

# THE BIRD OF HEAVENLY AIRS

## *Thematic Strains in Douglas Le Pan's Poetry*

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**I**F T. S. ELIOT'S THEORY is valid — “that genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood”<sup>1</sup> — then Douglas Le Pan is one of Canada's most “genuine” poets. A merely casual reading of either *The Wounded Prince*<sup>2</sup> or *The Net and the Sword*<sup>3</sup> leaves the reader feeling that he has experienced the immense grandeur and tragedy of human existence, and a study of Mr. Le Pan's poetry moves one to believe — with the historian Arnold Toynbee — that in this world are some privileged few who attain to sublime heights of universal compassion, and that in the translation of that compassion into deliberate action, is an intense suffering and martyrdom that rivals the anguish of a Christ crucified.

The conjunction of the name of the poet Le Pan, with that of the historian Toynbee, is not incidental. It is rather the theme of this exposition that an understanding of many of the ideas which underlie Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*,<sup>4</sup> will lead to a fuller understanding and appreciation of the poetry of Douglas Le Pan.

Much of Mr. Le Pan's poetry concerns itself with the heroic, that is, with those rare personalities who actively respond to the challenge which a life lived *for* humanity brings. Thus, “to dive for a nimbus on the sea-floor,” says this poet, “calls for a plucky steeplejack,” a “dolphin-hearted journeyman,” or even “daring's virtuoso” (*NS*, p. 34). And it is the destiny of these courageous and creative individuals to show the way for the masses of humanity: the “bleary hordes . . . afraid to wake” to a nimbus clutched in a hero's hand; the pale sophisticate who leers a set grin over his “weather-beaten mask,” so that he not only “sees everything” but “has the air of having seen it all before,” as described in *Image of*

*Silenus* (*WP*, p. 36). This mass-man of the grey flannel mind, haloed in his “man-made twilight,” has all but lost the capacity to marvel at “the great blue heron” who is:

unmistakeably a wonder,  
Unmistakeably blue among the indistinguishable limbs and boughs.

This heron, “a great bird/With wings stretched wide as love”, also the “stranger” in *The Nimbus* who will “plunder the mind’s aerial cages,” and the “bird of heavenly airs” who is *The Wounded Prince* — these are the precious few, the singular beings who freely and dynamically take up all the challenges in living; who *seek* a face to face encounter with life’s realities, no matter how bitter; and who *crave* personal involvement rather than escape. These are the dedicated few who live and die for their ideals. Such is the controlling motif which touches much of Le Pan’s poetry.

Something of this heroic approach to living may be found, too, in Arnold Toynbee’s *A Study of History*. In fact, to touch upon some of this historian’s views may help to illuminate, for the reader, the particular sort of heroism with which Mr. Le Pan is concerned.

Near the beginning of Chapter Five Toynbee says: “an encounter between two superhuman personalities is the plot of some of the greatest dramas that the human imagination has conceived” (p. 60). One of the central themes of Toynbee’s philosophy of history rests in this word “encounter”. In his terms, an encounter is a response to a challenge. Where society is confronted by problems, “the presentation of each problem is a challenge to undergo an ordeal” (p. 62), for out of encounter comes creation. Laying stress upon *individual* response to challenge, Toynbee quotes the following passage by Henri Bergson to amplify his theme:

Just as men of genius have been found to push back the bounds of human intelligence . . . so there have arisen privileged souls who have felt themselves related to all souls . . . and have addressed themselves to humanity in general in an élan of love. The apparition of each of these souls has been like the creation of a new species composed of one unique individual (p. 212).

It is this sort of willing commitment which informs Mr. Le Pan’s heroes. In his *Portrait of a Young Man* (*WP*, p. 7), says Le Pan, “He, like Ulysses, his own thongs commanded.” In *Lines for a Combatant* (*NS*, p. 23) he speaks of “the fruition that blooms around elected action.” In the same poem the concept of selfless dedication is emphasized:

having made my peace from brittleness,  
 To the air committed ambition, expectation,  
 My soul, even, that flickers above me fitfully  
 I wait here in the olive-grove . . . "to die,  
 To die so long as it is in the light."

