

THE GRAMMAR OF SILENCE

Narrative Pattern in Ethnic Writing

Robert Kroetsch

WHAT I AM SETTING OUT TO DO here is simply this: I want to ask if there is a characteristic narrative of the ethnic experience.¹ More exactly, I am asking, is there, at the point where literature and ethnicity meet, a characteristic narrative structure? Assuming that such a structure does exist, what are some of its elements? Or, as I prefer to put it, what is the *grammar* of the narrative of ethnic experience?

Behind this specific intention, I am asking for a theory of ethnicity, a theory which I would locate in the idea of narrative. There is, possibly, a story that repeats itself, with significant variations of course, whether we are describing and exploring the ethnic experience as sociologists, as psychologists, as novelists and poets, or as literary critics. Not only am I limiting myself to the literary expression of that narrative — I am, outrageously perhaps, working explicitly out of two literary texts.

Frederick Philip Grove is perhaps the most complex and most instructive ethnic writer yet to appear on the Canadian literary scene. As you know, he was a writer who arrived in Canada in the early part of this century and who gave the impression that he was a Swedish aristocrat who had fallen on hard times while visiting in Toronto. He went out to the prairies and set about becoming a Canadian writer, working in English, and by the time of his death in 1948 he had succeeded to a remarkable degree, though, as we shall see, he insisted throughout his career on calling himself a failure. Only in recent years have we discovered that Frederick Philip Grove was not a Swede but rather a German writer of bourgeois background, Felix Paul Greve, who faked his suicide and migrated to Canada and became, under his assumed name, a central figure in Canadian writing.

I am going to work with two of his numerous texts. In his novel, *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925),² a novel that he began in German and finished in English, he tells the story of a Swedish immigrant, Niels Lindstedt, who goes to the frontier in Manitoba to make a new home. The story is a love triangle. Niels falls in love with a Swedish girl, Ellen Amundsen, who has sworn an oath not to marry, because of the horrible example of her parents' marriage. Niels then marries a

Canadian widow, Clara Vogel, and ends up murdering her. After a period in prison, he returns to his community and marries Ellen.

In his "autobiography," *In Search of Myself* (1946),³ Grove purports to give an account of how he himself left Sweden and came to North America and, while living in Manitoba, set about establishing his career as a teacher and writer, after years of working as a farm labourer. He marries a Canadian woman, a teacher from a Mennonite background, and sets about his heroic effort to establish himself as a writer, against what seem to be impossible odds of poverty, poor health, and publishers' indifference.

WE HAVE HERE, THAT IS, two narratives of the ethnic experience, one using the conventions of the novel, the other using the conventions of autobiography (and I might add that the chapters of *Search* are titled, "Childhood," "Youth," "Manhood," and "And After"). What is interesting is the elements that occur in both. Both are stories about the migrating generation. The experience of the migrating generation, it seems to me, is granted privileged status in this literature (even while those same immigrants might have experienced a violent silence in actual life). The migrating generation is often seen in heroic terms by the later generations. Importantly, here, in the writings of Grove, we have narratives written by the person who experienced the migration.

Grove's principal characters in *Settlers*, Niels and one of the two women to whom he is attracted, Ellen, are from backgrounds that came close to making them serfs in Sweden. The hero of *Search*, on the other hand, perceivable as Frederick Grove himself, comes from a background of extreme wealth; he might indeed have become master of the kind of estate on which his fictional characters were potentially serfs. Grove imagines these two extreme possibilities, and yet both Niels and Phil (the hero's name in *Search*) come to the same narrative predicaments, often seen in binary patterns. Let me list a few of them.

There is an extreme tension between ideas of success and ideas of failure. Niels labours for years to build a large house that he believes is the emblem of success. Yet, in that same house, he discovers how totally he has failed in the new world: his wife, Clara, becomes a figure of death, haunting that house, and reminding him constantly of the failure of what he calls his vision.

Writing *Search* twenty-one years later, Grove is even more obsessive about the idea of failure. At one point, in speaking of his literary career, he says, "I tried; and I shall shortly discuss why I was bound to fail, as I had failed in everything that I had ever undertaken with an economic aim in view; this book is the record of a failure; and its explanation: a double failure, an economic and a spiritual one, for ultimately the one involved the other." It seems apparent, after awhile

(and the word failure is used obsessively in the second half of the book), that the idea of failure has become a generative force in the narrative and in Grove's own life.

