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THE CANADIAN LANDSCAPE THROUGH POETRY

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

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positive perspective. Suddenly, the ground willows of Baffin Island that crawl along the frozen surface unable to stand the Arctic wind, acquire the grandeur and dignity of those people who never give up the struggle in spite of being continuously defeated. The initial attack gives way to graceful celebration:

*And yet - and yet -
their seed pods glow
like delicate grey earrings
their leaves are veined and intricate
like tiny parkas
They have about three months
to make sure the species does not die
and that's how they spend their time
unbothered by any human opinion
just digging in here and now
sending their roots down down down
And you know it occurs to me
 about 2 feet under
those roots must touch permafrost
ice that remains ice forever
and they use it for their nourishment
they use death to remain alive. (*14)*

The final section is a humble recognition of the poet's initial folly. The spartan nature where the trees struggle to survive leads him to revise his standards of natural beauty, his old world stance and his pride. At the end of the poem, Al Purdy is as far removed from his old self as he is

from his home but he avoids becoming too solemn or mystical because, to paraphrase his own words, he is suspicious of the impulse that inclines him to embellish or magnify things. (*15) Al Purdy simply regrets his error of judgment leaving the task of drawing more serious conclusions to the reader:

*I see that I've been carried away
in my scorn of the dwarf trees
most foolish in my judgements
To take away the dignity
 of any living thing
even tho it cannot understand
 the scornful words
is to make life itself trivial
and yourself the Pontifex Maximus
 of nullity
I have been stupid in a poem
I will not alter the poem
but let the stupidity remain permanent
as the trees are
in a poem
the dwarf trees of Baffin Island. (*16)*

The cleansing atmosphere of the Arctic has made Purdy more receptive to the rhythms of a land he now sees as being strangely but beautifully alive. The poem "Arctic Rhododendrons" may be interpreted as the artist's tribute to the North where he has learnt to see every living presence as part of the miracle of being. He reminds us

that, in summertime, most tundra regions boast a great array of flowering plants that nature adorns with the delightful beauty of transience. The poet describes the rapid spring florescence of the North as 'small purple surprises' which he likens to the intense though ephemeral ecstasy of love:

*Years ago
it may have been
that lovers came this way
stopped in the outdoor hotel
to watch the water floorshow
and lying prone together
where the purged green
boils to a white heart
and the shore trembles
like a stone song
with bodies touching
flowers were their conversation
and love the sound of a colour
that lasts two weeks in August
and then dies. (*17)*

Al Purdy continues to enliven the Arctic landscape by filling it with people and animals that move naturally in this environment. Like the poems "Trees at the Arctic Circle" and "Arctic Rhododendrons", the pieces that record Purdy's encounter with the natives are endowed with ideas of change and renewal, though the sense of physical and cultural dislocation is more intense.

As soon as the poet establishes contact with Eskimo communities, he realizes that his 'southern' ethos does not apply to the Arctic and that, consequently, he has to revise inherited patterns and beliefs in order to appreciate and benefit from the unsullied beauty of the environment. This need to remove the trappings of culture is likely to go unnoticed because it comes to the fore in poems such as "Washday" and "When I Sat Down to Play the Piano" where Purdy gives us an account of the most domestic, comic, and even grotesque aspects of his experience. In "Washday", the poet joins a group of Eskimo housewives who are chattering and scrubbing clothes. Suddenly, one of the women pronounces his name and the poet feels that through this simple utterance, the girl seizes part of his self, washes it, and returns it to him refreshingly clean:

*Suddenly I
feel I'm picked up
with surprised vertigo
And held
between those lips
as she adds my name
to the weightless sounds
breathed out
some of the "me" I am
removed
the walled self*

*defences down
altered
I'm given to the air
then back to myself
like a gift from her. (*18)*

The idea that part of our conception of ourselves is dictated by others is implicit in these lines. When our name is uttered by those who move in our milieu and have a fixed idea of ourselves we may feel trapped in their vision which, paradoxically, we have helped to create. Contact with people who have been shaped by a different culture and environment and who, consequently, see us from a new angle help us unveil new traits in our personality. To a great extent, this explains why Purdy experiences a kind of rejuvenation when Leah, the Eskimo woman, pronounces his name for the first time. We may also see her as the embodiment of the northern landscape which, in North of Summer, the poet describes as being haunting and mysterious. From this perspective, the poem is especially significant because it lays further emphasis on the idea that the Arctic is a regenerating environment that helps the individual break the

bonds of selfhood and achieve expansion and renewal.

