

**THE PRESENCE OF ICE:
THE EARLY POETRY OF ALDEN NOWLAN**

by
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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, not just a crazed prophet crying in the wilderness of the Maritime provinces. Readers outside Canada have recognized this for some time now. Robert Bly, for example, places Nowlan in the tradition of Dostoevsky and Lawrence because of his "psychic bravery" in "skating out along the edges of fear" in his poetry.¹ Fortunately, nothing more needs to be said at this time about the fact of Nowlan's universal appeal.

This then is the proper time to examine Alden Nowlan's early poems, because we can now view them from a healthy critical distance and our vision is no longer clouded by the issue of their relevance. Following this perspective we soon discover that there has been — surprisingly — much left unsaid about a very rich period in the development of one of our best contemporary poets. In these poems Nowlan presented the world he knew as a boy and as a young man growing up in rural Nova Scotia and coming of age in rural New Brunswick. His picture of this rough landscape and its suspicious Puritanical inhabitants is startling, but totally realistic, especially in its original mythical suggestions about the psyche and society of the Maritimes. Also, this myth is typically Canadian, though still elusive. Indeed, Nowlan's early poems are pioneer works in the exploration of the real Canadian soul.

¹Robert Bly, "For Alden Nowlan, With Admiration," the introduction to Nowlan's selected poems, *Playing The Jesus Game* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: NEW/BOOKS, 1970), 10.

In most of his early poems Alden Nowlan seems guarded, even suspicious, about revealing himself to his readers. He confesses in these poems not the truth about himself but the truth about his neighbours and his environment. There is ample fear, even terror, in his writings of the '50s and early '60s, but it is fear of his countrymen's callousness, ignorance, and violence. Few poems from this period approach the dread of the self which was to become such a common theme of his later writings. This is not to say that he was not artistically courageous at the beginning of his career. On the contrary, it took immense daring for him to even *admit* to writing poetry at all, for the simple reason that a thinking man in a doing community is certain to be scorned by his neighbours. A poet is worse than useless on the frontier, and in many ways the rural Nova Scotia of Nowlan's youth in the '30s and '40s was still a frontier society. The result of this repression of the artistic impulse because of social pressure was the feeling that writing was a shameful act. In an interview with *Fiddlehead* in 1969 Nowlan recalled the beginning of his career as a writer. Asked whether anyone ever encouraged him to write as a youth, he replied,

No. Never until I was 25 years old and met Fred Cogswell. Wouldn't have dreamed of telling anyone I write in all that time. That span of a quarter of a century made it difficult for me to discuss my writing — it's a heritage.²

And what a heritage! People living outside the Maritimes find it difficult to believe the toughness of the life in the rural Nova Scotia of Nowlan's youth or the rural New Brunswick of his early manhood. Even people who grew up in Halifax or Fredericton or Charlottetown are sometimes astonished by Nowlan's descriptions of Maritime life. In an earlier interview, in 1963 with *Amethyst*, Nowlan commented on the — to him maddening — incredulosity of some of his readers:

... Eli Mandel wrote a very kind and very good review of one of my books in *The Canadian Forum*. And in it he said something like this: "Mr. Nowlan's world of child-beatings, and Saturday night dances isn't the real Maritimes. . . ." Well, that is like saying my whole life has been a figment of my imagination.³

Ironically, it was precisely the reality of Nowlan's portrayal of the Maritimes that caused critics from Upper Canada to label him a regionalist and a freak. Readers did not — and still do not — like to think that they

²*Fiddlehead*, 81 (Fall, 1969), 8.

³*Amethyst* Extra on Alden Nowlan," *Amethyst*, II (1963), 18.

Clearly though, the desperate need of sensitivity to escape a culturally oppressive environment accounts for Nowlan's preoccupation with crudity and violence in his early writings. His first books — *The Rose and the Puritan*, *A Darkness in the Earth*, *Wind in a Rocky Country*, *Under the Ice*, and *The Things Which Are* — as well as his award-winning *Bread, Wine and Salt* of 1967, all shed the nightmare of the "grotesques" of humanity and landscape that he had known. These books report to the outside world — or should I say inside world? — what it was like in the wilderness of the rural Maritimes. I hesitate to say that Nowlan's readers are in the outside world, as idiom would dictate, because I think that his early poems usually refer to a place outside the "garrison" of the conventional mentality of most of his readers.

