



## Special Collections

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### Biocritical Essay

#### Various Persons Named Alden Nowlan

by

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For one thing, I've accumulated such a company  
of past selves, enough of them to fill the stage  
in a sizeable theatre, that it is easier to believe  
the person I am is only one among many, to look at him  
in almost the same way I would look at anyone else.

("He Enters His 50th Year", *An Exchange of Gifts* 24)

While I was alone much of the time, I was almost never lonely  
until I became an adolescent. A small child has so many  
selves; when he seems to be talking to himself he's actually  
engaged in conversation with another of his multiple identities.

("Growing Up in Katpesa Greek", *Double Exposure* 16)

A writer's words, once they are out, become part of a self outside himself or herself. That self is likely to be one of many such, since each utterance or discourse finds its own selfhood, a self-made one, since language taking form forms that self, language, it is true, that has its immediate source in the writer's consciousness. A writer's outer or other persons are likely to be as various as the writings themselves and arguably more so, since within the making of a single work, even a short poem, there may be more than one persona forming. All the selves and personae compose the one we call the writer, not as he or she is as a total human being, but as he or she lives, moves and has being in the writing.

It was raining so hard that Kevin thought God must have torn a hole in the sky and let all of the rivers of heaven spill upon earth. The cold spring rain hit the roof with the force of gravel, rattled down the walls and splashed black and silver against the tawny window panes. It felt good to be in the house, safe in the sleepy warmth and lamp-glow of the kitchen, breathing the soporific aromas of smouldering millwood and burning kerosene.

*(The Wanton Troopers 7)*

There are no chance visitors to Lockhartville. You arrive there by turning off one road and then another and another, as if you were a child playing snakes and ladders. And each road is a little lonelier and a little narrower and a little rougher than the previous one. There are no signs to direct you, only maps drawn to too small a scale, and memories that have become increasingly detached from geography.

*(Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien 3)*

Here are two openings: the first, to a novel written in 1960 and not published until after Alden Nowlan's death; the second, to a novel published in 1973. Both depict Kevin O'Brien, a name given to one of Nowlan's sets of selves, the set born partly or largely from memories of the writer's own childhood. How true are they? Can we hope to find the child Nowlan in either or both novels? Which adheres more closely to the actual life lived? Can we know? Can we judge?

The openings establish perspectives, tones, rhetorical strategies for their respective books, one the work of a relatively young writer of prose, the other a work of his maturity. In each the presiding persona begins to form in the tone and perspective of the opening sentences. Is the first more open, less guarded, in its illusion of closeness to the child Kevin, whose receptiveness and responses it purports to record? Is the second deliberately assuming a more distanced view, one more abstracted from memory, more artful in its depersonalizing personal address to "you"? Or is the opposite true? Is the first more self-conscious, more wishful, more compensatory in forming its illusion through language of a super-sensitive child? Is the second in its very detachment, its sparer rhetoric, evidence of greater comfort with what was and with recalling and depicting what was honestly and openly? We can make judgements but we cannot know, because both alike embody selves outside the writer's self, two Kevins sprung from language as it functioned in the writer's art at the time of writing, the first reflecting his relative immaturity, the second his maturity, as a writer of prose fiction. Each, one might argue, is as honest as it can be, and the personae are as true Kevins as all those named such in the stories and as all the I's of the poems.

The habit of self-invention is ingrained in consciousness, not just that of a writer or artist but of any human being. The writer, who not only lives in language in the sense of finding his selfhood in words but also lives so consciously, must be aware of the process while it is going on and so be aware that the selfhood attained to in words is partly or largely one inherent in them, his own words true, since they rise to his unique consciousness and receive their ordering outside himself from unique needs and proclivities. The writer both receives from language and gives to language his persons and his selves.

