

# *Dulce vs. Utile: The Kevin O'Brien Syndrome in New Brunswick Literature*

*Barrie Davies*

*You know, I've lived to see long rafts on this river—I've lived to see long logs on this river—I've lived to see pulp drives on this river—and now I've lived to see nothin on this river.*

—David Adams Richards, *Blood Ties*

An important and recurrent theme in Maritime literature is what might be called the Kevin O'Brien syndrome, or *dulce versus utile*, or I'm-lucky-only-a-bird-shit-on-my-head,-after-all-Marsyas-got-flayed-alive. Kevin O'Brien is a prominent character in Alden Nowlan's short stories (in particular, in "Night Watch"), while Marsyas is the subject of a poem by the same name, written by Charles G.D. Roberts. The "binder-twine mentality of a country hardly out of a money-getting and home building stage"<sup>1</sup>—the lack of audacity, the puritanism, the contempt for educational and aesthetic development, the frontier high-jinks and frost-bitten imagination—identified by writers and critics such as Archibald Lampman, A.J.M. Smith, E.K. Brown, Douglas Bush, Northrop Frye, and Margaret Atwood as typical of Canadian society and culture can be documented in Maritime literature from colonial times to the present. In fact, the mentality described, like the literature encoding it, finds some of its earliest and some of its most anguished articulations here—not only in measured, academic reflections, but in a range of sardonic, despairing, or tragic dramatizations.

For example, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Gubbins, as he rode and sailed about the province of New Brunswick in the early years of the nineteenth century, recorded his experiences and impressions, publishing his account as *New Brunswick Journals 1811-1813*. On the morning of July 22, 1813, arriving at Chatham, where he stayed with Francis Peabody, Gubbins watched the timber being loaded into seventy ships for England, reflecting on "the air of bustle and business" of the colonists, and also on

---

<sup>1</sup> Archibald Lampman, letter to E.W. Thomson, 16 Feb. 1892, Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa, 2940, 1.

the numerous deplorable instances of the effects of drunkenness, the prominent vice of this country. Men of low minds and no education after acquiring a competency very generally here become sots: nor is this confined to the male sex. In the houses of the inhabitants of the Miramichi the spirit bottle is generally on the table from morning till night.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Francis Beavan minced her words more in her account of the colony, *Life in the Backwoods of New Brunswick*, published in 1845, in her attempt to leaven the lives of "the settlement . . . formed of a motley mixture of all the different nations—Blue Nose, English, Scotch, Irish, Welch, and Dutch" with morally uplifting tales of an idealized settler who, "possessed of a strong arm and a hopeful heart, [worked] to give the lips he loved unborrowed bread." Nevertheless, her piquant observations on the discomfiture of the itinerant school-teacher at the hands of the village toughs, and other similar tales, flesh out her understatement. "And in this country, where operative power is certain wealth, he who can neither wield axe or scythe may be looked on with a slight shade of contempt."<sup>3</sup>

What is the fate, then, of imaginative intelligence and aesthetic sensibility? of makers of imaginative works? of *homo ludens/femina ludens* in a society partly formed by these politically and socially embittered, uneducated, without-English and anti-English people, struggling for survival in isolated communities? Or, to ask the question another way, what happens to Loyalist values when surrounded by Disloyalist ones? In a society shaped by the Puritan work ethic, materialism, rigidly defined sexual roles, and a hostile suspicion of the outside and the new, the objection to the arts and artists, simply put, is that they perform no useful function which can be understood or measured. Consequently, the aesthetic encounter becomes an aesthetic perversion or an aesthetic disaster, and intelligence is estranged, hobbled, or crippled.

Fredericton of the last quarter of the nineteenth century undergoing, in Roberts' words, an "aesthetic ferment" was unique and not typical of New Brunswick at the time, for, as A. G. Bailey puts it, "Elsewhere agriculture was disrupted and an ordered social existence rendered impossible by the lawless and speculative spirit of the timber trade."<sup>4</sup> The expansive tim-

<sup>2</sup> Howard Temperly, ed. (Fredericton: Heritage Publications, 1980) 81.

