

AL PITTMAN AND TOM DAWE: ISLAND POEMS.

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Hurrah for our own native isle, Newfoundland!
Not a stranger shall own one inch of its strand!
Her face turns to Britain, her back to the Gulf.
Come near at your peril, Canadian wolf!¹

—nineteenth century anti-confederation song.

This image of Newfoundland as a feisty country protecting its independence is a very common one. Today, more than thirty years after confederation with that Canadian wolf, the concept of Newfoundland as nation, both within the province and outside of it, is still a common one. Thus when one speaks of insularity, the tendency is to see it in political terms, a place which looks inside rather than out, except in the sense that the defenders of a garrison look out from the parapets.

But insularity must also be seen in its most literal sense in that Newfoundland is an island. The encircling sea which must be crossed in order to make contact with the rest of Canada and the rest of the world is a simple fact. Thus any analysis of psychological or political insularity must always retain an awareness of the geographical.

In "Stranger at Hemlock Cove," Tom Dawe records the reactions of the local people to the new teacher, "Reading stuff by poets with queer ideas / like men are islands and such, . . ." ² The error, perverting John Donne's "No man is an island," produces a line which would apparently follow the Newfoundland experience and which is perfectly suited to the isolationism of the modern poet, one of the identifying features of modernism.

In *Realism in Our Time*, George Lukacs states that in realism, the characters' "individual existence . . . their 'ontological being,' as a more

¹Gerald S. Doyle, ed., *The Old Time Songs and Poetry of Newfoundland* (St. John's: Gerald S. Doyle, 1940), p. 69.

²Tom Dawe, "Stranger at Hemlock Cove," *Hemlock Cove and After* (Portugal Cove, Nfld.: Breakwater Books, 1975), p. 17.

fashionable terminology has it—cannot be distinguished from their social and historical environment. Their human significance, their specific individuality, cannot be separated from the context in which they are created. The ontological view governing the image of man in the work of leading modern writers is the exact opposite of this. Man, for these writers, is by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings.”³ In realism, individual characters are isolated but they are only individuals: “Beside and beyond their solitariness, the common life, the strife and togetherness of other human beings, goes on as before. In a word, their solitariness is a specific social fate, not a universal *condition humaine*.”⁴

That isolation is a real physical and political fact in Newfoundland seems obvious. This should be even more true for Newfoundlanders from the bay, from the outports. In his study of Newfoundland literature, *The Rock Observed*, Patrick O’Flaherty makes the following observation:

If life in the outports seemed to men like Bartlett and Smallwood to be limited and poverty-stricken, it can easily be imagined what habitués of the best society in St. John’s thought of it. By the end of the nineteenth century the capital city’s dominance over the social and economic life of the country was complete. Whatever “leisured classes” Newfoundland could boast of possessing were located in St. John’s East in close proximity to the elegant home of the governor.⁵

Even for Tom Dawe and Al Pittman, growing up in rural Newfoundland after the war, this series of removals from power is quite extensive. Just as Britain and the United States seem far from insignificant Canada, so does Toronto from insignificant Newfoundland, and St. John’s from insignificant outports.

Both Dawe and Pittman might appear to have this attitude in their reactions to resettlement, the government policy in the sixties which moved Newfoundlanders from small outports to “growth centres,” in hopes of emulating an urbanized vision of the good life. In “Stage,” Dawe looks at the result:

³George Lukacs, *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 19-20.

⁴Lukas, p. 20.

⁵Patrick O’Flaherty, *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), p. ??

No put put of the motor boat,
 no waiting women placing boughs,
 no children playing in the cliffs,
 no cod-oil doors with painted moons,
 no meadows green through caplin,
 no sound-bone talk from tired men . . .

But one grey fish-stage
 leaning seaward
 from the cold sloping rocks
 below the meadows
 of the unmown hay . . .⁶

Pittman's last play, "West Moon," takes this ghostly reaction to a more literal extreme as the inhabitants of the outport cemetery realize that resettlement will mean no relatives living near to tend their graves and remember them.