This theme is more concentrated and more graphically portrayed in the poem *The Net and the Sword* (NS, p. 20).

Who could dispute his choice  
 That in the nets and toils of violence  
 Strangled his leafing voice  
 Enforced his own compassionate heart to silence,  
 Hunted no more to find the untangling word  
 And took a short, straight sword?

Here, the ancient Roman arena symbolically represents the modern battlefield. Of the two gladiators, one holds the net which entangles — this signifies the complexities of warfare where all is "littered/And looped with telephone wires, tank-traps, mine fields,/Twining about . . . ." The second gladiator in this encounter is the young soldier who, with clear-eyed purpose, *chooses* to be entangled in this mesh of war by taking up a "short, straight sword". The very bluntness of Le Pan's expression stresses the lad's immaculate decision. He consciously steels himself for combat by stifling his "compassionate heart to silence". He no longer seeks escape by an "untangling word" that could detach him from the world's problems. Rather, with single-purposed "eyes thrust concentrated and austere", he freely elects "among the sun's bright retinue" to die. In dedicating himself at least to a partial fulfilment of peace, he hopes for a new growth of civilization. Certainly, he himself does not expect to put an end to war — "to strike the vitals of the knotted cloud" — but he knows that his "smooth as silk ferocity" translated into action will cut away some of the ropes in the web of war and "at least let in the sun", a symbol of enlightenment and growth. Toynbee, who also stresses individual response to social challenge, may cast further light on the complexity of Mr. Le Pan's poetry when he states in his philosophy of history that essentially the *part*, not the *whole*, is at stake; yet, adds Toynbee, "the chances and changes to which the part is exposed cannot conceivably leave the whole unaffected" (p. 65). Each man then, may choose his dynamic role in the vast amphitheatre of the world.

On the other hand, in *Finale* (WP, p. 34), Mr. Le Pan depicts several forms

of insular existence: "the spy . . . living in a perpetual cellar", "the criminal, working at night", and "even the lovers living on their island". But, says Le Pan, this attempt to cut oneself off from the ordinary life of society cannot long continue, for "always the path leads back". Somewhere, somehow, contact with society is made, even against the escapist's will. His return may seem to offer no more than "dust, heat, noise" — but out of this the creative genius will fashion a new world. It may be enlightening to recall, at this point, Toynbee's theory that non-detachment from the affairs of the world is a positive humane principle, as opposed to that of escapism or isolationism which repudiates humanity. Still, Toynbee does uphold a principle of *temporary* withdrawal and return. The creative personality may withdraw from society in order "to realize powers within himself which might have remained dormant if he had not been released for the time being from his social toils and trammels" (p. 217). Such privileged personalities, following the path of mysticism pass first out of action into ecstasy but, unlike the Buddhist mystic, they do not remain in a state of abstract contemplation — of Nirvana — but rather pass once more out of ecstasy into action on a newer and higher level. Or, as Mr. Le Pan puts it, once returned from the escapist world of "the long voluptuous silence", that world which hears its "bird-calls issuing from the arras of a dream", the individual must face again the world of "steel-bright necessity". Here, says Le Pan, the creative person operates on

those notes

That sound so improbable, to weld a music like a  
 school-boy's song,  
 Out of those metals to hammer, to conquer, the  
 new and strenuous song.

A slight variation of the same theme is evident in *Canoe-Trip* (*WP*, p. 13). Here, a brief escape to the woods and streams of northern Canada results in

crooked nerves made straight,  
 The fracture cured no doctor could correct.  
 The hand and mind, reknit, stand whole for work.