I am obviously borrowing here from the theory of D. G. Jones (who first borrowed from Northrop Frye). In *Butterfly On Rock* Jones argues that the central tension in Canadian literature has always been between the garrison of borrowed culture — either European or American — and the wilderness of authentic Canadian experience. He also points out that most Canadian poets who emerged in the '60s were primarily concerned with exploring the mental as well as the physical wilderness of Canadian life. In his own words:

What many poets of the past decade have undertaken is precisely the role of the nth Adam. They have set out to take an inventory of the world but scarcely uttered, the world of the excluded or ignored. It would comprehend whatever is crude, whatever is lonely, whatever has failed, whatever inhabits the sounds of the deserted streets, the open highways, the abandoned farms. It is the wilderness of experience that does not conform to the cultural maps of the history books, sermons, political speeches, slick magazines, and ads. And it is the wilderness of language in which the official voices of the culture fail to articulate the meaning of the actual sensation of living and tend to become gibberish.⁴

Though Jones says very little about Nowlan specifically, it is obvious that Nowlan's early poems about the uncharted rural Maritime consciousness — one of the unlikely places that is not supposed to exist — are no more unusual, or "regional," than Al Purdy's poems about Ontario or Leonard Cohen's poems about Montreal. In fact, in the late '50s and early '60s Nowlan helped to establish the movement Jones speaks of by determining to explore the wilderness of his Maritime heritage. As usual, Mr. Nowlan himself says it best:

I don't know that the life of a New Brunswick farmer is much more primitive than the life of a bartender in Toronto. It's mostly that these people who think of the subjects of my poems as primitive and

⁴D. G. Jones, *Butterfly On Rock* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 166.

violent think of any kind of real life as primitive and violent — I mean any kind of real life outside of a certain, oh, suburban, sophisticated, academic kind of real life.⁵

But how does Nowlan identify the real life of the rural Maritimes as he knew it? Here again Jones's theory proves relevant. The most recurrent theme he finds in Canadian literature is "... a sense of exile, of being estranged from the land and divided within oneself."⁶ These words might have been written specifically about Alden Nowlan's early poems. To put it briefly, these poems depict a harsh landscape and a crazed populace who can hope for little more than survival within it. (Here Margaret Atwood's theory about Canadian literature is also relevant, though she, like Jones, has written very little about Nowlan.) Indeed, the ruggedly desperate people of Nowlan's early poems and stories constantly battle the forests and the rocky soil for a livelihood, and constantly battle the chaotic, earthy forces of darkness within themselves, vainly allying themselves with the Puritanical, rational forces of light promoted by the church, the most important institution of the community. And inevitably, a feeling of paranoid schizophrenia — "the national [not the *regional!*] mental illness of Canada" as Atwood calls it⁷ — pervades Nowlan's writings about these people.

Perhaps the most effective way to demonstrate the manifestations of this theme is to regard them in their proper light as myth. It is true of Nowlan that, as Keith Fraser has pointed out, "The ideal landscape of Roberts and Carmen, his literary ancestors, are the ones he avoids and de-mythologizes."⁸ Nevertheless, his poetry is, in the best sense of the word, mythopoeic, because it embodies psychological and sociological truths in recurring symbolic figures and scenes. Rather than simply de-mythologizing the Maritime landscape, Nowlan re-mythologizes it. In this new myth the landscape becomes typically Canadian, that is, harsh and non-human, and therefore frightening and alienating.⁹ Almost any of Nowlan's early poems would illustrate this, but I think the short poem "Atlantic Coast: Summer" is especially interesting:

⁵Ameythyst, 18.

⁶Jones, 5.

⁷Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970), 62.

⁸Keith Fraser, "Notes on Alden Nowlan," *Canadian Literature*, XL (1970), 41.

⁹This is an amalgamated impression put together from reading Jones's *Butterfly On Rock*, Northrop Frye's *The Bush Garden* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), and Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972).

