

STUDIES**The Poetry of Alden Nowlan: a
Critical Reassessment****By W. J. Keith**

The critical reputation of Alden Nowlan is fraught with paradox. All serious readers of Canadian poetry know his name, and are aware of the quality of his writing, but he does not readily spring to mind when the major Canadian poets are listed. Patrick Lane and Lorna Crozier have reported—in my experience, rightly—that students respond with enthusiasm when confronted with his verse (xi), yet he is often excluded from university courses in favour of supposedly more sophisticated but far less rewarding poets. He has been lovingly edited, but the editions are generally flawed and for scholarly purposes are frustratingly difficult to use. Criticism has tended to concentrate on his regionalism and the fact that he wrote in both regular and irregular verse—legitimate matters of concern, but not ones that in themselves lead, as the best criticism should, to a closer appreciation of his finest poetic achievements.

In the following essay, I aim first at clearing the ground by drawing attention to specific problems in the approach to Nowlan's work. This is a necessary procedure, even though it delays the more important process of coming to grips with the actual writings. I shall then attempt to make critical discriminations within Nowlan's work, including detailed discussion of a number of his best poems drawn from both the earlier and later stages of his career.

I

The most substantial editions of Nowlan's poetry are *Early Poems* (1983) and *An Exchange of Gifts: Poems New and Selected* (1985), both edited by Robert Gibbs. These are labours of love, and we all owe a profound debt of gratitude to Professor Gibbs for his diligent compiling of these memorials to his friend and fellow poet. Nonetheless, it has to be acknowledged that Gibbs is a poet first and an editor second. These books, for all their

considerable merits, leave much to be desired when consulted extensively, for scholarly purposes, over a period of time.

Early Poems claims to reprint Nowlan's first five volumes, *The Rose and the Puritan*, *A Darkness in the Earth*, *Wind in a Rocky Country*, *Under the Ice*, and *The Way Things Are*, plus previously uncollected poems contained in *Five New Brunswick Poets*. However, two of the fourteen poems originally printed in *A Darkness in the Earth* are not included; no reason is given for these omissions—indeed, their absence is not even mentioned.¹ In addition, the book contains a number of misprints. I have detected fourteen, and, while most of these are trivial and obvious, at least two are more substantial. The dropping of a definite article in the fourth line of "Hens" (12) has a deleterious effect on the rhythm of that poem, while the misprint of "bouncing" for "bounding" in the third stanza of "Dancer" (157) produces a ludicrous effect. The book contains an index of first lines but no alphabetical list of titles. When well over a hundred and fifty poems are involved, this makes an individual title difficult to locate.

An Exchange of Gifts provides a selection from the whole range of Nowlan's verse, though the later poems get the lion's share of representation. For the most part, the poems are arranged chronologically, though the "new," uncollected, and therefore most recent poems are placed first, out of order. For the serious reader, this creates a somewhat confusing effect. Moreover, two of these poems ("Ghost Stories" and "He Attempts to Love His Neighbours") are not in fact new at all, since they appeared in *I Might Not Tell Everybody This*. How Gibbs made this slip I cannot imagine, but it is not the only one, since the selections from *I'm a Stranger Here Myself*, published in 1974, appear *after* those from *Smoked Glass*, published in 1977. Moreover, he lists in his Table of Contents one poem that should be in *Between Tears and Laughter* under *Smoked Glass* ("Sister Mary Cecilia") and one that appeared in *Smoked Glass* in *Between Tears and Laughter* ("A Very Common Prescription")! And because the *Smoked Glass* selections are themselves misplaced, this means that each poem is thus misdated by six years. Another oddity is the absence of any mention of *Playing the Jesus Game*, the volume of selected poems published in the United States in 1970, which printed twenty-two poems that have not appeared in other Nowlan collections. It is possible, of course, that Gibbs considered none of them worthy of inclusion. Save for one or two poems, this can be seen as a readily defensible position (I have not found occasion to single out any of these poems in the ensuing discussion), but it troubles me that the book is passed over silently, as if it did not exist. Since the

copyright is attributed to Nowlan himself, there should have been no difficulty about reprinting.

The texts are reproduced accurately and attractively, and I have no serious quarrel with Gibbs's choices. No two readers will agree totally about inclusions and exclusions, and Gibbs provides a representative selection which reproduces virtually all Nowlan's best poems (though personally I miss "TermCancCline" from *Between Tears and Laughter*). But there are a number of minor irritants. For some unstated reason (and this is true in one instance of *Early Poems* as well) Gibbs does not reproduce the original order of the poems within individual volumes. Some poets are particular about such details, and I can think of no reason to depart from it. Gibbs offers no bibliographical information and no notes, and this time there is an index of titles but not one of first lines—a preferable choice, but why can't one have both? However, poems beginning with indefinite or definite articles are here perversely indexed under "a" and "the," a practice that can lead to considerable confusion and frustration. Even more amazingly, no dates are given anywhere in the book for individual volumes! This is clearly a book designed for poetry-lovers rather than dedicated scholars, and that is admirable, but there is no reason why at least basic information could not have been provided.

Of more recent anthologies, Allison Mitcham's, containing prose as well as verse, is highly subjective and contains a number of very strange choices. Some decidedly indifferent poems ("Circles" from *The Mysterious Naked Man*, for example) are included, while many that most discerning readers would place among "the best of Alden Nowlan" are missing. *Selected Poems*, edited by poets Patrick Lane and Lorna Crozier, is generally discriminating—more so, in some respects, than *An Exchange of Gifts*—and its choices as good as limitations of space would allow. Yet here too there is a total absence of dates; even the volumes in which the poems first appeared are not indicated. They are reproduced in chronological order until almost the end, but then, without warning, three poems that had appeared only in *Playing the Jesus Game* (1970) are inexplicably tacked on after mature poems of the 1980s! Clearly, some serious bibliographical work on Nowlan is desperately needed.

