

Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien: Nowlan's Novel Response to the Critics

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THE 1973 NOVEL *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien* is something of an anomaly within the corpus of works attached to the name of Alden Nowlan. Nowlan is predominantly known as a writer of short poetry, short fiction, and drama. The novel represents the only piece of extended fiction published under his name during his lifetime and with his assent. He had written an earlier novel, *The Wanton Troopers*, but had abandoned it after it had been rejected by a publisher; it was eventually published by Goose Lane Editions in 1988, five years after his death. *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien* also differs from Nowlan's more characteristic work because of its formal peculiarity. While Nowlan's poetry tends to be monologic in nature, working from the perspective of the lyric "I," the novel presents a dialogical text in which multiple narrative voices interact. The multiple narrative voices represent the protagonist, Kevin O'Brien, at various stages in his development: as a Nova Scotia child, as a rebellious adolescent, and as an adult who has moved away from home and now returns to view the home place with new eyes.

The novel also presents an interesting opportunity to see an author mobilize a variety of different discourses that impinge upon the creation of his artifact. By the time Nowlan comes to write this novel, he has already published several volumes of poetry and one volume of short fiction and has experienced the critical scrutiny of his work. The reception of Nowlan's early work often alludes to the question of his identity as a writer: is he a regionalist? If he is, then is that a good thing or a bad thing? If he is not a regionalist, then is he a "universal" writer? Indeed, the critics of his early work can, for the most part, be divided into specific camps based on their response to this question. There are those who see Nowlan's identification with the concerns and the particular identity of the Maritimes as a limiting factor, equating regionalism with parochialism. There are those who defend Nowlan's regionalism as an entirely valid approach to literary expression. Then there is a third group that justifies Nowlan's regional

writings as being expressive of universal truths in a particular geographical and historical frame.

As Nowlan the author sees his reception determined by the interaction of these different positions, Kevin O'Brien sees himself in terms of the different interpellations that correspond to various phases of his life. His journey home permits him to juxtapose his various incarnations (regional child, rebellious adolescent, metropolitan journalist) and to listen to the polyphonic complexity of the voices that have attached to his proper name, the voices of the various persons named Kevin O'Brien. The journey home climaxes in the novel's final chapter, in which Kevin confronts both his alienation from the home place and its expectations of him.

Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of the novel provide some context for understanding the position of *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien* within Nowlan's work as a whole. Bakhtin suggests that the novel is unique as a genre because of the way in which it integrates a variety of different stylistic unities into the novelistic whole, ranging from direct authorial narration through various forms of stylized oral and literary types of narration to the stylistically individualized speech of characters. For Bakhtin, "the novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (262). This matrix of different language uses permits a variety of dialogized social voices to operate within the text. The novelist welcomes and even intensifies this heteroglot quality in the text, constructing an authorial style which uses "words that are already populated with the social intentions of others and compels them to serve his own new intentions" (300). He goes on to suggest that this diversity is definitive of the novel:

The orientation of the word amid the utterances and languages of others, and all the specific phenomena connected with this orientation, takes on *artistic* significance in novel style. Diversity of voices and heteroglossia enter the novel and organize themselves within it into a structured artistic system. This constitutes the distinguishing feature of the novel as a genre. (300)

Within this context, Nowlan's turn to the novel affords him the opportunity to mobilize those various voices that surround his work, whether they be the critical voices that identify his work as problematically and narrowly regional or the voices of regional antecedents such as Ernest Buckler. These multiple voices enter the text through the consciousness of the protagonist Kevin, who, as a child, demonstrates the influence of the

regional voice, but as an adult, shows the influence of his job as a reporter at a metropolitan daily.

On his return home, Kevin experiences alienation because he has left the region and become an inhabitant of the city; as he has grown into his metropolitan adulthood, his childhood home has become subordinate in his mind. This alienation licences his self-representation as a detached observer, who, as an author-figure and journalist, can objectively evaluate life in the region; as Kevin's stories show, he views his childhood home as ripe for criticism. Janice Kulyk Keefer points out that the narrative "successfully deploys two languages — that of the 'work beasts' of Lockhartville, and that of the educated middle-class reader" (170). That middle-class reader is analogous to the writers of the critical evaluations which condemn, apologize for, or defend the regional nature of Nowlan's early poetry.

