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NEGATIVE NATIONALISM AND THE POETRY OF DENNIS LEE

BY

ROBERT STUART GRANT

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the
Department of English in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts at the
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Windsor, Ontario

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ABSTRACT

An article by Louis Dudek suggested that the literary nationalism evident in much 19th Century English Canadian poetry did not simply die out after the First World War but rather evolved into a new poetic phenomenon which he terms "nationalism-in-reverse". This contemporary version of literary nationalism manifests itself in terms of a negative bias; it is an expression of a rational disillusionment presented in terms of Canadian reality.

The poetry of Dennis Lee (Co-Director of House of Anansi Press and sometime Resource person at Rochdale College) seemed to lend itself well to explication in terms of Dudek's description.

An abbreviated rehearsal of the parallel histories of political and literary nationalism in English Canada would provide a perspective from which to view this negative nationalism to which Dudek alludes. And a careful reading of Dennis Lee's poetry would hopefully reveal the extent to which this contemporary Canadian poet's works evince "nationalism-in-reverse".

A study revealed that as Lee's poetry developed (both in terms of craft and sensitivity) he tended more and more to link his spiritual anguish to Canada's political indecisiveness and to a technology and empire belonging to the United States of America. This sentiment found its

culmination in Lee's Civil Elegies in which he laments the death of Canada as a nation. Lee does not, however, approach the ideological vehemence of contemporary prose statements of this sentiment, but rather views the fate of Canadians and Canada with an understanding that is derived from sharing that same fate.

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Chapter I:

INTRODUCTION

Poems such as Charles G. D. Roberts' "Canada" or Charles Mair's "Tecumseh" form a part of Canada's tradition of literary nationalism. They and other poems like them were the product of a particular social milieu, a not unpredictable by-product of a 19th Century romantic idealism. This literary tradition supposedly expired shortly after the First World War, together with the popular sentiment known as nationalism, which had paralleled and inspired it.

Louis Dudek suggests, however, that this tradition has rather evolved into a modern tradition of literary nationalism which he identifies as a "nationalism-in-reverse," in which we see

a fragmented image of Canada, shot through with negative bias -- a wasteland poetry presented in terms of Canadian reality. ¹

The distinguishing characteristics of this new genre of Canadian poetry are: the use of images and ideas more or less peculiar to Canada; often a negative bias against Canada and things Canadian (Ramsay Cook remarked in the Winter 1970 issue of South Atlantic Quarterly that "Nationalism in Canada, as elsewhere, is very often the doctrine of the discontented. Indeed, it might be argued that while a patriot is a man who loves his country, a nationalist is a man who hates it.") and

¹ Louis Dudek, "Nationalism in Canadian Poetry," Queen's Quarterly, LXXV, (1968), 567.

occasionally it includes expressions of personal alienation and a disillusionment with modern, technological society, i.e., "American society" since the U.S. seems to be the fountainhead of modern technology.

Perhaps "nationalism" is not quite the right word to use in describing this genre of modern Canadian poetry, since it evokes mental images of protective tariffs, transcontinental railways and Imperial connexions. But the only alternatives are either to coin a new descriptor to describe this poetic phenomenon (perhaps "msilanoitan" -- which is, of course, "nationalism" in reverse) or to retain the word "nationalism" and to consign to it a somewhat new interpretation (like Humpty Dumpty, who insisted, "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less.")²

Since Dennis Lee, the primary subject of this thesis, refers to himself as a "WASP Canadian nationalist," then the use of this term can perhaps be retained in describing his poetry.

Dennis Beynon Lee was born in Toronto, Ontario on 31st August, 1939, and with the exception of two years spent working and writing in Europe, he has spent most of his life in the city of Toronto.

Lee took both the B.A. and M.A. degrees in English Literature at the University of Toronto and then taught English at the same institution from 1963-1967. In 1967 he

² Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass (New York: Random House, 1946), 94.

became a Resource Person at Rochdale College in Toronto.

Rochdale, a new "college," is described by Lee in his essay, "Getting to Rochdale," as

an experiment in higher education and urban living which opened in Toronto in the fall of 1967. It grew out of the co-operative student housing movement, which is very dynamic in Toronto, but it has become legally independent.

.....

At the moment there are some 30 full-time members of the college, who come from all over North America and range from Ph.D.'s to high school dropouts. They are much younger than a cross-section of the university, but somewhat older than a cross-section of undergraduates. There are another 50-200 part-time participants, mostly students or teachers at degree-granting institutions in Toronto. We occupy six rented houses this year; next fall we'll move into an 18-storey building which is under construction at the corner of Huron and Bloor. It will house 850 residents, who will own and operate the building co-operatively; it will also become a focal point for the college's external members. It is up to each member to determine the extent, form and content of his participation in the college's educational life -- including, in a number of cases, none at all. 3

As an experiment, Rochdale for Lee was not a complete success. Looking back on his experience, Lee states in a personal letter that Rochdale "now looks like a detour." 4

A much greater personal success for Lee was the publishing house he and Dave Godfrey founded in the spring of the same year (1967) that he joined Rochdale College. The firm's inception is described in one of their 1969 book catalogues:

3 Dennis Lee, "Getting to Rochdale," in The University Game (Toronto, 1968), 77.

4 See the letter to Robert Grant in Appendix, dated 23 February 1971.

House of Anansi was created in the spring of 1967 by Dave Godfrey and Dennis Lee, over 12 bottles of beer in the Babloor pub in Toronto. Since then it has published about 20 books, created at least 53 Master Plans for revolutionizing publishing in Canada (none of them remotely workable), and come to be recognized as the leading publishing voice for youth and imagination in the country.

Anansi has published books by Purdy, Grant, Ginsberg, Atwood; it also does a high proportion of books by newcomers. To our surprise, both kinds sell well. We find that we now have an Anansi readership, who count on our new titles to keep them in touch with interesting Canadian writing.

Our future publishing will be evenly divided among poetry, fiction and social criticism. It will go on being both playful and hard-nosed -- business-like where that is needed but making more sense as play than as work.

The firm's logogram is, appropriately enough, a large black spider, in honour of Anansi, the "playful" African spider-god, who after he had created the world, went around playing pranks on the inhabitants.

Among Anansi's first publications in 1967 were Dave Godfrey's collection of short stories, Death Goes Better with Coca-Cola and Lee's first volume of verse, Kingdom of Absence. The success of these first two publishing ventures was followed in succeeding years by the publication of Mark Satin's (director of the Toronto Anti-Draft Programme) Manual for Draft-age Immigrants to Canada. Now in its fourth printing, having sold more than 35,000 copies, the Manual is described in the publisher's blurb as "The Baedeker of young Americans considering Canadian citizenship."

During the same year as the first printing of Satin's

Manual (1968), Anansi published Lee and Adelman's (editors) The University Game, a collection of essays largely critical of modern universities; Lee's second volume of verse, Civil Elegies; and an anthology of "never-before-published" poems by young Canadian poets, edited by Dennis Lee and entitled, T.O.Now: The Young Toronto Poets. This latter volume was succeeded by a second volume in 1969, edited by Peter Anson, and entitled Canada First in honour of the 19th Century nationalist association. Canada First, however, was not truly representative of Canada's young poets, and accordingly was subtitled, "a mare usque ad Edmonton" as an apology to the West Coast poets. In 1971 a third Anansi anthology of emerging poets appeared, edited by Jack Ludwig and Andy Wainwright, this time bearing the simple title, Soundings.

Throughout its short history, Anansi has maintained its original editorial policy of publishing significant works in the areas of fiction, social criticism and poetry. The policy has been very successful and through a series of what can only be termed remarkable editorial coups, Anansi has won well-known writers away from other publishers. Some of those coups have included the publication of George Grant's Technology and Empire, Michael Ondaatje's volume of verse, The Collected Works of Billy the Kid (winner of the Governor-General's award for 1970), Allen Ginsberg's Airplane Dreams, and most recently, Northrop Frye's collection of essays, The Bush Garden.

For the year 1971, Lee has decided to relinquish temporarily many of his responsibilities to Anansi and Rochdale College in order to devote his time more fully to writing new poetry and revising many of his earlier works.

Without a doubt, Lee has been very influential in bringing new names and works to the attention of Canada's reading public. But just as noteworthy has been the part Lee's poetry has played in reflecting the new sense of nationalism (and anti-Americanism) among many young English-speaking Canadians.

Chapter II:

CANADIAN NATIONALISM: LITERARY AND SOCIAL FORCES

"A Canadian is a fellow who has become a North American without becoming an American."

Arthur Lyon Phelps (quoted by Sutherland in Dudek's The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada, p. 58)

A nation is a "society united by a common error as to its origins and a common aversion to its neighbors."

Aldous Huxley (quoted by Shafer in Nationalism: Myth and Reality, p.6)

Boyd C. Shafer, the American historian, writing in 1955, stated that "the nation-state and nationalism are possibly beginning to decline today because modern technology, the volume of industrial production and commerce, the speed of communication, and perhaps the enlightenment of many people are making national boundaries obsolete." 5

Shafer had perhaps spoken too soon. Grant's Lament for a Nation (published in 1965), Dennis Lee's Civil Elegies (1968), Lumsden's Close the 49th Parallel, etc. (1970), in addition to articles by Louis Dudek and Frank Watt on nationalism in Canadian literature, and the 50th anniversary issue of the Canadian Forum (April 1970) in which the three editorials and several articles are addressed to the fact of Canadian nationalism, all go together to evince the fact that in Canada at least, nationalism is to some extent still surviving.

Peculiarly enough, the very factors which Shafer cites as contributing to the diminution of nationalism are, in fact, contributing to a revival of nationalism among some English-speaking Canadians.

Particularly offensive to the contemporary English Canadian nationalist is "modern technology" and the "volume of industrial production and commerce". They are evidence

5 Boyd C. Shafer, Nationalism: Myth and Reality (New York, 1955), 10.

of a world dominated by the United States, which is the fountainhead of modern technology and commerce. Abraham Rotstein expresses this sentiment in his paper, "Binding Prometheus," where he declares that "the one most significant area of this threat to national independence is the virtual monopolization of new technological development in the hands of the American multinational corporation which has become the single most dynamic force of our time." ⁶

Or as George Grant expresses it: "The aspirations of progress have made Canada redundant." ⁷

The reasoning of such nationalists as Grant goes as follows: American scientists tend to direct their efforts to such areas as control of heredity, the human mind and society. Each new victory in biochemistry or psychology gives the American politician "prodigious power to universalize and homogenize", ⁸ subjugating the rest of the world to the American way of life, making all indigenous cultures anachronistic. Compounding the problem are America's massive public and private "multi-national" ⁹ corporations which cooperate with these scientists "in their efforts to master nature and reshape humanity." ¹⁰

⁶ Abraham Rotstein, "Binding Prometheus," in Close the 49th Parallel, etc., The Americanization of Canada. (Toronto, 1970), 211.

⁷ George Grant, Lament for a Nation (Toronto, 1965), 53.

⁸ Grant, op. cit., 54.

⁹ "Multi-national": a term commonly used cynically to mean an American parent corporation which has foreign subsidiaries.

¹⁰ Grant, op. cit., pp. 63-64.

Internationally, the imperial power of these corporations has destroyed indigenous cultures in every corner of the globe. Communist imperialism is more brutally immediate, but American capitalism has shown itself more subtly able to dissolve indigenous societies. 11

The "speed of communication" and the "enlightenment of many people" which Shafer had hoped would make national boundaries obsolete, are also backfiring into attitudes of anti-Americanism. Melville Watkins, in his paper, "Technology and Nationalism," points out that although

American periodicals (such as Time and Life), Hollywood, and radio and TV piping American programmes into Canadian homes, have created mass taste on a continental basis, 12

they have also served to enlighten many Canadians to the fact that "Canada was only the first to receive the smothering embrace of enveloping U.S. technology as the United States moved to its present position of forming a virtually worldwide environment."

"American television programmes," continues Watkins, "while blanketing the world also awaken it; they may yet turn out to be the most effective technique imaginable for creating anti-Americanism." 13

Fear and mistrust of a technology which pervades our private and collective existence and shapes our values and

11 Grant, op. cit., 64.

12 Melville Watkins, "Technology and Nationalism," in Nationalism in Canada, ed. by Peter Russell (Toronto, 1966), p. 297.

13 Ibid., p. 298.

moulds our institutions,¹⁴ as well as fear of the anonymous tyranny wielded by the concomitant "modern bureaucracy, necessary for co-ordination and control of technology"¹⁵ seem to lead inevitably to an attitude of anti-Americanism, because the United States is the fountainhead of these social forces. That this fear of a technology and bureaucracy which largely originates in the U.S. has led to a hatred of things American is not surprising. It is only human nature to hate that which we most fear. Indeed, fear, envy and a resulting hatred of the United States seems to have been of prime importance throughout the history of English Canadian nationalism.

Technology and commercial imperialism are only the latest bugbears contributing to a revived Canadian nationalism. Prior to these things, fear of military aggression (a fear not without foundation, based upon the experiences of the War of 1812), fear that America's "manifest destiny"¹⁶ might extend northward, fear of annexation,¹⁷ fear of gradual absorption of a numerically smaller country by a larger, fear

¹⁴ Watkins, op. cit., 284.

¹⁵ Rotstein, op. cit., 216.

¹⁶ "manifest destiny": a phrase referring to the goals of American expansionists, particular of the 1840s, to extend the boundaries of the U.S. westward to the Pacific.

¹⁷ annexation: Those who founded the Canada First Movement feared that after the Union had won the American Civil War, the Monroe Doctrine might look to the north and the U.S. would begin to subsume a sparsely populated Canada. See Carl Berger, The Sense of Power... (Toronto, 1970), p. 61.

of "mobocracy",¹⁸ each in its turn has helped nourish a nationalist sentiment among Canadians.

But fear of the U.S. forms only the negative side of the nationalist coin. On the positive side there has been the strong appeal to Canada's potential greatness. An expression of faith in this potential is somewhat hyperbolically stated by the words of William Morris in an 1880 issue of the Canadian Monthly and National Review:

As power slips from the disorganized grasp of the United States, it will fall to Canada as her natural right, making her the first nation on this continent, as she is now the second. United closely, as she shall be from the Atlantic to the Pacific by a common nationality, our country will go on, increasing from age to age in wealth, in power and in glory... 19

Of course, any stance which stresses a "common nationality" in Canada precludes recognition of the French fact. Indeed, a suspicion of French Canadian Catholicism was held by many of those responsible for articulating the English Canadian national consciousness, especially among the intensely nationalistic Canada Firsters. 20

The realization of Canada's potential has been a commonly held aspiration throughout Canadian history. Only the means were in real dispute. One means of seeing Canada come into her own was through Imperial Federation, which Carl Berger

18 "mobocracy": a term used by 19th Century Canadian critics to describe the Republican democracy of the United States.

19 quoted by Ramsay Cook, "Nationalism in Canada..." The South Atlantic Quarterly, LXIX (Winter, 1970), 2.

20 Carl Berger, The Sense of Power... (Toronto, 1970), pp. 72-73.

calls "one form of Canadian nationalism." ²¹ Establishing closer ties with Great Britain would, of course, ward off any potential threat from the U.S. But in addition, it was hoped by many Imperialists that Canada would become "the future centre and dominating portion of the British Empire."²²

The appeal of Imperial Federation, however, was killed by the First World War. The fact that 50,000 Canadians had died in Europe by 1918 dominated all discussions of imperial unity and gave "enormous impetus to North American isolationism." ²³

Annexation to the United States was another means of raising Canada's status among the nations of the world and hopefully achieving immediate economic benefits. Perhaps the first serious move towards annexation was made in 1848 by the Reform Club. Then in October, 1849, the "Annexation Manifesto" appeared in the Montreal Gazette, signed by more than 300 prominent, English-speaking Montrealers, which called for a "friendly and peaceful separation from (the) British connexion and a union upon equitable terms with the great North American Confederation of Sovereign States." ²⁴

The proposal, backed mostly by the Montreal business

²¹ Berger, op. cit., 259.

²² W. D. Lighthall, Canada, A Modern Nation (Montreal, 1940), 78, cited in Berger, op. cit., 261.

²³ Berger, op. cit., 264.

²⁴ Kenneth McNaught, The Pelican History of Canada (New York, 1968), 110.

community, was in response to the loss of preferential trade treatment by Great Britain, when the latter shifted to a free trade position. ²⁵ This potential crisis, however, was averted when most Canadian Tories quickly dissociated themselves from the "heresy of the Montreal group" ²⁶ and by Lord Elgin, the governor-general of British North America, who

persuaded London, that a more creative and natural relationship could be sustained by using the diplomatic influence and talents of Britain to secure alternative economic benefits to those lost by the Canadians through removal of preferential imperial trade controls. ²⁷

More than thirty years later, talk of annexation was again revived, but this time such talk originated with the distraught Canadian consumer. American manufacturing, protected by stiff tariff barriers, had begun to put the squeeze on Canadian manufacturers who were without similar tariff protection. The Macdonald government felt compelled to protect the home economy with reciprocal duties euphemistically termed the National Policy (1879). The new tariff schedule, however, was unable to avert the economic depression which followed, and during the 1880s and 1890s nearly one-third of Canada's population emigrated to the more prosperous United States. ²⁸

²⁵ S. F. Wise and Robert Craig Brown, Canada Views the United States... (Seattle, 1967), 46.

²⁶ Wise, op. cit., 47.

²⁷ McNaught, op. cit., pp. 103-104.

²⁸ Norman Penlington, Canada and Imperialism (Toronto, 1965), 6.

