THE WOUNDED EYE: THE POETRY OF DOUGLAS LE PAN

J. M. Kertzer

I wish to consider Douglas Le Pan as an imagist poet, using the term in a special sense that illuminates his characteristic themes and techniques and shows the intimate relation between the two. A useful point of departure for this study is the image in the opening line of "The Wounded Prince," the title poem from his first volume: "In the eye is the wound." The wounded prince is man himself, the stricken hero, one of a series of soldiers, crusaders, prophets, *coureurs de bois,* gladiators and deserters who populate his work and serve as models of the human condition. Noble yet flawed, he is Le Pan's modern tragic hero, a figure whose nobility paradoxically lies in his wound. The prince is scarred by "Lancings of pity, blades of sensual disappointment" (*WP*, 8),[1] by humiliation, grief and finally love — in short, by all that makes him human. Humanity itself is his flaw because man is a fallen creature. "I see humanity as the wound you bear / Cleft in your side and mine uniting us" (*NS*, 32), laments the soldier in "Field of Battle." But his image, suggesting Christ's wound and brotherhood, proves that man's painful humanity is also his nobility and possibly the source of his salvation. Through "an integrity of suffering" he can rise "into the heaven / Of a world reclaimed, caught up on the loose stanzas of love." The prince too is healed by the very condition that wounds him, redeemed by courage ("the crest of bravery") and especially by love. The poet concludes that "your dear eye" — a phrase suggesting the prince is loved as well as loving — suffers "from wounds / By love inflicted, this strict and healing blade."

The opening line, "In the eye is the wound," introduces an elaborate play of imagery of perception and injury. Together they suggest impaired vision, and through their elaboration (combining with imagery of birds) they direct the poem until man's "puny eye"

[1] I have used the following editions and abbreviations: *AP*: *The Wounded Prince and Other Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948); *NS*: *The Net and the Sword* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1953). Other poems from other sources are indicated in the notes.

attains a "wide aerial gaze." Thematically, Le Pan's poetry frequently examines how the hero-lover-poet's vision is impaired and how he strives, with or without success, to purify and extend his gaze. Technically, it relies on a sequence of vivid images, themselves visual tokens demonstrating how human sight is obscured in various ways. Often the blinding horrors of war distort perception, as in "Elegy in the Romagna," where the soldier cries: "My eye-balls are / Skewered forward to hang peering, shuddering" (*NS,* 48). But war is just the most violent example of what happens to everyone who grows up and surveys his life. For Le Pan, youth is a period of unobservant self-absorption, but with maturity comes a wider view and puzzled vision. In "Portrait of a Young Man" (*WP,* 7), the youth has just reached the age when he is blinded by time and sorrow. He looks back regretfully at his proud, self-sufficient boyhood, "the country of peacocks" that he has outgrown and now finds "Lovely but unapproachable." His eyes at first "see nothing," but then grow "puzzled" as they stray. They are not healed because, unlike the wounded prince, the youth can meet no answering loving gaze. He is sustained only by courage ("Proud nerves, laced tight, / Stiffen the blood like a uniform"), by those steadfast military virtues that Le Pan admires and presents as heroic: "He, like Ulysses, his own thongs commanded." This allusion, suggesting will power and self-restraint, may be to the episode where Ulysses has himself bound to the mast in order to observe yet withstand the temptations of the Sirens (*Odyssey,* Book XII), just as the young man plucks himself back from the enticing country of peacocks.

In contrast to the wounded eye, Le Pan sets images of lucidity, insight and a noble clarity of vision. His favourite image, perhaps the most common in all his poetry, is the sun. It provides the "universal luminosity" which he has set as a literary ideal.[2] In the legendary poems, the sun represents an antique splendour lost to the modern world. The rider on the sand is pictured "Drinking the sun's strong immortality" (*WP,* 4). The early stanzas of "A Vision" present a glistering "hieratic show" in which falling twigs "left a wound for light to close" (*WP,* 25). The war poems, set in the Italian campaign, frequently describe the powerful Italian sun: the "lion sun" (*NS.* 16), the "wise light" (19), the "sun's bearded glare" (39), the "Light that alive, would be pungent with resin" (18). This brilliance, associated

[2]"In Frock Coat and Mocassins," *Canada: A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom,* ed. William Kilbourn (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), p. 6.

with peace, sanity or the wisdom and faith of the past, shines in ironic contrast to the darkness of war or the destructive light of flares and bombs. Soldiers are shown peering through binoculars or a theodolite (a surveyor's instrument), making a reconnaissance or longing, like Ajax, " 'To die so long as it is in the light' " (23). In their heroism they are "the sun's bright retinue" (20). In "One of the Regiment" (21-22), the Canadian soldier's bravery shares in the glory of the land he has invaded. In the "sifting, timeless sunlight" of Italy, a land "Where the sun described heroic virtue," the soldier is shown to frown darkly and to "stare / For some suspected rumour that the brightness sheds." We are not told what he sees on the battlefield, but we are assured that he is transformed by his vision until he too achieves heraldic brilliance:

> underneath his wild and frowning style
> Such eagerness has burned as could not smile
> From coats of lilies or emblazoned roses.
> No greater excellence the sun encloses.

