

Cadence, Country, Silence

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What am I doing when I write?

I don't know.

A hockey player may understand very little about the principles of anatomy. But he drags his body across the ice somehow.

What am I doing when I write? In a sense the question is too important to be discussing at a writers' conference. For myself, I write to find out — among other things — what it would mean to write authentically. The question is posed by the writing to be done, and it is answered — sometimes — in terms of the writing as it is done. There is very little of me left over to analyse what is going on, and I honour the necessities that imposes. The first is to preserve my ignorance about many things.

Hence I have little theory to offer, and not much analysis. But it is still possible to make friendly noises — in much the same spirit as when one is lifting a heavy load with someone else, or making love. My noises fall into three groups.

1. Cadence

Most of my life as a writer is spent listening into a cadence which is a kind of taut cascade, a luminous tumble. If I withdraw from immediate contact with things around me I can sense it churning, flickering, dancing, locating things in more shapely relation to one another without robbing

them of themselves. I say it is present constantly, but certainly I spend days on end without noticing it. I hear it more clearly because I have recognised it in Hölderlin or Henry Moore, but I do not think that it originates in their work; I imagine they heeded it too.

What I hear is initially without content; but when it comes, the content must accord with the cadence I have been overhearing or I cannot write it. And I speak of "hearing" cadence, but in fact I am baffled by how to describe it. There is no auditory sensation — I don't hallucinate; yet it is like sensing a continuous, changing tremour with one's ear and one's whole body at the same time. It seems very matter-of-fact, yet I do not know the name of the sense with which I perceive it.

More and more I sense this cadence as presence — though it may take 50 or 100 revisions before a poem enacts it — I sense it as presence, both outside myself and within my body opening out and trying to get into words. What is it? I can convey some portion of that by pointing to things I have already written, saying "Listen to the cadence here, and here; no, listen to the deeper cadence within which the poem is locally sustained." But the cadence of the poems I have written is such a small and often mangled fraction of what I hear, it tunes out so many wave-lengths of that massive, infinitely fragile polyphony, that I frequently despair. And finally I do not ask what it is; it is all I can manage to heed it.

Have I stressed enough that I am not making an ideal statement? This is not what I think poets *should* be confronted with; in fact I had seldom heard of it until it started up, almost out of my range of perception, 8 or 10 years ago. Not through drugs as it happens, and now it is what surrounds me. Nor do I think every writer needs to be haunted by cadence in order to write well; I speak only of my own experience. The *errance* that is most immediate to me is hearing poems in my head, my forearms, my gut — hearing cadence with my body but not being able to write its poems.

I take my vocation to consist of listening to this cadence — for a time it was most like the fusion of a very vibrant cello with a very raunchy saxophone, but now lately there has been organ and flute as well — I take my vocation to consist in listening into it with enough life concentration that it can become words through me if it chooses. I hear it seldom in other poets (though strongly in Pindar and Hölderlin), more often in sculpture and music: in Henry Moore, the Brandeburg Concertos, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, early Van Morrison.

How does it work? Michaelangelo said he could sense the final sculpture in the uncut stone; his job was to keep pruning away marble till the figure became visible. That makes sense to me. Content is already there — though I don't know in advance what it is — and there in its own terms. But not as a platonic essence; it is already there in the medium — in the raw stone, if you are a sculptor, or in the raw cadence. So most of my time with a pen is spent giving words, phrases, bright ideas, their permission not to enter the poem, pruning them, letting them stay outside without dumping on them. What remains is the poem.

Perhaps that is why the poem, at least in my sense of it, wants to exist in two ways at once: as a teeming, a-rational process which overflows every prior canon of form (or is prepared to, and can when it chooses) — and simultaneously as a beautifully disciplined structure whose order flowers outward from the centre of its own necessity, and which does not miss a single hurdle or checkpoint on the way. Cadence, which has been the medium of existence for the content all along, including the time before you wrote the poem — cadence teems; content has the other task, of filling out the orderly space of its own more limited being. So those two ways, the anarchy of infinite process and the shapelines of that which lives outward to its own limits, have been coinciding seamlessly all along; if the poem is any good they will simply go on coinciding in it. It will be intelligible out of courtesy, not timidity; its form is not to obey form but to include and carry beyond it.

In the presence of cadence — which is continuous, both as goad and as grace and as something I experience almost as mockery — the chance to turn a good phrase, write a deft poem, the chance to be a *poet*, leaves me cold. It seems like the cheapest evasion. For this jazzy, majestic, delicately cascading process I hear surging and dancing and pausing is still without the witness I might be, if it choses to become incarnate in the words I set down.