Those who did not emigrate to the United States during this time tended to view the U.S. from an attitude of moral superiority. American institutions such as the Presidency had particularly harsh criticisms leveled against it by Canadian critics who felt that the President, once elected, was no longer responsible to the people who had elected him.²⁹ And the Congress, which was supposedly responsible to its constituents, appeared ineffectual in bringing any pressures to bear on the chief executive. The American House of Representatives, in particular, although unknown through first-hand knowledge by most Canadians, had earlier been caricatured as an "arena for the grossest kind of politicking, filled with scheming, corrupt, and disorderly congressmen engaged in fleecing their constituents and abusing their privileges."³⁰

Apart from any political union with the U.S., however, an alternative plan for commercial union with the Republic would have provided many Canadian emigrés of this period with the material benefits which they had craved. The plan, termed "Unrestricted Reciprocity with the United States" was devised by the Liberal Party in 1887, and expounded by its chief exponent, the Oxford-educated Goldwin Smith, formerly a member of the Canada Firsters. Reconsidering his earlier sentiments which were in favour of Canada First, Smith had pointed out that geographical regions ran North-South through

²⁹ Wise, op. cit., 100.

³⁰ Wise, op. cit., 79.

both Canada and the U.S., and that trade should follow this, the more natural course. ³¹ The plan, of course, was never implemented, although the sentiments which inspired it are still apparently held by some present-day Canadians.

At a time such as this, fraught as it was with uncertainty about Canada's place in North America, any talk of annexation, political or commercial, was sure to draw some intensely nationalistic responses, especially from the spokesmen of the Canada First Movement, an organization founded in 1868, a year after Confederation, by a group of intellectual patriots. ³² One of the spokesmen of that Movement, George Munro Grant, speaking before the Canadian Club of New York in 1887 (?) stated that

The adoption of the National Policy, or the protection of our manufacturers against all other countries, Britain included, was a distinct declaration of commercial independence, that has been reaffirmed again and again by the people of Canada. ³³

And that the phrase, "Canada First," the title of his speech, meant that Canada

though still nominally and officially in the colonial position -- is really a nation, and

³¹ Donald Creighton, Canada's First Century... (Toronto, 1970), pp. 69-70.

³² McNaught, op. cit., 156.

See also: David P. Gagan, "The Relevance of Canada First," Journal of Canadian Studies, (November, 1970), 36-44.

³³ George Munro Grant, "Canada First" (a speech "read before the Canadian Club of New York"), in New Papers on Canadian History, Art, Science, Literature, and Commerce. (n.p., 1887?), pp. 250-251.

that therefore its interests and honor (sic) must be regarded by all true Canadians as first or supreme. 34

In explanation, Grant continued:

The present calm determination to protect our fisheries, and to waive no jot of our rights, although all our interests and feelings lie in the direction of unfettered commercial intercourse, and the preservation of friendly feelings with the United States, is another proof that we have become one people. 35

Then towards the end of the speech, Grant sketched a nationalist sentiment -- the possibility of great deeds and national heroes -- which, of course, does not necessarily follow from the facts simply stated:

(we) have made ourselves the fifth maritime nation in the world. We own great ocean-going steam fleets, and have constructed canals and railroads as wonderful as any to be found on the planet... From such an industrious, duty-doing stock, heroes are apt to spring. But the heroes must come or we shall have only a community of beavers, not a nation. 36

This last statement by Grant in some ways sounds like an oblique reference to racial superiority. Indeed, George Denison and Robert Grant Haliburton, two of the co-founders of the Canada First Movement, explicitly held to the idea that being of racially purer stock than the population of the United States and lacking the debilitating affects of a southerly climate,

34 G. M. Grant, op. cit., 247.

35 G. M. Grant, op. cit., 251.

36 G. M. Grant, op. cit., 259.

Canadians were destined for greatness. 37

But try as these nationalists did to inspire Canada to heroic heights, or at least to maintain an autonomous Canadian identity, Canada was becoming subtly more and more like the United States, a fact remarked by Frederick Engels, while visiting Canada in 1888, a year after the speech given by George M. Grant.

It is a strange transition from the States to Canada. First one imagines that one is in Europe again, and one thinks one is in a positively retrogressing and decaying country. Here one sees how necessary the feverish speculative spirit of the Americans is for the rapid development of a new country (presupposing capitalist production as a basis) and in ten years this sleepy country will be ripe for annexation.... Besides, this country is half annexed already socially -- hotels, newspapers, advertising, etc., all on the American pattern. And they may try and resist as much as they like; the economic necessity of an infusion of Yankee blood will have its way and abolish this ridiculous boundary line -- and when the time comes John Bull will say 'yea and Amen' to it. 38

As Canada grew more in the likeness of the U.S., many nationalistic Canadians became more sensitive to the distinctions between Canadian and American life and institutions, acting out what Freud termed the "Narcissism of small differences." 39 Attitudes such as this survive even to the present day and are satirized in Eugene McNamara's short story, "Made in Canada." 40

37 McNaught, op. cit., 159.

38 Ramsay Cook, "A Nationalist Intellectual Behind Every Maple Tree", Saturday Night LXXXV (April, 1970), 21.

39 Wise, op. cit., 96.

40 Eugene McNamara, "Made in Canada," Queen's Quarterly, LXXV (1968), pp. 597-612.

In addition to Imperial Federation and annexation, the third means of achieving some degree of Canada's potential as a world power was to pursue an entirely independent course in both foreign and domestic policy. This stance is reflected in Canadian foreign policy after 1921, which stressed status and autonomy.⁴¹ It is also reflected in the many "Canadian" associations which came into being during the 1920s and early 1930s, including the Canadian Authors Association (founded in 1921), the Canadian Historical Association (May 18, 1922), the Canadian Institute of International Affairs (1928) and the Dominion Drama Festival (1933). Along with these associations, Canada's "Independent Journal of Opinion and the Arts," the Canadian Forum, came into being in 1920.

This pursuit of an "independent" stance had the effect of severing the umbilical ties with England, but as the influence of Great Britain diminished that of the U.S. increased proportionately. At the heart of the situation was Canada's need for capital investments in order to exploit her natural resources and expand her economy. A prospering America responded to this with vigour, seeing in Canada both a new marketplace and a good investment.

An advertisement, headed by the words, "Canada -- a neighbor with money to spend," appearing in the American publication, The Literary Digest, for March 1, 1919, demonstrates the appeal to American capital to "cultivate the Canadian

⁴¹ Berger, op. cit., 264.

market." The success of American investment -- as cited by this advertisement -- was remarkable even for this early date. But despite the protectionist tariffs of both nations, this situation was to get even better, at least for the Americans. 42

During the decade 1920-1930, British investments had continued to decline sharply, while American investments had sharply increased. To some degree, Canada might have anticipated the decline in British investment, since the nineteenth-century British empire followed a general policy of devolution in both economics and politics, encouraging local initiative and granting local autonomy. 43 What she was perhaps unprepared for was the economic voraciousness of the American empire.

The trend continued for the next several decades until 1945 when 70% of the non-resident investment in Canada was attributable to Americans while British investment had declined to 25% of the non-resident investment.

While non-resident investment in Canada was coming under the control of Americans, Canadian imports and exports were resulting in a very serious deficit in balance of payments to the U.S. By 1958, "60 percent of Canadian exports were sold to the American Republic, and over 70 percent of imports were bought from it." 44 The implications of this are sketched

42 See the Appendix for a copy of the advertisement.

43 Creighton, op. cit., 181.

44 Creighton, op. cit., p. 285.

in agonizing detail by a nationalistic booklet appearing in 1963 entitled, "How They Sold Our Canada to the U.S.A." 45

Although the tone of this booklet is one of rage, the facts are not overstated. An article appearing in the April 16, 1970 issue of the Detroit Free Press outlines the present state of affairs:

Americans own or control about two-thirds of Canada's manufacturing, forests, oil and mineral production.

Many of Canada's leaders feel strongly that this 'Yankee economic invasion' should be turned back, or placed under strict government control.

However, a majority of Canadians, politicians have found, are not prepared to pay the price in terms of lower living standards that withdrawal of American investment would entail. 46

That the problem is real enough was recognized by the present-day Canadian government's white paper on foreign policy, which appeared shortly after this article. In it, one of the government's stated positions was that "Canada must wage an unrelenting struggle to prevent its sovereignty, independence and cultural identity from being undermined by the preponderant power and influence of the United States." 47

But a concern over American control of the Canadian economy, a concern which has grown commensurately with that control since about the 1920s has in the past ten years spilled over into concern about such areas as the infringement

45 Andrew Lamorie (pseud.). How They Sold Our Canada to the U.S.A. Gravenhurst, Ontario: Northern Book House, 1963.

46 Detroit Free Press, Thursday, April 16, 1970, p.6-A.

47 Globe & Mail, Friday, June 26, 1970, p. B-2.

of technology and bureaucracy on personal freedoms,⁴⁸ and the Americanization of Canadian universities.⁴⁹

By broadening the area of confrontation, disclosing that the problem of the Americanization of Canada is one which touches almost every person and every endeavour, the modern Canadian nationalist has evoked responses in an increasingly large number and wide range of people. However, the responses have ranged from indifference (or even opposition to any programme which implies giving up a standard of living fast approaching that of the U.S.) to such responses as the advocacy of socialism, or even just plain despair. This latter attitude of disillusionment with Canada and despair over her ultimate fate seems to be the stance taken by the poet, Dennis Lee, and certainly the one taken by his mentor, George P. Grant, in Lament for a Nation.

Occasionally however, an event such as the Pipeline controversy -- a situation in which the Liberal government in 1956 "railroaded" through a bill in Parliament establishing the Trans-Canada Pipe Lines Corp., to be built by capital raised by an American-controlled company -- will again precipitate a nationalistic reaction from among a large number of Canadians.⁵⁰

48 Grant, Lament..., passim.

49 See Peter Hughes "Winstanley", "Americanization of the University: Two Views," Canadian Forum, April-May, 1970, p. 96 ff. and James Steele and Robin Mathews, "The Universities: Take-over of the Mind" in Ian Lumsden (ed.), Close the 49th Parallel etc. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1970, p. 169 ff.

50 William Kilbourn, Pipeline; Transcanada and the Great Debate, A History of Business and Politics. Toronto: Macmillan, 1970.

But in general, Canadians tend to buy the American way of life, while harbouring just below the surface a non-specific anti-Americanism coupled with an irrational superiority complex.

Paralleling this evolution of nationalistic feeling in Canada has been an evolution in literary nationalism -- a phenomenon perhaps easier to demonstrate in Canadian poetry than in any other literary genre. That the evolution of literary nationalism has paralleled political nationalism is not to imply a cause-and-effect relationship. Specific incidents in Canadian history, although often resulting in a nationalistic response on the part of large numbers of Canadians, have not resulted in specific poetic celebrations of those incidents. Nevertheless, as Louis Dudek points out in his article, "Nationalism in Canadian Poetry",

the study of literature is always to some extent a political fact, as well as a purely aesthetic or literary one, though teachers and students are often unaware of that dimension. 51

What Dudek meant by this comment is that the very choice of a literature to be studied is an expression of a political outlook. The fact that the great nations of the world, such as Great Britain, United States, France, Germany, choose to have their high school and college students study the literature of their own country before studying "foreign" literature is a tacit expression of a belief that its literature is an expression of its quality of life. That Canadian students have until recently studied only British and American literatures

51 Dudek, op. cit., 557.

in their English classes is viewed as an expression of a colonial mentality:

Only nations still under tutelage, subordinate to others, live a life of virginal modesty: to them 'great art' is always what other people have done, especially those others to whom they are culturally and politically bound. 52

E. H. Dewart, in his 1864 edition of Selections from Canadian Poets, wrote in the preface:

A national literature is an essential element in the formation of a national character. It is not merely the record of a nation's mental progress: it is the expression of its intellectual life, the bond of national unity, and the guide of national energy. It may be fairly questioned, whether the whole range of history presents the spectacle of a people firmly united politically, without the subtle but powerful cement of a patriotic literature. 53

In Dewart's anthology a full one-third of the collection is devoted to "Descriptive and National" poetry, of which Helen M. Johnson's "Our Native Land" is a rather typical example of the "powerful cement of a patriotic literature" which Dewart alluded to in his preface. In this poem Miss Johnson rhapsodizes:

With loyal hearts we still abide
Beneath her sheltering wing; --
While with true patriot love and pride
To Canada we cling!

Nearly thirty years later, in 1889, W. D. Lighthall edited an entire volume of patriotic and sentimental verse

52 Dudek, op. cit., 559.

53 E. H. Dewart (ed.) Selection(s) from Canadian Poets. Montreal: n.p., 1864, p. ix-x.

entitled, Songs of the Great Dominion, which grouped the poems under such headings as "The Spirit of Canadian History", "Settlement Life", and "Seasons".⁵⁴ One of the poems in this volume is Charles G. D. Roberts' "An Ode to the Canadian Confederacy" in which the poet exhorts the nation to greatness:

Awake, my country, the hour of dreams is done!
 Doubt not, nor dread the greatness of thy fate.
 Tho' faint souls fear the keen, confronting sun,
 And fain would bid the morn of splendour wait;
 Tho' dreamers, rapt in starry visions, cry,
 "Lo, yon thy future, yon thy faith, thy fame!"
 And stretch vain hands to stars; thy fame is nigh,
 Here in Canadian hearth, and home, and name; --
 This name which yet shall grow
 Till all the nations know
 Us for a patriot people, heart and hand
 Loyal to our native earth, -- our own Canadian land!

.

O strong hearts of the North
 Let flame your loyalty forth
 And put the craven and base to an open shame,
 Till earth shall know the Child of Nations by her name!

Most all of the poems in Lighthall's volume are similar in tone and rhythm to English poems of the Romantic tradition. Indeed, the Canadian patriotic verse in this volume appears to be a by-product of a Romantic idealism.⁵⁵ For the most part it is as Dudek describes it: "absurd and inflated in manner... much too high-flown, lacking in particulars."⁵⁶ Nevertheless, production of this type of verse continued well into the 20th Century.

⁵⁴ William Douw Lighthall (ed.) Songs of the Great Dominion: Voices from the Forests and Waters, the Settlements and Cities of Canada. London: W. Scott, 1889.

⁵⁵ Dudek, op. cit., 563.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

When, late in the 19th Century, Canadian nationalists such as Bourinot⁵⁷ made imperialism the basis of their nationalist argument, poets such as Frederick George Scott seemed to follow dutifully, as Scott's publication in 1906 of A Hymn of Empire with its title poem demonstrates:

Lord, turn the hearts of cowards who prate,
 Afraid to dare or spend,
 The doctrine of a narrower State
 More easy to defend;
 Not this the watchword of our sires
 Who breathed with ocean's breath,
 Not this our spirit's ancient fires
 Which nought could quench but death. 58

But not all Canadian verse which we could perhaps class as nationalistic is as vague and lacking in specific detail as these poems. In fact, concomitant to this type of insipid patriotic verse there developed in Canadian poetry a tradition of what may be called epic verse -- or to use a phrase from Plato -- "hymns to gods and praises of famous men."⁵⁹ In this class would fall such works as Sangster's "Brock" or Charles Mair's "Tecumseh" in which is exalted the Indian leader who had assisted Brock in defending Canada against an armed invasion by the U.S. and thus averted possible annexation.⁶⁰ Even as late as 1952, appearing somewhat anachronistically to the mainstream of this tradition, is E. J. Pratt's epic,

57 Berger, "Race and Liberty: The Historical Ideas of George Bourinot," Canadian Historical Association. Annual Report, 1965, pp. 87-104.

58 Frederick George Scott, A Hymn of Empire (Toronto, 1906), 10.

59 quoted in Dudek, op. cit., 563.

60 Norman Shrive, Charles Mair, Literary Nationalist (Toronto, 1965).

"Towards the Last Spike", in which among others (such as the Chinese) those men with "Oatmeal ... in their blood and in their names," who had assisted in the construction of the Trans-Canada railway are praised for the edification of posterity.

In addition to these two parallel traditions, patriotic verse and the Canadian epic, is a third tradition of poetry in Canada which could qualify loosely as "nationalistic" -- and this is the ubiquitous Canadian poetry which either uses nature as the primary subject or in which there is a reflection of the poet's physical milieu. As Frank Watt suggested in his article on Canadian literary nationalism, "The one safe common denominator of all nationalistic Canadian writing is the land itself." In this same article he describes the development of this poetic phenomenon:

It is easy to trace this process through the history of Canadian poetry. Pre-Confederation poetry shows the Canadian terrain as a vast, hostile, dimly seen, unpoetical mass, the poet often struggling ineffectually to catch and express its feeling in imitations of the clear, regular, elegant couplets and poetic diction which Pope and his school bred to civilized perfection in the gardens of England. By the 1880s poets are not any longer bemoaning the inhuman and unpoetical nature of Canadian landscape: they are recording its details and its moods with high fidelity. By the mid-twentieth century poets have gone a stage further: the terrain is no longer merely external, something to be observed closely and described accurately in appropriate language. If it is referred to at all it is used symbolically, or as an extension or manifestation of the human. The country may still appear vast, alien and forbidding at times, but the poet has it under greater imaginative control. 61

61 Frank Watt, "Nationalism in Canadian Literature," in Nationalism in Canada, ed. by Peter Russell (Toronto, 1966), 241.

As these traditions of literary nationalism matured in Canada, there also grew a more conscious awareness that literature and nationalism are indeed related and that the relationship is not necessarily accidental. This awareness was undoubtedly one of the motivating factors behind the founding of the Canadian Authors Association in 1921 and their yearly campaign to "Buy Canadian Books" -- although the officially stated reason for their founding was for the

specific purpose of opposing an iniquitous Copyright Act by which certain sinister interests had robbed the native author of a clear title to his own work and had disgraced Canada in the eyes of foreign authors.

