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Modern Noise and Poetic Authority in John Newlove's Poetry

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Although most critics focus on John Newlove's "highly visual" style ("Interview" 144), much of his *oeuvre* deals with "noise," which appears in his poetry as a word, an experience, and a technique. Whether contemplating or immersed in aural, ambient, and dialogic noises, his speakers often orient themselves psychologically in relation to these phenomena. Typically, theorists treat noise as something that *only* interferes, that—to borrow William Paulson's more broadly applied term—"muddles" (67) the poet's mind; Douglas Kahn similarly observes that many have tended to portray modern noise as a "chaotic, unwanted" (20) experience. In Newlove's case, though, poetry's aesthetic is rooted in the complex representation of modern aural experiences and audible worlds that support "no knowledge / only noise" ("Insect Hopes," *LCA* 191).[1] Assuming such a privileged place in his writing, "noise" offers wide perspectives on Newlove's versatility because his various depictions of it incorporate an array of voices and poems contending with the experience of modern noise. As poems that portray such vocal struggles, Newlove's noise poetry can be used to characterize the vacillations between asserted and compromised poetic authority in his work.

Such a claim assumes that noise profoundly affects the individual and his or her environment, which recent noise theorists also posit. Phillipp Schweighauser argues that nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature "negotiates, affirms, critiques, *and* becomes an integral part of the acoustics of modernity/postmodernity" (3). Such literature grapples with the "extremely dense texture" of "our acoustic environment": on a daily basis people face "constant background noise, 'white noise,' against which other acoustic phenomena struggle to make themselves heard" (4). Noise also affects other senses, because a noisy event could interrupt one's visual focus as much as one's aural focus. Representing such phenomena in literature proves difficult: by virtue of its coherence, plain language operates in opposition to noise. How then, Schweighauser asks, does one represent "the unrepresentable"? In order "to write the unwritable without effacing it, we need a language that enlists but ultimately frustrates our desire for presence and communicative transparency. In its ambiguities, its direct-

ness, figurality, and fictionality, literary discourse seems to be a privileged site for such an endeavor" (194). Kahn likewise insists that the "existence of noise implies a mutable world through an unruly intrusion of an other, an other that attracts differences, heterogeneity, and productive confusion." These "unruly intrusion[s]," however, *can* become productive if they can be deciphered; they can promise "something out of the ordinary," or they might remain "banal" (22). Paulson's note that noise is more than a series of "external disturbances" (87) is consistent with Schweighauser's and Kahn's work. Noise is a "positive factor" (76) once it is understood or it can remain a random disturbance. Although it is always an aleatory element that may or may not make sense to its listener, it is also something that can augment, alter, or interfere with a system or message.

These various conceptualizations of noise are found throughout Newlove's work, but under diverse circumstances. He represents multiple forms of noise, two of which are societal and historical. Such poems showcase typically confident and authoritative poet-speakers who, as in "Insect Hopes," believe contemporary culture privileges noise over knowledge. Other personas, such as the one in "Public Library," engage more proximally with societal noise: the speaker tries to read in an unexpectedly clamorous environment. In a historical context, noise can be an echo of the past or a repeating version of it, a "creature noise" that transcends time (*LCA* 67). In poems like these, Newlove's speakers might observe noise from afar or nearby, contemporarily or historically, but they maintain enough critical distance to respond authoritatively to the Western world's aurality and its impact on or emergence out of a fragile modern society.

Other speakers experience noises that preclude critical distance. Many of these poems are dialogic, such as "White Cat" or "The Common Root." Typically, quotation marks are absent in Newlove's dialogues, which complicates the reading experience: utterances, whether external, internal, or from multiple speakers become indistinguishable from one another. Consequently, the layered dialogue fragments the poem and challenges the poet's voice. These "inimical noise poems" portray the poet under fire, constantly in tension with an all-too-audible world that threatens to invade and interrupt the creative act. In contrast, speakers in, or at the periphery of, natural spaces experience noise fearfully. In these "natural noise poems," such as "Not Moving," the speaker is "afraid" of the forests and their sounds because he knows that something is "undoubtedly moving" amid the darkness (*LCA* 20-1). He declines to engage with his subject. Instead, he is transfixed by fear—he becomes "the only animal / not moving / at all" (*LCA* 21). Such speakers are often "afraid" and "cold" or have

extreme difficulty understanding, explaining, or confronting the "dance of sound" in nature ("One Thing," *NDS* 24).