The immensity of his failure becomes a measure of his success. His very failure is not only his own; it becomes a measure of and a criticism of the society into which he has entered. Like that supreme master of creative failure, Malcolm Lowry, Grove is able to force himself into heroic bouts of writing by meditating on his failure, by recording it carefully, by listing the titles of failed manuscripts and the growing total of rejections. And, like Lowry, he goes on imagining for himself ever more ambitious projects.

Where the appearance of failure might be an act of rebellion or a naturalistic element in traditional Canadian writing, for the ethnic writer it harbours darker and more complex and possibly more exciting possibilities. As in the case of Grove, it becomes the single word by which he judges both himself and the society into which he has entered. That word can be or is made, at times, to lose its traditional meaning and come to signify success.

ANOTHER ESSENTIAL AND related binary is that of ideas of inferiority and ideas of superiority. Neils Lindstedt, from the opening page of *Settlers*, is paired with a kind of double, a fellow immigrant, Lars Nelson, a giant of a man who with ease makes a good marriage and becomes a successful farmer. Nelson has succeeded by the standards of the materialistic society around him, but it is obvious that he is, for Grove, morally and spiritually the inferior of Niels Lindstedt. Lindstedt is the superior man who brings to bear on experience the possibilities of and demands for relevance and meaning. He confronts the idea of signification. And yet it is he who commits a murder.

Phil Grove, in *Search*, represents the pinnacle of European culture. He has been everywhere, he has studied everything, he has met everyone of artistic consequence in Europe. Then he begins his years of work as a farm labourer on the Great Plains of North America. He tells at some length of pairing up with a Pole who like him looked disreputable but who, like him also, "spoke half a dozen European languages." At one point they begin to discuss French poetry while pitching bundles into a threshing machine. "It was done ostentatiously, with the pointed intention of making the other hobo's open their mouths. He [the Pole] even dropped his perfect American speech and changed to French; and in doing so, he adopted what, in these raw surroundings, might have passed for aristocratic society manners, handling his pitch-fork with the nonchalance of a fop, parodying that nonchalance by its very exaggeration."

European culture has been reduced to a parody of itself, and that largely by means of language acts. Grove and his friend are at once superior and inferior. And on this occasion they are shortly hauled in by the local police and fleeced of all their cash, in the final carnivalization of what they and their values represent in this new world.

Thirty pages later Grove can write, "I wanted to be in touch with the finest and highest thought of my age. Instead, I was being rubbed the wrong way, day in, day out, by those who, for the moment, were my social equals — whom others would have called the scum of the earth. . . ." Half a page later he can write, "I was no longer a 'good European'; let Europe take care of her own troubles; I was rapidly becoming extra-European, partly because on account of my failure to take a sixth trip to Europe. Europe, to me, had suddenly ceased to exist."

By the end of the book this arrogant extra-European can say, "As I have said, I was suffering from an inferiority complex." The tension between superiority and inferiority must either destroy him or make him write. Grove, moving from class-conscious Europe into the North American ideal or illusion of democracy, is *unsettled*. Again, in a situation where signified and signifier do not cohere, he might be totally destroyed, or he might become the truly creative individual.

THERE ARE OTHER BINARY patterns that Grove establishes as basic to the ethnic experience: revelation and concealment, integration and resistance, forgetting and remembering. But behind all these is the basic tension between signifier and signified. In a painfully moving passage Grove observes "That the artist is not a hunter constitutes him a cripple, physical or mental, and therefore an object of contempt as well as, paradoxically, of a reluctant admiration. For his work partakes of the nature of a miracle . . . the work of art becomes a fetish endowed with the functions of magic."

In the new world, the magic seems to falter. For the heroes of *Search* and *Settlers* it becomes difficult, even impossible, to tell failure from success, to tell superiority from inferiority. A gap opens between word and object. In the Europe of their past — as Grove's characters remember it — it was possible to define and locate connections. In the abrupt change to this new world, a chasm opens.

