

# REVIEW ARTICLE

Michael Estok

## ALL IN THE FAMILY: THE METAPHYSICS OF DOMESTICITY

"How small such things, domestic, *kitsch* almost"

*White*. By Douglas Barbour. Fredericton, N. B.: Fiddlehead Poetry Books, 1972. Pp. 68.

*The Energy of Slaves*. By Leonard Cohen. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972. Pp. 127.

*Cannibals*. By Stanley Cooperman. Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1972. Pp. 110. \$2.95.

*The Best Name of Silence*. By David Helwig. Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1972. Pp. 140. \$2.95.

*Lies*. By John Newlove. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972. Pp. 96. \$4.95.

*Bread Crusts and Glass*. By Peter Stevens. Fredericton, N. B.: Fiddlehead Poetry Books, 1972. Pp. 56.

*Driving Home: Poems New and Selected*. By Miriam Waddington. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1972. Pp. 176. \$2.95.

Looking over these recent books of Canadian poetry is like going home for Christmas. The initial delights of renewed intimacy gives way to claustrophobic terrors as the visit lengthens. And then we have to leave. One common mark of the clan—apart from their having pretty well established reputations—is that at least three of these seven poets are editors too; three change hats to do reviews, and another arrangement of the group turns up four teachers. Should we call this the *virtu* of a genuine "renaissance" or see in it the sign of just how vertical the mosaic of Canadian letters is? Sometimes the family seems so compact as to be, frankly, incestuous. We are too close for comfort. Yet no closer than we need to be for survival. A wry anecdote of John Newlove's makes the point. Newlove explains how he went in the hole on royalties from McClelland and Stewart the year one of his most recent books came out because in an uncharacteristically gay mood of economic abandon he was seduced (by surprise in seeing it there) into buying a copy at a

newsstand. Is anybody else out there reading? Maybe Margaret Atwood can afford to say she doesn't care. But I don't believe her.

Perhaps, though, the privacy Canadian publication usually guarantees makes stronger poetry. The best of much of this new writing seems to me to be wrought—or wrenched—from the internecine strains of various kinds of forceful domestic intimacy. We write about our wives, our families, our lovers, our friends—for our wives, families, lovers, etc.; while uppermost in our minds is that most strenuous intimacy of all—our intimacy with words themselves:

What a life!—rolling thin cancerous cigarettes, using a plastic kitchen plate and a knife to slop up flaccid child feces from the floor, washing glass ashtrays bought in supermarkets, reading books, making notes, writing words, words—words, for God's sake!

Why can't I draw?

(Newlove, "Or Alternately")

We correspond with each other—with ourselves—from inside the closed walls of rooms; Cohen's "Picture of the artist and his room" is pretty much a faithful generalization:

He might be waiting for an ambulance,  
a naked woman, or the Seraphim  
of God. But he's not. He's going to get up  
and paint his room at midnight with himself  
in the corner saying, This is myself.  
This is the bed. This is the plastic cup.  
I am one, I am welcome, like the chair,  
the table, any of the objects there.

Or we write postcards to each other from the ends of the long room automobile and airplane make of our lives. Home, Miriam Waddington tells us, is where "the traffic roars/in the mirror". While for David Helwig it is the place we only imagine we can leave:

I'll go in summer  
when the good weather comes, and the kids  
take to the highway, a generation of poets  
chasing metaphors, up to TO, out to Van  
down to California. . .

dream cities

We travel to see them or hear from friends  
travelling alone or together the long roads  
of the country

I hardly care now  
if I ever see Vancouver

("Report from the City of Dreams")

Or else we find ourselves—and here's the obverse effect of claustrophobia—making love to trees, or to the absence of trees, the empty landscape of Douglas Barbour:

our eyes strive to move  
beyond,  
                                  into the sun itself  
a white intensity  
at the centre of the  
                                  poem.

Are we too much inside or outside ourselves? The process of connecting inside and outside—of reaching that figure at the other end of the long room, of making the private self a public one, of creating a community out of correspondences: this is the crucial preoccupation of Canadian poetry at the moment, as I see it, and the variety of ways such structures of intimacy may be built reveals itself insistently in the books before us.