In his Canadian poems, Le Pan associates the sun with the vast, fierce purity of the land. Explorers, canoeists and settlers are alien invaders who must face "the anger of the flagrant sun" (*WP*, 11), who must travel beneath skies that "baffle the eye with portents and unwritten myths, / The flames of sunset, the lions of gold and gules" (*WP*, 13). But through his efforts, the explorer, like the Canadian soldier in Italy, attains heroic stature. He shares in the strength of the land; his wounds are healed ("But here are crooked nerves made straight, / The fracture cured no doctor could correct," *WP*, 14); and he gains an insight enabling him to read the portents and myths of a land that has become his home. He may even glimpse the strange gods of the new world. In an earlier poem like "A Country Without a Mythology," the "lust-red manitou" is present but unrecognized. In later poems, the vision is sharper. "For a Canadian Bestiary"[3] presents a series of views of the sweet savagery of the country and its animals, a bestiary being more appropriate to Canada than the heraldic beasts that Le Pan usually associates with Europe. The hummingbird, for example, reveals a "kind of ecstasy" that "doesn't exist in Europe." It is a distillation of Canadian light:

[3]*Tamarack Review*, #54 (1970), pp. 53-56. The "Bestiary" contains five poems: "The Beaver," "Flickers," "In Praise of Porcupines," "Lessons of the Hummingbird," "Black Bear."

Sun, sweetness, savagery
distilled into a drop from the rainbow's edge
a promise of love and freedom that the heart drinks up
and, losing it, grieves
as it darts away and is lost in the light through the pinetrees.

The light is even more splendid in "A Rough Sweet Land,"[4] where it at first dazzles the poet, but finally permits a divine vision. In "A Rough Sweet Land" (the title is drawn from Charles G. D. Roberts' "An Ode for the Canadian Confederacy"), Le Pan seeks a redemptive or "angelic" vision of the Canadian landscape and history. But Canada again seems to be a land without a mythology, its "Air without angels, sky without sound." It is too violent and alien, its light too blinding:

and the sun, swirls
with a trillion scintillations, light scattering light,
light washing waves, light breaking into particles . . .
a great tower of light now, trembling in time without tense.

Gradually, after another exploration by canoe, the adventurer, like the wounded prince, is healed by the very power that injured him. The light which is "mirroring violence, mirroring pain" is also "mirroring a state where mind undergoes the damage it has done, / where the body heals itself, mind heals itself." The intruder merges with the brilliant land only when he accepts both its sweetness and its roughness. Then he finds his "gaze both wounded and unwounded." He triumphs through his suffering, submits himself to the dazzling light, and is rewarded with a vision of a lusty, god-like, dancing Indian figure, the manitou which his eyes can now recognize.

Le Pan's imagery of sunlight and vision occasionally reverses itself so that insight is associated with blindness. This reversal is a traditional one, and serves to distinguish the visionary from the merely visual. Homer, the inspired poet, is blind. Similarly in "Legend" (*NS*, 40), an old, blind man is mocked and scorned, but finally recognized as a mystic who has "the bee-hive roar of the sun" in his head. He follows an inner light, like the "Man of Honour" who

[4]*Tamarack Review*, #63 (1974), pp. 32-37. Other poems about Canada not included in the two collections are: "The Green Man," *Tamarack Review*, #59 (1971), pp. 56-58; "Astrolabe," *Tamarack Review*, #61 (1973), p. 32; "Red Rock Light," *Queen's Quarterly*, 78 (1971), 30-31; "Analogues for the Sky," *Canadian Forum*, Feb. 1973, 13.

pursues his honour through an arctic landscape until he reaches the "valid pole" where he has "ashen eyes the sun burnt out, alive" (*NS*, 45). In "Self-Portrait as Strawman,"[5] the insight gained is poetic: the poem is a "portrait" (another kind of vision) of the poet as seer. He gladly sacrifices his normal sight in order to blend into the brilliance of nature:

> My eyes so dote on the light in the chokecherries till,
> delighted,
> they take them for pupils, I need no sight of my own.

His altered vision is registered by a delightfully fanciful image (chokecherries as pupils), which is itself an illustration of the poetic transformation it describes. This metaphoric fancy then permits his metamorphosis into a scarecrow. He abandons the complexities of human identity in favour of a mindless yet observant contentment: "But who am I? and when? and what have I done? / those questions are sighed away on the wind, are like straw."