It's summer yet but still the cold
 coils through these fields at dusk, the grey Atlantic
 haunting the hollows and a black bitch barking
 between a rockpile and a broken fence
 out on the hill a mile from town where maybe
 a she-bear, groggy with blueberries, listens
 and the colt, lonesome, runs in crooked circles.

Admittedly, this little poem is so crowded with typical Maritime imagery that it looks as if it might have been the result of an assignment to a CBC documentary crew. Still it is realistic and chilling in its depiction of a foggy, drizzly summer day in New Brunswick or Nova Scotia. Indeed, the most horrifying feature of this grim scene is that it is summer. The archetype of bounty and beauty has been turned inside out with startling effect.

But there is no need here to dwell on the symbolic setting of Nowlan's myth. Mr. Fraser has already pointed out in his article the uncompromising indifference of this landscape to human life. So too have most of Nowlan's early reviewers. And this feeling of Nowlan's about the land generally coincides with what both Jones and Atwood claim most sensitive Canadians feel about it. The difference is one of degree: Nowlan's early vision of the Maritime landscape is almost relentlessly nightmarish. There is certainly none of the idyllic quality that tempers, say, Atwood's Susanna Moodie contemplating the bush or Purdy's farmer taking in the spectacle of the country north of Belleville. Any natural beauty in Nowlan's early poems is freakish and fragile and doomed, for, as the persona of "The Rose and the Puritan" says, "the world is wind, the winged wind with claws."

What I do wish to emphasize here is the split consciousness of the Nowlan world. To put it simply, an incessantly rampaging Puritanism has divided life for Nowlan's rural Maritimers into the two traditional realms of light and darkness, the world of light occupying the upper level of consciousness and representing social rationalism, and the world of darkness occupying the lower level of consciousness and representing individual passion. This arrangement is, of course, archetypal and may be easily imagined in a diagrammatic scheme: the upper realm of light includes such qualities as reason, conscience, and social role, and the lower level of darkness includes such qualities as imagination, desire, and individuality. A surface, usually water, but in Nowlan's case, ice, separates the world of light from the world of darkness. All the people in Nowlan's early poems may be imagined in ranging heights or depths of consciousness in this scheme. For the sake of convenience, I shall illustrate how four typical early poems of Nowlan's represent four typical levels of consciousness in this world, from "Warren Pryor" at the top in the purified light, to "The Daughter of Zion" still in the light but just above the ice, to the "Cousins" just below the ice in the darkness, all the way down to "The Wickedness of Peter Shannon" deep in the darkness.

The title of Nowlan's first full-length book, *Under the Ice*, is especially meaningful when considered in relation to this scheme, for in most of his poems in the late '50s and early '60s he was intent on releasing the spectres

hidden under the ice of the Puritan conscience, or, less frequently, intent on freeing the no less desperate spirits floundering in the rarefied mentality of the Puritan conscience itself, above the ice.

But, before going on to the individual poems, two things should be noted. First, Alden Nowlan's early poems show him to be the spiritual kinsman of two American writers whose treatments of Puritanism have become classics of North American literature. I am thinking, of course, of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Robert Lowell. This is Nowlan's tradition, his inherited world-view, the philosophy satirized by Lowell in the splendid poem "Children of Light" and by Hawthorne in "Young Goodman Brown" and *The Scarlet Letter*. Nowlan's despair about the Puritans' hypocritical divorce of reason and emotion easily equals theirs, or anyone's.

The second thing to notice here is that Nowlan has renovated the standard symbols in the Puritan myth (which are, as I have already mentioned, the same symbols universally used to represent many opposing qualities of experience, such as good and evil, the known and the unknown, life and death and so on). Instead of using water to symbolize the surface or boundary between the realms of light and darkness, as in the various baptism or regeneration myths, Nowlan — with an imaginative stroke — uses ice as the surface. This hardens the reality of the divorce and seems to suggest an abandonment of hope that there might ever occur a Blakean, apocalyptic marriage of heaven and hell to make these people *whole* again, in the Biblical sense of being healthy or peaceful. I can think of only one other instance of ice being used in somewhat the same way, namely Raymond Souster's poem "The Death of the Grenadiers" in which drowned British soldiers from a past century haunt modern girls skating on a pond. This is, obviously, another Canadian parable of alienation from the land, since the grenadiers drowned because they ignorantly route-marched across thin ice following a band of Indians who were wise enough to cross single file and survived. Nowlan, however, emphasizes the presence of ice in the very mind of the Puritan.

