"DESERTS OF THE HEART": THE POETRY OF JOHN NEWLOVE

SAMUEL JAMES COOK, B.A., B.A.Ed.

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By

Samuel James Cook, B.A., B.A.Ed.

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ABSTRACT

John Newlove, whose main recognition as a poet came with the publication of Lies (1972), is often considered as the Prairies' first poet. This thesis explores four major themes of Newlove's poetry: man alone, the failed lover, the searcher, and the poet.

The first chapter depicts individuals who are essentially alone. They are isolated from other individuals and from their essential selves. Their isolation appears to stem from society's indifference to their plight and from their own insecurities and inadequacies.

The second chapter explores those poems in which the personae fail to find communication, communion and commitment in their love-relationships. The desire to find love is especially intense, yet the personae are unable to effect a mutually lasting relationship.

In the third chapter, a search motif is presented. Here, the personae look especially to the land and its people - as they are portrayed in history and legend - to satisfy their desire to find fulfilment, to accept fears of death, and to find their respective identities.

The fourth and final chapter concentrates on the poetic process and the poetic vision. With respect to the former,

the poems deal with Newlove's suspicion of language, his direct and unadorned speech that defies traditional poetic techniques, and the difficulty of composing. The latter part of the chapter focuses on the poet's desire for perfection, the need to present the truth, and the poet's task - to warn and to affirm.

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ABBREVIATION KEY

The following abbreviations have been used:

MIA	Moving In Alone. Toronto: Contact Press, 1965.
WTS	What They Say. Kitchener: Weed/flower, 1967.
BNW	Black Night Window. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968.
TC	The Cave. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970.
TFM	The Fat Man: Selected Poems 1962-1972. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977.
TNTDS	The Night the Dog Smiled. Toronto: ECW Press, 1986.

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INTRODUCTION

Born in Regina in 1938, John Newlove lived in various small communities in eastern Saskatchewan, notably in Verigin and Kamsack, where his mother taught school. This prairie influence is deeply embedded in his poetry. In fact, he is seen as

> the first important prairie poet, a poet interested in integrating the moral meaning and the history of the land into the Canadian psyche in an attempt to heal such twentieth-century diseases as alienation and despair.[1]

Before moving to British Columbia, in 1960, where he became involved with the Tish poets, he held a number of jobs, including teaching and social work. In the late 1960's he moved to Toronto where he spent some time editing and as writer-in-residence at the University of Toronto. After spending some time as writer-in-residence at Regina in the early 1980's, he moved to Nelson, British Columbia. His poems, published in numerous magazines, both national and international, have been translated into several languages. As well, they appear in several anthologies.

Newlove's major recognition as a poet came in 1973 when he won the Governor General's Award for Lies. Before Lies, he had published five small press books and three major

collections: Moving In Alone (1965), Black Night Window (1968), and The Cave (1970). In 1977 he edited Canadian Poetry: The Modern Era and published The Fat Man, a volume of his selected poems. The Green Plain, a single philosophical poem appeared in 1981.[2] However, it was not until 1986, after a fourteen year hiatus, that he published a collection of new poems, The Night the Dog Smiled.

Critics have been almost unanimous in their praise of Newlove's craftsmanship.[3] In fact, some see it as his biggest virtue as a writer. While this appears as an overstatement, Newlove is recognized for the precision and directness of his style

> in which most of the traditional signs of poetry - simile and metaphor, overt symbolism, rhyme and heightened language - seldom appear, yet which is intensely rhythmic, full of punning turns and wry modulations of tones.[4]

A. F. Moritz, in an article that is largely a portrait of Newlove's personality, takes this statement further. He sees Newlove's "streamlined forms" as being significant in "the evolution of manner that has reshaped Canadian poetry during the last two decades."[5]

However, the critical reviews, especially those in the late 60's and early 70's, are not so generous in their assessment of Newlove's poetic vision. They tend to see little positive in his poetry and paint a bleak and dismal picture. One of the most disparaging reviews is by Frank

Davey, who feels that Newlove's poetry "displays a self-loathing only slightly less strong than his loathing for the human race and its wretched and treacherous planet."[6] The poems, largely autobiographical, portray Newlove as "bleeding, vomiting, lying, despairing, stumbling, fleeing, betraying, and being betrayed."[7]

Other early reviewers, though slightly less disparagingly, look through Newlove's "black window", focusing on the pain, despair, loneliness, ugliness, and guilt that permeate much of Newlove's work. Al Purdy, considered by Newlove to have been a motivating force behind his writing, acknowledges the dark tenor of the poetry:

> But Newlove's human hell is a far worse inferno than Dante's, because he does not postulate a heaven as counterbalance. Hope there is none, pain is all; and the modulation of pain, lessening and intensifying, are among the few grim consolations of being alive.[8]

Another reviewer describes Newlove's negativity this way:

> [His] vision is indeed dark. His universe is one of solitude, failure, ugliness and nausea. The only driving forces of life are desire, which is always thwarted, and dreams which are never fulfilled. This world is a place of waste, despair, and desolation.[9]

A similar black tenor is echoed, for the most part, in the first 'significant' article written before the publication of Lies. In Margaret Atwood's assessment, Newlove has " a life-and-death obsession" with "the world he

is stuck in." It is a world where "nature is something to be disliked or feared" and where individuals live "meaningless and mutually destructive lives."[10] Newlove often finds himself in "a corner [where] the self exists isolated in a revolting body, dwarfed by a threatening and destructive universe where action is futile, love impossible and words fraudulent ...."[11] She does note, however, more positive qualities such as the desire to survive "even though difficult and absurd", the desire for "awareness even though painful,"[12] and the desire for "salvation ... that must come both through and despite words and from facing the truth."[13]

Some early critics also see a fragile hope in some of Newlove's poems. Gregory Cook, in a review of Black Night Window, while stressing the bleakness of Newlove's poetry, feels that it is not "defeatist" and is lightened by "touches of humour."[14] Another reviewer concludes that "It is the struggle between identification and despair that gives tension to Newlove's vision, and love and identification finally win out."[15]

The most positive critical responses begin with Jan Bartley's extensive article "Something in Which to Believe for Once: The Poetry of John Newlove." She sees Newlove's poetry as combining both negative and positive qualities:

> Newlove is, I think, more concerned with the process of searching than with the stagnancy of gloom. An overview of his work reveals the poet's persistence in examining attitudes to society and man's relationship to the cosmos. In this constant effort

> to find a personal faith in something or anything which is not delusive, the perseverance of Newlove at least equals his pessimism. No one can deny the poetry's dominant shade of blackness; but it is too easy to dramatize it thereby ignoring any positive tones and even the occasional moods of optimism.[16]

She goes on to say that Newlove's refusal "to romanticize his vision" has resulted in the negativity for which he has been criticized and that "his tendency to 'affirm the world despite it' is underrated and often overlooked."[17]

In her thesis "The Several Masks of John Newlove" - the most expansive treatment of Newlove's poetry to date - Mary R. Gould also refutes those who tend to see Newlove as a poet with a single negative vision. Instead, she argues that his poetry reveals a "many-faceted personality."[18] While admitting that his confessional poetry is full of despair, she feels that even here the "aesthetic satisfaction ... afforded by a skilfully crafted work of art allows a critically positive reaction."[19] With respect to the other poetry, she concludes that "[t]olerance and comprehensive understanding, compassion yet irony [sic], wry humour and light playfulness, affirmation and acceptance comprise the essential attitudes of Newlove's expression ...."[20]

The Night the Dog Smiled (1986) received from the reviewers a more positive response than Newlove's other works. The blackness is still quite pronounced, but as one reviewer put it: "Though he writes 'In the edge of a painful

century', Newlove tries to expose the beautiful in the horrific, the permanent in the face of the ephemeral."[21] Douglas Barbour sums it up well:

> ... the poems in The Night the Dog Smiled display all the craft, wit, density, and (com)passion we come to expect from John Newlove during the decade of his rise to the top of his craft.
>
> But there is more here ... without any diminishing of his sharp and accurate perception of human cruelty, frailty, hypocrisy, and suffering, Newlove offers us a more positive vision in these new poems than he has ever managed to before ... never before have Newlove's texts so obviously spoken of, and even proffered, love and compassion.[22]

While it is not my intention to prove the validity of the nature of Newlove's poetic vision as advanced by the critical reviews, it will not be ignored. The main aim of this thesis is to give an overview of the stances Newlove takes on several important concerns. The use of the persona as a controlling technique will allow these concerns to be explored from different perspectives. Four major themes will be examined: the isolation of the individual in a seemingly uncaring society, the inability to find commitment in love-relationships, the search for a sense of identity and fulfilment, and the nature of the poetic experience and the poetic vision. Gould, in her thesis, differs with respect to the "mask" technique. She uses it to stress Newlove's own roles as story-teller, historian, humourist and celebrant and, by so doing, illustrates the complexity of Newlove's

personality. "The several masks of John Newlove," she argues, "indicate a complex personality which challenges the one-dimensional portrait of the poet so often drawn by critics."[23] My study, however, is more concerned with Newlove's work and less with his personality.

Newlove's poetry does suggest a significant movement from the personal to a more expansive and social vision of mankind. Although there seems to be a process of changing poetic vision, Gould states that her correspondence with Newlove shows

> that poems of a confessional and non-confessional nature were composed contemporaneously. After the first really significant and sizeable collection of poetry was published in 1965, that is, Moving In Alone, the three subsequent publications ... represented material composed more or less simultaneously.[24]

With this in mind, I have made no attempt to arrange the poems in chronological order. Instead, they have been grouped according to themes. I have discussed Newlove's poetic techniques only where they seem to enhance the themes under discussion.

NOTES

1 David O"Rourke, "John Newlove," The New Canadian Anthology, eds. Robert Lecker and J. David (Scarborough: Nelson Canada, 1988), p. 217.

2 The Green Plain first appeared in 1977 with John Metcalf's "Girl in Gingham" in Dreams Surround Us. It also appears in The Night the Dog Smiled (1986). In the original publication, each stanza is isolated on a single page, the entire poem covering some twenty-two pages.

3 For further reference to style, see Paul Denham, The Evolution of Canadian Literature in English 1945-70, ed. Paul Denham (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), p. 248; Desmond Pacey, review of The Cave, The Canadian Forum, Nov. -Dec., 1970, p. 309; Rick Johnson, review of Lies, Quarry (Spring, 1973), p. 65; and R. G. Collins, review of The Night the Dog Smiled, Journal of Canadian Poetry, No. 3, 1988, p. 88.

4 Douglas Barbour, "John Newlove," The Canadian Encyclopedia, Second Edition, Vol. 3 (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1988), p. 1492.

5 A. F. Moritz, "The Man from Vaudeville, Sask." Books in Canada, Jan. 1978, p. 10.

6 Frank Davey, "John Newlove," From There to Here: A Guide to English Canadian Literature since 1960 (Erin, Ontario: Porcepic, 1974), p. 205. In an interview as quoted in Jon Pearce, "The Dance of Words," Twelve Voices: Interviews with Canadian Poets (Ottawa: Borealis, 1980), pp. 113-14, Newlove takes strong objection to Davey's comment.

7 Davey, p. 206.

8 A. W. Purdy, review of Lies, Wascana Review, No. 2 (Fall, 1974), p. 71.

9 Robin Skelton, "Newlove's Power," review of The Fat Man: Selected Poems 1962-1972, Canadian Literature, No. 79 (Winter, 1978), p. 102.

10 Margaret Atwood, "How Do I Get Out of Here: the Poetry of John Newlove," Open Letter, Ser. 2, No. 4 (Spring, 1973), pp. 59-60.

11 Ibid., p. 64.

12 Ibid., p. 66.

13 Ibid., p. 68.

14 Gregory Cook, review of Black Night Window, Canadian Literature, No. 39 (Winter, 1969), pp. 97-98.

15 John Ferns, "A Desolate Country: John Newlove's Black Night Window," The Far Point, No. 2 (Spring-Summer, 1969), p. 70.

16 Jan Bartley, "Something in Which to Believe for Once: The Poetry of John Newlove," Open Letter, Ser. 2, No. 9 (Fall, 1974), p. 19.

17 Ibid., p. 26.

18 Mary R. Gould, "The Several Masks of John Newlove," Unpublished M. A. Thesis, Queen's University, 1975, p. i.

19 Ibid., p. 97.

20 Ibid., p. 98.

21 Ann Archer, review of The Night the Dog Smiled, Queen's Quarterly, No. 4 (Winter, 1987), p. 1043.

22 Douglas Barbour, "Weather Report: "Stars, rain, forests"," review of The Night the Dog Smiled, Essays on Canadian Writing, No. 36 (Spring, 1988), p. 90.

23 Gould, p. 3.

24 Ibid., pp. 2-3.

CHAPTER I

MAN ALONE

> Everyone is so
> lonely in this
> country that
> it's necessary
> to be fantastic.
>
> John Newlove

One of the problems facing contemporary man is an acute sense of isolation. Individuals, for various reasons, find themselves isolated from others and estranged from self. A common motif in John Newlove's poetry is 'man alone', the individual who finds himself isolated and alienated in a seemingly uncaring society. In an effort to embody and to dramatize the sense of isolation in Newlove's poetry, this chapter will explore several of his poems which deal with individuals who are essentially alone.

In "Verigin, Moving In Alone," (MIA, pp. 86-88) the persona is an adult reminiscing about his childhood in Verigin, a small prairie town in Saskatchewan. He reveals the acute sense of isolation he frequently felt as a child. The images, although only a collection of fragments, are as sharp as when they were first experienced.

The poem begins with a catalogue of facts, enclosed by parentheses[1]:

(fatherless, 250 people
counting dogs and gophers
we would say, Jmaeff's grocerystore,
me in Grade 4, mother
principal of the 2-building
3-room 12-grade school)

Although the catalogue is presented objectively, it begins and ends with those facts that appear to have greatest significance. "[F]atherless" focuses on the fact that an integral part of the boy's formative years is missing. There is no father-figure to act as a model or to provide direction and affection. The mother is remembered only as "principal of the 2-building/ 3-room 12-grade school." By implication, she is a professional, perhaps authoritarian, and unable to fill the vacuum created by the father's absence. In essence, then, the persona felt orphaned. Sandwiched between the references to the parents are the facts necessary to establish a sense of time (primary school years) and place (a prairie village). The listing of these external realities appears to be a deliberate attempt by the persona to locate himself objectively in his past. The detached tone, the laconic language, the parenthetical statement - all attest to the adult's attempt at articulating honestly his childhood experiences and at interpreting them objectively in an attempt to identify himself within this context.