.
 It was assumed also that such a nation-wide organization might achieve subsidiary ends (a) by annual educational campaigns, seeking to give the Canadian public a nodding acquaintance with the literature that we already possess and so build up a sympathetic audience for the writers of the present and the future, (b) by fostering mutual acquaintance and encouragement, and (c) by a joint study of literature and the problems of authorship. 62

But in 1926, an article by Douglas Bush appearing in the Canadian Forum, had brought the Canadian Authors Association to task for their annual "educational campaigns" and the beginning of the end of traditional literary nationalism in Canada was in sight:

As each Canadian Book Week or gathering of the Authors' Association recedes into the past and the echoes of mutual adulation roll comfortably from soul to soul, there rises insistently in one's bosom the impolite query: "Do Canadian authors ever read anything?" It would seem

62 Watson Kirkconnell, (reply to Douglas Bush in letters to the editor), Canadian Forum, VII (January, 1927), 110.

incredible that intelligent persons who were abreast of the contemporary movement could hold the opinions which most of our literati exuberantly express about their own and their friends'.

In the literary way Canada is probably the most backward country, for its population, in the civilized world, and the quickest way to get rid of this unpleasant family skeleton is to abolish critical standards and be a booster. We don't know what to write, but by jingo if we do we have the pen, we have the ink, we have the paper too. And so we have bulky histories of Canadian literature praising the product of every citizen who ever held a pen...63

The Canadian Authors Association's vehement opposition to this criticism notwithstanding, the judgment that Canadian literature was not "world famous", at least not yet, seemed to stick, and many of the poets now included in modern Canadian anthologies either withdrew their membership or refused ever to become members.

At about this same time, F. R. Scott, the son of the poet who had earlier written "A Hymn of Empire" celebrated the Association in his satirical poem, "The Canadian Authors Meet", in which we see

Expansive puppets percolate self-unction
 Beneath a portrait of the Prince of Wales.

The air is heavy with "Canadian" topics,
 And Carman, Lampman, Roberts, Campbell, Scott,
 Are measured for their faith and philanthropics,
 Their zeal for God and King, their earnest thought.

O Canada, O Canada, Oh can
 A day go by without new authors springing
 To paint the native maple, and to plan
 More ways to set the selfsame welkin ringing?

63 Douglas Bush, "Making Literature Hum," Canadian Forum, VII (December, 1926), 72.

Within two years of Bush's article (in 1928), A.J.M. Smith had published an article entitled, "Wanted: Canadian Criticism" in which the blame for poor Canadian writing was placed on poor Canadian criticism. To Smith, criticism of the time seemed to be a "mixture of blind optimism and materialistic patriotism, a kind of my-mother-drunk-or-sober complex that operates most efficiently in the world of affairs and finds its ideal action summarized in the slogan 'Buy Made in Canada Goods.'" ⁶⁴

Continuing in the same manner, Smith observes that, apparently, if the poet writes of

the far north and the wild west and the picturesque east, seasoning well with allusions to the Canada goose, fir trees, maple leaves, snowshoes, northern lights, etc., the public grasp the fact that you are a Canadian poet, whose works are to be bought from the same patriotic motive that prompts the purchaser of Eddy's Matches or a Massey-Harris farm implement, and read along with Ralph Connor and Eaton's Catalogue.

.....

if (only) the Canadian Authors (Association) had the honesty to change the name of their society to the Journalists' Branch of the Canadian Manufacturers' Association and to quit kidding the public every Christmas that it has a moral obligation to buy poor Canadian, rather than good foreign books. ⁶⁵

John Sutherland, writing nearly 20 years later (1947?), in his preface to Other Canadians ⁶⁶ similarly criticised the

⁶⁴ A.J.M. Smith, "Wanted: Canadian Criticism" in Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski, The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada (Toronto, 1967), 31.

⁶⁵ Smith, op. cit., 32.

⁶⁶ John Sutherland, Other Canadians, Anthology of the New Poetry in Canada, 1940-1946. Montreal, First Statement Press, 1947(?).

Canadian Authors Association. The Association had published a review article in which the reviewer had remarked:

His verse contains many ideas which are essentially Canadian, and that is good, for he may stimulate other Canadian poets to choose their homeland as subject for their verse. If this is accomplished Mr. Anderson will have made a valuable contribution to Canadian literature. 67

Sutherland, of course, takes the CAA to task for thinking that "a man who chooses his homeland as his theme will make a valuable contribution to Canadian literature." 68

But along the same lines, Sutherland takes A.J.M. Smith to task for having divided all Canadian poetry in his 1943 anthology into "native" and "cosmopolitan" -- the latter concerning itself with human emotions, problems, etc. For Sutherland, there was no poetry which could be termed "native" since there was no Canadian poetic tradition. All Canadian poetry, as Sutherland saw it, merely paralleled English and American poetic traditions. Traditions of English and American poetry had been transplanted to Canada, and was "native only in this sense of being smaller and more cramped than the home plant." 69 Any possibility of a poetic tradition in Canada would have to be found in the poetry of such writers as Layton, Dudek and Souster -- which poetry was concerned with "the individual and the individual's relation to society." 70

67 Sutherland, quoted in Dudek and Gnarowski, The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada. 48.

68 Sutherland, op. cit., 49.

69 Sutherland, op. cit., 54.

70 Sutherland, op. cit., 57.

For Northrop Frye, however, there is something distinctive about Canadian poetry. For Frye, Smith's anthology "unconsciously proves the existence of a definable Canadian genius...which is neither British nor American but, for all its echoes and imitations and second-hand ideas, peculiarly our own." ⁷¹ The genius of Canadian poetry for Frye, at least at this time, is the way in which the poet so often treats nature; "there is little of the vagueness of great open spaces in it...One finds rather an intent and closely focused vision, often on something in itself quite unimportant." ⁷² This "controlled vision", according to Frye, time and again reveals "the fact that life struggles and suffers in a nature which is blankly indifferent to it," that man's

thrifty little heaps of civilized values look pitiful beside nature's apparently meaningless power to waste and destroy on a superhuman scale, and such a nature suggests an equally ruthless and subconscious God, or else no God. ⁷³

With this decline of the so-called maple leaf school of poetry, which follows the decline of Romantic idealistic poetry in general (although the decline in Canadian poetry was hastened by such critics as Bush, Smith and Sutherland) there was a corresponding rise of rational disillusionment, irony and harsh reality in Canadian poetry, a phenomenon which Dudek labels

⁷¹ Northrop Frye, "Canada and Its Poetry" in Dudek and Gnarowski, op. cit., 88.

⁷² Frye, op. cit., 93.

⁷³ Frye, op. cit., 94.

"nationalism-in-reverse." 74

This transition from traditional literary nationalism to a literary nationalism-in-reverse parallels, in time at least, Canada's political transition from dependency on Imperial connexions as a means of fostering national aspirations (a political phenomenon extant through the First World War) 75 to a post-war isolationist stance coupled with a desire for national status and autonomy. From the 1920s on, however, a growing dependence on American capital forced many to the conclusion that the political transition was merely from the status of British colony to that of American satellite. 76 And the bitter disillusionment which accompanied this new arrangement seems to be reflected in the love/hatred with which such varied modern poets as Birney, Layton and Atwood sardonically view their country.

In Earle Birney's 1948 poem, "Canada: Case History" we read of Canada as

... the case of a high-school land,
deadset in adolescence...

.....

His Uncle spoils him with candy, of course
yet shouts him down when he talks at table. 77

74 Dudek, op. cit., 566.

75 Penlington, op. cit., 11.

76 Creighton, op. cit., 285.

77 cf. this poem with his later version, "Canada: Case History 1969."

From Irving Layton, we get this 1965 sketch of the "Anglo-Canadian"

A native of Kingston, Ont.
-- two grandparents Canadian
and still living

His complexion florid
as a maple leaf in late autumn,
for three years he attended
Oxford

Now his accent
makes even Englishmen
wince, and feel
unspeakably colonial.

And the same poet, in his poem, "From Colony to Nation" portrays the Canadian in general as

A dull people, without charm
or ideas,
settling into the clean empty look
of a Mountie or dairy farmer
as into a legacy

A more recently published poem by Margaret Atwood, entitled "At the Tourist Centre in Boston", reveals the poet's reactions to a Canadian tourist centre in an American city:

There is my country under glass,
a white relief-
map with red dots for the cities,
reduced to the size of a wall

.....

is this a manufactured
hallucination, a cynical fiction, a lure
for export only?

I seem to remember people,
at least in the cities, also slush,
machines and assorted garbage. Perhaps
that was my private mirage

which will just evaporate
when I go back

The reflection of national character in Canadian poetry from about the 1920s seems to have shifted from the heroic to perhaps something like the shadowy Toronto street figures in Raymond Souster's poetry, suggested by Watt as "standing at night in doorways smoking cigarettes, filled with desire and nostalgia, while the real energy and will of the world go about their business far away." 78

You and I in the doorway like part of a tomb
Kissing the night with bitter cigarettes.

(Souster, "Night Watch")

"The image of Canada which thus emerges in our modern poetry," writes Dudek, "is a fragmented one, exaggerated by individual irritability, shot-through with negative bias. There is little euphoria, or ecstasy; the tone is often sardonic, critical, negative. This is wasteland poetry presented in terms of Canadian reality..." 79

Writing within this tradition of wasteland poetry is the Toronto poet, Dennis Lee, whose poetry reflects both anti-American sentiment and feelings of disillusionment and despair over his country:

he comes to Sibelius Park.
Across that green expanse he sees the
cars parked close, every second licence Yankee,
he thinks of
the war and the young men dodging...

.....

78 Watt, op. cit., 247.

79 Dudek, op. cit., 567.

Supper is over, I sit
 holed up in my study. I have no
 answers again and I do not trust the
 simplicities, nor Sibelius Park;...

(Dennis Lee, "Sibelius Park") 80

Dennis Lee's poetry is perhaps best understood and appreciated against this background knowledge of the history of Canadian nationalism, including a history of the rise and fall of Canadian literary nationalism. Although New Criticism may prefer to see poems as "self-contained verbal constructions", the fact remains, as pointed out by Watt, that poetry may be conditioned and/or caused by social forces.⁸¹ And it is for an appreciation of this fact, and the discussion of the poetry of Dennis Lee to follow that these "forces" were defined and described in the foregoing chapter.

80 Dennis Lee, "Sibelius Park," Canadian Forum, (April-May, 1970), 103.

81 Watt, op. cit., 237.

Chapter III:

DYING IN THE KINGDOM OF ABSENCE; A FATE WORSE THAN LIFE

All we have won is threatened by the machine,
so long
as it, instead of obeying, as spirit dares to
command.

Rilke, Sonnets to Orpheus, II, 10.

It is like this
In death's other kingdom.

T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men"

and Lee's. For one thing Rilke dashed off his 55 songs of affirmation in a two-week period after he had for the most part finished his Duino Elegies. Lee on the other hand, spent four years writing his "sonnets" which are essentially negative in tone, and were published before his Civil Elegies.

All this is not to deny that Lee is still fascinated by Rilke, who in turn was much influenced by Nietzsche and the French symbolist, Valéry. That Lee had chosen to translate "Die Erste Elegie" from Rilke's Duino Elegies ⁸⁴ and that one of Lee's sonnets in Kingdom... alludes to Rilke are ample evidence of Lee's fascination with the German poet.

Oh Rilke, work your lovely fraud
for we who are your music must applaud.
(Kingdom, No. XI)

But aside from Rilke, Erich Heller and Paul Tillich, all of whom have apparently had some effect on Lee's thinking, ⁸⁵ perhaps the best introductions to the poetry of Dennis Lee (or at least the most relevant in terms of our purpose for considering Lee's poetry) are George P. Grant's Technology and Empire ⁸⁶ (especially the two essays, "In Defense of North America" and "Canadian Fate and Imperialism"), and Lee's own essay, "Notes on a WASP Canadian Nationalist." ⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Dennis Lee, "First Elegy from Rilke: Duineser Elegien, 'Die Erste Elegie'" (translated by Dennis Lee), Quarry, XIX (Fall, 1969), 6-9.

⁸⁵ See letter addressed to Robert Grant in Appendix, dated 10 December 1970.

⁸⁶ George P. Grant, Technology and Empire; Perspectives on North America (Toronto, 1969).

⁸⁷ Dennis Lee, "Notes on a WASP Canadian Nationalist," in Notes for a Native Land, ed. Andy Wainwright (Ottawa, 1969).

In this latter essay, which takes the form of two students (?) "rapping" together in Nathan Phillips Square (the same setting as used in Civil Elegies), Lee refers to himself as a Canadian nationalist. He is quick to admit that he does not fully understand the meaning of that statement.

In fact, Lee explains:

my kind is totally baffled by Canada. Not the slightest inkling of what we're about -- plenty of theories and plenty of nostalgia for pasts we never knew, plenty of anger; but no workaday sense of where we've been and who we are. 88

Lee goes on to describe himself as one of millions of suburban Canadians, whose parents

were mostly from towns or downtowns -- who will never have an instinctual sense for landmarks, social textures, history; never know their own time and place as sacramental of anything, whether better or worse, because they will never know that anything else exists.

.....

we've got this sense of a formless middle-class WASP Canadian suburb stretching away in all directions to infinity. And way out at the periphery are things like Newfies, the Congo, Rosedale, Jews, Marxism-Leninism and everything prior to 1945. We belong to the United Church. And those things all hang out there in a funny limbo -- we're more than willing to let them exist, but they can never quite struggle out of the exotic and into the real.

.....

The suburban WASP has no instinctive sense of place or a differentiated society. Ergo he has no sense of Canada. 89

88 Lee, "Notes...", 20.

89 Lee, "Notes...", 21.

The implications of all this for the Canadian WASP writer, says Lee, is that too often he attempts to see parables in the landscape or cityscape (as do Mac Lennan, Ross, Symons and Purdy). That is, the Canadian WASP writer, in the course of describing the natural or urban environment he encounters, subtly suggests social or psychological commentary, as in the case of Lee himself when his descriptions of the Muskoka silence anticipates a spiritual void.

The writer first becomes alienated from his suburb, and then suddenly the whole question of civilization in general becomes opened for re-consideration. At this point he begins hunting for absolute values with the fervour of a religious seeker, and in the process of seeking, he discovers things "that others knew all along."

For instance, that men and women embody in their society their vision of how it is good to live together. That it's possible to do so consciously. That it's a human failure not to do so consciously.⁹⁰

Since Lee has here defined for us one aspect of the Canadian-WASP-nationalist writer, i.e., someone who has a proclivity for seeing parables in the landscape, then we are left with the ineluctable conclusion that to the degree that Lee himself draws parables from Muskoka or Toronto (however subtly or beautifully this is done), he himself must be a nationalist writer.

It remains to be asked, however, what is the source of the suburban Canadian's alienation? For an answer to this we should

⁹⁰ Lee, "Notes...", 22.

look into George P. Grant's Technology and Empire, for it is to George Grant (together with Dave Godfrey) that Lee dedicates his Civil Elegies; and it is Technology and Empire which Lee identifies in a personal letter as a source of influence on his thinking.

In his first essay, "In Defense of North America", Grant suggests that as North Americans we live in a "terra incognita" -- we have no traditions which pre-date the beginning of the industrial revolution; we have no instinctive sense of where we've come from and no clear idea of where we're going.

We live in the most realized technological society which has yet been; one which is, moreover, the chief imperial centre from which technique is spread around the world. It might seem then that because we are destined so to be, we might also be the people best able to comprehend what it is to be so. Because we are first and most fully there, the need might seem to press upon us to try to know where we are in this new found land which is so obviously a "terra incognita". Yet the very substance of our existing which has made us the leaders in technique, stands as a barrier to any thinking which might be able to comprehend technique from beyond its own dynamism. 91

A further clue to the source of the suburban Canadian's alienation is found in Grant's essay, "Canadian Fate and Imperialism." Describing the modern Canadian's sense of alienation, Grant remarks that

The word "alienation" has become a cliché to be thrown about in journalistic chitchat. Surely the deepest alienation must be when the civilization one inhabits no longer claims one's loyalty. It is a rational alienation, and therefore not to be overcome by opting out of the system through

91 Grant, Technology..., 40.

such methods as LSD and speed. The ecstasy therein offered is just another package which one buys from the system and which keeps people quiet. Indeed the depth of the alienation is seen in the ambiguity of the words "one's own". To repeat, the events in Vietnam push one towards that divide where one can no longer love one's own. Yet it is impossible to give up the word "almost". Think of being the parent or the child of a concentration camp guard. One would want to say: "This is not my own," and yet one could not. The facts of birth are inescapable. So are the very facts of belonging to the civilisation that has made one. It is this inevitability which leads to the degree of alienation and disgust which some feel in the present situation. 92

He goes on to observe:

Like all civilisations the West is based on a great religion -- the religion of progress. This is the belief that the conquest of human and non-human nature will give existence meaning. 93

When technology fails to give any substantive meaning to our existence -- and when the actions of that society which is the source of modern technology becomes inhumane (as the U.S. has been in the Vietnam War) -- then alienation results. And this alienation forces us into an awareness that the place we reside in is a "terra incognita" -- we don't know how we got there and we don't know where we're going. In an attempt to make sense out of his existence, the Canadian-WASP-nationalist writer will sometimes attempt to draw parables from the landscape.

"Landscape parables" and the use of images peculiar to Canada, therefore, constitute two criteria by which we might

92 Grant, Technology..., 76.

93 Grant, Technology..., 77.

adjudge whether or not Lee does in fact have any relation to Canada's traditions of literary nationalism. But, as the citation from Dudek used in the earlier chapter points out, ⁹⁴ we have long since departed from a tradition of patriotic verse. If Lee's poetry does follow these traditions we shall expect to see it in terms of a "nationalism-in-reverse" -- i.e., a fragmented image of Canada, shot-through with negative bias -- a "wasteland poetry presented in terms of Canadian reality..." ⁹⁵

To demonstrate that Lee's poetry does in fact contain these elements requires that we simply give a close reading to his works. In doing so, we should not expect to see landscape parables, peculiarly Canadian imagery, negative bias and/or anti-American sentiment expressed in each and every poem. Lee's poetry explores a greater range of images and ideas than just these. Nevertheless, these things do appear in many of the poems in Kingdom... and appear with greater frequency in Lee's later verse, as he develops a more closely defined national consciousness.