In Dawe's "The Madonna," he looks at a church abandoned in a small island community. Yet even without people it has a presence, as the walls "loomed strong":

And there were certain still nights
 when the ocean pulsed in calm
 and duplicated every-season's moon.
 On such nights
 the firm church-steeple seemed
 to waver down on a ribbon of tide . . .⁷

The title of one of Pittman's earliest books, *Seaweed and Rosaries*, suggests a similar connection between faith and the bay. In one of his poems to the abandoned outport, "St. Leonard's Revisited," he wandered

and came again to the cove
 as they did after rosary
 in the green and salty days . . .⁸

"The Madonna" is a lament for the vandalism which some young men perpetrate on the statue left inside the church but it is no simple defence of the Roman Catholic faith. The religion here, as in Pittman, is not denominational or dogmatic but an association between tradition and the island experience.

⁶Dawe, "Stage," *Hemlock Cove and After*, p. 34.

⁷Dawe, "The Madonna," *Hemlock Cove and After*, p. 44.

⁸Al Pittman, "St. Leonard's Revisited," *Seaweed and Rosaries* (Montreal: Poverty Press, 1968), p. 7.

The young boys in "The Madonna" come to the island as outsiders but there is always a suggestion of some danger in the human element resident on the island, in both Dawe and Pittman. In Dawe's "Inuk,"⁹ the people of Hemlock Cove reject an Inuit arrival. In Pittman's *A Rope Against the Sun*¹⁰ there is a series of harsh and unnecessary conflicts. This atmosphere of hostility can extend to the buildings themselves, as in "Island Estate at St. Andrew's." Pittman takes a compatriot to an isolated, dark and withdrawn house, representative of an almost gothic danger. He ends, however, with nature in opposition:

from there on the top step
stand in deep shadow
your back turned
to the great dark door
observe what perfect patterns
the bright whitecapped waves make
as they glisten silver in the sunlight
all the way to the thin horizon
and beyond¹¹

Dawe's "House on the Coast" presents a similar image, although the house is by no means foreboding. The important point is that its abandoned state leaves room for a clear interaction between the parts of nature:

There's a plain old house on a coast
with evening now in its upper panes
and no smoke in the on-shore air
to blur the lines
of seven sea-gulls wheeling
the horizon definite
over rock edges and pools
and the empty pebble-beach.¹²

In this, as in so many of their poems, there is a clear connection between the different elements of the island, all brought together at that point where land, sea and air meet. This atmosphere is often improved by the absence of man as in Dawe's poem. This is perhaps related to the association between death and the sea, as in Pittman's "Driftwood":

⁹Dawe, "Inuk," *Hemlock Cove and After*, pp. 3-8.

¹⁰Pittman, *A Rope Against the Sun* (Portugal Cove: Breakwater Books, 1974).

¹¹Pittman, "Island Estate at St. Andrew's." *Through One More Window* (Portugal Cove: Breakwater Books, 1974), p. 30.

¹²Dawe, "House on the Coast," *Hemlock Cove and After*, p. 31.

A grey portion of bone
 ignored perfectly by insects. Oblivious
 perfectly to the heat of the sun. The shift
 of sand. The grip of ice. Rain. Wind.
 Time, Imagine us cast up here in perfect
 communion with this driftwood.¹³

Pittman appreciates the perfection of this state but the contemplation of oneself as bone, however aesthetic, must be small pleasure at best. In "Shipwreck at Frenchman's Cove" he sees boys crawling on the few skeletal remains of a shipwreck:

do they find
 some perverse comfort
 in knowing that you too
 were killed by the sea
 like so many of their fathers
 before them¹⁴

For the Newfoundlander, the sea must be an image of danger as well as of beauty and completion. In "Driftwood," Pittman brings both together. In *A Rope Against the Sun*, the reef in the harbour attains supernatural significance in the fear which it instills in the people of Merasheen. But they are still tied to the sea. The fishing society has decayed but it remains as an heroic myth. The old drunk, Joe Casey, hollers out praise for various ships, "toasting the first in a long list of drowned seamen he'll pay tribute to before he joins them in his drunken dreams."¹⁵ Jake Connors is likewise withdrawn from active life but his past greatness is always recalled: "At that time, the children played at make-believing they were Jake Connors, skipper of the Swallow, and most renowned fish-killer in the bay."¹⁶

In "On the Full Tide," Dawe reflects on his own childhood, and the importance of the acceptance of the old fisherman, "holding the thorns from lobster pots/and wrinkled like iced kelp/across the nets of fall":

I always felt that
 he smiled at me then
 as the pure surf smiled at me,
 as the ringing cliffs

¹³Pittman, "Driftwood," *Once When I Was Drowning* ([St. John's, Newfoundland]: Breakwater Books, 1978), p. 27.