While the first stanza gives the larger context of time

and place, the subsequent stanzas focus more on specific moments. In stanza two the recollections are sharper, non-statistical, and more personal:

> a boy sitting on the grass
> of a small hill, the hot fall,
> speaking no russian, an airgun
> my sister gave me making me envied.

The use of the third person, and the clipped phrases used to maintain the catalogue effect, further illustrate the persona's attempt to place his childhood in the proper perspective. It is not until the final line of the stanza, however, that the persona adopts a definite subjective stance.

Newlove's images and ideas create the impression of isolation. The boy is alone; a mere speck, it seems, in the vastness of the prairie landscape. His inability to speak Russian and thereby communicate with his peers, and the envy they have of him because of his airgun intensify his sense of social and psychological isolation.

The first part of stanza three is a natural movement from the second:

> I tried all fall, all spring
> the next ominous year, to kill
> a crow with it, secretly glad
> I could not.

While "ominous" suggests that the boy feels threatened and that his present predicament foreshadows things to come,

what is of greater significance is his persistent effort "to kill a crow." This appears to be an overt attempt to gain acceptance by being able to kill as men are. On the inside, though, he is "secretly glad" that he is unable to kill. Still, his aversion to killing distances him from others - especially from

> ... the men
> in winter shooting the town's
> wild dogs, casually tossing
> the quick-frozen barely-bleeding
> head-shot corpses onto
> the street-side snowbanks.

The blunt, hyphenated adjectives "quick-frozen," "barely-bleeding," and "head-shot," and the vivid details used here suggest that the persona, though much younger than the men who did the killings, had deeper perceptions and stronger emotions. In short, his poetic nature set him apart.

These negative images give way as the persona briefly recalls the more pleasant memories of his boyhood. There is the highway snowblower which he perceives as "some alternate of a golden summer's/ wheat-threshing machine." As well, there are the boyhood games "of cops and robbers." The images - enriched by such suggestive terms as "golden," "hard-tossed," "wild," and "3-dimensional," and given vitality by the active verbs "running," "pretending," and "leaping" - suggest that the persona was an exuberant participant. However, these brief moments of acceptance and

belonging serve only to accentuate the loneliness he usually felt.

The cataloguing continues, and the memories darken again: "cold spring swimming," "doomed fishing/ in beastless ponds," and being "strapped/ in school ... coldly holding back tears." The last image suggests that he will not allow his emotions to surface. Exposure of his true feelings among his peers would, like his airgun, distance him from them. His sensitivity in an insensitive society would render him hopelessly vulnerable.

This unwillingness to allow his emotions to show is more emphatically conveyed as the persona recalls his father's drunkenness. As a boy he seems to have been unable to articulate his love for his father; now, as an adult, he appears to want to compensate:

> ...how I loved him,
> loved him, love him, dead, still.

Here the most dramatic moment of the poem is reached as the persona openly declares his love. Repetition and the deliberate pacing of the line give extra emphasis to the continuity of the persona's love and his regret in having been unable to share it.

Stanza eight gives further insight into the ineffectiveness of the home to provide the comfort, love, and direction that the child needed. There is the terror of living "alone" in the house with a "mad" older brother:

My mad old brother chased me
alone in the house with him
around and around
the small living room, airgun,
rifle in hand, silently,
our breaths coming together.

These memories, these images - "sights and temperatures/ and remembrances" - are as vivid as the "lost gull [that] screams now/ outside [his] window." The image of "a lost gull" provides an effective comparison, reinforcing the adult's sense of loneliness and lack of direction. This sense of isolation is intensified by the tedium implied in the hyperbole of his "year-long/ night and day" which is juxtaposed with the "magnificent prairie" setting of which he feels he should have been a part.

As the poem began, the persona moved into his past with a deliberate caution. In the last two stanzas recollections of pain and pleasure, death and life, seem no more than insignificant fragments until "everything breaks down." The persona, in recalling events from his past, has been able to articulate successfully some of his childhood experiences - experiences that reflect his relationship with others, his isolation and his temperament. However, the negativity of many of the recollections and their fragmented nature have not permitted any meaningful order to emerge. The persona has not found any sense of direction. He must, as he has been doing, "[move] in alone." As D. G. Jones observes,

there is an affirmation of "the facts of his singular fate, though the various elements fail to resolve themselves into any larger or final pattern of meaning."[2]

Whereas "Verigin, Moving In Alone" presents intense, but fragmented images of the persona's childhood, "Kamsack" (BNW, pp. 60-61) is a more sustained statement of childhood isolation. This is particularly true of the second and third parts of the poem.

Part 1, "The Dam" is largely a criticism of the double standard imposed by adults. Adopting a more continuous linear argument in contrast to the 'fragmented' memories of "Verigin, Moving In Alone," the persona recalls how, as a boy, he and others were told to stop their swimming near the dam since their "bodies/ would pollute" the town's drinking water. Now as an adult, he perceives the incongruity of the situation:

> the farmers' cows
> farther up were
> not delicate
> in their droppings.

However, of greater significance are the moments of belonging to the group that is implied by the use of "we" and "us." As well, the final two stanzas suggest a sense of togetherness. This harmony is conveyed not only by the hydro-worker who gave them "rollings/ for cigarettes" and "showed [them]/ the oiled machinery," but also by the

euphonious "oiled" and the end rhyme in the final two lines. These brief moments of oneness heighten the isolation evident in the next two parts: "The Memories" and "The Dog."

"The Memories," which is little more than a prose statement, somewhat disjointed in structure but unified in its sense, serves as a link between the other two parts of "Kamsack." While in "The Dam" and "The Dog" the persona recollects specific memories, in the second part he reflects more on the significance of memories.

Beginning in a matter-of-fact tone, the persona recalls his inability as a child to communicate effectively with his peers:

> I was an inconsequential
> person, there were
>
> many secrets
> I didn't know and things
> I'll never know,
> not speaking
>
> russian, not speaking
> anything well enough
> to be trusted, though
> the grammar was fine.

These lines reveal the boy's low self-esteem and the acuteness of his isolation. There was a lack of sharing and trust. His peers saw him as someone who lacked an understanding of their world. They would look at him

> ...in
> a sudden disgust, as if
> they would say, Won't he

ever understand
anything?

The persona, as an adult looking back, recognizes the truth: his feelings of frustration and isolation as a child stemmed from his inability to articulate satisfactorily his innermost emotions.

In Part 3, "The Dog," the boy, alone with his dog, comtemplates life and his perceptions of himself. The section begins with a vivid image:

Lying on my back
on the hot prairie
dreaming of
the nervous sea,

my .22 rifle
by my side, my dog
ranging about and snuffing,
content that I

should do nothing, for
he was a damn fool
of a dog, red and curly,
and always scared

away the crows or gophers
before I could shoot.

The persona, older than the boy in "Verigin, Moving In Alone," seems to have had a more significant awareness of life and his own insecurities. The sense of tranquility that the image initially presents is undercut by the boy's "dreaming of/ the nervous sea." Here he contemplates the uncertainties of life and seems to have doubts about his own existence. The persona envies the dog's relaxation and

freedom while judging him a "damn fool."

There is no positive action; instead, the boy dreams

> ... of the sea
> and anything to do except
>
> what was at hand
> I spent summers,
> never thinking anyone
> would love me.

The boy, then, caught up in self, is unable to face what is expected of him. Feeling unloved, he indulges in self-pity and receives pleasure from that aberrant emotion:

> never caring beyond
> the delight at making
> myself feel sad.

This helps him to endure the intense isolation he feels. In retrospect, the persona sees the falsity of the situation. The reference to "false tears/ tightening [his] throat" is a recognition that his feelings of sadness were self-induced and that his "delight" was as artificial as his tears.

The persona's aloneness is further emphasized by an acknowledgement of his narcissism:

> never thinking anyone
> could love me, not
>
> as I loved myself - except
> that red dog, damn fool
> running and barking
> away toward the town.

The contrast between the boy and the dog is strong. The dog

is involved, an active participant that scares off gophers and goes "running and barking/ ... toward the town." While the dog moves outside of self, the boy, in his misery, remains introverted, absorbed in his own importance. The boy's experience, then, is an escape from others rather than a communication with nature which the setting invites. The informal language of this section gives it an immediacy that allows for an understanding of the intensity of the isolation and the loneliness the persona, as a child, felt.

While "Vericin, Moving In Alone" and "Kamsack" explore the loneliness and isolation often experienced in childhood, the other poems to be discussed in this chapter focus on the isolation experienced by adults whose lives are empty and meaningless. These individuals appear as helpless victims who are trapped either in self or in an uncaring society.

"Public Library" (BNW, pp. 70-73) is a prosaic poem whose long lines and pauses help to reflect the boredom and isolation of its characters, mainly social rejects, who have found refuge in the setting that gives the poem its title. Through a series of vivid images, the poem provides an agonizing glimpse of the loneliness and helplessness of these victims. They are together, but so desperately alone.

The persona is numbered among them, but he is younger than most of them are. An understanding and compassionate onlooker, he has been sitting "day after day in the smoking room of the library"

...half reading
half in a dreamed trance half listening
to the sounds around [him] half looking
at the people around [him].

The sounds, such as the shuffling of feet, the rustling of paper, the snores, the grunts and the sighs, are all irritating expressions of boredom. But there are more intense and painful noises: the "noise of the man who sat all day ... going aahh aahh every four seconds"; and the noise of

the man who talked to himself
in a strange sounding language
something slavic or made up
giggling and twittering between the phrases
his laughter rising as the day went on
to a higher and higher more hysterical pitch
until when it seemed he would finally have to
collapse
from giggling he suddenly flushed
as if insulted by himself
and screamed in english the anguish language
Son of a bitch son of a bitch you
put on his hat and left to go home and make supper
for himself in some grey room.

The intensity of this image conveys the frightening isolation of so many individuals in contemporary society. Yet, despite the sterility of their existence and their feelings of being "abandoned/ left alone by all the other two billion," they still have their pride:

old men snorting in bewildered hurt derision at the
newspapers
and trying to suck up the mucus in their noses
without having to show a dirty handkerchief
so strong their pride.

Their poverty and the spiritual isolation engendered by it are emphasized by graphic images of their physical appearances:

> ...years old oxfords with great cavities
> mocassins thick grey woollen socks knee high
> old army issue from two wars at least
> . . . . . .
> mismatched doublebreasted fantastically wide
> lapelled
> old pointed blue pinstripe suitcoats
> relics of other generations the wearers outside
> all generations.

"[O]utside/ all generations" is a particularly significant phrase since it places these individuals apart from the rest of humanity. Their isolation is total. The few younger men who frequent the library are only "a little neater"; their "breathing and spit a little less obvious."

Into this bleak scene enters "the well-dressed/ tightly-girdle-assed pointy-wire-breasted and well-stroked/ young woman." She provides for the men a momentary release from their pathetic predicament as they shift

> ... around in their chairs
> to ease the strain on the crotches of their
> greasy pants
> as forgotten juices stirred.

Feeling uncomfortable, she leaves. Her appearance and her choice of "a safer floor" emphasize, by contrast, the plight of the others. The poem concludes with a subtle

identification of the speaker with these rejects, since he refuses to comment on the well-fed and well-dressed businessmen who occasionally blunder in and out of the library: "of them/ I will not speak for I do not know."

While "Public Library" provides a generalized view of the "outcasts" of modern society, "Company" (Lies, pp. 20-25) focuses more specifically on the individual "derelict" who can be viewed as a typical representative of his kind. By being referred throughout the poem as "it," the individual becomes a mere object, something that is non-human. Newlove's use of the impersonal pronoun, and an uncompassionate third person narrator are apparently intended to emphasize the individual's isolation and the inhumanity of his situation.

In the simple, unadorned language that is prevalent throughout the poem, Part 1 presents a picture of the hopelessness of the individual's situation. This is partly revealed by the negative attitude of the women he so strongly desires, yet fears:

> They sense it has been without a woman a long time and they loath it.
>
> They smell the worst kind of celibacy on it, involuntary.
>
> There is a rancidness, a smell of having given up, of having been given up on.

Their loathing has nothing to do with his physical appearance or his inability to pay; instead,

> It is the smell of hopelessness,
> it is fear's emanation, that ulcerates the stomach.
> Women edge away from it, feeling something unhuman.

In Part 1, the diction - in particular "it," "coveting," "loath," "rancidness," and "hopelessness" - effectively conveys the extent of the man's alienation and his "having been given up on."

Part 2 illustrates not only the individual's desperate need for human contact but also the sadistic and masochistic nature of man:

> It loves company and company is disgusted by it;
> company enjoys being digusted by it;
> it enjoys disgusting company.

Desperately searching for some recognition, "it" deliberately acts

> as company expects it to act:
> cadging, begging, groping,
> insolent subservience,
> arrogant whining.

However, thinking he "knows all about people," the man feels that he is the manipulator. They, needing someone to reafffirm their own comfort and sense of superiority, are manipulating him. This parasitic relationship continues until the socially accepted ones feel their security threatened. When this happens, the individual is alone again. The futility of his situation is reinforced in the

final stanza which indicates the cyclic nature of the relationship.

In Part 3 the individual attempts to find comfort among others who are lonely. Sitting in "Salvation Army and welfare barracks," he tries to lessen his loneliness and, simultaneously, give himself a semblance of respectability as he tells "the other bums what [he] might have been/ or done." The others tell him "what they might have been or done." His experience is not unique: "all of the beds in all of the cities the same." Yet there is little escapism since they do not admit awareness of the basic truths of their position.

The setting for Parts 4-9 is a public beach. The immediate reality of the beach with its "washed-up logs" and "dark green-black vegetable sludge from the sea" is symbolic of the individual's predicament and serves to accentuate his loneliness. He is the flotsam and jetsam of society. In an effort to find solace, he reaches outward beyond the ocean and allows himself the luxury of romanticizing. The polysyllabic place names add to the romance of far-away places: "impossible miles across there are the islands of the Pacific,/ imagined decorations in a romantic atlas, alien histories,/ Polynesia, Melanesia, Micronesia...an atlas/ full of life." There is an awareness that such a romantic vision is false.[3] But in his need for recognition and acceptance, he is willing to deceive himself into

thinking that any place is better than the present one.

Brought back from fantasy to reality, the 'loser' ironically resorts to memory to alleviate his misery and give him a sense of vitality. But "[m]emories drift past;/ they cannot be grasped." As well, there is the painful recognition that time distorts memories, making them little more than half truths:

> To remember without lying is difficult.
> With friends, drinking beer, there is a set of
> rules,
> a code of telling -
> that covers the errors,
> the cowardices and stupidities,
> turning them into weak amusing virtues,
> anecdotes in which no one really wins or loses.

