

LOCAL CULTURE AND THE NATIONAL WILL

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ONE OF THE THINGS THAT MAKES any discussion of local and national culture difficult is the elusiveness of the terms themselves, and in the face of such difficulty a tendency to simplify complex and evolving phenomena. As a writer of poems and novels who has spent some part of twenty-five years in exploring the extremes of the national and the local (Louis Riel and my own grandfathers, Nootka Sound and Point Edward), I have formed some opinions about each, about their nature and their value as culture. What follows is a sketch of these ideas, an argument if you like for the sort of book one rarely gets around to writing.

We begin by defining local culture, the root-flesh from which all subsequent culture is derived. Without it, nothing happens. In its radical form *local culture* (and by extension all culture) consists of those human products, communal states-of-mind and explicit and tacit communications whose principal purpose is to help establish an individual's place within the group. The group may be as small as a family or as large as a clan or a geographical region. What keeps it local and radical are these distinguishing features: the time and space, history and perspectives, legends and dialects that infuse the objects of culture — and whose general acceptance demarcates the existence of local culture — are *mutually shared* by members of the group. The amount of translation needed between the subject-matter or elementary form of the object and that understood by the “audience” will always be minimal. Theme will dominate variations, performance be valued over composition. This is the culture of tale, folk song, jig, communal quilt. Its well-springs are dream, collective memory, character, idiolect, love, existential terror. Its purposes are always clear-cut: the reinforcement of group and individual identity through coherence, bonding, and integration. Coherence through history — family, village, clan — actual and invented; bonding with the living members, the generations, the fantastic figures of legend; integration with these latter agents and with the exigencies of immediate space inhabited but not so easily mediated as time and history. Integration, of course, is the hope of both the group and the individual constituents. The need to belong — to be able to mediate between the existential objects we are born next to and the phantasma of our private-but-no-less-existential dream world — is particularly human and particularly hazardous.

To surrender utterly to the phenomenal datum means the death of dream, to unleash the incoherent energies of dream signals the end of social harmony. Hence integration may be at times too strong a word; perhaps accommodation better fits as both individuals and the collective strive to balance the forces propelling them. In this sense the social group, so ubiquitous throughout human history, is both the reason for, and the necessary condition to, the formation of a culture and its effects. Until very recently, local culture and the regional social group were close to being synonymous. Each tribe of us, as it were, was more than a mere sum of its cultural objects and habits; our culture was a *process* with renewable by-products; it was as much the *impulse to create* demonstrative and binding signs, symbols, and rites as it was to conserve the manifest stories, iconography, and drama that resulted therefrom. Often the impulse was collective, emphasizing group values; occasionally it was individuated to remind the group that language is after all a colloquy of separate voices speaking from the common dark. Looking back, as we often do, at the surviving objects of an extinct tribe and attempting to reconstruct its culture is a risky enterprise for many reasons, not the least of which is the fact that sagas, sculptures, runes — once removed from the *living context* which they inhabited and hence robbed of their unspoken aboriginal magic, their capacity to incite and spawn tacit patterns of connectiveness — are dead objects whose resuscitation can only be achieved in a present-day, far-removed context entrapped by its own cultural necessities.

While dynamic and elementary, local culture in order to survive must strike a balance between past and present, between conservation and necessary growth. It lives constantly with the danger of ossification if the forms become overly rigid, if time is not merely slowed but stopped, if variations are seen to threaten the theme. The result is what we might call *static local culture*, the source of much gratuitous criticism aimed at regional craft traditions or artificially revived enterprises like totem-pole reconstruction or the disinterment of folk song collections. The latter phenomenon, however, ought to be viewed with sympathy for it is probably symptomatic of a deeper malaise. Many of our regions in Canada are too new, too polyglot, or barren of any continuous traditions, and so they import — in desperation and holus-bolus — an intact regional culture from somewhere else on the planet. The most egregious example of what I call *ersatz local culture* is the adoption of country music from Nashville by large segments of the rural population, many of whom once had a thriving local music. They appear to feel more at home with a foreign regional culture than with the mass cosmopolitan culture being served up to them by their betters. While pathetic in a way, such behaviour does point up the powerful need for communities to feel they have adopted *their own kind* of culture for *their own purposes* — identity and bonding. It helps explain why a local balladeer in Woodstock, Ontario, can sing the praises

of a hometown belle in flawless Tennessee twang. The long, arduous process of reintegrating and reinventing a genuine local tradition may indeed have begun. I find this sort of *aberrant local culture* painful but heartening.

