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THE CANADIAN LANDSCAPE THROUGH POETRY

VOLUM I



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According to Henry Kreisel, these sudden eruptions of violence prove that when the self is choked by physical and emotional restrictions it finds unsuspected outlets to relieve internal pressures. Kreisel adds that, in such cases, the individual is defeated by the same forces he has so eagerly tried to suppress:

*It is not surprising that there should be sudden eruptions and that the passions, long suppressed, should burst violently into the open and threaten the framework that was meant to contain them. (*4)*

This contemporary Canadian writer and critic also remarks that such violent manifestations bred by repression are generally exploited by novelists who find in illicit love affairs and their dramatic consequences a frame to sustain their plots.

In prairie poetry, however, violence is often conveyed through poems that describe how an individual, who may be a child, takes delight in inflicting pain and suffering on

some other living creature, generally an animal. On the surface, these poems are cruel stories that are immediately felt and understood. Beneath the surface, but always suggested and imaged by it, is the solitude of the prairie and its life-constricting codes.

**3.1.- FLOWERS OF BLOOD: PATRICK
LANE**

Patrick Lane is one of the Canadian artists who have most powerfully conveyed the idea that the apparent monotony of the prairie landscape and the puritan decorum of its society hide a convulsive reality which is ultimately a reflection of the cruelty and violence that pervade modern society.

As Jean Mallinson points out, the method used by Lane to explore the darkest forces buried in the human psyche and the situations

in which they are likely to emerge is emblematic. Mallinson also reminds us that:

*The emblem is a figure which concentrates meaning: often a small fiction or tableau, it may imitate narrative, but its function is not to be narrative, to go from here to there, but to be exemplary, to arouse a question or to suggest a conclusion. (*5)*

The emblem stories used by Patrick Lane may be divided into three groups. The first and most important one, considering the number of poems it contains, includes pieces that describe how a human being tortures and kills an animal with appalling sadism. The second group gathers compositions that highlight man's viciousness to man with equal force and directness and the third group takes the reader to the animal world where he finds the same pattern of domination and subjection and its urge for survival which, inevitably, involves the need to destroy. The intended correspondences between man and beast soon become evident. By likening the human world to the animal one, Patrick Lane reminds us that

violence pervades the life of all existing creatures. This technique also helps him highlight man's bestial component which not only manifests itself in extreme situations such as war but also in the apparently quiet flow of everyday life.

However, the poet's message is much more than a reminder of man's destructive vein. The interest of Lane's poetry also lies in the analysis he makes of the reasons for man's cruel and violent actions and in the compassionate attitude he adopts towards this reality. Lane is particularly understanding about those who, wrecked by life, strike back with extreme brutality trying to destroy whatever they have at hand. Thus, what Patrick Lane is ultimately saying through his emblematic stories is that man is no less a victim than the creatures he attacks. Like them, he is extremely fragile and vulnerable and is often unable to oppose resistance to destructive forces much greater than his own

and against which his chances are less than marginal.

In the poetry of Patrick Lane these forces stand for different realities. Sometimes, they represent political tyranny and social injustice as in the case of Lane's poems about the lives of outcasts in the South American countries he visited. "The Children of Bogota", for example, is a bitter attack against the callousness of modern society and also a reminder that to be a witness is not to be innocent:

*The first thing to understand, Manuel says,
is that they're not children. Don't start feeling
sorry for them. There are five thousands roaming
the streets of this city.*

(...)

Children? See those two in the gutter

*behind that stall? I saw them put out
the eyes of a dog with thorns because
it barked at them. Tomorrow it could be you.*

(...)

*In five years they'll be men and tired of killing
dogs. And when that happens you'll be the first
to cheer when the carabinieri shoot them down. (*6)*

On other occasions, the destructive forces which are so strongly felt in this poem refer to the prairie as a land that, far from being a garden under man's tillage, is a harsh and oppressive environment that tyrannizes its dwellers and, consequently, breeds violence and emotional unrest. In all cases, however, the poet emphasises fragility and vulnerability, two ideas which, together with cruelty and violence are the dominant themes in Patrick Lane's poetry.

From this perspective of man's dual role as aggressor and victim, the cruel and violent outbursts which abound in Patrick Lane's prairie poetry arouse compassion rather than anger since these actions are not prompted by a hatred of the victim but rather by the urge to relieve the physical and psychological stresses imposed by the land. Unable to direct his rage towards an invisible force, the individual hits out at other creatures because, consciously or unconsciously, they appear to him as the embodiment of the aggressor.