In historicizing the reception of Nowlan's early work, it is important to note that Nowlan wrote from New Brunswick at a time when Canadian nationalism was gathering momentum and the national literature was becoming increasingly reified. His early works include *The Rose and the Puritan* (1958), *A Darkness in the Earth* (1959), *Under the Ice* (1960), *Wind in a Rocky Country* (1961) and *The Things Which Are* (1962). There is then a five-year hiatus, during which Nowlan battled cancer, before the publication of the Governor-General's Award-winning *Bread, Wine and Salt* (1967) and the story collection *Miracle at Indian River* (1968). Although I hesitate to read too much particular significance into any literary award, I note that Nowlan collected the prestigious national award in 1968 for a book published in the year of the centennial of Canadian confederation, as nationalist a context as one might imagine in the Canadian mind. The irony here proceeds from the fact that his early poetry was seen by at least one reviewer as militating against the juggernaut of national identity.

Eli Mandel reviewed Nowlan's work three times in the early sixties and discounts his regionalism, suggesting in one review of an anthology of New Brunswick poets that "the dreams which trouble the Maritimes are the same as those which disturb the long nights of Albertans and that nightmare is not *simply* a province named New Brunswick" (Rev. of *Five* 68). Later, addressing violence in *The Things Which Are*, Mandel says, "It's by the way to ask whether or not so much blood flows in New Brunswick; personally, I'm sure the province is no bloodier than Alberta" (Rev. of *Things* 280). He argues that regional voices threaten a long-awaited "single coherent shape" that Canadian poetry was approaching and instead

contemporary poetry has mounted its horse and ridden off in all directions at once. There are still, of course, coterie poets: on the west coast, for example, a particularly limp group writing as though Vancouver's damp had somehow soaked their diction; on the east coast, a determinedly regional group muttering about farmers chopping off heads of chickens or wives, as the occasion demands. (278)

Behind its colourful descriptions, this passage is motivated by the ideal of a literary identity that would erase regional difference in deference to a coherent national literature. In an earlier review of *Under the Ice*, Mandel questions Nowlan's credibility, saying "no one, surely, will mistake Nowlan's Faulknerian world of barn-burnings, bear-baiting, child-whipping, and Saturday-night dances for the actual Maritimes" (Rev. of *Under* 91). By invoking Faulkner, Mandel suggests that there is a trans-regional language of regional literature, that Nowlan and Faulkner achieve their sense of regionality by employing the same discourse.

Mandel was not the only critic to draw attention to regionalism as a detrimental feature of Nowlan's writing. Two other reviews of *Under the Ice* sound the same note. Miriam Waddington says that Nowlan "writes out of his isolated chip-on-the-shoulder Maritime culture" (71). Alec Lucas writes:

Regional poetry contains its own peculiar pitfalls, and Nowlan has dropped into some of them. His rhythms are often unduly irregular and his diction unduly flat. He seems to think that the poet best presents crudity by writing crudely. The result is not regional poetry but dogpatch verse. (62)

Although Lucas does not condemn regionalism out of hand, he aligns Nowlan's regionalism with the backwoods caricatures of cartoonist Al Capp. The implication is clear: what Nowlan offers as literature is here received as cartoon.

Mandel, Waddington, and Lucas write from the perspective of the Canadian academy. At the time of publication of these reviews, Mandel was a professor at the Collège Militaire Royal de St.-Jean in Alberta, Waddington was a social worker with North York Family Services (although she would join the English faculty at York University three years later), and Lucas was a professor at McGill University. Their reviews represent a national critical discourse operating from outside the region represented in Nowlan's work; critics from the Maritimes tend to view him differently.

Nowlan and the critics who defend him deny the existence of a New Brunswick school of writers; however, the response to Nowlan's work by Maritime critics suggests some degree of consensus about his importance in the region. Robert Cockburn, writing in *The Fiddlehead*, a Fredericton-based journal, attacks the critics who call Nowlan "a man of one theme" and claims that "there is more variety in *Under the Ice* and *The Things Which Are* than most critics seem to have been aware of" (Rev. of *Bread* 74). He drives the regional point home, identifying Nowlan as "of independent character and fortunate domicile... [and] largely free of the dictatorial antics of the covens of Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver" (76). If Mandel represents the extreme of one position, Cockburn articulates the extreme of the other pole. In the middle sit critics such as Peter Pacey who, in 1971, suggested that "there has been nothing regional, in a pejorative [*sic*] sense, in the poetry since the publication of *Bread, Wine and Salt*" (114). He adds that Nowlan uses the region as a metaphor for all humanity, implying the universal through the particular, using his own experience as the raw material of his art.