Finally, in Part 9, he leaves the beach and his memories and makes his way, "head down," to "the smoking room of the public library."

Things cannot be worse. Ironically, however, it is the hopelessness of the individual's isolation that gives him hope. This hope finds its fullest expression in the concluding section. There, in the library,

> Perhaps something good will happen.
>
> Perhaps it will meet someone it knows
> or someone who knows it.

That remote possibility allows him to think of "an almost mythical friend."[4] As this happens the impersonal "it" gives way to "Him." The poem concludes with the possibility of a

strong sense of communion:

> They would talk together about the past.
> They would agree with each other.
> They would drink beer and smoke and talk confidently about women
> until closing time.

Here, the urgency of the individual's desire for acceptance and togetherness is reinforced by the repetition and parallel structure that begin each sentence. However, hope for a positive relationship seems illusory. The title "Company" is painfully ironic.

In a valiant effort to ease the pain of his isolation, the individual has moved through a series of experiences. While neither has provided any real or lasting comfort, each has, in its own way, provided him with the impetus to continue that elusive search.

In "Harry 1967" (Lies, pp. 73-76), however, Harry has lost touch with the reality of his pitiful existence. He is not only alienated from society, but also estranged from self. Unlike the individual in "Company" who has been able 'roll with the punches' to some extent, Harry has been defeated.

The third person omniscient point of view is used to present a series of prose statements which give a graphic and compassionate picture of Harry. Although he is only thirty-six, he is portrayed as an old man who no longer sees the aridity of his existence: "Old Harry just sits on the

porch all day staring at himself/ and not seeing a damn thing." His perception of himself is removed from the reality of what he is, for Harry imagines himself as "sitting on the porch of a house he never/ had." The "reality" of his illusion is so intense that he can feel "the sunlight almost." Even though Harry lives in a "ten-dollar a week light-housekeeping room," he has created, through his self-delusion, a degree of normalcy.

Harry's acute isolation seems to have been caused by a failure to achieve anything significant in his life. Maybe his dreams were unrealistic or his education inadequate for he left school "at sixteen before he finished Grade/ Nine to get in on the big money." Whatever the reason, Harry has "missed out" on life and his spirit has been destroyed.

Juxtaposed against the sterility of Harry's present existence are his former dreams in which he saw himself in heroic but unrealistic circumstances[5] :

> Harry went to Ethiopia and was a general in a revolution
>
> And he killed the Emperor with his own hand.
>
> And his gallant tribesmen swept down upon the lines of khaki machinegunmen and sabred every one of them.
>
> Harry was nicked by a fragment of shell that left an inch-long cut like one a knife would make on his forearm.

This excerpt illustrates that the fantasy had an "egoistic nature"; its "[s]tructure and grammar indicate that the vision is a little-boy dream ... as breathless, repetitive sentences follow insistently upon one another."[6] While the dreams might help to account for Harry's failure, there is no doubt that despite their unattainability they do provide for him a sense of importance and of involvement. They compensate for his failures and give his lonely life a modicum of comfort. However, "That was a long time ago"; and the poem concludes by reiterating, through a series of negatives, the extent of Harry's isolation. Unable to change the direction of his life, he finds himself irreparably alone.

Then there is the unforgettable "She" (Lies, p. 37), which illustrate that isolation is not confined to a particular gender. This poem presents an anonymous individual, a product of an anonymous society, alone and trapped because of the treachery of her body and the physical realities that surround her. She is alone like her tears; those "chemical beast[s]/ shut in a dark room with the walls closing/ behind her eyelids." There is no communion with other individuals or even with nature:

> ...all touches hateful,
> the white sweep of clean snow death to her,
> the grey naked trees death to her.

The images of the snow and the trees are sad reminders of

her mortality. In spite of her despair, she attempts to hold back the tears; to put on a brave front. But it is too much:

> Tears
> slide like glycerine down the round cheeks
> and shimmer on her chin. No motion
> escapes her face; sadness gathers
> in her bones; her fingers curl, an ulcer
> pins her down, rotting in her body.

The contrast in stanza three serves to reinforce her isolation. On the television screen there are reflections of activity:

> The quiet shadows on the screen
> dance, gesticulate, the news comes on and goes,
> cars are sold, women sing and smile,
> but she does not.

Although these images can be seen as symbolic of the shadowy nature of human existence, there is at least the semblance of action and communion. She, however, is alone and barely able to move her body "as if she had forgotten how."

Nor will spring, the season of rebirth, change conditions for her. She sees it as a season of deceit, pretense, and death. For her,

> ...the trees
> with their sticky shiny leaves will only be
> in costume, mocking, the fresh air
> will lie; animals stretching in their skins
> stretch to die.

For her, there is no consolation.

Yet, despite the negativity of her perceptions, she

bestirs herself in what seems a desperate effort to resist her overwhelming agony and to free herself:

> She moves. Her shoulders ache. She feels
> the harnesses she lives in, she feels
> the jelly on her skeleton, she feels the tears
> upon her face and dries them with her hands,
> touches her hair, sits up and tries to smile.

Momentarily, the mood of despair and depression is replaced by one of hope. The repetition of "she feels" emphasizes this surge of hope as she "makes a positive effort to free herself from the heaviness of flesh and bone."[7] However, her hope is short-lived. The final two lines of the poem reveal the insignificance of her actions:

> It is a brave attempt, saying: See how brave I am!
> Her breasts hang heavy on her, and the room is dark.

Although she is aware of her own responses to the world around her, she is trapped in the aridity of her existence. Any hope of escape is futile.

While it it true that isolation and social and psychological alienation comprise the more obvious thematic threads connecting these poems, there seems to be a subtler suggestion common in them. It is not openly stated, and should, perhaps, be posed as a question. Are these individuals isolated and alienated by an unapproachable and uncaring society, or are they victims of their own self-concepts? It seems that Newlove himself has been unable to

satisfactorily decide this issue. Whatever the cause, there is no doubt that the vision is dark and the isolation strong.

NOTES

1 In Newlove's collection The Fat Man (1977), the parentheses have been removed from the initial stanza.

2. D. C. Jones, Butterfly on Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 173.

3 See T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," where Prufrock is undeceived.

4 Pearce, Twelve Voices, p. 114.

5 See E. A. Robinson's "Miniver Cheevy."

6 Gould, p. 61.

7 Bartley, p. 43.

CHAPTER II

THE FAILED LOVER

I have desired many
but I wonder if I have loved one?
John Newlove

Please don't
look in my face
with your lonesome eyes
for something that's
been used up
a long time ago,
that I look for myself
in another mirror.
John Newlove

The idea that isolation results from the inability to love others and to establish any lasting or intimate relationships is a recurring theme in Newlove's poetry. The poems that explore failed love "are particularly intense and sometimes almost tragic since it appears that love and close personal relationships are crucial to [him]."[1]

To what extent, one may ask, is the speaker or the persona Newlove himself? When told in an interview with Jon Pearce that his poetry is seen as basically autobiographical, Newlove offered this response:

> Any writing is autobiographical in the sense that it's made by a human being who presumably draws in part from his experience, his response, his view of the world. But surely Shakespeare isn't responsible for the views of Hamlet or Macbeth. As far as I

> know, Shakespeare didn't murder anyone. I have never in my life, except for the occasional lyric - I might as well admit it, love lyric - been auto-biographical. Never. In a love lyric you have to be, but otherwise, never.[2]

Newlove, with some reluctance, admits that there is an element of confession in his love poems. Confessional poets, on the other hand, focus on "the Self as primary subject, the self treated with the utmost frankness and lack of restraint."[3] Their poetry

> ... springs from the need to confess. Each poem is in some way a declaration of independence. Or of guilt. Or of anguish and suffering. Thus the writing of each poem is an ego-centred, though not an ego-centric, act; its goal is self-therapy and a certain purgation.[4]

There appears to be little doubt, as Gould convincingly argues in "The Several Masks of John Newlove," that Newlove does adopt a confessional stance in those poems that deal with love-relationships.[5] She is, however, at pains to caution

> ... that no totally objective or complete rendering of the poet in the poem is possible and that the poem cannot with validity be equated with the poet. It is also useful to bear in mind that the poet as confessor is sometimes the poet as trickster or pretender.[6]

Since one has no way of isolating with certainty fact from fiction in a particular lyric, it is prudent to assume that Newlove has adopted a persona. This chapter will examine a

number of poems in which the persona fails to establish a sense of communication, communion, and commitment in his love-relationships.

In "All My Friends" (MIA, pp. 19-20), the persona, in contrast to his friends who "are getting married in/ various places," has been unable to accept and develop an intimate commitment to another individual. Aware of his failure, he indulges in self-analysis.

Initially, adopting a tone of wry humour, the persona indicates that his failure to commit himself to the opposite sex is causing him to "rapidly [turn]/ homosexual." However, caught between these two forms of sexual attraction, he is unable to commit himself to either. Homosexuality does not offer the kind of fulfilment the persona seeks:

> All
> I can do is to admire
>
> circumspectly the beautiful
> young boys on the streets
> and touch the hands
>
> of my friends occasionally.

The tone shifts to one of despair as the persona recognizes that, "turned/ both ways," he is locked in self: "every-thing/ turns onto me and/ I can do nothing." He is so immobilized by his sense of inadequacy that he cannot accept that anyone else can love him. If they said so, it would be a lie; if they believed it, it would be an error in judgement:

... do

not believe what some kind
person says: I love you.
And can never say, I love

you, cannot allow someone to
confuse in themselves things
they do not feel of me. As

if they would!

Although unable to act, he is quite aware that his desires are strong. Initially, he sees them as sexually motivated:

Too many desires,
genital-born desire said
the Greeks: the venereal

mountain!

The Classical allusion and the isolation of "mountain" give emphasis to the enormity of his desires which, though "not/ wholly sexual" are "strongly" so. Acknowledgement of his sexual longing briefly allows him to deny his need for real love. But he can only hold his lie for a moment. All of his explorations return to his single personal truth: his knowledge of his own inadequacy in love-relationships.

At this point he recognizes that he lies for self-preservation. He feels that if he states his problem, he will eventually get rid of it:

It is that the confession
hopes to be the cure, the lie
to engender the truth.

In Will to Power Nietzsche states:

> There is only one world, and that world is false, cruel, contradictory, misleading, senseless .... We need our lies to vanquish this reality, this "truth"; we need lies in order to live....[7]

Newlove's persona, too, must lie.

> It is my fashion. My
> old fashion, to which
> I must comply.

Lies are inevitable; he needs them to survive.

"Seeing Me Dazed" (MIA, pp. 21-22), a poem which immediately follows "All My Friends," provides an intense feeling of self-pity and isolation.[8] Here, the persona is trapped in what Atwood calls a "minor catatonic trance."[9] He desperately wants a caring relationship with his female companion. He knows , however, that his desire is futile, not because of the woman but because he is unable to give affection in return.

As the poem begins, the persona, filled with self-pity that he mistakes for despair, wants "to be comforted." The woman ignores him and goes about her household chores. The persona sees her as a cold and impersonal individual, but it is obvious that he has made her immune to his selfish demands. Later, he twice acknowledges as much: "I put you away."

In stanza three, the persona adopts a whining and accusatory tone as he attempts to elicit pity:

I was unaware
it was so much: to be comforted
when nothing will move for me,
when everything turns onto me,
when the red table is jealous
and folds over me, the clay cup
is useless in my clumsy hand.

Personified, inanimate objects such as the "red table" and the "clay cup" become either hostile or indifferent. In essence, physical reality merges with the emotional reality of the moment. As he turns inward things turn in on him, making him impotent.[10] Stanza four, which presents a sudden shift to the outside, provides a contrasting image:

Outside the rain goes; at bus-stops
dry grass is tossed on green
by workmen to protect from winter.

Here, the idea of the workmen working together - and even the "mechanical" comfort they provide - help to intensify the self-pity and self-centredness the persona feels and to isolate him further.

As his perception sharpens, he images the world as "a silver pin", a winter world of physical pain in which he is so vulnerable. Nature offers no solace; instead it seems to reaffirm the misery of his existence. In contrast to the people on the prairies who can endure "the wind/ and the numbing snow five months long," he cannot endure the pain of his emotions. He briefly acknowledges his stupidity and unfairness -

> I am the stupid one, I am the one
> who cannot endure. I am the one
> who always steals what is not given,
> from a difficult place, an innocent person.

- and attempts to force himself to grasp the truth that he has been exploiting others; "steal[ing] what is not given" and giving nothing in return. Very quickly, however, he lapses into self-pity and takes on the whining tone again. Would it be difficult, he asks,

> To put a hand
> on me? To give comfort,
> a little dry grass, is nothing;
> it can be mechanical, it can be
> invented!

While "Anything will do," the persona knows that not even a "mechanical" gesture of love will be forthcoming, since his selfish actions have been responsible for her indifference.

There is, then, no hope for communion. As a lover, the persona has failed. He has not "allowed/ anything" - any meaningful relationship - to grow between them. In contrast to the woman "who talks on the telephone gaily," he finds himself locked rigidly in a world of hostile or unanswering objects:

> ... I sit staring,
> unable to shift from table or cup
> or lift my eyes from the blank white wall.

Unlike in "All My Friends" where the persona hopes "the

confession ... [will] be the cure" and where, in a limited way, confession offers solace, here the persona is emotionally trapped, unable to free himself. He has "not allowed/ anything"; any meaningful communication has been lacking. He looks for "some little comfort, human contact, but [he] is inaccessible and no comfort, even mechanical, ... is possible."[11]

In "Seeing Me Dazed" thoughts shuffle through the persona's mind as he sits immobilized. As well, the woman is referred to in the third person. But in "Away, Or Far" (TC, p. 29), the woman is referred to in the second person. The emotional distance between the persona and the woman with whom he has been unable to establish a fulfilling love-relationship does not seem quite so great. Adopting a tone of resignation, he admits that his need for love is intense, but he is incapable of reciprocating with genuine understanding and caring:

> I live
> to be loved, but love I cannot give.
> Everything must be faked.

Freely revealing his willingness to lie in order to make her happy, he pleads that she allow him to fake affection, to fabricate something that will fill the vacuum created by his inability to love - an inability that is emphasized by isolating the statement "Everything must be faked." He asks,

Is there nothing,
no rhythm, image, is there nothing
I can conjure for you?

Here, repetition emphasizes the helplessness the persona feels and his groping for a solution.