Niels Lindstedt believes he can attach the right woman to the word "wife." The Canadian widow, Clara Vogel, is in his perception seductive and evil. The immigrant girl, Ellen Amundsen, is innocent and desirable. He brings with him a paradigm that makes of women whores and virgins. Somehow he manages to set a trap for Ellen and get caught by Clara. He stumbles into an immense chasm

between word and object, and compounds the space by becoming a murderer, not the farmer, the nurturing man, he wants to be.

The gap in *Search* is equally catastrophic. The single-minded hero of that autobiography that might be fiction and might be fact (another threatening binary in the ethnic experience) confesses a few pages from the end of the book, "I have often doubted whether there is anything that I can legitimately call 'I'." This narrator, completing an autobiography, confesses that he cannot locate the "I" that is the subject of the book. The gap between signifier and signified has become the subject itself, a question mark over what it is we mean by the act of writing. Grove (or Greve), the bourgeois man from Germany, in writing the autobiography of the Swede, Phil Grove of Manitoba, announces a contemporary predicament and grounds it in the narrative of ethnicity.

HOW DO THESE PATTERNS of binary opposition get turned into narrative? How do we avoid a kind of paralysis with characters caught between two worlds — caught, if you will, in silence. If we take departure and return as the basic or archetypal design of the journey, then the ethnic story immediately becomes problematic in that the traveller buys a one-way ticket.

If the elements in the binaries are the nouns in the grammatical set, what are the verbs that set things in motion? How do we articulate the silence?

A principal way to establish or re-establish narrative coherence in the face of the gap between signifier and signified is through a re-telling of stories. In ethnic writing there is often an attempt at healing by the rewriting of myths. The myth most often retold, at least on the surface of ethnic writing, is the garden story. Niels Lindstedt is obviously in search of a new version of Eden. Two major scenes take place in a garden or bower. The garden is set in contrast to the house. And further, the image of the garden recalls the question of naming that is so central to the Genesis story. I want to conclude, later, by looking at those two scenes.

Phil Grove in *Search* is also aware of this model. When he finds himself feeling like an exile in North America, he does not dream of a return to Europe. Rather, he explains, "A new nostalgia arose . . . I would build a shack on some hillside overlooking a stream and the woods." He even decides on the location of this Edenic place: ". . . it was in the Pembina Mountains, on the Canadian side, not very far from the little town of Manitou in Manitoba."

In his choice of place he is able to unite the Indian spirit of place, or at least of the place-name, with his dream of paradise. In actual fact, of course, as Grove establishes so vividly in the prologue to *Search*, he struggled in vain toward that

paradise, and ended up trying to run a dairy farm in rural Ontario. That prologue begins: "It was a dismal November day, with a raw wind blowing from the north-west and cold, iron-grey clouds flying low — one of those Ontario days which, on the lake-shores or in a country of rock and swamp, seem to bring visions of an ageless time after the emergence of the earth from chaos, or a forebodying of the end of a world about to die from entropy."

Grove, on his way by car to pick up a girl to work as "a household drudge," is painfully aware that there is only one thing you do in this paradise — and that is work. And work, in this new world, is another version of silence. Grove is remarkable in his portrayal of the silencing effect of work. Even the obsessive writer, in *Search*, seems to be silenced by his own heroic efforts. He writes and he writes, and his very effort cuts him off from all chance of being heard. And, not inappropriately, he himself begins to be afflicted with deafness.

And yet this silence is enclosed in a larger silence. Grove's travelling heroes are caught between the "silenced" old version of the garden (European in this case) and the not-yet-speaking new one. And, it seems to me, behind the not-yet-spoken garden, there is another myth trying to speak itself.

While the garden myth is often present on the surface of a narration of the ethnic experience, I suspect the concealed story is that of the necessary death — the death, that is, out of one culture, with the hope that it will lead to rebirth in another.

Grove faked his own death. And yet in a symbolic way there was nothing fake about it: he died out of one culture and into another.

DEATH AND REBIRTH is a recurring pattern in *Search*. Phil Grove is ill to the point of death and wonders if it wouldn't have been better if he had died, because in that case his manuscripts would have been destroyed and the struggle to write would have been over. But the most moving and ironic death is that of his young daughter, May. A few sentences after reporting her death, Phil Grove remarks, "And now, as if we had at least paid our dues to the fates, break after break seemed to come for me."