Beginning then at the top level of the scheme, let us consider the lyric "Warren Pryor," one of the most anthologized of Nowlan's early poems. This poem tells of a success story with a twist. Warren Pryor is a young man who has achieved the highest status possible in rural Maritime society: a respectable job in the bank in the nearest town. Of course, this did not happen easily; "every pencil meant a sacrifice" for his parents to send him to high school in town (this was before the regionalized school system). But they were intent on their son's being saved from the life of the farm, "the meagre acreage that bore them down." The sacrifice works, or seems to: "They marvelled how he wore a milk-white shirt/work days and jeans on Sundays." Being certain of their values, namely progress and respectability, they never thought to ask Warren what he felt about his elevation in society.

And he said nothing. Hard and serious
like a young bear inside his teller's cage,
his axe-hewn hands upon the paper bills
aching with empty strength and throttled rage.

The brutal tragic irony of the ending is only half of the total irony of the poem. The other irony is that Warren Pryor is locked into the upper world, instead of the underworld where most of Nowlan's characters find themselves imprisoned. Still, it matters little whether one is locked in or locked out; either way the self is divided and inarticulateness and psychological paralysis is the result.

Lower in the scheme, perhaps just above the icy surface, "The Daughter of Zion" lives out her narrow existence. Less respectable than Warren Pryor in the community at large, but still prominent in the Puritanical church, the most important institution of the rural Maritimes, this woman's life is also portrayed with notable irony by Nowlan. This time the irony is in the very language of the poem, the choice of images in particular:

observing how she tries to avoid the sun,
crossing the street with eyes cast down
as though such fierce light were an indecent spectacle:
if darkness could be bought like yard goods
she would stuff her shopping bag with shadows

Here is the lover of God — light, in other words — at home in darkness and gloom. This is a picture of the sourness of the Puritan that is worthy of Hawthorne himself. But the Daughter of Zion, like Young Goodman Brown's wife Faith, finds delight, even sexuality, in the service of God:

... only last night
in a tent by the river,
in the aisles between the rows
of rough planks laid on kitchen chairs,
before an altar of orange crates,
in the light of a kerosene lantern,
God Himself, the Old One, seized her
in his arms and lifted her up and danced with her
and Christ, with the sawdust clinging to his garments and
the sweat of the carpenter's shop
on his body and the smell of wine and garlic on his breath,
drew her to his breast and kissed her,
and the Holy Ghost
went into her body and spoke through her mouth,
the language they speak in heaven!

This woman, though ostensibly above the surface, draws her vitality from beneath the surface. The irony is that she does not realize that her fellowship is as much with Dionysus as with Jehovah. The Daughter of Zion, like all Puritans, has voluntarily locked herself into the upper world of light and respectability, but no barrier — not even ice — can keep out the world of darkness and passion. In fact, the only time she is not mute and awkward is when she is letting the undercurrents of an emotional God flow through her body and dance on her tongue.

The poem "Cousins" describes people who live just beneath the surface of respectability, revelling in darkness and passion:

So violent they go logging
or harvesting their meagre acres
as if they were going on a raid,
work twelve hours, then hitch-hike to a dance
in Larchmont or Bennington,
get drunk as a fiddler's bitch,
roostering for skirts and fist-fights

An overwhelming vitality twitches through this scene, and the reason the energy is so violent is that it has been repressed by both the stringency of the land (the "meagre acres" echoing a similar phrase in "Warren Pryor" so that it becomes almost an epithet) and the strictness of the Puritanical community. In fact, the lifestyle of these wild cousins is actually so rigid and codified that they share a measure of respectability in the community only slightly lower than that of the Daughter of Zion. Often the people who enjoy the dance most on Saturday night are the same ones who enjoy the church service most on Sunday morning. There is a parallel rowdiness in the cousins' "roostering" and the Daughter of Zion's worshipping. But, paradoxically, in both cases the spontaneity is only an illusion; the outbursts of drinking and dancing and speaking in tongues are really regulated by an intricate system of expectations. All of Nowlan's rural Puritanical Maritimers know what to do, or what not to do, both Saturday night and Sunday morning.