The persona realizes that unlike himself, the woman is capable of giving love and affection: "Everything that moves/ moves in you." His awareness of her responsive and free nature and his inability to respond make his situation more painful: "I see, and wish that I did not." His feelings are trapped inside him, expressed only in a kind of internal monologue. The vitality of her position as opposed to the sterility of his own is too much to bear: "Please/ lose me if it pleases you. I live too." In his isolation and loneliness, the persona desires to be released from a relationship that torments rather than fulfills.

In "Without Ceremony" (BNW, p. 26), however, the woman is receptive to the persona's needs. She provides comfort and affection without his having to give anything of himself:

Where are you?
Now that I need you
you're right beside me,
your arm bent,
anxiously waiting,
around my back, comforting.

Although warned of his "unreasonableness" and of his

"inability/ to change" his egotistical nature, she has not believed him. The warm and loving person is now "half-bewildered" by his unresponsiveness to her expressions of love.

While the persona indicates a dislike for his self-centred attitude, there is no hatred. "Hate myself?", he wonders. Instead, he attempts to make a virtue of his defects:

> There's pride
> even in my despising,
> my inability
> to change, which I call
>
> stubbornness and praise
> in myself.

Although he might be attempting to rationalize and mythologize the negative aspects of his character, the final stanza attests that the persona is fully aware of the negativity of his attitude. In a striking metaphor, he compares himself and his actions to one who strums

> like a dirty old
> one-string guitar: playing
> the unlovely song over
> skilfully, with ceremony.

Clearly, he recognizes the cheapness and the ugliness of his behaviour.[12] However, he seems content to wallow in masochism rather than change his ways.

"These Are Yours" (TC, pp. 12-13), a more satisfying

poem than the previous one, presents the acute feeling of isolation and alienation that often results when a relationship fails. The poem, written in a series of fragments, images the shattered relationship that is its subject. Now that the woman has gone, the persona is left in utter despair. The images, presented in short staccato lines, express the depth of emotion the persona feels for the one who has left him. He has only relics of their relationship to cling to: "the sheet [she] lay on," their "polished words," the "corner [where they] kissed," and her "tears."

While Parts 1 and 2 focus on the persona's loss, Part 3 shifts to the outside world. Its first two images offer a vivid contrast to the persona's predicament. The initial image - "The snow sings/ to the swaying trees" - creates a sense of joy and harmony in nature, a harmony which is reinforced by the soft alliterative sounds of the sibilants. Next, the image of children doing "their Indian imitations/ indoors" evokes a feeling of normalcy that is remote from the loneliness the persona experiences. The third image, however, shifts the focus to his emotional reality: "Dry yellow tobacco/ drops to the floor."[13]

The alienation the persona feels as a result of his failure in love is further developed in Part 4 where he directly acknowledges his plight:

Haven't got
much left
now.

Here, the intensity of his emotion is emphasized by the slowing down of the rhythm. Part 5 presents a slight change in tone as he envisions some hope. Despite his emotional difficulties, there is something left to offer a degree of solace. Newlove's persona, like the speaker in The Waste Land, must shore fragments against his ruin. Language and fragments of memories can provide a form of antidote:

But still,
polished words....

Shiny remnants
of our future dreams.

As the persona attempts to catalogue more positive details from his past in order to fabricate a connection with his former love, he realizes that he must accept the blame: "It's as if/ I had a talent for being hurt." Only now does he empathize with her: "These are your tears,/ rubbed off on me." The poem concludes on a tone of resignation. The persona does not appear to have the strength or the volition to accept the end of the relationship: "My time is past;/ but still I must continue."

Another poem that explores the need for love and the failure to fulfil that need is "The Funny Grey Man (TC, pp.

18-19). Here the third person narrative allows for a more universal statement than in those poems already examined. The man, who is shown to have a negative self-concept, as suggested by the title, finds what he thinks is a lasting love-relationship. But being totally subjective, he sees only the woman's external beauty:

> Oh, she was
> beautiful - with brown hair
>
> and brown eyes that promised
> more than they could bear.

He fails to realize that his emotional transport and transcendence are based on self-deception or at least on his failure to understand that "the mind does not always say/ what the eyes do." Blindly he accepts a relationship that seemingly will provide an escape from his insecurities: "the funny grey man was in love/ again and forgot what he was."

But the relationship is not a mutually caring one. The "funny grey man" fails to realize that he is being manipulated: "He saw nothing funny in being funny/ and amusing her." The sardonic humour created by the different nuances of "funny" intensifies the ambivalent nature of their relationship. She takes, but gives nothing in return:

> She let him touch
> her breasts and touch her hair
> and told him of her other loves,
> at which he felt a pleasurable
> despair. Oh, she was beautiful!

The oxymoron "pleasurable despair" underscores his masochism as he listens to her tales of previous loves.

Stanzas five and six provide an abrupt awakening. Becoming more objective as the first flushes of love fade, he begins to understand the reality of their relationship. Now, he sees that they are mirror images of one another.[14] Both are self-centred and self-pitying creatures:

> And then one day he came
> to life again and watched himself
> perform and saw that she
>
> was just like him (but not
> so funny or so grey) and thinking
> of herself and her despair.

Thus, he is caught in a vicious circle. Escape from his own despair and her beauty is impossible. Neither can they help each other since each is caught in personal insecurities. There can be no true relationship as mutually caring lovers; instead, only a parasitic one can exist. Now,

> The funny grey man feels depressed
> sometimes and sometimes needs
> a drink. Oh, she was beautiful.

The shift in the inflection of the refrain, "Oh, she was beautiful!" from exuberance in the first stanzas to a despondent acceptance in the final stanza underscores the tragic nature of the relationship. As Bartley observes, the poem concludes "with an effective understatement of resignation as Newlove points out the folly of [expecting]

either rescue or improvement."[15]

"Succubi" (MIA, p. 23), the final poem to be explored in this chapter, reveals a nightmarish world in which the persona, in his dreams, feels as if he is being suffocated by seductresses.[16] The running together of the images adds to the stifling atmosphere.

The first stanza provides a series of striking negative images that lead naturally to the final three stanzas. The persona begins by presenting those nightmares he no longer has:

> I don't dream anymore about arthritic spiders
> hobbling knobbly-kneed across the floor
> Or menstrual wheat! Or that long-tongued snake
> running up my leg Black as Creation
> dull sad water eyes like unpolished leather
> Or dream-litter hitch-hiking descendants
> all over the roadsides As if the crusts
> of sons and daughters were as cheap as bread
> All night I dream of Love and shoot the lovers dead
> from the hip.

These past dreams give significant insight into the persona's fears - fears that isolate him from others and prevent a loving relationship. Dreams of spiders and wheat are usually associated with creative or life-giving forces; but here both images are distorted and surrealistic. The "arthritic spiders" and the "menstrual wheat" suggest an inability to create. The distortion in the latter image, in particular, seems to suggest a latent repulsion of female sexuality.[17] The final image of the stanza reinforces this

idea, and shows how little he has changed despite his protestations. He concludes: "All night I dream of Love and shoot the lovers dead/ from the hip."

The persona, repelled by man's sexual nature and by his own sexuality, projects this loathing on the women in his dreams. It seems as if they would devour him with their sensuality. He is powerless to prevent it:

> But what I really dream
> is those women suffocating me
> their dead flesh denser than cold syrup to swim in
> Slowing me down slowing me down.

Because of his disturbed psyche, he creates monsters of these women who come to him in his dreams. In stanza three, images such as "thick women," "gross bellies," "mottled breasts" and "red-grease kisses" effectively convey the ugliness of these seducers and provide insight into the persona's troubled mind.

Although the persona cannot accept his own sexuality, he cannot deny it. The final stanza makes this clear:

> They come down in the night
> These women
> sucking the very life out of me As lustful
> themselves as my schemes are
> and as cruel.

The final two lines reveal his awareness that he is reflecting his own baseness. But he cannot rid himself of it. What most individuals see as beautiful, sensual and life-giving, and an essential part of a love-relationship

becomes, in his dreams, unconscious externalizations of his own terror.

The poems discussed in this chapter illustrate the tragic failure of the various personae to find love. The desire for love is intense; yet, for the most part, the personae are unable to show any positive response. Especially debilitating is the tendency to withdraw into self as a result of an inadequate self-concept. Locked in a tragic sense of their unworthiness, the personae are unable to effect a mutually lasting relationship. As lovers, they fail.

NOTES

1 Bartley, p. 30.

2 Pearce, p. 114.

3 Robert Phillips, The Confessional Poets (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), p. 4.

4 Ibid., p. 8.

5 Gould, Chapter Two.

6 Ibid., p. 17.

7 Quoted by Ann Mandel, "lies in the world," review of The Fat Man: Selected Poems 1962-1972, The Camrose Review: a journal of lutheran thought, No. 1 (1982), p. 46.

8 See also "This Is The Song" (MIA, p. 17), another poem in which the persona undertakes self-analysis and sees self-pity as a major flaw.

9 Atwood, p. 61.

10 This idea (even the words "everything turns onto me") occurs also in "All My Friends."

11 Gould, p. 23.

12 The idea of the persona recognizing himself as one who victimizes is explored in "Never Mind" (TC, p. 21).

13 Cf., the images of boredom and inertia in T. S. Eliot's "Prufrock": "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" and "... the butt-ends of my days and ways."

14 Bartley, p. 32.

15 Ibid.

16 Succubi were demons in female form that attempted to have sexual intercourse with sleeping men. In medieval Europe, such unions were thought to result in the birth of witches, demons and deformed offspring.

17 See "The First Time" (MIA, p. 28).

CHAPTER III

THE SEARCHER

> We wander. It is our way. The people with whom
> we have no relation/ went also, they on regular
> trails in search of food,/ we on highways, railways,
> in planes, hungry with curiosity,/ forgetting as
> soon as we learn, wanting rest/ and ownership,
> something in which to believe for once.
>
> John Newlove

This chapter will explore the search motif common in Newlove's poetry. In each poem to be discussed, the persona searches for some way to cope with his own inadequacies and with the negativity of a society that tends to isolate him. More specifically, the poems to be discussed centre on the persona's search to find lasting relationships to fill up - if only momentarily - the emptiness of existence, to confront and accept his fears of death, and to find an identity that will provide a sense of fulfilment. In all but three of these poems, the land and its people - as they are imaged in history and legend - are central to the persona's quest. This results in a more pronounced social consciousness than is evident in some of the poems discussed in chapters I and II.

One persona in Newlove's earlier poems is the hitchhiker. He is uprooted and without any clearly defined

destination. He is on the move in an attempt to escape a locked-in existence and to find, if possible, some satisfying relationship and some sense of identity.

"The Hitchhiker" (BNW, p. 15) begins with the question "On that black highway,/ where are you going?" This immediately evokes a sense of the indecision and lack of direction the persona experiences as he waits by the roadside. The images in the poem give a lucid picture of the hitchhiker's dilemma. The "black highway" becomes a symbol of the persona's life, a life of darkness which engulfs him like the blackness of night. The "cold wind" that he feels as he waits for a ride intensifies his isolation. He is alone in his search, and the process is an exercise in futility. The road might as well be circular since for him there is no ending:

> going through the country
> to no end, only
>
> to turn again at one sea
> and begin it again.

Still, there must be movement because the hitchhiker is, as Newlove suggests in "The Prairie" (TC, p. 35), "never/ ... at ease." In this poem, the persona, a hitchhiking poet, "compiles ... masses of words" that "do not suffice." His search seems futile:

> ... never
> ... at ease, but always migrating
> from city to city

seeking some almost seen
god or food or earth or word.

His goal is never more than "almost seen." Ironically, the hitchhiker (BNW, p. 15) feels "safe with strangers/ in a moving car." Presumably, this is because strangers are not likely to probe into his life; also they would be much easier to lie to should they ask questions. Ultimately, this is escapism. What the hitchhiker really seeks, as Atwood has noted, is escape from himself.[1]

The truth of Atwood's remark is also obvious in "By the Church Wall" (MIA, pp. 58-59). The persona has taken refuge for the night in the "wet grass" by a "white rural church." However, he is kept awake by the spectre of "mocking faces" that fail to understand his fears and his desires. He feels betrayed and hurt. In a tone of utter despair, he envisions himself as caught "beneath a black mass of flat clouds,/ dry in a damned and useless land." The aridity of his existence is reflected in the aridity of the land. The hollow croaking of the frogs, the "thin bewildered song" of the loons, and the screams of the child "in a house across the road" intensify the loneliness and fear the persona experiences.

He is aware, however, that his graveyard surroundings are not creating the "ancient dread" that "clenches [his] belly and fluttering heart." As he lies in the "shadowed grass," it is not those things that are traditionally associated with a graveyard that haunt him - fear of ghosts,

darkness, decay, and death - though Newlove subtly exploits these associations to emphasize his theme by contrast. The persona is not afraid of the buried dead: "There is nothing to hurt me here." Instead, he is haunted by the ghosts of his past and, to some extent, his future:

> All the mistakes and desires are here,
> old nameless shame for my lies,
> the boy's terrible wish to be good and
> not to be alone, not to be alone,
> to be loved, and to love.

In this wasteland, the hitchhiking persona knows he is "fond only" - self-indulgent, foolish; and he is only half-deceived by his escapism: "formulating/ one more ruinous way to safety."

The rootlessness of the hitchhiker is but one characteristic of Newlove's questing personae. A far greater social consciousness marks the speaker in "Ride Off Any Horizon" (BNW, pp. 34-37), a poem that

> ... contain[s] almost all of the areas of experience that concern Newlove in his poetry: the vast, untamed Prairies barely touched by the forces of industrialization; the Prairies of the depression; the destruction of the Indians ...; the place of boyhood and family memories and emotional relationships; and finally, the lonely crowds and concrete wilderness of the city.[2]

The poem speaks of the persona's desire for identity via the past, through memory and history, that will give him a sense of permanence and alleviate the emptiness he feels in a cold

and impersonal society.

The poem is divided into six unnumbered parts, each part focusing on a particular period in time. As Gould notes,

> Sections oscillate between images of the past and images of the present, as the ... personal past ... gives way to the legendary and historical past imaged in the picture of the farmer in the depression and the Indian leaders at the time of their defeat, and past gives way to the present with images of urban society.[3]

The persona, through his visions of the land and its people, tries to satisfy his desire. The refrain - "Ride off any horizon/ and let the measure fall/ where it may" - links each section. Highly suggestive of the stream of consciousness technique, the refrain allows the imagination or the mind to follow any direction it wishes.

