

Book Reviews

Early Poems. By Alden Nowlan

Between 1958 and 1963 Alden Nowlan published six selections of poems: three pamphlets, two full-length collections, and a group of poems in the anthology *Five New Brunswick Poets*. Since slim volumes of verse by as yet unknown poets have a way of vanishing from the earth, Fiddlehead Poetry Books, under the editorship of Peter Thomas, has performed a valuable service by reprinting in their entirety these early collections. Alden Nowlan's *Early Poems*, issued this past October, is attractively printed and bound and contains sixteen photographs by R.E. Balch providing an appropriate visual counterpart to the verbal images the poems present. There is also a brief, eloquent preface by Robert Gibbs.

Like many poets of his generation, Alden Nowlan began by writing in strict forms, often rhymed quatrains. Later, he moved toward a more expansive blank or free-verse line and rhymed much less frequently. Gradually his voice became more intimate and his matter often explicitly autobiographical. Why this should have happened is too complex a question to examine in a brief review, but happen it did, almost certainly for the better. Nevertheless, one is impressed in these early poems with the consummate skill of a young poet, not yet thirty, with no formal education, who can employ traditional rhyme and meter to give shape to his experience and embody important ideas without straining syntax or cheating clarity. Occasionally, the expansive voice of the poems is pinched by the proprieties of strict form; sometimes an unleavened flatness is the consequence of a surrender of those properties to sentimentality. The remarkable thing, however, is that few of Nowlan's early poems are unsuccessful and that most, by a young poet who was self-made as all poets are, but self-made in isolation as most are not, remain of enduring interest and power.

But the authority in Nowlan's poetic voice has to do with something in addition to his lyrical gift and formal mastery. The fundamental strength of that voice derives from its expansiveness and native generosity and from its relation to its subjects. Coming from the rural poor of the Atlantic region, and yet, because of superior gifts, no longer being at one with the world that shaped him, Nowlan was both insider and outsider, able to speak for that world with compassionate understanding and

against it with the insight of one who has suffered its harsh impositions. Because of his gifts and his childhood circumstances, Alden Nowlan was ideally suited to take the raw experience of the region and, in a voice grounded in that experience, give it the articulation of significant form in which its universal aspects are made apparent.

These early poems, distillations of the imagination of a place, evoke the reality of a rural existence that is rapidly disappearing. They contain striking portraits of rural characters and vignettes of back-country living, its felicities as well as its spiritual distortions. There are evocations of familiar activities: jacking deer, making (and drinking) homebrew, visiting the bootleggers, fighting at the Saturday night dance, working the fields, picking berries, baptizing in the river. The lives of the poor, the wounded and desolate take on a dimension of depth; one sees again the insular cruelties of rural life and the psychic wounds inflicted by puritanical religion.

Perhaps it is not too much to say that religious issues are at the core of Nowlan's work, early and late. In these early poems, religion as subject and theme is pervasive. One confronts here a religious sensibility in the deepest sense, that of the prophet: Nowlan is concerned not with doctrine, words on a page, but with people and the mystery of their existence, and with the way in which an unimaginative, unsympathetic, mechanical approach to the world is always a violation of spirit, a form of idolatry. As he writes in the poem "The Geneology of Morals"—a title drawn from Nietzsche, another prophetic breaker of tablets—"the same nightmares/instruct the evil/as inform the good." For Nowlan, one important difference between good and evil lies in those two verbs, "inform" and "instruct." In his work the ancient identity of religion and poetry is renewed, sometimes in direct assaults on the distortions of puritanical fundamentalism ("In Awful Innocence," "The Idolater," "Parakeet," "The Rose and the Puritan"), but most often in the poet/prophet's gift for allowing honest feeling and the brute actuality of things to take priority over convention.

In *Early Poems* one can see in their budding the qualities that make Alden Nowlan an important poet in a way that has not yet been fully acknowledged: his disciplined sense of form and his lyrical force; his experiential grounding in place that enables him to speak with authority about a significant social reality whose denizens have been voiceless; and his firm sense of what is important in human life and of the ways in which central imperatives can be betrayed by everything from ordinary, unthinking cruelty to the deliberate distortions of religious doctrine.

This new edition of Alden Nowlan's poems, all written before he was thirty, makes available, for the first time in the wise light of retrospection, the early work of a major Canadian poet.