I do not say any of this with false humility, for I am convinced that it does so choose. But it leaves me with a strong sense of the silliness of most of what a writer is tempted to do; and a thorough impatience that I cannot organise my life so as to listen with greater concentration, and let my craft be more fully entered by it. For finally, I believe, cadence chooses to issue in the articulate gestures of being human.

2. Country

But not just being human; being human *here*. In my case cadence seeks the gestures of being a Canadian human; *mutatis mutandi*, the same is true for an Israeli or an American or a Quebecker. Any man aspires to be at home where he lives, to celebrate communion with men on earth around him, under the sky where he actually lives.

But voice issues in part from civil space. And if we live in space which is radically in question for us — as many of us do — that makes our barest speaking a problem to itself. Alienation in our public space is not just one among many subjects we can write about; it enters and undercuts our writing, makes it recoil upon itself, become a problem to itself.

The act of writing “becomes a problem to itself” when it becomes a vicious circle; when to write necessarily involves something that makes writing impossible in principle, or makes it a betrayal of itself. This takes different forms in the civil space of different countries; I can speak only of the Canadian experience. (The point is not to compare political

stigmata, of course — or if it is, I hasten to recognise that those borne by a Jew, a Pole, a Rumanian, a Quebecker are more painful than a Canadian's.)

Abraham Yehoshua speaks of writing in a divided language. In part modern Hebrew is charged with religious connotations which go back millenia, but with which some Israelis no longer feel at home; and in part it is spanking brand new, without the grainy texture of a living language, created ex nihilo to make modernity articulate in Israel. The language embodies the tensions which being an Israeli entails; using it well already demands a provisional triumph of citizenship, a reconciliation of jostling civil currents at the level of words and phrases.

And Michèle Lalonde speaks of coming to verbal maturity in Quebec in a kind of linguistic no-man's-land, speaking a French one has been taught to despise and a rag-tag-and-bobtail American-Canadian English fit only for the neon Pepsi billboards which denote one's servitude. In such a situation, good writing must be achieved in a language that embodies the very experience one must transcend in order to achieve good writing. Writing has become a problem to itself right at the level of diction.

For a Canadian, the problem is not externalised that dramatically in language. The prime fact about my country as a public space is that in the last 25 years it has become an American colony. But we speak the same tongue as our new masters; we are the same colour, the same stock. We know their history better than our own. True while our civil inauthenticity has many tangible monuments, from *TIME* to Imperial Esso, the way it surfaces inwardly in our writing is difficult to take hold of — precisely because there are so few symptomatic battlegrounds (such as language) in which real conflict is visible. Nevertheless, many writers here know what it is for writing to become a problem to itself. That experience is my subject.

I will take for granted the American tidal-wave that inundates us, in the cultural sphere as much as in the economic and political. How some 2% of the books on our paper-

back racks are Canadian, because the American-owned distributors won't carry them. How Canadian film-makers have to go to the U.S. to make distribution arrangements for Canada. — Where they are commonly turned down, which means the film often cannot be made. How almost all our prime TV time is filled with yankee programs. How a number of Alberta schoolchildren were still being taught, recently, that Abraham Lincoln was their country's greatest president. The whole sickening farce has to end, and soon; but I will take it for granted and try to see, beyond it, how writing becomes a problem to itself.

* * *

I want to speak of 'words', but not merely those you find in a dictionary. I mean all the resources of the verbal imagination, from single words through verse forms, conventions about levels of style, characteristic versions of the hero. And I use my own experience of words because I know it best. It is representative, partly at least, of a generation now in its thirties.

My sense when I started writing, about 1960 — and this lasted five or six years — was that I had access to a great many words; those of the British, the American, and (so far as anyone took it seriously) the Canadian traditions. Yet at the same time they seemed to lie in a great random heap, which glittered with promise so long as I considered it in the mass but within which each individual word went stiff, inert, was somehow clogged with sludge, the moment I tried to move it into place in a poem. I could stir words, prod at them, cram them into position; but there was no way I could speak them directly. They were completely external to me, though since I had never known the words of poetry in any other way I assumed that was natural.

Writers everywhere don't have to begin with a resistant, external language; there was more behind the experience than just getting the hang of the medium during apprenticeship. In any case, after I had published one book of poems and

finished another then a bizarre thing happened: I stopped being able to use words on paper at all.

All around me — in England, America, even in Canada — writers opened their mouths and words spilled out like crazy. But increasingly when I opened mine I simply gagged; finally, the words no longer came. For about four years at the end of the decade I tore up everything I wrote — 20 words on a page were enough to set me boggling at their palpable inauthenticity. And looking back at my previous writing, I felt as if I had been fishing beads out of a vat of crankcase oil and stringing them together.