Kingdom of Absence was first published in the spring of 1967 by the House of Anansi Press, of which Dennis Lee is Co-Director, and went out of print before that summer. According to an addendum on one of the book's back fly-leaves, the 43 poems which constitute Kingdom... were written in London and

94 See p. 2 of this thesis.

95. Dudek, op. cit., 567.

Toronto between 1962 and 1967. ⁹⁶

In Kingdom of Absence, the poems are arranged in a series of seven "sonnet" sequences. Each section is titled, while the individual poems are numbered in consecutive order, suggesting perhaps that while a group of poems may centre around a single theme, all of the poems, since they carry consecutive numbers, are in some way related to the whole.

The relationship which the individual sections have to one another, however, is ambiguous. There does not seem to be any progressive development from section to section. The first and last sections have the Muskoka area as their setting, and there is posed in these sections a tension between the personal void which urban existence creates for the poet and the silences of Muskoka which only anticipates that void. The five sections between these two address themselves to both the real and the surrealistic in the poet's existence. They appear to have been presented in no particular order. For instance, the section, "Acrobat" could have been placed immediately after "Cities of the Mind Interred" without disturbing the overall effect or the final outcome of the volume. The individual poems within each section, however, are more closely

96 Prior to the publication of Kingdom..., several of the poems had already appeared in issues of the Canadian Forum and in Alphabet. Specifically, Nos. VII, VIII and IX, entitled "Three Sonnets from a Sequence," Alphabet No. 7 (December, 1963), 8-9.

No. II was published originally in Canadian Forum 44:4 (April 1964) and was entitled simply "Poem".

No. XI, appeared in Canadian Forum 43:16 (April 1965) and bore the title, "Sonnet".

No. XXII, appeared on the same page as No. II in the Canadian Forum 44:4 (April 1964) and was entitled, "Sonnet: The View from the Parade Square".

linked together in the consideration of a single theme and within any particular section seem to be arranged in a progressive, or at least a "meaningful" order.

The first section in Kingdom... is a series of five sonnets entitled, "Muskoka Elegiac", suggesting a lamentation over the deadly existence of a life "in toronto, pent" (i.e., confined) and a sorrow at having to leave the rugged, quiet beauty of the Muskoka area, where

The only sound that troubles air
Is in the Severn's ⁹⁷ lively going,
In the grass's silent racket, growing.

This first poem in the section is, unlike most others in the rest of the volume, very regular both in its rhyme and rhythm, suggesting that the poet senses some order (regularity) when he is in the Muskoka area. The sentiment expressed (the desire to escape the frenetic pace of the city for the more relaxed pace of the country) harks back 150 years to the Romantic poet, John Keats, whose poem, "To one who has been long in city pent", expresses the same feeling.

The five poems which compose this section are studded with images of things common to the area: the leaves, the pine needles, pines, Queen Anne's Lace (the delicate white flowers associated with the wild carrot), shad flies, loons, tufts of moss, Muskoka Lake.

Pervading all is silence, interrupted occasionally by

⁹⁷ The "Severn" is the name of a river in this area.

the "insect hum", the "spectral loons" as they "beat north, crying cold annunciation", and the "shad flies... bashing at the screening,/ bashing their lives out." But for the most part it is so quiet that the poet claims to "hear the small worms inching in their mansions."

When the silence is perturbed, as when "the insect hum resumes" it is likened to "a fist among the lilies." And with the disturbance of nature's silence comes a perturbation of the mind -- "the old knowledge recurs" -- and this is also likened to a fist among the lilies.

The "old knowledge" no doubt refers to whatever painful memories are associated with the city of Toronto which he has momentarily left behind, but to which he must inevitably return. The line harks back to the first sonnet in which the poet, upon leaving for Muskoka, exclaimed

Soon enough our minds will bark
Hysteric in the urban dark,
And soon enough they'll start their din
To call us in, to call us in
And fix us in toronto, pent.

As well, the line anticipates the last poem of this section, in which the poet's thoughts are likened to shunting boxcars, kicking back and forth "between the grey/ and concrete monotone of cold toronto/ and blue muskoka." In Toronto there is confusion; in Muskoka "the green and pasture days revolved/ in ordered glory." In Toronto there is "hysteric in the urban dark", while in Muskoka, "the nights arose/ like jewels from the sorry lake, forlorn/ at every solar death."

The whole experience, says the poet, is both a "transport

and a mockery." The result of the tension which is set up between the experiences of Toronto and Muskoka is that "The knives (instruments of death; appropriate to an elegy) turn and turn in the mind." That the knives turning in the mind do anticipate the death of the mind is suggested by the next section, which bears the title, "Cities of the Mind Interred." In fact, the very phrase, "knives turn in the mind" is repeated in sonnet VII, thus linking this section with the last.

This series of eleven poems (the longest section in the volume) begins with "built cities" such as Rome, London and New York, but becomes progressively internalized, referring ultimately to cities of the mind. The poet is here concerned with urban alienation in general, its origins and its effect upon the human spirit. That effect is seen in the poet's friends and acquaintances who are pictured as "strung up in the city,/ numb, bemused or raging..."

Life seems to be without direction, and the "terra incognita" referred to by Grant seems to be reflected in the line

This was a valid country till we got here.

In the same poem, Lee remarks that "God is dead", (a claim made originally by Nietzsche) and that men of intellect -- "men with honed and razor minds" -- are out combing the holy mountains in search of the "logos", the "absolute". The image conveyed here is reminiscent of the religious seekers, as Lee portrayed them in his essay, who are out in search of the truth to be found through "landscape parables". As well,

there is brought to mind the lines from one of the Upanishads used by W. Somerset Maugham as the epigraph to his novel, The Razor's Edge:⁹⁸

The sharp edge of a razor is difficult to pass over;
thus the wise say the path to salvation is hard.
(Katha-Upanishad)

Life as it is lived seems without meaning. And the lines expressing this idea --

Everywhere I go the objects whimper.
I'm here, king of the ninnies, and I stuff
old value into losers, and they die.
(Kingdom, no. VII)

parallel the first and last lines of T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men", and in so doing suggest the same ennui which was at the heart of much of Eliot's poetry.

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men

.

This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper

The origin of this life without value seems, according to the poet, to have been with the Renaissance.

The trumpets of the randy Renaissance
came blowing wind and integers, blew news
high to the good old concert of the spheres:
linear mind is the measure of all things.
(Kingdom, no. VIII)

At that time there was heard, as counterpoint to the music of the spheres, the monotone notes of Newton and Descartes, declaring that "only measurement is real/ and the

⁹⁸ William Somerset Maugham, The Razor's Edge. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1944.

measuring mind." With that declaration, they "shrunk the universe to three dimensions." After that everyone, including such men as Van Gogh, had to be "crumpled through the slot of a single vision" and left to bleed "his sanity away."

In effect, what has happened is that rationality, which was to be the foundation of modern technology, has placed strictures on reality. Reality, because of the insights of Renaissance man, is now as confined as the poet was in the city of Toronto (see Kingdom, no. I). The Renaissance has ultimately imprisoned rather than freed mankind.

Included also in this section are several sonnets in which the poet reflects on the possibility of absolutes and makes such tentative conclusions as, "nothing is preserved", not even the poem, because its maker is mortal. Indeed, at the very word, "mortal"

we rise to our inheritance, to work
in time as orphans of eternity,
whom time kills, and we are wedged in graves.
(Kingdom, no. X)

Perhaps the only absolute is the ground, he suggests in another sonnet (no. XII): "Speaking the objects,/ making it conscious, improvising cosmos,/ is much. Is human." It is indeed the "lovely fraud" which Rilke works (no. XI), but it "is not the ground" -- using the word "ground" as a pun to refer both to the earth in which we are wedged and something more ultimate, such as the Tillichian "ground of being." 99

99 Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951, Vol. 1, p. 244-245.

All such considerations aside, there at last seems to be "nothing to signify, nothing but/ number now; unless it be/ a sacrament, this blank and/ lethal tedium."

The last three poems of this section portray the poet as a religious seeker. They consist of a prayer, the description of two apocalypses, and an attempt at blasphemy.

The prayer (a matin, as evinced by the mention of corn flakes) is addressed to "Our Highest Factor" (a mathematical term). The poet's cynicism is conveyed in the last lines where he calls upon this "mega-thing" to "preside until/ some fledgling angel farts, and blows the whole/ celestial superstructure down to shreds/ and smithereens. Then canst retire with Odin/¹⁰⁰ to snigger'at Thy orphans as they pray."

The next sonnet (no. XV), which describes his two "apocalypses", involves appropriately enough, two adjuncts of the modern technological society: the telephone and the psychiatrist. But the revelations were without specific content: the poet was simply "made luminous". He finally concludes, "who wants to be made luminous?" Besides, "These are not my daily ways... Such knowledge is high, it is too high for me, etc.", referring no doubt to Isaiah 55:9.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth
 . So are my ways higher than your ways
 and my thoughts than your thoughts.

In the last section he decides to give blasphemy a go, having before decided that it's the "one thing that really

¹⁰⁰ In Norse Mythology, the god of war, wisdom and poetry.

cleans you out", suggesting that this act will do for the spirit what an emetic or cathartic will do for the body. The poet then coins a "nice phrase, Santichrist", but calls it quits after flubbing with the "False-God-of-this-Modern-Day-Age."

The next section, the "Annex Elegiac", ¹⁰¹ unlike the "Muskoka Elegiac", includes lamentations for the deaths, both physical and spiritual, of persons of the poet's acquaintance. They include: "my hung friends" who keep "founding co-ops" and "improvising lives" (the "hung ones" connoting a spiritual execution); there is Larry, killed as a result of drunken driving (?) ("Your drunk tires gunned you down"); Michael, who was "gunned in the spirit", "riddled with caring"; another, "gone queer, ...detonated daily on the Jarvis"; one, who was "dis-mantled arm by leg by dark vagina knoll in London town by lovers"; and many others who "go down content, embalmed in piety or booze, art, or the gaudy causes."

Finally, among this review of "mortal presences" is a sonnet (no. XXII) in which the poet, having reviewed his own "troop of scruffy selves", his "personae", witnesses their merciless slaughter: "I led my soldiers naked into gunfire."

The reason for these spiritual deaths has to do with the "city of nervy backward improvisations" and the individuals' inability to find meaning in their urban existence:

¹⁰¹ The "Annex" is a section of Toronto bounded by Avenue on the east, Bloor on the south, Bathurst on the west, Dupont or the CPR tracks on the north.

Can do can
wreck can build but
far from being
(no. XVII)

The only guiding "darkness" (as opposed to guiding light) is the "Absence of felt value."

What darkness lights your way?
Absence of felt value.

As a result, the poet and his friends lead their carefree "strung-up lives beneath the neon sky."

The most cogent presentation of the situation, however, is described in terms of the poet's own existence in poem XXI. Lee describes himself as "strung in toronto... hung between styles." The negative bias, anti-American sentiment and "nationalism-in-reverse" which Dudek had described, is here seen in its fullness, and as such, helps to explicate the complaint which is only intimated in the other poems:

Toronto the Good ¹⁰² is dead, and Revell's luminous towers ¹⁰³
look down on yankee heaven: chrome under smog.

.....

I am the speck on the sheer white tower sheath,
and nothing I have written yet is real. Which demonstrates
at last, I am Canadian.

In the section entitled, "Kingdom of Absence", which is placed midway among the seven sections, and which is used as

102 The title of a book: C. S. Clark, Of Toronto the Good; A Social Study The Queen City of Canada As It Is. Montreal, Toronto Publishing Co., 1898 (Reprinted by Coles, 1970).

103 The Toronto city hall in Nathan Phillips Square, referred to again in Civil Elegies. Revell was the architect.

the title of the whole volume, the poet awakes to find himself afloat on an ice floe. Round about the poet, each on his own individual floe, are ten thousand of his "brothers". Some "threshed and floundered", "some were singing" (no. XXIII), "one compelled the wind, and strung his frame/ in torment for a sail" while another "like a god,/ stood rooted to the future of our drifting,/ gazing like a statue through the cold." (no. XXV). Even his own "slim and driven comrade" (his wife?) is drifting out beyond his vision, "her flimsy smile unchapped at last" (no. XXIV).

"Strange ice," remarks the poet, "strange sea; strange cargo" and surrounding all is the "flat and vast irrelevance of lapping breakers,/ there is no map, no comrade, and no goal." And with this comment we are once again reminded of Grant's description of the "terra incognita" of modern, Americanized civilization.

There are, of course, the "heroes", as there are in every situation. They are able to endure the "malady of direction". With confidence, self-assurance "they bestrode their floes/ and drove them toward the many setting suns" (i.e., their goals). But Lee cannot "trust their suns", he "could not consent to any light that was not dark". For with the absence of felt value, there is no alternative but to "eat the darkness,/ watching the silence of annihilation" (no. XXVI) and to call upon Absence to be utter. The only absolute is absolute nothing.

At one point, it would seem that there is a possibility

of direction when the poet exclaims

There is no setting forth but for the lone
and single goal, the spirit's newfoundland.
(no. XXVII)

But in the end, he sees himself as "scorned/ between two
vacancies, unclaimed by sky/ or water, parched and ownerless
I lag."

This is what it is like in the Kingdom of Absence, where
there is complete absence of felt value, no goals, and the
highest aspiration is simply to drift until one dies.

Many have died of this expanse, which I
shall die of. It is
all the birth I ask:

by that sun, by these zero
, calms, by the still expanding calm of the
solar deathwatch, here in the
Kingdom of absence.

Because the metaphor of life on an ice floe is alien to
many a reader's experience, there is a tendency to view the
poet as being melodramatic in his attempt to express a sense
of absence of felt value, or alienation. But another of Lee's
poems, addressing itself as well to "absence" and "silence",
but with a setting more familiar to the reader, will perhaps
serve to explicate this section of poems.

The poem, "Glad for the Wrong Reasons", appeared in
John Colombo's collection of sixty poets and their favorite
poems. In introducing this poem, Lee wrote that although he
does not have a favourite poem, "Glad for the wrong reasons"
is

one I still find satisfying. Largely because it articulated something that still preoccupies me: the tension between the dimension of stillness as bedrock sanity and as a quietist escape, and the further tension between a preoccupation with the absolute and the muddle of day-to-day. 104

Again the opening scene is that of the poet upon awaking and again there is the absence and silence and the feeling that "there is/ something about our lives that/ doesn't make sense."

GLAD FOR THE WRONG REASONS

Night and day it
 goes on, it goes
 on. I hear what feel like ponderous immaculate
 lizards moving through; I call it
 absence I call it silence but often I am
 glad for the wrong reasons.
 Many times at 6:00 a.m. there is a
 fiendish din of cans, like now
 for instance and we
 lunge up punctured through the
 blur & the broken
 glass of last night's argument, fetching up
 groggy on a landscape of bed, well I can
 taste our dubious breath and look it's
 me, babe, I wobble my neck and lounge the
 trophy from my dream across your belly, your
 body slouches towards me, Jesus, there is
 something about our lives that
 doesn't make sense, tomorrow
 I'll fix them up, remind me, the garbage
 cans have stopped now but the room is
 bright too bright to
 fix I mean ah Jesus I burrow slow
 motion back to sleep; and the
 lizards resume their
 phosphorescent progress, I crowd towards them
 but I should
 not be here now, swallowing fast & doggedly
 gawking &
 staying put and glad but glad for the wrong reasons.

104 Lee, "Glad for the Wrong Reasons," in How Do I Love Thee, ed. John Robert Colombo (Toronto, 1970), 139.

The idea suggested here is that human relationships bring with them an inexplicable, recurring "gladness". But his gladness seems wrong or inappropriate in relation to the "absence". Gladness is merely a part of the muddle of day-to-day life, and does not necessarily point to an absolute (such as love or human relationships).

The shortest section of this book, "The Acrobat", consists of only three poems and portrays the poet as a trapeze artist. As the section opens, a parade is about to begin. T. S. Eliot, author of "The Wasteland", sends up word to the poet, asking if he would like to join them, but the poet must decline because he is unable to extricate his left testicle from the trapeze cord (a very painful situation to be in; but there is no hint that it is any more painful than dying in the Kingdom of Absence, or being strung up in Toronto).

Passing by him are a host of personalities, including the Dane, "Relevant in black" (Hamlet?), Nietzsche, Dostoievsky and "thirty dirty ladies on a pink kazoo". They are all rather somber characters, with the exception of the uncouth ladies, whose antics (which included burping out loud and kissing each other's armpits while singing "God Save the Queen", the national anthem of Canada at the time this poem was written) cause the poet to laugh.

As the author continues to hang, ¹⁰⁵ it is "with nirvana

¹⁰⁵ This surrealistic image of the poet suspended by his left testicle from a trapeze seems to hark back to poems XVII and XXI, where the poet refers to his "hung friends" and where in describing his spiritual condition he refers to himself as being "strung in toronto."

I (with whom he heads out for Muskoka) and perhaps she is as well the "slim and driven comrade" he watches drift out "beyond his ken" in poem XXIV.

In this section, she is "a lady sabotaged by love". She has "a gait so lithe the wind would cock its head/ to watch her by". And apparently she is the poet's constant companion: "My lady travels everywhere I go."

The seeming contradiction between his constant companion who at the same time drifts on an ice-floe out "beyond his ken" is resolved when it is recognized that this section, "Lady" is realistic in its portrayal of the Lady, while the section, "Kingdom of Absence" is surrealistic in its imagery. His Lady could well be by his immediate side and still be, in a spiritual sense, and because of the poet's preoccupation with other things, "drifting out beyond his ken."

Although the poet is under spiritual stress, he is still able to respond to his Lady's "unbelieving love."

On these few days
when I can bear to think I call to mind
her small persuasive caring...

(no. XXXIII)

When his "lady speaks our daughter" (addresses or talks about?) we are more assured than before that this lady is his wife. But his wife is not the subject of his poetry:

My subject is the absence of the real
in time; the deprivations of the tongue;
tentative knowings; and the long gaunt descent
through lesser names of love into the dark.

