The Poetry of Elizabeth Brewster

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P. K. Page tells the story of how she and some friends "discovered" the poetry of Elizabeth Brewster. In the spring of 1941, when P. K. Page was living in Saint John, New Brunswick, she and some of her friends in that city became concerned about the apparent lack of poetic activity in a province which had had a literary tradition going back to its foundation in the late eighteenth century. To find out what, if any, poetry of merit was being written, they sponsored a poetry contest in the *Telegraph-Journal.* Elizabeth Brewster, then a girl in her late teens, was one of the winners of the contest, and she and Pat Page struck up a friendship which has continued to this day. Miss Brewster says of the episode: "When I was in Grade X I sent some poems to a contest in Saint John run by the local Authors' Association. Pat Page was one of the judges and liked my poems, invited me to Saint John, lent me anthologies of modern poets, and exchanged a number of letters with me."[1]

Elizabeth Brewster, then, has been writing good poetry for over thirty years, but it is only in the last four years, since the publication of *Passage of Summer* in 1969,[2] that she has been widely known outside of the Maritime provinces from which she sprang. Her early work, although it was published widely in periodicals such as *Poetry* (Chicago), *Northern Review, Contemporary Verse, The Canadian Poetry Magazine, The Fiddlehead, Queen's Quarterly, Tamarack Review* and the *Canadian Forum,* was collected in small chapbooks of limited circulation and therefore did not earn her the national reputation she deserved. *East Coast* appeared as a Ryerson Poetry Chapbook in 1951,

Lillooet and *Roads* in the same series in 1954 and 1957 respectively. *Passage of Summer* is a much more substantial volume, containing 132 poems in a book of 129 pages, and gave the general public its first opportunity to appreciate the range and variety of its author's sensibility. Moreover, *Passage of Summer* was supplemented in 1972 by a second substantial volume, *Sunrise North,*[3] which contains 85 additional poems, and some 40 more poems have been written since it went to press. The Brewster canon, then, now amounts to nearly three hundred poems, and an at least preliminary critical examination of them is overdue.

There is not space in this article to give an extended biography of Elizabeth Brewster, but as her poems rely very heavily upon memory, and as I have known Miss Brewster ever since she first became a student of mine in 1944, I feel it my duty to say something about her life and personality. Reviewers have often sought to dismiss her as a merely regional poet, or as a typical spinster librarian of limited experience and weak feeling. Although there is a strong regional base to her work, she has actually had a much wider experience of the world than the average person and even the average poet. Born in Chipman in 1922 and brought up in various parts of rural New Brunswick, she started writing poetry when she was nine or ten, and her first poem to be published — "a very conventional poem about Autumn," as she now describes it — appeared in the Saint John *Telegraph* when she was twelve. It was when she became a student at the University of New Brunswick in 1942, however, and came under the influence of the group of persons who, in 1945, were to launch *The Fiddlehead* magazine, that her work began to increase significantly in quality and quantity. Several of the best of her early poems, such as "The Loneliness That Wrapped Her Round" and "Only the Subtle Things," appeared in the early issues of *The Fiddlehead.*

Elizabeth Brewster, however, left New Brunswick almost

immediately after graduation from U.N.B. in 1946, and although she has spent a few years back in her native province, and has continued to visit it frequently over the years, most of her adult life has been lived elsewhere. After U.N.B. she spent a year at Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Mass.; she was a Beaverbrook Overseas scholar at the University of London; she took a profesional librarian's course at the University of Toronto; she worked as a librarian at Queen's University and in Ottawa; she spent several years in Bloomington, Indiana, where she obtained her Ph.D. in English from the University of Indiana for a thesis on George Crabbe; she taught for a year at the University of Victoria in British Columbia; she spent several years as a librarian at Mount Allison University in Sackville, N.B., and then came back to Fredericton as a librarian at the Legislative Library; more recently she has been a librarian at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, and has taught Creative Writing there; in 1972-73 she is a full-time member of the Department of English at the University of Saskatchewan at Saskatoon. Far, then, from being a poet of narrow horizons, she has lived for considerable periods in five of the Canadian provinces, in the United States and in the United Kingdom, and all these varied locations are reflected to some degree in her poetry.

