

Atlantis Book Reviews

In Search of Eros Elizabeth Brewster.
Toronto:Clarke, Irwin and Company Ltd.,
1974. Pp. 88.

Eli Mandel says of Al Purdy that he "has been more careful and precise in developing his personal mask or image than most Canadian poets." (1) George Bowering in a poem "The Red Hot Element" exclaims "Layton you old lech/ . . . I waited years to hear you/lambast the membrane covered ears." (2) Anyone who has ever met the huge framed Milton Acorn can ever forget him or fail to associate his poetry with his large person. Margaret Atwood's penetrating presence, her involvement in Canadian affairs, make her known to a wider audience. There can be little doubt that good writers, poets, artists can be shown to the back seats of our minds unless they insist on their right to be considered for the front row. Modesty is no more an asset in the world of literature than in the world of business. Perhaps Elizabeth Brewster's career is ample proof of that.

Born in Chipman, New Brunswick, she is less familiar to Maritime audiences than she deserves to be. In recent years we have actively sought out our successful natives and brandished them like gleaming swords above our heads to proclaim our equality if not superiority to "Upper Canada." We have an impressive list of writers: L.M. Montgomery, Thomas Raddall, Ernest Buckler, Charles

Bruce, Alden Nowlan, Milton Acorn, to name the best known. If Elizabeth Brewster is not in the list it is partly because she is not old enough to have achieved the eminence of, say, Thomas Raddall, and partly because she is not as vigorously present as, say, Alden Nowlan, or that she is too modest to "lambast the membrane covered ears." It is her modesty which, while it produces some of her best poetry, at the same time deprives her of some of her potential audience.

The three major collections of poems by Elizabeth Brewster, Passage of Summer (1969), Sunrise North (1972) and In Search of Eros (1974), trace her growing self-confidence both as a poet and a



erson. Passage of Summer contains most of the poems from her Ryerson Chap Books, East Coast, Lillooet and Roads and Other Poems published between 1951 and 1957.

There is a curious combination in this volume of nostalgia, penetrating disillusion, self-depreciation and sheer pleasure in "considering objects" as she does in one section and of observing people as she does in her written portraits in another section. But Brewster's is essentially a lyrical style and one can easily miss the depth of her feeling by succumbing to that pleasant cadence that seems to null intellectual response. "Linger in shade/And softnesses" ("Eviction") with her, we forget perhaps that she has a sharp sense of the ugliness and pain which can emerge suddenly from the protected world:

The idiot with his slobbering
mouth, half shoved,
Half led by his younger brother,
slowly moved
Across my childhood's April
("The Idiot," p. 2)

She is conscious that, like the lovers in her "Poem for a Drawing by Bruno Obak," one

Must now look out again
At worlds of Arctic frost
Where wild beasts snarl for food
And paradise is lost.

Against the wish to "break the doors and smash the windows" ("If I Could Escape") is a peculiar kind of resignation in the face of her own felt inadequacy. The "passage" of Summer in

the title of the collection seems to suggest less a voyage than the actual passing of one's youth, the decline into old age and death. This tone of regret for lost youth is reflected in her uncertainty about her own capacity to love or be loved. There is almost a tone of self-pity in the love poems, a certainty of defeat that makes one wish she would rage against the adversary which is herself. Instead she is one

. . . who must always tiptoe over
floors,

Stand with raised hand and thudding
heart outside doorways,
Linger embarrassed in the corridors
of life

("Alone in the Public Room," p. 11)

or, in another poem, she is "of those who walk/In a quiet and orderly manner/to their own funerals." ("End of the World," p. 111)

The poems in the next volume, Sunrise North, begin to reflect the new self-confidence of her outlook. The poems are less lyrical, less nostalgic in tone and in some cases, I think, less interesting. I wish, for instance, that she had called this collection "If necessary, scream," the last line of the last poem in the collection called "Advice to the Fearful Self." Instead the title poem is a rather insipid one about Winnipeg. But there is also a more lively sense of humour in these poems. "It must be lovely to work in a library" is an amusing thrust at the bourgeois complacencies

which ends "It is always rewarding/to be part of a worthwhile enterprise(14)."

There is a greater variety of verse forms in this second volume, too, although even in the first volume the variety and complexity of her versification becomes more impressive the closer one looks. But there is something experimental about the first volume. There are too many echoes of well-known poets: Emily Dickenson, Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot to name a few and the more obvious. In Sunrise North as in Passage of Summer many of the poems evoke the childhood that Brewster tried unsuccessfully to stir into life in her novel The Sisters. The poems about her mother, father, sister, country people, herself as a school-girl, the nostalgia of the grown woman's return to her birthplace seem to penetrate life more deeply than the landscapes or "watercolours" depicting Prairie scenes at various times of the year. And while Passage of Summer is almost entirely free of love poems, Sunrise North has many fine poems almost hesitantly asserting an older woman's discovery of sexual love. The persona, now so familiar if one has read Passage of Summer, a woman conscious of her plainness ("But I was always a plain girl" for "Recognition"), aware of a long history of being "terrified of loving" ("New Year's Eve") slowly, cautiously, offers her love while fearful of rejection:

Love, do you fear as I do
the cold winds of winter

the white weight of snow?
("September Twilight," p. 28)

To understand
And to be understood
And yet to be loved
.....
Yet another person
is an island world
Alien, dangerous.
All around the shores
Are piercing rocks
And on the branches of the flowering
trees
Are thorns that thirst for blood.
("November Sunday," p. 29)

In "November Sunday" the use of images which have both a sexual and religious dimension suggests, perhaps, the origin of much of the fear of her sexual being that the persona in the poem displays. The "piercing rocks," "the branches of the flowering trees," the "thorns that thirst for blood," illustrate the ambivalent nature of the speaker's attitude toward love. The nightmare landscape removes that love to a safe distance; the abstraction provides safety.

