SEAS, EVOLUTION AND IMAGES OF CONTINUING CREATION IN ENGLISH-CANADIAN POETRY

by

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ABSTRACT

There is a relationship between seas, evolution and images of continuing creation in English-Canadian poetry. The seas of this thesis become landscapes for the poems in which they occur. Replacing the Garden, they have become the typical location of genesis, original and continuing. They are often metaphors for chaos--primal, final, internal and external--and continually cast up new forms while cancelling old ones. As generic and genetic environment they represent the various wildernesses, personal and environmental, in which our poets have found themselves.

Evolutionary theory had become commonplace by the time this poetry was written. It provided the poets with a means of exploring, describing and ordering their environments. Emphasizing change, unity, and the living presence of the past this thinking has given man a physical history from out of the ocean. The basic laws of survival seen operating by Darwin are found applicable to all creation, human, animal, vegetable or artistic.

Images of continuing creation often arise from a fascination with the processes of survival. It becomes necessary for "species" to adapt, to be continually creating themselves, in response to their constantly altering situation. Man is seen as a controlling form in

nature only in so far as he is also an expressive form.

This thesis begins by sketching a movement in the landscape of Canadian poetry before Pratt from the land to the sea. In Chapter II, "E. J. Pratt: The Triumph of the Species," man is seen in a struggle for survival with the wilderness. The seas of "Newfoundland" storm the man's islanded life, to run within the sluices of his body, teaching him that man and nature are of necessity interdependent. In "Brébeuf and His Brethern" we find Pratt making rather sophisticated use of evolutionary thinking. In Chapter III, "A. M. Klein's Portrait of the Landscape," we discover the poet become one with and drowned in his landscape. In Chapter IV, "F. R. Scott: The Presence of the Past," we find evolutionary explanations for the vitality of the individual. Chapter V, "Earle Birney's Response to E.J. Pratt's Poetry," examines the relationships between the works of these two poets. Chapter VI, "Irving Layton: The Swimmer's Neighbourhood," looks at further examples of the drowned poet. Chapter VII, "Margaret Avison: Creativity From a Flux of Spirit," describes how she finds "this chaos singling off/ in a new Genesis" and being gathered together into an "all-swallowing moment/ once more." That moment is itself "radium" and gives off particles continually, which themselves become seeds. In Chapter VIII,

"Jay Macpherson's Vision of the Interdependence of All Creation," we find a complex and abstract representation of the mythical relationship between the poet and his environment. The sea is a major symbol in this structure. Her complex of forms ingesting one another presents us with the interdependence of everything, be it man, God or nature. Chapter IX, "Margaret Atwood: The "I" and its Environments," provides a kind of synthesis of many of the themes examined in the thesis. She works with a land-sea tension which becomes part of her larger metaphor of "the circle game" and with some metaphors drawn from evolutionary theory. She writes about the continually evolving relationships between the "I" and its environments, external or internal, animate or inanimate. In her poetry the mind has an evolutionary history from out of the ocean, a physical history rather than a history of ideas. In Chapter X, "Gwendolyn MacEwen's Holy Waters of Continuing Creation," we find man's evolutionary history almost becoming a metaphor for his spiritual (or mystical) development.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

There is a relationship between seas, evolution and images of continuing creation in English-Canadian poetry. The latter group, images of continuing creation, really encompasses much of our interest in the other two.

The seas of this thesis will generally form a generic and also genetic landscape for the poetry in which they occur. They will become metaphors for the untamed environments, internal and external, in which our poets find themselves. With the acceptance of evolutionary theory, these seas have replaced the Garden as the location for genesis, both original and continuing. They will also frequently be seen as an anonymous chaos swallowing and destroying that which is individual.

Evolutionary theory has been the poet's means of identifying, exploring and explaining his situation. It emphasizes the interdependence of man and his environment. Change, unity and the living presence of the past will be seen as essential aspects of this imagery. The same evolutionary rules will be found governing all forms of creation, be they human, animal, vegetable or artistic.

The images of continuing creation arising in this poetry will often develop from a practical fascination with the processes of survival. Man will here find himself part of a flux of life and spirit; while his own existence may appear finite and essentially anonymous he will discover a

dignity through his participation in the greater processes and in his expressive function.

The shadow of Darwin will frequently fall over the material we will discuss. However, evolutionary ideas had become commonplace when this poetry was written and so we will not attempt to trace them back to The Origin.[1] It would be wrong to attribute too much of what we will call evolutionary theory directly to Darwin. He was, probably, just one of many sources which led these poets to their very physical sense of being and history.

Even knowledge has a physical rather than a purely intellectual history in the best of these poems. The individual man is the controlling factor of nature only in so far as he is also its expressive form. He can participate in the creative process if he so chooses, but only when he agrees to relinquish his separate, absolute identity and find a more fluid and merged one in the processes of nature. For the Canadian poets who will be discussed here, the unifying experience derives from the essential interdependence of all species; they find not a greater self but rather a creative anonymity in their fullest relationships with their environments.

We will see this expressed in many ways. A.M. Klein writes that he "lets go his manshape to become."[2] What he becomes is bird, dolphin and plant but it is essential that first he lets go his sense of individual identity and then enters into the experience of all the other species.

Not all expressions of this feeling are so literal. Margaret Atwood's version in "The Settlers" is rather different but belongs to the same family.

> They dug us down
> into the solid granite
> where our bodies grew flesh again,
> came up trees and
> grass.
>
> Still we are the salt
> seas that uphold these lands.[3]

Her vision of continuing creation does not come directly out of Darwin's theories by any means, but it shares a basic dignity which we find in his essential statements:

> When I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Silurian system was deposited, they seem to me to become ennobled. Judging from the past, we may safely infer that not one living species will transmit its unaltered likeness to a distant futurity. . . . .
>
> There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.[4]

Perhaps Margaret Avison's imagery of continuing creation could be used to explain that of the other poets as well. She sees the spirit as radium, that is, centrally disintegrating into particles which have a life force of their own and which themselves are seeds to new forms. She sees the vital spirit as gathering its fragments together and also breaking down and scattering or seeding

all forms with itself. Only in its numerous locations can we find the Idea. This is one way in which the continual vitality of all species of creation can be expressed.

In Gwendolyn MacEwen we find the blatant statement that man himself must change, must go through further evolutionary processes. Her concern is with the development of our next level of existence, a more spiritual one. She suggests that we have passed beyond the stage in which our present form can be fully effective and we must now change or else face the fate of the dinosaurs.

In Pratt, we find the dinosaurs. His is the other end of the spectrum from MacEwen and the other end of the time span we will be most concerned with. In the direct relationship we find between his Newfoundland people and the sea we discover the beginnings of a poetry which has a basic optimism in that it expects life to continue, man to survive, the wilderness to be productive if treated properly. But it is also a harsh, unromantic, practical poetry which deals with the rules of survival and perhaps, naturally, because of this, it places greater emphasis on the species than it does upon the individual.

Canadian poetry is largely an immigrant poetry. This is not to say that it is a colonial poetry, though we have also had that (poetry which focuses on another environment rather than seeking to participate in its own). By immi-

grant poetry we mean that which has begun at least to adapt to its new situation.

Darwin points out that when a species migrates to a new location, adaptation naturally takes place if that species is to survive. The immigrant must change to reflect its participation with a different environment, and the environment must itself change in response to the introduction of a new organism. Every viable immigration causes a chain reaction of organic change and re-organization. What Darwin says of species of animals may also be said of poetries:

> Bearing in mind that the mutual relations of organism to organism are of the highest importance, we can see why two areas having nearly the same physical conditions should often be inhabited by very different forms of life; for according to the length of time which has elapsed since new inhabitants entered one region; according to the nature of the communication which allowed certain forms and not others to enter, either in greater or lesser numbers; according or not, as those which entered happened to come in more or less direct competition with each other and with the aborigines; and according as the immigrants were capable of varying more or less rapidly, there would ensue in different regions, independently of their physical conditions, infinitely diversified conditions of life, - there would be an almost endless amount of organic action and reaction, - and we should find, as we do find, some groups of beings greatly, and some only slightly modified . . . [5]

In this study we may be able to observe a number of roughly parallel characteristics which have developed in the different immigrant poetries as responses to their

new environment. Perhaps these changes reflect contact with an aboriginal nature in Canada or perhaps they develop from the mutual relations between the various species inhabiting our national literature or, even, our entire culture. In a country of Canada's vastness it may seem risky to speak of a characteristic aboriginal environment but, to argue backwards, we do find that poets of differing backgrounds have given works to the body of our poetry which seem more than coincidentally related to one another.

The first chapter of the thesis will present a historical sketch of English-Canadian poetry before E.J. Pratt. Some beginnings of a movement towards the seas, internal and external, of the poet's environment are pointed out. In the second chapter we will follow Pratt's vision as he traces human history back to the genesis of all life in the ocean. We will also examine his statement in "Newfoundland" that the floods and pulses of the body are actually related, in a familiar way, to those of the sea. And then we will go on to look at his rather sophisticated use of evolutionary imagery in "Brébeuf and His Brethern."

To some extent other poets discussed may have been influenced by Pratt's poetry. No attempt will be made, however, to trace the influence of foreign poets on these Canadian "immigrants" or to relate the images of seas, evolution and continuing creation found in English-

Canadian poetry to similar images in other places.

We do not intend to impose a generative tradition on the history of our poetry, nor to describe a dominant line of development in it. The poets we will write about do not constitute a group of favourites, nor are they supposed to represent a "great tradition" in Canadian poetry. They will frequently show the poet participating in his environment which, in turn, participates in him.

If any bias dictated the choice of poets for this thesis it was the sense that these nine made a reasonably representative group chronologically and that their poetry tended to be "expansive" in nature.

In Chapters II through X we will look at works by E.J. Pratt, A.M. Klein, F.R. Scott, Earle Birney, Irving Layton, Margaret Avison, Jay Macpherson, Margaret Atwood and Gwendolyn MacEwen. These studies will not be exhaustive nor will they pretend to make critical judgments about the poetry. Our concern will be with the content of the poetry rather than with the poetry <u>per se</u>. This distinction is essentially artificial and we will not always be successful in maintaining it. Our intent will consistently be, however, simply to reveal the shape and function of the images and metaphors central to this thesis which we find structuring certain poems.

In this thesis we will be examining the creative relationships between a number of English-speaking Canadian

poets and their environments. Obviously, we will be able to provide only a sketch of what the whole picture might be, but, within our scope here, we will try to point out the significance of seas, evolution and images of continuing creation in our poetry.

NOTES

[1]Charles Darwin, On The Origin of Species By Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in The Struggle for Life, A Facsimile of the First Edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1966), [first edition 1859]).

[2]"Lone Bather," Canadian Anthology, revised ed., edited by Carl F. Klinck and R.E. Watters. (Toronto, W.J. Gage, 1966) p. 338.

[3]Margaret Atwood, "The Settlers," The Circle Game (Toronto, Contact Press, 1966), pp. 79-80.

[4]The Origin, pp. 489-90.

[5]Ibid., p. 408.

CHAPTER I

A MOVEMENT IN THE LANDSCAPE OF CANADIAN POETRY

FROM THE LAND TO THE SEA.

Northrop Frye points out that in Canadian literature an old language "with a thousand years of disciplined utterance behind it" confronts a new land.[1] He says that there are certain aspects of this country which must, "for a long time yet, make it appear young," aspects which, he suggests, were characteristic of Britain at the time of Beowulf or The Seafarer. Though he is speaking specifically of English-Canadian literature, he suggests that the Canadian environment makes a particularly uncomforting impression on the artist's mind:

> an impression of its primeval lawlessness and moral nihilism, its indifference to the supreme value placed on life within human society, its faceless, mindless unconsciousness, which fosters life without benevolence and destroys it without malice . . . It is all very well for a European poet to see nature in terms of a settled order which the mind can interpret, like Wordsworth, or even in terms of oracular hints and suggestions, like Baudelaire in Correspondences; but the Canadian poet received all his initial impressions in the environment of Rimbaud's Bateau Ivre.

Coinciding with the growth of Canada as a nation and the rudimentary development of an English-Canadian poetry, came the popularization of alternatives to the view of man as lord of nature. Darwin's evolutionary theories

seem to have had the effect of springing such minds as E.J. Pratt's from the feudal concept that man was divinely ordered to have dominion over the earth and all its creatures. It is obvious why certain Canadian poets have found such an arrogant view of their relationship with nature contrary to their experiences. Even in such an early poet as Standish O'Grady (1842), where we would not seek evolutionary ideas, we find a sense of commonality between man and nature; man is just one of the animals hard put to survive:

> In winter here, where all alike contrive,
> And still withal few animals survive,
> Till summer's heat, so potent and so quick,
> Enough to make the Crocodile grow sick;
> With vile mosquitoes, lord deliver us,
> Whose stings could blister a Rhinoceros.[2]

O'Grady's pungent lines comparing the Emigrant's fate with those of Bear, Crocodile or Rhinoceros, are probably less representative of his time than those of some of his contemporaries who continued to portray their experiences in terms of Biblical myth. Adam Burwell's hero finds himself part of a creative consortium making a new Garden of the Canadian Wilderness:

> "He pierc'd the woods, his devious way be found,
> And on the banks of Kettle Creek sat down.
> Then bow'd the forest to his frequent stroke;-
> There from his hearth ascended hallowed smoke;
> Angels look'd down, propitious from above,
> And o'er his labors breath'd celestial love:-
> "Go on and prosper, for thine eyes shall see
> The steps of thousands, soon to follow thee;
> Go on and prosper, for the fostering hand
> Of heaven, shall plant this highly favor'd land."[3]

It was inevitable that there should be this kind of loyalist (in more senses of the word than one) poetry; it was also inevitable that the old, Old World concepts should prove, unlike the Phoenix, incapable of sustained regenerations. The old language and culture, for all its heritage of discipline and richness, had to confront a new world, both as physical reality in America and as manifested by changing ways of life and increasing knowledge everywhere. Coping with this vast Canadian wilderness seemed to heighten the intellectual conflicts already developing in Europe and the United States. Everywhere, poets found it necessary to find new ways of understanding their relationships with all that entailed their environments. In Canada, as the typical landscape of poetry became, less and less often, the Garden, it became, more frequently, the sea.

There are several explanations for this phenomenon: first, according to the theories of evolution, the sea was the origin of life--in it the earliest creatures had their beginnings and even the later, warm-blooded mammals have a variant of sea-water sluicing through their veins. In rejecting one Genesis as basis for metaphor poets substituted another. Secondly, it was the sea which separated us from our "homelands;" it was, as Oliver Goldsmith (grandnephew of the famous British poet) remarks, a point of "noble courage" on the part of the settlers:

> Who, leaving far behind their native plain,
> Have sought a home beyond the western main;
> And braved the terrors of the stormy seas,[4]

For many Canadian settlers that sea passage may have taken on, subconsciously, aspects of a birth--the legendary cramped quarters, the extended period during which they were subject to the rhythms and weather of the sea, the final release into a new country making, frequently, new demands upon them. Even today, in the age of airplanes and later generations, a sense of the Atlantic passage may be retained as almost part of our definitive culture--that through which "we" have come, that which separates us from Attica, Bethlehem, Rome, Paris, and London.

For a "new" poetry in a "new" land it was necessary to find definitive images. Despite the continuing attitudes of colonialism, poets sought to express their actual experiences and this meant that fields and meadows and flowery woodlands became, essentially, unreal. The land, though rich in cycles and history of myth and art in Europe, had a more primitive nature in Canada. The earlier pastoral poetry lacked, as a landscape in literature, that primeaval aura that was so much part of the Canadian experience.

The poet who would escape Attica and Bethlehem could turn to the sea. It was from the sea that Pratt's fisherfolk drew and endured their livelihood, their emotional as well as physical livelihood. The sea moves, it has a voice, and we have English words for movement, transition,

expression and even unity that are really sea-words. Much of the Canadian experience could not be expressed by meditation in tranquility; it was an experience of survival in motion, of physical thought.

To illustrate how this change in the landscape came about, we should look at some of the poems.

In 1860 Charles Sangster wrote the following sonnet:

> Above where I am sitting, o'er these stones,
> The ocean waves once heaved their mighty forms;
> And vengeful tempests and appalling storms
> Wrung from the stricken sea portentous moans,
> That rent stupendous icebergs, whose huge heights
> Crashed down in fragments through the startled nights
> Change, change, eternal change in all but God!
> Mysterious nature! thrice mysterious state
> Of body, soul, and spirit! Man is awed,
> But triumphs in his littleness. A mote,
> He specks the eye of age and turns to dust,
> And is the sport of centuries. We note
> More surely nature's ever-changing fate;
> Her fossil records tell how she performs her trust.[5]

The combination of themes in this sonnet are similar to those found in Pratt: "ocean waves," "vengeful tempests and appalling storms," "that rent stupendous icebergs," and the "fossil records" which tell how nature "performs her trust." But the differences are equally striking. The narrator, remaining seated and quite dry on the stones maintains a faith in an unchanging God and in the triumph of little man. Sangster cuts out man, who has "soul, and spirit!" from nature. Nature has force but nothing else, she acts upon God's creations and wrings from the sea "portentous moans:" there is a division between forces

and the bodies subject to them. The narrator is philosophically within the garden where he was made from dust and in which he will return to dust. And the layers of dust will contain physical records of creation's fate--the body will endure as will the soul and the spirit, though changed.

Similarly, Charles Heavysege, "Sonnet XIII," in 1865[6] approaches his "all-wise Spirit" through Biblical myth. His narrator muses on the "dread abode--And endless penance" of "Heaven's aborigines" expelled from the garden, while sitting on the sand beside a lake "against whose shores the rolling waves were driven." Like Sangster, Heavysege is not seeking anything in the waters beating up on the shores, nor are those waters significant of much except that they have also been "driven."

By 1887, in Sir Charles G.D. Roberts "Tantramar Revisited,"[7] the earlier mythic structure is loosening. The landscape extends from the hills to a long, low marsh which merges with the sea. Above the marshes, where the narrator is, "stretches a riband of meadow,"

> Shorn of the labouring grass, bulwarked well from the sea,
> Fenced on its seaward border with long clay dykes from the turbid
> Surge and flow of the tides vexing the Westmoreland shores.

Yet while the narrator remains on his now narrow and cropped vantage point above the marshes his thoughts and memories move out like them, long and low into the sea.

Well I remember the piles of blocks and ropes,
and the net-reels
Wound with the beaded nets, dripping and dark
from the sea.
. . . . . .

Now at this season the reels are empty and idle;
I see them
Over the lines of the dykes, over the gossiping
grass.
. . . . . .

Then, as the blue day mounts, and the low-shot
shafts of the sunlight
Glance from the tide to the shore, gossamers
jewelled with dew
Sparkle and wave, where late sea-spoiling fathoms
of driftnet
Myriad-meshed, uploomed somberly over the land.[8]

No longer is the sea just another body which the winds of fate move. It is now a force of its own, something "vexing" the land, something the meadows are "bulwarked well" from. In his youth the narrator had seen the "late sea-spoiling fathoms of driftnet/ Myriad-meshed, uploomed somberly over the land." But at the time of the poem the empty reels lie scattered upon "the lines of the dykes, over the gossiping grass." The nets are not out in the sea or uploomed over the land but hung over rafters in the barns above the hay. Their harvest is done for the season and they have been brought inside the structures of man for protection. This is not necessarily an image of negative import; the seasonal storage of the nets is part of their cycle of use. But Roberts does seem fearful that this apparently unchanging pattern will also prove impermanent and that he will be confronted by yet another example

of "chance and change." He seems reluctant to test the firmness of his earlier observation that the pastoral continuity of this life-rhythm is basically unchanging; he would rather have the "darling illusion" of stability than the reality of the marshland. Though his thoughts move out towards the encroaching sea, the possibility of continual flux, he chooses not to make the move philosophically into its system of values: he acknowledges but denies a move in the landscape away from the garden towards the sea.

> Yet will I stay my steps and not go down to the marshland,--
> Muse and recall far off, rather remember than see,--
> Lest on too close I might miss the darling illusion,
> Spy at their task even here the hands of chance and change.

In a poem by Archibald Lampman, published one year later than "Tantramar Revisited," we find the sea become a mysterious source of what seems to be continuing spiritual regeneration. Yet it is significantly "life's outer sea," and distant from man's more accessible experiences.

> Though strife, ill fortune, and harsh human need
> Beat down the soul, at moments blind and dumb
> With agony; yet, patience--there shall come
> Many great voices from life's outer sea,
> Hours of strange triumph, and, when few men heed,
> Murmurs and glimpses of eternity.[9]

Lampman desires "to keep the mind at brood," to be patiently, if despondently, listening for the "many great voices from life's outer sea." In others of his poems the role of the sea is more generally taken by dreams; the landscape of his poetry is characteristically some-

thing whose import has been revealed to him in a kind of pensive reverie. While frequently writing from a "garden" he tends to reach out towards the partly-known and thus, while there are few sea-scapes among his poems, his work does give impetus to the move out of the ordered landscape and into an exploration of the subconscious.

Bliss Carman, in a much later poem which is, however, quite similar to his earlier writings, picks up the theme of voices from the sea but now the sea's voice has been internalized.

> And all that haunted day,
> It seemed that I could hear
> The echo of an ancient speech
> Ring in my listening ear.
> And then it came to me,
> That all that I had heard
> Was my own heart in the sea's voice
> And the wind's lonely word.[10]

Carman's poetry typically operates on simile; the world to him is a "rag-bag" and the sea part of it. Rather than moving the landscape from the land to the sea, he, like Lampman, extends it to include the sea.

> Make me over in the morning
> From the rag-bag of the world!
> Scraps of dream and duds of daring,
> Home brought stuff from far sea-faring,
> Faded colours once so flaring,
> Shreds of banners long since furled!
> Hues of ash and glints of glory,
> In the rag-bag of the world![11]

The "scraps of dream and duds of daring" which he strings together occasionally give way to what seems a more unified poetry such as we find in "Low Tide on

Grand Pré."

There down along the elms at dusk
We lifted dripping blade to drift,
Through twilight scented fine like musk,
Where night and gloom awhile uplift,
Nor sunder soul and soul adrift.

And we took into our hands
Spirit of life or subtler thing--
Breathed on us there, and loosed the bands
Of death, and taught us, whispering,
The secret of some wonder-thing.

The night has fallen and the tide--
Now and again comes drifting home,
Across these aching barrens wide,
A sigh like driven wind or foam:
In grief the flood is bursting home.[12]

The poet, drifting with the tide, has apparently left behind the infallible land. Unwelcomed, the sea rolls home "across these aching barrens wide," to recapture its own. Elsewhere, it is in the "Gravedigger" sea that Carman's narrator finds "an equal grave for lord and knave;" man is subject to watery oblivion or, at best, "a bleaching grave" on the beach. In neither instance is he buried under fertile soil; in neither grave will he sprout new life. And yet, Carman is essentially an optimist and clings to the pastoral illusion. He says, "Spirit of Life" breathed on us there, and loosed the bands of death."

This is similar both in its tentativeness and in its meaning to Lampman's statement that from life's outer sea come "Hours of strange triumph" and "murmurs and glimpses of eternity." The redemptive force is no longer called God and no longer has a lucid order connected with it;

Carman now only senses the power of "some subtler thing" even than a "Spirit of Life" drifting in with the tide, as the tide. The dreaminess and indefiniteness of these lines indicate a kind of suspension of the poet's points of reference; the half-light, half-land, half-sea setting represents this state of flux. The poet seems almost unsure of where he is and what has been or will be happening to him.