To discover that you are mute in the midst of all the riches of a language is a weird and self-contradictory experience. I had no explanation for it; by 1967 it had happened to me, but I didn't know why. In fact I could barely take in what had happened; I had just begun to write, and now I was stopped. I would still sit down in my study with a pen and paper from time to time, and every time I ended up ripping the paper to pieces and pitching it out. The stiffness and falsity of the words appalled me; the reaction was more in my body than in my mind, but it was very strong.

All I seemed able to do, by writing, was discover new ways in which words could be used inauthentically. What on earth was going on?

* * *

Those of us who stumbled into this kind of problem in the nineteen-sixties — whatever form the experience took — were suffering the recoil from something Canadians had learned very profoundly in the fifties. To want to see one's life, one's own most banal impulses and deeper currents, made articulate on paper, in a film, on records — that was ridiculous, uppity. Canadians were by definition people who looked over the fence and through the windows at America, un-self-consciously learning from its movies, comics, magazines and TV shows what it meant to be a human being. The disdainful amusement I and thousands of my intellectual

comrades felt during that time for Canadian achievement in any field, especially those of the imagination, was a direct reflection of our self-hatred and sense of inferiority. And while we dismissed American mass culture, we could only separate ourselves from it by soaking up all the elite American culture we could get at. If anyone from another country was around we would outdo ourselves in showing how knowledgeable we were about Mailer and Fiedler and Baldwin, about the beatniks and the hipsters, about — if we were really willing to show our breadth of mind — the new plays from angry London. And we would fall all over ourselves putting down the Canadians. This was between 1955 and 1965.

We were shaping up to be perfect little. Toms and *ven-dus*. And, like intellectual Toms in most places — like Mordecai Richler today — we were prepared to sell out, not for a cut of the action or a position of second-level power, but simply on condition that we not be humiliated by being treated like the rest of the natives. We were desperate to make that clear: we weren't like the rest. The fact that we would never meet the Americans we admired from one end of the year to the next did not cramp our style; we managed to feel inferior and put down anyway, and we compensated like mad. We kept up with *Paris Review* and *Partisan*, shook our heads over how Senator McCarthy had perverted the traditions of our country; in some cases we went down to Selma or Washington to confront our power structure, and in all cases we agreed that the greatest blot on our racial history was the way we had treated the Negroes. It boggles the imagination now, but that was really what we did — it was how we really *felt*. We weren't pretending, we were desperate. And the idea that these things confirmed our colonialism with a vengeance would have made us laugh our continentalized heads off. We weren't all that clear on colonialism to begin with, but if anybody had colonialism it was our poor countrymen, the Canadians, who in some undefined way were still in fetters to England. But we weren't colonials; hell, *we* could have held our heads up in New York, if it

had occurred to anyone to ask us down. Though it was a bit of a relief that no one ever did.

* * *

My awakening from this astonishing condition, like that of many with whom I now feel rapport, was fairly private and extremely confusing. It was often touched off by trying to cope, individually, with the radical critiques of America that originated in America, particularly over Vietnam. (Concerted radical activity in Canada, during much of the sixties, was often one of the most colonizing experience to be found. Those who entered it early, it seems to me, had to find an even more painful route to their own citizenship — when they were able to.) From that muddled process I remember one particularly disorienting couple of months in 1963, after a teach-in on Vietnam held (as an imitation of American teach-ins) at the University of Toronto by a group of first-rate professors and students. It lasted a weekend, and as I read the background material and followed the long dull speeches in the echoing cavern of Varsity Arena, two things dawned on me. The first was that the American government had been lying about Vietnam; the second was that the Canadian media, from which I had learnt all I knew about the war, had helped to spread its lies.

I present these discoveries in all the crashing naivete with which they struck me then. Interestingly, while the first revelation shocked me more at the time, it was the second that gnawed at me during the ensuing months. I just couldn't get my mind around it. I did not believe that our newspapers or radio and TV stations had been bought off directly by Washington, of course. But if it was not a case of paid corruption, the only reason for a co-operating in such colossal deception — consciously or unconsciously — was that they were colonial media, serving the interests of the imperial rulers.

This language made me bridle — it conjured up nothing so strongly as images of mindless five-hour harangues in Cuba or Peking, foreign frenzies of auto-hypnosis, numb rhetoric.

I had read about that in the newspapers too. But no matter: it was the only language that made sense of what had been happening, and though I did not accept the terms for another five years I accepted their substance almost at once.