***The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Study in Art and Ideas.* By William E. Buckler. New York and London: New York University Press, 1983. Pp. xiv, 303. \$27.50**

William E. Buckler has organized his book as a series of concentric circles or communicating chambers through which he moves with deliberation from general issues to the stuff and texture of individual poems by Hardy. His opening chapter performs some ideological and methodological ground-clearing, and presents a vigorously-argued case for reviving the ideals of what it now seems rather quaint to refer to as the New Criticism. Declaring a plague on both the houses of structuralism and deconstructionism—or at least on their more uncompromising advocates—he states that the ‘critical assumptions and values’ informing his book are ‘continuous with those of Arnold, Pater, Eliot, and the New Criticism’ (p. 14). This will no doubt strike some as irredeemably benighted, and their misgivings will not be allayed by the somewhat old-fashioned style of literary discourse employed in portions of his book (the mature Tennyson was, for instance, “a master spirit destined to a place among the half-dozen greatest poets in the English language”). Others may prefer to regard his approach as evidence of a refreshing sanity and respect for methods that, unlike most of the current orthodoxies, have been tested by time.

Chapter 2, ‘Hardy’s Sense of Self: The Poet Behind the Autobiographer in *The Life of Thomas Hardy*’, stresses Hardy’s ‘singular dedication’ to the profession of letters and the ‘quality of aptness’ (pp. 19-20) to be found in even his most small-scale literary undertaking. The autobiography, his last major prose work, is ‘the aesthetic capstone to a career that, in its own special way, was almost wholly aesthetic’ (p. 22); and in it Hardy ‘builds a self-image that is overwhelmingly poetical’ (p. 40). Chapter 3 moves closer to the poems themselves and considers the problems inherent in doing so. Hardy’s poetical canon has some odd features, including as it does ‘947 poems averaging in length less than a page each, written over a period of 68 years’ (p. 47). Moreover, as Buckler points out in a later chapter, its odd publishing history (not even Philip Larkin included a lament on growing old in his *first* collection) makes it impossible to trace the kind of development that is an important aspect of our understanding of Tennyson or Yeats. One might add that the unusual nature of the canon perhaps provides at least a partial explanation of the relative neglect of Hardy’s poetry until quite recently: for obvious reasons many critics and teachers feel uneasy at being confronted by a large number of short poems for many of which we have no reliable dates. The chapter also explores Hardy’s relationship to Tennyson and Arnold, and makes an interesting comparison between the latter’s Switzerland poems and Hardy’s great lyrics of 1912-13. About Browning’s influence, which previous critics have often seen as significant, Buckler is more sceptical; but it may be suggested that, whether or not influence is in question—and direct influence is often

difficult to prove and not always of great moment in any case—Browning, like Hopkins, offers a very instructive parallel to Hardy's own practice.

Chapter 4 confronts the poems, or at least a portion of them; for Buckler has decided, for better or worse, to concentrate on Hardy's first volume, *Wessex Poems* (1898). His reason for doing so is stated clearly in the Preface: the chapter deals *seriatim* with the contents of this collection 'as a way of suggesting the values of seeing Hardy whole, rather than as the author of a comparatively few well-known poems supporting a relatively few familiar ideas'. I find this an odd mixture of tentativeness ('a way of suggesting') and unconventionality (I know no other study of a poet so comprehensively titled that limits itself to a single volume of the subject's work); and I am puzzled as to why Buckler has ignored a third possibility. Restricting attention to a single volume is not the only alternative to ignoring all but a handful of hackneyed anthology-pieces: a critic can range widely throughout an author's published work, choosing unfamiliar as well as familiar items. Buckler's commentary on these poems repeats a task already undertaken in the handbooks to Hardy's poetry by J.O. Bailey and F.B. Pinion, and it has to be said that he does not always avoid the manner of a guide-book ('Most critics agree that *Neutral Tones* is a marvel of workmanship'; '*Thoughts of Phena* is a first-class meditative lyric...'; etc.). Nor is it easy to see why so many poems are quoted in full when the reader of a volume such as this is likely to have Hardy's poems at hand. It is good, though, to find attention paid to the quirky, idiosyncratic illustrations that Hardy executed for *Wessex Poems*—discussed and reproduced here, though so often ignored and omitted from reprints of this collection.