Poems such as "A Rough Sweet Land" and "Self-Portrait as Strawman" show the subtlety of Le Pan's concern with perception. He explores kinds of sight and insight, literal, metaphorical and fanciful, by means of imagery, a technique which itself has a visual appeal. Moreover, his imagery is of vision, which may be wounded with consequent distortion, or clarified with consequent transformation. He is an imagist, therefore, in the sense that he bases his poetry on carefully observed particulars which he then expands and explores as a means of conveying thought. He argues through imagery because, as he has admitted, "that is the way my mind moves — in images."[6] The movement of thought around a single image or from one image to another is clear in the earlier and shorter poems, but it is also essential to the longer war poems. In part the latter resemble the traditional romantic meditations of Wordsworth and Coleridge; in part they resemble the reflections of World War One poetry, in which the soldier-poet ponders his condition and finds his thoughts growing fanciful or fantastic. But Le Pan's meditations in

---

[5]*Canadian Forum*, Feb. 1973, 12.

[6]"Responsibility and Revolt," *Queen's Quarterly*, 74 (1967), 291. This article, the Dunning Trust Lecture at Queen's University, delivered on February 16, 1967, reveals a great deal about Le Pan's social and, to some extent, poetic views. Often it comments indirectly on his novel, *The Deserter*. Other articles by Le Pan that are of interest are: "A Memorandum," *International Journal*, 22 (1967), 414-425; "The Old Ontario Strand in the Canada of Today," *Queen's Quarterly*, 73 (1966), 483-495.

time of war are conducted through a sequence of images which, though drawn from actual scenes, grow increasingly metaphoric. In some cases ("Tuscan Villa," "Field of Battle," "Elegy in the Romagna"), the present scene is all but obscured by the nightmarish images it provokes as the meditating mind and observing eye turn inward.

When Le Pan says that his mind *moves* in *images,* he indicates the two, related ambitions of imagism, and he also hints how he complicates imagist theory. An image is a perception, in simplest terms, a "picture made out of words." But it is a picture put to poetic use: it is a rhetorical device, a trope or movement of thought. The power of the image lies in the vital connection between picture and thought, between percept and concept. C. Day Lewis explains that effective imagery combines "precision" — the virtues of accurate observation — with "revelation" — an expansion of feeling and meaning that is prompted by the observation but is essentially metaphoric. An image is a "word picture" charged with significance.[7] Because words, not pictures, are the substance of imagery, the theories of the early Anglo-American imagists imply a confidence in language both to describe an object and to charge it with meaning. There must be a justice in language if there is to be a valid image or a *mot juste.* As Hugh Kenner observes, "there can be no *mot juste* unless there can be a real and supple relation between the world consisting of a congeries of intelligible things, and language considered as a structure of directed perceptions."[8] The power of language to direct and record our perceptions is a recurring theme in the notes and essays of T. E. Hulme, who advocated a poetic diction that is "direct," "visual," "concrete," and that is able "to make you continuously see a physical thing, to prevent you gliding through an abstract process." For Hulme, "meaning (i.e. *vision*)" depends on fresh, precise imagery.[9] To equate meaning and vision, however, is to forget that in poetry "vision" is really verbal. The image is not simply a percept, but also, as Ezra Pound realized, a linguistic or metaphorical play of concepts. Although Pound denied that the image is just an idea, he did more elaborately call it "a radiant node

[7]C. Day Lewis, *The Poetic Image* (1947; rpt. London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), pp. 18-19, 23.

[8]Hugh Kenner, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 98.

[9]T. E. Hulme, *Speculations,* ed. Herbert Read (London: Keagan, Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1924), p. 134; *Further Speculations,* ed. San Hynes (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1955), p. 77.

or cluster . . . from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing." It is a "vortex or cluster of fused ideas and is endowed with energy." The power of the well-observed, well-articulated image to make the world intelligible, to fuse its ideas radiantly, is evident in Pound's assurance that "the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol."[10] He implies here the language is itself adequate to charge its imagery with significance.

Returning to Le Pan, we find that his poetry occasionally, though by no means always, expresses confidence in the justice of language and the adequacy of the image. In other words, he shows faith in art to interpret reality and to bring man into harmonious accord with it. The clearest example occurs in "Angels and Artificers" (*WP*, 30-31), where diligent artists achieve an angelic vision, like the view of Canada in "A Rough Sweet Land." In the first stanza, man's alienated condition is expressed in visual terms as in "Eclipse": "When the skies close . . . When the shrunk light stiffens, mortifies." The artificers, through patient, skillful, loving, imaginative labours, restore the wounded eye. Through their fallen humanity they were injured, but now are healed. They "resurrect the light" and attain a vision of the "heavenly company":

> A miracle!
> Flowers springing up in place of spotted leprosy,
> Warmth glancing, pouring on the ulcered earth,
> Joy coming out in every leaf and bough.
> And there
> Where mists unravelling reveal the mountain,
> The sacred mountain where the vision flows,
> The source, the head, the day-spring manifest,
> Intelligence-and-Power; the lost archangel.