Of the same general period is Duncan Campbell Scott's poem "The Piper of Arll."[13] It seems, remotely perhaps, related to Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner" (similar metrical pattern). Here, for the first time, we find a Canadian poet not only "longing for the sea" but drowning in it. Scott unites this sea-love with a magical explanation of the source of poetry. Beginning:

> There was in Arll a little cove
> Where the salt wind came cool and free:
> A foamy beach that one would love,
> If he were longing for the sea.

the poem gives the history of the piper, a shepherd whose "heart was swayed with faithful love/ From the springs of God's ocean clear and deep." Even in the poastoral tense of the poem it was in the ocean that the springs of the piper's song were found--later, it becomes very questionable whether or not the ocean remains "God's."

The story is that one evening a strange ship appears in the bay of Arll. The piper, moved by the "longing songs" in an "outland tongue" of its crew which carry to

him across the water "molded a tranquil melody/ Of lonely love and longed-for death."

> Beneath the stars each sent to each
> A message tender, till at last
> The piper slept upon the beach,
> The sailors slumbered round the mast.

Awakening with the dawn, the piper sees the ship departing.

> Limned black against the crimson sun;
> Then from the disc he saw her slip,
> A wraith of shadow--she was gone.
>
> He threw his mantle on the beach,
> He went apart like one distraught,
> His lips were moved--his desperate speech
> Stormed his inviolable thought.
>
> He broke his human-throated reed,
> And threw it in the idle rill;

But subsequently he finds his pipe again and carefully mends it, then blows out the water/melody collected in it.

> And starting out in piercing drops,
>
> A melody began to drip
> That mingled with a ghostly thrill
> The vision-spirit of the ship
> The secret of his broken will.
>
> He singing into nature's heart,
> Guiding his will by the world's will,
> With deep, unconscious, childlike art
> Had sung his soul out and was still.

What is chronicled here is the demise of song as servant to a shepherd's God and the discovery of another master for the piper's art--"nature's heart," "the world's will," the piper's own soul from which he draws a "deep, unconscious, childlike art." Unfortunately for the piper, this results in his death; he leaves the grove of Arll

where he had tended the "pasture of his sheep" in which his "heart was swayed with faithful love" and sinks to the ocean's bottom where in time another grove, this of silver leaves, appears, but in it he does not sing.

The second evening the ship reappeared and sailors, singing, row out from it to fetch back the piper, piping. Sails are put up but no wind comes and gradually the charmed ship sinks. The "angel at the prore" is gone and the sailors, hair floating, and faces turned upwards, "watch the star-flash blur and die."

She sank and sank by yard and mast,
Sank down the shimmering gradual dark;
A little dropping pennon last
Showed like the black fin of a shark.

And down she sank till, keeled in sand,
She rested safely balanced true,
With all her upward gazing band,
The piper and the dreaming crew.

And there, unmarked of any chart,
In unrecorded deeps they lie,
Empearled within the purple heart
Of the great sea for aye and aye.

There is no "fossil record" of this death; nature no longer "performs a trust" and is accountable for her actions. The music has stopped, but in the "liquid night" a vine grows over the ship, weaving about it "A plentitude of silver leaves." In the haunting quiet of these depths the silent but flourishing growth of a silver-leaved vine has the magnetic force we later find in Klein's image of his drowned poet, glowing "...like phosphorous. At the bottom of the sea."[14]

Scott's poem is interesting because it deals with the poet who has left the land to sink (and die) in the realms of mysterious, uncharted depths. The piper follows his song to its watery source but once there, sings no more. This theme is not dwelt upon, however, in other poems by Scott. It is not until Pratt that we find the typical landscape of Canadian poetry become the sea--and not just the sea as a grave or source of dreams.

NOTES

[1]"The Narrative Tradition in English-Canadian Poetry," Canadian Anthology, Revised ed., ed. C. F. Klinck and R. E. Watters, (Toronto, Gage, 1966), pp. 523-524.

[2]"The Emigrant," Canadian Anthology, (1842), p. 30.

[3]Adam Hood Burwell, "Talbot Road," Canadian Anthology, (1820), p. 15.

[4]"The Rising Village," Canadian Anthology, (1825-34), p. 25.

[5]"Sonnet VIII," Canadian Anthology, p. 72.

[6]Canadian Anthology, p. 77.

[7]Ibid., pp. 99-101.

[8]See Margaret Atwood, "Notes From Various Pasts," The Animals in That Country, (Toronto, Oxford, 1968), p. 10.

[9]"Outlook," Canadian Anthology, (1888), p. 125.

[10]"The World Voice," Canadian Anthology, (1894), p. 117.

[11]Spring Song," Canadian Anthology, (1894), p. 112.

[12]Canadian Anthology, (1893), p. 111.

[13]Ibid., pp. 151-53.

[14]A. M. Klein, "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," Canadian Anthology, (1948), p. 344.

CHAPTER II

E. J. PRATT: THE TRIUMPH OF THE SPECIES

The sea may appear to be mainly a destructive force or even a graveyard in some of Pratt's poems--he has been fascinated, as Birney put it, with the Marathons in history and, because his landscape is so often the sea, the ocean is frequently a battlefield. But it would be a misinterpretation to assume that this is the only aspect of his sea's relationship with man. The sea becomes a symbol of a creative and sometimes chaotic life force; it is both original and final and its main fact is that of continual change, motion, and interaction with the rest of nature. Man is in a very real way united with this continually genetic sea and Pratt insists that the greatest protection available to the human species is to be found in its creative responses to the realities of its environment--physical, intellectual, emotional, or spiritual.

"Newfoundland," which stands at the head of Pratt's Collected Poems, has often been ignored by his critics, most probably because it is a lyric rather than a narrative poem and rather effusive in its strength. Yet, it does have a power which is not simply rhetorical; it truly stands at the beginning of his collected work because in it we find some of Pratt's most passionately central themes. If we understand its general statement it becomes harder to go astray in understanding the particulars

presented in the longer narrative works.

> Here the tides flow,
> And here they ebb;
> Not with that dull, unsinewed tread of waters
> Held under bonds to move
> Around unpeopled shores--
> Moon-driven through a timeless circuit
> Of invasion and retreat;
> But with a lusty stroke of life
> Pounding at stubborn gates,
> That they might run
> Within the sluices of men's hearts,
> Leap under throb of pulse and nerve,
> And teach the sea's strong voice
> To learn the harmonies of new floods,
> The peal of cataract,
> And the soft wash of currents
> Against resilient banks,
> Or the broken rhythms from old chords
> Along dark passages
> That once were pathways of authentic fires
> And swept by the wings of dream.[1]

Nature becomes internalized in man; the sea which has been the external environment for the islanded life now pounds at "the sluices of men's hearts." Salt water flows where blood has through man's body. From Pratt's point of view it would seem that man may have been a more spiritual creation and nature a more mechanistic one under some previous conditions, and it is an improvement in their states when they are united in Newfoundland. Pratt does not lament "the fall" of man into this wilderness land but he does lament his frequent failures to recognize the reality of his position in nature and his resulting inability to function fully.

The veins of man were once "swept by the wings of dream," were "pathways of authentic fires" before becoming sluices for the "soft wash of currents." In them can still

be heard the old chords of these now broken rhythms. And the sea was once "Moon-driven through a timeless circuit" "Around unpeopled shores," it was subject to simple mechanical forces of invasion and retreat and had not the "lusty stroke of life" Pratt finds it to have as it pounds, throbs, leaps, and runs about Newfoundland. In its ebbing and flowing on peopled shores it learns "the harmonies of new floods."

Pratt's view is that the original wilderness creation discovered independence only when nature was completed with man's introduction. The argument, which seems to be supported by "The Truant,"[2] that nature (and God) are just machines in Pratt's poems overlooks the importance in them of man being part of this nature and very distinctly, for Pratt, that part which gives feeling and significance and intelligence to the rest. Man is not the lord of the universe but the universe finds expression through his action and creative imagination.

In the sixth stanza of "Newfoundland" this point is taken further. The crags of the island become symbolic of the people living there. If they are rigid and fail to correspond with the winds and tides impinging upon them, if "the mind reads assault/ In crouch and leap and the quick stealth" of the sea, it is "stiffening the muscles of the waves." Man seeing in nature a foe creates one.

Pratt is insisting that we cannot subdue nature and that in our attempts to do so we are "Over-zealous" and "Guard too well" "the thresholds, altars, and the fires of home." We are safer when we understand the confluence in us of life-giving and life-taking forces. Those whose "hands are full to the overflow" are the winds and tides that are familiars of man, are of his own family.

> Not with that wild, exotic rage
> That vainly sweeps untrodden shores,
> But with familiar breath
> Holding a partnership with life,
> Resonant with the hopes of spring,
> Pungent with the airs of harvest.
>
> They call with the silver fifes of the sea,
> They breathe with the lungs of men,
> They are one with the tides of the sea,
> They are one with the tides of the heart,
> They blow with the rising octaves of dawn,
> They die with the largo of dusk,
> Their hands are full to the overflow,
> In their right is the bread of life,
> In their left are the waters of death.

In Pratt's poems, man is only a controlling form insofar as he is also an expressive form. Language and music are seen to derive from, as well as allow, communication, whose root is communion--the interaction of several parts of nature including man. There are numerous metaphors throughout "Newfoundland" which point to this theme.

The tides, in the first stanza, had no harmony in the original unpeopled arena but now their stroke of life against the island, causes a new music to peal forth. The harmonies of these new floods are created by the "sea's strong voice" flowing and ebbing through the instrument of

the human body and include "the broken rhythm from old chords." Though this is a new flood it carries with it a history, both physical and musical. The same tides as flood through the poet wash upon the shores of Newfoundland where they encounter the red sea-kelp, "Red as the heart's blood," which also grows far under the surface of the sea. Here, "It is rooted in the joints of rocks" but it is also "piled thick/ Above the gulch-line"--the loose pieces churned up from the sea's depths have been carried ashore on the tide.

> Red is the sea-kelp in the beach,
> Red as the heart's blood,
> Nor is there power in tide or sun
> To bleach its stain.
> It lies there piled thick
> Above the gulch-line.
> It is rooted in the joints of rocks,
> It is tangled about a spar,
> It covers a broken rudder,
> It is as red as the heart's blood,
> And salt as tears.

The new tide, the new day, cannot wash clean or bleach away the depth of blood-red kelp or salt tears accumulated. This drift, or growth, tangles around a spar and covers a broken rudder; it, in itself, obscures the old forms, particularly the broken and bleached forms that once were parts of vessels.

The winds which blow and die, the tides which ebb and flow and in so doing hold a partnership with life, are "Resonant with the hopes of spring." They "call with the silver fifes of the sea" and they also "breathe with the

lungs of men." Musical or poetic expressions are parts of a total symphony of life and death.

> They are one with the tides of the sea,
> They are one with the tides of the heart,
> They blow with the rising octaves of dawn,
> They die with the largo of dusk

Man is no rigid instrument like the seashells on the beach which can only "babble of the passing of the winds" or like the crags whose "blind interchange/ Of blow for blow" with the waves simply "spills the thunder of insentient seas." He is himself a creative force; his mind, which may mistakenly read only assault in the waves' rhythm, has a body of rhythms both old as memories and new as the daily pulse and throb of nerve or vein with which he modifies the sounds he makes from the voices passing through him. Given mind and memory he tells the story, he makes eternal the fires and dreams and it is from the confluence of nature in him that the harmonies of life discover expression.

> Tide and wind and crag,
> Sea-weed and sea-shell
> And broken rudder--
> And the story is told
> Of human veins and pulses,
> Of eternal pathways of fire,
> Of dreams that survive the night,
> Of doors held ajar in storms.

Pratt says that if we choose not to leave our doors ajar in storms, if we are afraid of the primitive realities and set ourselves to lock and guard our life from

them, we will be eventually self-destructive. Like the rigid spar or rudder, we may find our forms broken and ourselves shipwrecked on the very structures we set, like rocky cliffs, as guards. Pratt's alternatives however, are a little less polarized than they may seem; it is implied that the inhabitants of his "Newfoundland" were themselves shipwrecked. Pratt seems to be suggesting that we can, at almost any time, begin a real correspondence with nature, and, in particular, with the seas about us and within us.

In the combination of symbols "bread of life" and "waters of death" is reiterated the vision Pratt has of the holiness of man in communion with nature. Those "dreams that survive the night" are part of the "eternal pathways of fire": man becomes a spiritual channel only when he consciously allows his body and mind the freedom of his full nature--a nature both internal and external.

Northrop Frye comes the closest of any critic to understanding these central themes in Pratt's poetry when he says:

> As the poet watches the sea beating on the Newfoundland shores, a possible ironic or fatalistic vision is dismissed and the vision of the unquenchable energy and the limitless endurance which unite the real man with real nature takes its place.
> . . . . . .
> E. J. Pratt took his place at the centre of society where the great myths are formed, the new myths where the hero is man the worker rather than man the conqueror . . . and where the poet who shapes those myths is shaping also a human reality which is greater than the whole objective world, with all its light-years of space, because it includes the infinity of human desire.[3]

In "Newfoundland" we have found a statement of the idea, to oversimplify it, that the impulse to poetry comes up from the sea through the tidal pulses of the person. Pratt is here dealing with the problem of translation into language of something not primarily linguistic. He speaks of "the broken rhythms from old chords" which sound "along dark passages" which he says were once "swept by the wings of dream." This problem of translation is a concern of many of his poems. We find it underlying his fascination with radio messages--electric information--and in poems like "Silences"[4] or "Sea-Gulls":

> For one carved instant as they flew,
> The language had no simile--
> Silver, crystal, ivory
> Were tarnished. Etched upon the horizon blue.
> The frieze must go unchallenged, for the lift
> And carriage of the wings would stain the drift
> Of stars against a tropic indigo
> Or dull the parable of snow.
>
> Now setting one by one
> Within green hollows or where curled
> Crests caught the spectrum of the sun,
> A thousand wings are furled.
> No clay-born lilies of the world
> Could blow as free
> As those wild orchids of the sea.[5]

In particular, there seems to be some rare excitement Pratt discovers in or between the sea and its creatures (of which man is still one) for which he feels language supplies no simile. That he should eventually choose to compare the sea-gulls (common, grey-white, raucous) with something exotic, fragile, colourful (caught in wave-nests

of spectrumed light and blowing free as "wild orchids of the sea") suggests that he finds his language incapable of translating those qualities. The wild, exotic, fragile, colourfulness of the commonplace finds no proper parable; he cannot capture in words the total experience of that "one carved instant as they flew"--at least, not while also preserving the "instant" sense.

Another simple lyric, earlier than "Sea-Gulls," which deals with this problem is "In Absentia":

> Erect and motionless he stood,
> His face a hieroglyph of stone,
> Stopped was his pulse, chilled was his blood,
> And stiff each sinew, nerve and bone.
>
> The spell an instant held him, when
> His veins were swept by tidal power,
> And then life's threescore years and ten
> Were measured by a single hour.
>
> The world lay there beneath his eye;
> The sun had left the heavens to float
> A hand-breadth from him, and the sky
> Was but an anchor for his boat.
>
> Fled was the class-room's puny space--
> His eye saw but a whirling disk;
> His old and language-weathered face
> Shone like a glowing asterisk!
>
> What chance had he now to remember
> The year held months so saturnine
> As ill-starred May and blank September,
> With that brute tugging at his line?[6]

Ostensibly, this is a poem about the moment of dying yet it is simply called "In Absentia" and may thus be read as a poem about the absence of the narrator as when he went fishing (to be prosaic) or, more likely, as in

his periods of creative fervour. The last line may be read in several ways; the "line" may be a fishing-line, an anchor-line, life-line, or line of poetry. The latter interpretation is reinforced by the general upheaval, inversion, loss of the usual senses of meaning and location in the central stanza. His "old and language-weathered face/ Shone like a glowing asterisk!" Possessed, he becomes quite rigid as if in a kind of convulsion, his face a "hieroglyph of stone" but the fervour is not saturnine and he, even in his rigidity, glows starlike with its force. He is the primeaval picture-sign of that force, a single hieroglyph himself, part of the language it is part of yet trapped within it and unable to escape into fluency and motion. The brute tugging at his line eclipses his ability to remember by translating him out of his classroom and into a unity of non-lingual, unrational experience. How can he hook that trophy and carry it back to his own puny space where his is the face of language?

"Brébeuf and His Brethern"[7] may seem to be so different from "Newfoundland" that it is impossible to compare them but they do, in fact, proceed from similar concepts. The landscape of "Brébeuf and His Brethern" is a cross, the physical juncture of two cultures. Ignoring our blatant oversimplification for the moment, we can say that the Indians in this poem represent a more physical and fre-

quently savage form of human nature and the Jesuits, a more spiritual and conceptualized one. In "Newfoundland" we also find a juncture of physical nature--the sea--and spiritual nature--the original man. In both poems the extremes cross and some altered form develops from their juncture. In "Brébeuf and His Brethern" it is the present day roadside martyr's shrine (also, perhaps, the Canada of which it is a part); in "Newfoundland" it is the man who understands the reality of his relationship with nature.

This interpretation of "Brébeuf and His Brethern" makes it easier to understand the many ironies of the poem. So long as one reads it seeking a hero--as a tale of "good guys" and "bad guys"--one will find the ambiguities in Pratt's approach to both the Indians and the priests stumbling blocks. Only when one realizes that the aim of the poem is not so much to show the heroism of the Jesuits as it is to indicate the essentially primitive nature of both forms of existence and to draw parallels between Brébeuf and the Indians, his "Brethern," showing why both cultures must change in the process of evolution, can one begin to understand the poem.

Of course "Brébeuf and His Brethern" is not so simple as this analysis of it might seem to assume. For one thing, though both the Jesuits and the Indians are seen to share certain primitive bases for their cultures--the

ritualized death, the ethos of communal wealth, the creed of hospitality, the subjugation of the body in trials, etc.,--the Jesuits to whom the narrator feels closest, are, in the poem, a higher form of human nature than the Indians. Yet their order is rigid and must pass.

When the priests operate on the common denominator of the two cultures--in face of death and in the courage to bear hardships--they prove to be at least the Indians' equals. Desire for fame may well be the impetus sending out some of the missionaries to their martyrdom but impelling them also is a society in which the individual is ordered into what is considered to be the good of the whole, where man as a social being has a cause and a vividly articulated raison d'être. In Pratt's works the individual is important but his society is probably more important.

If it is essential to find a hero in the poem, possibly the best candidate would be Rageneau, the Shepherd, who burns down the Jesuit fort of Sainte Marie "in sacrificial fire." In so doing he shows an understanding and acceptance of the real orders of life. There was no way in which Huronia could be made into France, despite the illusion of the fort and its inner gardens, any more than it would have been possible for the Romans to make a new Rome of Jerusalem. It is not as a Phoenix rising that the ashes of Sainte Marie find new life in the twentieth

century martyr's shrine of Sainte Marie, though they were the seeds from which it grew. In its re-corporation it is different, despite the fact that past lives on in it.

Brébeuf, while not truly the "hero" of the poem, is its central character. In him the paradoxes and themes become apparent. The Jesuit culture is shown to be the result of many "crossings"--beginning with that of Roman and Jew and continuing through the warrior blood of Loyola, the soldier-priest.

It seems appropriate that the Jesuits should seek a conflict--the frontier of savagery and Christianity--that reflected an internal paradox of their order. Loyola "soldier-priest, staggering with wounds," left "his sword and dagger on an altar/ That he might lead the Company of Jesus;" Brébeuf likewise does not "go forth in peace" but views his calling as a battle-cry. His oath of allegiance and steadfastness unto his martyrdom

> had its root
> Firm in his generations of descent.
> The family name was known to chivalry--
> In the Crusades; at Hastings; through the blood
> Of the English Howards; called out on the rungs
> Of the seige ladders; at the castle breaches;
> Proclaimed by heralds at the lists, and heard
> In Council Halls:--the coat-of-arms a bull
> In black with horns of gold on a silver shield.[8]

Brébeuf is the black bull; is Echon, the evil-one, as the Indians named him; he is also the black-coat, the priest, the father. In this contradiction we find the roots of both his success and his failure. He succeeds because

built into his cultural experience is the basic example, idealized, of a "crossing." Brébeuf's position with respect to the martyrdom of Jesus and to his own death, also with respect to the Indian's death-rituals and his horror of them (which leads him to justify taking children from their homes so that they will not be exposed to such barbarism and placing them in an institution where they will instead be surrounded by a spiritualized version of the same thing) becomes fraught with ironies. Yet it remains true that his strength in face of death comes not from his ritual familiarity with death so much as from the cultural experience of the cross. He wears about his neck a symbol to remind him that an invisible triumph arises from that crucifixion; it is the shape and nature of juncture which he follows.

The ritual sacrifice of the mass is repeated in Brébeuf's martyrdom. Throughout the "mocking paraphrase of the symbols" perverting the sacraments of the priests into their tortures, Brébeuf refuses to cry out in pain.

> Was it because the chancel became the arena,
> Brébeuf a lion at bay, not a lamb on the altar,
> As if the might of a Roman were joined to the cause
> Of Judaea?

Brébeuf is the culmination of a form which began to shape itself from the crossing of Roman and Jew. He is no Christ, no sacrificial lamb, but "a lion at bay"--strong, dangerous, fierce, the king of the beasts. He is also

the black fighting bull which brings to mind Minoan games, Roman victories, even the colour and violence of Loyola's Spain. He has "the might of a Roman" joined to "the cause/ Of Judaea," but is himself crossed by the savagery of wilderness Canada. His strength in the face of torture and death derives from neither the "might of a Roman" nor "the cause/ Of Judaea" alone. It is not native to himself, either, does not come from his muscles, blood, or heart.

> Not in these was the valour of stamina lodged;
> Nor in the symbol of Richelieu's robes or the seals
> Of Mazarin's charters, nor in the stir of lilies
> Upon the Imperial folds; not yet in the words
> Loyola wrote on a table of lava-stone
> In the cave at Manresa--not in these the source--
> But in the sound of invisible trumpets blowing
> Around two slabs of board, right-angled, hammered
> By Roman nails and hung on a Jewish hill.[10]

This vision is not one of Christ--who is not there--nor is it necessarily even a religious vision for there is no God mentioned. It is a vivid picture of the sound of an invisible triumph surrounding a cross, hammered together with Roman nails by decree of a Roman court, made of Jewish boards and hung on a Jewish hill. It is the triumph of the species rather than a particularly religious triumph.

Brébeuf fails insofar as he does not understand the human element of his symbols--he does not, in the end, see the figure on the cross and he does not really participate in the concept of brotherhood which underlies the Jesuit order. He fails to see the Indians as his "Brethern"; even

the Indian priest is treated with a kind of zoo-keeper paternalism. Brébeuf is not callous, he is, rather, of such a character that he would rather fight than change. He does not share Rageneau's quiet, meditative observation and protective wisdom. Rageneau is the one who sees that the Jesuit fort must go, that the flamboyance of martyrdom has reached its full extent and effect and that a new approach--that of conserving his flock--must now take precedence. But Rageneau has always been "the Shepherd," the keeper of the flock as opposed to Brébeuf, its transient leader and champion.

Rageneau's light, which fired the mission, is that same light Pratt sees burning again in the new chancel:

> there in due time to blossom
> Into the highways that lead to the crest of the hill
> Which havened both shepherd and flock in the days of their trial.
> For out of the torch of Rageneau's ruins the candles
> Are burning today in the chancel of Sainte Marie.[11]

And we are reminded of Frye's statement that in Pratt's myths the hero is "man the worker rather than man the conqueror."

We should, briefly, point out the pervasive use of evolutionary motifs in Pratt's poetry. Not only do his main human and animal characters come into focus trailing a genealogy but the device is used to describe such inanimate things as the 6000 or the Submarine. "The Great Feud" offers many examples of Pratt using Darwin's theories

about the evolution of the species. In poems such as "The Prize Cat" or "From Stone to Steel" or even "Silences" we see the force of the very real evolutionary past translated into the present--the past determining the present insofar as the present cannot entirely transcend it.