These speakers' struggles with aural interference and the varying effects of noise on vocality often produce something of a power struggle, or at least an opposition, in Newlove's writing: the individual versus noise. His personas in societal and historical noise poems, for example, critique North American culture: they strive to show that Western modernity's intellectual shortcomings are due to a cultural preference for noise over erudition. In such poems, the speakers are empowered intellectuals, usually poets. Inimical noise poems similarly feature poet-speakers, but their authority comes into question, because they never reach the positions of judgment common to societal or historical noise poems; auditory phenomena partly determine the trajectory of these lyric poems. Natural noise poems undermine Newlove's speakers altogether. These personas make virtually no attempt to observe noise or place judgment on its source; they instead offer a fragmented description of nature. Often afraid of the natural world, these speakers remain limited in their capacities as observers. In short, they find it difficult to represent natural forces that "live for their own reasons, not ours" ("The Green Plain," *LCA* 172).

As tensions that illuminate a power struggle, these aspects of Newlove's noise poetry shed light on his multifaceted portrayals of poetic authority. Historically, the concept of "poetic authority" has proven as enigmatic as "noise." Cristanne Miller argues that "authority inheres in that factor or those factors that poets allude to, invoke, or openly manipulate as enabling them to say what they do" (2). Her broad definition is versatile enough to encapsulate a basic view of authority that John Guillory shares: "[p]oetic authority is ideally attained by a successful persuasion" (ix). Poetic authority, then, is "an understanding of speech itself as an act of power" (Miller 8), but there are always two kinds of power on display: the power of the poet (Newlove) and the power of the speaker (his persona).

Most interesting is the way in which these two displays of power intersect in Newlove's noise poetry. His speakers' grapples with the audible world suggest that their poetic authority functions differently, sometimes less perceivably, in certain arenas: in poems about societal or historical noise, an elitist speaker might self-assuredly assert his authority; in inimical noise poems, a shaken persona struggles to overcome interruptions and distractions so that he may speak; and in poems about natural noises, speakers rarely say anything at all because they predominantly exhibit fear. Though the condition of the speaker varies in Newlove's work, the poet

himself retains a sense of authority as a virtuosic creator. In other words, Newlove's own extratextual authority is rooted in his ability to poeticize these various circumstances and to do so convincingly. I make this point because my primary goal is to demonstrate the diverse authorities that operate *in* Newlove's noise poetry, but one must avoid conflating these complex conditions with the talent, sophistication, and authority of Newlove himself.

Yet, the "socially situated disgust" (243) that Jeff Derksen claims to be characteristic of Newlove is a trait the poet shares with speakers in societal noise poems. Take "Insect Hopes," for example, where the speaker "know[s]" what humankind wants:

> Not these sweaty visions everyone has
> no recognizable rhythms
> no beauty in the line
> no knowledge
> only noise
> no feeling of pain
>
> (*LCA* 191)

The misalignment of "noise" on the page signals both his distaste for it (because he isolates the word) and its intrusive quality (because its presence disrupts the speaker's catalogue). Furthermore, the speaker positions "noise" both figuratively and physically in opposition to "knowledge," which suggests that noise also impedes the psychological growth of "failed cities" (*LCA* 192). Civilization embraces noise as a distraction from the inescapable "sweaty visions everyone has"—a reference to the cold sweat of and fears rooted in nightmares—and from the "rhythms" of poetry. As a result, rhythms that *should* be "recognizable" are, like poetry's "beauty," ignored; such emphases suggest the speaker is a poet. The poet-speaker thus elevates himself, critical of individuals who avoid the necessary lessons of unfelt "pain." Perhaps it is the knowledge arising from such pain that prompts the speaker in "White Philharmonic Novels" to remark that he "remember[s] pain almost with affection" (*LCA* 201), which offers some justification for the elitism of "Insect Hopes." In other words, both poems suggest the tension between the social majority who decline to learn and the observant, erudite poet who learns from and embraces pain.

The poems in which Newlove confronts this binary of "knowledge" and "noise" exemplify instances of societal noise and often mark the most overt assertions of poetic authority in his work. In "Public Library," for example, the speaker moves from "half reading" and sitting "half in a

dreamed trance" to "half listening" and "half looking" (*LCA* 83). As in other poems, "the *sound*s" and "irritating *noise*" (*LCA* 83, emphasis added) are markers of what Kahn terms "all sound," an aural "totalization" that distinguishes itself from the more focused "isolation" of "one sound" (9). The violent images highlight their damaging presence: newspapers rustle "like a sea or wind," books "snap" shut, or have their "backs [...] broken," while "pieces of paper being torn" sound like the "magnification of a snail's death scream" (*LCA* 83). These noises disrupt the speaker's scholarship and his sense of temporal place. He gauges time by how often "the man who sat all day" goes "aaah aaah every four seconds" or how another blows his nose "noisily between his finger tips / ten times an hour" (*LCA* 84).

