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N E L A B U R E U i R A M O S

myths built around the idea of the prairie as a hostile environment whose flatness, emptiness and immensity have made psycological adaptation impossible. In two witty lines the poet dispels the mist of this negative vision of the prairie saying that:

> *The chief difference in the land*
> *is that there is more of it. (*5)*

Then, as if to prove that the prairie is neither empty nor frightening she gives us slices of family life that sound reassuringly familiar to anyone acquainted with the quiet existence of country people. In Brewster's poems, uncles, aunts, grandparents, relatives and friends meet in their warm and cosy homes to talk about the weather, the interests of the community or to comply dutifully with the social task of mourning one of their elders.

However, to take Elizabeth Brewster's poems literally is not to do them justice. Beneath the simplicity of form and content of her pieces is a world full of larger

significances that the analysis of one of her prairie poems will help to unveil.

The poem is entitled "The Future of Poetry in Canada" and is, at its most immediate level, a chronicle of prairie life in a small community. Elizabeth Brewster takes us to Goodridge, Alberta 'where electricity arrived in 1953/ the telephone in 1963', and introduces us to its people for whom the most important social activities are 'the golden wedding anniversaries of the residents' and 'the farewell parties', all of them 'well attended in spite of the blizzards'. At these gatherings, through which Brewster highlights the sense of community as a therapy against loneliness, people talk about the weather and 'remember the time they threshed in the snow/ and the winter the temperature fell to seventy below'. The prairie cold is presented as an old enemy that people have learned to expect and resist without becoming insanely obsessed about it.

Apart from remembering weather conditions, the members of the Goodridge community also like to recall other events such as:

> *(...) the time*
> *the teacher from White Rat School*
> *piled eight children in his car*
> *and drove them as a treat,*
> *all the way to Edmonton;*
> *where they admired the Jubilee Auditorium*
> *and the Parliament Buildings*
> *and visited the CNR wash rooms*
> *but were especially thrilled*
> *going up and down in an elevator.(*6)*

This approach to the prairie through the domestic and the familiar imposes patterns of security on an environment that other artists have generally described as being hazardous and frightening. As Carrie MacMillan has remarked, Elizabeth Brewster "exorcises all bad dreams in the clear light and reassuring ordinariness of day".(*7) This critic goes on to say that by embracing the familiar and the mundane Brewster suggests that:

> *the ordinary and the normal are what preserve sanity, are what one clings to in a world gone mad with 'isms' and bombs when*

*one attempts to comprehend, large, absolute truths.(*8)*

This simple, wise and down-to-earth philosophy as well as the poet's serene outlook on the prairie constitute a refreshing and relaxing rest after having travelled through the poetry of Robert Kroetsch, Eli Mandel, Patrick Lane and John Newlove. The charming simplicity and quiet tone of Brewster's prairie poems dispel the mist of fear and anxiety that these writers have cast over the prairie.

However, Elizabeth Brewster does much more than minimize the strangeness of the land. A closer analysis of "The Future of Poetry in Canada" reveals that she celebrates the prairie with genuine enthusiasm although the low-keyed tone of the poem may belie the poet's feelings and intentions. Brewster recreates the romantic myth of the Canadian west as a land of promise by seeing the prairie as an important reservoir of Canada's poetic potential. Right from the beginning of the poem, the prairie emerges as

the simple and rustic environment that preserves people's innocence as well as their capacity to take delight in simple things. This Arcadian vision of the prairie and of its people is contrasted with the image of big urban centres in the east as places that weaken, if not destroy, man's pristine values:

> *some people say we live in a modern mechanized nation*
> *where the only places that matter*
> *are Toronto, Montreal, and maybe Vancouver;*
> *but I myself prefer Goodridge, Alberta,*
> *a town where electricity arrived in 1953,*
> *the telephone in 1963. (*9)*

The term 'mechanized' has obvious negative connotations. It suggests a world ruled by technological and utilitarian principles and implies man's insensitivity and alienation. The poem also brings to mind romantic ideas about the physical and spiritual benefits of living in contact with an unsullied environment and implicitly celebrates the wisdom and sensitivity of country people as the poet's final wish suggests:

I hope at least one poet
in the next generation
*comes from Goodridge, Alberta.(*10)*