Worse than that, however, was the recognition that the sphere of imperial influence was not confined to the pages of newspapers. It also included my head. And that shook me to the core, because I could not even restrict the brainwashing I began to recognize to the case of Vietnam. More and more of the ideas I had, my assumptions, even the instinctive path of my feelings, well before they jelled into notions, seemed to have come north from the States, unexamined. A few years before, that had been largely what I strove for (though I wouldn't have put it that way). But now the whole thing began to turn around, and I was jarred loose. After ten years of continentalizing my ass, what had I accomplished? . . . *I was a colonial.*

It was something I would be years coming to terms with.

As my whole system began to rebel against our spineless existence in this colonial space — by 1967, say — I began to find literary words impossible. I read far less, I stopped going to Stratford, I squirmed in front of TV. And nothing I wrote felt real. I didn't know why. I couldn't even say what was the problem, for any words I might use to articulate it were already deadened, numb, inert in the same mysterious way. So none of this got said, except by the revulsion of my nervous system; otherwise I was mute. Writing had become a full-blown problem to itself; it had grown into a search for authenticity, but all it could manage to be was a symptom of inauthenticity. I couldn't put my finger on what was inauthentic, but I could feel it with every nerve-end in my body. And I only wanted to write, I said, if I could also convey the muteness that established — life a key in music — the particular inauthenticity of this word, and of that word. (At the time I called it 'silence', but most of it — I think now — was simple muteness.) I couldn't write that way. So for four years I shut up.

* * *

Though I hope not to over-dramatize this, it was when I began to read a series of essays by the philosopher George Grant that I started to comprehend what we had been living inside. Many people were turning to Marcuse for such clarifications then, and through him to Marx; others found perspective in Leary and Brown. But apart from the aversion I now felt to swimming with fashionable American currents all over again — it made me feel like a lemming — I found a greater toughness and depth in Grant's thought. Though I did respond to the others. What was more, I found myself sufficiently at home in his ideas that this time I wasn't just trying desperately to learn a new gospel, to keep up with a new saving dispensation. Even though reading those essays made me unlearn some of my deepest assumptions, I found myself beginning to relax and think for myself. That mattered to me, because I never wanted to spend time again chasing somebody else's standards of what was good.

Grant's analysis of "Canadian Fate and Imperialism", which L found in *Canadian Dimension*, was the first that made any contact whatsoever with my tenuous sense of living here — the first that seemed to be speaking the words of our civil condition. My whole system had been coiling in on itself for want of them. As subsequent pieces appeared I realised that in fact it had happened: a man who knew this paralyzing condition first-hand was somehow using words authentically, from the very centre of everything that had tied my tongue.

Six of the essays were later collected as *Technology and Empire*, the most profound book written in my country. In it, Grant's understanding of Canadian experience is only a part of his larger perspective on the West; I shall certainly not do justice here to the breadth, subtlety or richness of his thought.

His first perception was that in refusing the American dream our Loyalist forebears were groping to reaffirm a classical European tradition, one which embodies a very different sense of public space. By contrast with the liberal

assumptions that gave birth to the United States, it taught that men are subject to sterner civil necessities than liberty or the pursuit of happiness; that reverence for what is is more deeply human than conquest of what is; and that men's presence here is capable of an organic continuity which cannot be ruptured except at the risk of making their condition worse — that any such change should be undertaken in fear and trembling. (Grant would not claim that all Hellenic or Christian societies used to live by these ideals, only that they understood themselves to be acting well or badly in their light.) And while our own ancestors were often mediocre or muddling, convictions like these demonstrably did underlie many of their attitudes to law, the land, indigenous peoples and Europe. Their refusal of America issued, in part, from disagreement with the early Americans about what it meant to be a human being.

This overstates what Grant finds in the Loyalists (the British Americans who came to Canada after 1776), in order to clarify the deep novelty of his perspective. In fact, he declares that the typical Loyalist was "straight Locke with a dash of Anglicanism"; the British tradition he held to had already broken with the classical understanding of public good which Grant cherishes. Loyalism was a gesture in the right direction, perhaps, but it never succeeded in being radically un-American; it did not have the resources.

Nevertheless, I found the account of being alive that Grant saw in the Greek and Judaeo-Christian traditions of Europe far less self-indulgent than the liberal version that had achieved its zenith in America — far closer to the way things actually are. The doctrine of essential freedom, which in an argument of inspired simplicity Grant sees as the point of generation of technological civilisation, led to a view of everything but one's own ego — the new continent, native peoples, other nations, outer space, one's body — as a kind of raw material, here as pure value-free externality, to be manipulated and remade according to the hungers of one's nervous system and the logic of one's technology. But not only did this view of an unlimited human freedom seem

arrogant and suicidal; it also seemed wrong, inaccurate, a delusion.

Suddenly there were terms in which to recognise that as we began tentatively to criticize our new masters during the sixties we were not just wanting to be better Americans than the Americans, to dream their dream more humanely. Our dissent went as deep as it did because, obscurely, we did not want to be American at all. Their dream was wrong.