Kahn therefore rightly contends that ambient noise "situates the writer" (42), but his claim that this moment of orientation is innocuous seems unjustified in Newlove's case. At times, the speaker appears overwhelmed by his situation and thus drawn into this disruptive noisiness. Distracted, he feels compelled to *look* "at the people around [him]." He observes their obsessive male gaze as an anonymous woman enters the library: "[she] would come in and look about / [...] / afraid to walk out again immediately / lest we be too obviously insulted." These descriptions seem banal, but the gaze becomes increasingly sexual: "the men who could see far enough staring furtively / at her fat knees shifting around in their chairs / to ease the strain on the crotches of their greasy pants" (*LCA* 86). The speaker then watches the men "star[e]" at the "girl" and her "breasts," "legs," "up her / tight skirts to see her sweating thighs" (*LCA* 86). Although he condemns such salacious stares, he finds himself sharing in these eroticized moments; note the communal "we," which implies he, too, might be "insulted" by the woman's departure. As the noises compel him to monitor and partake in these lustful scenes, he situates himself, as Kahn suggests one might, in relation to the noisy world around him. The speaker might decline to view this realignment as a form of "aid" (Kahn 42), however, since he witnesses only the library's lascivious aura, noisiness, and resistance to knowledge. Although these noises challenge the speaker's ability to read, they have little effect on his authoritative role. It is precisely because the populace embraces noise and frustrates the speaker's desire for knowledge that he asserts an elitist tone and denounces others.

In such cases, noise is an obstructive force, something that, as noted earlier, "muddles" or obscures information necessary to society's survival. In that regard, the persona in "Insect Hopes" draws connections between cultural ignorance (of pain, of knowledge, of poetry, and of the self) and

humankind's continual failure to gain insight from the mistakes of other centuries:

> But I wanted to tell you still how lovely we are
> of the ages of jewels
> of failed cities
> of the notion that there was good
> how this century began like all the others
> in blood
> and milk-white dreams
> and ended
> with insect hopes
>
> (*LCA* 192-3)

Despite his lamentations, the poet-speaker still has some hope for the future: he believes "we are lovely," albeit in unexplained ways. Yet he also suggests that "we are" many other things: "we are not wholly beasts yet," "we are surrounded by liars," "at least I know how lovely we are / Enduring—," "we are one after the other," and "[w]hat nonsense we are" (*LCA* 192). Some of these declarations are more hopeful than others and exhibit the radical polarity of what humankind can potentially embody: "we" might be "lovely" and, as the enjambment implies, "[e]nduring," but there is something ominous about the litotes and reversed Darwinism of "we are not wholly beasts *yet*" (emphasis added).

Least encouraging is the poet-speaker's declaration that "we" are sheer "nonsense." The fact that people live in "failed cities" and corrupt the purity of "milk-white dreams" is a testament to such cynicism. A tension between purity and corruption pervades these lines, a tension that the layered image of blood, which could be either placental or spilled, epitomizes. The lines bring to mind "White Philharmonic Novels," in which the speaker accuses the reader directly: "You prefer the blood of death / to the blood of birth" (*LCA* 201). Newlove depicts new generations as an opportunity, one disregarded by humankind, for a cultural shift, a move away from the bloody and "failed" societies of previous epochs and toward a more enlightened era. In other words, centuries end (like "Insect Hopes" itself) without punctuation: each new generation continues the perversions of the past and achieves only "insect hopes" that drown in the blood of cyclical war and death.

The "insect" image recurs frequently in Newlove's work as a metaphor for humanity. In *The Green Plain*, the speaker wonders if "civilization" is "only a lack of room, only / an ant-heap" (*LCA* 170), and in "It Is a City,"

the "casual insects auction death away" (*LCA* 147). Many of these poems stress the poet's ascension above "insects." From this elevated and authoritative social position, he observes and critiques modern noise and its victims, even if still somewhat affected by the experience. This same superior enlightenment, this "disgust" at society's perennial ignorance, tempts one to qualify Brian Henderson's brief definition of Newlove's noise: "Newlove finds words [...] are often mere noise, a static which garbles meaning and distorts the world we live in" (9). Perhaps *others'* words seem like noise, but Newlove's speakers use words to clarify their disgust, to assert their authority over others, and to identify the various and prevailing forms of noise in what they believe to be an insect-like society that itself "garbles meaning."

This sense of empowerment parallels nicely with Jane Griffiths's take on poetic authority: she argues that a poet asserts himself by "claim[ing] a high status for the poet" (Griffiths 4)—think, for instance, of the speakers in Irving Layton's "The Birth of Tragedy," Louis Dudek's *Atlantis*, or Newlove's "Insect Hopes." Cristanne Miller similarly posits that William Carlos Williams's need "to 'assert himself' [is] the primary tactic, and perhaps even goal, of his poetry" (4). Repeated instances of self-assertion and a tendency to raise one's self above the rest of the "ant-heap" define Newlove's speakers in these societal noise poems; society / poets respectively privilege the alternate spectrums of noise / knowledge.