> The snarl Neanderthal is worn
> Close to the smiling Aryan lips,
> The civil polish of the horn
> Gleams from our praying fingertips.
>
> The evolution of desire
> Has but matured a toxic wine,
> Drunk long before its heady fire
> Reddened Euphrates or the Rhine.
>
> Between the temple and the cave
> The boundary lies tissue-thin:
> The yearlings still the altars crave
> As satisfaction for a sin.[12]

We have seen Pratt's interest in those points of conflict, of stress but also of meeting, which he sees as germinal in the processes of continuing life. Birney's observations that:

> The Marathons past and present are to him the enduring themes, and nature on this earth is a scene of the working out of the human principle, whether for the manlike in beasts or for the godlike in man.[13]

are valuable for pointing our interest to these battlefields in Pratt's work, but Birney speaks of "the human principle" as their context. It would seem that what Birney observes is actually part of Pratt's evolutionary theory and his fascination with the focusing of nature in time.

Throughout Pratt's work we find his "sensitivity to time as the controlling element in human affairs":[14]

> Although he possesses religious conviction, we feel that he is content to leave the man of eternity to other cartographers; he gets his main effects from the enormous background of geological time and tide against which is set the exact flash of the passing moment of human inspiration, content, or agony.[15]

Hillyer catches the elements of Pratt's context here: "geological time and tide" focused, judged, illuminated or given new energy by "the exact flash of the passing moment." It is true that Pratt does not forecast the future--his sensitivity to the dramatic context and content of life obviates the need for future vistas in his epics--but he leaves us with a sense that the patterns of the past will continue into the future. The tides and the sea, internal or external, represent a context of time and nature; man is placed in an evolutionary history that makes all things subject to change and in which nothing can hope to remain influential without adaptation. It is not an entirely logical history--things do not necessarily survive because of their worth and sometimes those who fall are great losses--it is, however, a history logical to the extent that its processes work themselves out. Once a movement is begun towards a crossing, a moment to focus and perhaps free into new forms the old which meet at its instant of juncture, that movement is like a wave, travelling over many waters to

eventually break and cast what drift it has collected upon the shore.

> As old as it is new, as new as old,
> Enduring as a cape, as fresh as dulse,
> This is the Terra Nova record told
> Of uncontractual blood behind the pulse
> On sea or land.[16]

Perhaps more than anything else Pratt's landscapes introduce a vivid sense of the wildness and the primitive force "Of uncontractual blood behind the pulse/ On sea or land;" he gives a different kind of reality to Canadian poetry through these landscapes. Pratt's poetry may leave us with the sounds of huge, creaking beasts ringing in our ears for reasons not entirely to be explained by his subject matter, but it also sets the scene into which other, perhaps better, poets move. Whether they discover it for themselves elsewhere, whether Pratt's poetry simply reinforces their own observations, or whether these poets have been directed to their sea-scapes and evolutionary models of creativity by Pratt's poetry is something we cannot really judge. Suffice it to say that in Canadian poetry of the past thirty-five years we find examples of poets continuing to be interested in and adapting concepts we discover in Pratt's work. If this is not a response to Pratt, it may be something more significant, a response to the realities of man's relationship with this Canadian nature.

NOTES

[1]"Newfoundland," The Collected Poems of E.J. Pratt, 2nd. edition, ed. Northrop Frye (Toronto, Macmillan, 1962), pp. 2-4.

[2]Ibid., p. 100.

[3]"Silence in the Sea (1968)" in Critical Views on Canadian Writers: E.J. Pratt, ed. David G. Pitt (Toronto, Ryerson, 1969), p. 138. This is adapted from Silence in the Sea, the Pratt Lecture delivered at Memorial University of Newfoundland, March, 1968 (St. John's Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1969)

[4]"Silences," The Collected Poems, pp. 77-8.

[5]"Sea Gulls," Ibid., p. 36.

[6]Ibid., pp. 7-8.

[7]Ibid., pp. 244-298.

[8]Ibid., p. 246.

[9]Ibid., p. 295.

[10]Ibid., p. 296.

[11]Ibid., p. 298.

[12]"From Stone to Steel," Ibid., p. 41.

[13]Earle Birney, "E.J. Pratt and His Critics," reprinted in Canadian Anthology, revised edition, p. 530.

[14]Robert Hillyer, "Poetic Sensitivity to Time," Saturday Review of Literature, Vol. 27, April 28, 1945, p. 11.

[15]Ibid.

[16]"Newfoundland Seamen," The Collected Poems, p. 115.

CHAPTER III

A. M. KLEIN'S PORTRAIT OF THE LANDSCAPE

In A.M. Klein's poetry we find an example of a re-interpreted relationship between God, man and nature. Unlike most of Pratt's poetry, most of Klein's is essentially religious, yet like Pratt's, Klein's also has the interdependence of man, nature and even God as a central theme. One of the strongest elements in the poetry of A.M. Klein is a kind of transcendentalism. Milton Wilson, writing about "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens," describes the relationship between the various elements of this unity.

> Between microcosm and macrocosm stands God, the imminent lens or eye, the focus and burning glass of all creation. Klein's Spinoza translates this figure into theorem and into pantheistic psalm.
>
> I behold thee in all things, and in all things: lo, it is myself; I look into the pupil of thine eye, it is my very countenance I see . . .[1]

The poet is again seen as a kind of lens in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" and, again, the emphasis is upon the poet as that which translates--like Spinoza, this poet has the capacity to change that which passes through him to focus it.

> The truth is that he's not dead, but only ignored--
> like the mirroring lenses forgotten on a brow
> that shine with the guilt of their unnoticed world.[2]

His language becomes a "burning glass of all creation." Translation and interpretation, the work of religious scholars, become, in their broadest senses, a responsibility of the poet and psalmist; he finds himself one with a greater unity yet as "the nth Adam" must take:

> a green inventory
> in a world but scarcely uttered, naming, praising,
> by flowering fiats in the meadow, the
> syllabled fur, stars aspirate, the pollen
> Whose sweet collision sounds eternally.
> For to praise
> the world--he solitary man--is breath
> to him. Until it has been praised, that part
> has not been. Item by exciting item--
> air to his lungs, and pressured blood to his heart--
> they are pulsated, and breathed, until they map,
> not the world's but his own body's chart![3]

Klein is usually thought of as a Jewish poet, which he so obviously is, and when one speaks of tradition in connection with his poetry it is generally Jewish tradition. Yet while his theme of unity with its transcendental elements and its humbler catalogues may often be couched in formal psalms, like the following, it is in content not dissimilar to other New World poetry: Whitman's Leaves of Grass seems an obvious example.

> Lord, accept my hallelujahs; look not askance
> at these my petty words; unto perfection a fragment
> makes a prayer.
> . . . . . .
> I am thy son, O Lord, and brother to all that
> lives am I. The flowers of the field, they are
> kith and kin to me; the lily my sister, the rose
> is my blood and flesh.
>
> Even as the stars in the firmament move, so
> does my inward heart, and even as the moon draws
> the tides in the bay, so does it the blood in
> my veins.

> For thou art the world, and I am part thereof;
> Howbeit, even in dust I am resurrected; and even
> in decay I live again.[4]

To some extent Klein's immersion in Jewish tradition explains his connections with other poets who, though they have not shared his specific background, have been moved by Old Testament poetry, but such an explanation over-simplifies things too much. Though Klein studied for the rabbinate and became a master of Hebrew it is in English that his poems are written. Reading them it is impossible to miss his sensuous delight in their language or his familiarity with English poetry. In "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" he describes his love of writing and the change this made in him, giving him a sudden awareness "of the air, like shaken tinfoil"--a metaphor which may well have been picked up from G.M. Hopkins' "God's Grandeur." In its extension, however, this metaphor leads into a statement of poetic inspiration that seems surprisingly similar to the poetics of Charles Olson or Robert Duncan. The words he utters or writes are "air to his lungs, and pressured blood to his heart," his poetry is a physical expression, its rhythms and pulses are those of his body. The words "are pulsated, and breathed, until they map,/ not the world's, but his own body's chart!"

Klein does not see himself as an Aeolian harp; he says "to praise/ the world . . . is breath/ to him" not that the experience of the world causes him to write about it. It

is his breath which creates the poem and thus, by extension, the world--"until it has been praised, that part/ has not been"--and not vice versa. Yet, his breath is subject to the same forces as are the wind, the tides, the stars. His portrait is of the poet as landscape; of the essential anonymity of this nth Adam, the focusing factor in nature which is creative. In this, his stance seems fairly similar to that of E.J. Pratt.

Originally this poem was called "Portrait of the Poet as a Nobody" but that title is less accurate; though Klein's poet is anonymous he "makes of his status as zero a rich garland/a halo of his anonymity." He may be anonymous but he is not without a body. His specific form is a "rich garland," his circular shape a lens. Without his body he could not perceive and what he has not focused upon, has not been named, does not exist. He is himself the landscape of his poetry and all landscape he knows is himself. This position seems different to that of the Old Testament poets and most English poets; it is quite strikingly an American or New World attitude.

In 1936 Klein published "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" and "Soirée of Velvel Kleinberger" in New Provinces.[5] This volume contained the work of six Canadian poets, including a number of poems by E.J. Pratt. Klein had also published in the McGill Fortnightly Review

and later, in the Canadian Mercury and the Canadian Forum; between 1945 and 1948 he lectured in poetry at McGill. Obviously, he was familiar with Canadian poetry and, while it would be misleading to attribute to it too much influence, it is interesting to see that there are some parallels between his metaphors and those of his fellows.

Perhaps the most obvious comparison is in the area of water imagery and the theme of submersion. When T.A. Marshall writes in "Theorems Made Flesh: Klein's Poetic Universe" that Klein uses this kind of imagery in The Rocking Chair . . . to suggest both the neglected state of the submerged poet and the birth of a shining new world in his imagination,"[6] he tends to place all his emphasis on the protective nature of this "shining new world" and misses the point that it is in the submersion, the "cultural ghetto of the Jew," that motivation is formed and threatening forces are most easily recognized.

> But it will come! Some dead of night with boom
> to wake the wagering city, it will break,
> will crack, will melt its muscle-bound tides
> and raise from their iced tomb
> the pyramided fish, the unlockered ships,[7]
> and last year's blue and bloated suicides.

He is, however, quite right that "The deep well of memories, instincts and creative impulses can become one with the creative lens; thus water serves the function that the moon served in the earlier poetry."[8]

In Klein's "Lone Bather" we find the concept voiced in such Pratt poems as "Newfoundland," "The Drowning," "In Absentia," "The Ground Swell," etc., that underwater (or, at least, in water) the man moving freely through his subconscious is most intensely alive. The differences between Pratt's metaphor and Klein's are considerable: Klein's swimming pool is no ancient mother sea but a kind of lovely womb to which he returns as fetus almost (going back through evolutionary changes of bird, dolphin, to plant) to cavort sensuously if not sexually:

> Splashes and plays alone the deserted pool;
> as those, is free, who think themselves unseen.
> He rolls in his heap of fruit,
> he slides his belly over
> The melonrinds of water, curved and smooth and green.
> Feels good; and trains, like little acrobats
> his echoes dropping from the galleries.[9]

Yet it too is a poem about poetic creation couched in the metaphor of water and poet in the water, this one training his echoes as if they were his troop of acrobats. For all its bedlike comfort this swimming pool holds a threat similar to that lustier, but sexless, threat of Pratt's seas. It is not simply a threat that one might drown in them; it is a survival challenge necessitating the translation of that free and enriched self out of the private into the public world.

"A street sound throws like a stone, with paper, through the glass;" the time comes when Klein's bather must

communicate not just with his echo but on paper with a street sound. The demand is made - because he responds to the expression of his community, because he chooses to interpret the street sound as a call to him - that he be born into man's world, that he rub away "the bird, the plant, the dolphin" and become again "personable plain," making himself clear to the street.

Milton Wilson, in his article "Klein's Drowned Poet: Canadian Variations of an Old Theme,"[10] suggests that the source of Klein's metaphor at the end of "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" stems from Milton's "Lycidas." Given the identification of Klein's poet with Lycidas in the second line of the poem this is obviously an intended literary reference.

> Not an editorial writer, bereaved with bartlett,
> mourns him, the shelved Lycidas

However, it seems probable that part of Klein's responsiveness to Milton's poem may have been cultivated by his reading of Pratt and other Canadian poets. By 1948 there were several examples of poems by Canadians on the theme of the drowned poet. Wilson is right in pointing out the ancient theme but gives short mention of its Canadian history before Klein's "Portrait." His only bow to it comes in a brief reference to Scott's "The Piper of Arll":[11]

> But no catalogue of "immersion images" [in Klein's poetry] would prepare one for Klein's Lycidas when he finally appears at the beginning of "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," an Orpheus dismembered into Bartlett's Quotations, buried on the library shore, unwept even by our brief custodians of fame. ... And that beginning hardly prepares us for his last appearance at the end of the poem, crowned and shining (however equivocally) at the bottom of the sea, another "lost prince of a diadem."[12]

It seems fitting that Klein's poet should begin his transformations through Orpheus and Lycidas but end them as a kind of Piper of Arll, "another 'lost prince of a diadem,'" in Canadian waters.

> And sometimes in the liquid night
> The hull is changed, a solid gem,
> That glows with a soft stony light,
> The lost prince of a diadem.
>
> And at the keel a vine is quick,
> That spreads its bines and works and weaves
> O'er all the timbers veining thick
> A plentitude of silver leaves.[13]

Another instance of this theme prior to Klein can be found in Marjorie Pickthall's "The Pool."

> Night after night I would leap in the pool,
> And sleep with the fish in the roots of the rush.
> Clear, O clear my dreams should be made
> Of emerald light and amber shade,
> Of silver shallows and golden glooms.
> Sweet, O sweet my dreams should be
> As the dark, sweet water enfolding me,
> Safe as a blind shell under the sea.[14]

Pickthall's pool may be purely a romantic escapist wish, despite the sexual imagery ("And sleep with the fish in the roots of the rush") for it has none of the supernatural tenseness about it of Scott's poem, but it also

involves a drowned poet in a rapidly growing dream-like world of gem light, of "soft stony light." Klein's marvellous vision of the poet who "lives alone, and in his secret shines/ like phosphorous. At the bottom of the sea" seems related to the reflective, cool white fires of "a plentitude of silver leaves" which relentlessly cover the drowned ship of the Piper of Arll. The silver leaves are growing and therefore must be functioning, there must be some sort of reaction going on in them perhaps paralleling that green combustion of chlorophyll and sunlight which usefully produces food energy and more green leaves. The mystery of the process is symbolized by the silverness of the leaves; they appear to be only reflective yet grow and in their resemblance to precious metals strike us as more rare and wonderful than the green. Klein's phosphorous is also mysterious; it too is reflective yet glows like a silver fire in the midst of its apparently complementary (or contradictory?) element. In all three poems there is an essential note of secretiveness which is not found in Lycidas.

In Pratt's early poem, "The Drowning,"[15] the bereaved narrator, who may actually be the primary victim of the drowning, lives most intensely only in his sleep at night when he returns "To the cold green lure of the waters." (See Layton, "The Cold Green Element.") The motion of "a

wheel in my sleep" is what hones the "edge of the pain," a wheel turning like the cyclical tides in "Newfoundland," rising at night in the subconscious dreams, falling during the day. Through its action the sea enters the narrator's cottage "Though a year of days/ Has latched its doors on the sea." In his drowning the narrator/poet returns not only to his grief but to that cool, green and secret lure of the waters. The very magnetism of this lure suggests it contains a kind of threat as well; the siren song is beautiful but passionless. The coolness, bloodlessness of these metaphors for dreams and oceans which hone the senses without kindling them seem to express an underlying frustration on the part of the poet with his daily landscape. There may no longer be a heaven for Lycidas to rise into but these Canadian variations on that theme provide him with another world, just as fleshless. It would seem that what Klein landed on in his "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" is perhaps a continental shelf, already Canadian, though part of an international ocean.

In a different vein we again find echoes of Pratt in Klein's poetry. Pratt's metaphors of tide, blood, island, sea, etc. in "Newfoundland" and in other poems work at establishing a universal unity. The sun is in the water in "In Absentia," the boat in the sky; in "The Titanic" the zodiac is also in the water, but more typically, Pratt's means of establishing the transcendental confluence of all

things are his metaphors of the universal rhythms of life, the tides and pulses, and his vision of each creation carrying in itself signs of its evolutionary history. This is true of man, but is also so for the cachelot, for the ship the Titanic, for the prize cat, or Carlo, or the 6000. Klein, in some places includes similar kinds of statements of interrelationships in his general theme of unity. For example, in "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" he says:

> Even as the stars in the firmament move, so does my inward heart, and even as the moon draws the tides in the bay, so does it the blood in my veins.

In "A Psalm Touching Genealogy" we find the weight of generations past within the present:

> Not sole was I born, but entire genesis:
> For to the fathers that begat me, this
> Body is residence. Corpuscular,
> They dwell in my veins, they eavesdrop at my ear,
> They circle, as with Torahs, round my skull,
> In exit and in entrance all day pull
> The latches of my heart, descend, and rise-
> And there look generations through my eyes.[16]

This is a clever, punning kind of poem which might appear to have little parallel in Pratt's lyrics yet it does work on a theme Pratt has also used, the living past within the present.

Klein's poetry is an important "species" in Canadian literature; though obviously an "immigrant" with a strong family stock elsewhere, his writing reflects equally its adaptation to the Canadian environment. Later poetry,

such as Margaret Atwood's, which might be characterized as "second generation Canadian," has found its native environment included in Klein's work. He has become part of the definitive Canadian scene, this poet who portrayed himself as one with and drowned in his landscape.

NOTES

[1]"Klein's Drowned Poet: Canadian Variations on an Old Theme," Canadian Literature 6 (Autumn 1960), p. 15.

[2]"Portrait of the Poet As Landscape," Canadian Anthology, rev. edition, ed. Klinck and Watters, p. 341.

[3]Ibid., p. 343.

[4]"Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens," Canadian Anthology, p. 329.

[5]New Provinces; Poems by Several Authors, ed. F. R. Scott, (Toronto, Macmillan, 1936).

[6]Canadian Literature 25 (Summer 1965), p. 50.

[7]"The Break-Up," The Rocking Chair and Other Poems, (Toronto, Ryerson, 1948), p. 25.

[8]Canadian Literature 25 (Summer 1965), p. 50

[9]The Rocking Chair, p. 37.

[10]See note 1.

[11]Duncan Campbell Scott, Canadian Anthology, p. 151.

[12]Wilson, "Klein's Drowned Poet," p. 13.

[13]"Piper of Arll."

[14]Canadian Anthology, p. 223.

[15]Newfoundland Verse, (Toronto, Ryerson, 1923), p. 2

[16]Canadian Anthology, p. 334.

CHAPTER IV

F. R. SCOTT: THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST

A.J.M. Smith points out the sphere of Scott's influence on Canadian poetry in this excerpt from a 1967 article:

> There is hardly a poet in Canada who has not, passing through Montreal, made his pilgrimage to Clarke Avenue, Westmount, and been royally entertained and stimulated with wise and witty talk about poetry and poets; and all of them from the early days of Leo Kennedy, Abe Klein, and myself, through the time of Patrick Anderson, John Sutherland, P. K. Page, and the rest of the overlapping and heterogenous groups that might include Louis Dudek, Ralph Gustafson, Irving Layton, Doug Jones, and John Glassco, felt the charm, energy and good sense that animated Frank Scott and made him one of the leaders in every group.[1]

Robin Skelton calls Scott "a poet of the middle slopes;"[2] yet what his poetry itself may have failed to achieve in the fullest his personality apparently has compensated for in helping to create a forum for Canadian literature. Scott does seem a representative Canadian poet, representative, at least, of the older generation now writing.

Quite a number of Scott's poems fall into the area of our interest. The seas in his poetry are places of genesis of particulars and of the dissolving of such particulars into a lasting unity. The human "swims into being" as an embryo, bearing resemblance to its less developed forefathers of evolutionary history, and enclosed in a world of waters:

Note, please, the embryo,
Unseeing
It swims into being.
Elan vital,
Thyroid, gonads, et al.,
Preserve the unities.[3]

This same human being and his "elan vital" returns to "the deep sea" with his death and it is in the sea's depths that he finds lasting absolutes. The narrator promises that he and his beloved will find "A stillness," and will "stay" among "Things central, absolute and whole," within the deep sea though that same sea will be shaped into the waves of passing events. Particularity becomes a transient aspect of life in Scott's poetry and even "the unities" of "thyroid, gonad, et al.," become particulars which the tidal action of time can change. This results in a dramatic perspective of space (and irony) about man in many of Scott's poems.

We shall find, each the deep sea in the end,
A stillness, and a movement only of tides
That wash a world, whole continents between,
And we shall know, after the flow and ebb,
Things central, absolute and whole.
Brought clear of silt, into the open roads,
Events shall pass like waves, and we shall stay[4]

In a later poem, "Japanese Sand Garden," Scott works with the idea of the sea as "the eternal relative."

suddenly

horizons vanish

in this vast ocean

where the most

is made from the least

and the eternal relative

absorbs

the ephemeral absolute[5]

The poem turns on the concepts of evolution:

in this vast ocean

where the most

is made from the least

We know from other poems that "the most" might be read as the human, made from its simple cells, but it is also the "ocean" which in this poem, is made from sand and pebbles. The Japanese Sand Garden is a wryly ironical metaphor being both formal garden and symbolic ocean. The sand garden is representative of the ocean (whose action may well have produced its sand and gravel) and the ocean itself becomes a symbol for an even vaster and more eternal relative. The grains of sand reduce the emotional significance of the ocean just as the oceans reduce the emotional significance of "the ephemeral absolute." Not only is the ocean the "eternal relative" in the sense that it is the continually generative family/mother but also in the sense that it is that which can always be compared with the "ephemeral absolute"--by knowing or comprehending the meaning of "eternal" in terms of the ocean we can absorb the understanding of something more ephemeral and more eternal.

Scott's irony is romantic in that it is based on a belief in man and hope for his future. Perhaps that is why he has picked up these metaphors of ocean-evolution;

they allow both realism (and a certain bitterness of caustic comment) and hope--they leave an eternal relative which is capable of absorbing an ephemeral absolute, an ironic rather than a destructive action "... which is itself (the absorbing) an evolutionary process." Civilization, as well as man's body, is seen to be the result of evolution:

> I travelled around the world
> And saw great temples and tombs
> Standing on mounds of time
> Where nations had come and gone.
>
> Karnak, Parthenon, Rome,
> Angkor, Teotihuacán,
> Abandoned on the road
> As the inner spirit died.
> . . . . . .
>
> As a snail, at a snail's pace
> Starts on its short trek,
> Dies in a last shock,
> And leaves the tower on its back,
>
> So the faith of an age gave birth
> To a shell, now empty,
> Save for the old far sound
> Of tides in this human sea.[6]

If "tides in this human sea" become the "eternal relative," "the old far sound" which has been a consistently generative "word" in the world's procreation of nations and civilizations, they also become an equally important symbol of present and daily life. In the tidal ebb and flow Scott finds a parallel for the constant flux of all things. Smith calls Scott's "Mount Royal" "a Pratt poem with a difference."

> One thinks of the vivifying dynamism of the description of the Laurentian Shield in "Towards the Last Spike." Here time is speeded up: the Mountain rises out of the sea; the sea subsides, leaving its deposit of silt and shells; Man walks and builds his muddled cities "where crept the shiny mollusc," and the poet or poet-mind observes it all.[7]

"Mount Royal" is geological evolution vivified: the transitory nature of man's life is depicted as a reflection of the transitory nature of the very earth he considers solid. Man, "You gill-lunged, quarrelsome ephemera!" is as illusory in his importance as were the "deep-down fishes safe, it seemed, on sand," from which he evolved.