Before Grant, a person who grew up in as deeply colonized a Canadian decade as the fifties had no access to such a fundamental refusal of America, no matter how viscerally he felt it. Hence before Grant many of us had no way of entering our native space. And it was extremely disorienting to realise that not only could this refusal of America be a full-fledged search for alternative life-space — in Canada, of all places; not only that, but it was continuous with the founding instincts of our country. But our tiresome beginnings had always been a source of embarrassment or amusement to us; they were hardly something we could have lapsed from or betrayed. As this was stood on its head, relatively at least, Grant gave us access to our past as well.

But Grant can scarcely be presented as an apostle of public joy. His next perception virtually cancels his reclamation of space to be in: that by now we have replaced a dissenting American space with a wholehearted and colonial American space. The sellout of Canada which has been consummated over the last few decades, by businessmen, banks, the federal Liberal party and many provincial governments, does not just involve real estate or corporate takeovers, nor who will put the marionettes in Ottawa through their dance. It replaces one tentative human space with another, more zealous one.

For the political and military rule of the United States, and the economic rule of its corporations, is merely the surface expression of modernity in the West. But modernity is also inward. It shapes the expression of our bodies' impulses, the way we build suburbs, what we do in our spare time. Always we are totally free men. faced with a world which

is raw material, a permanent incitement to technique. Any problem caused by our use of our freedom is merely accidental, and can be remedied by a greater application of the technology which expresses that freedom. There is simply no court of appeal outside that circuit.

This view of man, we know now, may well destroy the planet. It informs the American empire, and those of the westernizing East; but it has also taken dominion at the level of day to day — in the textures of making love, doing our job, thinking, writing, raising children, enjoying and hating and being bored by other people. It is Grant's achievements to have shown how, as we select the newest manual on how to pleasure our partner's body or adjust our children's psyches, as we call in more value-free experts to solve Poverty and downtown traffic, we are acting on the same view of man as that which animates the war in Vietnam and the destruction of the Great Lakes. Breathing, we breathe that modernity; almost it breathes us.

Technology then, for Grant, means a whole stance towards the world — not simply the hardware produced by the electronics industry. And well beyond the political hegemony of the States, the space of American technology increasingly sets the terms in which we go about being human in daily life. In Canada, we are ruled by it even more thoroughly than by Washington and Ford. We can still act, but it is the context within which we must act.

And finally, Grant declares that the dissent from liberal modernity is necessarily to fall silent, for we now have no terms in which to speak that do not issue from the space we are trying to speak against. The conservative impulse, in which Grant sees the future we almost used to have, he judges finally to be mute as a contemplative stance and impotent as a practical one. It can sense 'intimations of deprivation' to which liberal man are not open, but it can sense them only in waiting and silence.

What is unique about this modern despair, Grant holds, is not that our lives as public beings are judged to be screwed up, riddled with exploitation and nastiness. There

is nothing new about that. We now have greater resources for doing harm, it is true; but we are scarcely the first human beings to notice that the lives of nations are in a mess. What is unique about this despair is that it cannot get outside itself. Any realistic statement of ideals by which we might judge our plight, might bring it into perspective, turns out to be a restatement of the very liberal ideals that got us into the fix in the first place. For the god of our liberal civilisation is very jealous, and it has already pre-empted and redefined the terms in which we might dissent from it. And while this is not a problem that preoccupies most people in their day-to-day lives, it does affect our day-to-day lives; and furthermore it creates a *Catch-22* situation at the levels from which any civilisation draws its deepest resources. Grant explores that *Catch-22* with a clarity which induces vertigo.

I recognize all the bleakness for which Grant is often criticised. But only with my head; for months after I read his essays I felt a surge of release and exhilaration. To find one's tongue-tied sense of civil loss and bafflement given words at last, to hear one's own most inarticulate hunches out loud, because most immediate in the bloodstream — and not prettied up, and in prose like a fastidious groundswell — was to stand erect at last in one's own space.

I do not expect to spend my life agreeing with George Grant. But, in my experience at least, the dark Canadian has enabled us for the first time to say where we are, who we are — to become articulate. For he gives words to the things we feel to be most essential about the public space of Canada; our sense of ourselves as half-finished, tongue-tied, always a step behind other peoples. He doesn't back away from that into paeans on the greatness of the land, nor the glories of our past; nor does he berate us for it. He sets it in the context of world history, making it intelligible; and he gives it eloquent words. That first gift of speech is difficult to speak of without babbling; it is a staggering achievement. And in trying to comprehend the deeper ways in which writing is a problem to itself in Canada, I can start nowhere but with Grant.