Elizabeth Brewster's celebration of the prairie is also perceived through the simplicity of idiom which, by now, we recognize as a characteristic of prairie poetry. However, Brewster's use of simple language also responds to a personal liking for plainness and clarity as much as to the demands of a landscape that eschews verbal ornamentation:

> *I prefer, as far as my own work is concerned, a language which is clear, straightforward and with little adornments. I do not normally allow myself a word which I should not use in plain prose and I normally also use the sentence construction of plain prose. I think of a good style, whether in prose or verse, as being rather like the lady whom Sam Johnson considered to be well dressed because he did not remember what she had on. Or perhaps as Yeats says of his later poems, the poetry is naked. (Crabbe speaks of poetry "without an atmosphere") Nothing requires greater effort, or is more beautiful, than simplicity (*11)*

Although it is difficult to ascertain the degree of influence that the spartan prairie

environment has had on Elizabeth Brewster's style since her maritime poems also exhibit the same simplicity, it is sensible to assume that the austerity of prairiescapes have contributed to the simplicity of her poetic diction.

One feels comfortable reading Elizabeth Brewster's poems. They have the flavour of things which are clear and unaffected. She is a real homemaker who brings into focus all that is reassuring in the land, like the little prairie towns the poet describes as cosy clusters of humanity:

> ***each with its grain elevator***
> ***onion-domed church***
> ***and Chinese restaurant (*12)***

Brewster lives in one of these communities where she feels content and at ease and it is this contentment and her love for all that is simple and familiar that allow her to enjoy the details and situations that only the loving eye can discover. In "New Glasses", she delights in

a 'patch of daisies' she had 'never noticed before' (*13) and in "Renewable Glory" she marvels:

(...) how the smell of lilacs
is as sweet as ever
and how this year's dandelions
sow themselves
like last year's
*on the wind.(*14)*

Similarly, in "Sometimes I Think of Moving" Elizabeth Brewster is captivated by the charming simplicity and relaxing rhythms of prairie life:

Sometimes I think of moving
to the other side of the river,
where the lawns are sleeker
and I could walk
to the university

But then I take my Saturday walk
(...)

and I am released
and walk along Twentieth Street
past Ukrainian and Greek restaurants
and pawnshops and furniture shops
and Ben's Bad Books

I peer into a shop
smelling of spicy meats
and crusty homemade bread
in unwrapped loaves
(...)

and I plunge down a side street
past backyard gardens
with petunias and bleeding hearts
and marigolds and pansies.
(...)
*and I am happy (*15)*

This is not escapism. That is, Elizabeth Brewster does not concentrate on the life of the prairie community to avoid confrontation with the landscape as is proved by the considerable number of references to the climate and geography of western Canada that appear in her poems. In "Thirty Below", for instance, she says: 'The prairie wind sounds colder/ than any wind I have ever heard' (*16) and in "Road between Saskatoon and Edmonton" the vastness of the prairie is reflected in the sky that Brewster describes as being 'wider and higher than the one I grew up with'.(*17) Allusions to the vastness of the land are also implicit in "Great-Aunt Rebecca" who 'remembered the remoteness, the long walks between/ neighbours',(*18) and in "Sunday Morning" where the idea of a still limitless space is conveyed through the notion of a dull

and static eternity as the following lines reveal:

> *It is no special day.*
> *Christmas is over,*
> *Lent has not started yet.*
> *It is a long time*
> *to any time (*19)*

Elizabeth Brewster combines references to the physical world with descriptions of the quiet life of prairie people and her own contentment with the land. This technique shows that the poet is strongly aware of wilderness and space but that these forces never threaten to anihilate the poetic persona simply because the poet does not feel compelled to brood over them. In Brewster's work the threat does not come from outside but from within. It is only when we enter the domain of the strictly personal that we realize the effort the poet has made to achieve serenity as she admits in "Peace", a poem which is reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's compression and stoicism:

Peace is pain increased
till it is numb
and a cry so shrill
that it seems dumb.