In poems that deal with historical noise, Newlove's speakers expound the cyclical nature of societal decay alluded to in the final lines of "Insect Hopes." The noise of history permeates Newlove's work: the "cries" of the past in "The Light of History: This Rhetoric Against That Jargon" (*NDS* 57) or the "whistle" of the past in "Notes From and Among the Wars" (*LCA* 152). "Crazy Riel" epitomizes Newlove's tendency to depict noise as a historical gateway, if not an immersive historical experience. The speaker, declaring it "[t]ime to write a poem," hears "the creature noise" and the "noise of images" (*LCA* 67). He also hears the noise of "politics," of "frogs," of "dying," and of "a page," all of which are constituents of the same aural register. He invokes all of these sounds as a means of visualizing an aural history, perhaps because (as the poet's sudden slips between time periods and settings suggest) he draws parallels between history and the present and expects to observe both at the same time. He speaks of the "young men" who "keep quiet, / contemporaneously," a passage paired with the speaker's memory of his "boyhood home" where children "catch [frogs] for bait or sale / Or caught them." Yet at other times the speakers tells stories from Louis Riel's point of view, where there are "[h]uge

massed forces of men / hating each other" (*LCA* 67) on the battlefield. These slips between time and setting suggest that the speaker *hears* history intersecting with the present, or even vice versa.

According to the poet, history relates to the present via death's continuing noise; again the poet assumes a position of authority because he condemns the warring nature of the modern world. As one gathers from "The Singing Head," death cannot halt sound: the severed head—presumably a "martyr" like Orpheus (Atwood "How" 67)—still "sings […] for as long / as it may be lucky / to shout out the words / in measured time." Despite the swing of "the sword" and the ensuing "blood gush," "the auditory / nerves carry on / the sound, / the self-made sound" (*LCA* 35). The image of martyrdom is also an image of death's continual presence in history, which clarifies why the speaker in "Crazy Riel" so seamlessly conflates Riel's century with his own: both periods blare the noise of death. In this regard, the "creature noise" carries a number of connotations. Because of the phrase's proximity to the speaker's talk of "massed forces of men," one might assume that the speaker simultaneously hears the battle and dehumanizes the "men" as creatures—this reading fits nicely with the "insect" motif in Newlove's poetry. The "creature noise" might also refer to literal creatures in the poem: "The noise the frogs hesitate / to make as the metal hook / breaks through the skin" (68). The noise of death persists here, too: "[t]he noise your dying makes / to which you are the only listener" (67). In opposition to humankind's "stride toward the stars," "man's perpetual wars" ("Notes From and Among The Wars," *LCA* 152) and the reflexive sound of death survive time. If these history poems are authoritative condemnations of humankind's inability to overcome the noise of death and perpetual wars, then it is fair to say that societal and historical noise poems share the condition of being predominantly observational works. Speakers in these poems maintain critical distance, even if the distance is as remote as it is in "Public Library." Removed from noise, they define and justify their anti-social elitism.

Less removed is the speaker in "North America," whose memory provokes historical noises to invade his mind and, consequently, the poem itself. This poem represents a tame case of inimical noise: a randomly remembered text disrupts the speaker and infiltrates the poem. Under the influence of "white wine," he hears "curious thought[s]" and "a medley / of sounds / from other men's tongues" (*LCA* 57). The rest of the poem is a significantly long quotation, almost exactly half the poem, which details how an anonymous second speaker's "horses / were / so torn that / the blood // streamed down / their legs and / breasts" (*LCA* 58-9). The noise of

death is still present in this excerpt, embodied by the bloodied horses. More important, though, is the speaker's dialogue with history and historical texts. He invokes a virtually unknown historical textbook, John Bakeless's *The Eyes of Discovery: America As Seen By Its First Explorers*, which helps him "recover" the "noise / made / of the continent" to his "mind" (*LCA* 59).[2]

The intersection of Bakeless's book with Newlove's poem demonstrates that, as he says in "White Philharmonic Novels," the "arrangement" of "phrases" (*LCA* 202) crystallizes authority. And "North America" is meticulously arranged: the lineation is terse and thus feels very controlled, even when Bakeless's text enters. The "arrangement" leads to some interesting uses of enjambment; in the lines above, for example, the isolation of "breasts" inevitably makes the line seem sexualized. This arrangement reminds the reader that the poet retains control over the intrusive second text. The allusion can therefore be read two ways: as the infiltration of the speaker's voice or as the poet's manipulation of a foreign element. In the first case, even if Bakeless's content seems to compete with the speaker's own voice, the recitation still suggests erudition; the speaker demonstrates the kind of knowledge that Newlove's personas so often seek. In the second case, Newlove himself permits Bakeless's presence and manipulates the latter author's meaning and words. Either way, the external element introduced into the poem does not fracture the authority of the poetic voice.