Similarly, while praising Nowlan's "acute feeling for place" (41), Keath Fraser distinguishes Nowlan's work from the Romantic detachment of an earlier major New Brunswick poet, Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, because the "consequence of calcified regionalism clutches Nowlan most noticeably" (42). Fraser's metaphor of "calcification" suggests a regionalism that has hardened and become lifeless. But in using the metaphor as a qualifying adjective, he allows the possibility of a life-affirming regionalism, a regionalism that has escaped calcification. Again, the critic's ideal becomes clear: "the regionalist at his best canalizes attention toward the aggregate experience of this individual, the Everyjoe who has served all masters in a *universal regionalism*" (44). Fraser's conclusion that Nowlan continues to grow as a poet even as his regional qualities endure suggests that regionalism serves the universalizing impulse.

In this critical discourse, then, regionalism becomes a charged word, possibly a slight, at very least an attribute that must be justified. The critical discourse assumes that a literature that attempts to represent its region faithfully simply demonstrates universal behaviour in particular surroundings rather than expressing a difference of view. As such, regional art is inferior to either national art or universal art and perhaps signifies an early stage in an artist's development. The process of development is the focus of Michael Brian Oliver's 1978 monograph, *Poet's Progress: The Development of Alden Nowlan's Poetry*. Oliver establishes his position by invoking closure on the debate with the opening words of his first chapter:

Alden Nowlan is no longer considered, by even the least perceptive critic, to be a “regional” writer. This recognition that his writing, especially his poetry, is not limited in its relevance to Atlantic Canada — or even to Canada for that matter — must be enormously satisfying to Mr. Nowlan personally, considering that the label “regionalist” has stuck to his reputation like a burr since the early ’60s when his career was just beginning. Today there is no longer any question: Alden Nowlan is an important poet, . . . Fortunately, nothing more needs to be said at this time about the fact of Nowlan’s universal appeal.(5)

Oliver goes on in this opening chapter to relate Nowlan’s poetry to the nation-building thematic master-narratives of the 1960s and 1970s produced by D.G. Jones (*Butterfly on Rock*), Margaret Atwood (*Survival*) and Northrop Frye (*The Bush Garden*). So where earlier expressions of nationalist fervour dismiss Nowlan’s poetry as narrowly local and parochial, Oliver seeks to recuperate it as a local manifestation of the national ethos within a homogenizing thematic context.

The criticism, taken as a whole, suggests that the trajectory of Nowlan’s poetic development arcs away from the strongly local orientation of the earlier poetry to the work of the late 1960s, from which the regional “in a pejorative [*sic*] sense,” to use Pacey’s term, has been purged. Similarly, within the context of a study purporting to chart, in its suitably Bunyanesque title, the progress of a poetic pilgrim, Oliver characterizes Nowlan as having grown out of the region into the adulthood of the metropolis, dismissing the regional in favour of the national.

Little wonder then that the poet himself would want to reject any categorization of himself as regional. Nowlan responded to the “charge” that his poetry was “too regional” by saying that “most of the critics are people who want me to write about Toronto — which is smaller than the Maritimes” (Cockburn, “Interview” 10). In response to Mandel’s assertion that no one would mistake Nowlan’s Maritimes for the actual Maritimes, Nowlan, who calls the review “a very kind and very good review,” strikes a bemused tone: “Well, that is like saying my whole life has been a figment of my own imagination” (Cook 18). Elsewhere, he laments an apparent pedagogical need “to make believe that literature, like hockey, can be organized geographically (or otherwise) into leagues and teams” (Nowlan, “Something” 10).

Nowlan displays a degree of ambivalence to the critical discourse surrounding his early work. He expresses his frustration with the narrow critical view of his writing, and yet, in a 1963 interview with Gregory Cook, he speaks of his work in the same universalizing tone as that found in Oliver:

I feel my work is less and less provincial because I myself am becoming less and less provincial. I mean a lot of my stuff has probably been provincial or parochial, but that isn't a failure in the material, it is a failure in me. I can write a lot better now than I wrote when I did the poems in *Under the Ice*. I'm ready to fight anyone who says that *The Things Which Are* is a book of regional verse. No, I'm not ready to fight them. Really, I care less and less about what people say about my poems and stories. No, that is false too, in a way, because I'm sensitive to praise and dispraise, but I don't let it affect my writing. (19)

The hesitancy of his response here suggests that Nowlan struggles to find a way to articulate his frustration. At any rate, he is aware of the divided critical discourse surrounding his work. So when he comes to write *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien*, he can anticipate how it might be read. Writing the novel, Nowlan, considered a conservative stylist in other genres, adopts a narrative structure that permits multiple voicing and an idiosyncratic sense of narrative time. The heteroglot narrative structure permits a debate between regional voices and non-regional authoritative voices across a number of character zones surrounding various persons named Kevin O'Brien.