THERE IS, HOWEVER, ANOTHER VARIATION of local culture which is perhaps the most significant one. Within thriving, genuine communities bound by cultural necessities, an artist rises from time to time who fashions individualistic works whose effects are too powerful, too true for the group to accommodate. Such an artist uses the very dialect, symbolism, and psychological geography of the place in order to speak (in part) directly to his group. Often he lives, creates, and remains in the community. I think of David Adams Richards or Greg Curnoe among many of our regional geniuses. Sometimes, however, the local community does not always fully appreciate the results, precisely because the perceived balance between individual and group identity has been tipped. The artists may go underground; sometimes they are adopted and lionized outside their region and move into exile or join a larger configuration of communities. But what has happened is irreversible: nurtured by the resident local culture or in opposition to its stasis, utilizing the mythology, iconography, and psychic history of the *locus*, an artist of extraordinary talent — a visionary with a command of craft who is driven to re-create the community through the imagination of one of its individuals — produces works of such power that they provide the basis for a new kind of culture itself: the transformational.

Transformational culture is often, even wilfully, confused with so-called “universal culture” and then set simplistically and deliberately against “local appeal” as if the two were antonyms in whose opposition lay some profound critical and anthropological insight. “Canadian writers will never be considered for the Nobel Prize until they start writing books about universal themes!” How often we have been compelled to listen to such nonsense in its various guises. When a work of transformational power is produced, it is grounded in the local, but that ground is thereby raised to the allegorical perspective. To the local “reader” the symbols will feel familiar but strange, their configurations novel and scary (I think of Winghamites coping with Alice Munro’s stories or the valleyfolk puzzling over Buckler). Such works are addressed by the artist to himself and to anyone else who can translate, penetrate, and respond to the ideological surface. While instrumental music and abstract painting may “travel” more readily, literature, objective painting, folk song, and the plastic arts — where subject and formal elements are locally rooted — will travel only as far as their surface depictions, their referents, and the underlying *mythos* can be understood by any would-be responder

(all three factors are operative, not just the so-called "universal types" somehow visible beneath the interfering clutter of the surface).

Furthermore, transformational culture is likely to be the result of an accidental but wondrous integration, in the mind of an individual artist, of his own local impulse with all his worldly experience. The transformational artist — far from hibernating in the local bush — soaks up foreign impulses of all kinds but always drives them downward and inward to himself and his own space and time — reformulating the local mythology in terms that (1) illuminate, for those constituents who can stand it, the locale in fresh, frightening, abiding ways, (2) allegorize both its substance and dialect, its surface and depths, its mores and neuroses, and (3) revalue it through the individual imagination and waft it abroad to any of those other communities or individuals "out there." Regionally transformed such knowledge is, but never fully universal; that is a contradiction in terms. Those outside the immediate culture (region, province, country, continent) can respond to it only as far as its particular paradigms can be understood. All culture travels and has in the process to be translated. For example, to put the case crudely, what remains of *Hamlet* when translated into Russian or read in the original by a grade-twelve student in Regina on a snowy Saturday? Quite a lot, we think, though not all and certainly not the same everywhere. Even though it is not universal, *Hamlet* does travel. Indeed its record of successful travelling is what is fascinating from the perspective of cultural analysis. There is no official translation for a work that transformed its own culture and still has the potential to transform the culture of communities not yet realized. Like all products of local culture that rise to the level of the transformational, it was prompted by local historical circumstance and is even now moving through historical time and subject to its ruthless emendation. Each community who adopts it — each individual who opens his mind to it — must affect a new translation, and unless some parody of cultural activity is in vogue, must integrate it with his own genuinely developed experience. The idolatry often associated with the response to "great" foreign works is always a perversion of culture, as is much of the literary criticism which attempts to fix such works "once and for all time."

One is still willing to make an effort to read (i.e., translate) Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* because the locus of its feelings and "statements" lies in relationships we can still understand and be deeply moved by. Nonetheless, to deny that the conceits, ornamentation, and political references are not partly impedimental is both untenable and perverse. Donne's literary conventions, dialect, and politics are not our own, in particular or in general. It appears that no one is willing to admit this obvious cultural, one might even say anthropological, fact, for fear perhaps that the great artists of the past will either be instantly debated or automatically devalued *vis-à-vis* the local and contemporary. That is patently absurd. Our re-

sponse to art doesn't work that way. Many individuals, even communities, will be happy to respond to *Hamlet* despite the layers of translation necessary and even find it more rewarding than the latest Canadian melodrama downtown. The two kinds of response — to the foreign and the local — and the myriad variations in between are not mutually excluding. What one may be forgiven for thinking is that many teachers and cultural imperialists fear that if the illegitimately formulated mystique of the "great work" is allowed to deflate, their student/client responders will either reject the work out-of-hand or enter into a genuine, transformative and dangerous liaison with it.