> The image ... based on the musical sense of "measure" ... directs attention to the esentially musical nature of the poem ... and indicates the incantatory nature of the refrain as it conjures up each new image pattern.[4]

Certainly, the rhythmical repetition, lulling to the ear, helps to bring the reader into the persona's state of mind - his memories and vision. As well, the phrase "let the measure fall/ where it may" allows for an objective judgement of the evidence of history, recent and remote. Newlove informed Gould that he saw the refrain as "partly magic invocation, partly an abjurgation ... to keep (despite

the repetition) thrusting forward in the poem."[5]

The first part comprises a catalogue of fragments that succinctly establish the Prairies as the setting. The images of the wheat fields, the "dirty river full/ of boys," the "throbbing/ powerhouse," the dam and the "rocks/ boiling with white water," and the "narrow prairie/ river" firmly establish the presence of the land. Unlike the boy in Part 1 of "Kamsack" (BNW, pp. 60-61), which appears to have the same setting, the persona here does not experience the same feeling of belonging. The fragments evoke a vivid sense of place, but the lack of personal pronouns in this section suggests a plea for dispassionate assessment.

In the second section, the persona moves backward "in vision and history" to the wanton plundering of the land and the slaughter of the Indians and later to the Depression. It is a past that he has not directly experienced: "I have not seen it! except/ in pictures and talk." But this does not diminish the bleakness of his vision. The initial image of "the piles of bones/ that dot the prairie" becomes a symbol of death and an indictment of our destruction of nature and the Indians. There is no solace here.

The images that follow present a despairing picture of a drought ravaged land:

> ... there is the fence
>
> covered with dust, laden,
> the wrecked house stupidly empty.

More notable are the devastating psychological effects on the farmers who once depended on the land for their livelihood. Just as there is an aridity of the land, they experience an aridity of desire. An emptiness has replaced their hopes and dreams. The "vision" that similar tribulation will beset the land again negates future hope. It connotes a spiritual and emotional barrenness.

In a cynical tone, the persona offers proof of wilted dreams and lost hope:

> here is a picture for your wallet,
> of the beaten farmer and his wife
> leaning toward each other-
>
> sadly smiling, and emptied of desire.

The picture becomes a souvenir of failure, of the stupid perseverance of the individual in a hostile environment.

The quest continues in the third section as the persona shifts to the "black prairie" of his childhood. While "black" images the richness of the prairie soil, it is also symbolic of night, the unknown, and death. These ideas are associated with "the flat earth theory." The prairie was

> never-ending they said in school,
> round: but you saw it ending,
>
> finished, definite, precise-
> visible only miles away.

As a child the speaker felt trapped and isolated by the

limitations of his vision. His perceptions as a child provide him with an effective metaphor for the deep-seated isolation he now experiences.

The setting in section four is a small prairie town "on a hot night." Rather than a participant in the mundane activities of the townsfolk, the persona appears to be a perceptive observer. The clear, compressed imagery effectively mirrors the banality and the emptiness of the people's lives:

> the boys and girls
> are practising against
>
> each other, the men
> talk and eye the girls-
>
> the women talk and
> eye each other.

The different connotations of "eye" reveal their respective hidden desires and insecurities. The Indians in the whiteman's town are obliged to concentrate on pool. As a diminishing technique, no doubt, Newlove spells 'indian' with a lower-case initial.

The displacement of the Indians triggers the persona's reflections, in section five, on their defeat. In the initial image, he sees in memory the Indians' inevitable defeat and the death of their culture:

> and damn the troops, the horsemen
> are wheeling in the sunshine,
> the cree, practising

for their deaths.

The persona accepts the guilt and responsibility for the inhumane treatment of Canada's indigenous peoples. Since he belongs to the race that destroyed the Indians' way of life, he too feels implicated. Employing apostrophe, he addresses two of the Indian leaders, Poundmaker and Big Bear, and acknowledges that

> it is not unfortunately
>
> quite enough to be innocent,
> it is not enough merely
> not to offend-
>
> at times to be born
> is enough, to be
> in the way is too much.

Newlove's persona recognizes that the desire to satisfy their own greed motivated the whites to dominate and to exploit the land and its native peoples. He is rather cynical in his despair of those who perceived the Indians to be inferiors who must submit to a white civilization:

> some colonel otter, some
> major-general middleton will
> get you, you-
>
> indian.

The concluding lines of the section emphasize the futility of the Indians' desires: "though you love that land more,/ you will go where they take you." This section becomes an

indictment of the whiteman as a destroyer of a people and of a culture. Certainly, there is nothing positive here with which the questing persona can identify.

The jarred rhythm of the refrain opening the final section brings the persona from his reveries of the past back to the cities of the present. He recognizes that the place does not make any difference because of the universality of man's condition:

> it doesn't have to be
>
> the prairie. It could be
> the cold soul of the cities
> blown empty by commerce.

The images, particularly "cold soul," "blown empty by commerce," and "concrete horizon" depict the city as cold and impersonal. (They are, as "Like A River" [Lies., p. 51], suggests "concentration camps of the soul.") The cities' materialistic pursuits have dehumanized their inhabitants. Ironically, modern man looks to "commerce/ to fill up the emptiness" created by the disappearance of human and spiritual values.

The second half of this concluding section paints a more explicit image of the people. There is no action: "the streets are full of people," but they have succumbed to the cities' demands. As a result, their lives are sterile and meaningless: "Their eyes are fixed as far as/ they can see beyond each other." They are so preoccupied with themselves

that they are unable to communicate with others.

The hopelessness of their situation is intensified as the city-dwellers look to the "concrete horizon" which mirrors the cities' artificiality. The people are trapped inside; escape is impossible. Here, the urban horizon parallels the rural horizon that the persona as a young boy saw in section three. Then, however, it was an illusion; now it has become a reality. Freedom and individuality do not exist, the speaker concludes, except for the wind that "blows as far as it may." He has failed in his search. His vision of the land and its people has not provided a presence with which he can positively identify in order to satisfy his desire for fulfilment.

In another poem, "Samuel Hearne in Wintertime" (BNW., pp. 84-85), the persona looks to the national past, more specifically to Samuel Hearne,' hoping to find in the explorer's character and in the land he explored those qualities that will replenish his arid existence.

The poem begins with a merging of the present and the past. The persona in his despair - cold room, sick children - is tempted to change places (if he could) with Hearne and regard as "good" the realities of Hearne's world. However, unlike some twentieth-century readers comfortable in their heated houses, Newlove's persona refuses to fantasize; he confronts the reality:

Hearne, your camp must have smelled

like hell whenever you settled down
for a few days of rest and journal-work:

hell smeared with human manure,
hell half-full of raw hides,
hell of sweat, Indians, stale fat,
meat-hell, fear-hell, hell of cold.

Images of "human manure," "raw hides," "sweat," "stale fat," and "cold" evoke a repugnant picture of Hearne's living conditions. The aversion is intensified by heavy stresses and the repetition of the word "hell."

Juxtaposed with the reality of Hearne's situation are stark images from the persona's wretched life. It is filled with "dirty pants," "puffy children coughing ...,/ crying, sick-faced,/ vomit stirring in grey blankets/ from room to room." Ironically, it is Christmas, a time of joy and celebration. But the persona can only sit in the "cold room" and endure as he searches for something in "Samuel Hearne and the land" that will provide a sense of satisfaction. There is "No praise in merely enduring." The latter word triggers an important realization that "Samuel Hearne did more ... than endure".

Part 3 centres on the historical past and the harshness of the Canadian landscape known to Hearne. The physical conditions with which Hearne had to contend enhance his character. In Part 4, the persona realizes that he has "almost begun to talk" as if Hearne saw himself as a man of destiny, a hero. The persona now realizes that Samuel Hearne

was simply "SAM," a man who followed his dreams and fulfilled himself by discovering the essence of the land. However, any hope of positive identification with Hearne quickly dissipates as the persona recalls, in Part 5, the horrifying image of the brutal slaughter of the Eskimo girl:[7]

> There was that Eskimo girl
> at Bloody Falls, at your feet
>
> Samuel Hearne, with two spears in her,
> you helpless before your helpers,
>
> and she twisted about them like
> an eel, dying, never to know.

Now, the persona recognizes the paradox of Hearne's helplessness: "You helpless before your helpers". This image undercuts the idea of identity-by-association and negates the persona's search.

In "Crazy Riel" (BNW., pp. 18-19), a poem which focuses on another historical figure, the quest for fulfilment continues. In this poem, which illustrates Newlove's "ability to make transition from the immediate act of writing, to personal recollection, to his immediate perspective, [and] to myth ...,"[8] the poet and the searcher are one. The poet-persona, feeling the need to fill the emptiness of his existence, turns to poetry - the writing of poetry:

> Time to write a poem

or something.
Fill up a page.
.....
To fill up a hole.
To make things feel better.

This process is intended to be therapeutic. In response to a question concerning the need "to fill up a hole," Newlove said that most people have that need and invent

> things to keep themselves alive. Whether it's watching hockey ... or just making things up to pretend you're still alive. It's a very curious mechanism of the human mind - after all, we're flaked out about a third of the time ... walking around, not seeing or doing anything. You know we use to laugh at bears for hibernating all winter, but we do about the same thing.'

To fill the void, the persona turns to "the creature noise"; the "noise" found in a world that is characterized by hatred, ignorance, contempt, cruelty, deceit and death. The repetition of "noise" and "to fill up" connects the images and maintains a forward thrust.

The initial image of "Huge massed forces of men/ hating each other" establishes the tone and introduces the idea of conflict, of man's inhumanity to man. This is followed by a "noise" from the world of nature. The robin, the harbinger of spring, "sucks up worms,/ hopping from one to another." However, the robin's killing of the worms is not of the same order as the ruthless killing suggested in the first image. The impulses come from different sources: greed and need. As the search to fill the emptiness continues, the persona

remembers his youth: "the grassy marsh/ ... by the lake." Here boys catch (or caught) frogs "for bait or sale." These images share a common unifying element, death. The causes of death, however, are drastically different: men's hatred for each other, the need for survival, and the innocent indifference of youth.

Memories of his youth prompt the persona to move into the historical past and conjure up

> ... images
> that are people I will never understand.
> Admire them though I may.
> Poundmaker. Big Bear. Wandering Spirit,
> those miserable men.

All are heroic Indian leaders who were helpless in their efforts to prevent the destruction of their way of life by the whites. Then, there is Riel:

> Riel. Crazy Riel. Riel hanged.
> Politics must have its way.
> The way of noise. To fill up.
> The definitions bullets make,
> and field guns.

Using a compressed language, the persona evokes powerful impressions: the opposing views of Riel's personality,[10] his execution for treason, the propaganda and deceit of politics, and the use of the military to assert political will.

The progression continues as the poet, as searcher, catalogues human and animal "noises" of death. Precise

language creates powerful images:

> The noise your dying makes,
> to which you are the only listener.
> The noise the frogs hesitate
> to make as the metal hook
> breaks through the skin
> and slides smoothly into place
> in the jaw. The noise
> the fish makes caught in the jaw.

Since these are, paradoxically, silent noises that can only be experienced by those in the throes of death, the intensity of the suffering increases imaginatively for the reader. Historically, however, such deaths have been perceived as insignificant by those not victimized. The "noise" the fish makes becomes no more than that made by a stone thrown into the water. It is "inhuman, even mechanical. Nothing seems to change with their deaths":[11] "The lake is not displaced,/ having one less jackfish body." Even back in "the grassy marsh" remembered from the persona's childhood, "the family of frogs sings." However, for the persona, who is now older and possessed of greater sensitivity, the song becomes shrill, and the music "grey" as he recalls the "images of death [that] hang upside-down."

These "images of death" take the persona back to the dead Indian heroes, and provide an opportunity for him to made a profound statement on the human condition. History has created so much confusion that it is sometimes impossible to discriminate between right and wrong:

> The wax that paves hell's road,
> slippery as the road to heaven.
> So that as a man slips
> he might as easily slide
> into being a saint as destroyer.

The final two lines, the climax of the poem, focus on Riel as he dies: "In his ears the noise magnifies./ He forgets men." Death becomes his preoccupation; politics and propaganda are insignificant. Whether Riel's death is an escape from or a transcendence of the world of "noises," the persona appears to ally himself with Riel. Monkman's comment that Newlove's speaker "imagines 'crazy Riel' as a saint rather than a mad destroyer, a man guided (like the poet) by visions not born in the noise of this world" appears a valid one.[12]

Images associated with death pervade "Crazy Riel" and result in a sensed rather than an articulated triumph. In "Resources, Certain Earths" (MIA., pp. 74-77) Newlove's persona, haunted by a fear of death, searches for some way to confront and accept his mortality. Such an acceptance is essential, since "the realization of death/ is the realization of life." He looks to the Northwest coast Indians, particularly to their legends and myths, to find a means of accepting death.

Immediately, the persona identifies with the native people as his perception of their "confusion" parallels the confusion in his mind. Relying on historical references, he

evokes an image of these indigenous people in their natural environment. They were

> endowed with valuable qualities,
> hemmed in by stormy eases
> along a narrow strip of coastline,
> dense forest and steep mountain ranges
> behind them.

Their isolation offered protection and allowed them to develop a distinct culture until the intrusion of the whiteman and his advanced technology. The result was a region

> ... filled
> with flunkies, whistle-punks, chokermen,
> cat-skinners, the fiery mountainsides
> and stands of trees disappearing.

The ruthless destruction of the Indian culture and the rape of the land are reinforced by the picture of a simple people who had a strong affinity with the land:

> They lived
> and died in wooden houses, communally;
> their colors were confined to black,
> dull red, a coppery blue
> which turned dark green in light,
> pale yellow; resources, certain ochrous earths
> of copperish clay, fungi, burnt
> clamshells and charcoal combined with oil;
> polish was done with shark or dogfish skin
> or by bare hand.[13]

This verse-paragraph concludes with the persona again finding common ground on which he can associate with these early people. "Each man/ had to solve his own problems; and

I mine."

The persona moves abruptly to the twentieth century: to the completion of the railway, the world wars and the Depression. The allusion to the wars universalizes man's inherent cruelty and becomes, as well, a reminder of man's mortality. This is reinforced by the allusion to Leon Trotsky's assassination in his study at Coyoacan:

> (Deliveress from guilt, mutual love, defend
> us, deliver us. They said as Leon, stumbling
> in blood from his study at Coyoacan,
> o Indian place-name, I am full of them,
> an ice-pick numbing the hurt brain, did:
> said, See what they have done to me! dying.)

The prayer-like chant indicates the persona's urgency to be rid of the guilt associated with the victimization of the Indians and of man's capacity for evil: "See what we have done to them,/ and to ourselves." Only by being freed will he be able to find an identity with the Indians that will allow for a possible acceptance of death.