After absorbing *Technology and Empire*, I think I understand a lot of my reactions of the late sixties (though not because Grant diagnoses them, or even describes them). Why I stopped being interested in Shakespeare at Stratford, for instance, when I had gone avidly for ten summers; why I fidgeted and squirmed in front of a TV set, and read so much less. And why I dried.

It has become customary to explain most of our problems by referring to American imperialism. But while the explanation for those problems may coincide with the meanings of the American takeover, it is not exhausted by them; what we lack cannot simply be described as freedom from American bullying. Still, seeing the American conquest of Canada as the takeover of one version of civilisation by another (with all Grant's qualifications understood) does put many of our discontents into focus. And it clarifies, among other things, why a writer could find words going dead in the late sixties.

The words I knew said Britain, and they said America; but they did not say Canada. They were always and only about someone else's life. All the rich structures of language were there, but the currents that animated them were not home to the people who used the language here. Even those words, 'language', 'home', 'here', had no native charge; they conveyed meanings in whose face we had been unable to find ourselves, meanings we were unable to approach as equals. The language was drenched with our non-belonging, and words had become the enemy; to use them, as a writer, was to collaborate further in one extinction. And so, by a drastic stratagem of self-preservation, words went dead. For the civil self seeks nourishment as much as the biological self; and if everything it can find is alien, it may protect itself in a visceral spasm of refusal. Even if there is no guarantee that food can be found that will nourish it, and not unseive it.

The circle is vicious; writing has become a problem to itself. To speak unreflectingly in a colony is to use words that speak only alien space; to reflect is to fall silent, discovering that your authentic space does not have words; and to

reflect further is to recognise that you and your people do not in fact have a privileged authentic space just waiting for words — you are, among other things, the people who have made an alien inauthenticity their own. You are left chafing at the inarticulacy of a native space which may not exist.

But perhaps — and here was the breakthrough — perhaps our job was not to fake a space of our own and write it up, but rather to find words for our space-lessness. This dawned on me gradually. Instead of pushing against the grain of an external, un-charged language, perhaps we should finally come to writing *with* that grain.

And to do that, one began by giving up the idea of writing in the same continuum as Lowell, and Roethke, and Ginsberg — noble dissidents though they were in imperial space. This was not a question of accepting lower standards but of coming home, coming to one's own space and necessities. And one began by striving to hear what happened in words — in 'love', 'inhabit', 'fail', 'earth' — as we let them surface within our muteness. For there was nothing as direct as starting to write in *joual*, though the process was similar; there was only the decision to let words be how they actually are for us. (Though again I am distorting the experience; there was nothing conscious about this decision, initially at least — it was a direction one's inner ear took up, and even the description comes later.)

The first mark of words, as one began to re-appropriate them in this space-less civil space, was a kind of blur of unachieved meaning. That I had already experienced, though only as something oppressing and negative. But then I began to sense that, where I lived, a whole swarm of inarticulate meanings lunged, clawed, drifted, eddied, sprawled in half-grasped disarray beneath the tidy meaning which the simplest word had brought with it from England and the States. "City": once one learned to accept the blurry, featureless character of that word — responding to it as a Canadian word, with its absence of native connotation — one was dimly savaged by the live, inchoate meanings trying to surface through it. The whole tangle and Sisyphean problematic of

people's lives here, from the time of the *Coureurs de bois* to the present day, came struggling to be included in the word 'city'. Under the surface blur there was a living barrage of meaning: private, civil, religious — unclassifiable finally, but there, and seamless, and pressing to be spoken. I called it cadence. And I *felt* that press of meanings; I had no idea what they were, but I could feel them. Yet how in the name of heaven — again I am saying things that were nowhere near conscious definition till I wrote them down just now — how was it to be conveyed?

* * *

But that question jumps ahead too fast. We must return to our central paradox. Voice articulates citizenship, among other things: the paradox is that voice can be authentic here only when it speaks inauthenticity with art. Not as its symptom, but as its voice. And reading Grant let me glimpse in that paradox the first necessity of writing, at a time when writing is a problem to itself.

That necessity is to name its own disease. Its alienation, its speechlessness, its deracination from any civil space but what is alien. And to name it in the sense of limming it, recreating it, making it real. Given the impasse, that is the one thing for which real words can maybe be found.

Thus it will not do to ignore our disease and try to write of other things; nor to spend all our energy castigating it as something external; nor to invert it and pretend to be writing from everything that is its opposite. The impasse of writing that is problematic to itself is transcended only when the impasse becomes its own subject. Any other course (except in minor work — although I do not put that down) leads to writing whose joints and musculature never work together, or which remains constantly out of focus with itself. We have had a lot of both in Canada.