Critical discussion of Nowlan's work is confined for the most part to a number of articles of varying quality. Most of these are given in Michael Oliver's listing at the end of his essay in the *Canadian Writers and Their Works* series. Indeed, Oliver himself has produced the most substantial commentary in his fifty-six-page article and in his earlier pamphlet *Poet's Progress*. However, Oliver's evaluations of earlier criticism, in both his

contributions, should be treated with caution. More recently, Patrick Toner has published a full-length biography, *If I Could Turn and Meet Myself*. None of these, however, is particularly rigorous in its critical approach. As a biographer, Toner inevitably concentrates more on the man than on his work, and is generally content, so far as literary criticism is concerned, to quote brief snatches from contemporary reviews. Oliver makes a number of legitimate points, but is strangely uneven in his comments. (His remarks about rhythms and metres in the *Canadian Writers and Their Works* article are particularly inaccurate and misleading—a point to which I shall return.)

As I have already indicated, much critical discussion centres upon Nowlan's regionalism. Maritime commentators tend to discuss it with a kind of suspicious defensiveness, while outsiders can sometimes be uninformed and condescending on the subject, or, in a misguided attempt at compliment, deny that he was a regionalist at all. Still, this topic has been aired often enough, and I have no wish to waste more ink upon it. I shall merely assert what ought to be obvious: that Nowlan clearly *is* a regionalist, since the vast majority of his poems (even those that may sound philosophical and even abstract) arise out of a specific and intensely local matrix; on the other hand, he is just as clearly one of those authors who, like such distinguished predecessors as Thomas Hardy or Robert Frost or Emily Bronte or William Faulkner, transcend the limits of their regionalism to become writers of national and even international significance.

The other much-discussed topic—the relative merits of his earlier (mainly regular) and later (mainly irregular) verse—is more complex. The tendency has been for commentators to divide themselves into two main camps: the traditionalists, who prefer the earlier poems favouring regular rhythms, recognized stanza-forms, and easily scanned lines, and the more numerous champions of allegedly contemporary writing who declare themselves supporters of so-called “free verse.” My own position on this issue will become obvious in the later part of this essay. Suffice it to say here that I am interested in fully achieved poems, whether regular or irregular, and that I find examples in both the early and late volumes.

As for literary criticism on Nowlan, if one sets aside Lane and Crozier's brief but sensible Introduction, I have found two earlier discussions genuinely useful. The first is Louis Dudek's “A Reading of Two Poems by Alden Nowlan,” that originally appeared in a special issue of *The Fiddlehead* in 1969 and was subsequently reprinted in Dudek's *Selected Essays and Criticism*. He offers subtle and sensitive readings of “The Execution” and “The Bull Moose,” both from *The Things Which Are*. Both poems,

though early, are irregular in their rhythms and stanza-patterns. Dudek concentrates fruitfully on the larger meanings implicit in what seem, on a first superficial reading, particular and limited narratives. He reads the texts carefully, refers to them regularly, but continually relates them to a larger world of ideas. It is precisely this higher significance, I believe, that distinguishes Nowlan's major poems from his more casual and less important work.

The second is a brief comment by John Metcalf in his collection of essays *Kicking Against the Pricks*. Metcalf writes:

I've always admired [Nowlan's] early poetry, the poems in *The Rose and the Puritan*, *Under the Ice*, *Wind in a Rocky Country*, but with his *Bread, Wine, and Salt*—which won the Governor General's Award—an aspect of his temperament which I consider detrimental to his poetry began to receive intensified expression. Some of the poetry became far too prosy and he gave in to the desire to be warm, wise, and "philosophical"—cracker-barrel philosophy. At the end of that road lies the *Reader's Digest*. (122)

This is fresh and provocative. Although I have a great admiration for what I consider the best of Nowlan's later poetry, where he avoids or transcends this tendency, I believe that Metcalf makes a valid point here. It has been decidedly influential in the critical discussion to follow.

II

Anyone embarking on an extended discussion of individual Nowlan poems would be wise to ponder a shrewd comment by Fred Cogswell on the tendency of commentators to recreate Nowlan in their own image. He notes that "Oliver's Nowlan was conceived in the image of an Oliver who, as student and as teacher, wished to submerge his own identity as a Maritimer in the larger community of those who desired not to belong to a special place but rather to a special time; in other words, to be 'with it'" (218). By the same token, Cogswell himself admits that, as someone who grew up in a world similar to Nowlan's, and as one who writes poetry within a similar tradition, he creates "a Nowlan in [his] own image as a regionalist" (219). I should therefore list my own credentials—and possible biases. I am not a Maritimer, nor Canadian-born, and I was brought up within the English "practical criticism" traditions of the mid-twentieth century (not to be confused with a-historical American "New Criticism"). I am also conscious of the fact that, like Cogswell, my appreciation of poetry is affected

by my own practice; though my own verse bears little resemblance to Nowlan's, it inevitably wrestles, like his, with the problem of employing colloquial speech while trying to avoid descent into the prosaic and banal. As a result, I approach his poetry with a special interest in its technical aspects. These facts should be taken into consideration in the ensuing pages.

The opening poem in *The Rose and the Puritan*, "The Brothers and the Village" (EP 11),² has not been discussed at any length by previous commentators. I can remember only a passing remark, in a review by Northrop Frye, that the subject is "a little on the hackneyed side" (107). Yet most traditional poetic subjects could be called hackneyed, and Nowlan's presentation of his material is in fact remarkable. The poem begins:

The neighbours, in a Sunday meeting mood,
Would roll sweet bits of pity on their tongues
And wonder gravely how the honest Browns
Could breed so little virtue in their sons.

The rhymed quatrain was to become Nowlan's favoured stanza-form for years, and it is clear from this specimen that he mastered its intricacies from the start. What is especially admirable here is not just the smoothness (which is basically a matter of syllable-juggling) but the way an illusion of ordinary speech-rhythms is perfectly superimposed upon the strict metrical pattern. The lines flow easily, and their texture is strengthened by assorted effects of alliteration and assonance.³

But this opening stanza also sets up the formal structure of the whole poem. It is succeeded by three further quatrains, each devoted to one of the Brown sons, and each emphasizing personal qualities which, although despised by their neighbours, are generally considered a mark of civilized decency. One of them is sympathetic to animals and appreciative of the beauty of flowers and poetry; another is an idealistic lover of women, and the third a devoted reader of books. Invariably, the argument is clinched by verbal originality: the violence of the "classmate's rock" that shatters the crow and so disturbs the first of the sons, the transferred epithet of the "lazy tree" in the description of the second, and the unexpected linkage of nouns when the third brother "Threw all his earnings into books and rum." The neighbours themselves, who "roll sweet bits of pity on their tongues," are also economically characterized through a dexterous verbal effect. "The Brothers and the Village" is, in fact, a small masterpiece in a style that, however old-fashioned it may seem to those who feel the need to be up-to-date at all costs (it would not have seemed old-fashioned to the recently

deceased Wallace Stevens, nor to the younger Richard Wilbur or Philip Larkin), is perfectly fitted to its subject and intention.