> No things sit, set, hold. All swim,
> Whether through space or cycle, rock or sea.
> This mountain of Mount Royal marks the hours
> On Earth's sprung clock. Look how where
> This once was island, lapped by salty waves,
> And now seems fixed with sloping roads and homes.
> Where flowers march, I dig these tiny shells
> Once deep-down fishes safe, it seemed, on sand,
> . . . . . .
>
> But sea-bed floated slowly, surely up
> As weight released brought in-breath back to earth
> And ground uprising drove the water back
> In one more tick of clock. Pay taxes now,
> Elect your boys, lay out your pleasant parks,
> You gill-lunged, quarrelsome ephemera!
> The tension tightens yearly, underneath,
> A folding continent shifts silently
> And oceans wait their turn for ice or streets.[8]

In "Lakeshore" we find Scott writing a "swimmer poem" which operates on the conceit of inversions; the water becomes "liquid air," the stones, "Floating upon their broken sky," are weightless images on the surface of the waves while under them the fish "fly." The narrator's

image of himself is inverted:

> And I am a tall frond that waves
> Its head below its rooted feet
> Seeking the light that leads it down
> To forest floors beyond its reach
> Vivid with gloom and Beebe dreams.[9]

He, the tall frond, turns his head toward the light of a dark sun, a drowned sun. The "light that leads it down" into a realm where gloom is vivid among distant forest floors and "Beebe dreams" is the opposite of the sunlight which draws the heads of other plants upright. The choice of "tall frond" as descriptive of the narrator enhances the conceit of inversion, not only by reducing him to vegetable status but by pictorially removing his spine and will, by suggesting he is in a shape so fluid that it offers little resistance to forces like the vivid gloom which pull its waving head down below its rooted feet. The head of the man, the place where dreams happen, where light, dark or bright, is perceived, contradicts the fact of "rooted feet" in its fascination with the underwater depths:

> The water's deepest colonnades
> Contract the blood, and to this home
> That stirs the dark amphibian
> With me the naked swimmers come
> Drawn to their prehistoric womb.

The blood is contracted both by and to the "water's deepest colonnades;" the pressure increases on the man as he goes down but he is also drawn down by a blood contract.

The naked swimmers are "drawn to their prehistoric womb" in silent, liquid, sport "too virginal for speech or sound." Though they are there, "Within the cool and sheltered grove/ Stroked by the fingertips of love," their sport is not really sexual. Rather, it is the sport of self-discovery--"And each is personal and laned/ Along his private aquaduct." The naked swimmer seeks to complete the inversion (or reversion) by following through his own private waterways--the routes of his passage through time and forms:

> They too are liquid as they fall
> Like tumbled water loosed above
> Until they lie, diagonal,
> Within the cool and sheltered grove
> Stroked by the fingertips of love.

Yet "Too soon the tether of the lungs/ Is taut and straining, and we rise." The inversion can no longer be sustained yet its effects remain; the ground becomes a prison where lives a "landed gentry, circumspect" as opposed to the tumbling freedom of the water or its cool and sheltered groves wherein the swimmers found the "mermaids in our memories:"

> This is our talent, to have grown
> Upright in posture, false-erect,
> A landed gentry, circumspect,
> Tied to a horizontal soil
> The floor and ceiling of the soul;
> Striving, with cold and fishy care
> To make an ocean of the air.
>
> Sometimes, upon a crowded street,
> I feel the sudden rain come down
> And in the old, magnetic sound
> I hear the opening of a gate
> That loosens all the seven seas.

Watching the whole creation drown
I muse, alone, on Ararat.

The poet/narrator is the single part of creation left after the flood, "alone, on Ararat," with whom a new covenant might be made. Yet, the poet is alone in his musing over his observations and memories and even he seems dispassionate; another drowned poet but this one drowned in thin air.

We also find in Scott's poems a connection between images of water, and particularly of the swimmer in water discovering his latent self-hood, and images of glass, lenses, or mirrors and circle images where horizons contract and expand like the eye of a camera and produce a symbol of central unity in an almost hallowed nature. This kind of poem seems to first appear in Klein ("Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens"--published in New Provinces which Scott edited) but recurs most remarkably in Margaret Atwood's work. Scott's poems, "Autumn Lake, 1 and 2" might almost seem to be a description of what happens in some of Atwood's poems, except hers leave a sense of tension and transience even at their calmest.

An even more striking example of how some of Scott's poetry shares areas of common interest with Pratt, Klein, Birney, Atwood or even Layton can be found in "Time As Now." Taking the general theme of the living past in the present he makes a statement about the significant

evolutionary context of the individual, sensitive mind which is so much in line with what we might have expected him to say that it is surprising:

> All time is present time.
> Present in now
> Is all that ever was.
> The added new is additive for old.
> All forces, thoughts, events and spectacles
> Having inevitable consequence
> Ride the long reaches of on-moving time
> And speak their history today in me.
> Out of this earth, or out from outer space,
> Or out from records in these rocks and books,
> Waves flow incessantly,
> Their sequel pregnant in our living flesh.
> The air I breathe, the neutron in my brain,
> This plasma that has ridden fishy veins,
> Shape my rehearsing of all former life.
> I feel huge mastodons
> Press my ape-fingers on this typewriter
> Old novae give bright meaning to my words.[11]

It is the actual, physical existence of a real past in a real present which shapes his body, his perceptions and even his poetry. In Scott, this experience is an explanation for the energy of the individual. "Waves flow incessantly,/ Their sequel pregnant in our living flesh." Man does not stand apart from the rest of nature except in so far as the burden of evolution has made more of the past's real energy alive in him. Scott's man, like Pratt's or even Klein's, is a controlling or focusing form only in so far as he is also an expressive form. And the harmony of his expressions necessarily incorporates the past if it is responsive to the realities of the present.

NOTES

[1]"F. R. Scott and Some of His Poems," Canadian Literature, 31 (Winter 1967), pp. 25-26.

[2]"A Poet of Middle Slopes," Canadian Literature, 31, pp. 40-44.

[3]"Teleological," The Eye of the Needle; Satires, Sorties, Sundries, (Montreal, Contact Press, 1957), p. 16.

[4]"Departure," Events and Signals, (Toronto, Ryerson, 1954), p. 31.

[5]Signature, (Vancouver, Klanah Press, 1964) p. 10.

[6]"Journey," Signature, p. 21.

[7]"F.R. Scott and Some of His Poems," p. 30

[8]Signature, p. 52.

[9]Events and Signals, p. 2.

[10]Signature, p. 15.

[11]Ibid., p. 53.

CHAPTER V

EARLE BIRNEY'S RESPONSE TO E. J. PRATT'S POETRY

Isolating the influence of E.J. Pratt's work on Earl Birney's poetry is a little like trying to weed clover from a lawn--at some point one is likely to remark that it is all green. The basic difficulty results from the surprising number of parallels in the thinking of these two poets, despite their very distinct differences. It becomes a matter of judgment whether Birney says something similar to what Pratt said because 1) he intended to do just that or, 2) he and Pratt share an environment in which such observations are actually commonplace and so, 3) parallels between them happen by accident. It would seem that all three possibilities have, at one time or another, contributed to the area of commonality between them. Some observations might suggest that Birney went through a period in the 40's when parts of his Canadian experience were seen in terms of Pratt's expression; that is not to suggest that he borrowed from or was even largely under the influence of Pratt's poetry, only that part of his development as a poet seems to have involved his working through Pratt.

In 1948 Birney dedicated The Strait of Anian[1] to "Ned Pratt." The dedication in itself would prove little except that he admired or wished to please Pratt at the time of the book's publication, but there is internal

evidence in The Strait of Anian which suggests that Birney had indeed been influenced by Pratt during the composition of its poems. "Atlantic Door," and "World Conference," the first and last poems of the book, make specific references to poems by Pratt. Besides these two there are several others: "Pacific Door," "The Ebb Begins from Dream," "Gulf of Georgia," "And The Earth Grow Young Again," "Invasion Spring," "Time-Bomb."[2]

Before going on to examine the nature of Pratt's influence in the poetry itself, we should add two pieces of evidence to the background of our discussion. Ten years after The Strait of Anian's publication, we find Birney writing of Pratt with well-considered respect, demonstrating a history of reading both his poetry and his critics. He identifies several of Pratt's poetic aims[3] and then goes on to make some observations. The following criticisms illustrate reservations in Birney's attitude to Pratt's work.

> Whether his extremely energetic and even bizarre diction is inflated or not is a matter of whether it attempts to fob up an excitement beyond what the emotion justifies. Being "sentimental," for me, is the same thing. I will admit that sometimes Pratt creates such an impression, not however from emotional insincerity but from a tendency to be diverted, by the gleeful enthusiasm for words themselves, from the passions which are their justification.[4]

> By and large, our twentieth-century poets have tried to find a religion in their negativeness; and our critics have no real faiths at all. "Critics who do not believe," as Cyril Connolly

> complained in reviewing Yeats' Collected Letters, "must comment on creators who do." So Pratt, with his naive contentment with a positive religion of man, has failed to attract.[5]

It is indicative of Birney's nature that, despite grounds for fairly basic incompatibility with Pratt's poetry, he chooses to give him some heady laurels.

> Surely all these conscious aims, themes, and values of Pratt are important enough, and their projection in sixteen books of exciting and highly individual language and rhythm is near enough to God's plenty that we do not have to metaphysicize and distort both his effects and his purposes to make him presentable to the arbiters of current literary fashion. I think there is enough, and I suspect also that literary history, that jade, will shortly play one of her usual jokes on what Cocteau writing on the film calls our "false elite that has planted itself between the masses and the artists," and we will find E.J. Pratt accepted and acclaimed internationally in the next generation for the very qualities and forms that have hindered his acceptance in this.[6]

> For Pratt is old-fashioned mainly because his literary art, his prodigious virtuosity in the craft of story-telling and the structural use of image, language, and rhythm happen to have been expended not in the dominant Jamesian tradition of the prose short story and novel but in the Chaucerian tradition of poetic narrative. I do not mean to imply that Pratt is Chaucer's equal or has tried to be; he has never really attempted to create an ordered world of characters and project himself into them. But he is in Chaucer's tradition in his devotion to the great art of heroic verse narrative, whether grave or comic, a very long and rich and varied tradition . . . .[7]

Elsewhere in this article Birney exhibits his impatience with "neurotic agonies" and with poetry that "is a sort of means to the end of religious mythos and oracular philosophy or private purgation,"[8] and suggests that

such writing has been encouraged not by the reading public but by a parasitic colony of critics. It is interesting to find an article on Pratt the origin of such remarks because one of the areas of similarity between the two poets is that they both tend to be "public" writers. It is possible to trace a development in each of them whereby the vulnerable presence of the poet is quite drastically removed. In Pratt, the "thouing" is one of the first affectations to leave; in Birney, each revision of such poems as "The Road to Nijmegen" pares more of the direct individual references from it. When the narrator appears it is generally as a character--the professor in "Machu Picchu," the visiting poet in "Cartagena de Indias." Pratt rarely has an overt narrator present in his longer poems though we find one in "The Iron Door," "The Depression Ends," "Magic in Everything" and numbers of his short lyrics. Of course, it is hard to say whether or not this area of parallelism between the two poets indicates any conscious connection; probably it does not though it might be suggested that Birney was happy to find a figure such as Ned Pratt in Canadian literature supporting so energetically the premise that a contemporary writer need not publicize "neurotic agonies" or use his poetry as "a sort of means to the end of religious mythos and oracular philosophy or private purgation."

The second extra-poetic piece of information is a statement Birney made recently to a group of students. He reportedly disclaimed any conscious influence on his poetry from the works of Pratt.[9] Various approaches are possible in expanding upon this remark but it is probably sufficient to point out that poetry does not usually come from a vacuum and Birney's, in particular, tends to exhibit a synthesising of many influences; the level of consciousness at which this occurs in the poet is not something we need to argue about. In The Strait of Anian, for example, it is possible to point out many influences on Birney's work ranging from Old English poetry through Sinclair Ross's As For Me and My House, the former being major and the latter minor.[10] It would seem, in perhaps a curious sort of way, that Pratt has been an important influence on Birney. His ocean "landscapes" and heroic philosophy coupled with the primitive and high-spirited forces of his settings and characters somehow merged in Birney's writings with things from Beowulf and Old English poetry to provide a strength of vision, a kind of perception about Canada, that remains even after his travels and increased sophistication about both his country and his poetry.[11] It seems also that Pratt's fascination with evolution has made it a more acceptable philosophy to be presented in Canadian poetry than it would have been without such a champion. In many of Birney's poems we find man's relation-

ship with nature and his historical environment expressed in terms of evolution; often this is done more evocatively and less didactically than in Pratt's work, yet the underlying philosophy would seem to be similar. And, finally, there are some specific references in Birney's poems to poems by Pratt; things like the iceberg in "World Conference," or the sodden hull of the Titanic in "Atlantic Door."[12] In "The Ebb Begins From Dream" the specific reference would seem to be to "Newfoundland:" compare some of the following images:

"frustrations like long weeks that lie
and rot between the cracks of life,"

with

"Red is the sea-kelp on the beach
. . . . . .
It is rooted in the joints of rocks"

or this pair:

"the ebb begins from dream . . ."

with

"Here the tides flow,
And here they ebb;
. . . . . .
Along dark passages
That once were pathways of authentic fires
And swept by the wings of dream."[13]

The similarity between these two poems may not strike one upon a first reading; "The Ebb Begins From Dream" does not repeat the performance of "Newfoundland" yet it clearly invokes images and replies to suggestions made in the earlier poem. The sustained tidal rhythm of Birney's

poem is highly reminiscent of Pratt's. Some aspects of "Newfoundland" find no reflection in "The Ebb Begins From Dream"--the importance of wind, a tide of breath; the blood-redness of the sea-kelp; and, significantly, the inspiring function of the "sea" flowing through the lives of man. In Birney, the emphasis is on the erosion of life by the regularity of its rhythms; housewives are reduced to crab status, the milk and newspapers--our daily sustenance--are seen as a kind of flotsam on the threshholds of the closed homes. Unlike Pratt's Newfoundland folk these city dwellers hold no doors ajar in storms; the dreaming sea engulfs them and their establishments, it does not simply ebb and flow through them.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about the two poems is the comment Birney is making about the "ebb" and the "dream". One ambiguity in "Newfoundland" is the remark about the veins of man once having been "pathways of authentic fires/ and swept by the wings of dream." The suggestions are distinctly puzzling; on one hand we visualize man having had fires running through him, at some time before his relationship with the sea began, but given the last line, later deleted, those fires are either dreams or else, the wings of those dreams put out the fires--swept them away, blew them out. At any rate, the dreams seem to have preceded the sea as inhabitants

of our bodies, as the sustaining substance of transfer from individual cell to individual cell. Were we "dry" creations, then? Is this a statement by Pratt of the spiritual nature of man's creation which preceded the physical and animal creation? Yet, now, in the post-Ocean situation, "dreams" come in with the tides at night--the doors held ajar allow in not simply spray and the crash of breakers but new wings of dreams to sweep out our homes, to survive in them the night.

> And the story is told
> Of human veins and pulses,
> Of eternal pathways of fire,
> Of dreams that survive the night,
> Of doors held ajar in storms.

Birney picks up the statement that man was designed for "dreams" but is physically subject to the tidal ebb, the continuing erosion of matter. His statement that the ebb begins from dream is thus quite straightforward--our dream of humanizing ourselves, of civilizing, urbanizing, and specializing was the initiator of the decay in the systems we dreamed of and then created. But, that decay is an "ebb" and must "flow" in again on itself--what appears as individuated erosion, is actually part of a greater cyclical rhythm which, itself, begins from dream.

> The stars like stranded starfish pale and die
> and tinted sands of dawning dry
> The ebb begins from dream leaving a border
> of milk and morning paper on the porches
> . . . . . .
>
> Now the tide is full and sighing creeps
> into the clean sought coigns of sleep

And yet in sleep begins to stir
to mutter in the dark its yearning
and to the round possessive mother turning
dreams of vaster wellings . . . .

Another direct reference to Pratt seems to come in "World Conference" or, as it was later renamed, "Conference of Heads."

The quiet diesel in the breast
propels a trusting keel
whether we swing toward a port
or into whales of steel

The compassed mind must quiver north
though every chart defective
There is no fog but in the will
the iceberg is elective.[14]

The "quiet diesel in the breast" is a purely mechanical heart which drives forward a "trusting keel." The keel is trusting because it is blind and mindless; it has no foresight and therefore destination has no meaning to it. The "compassed mind" of the ship is also dependent upon a force to drive it--magnetism--and must obey this force, "must quiver north/ though every chart defective," through every recording of man's experience with his environment may be inaccurate. "There is no fog but in the will"--the ship's position is there to be read despite atmospheric densities which might obscure human vision, but in the will to read, to understand, and then to act there may well be fogs and confusion. "The iceberg is elective"--this seems to contradict Pratt's Titanic in which the iceberg was not elective, at least, not after

the ship's launching and the berg's calving.

> But with an impulse governed by the raw
> Mechanics of its birth, it drifted where
> Ambushed, fog-grey, it stumbled on its lair,
> North forty-one degrees and forty-four,
> Fifty and fourteen west the longitude,
> Waiting a world-memorial hour, its rude
> Corundum form stripped to its Greenland core.[15]

Birney's original title, "World Conference," echoes Pratt's "world-memorial hour" when the iceberg, in its "lair," will meet the floating arrogance of the Titanic. The later title, "Conference of Heads," suggests that the meeting between the iceberg and the ship is really an impact of two heads--two masses with headway, with established direction and speed multiplying the strength of their force of impact. It is also a coming together of two minds and wills, "heads," which results in a kind of sharing of their directions, a conference establishing new courses. In Pratt's poem this conference seems predestined but Birney insists that there is no predestining power, no fate, beyond that pattern resulting from human lapses, from fogs in the will to read the information presented of necessity by the quivering, compassed mind. The mind is compassed not simply by the connection in imagery with a compass box but as in "encompassed," the mind boxed-in by the will; it has no force of itself but registers those forces working upon its sensitive structures. Similarly, there is no intelligence driving the iceberg; intelligence registers, wills drive. We fail mechanically.

In the Titanic, which was a mechanical wonder, an unsinkable ship, the bulwark heads fail. They, like the deep keel, may be "trusting," in that they do what they are driven to do, but cannot be "trusted."

The "whales of steel" seem to be another Prattian image. Pratt was fascinated with gigantic creatures and in particular, with gigantic aquatic figures. The whales of steel are connected with man, in part because they are mammalian but more because steel suggests that man has made them. That they loom destructively in the path of the trusting keel ties in with the whole pattern of comment built up in this poem; Birney says that there is no particular force of evil but that human errors compound and, in particular, errors in mechanical creation, lead often to destructive conferences. Man creates huge, "mindless" beasts of steel which are even more dangerous to him than the animals they may be compared with. It is not natural for a ship to collide with a whale for unless the whale had been maddened and was of its own will attacking the ship, it would seek to avoid the collision. Whales of steel avoid only what men direct them to avoid.

In poems like "Newfoundland," nature and man are one in Pratt (and here we find the uniting imagery of tidal pulse) but frequently, when nature is depicted as a brute force man becomes an opposing force though still sharing a basic connection with that which he opposes ("Silences,

Etc."). In "Towards the Last Spike" there are numerous images of man confronting nature and surpassing her through his artistry in developing mechanical servants. But more interesting may be the following:

> He fought the climate like a weathered yak,
> And conquered it, ripping the stalactites
> From his red beard, thawing his feet, and wringing
> Salt water from his mitts; but most of all
> He learned the art of making change.[16]

Here, it is only after he had hardened himself physically that the art of making change gives an advantage to the man. In this immediate context, the "art of making change" is trading or exchange, but obviously, it is meant to be read as man's adaptability via art, via his creative ability. This is then a traditional view--man conquering nature through his adaptability deriving from the superior intellect which gives him the ability to make "tools," whether they be mechanical or social--but it is given a Prattian touch by the insistence that all this must come after a simple struggle for physical survival; man's mind, on its own, is useless unless it is established in a body that can fight "the climate" persistently and successfully.

Birney's view is relatively similar although the "climate" to be fought tends to be more often an internal rather than an external one. He shares Pratt's inclination to "set" man in an evolutionary context but the significance of the context in Birney tends to be personal rather than historical. This is not always so ("O men be

swift to be mankind/ or let the grizzly take"),[17] but even in the cases when it is not Birney makes the nature man must overcome part of his own internal make-up. The grizzly is a symbol for the beast in man though it also suggests that, should man exterminate his own species, another animal species would take his place as "rulers" of the earth. As was discussed earlier, the vestigial history of evolution in Pratt's men does not have quite the same effect; his characters, even Brébeuf, the saintly "evil-one," are not held back in their effective section by a schizophrenic self-division--man is not so ironically a part of nature as he is in Birney.

Birney's interest in the evolution of man and nature in (and from) ocean may be as understated as it is here in "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth."

> The shore snouts up again
> spilling beachlogs glossy and dry
> as sloughed snakeskins
> but with sodden immovable hearts
> heigh ho the logs that no one wants
> and the men that sit on the logs
> that no one wants
> while the sea repeats what it said
> to the first unthinking frogs
> and the green wounds of the granite stones
>
> By cold depths and by cliffs
> whose shine will pass any moment now
> the shore puts an end to my ledge.[18]

The sea is both the beginning and end of life--it is the place from where the shore first "snouted up," it is that which spoke to the "first unthinking frogs" and it is

even that which first gave a word to the "green wounds of the granite stones," the initial lichens and mosses. It is also that which continues to slough off bodies, unwanted snake skins of driftlogs, unwanted men who sit upon them. And it is also that which casts an edge to the land, to the lives islanded upon time.

> The theme lies in the layers
> made and unmade by the nudging lurching
> spiralling down from nothing
>
> down through the common explosion of time
> through the chaos of suns
> to the high seas of the spinning air,
>
> where the shelves form and re-form down
> through cirrus to clouds on cracking peaks
> to the terraced woods, and the shapeless town
> and its dying shapers[19]

The order Birney describes is fluid; its "layers/ made and unmade" "spiralling down from nothing" are not accumulating a fossil record in sedimentary rock, nor do they create a qualitative "chain of being." Birney depicts creation as "spiralling down from nothing" and maintaining its original chaotic quality of something oceanic, something in which forms exist and are subject to motion but in which orders are transitory relationships.

