PATRICK LANE AND THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

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In a village of the indigenes,
One would have still to discover. Among the dogs
and dung,
One would continue to content with one's ideas.
(Wallace Stevens)

Among the poets from the West Coast who have achieved a measure of prominence in the last decade or so, Patrick Lane is somewhat of an anomaly. While most of his contemporaries were attending creative writing classes and developing theoretical rationales for their poetry, Lane was doing manual labour in the interior of British Columbia. When these academically trained poets began publishing, it was with a degree of confidence in their poetic voice and their relationship to place that one seeks for in vain in Lane's work. Although the majority of his poems are about the places he has worked in or passed through, and about his relationships with people, his canon is also punctuated with poems that reveal considerable anxiety about authority, particularly about the sources of poetic authority which ultimately define the poet's moral stance to his material and to his audience.

In an early essay entitled "To the Outlaw," Lane, quoting from Neruda's "Toward an Impure Poetry," declares his intention to write "a poetry impure as the clothing we wear, soup-stained, soiled with our shameful behaviour, our wrinkles and vigils and dreams . . ."[1] Neruda's manifesto was issued in 1935 in reaction to the "pure poetry" of an

1. Patrick Lane, "To the Outlaw," in *Western Windows: A Comparative Anthology of Poetry in British Columbia*, ed. Patricia M. Ellis (Vancouver: Comm-Cept Publishing, 1977), p.211. All further references to this work (*TO*), originally published in *New: American and Canadian Poetry*, 15 (April-May 1971), appear in the text.

________ *Beware the Months of Fire* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1974). All references to this work (*BMF*) appear in the text.

________ *Poems: New and Selected* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1978). All references to the work (*PNS*) appear in the text.

________ *The Measure* (Thornhill, Ontario: Black Moss Press, 1980). All references to this work (*M*) appear in the text.

older generation, whose leading figure was the Spanish modernist Juan Ramon Jiménez; in it, Neruda advocates a poetry that attends to the common objects of man's everyday existence, a poetry "smelling of lilies and urine, spattered by the trades we live by, inside law or beyond law."[2] Lane's essay, first published in 1971, is also an attack on the aestheticism of the modernists,[3] but where Neruda is lyrical, Lane is splenetic, especially where academics are concerned: "if bullshit was feeling these men could grow gardens on their tongues that would put mythic Babylon to shame. For they place boundaries around the poem with the laws they write as if creativity were the sum of one plus one." (*TO*, p.211). In particular, Lane rejects what he perceives as a modernist obsession with formal pattern at the expense of the poet's involvement with the moral issues of his society. To counteract this complacency, which he describes elsewhere as "objectivity" and "creeping intellectualism,"[4] Lane places himself as poet "beyond the laws that give men a security in structure," insisting that the poet must avoid "the sanctuaries of security, church, state, business, the military, and the university" (*TO*, p. 213). A great deal of what Lane has to say in "To the Outlaw" echoes with the kind of self-righteous bluster not unfamiliar to readers of Layton's prefaces.[5] The philippic rhetoric and anti-intellectual posturing of the essay should not blind us, however, to its considerable merit as a preamble to Lane's early poetry. To a lesser degree, it also illuminates some of his more recent work, in which his youthful belligerence towards the modernistic world-view has been replaced by wary acceptance.

For Lane, poetry is "born in the bondage of experience," and this places it outside of the law, "the pure definition of the barb-wire fences of our impossible morality" (*TO*, p.211). The corollary is that the poet is an outlaw, an anarchist whose creative impulses frequently place him in an antagonistic relationship to society and the poetic tradition of which

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2. Quoted by Manuel Duran and Margery Safir in *Earth Tones: The Poetry of Pablo Neruda* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p.43.
3. The distinctions between modernism and post-modernism in this essay are basically those outlined in Frank Davey's "Introduction" to *From There to Here* (Erin: Press Procepic, 1974), pp.11-29).
4. Stephen Dale, "Interview," *Books in Canada*, 10, Vol.10 (December 1981), p.32.
5. A comparison of "To the Outlaw" with Layton's prefaces, especially with "Foreward," *The Swinging Flesh* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961), indicates that Lane owes more to Layton than his gift for lyrical fulmination; for both poets, for example, W.H. Auden's work epitomizes the aesthetic detachment of the ivory tower, much as Jiménez represented, for Neruda, the gongorist tendencies of Spanish poetry in the 1920s.

he is a part. Although Lane's choice of the outlaw as a trope for the poet may have been inspired by his reading of Neruda, who also declared himself to be "the enemy of laws, leaders, and established institutions,"[6] his choice is more readily comprehensible when it is viewed as a reaction to the turmoil of the 1960s.[7] In order to establish this thesis and lay the groundwork for what is to follow, however, it is necessary to digress briefly to some historical considerations.