In other cases, however, Newlove portrays severe acts of aural infiltration that *insurmountably* fragment his speakers' voice and appear to challenge his poetic authority. These inimical poems are mostly dialogic, like "White Cat," "Funeral," or "The Common Root," where dialogue intrudes as an incarnation of noise; these poems' lack of quotation marks exemplifies such intrusion, because the interlocutor's voice blends with the speaker's narrative. This conflict occurs in the majority of Newlove's multivocal poems, as in "Public Library," "White Philharmonic Novels," "No Song," and numerous others. For Newlove, those speakers who distance themselves critically from societal and historical noises merely observe aural phenomena, but inimical noises represent the poet's struggle to write from *within* a noisy civilization.

"White Cat" epitomizes such a conflict in its depiction of a poet-speaker's effort to capture external aurality. The poem begins with a woman's dialogic intrusion into the poem:

> I like orange juice
> better than anything else
> in the world, she said –

wearing a blue dress;

when I wrote it down,
drinking cold tapwater she
turned and, What
did you do? said, then

came, sat in
the rocker chair
(*LCA* 25)

These lines distort the "I," since the reader is initially led to believe that it is *the poet*—described as such because he is a self-proclaimed writer—who likes "orange juice." In fact, the persona drinks, depending on how one reads the line, "cold tapwater." The female character's role is curious. She is presumably the speaker's wife or partner and makes a habit of loquaciously interrupting "John," repeatedly asking him questions he does not or refuses to answer. As "John" writes, the female subject invades both his space and his poem. It is her voice that dominates the text rather than his.

The interlocutor's interruptive dialogue and the way in which Newlove creates it as noise on the page raise issues about the speaker's hold over external voices. When the female subject remarks,"[t]his cat is / sick, John, do you think / she has distemper" (*LCA* 25), one notices a few peculiarities in the second line. It is unclear if the reader observes John *Newlove*, or if he should still be reading the speaker as a fictionalized persona. Newlove's caesural "John" also changes the intimations of the line. Given the stark enjambment, the reader might wonder if *John* is sick, or if *John* does "think," or if he (presumably an emasculated "he," since the cat is female) has "distemper"; he certainly seems somewhat indignant when he responds, "How should / I know." If one reads further into the parallel between a "sick" John and a "sick" cat, it is noteworthy that the cat's "eye" has been "injured." The final lines of the poem, again spoken by the interlocutor, question this injury: "Is it? Is it?" (*LCA* 25). The poet, speaking through his female subject, poses this question to the reader: is there an injured "eye"/"I" in the poem? Is the poet "sick?" Again, the problem of authority surfaces, further complicated by the fact that one cannot be sure who Newlove believes these sensorial injuries affect: the cat, himself, or his poet-persona, "John." Whether the reader believes the poet is disempowered or not, "White Cat" asks crucial questions about the effectiveness of voice and the poetic eye when both compete with audible disruptions. "White Cat" establishes some conventions in Newlove's inimical noise

poems: he depicts the challenge of writing dialogue, which becomes noise in the context of lyric poetic composition. For example, his desire to represent authentically the female subject of "White Cat," a goal outlined in the second stanza's first line, is *too* fully realized and consequently, it consciously dismantles his own voice. In other words, this poem serves to show the speaker's struggle to write amidst noise, even if it is the noise of human relations.

An equally compelling example is "The Common Root," which, like "White Cat," begins with dialogue:

> If you won't say
> anything, then
> shut up, the indian
> whore in the cafe
>
> said to me.
> (*LCA* 60)

The "indian whore's" paradoxical demand that the speaker "shut up" if he won't "*say* anything" (emphasis added) suggests that, from her point of view, his utterances lack a discernible message and are therefore themselves examples of noise. Yet, her accusation is itself a form of noise, since the reader is unaware that this opening section is dialogue until the fifth line—which is delayed further by the stanza break. Until that point, the lines can easily be read as the beginning of a harangue against the reader. Confusion also arises from Newlove's use of enjambment, just as in "White Cat." Lines such as "shut up, the indian" sound imperative; Newlove's caesura is the only hint that these structures are misleading. The layered dialogic effect of Newlove's stylistic techniques in this poem shows how speech acts, when viewed from alternative perspectives, can become noise: despite the "indian whore's" insistence that the speaker's words are meaningless, he portrays her dialogue as an interference, which Newlove himself uses to defamiliarize, or perhaps even make "noisy," speech acts and poetic narratives in general.