Alden Nowlan's awareness of his own self-making permeates his mature writing. From his accounts of childhood, both those that are overtly fictions and those that are ostensibly memoirs, we gather that for him inventing selves was to begin with a defence against hostile conditions. There is little doubt that conditions both within and outside the family were harsh -- poverty, narrowness of outlook, a code that hid sensitivity or softness under scorn and brutality toward any who dared or were compelled to depart from the norms. But the inner life he developed, his dream kingdom in which he triumphed over all enemies, was not uncharacteristic of imaginative children, even those growing up in more sympathetic surroundings. What is significant is that according to his accounts Nowlan's imaginary worlds very early came to reside in words, taking form from his avid reading of the Bible and of accounts of monarchs and dynasties and soon developing into his early efforts at writing.

If I were to extend my comparison of the two novels and look at them in the light of the non-fiction essays and interviews, the divergences would continue to proliferate. The Kevin of the schoolroom in *The Wanton Troopers* listening to Miss Roache's tirade about punishing Hitler (17-18) is not the Kevin of *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien* whom we find in a similar setting listening to a similar tirade from a Miss Noseworthy (7-10). This Kevin is more secure, more integrated into his peer group; he has a brother, Patrick, fighting in Italy; he is twelve years old, only a few months or a year older than the earlier Kevin, but appearing to be much more mature. The essay, "Growing Up in Katpesa Creek", may adhere in its details more closely to the facts of Nowlan's life, but it may also be no less an imaginative re-creation, an extension of the process of self-invention:

My myth is set in a thin-soil settlement at the edge of the fertile Annapolis Valley, a stretch of dirt road dotted at intervals by houses inhabited mostly by subsistence farmers or woodsmen who cut logs, pulpwood and pit props or worked in sawmills, depending on the season, and for part of almost every year were unemployed. My father worked for more than 50 years and never, to my knowledge, had a permanent, year-round job in all that time, although God knows he was willing enough. "Always be sure of your pay, boy," he advised me when I first went to work, at 15, in a sawmill.

(*Double Exposure* 17)

So we have the acknowledged myth and the truth it contains. The years are the first nineteen, from 1933 to 1952; the place is Stanley, Nova Scotia, near Windsor; the schooling, to Grade 5, to age 12; the work, cutting pulp, cutting pit-props, acting as night-watchman at the sawmill; the reading, all that he could get his hands on, including the often uncut pages of books from the Windsor public library. Then there's the secret life -- always the secret life -- in which the self was being invented and re-invented, the life that became the writings.

From the published writing one can glean attitudes toward home, family and community that are neither constant nor consistent. Toward the father-figure, for instance, the feelings expressed are always ambivalent. He appears variously as indifferent, unsympathetic and hostile to the son's or nephew's secret games. He is capable of both cruelty and tenderness: the one, openly displayed; the other hidden even from himself. An early poem that contains much of the figure as he would appear again and again in the fiction, memoirs and poems is "Weakness":

Old mare whose eyes  
are like cracked marbles,  
drools blood in her mash,  
shivers in her jute blanket.

My father hates weakness worse than hail;  
in the morning  
without haste  
he will shoot her in the ear, once,  
shovel her under in the north pasture.

Tonight  
leaving the stables,  
he stands his lantern on an over-turned water pail,  
turns,  
cursing her for a bad bargain,  
and spreads his coat  
carefully over her sick shoulders.

*(An Exchange of Gifts 38)*

The speaker speaks unflinchingly in the opening lines, identifying with the father's cold appraisal of the mare's moribund condition. The voice becomes even more detached in the second stanza, mirroring the father's business-like despatch -- "without haste". The matter-of-factness continues through six lines of the final stanza, changing only with the word "carefully", and one could argue that even there the chance is minimal. But the placing of the word "carefully" and its moving from what might be observed by the watching child toward empathy with the father and the "sick shoulders" of the horse are what the poem turns upon.

In one of the posthumously published poems, "My Father's Body Was Found by Children", ambivalence persists, hardly the same, and hardly a simple doubleness of view, but a rich interplay of feelings, attitudes and distances:

My father's body was  
found by children.  
Boys from the neighbourhood  
who thought he was asleep  
in his chair until  
they came back next day  
and saw he hadn't moved.  
Children often visited him,  
I'm told.