IF ALL GENUINE WORKS OF CULTURE emanate through transformations from the local, what then can a *national culture* be? Given the size and multi-regional nature of most modern nation-states, it is not unfair to claim that there are few, if any, monolithic cultures at the level of the nation-as-a-whole. Certainly Canada fails to qualify on ethnic, linguistic, and geographical/historical grounds. However, if we define a genuine national culture as a multi-communal one, then we can see more clearly how local culture gets transformed to regional, provincial, and national configurations (not syntheses). In this latter view, a national culture would be characterized by the shared, non-threatening exchange of cultural experiences, values and artefacts — within a federated state like Canada — between the consenting member-groups. Ideally a set of affinitive local cultures would exchange cultural effects in order to allow the tension along the axis of individual/group or small-group/large group/foreign community to initiate positive responses, and to promote accommodation to, and integration of, new forms and new knowledge where risks are bearable and growth assured. In an ideal multi-communal culture, transformational artists would be encouraged to send their works abroad and in turn be open to influence from reciprocal artistic experiences. Here, too, the accidents of history and circumstance can be accepted and continually transformed into the vision of ourselves we need to survive.

Obviously Canada is not an exemplum of such a culture. Here, as in many other western nations, we are victims (or impressarios) of a *pseudo-national culture* which in its virulent forms breaks down the will of local cultures through deliberate social policy or the mindless intervention of modern technological systems that leave the regional community mesmerized, exhausted, or happily drugged. It would require another paper longer than this one to elaborate the complex ways in which the modern nation-state has adopted and deployed technology to disrupt and destroy the luxuriance of local culture (not to mention the intimidation and outright annihilation of transformational artists everywhere).

However, it may be sufficient here to point out that the main features of this technology (a true antonym for local culture) are these: (1) mass media and mass communication systems which allow bogus foreign culture to inundate the regions; (2) a consequent increase in the pace, volume, and repetition of alien "structures" (bogus or genuine) which induces anxiety, narcosis, or at best aberrant imitation; (3) an irresistible temptation to use these instruments to control, to propagandize, to purvey an "official" view of culture, or merely through neglect to allow a metropolitan culture (like Montreal or Toronto) to overwhelm. As we have noted, the growth of local culture and its transformation and dissemination require time, stability, trust, and the means to communicate its quiet news.

As a nation we have in Canada an ideal conglomeration of communities in which to foster a genuine national culture of the multi-communal type. So far we have remained relatively uninfected by the more totalitarian perversions of modern technology. We may ignore our own artists, but then we don't torture them either. We are a federated state and intractably regional. Nonetheless, technology as an instrumental system and as a way-of-thinking has arrived on these shores. Technology itself is inimical to the preservation of local culture. The effects of mass TV and radio — despite the well-meaning distortions of the CBC — are already apparent. The importation of ersatz foreign cultures is accelerating apace. Our national government is more and more seduced by the efficiencies of centralization; soon it may be hungry for a representative transcontinental pseudo-culture to peddle abroad. For the moment it seems content with province-bashing at the political level and at the cultural level — when it thinks of it at all — seems pleased with the collocation of frozen folk-cultures it piously labels "multi-cultural" — surely an unconscious parody of a multi-communal national culture wherein each of the regional groups (including of course ethnic communities) would have a living, developing *anima* of its own — fostering, tolerating, or flinging abroad transformational works to those mutually committed enclaves who, for these moments in time at least, have decided to try to become as capacious a community as their imaginations will allow.

Culture is both a transformational and a conserving phenomenon. Without it no community or nation long survives in any terms we would call human. Because it is local, psychological, and grounded in time, it cannot be manufactured. As a nation this country has been singularly blessed to be able to nurture local culture, encourage transformations within it, and absorb — if it is at all possible — the terrifying incursion of the technological into our lives. Some understanding of the imperatives of local culture and the shibboleths of cultural industrialism may help us in the critical years ahead. As a nation of federated communities we will also need more will and determination than we have shown thus far.