The sense of physical and cultural dislocation, which in Purdy's northern poems may symbolise the emotional crisis that is often necessary to achieve personal growth, is also present in "When I sat Down to Play the Piano". On the surface, this composition is an oblique criticism of the White man who has always felt entitled to seize other people's lands on the grounds that he belongs to a superior race. On a less general level, the poem may be interpreted as an ironic version of the idea that the northern wilderness is a dangerous but invigorating environment that breeds physical and moral health. This second interpretation contradicts the message that underlines North of Summer where the vision of the North as a restorative milieu comes to the fore with force. However, far from confusing the reader, this contradiction adds depth and credibility to Al Purdy's work. It bespeaks an artists who humanizes and modernizes the myth of

the North through the irony, scepticism and fusion of opposites that characterize contemporary art.

The poem begins as a parody of the dignity and solemnity that accompany the entrance of a king or perhaps the arrival of a daring explorer:

*He cometh forth hurriedly from his tent
and looketh for a quiet sequestered vale*

The third line reveals that the purpose of such kingly rush is none other than the unheroic urge to defecate which the poet does by squatting among boulders in the presence of amused children and menacing huskies hungry for human excrement:

*he findeth a quiet glade among great stone
squatteth forthwith and undoeth trousers
(...)
and beginneth the most natural function
buttocks balanced above the boulders
(...)
white teeth snapping at the anus.*

Purdy could not have found a more humorous way of expressing the idea that the Arctic demands self-abasement as a prerequisite for renewal:

*I shriek
and shriek
(the boy laughs)
and hold on to my pants
sans dignity
sans intellect
sans Wm Barrett
and damn near sans anus. (*19)*

The poem also suggests that in spite of its harshness and solitude the Arctic is an environment where Purdy feels intensely, viscerally alive. Besides, it stresses the poet's inclination to dwell on the concrete and the commonplace where he admits to feeling much more at ease than outside the limits of the physically seen and touched:

*Yes, I generally stick to the concrete, or get to it pretty quick. You can start from the concrete, but I don't think you can take off from no stance at all. (*20)*

However, this distrust of the irrational does not prevent him from partaking in the pleasurable thrills and intimations of the supernatural induced by the northern wilderness as

we shall see in the following poem. Dennis Lee remarks that this dual attitude:

*(...) gives him a way of affirming the mundane world without pumping it full of artificial uplift, of honouring his origins in a way his early verse did not, of keeping his hand in and of providing a ground-base against which the moments of insight can register more tellingly when they come along. (*21)*

One of these moments appears in "Still Life in a Tent" where the myth of the North as a land that helps open the gates of the soul is especially evident. In no other poem does Purdy get as near to mystic experience as he does in this lyric which records the artist's descent into and exploration of the uncharted regions of the self. However, as we have already seen in previous pieces, Al Purdy seems to protect himself against a too serious interpretation of the poem by insisting on the fact that the lines have been written in a feverish state, though this insistence may also be a way of saying that the origins of poetic inspiration and religious revelation are almost invariably located beyond the limits of rational understanding. At the

beginning of the poem he says: 'I have a slight fever' which, as the poem unfolds, becomes more and more intense until it 'burns and burns/ with bells of systole and diastole'. The poet continues to remind the reader that his 'thoughts travel together / in feverish fantasy' and it is only after he has made this clear that he admits to being on the road to himself:

*I'm so glad to be here
with the chance that comes but once
to any man in his lifetime
to travel deep in himself
to meet himself as a stranger
at the northern end of the world. (*22)*

The mystery and impenetrability of the Arctic landscape, its essential bleakness and solitude save for the howling of huskies that bark 'like hell' are both the departure point and metaphor of his inward journey. Landscape and self become one:

*Now, a berg splits
inside/outside the tent
a dry white noise
met dogs drift in
and out of hearing
I lie there fevered and
float a single thought out*

*in a night tinted
with day flowers in my mind. (*23)*

The physical breaking of icebergs in a land that is continuously moving symbolises the breaking of inner walls although there is no allusion in the poem to the outcome of the experience because the emphasis is on search rather than discovery. It is a quest for a personal Cathay or Paradise that began at Frobisher Airport and led the poet from island to island where he struggled to locate himself both physically and spiritually for the land was new and strange to him.