“A Letter to My Sister” (EP 12), the fourth poem in the chapbook (though second in *Early Poems*), introduces another feature that is to become characteristic of Nowlan’s later work. Writing about “The Bull Moose,” Dudek judges it “successful as a moving literal narrative and as a metaphor freighted with many implications” (286-7), and the same can be said of this poem. On the surface, it concerns a woman who continues with her domestic routine even when there is a threatening fire in a nearby barn:

The haltered horses scream and flaming shingles
come down like bombs upon the yard and yet
even the heat that cracks these windows shall
never disturb the table that you set.

Read in this way, it is a curiously moving “regional” poem in which the men take part in the world of action and the woman’s place is in the home. But the word “bombs” startles us into considering a broader meaning, in which the fire is a metaphor for a violent world in which the “sister” bravely and honourably maintains an all-important order. Again, the effect is achieved with all the technical resources of traditional verse (including a judiciously employed alliteration), and the poem, if read imaginatively rather than just literally, is recognized as more than a regional vignette; it makes a universal statement about civilization and the human condition.

One cannot read far in Nowlan without realizing that there is no pat correlation between early and later work on the one hand and the employment of regular and irregular verse on the other. A minority (but a substantial minority) of the poems in *The Rose and the Puritan* eschew rhyme and/or regular line-lengths. One of these is “Weakness” (EP 18; SP 5), a relatively straightforward poem about the speaker’s father who compassionately places his own coat over the shivering and sick mare, even though he intends to shoot her in the morning. The poem is not, however, quite as straightforward as it may seem: does “weakness” in the title apply to the mare or the father or both, and (more generally) is it justifiable to treat compassion, Nietzsche-like, as a weakness? But the poem is of particular technical interest through its use of accentual stress. As with most of Nowlan’s irregular verse, the accents follow the stresses of vernacular speech. It is important to insist that there is no hidden regularity governing these stresses. I wish to underline this point because some prosodists seem determined to locate the ghost of a regular metre under all “free” verse. Oliver is one of these. For no discernible reason he claims that Nowlan includes

eight stresses in each of the first two stanzas of “Weakness” and sixteen in the third. In order to show this, he scans the poem in what I consider a totally forced and misguided fashion. He maintains that he marks “the stresses that normal conversational speech should give to [the] lines,” though he grants that “of course another reader may disagree” (“Alden Nowlan” 102). But more than disagreement is involved. In the first stanza, if any word demands a stress it is “drools,” which receives no emphasis in Oliver’s version. Similarly, he ignores an essential stress on “blanket.” The only reasonable course is to assign the obvious stresses and give up any theories of subtextual metrical regularity.

A number of these early poems are well-known, and have been commended often enough in the past. These include “Hens” (*Rose*; EP 12; EG 35; SP 3),⁴ “Beginning” (*Under the Ice* 1; EP 53; EG 5; SP 12), and “Warren Pryor” (*Under the Ice*; EP 76; EG 57; SP 19). I shall pass them over, merely noting that they possess the same qualities that I have discussed in my analysis of “The Brothers and the Village.” Such poems require considerable technical dexterity to achieve even competence, and Nowlan is able to offer far more than competence. On the other hand, they tend to display a fairly narrow emotional range. Most of them gain their effects through a tight-lipped precision of description with only the occasional shift of tone to an affecting tenderness, as in the close of “Poem for the Golden Wedding of My Puritan Grandparents” (*Wind*; EP 48; EG 49). These poems contain many subtleties. For instance, in “Aunt Jane” (*Under the Ice* 2; EP 55; EG 52; SP 13) we are initially taken aback by the seemingly grotesque line “was dead at ninety, buried at a hundred” until further thought reveals the sad reality that her mind died before her body. Similarly, we need to recognize and applaud the wonderfully poised last line of “Poem for Helen and Martha Knox” (*Wind*; EP 49), “God has his merciful, if daft, devices,” where “merciful” is conventional, expected, and right, while “daft” is bold, unexpected, and equally right. This early poetry is accomplished, and of an admirably consistent technical standard, but only occasionally does it spill over into exuberance, as in the famous “God Sour the Milk of the Knacking Wench” (*Wind*; EP 48; SP 10).

The publication of *Under the Ice* by Ryerson Press in 1961 represented a new phase in Nowlan’s poetic career: this was the first time that his work had appeared under the imprint of a recognized commercial publisher. A change is immediately discernible. It is worth noting that the book contained seventy-eight new poems (not counting those reprinted from the earlier chapbooks) against forty-six in all the earlier publications combined. *The Things Which Are*, which appeared only a year later, contained

an additional fifty-five. Now this can be explained in one of two ways: either Nowlan experienced an extraordinary poetic outpouring in the early 1960s, or he had been extremely selective in his earlier publications and hurried to bring out previously unchosen poems as soon as he had an opportunity to do so. In either case, it is clear that he became less rigorous in his choices as the opportunities for publication increased. But this success came at a price. What I find impressive about the early pamphlets is the *consistently* high technical standard. This is not true from *Under the Ice* onwards. There are approximately the same number of excellent poems—possibly even more—but the total effect is dissipated by the number of indifferent poems that display no obvious *raison d'être*. One senses an impulsion to write more poems even if Nowlan has little or nothing new to offer—as though *any* new experience, however casual or trivial, demands to be recorded.⁵

A possible explanation is that Nowlan here came under a poetic influence that proved less than happy. One can, of course, speculate too glibly on the subject of influences, though Nowlan clearly benefited in some way from the poetic examples of Fred Cogswell and the American Edwin Arlington Robinson. This is common knowledge, and the influences seem generally positive. But, thanks to Cogswell's recommendation, he had also encountered the work of other beguiling writers, including Raymond Souster, even before he published *The Rose and the Puritan*. Souster's influence is discernible, I suspect, as early as *Wind in a Rocky Country* in such poems as "At the Fair" (EP 43) and, more successfully, "Partnership" (EP 39). It becomes increasingly evident in *Under the Ice* (see, for example, "Cousins" [5; EP 59], "At the Lunch Counter" [13; EP 67], "Walking Home from Work" [25; EP 84], and—especially interesting, because uniquely Maritime subject-matter is here wedded to Sousterian style—"The Smelt Run" [41; EP 104]), and even more so in *The Things Which Are*, published by Souster's Contact Press. Indeed, though the fact is not generally known partly because no trace of it appears in *Early Poems*, one of the three persons to whom the book was originally dedicated was Souster.