Canada's Centennial, flower power and the Age of Aquarius notwithstanding, the 1960s was a decade which signalled for many the final demise of modernism. Charles Altieri, in his impressive study of the poetics of that era describes the modernist ideal this way:

> The ultimate desire of the moderns—most pronounced in Yeats, Eliot, and the Pound of the early Cantos but present in Crane and Stevens as well—is to libeerate those potential forces in the culture which might provide models and sustenance for the imagination as it seeks to bring individuals and the culture to more complete, more fully humane uses of human energy.[8]

This was not perceived to have happened; instead, it appeared that while the world awaited Stevens' major man, it had been delivered into the hands of carnivorous half-wits who talked of peace by balance of terror; humanitarian idealism in the international arena began to look suspiciously like cultural aggression; technicians and scientists were perceived as factotoums for exploiters and terrorists. Finally, the philosophical traditions in Western thought descending from Socrates, which had been severely scrutinized in the works of Sartre, Heidegger and others, were increasingly challenged by concepts stressing Pre-Socratic notions of flux while the research of Levy-Bruhl and Lévi-Strauss gave new meaning to the term primitivism. These developments were paralleled by a heightened awareness of man's need to preserve the ecological balance, giving a renewed impetus to notions of a purposive Nature. In this climate, it became increasingly difficult for the poet, as

6. See Robert Bly, "Refusing to be Theocritus," in *Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems*, ed. Robert Bly (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p.7.
7. Lane's anti-establishment stance was not unique in Vancouver in the 1960s and early 1970s; Bill Bissett, with Lane one of the founders of Very Stone House, achieved so much notoriety for his challenges to established authority as to be denounced in the House of Commons. One of the most well-known symbols of Vancouver's artistic counterculture was *The Georgia Straight*, founded by Dan McLeod in 1967.
8. Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1979), p.38.

for others, to accept unquestioningly the legacy of Western thought, particularly insofar as its ideals had seemed to become abstracted and largely academic. In short, as "it became harder to separate creative from demonic possibilities in our culture,"[9] it became imperative for some to seek out other sources of the creative impulse. As an outlaw, the poet can seek out these sources unconstrained by tribal taboo, fashion, or even the canons of good taste. Decorous language, like the gardens of Babylon, may testify to a highly refined culture but it does not necessarily testify to a highly civilized one.

One of the many implications of the failure of modernism noted by Altieri is the suspicion that modern society is a ctually inimical to artistic activity. The ramifications of this premise, and it is no more than a hypothesis, are enormous. First of all the notion that the sources of the creative impulse can be located outside culture presupposes that there are values which can be located elsewhere, in Nature for instance. Without postulating the existence of such creative sources, whether in culture or Nature, it is impossible to conceive of a poetic act which insists that there is significance in the ontic. For the Romantic poet, value was postulated as an attribute of a sacramentally viewed Nature; for the Victorians and the Moderns, the repository of value was the ethical individual and, by extension, culture as the expression of the best that has been thought and said. Deprived of the theological foundations of Romantic Nature, and suspicious of the metaphysics which underlie traditional Western thought, the postmodern poet is hard-pressed, but not without options. If he turns to Nature, it must be without the theological suppositions that became largely inoperative after Darwin; if to culture, it must be to those aspects of it which have not been vitiated by the historical record, or to those segments of it which, however debased, are not perceived as culpable for the failure of its ideals. It should be clear, however, that if the poet turns to culture, he is in fact turning in upon himself as the custodian of values which may have ceased to be operative in his society, and he may be subject to the anxiety that, as a product of that society, he has inherited false values.

Postmodernist responses to these issues vary, but the most common is typified by Olson's doctrine of particularism, which relegates generalization to the Aristotelian, "UNIVERSE of discourse."[10] The an-

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9. Altieri, p.38.
10. Charles Olson, "Human Universe," in *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), p.54.

odyne to abstraction is a revitalized *logos*, a language "returned to the only two universes which count, the two phenomenal ones . . .: that of himself, as organism, and that of his environment, the earth and planets."[11] Value, particularly for the poet suspicious of the integrity of his culture, can only be measured in terms of the poet's personal experience. One theoretical rationale for this position, and the possible source of Olson's concept of particularism, is provided by Martin Heidegger. In his essay on Hölderlin, Heidegger declares that poetry "is the unaugural naming of being and of the essence of all things . . ."[12] Because of the axiomatic truth of this, and because we are all heirs to Aristotle's legacy of generalization, "Poetry rouses the appearance of the unreal and of dream in the face of the palpable and clamourous reality, in which we believe ourselves at home. And yet in just the reverse manner, what the poet says and undertakes to be, is the real."[13] Lane concurs, theoretically at least, as the following quotation from "To the Outlaw" indicates: "There are no truths. There is no knowledge. There is only experience, sensual and sublime, personified in the outlaw and made manifest in his word" (*TO*, p.213). Obviously, when he says that "there are no truths," he is not asserting that nothing can be accounted as true; rather, he is questioning the correspondence between what he experiences as reality and certain linguistically correct statements about it. In "On the Essence of Truth," Heidegger distinguishes between 'truth' and linguistically determined statements which may be accounted as 'true' with an etymological ploy:

> If we translate *aletheia* by 'unconcealment' or 'revealment' instead of truth, the translation is not only more 'literal'; but it also requires us to revise our ordinary idea of truth in the sense of propositional correctitude and trace it back to that still uncomprehended quality: the revealedness and revelation of what-is.[14]

The "revelation of what-is" implies a willing submersion in the flux of experience as opposed to the egotistical (and modernist) ordering of it. Significance, or value, then, derives from attending to the particulars of one's environment, whether natural or man-made. For the postmodern poet, the creative impulse is not in Culture, but in culture, the local.