The images of wounds, diseases, and failing light that made the landscape moribund in the opening stanza are repeated and reinvigorated here. The vision becomes miraculous and transcendent. For Le Pan this is the ultimate image, the perfect fusion of insight

[10]Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (1916; rpt. New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 92; "Affirmations — IV. As for Imagisme," quoted by J. B. Harmer, *Victory in Limbo* (New York: St. Martin's Press 1975), p. 166; "A Retrospect," *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound,* ed. T. S. Eliot (1954; rpt. New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 5. Harmer gives a thorough account of the imagists' different views of poetic language.

and understanding, intelligence and power.[11] It is an image of glory that redeems man from the "nihilist heavens." Similarly in "Lines for a Combatant" (*NS*, 23-25), an image of classical heroism comforts the frightened soldier. The defiant cry of Ajax, " 'To die so long as it is in the light,' " acts as "Flame from a guttering text." It sparks an image of pride and calm that permits the soldier to face death by imposing meaning on an otherwise meaningless world:

> Yet, obstinate, the heart will have it
> That pride can infect the void with limits,
> By inbreathing turbulence with a quiet mind
> Can transmit the future vehemently;
> That unless is built a brittle glittering glacis,
> Drummed into the air volleys of scattering brightness,
> Unless in the air powdered breath is mustered,
> No showers will fall to make the new shoots bear,
> Nor the ransomed spring swell new buds with its sighing.

This passage corresponds to the quotation from "Angels and Artificers," though the terms are changed to suit the circumstances of war. The landscape becomes fertile when an assault — military rather than artistic, in this case — is made on heaven, an imaginative attack that gives the "void," like the nihilist heavens, a human shape. The infection of pride reverses the disease imagery. Man's intelligence and power are both effective in giving a passionate order to the turbulence of war and to the course of time itself. Viewed in this way, man's death becomes meaningful, even, the example of Ajax suggests, beautiful.

But the soldier's image proves to be "brittle," composed only of words or "powdered breath." It is a "blossoming fiction," lovely but ultimately false, which sustains him only for a short time until he finds a new image. Even in "Angels and Artificers," where the bright artifice does not face, its miraculous quality emphasizes its rarity. As Le Pan frequently insists, the age of miracles is long passed. His images of perfection tend to be classical, archaic, iconic, heraldic, fabulous, in some form that is, that reminds us how impossibly

[11]S. C. Hamilton discusses Le Pan's conception of Intelligence-and-Power in "European Emblem and Canadian Image: A Study of Douglas Le Pan's Poetry," *Mosaic*, #3 (Winter 1970), pp. 62-73. See also Marilyn Davies, "The Bird of Heavenly Airs: Thematic Strains in Douglas Le Pan's Poetry," *Canadian Literature*, #15 (Winter 1963), 27-39.

foreign they are to the modern world. They are distanced by nostalgia, by irony, or simply by history. The "fiery artificers" are, like the sages and artisans of Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium," exotic and remote. We are enjoined "Still to remember" them because they belong to the past. The same is true of Le Pan's unicorns, peacocks, salamanders and legendary princes. The rider on the sands serves as an emblematic "wonder and a warning" (*WP*, 4) to us. The salamander is an "Archaic creature" (*NS*, 39). The unicorn is consigned to myth or metaphor: "the virginal sky, cloud-craftily curling, / Is unicorned with gratuitous gems" (*NS*, 56). The peacock, once the image of proud youth and gorgeous beauty ("a peacock lustre damascened/ With meandering dreams and pleasures," *NS*, 37), becomes a sign of our fall from grace. In "The Peacock" (*NS*, 30), it cries out for the "lapsed garden" and "Lost paradise." Its call is the scream of man's grief as he receives the wound in the eye:

> Issue of tears that have never dried
> Start from the wound in an anguished flow.
> Through gardens shadowed by a sword
> Echoes the pain that has never died.

At the end of the poem, the dreamer "no more denied / The fissure in my own proud nature." He accepts his wounded humanity and is dignified by it. He is then rewarded by a "midnight feather" which is, however, only an enticing by puzzling remnant of the earlier glorious vision.

As these examples show, the ideal image may be unattainable; worse still, it may be equivocal. The peacock's eye, or the equivalent image in other poems, may prove "maleficent" rather than angelic. Instead of offering insight, it registers the corruption of vision, intelligence and power. It leaves us with only a clue to a puzzle that we must solve. This treatment of imagery suggests that Le Pan has complicated the theory of the imagists, and challenged their confidence in the power of poetic language. For Le Pan, the image is not always adequate to the task demanded of it. It may fail to provide illumination that will make the world appear intelligible and habitable. In the accounts of war especially, the poetic image is a feeble (though ultimately necessary) weapon against the forces of darkness. Le Pan's first response to this dilemma is to provide a vision of the failure of vision. He makes the very inadequacy of imagery a strategy in his poetry, using the faltering of rhetoric as a

rhetorical device. By dramatizing the obscurities of human blindness, he seeks to understand them and solve their puzzles.