.

And underneath the everlasting void.

It was not anything which his wife did that brought him to the place he's at. He had been happy teaching, and his wife made him happy; but only by excluding the outside world could he maintain this sort of happiness.

Lady, in tuition 108

I was glad, and I was glad 109
for your sweet body, only I left out the world.

(no. XXXV)

But there is a "given joy" which seems to be independent of anything done to bring about happiness. It is a joy that apparently originates in nothing and for that reason, the poet celebrates "the void". The language here is ambiguous, which is indicative of the poet's own groping to articulate what has happened within him. As an explanation to his wife, he says:

Lady, in extremis
an awe went out of me, and I
judged everything that lives by its demise.

What is being asserted here seems similar to Lee's poem, "Glad for the wrong reasons". The gladness seems wrong in relation to his preoccupation with "absence" and the "absolute".

Meanwhile, "in the durance" (i.e., his imprisonment; being in "toronto, pent"?), the poet's only response is to write about these experiences:

108 i.e., teaching.

109 See Lee's poem, "Glad for the wrong reasons", quoted earlier.

I make the song of the lively extremes:
 the daily waste, our tentative wills, and the absence,
 and the wingy spirit, singing for each of its deaths.

The final section of this volume is labelled "Accessions", suggesting both the act of coming to a throne (an idea appropriate to the volume's title, Kingdom of Absence) as well as the author's own resignation or assent to "the void".

Harking back to the first section, we find ourselves once again in Muskoka; the poet is

bedded down
 at midnight, in the heavy dark, distraught,
 constrained by silence, the tough, unsundered
 long and preternatural northern calm.

Amidst this silence, this "zero calm", the poet comes to name "the name I could not speak"

Yes. It is the void. Can you rejoice?

With this and the following poems of this section the poet gives us a profile of his present spiritual state; a state of being in which "absence" is presented as the only absolute:

only in this poverty
 and absence can the simple-witted spring
 achieve right flowers in the fetid concrete
 (no. XXXVII)

one must come to love the void
 (no. XXXVIII)

Only the awkward darkness of unmeaning
 lights you on your stationary way.
 (no. XXXVIII)

but just behind the billboard, just
back of it,
everything's real. 111

The real, however, is never exposed; it is merely hoped for and hinted at. What Lee succeeds in doing in these 43 poems is to pose a tension between a hoped-for absolute (which in the end manifests itself as absolute nothing -- and is represented by such terms as void, abyss, absence of felt value) and the "lethal tedium" of living "strung up lives beneath the neon sky", suffering the oppressiveness of life in "toronto, pent".

This tension is felt when the poet juxtaposes images of Toronto and Muskoka (the frenetic existence of life in Toronto and the silences of Muskoka, which anticipate the "void"), and when we see the frenzied activity of certain of those on the ice floes while the ice floes themselves drift silently apart from each other and into oblivion. The absolute (even absolute nothing) is striven for but never attained.

This is Lee's tentative "conclusion". But there is a postscript concerning such a conclusion appearing in the last of the seven poems in Civil Elegies. There the poet alludes to the spiritual anguish depicted in Kingdom... and reevaluates the tentative conclusions reached in Kingdom...

111 Rilke, Duino Elegies, with English translations by C. F. MacIntyre (Berkeley, 1963), 77.

But how do you go to a void? Do you bark your shins on it?
 Can you sit on Nonbeing? What about Nothingness?
 How many toes does it have? Does it eat corn flakes?
 I wrote a book called Kingdom of Absence but where did I
 find Absence?

I kept on finding words inside my mind.

And as long as I had that crutch I could
 face into anything. Void was holy, absence was a
 dazzling dark. But I did know
 what I had come through. But I came to
 idolatry, as in a season of God,
 taking my right to be from nothingness
 and in the coincidence of opposites, the plenitude of void
 I made myself twice culpable
 for I used a double crutch to prop myself.
 I thought it was the end but there is nothing but the
 process and detaching.

The expressions of a negative literary nationalism, the
 original motive for examining Kingdom..., have only been hinted
 at in such lines as:

Revell's luminous towers
 look down on yankee heaven: chrome under smog.

.

nothing I have written yet is real. Which demonstrates
 at last, I am Canadian.

They are not more pervasive in Kingdom... because the poet has
 not, at this point, specifically linked his spiritual anguish
 to the inherent contradictions of modern technological society
 (see Grant's Technology and Empire). When this connection is
 made and the implications explored, as they are in Civil Elegies,
 then Lee becomes more closely aligned to the poetry of "na-
 tionalism-in-reverse" as defined by Dudek.

"As an unsuccessful first book," wrote Lee, in describing

Kingdom of Absence, "I now think it's a pretty interesting unsuccessful first book." 112 But it is Civil Elegies which Lee considers most important among his works, 113 and it is Civil Elegies which most specifically links Lee to the contemporary negative nationalism in Canada.

112 See letter addressed to Robert Grant dated 23 February 1971 in Appendix.

113 See Murphy, op. cit., 638.

Chapter IV:

DENNIS LEE'S CIVIL ELEGIES: A LAMENT FOR A NATION

To lament is to cry out at the death or at the dying of something loved. This lament mourns the end of Canada as a sovereign state. Political laments are not usual in the age of progress, because most people think that society always moves forward to better things.

George P. Grant, Lament for
a Nation, p. 2.

When a musician puts notes on a score and calls the finished product a sonata, we naturally assume that the work will contain some, if not all, of the characteristics of the musical pieces which we know as sonatas. By extension of this argument, we can reasonably expect Dennis Lee's Civil Elegies to correspond to the commonly accepted definition of elegy: "a lyrical poem, often of lament, especially of unrequited love... Now, chiefly, a poem of lamentation for the dead." 114

These elegies should also contain at least some of the characteristics specific to the elegaic form, such as are evidenced, say, in Milton's "Lycidas": "the invocation of the muse, an expression of the grief felt in the loss of a friend, a procession of mourners... and finally, a consolation in which the poet submits gracefully to the inevitable and declares his conviction that, after all, everything has turned out for the best." 115

Lee is remarkably consistent in the use of elegaic conventions in his series of elegies, and the opening stanzas of his "First Elegy" corresponds very closely to Milton's elegy, "Lycidas" in which the poet declares his reason for

114 "Elegy", Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Mass., 1959).

115 William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, "Pastoral Elegy", A Handbook to Literature (New York: Odyssey, 1960), 343.

writing this lament: "For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime." The poet then invokes the muse: "So may som(sic) gentle Muse/ With lucky words favour my destin'd Urn." 116

At almost the same place in Lee's "First Elegy" the poet declares: "Many were born in Canada, and died/ of course but died truncated, stunted..." But the poet does not then invoke the aid of a muse, as does Milton. Rather the situation, the poet brooding in Nathan Phillips Square, "beneath the luminous white inevitable towers" 117 enshrouded by April smog, 118 evokes "our unlived lives", the spectres of our ancestors. They begin pouring across the square like "homing furies". Together with the air pollution, they amass together in "bitter droves". They have come not to assist the poet in his lament, but as furies, to accuse us. Invisible, they surround the poet, tormenting him, demanding to know when we "shall come to be". (The phrasing is ambiguous, but what the furies seem to be asking is, when shall we be naturalized in our "birthright dimension". We are presently "stunted", when shall we as Canadians, realize our fullest potential.)

Although the poet says that he often sits brooding in the sun of the square, this first elegy describes one particular

116 This and other quotations are from C. A. Patrides, ed. Milton's Lycidas; The Tradition and The Poem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Wilson, 1961).

117 For photograph of Nathan Phillips Square and the towers of the Toronto City Hall see Boris Spremo, Boris Spremo and His Camera Look at Toronto (Toronto, 1967), 51.

118 Cf. the lines from T. S. Eliot's "Wasteland": "April is the cruelest month breeding lilacs out of a dead land."

morning in which the poet is seated near Moore's sculpture, The Archer.¹¹⁹ Since the poet is sitting "off to the west" he is looking towards the east and is able to watch the sun rise. The effect is that of a crucifixion. The diction again is ambiguous. Lee says that he "saw though diffident my city nailed against the sky/ in ordinary glory." It is uncertain at this point whether it is the city itself, or the poet, that is suffering from this lack of self-confidence, this diffidence.

While sitting, watching the men and women going about their business, "performing their daily lives", the poet looks and sees the "lives we had not lived" marching in phalanx. This time the spectres are those of riderless cavalry coming down Yonge Street, led by William Lyon Mackenzie. The poet's allusion to "the first/ spontaneous mutual retreat in the history of warfare" is in reference to Mackenzie's foolhardy rebellion of 1837.

In the latter part of 1837 Mackenzie had printed and distributed broadsheets to the rural population of Ontario, which read in part:

INDEPENDENCE !

There have been nineteen strikes for Independence
from European Tyranny on the Continent of America.
They were all successful!

BRAVE CANADIANS! Do you love freedom? I know
you do. Do you hate oppression? Who dare deny it?

¹¹⁹ See Spremo, op. cit., 64

Do you wish perpetual peace, and a government founded upon the eternal heaven-born principle of the Lord Jesus Christ? Then buckle on your armour, and put down the villains who oppress and enslave our country -- put them down in the name of that God who goes forth with the armies of his people.

.....

We cannot be reconciled to Britain -- we have humbled ourselves to the Pharoah of England, to the ministers and great people, and they will neither rule us justly nor let us go. Up then, brave Canadians! Get ready your rifles and make short work of it. Woe be to those that oppose us, for "In God is our trust." 120

By Monday, December 5th, 1837, Mackenzie had managed to muster together about "eight hundred" ill prepared rustics. The men, with their muskets and pitchforks, gathered at Montgomery's Tavern outside of Toronto prepared to march on the city. Tuesday, at about eleven in the morning, the farmers, led by Mackenzie, began their long trek down Yonge Street into the city. It was nightfall before the men entered Toronto, only to be met by Sheriff Jarvis' twenty-seven musketeers crouched behind the rail fence of a vegetable garden. When Mackenzie's men were not quite a hundred yards off, Jarvis' men opened fire. As soon as they had fired they dropped their weapons and ran, assured that they were outnumbered, and fearing that the rebels might be able to see them more clearly than they could see the rebels.

120 William Kilbourn, The Firebrand; William Lyon Mackenzie and the Rebellion in Upper Canada (Toronto, 1956), pp. 161-162

Mackenzie's first ranks returned fire, then dropped to their knees so that those behind them could shoot. But the men in the rear thought that Jarvis' troops had picked off all the first rank with one firing, and panic-stricken they stampeded in retreat, some of them even finding their way back to Montgomery's tavern. 121

"Canadians in flight", says the poet. And all the Canadians' avatars are in flight as well. Or worse yet, they are subtly being replaced by American avatars. The idea is introduced by the image of Jenny Lind singing to an applauding audience. Jenny, the Swedish soprano was brought to North America in 1850 by P. T. Barnum (of circus fame) and "Americans everywhere welcomed her with frantic enthusiasm." 122 For some reason, according to Lee, Jenny Lind is famous in Toronto lore for having sung at the St. Lawrence Hall back when it was still a concert hall. 123

The mention of "Bird sang" refers to Charlie Parker, whose nickname was Yard Bird. Parker was an alto saxophonist, popular among the jazz enthusiasts in the 1940s and early 1950s, and considered by many to be "at once the most influential innovator and the greatest instrumentalist in the history of Jazz." 124

121 Kilbourn, op. cit., pp. 154-178.

122 George Grove, Dictionary of Music and Musicians, V (London, Macmillan, 1954), 240.

123 See letter addressed to Robert Grant dated 23 February 1971 in Appendix.

124 Robert S. Gold, A Jazz Lexicon (New York: Knopf, 1964), 19.

Again according to Lee, Jenny and Bird are examples of "cultural colonialism, of flight from ourselves and reliance on other people's pre-approved norms of excellence." 125

Interestingly enough, a revision of this first elegy (not yet published. See the Appendix) deletes mention of Jenny, and instead reads: "the American corporations/ sing we dance..."

While Jenny (or the American Corporations) and Bird sang, and the Canadians clapped, American magazines such as Time were busy undermining Canadian nationalism by their entertaining analyses of Canadian politics. We applaud because the writing is entertaining (in much the same way as Jenny's singing was entertaining), but the effect is that of a lullaby -- it anesthetizes the country. George Grant in his description of Diefenbaker's defeat of 1963 best illustrates what Dennis Lee probably has in mind:

Most journalists account for Diefenbaker's failure by the foibles of his personality. Influenced by Time magazine, politics is served up as gossip, and the more titillating the better. The jaded public wants to be amused; journalists have to eat well. Reducing issues to personalities is useful to the ruling class. The "news" now functions to legitimize power, not to convey information. The politics of personalities helps the legitimizers to divert attention from issues that might upset the status quo. Huntley and Brinkley are basic to the American way of life. Canadian journalists worked this way in the election of 1963. Their purposes were better served by writing of Diefenbaker's "indecision," of Diefenbaker's "arrogance," of Diefenbaker's "ambition," than by writing about American-Canadian relations. Indeed, his personality was good copy. The tragedy of his leap to unquestioned power, the messianic stance applied to administrative detail, the prairie rhetoric murdering

125 See letter addressed to Robert Grant dated 23 February 1971 in Appendix.

television -- these are an essential part of the Diefenbaker years. But behind all the stories of arrogance and indecision, there are conflicts -- conflicts over principles. The man had a conception of Canada that threatened the dominant classes. This encounter is the central clue to the Diefenbaker administration. The political actions of men are ultimately more serious than the gossip of Time and Newsweek will allow. 126

How ironic that Mackenzie patterned his rebellion after the ideals of the American revolution: he attempted to defeat one empire through the employment of ideals and tactics of another empire. The British empire has since retreated, but Canadians have retreated as well; the vacuum has been filled with things representing the technology of a new empire, such as "buildings" and "sky-concealing wires."

"How empire permeates!" exclaims the poet. And the irony of the situation is expressed by the juxtaposition of British and American images: "American cars on Queen Street."

The presence of any empire, British or American, is linked to the spiritual death of Canada, about which the poet is lamenting obliquely in this elegy. The description of a late, light snow fall (the time is April!) given next suggests this national death by the use of such images as "limbo", "coffin", and "stillborn".

Like manna dropped in limbo
the snow, cold eiderdown for coffins, filters stillborn
through our city. 127

126 Grant, Lament..., 7-8.

127 See the Appendix for the revision of these lines.

Something is wrong, suggests the poet, and Chartier of Major (the revision reads "Chartier of Major Street") has probably put his finger on it when he said that

if a country is not well governed
neither is it a country.

What is alluded to here is the mad bomber of Parliament, Paul Joseph Chartier, who was killed in his May 18, 1966 attempt to blow up the House of Commons. Following his death there was found among his papers these notes for a speech:

Mr. Speaker, gentlemen: I might as well give you a blast to wake you up. For more than a year I have thought of nothing but how to exterminate you for the rotten way you are running the country. 128

But now it is too late. The country is dead, and we witness the procession of mourners, an integral part of most elegies: "The spectres file across the square in rows."

The reason for Canada's death might lie with the individual, which is what is intimated by citing Revell as an example (Revell was the 20th Century architect who designed "the luminous white inevitable towers" of the Toronto city hall):

men and women live that
they may make that
life worth dying.

Paul Chartier's solution to his feelings of political frustration ended up killing him in a restroom in the Parliament Building. He was mad. And the poet asks rhetorically

128 Globe & Mail, July 2, 1966, p. 4.

(the rhetorical question being a device characteristic of the elegy), "we should be sane?"

This first elegy ends on a note of irresolution. Perhaps Mackenzie or the mad bomber had the best solution. But in any case, nothing has been done about the situation, and the spectres which came to accuse us, simply gawk at the presence of American cars, "slump and retreat". They are last seen "congregating above the Archer" in a "dense baffled throng."

The "Second Elegy" as with the first, finds the poet sitting in Nathan Phillips Square. The time is noon (in the "First Elegy" it was morning). It is lunchtime and it is summer, although the sunlight is not at all harsh. The scene is one of peace and contentment. Some people are dozing; some are sitting on the concrete benches surrounding the pool "idly unwrapping their food," and in so doing some of the sandwich papers find their way into the pool, where they move about on the water's surface and occasionally are drawn under by the small whirlpools created by the water jets.

The Canadians "prevail in their placid continuance," remarks the poet, ironically re-stating William Faulkner's Nobel Prize speech of 1950, in which he stated: "I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail." 129

But for the Canadians, "Nothing is important." Lee himself, on the other hand, personally sees things in terms of

129 Quoted in John Bartlett, Familiar Quotations (Baton: Little, Brown, 1968), 1039 b.

the Hindu dictum: Everything matters, nothing matters. 130

There is something of importance, says the poet in the next section of this elegy, and it is a matter of survival to know it. If any of the men sitting by the pool should come up against "void", he will be sucked under, just like the sandwich papers eddying on the water, or he will "himself become void." It matters not who that man may be: a stock-broker from Bay Street "tangled in other men's/ futures with ticker-tape"; or a printer "hammering type for credits or bread" ("credits" possibly referring both to the by-lines as well as the printer's creditors and "bread" referring both to the money he earns as well as the substance of life); or the suburbanite, who has retreated to this pool side from Long Branch, having suffered severe injuries in the on-going battle of the sexes ("the household acts of war").

The "void" which the man "comes upon" no doubt refers to "that great lacuna, Canada" referred to in the "First Elegy".¹³¹ These elegies are a lament for a nation -- and that the "void" most likely refers to Canada is made clear by the final line of this "Second Elegy": "it is time to honour void."