One way to bridge distance is to create it. You write yourself away from home, turning back occasionally to see where you are. Leonard Cohen will yet turn himself to a pillar of salt doing his trick. He sends us *The Energy of Slaves* from somewhere south of the border to his "Canadian Publishers", McClelland and Stewart—to his faithful Canadian fanclub, the only one that really knows how hard it is to get the-Montreal-that-was out of one's blood. Cohen still needs us as his single fixed star, while for us he is the eternal romantic-existential voyageur. For us he is the erotic space-man in Manhattan, in Greece, in Berkeley, and the disillusioned lover always returning. For us he is the troubadour-wanderer in self-imposed exile, and the one "great poet" we never quite had. Cohen continues in *Slaves* his gradual detransfiguration, the unravelling of his talent according to a deliberate myth of self-betrayal. *Slaves* is written against the background of Cohen's largely frustrated experiments in folk-rock shamanism; the aftertaste of his not having become an east coast Kesey in the electronic valleys of Nashville and New York permeates the book. Cohen's version of Dylan's "Lay, Lady, lay/lay across my big brass bed" is his even less elegant reminder that styles inexorably change: "the way you hold your cunt/is old fashioned". Cohen is reconciled to being passé, slave perhaps most bitterly of all to "neo-beat" disillusion. He returns to his old mistress-muses as if they were wives:

I have no talent left  
 I can't write a poem anymore  
 You can call me Len or Lennie now  
 like you always wanted  
 I guess I should pack it up  
 but habits persist  
 and women keep driving me back into it

As in Cohen's previous collections, the metaphor of magnificent doom, irresistible and immanent, controls the book, but more hypnotically here. For the first time, I think, Cohen has only half-disguised his sense of his metaphor's literal truth. For while the poems still warn their maker that, "Nothing that you built has stood/Any system you contrive without us/will be brought down", he knows that,

The poems don't love us anymore  
 they don't want to love us  
 they don't want to be poems  
 Do not summon us, they say  
 We can't help you any longer

This new move in the games of illusion and deception Cohen continues to play with his audience demands our attention. It injects the poems with the compulsive energy of a poet losing a war with his own craft: "Welcome to these lines/There is a war on". The poet struggles with us too now, openly, as much as with the fugitive lovers inside his room, or with "the Powers" outside—the "ten great cities", the view of the streets in the window. The poet enslaves us to his interior shadows. The shade of a warplane is the darkness in which love is made; it is the shadow of that old heroic hopeless defense of poesy which now falls tragically inside the poem itself:

We are alone  
 until the times change  
 and those who have been betrayed  
 come back like pilgrims to this moment  
 when we did not yield  
 and call the darkness poetry

If Leonard Cohen writes elegiacally backward from some faraway point in a doomed present, Stanley Cooperman's poetry plunges headlong into regions never actually arrived at. The landscape whirls on before we find out where we are. Recognizable patterns, familiar places, quiet domestic scenes simply explode in the verbal guerilla raid of Cooperman's *Cannibals*:

Let books flap in their own wind,  
 open all your mouths:  
 stroke parrots  
 in the bright arena of your eyes  
 until love breaks open  
 like a ready egg,  
 and laughter grabs us by the yolk  
 of our impossibles. ("Greco's Dance")

Cooperman leaps (if I may borrow his favorite stylistic device of the outrageously mixed metaphor), like a salmon in a power dam, at the poles of a universe electric with incoherences. While he follows a basically regenerative homing instinct, he finds himself caught in the mechanism of poetic speech, as in a blood and guts bespattered turbine. The positive pole of the dynamo is the friendly laughter of domestic harmony, in which Cooperman can dance the crazy clown to a delighted family, leaving mad "unsigned notes/under the roots/of trees" in his literary garden. The negative pole is his recognition of just how precarious the fish-ladders, or alternatively, how frail the protective hedges are: his manic dance of poems simultaneously mourns the family wrecked by pogrom or by the devouring monster of the city and its typical mechanical cannibal, the subway express. Cooperman gives this latter image an almost unutterable personal impact in describing the circumstance of his father's death (which of our child-fathers has Moloch not eaten?):

I remember your face  
 on the 8:30 express, the bridge  
 the coffee-factory  
 your nose  
 filled with breath:  
 I remember you  
 hanging from a yiddish newspaper  
 pierced with iron wheels:  
                   you were  
 my angel  
 with a broken back. ("Yahrzeit")

So the clown becomes a squatting hunchback, "comic/on piles of his own dead".