In response to the question "[W]hat do I have to apologize to them for?", the persona, by cataloguing the Indians' fears, myths, and deaths, confirms an identity:

> their fears, legends of malicious tricks,
> colors and maskings, knowledge of
> the wild woman of the woods wearing
> a hummingbird in her hair, deaths,
> are mine, because I am a man also
> and hemmed in; it is done
> to me.

He, too, is a victim. Death has "hemmed" him in. Alluding to Paracelsus, a sixteenth-century physician and alchemist, the persona comments:

> The universal man
> has his diseases ...
> as the individual does. The prime disease
> is death. I act because I live,
> homunculus said. Dead, I do not act.

Death is inevitable, but it must be accepted in order to affirm life. Since the Indians could confront death without fear, the persona looks to them. But he realizes the difficulty of fully assimilating with these native peoples. His every thought or possession has been changed by the white society to which he belongs:

> But everything I own or own to
> is pecked, incised, sculptured, carved,
> moulded, inlaid, every possession painted
> in their manner, with this, the fear and guilt.

But by drawing on Paracelsus's claim that man has "innumerable Egos," and "contains ... the whole of the animal creation," the persona again makes a significant parallel with the Indians; namely, in the wearing of masks. He finds himself mirrored in the Indian tradition. Just as the Indians wore masks to allay their fears and provide themselves with assurances against the uncertainties of life, he, too, masks himself: "I wear masks of birds and animals, intentionally/ grotesque, never of myself." The

masks act as shields, providing a degree of security. However, the mask which best reveals his innermost fears and longings is his writing:

> How
> should I mask myself, but in my words?
> In my words, masked in my words,
> the realization of death!

By looking to the Indians, the persona has been successful in finding a way to incorporate, without fear, the reality of life with the reality of death.

The acceptance of death cannot be done in pieces, in "particle[s]." Like the persona in Robert Browning's "Prospice" who says of death "Let me taste the whole of it ...,"[14] Newlove's persona realizes that death's reality must be grasped whole and at once. To do this is to remove fear:

> Let me swallow it whole and be strong,
> accept it whole and be strong!
> Let me take it whole and be strong!
>
> Let me know it well
> and be strong and complete and be saved.

In the climactic ending, the urgency to accept and the emotional intensity the persona is experiencing are conveyed by the cadence and the repetition. The sound and sense of these final lines are quite reminiscent of "Prospice".

D. G. Jones writes that Newlove and other Canadian poets

> abandon the garrison of an exclusive culture and go into the wilderness, where they experience, not a greater sense of alienation, but a greater sense of vitality and community. Implicitly or explicitly, each may be said to accept the fellowship of death...,[15]

"Resources, Certain Earths" becomes an affirmation of life by the persona's confronting and accepting death.

"The Pride" (TFM, pp. 67-74), Newlove's most ambitious poem, also explores the necessity of retreating into the past to find an identity. The persona looks to the native Indians, our original ancestors, hoping to discover in his search, not only an individual identity but also a national identity. The poem's seven sections, each comprising one run-on sentence, focus on different aspects of the persona's quest for

> "the pride," the sense of "completeness" and identity which, he feels, the Indians possessed and he, as a twentieth-century Canadian, desires and lacks.[16]

The persona begins his search in Part 1 by looking to Indian history. A series of vivid, yet concise, images provided by a "chronicler" flash before us like those of a slide presentation. Although only a series of fragments, they provide significant insight into Indian life. These images, however, are largely ones that evoke terror and death:

> the crazy dogs, men

tethered with leather dog-thongs
to a stake, fighting until dead,

... arikaras
with traded spanish sabre blades
mounted on the long
heavy buffalo lances,
riding the sioux
down, the centaurs, the horsemen
scouring the level plains
in war or hunt
until the smallpox got them,
the warriors.

The guilt noted in "Ride Off Any Horizon" and in "Resources, Certain Earths" is lacking here as the persona, in a matter-of-fact tone, presents information regarding the whiteman's destructive impact on the aboriginal tribes. The "[S]panish sabre blades," the "horses," and the "smallpox" are woven without judgement into the fabric of Indian history.

The final image, that of the land, is the most lingering. Here the loneliness, isolation and fear that pervades the land is effectively conveyed by the diction, by such words as "desolate," "unfound," "mirages," "cold," "lone," and "terror." This image of the land suggests that not just the Indians are hostile but the land itself.

The persona continues his search by turning, in Part 2, to West Coast Indian myths and legends that "haunt the mind like remembered ruins."[17] The violence of Part 1 has been replaced by a cataloguing of fragments of Indian mythology which seems to chronicle the attempts of the various tribes to come to terms with their natural environment, and with

the gods who controlled the Indians' existence. [E]thlinga, the god of rain, "empties his bucket, refreshing/ the earth"; and the raven, considered as the god of creation, "brought fire,/ food and water to man,/ the trickster." Newlove breathes life and energy into his images of these gods that were so prominent in nati life. The awesome power of the god of thunder is evoked in these lines:

> he is nootka tootooch, the wings
> causing thunder and the tongue
> or flashing eyes engendering
> rabid white lightening,
> whose food was whales.

The diction and the rhythm, particularly the heavy stresses created by the alliterative t's and w's, present nootka tootooch as a god to be feared. Newlove shows in this section an "excellent and variable command of rhythm and sound [that] emphasizes spirit, tradition, and pride among the ancient tribes."[18] In the concluding stanza, the persona states that it is partly through Indian stories that contact with the past can be made:[19]

> they are all ready
> to be found, the legends
> and the people, or
> all their ghosts and memories,
> whatever is strong enough
> to be remembered.

After presenting these fragments of Indian history and culture, the persona turns inward in Part 3 to question the

purpose of his quest. Pondering his unsuccessful attempt to identify with the past, he acknowledges his bewilderment. The "tales" lack clarity; they do not provide a sense of "completeness." Instead, they become "a half-understood massiveness, mirage,/ in men's minds." How, then, can he "proceed" with confidence

> along a line
> neither straight nor short,
> whose future
> you cannot know
> or result foretell,
> whose meaning is still
> obscured as the incidents
> occur and accumulate?

The persona is cognizant of the complexity and the uncertainty of his quest.

Part 4 begins with connotations of progress - "orchards," railways, ranches. However, the progress is undercut as the persona remembers that the plains are "bare." Still, they are "not barren"; they contain within them the essence of the past; the vitality and the pride of the native ancestors. The chant, it is "easy/ for me to love their people," emphasizes the persona's exhilaration as he senses hope. "Communion with the land becomes identification with the land's people."[20]

In Part 5, the persona, having sensed hope, looks again to the past. The section begins with a prosaic paraphrase of a conversation between an old Cree, Saukamappee, and David

Thompson. The time is 1787, and the old man relates some things that happened when he was sixteen: the raids, the war parties, the battle arrays, and the tribal fighting. In the original version in Black Night Window, this account was rendered in free verse.[21] The change into prose is significant in that it

> emphasizes the poetic quality of the visionary lines which follow, in which the poet abandons the attempt "to know" which tribe settled where, had guns, or fought whom, and instead attempts to feel, to comprehend, what that life was actually like.[22]

These latter stanzas provide vibrant images of the cyclic nature of the lives of the Plains Indians, their closeness to nature, and the successful slaughter:

> these people moved without rest
> backward and forward with the wind,
> the seasons, the game, great herds,
> in hunger and abundance-
>
> in summer and in the bloody fall
> they gathered on the killing grounds,
> fat and shining with fat, amused
> with the luxuries of war and death,
>
> relieved from the steam of knowledge,
> consoled by the stream of blood
> and steam rising from the fresh hides
> and tired horses, wheeling in their pride
> on the sweating horses, their pride.

The accelerated rhythm of these three stanzas and the use of repetition suggest that the persona has made contact with the past. It is, however, an imaginary contact, a product of his desire. The persona appears to be as Romantic here as

the Romantic concepts of history Newlove so often condemns.

The persona's search in Part 6 becomes a collective one. Ultimately, the Indians' pride in the "luxuries of war and death" as expressed in "the pride, the grand poem" - symbolic of unity and identity - will become "our pride." To achieve this, we need a firm hold on the past;

> and then the sunlit brilliant image suddenly floods
> us
> with understanding, shocks our
> attentions, and all desire
> stops, stands alone.

As a result of this sudden revelation, "we are no longer lonely/ but have roots." The revelation of who we are and what we are will become a sustaining principle in our lives. But our identity with the past will not come easily. As the persona asserts, it is something innate that "grows in us/ and idles about and hides/ until the moment is due." Only then will we have

> the knowledge of
> our origins, and where
> we are in truth,
> whose land this is
> and is to be.

At the end of Part 6 the poem has a sense of completeness that at first makes Part 7 seem "a superfluous addition to a complete and masterful poem."[23] The persona has, through his imagination, established an identity with the land and the native peoples who once inhabited it. But

for Newlove's persona an identification derived from the "fragments" as they are romanticized is insufficient; there must be a kind of synthesis of Indian and whiteman. This, he asserts, can happen since the original natives

> still ride the soil
> in us, dry bones a part
> of the dust in our eyes,
> needed and troubling
> in the glare, in
> our breath, in our
> ears, in our mouths,
> in our bodies entire, in our minds, until
> at last
> we become them.[24]

Newlove's persona transcends racial differences, making the Indians "our true forbears" for "we/ are their people, come/ back to life."

The validity of the thesis presented is questionable, yet "the lure of rhythm and repetitive sound and the undercurrent of urgent identification make his position tempting."[25] Furthermore, the poem makes one of Newlove's strongest affirmative statements. The persona, in his quest, has discovered the means - even though it is idealistic - of achieving not only a personal identity but also a national identity based on a common heritage.

While the poems in this chapter make significant statements about "the nature of the land, [and] the moral meaning of its history ...,"[26] they do not provide, for the most part, the sense of fulfilment that the questing

personae seek. Only "Resources, Certain Earths" and "The Pride" end on an affirmative note. Despite the bleakness and the negativity of the subject matter, however, the persistence of the search is positive and indicates the overwhelming need for the questing personae to find something tangible, "something in which to believe" that will dispel their feelings of isolation and alienation.

NOTES

1 Atwood, p. 62.

2 Gary Geddes and P. Bruce, eds., 15 Canadian Poets (Toronto: Oxford Universiy Press, 1970), p. 284.

3 Gould, p. 49.

4 Ibid., pp. 48-49.

5 Ibid., p. 49.

6 Hearne was the first European to make an overland trip to the Arctic Ocean. For an interesting account of his journey see Richard Glover, ed., A Journey: From Prince Of Wales's Fort In Hudson's Bay To The Northern Ocean By Samuel Hearne (Toronto: Macmillan Company, 1958).

7 For a full description of the slaughter of the Eskimo girl at Bloody Falls, see Glover, pp. 99-103. Note, in particular, how deeply Hearne was affected by the scene: "... it was with difficulty that I could refrain from tears; and I am confident that my features must have feelingly expressed how sincerely I was affected by the barbarous scene I then witnessed; even at this hour I cannot reflect on the transactions of that horrid day without shedding tears" (p. 103).

8 Gregory Cook, p. 98.

9 Jan Bartley, "An Interview with John Newlove," Essays on Canadian Writing, No. 23 (Spring, 1982), p. 153.

10 Here Newlove appears to be making reference to the different attitudes held toward Riel. Although most historians and psychologists see him as a madman, there are those who see him as a saint. For an interesting commentary on Riel's personality, see Howard Palmer, ed., The Settlement of the West (Calgary: Comprint Publishing Company, 1977), pp. 15-59.

11 Douglas Barbour, "John Newlove: More Than Just Honest Despair; Some Further Approaches," Essays on Canadian Writing, Nos. 18-19 (Summer-Fall, 1980), p. 260.

12 Leslie Monkman, A Native Heritage: Images of the Indians in English-Canadian Literature (Toronto: University

of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 124.

13 Pearce, pp. 120-22. During the interview, Pearce suggested that throughout Newlove's poetry there were "a number of literary references." Newlove admitted that he was "an incorrigible thief" and that the interviewer was right. Referring to "Resources, Certain Earths," Newlove noted that "one whole verse paragraph ... except for the lyrics, ... is straight out of an obscure study of British Columbia Indians."

14 Ian Jack, ed., Browning: Poetical Works 1833-1864 (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 846.

15 Jones, p. 136.

16 Susan Wood, "Participation in the Past: John Newlove and 'The Pride'," Essays on Canadian Writing, No. 20 (Winter, 1980-81), p. 233.

17 Ferns, p. 72.

18 Bartley, "Something in Which to Believe for Once: The Poetry of John Newlove," p. 21.

19 This idea contrasts with Earle Birney's view that Canadian poets are hampered by a lack of history. In "Can. Lit." he writes: "It's only by our lack of ghosts we're haunted." However, poets such as Newlove, Purdy and Atwood have shown that there is a history and a mythology to be tapped.

20 Gould, p. 44.

21 See Pearce, pp. 117-18. Newlove, in conversation with the interviewer, makes reference to the revision. "Since the poem appeared in Black Night Window, I've revised it so that the conversation with Saukamappee is now a block of prose. Then the poem turns back into verse again. It was a mistake to try and force the wrong set of rhythms by way of line breaks on what was actually an aside to introduce something else. I found that when I read it, that portion - the conversation with Saukamappee - always was prose when I said it aloud, no matter how cleverly I had written the lines."

22 Wood, p. 236.

23 Gould, p. 47.

24 See Monkman, p. 143. Monkman feels that the idea expressed here recalls A. M. Klein's "A Psalm Touching

Genealogy." Of his Jewish ancestors, Klein says: "Corpuscular/ They dwell in my veins, they eavesdrop at my ears,/ They circle, as with Torahs, round my skull ...."

25 Bartley, "Something in Which to Believe for Once: The Poetry of John Newlove," p. 23.

26 George Woodcock, "Poetry," Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), Vol. III, p. 316.

CHAPTER IV

THE POET

I am too tense,
decline to dance
verbally. The flower
is not in its colour,
but in the seed.
John Newlove

Even in these worn-out days,
worn-out terms,
once in a while our poets
must
speak.
John Newlove

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.
W. H. Auden

Newlove has no poem that can be regarded as an extended statement of his poetics - nothing comparable, for instance, to A. M. Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape." However, some specific poems and references from other of Newlove's poems give insight into the nature of the poetic experience and the poetic vision.