The tortured animal, as Margaret Atwood remarks, may also be interpreted as the symbol of a victim complex. In her well-known book Survival, this poet, novelist and critic says that the killing of animals in Canadian literature symbolizes the suffering that nature inflicts on Canadians and she adds that when the English Canadian describes the killing of animals:

*He projects himself through his animal images as a threatened victim, confronted by a superior alien technology against which he feels powerless, unable to take any positive defensive action, and, survive each crisis as he may, ultimately doomed. (*7)*

Thus, in Patrick Lane's prairie poems two main images coalesce: that of man pitted against and defeated by the imprisoning monotony of the prairie and the life-denying codes it imposes, and that of the same individual who strikes back with brutality in retaliation for his fate.

These two images are so vividly conveyed that they are often a test of the reader's power of endurance. In "Because I Never Learned", for instance, the narrator explains that, at his father's request, he crushed the head of a kitten with his boot after the bus had run over its hind quarters. He remembers 'the silence of the dying' as:

*the fragile skull collapsed
under my hard bare heel,
the curved tongue in the dust
that would never cry again
and the small of my father's back
as he walked tall away. (*8)*

Similarly, in another poem entitled "Last Night in Darkness", the artist explains that, one night, someone killed his cat by dipping her in gas and setting her aflame. He remembers that the following morning he and his son had to confront a nightmarish sight:

*Her scattered kittens adorned the yard
in opaque sacks where she aborted them;
none of them burned in her pain. (*9)*

The most disturbing element in these two compositions is the savagery displayed by the aggressor which is equally unpleasant in both poems in spite of the fact that in the first one the killing of the kitten is presented as an act of compassion rather than a sadistic crime.

There are other points in common in the two pieces. In both cases, a child is involved in the action, as a participant in the first case, and as a mere spectator in the second. The presence of the child may suggest that exposure to pain and death began at an early age in isolated prairie farmsteads. Suddenly, all romantic assumptions about the innocence of childhood and the spiritual benefits of country life are swept away. Only in more congenial and reassuring environments do these assumptions prove to be true. In the old pioneering days, survival on the prairie demanded toughness and a considerable degree of insensitivity towards suffering that children

soon learned from their elders. On the prairie, as Leona Gorn remarks in her poem "Survival":

*There was never gentleness
All this romantic bullshit
About growing up in farms
All I remember
Are pain and death
Where pigs were castrated. (10)*

Patrick Lane did not grow up in an isolated prairie farmstead. He was born in Nelson in the Kootenay district of inland British Columbia in 1939. However, early in his life his family moved to the prairie where he experienced the harshness of the land and perceived the atmosphere of emotional repression and brooding violence which seems to be a characteristic of societies that lead a monotonous life and are cooped up in their own rigid views on morality. Hence the poet's frequent use of images of cruelty and victimization that take us to the Canadian west even if through these images the poet wants to convey a reality other than the prairie. This is the case of the poem entitled "A Murder of Crows" where Lane expresses the agony that

often precedes the act of artistic creation. The lines are so crammed with references to dead and tortured animals that we lose sight of the theme these images are meant to convey though the stark and naked landscape of the prairie is never out of focus. The poet writes:

*I have struggled
tonight with the poem as never before
wanting to tell you what I know -
(...)*

*My knife slid up and steaming ribbons of gut
fell to the ground. I broke the legs
and cut the anus out, stripped off the skin
and chopped the head away; maggots of fat
clinging to the pale red flesh. The death? (*11)*

"The Killing Table", as the title suggests, is no less distasteful. This time, the victims are cockerels which are systematically massacred by sliding a knife up inside their throats while those who await their fate 'peck each other wildly/ no longer sure who is alive and who is dead'.(*12) The same brutality pervades "The Small Boy" who sees how a man bites hard into the head of a chicken (*13) and "The Young Man" which is an

example of deviant sexual behaviour. (*14)
Finally, in "The Woman" we see how a rooster whose head has just been chopped off, continues to run wildly while 'the red neck, stiff and hard, jerks/ down at the earth, hitting the lost mind'. (*15)