The distance "yolked" between these polar impossibles makes the poet's speech both difficult and yet magnetic. It goes some way to account for Cooperman's indigestible oxymoronic mixture of image fragments, and to justify his restless stride from sensation to sensation. The pull of his opposi-

tions tears us apart. His angry love batters down his reader's demand for order. But our insatiable hunger confronts what turns out to be the poet's own dissimulated appetite, and we find ourselves baring our teeth (is it a smile or a snarl?) in mutually destructive dialogue. In this "silence between screams" Cooperman forces us to acknowledge his cannibalistic schizophrenia as our own:

If there were something to hold . . .

hard, pure in appetite, knowing  
whatever there is to know  
completely . . .

let it, please, let it be  
now

anything

now

that can separate  
one side of my face  
from the other:  
stamped  
with indelible space, a definition  
of what it is I mean, who

I mean

to mourn. . . . ("Elegy for Marinkee")

Patterns of domestic experience only reluctantly arrange themselves into dishes fit for the public palate. Peter Stevens says as much in the title of his collection, *Bread Crusts and Glass*. Like Cooperman's, Stevens' poetry opens out from the domestic scene towards public parable. Stevens does not perform so flashily as either of the two poets already discussed—he may not be "the fairest of them all", according to his own admission—but he is a steadier-eyed, more whole-minded writer than either. He is more self-possessed; he has his feet on the ground—sometimes they seem almost rooted there. Stevens creates a secure sense of place, of where he is, whether he writes from his back yard in Windsor, from a jazz concert, a logging camp or "From Yunnan Province 1917". This solidity builds up from what I consider Stevens' most distinguishing feature as a poet—his thorough, earnest moral sensitivity. These are his "Bread Crusts". He gives the point of time and space he speaks from clear moral dimensions by investing it with human warmth:

howling rising ice-dust  
spirals over children

flapping small amphibians  
 stranded on blank flats  
 wagging their limbs  
 frantic on their backs  
 impressing the snow  
 with shapes of angels  
 to make the dead white land  
 fluid with myths.

("Snow")

Stevens is a poet of feelings, and the range of feelings he can articulate about family life especially gives him sure ethical footing. From this basis of personal reference his poems of social criticism seem naturally to move. Stevens directs his acute conscientiousness to some rather sharp social comment—the "Glass" of the title perhaps. "Dieppe Gardens, Windsor" describes with gentleness and restraint the human derelicts both of war, and of public indifference, whose only real place of habitation this place is. The "Yunnan" poem mentioned above shows Stevens' talent for reading between the lines of the written experience of others, as he extrapolates from a terse report of anti-opium investigators written to please corrupt bureaucrats, and shows us the real conditions of life in China amidst the social turmoil of this revolutionary period of its history. Stevens' best poem of this mode recalls to our scrutiny Canadian Indian life as Paul Kane saw it, and as he might now see it. Kane's painted eyes look through us, staring out of frames as rigidly fixed in museum and legislature as are the laws which cheat a race of its heritage. These noble figures become in Stevens' recapitulation the collective spectral conscience of Canadian history.

His most powerful poetry Stevens saves for the end of his book in a series of "twentieth century legends"—though we could have been spared the rather schoolmasterly lecture which introduces the group. Here Stevens' strong personal viewpoint expands into cultural myth, and so subtle and penetrating a critical mythographer has not, I think, been seen in Canadian poetry since Klein or F. R. Scott. Stevens chooses difficult subjects—the abdication of Edward VIII, Hitler as oratorical Orpheus, Icarus as cowboy-motorcyclist—and makes them emblems of our cultural impotence: the failure of our most public artists to generate myths capable of seizing the darkened but still hopefully survivable human heart. Just how cruel and cannibalistic the myths we do honour can be—our myths of class, of ideology, of economic fatalism, of violence—and how deep are the chasms of separation they generate, Stevens summarizes in "The Garden Party":



Tall exquisite women thread mazes of flowers  
 their bloom-explosions quiet among shrubs and trees  
 whose leaves are more really green than green.  
 They smile and nod at princes, leaders,  
 benevolent millionaires, then stop  
 to speak with handsome men.  
 Their mouths are dazzling with wit  
 but the talk is serious and involving.  
 They also make their assignations  
 to culminate in ecstatic silken bedrooms.