One aspect of Newlove's poetry that has been given considerable attention is the poet's desire for honesty of expression and idea. Douglas Barbour observes that "a strong

concern for the truth is one of the central animating forces of [Newlove's] poetic[s]."[1] In "A Complete Autobiography" Newlove asserts paradoxically: "I will invent no more than is true."[2] It becomes clear from reading his poems that Newlove does not consider truth as easily definable or easily attained. We are surrounded by too much ambiguity. As the epigraph to Lies suggests, "Lies and perjury were so familiar to him that he often deceived himself and told the truth when he thought he was lying."[3]

The desire to be truthful has led the poet to be wary of words. One of the strongest statements on the distrust of words comes in "The Last Event" (TC, pp. 38-39). The persona presents grotesque images of man's potential for hatred and self-destruction. But words are inadequate to deal positively with man's arrogances and atrocities. Words either hide the truth or are empty and meaningless: "Words impart mastery, not sense; preaching is an art, oratory, flashy/ flesh, slick ornamentative goings-on, but poems ...." He leaves poetry undefined. His refusal to condemn poetry elevates it and implies that it can perform a significant role. (This aspect of his poetics will be discussed later.)

Newlove's suspicion of language is reflected in his preference for direct and unvarnished speech:

> [The] determination to be plain, to the extent of almost eliminating similes and metaphors as well as applied decorations of all sorts, is the

overriding principal of Newlove's style.'

Newlove himself says that

> "Metaphors and images are lovely things, but they're just resemblances; they're not the thing itself and I try to produce the thing itself.... I don't find them useful for me. I like them in other people. That may be good or it may be a lack, but I just don't use them very well. I don't feel that way - that anything is the same as anything else, it's merely like something else. I don't find that illuminating at all."[5]

Ironically, "The Flower" (TC, p. 46) a poem, whose brevity and form reflect Newlove's paring down of language in his desire to emphasize the core of his poetics, effectively uses metaphor. Here is the poem in its entirety:

> I am too tense,
> decline to dance
> verbally. The flower
> is not in its colour,
> but in the seed.

Similarly, in "Shakespeare's Sonnets" (TNTDS, p. 41) the persona indicates his interest in the permanent: "I'm not interested in rainbows/ but in the sky itself." He suggests that the interest in "the dark lady" of the sonnets is peripheral and insignificant and that Shakespeare's real interest lay in humankind:

> All the couples of Shakespeare's sonnets
> make sense to me. It was another love
> other than the Dark One he reached for.
>
> Us.

By isolating the word "Us," Newlove not only emphasizes Shakespeare's compassion, but suggests his owm infinite compassion as well.

As the persona in "It Was All There" (BNW, p. 44) suggests, art can be found all around us. However, the creative act is not easy. Time and again, Newlove's personae refer to the often difficult act of composing poems. It is a process that comes "slowly, hesitantly/ at first" ("The Arrival," BNW, p. 41).

"The Crab-Apples" (BNW, p. 39) addresses the subject briefly and allegorically. It is spring, a time of renewal, and the creative impulse that has lain dormant in the poet for some time has returned: "I am creeping back into being/ a poet again." Although the persona appears to question his role as a poet, he puts aside his fears of inadequacy and accepts "the first/ tentative lines." He envisions himself as a tree, whose "dead branches/ suddenly [revivify] themselves with a grafted fruit/ slightly different in nature each time." The slight revisions, the fragmentary nature of the ideas, and the tedious waiting make the poet-persona "ill-tempered." The concluding couplet suggests - and reinforces by its rhyme - the persona's satisfaction and accomplishment: "But even the wrinkled crab-apple satisfies me -/ in boyhood I stole them from a neighbour's tree."

"By Main Weight" (WTS, pp. 18-19) also deals with the poet's struggle to create poetry that effectively

communicates his ideas. In this very personal revelation of the poetic process, the speaker adopts a simple langauge and a sombre tone as he explores his exhaustive but ineffective effort to write a poem that effectively addresses two aspects of human existence: our mortality and our isolation - "we die" and "we are alone." This very theme invites the sentimentality - "the fainting tone of sadness" - that weakens so much poetry. This may be why he feels the need to be harshly honest.

"By main weight of the mind," that is by sheer intellectual endeavour, the speaker forces "out the line/ in uncertainty, not knowing/ what may come next." The problem is how to "shock" without alienating; and in shocking, how to comfort. His hesitancy and inability in this regard are suggested by his word-play: "want[ed]/ I want" and "brutal,/ brittle." Moreover, he knows that there is no guarantee of results: "the poems/ that I make are no help."[6] Still, he hopes that by giving full expression to his reactions, by shocking and offending, he will actually be offering the highest expression of the love and acceptance he feels. Desiring not to hurt, he turns to love, which ironically, can be more painful "for it is the very culmination of human emotion: it is human, therefore impermanent and unreliable."[7] Even though the proclamation of love may be a sad "trick", a deception, it is necessary if only to make existence bearable.

While the speaker in "By Main Weight" questions the effectiveness of poetry in protecting mankind from "the capricious force which shapes human existence,"[8] there are poems, the very writing of which allows the poet-persona to cope temporarily with the meaninglessness of his own existence. In "Crazy Riel" (BNW, pp. 18-19), writing becomes a means of filling the void that the persona feels:

> Time to write a poem
> or something.
> . . . . .
> To fill up a hole.
> To make things feel better.

Writing poetry becomes a form of therapy that permits the poet to confront the "noises" of the world and to lessen his alienation, allowing him to survive in a world of hatred, ignorance, death, and guilt. The act of writing is only briefly therapeutic for the poet-persona in "No Pleasure" (Lies, p. 31), a poem which explores his painful and despairing world:

> There is no pleasure anywhere.
> The zinc air stinks
> with a persistent pain. Cheap drugs
> rain into the stomach,
> becoming mud.

In this drug-dependent society, the persona feels "like a garden slug" just barely able to drag himself along. His shoulders and back become disloyal and treacherous. They remind him of his mortality. His only solution when this

happens is

> Forming letters with a pen
> . . . . . .
> trying not to be
> immediate, but in some way elegant
> by hand-something my corpse
> can't do.

But the release is only temporary as that "styleless jerk" - awareness of our mortality - intervenes and the persona is left alone with his agony again.

The driving force behind Newlove's poetry is desire. He yearns to see an ugly and turbulent world transformed into one of perfect order and permanent beauty. His Romantic vision is tempered, however, since he realizes the difficulty of fulfilling his desires. In "The Story of a Cat", one of the few short stories that Newlove has written, the narrator echoes this view:

> Desire sickens me. My first desire is hopeless; it can never be had. It is: Not to die .... This unobtainability of my prime desire makes me know that all my other desires are unobtainable too. No. They are not unobtainable, as the first is, but they can never be satisfied.[9]

The distance between dream and reality, between desire and fulfilment, creates a central tension in much of Newlove's poetry. "In This Reed" (BNW, p. 82) clearly reveals this tension.[10] Although the speaker recognizes his limitations as a poet, his desires are intense. His "hunger" represents his desperate need to see the world, not as it is with all

its flaws and weaknesses, but as it ought to be. It appears that he wishes to create images of perfection and virtue that might act as models by which human morale may be strengthened and maintained."[11] However, the speaker is aware that man's nature prevents him from attaining the ideal:

> It is imperfection
> the eyes see, it is
> impreciseness they deserve,
>
> but they desire so much more.

Regardless of how great the desire, there cannot be a wish-fulfilment:

> What they desire, what they hope,
> what they invent,
>
> is perfection, organizing
> all things as they may not be,
> it is what they strive for
>
> unwillingly, against themselves,
> to see a perfect order, ordained
> reason.

The final stanza suggests the futility of speaker's attempt at making his dreams a reality. What the eyes want to see "closed, is what/ they want, and will not be." However, while the perfection the speaker seeks seems difficult to attain, his awareness of that perfection makes for a positive statement. As Douglas Barbour notes, [Newlove's] "way tends to be the <u>via negativa</u>, but even so the poems assert the ideal, if only in their desperate longing for

it."[12]

Wilfred Owen, in the Preface to The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, wrote: "All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true poets must be truthful."[13] Newlove's rather sweeping philosophical poem "Notes From and Among the Wars" (Lies, pp. 40-48) makes much the same claim. The poem consists of twenty sections of varying lengths in which the speaker muses on man's interactions with others and his interpretations of self: his emotions, self-deceptions and fears. War, internal and external, becomes the unifying metaphor.

Part 1 presents a striking contrast. The individual whom the speaker addresses has either accepted or effectively denied the pain and despair of human existence:

> Your drink is twice as strong as mine is
> Your mouth is twice as fair as mine is
> Your hair is sweeter than mine is
> You smile where I could wish to smile
> You sleep when I could wish to sleep.

The speaker, apparently because of his sensitivity, cannot avoid the ugliness and pretensions that surround him. And he cannot reconcile what others can justify. He must speak the truth. Only by confronting the negative aspects of man's existence can he alert mankind.

He begins by focusing on an ancient past marked by an arrogance that ironically is now seen as "beautiful to archaeologists." He then moves to the more immediate past,

the Jewish holocaust of World War II. Beginning with Part 4, the speaker shifts from the atrocities of history to interpretations of self: the insignificance of human effort, especially our inability to establish lasting relationships, and his own inability to attain personal happiness and communion because of mankind's essentially destructive and arrogant nature:

> I would like to whistle softly in your ear
> to recall to you a tune we might have played
> if I could remember it. Instead I sit reading
> of man's perpetual wars,
> of how he says he strides toward the stars.

In Part 7, the speaker presents a compelling picture of the poet who has "gone wrong" and is unable to effect change. The failed poet, a reminder of E. J. Pratt's escapist poets in "Still LIfe," is searching to find

> some simple part
> that he might make
> into an easy song
> or phrase to take
> as medicine
> when he walks along
> in his mind,
>
> when his mind soars
> from the start,
> gone wrong.

The speaker suggests that the escapist poet has a distorted perspective. There are no sugar-coated remedies, no easy answers, no ready-made solutions to ease the pain, ugliness, and despair that surround us. Instead, the speaker implies,

the "true" poet must be honest and speak the truth however painful it may be.

In the remaining sections the speaker presents other despairing aspects of humanity: our distrust and fear of others, our isolation, our tendency to stagnate, our passive acceptance of daily occurrences, and our innate savagery - this last one being explored in some depth in Part 14. In this section, the persona asks God's forgiveness for hating "the human in ourselves/ knowing there is enough to hate/ in the human in ourselves." Poems cannot erase man's past mistakes: "The wars the slaveries no dead men redeemed by poems/ no humiliation redressed with songs." Sensitivity is denied; there is savagery instead: a savagery that reaches down to the family, the supposed basis for a civilized world. Furthermore, there seems to be no ending:

> The torture goes on forever as we in perpetual
> motion
> breed and destroy ourselves for any reason
> even intelligent ones
>
> All of which we have always known
> in despair and amusement at ourselves.

Although we know the truth of our horrible cruelties, we still perform them, covering them with rationalizations. Man knows the evils that surround him. But he must be awakened to the need for reform.

Part 19 reaches back to the opening of the poem. The speaker's confrontation with the realities of human

existence has resulted in an affirmation of its negativity. In stark images, he presents, as he sees it, the truth:

> It is not the milk-bearing tree I see
> but the one that seeps blood or trees
> exploding like tnt in the winter's cold.

His bleak vision is brought to a chilling climax in the concluding section where death becomes the identifiable truth: "Caught in the maze of life/ and knowing only that we end." We question, but our questions provide no logical answers to life's riddles. Even our fantasies fail:

> If you were in the air
> would you be a bird?
> If you were able
> would you wish to be?
> And would you sing
> if you wished to be?
> And if you cared to be -
>
> Would you want to fly? knowing
> below and as you fly
> in the green concealed pit
> the hunters with their sighted shotguns lie.

Although "Notes From and Among the Wars" affirms the negativity of social conditions - historically and currently - it does acknowledge the poet's desire to speak truly, not to gloss over or escape into a never-never land. For Newlove, "The act of art is affirmative even if all it can affirm appears negative; the act of art is an act of life."[14]

Like the previous poem, "Insect Hopes" (TNTDS, pp. 44-

46) makes a disparaging statement on man's proneness to venality and self-destruction. The poem, uneven at times, begins by asserting:

> The world's longest poem didn't start like this
> didn't go on like this
> it doesn't end like this - there was still
> a cigarette burning. After
> the ending, after all the Indians
> the Pygmies, the Gypsies, the Jews
> the burned and the black and the spurned
> after all the cheated and demeaned were buried
> by bulldozers
> or sold as cheap souvenirs in green translucent
> glass
> that cigarette still fumed -
> what wealth!

"The world's longest poem" implies a kind of collectivity of all those who have misrepresented us. It is not only the historians, but others such as escapists or overly optimistic poets and politicians. The poet-persona, however, understands these "liars" and the falsity and the ambiguity of their stances. He is also aware of what is needed to effect positive change. By cataloguing a series of negatives, he suggests what is necessary to prevent us from becoming "beasts":

> Not these sweaty visions everyone has
> no recognizable rhythms
> no beauty in the line
> no knowledge
> only noise
> no feeling of pain.

The images of man's evils, cruelties and miseries must be

replaced by those of beauty, understanding and sensitivity. True poets can help to effect these changes, but mankind has believed the "liars." Ironically, the truthful poets - "the poet that is in us" -are condemned as liars and "called sick." The persona sees himself as "healthier" than his detractors since his perception allows him to see not only the bleak side of man's existence but also the good that is concealed by man's inhumanities. "We are not wholly beasts yet," he asserts. As well, he can recognize the very beauty or virtue of our endurance:

> 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[15]
> how this century began like all the others
>
> in blood
> and milk-white dreams
> and ended
> with insect hopes.

Although the present is following the pattern of the past and "insect hopes" can be given opposing interpretations, I believe Newlove is cautiously optimistic. Loveliness exists despite the apparent lack of it; there is a thread of good however minute and insignificant it might seem. The poet-persona sees the potential for renewal, and the realization of our "milk-white dreams" becomes a remote possibility; and this truth, he feels, must be articulated.

"The Green Plain" (TNTDS, pp. 19-23) also presents the

poet's vision of man and his place in the universe. Despite the bleakness of some of its images, it is one of Newlove's most affirmative statements. As well, in the Preface to the original publication, Newlove attempts to explain why he writes poetry. Although the "preface is a bit too precious, confessional and self-effacing with its exaggerated guilt and narcissism,"[16] it does reveal what could be the poet's motivation for writing poetry: his childhood vision of a "tangible" paradise and the abrupt shattering of that vision. Newlove writes:

> Most of what I write seems to me to go back eventually to that day; to the real knowledge of the existence of a veritable paradise and the real knowledge of the tiny monster, the ogre, lurking like a shadow in the greenness.[17]

Although his vision is dark, he sees himself "not [as] a candle in the wind, but a long fuse ...."[18] The re-establishment of the lost paradise is possible. Newlove suggests that eventually his poetry will play a purgative role in that renewal by helping to destroy the negative elements of human existence.