Buckler's claim, central to his study, that Hardy was 'primarily a poet' raises important and challenging questions, but again it seems to me that to insist that he was a poet who happened to write novels rather than the other way round does not exhaust the repertoire of possibilities. There have been plenty of poet-novelists or novelist-poets—Goldsmith, Scott, Emily Brontë, Meredith, Melville, Lawrence, Joyce, to name only a few at random—but Hardy seems to offer a case that is very rare and perhaps unique: he is both a major novelist and a major poet, with a substantial *oeuvre* extended over a considerable period of time in both media. When Buckler writes, therefore, that for Hardy 'Poetry was not adjunct or secondary to novel-writing; rather, the novels are suffused and characterized by the new poetic note that Hardy, in despair of recognition and acceptance as a poet in 1870s and '80s, made subtextual, so to speak, in his prose fiction' (p. 48), we may first murmur 'Very true' but then quickly wonder whether it doesn't also work the other way round: it seems a *prima facie* improbability that anyone who devoted himself fairly unremittingly to the art of fiction for more than a quarter of a century would fail to bring to the writing of poems certain modes of regard and certain attitudes to language and form, and that the habits of the novelist would not to some degree be 'made subtextual' in the poems. And when Buckler suggests (p. 84) that as a dramatic poet Hardy understood that 'language is a meta-

phor of character, the style of a persona's rhetoric being, along with his patterns of thought, one of the crucial clues to character definition', we may echo Ezra Pound's dictum—essentially true, though arithmetically inaccurate—that 'there is the harvest of having written twenty novels first'.

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***Man Descending.* By Guy Vanderhaeghe. Macmillan, 1982.**

A short story collection by a good writer puts more demands on the reviewer than does a novel by an artist of commensurate talents. The nature of the short story demands an extraordinary compression of form and content, which can only be appreciated through a close reading at all times, a strict attention to the intentions and results of language. There is time with the novel to let the mind wander; indeed except for the rare instances of reading a novel at a single sitting, the mind must encounter reality for hours or even days on end while the fiction somehow remains intact. There is a kind of band-aid vision of longer fiction that arises out of necessity and perhaps out of the *need* to experience such shaped situations at intervals. To commit oneself to a short story, if it is presented by a writer of ability, is to do without adhesives, to admit that *this* rather than anything else for the moment is *it*. In the short story, as in the poem, language is reality; there are no intrusions from territory beyond the fiction. It is certainly possible to review *a* short story, but to say something about all twelve stories in a single collection is—even if the stories are linked in terms of setting, character, or theme—to speak of a dozen distinct units that happen to be between the same covers. For no one short story, worthy of the name, is written primarily with another story in mind. The primacy of the particular text matters before its relationship to other texts.

The stories in *Man Descending* succeed because of Guy Vanderhaeghe's ear for dialogue, his unadorned presentation of an essentially tragic vision of modern man, and his recognition that while perfection in the writing of fiction is to be aimed at, the rough edges of the humanity he writes about must necessarily influence the way he tells the tale. Some stories do not quite measure up to his best writing in the collection because Vanderhaeghe either ends things too neatly ("Going to Russia," "Dancing Bear") or does not offer an ending in the form of a resolution—it is not the lack of resolution but the nature of the open-endedness that fails to satisfy in such works as "Drummer," "Cages," "Man Descending," and "Sam, Soren, and Ed." This nature, however, is not a casual one, and crafted chance-taking is one of its chief components, so what might be called Vanderhaeghe's lesser tales are nevertheless extremely powerful and rewarding. These works, along with "The Watcher" and "How the Story

Ends," reveal Vanderhaeghe as not just a fine writer in a particular genre, but as one of our finest artists, in the company of Alice Munro, Audrey Thomas, Alistair MacLeod, and W.D. Valgardson.