The critic Van Rys has described Al Purdy's journey into the Arctic as "a parodic reprocessing of Homeric epic".(*24) He also says that "like Odysseus, the poet hops from island to island meeting strange peoples" and that the poems in North of Summer:

(...) constitute a carnivalized version of epic heroism. Rather than Odysseus of the nimble wits we have the confused poet. While Odysseus' disguises allow him to test people and gain his revenge, the poet's masks cover instead a fully

*ambivalent identity. The poet is Nobody, but a carnivalized version of the clever Odyssean Nobody. He is continuously caught in unheroic postures, lounging before dinner, defecating among hungry huskies, washing clothes, urinating into the ocean. (*25)*

I would say that apart from being a parody of the epic story, North of Summer is a modern version of the Romantic wanderer who is suspicious of his emotions and intuitions perhaps because the kind of poetry that is most appealing to a 20th century reader is that which is written out of the artist's doubts rather than out of his certainties. What is certain, however, is that the poems in North of Summer bespeak an artist who is interested in the Canadian Arctic as the emblem of the whole particular Canadian ethos. It is the same interest that made the Confederation poets and the painters of the Group of Seven turn to the northern wilderness in search of experiences that would make images for a Canadian art and character. Al Purdy's North of Summer is, in short, an attempt to keep the myth of the North alive and thriving.

It is now time to establish a comparison between the poetry of the Confederation artists, E.J. Pratt and Al Purdy in order to see the differences and similarities in their ways of seeing and rendering the northern myth. The most obvious link between these writers is that all of them make Canada the centre of their poetic universe. In the case of the Confederation poets and E.J. Pratt, this choice responded to a genuine love for their country but also to the political circumstances of a time which demanded full social commitment to the task of creating, and in the case of Pratt affirming, a sense of nationhood. Although Canada came into being in 1867, the Canadian society was far from considering itself a nation when the Confederation poets produced the main bulk of their work for, as G.D. Ross Roy remarks:

Politiquement une nation peut naître du jour au lendemain; psychologiquement et culturellement, cela ne peut se réaliser que bien plus lentement. Il faut qu'il ait des intermédiaires.

(*26)

The Confederation poets as well as E.J. Pratt and the artists of the Group of Seven assumed this role of intermediaries by breaking the umbilical chord with Europe and forging a Canadian identity based on the unique and invigorating character of its geography. For these artists, it was the quality of being northerners that could homogenize all Canadians into a single mould giving them a sense of nationhood.

In the case of Al Purdy, the role of mediator suggested by Ross Roy is less clear though by no means absent. Canada has never ceased to grope for an image of herself, an image that could distinguish her from Europe and, especially, from the United States. Today, the affirmation of a Canadian identity is perhaps more difficult than in the days after Confederation because the country is a melting pot and the United States have literally invaded Canada through their powerful mass media. Many Canadians resent this fact and experience the necessity of affirming the Canadian nationality. Al Purdy's North of Summer suggests that the problem of identity is still

hooked to the country's collective consciousness and, therefore, the volume may be interpreted as a reflection of this feeling. To a great extent, this explains why Al Purdy does not renounce the ideal image of Canada as a northern country which may play a leading role in the bettering of mankind by helping man turn his eyes to nature. He also seems to remind us that the respect for the natural world, whether born out of fear or love of the wilderness has always been of paramount importance in Canadian society.