The speaker reports what he has heard from a distance. His father has become something other than the man

he had known: first simply a body; then, somebody the children have a claim on he doesn't share. The lines that succeed this opening maintain but modify the distance:

He'd wrestle  
with them if he was drunk,  
converse with them soberly  
at other times. His shack  
was the sort of dwelling  
a twelve-year-old would  
build for himself,  
in his last years he lived  
the way a small boy would  
if allowed to live alone.  
Huck Finn at seventy.

The speaker enters the camaraderie between the old man and the children, but then withdraws, contemplating a life he can characterize sardonically, yet affectionately. The next four lines make an open effort at understanding without overtly drawing any closer:

To think he might have been  
a child all his life  
if less had been asked  
of him and more been given.

For all their paradoxical tidiness, these lines may be read as a conciliatory gesture, a willingness to concede to this figure, now doubly or triply distanced by death, by report, by the late assertiveness of the child in him, his right to be himself. The final lines abruptly change, calling into question all we might have read so far:

To think I'm afraid  
of him, even now,  
half-expecting to look out  
some night and see him  
standing there:  
I fear that most.

*(An Exchange of Gifts 29)*

The phrase "even now" brings forward the childhood fears in the speaker, fears that, for all the distance established and maintained in the poem up to now, suddenly well up. So the poem enacts, almost to the extent of parody, the tricks the mind plays with its lost selves, its ghosts. As a poem of Nowlan's maturity, it demonstrates how simplicity and directness of manner are anything but indices to the range and complexity of feelings encompassed. Freedom of expression, which is in the composition of verses a freedom from evident self-consciousness, allows for a full as well as a free play of feelings, attitudes and perspectives.

So attitudes toward the family and community double and change as distances and perspective reconstitute the perceiving eye. In the early poems, as in the posthumously published novel, the community is seen as almost uniformly hostile to the sensitive or "different" individual. Yet even there, brutality, drunkenness and twisted piety appear as compensatory for narrow and intolerable circumstances. As the boy Kevin invents his dream worlds, so must others who inhabit Lockhartville find ways to escape and to retaliate. Kevin's grandmother, for instance, appears in *Wanton Troopers* as one totally soured on life, a querulous Cassandra pronouncing doom on the family and the community:

To ease the perpetual pain in her stomach, Martha O'Brien held a brick, heated on top of the stove and wrapped in an old wool sock, against her waist. She lived on crackers, soaked in milk until they'd become an oozing pulp, but her soul was nourished on the flesh offered in sacrifice to the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob....There was nothing Kevin found more frustrating than his grandmother's sermons on the certainty of poverty and the duty of humility before one's betters. He writhed in vexation when she told him, as she often did, that within four years he would be working in the mill. He hated her for the grim satisfaction he detected in her voice. And his hate was made more vicious by the thought that she was probably right in her prediction. (20-21)

*Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien* yields a very different impression of the grandmother:

And she had sung "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood," while sitting in her rocking chair, a hot brick wrapped in an old sweater or stuffed into an old wool sock pressed hard against her belly to ease the pain, other bricks warming on the back of the wood stove....The old woman wore a black wig shaped like a soup bowl and boasted about her jet-black hair. "There's not many women my age that has hair to compare with mine, with not so much as a wisp of gray in it." She rouged herself with bits of crepe paper moistened with saliva and bragged about the youthful redness of her cheeks. (53, 55)

Whether or not truer to an original, the second portrait is much the fuller. The old woman with her piety, her vanity, her family pride, her memories of an adventurous youth, her saws and hymns and Irish ballads, is a grand figure for Kevin to claim as an ancestor. "Growing Up in Katpesa Creek" claims a similar figure as grandmother for Alden Nowlan:

I was better acquainted with my other grandmother, who delighted in having me address her as Old Em, an Irish peasant woman who, despite a lifetime of abysmal poverty, was as richly alive as anyone I've known. As a young woman she had gone into the woods with horse, axe and bucksaw to fetch firewood, as a very old woman she sang wild Celtic ballads and step-danced....When she was dying she would heat bricks in the oven, wrap them in old wool socks and hold them against her belly to ease the pain.