One conclusion to be drawn from poems like "White Cat" or "The Common Root" is that, for Newlove, both civilization *and* poetry can generate "noise" in diametrically opposed ways, since the former epitomizes ignorance and the latter a skillful representation of aurality. In the case of noise *in* poetry, the dialogic or general aural interference becomes "the source of a negative mediation [...] an irritant that works against effective communication" (qtd. Schweighauser 5). Such poems portray a disorient-

ing relationship between the speaker and the aurality that surrounds him. In effect, this cacophony prevents the speaker's message from being readily perceived by readers. Conversely, the *poet's* message might be ideally communicated, because Newlove captures a complex and frustrating snapshot of the audible world.

Nowhere in Newlove's work is such distortion better exemplified than in "White Philharmonic Novels." The poem's difficulty lies in its erratic arrangement of voices and of fragmented narratives, what Susan Glickman describes as an occasionally frustrating "incoherence" (103), and in its continuous suggestion that "[t]he message is that there is no message" (*LCA* 197). Even the title itself raises a number of questions about "meaning" in the poem: if whiteness symbolizes an idealized purity, then why does the poem conclude with the speaker symbolically "wash[ing]" (*LCA* 206) his hands of it? Or if the whiteness is "white noise," how does this vague ambience suggest harmony? Of course, the overwhelming presence of "whiteness" in Newlove's work—"White Cat," "milk-white dreams," "white wine," the white "snow" in "Driving," and many other examples—makes this colour an even more complex signifier. The mention of "novels" is also somewhat bizarre, because this poem lacks any trace of a coherent narrative; though, its numerical sequences gradually lengthen as they approach the sixth section, which creates a climactic effect that concludes with the denouement of sections seven, eight, nine, and ten. Lastly, it is difficult to determine what Newlove means to suggest with the word "philharmonic." One possible interpretation is that the speaker (or Newlove himself) is a lover of harmony, one who *desires* a euphonic world, but finds instead a noisy one, which is represented in microcosm by the dissonant poem itself.

"White Philharmonic Novels" exemplifies Schweighauser's conclusion that "literary discourse" is a "privileged site" for depicting the frustrations of "unwritable" noise: each section is part of an inharmonious whole. Frequent reconfigurations of recurring phrases in the poem prevent any one meaning from emerging as the speaker's unifying line of argument:

> Look, nobody gets wise writing
> Now I must be making pretty manners
> at you
> It's necessary to realize that all these phrases
> are stolen. The arrangement is all.
>
> (*LCA* 202)

Compare the above sequence from section seven to one in section ten:

> I made these voices.
>
> The arrangement is all.
>
> It grew and grew until it was bigger than I was
> and it made me think that I was bigger than I was.
>
> The lie is elaborate and exact
>
> (*LCA* 206)

The visually compact and less authoritative, one might even say less arranged, excerpt from section seven sounds far more passive than the assertive section ten. In the latter excerpt, the poet-speaker lays claim to "these voices," the allusive noises that permeate his text, and manipulates the space on the page, thereby simulating the enormity of the poem and its habit of growing "bigger" even than the poet-speaker. Newlove's speaker therefore exhibits his own craftiness through "elaborate and exact" manipulations.

The poet-speaker's "stolen" lines are representative examples of these manipulations. It is no surprise that Newlove's meditation on Eliotic theft and "arrangement" is itself stolen from Louis Dudek's *Atlantis*: "all the elements are there. / It's just a matter of arrangement" (29). Dudek's lines are only one register of an allusive cacophony that comprises Newlove's densely layered poetic voice. His undisguised allusions to Anthony Trollope's *The Tireless Traveler* and Flaubert and his "mania for sentences" (*LCA* 204) underscore some of this layering. Furthermore, the speaker's attention to "lies" in the poem encourages readers to identify the pun on "lying" in "I wish I were lying with you now" (*LCA* 199); the play on words calls to mind Irving Layton's "women lie honestly by their men at last" ("Whatever Else Poetry Is Freedom," *A Wild Peculiar Joy* 56; Newlove often read Layton), which Layton himself steals from Shakespeare's "Sonnet 138." Similar allusive dialogues occur throughout Newlove's poetry. The title of "The Death of the Hired Man," for example, alludes to Robert Frost's poem of the same name, while content of the poem shares startling parallels with Layton's "The Bull Calf." Similarly, *The Green Plain*'s speaker depicts "the mechanisms" "burning, burning" (*LCA* 174) in a moment similar to scenes in *The Waste Land,* in which T. S. Eliot's speaker invokes St. Augustine and describes "Carthage" "burning burning burning" (ln 307-8). "White Philharmonic Novels" is also highly self-referential, in dialogue not only with the speaker's significant other, but with itself—numerous lines are repeated in different contexts—

as well as with Newlove's other works; there are embedded references to his poems "Cold, Heat," "Driving," "Not Moving," and many others. The abundance of intertextual and intratextual voices ironizes the title: the poem becomes a dialogically dissonant piece and so any "love of harmony" remains unattained.