If that man, encountering the "void" does not go under, then "he/ must himself become void," i.e., he will become empty, destitute or useless ("truncated", "stunted", and "deprivation" are words used to describe this phenomenon in

130 Lee, "Getting to Rochdale", in The University Game (Toronto, 1968), p. 93.

131 See Chapter 3 of this thesis for a further discussion of Lee's use of "void".

the "First Elegy"). Or as George Grant expressed it in the epigraph used to introduce this volume:

Man is by nature a political animal, and to know
that citizenship is an impossibility is to be
cut off from one of the highest forms of life. 132

Although he is honouring a nation in these elegies (Lee specifically entitled them Civil Elegies), several of the elegies also honour specific citizens who, like Canada, are now dead, and whose demise or downfall seems to parallel the defeat of Canada. In the "First Elegy" it was William Lyon Mackenzie who was so honoured. In this elegy, the Canadian being cited is Tom Thomson, the painter.

Thomson, born in Claremont, Ontario in 1877, spent virtually his entire life in Ontario. Thomson became known primarily for his artistic interpretation of Ontario's northland. He was a close friend of the painters who later became known as members of "The Group of Seven," and Thomson's influence is reflected in their works, both in terms of subject matter and techniques.

Thomson became an expert woodsman in his adult life (he "was part of the bush"), and spent considerable time in Algonquin Park painting his favourite subject, the Canadian wilds ("very suddenly the radiance of the/ renewed land broke over his canvas"). But by a quirk of fate, Thomson, "for all his savvy" drowned in Canoe Lake in July, 1917 at the age of 39. His canoe was found several days before his body was recovered.

132 Grant, quoted as epigraph in Lee's Civil Elegies.

Lee's reference to "the far loons percolate/ high in November and he is not painting their cry" refers most likely to Thomson's paintings of the northland during the autumn months. 133

Having recalled to mind Tom Thomson, the poet snaps back to the reality in the square, and muses on how "any combination of men and time" can "ignite" our imaginations. We are now back among the "arches" of Nathan Phillips Square, confronting the "sunlight" and the sandwich papers, which now appear as "paper destroyers".

At this point, the poet remarks that "it is two thousand years since Christ's carcass rose in glory", a line which harks back to the "First Elegy", in which we saw the "city nailed against the sky/ in ordinary glory". The ascent into glory, which follows the resurrection, "is not for us". Thomson, a symbol of Canada, is dead and "done." For Thomson (Canada) there is no resurrection and consequently no ascension.

The resurrection and ascension, says Lee, are among those "good myths" we wish were true. But myths "are what they are", a way of ordering "the themes of the wishful particulars, massed and ranked in their/ hubbub,/ upgathered in hierarchies of meaning, crowned/ by some real reigning affirmation from which all things derive." The language is metaphysical and somewhat ambiguous, although the basic idea about myth which he is defining seems to be more or less in concert with Thrall & Hibbard's definition of myth as

133 See R. H. Hubbard's Tom Thomson (Toronto, 1962) and Ottelyn Addison's Tom Thomson... (Toronto, 1969).

Anonymous stories having their roots in the primitive folk-beliefs of races or nations and presenting supernatural episodes as a means of interpreting natural events in an effort to make concrete and particular a special perception of man or a cosmic view. 134

The "reigning affirmation" from which the myth of resurrection is derived is that of "Gloria/ of course." But the glory is no part of Canada. The reason has to do with the Canadian people themselves: "Many are called but none are chosen" -- a line reminiscent of Christ's description of conversion: "For many are called, but few are chosen." 135

"We are the evidence/ For downward momentum," says the poet, and the line evokes images of eddying sandwich papers, the man who comes upon void and goes under, and the body of Tom Thomson, "trundled by submarine currents."

Suddenly, the poet is aware of "new silences" in the square. The time has shifted to late afternoon, "shadows appear", people get up and walk away, leaving the poolside benches empty. All that is left are the sandwich papers following the undercurrents of the pool, and the poet's private thoughts, which are not necessarily of "drowned men", nor of "coming extinctions", for there is nothing edifying in such reflections.

The final "stanza" of this elegy is an exhortation: wherever the people encounter the void, whether in Long Branch

134 Thrall & Hibbard, op. cit., 298.

135 Matthew 22:14.

or on Bay Street, 136 say to them that it's as bad as we thought, "we have spent the bankroll" (which is perhaps a way of saying that we have exhausted our inheritance). Now, here in Nathan Phillips Square, says the poet, it is time to pay tribute to Canada: "It is time to honour the void."

The "Third Elegy" is linked to the first two elegies by the recurring images of the pool, the city hall towers, Moore's Archer, and the mention of Bay Street and "void". In addition, it is linked to the "Second Elegy" in terms of its specific ideas.

In the "Second Elegy", the poet claimed that for the Canadians he could see around the pool, "Nothing is important", which suggested Lee's fascination with the Hindu dictum, "everything matters -- nothing matters." In the "Second Elegy" nothing seemed to matter. Here in the "Third Elegy" everything matters, because the children are everything. This the poet finds regrettable, because it makes our condition more difficult to endure.

It would be better maybe if we could stop loving the children.....

.....

if only they stopped mattering, the children.

136 It is interesting to note that Lee uses names of places associated with water (Long Branch, Bay Street). This is consistent with the other imagery in this section, which alludes to Thomson's drowning death and the pool in Nathan Phillips Square.

The "kids" are realistically portrayed by Lee and are perhaps employed here as a contrast to the spectres in the "First Elegy": they are involved in "delicate brawls", they are "pelting across the square in tandem", they are "raucous", they "swarm", they are full of boundless energy, climbing over the Archer, "never winded". All of those characteristics of childhood, which so many adults find annoying, are for the poet, "blessed humdrum".

The "real", of which the children are most painfully a part, can be made to dissolve momentarily when the poet stops thinking of all the implications of being:

the beautiful footholds [of reality]
crumble the moment I set my mind aside.

But the world doesn't stop, just because the poet stops thinking about it: "the world does recur".

It would be desirable to "avoid the scandal of being," says Lee, but it is impossible to do so -- "the ignominious hankerings/ go on", and these in turn precipitate "the ache of things", a "lonesome ego" and "lethal desires." It is noteworthy that the hankerings, life's primal urges, are called "ignominious" and the desires are termed "lethal". Although the poet does not say so at this particular point, the preceding elegies suggest that desires are lethal, hankerings are ignominious and being is a scandal, only because the person involved has suffered the humiliations of being a Canadian. The poet himself would prefer to remain detached: "Perhaps we should/ bless what doesn't attach us..."

But just as there was no value in dwelling on drowned men and "coming extinctions" in the "Second Elegy" -- "they do not nourish" -- so in this elegy there is no value in remaining detached: "I do not know/ where we are to find nourishment."

Again, the poet is aware of the gently descending pollution, and he relates it to "the imperial way of life that bestows its fallout". As in the first two elegies, an awareness of the pollution evokes images of spectres. This time, instead of the ghosts of our ancestors, or Mackenzie's rebels, they are the U. S. Marines, appearing on the "fabled horizon of Bay Street." In his mind's eye, he imagines the marines as having just released "bacterial missiles over the Golden Horseshoe for love of all mankind." As though the invading marines were their "liberators" he sees his people following after them gladly accepting "the small change", which is a stereotype of the American war movies, in which the soldiers are seen giving pennies and chewing gum to the children lining the streets of the occupied city. The poet finds this a humiliation and imagines himself admonishing his countrymen accordingly.

But the country has surrendered, and daily, "our acquiescence", like the air pollution "presses down on us from above and we have no room to be." This section of the elegy concludes on the same note with which it began:

It is the children's fault as they swarm for
we cannot stop
caring.

The remaining sections of this elegy address themselves to Canada's relationship to an empire. Toronto is seen as "an outpost of empire" (British empire as well as American?), and Canada itself is called "a minor and docile colony". Canada's sin is that of "failure of nerve". Her role as nation is that of "complicity", which Lee also calls "the humiliation of imperial necessity". The role of the United States is that of a criminal, and the reason is related to the children, with which Lee began this elegy.

For a man who
fries the skin of kids with burning jelly is a
criminal. Even though he loves children he is a
criminal. Even though his
money pumps your oil he is criminal, and though
his programs infest the air

you breathe he is
criminal and though his honest quislings run your
government he is criminal and though you do not love
his enemies he is
criminal and though you lose your job on his say-so
he is criminal and
though your country will founder without him he is
criminal and though

he has
transformed the categories of your refusal by the
pressure of his media
he is
a criminal.

The leader of Canada, in her role as accomplice is according to Lee, the former Minister for External Affairs, the Honourable Mr. Paul Martin. It is not Martin, of course, "who sprays the poison mist/ on the fields of the Vietnamese... nor fries civilians." He is simply one of those "well-intentioned sell-outs of history", related in kind to the Britons who went over to the Romans, the "tired professors" of Germany who sold

out to Hitler, and the "brisk switches" of Budapest who sold out to Russia during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. But maybe Lee is being too harsh on Paul Martin. After all, "Mr. Martin is an honourable man, as we are all/ Canadians and honourable men." This last statement, of course, is the unkindest cut of all, since it is a re-statement of Antony's speech in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, where Antony insists that the traitor, "Brutus is an honourable man." 137

The final section of this elegy defines the "void" about which the "Second Elegy" was so largely concerned. The "void" says the poet, is

To participate in an
abomination larger than yourself. It is to fashion
other men's napalm and know it, to be a
Canadian safe in the square and watch the children
dance.

It is to burn "kids by proxy". That is the "void" which is Canada. But still, says Lee, to deny it, "is merely to be human."

The Fourth and Fifth elegies are the only elegies in this set of seven which do not have specific references to the "square" (Nathan Phillips Square). They each appear as internal monologues and considered as a part of the entire set of elegies, rather than as separate poems, they correspond to the digressions which are characteristic of the more traditional pastoral elegy, although these digressions often concern the Church in the traditional elegies.

137 William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Act III, Scene 2, line 86.

The technique used in this elegy is that of straightforward narrative, which differs from the poetic ambiguity of the other elegies. The subject is that of the relationship lovers have to each other, with the final section of this elegy suggesting a parallel between the self-destruction, which to Lee is inherent in all love relationships, and the nihilistic relationship between Canadians and their leaders.

The language of this elegy is precise and controlled, as Lee carefully describes the interpersonal transactions of lovers.

In the previous elegy Lee had taken the Canadians to task for their complicity in the Vietnam War and had imagined the U. S. Marines invading Canada. This elegy opens with the statement that war is not the only thing which keeps the poet awake at night: "for I have friends and lacerations." The language suggests that "lacerations" accompany friendship, although the next line might be meant to link "brave men" with "friends", while "spritely women" corresponds to the "lacerations":

for I have friends
and lacerations,
brave men and spritely women.

The lovers, about whom this elegy is concerned, are apparently compatible: their "neuroses dovetail". But they, like all lovers, are deeply involved in the games people play. The problem is that "we impose roles which feed the other's/hankering" while we ourselves "take on ... crippled roles".

a line which mimics the American patriot, Patrick Henry's line, "I regret that I have but one life to give for my country." By suggesting Patrick Henry's speech, Lee prepares us for the final section of this elegy in which he links the nihilistic relationship of lovers to the citizen's relationship to their leaders, by rhetorically asking, "do we also single out leaders because they will dishonour us, because they will diminish us? Do we also perhaps create our Paul Martin, our Mackenzie Kings?" Like our lovers, our leaders "act our heart's desire."

In the "First Elegy" the spectres demanded to know when we shall "come to be". In the concluding lines of this elegy, the poet is pessimistic that the time will ever come:

there is
no hope that we might come into our own and live
immediately with our claimed selves in the difficult
world.

The shortest of Lee's elegies, the "Fifth Elegy", is simply a statement of grief. As an elegy, it cannot stand apart from the elegies which preceded it, since it lacks even a statement as to the subject of the lament.

The first line -- "I am one for whom the world is constantly proving too much" -- is linked in tone and sentiment to the last line: "I cannot get purchase on life." (This last line being an expression which Lee has used before in another connection.) 139

139 Referring to a university seminar, Lee stated that "what they were saying had no purchase on me." Lee, The University Game, 69.

The Canadian government's official stance on continental capitalism is mimicked by Lee's reference to "the continental drift to barbarian normalcy." The line seems to be an allusion to a 1920 speech made by Warren G. Harding (not yet president of the U. S.) in which he said: "America's present need is not heroics but healing; not nostrums but normalcy, not revolution but restoration; not surgery but security." 140

There is little doubt about Lee's attitudes towards such a stance, for he portrays the politics of the situation in terms of "barbarian", "circuses", "holy wars", and "Rome".

The poet is reluctant to be carried along with this "drift". It frightens him and his steps become hesitant, although the rest of the country is pouring on past him.

The line, "we will carry the napalm for our side, proud of our clean hands", alludes to a similar sentiment expressed by George Grant:

However disgraceful has been our complicity in the Vietnam War, however disgusting the wealth we have made from munitions for that war, one must still be glad that Canadian forces are not fighting there. 141

And when Lee at last remarks, "I can't converse with friends without discussing Rome," we are reminded, of course, of the book, The New Romans: Candid Canadian Opinions of the U.S., edited by Alfred Purdy. 142

140 Time, Inc. This Fabulous Century, vol. III (1920-1930), 23.

141 Grant, Technology..., 77.

142 Alfred Purdy, ed., The New Romans; Candid Canadian Opinions of the U.S. (Edmonton, 1968).

The poet, in the "Sixth Elegy", returns to the square. Once again we have such images as "the towers", "children", the "pool", etc. The time is sundown and he is "watching the wind cut loose as it riffled the clouds on the sky, framing the towers at sundown."

Conspicuously absent, however, are the air pollution and the invading spectres. Here we have only everyday reality: "the newshawk's raucous cry", "children, chevies, hippies, shoppers", and "body odour".

The poet, though, is still wrapped up in reflection and introspection. He is "thinking of/ death in the city, others' and also my own and of many born afterwards" -- thoughts which in the "Second Elegy" he insisted were fruitless: "they do not nourish".

Nevertheless, while involved in such thoughts, two things occur to him: the importance of seeing the world with a unity of vision -- "to live among the calamitous division of the world/ with singleness of eye" -- and it occurs to him that "no man offends", a thought which reflects the poet's attitude at the close of the "Third Elegy" when he remarked that "denying it is merely to be human."

"But what are we to make of our lives?" asks the poet next; an important question at a crucial point in the poem, since some form of national self-realization has been at the focal point of the poet's attention for the previous five elegies. The search for this authenticity, says the poet can so easily become just "one more hangup".

The "kids and the calm and the endless parade of lethal desirable things" can and often do serve as "distractions", saving us from the "barren route", the "lonely inward procession" which is the search for authenticity, self-realization.

"I do not know a chastened handful who survived" this ordeal, says the poet. But one of the martyrs who "went that way", and whom Lee upholds as his "avatar", his "wretched blessed original", was Hector de Saint-Denys-Garneau.

The description of Garneau, who is the citizen honoured here as the subject of Lee's elegy, is sympathetic in its detail. Nevertheless, it increases one's appreciation of this elegy, if one is familiar with the background and life of Garneau.

Hector de Saint-Denys-Garneau was a sensitive, French-Canadian poet who lived from 1912-1943. An attack of rheumatic fever and a later illness left him with a weakened heart. This together with Garneau's excessive shyness led him into a permanent retreat at his family's home in Sainte-Catherine-de-Fossambault. From here, Garneau wrote much of his poetry as well as his Journal.

Garneau's retreat from ordinary social contact and his weakened heart are referred to in Lee's lines

Catatonic exemplar,
cardiac, scrupulous, hagridden...

The "palpable void" which Garneau sensed, is the personal

dimension of that void which, on the national level, is the result of participation "in an/ abomination larger than yourself." It is the void you become when you come upon void. On the national level it resulted from complicity in the Vietnam War and other "humiliations of imperial necessity." On the personal level the void is what you come up against at a party:

And often you left the room when the party was reaching its climax, and you had been foremost in
 repartee
 and fell crouching upstairs in a sweat by the bed,
 sick with repentance.

This sense of the void which Garneau felt is best illustrated by the entry in his Journal, dated "10:30 at night, January 31st (1935):

Back from tea at the X-s'. More and more I feel out of my element in this society, made up though it is of nice people who have each some good in them. My sensibility makes me feel too deeply the differences, all those clashes. Agglomerations of interest, agglomerations of greed, where people of the same sort group themselves to confront other groups, and where above all, everything that is mediocre and dull unites against originality and superiority. I never felt so strongly as on the last two occasions, that dance and that tea at the X-s', how much this society is simply a war, how completely the commonplace reigns there and carries everything before it without offending anyone, how sternly the superior and original person is rejected, or barely tolerated as long as he keeps quiet -- as if he were an outsider -- and how he is made to feel this. These people are cruel to the point of savagery, at times unconsciously, because their lack of sensitivity and their narrow selfishness prevent them from seeing and understanding the suffering they cause. They tear at the sensitive person with wicked joy, and generally in a way that is base, jealous and above all hypocritical.

They love to bite, or rather claw each other; they

are quick to notice the least weakness, and how to profit by it. But among themselves it seldom goes beyond a petty skirmish; for they form a kind of freemasonry; they keep on the look-out, knowing they must stick together, must have allies here and there, and as many as they can, for their own safety. 143

It was from this sort of social contact that Garneau retreated. From this, says the poet, Lee, Garneau

turned to sainthood,
and you beat down the thought for the pride and
retreated to
Sainte-Catherine, you watched your blood lap
wide on the lake at sunset,
thinking of John of the Cross, patron of void,
thinking of Jesus...

These latter lines also allude to Garneau's interest in Christian thought and his "quest for a salvation not only human but supernatural." 144

The line, "you watched your blood lap wide on the lake at sunset", is an oblique allusion to Garneau's death. On October 24, 1943, after Garneau had enjoyed dinner with friends, he set out by canoe to visit an island on which he was building a cabin. On the way back home, he had a heart attack. He managed to reach the shore, and made his way to a farmhouse in order to telephone his parents. There was no telephone, and Garneau was found dead the next morning near the shore of the river. He was 32. Interestingly enough, his age and the circumstances of his death parallel that of Tom Thomson, the

143 Hector de Saint-Denys-Garneau, Journal, translated by John Glassco (Toronto, 1962), 17-18.

144 Garneau, 12.

painter (see the "Second Elegy").