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11. Olson, p.54.
12. Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry," in *Existence and Being* (1949; rpt. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1976), p.286.
13. Heidegger, p.286.
14. Heidegger, p.306.

Predictably, Lane quarrels with Auden's precept that poetry can "survive in the valley of its saying" (*OT*, p.210) and insists, rather, that "poetry survives in the valley of experience" (*OT*, p.212). Auden's maxim is typically modernist in its recognition of language as a means of structuring experience and assigning significance or value; Lane's inversion of Auden stresses the value of experience without the intervention of an ordering, creative imagination. For the modernist, value is a function of Culture; for the postmodernist, value is an attribute of the poet's sensibility:

> Beyond freedom, beyond all temporal boundaries of ethics and morality is a place called beauty where the poet resides in bondage and in that beauty is a burning beyond all knowledge and understanding. It is from there that the poem comes. It is there the outlaw lives.
>
> (*OT*, p.213)

The true poet, Lane insists somewhat disingenuously, is "neither trained nor taught" (*OT*, p.211). In bondage to beauty, he "spins towards the margins of his experience like a rotting apple at the end of a string being swung in the hands of a satyr and the locus of that spinning is The Word surrounded and permeated with desire and feeling" (*OT*, p.211). It is paradoxical, perhaps, that Lane's foundation of a poetic is so deeply indebted to modernist distinctions between Apollonian and Dionysiac modes of experience but, as his opposition of satyr and Word suggests, Lane's is a tortured sensibility ill at ease with modernism but ultimately unwilling to jettison its humanist ideals. As a statement of poetic theory, "To the Outlaw" is more a justification for profound disenchantment with the older order than a program of action for a nascent postmodernist world view.

In Lane's poetry, the figure of the outlaw appears directly in only a few instances; more characteristically he appears as the *isolato*, a generalized type including all those who find themselves, willingly or unwillingly, on the margins of society. Sometimes, as in "Calgary City Jail" (*BMF*, p.23) or "On the Street," Lane portrays himself as an outlaw in the usual sense of the word, as inmate or fugitive from justice:

> taking my poems and stuffing them
> into my wet shoes to cut the cold
> hiding my head

as the sirens wailed past
into the night and gone.
(*BMF*, p.27)

In other poems, "Hastings Street Rooms" (*BMF*, p.34), or "On the Bum in Edmonton," for example, Lane identifies himself with the transients and derelicts who form the substratum of urbanized culture, "bum[ming] two bits,/ to buy my pride/ or pity, or something less' (*BMF*, p.31). Finally, the isolated self appears in numerous portraits of drunks, whores, cripples, Indians and others whose relationship to the seats of power is that of victim. Lane's sympathy for these individuals is often poignantly expressed; in "Krestova Solitaire", an old man "with eternities of flowers gone to seed" in his demeanor plays on in spite of never winning:

not seeing cards confuse themselves
and the table shining from his arms
forever moving laying down one card
atop the other in the unexpected rhythm
of a dream
(*BMF*, p.31)

Equally as often, however, one encounters resignation bordering on despair, as when the poet's cell-mate laughs when he carves his name above his bed: "What does it matter? he said/ they'll only paint you over" ("Calgary City Jail," *BMF*, p.23).

Lane's sympathies with the dispossessed and the disenfranchised also extend to those whose outcast status results from the refusal to conform to social norms. "Grey John," whom everyone agrees "was a good man," is incarcerated for "fucking his horse" and now a "new master's whip [hovers] above her/ her flanks shuddering" ("Grey John," *PNS*, p.39). A young boy's destructive rage, in "Gerald" (*BMF*, p.10), is seen as an understandable reaction to the hypocrisy and brutality of his father's conventional piety. The decapitated crow—Lane's birds, whether free or captive, are always associated with poetry—becomes an image of the boy/poet himself seeking to transcend an insensitive social order:

laughing his way to the garden
flapping his arms

the living sunburst air
full of his despair
while his father knelt in the sacristy
and called on Christ
to curse his wilfullness forever.
(*BMF*, p.11)

Similarly, in poems like "Because I Never Learned" (*BMF*, p.4), or "The Bear Went Over the Mountain," there is the suggestion that the poet's outcast status comes from a refusal to accept dehumanizing directives and rituals that constitute a part of the socialization process: "you learn to write with your right hand./it isn't easier./ it is what you learn" (*BMF*, p.83).