For example, the Cousins are expected to behave the way they do. They are part of a tradition, an identity, and their role in the village is often depicted in Nowlan's writings. The best known of his poems about this country Saturday night experience is "Stoney Ridge Dance Hall," also from *Under the Ice*. But the most complete picture of the Cousins is given in "His Native Place," the last and climactic story in *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien*. Here is what happens when the Cousins set up Kevin — or Alden — for a fight when he attends a dance while visiting the village where he grew up for the first time in years. Bob D'Entremont, a wild man from a nearby village, has been aroused by the Cousins — "for the hell of it" as Nowlan says in the poem — and he subsequently insults Kevin. The music stops, the village waits:

There were formalities to be observed, of course. Here such matters were governed by an etiquette that was never put into words, let alone written down. At this point I'm expected to invite him outside, Kevin thought. And when we get out there the others will make a purely symbolic attempt to prevent us from fighting. Before they stand back to watch. And the women and children will watch from the open door and from the windows, scraping away the frost with their fingernails. There will be no cheers and no hisses. And if I should happen to get him down I'll be licensed to put the boots to him, because after all he doesn't belong here, but if he gets me down, chances are Allister and Colin will interfere if he starts to put the boots to me. (p. 141)

The formalities governing the Cousins also demand another kind of violence, a quieter but even more horrible kind:

and when one of them
gets a girl in trouble,
which is inevitable,
he marries her,

it's a point of honour
with them to treat their wives
like whores, they talk about bedding
them as they talk
about going to the privy

Like the Daughter of Zion, the Cousins can only express feeling boisterously, according to local conventions. It is evident that their certainty about what to do is not self-possession after all, but only a slavish adherence to the village's values. And the strongest value is toughness, probably because the land has so long demanded it. Individual, gentle feelings are traditionally repressed, on Saturday night as well as Sunday morning. By the end of the poem we see that the Cousins, like both the Daughter of Zion and Warren Pryor, are imprisoned psychologically by the taboos and imperatives of the level of consciousness they inhabit:

they are so afraid
of weakness, my cousins
who are not frightened
by boots or tire-irons
behind the dance hall in Bennington
are scared into hilarity and contempt by kisses.

Finally, at the deepest level, far below the icy surface, we find Peter Shannon, the closest character in the scheme to Nowlan himself as a young man. The Irishness of his name and the resemblance of his thoughts to those of the youthful Kevin O'Brien, an acknowledged self-image, both indicate that Peter Shannon is a pseudonym for the author. This time the title — "The Wickedness of Peter Shannon" — is ironic, for the rigorous Puritanical guilt expressed by the adolescent Peter is viewed from the perspective of the mature poet, and it is obvious that the man sees quite a different reality than the boy. In this poem we see what is perhaps the most serious manifestation of the violence that so often disrupts the world of Nowlan's early poems. This is what is really under the ice:

Peter had experienced the tight, nauseous desire
to be swallowed up by the earth, to have his blue
eyes plucked out of his fourteen-year-old head,
his arms sliced off, himself dismembered and the
remnants hidden forever, his shame was so unanswerable.

William Blake, certainly another of Nowlan's spiritual kinsmen, wrote in *The Proverbs of Hell*, "The cistern contains, the fountain overflows." What Nowlan shows us in this poem is the poison that works its destruction deep beneath the *frozen* cistern of Maritime Puritanical religion. Peter Shannon cannot deny his desires: he masturbates! But immediately afterwards the darkness of guilt chokes the fire of feeling and leaves the boy with only self-abasement and puzzlement:

... how is it that no matter how much
I'm ashamed I don't blush, except in company ...
my cheeks
burning as though Christ slapped them!

There is no mistaking what Nowlan thinks of the "company" which wields such hurtful powers of restriction and punishment even in the private depths of the self.