Four stories are concerned with young boys and the pain, lessons, little victories and big defeats each absorbs in his meeting with the adult world. The boy in "The Watcher" senses that the best way to protect his weak position is to stay at arm's length from the adults around him—those who attempt to win his favour and those who seem not to give a damn. When he moves, as he finally must, within the arm's circle, he exposes his weakness and discovers he is forced to take sides. The adult who most wants commitment from him is the one to avoid most. Vanderhaeghe creates a situation that lasts for just a few weeks of one summer, a situation that is, in literal terms, resolvable for the boy. But this young watcher who so quickly becomes the older and wiser *player* or participant grasps the truth of another, entrapped character's Buddhist philosophy: "Those who are in the grip of desire, the grip of existence, the grip of ignorance, move helplessly through the spheres of life, as men or gods or as wretches in the lower regions." The resolution in the story, the terrible, forged pact between the weak and the strong, points to the turmoil of human relationships beyond the fiction with which Vanderhaeghe is so genuinely concerned.

"How the Story Ends" reminds me of only one other writer — Flannery O'Connor. Somehow in this tale of the give-and-take between a six-year-old, sickly boy who is *perceived* to be slow and his one-lunged, fundamentalist great-uncle, Vanderhaeghe has created the prairie equivalent of O'Connor's confined and grotesque South. But, as with O'Connor, questions of faith and salvation break through the realms of psychological violence and actual assault to suggest that affirmation of human experience is the central issue. Little Paul is told the tale of Abraham and Isaac by old Tollefson, and at pig-killing time on his father's farm, a ceremony in which he must partake, he is terrified that god is involving him in sacrificial demands. With his frightened cry that Tollefson tell him how the story of the pig-sacrifice will end, the boy first cracks and then expands the old man's interpretation of the Bible's tale and life's as well.

In the centre of the collection are two related stories of adolescence about two brothers. Billy, the younger, is bright and not caught completely on the merry-go-round of his small-town existence, but he suffers because of the attention given his rebellious, yet predictable, older sibling. "Drummer" is by turns hilarious, poignant, and disturbing, as Vanderhaeghe chronicles a night of double-dating for the boys. Gene, a legend in his own mind and the local Mr. Wonderful due to his hockey prowess, is trying to bed the high-school sweetheart, Nancy Williams, whom Billy secretly adores. Nancy proves too much for the crude, self-satisfied performer, so he leaves her with Billy and takes off with the other, more willing girl. Left with his dream in the flesh, his brother's cast-off, Billy can only emulate Gene's heavy advances and lose the girl he never had. But, more intelligent and sensitive than Gene, Billy subsequently senses possi-

bilities beyond kissing and telling, beyond local entrapments. A year later, in "Cages," the boys' father is introduced, and Billy's competition for the "old man's" love with a Gene now capable of unfeeling violence tests him even further. No longer left to be compared with Gene by the likes of Nancy Williams and her father, Billy must now become Gene and take the rap, out of love for his own father, for Gene's vicious attack on another teenager. The cages of the title refer to that particular structure that imprisons the father on his daily journey down into the mine where he works and to that space — that seems only to diminish — of heart and mind around Billy. But love, however fragile and misguided, prompts Billy's sacrifice: Gene has faded; it is not his solution, but Billy's, however muted, that matters.

The title of Vanderhaeghe's book gives a false impression of the stories, gathered as they seem to be under the image of decline. Yet Ed, who is jobless, caught in an adolescent time-warp in which he is incapable of commitment to any consistent path of behaviour, lifts himself up and out of his spiritual quagmire in "Man Descending" and moves from self-pity towards self-recognition and recovery in the sequel, "Sam, Soren, and Ed." He becomes the player, willingly, that the boy in "The Watcher" is forced to become. Instead of Buddhist words about lower regions, we have Kierkegaardian existential heights: "What ability there is in an individual may be measured by the yardstick of how far there is between his *understanding* and his *will*. What a person can *understand* he must also be able to force himself to *will*." In another story, even, or perhaps especially, a dying young man arrives at a kind of understanding so that his excuses and evasions fall away before a newly-realized "taste for perfection" and the ability to embrace his fellow travellers. Twice Vanderhaeghe closes things down too quickly: an old man dies of a stroke after a futile and blind insistence that he is strong enough to survive alone; the father of a retarded child drowns himself in self-pity and a romantic/pathetic side-stepping of issues. Though he lives on, the decline is evident here.

Man Descending won the Governor-General's Award for fiction for 1982, a year in which Alice Munro's *The Moons of Jupiter* was also on the short list. It is a shame that such lists and awards have to exist when in the end judgement comes down to matters of personal taste and the case of the new young star versus the established literary giant. What can be said is that if Guy Vanderhaeghe keeps on writing as he has in his first collection he will soon gain the international respect and attention that is now so deservedly coming to Munro. That is praise enough, I think, and sufficient recommendation for his book.

