

## IDENTITY AND THE FLIGHT WITHIN

Always there is the return to the philosophical vision of George Grant. For all of the political differences which separate the generations, and there are many, and for all of the criticisms which might be raised against Grant's choice of intellectual itinerary in his "labour of recovery" of classical *virtù*, yet there remains the simple, the resilient fact that Grant is a truth-sayer about the human condition; that somehow he has unified the philosophical imagination and the collective unconscious in Canada. And what is the truth which is announced in Grant's writings — a philosophical discourse which ranges, in part, from the intellectual patriotism of *Lament for a Nation* to the elegant ruminations on wisdom and justice in *Philosophy in the Mass Age*? It is, I would suggest, that if philosophy is to remain an erotic act, an extended speech about and for life which discovers the essence of human passion in the love of wisdom, it must necessarily be a philosophy of absences, of silences. It must speak, that is, with a voice which admits that even in this age of historical man, the essence of humanity is defined and circumscribed by the condition of marginality.

The philosophy of life is an old acquaintance of marginality, of estrangement and displacement. As Grant has said, in fact, of the origins of the life of reason that beginning with Socrates and Plato, philosophy has never unburdened itself of the more ancient responsibility of being a "practice of dying."<sup>1</sup> The elemental action of the philosopher is "to negate the world, and thus to critically negate oneself, to engage in self-transcendence."<sup>2</sup> But if dying to the world is constitutive of philosophy, if, that is, the struggle of wisdom against the profane is but the most recent expression of the more ancient tempest of good and evil, then the dying which we experience is not only our own, but at times that of our country. Philosophy in the age of marginality is transformed into a searing lament: "To lament is to cry out at the death or dying of something loved." And this is a political lament not only filled with "pain and regret", but one which is also the celebration of the past good. For what is this lament but a witnessing of the passing of Canada ". . . as a celebration of memory, the memory of that tenuous hope that was the principle of my ancestors. The insignificance of that hope in the hopeless ebb and flow of nature does not prevent us from mourning. At least we can say with Richard Hooker: 'Posterity may know that we have not loosely through silence permitted things to pass away as in a dream'.<sup>3</sup>

There is a certain tension in Canadian thought, a certain polarity, which runs through our historical consciousness and which, in different ways, is expressed as ideology, as myth, as opposing perspectives on what constitutes our collective sense of identity. The tension to which I allude is that between destiny and exile, between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, between a form

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of identity rooted in a powerful and brooding sense of the Canadian homeland and an identity based on a flight beyond the homeland, in exile. Destiny and exile as expressions of a fundamental polarity in Canadian thought are, perhaps, the informing impulses of really two quite divergent traditions in Canada: on the one hand, the tradition of philosophical nationalism as represented, in part, by George Grant, and the other a more liberal, cosmopolitan tradition represented by Northrop Frye and Marshall McLuhan. It would be striking, and not a little polemical, to add that the third great intellectual trajectory in Canada, that of the socialist idiom, represents a dynamic synthesis of the oscillation in Canadian thought between nationalism and universalism, between longing for absorption into the particular and an outward flight to world consciousness. Such, however, does not appear to be the case. And it is not an inaccurate reflection of the "unfinished revolution" in Canadian thought that that theoretician who most elegantly represents the social democratic ideal in Canadian letters — Harold Innis — traces out in his writings an uneasy movement between a universal archeology of communication and an historically specific study of Canadian political economy. Innis' early work, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, stands to his later opus, *Empire and Communications*, in much the same way that the Mexican philosopher Antonio Caso has written of the motif of "wings and lead": a migration to and fro between the "lead" of reality and the "wings of utopia". This is not to criticize Innis, who, along with such thinkers as Professors Grant, Macpherson, Taylor, Frye, Watkins and Rotstein, represents one of the major axes of Canadian intellectuality, but it is to indicate that marginality is central to the Canadian experience; and, as such, it yields an intellectual tradition which, irrespective of the nature of particular discourses — whether conservative, socialist or liberal — splits on the question of the relationship between intellectual imagination and national culture. Every serious Canadian thinker is faced, it might be argued, with a difficult and really impossible choice between self-imposed exile from his or her historical circumstance through active appreciation of universal culture and self-willed participation in a more localized historical destiny. That the choice between the indigenous and the universal is a false one — that, that is, a dynamic harmony of 'world' and 'earth' would be the more preferable ideal — is almost self-evident. But it may be the unique cruelty of Canadian experience, the peculiar psychological character of marginality in Canada, that our society forces a choice between historical destiny and intellectual exile, between the loving recovery of the indigenous and appreciation of universal culture. And, ironically, might not it also be that the sheer impossibility of this predicament, the 'wound' in Canadian thought which never closes, is the real source of the creative imagination in Canada?