Birney adds to the movement in the landscape of Canadian poetry from the land to the sea though in quite a different way than does Pratt. He writes, as it were, after the fact; the "landscape" has become a sea and he moves from there, sometimes describing skies or even moun-

tains in terms of oceans-"the high seas of the spinning air" above, or, in "North Star West":

> We are a gull whirring alone
> on a snowfrothed ocean of mountains
> south to the humped breakers of Waterton our eyes
> like planets roam are held to the pronged wave of
> Assiniboine
> pass to the tilted floes of Columbia's icefields
> and beyond to Robson a foam on the northernmost swell[20]

Looking down from the plane he sees the Rockies below him, the landscape of his childhood home, as an ocean. The description is pictorially accurate, as anyone who has flown over these mountains might observe, but the significance is more than just that. Up in the sky it is possible for him to achieve a merged and comprehensive view of his country, as much as anything, an emotional sense of what its identity is and how he has been a part of it. "For a space we held in our morning's hand/ the welling and wildness of Canada." This view is lost as:

> lassooing Vancouver's noon in the arc of our turn
>
> We sink and are stayed
> on the pitiless hardness of earth
> Billboards and baggage checks master us
> headlines open old wounds
> we bruise in a cabfull of cares to the city[21]

Birney's reflections upon ocean as the typical landscape of life tend to produce a kind of pessimism, or at least, a sense of morbidity, which is unlike Pratt's more optimistic (to Birney, naive) response. Where Pratt sees the continuing creative challenges of life as a hopeful and sustaining promise that man's deaths and errors are not

apt to inhibit, Birney places more weight on the destructive and errosive aspects of this chaotic fluidity--he sees a downward rather than a horizontal motion as typical.

dreaming my own unraveled plots
between eating water and eaten shore
in this hour of the tired and homing
retired dissolving
in the days of the separate wait
for the mass dying

and I having clambered down to the last
shelf of the grasping world of lungs
do not know why I too wait and stare
before descending the final step
into the clouds of the sea

The beat beating is the soft cheek
nudging of the sly shoving almost
immortal ocean at work
on the earth's liquidation[22]

Another area of congruency between Pratt's poetry and Birney's can be found in their interest in vehicles, machines of transport and communication: ships, planes, trains, radios. It is not by accident that Pratt chose to write the story of the Titanic sailing with the cream of society from Europe to North America and sinking disastrously without reaching her destination. Nor is it by accident that he wrote an epic about the building of the railroad across Canada, the story of how we came not simply to extend from sea to sea (the connections being maintained by the veins of transport already cut and functioning through the U.S.A. and simply shooting northwards in the west to link B.C. and the Prairies with points east) but in Blake's phrase "To build a Road over

that sea of mountains." Pratt's epic is one of forging under hardship and with luck a means of passing bodily through our own country, through ourselves, through a sea of mountains. (And Birney starts out sitting high up in those very mountains thinking the sky is also a sea).

> Had Blake the lift of Chatham as he had
> Burke's wind and almost that sierra span
> Of mind, he might have carried the whole House
> With him and posted it upon that sea
> Of mountains with sub-zeros on their scalps,
> Their glacial ribs waiting for warmth of season
> To spring an avalanche.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Sir John's "from sea to sea" was Biblical;
> It had the stamp of reverent approval;
> But Blake's was pagan, frightening, congealing.[23]

Pratt's vehicles become symbols for societies; they are often large and hold many people. An exception is the row-boat in "In Absentia" but that vessel becomes symbolic of the culture buoying up the English teacher which, when capsized, leaves him floating-free and discovering amazing things about himself and his language.[24] It is significant too that numbers of Pratt's vehicles are destroyed; this coincides with his whole evolutionary attitude towards forms that for a given period may seem capable of sustaining life. He seems to visualize man and his societies as almost inherently incomplete and imperfect, as lacking in coordinating wisdom and all too easily steered into disasters. Man is himself seen as partly vehicle; even in "Newfoundland" where much stress is placed on the natural

unity of man, history, and ocean, man becomes a vessel for life which is, as energy, always conserved, sometimes flowing here and sometimes there. The machines in the poetry can serve as warnings to man. "The Man and The Machine" needs little elucidation.

> By right of fires that smelted ore
> Which he had tended years before,
> The man whose hands were on the wheel
> Could trace his kinship through her steel,
> Between his body warped and bent
> In every bone and ligament,
> And this "eight-cylinder" stream-lined,
> The finest model yet designed.
> He felt his lesioned pulses strum
> Against the rhythm of her hum,
> And found his nerves and sinews knot
> With sharper spasm as she climbed
> The steeper grades, so neatly timed
> From storage tank to piston shot--
> This creature with the cougar grace,
> This man with slag upon his face.[25]

In Birney's poem, "Man on a Tractor,"[26] we find the machine he rides upon reminding the man of the hardness inside him, a harshness bred of bitter experience with poverty and war, boxcars and tanks. Yet he comes to the conclusion that it is better for him to be sitting and sweating on this symbol for "the iron in his chest" and making it work for him than it is for those "cool tourists/ moving on hired ponies under the posed avalanche." They do not recognize the destructiveness inside themselves and are thus unable to control it. This apprehension is similar to the fear in Pratt's "The Man and The Machine" that through our prideful misunderstanding of our machines we will increase our bestiality.

Perhaps the best way of assessing the similarities in these two poets' use of machines is simply to point out that they both, characteristically, write about men in motion. Even in such essentially meditative poems as "Six-sided Square: Actopan"[27] and "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth," Birney's characters are in motion. In Pratt's poetry motion is also frequently the building, fighting, surviving actions of man.

Radios appear frequently in Pratt's poetry and occasionally in Birney's. Pratt's fascination began when as a youth he followed Marconi's experiments at transmitting messages from Newfoundland. The valuableness of this machine made a strong impression on him for he spends perhaps a quarter of his "Foreword" to Behind the Log describing and explaining how he had a sense of the radio almost being magical.[28] Actually, it is not the machine itself he finds so wonderful but the ability of men to structure guesses from the limited information it gives them, to navigate with it through dangers. The radio is but a vehicle for the human voice.

> They did not wait till miracles of science
> Unstopped the naked ears for supersonics,
> Or lifted cataracts from finite vision
> To make night and its darkness visible.
> How long ago was it since sailors blew
> Their sirens at the cliffs while nearing land,
> Traversing channels, cocked their ears and waited?
> "Where did you hear that echo, mate?"
> "Right off
> The starboard quarter, Captain. Took ten seconds."
> "That's Gull Rock there a mile away. Where now?"

"Two seconds for the echo from port bow."
"That's orpoise Head I reckon--Hard a-port!"
. . . . . .

But though the radio burst and vacuum tubes
And electronic beams were miracles
Of yesterday, dismissing cloud and rain
And darkness as illusions of the sense,
Yet always there to watch the colours, note
The V-break in the beam's straight line, to hear
The echoes, feel the pain, are eyes, ears, nerves:
Always remains the guess within the judgment
To jump the fine perfection of the physics
And smell mortality behind the log.[29]

In Pratt's poetry radios are typically found in times of stress when a hot electric knowledge is passed over or into a stormy sea or across a ragged continent. As a metaphor for human speech communication, which, in Pratt, is inevitably limited and incomplete, the radio messages are cryptic and sometimes not read. Yet they remain, for all their tenuousness, the sole chance for help and communication between the ships (of state?) crossing the world's oceans. In at least one poem, a radio message becomes the symbol for something more than simple human communication; it takes on connotations of the "Word," an original creative power. In "The Radio in the Ivory Tower," his narrative is symbolically provocative as well as characteristically straightforward.

This is the cloister of the world,
Reduced to a cell in the fortress of peace
In the midst of anonymous, infinite darkness.

A slight turn of a dial,
And night and space and the silence
Thronged and tongued with life--
As the hosts might swarm through a lens
From a blood drop
Or a spot of dust in the heavens.[30]

In Birney's "Transistor"[31] the radio also seems almost magical; here, it is a metaphor for cultural transfer and has Orphic overtones. The visiting professor is caught up entirely in the performance of an old woman singing. Her total being and all its past is sending out transmissions to him. She grasps her broom handle like a microphone not simply because she is broadcasting her voice but because her gesture is being amplified to the narrator by his intense interest in drawing from her the fullest possible communication.

> the old woman was belting songs out
> as if she had to send them all the way
> back to the sea and the canebrakes
>
> they came now whorling
> as if her voice were immortal and separate
> within her and she only the toughened reed
> vibrated still by the singing dead
> by the slaved and the half-free
> . . . . . .

At the same time the narrator is listening to the woman singing a young couple are just as intently concentrating on the eminations of a transistor radio.

> Two faces black and anxious
>
> leant together under the transistor
> They'd found a nail in a pillar to hang it by
> The morning disc spin from Puerto Rico
> was sending a Hollywood cowboy
> from last year's Parade
> The machine swung his voice from shriek
> to silence and back
>
> I suppose they'd been listening to him
> as exclusively as I to her
> and out of just as much need
> to exchange our pasts

Birney seems to be making the point that we hear what we are interested in hearing but, also, that the world is full of "transistor" voices, of expressions which need to take a direct object in order to complete their sense. Everything is sending out information about itself but this is meaningless unless somewhere there is a will set to receive. Radios, music, poetry offer an elliptical and necessarily abbreviated message which is, however, capable of passing through distance or time to link isolated places and people, to make of them transitive verbs as well as objects. However, in typical Birney fashion, there is also the ironical and half-amused warning that those who "tune in and turn on" to the distorted messages passing through great distances may well be missing out on some equally valid transmissions from close at hand; that the fullest informations is available when more than just one sense is tuned to receive.

It would be possible to explore further areas of congruency between Pratt's poety and Birney's--their war poetry; the similar dialectics operating in each between love and the beast in man's breast and his history; their visions of macrocosms in microcosms and vice versa, of man as a hieroglyph or the world as an atom-- but we have here taken note of some things which seem representative or indicative of a specific response in Birney's work to

Pratt's. It has not been intended to project Birney as a Prattian disciple but to reveal some areas in which Canadian poetry has functioned as a forum. If there is a tradition in Canadian poetry it may be found in this kind of forum, it may also be found in such characteristic demands upon poet and reader as Birney made, below, in 1945.

> Lie where the breakers are crashing like glass
> on the varnished sand
> writing their garrulous arabic
>
> Dive from the shining fluted land
> through the water's mesh
> to the crab's dark flower and the starfish
>
> Trail the laggard fins of your flesh
> in the world's lost home
> and wash your mind of its landness[32]

NOTES

[1]The Strait of Anian, (Toronto, Ryerson, 1948).

[2]Ibid., respectively pp. 3, 37, 14, 36, 57, 60, 69, 84.

[3]"E. J. Pratt and His Critics," reprinted in Canadian Anthology, ed. Carl F. Klinck and R.E. Watters, revised edition, (Toronto, Gage, 1966), pp. 529-534. The "aims" Birney picks out are the following:

> When Pratt writes a poem . . . he throws a party, he is out to give pleasure, help us in fact to a good, rowdy, hell-kicking release. He believes, moreover, that poetry is a ball for a lot of people or at least about a lot of people. (p. 529)
>
> He had always wanted to be, in Wordsworth's phrase, "a man speaking to men," to communicate widely, emphatically, in language free of poetic diction, new or old, in images unclouded by private symbol, and in a style in control of itself, rather than under the control of baroque wit. Prosody, Pratt wrote, should be "put in service to the organic structure and order of language." (p. 529)
>
> A further aim . . . has been in his own words "to give body" to poetry through "research." This is why he soaked himself in the thirty-odd volumes of the Jesuit Relations before attempting Brébeuf, and why he went "behind the log" of a naval battle to make an actual voyage in one of the ships that had fought. These are not the actions of a mere versifying encyclopedist, a Canadian Erasmus Darwin substituting facts for feelings, but of a man whose capacity for feeling is so great he is like a smelter furnace demanding stacks of raw life for fuel (p. 530).
>
> As to Pratt's philosophy and morality, despite all that recent critics have said, I cannot see that it is consciously anything other than those "democratic visions" he spoke of, and his insistence on the necessity and value of struggle to realize and extend these visions. (p. 530)

> The Marathons past and present are to him the enduring themes, and nature on this earth is a scene for the working-out of the human principle, whether for the manlike in beast or the godlike in man. Man is the unique creature, the rebel, the thing of illimitable capacity for creation or destruction, the one unpredictable being in a mechanistic cosmos, the truant of the universe. (p. 530).

[4]Ibid., p. 532.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid., p. 531.

[7]Ibid., p. 534.

[8]Ibid., p. 532.

[9]In late March, 1970, to a group of Al Purdy's students who were interviewing Birney in Vancouver.

[10]See "Anglosaxon Street," "War Winter," "Mappemounde," etc. I hear As For Me and My House in "Winter Saturday."

[11]For examples of how this "fusion" takes place, look at "Atlantic Door," "Pacific Door"--lines like "over gargantuan whalehalls/ In this lymph's abyss . . ." See also "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth."

[12]Perhaps the reference to Jellicoe in the same poem derives from Pratt's mention of him in Behind the Log but as "Atlantic Door" was written in 1945 (so Birney claims in Selected Poems) this is not probable. I have not seen the poem published before 1948, however, and the line in which Jellicoe is mentioned has been rewritten between The Strait of Anian version and that of Selected Poems so it is just possible that Jellicoe was an addition to "Atlantic Door" made after Pratt's Behind the Log was published in 1947.

[13]"Newfoundland," Newfoundland Verse, (Toronto, Ryerson, 1923), and "The Ebb Begins From Dream," Selected Poems 1940-1966, (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1966), p. 108.

[14]"Conference of Heads," Selected Poems, p. 86.

[15]"The Titanic," The Collected Poems of E.J. Pratt, second edition, ed. Northrop Frye, (Toronto, MacMillan, 1962), p. 214.

[16]"Towards The Last Spike," The Collected Poems, p. 363.

[17]"Time Bomb," Selected Poems, p. 150.

[18]Selected Poems, p. 140.

[19]Ibid. p. 134.

[20]Ibid., p. 106.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid., pp. 135-136.

[23]"Towards The Last Spike," Collected Poems, p. 360.

[24]"In Absentia," Newfoundland Verse, p. 34.

[25]Collected Poems, p. 39.

[26]The Strait of Anian, pp. 74-76.

[27]Selected Poems, p. 43.

[28]"Foreword," Behind the Log, (Toronto, Macmillan, 1945).

[29]"Behind the Log," Collected Poems, pp. 312-313.

[30]Collected Poems, p. 86.

[31]Selected Poems, p. 53.

[32]"Gulf of Georgia," Selected Poems, p. 132.

CHAPTER VI

IRVING LAYTON: THE SWIMMER'S NEIGHBOURHOOD

One of Layton's earliest poems and the first in his A Red Carpet for the Sun, "The Swimmer,"[1] invites comparison with Klein's "Lone Bather."[2] They both involve the narrator, the swimmer or bather, in a process of reverse evolution which takes on a complex emotional significance. While these poems are partly escapist fantasies they are equally attempts to explore reality; both poems suppose that something more real exists than is allowed in the general course of a public afternoon and each narrator is, in his own way, setting out to confront that other reality. What this particular reality is differs from poem to poem although each swimmer is involved in a process of self expression or creative self-realization.

Klein's private self is highly sensual; the pool in which he bathes is a place of delightful, almost childlike fantasy. Not watched, he cavorts in the water, playing with his troop of echoes and frollicking in this "great big bed." It is simple sensuality: "He feels good." But he is quite accepting of the afternoon's eventual demands upon him and willing to deny his private world's right to remain primary when the time comes to rub "the bird, the plant, the dolphin back again/ personable plain."

Klein's trip back through physical history, his return to the womb and re-birth, seems almost just a game; he "swims fancy and gay." The diver who:

lets go

> lets go his manshape to become a bird.
> Is a bird, and topsy-turvey
> the pool floats overhead, and the white tiles snow
> their crazy hexagons. Is dolphin. Then
> is plant with lilies bursting from his heels.

is thoroughly enjoying the process of becoming "Himself, suddenly mysterious and marine." He notes with interest his changing shapes, remarking the possibility of himself as bird, or dolphin, or "plant with lilies bursting from his heels." In letting go his manshape he has also let go the outside world. While he has the pool's interior spaces to himself he enjoys his play there, however, even though his lovely watery identities are harshly contrasted with the "personable plain" of "Up, he is chipped enamel, grained with hair," the reader feels that Klein's narrator sees the bather and the man on the street as equally valid aspects of himself, possibly even balancing realities.

Layton's swimmer is not so accepting of his roles nor so gentle a bather, nor is he content with being "personable plain." His imagery in "The Swimmer," though somewhat reminiscent of Klein's, is violent and sexual.

> The afternoon foreclosing, see
> The swimmer plunges from his raft,
> Opening the spray corollas by his act of war--
> The snake heads strike
> Quickly and are silent.

Emerging see how for a moment
A brown weed with marvellous bulbs,
He lies imminent upon the water
While light and sound come with a sharp passion
From the gonad sea around the Poles
And break in bright cockle-shells about his ears.

The swimmer leaves his raft, prompted by the "fore-closing afternoon and the setting sun, to swim to shore. This would be a simple action if the narrator's passage through the water, the various relationships between the elements (sun and water in particular), and his images of the "skull-like beach" did not seem so disturbing to him. His passage is passionate, he becomes a kind of violent lover to the water. The swimmer is first reptilian (snake), then becomes vegetable ("brown weed with marvelous bulbs") lying "imminent upon the water." Moving again, he becomes a "male salmon."

He dives, floats, goes under like a thief
Where his blood sings to the tiger shadows
In the scentless greenery that leads him home,
A male salmon down fretted stairways
Through underwater slums . . .

But he is caught up short before he can complete the process of retreat through his physical or evolutionary history to an ancient neighbourhood:

Stunned by the memory of lost gills
He frames gestures of self-absorption
Upon the skull-like beach;
Observes with instigated eyes
The sun that empties itself upon the water,
And the last wave romping in
To throw its boyhood on the marble sand.

The swimmer resents being thrown up upon the sand, of having

to frame "gestures of self-absorption"; he is intensely frustrated and seems to be suggesting that other forms and the environment of those "underwater slums" were more satisfying to him. His blood sang to "the tiger shadows" of the sea but his "instigated eyes" can only watch the sun empty itself and its red light upon the water as he rests upon the "skull-like beach"--the "marble sand" which seems almost a mortuary table, upon which he is himself drained, at least emotionally, of vital fluids. Layton's swimmer, unlike Klein's, does not welcome his role as evolved and civilizing translation and translator of life; he suggests, moreover, that his role is sacrificial and has been thrust upon him, that only innocence and naivete allowed "the last wave romping in/ To throw its boyhood on the marble sand." Man, the "last wave" of "the gonad sea," is trapped and cannot steal back through "the scentless greenery that leads him home."

Pratt and Layton are so distinct from one another both in method and in motive that it is a little surprising to find any connection between them. Layton's poetic landscape is frequently the human body and his metaphors are often sexual (Pratt seems about as determinedly asexual as Layton is sexual) but in some of Layton's poems we do find water becoming an important and primal environment or symbol. A specific connection between the two may be "The

Cold Green Element,"[3] a poem which could have been inspired by an image in Pratt's "The Drowning."[4]

The most memorable thing about Pratt's rather stilted lyric is the conflict between conscious and subconscious in the last stanza.

> A cottage inland
> Through a year of days
> Has latched its doors on the sea;
> But at night
> I return in my sleep
> To the cold, green lure of the waters.

The magnetism of the final image is increased by the effect it has of releasing the narrator from the tension of his tight daily consciousness, his inland cottage with latched doors (in contrast to the seabord cottages of "Newfoundland" whose doors were left ajar in storms). The final image in Layton's poem also has a releasing effect though his apparatus for creating it is very different from Pratt's, as is his vision of what constitutes the poet/narrator's tightened daily consciousness.

> A black dog howls down my blood,
> a black dog with yellow eyes;
> he too by someone's inadvertence
> saw the bloodsmear
> on the broad catalpa leaves.
>
> But the furies clear a path for me to the worm
> who sang for an hour in the throat of a robin,
> and misled by the cries of young boys
> I am again
> a breathless swimmer in that cold green element.

Layton's use of this final image is striking. The drowned poet, both the one hung from the city gates and

also Layton's narrator (if they are separate characters), have been breathless swimmers in that cold green element. The narrator, who was moved by the furies out of his element, and like the worm "in the throat of a robin," given throat and voice "for an hour"--provided with an artificial ability to sing during his brief passage towards death--is really achieving a release of sorts in being allowed to drown again into anonymity. Pratt's poet points a strong contrast between daily existence and private, dream existence. At night the sea enters the cottage through his dreams and it is then that he can return to its cold green lure; during the day the wheels of time have softened the sharp edge of his grief, his sense of loss in bereavement (the face he remembers may even be his own). Layton's poem seems to be associated with "The Swimmer"--here, finally, in his role as poet the man can let go entirely and be breathless, be without physical limitation. He cannot in his imaginary world be caught short by his loss of gills. Both poets seem to be saying that they can only cope with their great sense of death's bereavement through their dreams; that death closes in on them in the daytime but in their subconscious they can face the reality of dying, can swim/move/act within the "cold green element" that is both death and the generative sea of the mind coping with death and life.

"Thoughts in the Water"[5] seems to be a poem about a

paradox apparent in much of Layton's water imagery--he begins by thinking "not of drowning. But of the female element" however that female element is quickly reduced to "green ointment" and then further reduced to "this featureless waste."

> Not of drowning. But of the female element
> that swaddles my limbs thrashing.
> I roll, a careless animal,
> in the green ointment;
> face down, my forehead bringing
> intelligence into this featureless waste.

Sex, death, and fertility all seem to be bound together in Layton's water imagery; despite his avowal that he is not thinking of death at the beginning of the poem, Layton's narrator finds himself drawn through a thought progression that inevitably brings him to his fear of drowning and the contrasting vision of his child and the child's hens, "laying like mad," the fecundity of the future generations contrasting with his already partly spent life.

> I fall from her clasp, shuddering,
> a senseless interloper, afraid;
> see I shall rise on the water
> drowned, and dismally rise;
> remember the face of my child, Adrian on the hill
> and all his hens that were laying like mad.

"Boys Bathing"[6] is a poem in which Layton uses imagery of evolution to work out a personal view or set of symbols. The sun is the great source of power but sun, blood, and water imagery are brought together in his description. Each boy, "as the philosophers/ would remind us" is "a compendium of history." They are:

Not like the dead bass
I saw afloat,
its history
what my eye made for it.

The child, as Layton explains in"One View of a Dead Fish,"[7] owns "some proof/ of birth, and sagacious forbears," "someone to mourn, a name." But he also holds in himself a physical history--he drcords his evolutionary past in the compendium of his body. Unselfconsciousness allows animal behavior reflecting this:

One bounces like a porpoise,
the tallest ones
race for the boat;
squeals, unselfconsciousness.

But even in the youngest boy intellect dominates. His play is stopped by a kind of amused curiosity, his personal vision of inanimate objects appearing animated.

But the youngest stops,
smiles at himself vaguely; at,
below the surface, the boulders
breathing like fish.

In the last stanza the imagery of blood, water and sun is brought into a vivid finale. The boys become aquatic Atlases, only now they support a dying sun (a diminishing source of strength and growth in the solar system and on earth) instead of the globe. The water is covered with the sun's shed blood, the power and responsibility for history shifts into a new generation. History, of which the boys are a compendium, is seen not as a constant continuum of indestructible energy of life but as a

life of itself which is like all other life-span's, limited.

> The sun is bleeding to death,
> covering the lake
> with its luxuriant blood:
> the sun is dying on their shoulders.

The waters often become associated with both death and life, become a sexual symbol of fertility and generation. In "The Widows"[8] the sea is not exactly "the female element" but is rather associated with "that cold green element," a kind of cool, intellectually creative power. The "green and fertile sea" which the narrator claims as personally his, is associated in action with "a wind out of the centuries" defeating the forces of death and impotence (the spiders widowed because they ate their mates); it is also associated with "Diogenes' great sun" which causes the lovers to rise and so ensures that all nature is blest.

> "Step back, sucking spiders,
> Dire conquerors,
> And let Diogenes' great sun
> Shine on my form of man.
> Your lovers shall rise with me.
> See through the bunching air
> Their limbs begin to stir
> And a froth falls from the youngest.
> Go, hang your sad cloaks from a tree
> For now is all nature blest."
>
> Like stricken shadows
> The twilight folds together
> They fell, their faces pale,
> Into one another.
> Then I roared and a wind
> Out of the centuries
> Hurled them sadly shrinking
> Against a blasted tree
> To mark--O grey diminutive rag--
> My green and fertile sea.

This green and fertile sea can also provide a pagan kind of baptism. The "waters where ends all sin" of "Laurentian Rhapsody"[9] are both those in which the lovers swim freely and also, perhaps, the final waters of death.

> And we'll make such noise the fish shall come
> To lead us out in a moonlight swim.
>
> On the rock the priest's girl will preside
> While Beauty and Age swim side by side.
>
> Bless the mistress, bless her young priest,
> Bless my grey hairs and your lovely breast.
>
> Bless the village, O bless this cabin,
> And bless the waters where ends all sin. Amen.