Peace cannot be shaken
by death or strife,
for it has swallowed both
*to make its life.(*20)*

Elizabeth Brewster's personal conflict is born out of her aloof nature, her condition as a spinster and a puritanical guilt for not having created solid things and people as she implies in the poem "There is Time":

All I have done
seems sometimes waste
scribble on sand
but always
*it can be done over.(*21)*

However, in "On Becoming an Ancestor" she sounds more pessimistic:

By chance or intention
whatever touching
of body or mind
*came too late.(*22)*

Against these feelings which add tension and depth to Elizabeth Brewster's poetry, the prairie emerges as a home where the poet finds strength and comfort as well as an inextinguishable source of poetic inspiration.

4.2.— AND WE HAVE ROOTS: DALE ZIEROTH

Like Elizabeth Brewster, Dale Zieroth, invests the prairie with human warmth by filling it with people who have grown roots in the land and have learned to love it. However, the stress in Zieroth's poems is generally on the pioneer's stubborn clinging to the prairie and on his efforts to achieve spiritual closeness with the land. This emphasis on the positive values of pioneering life transforms Zieroth's characters into the giant-conquerors that Henry Kreisel contrasts with the weak individual always threatened by defeat.

As in the case of Elizabeth Brewster's poems about the Canadian west, the setting of Zieroth's prairie pieces is always rural; the activities described are domestic and familiar and the language he uses is colloquial and direct. All these ingredients combined give Zieroth's poems a relaxing tone and a sense of communion between man and the prairie in spite of the fact that allusions to the harshness of the landscape abound in the work of this artist born in Manitoba in 1946.

Dale Zieroth generally conveys the fusion between man and nature through the grandfather figure who has always been wise and serene in spite of the obstacles he has had to overcome. Through this character, Zieroth emphasizes the idea that people have grown roots in the prairie and have established strong emotional links with the land. Besides, the portrayal of an old relative who is full of memories of things past is extremely useful to convey a sense of history so cherished by young communities which, like those of the prairie,

are engaged in the task of building up a local tradition. As the critic Ruddy Wiebe points out:

> ***The principal task of the Canadian writer is not simply to explain his contemporary world; it is to create a past, a lived history, a vital mythology.(*23)***

It is worth noting here that there is nothing, or very little beyond the figure of the grandfather in prairie history. As we have seen in the previous section, John Newlove is willing to go beyond that point in time into the culture of the Indians and the Métis. However, not all artists are ready to accept this part of prairie history as their own. For this reason, old relatives are frequently used by prairie writers to humanize the land and to create the sense of tradition which is essential to the development of local writing.

In "120 Miles North of Winnipeg" Dale Zieroth writes of a grandfather who arrived in northern Manitoba 'years ago' and learned to

feel at home in this prairie province in spite of the fact that:

> *In winter everything*
> *went white as buffalo bones and*
> *the underwear froze on the line*
> *like corpses. Often the youngest*
> *was sick. Still he never thought*
> *of leaving.(*24)*

The last line epitomizes the pioneer's determination to endure, his obstinate desire to impose his will upon the land and to measure his power against that of the prairie. Later on in the poem we hear that the grandfather's fortitude was always rewarded by nature which responded to his loving plough with bounteous harvests blessed by sunsets of extraordinary beauty:

> *(...) Spring was always greener*
> *than he'd known and summer had*
> *kid-high grass with sunsets big*
> *as God. The wheat was thick,*
> *the log house chinked and warm.(*25)*

These final words endow the whole composition with a positive meaning that

neutralizes the initial feelings of loneliness and grief produced by the references to sickness and to the rigours of winter.

The cold season has always been an overwhelming reality to all Canadians. However, it is on the prairie that the onslaught of winter has always made itself felt with extreme intensity because the land is cut off by mountains or by distance from moisture-laden winds. The harshness of the prairie winter is only relieved by the Chinook, a warm breeze that can raise the temperature from zero to fifty above in half an hour. It is the Chinook that makes the plains bereable in winter clearing the soil periodically and allowing cattle to feed. But this soft wind is only a warm spell in the long prairie winter which has always loomed large in the mind of its inhabitants.

It is almost impossible to find a prairie artist who has not incorporated winter as a dominant theme or metaphor to his work. Winter,

with its long shadows and its abstract black and white patterns, reinforces themes of desolation and solitude and, more particularly, of the indifference of nature to human values which is, according to Northrop Frye, a central tragic theme in Canadian literature.