There are more profound causes for alienation, however, than the simple refusal to conform to arbitrary strictures. At the heart of the poet's dilemma is a feeling of having been betrayed by social myths into believing in man's heroic potential:

I read the books
and dream that words could change
the vision, make of man a perfect animal
and so transformed become immortal.
("Wild Birds," *PNS*, p.103)

Struggling with notions of "form that was never/ ours, the questioning of paradise, the beauty of/ our minds," he is impelled to the conclusion that "chaos/ is our creation and the god we wished was man." But, rather than dismissing outright the modernist dream as untenable, Lane strikes a tragic pose with his question "What else was there to dream?" Modernist hopes for a vital culture can be seen as a defense against disorder largely originating in man himself.From this perspective, alienation is an awareness of spiritual rather than social dislocation, although in a broader sense the two are inseparable. In "Wild Birds", the poet is literally and figuratively adrift, "knowing the landfall" but blown outward against his will. Significantly, in this poem it is not the "I", the isolated self, but the "we", "all of us", who are "black cinders lost at sea." This shift from singular to plural represents another aspect of Lane's sensibility. The image of the sacrificial victim, inherent in the outlaw persona, emphasizes the poet's separation from the social order.

The persona who speaks in the plural is more compassionate, and more readily acknowledges his share of the universal guilt.[15]

In the volumes that succeed *Beware the Months of Fire*, the outlaw as a type all but disappears, although the concerns that may have justified his poetic incarnation in the first place remain. A notable exception is the poem "The Trace of Being", published in *Poems: New and Selected*. There is something Romantic, almost Baudelairean about the outlaw figures of Lane's early work: in "The Trace of Being", this view of the outlaw disintegrates, ostensibly under the impress of a more spiritually conceived sense of self:

> Why are the McLean Boys in my mind?
> Why are they always vicious punks
> who murdered out of fear? Why not
> heroic like Bill the Kid? Why
> was I always them? The dying gods?
> Peter's journey to Rome? Fish on stone?

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15. Serving as an epigraph to *Beware the Months of Fire* is the following quotation from Celine's *Journey to the End of Night*:

> The greatest defeat, in anything, is to forget, and above all to forget what it is that has smashed you, and to let yourself be smashed without ever realizing how thoroughly devilish men can be. When our time is up, we people mustn't bear malice, but neither must we forget: we must tell the whole thing, without ever altering one word,—everything that we have seen of man's viciousness; and then it will be over and time to go. That is enough for a whole lifetime.

Celine's exaggerated portraits of human nastiness and his depiction of a social order never far removed from the brutish did much to make him misunderstood by his contemporaries who, as in his supposedly anti-Semitic pamphlets, confused his moral imperative to bear witness with jaundice on his part. Lane's insistence on bearing witness to the more violent and sordid aspects of contemporary society have led to a similar misunderstanding by his contemporaries and have contributed, no doubt, in no small measure to the disdain with which his work has been received in some quarters. Lane's South American poems, published in *Unborn Things* (1975), are a case in point. Neil Whiteman, in "A Left to the Mind: The Poems of Patrick Lane" (*CV II, 3, No. 4 [Summer 1978], 49-52), at once praises the volume for genuine achievement, meaning that he liked some poems, but renders the verdict that it is an "antilitany of degradation, destruction, violence, sexual frustration, treachery, butchery, and death" limited by its "unmusicality, its technical gaucheries and its windiness," as well as by its refusal to affirm renewal and transformation. Christopher Levenson, in "Patrick Lane's Violent Poetry" (Queen's Quarterly,* 87 [Summer 1980], 279-85), takes umbrage with Lane's image of orchids ("At the Edge of the Jungle") which "gape/ like the vulvas of hanged women" (no doubt he would prefer Wallace Stevens' more decorous "thick cadaverous bloom"), and levels the charge of voyeurism, a charge that Marilyn Bowering in "Pine Boughs and Apple Trees: The Poetry of Patrick Lane" (*Malahat Review*, 45 [1978], 24-34), also makes, though less forcefully. The moral indignation, so unmistakable in "The Hustler," "Chile," and "At the Edge of the Jungle," is either overlooked or ignored by both Whiteman and Levenson, who fail to see that Lane's violent images are not the limits of utterance, much less the limits of outrage.