Tableau: a hand rests delicately on a sleeve  
 its slight grip softly vibrant,  
 in the other hand a glass  
 its long stem stroked between slim fingers.  
 Raised to her lips to sip the warmth  
 she rolls its glow round her full sweet mouth.  
 The man eats slowly a vol au vent,  
 his mouth watering fastidiously for the food  
 and for the promise lying on his sleeve.

That slow pose breaks.  
 Quickly she lifts her glass and drains the blood  
 as his teeth sharply meet inside creamed flesh  
 and just outside the gorgeous garden  
 hugging the ground in these defoliated wastes  
 we see them large on our binoculars' screens  
 almost numbed with their sheen until  
 under our broken finger-ends we feel  
 the warmth from the slender bodies of our guns.

We must wait now to see how Stevens himself writes us a legend we can survive with, showing us how the intensity of personal vision becomes redeeming public utterance. Stevens has in fact written the poem I'm describing—a work of really epic proportions based on the life and writings of Norman Bethune. (See "Sestina from Spain", p. 645.) A Bethune poem has long needed writing, but now that it is written, it appears it must wait even longer to be published. A great pity. Perhaps when our domestic self-absorption broadens enough to accommodate the hugely heroic subject of Bethune, the poem will find its fit audience.

Douglas Barbour's almost frigidly aesthetic emphasis in *White* stands opposed to Stevens' moral one. But the approaches of both poets compare in



the way they use a personal microcosm to order larger spaces. Barbour's book seems a kind of culmination of development for him. At least it is difficult to see where he can advance from this almost total exhaustion of the landscape-as-verbal-sculpture metaphor he began in his first two books, notably in *Land Fall*. White is the preeminent Canadian landscape colour, a tonal medium in which we mostly live our lives, the "destructive element" of our perceptual immersion. Insofar as it informs our awareness of things it is literally (and figuratively, for Barbour) the colour which contains the possibility of everything else for us:

we are moving  
into the land  
of no colour  
and all possibility

The variety possible within the range of colour we call, simply, "white" Barbour finds inexhaustible. White can be a metaphor for almost anything—even darkness:

winter makes us  
know  
new negatives: white  
darkness.

Every shade of white is different not only because it shows up differently against another, but because we see it differently from other people. Barbour explains to Stephen Scobie, to whom the first poem of the book is addressed,

Your white (brilliant,  
Platonic)  
sits in your head  
glowing ikon:

mine moves  
across irises/touches  
like soft flowers  
the dense pastures of  
nerves.

Barbour's sequence of poems expands as a deliberate visual exercise, an experiment in the writing of concrete verse on the level of the *imaginatively* seen colour. Barbour makes a syntactical sculpture of "white" as well as using the white page as a species of visual pun in the usual "concrete" manner. This

invention adds to the poetry a richness of implication and a resonance not often found in concrete poetry. For example, Barbour's mere repetition of the image conveys an overwhelming sense of the blinding monotony of Canadian winter without the repetition itself being merely monotonous. "White" adds a shade to the spectrum each time it occurs. The whole concept is so apt, so natural a thing to find in our vocabulary that one wonders why no one has thought of doing it before now. Anyway, we have Barbour to thank for having made "rime" so rightly as to seem like a winter awakening to new snow. Barbour has written "winter's own perfect poem":

white	rime
light	rime
bright	rime
right	rime
white	rime

*Driving Home*, by Miriam Waddington, is as its title suggests, a reflective book. It contains a batch of new poems, but the new ones keep turning us back—as indeed many of the old ones do—to the poet's prairie origins and we find them where they should be, at the beginning of the book. The closer Waddington gets to home, the better she is, the more filled with life and rich reminiscence:

I am not really  
this middle-aged professor  
but someone from  
Winnipeg whose bones ache  
with the broken revolutions  
of Europe, and even now  
I am standing on the heaving  
ploughed-up field  
of my father's old war. ("The nineteen thirties are over")

No, she does not sound at all professorial. She's much too open, too breezy, too frank and simple to fit that stereotype. Yet the easy friendliness she establishes with her readers makes her an unmistakable figure—why isn't that . . .? Well, for gosh sakes, it's . . . our old home town girl. She lives in "tall Toronto" now, but she hasn't been corrupted, she's not impressed. She's well travelled; cosmopolitan sophistication has had its impact, but it hasn't turned her head. She's just a bit dowdy, out of fashion—thank heavens!