Like E.J. Pratt and the Confederation poets, Al Purdy holds the Romantic belief that nature favours self disclosure. However, this message is not as clear as it is in the writings of his predecessors because, as has already been suggested, Purdy is sceptical from the vision that wells up from within although, from time to time, he releases the hopes and beliefs that tradition has buried deeply inside him. Purdy's Romantic vein is also likely to go unnoticed because it is grafted on to the realism and pessimism of the atomic age. The idealism and

heightened idiom of the Confederation poets would seem naive in a world built on the possible destruction of the species. Perhaps, for all these reasons Al Purdy avoids the constellation of such words as 'sublime', 'grand', 'majestic' or 'awe' which so often appears in the poetry of the Confederation group. Perhaps he avoids Pratt's heroic diction for the same reason. Al Purdy is an adequate interpreter of his time and prefers to adopt the colloquial and direct idiom of the environmentalist because it is the kind of language that is most likely to appeal to a society that seems to have forsaken any experience of transcendence. This style allows him to humanize the myth of the North making it more comprehensible and thus bringing it closer to ordinary man.

Finally, Al Purdy's way of rendering the myth of the North does not contain any references to the supposed racial superiority of northern people. As may be expected, this belief, which could be detected in the work of the Confederation artists and E.J. Pratt in a more or less explicit

way, finds little or no echo in modern Canadian poetry. However, the ideas that a return to nature may bring about a new and more positive philosophy of life and that Canada may contribute to the advancement of this philosophy are present in the poetry of Al Purdy and it is these ideas that constitute the most obvious unifying link between the writings of the Confederation poets, E.J. Pratt and Al Purdy. All of them have dealt with the relationship man-nature in Canada in a way that contrasts with the poetic stance of other Canadian artists who have chosen to highlight the negative effects that the wilderness has had on the Canadian imagination.

THE NORTH : CHAPTER SIX. NOTES

1. George Woodcock (ed.), Selected Poems of Al Purdy. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972, p.4.
2. Al Purdy, "My Grandfather's Country" in The Collected Poems of Al Purdy, Russell Brown (ed.). Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, (1986), 1987, p.146-148. (All the poems quoted in this chapter are included in this volume).
3. Al Purdy, "The Country North of Belleville", pp.61-63.
4. Ibid.
5. Al Purdy in "A.W. Purdy. An Interview" conducted by Gary Geddes. The Sixties, George Woodcock (ed.). Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1969, p.67.
6. Al Purdy, North of Summer. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1967.
7. Dennis Lee, "The Poetry of Al Purdy: An Afterthought" in The Collected Poems of Al Purdy, op. cit., p.383.
8. Al Purdy in "A.W. Purdy. An Interview", op. cit., p.71.

9. Al Purdy, "The North West Passage", pp.79-81.
10. Al Purdy, "The Country of the Young", pp.105-106.
11. Al Purdy, "The North West Passage", p.80.
12. Al Purdy, "Trees at the Arctic Circle", pp.84-86.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Al Purdy, as quoted by George Bowering in "Purdy: Man and Poet". Canadian Literature, n.43, Winter 1970, p.32.
16. Al Purdy, "Trees at the Arctic Circle", pp.84-86.
17. Al Purdy, "Arctic Rhododendrons", p.81.
18. Al Purdy, "Washday", pp.101-103.
19. Al Purdy, "When I Sat Down to Play the Piano", pp.93-95.
20. Al Purdy in "A.W. Purdy. An Interview", op. cit., p.67.
21. Dennis Lee, "The Poetry of Al Purdy: An Afterthought", op. cit., p.386.
22. Al Purdy, "Still Life in a Tent", pp.90-93.

23. Ibid.
24. John Van Rys, "Alfred in Baffin Island: Carnival Traces in Purdy's *North of Summer*" in Canadian Poetry, n.26, Spring/Summer 1990, p.6.
25. Ibid., p.6
26. G.Ross Roy, Le Sentiment de la Nature Dans la Poésie Canadienne Anglaise. Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1961, p.9. My translation: Politically, a nation may be born overnight. Psychologically and culturally, however, this can only be achieved gradually, through intermediaries.

C O N C L U S I O N

CONCLUSION

Countries are like people. They have a past which functions as a kind of genetic code that conditions their development and they grow in an environment that plays an equally decisive role in the shaping of national character. This means that to a great extent, the collective personality of a nation results from the interaction between history and geography just as a single individual is moulded by his genetic inheritance and formative milieu.