Known as the Wild McLeans, the McLean Brothers (the youngest only fifteen) were executed in 1881 after having terrorized the Kamloops area and murdering two area residents. Unlike the exploits of William Bonny, also killed in 1881, those of the McLeans have not become the subject of legend or ballad. By identifying himself with the unheroic McLeans, and by positing a series of Frazerian images as possible explanations, Lane acknowledges his rootedness in the particulars of his own experience as a native son of that region of British Columbia and as a product of the Christian inheritance. The frontier ethos and its Hollywood rhapsodies are not in themselves sufficient validation of a generalized view of history that ignores communal values by canonizing the outlaw. Ultimately, however much the poet rages against the natural and social orders of which he is a part, he must acknowledge his complicity in those orders. He may, of course, lick his wounds, draw our attention to "the tears/ of ruin, the body wronged from the start," but finally his rage only has purpose if it speaks of the lhuman condition:

> The trace of being, the impossible wreckage
> of the human, without respite, without cease,
> turning and turning in spite of prophecy,
> corrupt, history without holiness, the gone
> peoples, the endless rituals, the dead
> and those who accompany them, singing.
> (*PNS*, p.107)

Lane's most agonized expression of the failure of humanist ideals occurs in "At the Edge of the Jungle," a poem whose very title calls into question man's ability to rise above barbarism. The first two stanzas present a series of images calling into mind Rousseau's dream-paintings of primitive scenes, but without that painter's naivete. In the kindly Frenchman's work, all hint of menace is controlled by the two-dimensional, almost static method of presentation; in Lane, dream has become three-dimensional, dynamic nightmare:

> I turn to where orchids gape
> like the vulvas of hanged women.
> Everything is a madness:
> a broken melon bleeds a pestilence
> of bees; a woman squats and pees
> balancing perfectly her basket
> of meat, a gelding falls to its knees
> under the goad of its driver.

This is a vision of a damned world where the poet, identified with a rooster, suffers terrible indignities at the hands of children while "diseased clouds . . . throw down roots of fire":

> I no longer believe
> the sight I have been given
> and live inside the eyes of a rooster
> who walks around a pile of broken bones.
>
> Children have cut away his beak
> and with a string have staked him
> where he sees but cannot eat.

Echoes of the Easter Gospels, Blake, Eliot and Lowell abound in this evocation of a naturalistic world in which spiritual values have been all but overwhelmed. Like Prufrock, the poet can recall a world for which ritual and ceremony testified to such values, however vestigial:

> I am grown older than I imagined:
> the garden I dreamed does not exist
> and compassion is only the beginning
> of suffering. Everything deceives.

The temptation to become "a pair of ragged claws" in reaction to what he perceives as a perverted human order also presents itself:

> A man could walk into this jungle
> and lying down be lost
> among the green sucking of trees.
> (*PNS*, p.80)

But Lane's ultimate values lie in culture, not Nature, provided of course, that, like the culture whose passing he laments in "Macchu Pichu" (*PNS*, p.61), the culture in question has spiritual significance and depth. This does not preclude the possibility of turning to Nature to recover a sense of wholeness, but, as will become evident, Nature is a dim source of creative energy for this unhappy humanist.

The supposition that Nature can function as a source of the creative impulse is implicit in a poetics stressing the poet's attendance on the particulars of his experience. As noted earlier, the contemporary return to Nature generally abjures the quasi-theological basis of Romantic Nature, although a secularized version analogically linking human virtue to landscape is almost coin of the realm. For some recent writers, Kroetsch, Atwood and Newlove, for example, the land functions shamanistically. Such an accommodation with Nature is very much in keeping with

postmodernist notions of immersion in flux or process, the poet recording his experience as participant rather than observer.

Although, in the manner of Lorca, Lane sometimes metamorphoses Nature into human terms ("breast of moon," "eyes of moss"), it is not for him ultimately shamanistic. It is, nevertheless, vaguely sacramental. Marilyn Bowering traces this sacramentalism in Lane to *Unborn Things*, a volume largely dedicated to poems arising out of Lane's travels in South America in 1972. Bowering argues that after the "brutal anger that cannot be relieved/ except on things," in "Slash Burning on Silver Star," Lane discovers a new relationship with landscape. Instead of perceiving himself as 'other', the poet becomes 'one with' place; in "Unborn Things" this manifests itself as "the myth of the dying/ resurrected god"[16] when the poet, in retreat from a decaying human order, declares his intention: "I will go into the field/ and be buried with the corn" (*PNS*, p.60). It would be unwise, however, to overemphasize the importance of this identification with Nature; Lane employs the future tense "I will" in each of the poem's three stanzas, indicating the attractiveness of his goal, not its attainment. The earth's vital energies, equated with the Dionysian well-springs of creativity, cannot provide the poet with an adequate basis for his creativity for the simple reason that their operations are mute. Furthermore, as ontological source, as Pure Being, Nature proves to be impossible to describe. This numinous world is frequently glimpsed in Lane's poetry, but the encounter always issues in silence. The value of the experience is not negated, but to express it directly would require a language so pure that, in Atwood's words, it is "not even a code."[17] This is Lane's "world of beautiful objects made manifest" (*TO*, p.212) by the poet, as in the dreamlike "Albino Pheasants":

> There is no way to tell men what we do . . .
> the dance they make in sleep
> withholds its meaning from their dreams.
> That which has been nursed in bone
> rests easy upon frozen stone
> and what is wild is lost behind closed eyes:
> albino birds, pale sisters, succubi.
>
> (*PNS*, p.95)