This necessity can be verified in much good colonial writing; in that of Grant himself, of Gaston Miron in Quebec, in many black writers. One can see that naming one's disease is not necessarily a matter of analyzing it (although it may be),

nor even of giving it an explicit name. But it is always a matter of turning back on it and consciously recreating its modes of being: making it articulate, allowing it distance from ourselves. In love and hatred. Thus one may choose to handle the formal themes of colonialism, brooding on the way our space is chaped by currents which are not our own. Miron does that; so does Bill Bissett. Or one may want simply to let alien space be felt as presence in a poem or novel, as the environment in which our most ordinary acts and feelings occur. But always first to speak one's own condition, to give it voice. For that words may just barely be released.

One we reach this perspective, we discover something surprising. For we can look back at Canadian writing from the last 100 years (its effective life-span), and see that mostly it has been struggling to do something very like that: to make our condition manifest. As Margaret Atwood has shown in her epoch-making book *Survival*, the dominant themes of Canadian literature have been death, the failure of nerve, and the experience of being victimized by forces beyond our control. Canadian writers have had a genius for sniffing out the maximum possible grief, with an instinct which is as depressing as it is infallible. Heroes lose, personal relations go awry, immigrants are mowed down with such knee-jerk regularity that we have clearly moved beyond candour to compulsiveness; finally Atwood asks, What gives? Why do Canadians insist on imagining only the worst? Our life here is not a bed of roses, and there has been a lot of real hardship in our history. But compared with that of most people our lot is almost obscenely comfortable. Why does our literature falsify it, to the point where you would think we were nothing but a nation of mute losers and victims whose major value was bare survival?

Her answer is, that is how the imagination works in a permanent colony! It recreates the condition of being in thrall.

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Three points are often made; I am, I must admit, just beginning to grasp their application.

There is a good deal of understanding, by now, of the mentality of people who have long been colonized. Much of it originates in colonies where oppression has been far more severe than here. But while Canada is almost unique in being both a developed nation and a long-time colony, and while we have not had to contend with imperial torture and mess murder, we can still understand a great deal about our own experience from such analyses.

- (1) The colonized people develops methods of passive resistance to its foreign masters: lethargy, shiftlessness, and inefficiency. The strategy is usually unconscious, and the more proud and energetic colonials will berate their fellows for it, taking it as a mark of shameful inferiority. But they don't see things very clearly. Why should a native work like a dog to build up the profits of a brutal English, French or Dutch trading company? Or, for that matter, to build up the profits of General Motors in Detroit? Why not just do enough to get by?

It is easy enough to understand the shiftless behaviour of most Canadian Indians in this light. But it is more of a wrench to see the lacklustre behaviour of white Canadians in the same way. Our inefficiency and low productivity, our reluctance to take risks or initiative — these things are well-known, but they are less spectacular than the Indians. That is because our oppression is much less severe.

But the cause is the same. When a country does not belong to its inhabitants, when they cannot find a fairly painless way to stop being exploited, when their normal civil hunger has been frustrated as deeply for centuries as it is in a colony, there is little incentive to act with initiative or think with passion. Some people still do, miraculously — particularly in such situations as the traditional family farm. But the further you get from the life of individuals, the more powerless the individual becomes. That is true anywhere, I suppose, but the form it takes in Canada is crucial. Since at least the eighteenth century in Canada, the further you moved beyond the

private life of the individual the more likely it has been that nobody in the country has, will have, or ever has had real power; that has been reserved for people in France, England, or America. So the public dimension to our lives has been taken away from us, made alien to us, just as surely as our furs and mineral resources; any initiative that resonates in that dimension lacks a measure of reality.

This is not something the individual is usually conscious of; few people say to themselves, "Why work to build up somebody else's colony?" Rather it is a climate that develops over decades and centuries, and whose central assumption is that the people you belong to can never act for itself, with self-respect. In that climate private incentive is sapped and the common good is a vague abstraction. You live in somebody else's country.

And so you take refuge, if you are a Canadian, in greyness and in a strange, low-key cynicism. And you reassure yourself by accepting a very low ceiling on what you can achieve. Hence the relatively low productivity of Canadian working people; the timidity of our entrepreneurs and lending institutions; the tendency of our first-rate artists and thinkers to perform or analyze other nations' achievements rather than become creators; and the impression our politicians convey that standing up to Americans in sponky negotiation, running the risk of being disliked by their counterparts elsewhere, would threaten everything on which they've staked their own identities.