It takes a long time and a great dose of love, or at least sympathy, to begin to know and understand the idiosyncrasy of a people and the

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character of a human being. However, there are physical traits and patterns of behaviour which come to the fore immediately and condition the way countries and people are perceived by others.

In the case of Canada, it is its vastness and natural beauty as well as its high standard of living and the civility of its people that first strike the visitor. Even those who have never travelled to this country associate the term 'Canada' with a northern wilderness, untamed, beautiful and unsullied and with peaceful and highly civilized citizens. Indeed, Canada possesses a splendid environment and is one of the most prestigious countries in the world because of its respect for minorities, its welfare state and its concern for human rights and the defence of the natural world. Besides, Canada has never been scarred by a civil war and its history records little or no interference in other countries' affairs.

In his introduction to the book A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom, William Kilbourn explains

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why Canada elicits worldwide respect and suggests that many aspects of the Canadian experience may serve as a model to other countries:

*In a world where independence often arrives with swift violence, it may be good to have one nation where it has matured slowly; in a world of fierce national prides, to have a state about which it is hard to be solemn and religious without being ridiculous, and impossible to be dogmatic. In a world with tendencies to political division and cultural homogeneity, Canada is a country that still stands for the alternative of political federation and cultural regional variety. In a world that strives for absolute freedom and often gains oppressive power, Canada presents a tradition that sees freedom in a subtle creative tension with authority; (...) In a world haunted by the fear of overpopulation, one is grateful for a place with room for more. (...) In a world of ideological battles, it is good to have a place where the quantity and quality of potential being in a person means more than he believes; in a masculine world of the assertive will and the cutting edge of intellect, a certain Canadian tendency to the amorphous permissive feminine principle of openness and tolerance and acceptance offers the possibility of healing. (*1)*

Needless to say, this does not mean that Canada is immune to the ills that affect modern society. The country has its share of violence and social unrest, but in comparison with the rest of

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the world one can say that Canada is, indeed, a beautiful and 'peaceable kingdom'.

So far, so good. However, if we delve into Canadian literature in order to gain access to the soul rather than the face of the country our first impression will probably be that like any other community, Canadian society has its fears and neuroses and that the land is not always a paradisiacal environment for its inhabitants, given the frequent recurrence of themes related to the country's obsession with self-assertion and the hardships imposed by a northern environment.

1.— THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY

European writers and readers, who have always been nourished by a rich tradition, may find the search for national identity and the feeling of cultural vacuum that besets many Canadian artists difficult to understand. However, the need for

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self-definition seems to be a characteristic of post colonial societies which have been subservient to the political and cultural norms of the colonizers for a long time. After gaining independence, usually through revolution, the newly created states face the task of forging an identity that may allow them to grow confidently as a people. When the cultural heritage of the colony is different from that of the metropoli, as was the case of India for example, the post-colonial period is, as William McGraw observes, characterised by:

*(...) a desire to revitalize and reinterpret the collective memory of their peoples in the context of a post-colonial present and to do this by transforming and transcending the imposed consciousness and by revising and reshaping the imposed language. (*2)*

However, in frontier countries like Canada and Australia with no indigenous tradition that could fit their emotional needs, the pioneers met the challenge of creating a new identity by discarding inherited standards in favour of the local. The length of this process depended on how

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eager the new country was for cultural distinctiveness. In Australia, the strong local flavour of the bush ballads, for example, was indicative of the bushmen's rebellion against the conventions of a society that had condemned them to exile. In Canada, the cry for freedom and independence was never so bold in pioneering days because the desire to maintain links with Europe was stronger than the will to divorce it. Historians insist on this fact and remind us that, unlike Australia, Canada developed from people who chose to be colonial rather than independent and decided to retain this status long after Confederation in 1867. In "Notes on the Canadian Imagination", for example, David Stouck writes:

*Men went to the United States seeking freedom and the opportunity for unlimited individual power.(...) Men came to Canada for different reasons. Where they had gone to the USA to escape tradition and build individual empires, they came to Canada seeking a place in which to preserve those traditions threatened at home. (*3)*

This initial choice accounts for the country's long political and cultural dependence

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on Europe which, in its turn, helps understand the Canadians' concern for self-definition.