Once the person is re-animated, says the author, "content, we face again the complex task". This return to creative activity seems to follow a sort of spiritual transfiguration which, in Toynbee's words "transcends the earthly life of man without ceasing to include it" (p. 439). The idea of a "transcendent" being in fierce contact with earthly reality is depicted in Le Pan's poem *Angels and Artificers* (*WP*, p. 30). Here, "the fiery artificers" work to create a perfect civilization,

Hammering it into curious shapes, annealing, burnishing,  
 Intent about the smithy, blowing it to a pitch  
 Of their quick zeal. Their breath was ardent, flickering  
 A Pentecost that played about the senseless mass  
 And conquered it. But like a lover.

The comparison of the breath of these creative individuals to a "Pentecost" suggests the Christian concept of a spiritually transforming love which informed Christ's disciples with a desire to serve mankind. Toynbee expresses this love-service idea in the following words: "the faculty which we shall think of first as being common to man and God will be one which the philosophers wish to mortify and that is the faculty of love" (p. 530). Further on he says: "the terminus is the Kingdom of God; and this omnipresent Kingdom calls for service from its citizens on Earth here and now" (p. 531). The awareness that love bears a heavy burden in its total commitment to one's fellow man is expressed by Le Pan in *Elegy in the Romagna* (NS, p. 47).

Their cries are mine,  
 Their miseries thrill through my impoverished nerves,  
 People the dungeon of my bowels with fancies.

Toynbee goes so far as to state that such a selflessly creative love operates in strain and tension which involves suffering and even a Christ-like martyrdom. Similarly, referring to *A Fallen Prophet* (WP, p. 32) Le Pan declares:

Pain was your vocation and achievement,  
 The restless sea your anthemed citadel.  
 But when the waters have gone over you,  
 Flashing shines still your dying, ransomed gift.

In *Image of Silenus* (WP, p. 36), when the superficial mask opens to reveal the hidden "figures of desire" we see that,

. . . other figures, neither gold nor silver,  
 Tell of the ultimate wish to do and suffer.

In *Reconnaissance in Early Light* (NS, p. 16) the young officer in command is described as one of these transfigured leaders of men,

His gaze alone is unperplexed,  
 He sips from this thin air some sacred word.

Through all his veins the sacrament of danger,  
 Discovering secret fires, runs riot.

Again, it is the wounded prince who endures a terrible humiliation from the stupid indifference of the mass man wasting in oceans of sludge. So, too, the great heron with wings "stretched wide as love" symbolizes the crucifixion of those rare and marvellous prophets in every age who are "killed" by the unfeeling, unvisionary mob. It is for such reasons that Le Pan pleads, in *The Nimbus* (NS, p. 34):

Stranger, reconquer the source of feeling  
 For an anxious people's sake.

**T**HERE IS GREAT NOBILITY of mind and character in a man who dedicates himself to the betterment of civilization; but this borrows a touch of the sublime when one realizes that this uncompromising, total dedication, is for an ideal which at best is a hazardous risk, with the odds stacked impressively against success. In conveying this spirit of daring involved in such a venture, Toynebee interprets the words of Faust to Mephistopheles after their pledge is made: "in attempting this I am aware that I am leaving safety behind me. Yet, for the sake of the possibility of achievement, I will take the risk of a fall and destruction" (pp. 64-65). The historian also refers to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden as the result of a similar risk: "the Fall, in response to the temptation to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, symbolizes the acceptance of a challenge to abandon this achieved integration and to venture upon a fresh differentiation out of which a fresh integration may — or may not — arise" (p. 65). The combination of tragedy and grandeur in these statements is truly overwhelming. How heroic is he who stakes his all on so perilous a speculation! There is moving pathos in the suffering of one such dedicated soul in Le Pan's poem, *One of the Regiment* (WP, p. 26).

No past, no future  
 That he can imagine. The fiery fracture  
 Has snapped that armour off and left his bare  
 Inflexible, dark frown to pluck and stare  
 For some suspected rumour that the brightness sheds  
 Above the fruit-trees and the peasants' heads

In this serene, consuming lustrousness  
Where trumpet-tongues have died, and all success.

This theme is also emphasized in *Lines for a Combatant* (NS, p. 23).