However, winter may also suggest other moods as in Brewster's or Zieroth's poems where, in spite of its bleakness, the cold season triggers thoughts of spring and summer. In Elizabeth Brewster's "The Future of Poetry in Canada", people attend community meetings in spite of the whip of the blizzard and in "120 Miles North of Winnipeg", Zieroth's grandfather perceives that below the cold, death-like setting around him the earth contains intimations of rebirth. As a farmer, the old man has learned about the prairie seasons and has achieved communion with the land through the day-to-day task of cultivating it. No other activity brings man closer to nature than farm chores. Through ploughing, planting and harvesting, which symbolize sedentary life just

as hunting stands for nomadic habits, Dale Zieroth's grandfather became so perfectly attuned to the seasonal rhythms of the land that his life was but an extension of the physical world around him. Besides, by linking the old man's life to the endless process of deaths and rebirths that take place in nature, Zieroth transforms his grandfather's existence into a timeless and mythical one thereby becoming part of the prairie cultural heritage.

The poem "Father" also highlights the fusion between man and the prairie and the physical and emotional robustness the land engenders. Zieroth conveys this communion by describing his father's character and actions through images drawn from the natural world. The poet remembers that when he angered his father, the man used to take him in his hands and shake him 'like a sheaf of wheat'. He also remembers him laughing with his friends and 'smashing down on his knees/ and making the noise of a tree when it cracks/in winter'. On Sundays, before church, Zieroth's father 'would

trim/ his fingernails with the hunting knife', the same knife he used 'for castrating pigs and skinning deer'. Even the process of ageing is described as one that draws the father closer and closer to the land. The final stanza is especially important because it further stresses the sense of belonging to the place and the wisdom and serenity the old man has achieved through his lifelong contact with nature. The father accepts his own process of decay as naturally as he has always accepted the seasonal changes on the prairie:

> *Last Christmas, for the first time, he*
> *gave presents, unwrapped and bought*
> *with pension money. He drinks mostly coffee*
> *now, sleeping late and shaving every day.*
> *Even the hands have changed: white, soft,*
> *unused hands. Still he seems content*
> *to be this old, to be sleeping in the middle*
> *of the afternoon with his mouth open as if there*
> *is no further need for secrets, as if he is*
> *no longer afraid to call his children fools*
> *for finding different answers, different lives.(*26)*

Another piece that also serves to create a sense of belonging to the prairie is "Manitoba Poem". Here, the emphasis is on modern community life rather than on the solitary

effort of the pioneer. There are, however, the same references to the strength and resilience of prairie people and to the harshness of the environment conveyed through images of men working outside under the blistering prairie sun and of children catching cold at the sudden onset of winter:

> *Summer comes in from Saskatchewan on*
> *a hot and rolling wind. Faces*
> *burnt and forearms burnt, the men seed*
> *their separate earths and listen to the CBC*
> *for any new report of rain.*
> *(...)*
> *Four months later this is over, men*
> *are finished. Children return*
> *to school and catch cold in their*
> *open jackets. Women prepare*
> *for long nights under six-inch goosedown*
> *quilts. Outside, the trees shake off*
> *their leaves as if angered by the new*
> *colours. An without any more warning than*
> *this, winter falls on the world,*
> *taking no-one by surprise. No-one.(*27)*

As in "120 Miles North of Winnipeg" and "Father", the setting is rural and the relationship between man and nature is so close that it takes all the mystery and the fear away from the land. As the final line suggests, the prairie community do not see the cold season as

part of the onslaught of an overtly hostile environment but as an old enemy they have learned to expect and resist.

There are more points in common between "Manitoba Poem" and the previous pieces. The three compositions deal with conditions of existence on the prairie. They describe the life of people who are permanently in contact with the basic processes of life and who do not strive for larger significances. In them we recongnize the wisdom of the unlearned and also their strength and stoicism which are values that the homemakers always bring to the fore in their poems.