The power of the image, I suggested above, lies in the vital connection between percept and concept, and in the ability of language to do justice to both. Le Pan makes his rhetorical challenge at all three points in this system. First, he may present a failure in language, showing words to be inadequate, fragile or misleading. Words are human and, like humanity, corrupt. The glorious "hieratic show" in "A Vision" proves to be a self-deception, a way of imaginatively avoiding the murderous facts of war. It is a glorious lie: "Evasion turned to heraldry." Language fails more radically in "Meditation After an Engagement" (*NS*, 37-38) where the soldier-poet is left without even the comfort of his words. He first appeals to the example of Paolo Uccello, an early Renaissance master of perspective, but his own view of the Italian landscape is so distorted by the horrors he has observed that the scene itself seems wounded: "The farm is pock-marked with a strange disease." The very words with which he describes it become suspect. He cannot accept the old, grand style, comparable to Uccello's style in painting: "The craters suppurate an acid sea / That, spreading, blots out old calligraphy." He cannot devise a style of his own to articulate the redemptive vision he desires. He cannot even express, and so find comfort in, his despair: "No. I cannot from a few leaves twist / A sheltering chaplet even of despair." At the end of his meditation he is left facing death in the lunacy of the "moon's eye," and caught in the "doom of words." In other poems, the soldier is trapped in "a Word- and star-less system" (*NS*. 55); or he realizes that because Ajax's inspiring words are brittle and finally unconvincing, he himself has become "brittle, brittle, a breaking sentence / On the lip of silence" (*NS*, 24).

Words fail the speakers in these poems, leaving them in a blind, uncomprehending silence. However, this is not Le Pan's most successful technique because he refuses to accept the doom of words in his own work. On the contrary, he eloquently laments the defects in language. Because he is in love with words and unwilling to debase them, he never attempts the disruptive techniques through which other modern poets have subverted traditional poetic diction in order to transcend the limitations of language, or to express what George Steiner calls an "exhaustion of verbal resources in modern

civilization . . . a brutalization and devaluation of the word."[12] Le Pan too is concerned with the ineffable and the brutal, but he does not tamper with his own diction in order to treat them. Indeed, he has been criticized for indulging in an "almost rococo use of language" even in the midst of the battlefield, presenting us with "a bejewelled reliquary which, however calm and beautiful it may be, conceals something whose story is one of cruelty and pain."[13] At times he adopts a precious style for irony or to evoke a lost heraldic past. But at other times his eloquence contradicts the failure of language which his poem declares but does not observe.

More often he challenges the pictorial power of his imagery by portraying a failure of perception. These are the poems of wounded, baffled (*WP*, 13), and anguished (*WP*, 25) vision, of dark mazes and labyrinths. The hero observes an image inaccurately or ambiguously, seeing in it only "an ambiguity of blindly mated elements." (*NS*, 33). He seeks a bright "emblem of order," but finds instead: "My gaze is limed and exiled!" (*NS*, 49). The best example of this technique occurs in "An Effect of Illumination" (*NS*, 26-27), where the familiar images of peacock eyes, stars and flames provide, not a healing vision, but a horrifying illumination of the void. In the first stanza the soldier's "mild eye" admires a "peacock train of stars," which suggests to him a "milky dream of heaven." This splendid image is another evasion turned to heraldry, and it is shattered by the flares, bombs and "Dragonish flames" of battle. After they have blasted his "sensitive retinas," the innocent imagery appears monstrous. He now observes:

> a cyclopean eye of quartz
> That stared and blazed and blinded speculation.
> Yes, heaven rebuilds its lavish masonry
> But not for those whom battle has trepanned.
> For shades who ruin with an opened skull
> Night reigns perpetually in broad day
> Maleficent peacock with a thousand eyes of stone.

Details from the comforting illusion have shifted ominously to reveal a heaven that is nihilistic and vicious. But this is not true or accurate

[12] George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (1967; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 67. Rosmarie Waldrop discusses the many challenges made to poetic language by modern poets in *Against Language?* (The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1971).

[13] Donald G. Priestman, "Man in a Maze," *Canadian Literature*, #64 (Spring 1975), p. 58.

vision. It does not bring the soldier into accord with reality. The eye of the cyclops is his own, exposing his petrifying terror and leaving him in the blindness of perpetual night.