The title "The Green Plain" is, in itself, an affirmation, a suggestion of fertility and a fresh beginning. The land is waiting "green and happy" for man to openly accept it. The poem, which at times appears somewhat incoherent, begins by alluding to our dreams. In contrast to "My Dreams" (Lies, p. 14) where dreams are ineffective

weapons against the pain of man's existence, here they become preservers, allowing us to maintain our sanity in a world that appears to lack meaning. There is a need, the persona suggests, for spontaneity as opposed to stasis: "We praise constancy as brave,/ but variation's lovelier." In the modern world there is neither communion nor individuality:

> Rain surrounds us, arguments and dreams, there are
> forests between us, there are
> too many of us for comfort, always were
>
> Is civilization
> only a lack of room, only
> an ant-heap at last?

In this ant-heap world where man is stifled by his fears and is too complacent to fulfil his expectations, the persona recognizes the need for "symmetry," for universal harmony. Yet, there seems to be little hope as the persona presents a striking picture of impotent man:

> Now a dream involves me of a giant sprawled among
> stars,
> face to the dark, his eyes closed.
> Common.
>
> Only he is not breathing, he does not heave.
> Is it Gulliver? - huge, image of us, tied, webbed
> in,
> and never learning anything.

The allusion to the bound "giant" effectively images both man's potential for good and his paralysis, his inability to

avail himself of the enormous positive qualities he has.

The persona does not stop here. He sees life as a process: "It is not time that flows but the world." He, as a poet, cannot stand idly by and watch man gradually destroy himself. As a poet, he must speak; he must affirm the brave new world that man can rediscover:

> Even in these worn-out days,
> worn-out terms,
> once in a while our poets
> must
> speak
>
> of Spring! of all things!

Despite the sterility of civilization, the poet must proclaim the possibility of renewal; he must reaffirm the worth of our dreams, not in logical terms but in more sensual ones:

> The flowers
> blow in their faces too, and they smell perfumes,
> and they are seduced
> by colour - rural as the hairy crocus or urban as a
> waxy tulip.

The persona's desire to affirm the goodness of life becomes a passionate and urgent plea: "Do not say time flows./ Say: We do. Say: We live." We cannot allow ourselves to stagnate. Hope is essential; otherwise, we will indeed be "tiny giants, swaggering/ behind the dinosaurs." The "mechanisms" for good are all around us and we must reach

out and see things not in isolation as is suggested by the commas in "Stars, rain, forests," but with a sense of harmony as "Stars rain forests" suggests. There must be an acceptance and a "symmetry" of ourselves and of all variants around us:

> Sew up the lives together. There is
> this only world. Thank God: this World
> and its wrapped variations
> spreading around and happy, flowing,
> flowing through the climate of intelligence,
> beautiful confusion looking around,
> seeing the mechanics and the clouds
> and marvelling, O Memory ....

Bartley claims that Newlove's "role as a poet is not to solve difficulties but to awaken himself and his readers to the flaws and barriers in the human condition."[19] There is no doubt that Newlove does this. But in "The Green Plain" he goes farther. The persona has worked towards a solution to our discontent. Satisfaction will be achieved by accepting "this World/ and its wrapped variations," and not by isolating ourselves or attempting to translate existence into logical terms. Instead, it involves faith, belief and emotion. As the poet-persona asserts in "The Light Of History: This Rhetoric Against That Jargon" (TNTDS, p. 57):

> There is time enough, has been, for understanding.
> To Hell with it. So long as the green Earth grows
> and the great stars shine, live on and love each
> other.
> Being is admirable and the graceful trees in the wind
> sway in concert with you in this ever deathless
> world.

NOTES

1 Barbour, "John Newlove: More Than Just Honest Despair; Some Further Approaches," p. 265.

2 John Newlove, "A Complete Autobiography," The Tamarack Review, No. 56 (Summer-Fall, 1980), p. 73.

3 John Newlove, Lies (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), page unnumbered.

4 Eli Mandel, "Mark More His Crushing Desire for Truth," review of Lies, The Globe and Mail (Toronto), 14 Oct., 1972, p. 32. With respect to Newlove's paring down of language, see also comments by Bartley, "Something in Which to Believe for Once: The Poetry of John Newlove," pp. 34-35; and Brian Henderson, "Newlove: Poet of Appearance," Essays on Canadian Writing, No. 2 (Spring, 1975), p. 12. There is little doubt that Newlove has been influenced by the Imagists. See, for example, the echoes of William Carlos Williams in "Return Train" (TNTDS, p. 26).

5 Bartley, "An Interview with John Newlove," p. 149. See also "At This Time" (BNW, p. 70). Here the persona talks about his "refusal" to use metaphor.

6 Other poets have made the same observations; see, for instance, W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" - "Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still/ For poetry makes nothing happen"; and Milton Acorn's "Knowing I Live in a Dark Age" - "... in this advertising rainbow/ I live like a trapeze artist with a headache, / my poems are no aspirins."

7 Gould, p. 29.

8 Ibid., p. 27.

9 David Helwig and J. Harcourt, eds., 72: New Canadian Stories (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1972), p. 41.

10 Metaphorically, the reed is the body or spirit of the speaker. It has, however, pastoral connotations of music, poets and poetry. See George Meredith's Modern Love, Section 8: "... we are two reed pipes, coarsely stopped:/The God once filled with his mellow breath."

11 This idea is similar to that of Horace, Sidney and

Shelley. They saw poets as makers of models of moral behaviour. See, in particular, Shelley's Defence of Poetry.

12 Barbour, "John Newlove: More Than Just Honest Despair; Some Further Approaches," p. 268.

13 C. Day Lewis, ed., The Collected poems of Wilfred Owen (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963), p. 31.

14 Barbour, "John Newlove: More Than Just Honest Despair; Some Further Approaches," p. 266.

15 See Birney's "Vancouver Lights" - "... there was light."

16 John B. Lee, "Infinite Solitudes: Brightly Burning Fuse," review of The Green Plain, Brick, No. 19 (Fall, 1983), p, 41.

17 John Newlove, "An Accidental Life," Preface, The Green Plain (Lantzville, B. C.: Oolichan, 1981), page unnumbered.

18 Ibid.

19 Bartley, "Something in Which to Believe for Once: The Poetry of John Newlove," p. 25.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined four themes that are common in John Newlove's poetry: the isolation of the individual, failed love relationships, the quest for fulfilment and identity, and the poetic process and the poet's role.

Isolation, a significant problem confronting twentieth-century man, is sensitively explored in the poems in Chapter I. Here the personae find themselves not only alienated from others, but also estranged from self. The first two poems focus on childhood isolation. The persona, isolated in the present, looks to his childhood as if hoping to discover something tangible to give him a sense of direction and make his life more bearable. However, the images and the ideas convey the intensity of his childhood isolation that resulted, in part, from his inability to communicate fluently with his peers. More significant, though, is the child's inability to articulate the verity of his emotions and to address adequately his negative self-concept. Part 3 of "Kamsack" takes the isolation further. Now the persona images himself as a child who is totally isolated in self and who indulges in self-pity to provide a degree of comfort. While there are moments of communion in these

poems, they serve to accentuate the loneliness.

The remaining poems present explicit images of those individuals whose lives are empty and absurd because they feel trapped in a malevolent society or in self. For instance, the highly emotional poem "Public Library" portrays those individuals who have given up; they have become the flotsam and jetsam of an indifferent society. While the isolation is just as acute in "Company," the derelict, who is imaged as a non-person, struggles to find solace despite "the smell of hopelessness" that pervades him. He feeds off others until he is cast aside; seeks refuge with his own kind; and turns to memory and fantasy. The isolation is psychological in "She" where the individual is trapped by the treachery of her body and by her perceptions of her surroundings. The acute social and psychological isolation that these characters experience appear to stem from both an uncaring society and their own feelings of inadequacy.

Chapter II explores another kind of isolation; an isolation resulting from the failure to establish a satisfying love-relationship. The desire for communion and commitment is strong, but cannot be achieved: "I live/ to be loved, but love I cannot give" ("Away Or Far," TC, p. 29). Despair, frustration, self-pity, and a willingness to fake affection dominate these poems. In "Seeing Me Dazed," the persona, wallowing in self-pity that he mistakes for

despair, becomes catatonic as he elicits some comfort - "anything will do," even something "mechanical." However, since he is incapable of reciprocating, he must resign himself to his painful existence.

There is also the pain and despair that results from a defunct relationship. "These Are Yours" effectively combines form and content to convey the intensity of the persona's agony which results from failed love. However, despair is not restricted to failed love-relationships. In "The Funny Grey Man" where there is no mutual caring, the result is also frustration and despair. The man rushes blindly into what he perceives is a relationship that will allow an escape from his insecurities and provide fulfilment. But his despair increases when he realizes the falsity of the relationship. Both individuals are self-centred and filled with self-pity. Only a parasitic relationship can exist.

These and other poems in this chapter depict the tragic failure to discover love and to maintain a mutually healthy love-relationship. Although Newlove's vision is dark, occasionally there are poems on love that convey brief moments of happiness.[1]

The search motif examined in Chapter III is significant in Newlove's poetry. Man is frequently portrayed as a wanderer, searching for something tangible that will alleviate the rootlessness and the emptiness of his existence and give him "something in which to believe"

("Like A River," Lies, p. 51). In contrast to the hitchhiker who moves physically through the country, hoping to discover some sense of direction and some permanence, the other questing personae look to the past, through memory and history, hoping to discover something positive with which they can identify. The persona in "Ride Off Any Horizon" searches in the past, remote and recent, to satisfy his desires. However, he discovers only death and destruction, guilt, unfulfilled dreams, and a dehumanizing materialism. The vision is just as despairing in "Samuel Hearne In Wintertime." The questing persona sees Hearne as an individual who has not only endured the wretchedness of his living conditions but also the harshness of the land and by so doing seems to have found fulfilment. But any hope of positive identification dissipates with the terrifying image of Hearne's helplessness in preventing the slaughter of the Eskimo girl. There is, however, limited affirmation in "Crazy Riel." Despite the images of hatred, ignorance, cruelty and death that pervade the poem, the persona seems to associate with Riel and find a temporary strength in speaking out against pain, violence, and injustice.

The two remaining poems, "Resources, Certain Earths" and "The Pride" provide the most affirmative statements thus far. In the former poem, the persona, haunted by a fear of death and aware that "the realization of death/ is the realization of life," discovers by identifying with the

lifestyles, myths and legends of the Northwest coast Indians, a means of accepting death as an integral part of life. The persona in "The Pride," through history, makes an imaginary contact with our original natives and with the land they inhabited that allows him to sense not just a personal identity but also a national identity based on a common heritage.

These poems, in which the land and its inhabitants - both present and past - play an important role, are illustrative of the strong social consciousness that is common in much of Newlove's poetry. As well, although the questing personae were, for the most part, unable to achieve their desires, the persistence of the search connotes an important affirmation.

The final chapter concentrates on the poetic process and the role of the poet. Newlove's desire for honesty seems to have led to a distrust of language. In "The Last Event": language is seen as inadequate to deal truthfully with mankind's illnesses: "Words impart mastery, not sense." This suspicion of words is mirrored in Newlove's preference for a direct and unadorned language.

The act of composing a poem is seen as a difficult process. Both "The Crab-Apples" and "By Main Weight" address the problem. While in the former the persona questions his ability as a poet, in the latter poem the persona emphasizes his difficulty in writing a poem that will express, without

being offensive, the truth. As well, the persona questions the effectiveness of his poetry: "The poems/ that I make are no help." However, in other poems, the act of writing allows the persona to cope temporarily with the sterility of his existence.

More significant than the poetic process is the role of the poet, the purpose of poetry. The force behind Newlove's poetry seems to be his desire to see our turbulent world transformed into one of perfection. "In This Reed" reveals the tension between this desire for perfection and the improbability of achieving it. Still, it is important for the poet to strive toward the ideal, however remote it might seem.

The speaker in Newlove's poetry seems to echo Wilfred Owen's comment that poets can only "warn" and for that reason "true poets must be truthful." As in "Notes From And Among The Wars," the speaker cannot be complacent, but must confront the dark realities of human existence. Part 7 suggests that there is no room for escapist poets. Instead, poets must present the truth however sordid and ugly it might be. Only by confronting the bleak realities of our despairing world can the poet hope to effect change. It is this emphasis on the undesirable which has prompted so much negative reaction to Newlove's poetry. No one can deny the bleakness of his vision, but presenting that vision appears to be Newlove's way of warning mankind. To gloss over the

atrocities of history, human failures, and pretensions would be to escape into a never-never land.[2]

"Insect Hopes" attacks man's disparaging acts and calls for those negative qualities that govern man's behaviour to be replaced by positive ones: understanding, sensitivity, and love of beauty. For the poet to effect meaningful change, he must be perceived, not as a "liar," but as a teller of the truth. The poem concludes on a more explicitly affirmative note: the poet sees some potential for good, however minute and insignificant it may seem. Our "milk-white dreams" are a possibility.

Although many of its images are dark, indeed, "The Green Plain" is one of Newlove's most affirmative poems. The "Preface" to the original edition suggests that there can be a restoration of the long lost paradise, and the poem itself becomes an explicit statement of affirmation. The true poet cannot stand idly by and watch the human race destroy itself; he must ultimately proclaim the potential for good that is all around us.

Despite the isolation, the despair, the failures, the death and destruction that pervade the poems discussed in this thesis, Newlove poetry is a compassionate groping towards the light. The Night the Dog Smiled, his latest publication, has a far more explicit optimism than his previous volumes had. As the speaker says in Part 6 of "The

Permanent Tourist Comes Home" (*TNTDS*, p. 15),

> Well, to die in the Spring
> and be buried in the muck
> seems reasonable. Enough
> of this. The mountains are bright tonight
> outside my window, and passing by.
> Awkwardly, I am in love again.

NOTES

1 See "Warm Wind" (TC, p. 15); "Early In May" (TC, p. 17); "That's The Way Everything Is" (MIA, p. 66); and "Susan 4" (BNW, p. 29).

2 See "That There Is No Relaxation" (Lies, p. 94). In this poem, the persona makes a passionate plea for images that evoke warmth and understanding. Instead, the images are "all ice." Momentarily, he has the impulse to give up; however, he quickly recognizes the necessity to continue, to present the truth no matter how painful it may be.

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