I realize that this kind of argument is challengeable: academic critics are quite capable of detecting influences of writers whom their subjects have never even heard of. I can only state that I am irresistibly reminded of Souster by such poems as "Old Man on a Bicycle" (*Under the Ice* 30; EP 91), "Disguise" (*Things* 15; EP 117; EG 66), and "Trans-Canada Highway" (*Things* 49; EP 147), and that Nowlan's awareness of Souster's poetry during this period can be firmly documented (see Toner 98, 100,

101, and especially 111, where their first meeting, on Souster's initiative, is portrayed). One could argue that in these poems Nowlan's style becomes more relaxed; alternatively, one could describe it as more slack, and also less ambitious. While many of these short poems possess a well-focused eye-on-the-object quality, they lack any larger significance beyond the transcription of a particular event or moment. Such poems, while anticipating much of Nowlan's more irregular later verse, by the same token move away from the admirable concision of phrase and formal roundedness that characterized his early poems. Cogswell has written that, after *Under the Ice*, "Nowlan's poetry loses much of its metaphorical richness." Charitably, however, he argues that this is balanced "by the naturalness of speech rhythm without sacrifice to euphony" (217-8). I am inclined, though, to agree with Keath Fraser, who observes that the poems of this period in Nowlan's development "often forfeit neat contours of structure and perception" (45).

Still, if there are more indifferent poems, there are many successes, including "The Bull Moose" (*Things* 25; EP 127; EG 69; SP 28-9) and "The Execution" (*Things* 44; EP 142; EG 76, SP 33), passed over here because so admirably discussed by Dudek. Instead, I shall confine my attention to a single poem, "The Grove Beyond the Barley" (*Things* 37; EP 136; EG 75). Here the irregular stresses and varied line-lengths are delicately justified. Like "Dancer" (*Things* 59; EP 157; EG 78), an accomplished traditional poem in the same volume, this poem presents a solitary girl observed in an unusual action. But in "Dancer" the girl, while bouncing her ball "venomously" (a magnificently powerful adverb) against the wall at sunset, temporarily stumbles but ultimately "restores the pattern of her mind," and this pattern is reflected in the regular quatrains. In "The Grove Beyond the Barley," with its haunting image of a naked, sleeping girl discovered in the deep thicket, Nowlan needs to vary his pace and his accents, line by line, to accommodate the rapidly changing moods that characterize the narrator's response.

"This grave is too secret: one thinks of murder." The opening line, with its combination of long vowels and heavy stresses (the sense demands a strong emphasis on "too") has a gothic ominousness about it, and the subsequent images ("white body," "disorder / of your naked limbs," "arms outstretched / like one crucified") suggest violence and horror. Immediately, however, the speaker's gentle parenthesis (ll.2-6) acts as tonal counterpoint. A similar contrast is achieved later when his fictional, melodramatic fantasy, with its culminating, highly accentual line, "thrown here like an axed colt," is immediately followed by the contrasting revela-

tion: "Then I saw your breasts: they are not asleep." Here the unostentatious yet startling change of tense establishes a remarkable immediacy. For the rest of the poem we share the actual moment of the narrator while viewing the sleeping girl. All these changes of tone require a loose form, in which Nowlan can speed up or slow down at will. The final words, in which the narrator characterizes himself as "a gentle satyr," exemplify the juxtaposition of violence and calm evident throughout the poem. We never learn the girl's story; we only know that it is *not* one of standard sensationalism. The narrator is offered a glimpse into the inexplicable mystery of another person, an experience that is to be paralleled in many of his later poems.

III

The publication of *Bread, Wine, and Salt* in 1967 is generally regarded as marking the beginning of Nowlan's mature phase. Perhaps, though I agree with Metcalf in finding the effect again dissipated by the inclusion of a number of inconsequential poems that give the impression of being willed—as if they reflect a conscious pressure to continue writing rather than a genuine urgency to express a new idea or experience. "In Our Time" (24), "Report from Ottawa" (25), "The Masks of Love" (53), "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner" (59; EG 97) might be cited as instances. But there are a number of successful forays into new territory as well. Before exploring them, however, I want to comment on a poem from this volume that in terms of subject-matter harks back to the earlier work, though it is written in the more characteristic style of his later writing. It illustrates an interesting transition between the two phases of Nowlan's work.

"Daughter of Zion" (12; EG 87; SP 42) needs to be read with particular care, since it is often misinterpreted. Much of the poem is taken up with an account of an apparently unattractive woman who lives only in her acts of religious, presumably Pentecostal, worship. Oliver asserts that her life is "portrayed with notable irony," the irony consisting in the fact that "she does not realize that her fellowship is as much with Dionysus as with Jehovah" (*Poet's Progress* 10, 11). Later, he describes her as "fanatically religious" (15). Yet, even if we pass over the not-unimportant point that, despite the Old Testament association of the title, Nowlan specifically connects her with all three members of the Christian Trinity, not just with "Jehovah," Oliver's discussion is inadequate because it ignores the poem's

framework. In fact, Nowlan takes considerable pains to insist that we would be wrong not to “look at her twice.” Our conclusions from merely “Seeing,” “observing,” and “noting” (plainly stressed by being placed at the beginning of verse-paragraphs) are shown to be incomplete. Moreover, the title of the poem establishes her as an accepted inhabitant of the holy city. The apparent criticisms of her puritanical condemnation of the sun as “an indecent spectacle,” and the speculative lines,

if darkness could be bought like yard goods
she would stuff her shopping bag with shadows,

are introduced, and evaluated, with a warning “as though.” In fact, the woman in question experiences a richly fulfilling experience in her religious devotions, which Nowlan would be the last to despise. The apparently negative part of the description, the “rough planks,” “altar of orange crates,” etc., are transformed by the woman’s ecstatic imagination. Whether Nowlan’s commentators consider her faith, like that of the protagonist in “Marian at the Pentecostal Meeting” (*Wind*; EP 35; EG 44), as no more than “cotton candy” is irrelevant; her own life is perpetually invigorated and irradiated. This highly satisfying religious rapture is beyond the understanding of any “stranger” (l.12).