The fact that the victim is always a domestic animal emphasizes its meek and defenceless nature. Unable to repel the attack of a superior force, the bird, like the cockerel in "The Killing Table" only 'beats itself with wings / and flies to death'. In all the poems, the victim's inability to resist the attack is contrasted with the chilling coldness displayed by the aggressor. In "The Killing Table", to continue with the same example, the narrator describes his action with the indifference bred by routine. He says:

*The mind is pierced, my knife
slips up inside the throat,
cuts the carotids, the blood sudden,
hot as memory and the hanged bird
beats itself with wings
and flies to death.
The red, like a stream of piss,
steams and bubbles in the blood
that came before. That's nine, I mutter,*

*and throw the carcass in the box
with his dead brothers. (*16)*

The same insensitivity is perceived in
"The Woman" as shown by the following lines:

*Her axe falls perfectly and like a blossom
a head grows in the dust.*

(...)

The woman leans against her axe.

*The rooster, without his comb, his glittering eyes
moves farther and farther away. The woman
slams the axe into the splintered block.*

*She walks slowly after the dead bird
but the rooster feels her coming.*

*He moves away from the dark boots, wary,
circling as if he knows she wants to kill again.*

*The woman, impatient, looks at the far sun
yellow inside a moving mist of white.*

(...)

The woman grabs

a chunk of cottonwood and hits him twice.

*He falls, a bag of limp white feathers. (*17)*

If we bear in mind Northrop Frye's and Margaret Atwood's theories about the negative influence that the Canadian landscape exerts on the artist, it is difficult not to identify the animal victim in Lane's poems with the individual tyrannized by his physical environment embodied in the figure of the aggressor. And if we turn to Henry Kreisel's

idea that violence in prairie poetry is provoked by physical isolation and a stern morality, we can also interpret the aggressor's savagery as a symbol of man's rebellion against these realities.

This interpretation of Patrick Lane's prairie poems is further confirmed by the form and style of the pieces which are also emblematic. The regularity of the stanzas, the controlled rhythms of the lines and the clear simple language the poet uses contrast with the explosive material the poems contain. For the poet, this may be a way of insisting on the idea that the prairie environment is deceptively peaceful because it is the kind of peace imposed by tyranny and, consequently, one that may easily turn to storm. The contrast between the formal structure and content in Lane's poems also reveals the poet's own rebellion against the rigid morality that has controlled the hand of the artist for a long time. Through this contrast Lane seems to invite his fellow writers to cut through

appearances and write about their own perception of reality however crude and disgusting this vision may be to other people.

Finally, Patrick Lane's unadorned idiom may be seen as belonging to the vein of simplicity that characterises prairie poetry. In this respect, his style does not differ greatly from that of other artists who, like him, have been influenced by the austerity of the Canadian plains. However, as George Woodcock remarks, Lane's colloquial tone is also due to the vagabond life the poet led before turning to poetry. Woodcock writes:

*Many of the experiences of that working life and its peripheral incidents - spending nights in jail, living the life of the city streets and slums and the lonely road - have entered deeply into Lane's poetry and helped to create its characteristically plebeian tone. (*18)*

Indeed, when reading Patrick Lane's poems it is not difficult to believe that his voice is that of someone who has walked right out of the street because of his blunt style and the

intimate knowledge he seems to have of the seamy side of life. However, this reality does not invalidate the idea that the prairie is behind Lane's plain, spare and apparently unschooled diction. There is, however, a difference between the use Lane makes of a simple language and the use made by other prairie artists such as Robert Kroetsch and Eli Mandel. As we have seen, for these two poets, an extremely plain idiom is the only way of translating the featureless and silent nature of the prairie. This is also true in the case of Patrick Lane but, for him, simplicity of expression is also a means of stressing the idea that, very often, the quietness of the prairie is only apparent.

It would be unfair to close this section on Patrick Lane without opening an angle on to the streak of love and compassion that runs through the poet's otherwise dreary world. His poem "Old Mother" which gives its title to a volume published in 1982 deserves special attention because it condenses the artist's

vision of the prairie as a desolate but loved environment. The poem reads:

*Old Mother
on your nest of twigs and bits of bone.
What are you dreaming?
Small flowers of blood?
The wind's voice buried in the dust?
Beneath you your shadow lies waiting,
thin-shelled, dark against
the belly of your kill. Your beak tastes
grief, tastes exile, tastes
the altars where silence speaks.
I hold you to me like a sacrament.
I drink your endurance.
I keep the point of your talon
deep in my heart. (*19)*

This piece, which captures the spirit of the prairie so intensely and, at the same time, so delicately, reveals Patrick Lane's tenderness and humane feelings, two traits that the reader has to bear in mind when approaching the artist's vignettes of tortured animals. Without this insight into the artist's heart, most of his poems would appear as the expression of the poet's bitterness towards the prairie and its people and would suggest that aggression is the price of living in this Canadian region. This is certainly not Patrick

Lane's message. The poet simply gives an insight into man's irrational impulses and gives examples of the environments where these forces may burst into the open with special virulence, the prairie being one of them.