The difficulty that Canadians seem to have to see themselves as members of a nation with a distinct personality is also due to the fact that the country lacked the impulse of a unifying revolutionary ideology. Canada was formed by two nationalities whose aversion to the republican destiny of the United States was stronger than their mutual dislike. Both the French and the British realized that their survival as a people depended on compromise and, consequently, they chose to share the northern part of the American continent rather than fight for it. This marriage of convenience did not foster a sense of nationhood which was further threatened by the influx of new nationalities and the geographical characteristics of the land.

Canada is a huge and sparsely settled country. The majority of the population is concentrated in a broad southern belt along the USA border and the rest of the land, especially

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the North, is a wilderness of immense rivers, lakes and islands that very few Canadians have visited. This fact of not possessing the land fully is, no doubt, an aspect that weakens the sense of identity. Besides, as Northrop Frye observes:

*Every part of Canada is shut off by its geography, British Columbia from the prairies by the Rockies, the prairies from the Canadas by the immense hinterland of northern Ontario, Quebec from the Maritimes by the upthrust of Maine, the Maritimes from Newfoundland by the sea.(...) every part of Canada has strong separatist feelings, because every part of it is in fact a separation. (*5)*

Thus, the history and geography of Canada help understand why Canadians have never felt a sense of national cohesion which would have helped them forge a Canadian identity. In his article "As We See Ourselves", Hugh Hoad enlarges upon this idea saying:

Everybody in this country has the psychology of a member of a minority group, and not a very important minority group either. The English Canadian feels swamped by the vast power of U.S. culture. The French Canadian feels crushed by the English Canadian, or claims to, though he's quite able to look after himself. The Ukrainians insist on their rights with the defensive,

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*turtle-like solidarity of a minority. Minorities are suspicious, defensive, fearful of being put upon, jealous of their legal safeguards, ready to take offence. The masses are not like that. The masses are so aware of their immense power that they can never get it through their heads that not everybody wants to be just like themselves. (*6)*

Hoad's final words allude clearly to the psychology of the mass prevailing in the United States and to the Americans' belief that the rest of the nations would, if they could, be like themselves.

The Canadians' antipathy to this philosophy accounts for their rich, multi-cultural society and their respect for minorities but it also explains their lack of national cohesion and precarious sense of identity. Canadian artists have always resented this fact. I would even dare say that contemporary writers are more concerned about the problem of identity than their predecessors. As we have seen, after Confederation, Canadian artists were enthusiastic about the future of the new nation and applied themselves to singing its excellences. This

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upsurge of nationalism continued with E.J. Pratt in the first half of this century. However, when American culture began to invade Canada, Canadian artists substituted the romantic enthusiasm of previous generations by a more realistic attitude towards a reality which could be stated, deplored or mocked but not changed. In The Impossible Sum of Our Traditions Malcolm Ross recognizes:

*You will be hard put to find any two or three
Canadians gathered together who can or will
agree on the meaning of the word 'Canadian'.(*8)*

Similarly, Robert Fulford observes:

*There are still more Canadians than not who
believe that the only identity we possess is our
non-identity.(*8)*

And in "Man Without a Country", Al Purdy conveys the same idea though in a more oblique and ironic way:

*But I have heard a man say
 "This is not a country
 I am going away from here"
It was as if he had said*

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*" I am no man because-
because this is not a country."(*9)*

The list could be as interminable as unnecessary because the problem of Canadian identity is a well-known one and Canadian artists continue to deal with it in their work in a more or less explicit way.

Canada's quest for self-definition is inextricably related to the Canadian artists' interest in nature themes because if there is anything that unites all the nationalities which co-exist in Canada, it is their consciousness of the wilderness. Canadian artists have invariably turned their eyes to nature either to write about the physical and emotional hardships it imposes or to celebrate its therapeutic qualities, but they have always used the wilderness theme as a means of stressing the uniqueness of the Canadian experience.

Both stances towards nature, that is, the positive and the negative, are widely represented

in Canadian literature though for reasons that escape my understanding the negative vision has received more scholarly attention and diffusion than the positive one and this accounts for the pervasive idea that Canadian literature is essentially pessimistic.