(*Double Exposure* 18-19)

Whatever the changes in the writer that lie between these versions, one can read in them a growth whereby he has come to see in the creatures of his imagination capacities to accommodate opposing persons equal to his own. What is a necessity to him he recognizes as a necessity to all. This insight underlies, one might argue, a shift from unrelenting irony in the early work to wry -- and often rueful -- compassion in the later.

Alden Nowlan's professional life began in 1952 with his move to Hartland, New Brunswick, to take up a position on the weekly newspaper *The Observer*. The move was decisive in many ways, not least of which was the open acknowledgment that his private vocation was to become his profession. Although the move was from one rural community to another, for Nowlan it meant entering a larger world. Without any apprenticeship other than his private experiments with writing, overnight he became a professional journalist. To augment a meagre income, he had to take on other jobs and responsibilities in the community, such as that of managing a country-music band. He married.

The Hartland years, 1952-1963, were for his poetry ones of productivity and development. Discovering the world of little magazines meant a release for his muse from solitary confinement. To know that he was not alone, that there were others of his kind out there to commune with, to learn from and to give to, meant a further integration of his imaged selves into a single, composite personality: a presiding voice, a stance, a perspective and, ultimately, a mature vision. The titles of the five Hartland books are themselves indicative: *The Rose and the Puritan* (1958) suggesting polarity; *A Darkness in the Earth* (1959), a dominant colouring; *Wind in a Rocky Country* (1960), a stirring and a resistance; *Under the Ice* (1961), a confirmed confinement; *The Things Which Are* (1962), a release to openness and inclusiveness. Titles are important for the faces they put on the writer as well as on the books.

This is not to say that the poems within books uniformly adhere to these labels. Even in the earliest collection, the whole range of the poet's sensibility and personality is to some degree present. Take, for instance, "Whistling of Birds", from *The Rose and the Puritan*:

Little bells  
under the dark water,  
ringing in the dark water,  
as the tide moves you;  
it is near morning  
when I hear you,  
shivering like flowers,  
little bells in the dark water.

(*An Exchange of Gifts* 39)

The form is open, yet closed. The voice is intimate, yet more overheard than heard. The images are utterly simple, yet fraught with suggestiveness. On a literal level, the dark water is the night, the night consciousness of the listener. The voice of the birds "near morning" can be taken as promising, though vulnerable: "shivering like flowers". The voice is released, yet not released. Intimations of freshness and promise are stilled by the dark reaffirmed. This is not an interpretation. For such a poem, there is no interpretation; one

can only record something of the range of associations and counter-associations stirred by such primal verses. What is significant is how unconfined the poem really is, how far from the stark ironies that control many of the early poems, ironies found in conclusions like this: "rebuking the gay gush of his laughter/with the terrible sanity of their faces" (*Early Poems* 21).

In going from the small early collections to *Under the Ice* and *The Things Which Are*, one finds oneself moving out of confinement into amplitude in every sense. The tightly formed early verses that served partly to teach the poet his craft do not so much give way to something else as open out into something else. The control is still there, but it comes more and more from inside the poem, a way of release through form rather than release from form. *The Things Which Are* ends with what looks like a conventional piece, "A Canadian Love Song":

Your body's a small word with many meanings.  
Love. If. Yes. But. Death.  
Surely I will love you a little while,  
perhaps as long as I have breath.

December is thirteen months long,  
July's one afternoon; therefore,  
lovers must outwit wool,  
learn how to puncture fur.

To my love's bed, to keep her warm,  
I'll carry wrapped and heated stones.  
That which is comfort to the flesh  
Is sometimes torture to the bones.

(*Early Poems* 166)

The voice to begin with is intimate, confiding, that of the mature love poems. It continues to be so through the lines of the first stanza, though the formalizing impulse begins to assert itself in the movement toward the finalizing rhyme. The rest of the poem gives more and more room to that impulse, which brings with it a distancing, a conventionalizing of the voice and persona to that of the anonymous lover in a *carpe diem* poem. When an effort to return to intimacy comes in the third stanza, it expresses itself in the imagery, much as in the preceding stanza the lovers had to learn to "outwit" conventional constraints. The drama in the poem is there in the strong images pressing against the formal language and pattern, which reasserts itself in the final, distanced statement. That withdrawal is not so much irony as paradox, one that abstracts a quintessential "truth" from the process of approach and withdrawal that has been the poem. The verses carry with them the containments of the early verse, but also allow into them the releases more characteristic of the later verse.