¹⁴Pittman, "Shipwreck at Frenchman's Cove," *Seaweed and Rosaries*, p. 8.

¹⁵Pittman, *A Rope Against the Sun*, p. 13.

¹⁶*A Rope Against the Sun*, pp. 26-27.

as the sea-birds
as the children smiled at me.
And it was good.¹⁷

Although the human life on the shore can be evil, and although nature is always on the point of destroying the fisherman, there is a connection between the wholeness found in nature and the power of the fisherman which, at times in a vicarious way, provides a potential for the poet in his relationship with island and sea.

As a rule, the interaction between beach and sea appears beneficent but it can easily change, particularly when, as is so often the case in Newfoundland, the point of contact is not a beach but rough rock or cliff. In "Evening, Bareneed, Conception Bay," Tom Dawe notes the following:

The cold wind
creeps unmarked
through an ancient picket-fence
and eats the salt-stained grass
already dead
on a skull of rock
above a misty bay
spilling itself
on the teeth of kelp-ringed crags.¹⁸

Pittman sees a more overtly dangerous transition:

from here on the headland
there is nothing
between us and the world's dark end
but infinite distance
black and immutable as death
the night encloses us
as we cling to each other
in darkness
and fall like broken insects
from the sky¹⁹

At the same time, this treacherous cliff can provide an inspiring balance. Once again it is a product of that close interaction between three elements, land sea and air:

¹⁷Dawe, "On the Full Tide," *31 Newfoundland Poets*, ed. Adrian Fowler and Al Pittman ([St. John's]: Breakwater Books, 1979), pp. 14-15.

¹⁸Dawe, "Evening, Bareneed, Conception Bay," *Connections* (with Tom Moore) ([St. John's]: [the authors], 1972), p. 31.

¹⁹Pittman, "Black Walk," *Through One More Window*, p. 55.

you walk knowing you
walk with angels
angry on either side

it is something you'll do only once
between here and wherever it is you're bound
and then only if²⁰

There is a mystic elevation to this position which is very different from the state of being totally immersed in water, from the drowning that is always a possibility for those who fish in the cold North Atlantic. In one of his poems, Pittman combines his thoughts on that potential experience with the change which he has experienced in maturation:

Once
when I was drowning
I held on long enough
to say the Act of Contrition

If today I were drowning
I wonder what I'd do

I can't remember
the Act of Contrition
and besides
I'm not nearly the sinner
I used to be
when I was eight and a half
years old.²¹

As in the earlier examples, the water has a power which is comparable to but clearly removed from that of the traditional church. As an adult, the potential for drowning remains but the ritual is forgotten and the concept of sin has been displaced. There seems to be no established set of values, a moral gap that is found in much of modernism.

A number of years later, Pittman finds a reply to this quandary. The island fear, the isolated drowning, remains at both points in the first poem, regardless of religious belief, but in the second work this has been altered:

²⁰Pittman, "Brimstone Head," *Through One More Window*, p. 52.

²¹Pittman, "Once When I Was Drowning," *Seaweed and Rosaries*, p. 30.

Once
when I was drowning
I held on long enough
to make an act of contrition

that was long ago
when I knew what to be sorry for
when I knew how to confess

that was before we made
an unholy sacrament out of our love
a brutal religion out of our innocence

now as I go spinning down
for the last time
I struggle in the flood
not for any absolution
but for your approval
of my perfect death²²

The lack of capitals shows how the religious ritual has even less power. But a sexual connection has overcome both the absence of religion and the fear of drowning. There is a positive link between the sea death and the lover.

It is difficult to find a similar mystical sea change in Dawe's poetry. There is a reasonably clear difference between those of his poems which consider religion and those which concentrate on the physical island. In "The Madonna," as noted above, there is an important connection between bay and church but this does not seem mystical. Perhaps an exception might be found in "Evening, Bareneed, Conception Bay." It ends,

Beyond
across the bight
a slow mist hangs
in a wooden cross
in a block of window-light.

Another example, although a rather pagan one, might be his reaction, thinking back to an old man who always used to believe in the man in the moon:

²²Pittman, "An Act of Contrition," *Once When I Was Drowning*, p. 79.