2.— TREACHEROUS NATURE

Given the high incidence of nature themes in Canadian poetry it is sensible to assume that the great overwhelming fact about Canada is the land itself. The impressive mountains, raging rivers and quiet lakes as well as the frozen lands of the North and the naked immensity of the prairie hold, for Canadian artists, a significance which is often anything but Romantic. As has already been suggested, this kind of emotional response is likely to be prompted by a more reassuring environment. Influential Canadian critics have observed that the Canadian imagination has always

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been at work trying to exorcise the devils that seem to be lurking behind every presence in the natural world. Northrop Frye points out that this fear of nature provokes "subconscious stampedings within the human mind" and that in Canadian poetry, "the unconscious horrors of nature and the subconscious horrors of the mind coincide".(*10)

Against this, it is understandable that the unseen menacing spirits in the natural world and in the self had to be forced out of their hiding places. Canadian artists had to give them shapes and names in order to make them appear as something more concrete hence less frightening. The contemporary poet Earle Birney, who spent part of his childhood and youth in the mountain village of Banff, recognised that he had to unburden himself about mountains through the relieving power of poetry.(*11) His well-known poem "Bushed" may be seen as an attempt to resist the pressure that the natural world exerted on him. "Bushed" describes the conflicting relationship between man and the Canadian wilderness. Nature is depicted as a purposely and actively ravaging force that takes

sadistic pleasure in inflicting pain and suffering on man. In order to survive this attack, the individual has to be constantly on his guard, armed with the weapons of endurance and imagination. But, the man in "Bushed" is not strong enough to resist the continuous onslaught of his powerful enemy and becomes increasingly obsessed with its destructive power. The poet tells us that the protagonist:

*invented a rainbow but lighting struck it
(...)
Yet he built a shack on the shore
(...)
At first he was out with the dawn
(...)
But he found the mountain was clearly alive
sent messages whizzing down every hot morning
(...)
When he tried his eyes on the lake ospreys
would fall like valkiries
choosing the cut-throat
He took then to waiting
till the night smoke rose from the boil of the sunset
But the moon carved unknown totems
out of the lakeshore
Owls in the beardusky woods derided him
moosehorned cedars circled his swamps and tossed
their antlers up to the stars
then he knew though the mountain slept the winds
were shaping its peak to an arrowhead
poised
And now he could only
bar himself in and wait
for the great flint to come singing into his heart. (*12)*

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The poem is both a warning against the dangers of the natural world and a vaccine against the poet's fears. In prairie poetry we have seen many examples which, like Earle Birney's poem, are a chronicle of man not at peace with the land around him. Patrick Lane's poetry condenses the harvest of physical and psychological stresses produced by the repeated betrayal of nature and the inward-looking obsessions of a small and intensely puritan society. On the other hand, the constant wanderings of Newlove's personae symbolise man's desire to escape confrontation with place and, by extension, with the self. Even the poetry of Robert Kroestch and Eli Mandel may be seen as examples of man's conflicting relationship with the wilderness. The drift into silence that characterises the work of these artists is indicative of the difficulty of coming to grips with the land both physically and imaginatively although silence in Kroetsch's and Mandel's poems also conveys the modernist sense of the unreliability of language and the anxiety caused by a blank page waiting to be filled with meaningful words.

CONCLUSION

An important part of the poetry that these artists have produced may be labelled as negative or pessimistic in the sense that it describes the way the Canadian wilderness has invaded man's consciousness and how the individual has responded to these attacks. This kind of poetry confirms Frye's and Atwood's theory that the conflict between man and nature is close to the core of the Canadian experience. However, we have also seen that Canadian poetry is not only an account of the wrestling between the individual and his physical environment. The homemakers draw on a world that is familiar and reassuring. Their poetry is the record of man who has conquered his geographical solitude and, by extension, his other solitudes not so much physically but imaginatively. However, the clearest proof that in Canadian literature the transmutation of character under the effect of place is not necessarily a negative process is to be found in the poetry prompted by the belief that remorseless winters have endowed Canadians with physical and spiritual fortitude and an ingenuity for survival.