The lovers are engaging in a kind of sacrament for which the waters become a symbol.

In "My Flesh Comfortless,"[10] the last poem in A Red Carpet for the Sun, Layton's narrator asks:

> In community of soil and sun
> Let me not taste this desolation
>
> But hear roar and pour of waters unseen
> In mountains that parallel my road--
> Sun vaulting gold against their brightest green!

It is interesting that Layton should choose the vibrant conjunction of sun and water as his closing image. He wants "Love" to "enclose me in your cold bead/ O lift me like a vine-leaf on the vine;" he asks to be made like a water drop himself or but a green anonymous vine-leaf--he wants to be freed of his "flesh comfortless" and be but one element of many in a lively nature. He seeks "community of soil and sun" and only asks that he might hear the "roar and pour of waters unseen." The vision expresses the

same sense of man being in a very real and physical way a part of nature that we have encountered elsewhere. It is perhaps a poetic extension of the scientific truths which underlie it but avoids becoming sentimental by retaining the sense of conflict--that man must relinquish his separate identity in order to take comfort in the anonymity of nature. That he is generally unable and unwilling to give up his separate and critical abilities accounts for the fact that most of the visions of the drowned poet, whether he be drowned in the ocean, the thin air, or a bead of water, take the form of wishful thinking. It is generally a dream state, this drowning, and, in some places (like Pratt) this is definitely acknowledged. In the release from separate identity the poet finds in his dreams he can actually merge with animal, vegetable, cyclical nature--he can dive down deep into the sea and be again a swimmer in that cold green element.

In his "Foreword" to A Red Carpet for the Sun Layton explains in other terms what it is he seeks as an environment:

> I am not at ease in the world (what poet ever is?); but neither am I fully at ease in the world of the imagination. I require some third realm as yet undiscovered, in which to live. My dis-ease has spurred me on to bridge the two with stilts of poetry, or to create inside me an ironic balance of tensions.

Eli Mandel launches from this statement to examine Layton's use of irony in his study[11] but it is possible to see the above quotation as simply an expression of the kind of tension Pratt's narrator reduced to simple terms in "The Drowning"--the conflict between the conscious and the unconscious (or subconscious) minds, also the conflict between the will and the reality of the imagination.

NOTES

[1]A Red Carpet for the Sun, (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1960), p. 1.

[2]"Lone Bather," The Rocking Chair and Other Poems, (Toronto, Ryerson, 1948), p. 37.

[3]A Red Carpet for the Sun, p. 78.

[4]The Collected Poems of E.J. Pratt, second edition, ed. Northrop Frye, (Toronto, Macmillan, 1962), p. 9.

[5]A Red Carpet for the Sun, p. 122.

[6]Ibid., p. 127.

[7]Ibid., p. 146.

[8]Ibid., p. 174.

[9]Ibid., p. 190.

[10]Ibid., p. 210.

[11]Irving Layton: Canadian Writers and Their Works, ed. William French, (Toronto, Forum House, 1969).

CHAPTER VII

MARGARET AVISON: CREATIVITY FROM A FLUX OF SPIRIT

Margaret Avison is essentially a poet of life as a sensory and spiritual experience, of a detailed and living universe as a flux of spirit. She describes how "this/ chaos singling off/ in a new Genesis" is gathered together into an "all-swallowing moment/ once more"--yet that "moment" is itself "radium" and gives off particles continually, without exhaustion; the center is radio-active. In the later poems at least, this becomes a specifically Christian statement.

In "Searching and Sounding" the narrator has been brought by the "you," who is apparently Christ, to "the place of/ baked stone, dryness, famine,/ of howling among the tombs."[6] She has seen the failures of health and spirit in the "roominghouse" where she is a social worker, and has been overwhelmed by the failures of herself and the spirit of healing, the power of making well. This causes her to deny Christ saying that she needs "something human, somebody now, here, with me." In reply the "you" whom she denies "have come and sounded/ a new music round me, newly:"

> as though you can clear
> all tears from our eyes only
> if we sound the wells of weeping with
> another's heart, and hear
> another's music only.

It would seem that comfort and effective action become dependent here upon the willingness of the individual to give up his separate nature, to enter the full hell of the experience of another. And this is apparently extended in the last section of the poem when the Christ is himself broken down and "ground by sea-slimed teeth" in his Descent. The ocean seems to be the place of the genesis of life forms which might be seen as germinating from the disintegration of the Christ--when he is "ground" the verb suggests that he also becomes the noun, "ground," as in Ground-of-all-Being, an interpretation which is supported by the next two lines:

> to the farthest reaches
> where your Descent began, on the beach gravel
> ground by sea-slimed teeth . . .
> those bloodless horses . . . .
>
> To what strange fruits in
> the ocean's orchards?

But in the next, and final, section of the poem the action is hard to follow. It seems to be reversing the statement of the preceding section and is perhaps saying that the Christ was not ground down by the ocean, was not attacked by its forms, its eroding waves, but was "Reaching" out "with Light that is perfect." The "You" did not need to be brought into the "ocean's orchards" of vegetable generation in order to make "all newness--/ all being" yet reached out to be ground, chose to descend, "that the remotest fishrib," might "make towards the fullness you/

put off, there." Exactly what is meant here is hard to say but it would seem that even in disintegration the "you" is still "the radium," "the all-swallowing moment." Perhaps the ocean has become a symbolic Eden, the shore a symbolic Hell and the narrator is saying that what she sees from her position is the fragmentation and destruction of the Christ in life but that those fragments are not destroyed but engaged in an all-inclusive generative process. She is apparently also comparing the failures of herself with this disintegration and asking that all of her "fragments" might be gathered into this greater unity which seems both Christ and the vegetably generative ocean, which may also be supposed to include the generative and lovely earth.

> From the first dews, the
> grasses at their budding,
> fragrance of mountain snow
> and sunfat cedars
> to the farthest reaches
> where your Descent began, on the beach gravel
> ground by sea-slimed teeth . . .
> those bloodless horses . . . .
>
> To what strange fruits in
> the ocean's orchards?
>
> Reaching
> with Light that is perfect, needed no
> kernels to swell nor juices to syrup nor
> no further making--<u>all</u> newness--
> <u>all</u> being
> that the remotest fishrib,
> the hairiest pink-thing there
> might as one fragment
> make towards the fullness you
> put off, there, on the
> ravening shore I view, from

my gull-blanched cliffs,
and shiver,
GATHER my fragments towards
the radium, the
all-swallowing moment
once more.

It would seem that Avison's Christianity has been sent to school in the scientific-evolutionary ideas we have been considering elsewhere. In "Waking Up,"[7] written before her conversion experience, she seems to be constructing a world dominated by animal-evolution yet including further reaches of the spirit--a Genesis flavoured with Darwin. The "monkey-/grinder habit" which appears to be the diurnal history of life as a repetition of "Monkey colour" mornings rising from "the pond" (but is also apparently man himself) "grinds out curbs, scurrying,/dust,/ day." Man, who is made from dust, makes more dust--monkey-coloured dust. And that dust colours his environment:

Monkey colour, morning smokes from
the pond. Looped and festooned
with fawn heraldic rags
trees wait. Seawall of day
deafens the turmoil the true seafarer,
the Wanderer, fronts.

The "true seafarer" apparently is one who escapes the confines of monkey-life and faces the turmoil--of the unknown? The sea is contrasted with the pool of diurnal existence; the "turmoil" the Wanderer fronts with the "today," "Like soil no inchworm's excremental course/ has rendered friable." The today, unplowed by worms, not

broken or yet turned by turmoil to dust, is "mute quantum/ of all past pitted against sun." Man seems to be offered two choices of movement, that of the "true seafarer" who wanders over the vast oceans or that of the "inchworm's excremental course" which slowly eats its way through the soil.

> Like soil no inchworm's excremental course
> has rendered friable,
> today, mute quantum
> of all past pitted against sun,
> weighs, a heft of awareness, on
> tallow, brawn, auricle,
> iris. Till monkey-
> grinder habit turning his organ
> grinds out curbs, scurrying,
> dust,
> day.

Avison's vision of evolution is also Christianized: in "Of Creatures the Net"[8] what she seems to be saying is that in the net or chain of physical, sensory history has been caught the "scattered and bound" "child Jesus." And what is more, that the net or chain of creatures exists for the sake of catching God within sensory perception.

In this poem she seems to be engaging in an argument similar to that which we find in "Searching and Sounding" and once again the sea is an important image. It seems to be associated with the registering of sensory perception, and with the unity of all--"forsaken brother/ And elder other," all creatures past and present--.

The sea becomes a water-drop and is compared with the perceiving eye--that which brings life into being by

registering its presence--and then the whole globe "Wherein all natures move." Its "great membrane" is "the skin/ That holds their troubles in" and "Is by us not broken." We are part of "the chain of ocean" which in "all natures" carries "the child Jesus;" man is not made in the image of God and given soul to separate him from the animals but rather finds that he is inevitably bound to all creation and that what soul /God/ Christ exists for him exists in all.

Of Creatures the Net

i

Of creatures the net and chain
Stretched like that great membrane
The soft sore ocean
Is by us not broken;

And like an eye or tongue
Is wet and sensing;
And by the ends drawn up
Will strain but not snap.

ii

And in all natures we
The primitive he and she
Carry the child Jesus,
Those suffering senses

That in us see and taste,
With us in absence fast,
For whose scattered and bound
Sake we are joined.

iii

Of the seas the wide cup
Shrinks to a water-drop,
The creatures in its round
As in an eye contained,

And that eye still the globe
Wherein all natures move,
Still tough the skin
That holds their troubles in.

iv

In all the green flood
More closely binds than blood;
Though windowed like a net
Lets none forget

The forsaken brother
And elder other;
Divided is unbroken,
Draws with the chain of ocean.

In "The Iconoclasts"[9] Avison suggests that there is a route through the "more primitive nakedness" of the sea into an experience of life's spiritual realities. Contrasting with this is "a dark Scandinavian destiny" of "lurking matriarchal wolves" or "iron laurels" which offers a closed, "secret circuit" reminiscent of "the inchworm's excremental course." She suggests that it is necessary to unscroll the "civic architecture" and "sculptured utterances of the Schools" if one is to find a "wild salvation wrapt within that white/ burst of pure art;" she proposes that forms, Platonic truths in effect, are discovered when we leave the caves of our shadowy and encompassing domesticated structures.

as the first men, when the bright release
Of sun filled them with sudden self-disdain
At bone-heaps, rotting pelts, muraled adventures,
Sought a more primitive nakedness.

Here the sea becomes a place for release from closed circuits and also a place where the individual is made

insignificant and his trappings meaningless.

> The Vikings rode the tasseled sea;
> Over their shoulders, running towards their boats,
> They had seen the lurking matriarchal wolves,
> Ducking their bright foreheads from the iron laurels
> Of a dark Scandinavian destiny,
> And chosen, rather, to be dwarfed to pawns
> Of the broad sulking sea.

In a number of places Avison writes about the necessity of "unscrolling" forms (as if they were waves); these may be intellectual constructions or they may be our own individual natures. This concern seems to be basic to "Dispersed Titles,"[10] though the poem is so loosely worked that it is adventuresome of the reader to draw conclusions about its intent.

> For Tycho Brahe's sake I find myself,
> but lose myself again for
> so few are salvaged
> in the sludge of the
> ancestral singular.

In this poem Avison seems to be writing in part, about the discoveries of two sixteenth century astronomers, Tycho Brahe and Johann Kepler. They assembled tables of astronomical observations which proved, among other things, that uniform motion has no existence in nature. And they replaced the Copernican model of the solar system (in which the planets had circular orbits) with one in which the orbits are irregular elipses. By "unscrolling" the classical concepts they provided the basis for man's ability to expand into space for their conclusions involved an initial recognition of the laws of gravity and motion.

For Avison, they also did something equally significant: they proved that the sun was the gravitational center of the now asymetrical solar system and since Avison's sun metaphors often become symbols for the son, Christ, who is the "Light of the world" this placement of it was significant allegorically. This latter aspect of their work does not seem to be important, however, in "Dispersed Titles."

The "Dispersed Titles" of this poem suggest that what Avison is trying to get at is the interdependence of motion and form, spirit and sense, knowledge and mystery, God and his creation. They run:

. . . [FLIGHT] . . .
. . . [HAS ROOTS] . .
. . . BUT IS CUT OFF . . .
. . . EXCEPT FROM ALL ITS SELVES . . .
. . . THE EARTH HAS OTHER ROOTS AND SELVES. . .
. . . THE NAMELESS ONE DWELLS IN HIS TENTS . . .
. . . AND "UP" IS A DIRECTION . . .

Her statements about the "roots" of flight, the vehicles which carry man away from the earth being made from elements mined in the earth, may recall her statements in "Of Creatures the Net." Avison seems attracted by such paradoxes of fragments gathered into a something else which can only exist by grace of "all its selves." The plane's flight depends on the minerals and the "hiero-

glyphs/ of chart and table;" the "nameless one" is found in his "tents;" the notion of direction is possibly only in relationship to something else; the titles are dispersed. As Brahe observed, motion is dependent upon the masses moving and influenced by their changing relationships--motion does not observe any separate order.

The airplane man pilots into "the sable air/ earth's static-electric fur" becomes "This little fierce fabrique" which:

> seals the defiant break
> with cycles, for old Tycho Brahe's sake.

The "little fierce fabrique" may also be the earth itself in which the airplane's flight has roots.

> Through the bleak hieroglyphs
> of chart and table
> thumb-tacked for winnowed navigators
> who stroke the sable air,
> earth's static-electric fur,
> who ride it bucked or level,
> master it with minerals gouged and fabricated
> out of it, insist
> on being part of it, gouged out,
> denatured nature, subject
> to laws self-corrugated,
> created out of it,
> through these hieroglyphs and chart
> mark with the hearing of the eye
> the bell rung hours of Tycho Brahe.

She expresses the difficulty of knowing the other roots and selves of the earth, those not mineable or measurable, explaining that:

> The northern centuries
> funnel me, a chute of
> steel and water tumbling,
> and I forget

She forgets the human history foreign to her northern environment but she also forgets "much more . . ."

> a name, not the made-name
> corrupted to man-magic, to fend off
> the ice

In this section, "THE NAMELESS ONE DWELLS IN HIS TENTS," and the last section, "AND "UP" IS A DIRECTION," she gets to the problem of man's limited ability to know and the false observations he makes because he simply lacks the details of information needed to construct the whole story. For herself, she solves the problem:

> Things I can't know I smell
> as plainly as if invisible campfires
> smoked: a hum of sightless suppers
> on the irridescent shore

But for others, the problem of approaching the mystery of "the nameless one" remains; she suggests that they are still bound by the symmetries of an assumed logical universe and cannot admit the possible order of an asymetrical, expanding universe. They still think "up" when looking at the sky, but Avison points out that "up" is a direction, that it is relative to man's position on the earth which is in turn relative to the earth's position in the solar system, and the solar system's position in a moving universe--that the direction and with it the comparative systems of knowledge relied on by man are quite meaningless once man moves, or attempts to move, out of the particular environment in which these relationships appear static

and standard.

Getting back to the individual and his relationships with his environment, she gives us the following passage in "The Local & the Lakefront."[11]

> On the flossed beaches here
> We're still curling our waves.
> Weather is tough.
> Things happen only to trees and the
> rivering grasses.
> A person is an alien.

The suggestion seems to be that we, who are "still curling our waves," are in the stage of breaking and pulling back, of forming ourselves into apparently individual contours. This is a primitive stage in our existence, one previous to that in which something can happen to us. We, divided by our "ships and cargoes," that which we are or carry with us which identifies us from one another, are aliens, strangers from one another and from nature. The underlying suggestion is that we must become anonymous, must accept that we are "committeeman," that the individual is part of a "we," is in fact a "committee" himself, and even more, is part of a greater unity. "Things happen only to trees and the / rivering grasses" because they do not suffer from the displacement man does--they have not made the ships and cargoes and cities in which we tend to find our meaning-but are related to, and so derive their meaning from, only what happens to them as parts of all nature. "A person is an alien" because he seeks himself in his own creations, in his separate identity. Avison insists upon

another kind of context:

> Committeeman:
> there are no ships or cargoes there.
> Believe me. Look. Admit it.
> Then we start clean:
> nothing earned; a nowhere to exchange
> among us few
> carefully.

The "nowhere" in which we can start clean reminds us of the ending of "The Swimmer's Moment."[12]

> With a despair, not for their deaths, but for
> Ourselves, who cannot penetrate their secret
> Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth
> Where one or two have won:
> (The silver reaches of the estuary).

Man, dwarfed by the sea's primitive nakedness, can still win to an anonymous nowhere which shall be "exchanged among us few/ carefully"--almost as a sacrament might be. Instead of sailing on the surface, of shaping the surface, the brave spirit in Avison's poems dives deep, relinquishing self to a sacramental death into what amounts to be a mystical experience of creative unity.

An underlying image in Avison's poems seems to be that of refining--the testing of the spirit, but even more the firing of it to burn out its impurities and leave it molten and formless, ready to be cast. In "The Swimmer's Moment" this process is effected by the whirlpool, a centrifuge of force which so flings out the characteristic impurities that the swimmers venturing into it are sealed up in "an eternal boon of privacy."

For everyone
The swimmer's moment at the whirlpool comes,
But many at that moment will not say,
"This is the whirlpool, then."
By their refusal they are saved
From the black pit, and also from contesting
The deadly rapids, and emerging in
The mysterious, and more ample, further waters.
And so their bland-blank faces turn and turn
Pale and forever on the rim of suction
They will not recognize.
Of those who dare the knowledge
Many are whirled into the ominous center
That, gaping vertical, seals up
For them an eternal boon of privacy,
So that we turn away from their defeat
With a despair, not for their deaths, but for
Ourselves, who cannot penetrate their secret
Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth
Where one or two have won:
(The silver reaches of the estuary).

This is a central poem; it was printed in Winter Sun, reprinted in The Dumbfounding, and is among the most satisfyingly coherent of Avison's works. To some extent it belongs with other poems we have been considering about drowned poets--those "one or two" who have passed through the experience of the whirlpool share the anonymity of Klein's poet in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape." They too have won a silvery environment, a passionless, mysterious, secret place. In Avison's poem they are not necessarily drowned though, given her Christianity, we may feel compelled to assume the estuary and its silver reaches beyond the spinning centrifuge of oceanic life symbolize a kind of heaven. Certainly, like the other drowned poets, hers have at least won a haven separate from our daily en-

vironment. It would seem yet another statement of the poet's alienation but more than that, it is in Avison a central experience--that of being whirled into anonymous otherness by the living environment through which we move. The sea is a known and generally supporting context; the swimmer who opts for a full, and here mystical, experience does so by relinquishing himself to the strongest cyclical motion of that sea. He stops swimming and enters the whirlpool--like Klein's bather, he "lets go/ lets go his manshape to become."

NOTES

[1]Winter Sun (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1960), pp. 29, 36.

[2]The Dumbfounding (New York, Norton, 1966), p. 60.

[3]"The Poetry of Margaret Avison," Canadian Literature 2: 47-58 (Autumn 1959), p. 47.

[4]"Critical Improvisations on Margaret Avison's Winter Sun," Tamarack Review 18: 81-86 (Winter 1961) p. 83.

[5]Ibid., p. 86.

[6]Dumbfounding, p. 60

[7]Poetry of Mid-Century 1940/ 1960, ed. Milton Wilson, general ed. Malcolm Ross (Toronto/ Montreal, McClelland and Stewart, 1964), p. 109.

[8]Ibid., p. 210.

[9]Ibid., p. 88.

[10]Winter Sun, p. 3.

[11]Poetry of Mid-Century, p. 108.

[12]Winter Sun, p. 36.

CHAPTER VIII

JAY MACPHERSON'S VISION OF THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF ALL CREATION

It is as hard to plunge cold into the middle of The Boatman as it is to turn oneself inside out; without some understanding of the family lines through Jay Macpherson's maze of archetypes (ark-types?) her poetry can seem as flat and unreal as a cartoon strip. However, for the purposes of this short study we must attempt to pull out only two lines of many from her patterned development. The first, and more important, is her vision of creation/evolution/environment; the second, her use of water-imagery.

Macpherson quite elegantly succeeds in evolutionizing the Bible--Noah, Eve, Adam, and so on join forces with other mythical figures of our foreign pasts and find themselves re-interpreted into a possibly acceptable though entirely abstract Canadian scene. Actually, the scene is so abstract that it represents everything and every place.

James Reaney says that Macpherson's central metaphor is "the myth of things within things."[1]

> We live in a Leviathan which God occasionally plays with and is always attempting to catch. Once we played with it and tried to catch it but it caught us instead. This myth is the central design of Miss Macpherson's book . . .
> . . . . . .

> What Miss Macpherson eventually seems to be saying, for example in her Ark poems, is that the God who plays with the monster of our universe has also got this Leviathan or universe within him. Man inside the Leviathan will one day become the God who plays rather than gets entrapped and finally the God with Leviathan inside him--Milton's "all in all."

This vision would seem to be quite similar in effect to that of other poets we have been considering--contemporary man containing in himself all his past and future, the creature and creator in one context which is man but is also all of nature. In the second poem of "The Boatman, "Poor Child," we meet this representative immortal who assumes so many identities.

> The child is mortal; but Poor Child
> Creeps through centuries of bone
> Untransient as the channelling worm
> Or water making sand of stone.
> Poor child, what have they done to you?
>
> Poor child the royal goosegirl combing
> Her hair in the field: poor children too
> Achilles sulking, Odysseus returned
> Philoctetes, Prufrock, and you and you.
> Poor child, what have they done to you?
>
> Go farther back: for these poor children,
> Ruined from the womb, still yearn,
> To swing in dark or water, wanting
> Not childhood's flowers but absolute return.
> Poor child, what have we done?[2]

The answer to the refrain may be simply "nothing" or, it could be "killed." The poor child is inside the body of time, trapped in the context it slowly erodes which eventually destroys it at the same time. It is Achilles, Odysseus, Philoctetes, Prufrock "and you and you." Though trapped within "centuries of bone" these

"poor children" yearn for "absolute return" to what seems another interior--a previous interior suggested by the womb, which "ruined" them (or does that "from" mean that they have been ruined since the womb?), in which they could "swing in dark or water." They yearn, like Odysseus, to leave the battle and return home, to a constant Penelope. They want to get back inside the womb, inside the whale, outside of time. Children's flowers fade with age--man leaves Eden anyway--but the dark and watery interior remains dark and watery. Inside the whale, which is the place of creation and also its location, is paradoxically outside of time for it represents essentially a generative rather than a historical order. Northrop Frye picks up the poor child's desire to return to this womb, to escape from its continuing experiences with defeat.

> Such myths as the flood and the apocalypse appear less for religious than for poetic reasons: the book moves from a "poor child" at the centre of a hostile and mysterious world to an adult child who has regained the paradisal innocent vision and is at the circumference of a world of identical forms.[3]

For all the apparent simplicity of Macpherson's basic myth, its extensions tend to become complicated. Understanding this world and the relationships of its parts to one another is not quite so simple as taking apart a Russian doll. Frye and Reaney, however, seem to exclaim with delight as they unscrew layer after layer. Section V,[4] "The Boatman," may be the most interesting for us. In it

we find "The Boatman" poem, "The Ark" suite of poems, "The Island" poems, "Leviathan," and "The Anagogic Man." Reaney says of this section:

> . . . when Man found himself sinking in the fallen world he had enough sense to build an imitation of that world which met it and himself halfway. One day he'll regain his island or Eden, but a floating island will do for now.[5]

That island is the Ark, which Frye writes about[6]:

> The figures of Noah and his ark emerge, expanding until they become identified with God and his creation respectively. The creation is inside its creator, and the ark similarly attempts to explain to Noah, in a series of epigrams in double quatrains, that it is really inside him, as Eve was once inside Adam.
>
> When the four quarters shall
> Turn in and make one whole,
> Then I who wall your body,
> Which is to me a soul,
>
> Shall swim circled by you
> And cradled on your tide,
> Who was not even, not ever,
> Taken from your side.[7]
>
> As the ark expands into the flooded world, the body of the Biblical leviathan, and the order of nature, the design of the whole book begins to take shape.