3.2.- A WAY OUT: JOHN NEWLOVE

Like the poetry of Patrick Lane, John Newlove's poems suggest that the prairie is not a romantic bower or idyllic garden but a menacing environment that haunts the artist's imagination with disturbing visions. Both poets stress the psychological disorders that long exposure to the prairie may produce in the mind of the sensitive individual. Patrick Lane underlines aggressive and cruel behaviour whereas John Newlove emphasizes restless motion. Most of his characters are cramped and nervous outsiders in their own country for they are:

*(...) always migrating
from city to city
seeking some almost unseen
god or food or earth or word. (*20)*

The restlessness that pervades these lines may be analysed from different perspectives though all of them take us to the prairie landscape and to the emotional wilderness it is thought to provoke.

If we concentrate on the universal significance of Newlove's poems we can say that the anxiety displayed by his personae is, like the violence manifested by Lane's characters, part of the predicament of modern man. Alienation is the term that best describes the atmosphere created by the aimless and restless pursuit of Newlove's characters who become increasingly estranged from other human beings and from themselves. Like Eliot's 'hollow men', the people in Newlove's poems move, robot-like, in a waste land, a mechanized world where there seems to be no possibility of rebirth or regeneration. This bleak vision of modern

society pervades the poem "The Engine and the Sea" where we observe urban men and women 'rigourously dancing with fractured minds contracted to a joyless pleasure, time sold from life'.(*21) To this pessimistic outlook on life we have to add the despair and impotence of an artist who feels immersed in a reality he can bear witness to but cannot change:

*The torture goes on forever as we in perpetual motion
breed and destroy ourselves for any reason
even intelligent ones. (*22)*

The universal significance of Newlove's message, however, does not take us out of the Canadian prairie. On the contrary, the anxiety that pervades these lines brings the poet's homeland into focus for it is the limitless, featureless and solitary prairie that constitutes the main source of inspiration in Newlove's poetic production. Indeed, as soon as we delve into the poet's world we realize that the prairie is a central theme and a dominant metaphor in Newlove's poems. We also observe

that he generally describes his land through conditions of existence and that, having done this, he widens his focus to encompass the rest of the world.

"Ride Off Any Horizon" is one of the poems that best illustrate Newlove's movement from the local to the universal. At the beginning of this composition, the artist reproduces the feeling of uneasiness elicited by the solitude and emptiness of the prairie and then he uses the atmosphere he has created as a symbol of man's anxiety and alienation.

The effect produced by the poem is not a static one although its monotonous and repetitive rhythm may suggest stillness. For a start, the title, which reappears at the beginning of the six sections that form the composition, triggers off ideas of movement. The term 'ride' spurs us into motion towards an unreachable horizon which is none other than that of the prairie. Then, we are hurled backwards and forwards from past to present and

present to past as Newlove recreates the wanderings and vicissitudes of prairie pioneers and the rebellion, defeat and dispersal of Indian tribes without losing sight of his own time. Finally, he takes us out of the prairie into the cold and dehumanized atmosphere of big cities and establishes correspondences between the 'blown dry and empty' landscape of his homeland and the shallowness of modern man.

In the first stanzas of the poem the prairie is described as the edge of the world both from a geographical and a historical perspective. The impressive flatness of the land throws doubts on the roundness of the earth and seems to validate the ancient belief in the horizon as the edge of the world from which the unwary traveller might fall into the abyss below:

*Ride off any horizon
and let the measure fall
where it may -*

*off the edge
of the black prairie*

*as you thought you could fall,
a boy at sunset*

*not watching the sun
set but watching the black earth,*

*never ending they said in school,
round: but you saw it ending,*

*finished, definite, precise -
visible only miles away,*

From a historical standpoint, the prairie is also described as a frontier land, an inhospitable region where physical and emotional acclimatization has always been difficult and often impossible. John Newlove depicts the land as a deadly and empty environment except for the ghosts of:

*dead indians, dead settlers
the frames of lost houses*

*left behind in the dust
of the depression.*

Then, in the final stanzas, once the spirit of the region pervades the composition, John Newlove uses the prairie as a metaphor for human alienation. The engulfing emptiness of the prairie invades the cities which are

presented as man's garrison against his own
existential void:

*Ride off any horizon
and let the measure fall*

*where it may;
it doesn't have to be*

*the prairie. It could be
the cold soul of cities*

*blown empty by commerce
and desiring commerce
to fill up emptiness. (*23)*

The general and the particular, the prairie and the world are admirably combined in this poem. The general gives this composition a universal appeal while the particular is especially appealing to those who are interested in gaining an insight into the Canadian western experience and into the intimate connections existing between mind and landscape.

Further exploration of John Newlove's work will confirm the idea that the anxious and constant wanderings of his characters may be

interpreted as man's inability to come to terms with the Canadian landscape and, more specifically, with the prairie. However, before doing this, it must be pointed out that conveying the plains through images of motion, as Newlove does, is not new in prairie writing. In his article "Poet as Critic as Prairie Poet" Peter Stevens remarks that movement is one of the responses the prairie elicits from its people. (*24) It implies a desire to escape the geography, the long winters, and the feeling of isolation the landscape produces. Northrop Frye enlarges upon the idea of movement saying that restless motion is a recurrent theme in Canadian literature and one that betrays the Canadians' fear of nature and their inability to fix things such as their sense of identity:

*A great deal of Canadian cultural history is summed up in it: the obsession with movement and transplantation, the eye that passes over the forefront object, the restlessness that solves all social difficulties by moving somewhere else, the commitment to a society that involves constant movement up and down an immensely long and narrow corridor. (*25)*

There is certainly much of this in John Newlove's poems. The wandering of his characters, who are always moving and always dissatisfied, reflects man's anxiety at being lost in the middle of an empty and apparently limitless space. It also translates the need to escape a feeling of guilt for what the White man did to the land and to its former inhabitants. In "The Pride", Newlove refers to the prairie as:

*a desolate country,
a long way between fires,
unfounded lakes, mirages, cold rocks
and lone men going through it. (*26)*

Similarly, in "The Sky", the plains, and also the mountains, are described as places that only inspire a desire to escape from them:

*Never knowing how we got there
one day we woke and saw the sky,
limitless, serene, capable
of black clouds and lightning,
the land limitless, yellow
with grain in summertime,
light green in spring, stretching
to the edge of the world
but never ending; and it made us
want to go. (*27)*

John Newlove further emphasizes man's difficulties to come to terms with the prairie by stressing the perfect harmony that existed between the Indians and their physical environment. The natives were perfectly attuned to the prairie because they chose to adapt to nature rather than to overmaster her. In his poem "The Green Plain", Newlove says that the early inhabitants were 'nomads roaming' a land which was for them a space of infinite freedom and possibility. (*28) For the White man, however, the prairie is often an oppressive and fear-inspiring place not only because of its climate and geography but also, and above all, because it is a land he has trespassed, seized and raped. This violent occupation has prevented him from achieving the kind of communion with nature enjoyed by the Indians. Thus, beset by loneliness, fear and guilt, the White man has always been unable to feel at ease on the prairie and to experience the freedom that comes with space:

*(...) but now we can go anywhere
and we are afraid
and talk of small farms instead of the stars
and all the places we go
space is distorted. (*29)*

Man's permanent dissatisfaction with place and his resulting haphazard movement conveyed through these lines also point to the Canadians' endless quest for roots and identity, a search that, paradoxically, has given them a distinctive personality. For John Newlove, as for Eli Mandel and Robert Kroetsch, the prairie is not only a place without physical points of reference but also without historical or cultural landmarks and this awareness increases the artist's anxiety. The bareness of the land is, to these three poets, a symbol and a constant reminder of an empty past they are eager to fill in. The difference between them is that Mandel and Kroetsch use their own past to create a sense of tradition while Newlove explores the possibility of incorporating the Indians as part of prairie people's identity since the natives:

*still ride the soil
in us, dry bones a part
of the dust in our eyes,
needed and troubling
in the glare, in
our breath, in our
ears, in our mouths,
in our bodies entire, in our minds, until at
last we become them
in our desires, our desires,
mirages, mirrors, that are theirs, hard-
riding desires, and they
become our true forebears, moulded
by the same wind or rain,
and in this land we
are their people, come
back to life (*30)*

Newlove's attempt to reconcile the White man and the Indian together with the sympathetic and understanding stance he adopts towards the natives, may be seen as an invitation to learn from them and to find new and more positive ways of experiencing the prairie. Besides, the shift from despair to love that we perceive in this poem tempers John Newlove's vein of pessimism upon which most critics have exclusively concentrated. Robin Skelton, for example, says:

John Newlove's vision is indeed dark. His universe is one of solitude, failure, ugliness and nausea. (...) the only driving forces of life are desire, which is always

*thwarted, and dreams which are never fulfilled. (*31)*

Similarly, Patrick Lane writes:

*Newlove is modern man inside a costume of despair. (...) If there can be a criticism of Newlove it would be that his vision is too narrow. That he sees nothing inside. A world without spirit. (*32)*

These two critics only give us a partial and, therefore, incomplete view of John Newlove's poetic personality which also includes positive aspects as Jan Bartley remarks in the following extract:

*No one can deny the poet's dominant strade of blackness; but it is too easy to dramatize it thereby ignoring any positive tones and even occasional moods of optimism. (*33)*

Indeed, John Newlove has so often been accused of being infatuated with disaster and despair that the vitalist thrust in his poetry, his desire to keep himself alive and thriving as well as his positive attitude towards the

prairie have generally been ignored or underrated. For this reason, the analysis of the optimistic vein in the poetry of John Newlove will be used as a bridge between this chapter and the following where a more positive vision of the land is presented.

As we have seen, movement in the poetry of John Newlove may be interpreted as an escape, as a way of avoiding confrontation with the natural world and with the self. Movement translates the restlessness and anxiety produced by the sheer size and emptiness of the prairie and, by extension, the sense of solitude and alienation that affects modern man. However, Newlove's constant motion may also be seen as an invitation to look for new perspectives, new ways of seeing and creating the world. John Newlove proposes movement as a therapy against physical and emotional stagnation because, for him, the alternative of passive despair is far worse than the prospect of a restless search. However fruitless this

quest might be, the perseverance, the stubborn determination of the searcher entails a good deal of hope and optimism. Pessimism is inaction, paralysis and death. Physical and spiritual movement, on the contrary, shakes off encroaching fixations of death and despair and involves a desire to find a way out.

With regard to the Canadian prairie, the constant movement that pervades Newlove's poems suggests that the proper response to the wilderness is further exploration. As we shall see, the poet is not a man who recoils in fear when confronted with the physical and cultural emptiness of the prairie. Instead of doing this, he ventures forth into the open with the courage of the explorer and the enthusiasm of the romantic wanderer who, through a long and intimate contact with the land, has reached a kind of mystic union with his environment.

This positive aspect in John Newlove's poetry is intensely felt in "The Double-Headed Snake" one of his most attractive and

celebrated poems. This composition has always been regarded as a superb example of the Canadians' ambivalent attitude towards nature. Traditionally, Canadian people have been both attracted and repelled by the vastness and awesome majesty of the landscape and have, consequently, described the land as both heaven and hell, a matrix of life and a source of terror and death.

In the poetry of John Newlove these two visions are also combined. He expresses the tension inherent in the Canadian experience and, in doing so, he follows a line initiated by the Confederation poets such as Archibald Lampman and Duncan Campbell Scott whose work also reflects this ever-present dialectic of opposites in the Canadian landscape. In "The Double-Headed Snake", as the title itself suggests, Newlove expresses the idea that the Canadians' attitude to their land is decidedly double-edged. The poem is full of references to the eeriness and beauty of the Canadian landscape. The lines exude fear and exaltation

and the whole poem is studded with images that bring forth man's dread of and admiration for nature with equal intensity. However, the real interest of the poem lies in the incredible vitality and energy it releases. Even though the poet speaks about the fear-inspiring nature of the Canadian landscape, this fear has nothing to do with a traumatic or paralysing experience. On the contrary, Newlove's fear is the emotive and pleasurable fear conventionally associated with the sublime and, therefore, it is a stimulating feeling that encourages man to further exploration in order to benefit from nature's extraordinary beauty and energy:

*(...) What's lovely
is whatever makes the adrenaline run;
therefore I count terror and fear among
the greatest beauty. The greatest
beauty is to be alive
(...)
Beauty's what makes
the adrenalin run. Fear at night
on the level plains, with no horizon
and the stars too bright, wind bitter
even in June, in winter
the snow harsh and blowing,
is what makes me
shiver, not the cold air alone. (*34)*

Through the fusion of fear and beauty and the identification of the resulting energy with a life-giving force, the prairie, like the rest of the Canadian landscape, emerges as a solemn, magnificent and extremely invigorating environment. It is a piercing vision that sweeps away past images of the prairie as an oppressive and deadly region.