Garneau is obviously Lee's avatar (see "First Elegy") for he calls Garneau, "my/ lonely heroic starter, out of my own wrong start I/ keep my distance and praise."

The poet does not suggest, however, that we should all look to Garneau for guidance. The original question, "what are we to make of our lives?" is answered only for Lee himself. The crowds "gust through the square," and the city hall towers "preside", the "world is itself" -- "waiting to be construed" (i.e., interpreted), but "the tongue must be sure" before it begins. Lee suspects he knows the direction in which he himself is moving, but cautions: "I will not enter void until I come to myself", a reference to Garneau, who "at the age of twenty-two ... had found himself." 145

The last elegy, the "Seventh Elegy", is the summation of all that has gone before; it is the poet's final spiritual assessment of himself. The theme again is personal void. The images of the square, which are interspersed throughout this elegy, function as counterpoint to the theme: the square is now seen during the fall -- "across the square the crisp leaves blow in gusts," there is the "empty pool", the "raw air", and the ubiquitous "kids cluster restlessly, truants I guess..."

The "void" which the poet here speaks about consists in the conscious withdrawal from the "precincts of value -- job

145 Garneau, ll.

or dogma, knowledge, civil elegies/ or easy picnics on the island." This "movement of spirit" (our spirit? Holy Spirit?) results in the "the bleak knowledge/ that what you once took for yourself is no longer valid." Despite the bleakness, the "unmeaning", the fact that one is made completely "vulnerable" by this stance, the overall effect is "redemptive", for it led the poet to "a source" within himself; it left the poet "free to love the world"; he became a "clear psalm of being"; and he "learned to dwell among absence in jubilee."

After a four-line description of the square, the poet returns to his monologue on "void", addressing himself now to national void. The despair over the loss of national identity expressed in the earlier elegies is here pooh-poohed by Lee.

despair is for dilettantes. For the
news is worse than we thought --
the void is for real

An interesting shift in attitudes takes place with these lines. In the "Second Elegy", the poet said that the "news is as bad as we thought." Here in the last elegy, he insists that despair is not to be engaged in seriously, even though the "news is worse than we thought." The irony of the statement lies in the fact that the situation is beyond despair. Civilization itself "cannot succeed"; each civilization will inevitably mature and end its days in "sellout or death". (The classic example mentioned here by Lee is China.)

But, asks the poet at this point, what if this void, this "regenerative absence", does not exist? If that were the case,

then the world we have just renounced, we would have to return to. "We would have to live in the world." In fact, a common sense analysis of the situation leads you to just such a conclusion:

But how do you go to a void? Do you bark your shins on it?
Can you sit on Nonbeing? What about Nothingness?
How many toes does it have? Does it eat corn flakes?

The poet has come to realize that personal "void" had become a "crutch" for him; his attitude towards the concept of void had been akin to "idolatry": "void was holy". He had thought that by withdrawal he had arrived at an absolute of some sort, but he has now come to realize that "there is nothing but the process and detaching."

The monologue is again interrupted, and a glimpse of the square is given; we see the kids and the poet is reminded how much they matter: "I cannot set them by at last." The poet then continues the monologue.

In the "Sixth Elegy" Lee had said, "I will not enter void until I come to myself". Here in the "Seventh Elegy", the poet's description of his spiritual progress brings him to the point where even void must be relinquished as an idol. By so doing, "void becomes void", that is the personal void he clung to so idolatrously becomes the void he sought (the type of void which Saint-Denys-Garneau enjoyed). There is a sense of release and acceptance which accompanies this "movement of spirit". The poet says that with this "movement of spirit", "I came to myself./ And I was easy." His new-found attitude

of acceptance even includes a promise to "honour each one of my country's failures of nerve and its/ sellouts."

Why? Because we aren't allowed to enter heaven "where it is all a/ drowsy beatitude." We must live on this earth. "Nor do we have recourse to void" as a means of copping out. "We enter void," says Lee, "when we know void does not exist." Nor do we seek after void as though it were an ultimate reality; when we approach it in this manner we make it into an idol:

we go on living
in silence, and are not to speak of
Reality for if we found Reality we would remain
unreal before an idol.

With this statement, the poet again suspends the monologue in order to glance around at the square. He notices that the "kids by the pool sit hunkering in their bodies." The image of the kids squatting on their haunches reminds him that halfway round the world, American and Vietnamese -- "yank and gook" -- assume similar postures and are "shooting each other to death." But alas, as disgusting as this may be, "there is no other world for us to live in."

The poet returns to the subject of void and announces that void must freely "supplant itself"; that it, like "god", the "soul" and "eternity" must "re-instil itself in the texture of our being-here." The intent of these lines is made clearer when the poet says that his most carefully chosen phrases, those "most precious words" chosen to express the difficult concept of "void", now begin to "fade"

and are supplanted by "new nouns", the concrete nature of which represents our "being-here", nouns such as "tree, lintel, tower, body, cup." The line is more than coincidentally reminiscent of similar lines from Rilke's "Ninth Elegy":

Are we here perhaps just to say:
house, bridge, well, gate, jug, fruit tree, window --
at most, column, tower... but to say understand this,
to say it
as the Things themselves never fervently thought to be.

146

The poet now notices that the air in the square is growing colder and is reminded of Sir John A. Macdonald, his heavy drinking, his "own interminable graft", and the faltering Canadian Pacific Railway project which Macdonald was able to argue successfully through the House of Commons. Despite the country's instability as a new nation and the almost staggering debts accrued by the corporation, Macdonald managed to get the railroad completed, "from ocean to ocean." ¹⁴⁷ For Macdonald "the country was real" and not a void. In fact he could not even think that the nation would have come to its present state of "civil bathos". With the attitude towards his country which Macdonald held, he was able to "expend himself beyond his time... making all manner of things well". It is this attitude which Lee admires in Macdonald.

In the last section of this elegy, the poet's attitude has shifted decidedly, from the negative defeatist outlook of

146 Rilke, Duino Elegies, 69.

147 Donald Creighton, John A. Macdonald; The Old Chieftain (Toronto, 1955), see especially chapter 8, pp. 243 - end.

the "First Elegy" to the type of inscrutable positive outlook held by Macdonald. It is a "kind of grace", says the poet, "a living silence at the center of one's/ life, real beyond notions of void". This source which is beyond him and yet within him, enables him to approach his "being-here", his being "alive on earth, going to and fro in Canada", with a new confidence:

Now lately I have thought I also could begin my life.

With this last line Dennis Lee's Civil Elegies have arrived at the positive resolution which parallels the optimistic conclusions of such elegies as Milton's "Lycidas", where the poet concludes:

To morrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new.

At the beginning of this chapter it was stated that since Lee had specifically called these poems "elegies" then they should parallel in some way our common understanding of the term. Explication of these poems has revealed that Lee is remarkably consistent in his employment of elegaic conventions. And assuming the reader has an excellent background in Canadian history and letters, the Civil Elegies taken as a whole, is a powerful statement of the effect of Canada's loss of national identity on the spirit of one very sensitive man.

But there remains something to be said about the Civil Elegies as "lyric", since one aspect of the definition of an

elegy is that it is a lyrical poem.

Thrall & Hibbard define lyric as a "subjective poem ... marked by imagination, melody, and emotion." 148 Lee's elegies seem to pretty well fit this definition with the exception of "melody". Milton's elegy is marked by what has come to be known as "elegaic meter". There is, of course, no conscious meter in Lee's elegies, but this does not mean that they do not have "melody".

The technique used by Lee to give his elegies "melody" is the poetic technique of the Psalms: repetition of images and "parallelism". The repetition of images has already been remarked; they include the recurring images of towers, children, pool, square, etc. The parallelism is most apparent in such lines as the following from the "Fourth Elegy":

do we also single out leaders because they will
dishonour us, because they will diminish us?

Another example, from the "Third Elegy" is the repetition of the phrase, "he is criminal".

The lineation in Lee's elegies, however, is still somewhat of a mystery, since it seems to lack all regularity and reason. It has been suggested in conversation with Peter Stevens, poetry editor of the Canadian Forum, that the irregularity in lining in some way parallels the chaotic demise of Canadian nationalism. If this is so, then it only serves to increase the effect of the Civil Elegies as a lament for a nation.

148 Thrall & Hibbard, op. cit., 269.

Chapter V:

CONCLUSIONS AND POSTSCRIPTS

For the 2-1/2 years following the publication of Civil Elegies (1968 to the present) Lee has written very little. Only a small handful of post-Elegy poems have appeared in print -- two of those appearing in the same issue of the Canadian Forum. 149

The first of these, dated September 1968, is entitled "Sibelius Park" and is largely an internal monologue in which Lee wrestles spiritually with his life in the present

Rochdale, yes Anansi
the five iconic books, sheepish errata
shitwork in a cold basement...

and his life in the past

he
hears himself 10 years ago affirming his faith in Christ
in the lockers, still half-clasped in pads & a furtive
virgin still...

Intruding occasionally into these thoughts is Sibelius Park, which Lee is passing on his way home. And

Across that green expanse he sees the
cars parked close, every second licence yankee,
he thinks of
the war and the young men dodging...

The second poem of Lee's appearing in this issue of the Canadian Forum is a short poem of only eight lines, entitled "In a bad time." In it there is a two-line, oblique reference to the technology and empire alluded to in Civil Elegies:

149 Canadian Forum, "Fiftieth Anniversary Issue",
(April-May, 1970), pp. 103, 116.

Fallouts fall; the empires breed
the nightmares that they need.

Another poem, bearing the title "1838, 1970, 2020" appeared in the recently published Visions 2020; Fifty Canadians in Search of a Future, edited by Stephen Clarkson. The title suggests the past, the present and the future, with the year 1838 referring to the Rebellion in Upper Canada led by William Lyon Mackenzie (cf. the First Elegy in Civil Elegies). The poem invokes the spectre of Mackenzie as a person capable of leading Canada in victory over the conflicting claims on her sovereignty:

The British want the country
For the Empire and the view
The Yankees want the country for
A yankee barbecue

.....

But who will speak for Canada?
Mackenzie, come again.

This same poem has recently appeared in Al Purdy's anthology, Storm Warning; The New Canadian Poets, under the title "1883", which apparently was a mis-print for "1838" (?)

The other poems by Lee appearing in Purdy's anthology, particularly "More claiming" and "Thursday" are poetic responses to a remembrance of his youth. There are allusions to "his paper route", "Hallowe'en" and a "messy pubescent/ surfeit of selves." The only mention of Canada occurs in "More claiming" where he remarks at the beginning:

That one is me too -- belting through
 school to the rhythms of glory, tripping, blinking
 at vanishing place names
 Etobicoke Muskoka Labrador Notting Hill Gate but he
 could
 never keep them straight
 though as they ran together they always had
 people in them, like ketchup on his shirt.

These lines could possibly be interpreted as the poet's truncated image of Canada, although they lack the intense negativism which is evident in much of his other poetry. A statement following these poems ¹⁵⁰ suggests that perhaps Lee, as negative nationalist, has begun to mellow:

I've decided that the challenge for me is not to learn how to project a Lee in the poems who is all Sensitive Plant, or all fuming erection, or whatever variant of the Poet-as-Feelie is current. The challenge is rather to learn to write poetry that can convey a rich indistinction of passion, thought, feeling, whimsicality, etc. in its own voice -- since those things are all present, and all inextricable, in my own way of marching through a day from morning to night.

Can I make that clearer? I wanted the voice of the poems to say things directly, concretely, with as much simplicity as is granted by (say) clear eyesight. But the voice itself I wanted to be a rich organic manifest of being human -- so that it would become impossible to say, "This is the voice of a man who has a bunch of feelings; or, of a man who is analyzing something; or, of a man who (... fill in the blank)." What I wanted as response was, "This is a human voice."

Nevertheless, the revision of his "First Elegy" (see the appendix) has strengthened his statements of negative nationalism; and a copy of an unpublished poem (see appendix)

¹⁵⁰ Al Purdy, ed. Storm Warning; The New Canadian Poets. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), p. 96.

entitled, "When I went up to Rosedale" bristles with such lines as:

And those were our conservatiyes! --
 A claue of little men
 Who took the worst from history
 And made it worse again.

The dream of tory origins
 Is full of lies and blanks
 Though what remains when it is gone
 To prove that we're not Yanks?

To the degree that any of these latter poems are statements of negative nationalism, then they of course corroborate his major work, the Civil Elegies. But because the argument is not extended by these poems, they will perhaps appear anticlimactic to the Civil Elegies.

Parts of these latter poems do however evince the poet's previously stated stance: that spiritual ambiguity is related to technology and empire (American technology and empire, by implication); that without malice or premeditation, sensitive Canadians (such as the poet) have nevertheless been deprived of personal and political identity.

Insofar as Lee's poetry reflects this stance, his poetry is a part of the new negative nationalism (prose statements of which can be found in the previously cited Lament for a Nation by Grant, Close the 49th Parallel, etc., edited by Ian Lumsden, and the section, "Relating to the New Romans" in Kilbourn's Canada; A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom).

As a poetic nationalist, Lee has come a long way from the type of patriotic literature which E. H. Dewart in 1864 saw as a "powerful cement", "the bond of national unity, and

the guide of national energy." Indeed, the ideas in Lee's poetry are not presented with any of the vehemence which would be likely to attract ideological support. In fact, in the last analysis Lee tends towards an ambivalence. He suffers the pangs of spiritual stress, and as his poetry developed he tended to link this internal turmoil to Canada's "loss of nerve" and an empire and technology belonging to the "yanks". But at the same time Lee seems quick to say that to be a Canadian is "merely to be human." 151

151 Lee, "Third Elegy", Civil Elegies.

APPENDIX

505 W. 30th Street
Apt. A-7
Holland, Michigan 49423

5 December 1970

Dennis Lee
474 Brunswick Avenue
Toronto, Ontario
CANADA

Dear Mr. Dennis Lee:

Dr. Peter Stevens, my thesis advisor, has given me your address.

I am presently in the midst of writing my M.A. thesis in English Canadian literature -- literally "in the midst" -- I have written two chapters and have two more chapters to write.

The subject of my thesis is the poetry of Dennis Lee, as viewed from the perspective of the history of literary nationalism in Canada.

The two chapters which I have completed are:

"Canadian nationalism: literary and social forces."

"Dennis Lee's Civil Elegies: A lament for a nation.

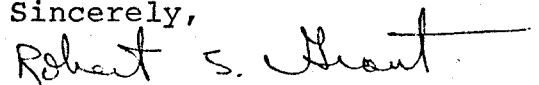
The chapter I am now working on is: "Kingdom of Absence and other poems." The remaining chapter(s) will be: "Dennis Lee: a biobibliography" -- and "Conclusions."

I hope that you are not offended by my "effrontery" in choosing your poetry as the subject of my thesis. Indeed, I am hoping that you can assist me.

I would like to interview you via telephone and ask some questions about your poetry in general, as well as some questions about specific difficulties I have had with some of your work. The interview would be recorded and would probably become part of the collection of the University of Windsor, Department of English. Prior to the interview I would send you a list of questions -- which would give you a chance to think about your answers -- and then decide with you in advance the day and time of the interview.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Robert Stuart Grant

Anansi

10 December 70

Robert Stuart Grant
505 W. 30th Street
Apt A-7
Holland, Michigan

Dear Mr Grant,

Thanks for writing. No, I'm in no way affronted -- I'm more bemused, I suppose. But I'd be happy to co-operate within whatever limits my sense of privacy would enforce. Do send on your queries -- I'll be interested to see what you've taken hold of.

It might help you to poke through a few books that overlap with my concerns; probably you've done a good deal of that already. In the perspective of literary nationalism there's not so much; mostly TECHNOLOGY AND EMPIRE, I suppose. (There's no influence, but do you know Dave Godfrey's "The Hard-Headed Collector" in DEATH GOES BETTER WITH COCA-COLA?) Poetically, you might look at Lattimore's PINDAR, the Penguin Hölderlin, and the DUINO ELEGIES. The metaphysics of the two books are perhaps the dodgiest to come at; I don't know how thoroughly you've thought of going into that. Things like Tillich's COURAGE TO BE and Erich Heller's DISINHERITED MIND are easiest to get into, I suppose; if you had more time than you do you might want to investigate Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross, some of those people, and more recent thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger. But trying to do it quickly to a deadline turns it into source-hunting, which I think you'd find pretty much a waste of time. Don't feel spooked by having those names thrown at you, by the way -- I don't write poetry the way Pound or Eliot did, and the poems don't have references which you'd misunderstand without knowing Pindar or Eckhart -- you can understand them very well without having heard of those writers. It's just that if the terrain is somewhat new, these are other people through whom you can make an entry.

Well; I'll look forward to the next step of this curious process.

Yours,

Dennis Lee

Dennis Lee



House of Anansi Press Limited 471 Jarvis Street. Toronto 284. Canada. Telephone (416) 923-7385

Apt. A-7
505 W. 30th Street
Holland, Michigan 49423

15 February 1971

Dear Mr. Dennis Lee,

Thank you for your prompt response to my earlier letter -- and may I hasten to apologise for being so slow in getting back to you. I took some time out to read a little Rilke, Hölderlin and Pindar.

It occurred to me after I had written my last letter that you may prefer to simply write your comments to my questions rather than relate them by telephone -- whatever will be most convenient to you.

I can't remember now how I first came across your name. Perhaps it was as co-editor of The University Game, which I had read when it first came out. Or, perhaps I had already linked your name in my mind to House of Anansi Press, publishers of the Manual for Draft-Age Immigrants to Canada. In any case, when one of my professors, Dr. Peter Stevens, handed me a copy of Civil Elegies by Dennis Lee, your name was already familiar to me.