The sea in <u>The Boatman</u>, like all the other major symbols, becomes paradoxical in what it does and represents. It is, first, the result of the Flood, the deluge of God's anger given form. However, the Flood is also the Boatman's or Noah's tears. It is then the creation of a creator designed to destroy other creations of the same creator; or, it is that result of the creation's reaction to

his fellow creation--Noah's tears when he views the world of which he is a part. "The black sea" is chaos, nothingness, which is the underlying support of the creation which in turn supports the creator. But the sea is also part of the creator. The eventual unity or interdependence of all is pointed out in "Ark Artefact."[8] The "you" is the creator in the first stanza but that creator can be alternately defined as Noah, God, the Boatman, or the reader, the Ark or the tree from which the Ark is shaped. In the second stanza, the necessary creation of the creator's love defines that love, becomes the means of distinction the creator can use to know himself. The rest of himself (that is not his creation) is "the always wounded/ Always closing sea," the always wounded sea for it is from the chaotic sea that elements are taken to make a defined creation; the always closing sea because it is always, no matter how much of it is removed, a whole, the one unity. And, it is always "closing" with the other, the creator (or even the creation) in the process of making the world. Its grief is defined and known through comparison with the ordered universe, the created creation.

Thus the sea becomes a symbol for the primitive nature, the unorganized nature of God. It takes a sea to make an island; an ark postulates a crew or cargo; the boatman is defined in terms of his boat.

In "Coral"[9] "the sea's untended gardens" seem a kind

of Eden in which "a tree of flesh that hardens/ In our destroying air" is still capable of being "a perfect tree" or a "living tree." In this light, the sea as elemental environment is seen not in its role as grief-stricken chaos or black womb of creation but as a rich, life-giving life-harbouring context in which illusions of the lasting perfection of the forms living in it can be maintained for they have not "hardened" in the destructive air, they have not entered time like the poor child "through centuries of bone."

In "The Island"[10] the sea, when internalized (or understood) becomes eternity--not death, and not change, and not even tidal sea but a crystalline concept of eternity which clearly islands all mortality within its bounds.

> No man alone an island:
> Stand circled with a lapping sea.
> I break the ring and let you go:
> Above my head the waters flow.
>
> Look inward, love, and no more sea,
> No death, no change, eternity
> Lapped round us like a crystal wall
> To island, and that island all.

Macpherson's use of the imagery of evolution and of the sea differs from most other poets we consider in that there seems little connection between the "real" sea and her highly conceptualized formulations; she chooses a mythical landscape for her book, however, which does seem to relate very interestingly to the more particularized mythical landscapes of other poets we deal with. Her

seas do not hold threats of death in the way that many Canadian seas do; they are the supporting, necessary, life-giving and shaping mother Nature grieving over her children perhaps but also idealizing them. Most of all, Macpherson's complex of symbols ingesting one another presents us with the interdependence of everything, be it man, God, or nature--hardly a new vision in this study, though an abstract way of expressing it.

> Fellow flesh affords a rampart,
> And you've got along for comfort
> All the world there ever shall be, was, and is.

NOTES

[1]"The Third Eye: Jay Macpherson's The Boatman," Canadian Literature, 3: 23-34 (Winter 1960), p. 27.

[2]Jay Macpherson, The Boatman, (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 5.

[3]"Letters in Canada 1957/Poetry," University of Toronto Quarterly 27/4 pp. 434-438 (July 1958), p. 435.

[4]The Boatman, pp. 48-56.

[5]"The Third Eye," p. 33.

[6]"Letters in Canada," p. 435.

[7]"Ark Overwhelmed," The Boatman, p. 52.

[8]Ibid., p. 50.

[9]Ibid., p. 62.

[10]Ibid., p. 53.

[11]"The Boatman," Ibid., p. 48.

CHAPTER IX

MARGARET ATWOOD: THE "I" AND ITS ENVIRONMENTS

> Axiom: you are a sea.
> Your eye-
> lids curve over chaos
>
> My hands
> where they touch you, create
> small inhabited islands
>
> Soon you will be
> all earth: a known
> land, a country.[1]

Margaret Atwood's poetry provides a kind of synthesis of many of the themes we have been examining. In particular, we find her working with a land-sea tension which becomes part of her larger metaphor of "the circle game" and with some metaphors drawn from evolutionary theory. Perhaps the best way of typifying her concerns would be to say that she writes about the continually evolving or changing relationships between the "I" and its environment, external or internal, animate or inanimate.

Her metaphors tend to be complex but she handles them with such discipline that her poetry gives the impression of simplicity.

> a flock of small
> birds flew scattered by the
> fright of our sudden moving
> and disappeared: hard
>
> sea pebbles
> thrown solid for an instant
> against the sky
>
> flight of words[2]

For a poet whose poems are consciously simple, whose language is hard and economical (like pebbles the words worn by the sea are small and round) Margaret Atwood has a remarkable ability to be evocative. Those sea pebbles do become birds, do fly up in sudden patterns. This quality comes from a stringent inner order where found objects have been placed carefully to relate exactly the sense intended. What makes this intensity difficult at times is the nature of her subject matter. She writes about those things which in themselves defy order; hers is a classical rendering of an essentially chaotic experience. She orders it but still leaves an "ordered absence." The mastery of her style is its ability to contain in its spare, controlled lines richness and mystery.

Atwood is chary of sensual imagery. Sensory experience in the world of these poems tends to be intellectualized; especially in The Circle Game,[3] the excitement is necessarily in the head. Yet, what happens in the head is the immediate processing of sensory information. The mind in this world has an evolutionary history, a physical growth from out of the ocean rather than a history of ideas. Its ability to elaborate is recognized but suspect; embroidery in her poems stiffens the fabric and gives a more rigid shape.

A constant of this world is that past processings, old formulations, are not to be trusted; myths are pre-

datory, are ropes to hang man by rather than save him with. Her full stress falls on the necessity of the individual to be in motion, to be continuously making and discovering on one side while destroying and departing from the other.

> Meanwhile, I wonder
> which of the green or
> black and white
> myths he swallowed by mistake
> is feeding on him like a tapeworm
> has raised him from the ground
> and brought him to this window
>
> swivelling from some invisible rope
> his particular features
> fading day by day[4]

The silent, desperate Messenger has been trapped by his careless ingesting of some myth. Atwood says one must be careful and conscious of what concepts or myths one has taken in so that one may give up such supporting structures of self before they become dangerous. Eventually, her ideal is to be able to relinguish all the control, to let go at least for long enough to be able to explore the inner seas of being. For Atwood, the primal experience is descent into the dark waters of genesis, is loss of virginity--the prizing of delineated, even secret, individuality. Intellectual knowing is a physical, sometimes even sexual experience.

> More and more frequently the edges
> of me dissolve and I become
> a wish to assimilate the world, including
> you, if possible through the skin
> like a cool plant's tricks with oxygen
> and live by a harmless burning.[5]

Atwood's wish to "live by a harmless burning" seems comparable to Klein's desire to "shine/ like phosphorous. At the bottom of the sea." She wishes "to assimilate the world," to, in effect, become anonymous since her individuality is defined by comparison with the other. If she assimilates him, who is a sea, she brings within her that chaos which his identity curves over. Visualizing this process as being like "a cool plant's tricks with oxygen," she wishes to "know" the other bodily but not necessarily sexually; to be simply part of a world the elements of which pass through her surfaces easily. It is a vision of unity but not a transcendental unity; the parts do not unite in a greater whole typified by the poet but rather the poet is just part of a natural flux, an environment which is "other" yet in which she can learn to participate bodily.

In her "Afterword" to The Journals of Susanna Moodie[6] Atwood talks about the effect of the Canadian environment on its inhabitants;

> We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely, and in the parts unknown to us we move in fear, exiles and invaders.

The characters of her poems are often in a country too big for any one of them to inhabit completely; they move through their fears, and may be exiles, invaders, settlers or explorers. Their "country" is often an internal state

but what is inside them reflects what is outside. The individual repeats his environment; the animals invade the people, the people become animals, the animals become the expression of the people who turn them out. The circle game is seen in macrocosm and microcosm; it represents objects, animate and inanimate, and patterns of motion. Atwood works, particularly in her most recent book of poems, with an inside-outside world that seems reminiscent of Macpherson's interests in The Boatman. Macpherson writes:

> You might suppose it easy
> For a maker not too lazy
> To convert the gentle reader to an Ark:
> But it takes a willing pupil
> To admit both gnat and camel
> --Quite an eyeful, all the crew that must embark.
>
> After me when comes the deluge
> And you're looking round for refuge
> From God's anger pouring down in gush and spout,
> Then you take the tender creature
> --You remember, that's the reader--
> And you pull him through his navel inside out.
>
> That's to get his beasts outside him,
> For they've got to come aboard him,[7]

We discover this kind of ark metaphor in "Departure from the Bush;"[8] it recurs in the "Afterword" when we read how Susanna Moodie "has finally turned herself inside out, and has become the spirit of the land she once hated."[9]

The book begins with descriptions of Mrs. Moodie's alienation from the land, by which Atwood apparently means, quite literally, her lack of correspondence with it. To begin with, her concern is entirely with the surfaces:

Is it my clothes, my way of walking,
the things I carry in my hand
--a book, a bag with knitting--
the incongruous pink of my shawl

this space cannot hear
. . . . . .

The moving water will not show me
my reflection

The rocks ignore

I am a word
in a foreign language.[10]

In the second poem we begin to work into the central paradox of the book: Atwood's riddle--the individual becomes a locale which is inhabited by the environment in which he lives.

After we had crossed the long illness
that was the ocean, we sailed up-river[11]

The immigrants find their ocean passage has delivered them into a larger darkness than they had known previously.

We left behind one by one
the cities rotting with cholera,
one by one our civilized
distinctions

and entered a large darkness.

It was our own
ignorance we entered.

Susanna Moodie learned the first axiom of this place when she realized she was "a word/ in a foreign language." She discovers the second when she abandons the surface, the reflective relationship between herself and the alien other and begins to seek alternate ways of knowing what is there,

not simply what of herself she finds there.

> I need wolf's eyes to see
> the truth.
>
> I refuse to look in a mirror.
>
> Whether the wilderness is
> real or not
> depends on who lives there.

Earlier examples of Atwood's fascination with "who lives there" in the wilderness, and of the interpenetration of the individual and his "country" can be found at the end of The Circle Game in the poems "The Explorers" and "The Settlers."[12]

> The explorers will come
> in several minutes
> and find this island.
>
> (It is a stunted island,
> rocky, with room
> for only a few trees, a thin
> layer of soil; hardly
> bigger than a bed.
> That is how they've missed it
> until now)

and, from "The Settlers":

> And as for us, who drifted
> picked by the sharks
> during so many bluegreen
> centuries before they came:
> they found us
> inland, stranded
> on a ridge of bedrock,
> defining our own island.
>
> From our inarticulate
> skeleton (so
> intermixed, one
> carcass),
> they postulated wolves.

They dug us down
into the solid granite
where our bodies grew flesh again,
came up trees and
grass.

Still we are the salt
seas that uphold these lands.

Now horses graze
inside this fence of ribs, and

children run, with green
smiles, (not knowing
where) across
the fields of our open hands.

The exploration and settlement of a new land is not a simple or logical process. Those who would define their own is-land/ I-land/ island need to release themselves from all former postulations about how to behave and how to expect the universe to behave. Like Adam and Eve, turned out of Eden, they must put all of themselves and their future into the granite rock of an island bed to fertilize its crystalline structures and make a new soil for trees and grass to grow in. Those who go to define an island (I-land) must do so austerely and without proper provisions for the task since they cannot tell ahead of time when they should go or what will be of use to them once they are there (or even, while they are travelling).

What should we have taken
with us? We never could decide
on that; or what to wear,
or at what time of
year we should make this journey[13]

These questions are trivial; no time of year, no cloth-

ing, no provisions can make the journey into identity easier.

so here we are, in thin
raincoats and rubber boots

on the disastrous ice, the wind rising

nothing in our pockets

When water turns, as in a whirlpool, objects are supported and carried around repeatedly by it; when it stops moving, in the center, the flotsam and jetsam converge and are still, are suspended and kept from surge.

(of course there was really
no shore: the water turned
to land by having
objects in it: caught and kept
from surge, made
less than immense
by networks of
roads and grids of fences)
. . . . . .

Still
we are the salt
seas that uphold these lands.

The narrator and her lover, the new Adam and Eve, are "still" in this last poem, they have settled after having been drowned; they have been buried but <u>are</u> still, are even yet. That they are <u>still</u> is their resurrection. And the nature of them is that they are the "salt (of the earth)." "Still," they are the buoyantly salted seas (the addition of land-crystal to water) which "uphold these lands."

In order to understand the complexities and difficulties of "mapping" the narrator's location in relation-

ship to her environment we must begin the circle game. Entering the whirlpool, to use Avison's metaphor, is the "swimmer's moment" in which all the metaphors begin to converge.[14] It is something Atwood does with trepidation and no promise of success.

> I walk across the bridge
> towards the safety of high ground
> (the tops of the trees are like islands)
> gathering the sunken
> bones of the drowned mothers
> (hard and round in my hands)
> while the white mist washes
> around my legs like water;[15]

Because the metaphors which make up the circle game develop throughout the books and relate to each other variously in the poems, it becomes difficult to describe the game in its entirety. However, certain concepts can be isolated. The metaphor can be representative of human place or human motion. As place: we find the eye, or variously the I which becomes an island/ is-land/ eye-land/ I-land; also a camera. It is also an egg, cell, or fruit. Essentially this is a containing object but equally one in which energy is recorded and passed on. It is a sphere in surface, the horizon thus forever beyond the reach of anyone travelling over it; the form is hard, as in turgid; it becomes meaningful when penetrated. This eye/I/is-ball expands and contracts to become the world or a moment or both.

> a meshing of green on green, the inner
> membrane of the gaping moment
> opening around a sun that is
> a hole burnt in the sky[16]

It can be the skull:

your heavy unbelievable
skull, crowded with radiant
suns, a new planet, the people
submerged in you, a lost civilization
I can never excavate[17]

It can be the I:

I am the horizon
you ride towards, the thing you can never lasso

I am also what surrounds you:
my brain
scattered with your
tincans, bones, empty shells,
the litter of your invasions.[18]

It can be a house (of ice):

The sun had been burning for a long time
before we saw it, and we saw it
only then because
it seared itself through the roof.[19]

It can also be the other, the lover:

Orange in the middle of the table:
. . . . . .
But quietly:
if I take the orange
with care enough and hold it
gently

I may find
an egg
a sun
an orange moon
perhaps a skull; center
of all energy
resting in my hand

can change it to
whatever I desire
it to be

and you, man, orange afternoon
lover, wherever
you sit across from me
(tables, trains, buses)

if I watch
quietly enough
and long enough

at last, you will say
(maybe without speaking)
. . . . . .
all I need to know:[20]

It is connected with the sun which seems, at times, almost a god, an eyeball (whose brain is the earth) which transmits waves of energy to sustain and create life, to produce new motion. It also proposes the moon, both the white moon of the huntress Diana and the orange harvest moon. In fact, the places of these poems seem governed by this circle game so that the world has aspects of a Ptolemic universe. The places of life: the eye, egg, I, I-land, earth, universe, cell, house, skull, etc., seem to contract and expand constantly. Yet, in each instance, the greater or lesser location of the circle game is central to life.

As well as being the place in which "it" is, the circle game is also a dance--the pattern of our motions which validates our claim to be alive. It can be the motions of children playing "Ring-a-Round-a-Rosie."

We can see (arm in arm)
as we watch them go
round and round
intent, almost
studious (the grass
underfoot ignored, the trees
circling the lawn
ignored, the lake ignored)
that the whole point

for them
of going round and round
is (faster
slower)
going round and round
. . . . . .
(the children spin
a round cage of glass
from the warm air
with their thread-thin
insect voices)
. . . . . .
I want to break
these bones, your prisoning rhythms
(winter,
summer)
all the glass cases,

erase all maps,
crack the protecting
eggshell of your turning
singing children:

I want the circle
broken.[21]

At the end of this passage Atwood expresses something similar to what Avison wrote in "Dispersal Titles"[22]--she, too, wanted to have the circles broken, unscrolled. Atwood's game sets them turning, opening and closing, and in the end she does escape their contours. She merges.

The circle game is the cycle of the seasons, the cycles of history, as in "A Night in the Royal Ontario Museum,"[23] the diurnal spinning of the earth ("The world is turning/ me into evening")[24] with the desire on the part of the narrator to gain the edge of the moment, for it is in that point when one moment is about to become another that she seeks to establish distinctions between them.

The world is turning
me into evening.

I'm almost ready;
this time it will be far.

I move
and live on the edges
(what edges)
I live
on all the edges there are.[25]

But perhaps the best way of describing the nature of the circle game would be to call it a kind of pilgrimage to center, when center does not exactly exist. At times this journey seems like that of a whirling dervish spinning himself into a mystical union of all things; at other times it is like the journey of Avison's swimmers relinquishing themselves to the currents of the sea when entering the whirlpool. It may be compared to the travels of an explorer through the Canadian wilderness though this comparison is only valid in so far as the explorer has no useful previous knowledge or guide, as he follows rivers blindly deep into the heart of a continent. The pilgrimage into motion towards a core or sea of being, a new passage to riches, is not easy to map since:

Mostly
that travel is not the easy going
from point to point, a dotted
line on a map, location
plotted on a square surface
but that I move surrounded by a tangle
of branches, a net of air and alternate
light and dark, at all times;
that there are no destinations.[26]

Very often the journey is a descent, through water. Her concept of the ocean deeps may have been influenced by Pratt's sense of threatening but significant watery depths where creatures earlier on the tree of evolution dramatize feelings which we, who still carry in us the earlier stages, now clothe in words.[27]

> But not
> rocked not cradled not forgetful:
> there are no
> sunken kingdoms no
> edens in the waste ocean
>
> among the shattered
> memories of battles
>
> only the cold jewelled symmetries
> of the voracious eater
> the voracious eaten
>
> the dream creatures that glow
> sulphurous in darkness or
> flash like neurons
> are blind, insatiable, all
> gaping jaws and famine
>
> and here
> to be aware is
> to know total
> fear.[28]

She imagines herself going down into the frightening, even waste, ocean. Her attitude towards this trip does change gradually from one of real terror, through combat with the danger:

> Whatever I do I must
> keep my head, I know
> it is easier for me to lose my way
> forever here, than in other landscapes.[29]

into a willing release of herself into it. In the first

real sex-poem of the book, in that it is the first not to be essentially virginal, "Pre-Amphibian," she writes about actually being in the water for the first time and is no longer structuring her reactions on the concept of cold-bloodedness at the bottom.

> but here I blur
> into you our breathing sinking
> to green milleniums
> and sluggish in our blood
> all ancestors
> are warm fish moving[30]

We can again compare her with Pratt when she writes: "in our blood/ all ancestors/ are warm fish moving" if we do not worry much about that change from cold to warm. The significance of the fish will be dealt with later in greater detail, but, essentially, they are a symbol for words, and, in particular, for the Word, a God of Light made flesh. What is exciting to her is that, going down, the "old languages" which are "obsolete" become sensually, hotly, alive in her own depths and history. What she finds in the experience of "drowning" into the center of her being is an ability to be sensual in an almost purely physical way. She becomes a unity rather than a unit, an island rather than an I. Yet even in the second book she remains aware of her strict limitations. In "The Shadow Voice" she says:

> I give water, I give clean crusts
>
> Aren't there enough words
> flowing in your veins
> to keep you going[31]

Returning to the discussion of the circle game as one of motion, perhaps the dominant sense one has about the narrator is that of her lack of stasis. She is, with a few notable exceptions ("Settlers," for example) moving away from the given situation of a poem. The personality seems almost split; on one hand, she encompasses, is fascinated by, and records in detail the place where she is at, then; on the other hand she seems afraid to be contained by it--says she cannot be caught in any moment. In "Camera," for example:

> You want this instant:
> nearly spring, both of us walking,
> wind blowing
> . . . . . .
> You want to have it and so you arrange
> you arrange us:
> . . . . . .
> for your organized instant
>
> Camera man
> how can I love your glass eye?
>
> Wherever you partly are
> now, look again
> at your souvenir,
> your glossy square of paper
> before it dissolves completely:
>
> it is the last of autumn
> the leaves have unravelled
> . . . . . .
> there has been a hurricane
> . . . . . .
> that small black speck
> travelling towards the horizon
> at almost the speed of light
> is me[32]

She is the ever-moving (therefore, the ever-living) eye. At the end of the above poem she is the fleeting instant; she is also the germ cell. Travelling at almost the speed of light (becoming, that is, almost pure energy though still matter, almost reversing from Word to Light) she moves towards the horizon, the point at which infinities meet and become one, but which she, rounding the earth's surface, will never reach. She has been caught by the hurricane, the destructive, almost invisible tumult and is blown by it though the suggestion is there that her motion is not involuntary. What is essential is the fact that she is in motion; when she becomes the fertilizing factor she will have merged and become still. Her concern with destruction is not morbid but rather defensive; it is a concern with the destruction of the hurricane which can give impetus towards new moments, is always in motion. Yet, naturally, for herself she fears destruction. This fear is probably the greatest impetus in itself towards motion, and thus towards life, in the poems. Or, to generalize, her fear of death, of being destroyed, is what impels her into life, communication, sex and poetry though, paradoxically, those are the things which make her fear death.

The lake or sea is herself as in "Axiom: you are a sea./ Your eye-/ lids curve over chaos." Throughout the first two books we are moved in and out of this idea until

it is finally postulated so clearly at the end of The Animals in That Country. We begin The Circle Game with:

> The photograph was taken
> the day after I drowned.
>
> I am in the lake, in the center
> of the picture, just under the surface.
>
> It is difficult to say where
> precisely, or to say
> how large or small I am:
> the effect of water
> on light is a distortion
>
> but if you look long enough,
> eventually
> you will be able to see me.[33]

What was initially a flat printed paper assumes the third dimension of depth. Her being there is absolutely "in the center/ of the picture" though it is "difficult to say where/ precisely" that center is or how large or small it and she are. It is interesting to note the narrator's deliberate vagueness about the location of this center. In part, it can be explained by the following:

> There is no center;
> the centers
> travel with us unseen
> like our shadows
> on a day when there is no sun[34]

But it is also related to the problem posed in The Journals of Susanna Moodie--the location of identity and, particularly, the identifying spirit, both particular and general. In The Circle Game she writes:

An other sense tugs at us:
we have lost something,
some key to these things
which must be writings
and are locked against us
or perhaps (like a potential
mine, unknown vein
of metal in the rock)
something not lost or hidden
but just not found yet

that informs, holds together
this confusion, this largeness
and dissolving:

not above or behind
or within it, but one
with it: an

identity:
something too huge and simple
for us to see.[35]

This then becomes the core of the "circle game." In the particular case of Susanna Moodie who "makes her final appearance in the present, as an old woman on a Toronto bus who reveals the city as an unexplored threatening wilderness" and who has then "turned herself inside out, and has become the spirit of the land she once hated:"

I am the old woman
sitting across from you on the bus,
. . . . . .

Turn, look down:
there is no city;
this is the center of a forest.

Your place is empty[36]

We are reminded that the reality of a wilderness is dependent upon "who lives there;" if we do not inhabit the wilderness we pass through then that wilderness is not real to us.