Niels Lindstedt, after shooting and killing his wife Clara, goes to his barn and kills a gelding in a curious scene that can only invite symbolic interpretation: the death of the horse is the symbolic death of the unmanned man, Niels Lindstedt. His process of rebirth is startling in its effect. After six and a half years in prison, Lindstedt emerges a man reborn. Grove himself had served a prison term. The threat of another led to his "suicide" and his movement from German into English as a writer. Perhaps the death in ethnic narrative is, explicitly, a death

out of one language into another. (And this, beyond the example of Grove, would seem to hold true even for the person who moves with apparent convenience from an English-speaking place to an English-speaking place.)

Another way to bring signifier and signified back into conjunctions is through a change of story model.

In the opening of *Settlers* the two men, Lindstedt and Nelson, are struggling blindly through a November snowstorm, moving from the edge of civilization, into the Big Marsh. As they struggle the narrative voice says, "Both would have liked to talk, to tell and to listen to stories of danger, of being lost, of hairbreadth escapes: the influence of the prairie snowstorm made itself felt. But whenever one of them spoke, the wind snatched his word from his lips and threw it aloft."

It is as if the old story forms are no longer adequate to the new experience. Silence has reasserted itself. Grove himself spoke of the "tragedy" of Niels Lindstedt, attempting to assert the appropriateness of a traditional mode. Yet he gives his story a happy ending that surprises many readers — an ending that many readers protest but that few would change. It turns out that we allow the tragedy to transform itself into something approaching comedy, in the name of a revisioning of the novel itself as form.

Grove's *Search* sets out to be an autobiography. By the end it too has become something else, with the author commenting in the middle of the book, "I felt an exile. I was an exile. I did not live among people of my own kind; among people who, metaphorically, spoke my language . . ." In the next sentence he adds, "The only sort of what, with a stretch of the imagination, could be called literary art with which I ever came into living contact, consisted of the 'tall' tales of the west; and they stood out in flagrant contradiction to the squalid reality I saw all about."

The offended Mr. Grove, in *Search*, has written one of the finest tall tales in the literary history of the west. If Mark Twain admitted to stretching the story a little, Frederick Philip Grove could be said to stretch it just about as much, while admitting nothing. He explains that at one time he was sending out as many as a dozen unpublished works, each one "copied out in six copies of fine, copper-plate handwriting. Let me say that there were twelve volumes in all; then there were seventy-two manuscripts; and each of them had been sent out and received back at least three times, more likely five times a year. So that I had made, on an average, three hundred and sixty shipments a year, or one a day." And this, he adds, has gone on for sixteen years.

Grove, in the course of that stretching, found a story model that enabled him to speak, eloquently and validly, of what he had experienced. Language had become that literal and that isolated for him. He had transformed himself into a great hoard of repeating and circulating and unread manuscripts.

IF THERE IS A GAP between word and object, the final question is language itself, and the question of naming. Perhaps the completion of the narrative is made possible, not primarily by the surface story, but rather by a narrative movement that entails a changed sense of language, a movement from the old language, through silence (a silence that might be imagined even as a death) into a new language.

Grove says, in *Search*: “Thus, in the attempt to set down my vision, I realized that I had at bottom no language which was peculiarly my own. In a way this was an advantage to me; I had half a dozen instead. But in another way, it was a disadvantage and even a misfortune: I lacked that limitation which is best for the profound penetration of the soul of a language. I ground my teeth in my struggles; and, for the moment, all my struggles were with words.”

The turning point in Phil Grove’s life comes when he is seen in a railway station by a French priest in North Dakota reading a copy of Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du mal*. Of the priest Grove says, “He was an immigrant himself; he was French, not, as I had supposed, French-Canadian.” This European priest talks to Grove of his circumstances and says to him, “Why didn’t you teach?” The priest, shortly thereafter, is killed in a railway accident — he is another double and a representative of European civilization and he dies the necessary death. Grove goes to Manitoba to begin his long and hellish struggle with story and language. He is ready to unname himself as European and to struggle to rename himself as Canadian.

This erasure of names is a part of the experience of migrating peoples, and part of the narrative of that experience. And that erasure becomes palimpsest, it leaves its trace — as it did when Greve changed his name to Grove, at once concealing and changing who he was and leaving a trace that would enable us to complete the task of renaming that he had initiated.