Four levels of consciousness ranging downward from light into darkness, with ice separating the conscious from the unconscious, the rational from the passionate, the socially acceptable from the socially unacceptable: such is Nowlan's portrayal of the rural Maritimes of his youth. A basic schizophrenia is defined by the ice, of course, much the same as a basic schizophrenia is defined by the fences of Susanna Moodie's farm in Atwood's portrayal of her. The essential difference in Nowlan's myth — and it is an important one — is that the barrier between the conscious and the unconscious is represented by ice instead of the customary water used by most writers. (Again Atwood herself is a good example: "This is a Photograph of Me," "Younger Sister, Going

Swimming," "Death of a Young Son by Drowning," and of course the novel *Surfacing* come to mind immediately.) The symbolic implications of Nowlan's innovation are both enormous and appropriate for the world of his early poems. What is under the ice is even more restricted and desperate and dangerous than what is under the water. Prufrock is under the water, the marauding Cousins are under the ice.

Each of the levels is self-contained and as long as its inhabitant remains at that level of experience no problem exists. In fact, the Cousins are remarkably alive and *social* at the dance hall, just as the Daughter of Zion is at the church service. In those moments a vital sense of community heightens the experiences described in Nowlan's early poems. All those times the village certainly appears as an attractive alternative to the rootless and barren city. But such moments are fragmentary, as anyone who has lived in a village knows, and Nowlan is no pastoral idealist. Warren Pryor and Peter Shannon also live in the village, and the Daughter of Zion and the cousins are practically manic-depressive when they find themselves on the street in daylight or at home alone with their families. Ultimately Nowlan's village exhibits the same symptoms of inarticulateness and metaphorical paralysis found in James Joyce's city and Sherwood Anderson's town.

Still, it is not enough to recognize the recurrence of violence, repression, guilt, and alienation in Nowlan's early writings. A more important matter is Nowlan's treatment of his tough landscape and his isolated neighbours. The tendency for urbane readers — both professors and students in Canadian Literature classes, for example — is to regard the characters of Nowlan's early poems and stories as figures of amusement, much like Hardy's rustics perhaps. But Nowlan himself certainly intended a far different reading. As he said in the first version of "Miracle at Indian River," his most blatant and humorous portrayal of rural Puritanical fanaticism:

It is easy to laugh at this, but then it is equally easy to laugh at Marshall McLuhan. Or at golfers or Rotarions on the I Ching or Habitat or Andy Warhol and any number of other persons and things. Laughter isn't such a bad thing either, so long as it isn't just a sonic sneer.¹⁰

Indeed, the title of one of his later collections of poems, *between tears and laughter*, suggests the exact stance of all of Nowlan's writings. The key to understanding his early works is that Nowlan's tone is always compassionate. He never ridicules his people. He often deplors their narrowness, and he often despairs of ever escaping the restrictions his heritage has

¹⁰*Fiddlehead*, 75 (1968), 7.

yoked him with, but he never mocks the life around him. And his compassion sometimes elevates his descriptions far above mere pathos. A good example is "Marian at the Pentecostal Meeting":

Marian I cannot begrudge
the carnival of God,
the cotton candy of her faith
spun on a silver rod

to lick in bed; a peaked girl
neither admired nor clever,
Christ pity her and let her ride
God's carousel forever.

Alden Nowlan's early poems defined, honestly and courageously, the rural Maritimes of his youth and early manhood. From the beginning of his career his poems encountered disbelief and narrow categorizing. He was accused of sensationalism and was dismissed as a "regionalist." But, as I have shown, his early poems are actually realistic messages from a sensitive man caught in a brutal society, and furthermore they belong in the mainstream of modern Canadian poetry, beside the works of Al Purdy, Margaret Atwood, Leonard Cohen and others. In addition, Nowlan's early poems are so consistent and complete that they work together to create a myth about the Canadian personality that is both rich in its psychological and sociological suggestions and inventive in its symbolism.

Having thoroughly and compassionately worked out an understanding of his heritage in his early poems, Alden Nowlan then advanced in his next works to reconstruct the giant of the self that his environment had so fragmented.

Sherbrooke, Quebec