I must learn to  
sing the joy of

penises and all  
 their frequencies;  
 the gloriousness  
 of blow jobs and  
 how avant garde  
 is everything in  
 London Ontario. . . .

("Sad winter in the land of Can. Lit.")

We can rely on Miriam Waddington for her good sensible opinions, good feelings, and probably, good chicken soup. What more is there to say? Loveable, enduring—a permanent contour of the Canadian poetry scene. This new selection will give her the accessibility she deserves. For professor or not, she surely exerts the fittest possible influence on the people she teaches. Here is some of her "Advice to the young":

Keep bees and  
 grow asparagus,  
 watch the tides  
 and listen to the  
 wind instead of  
 the politicians  
 make up your own  
 stories and believe  
 them if you want to  
 live the good life.

But beyond the healthy intimacies of family love, good conversation, the everyday rituals of sex, raising children, seeing friends, not seeing friends, getting drunk, staying sober, reading, watching the seasons pass, keeping the gunman from our doors as best we can . . . what is there? There must be something. David Helwig has written *The Best Name of Silence* to tell us what it is. Except that there isn't really anything. For Helwig, the metaphor of domesticity has become a kind of metaphysics of the imaginative life, a means of accounting for everything including its own internal processes. One writes *because* there is nothing else, nothing but silence, death. So we make ourselves articulate with what we have, what we are. As Helwig's character of the "wife" in the title poem (Helwig's domestic *anima*) phrases it for him, for us,

I must enter all  
 of myself, endure  
 what I must know,

fill my emptiness  
with my emptiness.

Whereupon a chorus of our "voices" responds to this apparently impenetrable solipsism,

The story must not go on. . . .

The words we do not speak  
can never make a sound.

The voice the story makes  
can only tell itself.

But the story does *not* end there, Helwig insists. The words we do not speak because we have not yet awakened to them—the "impossible" endings—contrive to bring us to say them. We continually enact our endings so that they may occur: "Somewhere a story/is beginning to happen". The best *name* of silence is death. David Helwig names and names again the things he knows best how to say, enunciating an ample and serene faith in life as it is ordinarily lived, filling with everything that can be made the spaces we might have considered merely empty because silence and death lie somewhere within them. The single example Helwig's metaphysics has left me room enough to include comes nowhere near doing him justice. But it shows how much Helwig can make of his narrow room of choice. Out of a bottle of beer and a fall afternoon, Helwig realizes a kind of dionysiac immortality in "Drunken Poem":

Afternoon is invading my eyes.  
Between here and the barn  
the fallen leaves lie untouched.  
I never rake the lawn, I never  
clean the car. The children  
squabble all around me  
as the day darkens and beer  
darkens my brain and the thought  
of you and a thousand confusions  
darken my heart, and I find  
a photograph on the table  
of a newborn child. My child, I think,  
my Kate who now stands near me,  
grown, difficult, beloved, and I find  
the threat of tears invading my eyes.

Oh sentimental absurd man, who

can you think you are, writing  
 this something, nothing, drunken words  
 that solve nothing and say  
 nothing, only that I know  
 nothing and that the earth  
 is the body of a god and you  
 and I are the body of a god. . . .

I wear a child's Indian headdress.  
 I write with a ball-point pen.  
 My brain is addled by beer,  
 by the coming of dark, by the love  
 of death, by you, by all the times  
 that I didn't know what I was doing.

The trees are black against the blue air  
 as the paper boy does his rounds  
 and the day becomes gone. Time,  
 death, loving; we can only live  
 by being in love with loss, with disaster.

There is no conclusion to this poem. Ever.