Kevin appears in Nowlan's first attempt at the novel, *The Wanton Troopers*, a straightforward naturalistic narrative of Kevin's earlier years which focusses on the disintegration of his parents' troubled marriage. While there are similarities between the Kevin of the earlier novel and the Kevins of the later novel, there are significant differences that make it impossible to view the character as unproblematically consistent. The later novel enters into a dialogue with the earlier novel, recasting many of the same plot elements and characters in a very different and more ludic structure. The later novel includes those critical voices which Nowlan was only beginning to hear at the time he was composing *The Wanton Troopers*. In the earlier novel, Kevin views the region as wholly present to him; in the later, he re-enters his home town as an alien attempting to cope with the memories of absent people.

As the hometown boy who has travelled from home to make his name and is now returning, Kevin views himself at least partly as the embodiment of an objective critical discourse reflecting on a place that is now foreign to him. At the same time, the later novel marks Nowlan's return journey to his own earlier manuscript. As such, the theme of poetic development that emerges from the criticism intertwines with the theme of the protagonist's development both in *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien* and in the interstice between the two novels that feature Kevin

as protagonist. *The Wanton Troopers* is the story of the child told by the novice author; *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien* is the adult story told by the mature author (Milton 61).

At the beginning of *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien*, Kevin stands at a particular point in his development. He is a mature independent adult who appears to have successfully escaped the repressive town of his youth. In his critical act of reading his manuscripts and in his professional role as a journalist, Kevin's consciousness becomes the conduit through which his own linguistic orientations at various points enter the novel. He is the privileged observer constructed by the various languages he speaks: the language of the region, the language of the metropolis, and, what constitutes the unifying thread, the language of mass media and pop culture. These three languages correspond roughly to the three positions within the critical discourse surrounding his work. As representative of the mainstream press and centralist ideology, Kevin is implicated in the subordination of the region. Language is the key here, and Kevin possesses that key; Keefer notes that language, which has liberated and alienated Kevin from the region, has been a factor in impoverishing "those who cannot aspire to correct or educated speech, and liberating those who can. . . . This 'fictional memoir' is the story of a returned prodigy, not prodigal" (167). The prodigy, who has risen above Lockhartville, returns to examine it as it is, as he remembers it and as he has written about it. The result of this process can be examined through an analysis of the final chapter of the novel, "His Native Place."

Nowlan delivers the narrative through three sources in the text. The story of Kevin's return, which forms the frame narrative, is spoken by a third-person omniscient narrator. That third-person voice also relates Kevin's memories. A third source of stories is his manuscripts. The narrative alternates among the frame tale, the memories, and the memoirs, creating a rhythm that leads the reader to expect the novel will end with the omniscient narrator reasserting control. The book ends with a third-person narrative of Kevin's attendance at a dance on the final night of his visit. All narrative time frames coalesce in this story: it occurs in the present of the visit but is recollected some days later and, as such, is an event of the past.

To this point, Kevin's memory has not been called into question. Each of his memories has been admitted unchallenged by the narrator's voice, except for the ending of "The Hetherington Murder Case" which ends with an admitted lie (Nowlan, *Various* 117). In the final chapter, "His Native Place," the narrator foregrounds Kevin's lapses in memory and a

number of things that mediate between Kevin and his ability to understand the signs of his home village. In this chapter, Kevin attends a dance with his boorish cousins, who goad him into fighting with a man from a nearby village over a local woman. The alienated Kevin has difficulty determining what is expected of him in this fight in which, as a result of a lucky punch and a fortuitous fall, he beats the larger man.