Apprehension of an improbable event  
· · · · ·  
Has offered my marrow and the gristle in my eye  
To speculation.

The soldier's "speculation" is that a

                    fruition that blows around elected action  
Will cultivate the barbarous heavens with thin scions  
Of a blossoming fiction.

A negative expression of this theme is seen in the paltry puppet-minds of those images of Silenus who lament in their blind despair, "*What if the promise were puffs of air?*" and who come to *believe* that the bird which they *actually saw* was "only a blue mirage" (WP, p. 36).

It is a cause for wonder, how any individual — transfigured or not — could wager so much, against so tremendous a risk. Toynbee suggests that the response of genius is possible because it seeks what is universal and eternal, rather than what is local and particular; and furthermore, that this is rendered possible by an awakened sense of the unity of all things. He says, "the painfully perturbing dissolution of familiar forms, which suggests to weaker spirits that the ultimate reality is nothing but a chaos, may reveal to a steadier and more spiritual vision the truth that the flickering film of the phenomenal world is an illusion which cannot obscure the eternal unity that lies beneath it" (p. 495). Such a unity, "broadens and deepens as the vision expands from the unity of mankind, through the unity of the cosmos, to embrace the unity of God" (p. 431). Le Pan interprets the unity of mankind beautifully in his poem, *Field of Battle* (NS, p. 31), where the soldier integrates the humane purpose of his life in a crumbling world, to that of Christ crucified.

Estranged from me — but yet you are not strange,  
I see humanity as the wound you bear  
Cleft in your side and mine uniting us.

At times there occurs an awareness of the temporary disruption of unity in the cosmos, as in Le Pan's *Elegy in the Romagna* (NS, p. 57) where the poet takes

a lesson from a painfully industrious spider.

Still the slow spider weaves.  
And so make to trial. To imitate the spider,  
From our unravelled tissues,  
To spin an intellectual thread, no more  
Mercurial nor more pure than this so precious crew,  
That mounting, mounting, breaking, respun, as  
thin  
As starlight, perhaps at last might clasp the  
upper air  
And there restore relation and identity.

But it is in *Tuscan Villa* (*NS*, p. 7) that war, chaos, and destruction are seen as a veritable *part* of the total unity. Le Pan speaks of that perpetual human fire that one moment in history builds castles and at another, burns castles. The soldier, “too tightly closed in a luxury of flame”, fails to see or understand that his life-giving role shares in an almost sacramental beauty. Then too, the deep awareness of the unity of everything in God is focussed in the same poem. Here, during a lull in battle, the author surveys the physical signs of the destruction of a civilization, a destruction which he has helped to “create”, and yet he is moved to say:

Surely this is not out of God’s grace,  
Where soldiers and a dying tower are lapped in peace.

So much for those heroes who meet life’s challenge in dedicated, personal encounter. There are also those who fail to respond either to the challenge of environment, or to the challenge from within. In *Elegy in the Romagna* (*NS*, p. 47) Le Pan depicts the other soldiers around him who fail to see the unity in chaos, and so cannot perfectly adjust to their environment.

Strand after strand I hear  
Phrase after phrase blown one way by the  
muffled wind.  
And so the air is peopled. One breathes, “I’ve  
seen too much.”  
Another, “Let me be lucky and be killed.”

The failure to respond to the challenge from within is best seen in *Image of Silenus* (*WP*, p. 36). Here, the “inner city, the city of phantoms” behind the mask, is the unseen, inner man where all the potentialities, all the aspirations of a human being have been denied fruition. These human beings of miniature heroics exist,



debased, in a world of wishful thinking. The inhabitants of their minds are only “the shrunken figures of desire”; they are unreal in so far as they represent vicarious living never to be realized in the objective world.

The runner here is always first to break the tape,  
 The infant Hercules compels the snake,  
 The surgeon cuts the flesh to an exquisite thinness,  
 The climber stands triumphant over Everest.