<sup>3</sup> (1845; St. Stephen, N.B.: Print 'n Press, 1980) 6, 85, 52.

<sup>4</sup> A.G. Bailey, *Culture and Nationality* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1958) 37.

ber trade was controlled by the few but attracted thousands of impoverished immigrants, bringing with them little baggage save their folk tales and ballad-forms adapted to celebrate the essentially masculine virtues of the lumber camps or the sea: feats of strength and courage, drunken brawls, scorn of women, and love of male camaraderie. A modern perception of the scene is offered by Robert Cockburn in his poem on T. C. Cunnion.

Grandly invincible for one full decade,  
He used his teeth to rip off ears  
And his boots stamped loggers' smallpox  
On the men he felled

.....

Kid brawlers, hot for fame,  
Began to beat him senseless.  
Came the day  
When, maimed by broken pride  
.....  
He limped from the lumber woods  
To exile.

The last one knows of T. C. Cunnion,  
He was on all fours in 1882  
In Bay City, Michigan,  
Growling, fighting bulldogs  
With his hands and teeth  
For one free drink.<sup>5</sup>

To read or write a poem or a story cannot be work for it is done for pleasure; and, to the puritan mind, pleasure is no virtue but a sin. To the materialist, an act which has no tangible profit has no justification. To be manly is to reject human gifts and potentialities which the culture defines as womanish or childish; one of these gifts is the creative imagination.

Maritime literature abounds in illustrations of the *machismo* values of the lumber and fishing camp, and of the paralysis of the artist figure. Ranging from the 1890s to the present day and chosen almost at random from the works of Charles G.D. Roberts, Charles Bruce, Ernest Buckler, Fred Cogswell, Alden Nowlan, and Dave Richards, the following excerpts may suffice to sketch the outline of the conflict of the beautiful with the useful, a mentality summed up, finally, in Nowlan's Kevin O'Brien.

<sup>5</sup> "The Peterborough Carnivore," in *Ninety Seasons*, ed. Robert Cockburn and Robert Gibbs (Toronto: McClelland, 1974) 72.

Roberts' poem "Marsyas" is, of course, partly Romantic posture, partly the ebb-tide of the English Aesthetic flood; but also, with its topography more New Brunswick than Greece, it is an indication of the fate of the poet who cannot live in the world of the material, the reasonable, and the respectable:

The thin airs wash  
 The circuit of the autumn-coloured hills,  
 And this high glade, whereon  
 The satyr pipes, who soon shall pipe no more.  
 He sits against the beech-tree's mighty bole,—  
 He leans, and with persuasive breathing fills  
 The happy shadows of the slant-set lawn.  
 The goat-feet fold beneath a gnarled root;  
 And sweet, and sweet the note that steals and thrills  
 From slender stops of that shy flute.<sup>6</sup>

Was it inevitable that Marsyas would later appear in an autobiographical poem by Alden Nowlan as a marked man outside a liquor store, alongside the winos in the alley, the mark of the artist as Cain proving his brotherhood with them?<sup>7</sup>

David, in Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*, stumbling behind the oxen, angrily reflects:

What was the good of learning here? All they thought about was lifting and lugging. They thought if anyone was smart it was like being half-foolish. You had to cripple every damn thought you had, every damn thing you did, so that they wouldn't look at you funny.<sup>8</sup>

In Charles Bruce's "Biography," the careful man is unaware of variegated pastures curving to the sea—the variety, the circle, and the sea representing the imaginative reach. Instead, he makes squares and reduces language to the utilitarian. The second stanza, if we include the words "planned" and "land," contains 15 "and's."

He stayed ashore and plowed, and drilled his rows,  
 And planned his hours and finished what he planned.  
 And made his profits: colts and calves and ewes  
 And buildings and piled stone and harrowed land.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> *The Collected Poems of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts*, ed. Desmond Pacey (Wolfville: Wombat P, 1988) 166.

<sup>7</sup> Alden Nowlan, "The Mark," *Early Poems* (Fredericton: Fiddlehead, 1983) 123.