Needless to say, in "The Double-Headed Snake" John Newlove is not only talking about place. As is true with most Canadian artists who describe nature, his vision encompasses far grander and more complex vistas than just those of plains and mountains. Through this poem, Newlove broods upon the polarities of life, on beauty and terror; on love and hate; on hope and despair and implies that these positive and negative aspects of existence are so inextricably intertwined that sometimes it is impossible to experience them separately. John Newlove's message is also a celebration of the Nietzschean courage to be and to progress that raises man to the level of a hero. However, as

has already been suggested, this universal significance does not blur the vision of the Canadian landscape which is a central theme in John Newlove's poetry.

"The Double-Headed Snake is not the only poem where the artist celebrates his homeland. In the poem "Driving", for instance, the reader realizes that the emotion which sparked the poem is a positive one as the following lines suggest:

*(...) I live in this country too.
I know how beautiful it is at night
with the white snow banked in the moonlight.
(...)
Around black trees and tangled bushes,
how lonely and lovely that driving is,
how deadly. You become the country.
(...)
This land waits. It watches. How beautifully desolate
our country is, out of the snug cities,
and how it fits a human. (*35)*

Once again, Newlove marries contradictory terms to refer to his homeland and suggests that it is the clashing of opposites that generates positive energy. Like the concept of terror that appears in "The Double-Headed

Snake", that of desolation in "Driving" acquires a positive connotation because of its association with the idea of beauty.

The prairie is further retrieved from its negative connotations in "Verigin, Moving In Alone", an autobiographical piece full of memories of childhood in the small farming community of Verigin where his mother was a schoolmistress. The poet evokes his school days, his games, and also his friends and family while he recreates the pleasant rhythms of his early days with love and nostalgia. With John Newlove we begin to feel the prairie as a home:

*all sights and temperatures
and remembrances, as
a lost gull screams now
outside my window,
a 9-year-old's year-long
night and day in tiny
magnificent prairie Verigin. (*36)*

John Newlove's poetry takes us back to the homesteader's dilemma: do I stay or do I leave?. His movement emphasizes the

rootlessness and homelessness of the early settler who, confronted with an alien and fearsome environment, never stayed long in one place. This constant searching for a homeplace was a source of tension for the traveller until, through his wanderings, he achieved familiarity with the land and decided to settle and grow roots in the prairie. The poetry of John Newlove reproduces this long and painful process of physical acclimatization. However, he brightens up the pioneering experience with sudden appreciations of the land's beauty, appreciations that are the most intense because man experiences them while in the grip of despair.

THE PRAIRIE : CHAPTER THREE. NOTES

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE HOMEMAKERS .

In his article "The Prairie: A State of Mind" Henry Kreisel observes:

*Man the giant-conqueror, and man, the insignificant dwarf always threatened by defeat, form the two polarities of the state of mind produced by the sheer physical fact of the prairie. (*1)*

These two emotional responses constitute the two main themes around which the work of most prairie writers revolves. Some artists such as Patrick Lane and, to a certain extent,

John Newlove have concentrated on what is negative or frightening in the prairie and have made it central in their work. In Patrick Lane's prairie poems the image that prevails is that of a solitary man who, threatened by a hostile environment and choked by the rigid morality of the society in which he lives, becomes cruel and vindictive. With regard to John Newlove's most pessimistic poems, the dominant vision is that of a paranoid wanderer who is permanently dissatisfied with the land and with himself for no sooner does he arrive at a place than he moves in the opposite direction. Through the poetry of Patrick Lane and John Newlove, we have seen that apart from being modern diseases, brutality and paranoia are two negative responses elicited by the starkness of the prairie and the spartan way of life it imposes on its inhabitants.