16. Bowering, p.30.
17. Margaret Atwood, *Two-Headed Poems* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.65.

Although the poet can point to this world—and Lane frequently evokes it through the use of bird or animal imagery—he cannot decipher it or reduce it to unambiguous utterance. There is a fact/value dichotomy which prevents the poet from construing the significance of what he observes or experiences; as he notes in "Of Letters," "A Magpie drifts across the sun./ His long tail writes too swiftly/ for me to interpret" (*PNS*, p.91). Frequently too, this numinous realm remains hidden from view: in "And Say of What You See in the Dark," "the book of the sky/ closes. Darkness cries the news to bats/ who fly in alphabets no man can read" (*PNS*, p.96). In "A Murder of Crows," Lane tries to recreate poetically the experience of skinning out an animal that he has killed, but his struggle is to no avail:

> What can be said? Words are dark rainbows
> without roots, a murder of crows.
> a memory of music reduced to guile.

The lines of communication between the poet and the 'outside' world, the poet's audience, are down—"somewhere/ a tree has fallen across the lines"—and his words become the cacophonous, disordered flight of a flock of crows or, at very best, artifice or "guile." He can describe the procedure of butchering the animal, but the part of the hunting experience that most affects him defies expression:

> The death?
> If I could tell you the silence
> when the body refused to fall
> until it seemed the ground reached up
> and pulled it down. Then I could tell you
> everything:
> (*PNS*, p.110)

At one level, of course, Lane is drawing our attention to the impotence of language in the face of death, but this poem is concerned only indirectly with grief or even guilt. The poet's principal desire is to reveal "what the grass said/ to the crows as they passed over,/ the eyes of moss, the histories of stone," those aspects of the scene which can be described as the poet's experience of radical presence. Of course, the latent value or order of such an experience is not available to the discursive acts of the mind, and the poem becomes simply a testimony to such experience rather than a recreation of it.[18] As Olson states, this

18. See Altieri, pp.29 ff.

kind of description "does not come to grips with what really matters . . . the very character of it which calls our attention to it, its particularity."[19] Lane's desire, like Olson's is to find a means of expression "which does not—in order to define—prevent, deter, distract, and so cease the act of, discovering."[20]

Lane poses the question about the relationship between language and actuality in "Temenos":

> Between the name that is and the name that is not
> Is the thing that is not. Call it stone.
> Call it not-stone. What have you named?
>
> (*M*, p.19)

Seen in terms of an inquiry into the nature of truth, Lane's concern with language can be viewed as a desire for a revitalized *logos*, for a language capable of revealing 'what-is' without sacrificing notions of value. The problem of finding a language which can integrate the abstract and the empirical orders is central to post-modernist aesthetics, and if Lane does not have the answer, it is at least noteworthy that he poses the question. To explore this aspect of Lane's writing more thoroughly, it is useful to turn once more to his essay. Lane's concern with language must be viewed in the context of contemporary Western history, "an age when the people are daily lobotomized by the Janus-faced god called Science/Technology" (*TO*, p.212):

> where universities extol the virtues of cliques and schools of conforming poets, set up computers in order to find out how many times Homes used the word love . . .; where business and materialism daily wipe out whole ecological systems for the sake of the myths: money, machines and production; where politicians speak of humanity in their chambers and daily ignore the murder of millions in the name of freedom; where philosophers and metaphysicians lose themselves chasing the chimera of the essence of knowledge; where men and women shoot, rape, pillage and murder in the name of God and virtue; . . .
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> (*TO*, p.213)

Explicit in this excoriation of the modern world is the notion that language can and should serve Truth, but that it has been prostituted somehow to the service of vested interests. Implicit, and more germane to Lane's epistemological concerns, is the notion of language's pro-

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19. Olson, p.56.
20. Olson, p.56.

pensity to conceal rather than reveal, or at best to reveal only "the thing that is not."

One difficulty which arises for Lane is in arriving at a satisfactory definition of the relationship between language as historically accreted utterance, Stevens' "rotted names," and the inexpressible truths to which the poet is witness. "Words," Lane states in *The Measure*, "are a bridge between what we perceive as the real and what we know as the mystery." Regrettably, as Sontag has postulated, the very "materiality" of the world proves to be an obstacle to "authentic sublimation" on the one hand, and the historicity of language proves to be a trap, cursing "the artist's activity . . . with mediacy," on the other.[21] In either case, public language fails to facilitate the desired poetic utterance and the poet remains a prisoner of time and space unable to express the clarity and integrity with which the world presents itself. Both tendencies, furthermore, call into question the validity, if not the viability, of the poetic enterprise, at least in terms of modernist assumptions, inherited from Coleridge, about the mythical, ordering powers of the creative imagination. A consequence of this failure of language, which is perceived by the poet as the disparity between apprehension and expression, is a kind of poetic despair, poetic because it issues in poems about the futility of poetry. An example of this is "Teachers," a poem which calls to mind Ezra Pound's "Epitaphs" for Fu I who, though he "loved the high cloud and the hill . . . died of alcohol," and Li Po, who also died drunk trying "to embrace a moon/ In the Yellow River." The futility of their aspiration provides an ironic object lesson for Lane, who has spent the day writing poems:

> Better to buy a bottle
> of Teachers Highland Cream
> and get drunk with the moon
> as it drowns in the sea.
>
> (*PNS*, p.56)

The role that habit or traditional knowledge plays in perception proves to be a recurring problem for Lane and in at least on instance he appears to adopt a phenomenological strategy, almost Heideggerean in its desire for immediacy of apprehension. "Rot my wisdom, I am drowned/ In the poisonous storms of the mind," he declares in "How the Heart Stinks With Its Devotions":

21. Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence," in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1966), p.5.

Empty your eyes of all save form.
It is the green perfection of the space
A leaf includes in its growing,
The delicate birth baffled by the wind.
Ah, heart, I cannot scorn the armies of your pain.
It is night, air, and I am drunk again on words.
One stone would be enough,
One leaf a feast.

(*PNS*, p.112)

A desire for immersion in Heraclitean flux, for participation in the cosmic dance is suggested here, and if this were truly possible, language would be superfluous to the experience. The poem's conclusion is ambiguous, but one is inclined to suspect that "one stone" is not finally enough; on the other hand, even though the anguish which led to the writing of the poem has not been specified, the act of writing has proved cathartic through the agency of the poet's engagement with a world independent of his troubled consciousness.

It was noted earlier that for Lane words bridge the gap "between what we perceive as the real and what we know as the mystery." The operative concept in this view of language's function is metaphor:

What if there wasn't metaphor
and the bodies were only bodies
bones pushed out in awkward fingers?
("Stigmata," *PNS*, p.94)

As in the previously cited "At the Edge of the Jungle," Lane employs images that shock the reader into an awareness of how things appear when stripped of mediating values. Deprived of metaphysical significance, crumpled bodies are "only bodies," simply shapes like the corpse in Robbe-Grillet's "The Secret Room." Man is more than just an object; he can ask, as Lane does, "What do I know of the inexorable beauty,/ the unrelenting turning of the wheel I am inside me?" Without the gift of metaphor the question is as meaningless as it is unlikely. Meaning depends upon the ability to make connections, to affirm significance with the unequivocal authority of the felt experience. Unless significance can be affirmed, the poet suffers something akin to Sartre's *nausea*, as Altieri puts it, "a sense of the divorce between self-consciousness and [the] objective world whereby a person experiences the natural world as too much there, as completely self-sufficient in its impersonality and hence as mocking the emptiness of man's need to project desires and

meanings on to it."[22] In "Stigmata," this condition is imaged as a fallen state:

> Waves come to the seawall, fall away,
> children bounce mouths against the stones
> that man has carved to keep the sea at bay
> and women walk with empty wombs
> proclaiming freedom to the night.
> Through barroom windows rotten with light
> eyes of men open and close like fists.

One need not pause long to recognize this as essentially a modernist poem, rife with tensions between fact and value, naturalistic experience and spiritual significance. Although Lane is reporting on the state of the world and on aspects of his own experience, he is not doing so by attending to the particulars of his environment, not as he is in, say, "Because I Never Learned" (*PNS*, p.15). This is a meditative poem, its metaphors clearly the product of a mind not content to describe "what is" but intent on revealing spiritual significance. This is not to suggest that Lane is a mythopoeic writer or even predominantly a symbolist, but he does seek for universals, for an informing myth locating significance in, and reconciling, the human and natural orders.

Lane struggles with an aspect of this problem in "The Witnesses," in which he tries to evoke "the rodeo dircuit of fifty years ago," when his father rode as "the McLeod Kid:":

> What if I try to capture an ecstasy that is not
> mine, what if these are only words saying
> this was or this was not, a story told to me
>
> until I now no longer believe it was told to me
> The witnesses dead, what if I create a past
> that never was, making out of nothing
> a history of my people . . .
>
> (*PNS*, p. 100)

Central to Lane's quandry here is his awareness of the poet's license to create *ex nihilo*, so to speak, "To remember words, to remember nothing/ but words and make out of nothing the pst." The line-breaks after "not" and "nothing" in the passages quoted underscore the poet's unease, the "agony" of his attempt to recreate the scene from insubstantial language. He is not willing to renounce his enterprise altogether

22. Altieri, p.32.

and retreat into silence, however, for he does allow himself the possibility of being a true witness to the event:

> To watch or not watch, to surround the spectacle
> horses asleep in their harness, tails switching
> bees swarming on melon rinds, flys buzzing
> and what if my words are their voices

This is only the grammar of hypothesis, however, and it could be argued that the stanza's astigmatism, if deliberate, suggests hallucination rather than authentic experience. Nevertheless, the poem concludes with a vividly realized image, a frozen moment retrieved from time's oblivion as the horse unseats her rider:

> Her mane, black hair feathered in the wind
> that I believe I see, caked mud in her eyes
> the breath broken from her body and the McLeod Kid
> in the air, falling, the clock stopped.