Finally, these pieces give further evidence that most prairie poems are shaped to the cadence of ordinary speech. Like Elizabeth Brewster, Dale Zieroth shows a preference for a language that dispenses with sophistication. The critic Peter Buitenhuis points out that the physical form of Zieroth's poems is also important and links the poet's interest in the

visual element to his prairie origins. In his article "Attempted Edens: The Poetry of Dale Zieroth", this critic explains that on one occasion a Canadian literary magazine misprinted Zieroth's poems by "centring each line of the page so that both left and right margins were ragged".(*28) The poet was distressed to see the mistake and produced the following remarks:

> ***The white space along the edge of that straight left hand margin is the white nothing out of which the words come out and into which they eventually go in their varying degrees at the other side of the poem, at the ends of their lines. The left hand margin is the beginning, the horizon over which the language pours. (*29)***

Peter Buitenhuis believes that Dale Zieroth's perception of the left hand margin as a horizon "could perhaps only be felt by a poet who has lived a long time on the prairies the only place, except at sea, where the horizon is a straight line". (*30)

Dale Zieroth's strict observance of a straight left hand margin is likely to go unnoticed because many other poets also use this technique and, consequently, the reader does not associate this procedure with the poet's prairie origins. But we immediately recognize the simplicity of idiom the poet uses as a unifying element of the poetry inspired by the landscape of the Canadian prairie. This plainness has proved to be an effective way to evoke the silence and nakedness of the land and, in the case of the homemakers, the plain and serene nature of its inhabitants.

4.3.- THE ROAD TO MYSTICISM: MIRIAM WADDINGTON

Like Dale Zieroth and Elizabeth Brewster, Miriam Waddington also concentrates on the synthesis of man and nature rather than on the emotional gap that separates them. However, the

intimate connection between the prairie and its people as expressed in Elizabeth Brewster's and Dale Zieroth's poems is still more deeply woven in the poetry of this contemporary prairie artist I have deliberately placed at the end of this section in order to close the prairie chapter with a positive note that has religious overtones.

Miriam Waddington is more than a homemaker who humanizes the prairie transfoming it into a lively environment. In Waddington's poetry, the Canadian plains acquire a sublimity that transfigures them from a physical place into a spiritual centre. The vastness of land and sky both seeming to extend to infinity, the essential simplicity of a uniform and uninterrupted landscape and the incredible light that floods the prairie at sunset and at dawn setting it aflame hold, for this poet, a religious, almost mystical significance. More than any other prairie artist, Miriam Waddington contradicts the pervasive myth of the land as one that awakens the individual to

his limitations rather than to his possibilities.

For this poet, the prairie is a refuge and a therapy against her personal failures and broken dreams. It is a way of keeping herself afloat as she admits in the following extract:

> *I feel lucky that I can still escape into my old world. (...) The landscape, at least, responds to me with the assurance that I am part of it and that it is home.(*31)*

The term 'escape' implies the existence of two different realities, the reality the poet leaves behind and the reality where she takes refuge. In Miriam Waddington's poetry these two worlds are clearly differenciated. There is, first of all, the everyday world of the adult often marked by grief and solitude and the green world of her chilhood on the prairie that rescues her from pessimism. These two worlds cannot be analysed separately since in the case of Miriam Waddington, as in the case of most artists, it is only when we have some sense of

the whole that we can bring the zoom lense to focus on the particular. This means that Waddington's vision of the prairie as a shelter and as a physically and spiritually invigorating environment becomes much more intense and significant when contrasted with her occasional moods of pessimism caused by her contact with the world of the outcast, the poor and the infirm and by her own unhappy marriage.

Miriam Waddington was born in Winnipeg in 1917 to Russian immigrants. Unlike Elizabeth Brewster who was born in New Brunswick and, as an adult, moved to the prairies where she lives now, Miriam Waddington is native to the west but moved to eastern Canada in her early teens. The poet recalls this experience as a sad one:

> *In the fall of 1930, when I was twelve, my family moved to Ottawa from Winnipeg. The reason was this: my father had lost his small sausage-making and meat-curing factory to a partner in a law suit. The world was then in the grip of the Great Depression, and the west had been especially hit. My father had the idea of starting a small sausage factory in Ottawa, and since there seemed nothing else to do, my parents rented out our Winnipeg house, sold the piano, packed us children into the car, and set out. The whole family was unhappy about the*

*move (...) Their problems in adjusting to this strange and unfamiliar Ottawa community must have affected us children. I know that I mourned the loss of my two best friends until I found a new one with whom I could walk to school, go to the movies, and share my innermost thoughts and feelings.(*32)*

At that time, the young girl was certainly not conscious that, as we shall see here, she did not leave Manitoba behind but locked it in her heart where she has always carried it as a treasure.