The woman’s ecstatic experience clearly breaks the disciplined routine which she follows in her humdrum diurnal life, so it is not surprising that Nowlan should choose a freer style. At the same time, he requires some corresponding formal pattern to hold the poem together. We duly find that, although irregular in terms of metre and line-length, “Daughter of Zion” is neatly divided into three sets of three—“Seeing...observing...noting,” “in a tent”...“in the aisles”...“in the light,” “God Himself”...“and Christ”...“and the Holy Ghost”—appropriately echoing the emphasis on the Trinity at the close of the poem. This, I suggest, is a good example of the alternative artistic effects that, in the later Nowlan, take the place of rhyme and traditional stanza-forms.

We move now, unequivocally, into Nowlan’s later, most mature poetry. Earlier commentators have stressed the expression of “human-ness,” his loving presentation of the oddities, frailties, warmth, and sometimes even the sublimity of ordinary human contact, and this is certainly an important emotional element in much of this verse. But there is more to Nowlan’s achievement than friendly geniality. I would prefer to stress other, more literary elements: his amazing tonal variety; the multiple levels of significance that characterize his best poems; the verbal sophistication—involving exquisite control of rhythm and cadence as well as word-choice—that

can raise what might otherwise be no more than run-of-the-mill verse into a major statement. Above all, it is important to insist that there is no readily available “key” to an appreciation of Nowlan’s work. Each poem must be approached on its own terms; its special qualities have to be isolated, its unique tone and movement identified, if its full effect is to be gauged. The rest of this paper will be devoted to separate analyses of a selection of what I believe to be his finest poetic achievement, with the intention of illustrating his remarkable range.

Bread, Wine, and Salt opens with “I, Icarus” (1; EG 82; SP 38), a deliberate positioning, I assume, to signal a new poetic departure. Superficially, it is a poem about a flying dream. More personally (one can safely assume, surely, that the “I” of the poem represents Nowlan himself), it is about a yearning towards a higher dimension—perhaps escape from the constrictions of small-village Maritime life, perhaps an ascent towards what Keats called, in his “Ode to a Nightingale,” “the viewless wings of poesy.” This is obviously irregular verse, and Oliver notes that it is “written according to grammatics,” by which he means that “Nowlan breaks his lines at the end of long grammatical units and makes deliberate use of rhetorical figures of speech, such as parallelism, anaphora, and periodic sentence structure” (“Alden Nowlan” 107). In this case, the end of every line corresponds to the end of a sentence. Since the sentences vary radically in length, the poem has a curious staccato effect, but it also suggests a point-by-point precision that contrasts intriguingly with the vagueness and mystery of the subject. In addition, Nowlan produces a striking effect with his title: if the poem itself suggests triumphant ascent, the mythic story indicated by the reference to Icarus hints at catastrophic fall. All this combines to create an aura of rich mystery which is typical of much of the best of his later work.

“A View from the Bridge” (*Bread* 28-9; EG 90) is a good example of the Nowlan poem that has larger significance than its obvious surface meaning. At first, it seems a rather cozy poem about watching popular films, but it is also a sophisticated inquiry into the nature of artistic conventions. Here the opening lines are so long and slow and lumbering that one is tempted to suspect a pun on “lumber” (l.1), but technically they succeed in building up tension. As soon as the first climax comes, the poem speeds up, signalled by a sudden short line containing the word “running,” with the word “zoom” following shortly thereafter. Again the lines lengthen in another climax leading on to a clever line-break referring to “the end / of the last reel.” Then, as it becomes clear that the sanctioned conventions are being observed, the tone relaxes (sufficiently, indeed, for the introduction of a mild joke: “even Red propaganda”) and the lines

loosen and become deliberately slack as everyone “will breathe a little sigh of relief / as he settles back / to enjoy the show.” The poem not only offers a shrewd analysis of how conventional factors mould our responses but also illustrates the process by its own subtle shaping.

“He Raids the Refrigerator and Reflects on Parenthood” (*Between Tears* 49-50; EG 154-5; SP 79-80) is a poem about “transforming / an occasion into / a ceremony”—or, rather, failing to do so. That phrase comes from “Poem for George Frederick Clarke” (EG 156), which appears on the immediately preceding page of *Between Tears and Laughter*. This is surely deliberate, so I regret Gibbs’s reversing of the ordering of these poems in *An Exchange of Gifts*—especially since it also manages to separate “He Raids...” from “Johnnie’s Poem,” another poem involving Nowlan and his stepson. Oliver cites “He Raids...” in support of his contention that, “even though Nowlan the man is at times sentimental, his poems are not” (*Poet’s Progress* 31). This is not, I think, valid as a general statement, but it applies well enough to this poem. More is involved here than Nowlan’s describing himself as a “maudlin boob.” By splitting himself in two, separating himself, dream-like, from his “maudlin” self, Nowlan is enabled to employ the general “you,” and so distances the poem from the limitations of a particular incident. Although apparently relaxed and conversational, it is tightly controlled. Nowlan is “almost” blubbing; Johnnie offers his request as if it were a joke but the fact that he is “serious” is underlined by repetition; “small matters” are seen to be paradoxically “important.” A casual party seems an odd setting for “rituals,” but social life is dependent on ritual, and, in this case, “The rite was spoiled / by an imperfection.” What ought to be a trivial incident comes to illustrate a larger tendency in familial relationships. Many of Nowlan’s poems *begin* from such modest beginnings; only the best are built up to create subtler patterns of significance.

“TermCancCline” (*Between Tears* 73) has been inexplicably neglected by Nowlan’s anthologizers; neither Gibbs nor Lane and Crozier include it. Yet it is surely the finest of the poems about hospital written during his extended battle with cancer. Toner (149-50) reveals that Nowlan originally conceived the idea as the subject of a satirical short story, but the presentation in the highly concentrated form of a brief poetic narrative was certainly wise. He avoids the emotionally self-indulgent not only by the exaggerated, surrealistic scenario of “the euthanasia division” with its clinical politeness (“The technician will see you / in an hour”) but also by the shattering impersonality of the language that presents the action as an everyday routine. As in “He Raids...” the subject is a generalized and so

impersonalized “you.” Moreover, Nowlan can gain subtle effects with the simplest verbal means. By shortening Terminal Cancer Clinic to “Term-CancClic,” he is able with the last syllable to suggest prison rather than (or as well as) hospital; in addition, he resuscitates dead metaphors by having the victim scan the titles of popular magazines that in this situation take on a new significance:

You pick up a copy
of an old issue of *Time*, lay it down, pick up a still
older issue of *Life*

We are assured that “everything is ordinary”—and the effect is chilling.