²³Dawe, "Evening, Bareneed, Conception Bay," p. 31.

Now we are scattered men remembering
back along a fish-spine row of years
to the time on that coast of his belief
when the moving herring-schools
mooned in the long night tides
and tangled in his waiting nets
just yards below his quiet house
where he slept.²⁴

Similarly, Dawe does not seem to find the sexual fruition at the island edge suggested in some of Pittman's poems. The latter's "Song Also," to Pat Lowther, a poet from British Columbia, provides a lovely example of the multiple connections of the island experience:

Take me to your island.
I'll speak so softly
you'll have to feel my words
whispering on your skin.
Coming from my own island
I know very well how sound
carries across water.
I'll come in the blackest night
of the year and walk with you
through the twisted trees
to the sea.
And we'll collect
whatever jewelled creatures
you want to wish up
out of the onyx ocean.²⁵

The romance is linked to the island as a place which possesses all the possible sensations of nature, as in "Sea-Lovers":

The green-backed sea
refused to run
 a longer course
and leapt
 the island's edge

And satisfied
with doing that
rolled in contented waves
over the grey sand
and kind of lazily

²⁴Dawe, "The Old Man and the Moon," *Hemlock Cove and After*, p. 23.

²⁵Pittman, "Song Also," *Once When I Was Drowning*, p. 31.

came
to cool our four feet
as we made love
to it
far better than
 we ever had
to each other²⁶

Here the insularity of the individual comes to the fore. But although each is unable to make the full connection to the other, there is potential for something approximating a completion, with nature, with that mixture of waves and sand at the shore.

The land-sea interaction has an importance which goes well beyond a metaphoric relationship with sex or religion. Part of the sensibility out of which Dawe and Pittman write is represented in their works for children. Both Pittman's *Down By Jim Long's Stage*²⁷ and Dawe's *Landwash Days* make attempts to bring modern children into contact with life at the edge of the sea, with fish as friends and playmates. In his "Author's Note," Dawe writes:

When I was just a conner-catching youngster living in Conception Bay, Newfoundland, my friends and I spent many long, summer days in the landwash. For us, this was all the area on the shoreline, especially that marvelous world around the tide-marks where all kinds of creatures lived. It was here in the ways of the fish, the flight of the birds and the clouds, the buzz of the flies, and all the other mysteries, that we formed our first view of the world: here was the meaning of everything.²⁸

This image of the landwash interaction as a communal one, to be made with friends, is primarily limited to the vision for the child, however. In the adult poetry, the tendency is to seek the island edge alone. Even when a friend accompanies or, as in "Sea-Lovers" and a number of other Pittman poems, is an equal participant, there is a separation. One might speculate that the dream of contact with another island-lover in the poem to Pat Lowther is only possible at the impossible distance which extends between Pittman's Newfoundland and Lowther's Gulf Islands.

²⁶Pittman, "Sea-Lovers," *Seaweed and Rosaries*, p. 17.

²⁷Pittman, *Down By Jim Long's Stage* (Portugal Cove: Breakwater Books, 1976).

²⁸Dawe, *Landwash Days* (St. John's: Newfoundland Book Publishers Ltd., 1980), p. 2.

Even alone, the poet's connection with the landwash seems limited. It remains for another element of nature, the gull, that bird which participates in land, sea and air, to achieve fully, as in Dawe's "Gulls and Ice":

The harbour
 once ice-congested
 succumbed to an Arctic thrust
 and threw its margins
 upwards jaggedly
 to pierce the eggshell horizon
 undulating the whole
 on immaculate whites
 and close-up watery greens
 in a matrix
 of melting spring sky
 seeming to cast itself
 gracefully awry
 in wheels of wavering flight
 as sea gulls
 in a new-creation light.²⁹

The power and danger of the sea is intensified by the ice in the harbour and the resulting direct antagonism between the sea pushing the ice and the shore holding it back. In the end once more, however, there is a lift up into the air, in which the image is compared to the gulls. The effect is linked to the gulls "in a new-creation light," a feeling of epiphany through this apparently angry contact at the shore.