The shock of war blinds "speculation" as well as perception. The soldier's skull is "trepanned" (this idea recurs in Le Pan's novel, *The Deserter*) and emptied so that he is mindless as well as sightless. When Le Pan adopts the third tactic of challenging the conceptual power of his imagery, an image may be clearly perceived but nevertheless remain unintelligible. The natural object is not, as Pound claimed it should be, the adequate symbol. It refuses to disclose its meaning; it is a puzzle, an absurdity, a clue to an unsolved mystery. It provokes brooding and pondering that lead Le Pan's heroes inward, into their own confusion and away from the reality they had sought to understand through precise observation. The frowning soldier in "An Incident" (*NS*, 18-19) scrutinizes the Italian countryside and "Bears the weight of this many-ringed, foreign noon" in an effort to grasp where he is and what he is doing there. The light "weighs and ponders like limestone" and prompts his own troubled pondering (surely the pun is deliberate), which is relieved by his abrupt, almost casual death. His death has neither dignity nor meaning; it is an "awkward animal tremor" that briefly disrupts the impassive, impenetrable scene. In the longer, more twisted meditation of "Elegy in Romagna," the narrator waits in vain for "new intelligence" to unriddle his situation. He observes shadows that lead him into an "argument" with himself and the war, but his mind sinks into "villain fancies." He cannot distinguish "relation" or "identity," that is, any logical order in the things he sees. The "spinning filaments" that he mentions form the maze of war, but they are also his own "thought-threaded" attempts to "spin an intellectual thread" or argue out the significance of war. His argument is partially successful, but for most of the poem he is entangled in his thoughts. He tries to discern images of death that "In gusts redound on my diminished light / With foul air reeking, and send me back defeated."

I have distinguished three techniques for the sake of analysis, when in practice the three co-operate. They show how, when observing eye and meditating mind are baffled, they turn back, contemplate themselves and puzzle over their operations. Le Pan's own poetic attention, therefore, is directed inward at the wounded self and at its consciousness of its agony, not outward at the social,

cultural or historical conditions that administer the wounds. His main theme is the psychological and especially moral trauma of modern man. The poetic, natural, Canadian and heroic visions that he celebrates have a strong moral basis. Ultimately he seeks a moral vision and, when vision itself fails, he seeks the very basis of man's moral sense. He depicts this bewildered self-scrutiny by elaborating imagery of vision until it turns back on itself and observes its own torment. For example, in "Lines for a Combatant," after the words of Ajax cease to comfort him, the soldier "Weaves in the sun the ceaseless argument" until he is defeated by his efforts to see or understand. Feeling ever more "brittle," he simply watches how:

> Above a grey-green well swells a ripe fig-tree,
> Its leaf-panes vanes in the light breeze slightly turning
> Till I wonder if it is they that please me, or the thought
> Of myself years on, remembering the light around the fig-tree.

The natural objects (well, fig-tree, breeze), which are possible symbols of fertility, are displaced by self-consciousness. He sees only himself trying to see. He uses the image to express his desire to survive the war, though at this point he does not appreciate the strength of that desire.

Another device that Le Pan uses to show how the observer observes himself is to insert a mirror into the pattern of perception: "Now through the gates of mirror and mirage / We look and grieve" (*WP*, 33). These are the words of a disciple of Jesus, a failed visionary who has been "Baffled by lights" and deprived of his Saviour. He had hoped to see a world transformed by faith into "some new Fortunate Islands," but after the crucifixion he can see only himself and his grief. A mirror again reflects man's grief, and becomes the very image of grieving, in "The Waterfall' (*WP*, 18). This poem tempts us with, but then denies access to, another visionary realm, the world of nature:

> Not this oblivion you gave before.
> Green water sliding down like light on leaves,
> Hushed edge of crystal, glass that never grieves
> The eye by mirroring, were then a door
> That opened into singing groves.

The singing groves correspond to the Fortunate Islands except in this case we enter them not through faith, but by sharing the mindless oblivion of nature, as we did in "Self-Portrait as Strawman." In the

first stanza quoted above, the water is *not* a mirror that grieves the eye; it annuls rather than encourages self-consciousness with its attendant problems of identity and purpose. It offers "joy's / Forgetfulness," by taking us through the looking-glass. However, this happy condition was a privilege "before," perhaps in the time of youth. "It must be something different now," in maturity, because the hissing "granite rain" tells only of "Entombment" and "Drowned clappers calling, melting, of bell-buoys / Murmuring, lost too far down for pain." Now the water reflects and deepens our grief. It offers no "anodyne" except the promise of death. In the mirror, therefore, the disciple sees his life without meaning; the observer of the waterfall sees his death without meaning.

The mirrored eye sees only its own mortality. Far from being narcissistic, Le Pan's heroes observe themselves in horror through the mirror of grief, or through the eye of the cyclops, the maleficent peacock or the sphinx. This last image appears in "Tusca Villa" (*NS*, 7-13), which provides a fine example of an image elaborated until it regards itself enigmatically. The poem at first appears to be built on opposing views common in war poetry: contrasts between the peaceful past and the chaotic future, between light and darkness, between cultural order and anarchic disorder. But these oppositions are not maintained; they blend and become confused as the poet's sight grows troubled, darkening from unblinking clarity to the "guano stare of vacuity." In the same way the narrative tone tries to maintain an assured "level voice," but loses its confidence. The central image is the ancient Tuscan villa, which is both the observer and the observed. The soldier examines it while it examines itself. At first it is set in "sunlight perfect as a tear," but tears, we quickly discover, are distorting, reflecting lenses:

> Unblinking sphinx with the sunlight goring its flanks
> The villa stares over the undulant plain
> Past the new-made graves and the tanks upturned like beetles
> Past the poplars dozing in the river-valley
> And the flickering, fiery tongues of the olive trees
> Hazily, to where a cypressed campanile
> Or rosy duomo has become irrelevant fuzz
> In a pair of binoculars, too dim to provide the guns
> With a reference-object or add to a new triangulation.
> But there at the periphery persists some old
> Enigma, exhaled long ago like a smile or a gesture.
> That the villa dallies with, dallies and drops,
> In dotage forgetting the key to its own conundrum.