With “A Pinch or Two of Dust” (*I’m a Stranger* 57; EG 221; SP 102), we find Nowlan in more sombre mood. It is a poem, however, that, while serious and dignified, resolutely avoids either the solemn or the righteously indignant. The dust in question, given to the speaker by a fellow-Celt, is a remembrance of how their ancestors at Culloden “were ploughed into / the compost of history.” But there is no superficial taking of sides here—he presents them as “the last of the old barbarians / destroyed by the first of the new”; they are “magnificent” but also “fools.” This tough clear-sightedness allows him to risk—and, amazingly, to achieve—a startling effect by which the ancestral blood, through a kind of secular transubstantiation prepared for by the compost-image, becomes equated with and indistinguishable from the soil itself.

At this point we may notice, with some surprise, that the climax recalls Rupert Brooke’s argument in “The Soldier,” though without the cloying sentiment and insistent knee-jerk patriotism that weakens that sonnet. Basically, it is a matter of verbal tact. At first, the versification seems easy and effortless—simple diction without rhetorical manipulation—but more careful scrutiny will reveal a combination of repetition (“pinch or two of dust,” “handfuls of earth...part of the earth,” “their blood,” “body”) and balance (“the last of the old...the first of the new,” “not only between / but within”). Unusually for Nowlan, the poem consists of a single, extended sentence, in which line-lengths firmly but unostentatiously control the pacing; the resultant poise is exemplary.

On a literal level, “The Jelly Bean Man” (*I’m a Stranger* 72-3; EG 232-3; SP 104-5), like the more often praised “Mysterious Naked Man” that gives its name to an earlier volume (1; EG 104; SP 56), is a poem about a mysterious outsider treated as potentially dangerous but for Nowlan an object of sympathy and even approval. He is an example of what Nowlan calls, in a newspaper article published in the same year that the poem was

collected, “the Wicked Candyman against whom mothers warn their small children” (*Double Exposure* 126), thus revealing him as a figure of fable and myth. The opening sentence presents us with a modern world of suspicion that can be interpreted as either wise caution or a chilling mistrust. But the man reveals his character through his two recorded speeches, one beginning “Kiss,” the other “Love.” And this lover is one who can transform a human being into a goddess. His “gift for her,” two cinnamon buns, suggests a flippant parody of the Edenic apple, but it is one that brings a return rather than a loss of innocence. Once again, here is a poem that transcends its immediate origins, and raises the issue of trust without pontification. Oliver describes the Jelly Bean Man as “downright weird” (*Poet’s Progress* 33), yet this is precisely the reaction that is being challenged; if his innocence is “weird,” so much the worse for the world that judges him. The poem ends with a supremely simple but beautifully balanced statement of our post-lapsarian difficulties in instructing children: “so easy to tell them / about evil, / so hard to tell them / about innocence.” And the final word in the poem is “love.” A potentially distasteful, sordid subject becomes the basis for a thought-provoking but disturbing modern parable.

“In Praise of the Great Bull Walrus” (*I’m a Stranger* 86; EG 244) is surely the most humorous and good-natured of Nowlan’s poems, yet it would be a mistake to underrate it on account of its basic unpretentiousness and general good fun. The relaxed conversational tone is achieved with considerable skill—and no less considerable art. It is easy to miss the simple but palpable artistry by which a phrase like “for the rest of my life” is delicately balanced against “one sunny afternoon” just as the walrus is imagined as answering the speaker in precisely the same phrases and cadences that the speaker employs himself. Moreover, the poem, for all its lighthearted charm, has a deeply serious core:

How good it is to share
the earth with such creatures
and how unthinkable it would have been
to have missed all this
by not being born

This sentiment was expressed before environmentalist concerns were either as fashionable or as pressing as they are now, and it is difficult to imagine a more direct, unselfconscious expression of the sacred bond linking all life. And the last three lines quoted look forward movingly to the subject of “It’s Good to Be Here,” which I shall discuss in due course. Above all, the poem ends on an unexpected note for Nowlan. The idea that

“not being born is / the only tragedy / that we can imagine / but need never fear” has all the unexpected crispness of a metaphysical conceit. A poet who can begin with an account of joining the seal herd (I’d better state that I find Nowlan’s version far more profound and satisfying than Robert Kroetsch’s better-known extravaganza) and end with that display of intelligence and wit is in possession of a remarkable technical control.

“The Red Wool Shirt” (*Smoked Glass* 15; EG 188-9; SP 118-9) is one of those poems that, like “TransCancCline,” are related in subject and theme to Nowlan’s other work but remain unique in conception and style. In consequence, we need as readers to approach the poem in a totally different way. We should not be looking for subtle linguistic effects here; rather, we have to concentrate on what is *not* said. The poem is best described, perhaps, as an exercise in verbal economy, a specimen of stylistic minimalism. Its effectiveness depends on the words *not* suggesting any additional meaning or resonance. The all-important facts in the story are never revealed; we are presented only with the occasion on which they are conveyed to the speaker. The emphasis on finely observed but not obvious relevant details (the red wool shirt with its missing button, the old-fashioned wooden clothes-pins, Charlie Sullivan’s self-decorated hat, and his “funny walk” that usually provokes what in this case is a sadly inappropriate smile) accentuates an ominous immediacy. Presumably the news brought by Sullivan concerns the death of the speaker’s close relatives (husband and son?), but we cannot be sure. If, as seems likely from the reference to “the weir fishermen,” the news involves a drowning, then “good drying weather” contains an almost unbearable irony. Similarly, the speaker’s sympathetic if somewhat condescending “Poor old Charlie” rebounds when “It’s bad, Mary” implies that she herself is the real object of sympathy. Such effects verge on the macabre. The poem partakes of the stark, eerie mystery of medieval balladry (“Edward, Edward,” “The Twa Corbies”) where the main subject is revealed indirectly, existing as it does on the indistinct margins of the poems. No resolution is possible. The banal phrase “And that was that” is exalted into a moving acceptance of life’s dangers and uncertainties.

