was "lack of tension between the poet and his environment". Thus, Knister complains that, although Lampman intuitively felt the alienation of nature from man, that feeling remained external. The conflict is between rather abstract concepts of Man and Nature and Lampman himself never becomes a part of the tension.

In an article in *Queen's Quarterly* (May 1924), Knister makes the same kind

of statement about Wilfred Campbell. Here he complains of Campbell's "reluctance to concern himself with the personal and the immediate". This reluctance, in Knister's estimation, leads to a failure of imagination, and Campbell is categorized as an occasional poet interested in ornament and not truth:

We find Wilfred Campbell, unable to find a subject within himself, and compelled to take one from exterior nature and decorate it as best he might.

The true poet, then, according to Knister, looks into himself. As he says in the same article, "the subject is already within him, so that he merely allows this or that external circumstance to annotate it."

**F**ROM THESE CRITICAL WRITINGS we can see that the element Knister admired in poetry, the element that he would try to reproduce in his own verse, was the subject within annotated by external circumstance, with a tension, explicit or implied, holding the poem in equilibrium.

There is this kind of felt tension in Knister's best poetry, often suggested by the conflict between man and nature. In "Cross-bred Colt" the colt with its "fierceness of expression" faces the hired boy who "swung a clip to its muzzle". The poem ends with a sudden tense awareness:

It turned away and stood awhile,  
Ears pricked,  
Considering — the first contact with man —  
Or was it pure surprise?

The young colt in "The Colt" has more freedom and grace of movement than man, and the farmer's comment at the end of the poem, "Idle Colts! /Somehow nohow of any use!" emphasizes the world of difference between man and nature.

Horses often become symbols of the stoic pattern of nature. They always show an acceptance of their lives; there is no effort on their parts to change, but they nearly always emerge with character, as in the series of poems, "A Row of Stalls", and with a sense of victory, as in "A Road", where in the deadness of winter all that shows above the ridges is "the breathmist of a horse", and man's dwellings are reduced to something "infinitely tiny, inappraisably lonely". Knister applies the word "patient" to the horses in "The Plowman" and "Lake Harvest" and in both these poems, the horse's calm acceptance is contrasted to man's labour,

which often seems so futile in most of Knister's poetry. The horses seek no meaning beyond themselves, beyond their own existence:

We are not done with toil:  
 Let rain work in these hours,  
 Wind in night's hours,  
 We with the sun together  
 Tomorrow.

(“Stable Talk”.)

Is their patience a lesson for man? Must man merely accept his labour and not be troubled by extraneous thought? In “In The Rain, Sowing Oats” the horses accept the pain and suffering of their labour without any comment, whereas the man, bothered by the bad weather and the hard work, plagues himself with thoughts about the horses eating too much grain and thoughts of his own supper.

This implied acceptance of life by the horses does not mean that their world is still, calm and lifeless. Nature is constantly on the move in Knister's verse. Indeed, this is one of man's great burdens: he can never fix nature, make something permanent. Knister's vision of nature is one of constant change; man has a very precarious grasp of the world. There is almost an element of the menace of natural objects in many of Knister's poems. Mud slithers, trees wait expectant, winds are not to be trusted for they are gentle and strong, “erratically so steady” (“Night Walk”), the hawk moves “against a grimy and tattered/Sky” coming from “trembling tiny forests/With the steel of your wings”.

By the motion and menace man is almost overwhelmed and submerged. The succession of bleak details of continuance in “Reverie: The Orchard on the Slope” suggests no place for man. The snow in “Snowfall” almost obliterates the desire for life, lulling “the fever/with pale bright sleep”, and the succumbing to these natural forces becomes more explicit in “October Stars”.

So far, much of what has been said about Knister could be applied to other poets who see nature as being alien to man. Other poets have suggested man's impermanence and transitory stay in the natural scheme. Poetry has often been used to suggest man's futile attempts to impose order on a constantly shifting landscape and to state that this futility arises because man does not have the patience or stoicism to accept the fact that he is working with, trying to arrange a pattern in his life with recalcitrant material. Looked at in this way, Knister's poetry does not seem very individual, apart from an occasional exactness of

observation. Is this all there is in Knister's meagre collected poetry? What has happened to "the subject within himself"? Does Knister fail in his own poetry to apply the rigorous demands he makes of Campbell, to make the external circumstances annotate "the subject within himself"?

The answer lies, I think, in the poem, "Moments When I'm Feeling Poems". In this poem there is a conflict between the poet's vision and the inadequacy of language to express that vision. This is the "old futility of art." Words always distort the poet's vision; the people who accept this inadequacy of language are "the ladies and the lords/Of life", for they "feel/No call to blight that sense with words".