In 1936, Miriam Waddington studied English literature at the University of Toronto and graduated in 1939, the same year she married the journalist Patrick Waddington. It was a time when, as Peter Stevens remarks, "there was no possibility of a woman or a Jew being hired to teach at the University".(*33) Consequently, she began to work for a magazine as a translator of French and German though she soon grew dissatisfied with her work and returned to the University of Toronto to study for a Diploma in social work which she obtained in 1942. It was precisely her work in clinics,

jails and as a welfare official that put her in contact with the world of deprivation and social injustice that constantly undermined her optimism and faith in life. Poems such as "My Lesson in the Jail" and "Investigator" condense the poet's state of mind during this period of her life.

In "My Lessons in the Jail" Miriam Waddington expresses the mixed feelings of rage, sadness and impotence she experienced when she was immersed in the atmosphere of loneliness and despair that pervaded the prisons she visited. Right from the beginning of the poem the sense of oppression is intense. Miriam Waddington describes the building as 'that domed citadel/ that yellow skull of stone and sutured steel'. Then, when she writes about her interview with a prisoner we learn that in spite of the man's hardened stance she managed 'to read/ Between the lines his suffering and doubt'.(*34) These feelings also pervade the poem "Investigator" where the artist opens a window on the lives and homes of the poor she

describes as the people who are forced to live with 'the blinds' permanently 'drawn against day and the feel of sun'.(*35)

However, it is when the poet deals with the failure of her marriage that her poetry acquires special dramatism and convincing intensity. Miriam Waddington divorced in 1960 after 21 years of marriage. The dissolution of this union was the inevitable corollary of a long story of fading and loss which the poet unveils in a number of lyrics where she sadly recalls her husband's infidelity, their increasing estrangement and her own regret for unlived experiences and unsaid words. The critic Maria Jacobs has written an interesting and enlightening article entitled "The Personal Poetry of Miriam Waddington" where she makes references to the poet's most intimate lyrics. This critic points out that the artist's dominant feeling during this traumatic period of her life was "the awareness of the unbridgeable gap between men and women".(*36) Such a remark implies that in spite of her

intense suffering, Miriam Waddington was able to universalize her problem and, therefore, to look at it from a certain distance. There is no doubt that this ability to keep the world in focus in spite of a devastating personal crisis allowed the poet to articulate her experience with intensity and delicacy. As a result of this detached stance, Waddington's intimate lyrics are seldom bitter or accusatory. The prevailing tone is one of sad acceptance although the reader perceives the emotional convulsion that lies behind the poet's controlled attitude. In "Someone Who Used to have Someone", for example, the poet writes:

> *There used to be someone to*
> *whom I could telephone*
> *and be sure when the operator*
> *said do you accept the charges*
> *the answer would be yes;*
> *but now there is no one to ask*
> *no one to telephone from the*
> *strangeness of cities in the*
> *lateness of nightness now there*
> *is no-one always now no-one*
> *no someone no never at all.(*37)*

By choosing to convey her sense of loss through the routine, almost trivial act of a

telephone call she can no longer make, Miriam Waddington seems to minimize the effects that her divorce had on her. Were it not for the lines which follow, the reader could even think that the poet is being sarcastic. However, the repeated and insistent use of negatives at the end of this first stanza betrays the woman's intense grief and solitude. Then, the first lines acquire new significance and the reverse-charge call that sounded like an ironical remark becomes a reminder that, very often, it is the most simple domestic activities shared by the couple that hold them together.

Looking backwards in search of the reason for the collapse of her marriage, the poet realises that their separation had begun long ago and sadly recalls the moments when physical contact only increased her feeling of solitude. In the following lines we also perceive that if there was love and physical attraction it was probably one-sided:

> *I wake to think about*
> *your lost and broken beauty*
> *and my speechless love.*

Of our embraces I remember
only my whisperings
and your silence
(...)
My sleep in your arms
did never awaken you
my staring at the noble
mask of your face
*did never make it live. (*38)*

The final blow came when the husband openly admitted his infidelity. Miriam Waddington recreates this past experience with moving realism:

Year curves to ending now
and thou dost say me, wife
I choose another love, and oh
the delicate delicate
serpent of your mouth
stings deep, and bitter
iron cuts and shapes
*my death, I was so fool.(*39)*

Against this backdrop of social and personal instability, the prairie emerges as the bedrock where the poet stands confidently and from where it is always possible to start anew. Far from intensifiying her feeling of loss and solitude as might have been expected, the prairie landscaspe constitutes, for her, a

therapy and an inextinguishable source of joy and energy that the poet conveys through recurrent images of open spaces and intense light.