“The Unhappy People” (*Smoked Glass* 18-20; EG 190-91) might well be described as the central Alden Nowlan poem. Corey and Brent, “my wife’s cousins,” could easily have become the subjects of a very different poem in one of the earlier volumes, along with “Carl” and “George and Fenwick” (see *Under the Ice* 20; EG 78-9); but the Professor belongs to a world beyond the rural Maritimes, the academic world that Nowlan presents, with an understandable unease and suspicion, in poems like “A

Mug's Game" (*Bread* 45; EG 93; SP 46) and "He is Entertained by the Chairman of the Department" (*Smoked Glass* 52). The important point is that the Nowlan-like narrator is set up as a mediator between representatives of these two worlds. This is one of the few genuine dramatic monologues that Nowlan wrote, and its success is dependent on the maintenance of a firm but courteous and accommodating tone throughout.

And here I am forced to take issue with earlier critical discussions of the poem. To be sure, Oliver properly calls it "the most delightful poem Nowlan ever wrote" and employs the word "merrily" in connection with what he calls its "central irony." Yet he also—to me, inexplicably—describes it as an "angry" poem, and I am convinced that he leads readers away from its central feature when arguing that it "totally devastates the official academic attitude towards 'backwoods' people" (*Poet's Progress* 39).⁶ Similarly, Cogswell writes of the "proof of superiority over effete academics" in the last line (235). But the poem does not operate within such convenient black-and-white terms, and both critics miss the good-natured ingredient in Nowlan's humour. Of course he favours Corey and Brent rather than the Professor; the latter's designation "the Unhappy People," however, is belied by the whole atmosphere of the poem, and the tone is that of confident amusement rather than anger.

Laughter, indeed, is constant and important throughout this poem:

You are free to take notes, if you wish.
At worst they'll merely laugh at you.

His laughter and his brother's
laughter and the laughter of the girl in the yellow bathing suit
mingle and rise like water from a garden hose...

At the same time, the speaker

can understand your not laughing
with them when they talk about driving
four-year-old cars at one hundred and ten
miles per hour down dirt roads with the police behind them.

The strength of the poem arises not from Nowlan's ability to understand both worlds, however much he may prefer one to the other. There is an assured and mature poise here, not present in the too-easy effects of "A Mug's Game" or "He is Entertained..." The final line—

Professor, I don't suppose that you'd care to arm-wrestle?—

is not, as Cogswell interprets it, primarily a matter of physical strength against effete weakness, but rather a perfect illustration of the hopeless incompatibility of two ways of life. It is important to insist that “The Unhappy People” derives its distinction from the fact that it is a magnificently funny poem, a joyous poem.

A poem on the subject of abortion, whether pro- or anti-, sounds daunting; one expects righteous didacticism. But “It’s Good to Be Here,” the poem that closes *Smoked Glass* (71; EG 209; SP 124), gains an extraordinary power by having a narrative told from the viewpoint of the foetus whose existence depends upon the outcome. The opening stanza is remarkable for its prodigality of pronouns: “I’m in trouble, she said / to him. That was the first / time in history that anyone / had ever spoken of me.” It is necessarily an imagined scene, though a perfectly credible one, and it succeeds not merely by virtue of the originality of its narrative stance but on account of the amazing variety—and control—of pace. The opening is short and clipped, notable for its simple, balanced phrases (“she said to him”; “There’s quinine”; “That’s bullshit”). But as the poem develops it rises to an argumentative climax with a long, eight-line stanza without internal punctuation, where the phrase “and then” occurs no less than four times, eventually being capped by “and at last” as the issue—a matter of life or death for the “I” of the poem—is resolved on a quiet note:

well, I guess we’ll just have to make the best of it.

While I lay curled up
my heart beating
in the darkness inside her.

It cannot be called an argument, but it adds up to a passionately effective statement that is difficult to ignore. As Nowlan had written earlier (though it is unfortunately placed later in *An Exchange of Gifts*):

how unthinkable it would have been
to have missed all this
by not being born.
(*I’m a Stranger* 86; EG 244)

And how unthinkable it would have been to have missed the best of Alden Nowlan’s poetry!

Finally, “What Happened When He Went to the Store for Bread” (*I Might Not* 16-17; EG 248; SP 127-8) is dependent on a related but distinct structural principle. It is a poem about causes and effects, and the decidedly complex interrelations between them. The opening word is appropriately “Because,” and it is repeated twice more in the first stanza. This effect sets the pattern for further repetition. In the opening stanza, we first encounter “a man,” then “this man,” “another man,” “yet another man” (the last two instances introduced by the rhyming words “met” and “yet”). In the second stanza, where causality and possibility are debated, “would” occurs four times, “might” twice, and “different” three times. All this sounds crudely mathematical, but the effect, as we experience the poem, is of both words and events repeating and intermingling. Above all, Nowlan, though serious, is not excessively solemn about these patterns; he is certainly not thinking in terms of a dour full-scale predestination.

The tone of the poem can even be playful—as when he speculates about a couple having “two children / who would not have been born except for my taste in music.” The whole effect is astonishingly elaborate. At the end of the first stanza, declaring “I am who I am instead of being somebody else,” there is a passing hint of God defining himself to Moses from the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). In the final stanza, after thinking about an important consequence for two people who “didn’t like my play and so left early,” he adds: “I put it that way so as not to sound immodest.” Yet immediately, the tone changes—“God knows there’s not a lot to boast about”—where “God knows” is far more than a casual expletive. And then the poem ends as it began, with the awed assertion that “so much seems to depend” (a slight hint of William Carlos Williams’s wheel-barrow?) “upon the time of day / a boy goes out to buy a loaf of bread.”⁷ One might even argue that the poem imitates and embodies its subject by offering the appearance of “free verse” while in fact being rigidly controlled and tightly organized.

IV

Nowlan’s work, taken as a whole, is remarkable not only for the radical change from traditional to irregular prosody but for the range of subject, tone, and approach. This is not true of the early poems, which, besides being of high quality in themselves, possess the specific merit of interrelating. The first slim chapbooks are, for the most part, unified by a common subject-matter as well as a shared attitude, with the result that, as we read, we find that the whole tends to be greater than the sum of its parts.