Other prairie artists, however, have been attracted by quite a different option and have chosen to highlight man's courage and endurance rather than his weakness and vulnerability.

They have celebrated victory instead of brooding on defeat and have thereby retrieved the prairie from its bleak and intimidating nature. I have called these poets the homemakers because they have filled their poems with people who, to use Margaret Avison's words, 'have won from space / an unchill and habitable interior'.(*2)

The homemakers highlight family life and the life of the prairie community rather than the nakedness and immensity of the landscape and concentrate on spaces of defined boundaries instead of depicting limitless areas. As a result of this shift of emphasis, the prairie void recedes and the immediate foreground is filled with people whose countless domestic activities and homes redolent of warmth and safety humanize the prairie and minimize the strangeness of the land which then emerges as an environment where life is possible without becoming violently insane or paranoid.

However, the fact that the homemakers depict the prairie as a land in the heart of its inhabitants does not imply the absence of conflict between man and the physical world. Having grown on stony land, the people described by the homemakers are as much aware of the menace and severity of the prairie as they are of its bounty and beauty. The difference between them and the personae depicted by Lane or Newlove lies in their perception of this conflict and in the way it affects them. In the poetry of Patrick Lane and John Newlove, this conflict leaves the individual strained and stranded in a world marked by violence, strife and fear. It is generally a negative relationship that reflects man's inability to come to grips with nature, with other people and with himself.

The homemakers, on the contrary, deal with people who have learnt to accept the prairie as it is and who have, through this acceptance, gained control over vicissitudes. They have grown so akin to the prairie and the life style

it dictates that this familiarity takes almost all the astonishment and all the fear from their existence. The people described by the homemakers are generally so absorbed by their daily activities that they have no time left for disturbing metaphysical or existential disquisitions. For them, the prairie is not frightening or intimidating although it remains a difficult environment.

Finally, the poetry of the homemakers evinces a strong love for the prairie and for the pioneer vocation and enunciates an ample and serene faith in life as it is ordinarily lived. It offers, in short, a new and more reassuring view of the Canadian plains and provides the most comprehensive account of the land and of its people.

**4.1.— WARM AND COSY HOME: ELIZABETH
BREWSTER**

Elizabeth Brewster is one of the artists who have replenished the prairie with people giving it a new and more inviting appearance. She was born in Chipman in 1922 and brought up in various parts of rural New Brunswick, a setting that constitutes the background and inspirational source of a number of poems. She has also lived in other parts of Canada and more specifically in the prairie province of Alberta where she moved in 1968. This mobility has allowed her to write of many different geographical locations, although the prairie and the eastern maritime region occupy the most prominent places in her work.

Elizabeth Brewster is a keen observer of the reality around her and has a special gift for describing the relationship between self and place without straining the reader with the conflict and tension that mark the work of

other Canadian poets who have also dealt with this theme. The relaxing tone of her poems is achieved by concentrating on the lives of ordinary people who feel comfortable and at ease in their communities in spite of the wilderness that surrounds them. This absence of tension is also due to the ironic stance the poet adopts in most of her pieces. Compared to Patrick Lane and John Newlove, Elizabeth Brewster's emotional involvement in her prairie poems is minimal and her capacity for detachment remarkable. The fine irony she displays even in poems whose themes are not inherently humorous, is the technique Brewster uses to achieve the distancing effect the reader perceives immediately. In the poem "Deaths", for example, the artist adopts a tone of wry humour to describe some sinister tricks that death plays on its victims thereby reminding us that it lurks behind every human activity:

*My nephew skated to death
On Christmas skates.
His mother told him
to skate close to the shore
And he would be safe.*

*He obeyed her, and drowned.
(...)*

*My teacher threw himself
From the top floor of a department store
Down to the sidewalk
And broke his neck.
The notes for next day's lecture
On T.S. Eliot
Fell from his head. (*3)*

In her prairie poems, irony also helps her minimize the strangeness and harshness of the land. In "Munchausen in Alberta", the biting cold of the plains that other poets have used to reinforce themes of loneliness and desolation, is given a surprisingly playful significance that diminishes the drama of the situation the poem describes:

*Our first winter in the settlement
the old man said,
January was so cold
the flames in the lamp froze.
The womenfolk picked them like strawberries
and gave them to the children to eat.*

*That's the only time
I was ever a fire-eater. (*4)*

Similarly, in "The Road Between Saskatoon and Edmonton", Brewster demolishes all the