Like "North America," "White Philharmonic Novels" underscores the power of Newlove's speakers, which is evinced by their ability to juggle voices and by their roles as a "compilers" or "collectors." Newlove's arrangement of texts and voices can be intertextual, intratextual, or dialogic. In such cases, he is *creating* a noisy piece, and so an overarching authority emerges from inimical noise poems: the convincing representation of a speaker's immersion in a raucous collection of texts and dialogues.

Yet the erudition and elitism of such speakers seems absent in poems like "East from the Mountains." Natural forces more overtly challenge the speaker's voice. The persona resides in the interstitial "hamlets" (*LCA* 39), caught between the cities and nature's "total wholeness" (*LCA* 38), contending with a "single wind" and "the blowing snow": "The single, faltering, tenuous line of melody / displayed by a thin man's lungs / unsurely, halting in the winter air: // what to say? Oh, say nothing" (*LCA* 38). Here noise would seem to be an obstructive element, one similar to that observed in Newlove's dialogic poems. But the obstruction is different in this poem; the speaker admits his inability to contend with "the high-pitched wind" (*LCA* 38). A natural aurality far outweighs the power of the human voice.

Significantly, Newlove's frequently employed poet-speaker is missing in this poem and others like it. Perhaps the fact that such speakers "unsurely" utter their "faltering," "tenuous," and "tired and halting song" (*LCA* 39) prevents Newlove from including the typically empowered poet figure he so often depicts. Indeed, these are speakers without power. "East from the Mountains" differs from poems about societal, historical, or inimical noise because the speaker relinquishes his voice and becomes a passive personage. He remains in awe of the natural world that "answers no questions, / but only exists / as it ought to" (*LCA* 38). Natural spheres appear to be places beyond the reach of this speaker's judgment.

When Newlove's personas come into closer proximity to these uncontrolled, external noises, they typically become frightened and fail to engage with the natural world. As the speaker of "In the Forest" hears the "thundering" of gravel rolling, which sounds like "a rock waterfall / that frightens" him, he fearfully sits in a "ditch" and hears the gravel "bounc[e]

/ off [his] hunched shoulders" (*LCA* 40). One also notices that the persona is "10 feet" below "the dark grass," and "dream[s] of the animals / that may sulk there." Implicitly, the natural external forces, literally and metaphorically towering over the speaker, are higher on Newlove's conceived hierarchy than is humankind. Animals, too, provoke the speaker's powerlessness, since "[e]ven the gentle deer / scare" him; he believes them to be "dangerous and inviolable / as [he is] not inviolable" (*LCA* 40). Nature proves to be an invincible and audible element that cannot be infiltrated. Aware of nature's power, the speaker obsesses over nature's sounds, as "wind magnifies" the forest's "usual noise" (*LCA* 40-1); consequently, he is "too frightened / to move or to stay" (*LCA* 41). The poem shares a number of similarities with "Not Moving," where the speaker identifies himself as a dehumanized "animal" (*LCA* 21), which recalls the danger of becoming a "beast" in "Insect Hopes." The transformation is not due to societal ignorance, but to disempowerment at the hands of "[w]aterfalls / in the dark / & the noise" (*LCA* 20). These speakers remain motionless when they face natural noises, too afraid to move, except when the persona from "In the Forest" "run[s] down the cold road" (*LCA* 41). "East from the Mountains" may seem more muted in its depiction of fear than poems like "Not Moving," but it shares with such works a typically reticent persona pitted against the noise of the natural world.

According to Margaret Atwood, these trends show that Newlove's "external" world is "something to be disliked or feared" ("How" 59); she only briefly acknowledges that poems like "The Double-Headed Snake" depict "terror and fear" as "among / the greatest beauty" (*LCA* 76). E. F. Dyck, however, pays extensive attention to "The Double-Headed Snake" and makes the valid observation that the poem shows that an individual can escape fear, even if he is in a Newlove poem. The speaker declares, "Beauty's whatever / makes the adrenalin run. Fear / in the mountains at night-time's / not tenuous, it is not the cold / that makes me shiver" (*LCA* 76); the enjambment foregrounds "Fear" as the very thing that makes "the adrenaline run" and is therefore "beautiful." Although speakers like the one in "The Double-Headed Snake" are far from Wordsworthian, their fears evidence only their subordination to nature. These confessions should be understood as the speakers' admission that there are beautiful things beyond human understanding and control, rather than as markers of what Atwood believes to be a detestable experience. As well, these speakers' cosmic smallness, their timidity and general hesitation to judge or to confront nature, marks various moments in which authority is, at the very least, obscured; one wonders where the confident and authoritative voices

of poems like "Insect Hopes," "Public Library," and "White Cat" have gone. In such poems, the poet thoroughly treats, even involves himself in, the world he observes, but in poems about nature, Newlove's speakers withdraw more than they engage. Their distance is trepidatious, rather than critical, but the speakers still appreciate the natural world.