The later work abandons this selectivity of subject, and substitutes an emphasis on *variety* of subject as well as a consequent opening-up of tone and treatment. This development, of course, has its own value, but it leads to a variety of achievement as well as range.

While it is difficult to generalize about a writer whose work runs the gamut from “A Pinch or Two of Dust” to “In Praise of the Great Bull Walrus,” it is fair to assert that he is an uneven poet who operates at varying levels of subtlety and engagement. It is instructive, for example, to compare “He Raids the Refrigerator...” with “Johnnie’s Poem,” that immediately follows it in *Between Tears and Laughter* (50; EG 157; SP 81). Both share a common theme, the relation of a father to his (step)son. But the second poem merely transcribes Nowlan’s feelings at a moment in time. The point of the poem lies almost wholly in the situation; all Nowlan had to do was to write it down with acceptable clarity and directness. Once the reader has got the point, there is little more to be derived from it. By contrast, in “He Raids...” we are offered so much more. Here the boy’s remark (“I’ll be / fifteen tomorrow, can I / have a whole pint of beer?”) is interpreted, its implications analysed and revealed. And then Nowlan goes on to consider and criticize his own responses. Moreover, we are provided not only with a context—the refrigerator, the poignant image of the almost-full bottle, an after-the-party atmosphere—but with an amplification of the subject: he not only “raids the refrigerator” but “reflects on parenthood.” A poem which begins lightly and comically ends with a serious insight. Nowlan *makes* something out of what would otherwise remain a casual passing incident.

There is nothing surprising, of course, about a poet’s work varying dramatically in quality. There are plenty of poets—from Wordsworth and Hardy to Souster and Layton—who would have been better advised to suppress their inferior work. But the line between Nowlan’s successful and unsuccessful writing is not easily drawn. It is not that he is good at some effects and poor at others; his failures often seem similar in their general attitude and emphasis to his successes. However, some generalizations can be offered. In one poem, “He Addresses Himself to One of the Young Men He Once Was” (*I’m a Stranger* 38-9), he admits: “I am / too often tempted to / play the comedian,” and “He Finds Himself Alone in the House” (*Between Tears* 19; EG 145) provides a convenient instance. He is rarely successful when he attempts the flippant; a poem like “First Lesson in Theology” (*Mysterious* 31; EG 117) is a good joke but a decidedly indifferent poem. When he tries to ingratiate himself by celebrating the popularly cute (“Sister Mary Cecilia,” *Between Tears* 117; EG 180), he can become

embarrassing. Some of his more satirical poems gain their effects too easily, and in his later poetry this is exacerbated by the dubious freedoms of “free” verse.

At the same time, Nowlan knew the pitfalls in the kind of poetic effect he desired. When John Metcalf, while conducting an interview, pointed out that the colloquial “sometimes...falls into the prosaic,” Nowlan replied: “It’s one of the risks you have to take. When I run the risk of sounding prosaic I run the risk deliberately” (Metcalf, “Alden Nowlan” 14). And he continued: “I think you have to risk sentimentality...because after all sentimentality is very close to the things that *genuinely* move people” (14-15). Nowlan was working in the vanguard of a major concern in contemporary poetry, and he can hardly be expected to be successful at all times. Yet one can legitimately regret his inability to discriminate within his own work.

F. R. Leavis once wrote of Thomas Hardy—wrongly, I would insist—that “his rank as a major poet rests upon a dozen poems” (59).⁸ But, if the poet lacks self-criticism, it is all the more important for literary commentators to make up the deficiency. The number of vulnerable poems included in *An Exchange of Gifts* and even *Selected Poems* shows that a consensus has not yet been reached. This is unfortunate. When Nowlan’s exemplary poems are rescued from the context of his lesser work, they shine forth as all the more remarkable, and reveal him as one of the most accomplished of Canadian poets.

Notes

- 1 Since the two poems (“About Death They Were Wrong” and “The Gunfighters”) are on facing pages in the original pamphlet, one suspects that Gibbs may have turned over two pages in error.
- 2 So that readers can locate the texts of poems as easily as possible, whenever I discuss a poem I use the following abbreviations: EP for *Early Poems*, EG for *An Exchange of Gifts*, and SP for *Selected Poems*. For the more substantial later volumes from *Under the Ice* onwards, I also give the page-number of the first edition.
- 3 In his discussion of technical poetic effects, Oliver claims that Nowlan “seldom uses alliteration” (“Alden Nowlan” 101). This is simply not true, and I shall be quoting a number of instances in the course of this study.
- 4 Here again it is necessary to warn the reader against Oliver’s scansion (“Alden Nowlan” 102). In the third line, for example, he places stresses on “winter,” “we,” “twenty,” and “seven.” It seems obvious to me that any sensible reading has to emphasize “hens” (the title of the poem, after all!), and I see no need for a full stress on “we.”
- 5 For a poem that seems to be about this need, see “Another Poem” from *The Mysterious Naked Man* (44-7, EG 124-7).

- 6 Oliver takes us even further from the main concerns of the poem when he goes on to equate Corey and Brent with “the teaching of Jesus to live *like* little children” (40)—there is no trace of a religious dimension within the poem—and when he devotes several lines to the relation of the poem to country music.
- 7 Once again one notices a persistent but not excessive alliteration that contributes to the final effect.
- 8 The poems I have discussed in this article represent, in my opinion, Nowlan at his most satisfying. There are, of course, many others of remarkable merit that I would have considered if space allowed. So far as his later work is concerned, these would certainly include the following: from *The Mysterious Naked Man*, “The People Who are Gone” (36; EG 119), “The Men in Antonio’s Barber Shop” (55; EG 128), “Afterword to Genesis” (80; EG 135), and “An Exchange of Gifts” (85; EG xix; SP 68); from *Between Tears and Laughter*, “The Night Editor’s Poem” (88; EG 171); from *I’m a Stranger Here Myself*, “On Being the Subject of a Documentary” (14; EG 210); from *Smoked Glass*, “Full Circle” (8; EG 182-3; SP 110-111); from *I Might Not Tell Everybody This*, “He Attempts to Love his Neighbours” (75; EG 23; SP 164-5), and “He Sits Down on the Floor of a School for the Retarded” (94-5; EG 279-80), to list only those that seem to me of exceptional quality.

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