She is far, too, from being a typical spinster librarian, if indeed such a creature exists. When I first knew her she was, it is true, shy to a painful degree, given to nervous giggling which could be quite disconcerting. She has referred to this adolescent timidity, and contrasted it with my (apparent) self-assurance, in one of the best of her early poems:

> Alone in the public room
> Listening to retreating footsteps
> Listening to a whistle and a scrap of song,
> I, who must always tiptoe over floors,
> Stand with raised hand and thudding heart outside doorways,
> Linger embarrassed in the corridors of life,
> Apologizing, back out of rooms like an intruder—
> I, who listen too nervously to the epoch-shattering
> stroke of the clock—

I would imitate, if I could, the staccato, assured
footsteps,
The whistle unconscious of fear, scornful of time.
But is it worth it? I ask, Is it worth it?
And think more respectfully of the fox's sincerity.
(*Passage of Summer*, p. 11)

As she grew older, however, she gradually overcame this shyness, and she has now achieved a considerable degree of poise. But there was always behind her timid exterior a character of great strength and toughness, and she was far from defenceless. For one thing, she always possessed a devastating power of sarcasm, and as a young lecturer I often felt its full force. For another, she possesses a will which is quite remarkable for its determination: years of relative neglect never deflected her from the craft of poetry; the view of other people (myself included) that she did not have the personal force to teach large introductory classes persuaded her not at all; and she has always resisted the temptation, which must be particularly acute for a single woman, to settle in one familiar place surrounded by old friends.

Moreover, as even a casual reading of her poetry will reveal, Miss Brewster is a woman of extremely complex sensibility, and of a high degree of self-discipline. She relies very heavily upon personal memories for the substance of her poetry, but her memories are not of the sort that may properly be described as nostalgic, since what she remembers is invariably honest and often brutally violent or searingly sad. She writes of loneliness with such mastery that the loneliness becomes tangible, an ache which her reader is compelled to endure with her. In spite of her strong concern with herself, she displays a remarkable empathy for other people, and in her treatment of them varies all the way from warm sympathy to cold sarcasm. Snow, fog, rain and ice are frequent images in her work and give it a prevailing greyness or whiteness, but there are many poems in which bright colours predominate and in which an infectious gaiety replaces the prevailing sadness. Stoical

self-assurance is her chief weapon against loneliness and loss, but she is also capable of writing good religious poems and some excellent love poems.

All this suggests that there is more variety in the substance of her poetry than we are apt to remember — and the same is true of her style. Quite deliberately and very consistently, she is a plain poet. In spite of her erudition, she makes little use of learned allusions or of an intellectual vocabulary. Like Wordsworth and Robert Frost, she writes in the rhythms and the word-order of ordinary speech. She is very sparing in the use of metaphors and similes, and she never seeks to dazzle us by metaphysical ingenuity. These generalizations are broadly true, but they leave out of account the subtleties which quite lift her better poems above the level of conversational prose. For example, for all her plainness of diction, she is capable of writing phrases which haunt the imagination, simple words so arranged that they take on an air of strangeness and mystery: "The blessed sun becomes the blessed moon"; "The mute, tenacious grass"; "Silence, settling grain by grain"; "The silent silver pastures/Of the moon"; "Loneliness terrible as a thousand lions"; "In their graves the dead lie still"; "the stiff folds of the sculptured air"; "Their blood is cold and slow."

Again, in spite of the deliberate economy with which she employs metaphors and similes, there are in her work many images, drawn mainly from landscape and domestic processes, which are apt and memorable:

> Our spirits are sheer columns of ice like frozen fountains
> ("East Coast-Canada")
>
> And silence grew over him like moss on an old stump
> ("Jamie")
>
> The elastic moment stretches to infinity
> ("In the Library")
>
> Fog wraps its damp and woolly scarf
> ("London Fog")
>
> Its [sky's] hot blue tongue licking the ice-cream clouds
> ("To Homai")

Their thoughts are leaves that drift across a sky
("Home for the Aged")

If the sheriff pain had not evicted me
("Eviction")

[A voice] dark and deep as molasses
("The Night Grandma Died")

[Silence] soft as snow or a slow bird's wing
("Silence is Obsolete")

[Thoughts] deep and thick as wool
("Silence is Obsolete")

Autumn leaves were mustard
On the sky's blue china plate
("Nothing is Like Nothing Else")

[Aunt Rebecca] Soft as silk and tough as that thick wire
They use for snaring rabbits
("Aunt Rebecca")

[Clouds] foamy as detergent
("Rising from Winnipeg")

[Words] Pick-axes chopping at the block of silence
("Block of Silence")

And again, in spite of the apparent simplicity and consistency of her metrical forms, there is more prosodic variety in her work than we are apt to assume. Most of her early poems were written in rhymed stanzas, many of them in tightly controlled quatrains; the whole of the long narrative poem *Lillooet* is in rhyming couplets; almost all of her later poems are in free verse, but a free verse that is carefully controlled. Every poem, whether in traditional stanzas or in free verse, is very deliberately shaped.