I mentioned before that even this subtle suggestion of a mystical, religious experience of the shore is unusual in Dawe. It is much more common in Pittman, and in "Sea Gull" he extends the image of this bird as a particular participant in the island coast:

Something sacred he seems
 raised for worship
 above the grey sea altar

poised on priest wind hands
 he awaits
 the genuflection

a certain concern for eternity
 kneels me on the salt wet rock

²⁹Dawe, "Gulls and Ice," *Connections*, p. 24.

and seeming satisfied
with that small penance
he tips one wing in casual benediction
and moves on seaward
to command another's adoration³⁰

Both Dawe and Pittman seem to find some kind of harmony in nature but in neither is it simple pantheism. The physical joining of land, air and sea presents suggestions of a possible harmony in opposition to their natural tendency to isolation. The gull is such a suggestion of the possibility but it remains quite removed from the very human considerations of the poets.

The means of overcoming the individual limitations is to become more a part of the island. Both poets seem to fit into Lukacs' definition of modernism in that their isolation is a contemporary malaise rather than a product of their environments. They may lament resettlement or the failure to achieve harmony between different religions and different races but these concerns do not present the cause of insularity.

Paradoxically, moreover, rather than the political isolation and geographical isolation increasing insularity, it seems to have little effect. It might be possible to see the St. John's-outport division as the cause of the resettlement lament, but this is seldom if ever a direct concern for the two poets. As to the geography, the island is never a limiting frame, with the sea cutting them off from important places elsewhere.

Rather it is a source of connections, as in Pittman's observation to Pat Lowther about how sound carries over water. It is a dangerous place, where the sea meets the land, but it is a necessary place if one is to recognize all the potentials in that restoring nature. This can be seen in another poem about a gull, Tom Dawe's poem, "The Tickleace is Ticklish":

The tickleace is ticklish
It seldom comes to land,
It sleeps upon the ocean waves
It does not like the sand.

It comes ashore to make a nest
But does not stay for long
It sits upon an iceberg top
And squalls a ticklish song.³¹

³⁰Pittman, "Sea Gull," *Seaweed and Rosaries*, p. 24.

³¹Dawe, "The Tickleace is Ticklish," *Landwash Days*, p. 39.

There is always a tendency to attempt an escape from the island and from those essential but ambivalent experiences at the edge of the water. In "Winter '72" Al Pittman shows two men hibernating in an outport house, apparently contented companions, but existing for faraway fantasies, like a "spangled princess." "Crewlike," they hide in their stationary ship, this "sea room house." Their fears of the winter sea are clear:

outside and above the boiling cove
 above the age-old fish-storied stages
 (resisting still in their trembling old age
 the never-say-die seaweeded sea)
 the sky crawling gulls claw
 at the white confusion of the whistling wind
 scratch their screeching frenzy
 on the impenetrable windwall of our alliance.³²

The final dream, however, releases them from both exotic visions and from fears of their winter island:

like a cocoon from which we will uncurl
 when thank god the stained sea windows
 releasing us weak-winged
 into the salty and seagulled sky.³³

The insularity of the poets, in the psychological sense, is a major factor in their poems. But it is the insularity of most contemporary poets, the insularity of what Lukacs calls modernism, the insularity of removed and often anxious contemplation. The insularity is not bred by a rejection of an oppressive mainland, nor an oppressive St. John's. Resettlement is presented as one more image of man's failure to maintain what is good. Rather than a defensive, pugnacious reaction against those who were in charge, it is the reaction of the poet who appreciates the beauty and harmony of rural life and who is depressed by its absence..

The one escape from this insularity, created not by the island but by modern life, is the island as physical being. Rather than being a cause of isolation, the island is a potential saviour from its pain. The individual contemporary poet, all too aware as the rest of his breed of that "universal condition humaine," to which Lukacs refers,

³²Pittman, "Winter '72," *Once When I Was Drowning*, p. 53.

³³"Winter '72," p. 54.

finds a possible hope in that energetic point of connection at the island's edge. The gull, who survives and prospers in his ambivalent stance between land and sea, provides a possible key. The island might defeat that isolation which Dawe so carefully repulses in "Connections:"

And we can sleep through this night
if we group and connect
our comfortable similes and such
as stays against
disconnection.³⁴

For most contemporary poets the defeat of that disconnection seems impossible but for the island poet it might be only a landwash away.

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³⁴Dawe, "Connections," *Hemlock Cove and After*, p. 42.