This is non-fulfilment: a sick feasting upon ephemeral fancies and anaemic hopes. These are the mass men, “animal, inarticulate”, who — merely existing in a mechanical and materialistic civilization — “are souls underground, buried under miles of brick” in “the real and suffering city” to be seen from any “railway viaduct”.

They are rows of jostling seeds,  
 Planted too close, unlikely to come to maturity.

They guard their nonentity, their death and despair, by that “guiling glass”, the “invisible barrier” of unmoved, inanimate faces where, sophisticated, “the mask grins again”. It is one of Toynbee’s theories that “in the Macrocosm growth reveals itself as a progressive mastery over the external environment; in the Microcosm as a progressive self-determination or self-articulation” (p. 189). Thus, if there is no articulation, there is no growth; there is only

A ground swell continually making for the shores of speech  
 And never arriving.

There is only stagnation and spiritual death. An image of Silenus.

The stagnation of the individual mind in Le Pan’s *Image of Silenus* is magnified in *Tuscan Villa* (NS, p. 7) to encompass the aridity of an entire society. The villa itself is the symbol of the decadence of an opulent culture. Its paralytic stupor is vividly depicted in the second stanza where it is

now too old, too torpid  
 To care. Explosions seep through the thick walls as rumours.  
 What little is left of the villa’s heart beats slow,  
 Integuments hardening inwards, all orifices  
 Closing. Daydreaming towards its end.

Insularity from events in the external world is an unmistakable sign of that stasis which Toynbee considers in his concept of the breakdown of civilization. This phenomenon occurs when a civilization is still alive, but does not grow. It rather

lives on the memory of some attainment in the past. It is an arid civilization caught in a moment of stasis. Toynbee, too, has this to say: "a civilization that has become the victim of a successful intrusion has already in fact broken down internally and is no longer in a state of growth" (p. 245). Mr. Le Pan, in *Tuscan Villa*, expresses his consciousness of the internal decay of a society when he questions:

Was there some vileness lurking understairs,  
Infection curled in the bud before it flowered,  
That brought this dreadful cleansing on the house?

The answer is given in the succeeding lines.

And in the bowels of the house clot deadly humours,  
The surfeit of garlanded years kept locked in the dark,  
Furs, faience, crystal, silver, jewels,  
A fistula soon to be broken in exquisite riot.  
Death, finally. The dark cornucopia  
Where the patron past dropped treasure lavishly,  
Is corrupted by its own confined effulgence.

Thus, the death of a whole society is a form of suicide. Still time, historicity, motion in life, according to Mr. Le Pan, is cyclical. A continuous pattern of death and resurrection establishes itself as the underlying unity in the life of individuals, of nations, and even of entire civilizations. The laying waste of Tuscan Italy at different times in history, whether by Hun, Visigoth, or Canadian, is all one in Mr. Le Pan's sweeping view. It is a "dreadful cleansing" of internal decay, a necessary and almost sacramental purification in the human situation. A similar tone of optimism can be found in Toynbee's philosophy of history for specific reasons which may help clarify our understanding of Mr. Le Pan's comprehensive view of life. To Toynbee it is *not inevitable* that a civilization will disintegrate, for growth depends on whether "the divine spark of creative power is still alive" (p. 254) in inspired individuals or minority groups; then "breakdown" may not occur. Rather, it is more inevitable that, once the old culture disintegrates, a new society will be born. Such a confidence in creation out of decay threads its way as a thematic motif throughout Mr. Le Pan's poetry. Consider, for example, the prophetic final stanza of *Tuscan Villa*:

Winds veer  
And the weathervane veers  
And the instruments are packed away.

But the crown with diaphanous veils  
 Of fire  
 Over the tower  
 And the trampled fields prevails  
 And will prevail that far-off day  
 When other towers are circled with mild birds.

Beneath the cyclic disturbance from peace to war, and from decay to regeneration — as symbolized in the veering winds — is an eternal harmony which “prevails” now (though obscurely concealed behind a veil of chaotic war), and “will prevail that far-off day” when peace will crown the world again. The creative evolution of society moves steadily forward so long as there is a “wounded prince”, a “bird of heavenly airs” who, though

Impaled, sings on;  
 Will not disown its fettering crest and crown;

So that what never could be dreamt of has been made.