The Saint John years, 1963 to 1968, brought the poet from a predominately rural life to urban life. They brought a further range of professional responsibilities in his work as first reporter, then provincial editor, then night news editor for the *Telegraph-Journal*. As a journalist then, Alden Nowlan was now fully professional. As a poet, he was reaching his maturity. *Bread, Wine and Salt* (1967) and *The Mysterious*



*Naked Man* (1969), which contain the work of the Saint John years, are again indicative in their titles: the one, of the basics of living, of wholeness, of sacramental sustenance; the other, of the extremities of imagination, of alienation, of roles. Together these titles say something of the fullness now reached in range and depth in the poetry.

Alden Nowlan began writing stories in the late 1950s and had published several as early as 1961, the year he took away from his work to write *The Wanton Troopers* with the aid of a Canada Council grant. His first collection, *Miracle at Indian River* (1968), gathers the early with the more mature work. What to me is significant about the mature writing in both prose and verse is its continuity from genre to genre, continuity of voice and persona, of angle of vision, of humour, of range and quality of feeling. This does not mean the effects are uniform. The composite self of Alden Nowlan the writer became recognizable, distinct, idiosyncratic, even, at times, crotchety. What is more, to those who came to know the man Alden Nowlan personally, writer and man merged into one. Whether the process was one of accommodating the man more and more in the writer or of allowing the persona of the writer to preside more and more over the man, to those who knew both, the person became one. (The process of accommodating one in the other may have been something going on in us his friends and readers as much as in him.)

This is not to say that all that was Alden Nowlan became known to either his readers or his friends. In both the writing and the man we knew there are intimations, troubling ones, of depths, of private hells never fully open to us. Some of these were obviously of early origin, others, of later -- such as the trauma he suffered in 1966 from throat cancer and radical surgery. His pain, his fear, affected him profoundly and affected his writing. The dark colouring in the later work is more internalized than that of the early, where it often resides in values, mores, geography and abuse from outside. With his experience of himself and of the world there came tolerance, not so much for the ways of men and women as for men and women themselves. The unique self in the writing became capable of great empathy, and so became a self, like that of Keats, that could accommodate the selves of others. When we read of his suffering, we read of our own; when we read of his vanity or folly, we read of our own.

A poem that illustrates the darkening of vision is "Brandy of the Damned" from *The Mysterious Naked Man*. It purports to record an encounter between the speaker and an elder brother:

His fears are those that no man dare confess  
except in jest; only the powerless  
harbour ambitions high as his -- my brother  
who, drunk as a lord, tells me how another  
hyena followed him today, its breath  
stinking against his neck, it came so close  
before he turned and strangled it to death,  
braiding his girl's long hair into a noose.

There is enough formalization in the language and the pattern to distance the speaker from the brother and his experiences. The verse is a way of allowing out, of dramatising, yet controlling and keeping at arms length the fears that lurk just under consciousness. The speaker not only records but gives his detached appraisal. He appears to be maintaining that his brother's hyena is not his hyena. The second stanza, though, draws him closer:

Sweetness of wine is bitterness of beer.  
"Little brother," he says, "you need not fear.  
You will see no hyenas in the street,  
and every nun and traffic cop you meet  
will nod or wave and measure you for mayor,  
sheriff or member of the Legislature.  
Why, had we not been twins like Eng and Chang,  
Senate and House of Commons might have sung  
your praises, high school history classes ring  
with your name, coupled with MacKenzie King's."

The rhymes have become more obvious. At the end their chiming is insistent, if sour. The voice of the brother has taken charge. A reassuring voice? Not to my ear. Its mock-confiding tones reek of the con artist or the wheedling drunk. All its comforting collapses in the revelation of twinship, and such twinship, the speaker taken over as it were by a sinister self. The final stanza releases, as only a fully realized dramatic form can release, the full horror:

He sits upon my bed and tells me this,  
laughing his elder brother laugh, and throws  
a sunburnt hairy arm across my shoulder,  
warns me the army worms are growing bolder:  
last night he woke to find a great white veil  
like those they leave on roadside bushes, lying  
across his face -- here laughter is the wail  
of wind in alder leaves sucked dry and dying.