***William Faulkner: First Encounters.* By Cleanth Brooks. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983. Pp. x, 230.**

***American Fiction: New Readings.* By Richard Gray, ed. London: Vision Press, 1983. Pp. 240. £14.95.**

Both these books address themselves first of all to the general reader and the beginning student. Cleanth Brooks is the more categorical in this aim, adding that *William Faulkner* "is not intended for the Faulkner specialist." After a brief introduction and a chapter dealing with a few of the stories, Brooks offers readings of what he regards as Faulkner's masterpieces, limiting himself to such considerations as theme, character and plot. All but the chapter on *As I Lay Dying* were originally prepared as lectures, and perhaps the book's strongest appeal is the sense maintained throughout of a speaker, fully in command of his subject matter, bringing his learning precisely and sparingly to bear on a carefully focussed argument.

American Fiction, a collection of essays by different authors, is more varied in terms of method and intended audience. In addition to introducing new readers to major American prose writers, this collection also hopes to offer "fresh perspectives" to those already familiar with the texts. Though the essays are more directly involved in critical debate than Brooks's lectures, and though the scholarly apparatus is much more in evidence, they do for the most part remain true to the title of the collection and to the editor's professed interest in the general reader: they are all essentially "readings" of particular texts, and they all are focussed on basic questions of interpretation.

One senses the influence of D.H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* in both the design and spirit of *American Fiction*. The authors are all attached to English universities and colleges (except for Harold Beaver at the University of Amsterdam) and they speak from a position outside American culture, though not outside the field of American Studies. Though the situation has evolved far beyond Lawrence's professed desire to combat the view that the "old-fashioned American classics" were "children's books," the editor yet claims that his commentators are engaged in recovering "something of the strangeness, the sheer idiosyncrasy or even oddity" of the American texts. Of course they also share Lawrence's more sophisticated version of his errand, to consider these apparently eccentric American writers in relation to modern literature generally. Eccentricity is, of course, purely a matter of point of view, but since the burgeoning field of American Studies has at its very base the assumption that there is something different going on in America which needs separate study, it is extremely important to keep alert to the broad sense of what these differences are.

Brooks and the authors of *American Fiction* address the question of the proper context of American writing. For Brooks, Faulkner's works are suffused with Southern history; yet he takes pains to distinguish Faulkner

from even the best of the local colourists. Brooks, as his earlier studies of Faulkner attest, is the last commentator to slight the importance of the particular local context of Faulkner's work; yet his explication in *First Encounters* is directed by his view that, if Faulkner's world is worth the reader's possessing, it is because "his themes are finally universal human issues and his characters have a relevance to basic humanity." Brooks uses background information sparingly in his discussions, to advance an understanding of individual motive and communal resistance which is much more than merely Southern. Joe Christmas, for example, according to Brooks, is "Faulkner's version of the completely alienated man," the problem of alienation being "one of the dominant themes of our century."

The authors of *American Fiction* for the most part share this approach to American novels as specific expressions of a modern (and post-modern) culture which transcends national boundaries. However, for them this approach is much more a tacit assumption than an argument. In fact, the strength of many of these essays, particularly those on Cooper, Poe, Twain, James, Dreiser, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner, lies in their focus on local historical and cultural questions. Charles Swann reads Cooper's "Leather-stocking" novels as commentary on the vexed question of the legitimacy of political power which was based on dubious land claims. Allan Gardner Smith considers Poe's "obsession with the idea of the will" in relation to contemporary psychology, Poe's personal history, and his "fierce imposition of formal coherence" in his work. Robert Clark discusses the opposition of Europe and America in James's "transatlantic" fiction in relation to the increase in class discrimination and the preservation of the myth of American democratic egalitarianism. Jim Philip examines Dreiser's worried personal relation to the "chaotic materials" of the world he described.

I suppose that careful attention to the specifics of a writer's fictive world is the least we should expect from a critic. However, there is throughout most of this collection a particularly astute eye for "oddity" which is almost always helpful. In the end, these essays do manage to make "idiosyncrasy" of general interest.

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