Much of the Canadian mentality is, thus, as in an epic poem caught up in an odyssey between the polarities of immanence and transcendence. Should the

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Canadian identity be established on the basis of communion with the universalistic features of bourgeois technology, or should our identity be a matter of discovering the autochthonous in Canadian history? It is as if the victory of liberal culture in Canada, so admired by some and so deplored by others, has released two warring impulses in the Canadian mind, one towards the attainment of aesthetic idealism, and the other towards the creation of an immanent ontology. Our intellectual emigration to the world, so bitterly yet eloquently expressed in Northrop Frye's criticism of the "garrison mentality" of nationalist intellectuality, is really a flight beyond the historically particular to a formalist aesthetic. Not only in Frye's writings, but also in McLuhan's perspective, there is to be found a denial of the philosophy of immanence and an optimistic celebration of a world freed by the "real as rational" to be denationalized and deterritorialized. *Spiritus Mundi, The Educated Imagination, Understanding Media*: these are, in exile, the meeting of the liberal imagination with the promise and peril of the "universal and homogeneous state". At the other extreme, but in the same historical context, another more authentic migration occurs. But this time in opposition to the contrived universalism of liberal thought, it is an "inner migration", a flight by a certain trajectory of Canadian thought into the unnamed and unarticulated mental landscape of Canada. This is a *flight within* which, undertaken in different ways and on separate occasions by George Grant, W.L. Morton, Clare Pentland, Hubert Aquin and Margaret Laurence, is intended to establish an authentic Canadian identity through a recognition of the "otherness" of the land and of its inhabitants. Against the perspective of aesthetic idealism, philosophers and historians of immanence — like Grant, Morton and Pentland — seek to evoke, if only in the covenant of remembrance, the promise that was Canada: a society which saddled with the fate of being both fully bourgeois and fully marginal is the real horizon of the myth of enlightenment.

It is, therefore, to the dynamic tension between cultural history and political economy, between the ideal and the real, that Canadian thought speaks. And it is this silent mid-point, this degree zero, between cosmopolitan consciousness and historical remembrance which stands as the ever receding locus of Canadian identity. Are we not torn in our analysis between "loyalty to one's own" and fealty to world culture? And is it not, perhaps, that the "cultures" of solitude in Canada — the Pascalian anguish of Quebec versus the old tory ego of English-Canada, metropolitan chauvinisms versus regional fatalisms — are really expressions of the impossibility of naming, and thus colonizing, the absence, the wound, that is Canadian society. On one side of the zero-point of Canadian identity stands all imagination, all future, all bourgeois ideology; on the other side, there exists only all remembrance, all passion, all past. To error in the direction of cultural transcendence is to be a world fugitive, a victim of colonialism lost in a psychology of self-contempt.

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To error on the side of the historically particular, of remembrance, is also to be victimized, but not by the will to power, but by the will to stillness, to adoration of a past that never was.

Only in breaching the silence, the absence, which marks our odyssey between stillness and self-contempt do we come to understand, with Octavio Paz, that solitude is the essential feature of marginality in the modern age. It is in order to breach the silence, to name the absence, that we turn in this issue to an active appreciation of the contribution of Mexican philosophy to an understanding of the human condition of marginality. Over and beyond the differences of the Mexican and Canadian historical circumstances, there is a striking and dramatic resemblance between the political and philosophical projects of the two nations. And, not inappropriately, since we wish to undertake the difficult task of reading Mexican thought in terms of its absences as an intimation of a more authentic "Other", we begin our discourse with a montage of the artistic imagination in Mexico and Canada. Fittingly, as Ortega would have it and as Berger has said of Picasso, art is the "vertical invader", the voice from the depths of the creative unconscious which announces that terror can also be normality. Our selection, "Dispossession and the Artistic Imagination", alternates works of David Alfaro Siqueiros with those of three Canadian artists. It is as if in the sphere of the creative imagination that Mexican and Canadian artists find a reciprocity which while based in different historical circumstances has about it the universal plight of domination. Without text, the art finds its own voice.

Arthur Kroker

### Notes

1. George Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, Copp Clark: Toronto, 1966, p. 20.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
3. George Grant, *Lament for a Nation*, McClelland and Stewart: Toronto, 1969, pp. 5-6.