*(The Mysterious Naked Man 3)*

The final lines wake us perhaps from the nightmare, but they sustain its starkness, while allowing the rhetorical structure to reform around it and the poem to recede into its closure, which is not altogether a close.

Even poems that are overtly lighter, poems like "The Mysterious Naked Man", in which the speaker wryly records public rituals while secretly identifying with the fears and fantasies of the trespasser, often in their very lightness mask hells of loneliness and despair.

The Fredericton years, 1968-1983, brought Alden Nowlan to the academy but did not make anything academic out of him. His house, though, became a resort for academics, as well as for writers, politicians, actors and assorted vagrants. And he became, not a guru, but a presiding genius in the old sense, a man in a chair. From his chair, he travelled widely both privately and publicly. His writing grew in the range of experience it encompasses -- social, political, intellectual and personal -- but one cannot say to what extent his new setting influenced the real growth of his mind and art. There is no apparent discontinuity between the last work and that of the Saint John years, just as there was none between that and the earlier work. The movement is, as it has been, toward more openness, toward naturalness of expression, toward complete

freedom to formalize as much or little as the poem calls for. The titles of collections continue to personify the speaker and his vision: *Between Tears and Laughter*, a stance taken early and maintained; *Smoked Glass*, the revealed, the half-revealed, and the concealed; *I'm a Stranger Here Myself*, alienation, bemusedness, wonder and continuing discoveries. (One can read that last title two ways: first, "I'm a *Stranger Here Myself*", by which the speaker forestalls inquiries, refuses to give directions, frees himself of the necessity for explanations or conclusions; the second, "I'm a *Stranger Here Myself*", by which the speaker establishes community with the other strangers, records his fellow-feeling with the reader about the strangeness of the place and time we find ourselves in. Nowlan's mature work validates both readings.) Again, such labels allow for the full range.

Obviously Nowlan's becoming a dramatist, collaborating with Walter Learning in the writing and staging of three plays was consequent on his being where he was when he was, when Theatre New Brunswick was in its infant years.

Through his many readings and through his weekly and monthly columns, Nowlan became widely known and loved as a writer. Within the community closer to him, he was loved as a man. His love of talk, of wise and unwise foolery, his reluctance to release friends late at night from his literal embrace, gave him something of a Johnsonian role. There were times when his darker selves surfaced, when anger or fear or whatever demons they were that troubled him raged and lashed out. Those were the times most of his friends would say when he was not himself. His art with its formal constraints secured him, all that he was to some degree finding expression and healing in it. But that is not to say that as a person he was secure and whole, only that for him, as for any artist, his art was a saving grace, in the deeper sense of that trite phrase.

In some of his late work, one can see a kind of impatience with the artfulness of art, a wish to discard any persona and to speak in his art simply as a man. Of course, art never quite allows such openness, while it never quite prevents it either. Words being words can only cross so far from the writer to us, yet poems as poems have always a grace of saying for the poet what he cannot otherwise say and of continuing to speak as from the heart even after it is stopped.

You know what I'm  
like when I'm sick: I'd sooner  
curse than cry. And people don't often  
know what they're saying in the end.  
Or I could die in my sleep.

So I'll say it now. Here it is.  
Don't pay any attention  
if I don't get it right  
when it's for real. Blame that  
on terror and pain  
or the stuff they're shooting  
into my veins. This is what I wanted to  
sign off with. Bend  
closer, listen, I love you.

These posthumously published verses were perhaps meant to be private, words for his wife Claudine alone. But that private, confiding voice, that ability to make a reader of his poems feel that he or she were the sole listener to or overhearer of private thoughts, was one Alden Nowlan cultivated early, as if establishing credence for the persona was fundamental to establishing credibility for the self or selves that lay behind it -- and not the reader's credence only but the writer's, his reason for entrusting so much of himself, so many of his selves, to his art.

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