I read the Civil Elegies and decided that I liked the sound of the words and their rhythm but I wasn't sure of their sense. So as an academic exercise I wrote a paper on the Elegies. After delivering the paper, Dr. Stevens asked me if I thought there was anything "nationalistic" about your verse. He didn't say that there was -- he probably didn't even mean to imply that he thought there was. He was just asking one of those questions which professors are paid to ask. Nevertheless, I was quick to pick up the gauntlet (or whatever it is that one picks up when faced with an academic challenge) and proceeded with a sophomoric enthusiasm to tear into your poetry expecting to find evidence in every other line which would have convicted you as a rabid nationalist. I probably would have succeeded, too, had I not stopped to recall that you were still alive. (Students and scholars can say all sorts of outrageous things about Shakespeare -- he's dead and can no longer defend himself. But a living poet is a different matter).

The problem with isolating a single aspect of a poetry for study is that that aspect quickly mushrooms into proportions which practically overshadow the work as a whole. This is the danger in seeing in your poetry anything which can be even loosely connected to Canadian literary nationalism. The mere act of identifying such an aspect of your poetry takes it out of context and makes it seem more dominant

than other (more important?) aspects of your poetry, such as the influence of Rilke.

Before I go any further, I should perhaps address myself to these other aspects of your poetry.

Even before receiving your last letter I had recognised your interest in Rilke. Your translation of "Die Erste Elegie" in Quarry and your allusion to Rilke in poem no. XI in Kingdom of Absence are ample evidence of your fascination with the German poet. As far as poetic influence is concerned, this does not seem to extend much beyond the fact that you chose the "sonnet" and the elegy as your modes of expression in Kingdom... and Civil Elegies, as did Rilke in his Sonnets to Orpheus and Duino Elegies.

The influence of Pindar which you claim in your statement in Murphy's Contemporary Poets of the English Language must have to do with your allusiveness. The allusions to events and persons in Canadian history which appear in Civil Elegies read much like the allusions to events and persons of classical antiquity appearing in Pindar's Odes, which 2500 years have made so obscure that a glossary is required to help the reader decipher them. (No slam intended -- It's just that these allusions were one of the problems I had in understanding Civil Elegies; which says something about my own ignorance, and does not imply an ineptness on your part).

The influence of Hölderlin I'm unsure of; perhaps it is one of personality. Such a phrase as "fusion of intellect and passion," which you used to describe what you saw in Hölderlin, brings me about as close as I seem capable of coming to a description of his influence on your poetry.

There are, of course, many other sources evident in your poetry, such as phrases and ideas from Tillich and Nietzsche. And lines such as

Everywhere I go the objects whimper.
I'm here, king of the ninnies, and I stuff
old value into losers, and they die.
(Kingdom, no. VII)

can only bring to mind the lines from T. S. Eliot's "Hollow Men"

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men

. . .

This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.

I do not ignore these things in my discussion of your poems. But in addition to a consideration of them, I attempt to demonstrate that there are aspects of your poetry which link it to a new tradition of Canadian literary nationalism.

The argument goes as follows: Such poems as Roberts "Canada" or Mair's "Tecumseh" were the products of a particular social milieu, a not unpredictable by-product of the Romantic idealism of the 19th century. This tradition of literary nationalism, of which poems such as this are a part, seems to have evolved into a modern tradition which is called by Louis Dudek, a "nationalism-in-reverse", a poetry in which we see

A fragmented image of Canada, shot through with negative bias -- a wasteland poetry presented in terms of Canadian reality.

(Dudek, "Nationalism in Canadian Poetry,
Queen's Quarterly 73 (1): 567.

Forming part of this tradition are such poems as Earl Birney's "Canada: Case History" which opens

This is the case of a high school land,
deadset in adolescence...

or, Irving Layton's "From Colony to Nation" in which we see

A dull people, without charm
or ideas,
settling into the clear empty look
of a Mountie or dairy farmer
as into a legacy.

or, F. R. Scott's "The Canadian Authors Meet"

O Canada, O Canada, Oh can
A day go by without new authors springing
To paint the native maple, and to plan
More ways to set the selfsame welkin ringing?

Lines from your poetry also come to mind in this connection:

... nothing I have written yet is real. Which
demonstrates
at last, I am Canadian.

(Kingdom, no. XXI)

The British want the country
For the Empire and the view.
The Yankees want the country for
A yankee barbecue.

("1838, 1970, 2020")

and of course, the whole of Civil Elegies.

The distinguishing characteristics of this "new" genre of Canadian poetry are: the use of images and ideas peculiar to Canada; often a negative bias against Canada and things Canadian (Ramsay Cook wrote recently that "Nationalism in Canada, as elsewhere, is very often the doctrine of the discontented. Indeed, it might be argued that while a patriot is a man who loves his country, a nationalist is a man who hates it."); and occasionally it includes an expression of disillusionment with modern, technological society (i.e., "American society" since the U.S. seems to be the fountain-head of modern technology).

Perhaps "nationalism" is the wrong word to use in describing this type of poetry since it evokes mental images of protective tariffs, transcontinental railways and Imperial connexions. Indeed, the popular sentiment known as "nationalism" and the Canadian literary tradition which paralleled it, probably expired shortly after the First World War. To avoid confusion, I have toyed with the idea of coining a new descriptor: msilanoitan (which is, of course, "nationalism" in reverse).

Well, in 25 words or more, this idea (together with a discussion of the history of Canada's political and literary nationalism) is what I have been researching and writing on for the past year.

Aside from the desire for a little biographical background material, the questions I have mostly concern some ambiguities I have encountered in your poetry. But first the biographical information: I have been able to find very little biographical information on you -- mostly the type written in Rosalie Murphy's Contemporary Poets of the English Language. Without violating your right to privacy, is there anything historical or anecdotal in relation to your poetic career which you might be willing to share? When did you first start writing poetry? What was your first published poem? In what direction do you see your poetry developing? How does the writing of poetry figure into your many endeavours? (Is it of primary importance to you? Do you write poetry every day or only when the spirit moves?)

About your poetry:

What or where is the "Annex"? (referring to the Annex Elegiac in Kingdom of Absence) and Schultz's? (poem No. V in Kingdom...) Is the dedicatee to Kingdom... your wife? Is the primary source of the idea of "void" Rilke, Nietzsche or another?

In Civil Elegies there are the lines

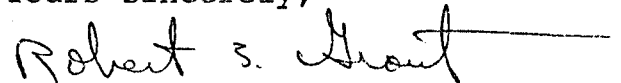
Canadians in flight. And all their avatars, Jenny
sang we clapped, Bird sang, Time sings we clap,
Life sings and
lullaby my country now and all.

Time and Life, I presume, refers to the magazines. What is
the significance of Jenny and Bird?

In the same elegy (First Elegy) there is an allusion to
"Revell's sign." Revell, of course, was the architect of the
Toronto city hall -- but what is Revell's sign? (Several
months ago, when I was in Toronto, I walked all around and
through the City Hall -- trying not to appear too conspicuous
-- searching for a sign. Is it the brass plaque containing
Toronto's coat of arms and its motto, "Industry, Intelligence,
Integrity"?).

Well, enough for now. Besides, I would like to think
that I was capable of apprehending the major thrusts of your
poetry on my own.

Yours sincerely,



Robert Stuart Grant

Anansi

474 Brunswick Avenue
Toronto 4
23 February 71

Dear Bob,

Let me amble through your letter and set down whatever it touches off.

Hölderlin, Rilke, Pindar have something in common in their cadence, their voice. It's hard to speak about the centrality this has for at least some writers -- the matter of an authentic voice -- but it is very important.

Your perspective on contemporary negative nationalism is an interesting one; any generalization has its flaws, but yours sounds like a sensible and useful one. I trust that you'll look fairly closely at the notion of being 'anti-'Canadian, or of 'hating' Canada; I assume you mean love/hatred rather than hatred. Once again George Grant is the first person to read -- the first essay in *TECHNOLOGY AND EMPIRE* is the best statement of unpatriotic nationalism we have, in both content and voice.

I started writing at high school, quit almost completely while I was studying at university, juggled analytic and imaginative work for a long while and seem now to have come down mostly on the latter side, though I obviously write poetry as an intellectual (among other things). Between about 20 and 26 or so, I had no contact with other writers, was getting my stuff rejected everywhere I sent it, and had no idea whether you could cram into poems the kind of cultural/cosmological history that *KINGDOM OF ABSENCE* is crawling with. I still don't know -- well, that's not true, I think you can but I don't think I succeeded terribly well in that book -- though as an unsuccessful first book I now think it's a pretty interesting unsuccessful first book. First poems published were in *ALPHABET* magazine, edited by James Reaney in London Ont, whom I sent 3 of the *ABSENCE* poems with a letter saying I would institute a lawsuit if he didn't publish them.

Writing is my vocation, but for the last 2½ years I have scarcely written anything; partly because of Rochdale, which now looks like a detour, and partly because of editing books at Anansi, which I like and do well. I've decided to take 1971 largely for my own writing; and working only one day a week at Anansi, reading & writing the rest of the time. I don't want to talk about where I see my work heading; but the first thing I'm doing is to revise the *ELEGIES*. I'll try in the next week to stat a copy of the revised first elegy, which you might be interested in having a look at. I see another book coming out sometime in the next 3 years, with the revised elegies and I think a great deal of new work.

The Annex is a section of Toronto -- if you know the city, it's bounded by Avenue on the east, Bloor on the south, Bathurst on the west, Dupont or the CPR tracks on the north. It's an area where the kind of people live who are described in that poem. 'Schultz' is the neighbour of the summer place in Muskoka that I spent my childhood summers at. It's one of the few totally private references in any of my work; I wanted a reader to see it as referring to someone's house nearby, with a pump



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and lots of open space, and then beyond that to convey the sense of someone musing over a past that (at this point) was very specific, private, and momentarily not fully part of the more generalized, accessible world surrounding it in the poem, where 'toronto' and 'muskoka' figure as much as emblems as they do as places.

The singing-clapping sequence in ELEGIES. Jenny and Bird are two other instances of cultural colonialism, of flight from ourselves and reliance on other people's pre-approved norms of excellence. Jenny is Jenny Lind, who is famous for some reason in Toronto lore for having sung at the St Lawrence Hall when it was a concert hall, I think before the turn of the century. Bird is Charlie Parker.

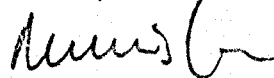
I used 'sign' in the sense that you find it in, say, the Biblical quote "And this shall be a sign unto ye" (or however it goes exactly) -- not as a literal sign, but as the manifestation of something terribly significant. The manifestation here is the building itself.

Yes, KINGDOM OF ABSENCE is dedicated to my wife. The kids who crop up now and again in my poetry are our two daughters, Kevin and Hilary.

The primary source of the idea of void is my own experience. I found that experience articulated, when I began to look, by a great series of people. Some of them were Kierkegaard, Tillich, Nietzsche, Rilke, Heidegger, Hölderlin, Erich Heller, Meister Eckhardt, John of the Cross, the Cloud of Unknowing, Evelyn Underhill, St-Denys-Garneau, Grant. I don't mean that they all use the word void, or that they mean the same thing when they use analogous words, or that their experiences were all fundamentally one experience; it would be pretty presumptuous of me to announce something like that. I mean that my own experience made things they had written resonant for me; and while there is likely some influence of the kind you suggest -- "Lee read about void in Nietzsche, or Rilke, or whoever, and then started writing about it himself," -- the situation is actually a bit more complex, something like this: "Lee's life-experience left him groping for words; he looked at other people's words; some of them touched off the sense in him that their writer's life-experience was kindred to his own; and sometimes he then picked up words or ideas from them, to try to talk about things he finds very nearly inexpressible." What is important in the process is the resonance of life-experience, of the kind that leads people to talk about void, abyss, non-being, emptiness, absence, and so on; the 'idea' of those things comes later and is a good deal less important than the resonance.

Well: enough sermonizing. I'll try to shoot that poem on soon.

Yours,



Dennis Lee

WHEN I WENT UP TO ROSEDALE

When I went up to Rosedale
I thought of kingdom come,
Persistent in the city
Like a totem in a slum.

The ladies off across the lawns
Revolved like haughty birds.
They made an antique metaphor.
I didn't know the words.

Patrician diocese! the streets
Beguiled me as I went
Until the tory founders seemed
Immortal government.

For how could mediocrities
Have fashioned such repose?
And yet those men were pygmies,
As any schoolboy knows.

For Head reduced the rule of law
To frippery and push.
Tradition-conscious Pellatt built
A drawbridge in the bush.

The Bishop Strachan gave witness, by
The death behind his eyes,
That all he knew of Eden
Was the property franchise.

And those were our conservatives!--
A claue of little men
Who took the worst from history
And made it worse again.

The dream of tory origins
Is full of lies and blanks,
Though what remains when it is gone,
To prove that we're not Yanks?

Nothing but the elegant
For Sale signs on the lawn,
And roads that wind their stately way
To dead ends, and are gone.

When I came down from Rosedale
I could not school my mind
To the manic streets before me,
Nor the courtly ones behind.

By Dennis Lee
26 March '71

FIRST ELEGY

Often I sit in the sun and brooding over the city, always
in airborne shapes among the pollution I see them, the
ancestors; pouring across the square in
fetid return, they darken the towers
and the wind-swept place of meeting and whenever
the thick air clogs my breathing I tangle with ancestors.
Many were born in Canada, and living un-lived lives they died
of course but died truncated, stunted, never at
home in native space and not yet
citizens of a human body of kind. And it is Canada that
specialized in this deprivation. Therefore the spectres ar-
rive, congregating in bitter droves, thick in the April smog,
accusing us and we are no different, though you would not expect
the furies assembled in hogtown and ring me round, invisible,
demanding
what time of our lives we wait for till we shall come to be.
Always they meet me
beneath the curving white inevitable towers, condemning Toronto--
snug with its cash and concrete--and that great lacuna, Canada.
The wide square stretches out
serene and singly by moments it takes us in, magnificent, each
one for now
a passionate civil man, until it
sends us back to the acres of gutted intentions,
back to the concrete city, to parking scars and the four-
square tiers
of squat and righteous lives. And here
once more, I watch the homing furies' arrival.

I sat one morning by the Moore, off to the west
ten yards and saw though diffident my city nailed against the
sky
in ordinary glory.
Men and women moved in their own space, performing
their daily lives and their presence occurred
in time as it occurred, often for good for they
despised mob paradigms, patricians in muddy York and rooted in
place they made their compact together, engendering history.
It is not much to ask. A place, a making
two towers, a teeming, a genesis, a city.
And as that crumpled before the shambling onset, again the
lives we had not lived in phalanx invisibly staining
the square and vistas, casting back I saw
that second origin, plain men much goaded by privilege, ontario
levellers
looking for justice now and heard
regeneration twirl its blood and the cavalry riding
riderless down Yonge Street, crying

"Mackenzie knows a word, Mackenzie
knows a meaning!" but it was not true. Eight hundred-odd
steely Canadians
turned tail at the cabbage patch when a couple of bullets
fizzed
and the loyalists, scared skinny by the sound of their own
gunfire,
gawked and bolted south to the fort like rabbits,
the rebels for their part bolting north to the pub: the first
spontaneous mutual retreat in the history of warfare.
Canadians, in flight. And all their avatars: the American
corporations
sing we dance, Bird sang, Time sings we dance, Life sings
until we
close the ring around the country's death.

Buildings oppress me, and the sky-concealing wires
cut zig-zag through my brain.
In April, in my mind the snow still
sifts down through the city, piled up high in the warmth of
the square,
and we print our tracks, and watch, and they drift off back-
wards vanishing helplessly into time and the terminal white,
and drag back with them too
the streetcars, high-rise, hydrants,
confusions of second mortgages, all the
litter of unlived history, still
waiting to be as they twitch and recede back into the cold.
But the mad bomber, Chartier of Major Street, Chartier/ said
it: that if a country is not well governed
neither is it a country and promptly
blew himself to bits in the parliament john, leaving as
civil testament
assorted chunks of prophet, twitching and
bobbing to rest in the flush.
But what can anyone do in this country, baffled and
making our penance for ancestors, what did they leave us?
Indian-killers,
stewards of unclaimed earth and rootless it does not matter
now if they,
our forebears' flesh and bone were often
good men, good men do not matter to history--
but what are we doing here now, at ease in the square as if
our lives
made sense because at last we have no notion
of what we might have come to be in America, alternative,
and how make public
a presence which is not sold out utterly to the modern?
utterly? to the
beautiful inflictions of what is for real, it pays off, it
is only
accidentally less than human?

in Nathan Phillips Square, among the sun,
as if our lives were real.
Lacunae. Parking lots. Regenerations.
Newsstand euphorics and Revell's sign, that not
one countryman has learned, that
men and women live that
they may make that
life worth dying. Living. Hey,
the dead ones! Gentlemen, generations of
acquiescent spectres gawk at the fins
of American cars on Queen Street, gawk and slump and retreat.
And over the square where I sit, congregating above the Archer
they crowd in a dense baffled throng and the sun does not
shine through.

By Dennis Lee
26 March '71

CANADA—A Neighbor with Money to Spend



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Montreal, P. Q.	750,000	GAZETTE STAR	Saskatoon, Sask.	21,054	PHOENIX STAR
Quebec, P. Q.	100,000	TELEGRAPH	Calgary, Alta.	56,302	ALBERTAN HERALD
Ottawa, Ont.	101,785	CITIZEN JOURNAL DAILIES	Edmonton, Alta.	53,794	BULLETIN JOURNAL
London, Ont.	60,000	ADVERTISER FREE PRESS	Vancouver, B. C.	120,000	SUN
Toronto, Ont.	525,000	GLOBE WORLD (S. & D.) NEWS STAR	Victoria, B. C.	45,000	COLONIST

Prepared by SMITH, DENNE & MOORE, Advertising Agency, Toronto and Montreal

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