This applies also to her two larger volumes, each of which is arranged carefully to create an unified structure. In *Passage of Summer,* for example, there are memory poems at the beginning, followed by dream poems, and then there is a turning towards the objective world in the sections entitled "On Considering Objects," "Portraits," "Lillooet," "Narratives," "Songs and Sonnets" and "Elegies." Poems of exploration and pilgrimage follow, and the whole is brought to a satisfactory conclusion by a coda of seasonal poems which runs the round of the year. In *Sunrise North,*

as Miss Brewster says in a note to me, "the poems have been arranged to tell a sort of story, the move to Edmonton and the prairie background, along with a love-and-separation story. The later part of the book moves into a deeper, more reflective mood, with the psychological and madness poems especially."

The largest group of poems in the Brewster canon thus far is that which may be described as poems of memory. Nearly a score of poems actually begin with the words "I remember," and at least as many more deal in memories without thus announcing the fact. Most of the memories cluster about Betty's New Brunswick childhood — the landscape, the weather, her family, her friends and associates, her childish hopes and fears — and it is no doubt this group of poems that has led many reviewers to label her as a regionalist. There is nothing wrong with regionalism, however, as long as it is honest rather than self-deluding, and provided that the regional material is given universal overtones. Miss Brewster's regionalism certainly meets both these tests. "Orange Rooster," for example, is clearly a poem that grows out of her memories of a New Brunswick barnyard, but there is nothing falsely idyllic about it, and the barnyard might be anywhere:

> I remember in the farm yard
> The orange rooster
> with blue and green tail feathers
> Shining like jewels,
> And his handsome red comb,
> And his operatic voice
> Speaking of love.
>
> How could he be expected
> To be faithful to any one
> Of those plain puritan
> Plymouth Rock hens
> Dressed in black and white
> Unfashionable check?
> But they followed adoring
> His voice and his sheen,
> Pecking each other
> And waiting to be mounted.
>
> (*Passage of Summer*, p. 3)

The same honest, unsentimental observation extends even to poems about members of her immediate family. Recalling the death of her grandmother, in "The Night Grandma Died," she concludes:

> And I, sitting on a footstool in a corner,
> Was sometimes warmed by the voice,
> And sometimes chilled remembering
> In the room next door
> Grandmother, dead, whom I had never liked.
> (*Passage of Summer*, p. 7)

Not only is this recollective group the largest, it is also the one in which Miss Brewster achieves her most memorable and moving effects. The poems in which she recalls her mother and father especially, such as "Thirty Below," "Family Quarrel," "Inheritance," "Elegy for My Mother," and "Deaths" are remarkable for the way in which they combine compassion and clear-sightedness, involvement and detachment.

The second major group, in terms of both quantity and quality, are poems of personal feeling, in which Miss Brewster conveys her own sense of loneliness, sadness, restlessness, or self-doubt. With these we may link the love poems, since almost all of those are poems not of love fulfilled but of love denied, not of union but of separation. This group is certainly the most melancholy, but it is also the most disciplined and the most intense. Even in the poems of recollection, and still more in the purely descriptive poems, Miss Brewster has a tendency to add details which are not absolutely essential, but in the poems of loneliness and love she has pared the expression to the bone. One of the best of this group, which will serve to illustrate the economy of which I have just spoken, is also one of the earliest that she has elected to preserve — "The Loneliness That Wrapped Her Round," written in Fredericton in 1944:[4]

> The loneliness that wrapped her round
> Was thick as drifted snow,
> So thick it seemed to make a sound
> Like birds that come and go,
> Like startled birds that flap their wings,

And rise, and flutter low.
So thick the air lay on her breast,
As still as vanished mirth;
"Suppose", she thought in that still night,
"Suppose this air were earth."

(*Passage of Summer*, p. 76)

A similar effect of a compression so great that an explosion of some sort seems inevitable (but never happens in the poem, whatever may happen in real life) is found in such of the love poems as "On Awakening at Night":

I awake at night
from restless dreams
and yearn for the comfort
of flesh on warm flesh
for your hands on my breasts
for your mouth
for your body on mine;
and I long for you
as I might long
for the flow of sunshine
or for water fountains bursting
in my hot mouth.

(*Passage of Summer*, p. 28)

Set side by side, these two poems written a quarter century apart illustrate also how Miss Brewster's style has developed. The essential qualities — ordinary diction, speech rhythms, imagistic spareness — remain, and in both poems the effect is of feeling tightly controlled and expressed with the maximum of economy. The later poem, however, has abandoned rhyme and regular rhythm for a free verse which is nevertheless under such a tight rein that the phrase seems scarcely suitable. In the love poem there is none of that random scattering of words on the page which the license of free verse frequently encourages; on the contrary, each word and each line has been deliberately "placed" and all inessential words — adjectives, adverbs, modifiers — have been ruthlessly excluded.