**T**HIS POET, LE PAN, is by choice a passionate pilgrim through his world, and his poetry bespeaks a man unafraid of passion in a literary era marked by much cold and chromium-plated verse which, one fears, is far too often assembled by the century’s mechanical brides. Mr. Le Pan may well feel alien in an age “without a mythology” since he possesses so dynamic and purposeful a myth himself. Perhaps this is partly why his poetry is unique, for in a very real sense these poems represent that land which only “the passionate man must travel”. The true humanist, the individual *engagé*, is rare in any age, and precious. Mr. Le Pan is no Silenus (*WP*, p. 36). He will not gather protectively about him a goat’s hide as Adam did, his second skin. Nor will he carry the sophisticate’s “weather-beaten mask” before his face: the blasé, insensitive “mask that sees everything, / That has the air of having seen it all before”, the mask which denies man’s human sense of wonder; the mask whose

strained grin has been rivered by marks of rain  
 Since first it was set up in the garden; it is not so bright now  
 As when it left the hands of the makers.

This is the mask of the common man which only occasionally and “unaccountably

opens" to reveal an "ill-assorted choir": Dionysus, Christopher, Francis, Apollo, Aphrodite, Hamlet, and Oedipus. These are vicariously worshipped midgets, captive aspirations imprisoned in the mass-man's mind but never brought to fruition. Therefore, they are "not heroic, filling all the sky" like the "great bird/ With wings stretched wide as love". They are "miniatures rather, toys in a toy shop window". This ravaged mask of Silenus hides the "inner city" of man's mind. It is merely a "city of phantoms".

Mr. Le Pan, then, is no Silenus. He is, however, "like one of the images of Silenus" in the way in which Alcibiades used that figure to describe Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*.<sup>5</sup> It is, in fact, from this classic that Le Pan draws the title and epigraph for his poem, *Image of Silenus*. Evidently part of this Canadian poet's function is to reveal, like Socrates, what Alcibiades calls "the wants of those who have need of gods and mysteries" (p. 177), and this, according to Le Pan, in a country which lacks a mythology. Perhaps it is significant that Douglas Le Pan often portrays stasis of mind as Canadian muskeg or "palsied swamp" (*NS*, p. 34), not as desert. Again, as Alcibiades said of Socrates, his very "words are like the images of Silenus which open" (p. 184), and, "he who opens . . . and sees what is within will find . . . words which have a meaning to them . . . of the widest comprehension . . ." (p.185). Alcibiades adds, "when I opened him, and looked within at his serious purpose, I saw in him divine and golden images of . . . fascinating beauty . . ." (p. 178). In experiencing rightly the richly textured poetry of Mr. Le Pan, the reader may respond in much the same way as Alcibiades to Socrates. He may sense too, the power of "poetic incarnation" whereby "word", somehow, has become "flesh", and poetry itself an expression of love for humanity.

One might well borrow Mr. Le Pan's words from *The Nimbus* (*NS*, p. 34) to indicate that in his own poetic way he comes "With the nimbus in [his] fist," and swims

from the foundered sunburst's roar  
With lost treasure on his back.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot, quoted by F. R. Leavis in *New Bearings in English Literature* (London, 1950), n. 1, p. 112.
- <sup>2</sup> Douglas Le Pan, *The Wounded Prince* (London, 1948); hereafter cited in the text as *WP*.

- <sup>3</sup> Douglas Le Pan, *The Net and the Sword* (Toronto, 1953); hereafter cited in the text as *NS*.
- <sup>4</sup> Citations from Toynbee in the text are to *A Study of History*, abridged edition of vols. I-VI by D. C. Somervell (Oxford, 1947).
- <sup>5</sup> Citations from Plato's *Symposium* refer to the text in *The Portable Plato*, ed. by Scott Buchanan (New York, 1948).