In Miriam Waddington's poetry the prairie vastness is never oppressive of frightening. On the contrary, it is a space that expands consciousness bringing forth the best in human nature. About the importance of space in her poems the poet says:

> ***Men think I write about love and loss and flowers. They find it hard to accept the fact that women have ideas. I think I write about poetry and about the changing Canadian myth now. I am a nationalist. I feel very close to the landscape. My new poetry is about space. (*40)***

Perhaps one of the poems that best exemplifies the poet's words is "Green World One", a lyric that epitomizes the artist's vision of the vast and open spaces of her chilhood in Manitoba and the new tendency in Canadian literature to build a more positive myth about the relationship between Canadians

and their physical environment. In "Green World One" the prairie landscape and the poet's inner topography are one. The artist becomes an extension of the land and the prairie appears as the mirror of her soul. The lyric is a passionate account of one of those mysterious moments when the self bursts into life after a period of inaction. Around the ideas of growth and plenitude, always related to the prairie landscape, the poet builds a moving lyric that also delights the ear:

> *When I step out and feel the green world*
> *its concave walls must cup my summer coming*
> *and curving hold me*
> *beyond all geography in a transparent place*
> *where water images cling to the inside sphere*
> *move and distend as rainbows in a mirror*
> *cast out of focus.*
>
> *this crystal chrysalis*
> *shapes to green rhythms to long ocean flowings*
> *rolls toward the sun with sure and spinning speed*
> *its warm expands*
> *until walls crack suddenly*
> *uncup me into a large and windy space. (*41)*

Apart from the vitality and aural richness of this poem, the most important aspect of the lyric is the use Miriam Waddington makes of the

prairie as the source of her sudden fit of energy which is even fearsome in its intensity. The land of her chilhood is certainly behind this poem that so beautifully expresses the process of transformation the poet experiences whenever she enters the green world of her chilhood. As soon as the artist is in contact with this reality, she feels protected and, at the same time, propelled into a spiritual realm of infinite freedom and possibilities.

This expansion of consciousness is not only conveyed through the image of a 'large and windy space' that immediately takes us to the prairie. The intense light that floods the poem also suggests this landscape. Indeed, in Miriam Waddington's poetry sunlight is as important as space as a means of conveying joy and plenitude. It is a recurrent image that reproduces the beautiful colours of the prairie sky and, at the same time, symbolises life's primal energies. The following extracts illustrate the idea that whenever Miriam

Waddington touches on the prairie, the landscape becomes 'a sudden radiance'. (*42)

"Popular Geography" is one of the poet's most anthologised pieces. It is frequently referred to as an example of the strong emotional ties that exist between the artist and her homeland but it is also a clear proof that, in Miriam Waddington's imagination, the prairie landscape is always a sunny and brilliant one:

> *Oh Manitoba, you are still*
> *a beautiful green grain*
> *elevator storing the sunlight*
> *and growing out of the black*
> *summer earth. (*43)*

Not even the dimness of winter can screen the light in Waddington's prairie:

> *Locked in a glassy iceland lake*
> *I was a child chinning myself*
> *on reflected treetops.*
> *Into my green world*
> *winter shone and splashed*
> *me with fresh light. (*42)*

So strongly does this light shine in her that it pervades most of her poems whether they deal directly with chilhood recollections or positive adult experiences. In "Night of Voices", for instance, images of the prairie brilliance and fertility are used to express moments of perfect physical and spiritual union between the lovers as in the following extract:

> ***day held back from coming and the***
> ***silence spoke your storied name above***
> ***the droughted prairie and blessed me***
> ***with its wheat touched me with its***
> ***root and fed me grainy light.(*45)***

As the poet grows older, she turns back to Manitoba more frequently with the ever-increasing awareness that her homeland is at the core of her being. As a child, the prairie was simply taken for granted. Later on, when Miriam Waddington was away from Manitoba it became the shelter where she found solace and the force to continue writing and living. Now, maturity has granted a new and more serene outlook on life and also the wisdom to discard the inessential, keeping what is really

valuable and meaningful to her. Consequently, in her most recent poems the prairie is, more than ever, the matrix of her work and a personal shrine she wishes to preserve.