Closely allied to the poems of love and loneliness are the poems of empathy, character studies in which Miss Brewster usually sees in others the same feelings of loneliness and sadness that she finds in herself. That, perhaps, is not a completely fair comment, for it does not take account of

the considerable variety of persons to whom the poet manages to relate sympathetically. In "In the Library," a meditation upon the portrait of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts in the U.N.B. library, she undergoes a sort of hallucinogenic experience in which she virtually becomes the dead poet; in "Home for the Aged," written in Ottawa in July of 1954, she becomes at one with a group of five old men whose lives "are folded up like the papers"; in "Lady in a Small Town," written in Sackville in November, 1962, she manages to enter into the consciousness of a middle-aged matron quite unlike herself; and in "D. H. Lawrence, Pilgrim," written in Fredericton in July, 1965, to give only one more example, she provides a very sympathetic portrait of a writer whose work has a quality very different from that of her own. These poems as a group show unerring psychological acumen and give the lie to charges that Miss Brewster is self-obsessed. Moreover many of these poems, especially the portraits found in *Lillooet* but including also such separate portrait poems as "Professor Blake," "Paper Flowers" and "Canon Bradley," reveal that Miss Brewster has a wry but none the less real sense of humour.

She has also a strong sense of horror and mystery. Any inclination one may feel to dismiss Miss Brewster as a tidy versifier is effectively blocked by such poems as "Lost in a Wide and Houseless World," "Dream Landscape," "Dream," "The Idiot," "Death by Drowning," "Cat," "Sorrow, the Bird of Death," "Cold Tea," "Undersea Gardens," "Blueflag," "Shock," "Answer" or "Fog." "Cat," one of the shortest of these poems, and one which was written on a summer night in Fredericton in 1966, will serve to illustrate this macabre vein:

> Last night, in the hot, moist night,
> I thought I was wakened
> When a huge cat
> With thick yellow fur
> And yellow eyes
> Thudded on my bed
> But it was only the heat of the night,

Thick and smothering
As cat fur.

(*Passage of Summer*, p. 21)

In a poem such as that the delicate state of almost classical balance which Miss Brewster manages to achieve in so much of her poetry gives way to a Gothic ferocity. Once more we are reminded of the subtlety and variety which exists in this poet's work.

The group of poems which I find the least successful — and here I am quite ready to admit that the fault may be mine rather than the author's — are the religious poems, such as the section of *Passage of Summer* labelled "Devotions" and poems in *Sunrise North* including "Sunday Morning," "Easter Vigil," and "Easter Sunday." Here, with a few exceptions, it seems to me that Miss Brewster's clear-sightedness deserts her, and that she indulges herself in a decorative and essentially artificial kind of Christianity. As I write this, however, I am reminded of the straight-forward honesty of such a religious poem as "Supposition," and again it is brought home to me how dangerous it is to generalize about this poet.

More uniformly convincing are the poems in which she gives voice to what I take to be her true philosophy — a kind of stoicism in which strength is achieved through suffering. This attitude, expressed sparely rather than in the more decorative style of the conventional religious lyrics, is found in such poems as "Granite's Not Firm Enough," "Peace I," "Eviction," "Self-Reliance," "Under a Plane Tree," and "Advice to the Fearful Self." Here is "Peace I":

Peace is what is found
When the sailor sets his will
To turn from a rough sea
To a rougher still.
Peace is a walking out
From a cold room
Into a colder blizzard
And drifted doom.
Peace is pain increased
Till it is numb,
And a cry so shrill

That it seems dumb.
Peace cannot be shaken
By death or strife,
For it has swallowed both
To make its life.

(*Passage of Summer*, p. 103)

One comes away from a re-reading of Miss Brewster's poetry with the sense of an art which is disciplined but which controls very strong reserves of feeling. The style is classical in its simplicity, dignity and balance, but the substance has much in it of romantic passion and intensity. In the course of a writing career extending over some forty years she has produced nearly three hundred poems, and there are at least a dozen of them which deserve a place in any Canadian anthology. My own choice of the twelve best would include "Dream," "The Moon is a Mighty Magnet," "Great-Aunt Rebecca," "The Loneliness That Wrapped Her Round," "Passage of Summer," "Deaths," "Afternoon at Currie's Mountain," "Wish," "On Awakening at Night," "November Sunday," "Blueflag" and "New-Year's Eve." The fact that that list includes several poems that I have not previously mentioned in this brief article suggests how rich a choice there is.

NOTES

[1]Personal letter to me, Jan. 1973.

[2]Elizabeth Brewster, *Passage of Summer* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1969). Subsequent page references are to this ed.

[3]Elizabeth Brewster, *Sunrise North* (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1972). Subsequent page references are to this ed.

[4]Where the place and date of composition are given in this article, the information comes directly from Miss Brewster.