If there were another poet who was more profitably infatuated with disaster than David Helwig, it would be John Newlove. With *Lies* Newlove takes a confident step further into the abyss. His obsession is regenerative, keeping itself alive, one might say, almost thriving. Perhaps that's the first lie we have to deal with, and the central one. Newlove's peculiar gift makes sanity out of madness, moral clarity out of human refuse. It is a simple gift of lying, and may deceive us into regarding him as a prophet of despair. Indeed exhaustion and despair do permeate Newlove's work. He'd be a damn fool and a bad liar if they didn't. But everything depends on how we listen to what they say:

So you live of the sea;  
 and I am the dry acrid land.

You have the sweet fish swimming  
 and dull mannerly grain grows in me.

Your blood shines in curving darts;  
 I grow in calculated rows.

So I say I love you,  
 and you say Why do you hate me?

I speak in a foreign language;  
 you don't know what I say. ("Why Do You Hate Me?")

The lie is in the listener's ear: "Children . . . children, what are you doing?/I despair of *you*". But the lie hides in the poet's dreams too, in the failure of his words to accomplish what he intends:

my dreams walked a thousand miles  
 in search of mountains.

What they found  
 was Calgary; they tried to climb  
 a hotel  
 with old-fashioned equipment.

Now there are needles  
 in the ears of my dreams.  
 There is frost on their eyes.  
 They try to be brave about shovels.

My dreams fell off everything they tried.  
 they lie flat on their backs  
 pointing newcomers in the wrong direction. ("My Dreams")

Properly heard, Newlove's gloom bespeaks a man of infinite tenderness. If a man despairs, it is only because he has hoped too much or loved too much. Newlove is sensitive to pain because as he shows us, he can imagine pleasure as acutely as he can its opposite: "Even a sad-assed man like me/has got to remember the beautiful women/and coming easily to the poems". But trapped by the pain of being born with open eyes and ears and nerve-ends, the poet constructs his dream out of the knowledge that no escape from pain exists. In fact, the dreams beguile by revealing the depths of their own betrayal. So that although we know they vitiate themselves, self-confessed liars as they are, they deceive us again at every level of exposure. The simple gift of lying so complicates and entangles itself that it begins greedily to absorb everything. The poet isolates himself with lies, leaving himself with a lonely but omnivorous personal pronoun. We forget that there ever was anything else. What, then, is the source of our pain?

Perhaps the devouring dream itself inflicts it—monstrous Orpheus:

Painful man, your hurt lasts longer than a movie;  
 it will not amuse a woman or the future for so long. New turns  
 must be invented every day. And newer tricks. So dream; dream of success,  
 and hope, though hope for what you can not guess, but when you slide  
 with your eyes closed into the universe you invented viciously,

do not complain that the wrong doors open wide, open, wait,  
 then close behind you,  
 and some friendly animal long thought of greets you and grows fat  
 lapping your red gore.

(“In the Crammed World”)

The power of Newlove's intricate structures of pain, loneliness, ugliness and horror makes them recognizable, and thus—somehow, desperately—manageable. I don't mean that by making the shape of pain coherent, Newlove merely purges it. That would be too easy—mere deviousness. And Newlove looks for no refuge. Rather, he forces us into a standoff with pain, an episode of recognition that failure is the common denominator of any human certainty. And here is our poet's “sad honesty”, what we have always known, that though our dreams are false, we must have them, and that because we are warned, we know how to find truth: the dreams get between us; they *cause* our loves to fail; they have created the babel of languages that separates us; they build our ruined cities:

Death is everywhere in the temples, idol towers,  
 cement for building manufactured from blood.  
 Rings adorn cold fingers.

In the very beginning the savage conqueror  
 has heard everything and does not mind,  
 does not listen,  
 just as an old man is loathe to sing—

There is a way of dying on cue. Turn out of the way  
 of him who bears in his hands  
 a terrifying creature, half beast, half divine.

(“Quotations”, “*Through fear of Novelty*”)

Failed speech, the failure that begins with the dream sliding between lovers, ends with a rift in the universe. If the poem just quoted reminds us of Yeats, we should not be surprised. Newlove's vision is beginning to assume the proportions of the really international talent this country has been waiting for. However we are deceived, his poetry shows us where John Newlove is heading. He has begun to defy categories. As he says, “I haven't been home for years”.