Kevin is so removed from the village lifestyle that, long before the fight, he is surprised to discover that “he had forgotten how, when his cousins or any of the young men of Lockhartville greeted one another, they invariably pretended they were about to wrestle or box” (130). He blames his unfamiliarity on faulty memory, which is ironic since Kevin’s memory has been the guarantor of authority for much of the preceding narrative. Similarly, his memory of Estelle is discredited because he remembers her as a child when she is now old enough to be an object of sexual conquest. Again, when he hears the familiar sounds of a local band, he doesn’t recognize the tunes they play. His memory fails him, and this marks him as alien. Kevin’s absence from Lockhartville, while it may have allowed him to grow in metropolitan sophistication, has cost him in terms of his familiarity with his native place. His knowledge of his home town has become outdated. Throughout the novel, he has prided himself on his ability to observe his home town with a perspective improved by education and big-city experience; in this final chapter, he is confronted by the fact that, in local terms, he is ill-educated and inexperienced.

If memory will not help him understand, he must seek another interpretive paradigm, mass culture. This provides a lexicon equally available to the villager and the city dweller, which facilitates communication although it does emphasize the differences: “television only serves to widen the gap between Lockhartville and the rest of the world, since little or nothing that appears on the screen has the remotest connection with what can be seen from the window” (3). At the same time, the city dweller claims a superior understanding of the images, as Kevin does in considering Estelle’s miniskirt:

It was funny, and a little pathetic, Kevin reflected, that nowadays girls in places like Lockhartville adopted exotic fashions more rapidly than most of their contemporaries in the cities, simply because their chief contact with the outside world was through television and their conception of what was fashionable was based on what was worn by Racquel [*sic*] Welch on the Johnny Carson Show. (133)

Estelle’s understanding is marked as naive or second-hand, and her at-

tempts to be fashionable no more than mimicry. Kevin feels superior because he can distinguish between Estelle's ersatz fashion and authentic fashion.

But this structure is quickly reversed and the tables turned. Kevin notes that local country singer Tracy Devlin sounds like Eddy Arnold when he sings "The Tennessee Waltz" and like Hank Snow when he sings "I've Been Everywhere, Man." Again, his superiority derives from his critical ability to see the source through the mimicry. However, when Tracy sings "The Waltz of the Wind," Kevin cannot locate a voice that is being mimicked (134). Either Kevin's knowledge of country music is, like his knowledge of Estelle, behind the times, or he is unable to recognize Tracy's own voice or the relatively unmediated voice of the region.

The climax of this concluding story comes in Kevin's fight with Bob D'Entremont. His cousins goad him into this local turf fight, which Kevin would just as soon avoid. But to back down would be to lose face. Still, he is uncertain how to approach this fight and attempts to make sense of it in terms of his understanding of movie fights. When his cousins tell him that D'Entremont carries a knife, again local knowledge fails him and he cannot be certain whether they are teasing him or not. So he turns to his knowledge of pop culture for assurance: "In the real world men did not fight with knives. Knife fights occurred only in films starring Robert Mitchum and Lee Marvin" (137). When the fight turns out to be a one-punch affair, he registers his surprise by saying he "had always imagined these, his people, battling like John Wayne and Victor McLaglan in *The Quiet Man*" (142). Like Estelle's conception of the outside world, Kevin's sense of the region he has left behind depends upon patchy memories supplemented by movies. His Maritimes owe as much to Hollywood as to Halifax. For all his pretensions to superiority, Kevin's reliance on the universal discourse of popular culture keeps him in his place.

Kevin has aligned himself earlier with two models of the supposedly objective critical observer. By quoting Thomas Carlyle (5) and George Santayana (129), he has shown that he can function at least nominally in a learned academic discourse. But it is by virtue of his profession, journalism, that Kevin is most closely identified with an authoritative discourse. He thinks of headlines just before the fight while he still believes he might get out of it:

If [D'Entremont] were sufficiently provoked he might come back next week with a half-dozen friends from his own village. But that was next week. And next week Kevin would be writing heads. "Government

Agrees to Tariff Talks.” Set in 42 Bodoni bold, centred on a three-column slug. “Middle East Crisis Worsens.” Set in 48 Cheltenham bold for six columns reverse plate with arrow ends. (139)

The headlines represent detachment, dealing with other conflicts far from Lockhartville and far from the headline writer. In his poetry, Nowlan has also parodied the notion of the detached journalist, notably in “The Execution” where that detachment breaks down in a horrific way, and in “The Broadcaster’s Poem” where it remains unbreached only by circumstance. In the novel, the detachment disappears when the fight becomes unavoidable; the headline that comes to mind is “‘Man Stabbed to Death,’ . . . two columns, two decks, 48 Bodoni bold, with a 12-point, 22-em lead at top left of the local page”(140), all of which suggests an important story, at least in the most local of contexts.