Doesn't this lead us back to the essential problem of Imagism? The Imagists believed that an image is, in Pound's definition, "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time". This dictum led to their insistence on the short poem as the only valid kind of poetry. A poem, in these terms, is a short but weighty summary of a compelling experience, an attempt to impose order on a vast disorder of material. Poets, whose concern is with this kind of reduction to essentials, are often too petrified to make the attempt. Imagism lost its force almost as soon as imagistic poetry was committed to paper. All those connected with imagism who have continued to write have left behind the rigorous demands of the movement. Emily Dickinson, attempting much the same kind of crystallization of experience in images, recognized the problem in one of her letters: "What a hazard an accent is! When I think of the hearts it has scuttled and sunk, I almost fear to lift my hand to so much as punctuation." She seems to substantiate what Knister is driving at in "Moments When I am Feeling Poems", for, if a poet's vision is to be crystallized, it may ultimately mean that silence is the best poetry, or in Emily Dickinson's words:

The words the happy say  
Are paltry melody  
But those the silent feel  
Are beautiful.

Is poetry, then, "the subject within" that the external circumstance of nature and farming annotates in Knister's poetry? Does Knister recognize within himself the impossibility of communicating his vision? Are the voices of nature urging the poet to discover the ultimate language or are they merely teasing him with the limitations of language? In "Reply to August", the night speaks:

The room does not know it has heard

But I know,  
My heart listening, wild with the word  
Murmured too low.

If he had the freedom of nature (and by the analogy I have suggested) the real freedom of language, he would be able to sing joyously, as he suggests in "Wind's Way". In "March Wind," a poem included as a footnote in Dorothy Livesay's memoir, it seems that the trees are crying to be unchained by the wind. By analogy, although the poem is not a very good one, as Knister himself recognized, the plea is for an unchaining of the poetic vision by the force of language.

This analogy is further emphasized by the fact that all these poems are much more regular. There is rhyme and a much more consistent metrical arrangement in them. It is as if Knister is denying the validity of the imagist techniques and has had to revert to more traditional forms to express his personal vision of the recalcitrant nature of language. It is also significant that this group of poems is written from the personal point of view. They are all in the first person in order to emphasize that this is the real "subject within" of his poetry.

Thus, in the poem, "Boy Remembers in the Field", there is the usual, rather bleak landscape. Here, then, is the barrenness of language, but its final treachery may be that it seems to offer eventual success:

If any voice called, I would hear?  
It has been the same before.  
Soil glistens, the furrow rolls, sleet shifts, brightens.

Again, although there is no regular metre, the "I" intrudes again. The promise of success pushes the poet on, makes him continue his "scrabbling in soil/And mean sorrows and satisfactions." ("A Road").

ONLY ONCE OR TWICE does Knister speak explicitly about the problems of poetic expression and the discrepancy between the felt experience and what eventually finds its way on to the page. He suggests in the foreword he originally intended for his selected poems, *Windfall for Cider*, that poetry should attempt to set the world before people, even though the poet recognizes the essential separation between emotion and actual expression:

Birds and flowers and dreams are real as sweating men and swilling pigs. But the feeling about them is not always so real, any more, when it gets into words.

He suggests this idea in "After Exile". The comment comes after he has given an objective view of the passing landscape seen from a train, and it is at this point that the "I" first occurs:

(It is not at no cost I see it all,  
See a simple and quaint pattern  
Like the water-mark in this paper,  
There if you like, or if you forget,  
Not there,

It is the same)

The farmer imposing order on his land is the poet imposing order on his materials, but always the material is unwieldy. It cannot be expressed, because language is inadequate. Yet the farmer continually cultivates, hoping by ploughing to gain new growth from his land and to bury his old unfulfilled desires, as Knister implies by the metrical, rhymed, first person "Plowman's Song":

Turn under, plow  
My trouble;  
Turn under griefs  
And stubble.

If my analogy is correct, "The Plowman", like Pratt's "Seagulls", is a poem about the poetic process. The poet's "unappeased" quest is for the expression of reality, for the complete harmony of felt experience and poetic expression, "the ultimate unflawed turning". The image of the plowman surely is the image of the poet, always returning, always expectant, trying something new, never looking backward.

Is this the reason that ultimately long before his death Knister gave up poetry? Did he believe that all his attempts at poetry would necessarily be flawed? Does this explain the concentration on short stories and novels in the last few years of his life?

In her memoir about Knister, Dorothy Livesay mentions that just before his death Knister was reading Rilke and she quotes one of Knister's favourite passages from that poet:

Verses are not sensations, as people think — they are experiences. For the sake

of a single verse one must see many towns, men and things, one must know the animals, one must feel how the birds fly, and in what way the little flowers open in the morning.

Rilke was also a poet who was constantly aware of the limitations of language and the separation of the external circumstance to be used to annotate “the subject within”. Knister, I feel sure, would have approved wholeheartedly of another passage from the same book by Rilke. This is Rilke’s description of a poet’s work:

Then you set about that unexampled act of violence; your work, more and impatiently, more and more despairingly, sought among visible things equivalent for the vision within.

It is only in the light of this kind of description and in the parallels between poetry and farming that I have suggested in this article that the true value of Knister’s poetry can be appreciated. And it is only in this sense that Dorothy Livesay’s remark about Knister’s farm country and his intense experience of it can be understood. Poetry/farming is “the central column of his thought”.