This passage suggests the failures of perception, conception and language noted earlier. Vision falters in several ways. The villa is itself the sphinx staring into the distance — as we follow the winding sentences — at an old, smiling enigma that it cannot solve. It is of course the sphinx that traditionally smiles enignatically: the villa is staring at an image of itself, but is unable to unlock its own conundrum because it has "lost the key." This puzzled vision is matched by the dim view of the soldier, calculating and gazing through binoculars uselessly, and it is confused further by an apparent contradiction. The adverb "Hazily" could modify "flickering": the hazily flickering, fiery tongues of the olive trees. But its prominent position and the odd syntax encourage the reader to make the adverb modify, and so counter, the main verb, "stares": Unblinking sphinx, the villa stares . . .hazily. Thus the clarity of vision, suggested also by the "perfect" and "goring" sunlight, is contradicted, made hazy, fuzzy and dim. The villa is the spirit of ancient Italy, looking in disbelief at the odd Canadian invaders and the modern violence of war, questioning its own identify and wondering how it has persisted in so alien a world. The soldier-poet responds with an uncomprehending stare of his own as he surveys the villa, the battlefield, his comrades and, finally, himself. During a lull in the fighting he refers to the apparently peaceful scene as "Mildness that holds its mirror to departing breath." He refers to the old practice (mentioned, for example in *King Lear*) of holding a mirror to the nose of a dying person to see if the glass is misted by his breath. In this mirror, however, he sees only the decay of the villa and his own death: "that the corpse / Of a dying house like the corpse of a man is vile."

In all these poems Le Pan challenges the confidence and what now seems the optimism of the imagist doctrine that poetic vision, and the language giving it focus, can be purified and made a finely tuned instrument of perception. This optimism arose in the years before World War One, when all that seemed necessary was to reform the wordy obscurities of Victorian literary diction. Le Pan writes in full light (or darkness) of World War Two. Nevertheless, he does not leave his heroes or his readers in pessimistic blindness. His final vision and argument are affirmative, though they are affirmed in the face of, even in the midst of, defeat. Le Pan quotes with approval the last lines of Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable:* "I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't

go on, I'll go on." In this last resolve, Le Pan sees "the simplest, barest root, both of responsibility and revolt. From such radical affirmations of primal courage have flowered the great acts of revolt against society, and the great acts to preserve and continue it." Revolt is simply the essential urge to be and to persist, the desire to survive. Responsibility is the recognition that one's being impinges on the lives of others: it is the germ of moral awareness. Poetry too, he explains, has its basis in revolt and responsibility. It is sceptical, critical, even subversive; it refuses to accept the world as it is. Yet it is also constructive and visionary. It has "rebelliousness at its core, even though it endeavours to make from that rebellion a new and deeper order."[14]

In his own poetry, Le Pan appeals finally to primal courage as the instinct that rebels against moral confusion and death. When his heroes are stripped of all ideals and certainties, of all redeeming visions, they fall back on "animal assertion" (*NS,* 24), on "animal / Heaviness' (*NS,* 53), on "animal affection" (*NS,* 55), on "animal heat . . . a deep ultimate animal courage."[15] This is the rough vitality of Canadian explorers and pioneers, the vigour that they share with the land they invade. It is the basis of military virtues and the heroism of soldiers. In his discussion of *The Deserter,* D. G. Jones explains this primitive quality: "the primitive and irreducible foundation of life, prior to goodness, justice, beauty, or truth, pre-rational, is courage, the creature's self-affirmation in the face of all that it is not, which could find no better expression than in the phrase, the courage to be."[16] If primal courage is prior to moral consideration, it is also, as Le Pan's comments above indicate, the necessary ground in which they must be rooted. It is the basis of responsibility as well as revolt. When his heroes discover that they cannot go on, they go on nevertheless because they reaffirm the very urgency of their being. They are saved by the self-consciousness that has tormented them, because it is based in the "living, sweet, imperfect red" (*WP,* 25). They are redeemed by their wounds. And because they realize that they share their pain with others, they enter into a "dark communion" with their comrades. They rediscover pity, concern, sympathy and love, which illuminate the void and "civilize / The waste places merciless' (*NS,* 25).

[14]"Responsibility and Revolt," pp. 216, 205.

[15]Douglas Le Pan, *The Deserter* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), pp. 292, 294.

[16]D. G. Jones, *Butterfly on Rock* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 156.