However, in making this kind of statement Atwood differs from Klein (who depicts the world as dependent upon the poet since he names it and thus brings it into existence); the unknown exists powerfully with or without our recognition in Atwood's poetry. And much of her poetry is involved in describing the attempts to "center-in" upon this wilderness--to make of identity a locale and vice-versa.

> Here on the rim, cringing
> under the cracked whip of winter
> we live
> in houses of ice,
> but not because we want to:
> in order to survive
> we make what we can and have to
> with what we have.

The season is winter when life is at a hiatus and she finds herself on the horizon or the rim of the eye-lid (see "In My Ravines"[37]). What she sees are little round igloos with people in them, frozen water turned opaque. They are like eyes, blinded with the cold through no fault of their own. From a frozen environment the inhabitants have cut a sufficient number of blocks to build their enclosures for self, protecting the individual and giving him space of his own, an interior climate. It is necessary for survival that the igloos be built, limited housing though they give, just as it is necessary for intellectual houses, myths and history, to be built though the latter are not so easily melted down with the reappearance of direct sunlight.

A kind of igloo/house reappears in "A Place: Fragments:"

> and in the center
> of the table, a paper weight:
> hollow-glass globe
> filled with water, and
> a house, a man, a snowstorm[38]

This "hollow glass globe filled with water" is placed centrally; it is again the eye, the inhabited universe of the individual, the wintery womb of glass which, when shaken, becomes filled with snow-flurries, the place with its own weather, the mind. It is a Russian doll kind of repetition of shapes and meaning in that the globe is symbolically the same as the objects it contains--the house and the man--and it operates as a symbol for the universe--that which one perceives while living. Its function is a paperweight; the ironical position of man is that he was created to hold in their place more abstract creations. The stark humour of being alive is that man must remain within that order created for him to inhabit for purposes which hardly enhance his sense of universal necessity. Though trivial, he is not without use--buffeted by his own small snowstorms, he still maintains order in some obsolete and poor "house." He weighs heavily on paper, pins down creative intellectualizations, leaves his pressure ring on some thin sheets which may well blow away when he and his environment are removed.

Where is the "I" in this picture? At the "fulcrum":

> I
> stood in the door-
> way, at the fulcrum where
>
> this trivial but
> stringent inner order
> held its delicate balance
> with the random scattering or
> clogged merging of
> things[39]

The I standing in the doorway seeing both the inner, ordered room and the outer random scattering or clogged merging, encompasses both, and watches the old woman make of the outside another room with a "sweeping grey sky" "dustless and free of spiders." The I/eye is "at the fulcrum," in the center, is herself the single point of pressure through which inside and outside are balanced. She comes to appreciate and accept this role; like the old woman, she too begins to make an inside of the outside where there will be no spiders.

Atwood's metaphors for the interior spaces which we inhabit seem reminiscent of Avison's.

> Gentle and just pleasure
> It is, being human, to have won from space
> This unchill, habitable interior
> Which mirrors quietly the light
> of the snow, and the new year.[40]

Finally, we should look more carefully at Atwood's use of water metaphors; in particular, we should see how they fit into her ideas about poetry and where they may re-

flect her extensive reading of the works of other Canadian poets. "Notes from Various Pasts" in The Animals in That Country begins:

> Capsized somewhere and stranded
> here, in a bluegrey rocking-chair
> and having adjusted somewhat
> to the differences in pressure
>
> I sit, looking at
> what has been caught in the net
> this morning: messages
> from a harsher level.
>
> I rock on the bluegrey
> day, while below me
> the creatures of the most profound
> ocean chasms are swimming
> far under even the memory
> of sun and tidal moon:
> some of them fragile, some
> vicious as needles; all
> sheathed in an armoured skin
> that is a language; camouflage
> of cold lights, potent signals
> that allure prey or flash
> networks of warning
> transmitted through the deep core
> of the sea to each other only[41]

The bluegrey rocking-chair perhaps first brings A.M. Klein to mind[42] but Atwood changes his metaphor. This is not simply the closed swing of the Catholic seasons and imagination in rural Quebec; the rocking-chair with its pendulum kind of motion, is here compared with her bluegrey days washing back and forth on the tidal surface of life. She has capsized somewhere, been overturned and dumped out of that which had "floated" her previously; paradoxically, it seems that she has had to adjust to the pressure at the surface. Now she is stranded in the rocking-

chair, caught in the memory of sun and tidal moon. She, in the transition, has "gained eyes and lungs, freedom/ to tell the morning from the night/ to breath" but wonders:

> Have I lost
> an electric wisdom
> in the thin marooning air?

Sitting in her island-chair she looks at:

> what has been caught in the net
> this morning: messages
> from a harsher level.

In the sounding net she let down for the night, the trap she lowered into her dream-consciousness, she searches for meanings. The net has caught messages "from a harsher level" while she slept. In it are found fish, and these fish remind us strongly of the inhabitants of Pratt's ocean deeps who also flash meanings silently to one another, who prey and warn and are also sheathed "in an armoured skin" that is a language which can be "transmitted through the deep core/ of the sea to each other only." That these fish are called words later in Atwood's poem points another route to their meaning: the fish being a sign for the original Christians and Christ, the "Word" who created all things. However they are interpreted it is obvious that these fish are synonymous with primitive "messages," with "an electric wisdom," the "once-living/ and phosphorescent meanings" that do not survive the translation into surface and the daily wash of language. They are words/ forms of an original meaning which can only be fully vital as first

created; evolved, they lack life. She tries to catch them in her net but without much success for, stranded in that "marooning" air (the air which turns blood red, makes us lung breathers) the meanings die and fade. The electric wisdom cannot pass through thin air--it needs the original salt water between the poles as an electrolyte before the cell can generate power.

The rocking-chair of rural Quebec in Klein's poem had petrified into daily currency a religion and culture which in the past had had vitality; during the transition it lost the ability to generate new directions. In Atwood's poem:

> The words lie washed ashore
> on the margins, mangled
> by the journey upwards to the bluegrey
> surface, the transition:
>
> these once-living
> and phosphorescent meanings
> fading in my hands
>
> I try to but can't decipher

Like many other Canadian poets, Atwood is admitting a fascination with the evolutionary depths of physical human history and a sense that in such primitive life-forms there was vitality which we have lost, "an electric wisdom" which has been translated out of man's adult life. She suggests that our language communication is less vital than and essentially dependent upon other, more primitive forms of communication which still supply us with the

"words" the forms we take up to make languages of.

In The Journals of Susanna Moodie Atwood plays upon the suggestion that we are not in our original shapes, that we have evolved and that we have a considerable degree of control in determining how we will participate in this process of continuing (intellectual?) genesis. Even when dying the narrator's thoughts turn in this direction:

the skeleton produces flesh	enemy opposing, then taken for granted, earth harvested, used up, walked over
the ears produce sounds	what I heard I created (voices determining, repeating histories, worn customs
the mouth produces words	I said I created myself, and these frames, commas, calendars that enclose me[43]

Elsewhere, Atwood emphasizes the very real, physical records we have of our evolutionary past in our bodies, and, particularly, the reality of our experiences in a not-so-foreign "ocean":

> Somehow I sit up
> breaking the membrane of water
>
> Emerged and
> beached on the carpet
> breathing this air once more
> I stare
> at the sackful of scales and
>
> my fisted
> hand
> my skin
> holds

remnants of ancestors
fossil bones and fangs
acknowledgement:

I was born
dredged up from time
and harboured
the night these wars began[44]

What is interesting about Atwood's version of the poet who goes down into the ocean's depths and returns with the vitality of the past, bringing it up into the present, is that she seems to view the experience of oceanic, or evolutionary or subconscious life as a natural part of the whole experience of living in her present condition. While she does not exactly rejoice in the richness of her "wilderness" she has no illusions about remaining in the underwater "marginal orchards" instead. She chooses to be born, she seeks identity. The merging of self with other, the interpenetration of the individual and the environment, the whole circle game with all its tensions, and inside-outside paradoxes, are simply parts of that pilgrimage to center, that continual movement of the identity which is becoming more and more complete.

Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," and Pratt's "Newfoundland," among others, lead into Atwood's "The Settlers" where her poet-narrator is indeed the landscape:

Children run, with green
smiles (not knowing
where) across
the fields of our open hands.

They also belong to the world of Atwood's paradox: the individual becomes a locale which is inhabited by the environment in which he lives. The poets may be drowned in a magical anonymity, but that anonymity is not a separation from present and germinal life--it is, rather, a full giving of self to it. The wilderness, internal or external, of Canadian poetry may be terrifying and thankless and primitive but it is no wasteland. It is alive with who lives there, and real by the same token.

NOTES

[1]Margaret Atwood, "Axiom," The Animals in That Country (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 69.

[2]"Some Objects of Wood and Stone, ii) Pebbles," The Circle Game (Toronto, Contact Press, 1966), p. 61

[3]Ibid.

[4]"A Messenger," Ibid., p. 14.

[5]"More and More," The Animals in That Country, p. 53.

[6]The Journals of Susanna Moodie (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 62.

[7]Jay Macpherson, "The Boatman," The Boatman (Toronto Oxford, 1957).

[8]The Journals of Susanna Moodie, pp. 26-27.

[9]Ibid., p. 64.

[10]"Disembarking at Quebec," Ibid., p. 11.

[11]"Further Arrivals," Ibid., pp. 12-13.

[12]The Circle Game, pp. 77-80.

[13]"Provisions," The Animals in That Country, p. 1

[14]Margaret Avison, "The Swimmer's Moment," Winter Sun (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1960), p. 36.

[15]"After the Flood, We," The Circle Game, p. 12.

[16]"An Attempted Solution for Chess Problems," Ibid., p. 17.

[17]"I Was Reading a Scientific Article," The Animals in That Country, p. 65.

[18]"Backdrop Addresses Cowboy," Ibid., p. 51.

[19]"Spring in the Igloo," The Circle Game, p. 48.

[20]"Against Still Life," Ibid., p. 66.

[21]"The Circle Game," Ibid., pp. 35-44.

[22]Margaret Avison, "Dispersed Titles," Winter Sun, p. 3

[23]The Animals in That Country, p. 20.

[24]"Evening Trainstation Before Departure," The Circle Game, p. 16.

[25]Ibid.

[26]"Journey to the Interior," Ibid., p. 57.

[27]E.J. Pratt, "Silences," Selected Poems of E.J. Pratt, (Toronto, MacMillan of Canada, 1968), p. 32. See also "The Cachalot," "From Stone to Steel," etc.

[28]"A Descent Through the Carpet," The Circle Game, p. 22

[29]"Journey to the Interior," Ibid., p. 58.

[30]Ibid., p. 63.

[31]"The Shadow Voice," The Animals in That Country, p. 7.

[32]The Circle Game, p. 45.

[33]"This is a Photograph of Me," Ibid., p. 11.

[34]"A Place: Fragments," Ibid., p. 75.

[35]Ibid., p. 76.

[36]"A Bus Along St. Clair: December," The Journals of Susanna Moodie, p. 61.

[37]The Circle Game, p. 19.

[38]Ibid., p. 73.

[39]Ibid., p. 74.

[40]Margaret Avison, "New Year's Poem," Winter Sun, p. 29.

[41]"Notes from Various Pasts," p. 10-11.

[42]A.M. Klein, The Rocking Chair and Other Poems (Toronto, Ryerson, 1948).

[43]"Solipsism While Dying," p. 52.

[44]"A Descent Through the Carpet," The Circle Game, pp. 22-23.

CHAPTER X

GWENDOLYN MACEWEN'S HOLY WATERS OF CONTINUING CREATION

There are many poems in Gwendolyn MacEwen's latest book, The Shadow-Maker,[1] which include material pertinent to this study. Nearly every poem in the first section and quite a number from the second and third sections might be discussed. However, for the sake of economy, we will only look at two: "The Heel" from the second section, "The Unspeakable," and "Dark Pines Under Water" from the third section, "The Sleeper." This will not demonstrate the scope of MacEwen's work but it should indicate how her poetry is related to that of other Canadian poets we have been discussing.

> In the organing dark I bless those who came
> from the waters
> scaleless and shrewd, and walked with unwebbed
> feet
> to create memory, when every movement invented
> their end,
> who stood beside the holy waters with upright spines
> to destroy themselves, to inherit themselves, to stand
> while the fish fell back and the waves erased
> their birth.[2]

The first stanza of "The Heel" needs little explanation. MacEwen has a vision of the evolution, not just of the vulnerable heel or the upright spine, but also of memory out of "the holy waters." She is herself in "the organing dark," in something akin to "the holy waters." The dark enclosing her seems a kind of creative chaos. Perhaps it is a specifically sexual dark and the waters

not just the original genetic ocean but also its prototype, the womb.

> They were terrible with sense and torn at the tongue
> and in the foreign hours when fog enveloped them
> they thrashed like swimmers down the rivers of their sleep;
> the sunken cities within them rose and towered high
> over the bright groin of their pain, and elsewhere
> they were lovers and their knees were pyramids of fire.
>
> I bless those who turned the double face of memory around,
> who turned on their naked green heels and had great dreams
> and in the queer hour when they are struck at the eyes
> and the last sunrise claims and cripples them, I stand
> and remark that on the edge of this strand I also feel
> the holy waters lapping just behind my heel.

There is yet another meaning for the "holy waters." They become the river Styx, dividing life from death. The Styx is a holy and protective river--Achilles' mother dipped him in it as an infant to make him invulnerable--but also a fearful one. To enter Styx is generally equivalent to dying; one can only pass from the shore of life to the shore of death. Yet these holy waters protect life from death. They divide the two, filtering death out of life, and they also provide a route into the nether regions. This is important for MacEwen who seems to view crossing the Styx not as a passport to death but as a means to a further, different, state of existence.

MacEwen develops an argument that our arrival in nature, whether it is the birth of the human species or

the birth of an individual person, creates memory. Our recording minds look forward and backward, noting each "movement." From the point of birth we move into death, inventing our end as we live. We "inherit" ourselves from our memories; we are the accumulation of all that we recall ourselves being. But we also inherit ourselves from the flux of evolutionary time. The human being is relatively unique among the species because it has attempted a historical understanding of itself. In understanding our origins we are made aware of our ends: to be born is to die; to be a separate species is to be bound by the necessity for adaptation. The human species cannot expect to live forever without alteration for the environment it inhabits alters, changing its relationship with people and demanding that they respond by changing as well.

Those "who came from the waters" and were "terrible with sense and torn at the tongue" suffered the tortures of being alien and having to discover new ways of life. They were forwarding the evolution of their species, and so of their whole environment, yet in their sleep their dreams returned them to "the sunken cities within them." It is not in these interior places of the memory or dreams that "they were lovers and their knees pyramids of fire" but in their new, real, land environment. MacEwen's

narrator blesses them for this. When they "turned on their nakes green heels and had great dreams" they were looking forward rather than backwards. Pivoting on their most vulnerable point, their alienation, their heel not dipped in Styx and so not sensibly part of the new state of existence, they consciously chose the new. Their dreams are now visions, not memories. And, as lovers, they enter their new environment.

MacEwen's narrator suggests that she too has left the "holy waters" of her genesis--this time, the landed consciousness claimed by earlier people--and is entering a new state of human evolution. In the context of the book this is doubtless a spiritual environment.

"Dark Pines Under Water"[3] has echoes in it of several poems we have already looked at, most noticeably, perhaps, Scott's "Lakeshore." It is more significantly related to others of MacEwen's poems, however, than it is to Scott's.

> This land like a mirror turns you inward
> And you become a forest in a furtive lake
> The dark pines of your mind reach downward,
> You dream in the green of your time,
> Your memory is a row of sinking pines.

The central conceit is that of reflection, both the mirror repetition of the forest in the water where the trees seem to "reach downward" and also the poet's private reflections as she is turned inward by the land. The "memory" sinks back into the water and the reflective per-

son follows it down to its dark and sunken roots.

> Explorer, you tell yourself this is not what you
> came for,
> Although it is good here, and green;
> You had meant to move with a kind of largeness,
> You had planned a heavy grace, an anguished dream.
>
> But the dark pines of your mind dip deeper
> And you are skinking, sinking, sleeper
> In an elementary world;
> There is something down there and you want it told.

In the previous poem the narrator had turned her back on "the elementary world" but here she recognizes its pull on her. Interestingly, this is epitomized by her wanting to express whatever it is that is "down there." Her conscious role is to tell. She sinks deeper and deeper into the unconscious mind, the elementary world, the dream-consciousness, in order to know it. This process implies that she expects to rise again into a present consciousness wherein she will translate the "something down there" into words. Like Klein's "Bather" this "sleeper" will wake up and face the requirement of making herself plain. She does not visualize this process as rubbing away her other selves but rather as expressing them. "Personable plain" would have different connotations for her than it probably had for Klein.

Like Scott, she recognizes the magnetic attraction she feels to the region of dark, sunken, reflective forests. Being drawn down into "the dark pines of her mind" against her intentions she realizes that she is only sinking because she actually wishes to know those depths.

Interestingly, she feels this is a constricting rather than a freeing motion. She says "You had meant to move with a kind of largeness" which suggests that she has not been freed by her familiarity with these submerged regions.

In MacEwen's poetry we find that man's evolutionary history includes his spiritual history. His physical development almost becomes just a metaphor for a more mystical evolution. She finds the places she has been, metaphorically, in the past (both hers and her species) alive in her memory but is, at the same time, exploring the possibilities of new places. She is the person at the point of "crossing," the individual letting go in order to become.

CHAPTER XI

CONCLUSION

> Whether the wilderness is
> real or not
> depends on who lives there

We have been exploring the relationships between a number of English-Canadian poets and their environments. Ignoring individual differences for the moment, we can generalize about our discoveries. Atwood's comment, above, is pertinent, for we have observed our poets making a locale of identity.

This has developed in quite a simple way. In Pratt's "Newfoundland" we found the poet's body, his island of life, being stormed by the sea. He could not help but accept as familiars its primitive rhythms and pulses. The twentieth century Canadian, here, the Newfoundlander, no longer able to abide in the Garden of Biblical Genesis, engaged in a struggle for survival in the wilderness. He learned that it is impossible to make a new Garden, to create an Island entirely isolated from its surroundings. In Pratt's "Brébeuf and His Brethern" the Jesuits fail to reproduce France in Huronia though they seeded the wilderness with an immigrant culture which, like fireweed, blossomed into a new kind of environment from the scorched earth. This hybrid culture was the result of the crossing of their French, Jesuit culture with the aboriginal Canadian environment.

Man and primitive nature, represented by the sea in "Newfoundland," have not simply been engaged in a struggle with one another. They have been inextridably connected, linked by a history of creative evolutionary development and by a shared dependence on the basic rhythms of life and death. In Pratt's poetry man draws his life from the sea, meets his death in it, finds a varient of it sluicing as blood through his body, and looks into its depths to discover his significance.

We found a further development in A.M. Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape." In this poem the poet and his landscape are identical, not just interdependent. Klein's poet describes himself as a zero, a nobody, an essentially anonymous form. But though he is anonymous he is not without a body. His specific form is a "rich garland," his circular shape a lens. Without his body he could not perceive and what he has not focused upon, and has not named does not exist. He is himself the landscape of his poetry and all landscape he knows is himself. Here we find, again, the sea as a metaphor for this generic landscape; Klein's poet "drowns" into his environment. He is to be found at the bottom of the sea, where he secretly shines with the mysterious, cool light of phosphorous.

Klein's drowned poet seems related to D.C. Scott's in "The Piper of Arll" and to a whole series of later

Canadian poets who seek their identities in the seas, both internal and external, which come to represent their environments. Among these we found F.R. Scott in "Lakeshore," Irving Layton in "The Swimmer," Earle Birney in "Gulf of Georgia," Margaret Avison in "The Swimmer's Moment," Jay Macpherson in "The Island," Margaret Atwood in "Pre-Amphibian," Gwendolyn MacEwen in "Dark Pines Under Water," and others. The interesting thing about most of these drownings is that they resulted in further creativity rather than death. These poets have been engaging in the sport of self-discovery. By plunging into the depths of the seas they have been sinking deeper into self-understanding.

Evolutionary theory has provided these poets not only with an alternative metaphor--the sea--to the Garden for the location of genesis, both original and continuing, but it has also presented a means of describing and ordering the processes of their wilderness. F.R. Scott's "Time As Now" provides a typical example.

> Waves flow incessantly,
> Their sequel pregnant in our living flesh.
> The air I breathe, the neutron in my brain,
> This plasma that has ridden fishy veins,
> Shape my rehearsing of all former life.
> I feel huge mastodons
> Press my ape-fingers on this typewriter
> Old novae give bright meaning to my words.

It is the actual, physical existence of a real past in a real present which shapes his body, his perceptions

and even his poetry. In Scott, this experience is an explanation for the energy of the individual. "Waves flow incessantly,/ Their sequel pregnant in our living flesh." Man does not stand apart from the rest of nature except in so far as the burden of evolution has made more of the past's real energy alive in him. Scott's man, like Pratt's or even Klein's, is a controlling or focusing form only in so far as he is also an expressive form.

Frequently images of continuing creation have been seen resulting both from the vision of the sea as a generic and often genetic landscape and from evolutionary theory. Margaret Avison's "Searching and Sounding" provides an example:

> to the farthest reaches
> where your Descent began, on the beach gravel
> ground by sea-slimed teeth . . .
> those bloodless horses . . . . .
>
> To what strange fruits in
> the ocean's orchards?
>
> Reaching
> with Light that is perfect, needed no
> kernels to swell nor juices to syrup nor
> no further making--<u>all</u> newness--
> <u>all</u> being
> that the remotest fishrib,
> the hairiest pink-thing there
> might as one fragment
> make towards the fullness you
> put off, there, on the
> ravening shore I view, from
> my gull-blanched cliffs,
> and shiver,
> GATHER my fragments towards
> the radium, the
> all-swallowing moment
> once more.

These images perhaps reached their furthest development in Gwendolyn MacEwen. Images of continuing creation pervade her poetry and she suggests that man will change radically (evolve) if the human species is to survive.

We have frequently discovered that knowledge has a physical rather than a purely intellectual history in this poetry. We have seen the poets dealing with the problem of translation into language of something that is not really capable of such translation. The mind, in this environment, has an evolutionary history, a physical growth from out of the ocean rather than a history of ideas. This is connected to man's significant role as an expressive form. In this connection it is interesting to read Robert Duncan's comments on Darwin's books:

> The fabric of Being in Darwin's poetic vision arose in the weaving of sexual selection--the falling in love and loving--and of natural selection--the alchemical process within the field of the Universe in which we, as thematic forms, either perish or survive. There it was--it had been a long time gathering--entered into our consciousness of world and self over a hundred years ago: the principle of a poetics that still has not wide belief among poets, a poetics not of paradigms and models but of individual variations and survivals, of the mutual affinities of organic beings and the evolution of living forms, not of good and bad works but of seminal and germinal works cast abroad in the seas of the world . . . .[1]

In this thesis we have attempted to discover some of these "seminal and germinal works." Hopefully, we have

been able to suggest many. Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," and Pratt's "Newfoundland," among others, lead into Atwood's "The Settlers" where her poet-narrator is indeed the landscape:

> Children run, with green
> smiles (not knowing
> where) across
> the fields of our open hands.

They also belong to the world of Atwood's paradox: the individual becoming a locale which is inhabited by the environment in which he lives. Our poets may be drowned in a magical anonymity, but that anonymity is not a separation from present and germinal life--it is, rather, a full giving of self to it. The wilderness, internal or external, of Canadian poetry may be terrifying and thankless and primitive but it is no waste-land. It is alive with who lives there, and real by the same token.

NOTES

[1] "Notes on Grossinger's Solar Journal: Oecological Sections" by Robert Duncan, (Los Angeles, Black Sparrow Press, April 1970).

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