<sup>8</sup> (Toronto: McClelland, 1961) 163.

<sup>9</sup> *Ninety Seasons* 88.

In Fred Cogswell's poem "The Butterfly," the boy, Ben, who collects butterflies, is thought to be demented and is appreciated only by his apparently retarded aunt:

Young Ben with net and jar would run a mile  
 To catch a brand-new butterfly to add  
 To his collection; neighbours thought him mad—  
 Hobbies like his are not New Brunswick's style.

One day when Ben came back from useless chase  
 His feeble-minded aunt who'd watched him run  
 Gave him, bursting with pride for what she'd done,  
 A bag of crumpled paper tied with lace.<sup>10</sup>

In Alden Nowlan's "Bull Moose," a poem about a creature which bears remarkable circumstantial similarities to its creator, the noble beast is trapped in the pasture with domesticated cattle and seen as a clown and a freak, though it is Christ-like and regal, like the scaffolded, cavalier king, Charles I.

Too tired to turn or, perhaps, aware  
 there was no place left to go, he stood with the cattle.  
 They, scenting the musk of death, seeing his great head  
 like the ritual mask of a blood god, moved to the other end  
 of the field, and waited.

The neighbours heard of it, and by afternoon  
 cars lined the road. The children teased him  
 with alder switches and he gazed at them  
 like an old, tolerant collie. The women asked  
 if it could have escaped from a Fair.

.....

And the bull moose let them stroke his tick-ravaged flanks,  
 let them pry open his jaws with bottles, let a giggling girl  
 plant a little purple cap  
 of thistles on his head.

.....

So they held their fire. But just as the sun dropped in the  
 river  
 the bull moose gathered his strength  
 like a scaffolded king, straightened and lifted his horns  
 So that even the wardens backed away as they raised their  
 rifles.  
 When he roared, people ran to their cars. All the young  
 men

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ninety Seasons* 78.

leaned on their automobile horns when he toppled.<sup>11</sup>

What is disconcerting in Nowlan's short story "Night Watch" is that Kevin O'Brien—a night-watchman in a saw mill, who surreptitiously reads and writes in a fortress-like structure he has created above the boiler—does really believe himself to be an idiot because of his ability; he is frightened, rather than contemptuous, of his life-destroying workmates. As he maintains his lonely vigil in the night, an act of unrewarded faith, he wonders:

The joke was that I hadn't known. John the Hog would have known. Even Hardscrabble would have known. But Kevin O'Brien? He hadn't known because he was a fool. An idiot. A simpleton. A moron. An imbecile.

What would they do to me, the others, if they found me out?<sup>12</sup>

Buckler's David, Cogswell's young Ben, Nowlan's moose, and his Kevin O'Brien all suffer from a radical marginalization, a deep spiritual and aesthetic alienation from provincial society. But the most desperate perversion of the concept of *homo ludens* is John Delano, the most promising, and now the most twisted, of creative sources in the Miramichi society portrayed in David Adams Richards's *Blood Ties*. Richards is not an historical novelist; rather, he is an auditor of powerful metaphors of a contaminated wilderness and a once noble river in which the salmon rot. On its banks, in the mill, Kevin, John's defeated friend, is burned and scarred by the chemicals which spew into the water, but John's burns are self-inflicted. John plays the game of trying to burn a hole in a ten-dollar bill without burning his hand. In his contemptuous game against the establishment, represented by the image of the Queen on the ten-dollar bill, he has proudly dedicated himself to losing, without beauty.

"Ya always lose the fuckin game," he said.

"What game?"

"With the cigarette, Christ."

"Okay, okay," she said.

<sup>11</sup> *Early Poems* 127.

<sup>12</sup> Unpublished ms. in possession of the author's widow, Claudine Nowlan.

He said nothing. It was when he spoke, she heard something in him. It was as if it was against himself like the dark pustulation on his hand—against himself.<sup>13</sup>

University of New Brunswick

---

<sup>13</sup> (Ottawa: Oberon, 1976) 276-77.