His connection to the event is undoubtedly sincerely felt, but it is purely logographic; that is, his direct experience is of an event in language, not an event in history. This conclusion might, at first glance, be interpreted as an admission of defeat; word-pictures cannot, after all, lay claim to authenticity in the way that first-hand experience can. Lane recognizes this limitation, but he also realizes, in another poem, that this is precisely why the poet's function is so vital to culture:

> Only the living eye breeds language
> where no language is. The words conjured
> are only images. The memory of something
> in the race that is unknown.
>
> ("Pissaro's Tomb," *PNS*, p.76)

This is as close as Lane comes to the Heideggerean view, expressed in the essay on Hölderlin and elsewhere, of poetry as ontological revelation. The poet's knowledge of the event, as his opening line to "The Witnesses" makes clear, is "to know as the word is known." Obviously, such a statement qualifies his insistence, in "To the Outlaw," that poetry is "born in the bondage of experience" by admitting that sometimes it is not possible to approach the world without the mediation of language. It is, however, completely consistent with his emphasis on The Word.

In retrospect, Lane's quarrel with Auden is really only a quibble, a qualification that says, in effect, that poetry can "survive in the valley of its saying" only if language functions as a bridge between conscious-

ness and experience. Such a qualification admits the distinction between "esthetic encountring" and experience of "the first-hand mode in the physical reality."[23] What it rejects is deliberate obscurantism, verbal gymnastics in which grace-notes supplant conviction, art for art's sake— in a word, aestheticism.

Admitting that the poet may not have as much impact as other media, Lane nevertheless believes that language can change the shape of the world:

> There is a sort of transformation that is sought, some kind of catharsis that is necessary not just for the writer but for the society in which the writer operates. As for the writer himself, there is a big desire for the transformation . . . The only way we [writers] stay alive is through constant witnessing.[24]

Transformation or regeneration at the societal or the individual level requires courage and honesty, or put another way, keeping faith with the world and the word. Authentic language, by which the poet articulates his encounter with the particulars of his experience, goes in fear of the chasm-filling abstraction, makes allowance for what cannot be known. Keeping faith with the world in its revealedness and with the word requires the capacity to accommodate mystery or uncertainty, the courage to resist fixity. Thus Kung's wistful rumination in Pound's "Canto XIII":

> And even I can remember
> A day when historians left blanks in their writing
> I mean for things they didn't know,
> But that time seems to be passing.

In this canto, it will be remembered, Kung is questioned about proper conduct by disciples, raises his cane against Yuan Jang for "pretending to/ be receiving wisdom," and insists upon inner order and strength of character as prerequisites for order in a changing world. The closing lines of this canto,

> The blossoms of the apricot
> blow from the east to the west
> And I have tried to keep them from falling.

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23. Stanley Burnshaw, *The Seamless Web: Language Thinking; Creature Knowledge; Art Experience* (New York: George Braziller, 1970), p.121.
24. Dale, p.32.

form one of the epigraphs of Lane's "Temenos" and, along with the lines from an Ancient Sybilline Oracle, fittingly announce the theme of finding the courage to be in a constantly shifting, possibly decaying, world order. Uncertain of purpose after a phrrhic victory on the field of battle, the narrator is in marked contrast to the orators, "Fat men," "Wordsmiths," who sing his praises. For him there is a split between the event and its depiction "That nothing be forgotten":

> Whose words are my words. Is what was said
> What is said? Do I repeat myself in what I think
> I know? In whose spell am I bound?
>
> (*M*, p.18)

It would be easy, in the words of Pound's Kung, "to shoot past the mark" and to suggest that Lane's narrator is caught in the spell of language's historicity, and that any account of his experience would be a fiction. Lane himself seems susceptible to this conclusion when his narrator muses on his inheritance of language:

> I remember the lessons. I remember them well.
> In the shade of the trees.
> The philosophers and the poets.
> The endless tangle of words.
>
> (*M*, p.19)

By the poem's conclusion, however, the complexity of the relationship between language and reality is acknowledged by the question, "What is the real that you demand it so?" and the enigmatic rejoinder, "If you learn nothing/ then there is nothing to learn" (*M*, p.21).

Reality, then, whether of the philosopher or the poet, is not the same as "the endless tangle of words" we use to describe/construct it. Unfortunately, the speculations of historians tend to become reified into 'history'm just as the outpourings of generations of poets become reified into a 'tradition' that the poet must contend with if he is not simply a sychophant seeking entry into a "biology of poets," a "culture of poems" (*TO*, p.211). Fortunately, Lane is too busy writing new poems to let these issues bedevil him. In the words of the nameless narrator of "Temenos," to whom the priestess of the temple has refused an answer, "The man must do/ Whether or not the spilled entrails speak" (*M*, p.18). Of this, at least, Lane can speak with authority.

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