The crucial difference between these natural noise poems and poems that depict societal, historical, or inimical noise, therefore, is that the latter group often confidently represents authority. And although I have separated them into categories for purposes of analysis, these three types of noise poems occasionally cross-dwell: "North America" contains historical, allusive, and dialogic elements, just as "White Philharmonic Novels" deals with some examples of societal noise, such as when the speaker hears both "the Nutcracker" and "the first Los Alamos test" at once (*LCA* 205). Such co-mingling explains why each category offers comparably empowered elitist speakers. Their elitism is rooted in the fact or insinuation that they are poets who manipulate and govern numerous voices and histories, pitted against a society of alienation and ignorance. Newlove either judges the world he envisions or immerses his speakers in what he perceives to be a far too noisy world, and both instances are examples of critique. In these spheres the poet demonstrates unrivaled authority over his subjects. Natural noise poems are equally "powerful aesthetic objects" (Barbour 278), but they are populated by apprehensive personas—rarely, if ever, poet figures—who themselves lack power and who are too afraid to do much more than run. It would be inaccurate to say that Newlove himself fails to retain authority in such cases. His speakers' fear is convincing and so he achieves Guillory's "successful persuasion." Yet, as opposed to what one sees elsewhere in Newlove's *oeuvre*, his speakers decline to assert authoritative roles or to offer thorough observations of a vocal struggle.

Such intricate approaches to voice and authority call into question critics' continual emphasis on "despair" as Newlove's trademark condition—for example, John Ferns (69), but almost every Newlove critic has employed this word at one point or another. Atwood's 1973 article, "How Do I Get Out of Here: The Poetry of John Newlove," is the paradigm of this approach. Wrought with hyperbole, the article purports a reductive characterization of Newlove's work: "Why not stick one's head in the gas oven or the toilet, where according to this analysis it logically belongs? Such a conclusion has occurred certainly to Newlove himself; occasionally it is death, not truth, that seems the only reality" (64). As the noise poetry shows, there exists in Newlove's poetry far more diversity and far less despair than Atwood leads readers to believe. Nevertheless, many critics

reinforce, if not overtly mimic, her unidimensional approach. Frank Davey, for instance, also emphasizes dismal motifs in Newlove's supposedly "autobiographical" work: "vomiting, lying, despairing, stumbling, fleeing, betraying, and being betrayed" (206).[3]

Newlove's noise poems expose the limits of such approaches. The poet is as likely to depict an individual elevated above the "ant-heap" as he is to dwarf a similar persona with ruminations on a natural cosmic symmetry or chaos. Readings like Atwood's come from a narrow focus on despair, paralysis, and fear, which are mere echoes of the conclusions she draws in *Survival*. As Newlove's selected poems, *A Long Continual Argument* (2007), are finally back in print, his poetry is ripe for new approaches. The task for willing critics is to resist the rhetoric of victimhood and despair that dominates the scholarship of the seventies and eighties, especially because, with few exceptions, a long critical silence came thereafter. New scholarship on Newlove demands better attention to his complex balance of theme and form, which I believe his noise poetry best exemplifies in a broad context: such poetry provides broad perspectives on moments of apparently concretized authority and elitism, of self-doubt and vocal struggle, and of apparently relinquished authority when speakers experience a modern sublimity. Newlove's noise poetry suggests a much greater diversity in his work than critics have acknowledged thus far, and a new generation of critics might now start to seek it out.

Notes

1 All quotations, unless otherwise marked, are drawn from Newlove's selected poems, *A Long Continual Argument*. I have compared the originals with the reprinted poems, and the relevant lines have been reproduced faithfully.

2 An alternative source for Newlove's allusion is the anonymously authored *Dragoon Campaign to the Rocky Mountains* (1836): "we rode through several thickets so matted together with an undergrowth of nettles and briers, as almost entirely to forbid a passage; our horses were so torn by them that the blood literally run in streams down their legs and breasts; we ourselves not entirely escaping, our hands and faces being more or less scratched and torn by them" (149). As Newlove reproduces verbatim Bakeless's excerpt, I have no reason to believe he was familiar with the earlier publication from 1836. Bakeless attributes his quotation to Louis Pelzer's *Marches of the Dragoons* and his article "Journal of Marches of the Dragoons"; I have been unable to find physical copies of either text.

3 Newlove himself has said that he "would object strenuously" to Davey's suggestion that such poems are autobiographical (*Twelve Voices* 113): "He's simply taken the idea that when one says 'I' in a poem, the 'I' means 'John Newlove'; [...] The 'I' is a grammatical device to make the poem more immediate" (*Twelve Voices* 114). The poet adds, "I can't recall a single poem that mentions me throwing up—not one. Self-loathing—I can

think of one or two poems that *might* suggest this" (*Twelve Voices* 113).

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