The climactic punch destroys all Kevin’s pretensions to detachment or alienation. He behaves exactly as the cousins expect. Significantly, as he leaves the dance with Estelle, Kevin is laughing. When Estelle asks him why, he utters the final words of the text: “‘Damned if I know,’ he answered” (143). The elevated tone has disappeared and he finishes with a swear word, “damned.” The narrative does not return to its frame but implicitly refers farther back to the italicized preface, in which Kevin wonders whether he should “begin this book with a page containing nothing except a question mark” (1). The book ends with an answer of a sort: “Damned if I know.” Earlier in the text, Kevin refers to some fictions as exorcisms (41), and it is perhaps the purgative force of the narrative that has removed the necessity to know.

His identity as a journalist depends upon his need to know on behalf of his readers, which leads to his reportorial investigations. That identity is suppressed at this stage of the story as he utters those final words sitting in the car with Estelle, away from the dance, amid fumes “like a naval smoke screen” (143), in a state where much interferes with perception, including the alcohol he has consumed. Then Kevin ends with a statement of the failure of knowledge; if the journey has been a quest for an understanding of himself and his regional roots, it has failed. Despite the cathartic climax of the punch, he has come to know nothing, only to experience pure viscosity. The verbal edifices that distance him from the region crumble at the moment of crisis and, as the narrative says, “he had never felt better” (143).

In naming Kevin’s antagonist Bob D’Entremont, Nowlan alludes to another Maritime *Künstlerroman*, Ernest Buckler’s *The Mountain and the Valley*, which begins with the line “David Canaan had lived in Entremont

all his thirty years" (13). Like Nowlan's novel, Buckler's novel takes place in the Annapolis Valley. Both involve an artist-protagonist concerned with his ability to escape a home community from which he feels alienated because of his superior language abilities and his active imagination. The significant difference between the two situations is that Nowlan's protagonist is able to escape from his home while Buckler's fails to escape and dies in the trying. Buckler's novel exemplifies a tragic pastoralism in which the artist dies as a punishment for his sin of pride because he sees himself as superior to his neighbours. David Canaan is punished for failing to accept his home and for constructing the valley as a place from which he must escape.

In this context, Kevin's punch seems to respond in a comic fashion to some anxiety of influence harboured by his creator, Alden Nowlan; the stronger man, D'Entremont, stands in for the strong author-father Buckler, who needs to be conquered in order that the younger writer might be freed. The plot of *The Mountain and the Valley* presents a paradigm of the experience of the Maritime writer. In Buckler's version of the Maritime *Künstlerroman*, the artist who believes he must escape to realize his artistic vision dies. The artist who fails to recognize himself in the region dies unfulfilled. It is the oppressive, monologic quality of this paradigm with its narrative containment of the energies of the imaginative youth that Kevin takes aim at in this punch at D'Entremont. Ironically, however, this punch becomes the means by which Kevin recognizes himself as part of the world of the cousins who have goaded him into the fight. The blow that seems at one level to liberate him from the oppressive tragic vision of the regional artist even more surely demonstrates his connection to the world of Lockhartville.

The ending presents an ambiguity that suggests that Kevin dismisses any sense of development or progression beyond the region. The confident journalist who re-enters his childhood home does not progress to any greater knowledge or understanding. Indeed, the novel concludes with his colloquial profession of ignorance: "Damned if I know." As noted, taken in conjunction with the novel's opening allusion to a question mark, this statement suggests a circularity to the novel, a circularity that seems to reject the linearity of David Canaan's tragedy. It may also be a circularity that rejects the underlying pattern of the poet's progress, a pattern of development or growth from naive regionalist to mature nationalist.

Through the dialogical narrative structure of the novel, Nowlan displays for the reader both his awareness of the critical discourse that surrounds his work and its influence on him. Kevin O'Brien represents

a refugee from his own home place who, in learning the language of the metropolis and adopting its perspective as his own mature view, learns a degree of disdain for the region from which he hails. The multiple Kevin looks upon himself as a fragmented creature who progresses from the parochial vision of his childhood to achieve the mature, nationalist view of his adulthood. But the final chapter of the novel acts to undermine Kevin's self-confident sense of having overcome the region. So Nowlan inscribes an ambiguous ending as Kevin's claims to have escaped founder on his reabsorption into the community and the dissipation of his sense of objective superiority. What remains is a regional statement that resists the paternalism of nationalist criticism and the tragic pastoralism of Ernest Buckler.

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