That moment of unnamings with its potential for renaming occurs twice in *Settlers*, and this in the marshland itself, that unshaped, unmapped, unnamed space. In paired scenes, one in the middle of *Settlers*, one at the end, the two adults, Niels and Ellen, are transformed into “boy” and “girl,” and the story’s past tense gives way to present tense. In both scenes the nameless “children” approach a schoolhouse and pass it up for the natural world of berry bushes and singing birds. Both scenes end with awkward and painful attempts at naming.

At the end of the first, Niels realizes that Ellen is going to refuse marriage:

The realization of a bottomless abyss shakes him.
 “Ellen,” he calls with an almost breaking voice.
 The girl slowly rises. “I know,” she says. “Don’t speak.”

He speaks with a *breaking* voice. She speaks to command silence — “Don’t speak.” Having been named herself, she then goes on to name the man in return: “Oh Niels, I am going to hurt you deeply.” It is as if the speaking of a name is, at this point in the story, the breaking of a taboo. That breaking of the taboo brings about tragedy.

Ellen refuses to marry Niels. We move immediately to a death scene. We see old man Sigurdsen dying: “Sigurdsen lay in his clothes, not on the bed, but on the floor, his head reversed, his legs curved back, sprawling. . . .” Niels watches the man die in what is a grotesque parody of sexual fulfilment and the narrative reports of Niels: “Quietly he got up and drew a blanket over it that had been he.”

Niels has entered into his death journey. He is *fooled* into marriage with Clara Vogel — the Canadian woman. He is unable to understand her — he cannot understand any of her names — as Clara Vogel, as widow, as district whore, as victim of frontier morality, as an experienced woman whose dimensions mock his own fatal innocence — and now, in an explosive reversal of convention, it is the European who is innocent, the Canadian who is experienced. The paradise Niels presumed to locate by building a house turns into hell. He completes his journey into silence by murdering his wife.

Niels Lindstedt goes to prison and in that version of silence earns (too easily for some readers) a kind of redemption. But Grove is not interested here in recording the literal prison experience. Prison has been a theme since the book opened. Grove is interested, rather, in Niels’ return from the prisonhouse of silence to the world of speech.

AT THE END OF THE BOOK Niels earns parole and returns to his farm and goes to meet Ellen. Again they meet, as they did in the middle of the novel, in “that natural bower in the fringe of the bush.” This scene is at once a repetition and a reversal of the scene in the middle of the novel. Again the narrative moves into present tense and again the two figures become nameless — they become simply the man and the woman. Again, he speaks her name, his voice almost failing him. Again she says, “I know. . . . Don’t speak.”

But now she wants Niels to be quiet so that she can speak. Speech, finally, is possible. At this point the old names have been stripped of all prior meaning. They can be spoken now as new names, as a beginning. Ellen, at last, can fore-swear her oath not to marry.

The repetition of the two scenes suggests a ritual unnamings and a renaming into new lives in a new world. And the paradox here is that the new names are exact homonyms for the old ones. The signifier sounds as it always sounded.

But the signified has shifted radically. Now it can be joined again with its signifier; name and object come together, the new life is possible.

A genuine settling is not so much described as proposed at the end of this narrative. In the last line of the text, a paragraph that is a single, short sentence, a "vision" arises between the two lovers, and this time it is "shared by both." A grammar of the narrative of ethnic experience has begun to assert itself. The silence is finding a way to transform itself into voice.

NOTES

- ¹ This talk was delivered as the introductory lecture in a series, "Ethnicity and Literature: Canadian Perspectives on Language, Silence, and Translation," University of British Columbia, 26 September 1984.
- ² Frederick Philip Grove, *Settlers of the Marsh* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1966). All quotations are from this edition.
- ³ Grove, *In Search of Myself* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1946). All quotations are from this edition.

FORMENTERA

Pasquale Verdicchio

This is only one
of many attempts at cactus
dry grass and mediterranean pine.

Only one blinding reflection
off whitewashed walls
and cool interiors.

Only one of countless walks
across cicada songs
to the sea.

Tracks are not lost in repetition,
pitch keeps its memory alive in flow.
And sudden desires to remain
renew the return.