In the poem "Provincial", the artist contrasts the austerity and asceticism of the prairie landscape with the sophistication of the many places she has visited and concludes by saying that in spite of the glittering beauty and cultural richness of cities such as Paris, Mexico, London and Moscow, the spartan nature of the prairie is, for her, far more entrancing:

(...) I have
visited Paris
Moscow London
and Mexico City
I saw golden roofs
onion domes and the
most marvellous
canals
(...)
All kinds of miracles:
but I would not trade
any of them for the
empty spaces, the
snowblurred geography
*of my childhood. (*46)*

Similarly, in "Transformations" :

(...) I have turned
my back on Minneapolis
and the Detroit lakes
I love only St. Boniface
its grey wooden churches
I want to spend my life
in Gimli listening to the
roar of emptiness in the
*wild snow.(*47)*

And, in "Totems", the poet also expresses her desire to preserve the prairie as a spiritual centre that supplies her need for protection and self-definition:

I want to whittle
a new totem pole
out of a poor little
Manitoba maple and
turn all its faces
to the sun
(...)
I want my totem
pole to match over
the fields against
the floods droughts and
*the spoilers of space. (*48)*

Finally, in "Icons", Miriam Waddington implicitly recognizes that the prairie has always been her sustaining myth and that her

increasing dependence on it gives the measure of her growing fragility and vulnerability. In this poem Waddington refers to middle age as the period when you start looking backwards for comfort. She also recognizes that she carries her memories as icons that protect her against solitude. She does not explicitly mention her homeland but, in the light of what has been said here, it is impossible not to believe that the poet's nostalgia is for the green world from which most of her poems have sprung:

> ***Suddenly***
> ***in middle age***
> ***instead of withering***
> ***into blindness***
> ***and burying myself***
> ***underground***
> ***I grow delicate***
> ***and fragile***
> ***superstitious;***
> ***I carry icons***
> ***I have begun***
> ***to worship***
> ***images. (*49)***

The simple and straightforward language Miriam Waddington uses in this poem and in the majority of her compositions may also be seen as a way of paying tribute to her homeland. As

is the case with most prairie artists, the nakedness of the great plains has had a decisive influence on the shaping of her poetic style. The emptiness of the prairie landscape is behind her plain, unadorned idiom as it is behind Robert Kroetsch's and Eli Mandel's naked language, Patrick Lane's blunt style and Elizabeth Brewster's and Dale Zieroth's colloquial rhythms. Miriam Waddington comments on her literary aesthetics saying: "In poetry I dislike rhetoric, intellectual word play and T.S. Eliot".(*50) This refusal to indulge in linguistic and intellectual sophistication gives her poetry a quality of directness that makes explanation seem unnecessary. Anybody may have access to Miriam Waddington's poetry. Her feelings and ideas are clearly expressed and no academic preparation is needed to realize that her plainness bespeaks a spirit imbued with the quiet slow rhythms of the prairie and the placid ease of provincial ways of life.

However, as in the case of the other prairie writers we have seen, Miriam

Waddington's conversational tone does not imply that her poetry is shallow or limited in scope. On the contrary, her poems are rich with significances that may have worldwide appeal. Especially interesting and relevant is the way she weds poetry to geography by becoming an extension of the prairie landscape herself. This communion gives evidence of the intimate connections that may exist between man and the prairie environment. Besides, the beneficial influence that the prairie landscape exerts on her constitutes a definite proof that this kind of relationship is not necessarily one of conflict.

In a country of stretching space and shifting perspectives like Canada, the individual sometimes shrinks back in fear thereby confirming Northrop Frye's influential theory that "the outstanding achievement of Canadian poetry is the evocation of stark terror" produced by "the frightening loneliness of a huge and thinly settled country".(*51) However, the immensity and quiet solitude of