And such an idea as 'building a country to which we'll be proud to belong' is dismissed by most Canadians, with a squirm of embarrassment, as public-relations hype that has nothing to do with their own lives. We would genuinely like to be less neuter among other nations, and to ourselves; but anybody with a concrete suggestion will be treated like a cheerleader at a funeral. In a country with a 400-year experience of colonialism, what other reflex would be honest? And anyhow, most of the cam-

paings to make us less apathetic have been con jobs; either we were supposed to work hander to boost somebody's profits abroad, or we were being invited to join the other happy peasants in decorous orgies of basket-weaving and folf-dancing (remember Centennial?). No wonder if we are, like all colonized peoples, very cynical. Yet it is amazing how seldom we stop and get irritated that, confronted with the challenge of becoming a larger and better people, we have no way of responding but cynicism.

For wanting to help make a worthwhile country — is that really an impulse one should be embarrassed by? Are we really such pygmies? In Canada, except for the supremely naive/or the supremely determined, the impulse does embarrass us. And so as public beings (for in our private lives we are often driven people) we take the easy way out, working and living in lacklustre fashion: grey, solid, resigned and without initiative. We are like the lazybones natives whom the British sahibs were constantly chewing out. Though perhaps it is better to resist by dragging your feet than to spring to your master's every command. It is just that the diminution of life-possibilities is so great, and the people who suffer the most are ourselves.

- (2) The colonized people is full of unfocused resentment, which it directs against itself. Resentment because its citizens are unable to partake in the life of their country with dignity or self-respect — since they don't even own it; unfocused because it has been bred into them that they are innately inferior, they have somehow brought this deprivation on themselves.

"Canadians never recognize anything good if it is their own." "Canadians will never risk money in their own country." "Canadians are a bore." It is from put-down remarks such as these that the colonial must fashion his sense of worth and identity. So far as that goes, the criticisms are usually true. But they do not describe anything innate; they describe the defence mechanisms of a

colonized people. Nevertheless they are taken up and recited by that people in a frenzy of self-hatred. Nobody runs down Canada more than the Canadians.

For that is what a colonized people does with its discomfort and resentment: directs it against itself as a whole, and subdivides into smaller groups which can then release it by hacking away at each other. This vague but powerful resentment shies away from its real targets — the colonizing power, and the leaders of its own acquiescence — and issues instead in senseless attacks on its members. Of course we do not have warring tribes here, as in certain African countries, nor warring religions as in Ireland, which escape into mindless slaughter of their colonized fellows. So it is easy to ignore the fact that we have five warring regions, which long ago set up an aggressive pecking-order among themselves and go regularly — though politely — for each other's throats. If you live in Ontario but are owned in England, why not cope by making a colony out of the rest of the country? Or if you live in Alberta and have funny feelings about what's happened to your oil and potash, if you suspect there's been a certain lack of gumption and you're somehow part of it, why not cope by going after the Quebeckers instead? Likewise, it is easy to ignore the fact that we tie up fabulous amounts of energy explaining away our colonial status, or trying not to notice it, or hopelessly lamenting it. Like every colonized people, we find those self-destructive things an easier release than saying together, "Our mutual situation vis-a-vis France, or England, or America, is intolerable. Let's stop taking things out on each other and change it."

- (3) A colonial people apes its imperial masters, but without the drive, conviction, or vivacity that characterize the original. The result is often a grotesque travesty, all style and no substance, and it is particularly exaggerated among the more privileged members of the colony. Fifty years ago the classic example was the little Englishman,

who was — whether in politics, education, the clergy or wherever — more stuffily British than the British.

The best contemporary example is probably the Canadian businessman or bank manager, who so often has all the smugness and blinkered vision of his counterpart in America but none of the latter's inventiveness and nerve. Or the colonized, second-rate Canadian intellectual, still fervently explaining that we have to give the best university jobs to Americans if we want real excellence. Or the Liberal cabinet minister or civil-service mandarin, secure in the knowledge that his calling is to integrate this country still more closely into the empire, condescendingly satisfied that it is all in the natives' best interests. (The outrage of these Little Americans, when confronted with the suggestion that Canadians may have as much innate talent and pluck as anyone else, is apparently inexplicable; they become just furious. But the Little American has spent much of his life throttling his own talent and imitating the forms of somebody else's and now people have the gall to suggest it was all unnecessary, was in fact dishonourable. Of course he becomes apoplectic; but, by the second principle we noticed above, it is inevitably the uppity natives he tees off on.)

Presumably Americans of any mettle find these specimens just as contemptible today as Englishmen of stature did at the turn of the century. Though most powerful Americans will take care to snicker in private; why do anything to disturb such easy marks? But none of this gets through to our unflappable sellouts anyway, as they wind their way through their endless ritual obeisances. We could all laugh at them too — if they weren't selling us.

DENNIS LEE