In all the love poems there is a sense of the precariousness of the love relationship. Many things separate lovers: age, distances, language. There is not one poem in which the poet gives herself up to love, now, in the present, without thought of herself or the lover. Even a love poem that begins rather lightly ends on a note of defeat and retreat:

At noon I decided
(Walking up the street to do my
errands)
that I really loved you,
and immediately felt happy,
as though April
were here again.

Why, I wonder?
Because after all there's no
future in it
("Sunrise," p. 26)

But still the love poem in Sunrise North distinctly links the three volumes Brewster has published. Passage of Summer with its suggestion of dying (the title poem is actually on the death of the poet's father), of the spring of one's life being over, is challenged, if ever so slightly, by Sunrise North. The dawn comes even to the cold north; there is a tone of renewed life and youthfulness. In Search of Eros contains something of the old reticence but there is a developed sexual awareness, a determination that sexual passion, eros, is something to be savoured whether one is fifty or fifteen. Nearly all the poems in this last collection are love poems or poems about love: poems about making love, being in love, the transience of love, its vulnerability and poems retelling the myths and fairy tales about love. The story of Psyche's search for her Eros is nicely told. It is witty, imaginative, and told in an easy narrative style that even a child would enjoy. I am not at all certain, however, that

Psyche's struggles and triumphs are really related to the themes that Brewster explores in her personal love poems. The myths are amusing and sprightly but not particularly related to Brewster's search for Eros. That search, the despair of success, is traced in the short love poems, "Poems for your hands," "Slow motion," "Tongue Tied," "Time Machine" and others.

In any collection of poetry the reader is bound to have her own favourites. I find Section II of the collection with the general title "In Search of Eros" less interesting than the more personal poems found in "The Magic Rod" and "Pilgrim." There are poems about childhood, the poet's father as father and lover, an amusing satiric poem on "The Gateway to the Golden West" and a poem "Earthquake" reminiscent of Frost's "Desert Places" with its disclosure of the horrifying landscape of one's own being. The collection ends (but for one more poem), appropriately, with "Disqualification." The poet turns her apparent disqualification for poetry into an affirmation of her own integrity and power. This short poem convinces us that she has the right to be considered "a truly established poet" in spite of her tongue-in-cheek disclaimer.

I suppose that what I miss most in Brewster is an interest in social issues. Occasionally there is a glance at the world of chaos outside her personal one, as in "Earthquake" where among the debris thrown up are "some faded

flags and uniforms/discoloured/war posters" or in "The Seige of Troy" (70) where Troy, World War II and the Napoleonic Wars are all seen in relation to the everyday events that continue in spite of the horrors of war. That's about it. The first poem in In Search of Eros is entitled "For P.K.P.," P.K. Page, and ironically much of Page's poetry has shown her very close involvement in contemporary social affairs. In her acknowledgements to Sunrise North Brewster especially thanks Margaret Atwood and Dorothy Livesay, again two poets who have consistently expressed their views on national and international political and social affairs in their poetry. Perhaps if one is socialized in youth to be apolitical it is difficult in maturity to change that fact. One hopes, however, that having explored her own personal world, Elizabeth Brewster can begin to look abroad. In "Lillooet" she claims to be "unable to proceed beyond the personal." But that was written a long time ago.

NOTES

1. Eli Mandel, Five Canadian Poets (Toronto, 1970), p. 39.
2. George Bowering, Points on the Grid (Toronto, 1964), p. 63.

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Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape Susan Brownmiller. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975. Pp. 472.

Susan Brownmiller's book Against Our Will is an important and long overdue study of rape. This work is much more than a piece of descriptive journalism; it is an exhaustive study in which the author's appreciation for history and her attention to detail result in a penetrating and thorough re-evaluation of the whole issue of rape.

Brownmiller's extensive research into the conditions and facts about rape-- its victims and its perpetrators-- exposes the reality of the situation and challenges the long-standing faulty assumptions which predominate the topic in our thoroughly sexist society. However, this important contribution is only half of the task the author sets out for herself. By examining the peculiar dual nature of rape; i.e., that it is at one and the same time a crime against property (possession of a woman) and a crime of assault, Brownmiller searches for the underlying societal values and attitudes towards women which are manifested in such a crime. The idea of woman as property rather than person and the equation of rape with violence and degradation rather than eroticism are themes which Brownmiller analyzes historically, in her attempt to explore the meaning of rape in contemporary North American society.