

Patrick Lane /
INNER LANDSCAPE AS DESPAIR
A review of John Newlove's *LIES*

(McClelland & Stewart, 1972)

Inner landscape as despair, but despair of what? The key to the poet's dreams are the key to the understanding of mankind. Newlove despairs of man and in so doing despairs of himself. Again and again I've heard people criticize his work as being largely based on self-pity. But you must understand that Newlove uses himself on the page as metaphor for the fall of man in a mechanized anti-human world. For John, man has died as a hero. In all his books (with the exception of *The Cave* where his poetry seemed directed to a minimalism of complete spiritual collapse) he chooses as a poet to define greatness with the hero and the Canadian hero particularly: Riel, Poundmaker, Samuel Hearn. Men who were driven by dreams into death. Historical Canadian mystics who by their own spiritual nature walked into death through mystery — it is what Newlove himself yearns toward.

From: *The Hero Around Me*

*Once heroes marched through my mind
in solid ranks, the deeds
shaped pointedly, and I knew
I could never be one of them,
though I desired it, wished for one sharp moment
in my life — thinking
of the hero as man in combat only . . .*

The day came, but not as war.

The day for Newlove was the realization that the combat was internal. He is now moving past the realization of the hero if only because he despairs of being one. He now sees the poet as man gone wrong; man somehow caught inside the abstract mysticism of language. His very worship of language torments him in a world that demands action inside experiential reality. The costume of himself as poet is the despair in seeing himself as a man gone wrong who relies on the magic of words to heal a world where no one listens.

From: *Notes From And Among The Wars*

*Among the wars
the poet walks along
in his mind
from the start
gone wrong
unable 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*

But it isn't the poet who has gone wrong. It is the society that has, the society that no longer has room for the poet, that no longer hears his songs. The poet was traditionally the voice inside the people: shaman, witch-doctor, priest. I am struck with the image of Robert Graves druid poet standing above the battle composing the song that will lift the death and destruction of man's confrontation with himself into the purer level of myth. But now the poet has become the fool or is classed as insane, for when Newlove's mind soars there is no one to listen except for a small group of academic poetasters who treat vision and poetry as cadavers to be dissected by their machine minds. So Newlove despairs and paints the reality of himself as *everyman*.

From: *In The Crammed World*

*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 cannot 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.*

Hope but no hope. A narrow vision of the hell that awaits man. For he has created a false universe and the world that is animal destroys him.

In so many poems he returns again and again to the despair of man trying to live with the reality of himself severed from godhead. Only in the historical perspective of hindsight can Newlove find the mythic proportion of man. There are no contemporary ones. Contemporarily man is the bumbler, the stumbler, the coward, and the fool. Self-pity coming out of his inability to find himself because he is ignored in his despair, anguish and sensitivity. For ultimately he can only be the primal magician,

he who heals with the magic of words. But who heals the healer when he begins to sicken in his silence? The metaphor of the poet is the stance of the abused imagination and there is no redemption, no salvation. Here are excerpts from some poems:

*There is no pleasure anywhere.
The zinc air stinks
with a persistent pain.*

*Hard crystals there are hard crystals inside them
in their bellies and their hands*

*I am becoming a statue
here in the glare of my own dead eyes
I am becoming a statue*

It is the smell of hopelessness

The wars the slaveries no dead men redeemed by poems

Hopelessness, disgust, despair, fear. Nowhere to turn. Even the self holds no source for magic. If there can be a criticism of Newlove it would be that his vision is too narrow. That he sees nothing inside. A world without spirit. But perhaps there is some hope. In the lead poem, *And The Dead Rose Up From The Water*, (a poem incidentally dedicated to Joe Rosenblatt) he says:

*Coming alive at the age of thirty,
refusing a few years
to abandon my despair,*

And then he breaks free of metaphor and myth and speaks directly of the fear he holds in himself :

*Children . . . children, what are you doing?
I despair of you.
I don't care if you kill yourselves, but
why kill me? I have only come alive
for a moment; and I wish I were dead,*

And no dead man can be redeemed by poems. No redemption. None. There is a selfishness in these poems. But A. M. Klein paints Newlove in his great poem, *Portrait Of A Poet As Landscape* :

*the world — he, solitary man — is breath
to him. Until it has been praised, that part
has not been. Item by exciting item —
air to his lungs, and pressured blood to his heart, —
they are pulsated, and breathed, until they map,
not the world's, but his own body's chart!*

He is talking of Newlove. I am not sure if John Newlove is a great poet. I am sure he is one of the finest poets in Canada. There is no question but that he is one of the finest craftsmen writing in the language today. There are few men who can handle the modern line as well as he. So many good poems. Newlove is modern man inside a costume of despair. Death dressed as a man who cannot bear his own visions. In the last poem of the book, *That There Is No Relaxation*, he calls out to God to shut out the visions, the dreams that invade him :

*Give me nothing.
Nothing to dream about.
Lord. Don't listen to me.
A little more and a little more.*

Call it God or the Muse, he will be given more. Graves called Newlove and all poets right when he named them priests of language. All I can ask is that he continue to listen and speak and doesn't go the way of Klein into a lobotomized world of schizoid spiritual death.