> Rapture of crimson
> That streams from longer wars and deeper scars
> Trembles behind the darkness, savour of light
> That could bind a thousand scattered wounds, tender
> As famished lips, in an artifact of tissue.
> From the battle's catacombs to the cupola of heaven,
> Where all the twitterings of love are gathered,
> Springs the invisible rose through desolation,
> Springs in a context of darkness . . . (*NS*, 33).

It is important to note that this final vision is not a transcendent solution to the dark enigmas that have riddled us into confusion. The desolate, blood-red rose springs "in a context of darkness." Its roots are in the earth. Thirst for transcendent or absolute experience, Le Pan warns, while admirable for its fervour, "runs the risk of deepening the very meaninglessness it wishes to defeat by setting up a Manichaean dualism" between an impossible ideal and painful reality.[17] It is an escapist tactic that deepens the despair it seeks to relieve. Redemption must come from below or from within, not from above. The "miseries and flaws of humankind," he remarks elsewhere, "are inseparable from its glories"[18]; and conversely its glories are inseparable from its flaws. The dreamers and escapists of "Finale" (*WP*, 34-35) are forced to leave the comfort of their refuges and return "Back through humanity's brutal barriers" to face reality. "Always the path leads back," the refrain reminds us, to the dust, heat and noise of the market place, and to the "actual sun."

The despairing soldier in "Meditation After an Engagement" is forced to return to the darkness of actuality, rather than the sun. He is left "in the night's neglect," staring at "ruts and puddles that reflect / Clay tarnished splendour." Le Pan elaborates his mirroring imagery here, as he does in "Twelve of the Clock" and in *The Deserter*, where he uses the image of stars reflected in water to suggest that ideals, which seem distant and inaccessible, must be sought through the earthly flaws and miseries of mankind: "Marvelling how, when reflected the calm of mighty stars / Seem close and easy" (*WP*, 2). When he realizes this, the soldier finds his "wisdom" not in the romantic visions prompted by Uccello, but in an ordinary Italian mother who "kindles withered twigs beneath / A pot" (*NS*, 38). She may be a literary relation to T. S. Eliot's "ancient women / Gathering

[17] "Responsibility and Revolt," p. 215.
[18] "In Frock Coat and Mocassins," p. 6.

fuel in vacant lots," in "Preludes"; but what was an image of despair for Eliot becomes one of primal endurance for Le Pan. For this soldier too, the road leads back to what is most human in himself and in others. The soldier in "Tuscan Villa" learns the same lesson, though the imagery he uses is grander. He turns his enigmatic gaze to the sky where he sees an apocalyptic vision of a world in fiery ruin, tearing apart the villa, the classical past and the bellicose present. Instead of reflected stars, he sees "Perpetual fire . . . where the earth is burning like a bush / All-trampling fire by which new towers are raised" (*NS*, 12). The allusion to the burning bush of Moses and careful use of the word "raised" (not "razed") prepare for the final recognition that renewal can come even through this catastrophe. Apocalypse turns into genesis. Even the flames of war are part of man's nature, a conflagration of the "animal heat" that warms him, that animates both nature ("charges through unrusted wheat") and man ("boils in a peasant's loins"). This paradox, fusing destruction and creation, "bursts its riddle in the kernelled ear" to answer the enigma of the sphinx. Soldiers, the agents of death, become figures of redemption. They are pictured sailing on a sea of fire that is their own blood, their wounds healed through sacrifice. They are:

> Too tightly closed in a luxury of flame,
> Too softly stroked by a lion's paw
> To see the blood in the flood of brightness
> Or know themselves as the scars the sky devours.

I wish to conclude this study by considering, not Le Pan's longer meditations conducted through a brooding sequence of images, but a short poem based on a single image, "Night-Wind" (*WP*, 16). In the succinctness and eloquence with which it expresses its theme, it shows in miniature what was later elaborated in the war poems, and sums up the argument of my essay.

> Spear this wind within your mind.
> It will pass with eagle swiftness
> While the bloom of heaven's vinyard
> Fades and leaves no wine behind.
>
> Snare the bird with cunning art,
> It has come from some white fastness
> Where it soared and rested freely,
> It will perish in your heart.

Grieve not when it flutters dead.
Though you see them not for rain-clouds
There are more above the streaming.
Take and eat your daily bread.

This is one of a series of poems in which — in the great Canadian tradition — the poet pursues a vision of the natural world that will permit him to commune with it. The person addressed wishes to storm the heavenly, alien "fastness' of nature by hunting its emissary, the night-wind, like a bird. But the image is inadequate: it is impossible to spear or snare the wind. His powers of perception (taking aim at the wind) and conception (the "cunning art" that would snare it) both fail him. His effort merely succeeds in destroying the wild freedom he tried to share. The poet then offers consolation for grief, loss, and blindness with the assurance that the soaring ideal exists, but must be sought in humble reality rather than airy speculation. His advice, "Take and eat your daily bread," counsels acceptance of the common lot which all men share.

University of Calgary.