

ON DEATH AND WRITING

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“**T**HE TWENTIETH CENTURY SHALL BE the century of Canada!” So declaimed Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Prime Minister of Canada, in 1904. He may have gotten the idea from the speech made in Boston two years earlier by the Attorney General of Nova Scotia, James Longley, who said, “The nineteenth century was the century of the United States. The twentieth century is Canada’s century,” but whatever the source, Laurier laid claim to this century again and again for over a year. Eighty-three years into the century we can see more clearly; even allowing for normal political balderdash, the statement is ridiculous.*

And it would have been ridiculous even if Theodore Roosevelt had said it at that time about the United States; or N. Lenin, exiled in London and dreaming about the nation of workers and peasants he was convinced he would found in his native land, a proletariat which, when he had a chance to found that nation, would prove as intractable as any nobility and he would end by founding a nation not ruled by a dictatorial and repressive czar, but by a party so brutally oppressive that anyone, even Lenin I think in his worst nightmares, would have prayed to avoid it; if he had had anyone to pray to, besides himself perhaps.

If the twentieth century belongs to any one nation, surely it is the nation of the dead. I mean that enormous nation of the man-made dead which during this century continues to develop with such deliberate, such dreadful, steady speed. The tiniest, most poverty-stricken of countries have often contributed most to its gross national product. Its geographical territory is everywhere, from the veldt of South Africa to the “civilized” cities of Europe and the jungles of Vietnam, or the sands of the Middle East and the bleak rock of the Falkland Islands. At times its population has grown by ten, twelve, and even fifteen million people a year; today its inhabitants number at least one hundred and eighty million, perhaps more for no real census has ever been, or can be, taken. Of these citizens, no more than 25 percent are soldiers; the rest are civilians (who always constitute the bulk of any nation), the children, the old men and women, the farm and factory workers, the mothers, the sick and the crippled, all caught within the

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boundaries of their proper countries by the relentless maw of this century's death machine, and ground down into violent emigration by that machine.

Scientifically, that machine has been developed to such a point of imaginative brilliance that in 1983 it provides the nation of the dead with an overwhelming capacity for growth. Indeed, it seems quite likely that the end of the twentieth century will see only one nation left on earth, and if we are ever going to have a name for it, perhaps we better hurry and suggest one now. How about *The United Republics of Total Death*?

Death is the normal end of life; I am not talking about a normality. I am talking about death deliberately planned and man-made, about human activity which has no other objective than to kill other human beings. In one sense, such activity has been with us throughout human history; for example, the Tatars in their wars with the Russian people used to pile the severed heads of their victims in pyramids around the cities they destroyed. It is difficult, but I believe one can grasp the "human-ness" of eighty-four neat stacks of human heads numbering, shall we say, between 400 and 621 each; one could even pick them up, hold them one by one in the palm of one's hand, and consider them, ponder them like Hamlet — all before they rotted completely away. But the issue becomes imaginatively ungraspable when the leader of one superpower declares that his nation would win a nuclear war with no more than 35, at most 45 million of his own citizens killed, because *the enemy would suffer more deaths than that*.

I am referring strictly to numbers. When we consider morality, the issue becomes even more difficult. For if morality concerns the relation between individuals, or between an individual and the larger society, then every human death caused by human violence carries with it a moral value, an aura of morality impugned. People do not die in masses; the heads in the pyramid were cut off one by one even if it could be done simultaneously; every person we kill has a name. A so-called mass killer, whether it be Eichmann or the Yorkshire Ripper, can really only be judged for each single killing because every one of his victims could claim that her individual death had a certain absolute moral value. As such, the un-morality of some killers, whether they be individuals or nations sending forth expertly trained killers in the name of a principle or their own national security, becomes morally incomprehensible to the contemplative mind. That a few people should be able to kill every human being on earth, including themselves, is of course now technologically possible but it is not, I think, morally graspable. For as Hegel says, at a certain point a quantitative change, if large enough, becomes a qualitative difference. We cannot understand, we cannot express in words the immorality (do you notice how *weak* that word is?), the measureless immorality of the Founding Fathers of The United Republics of Total Death. It drives as far beyond our moral comprehension as our grappling with the imponderable

curve of space: what is outside the edge of the universe, beyond that which eventually must return to coincide with itself? We cannot speak, or think, of it; we have no words.

HAVING BEGUN WITH THIS MOST HEAVY of all possible introductions, what can I possibly say to justify my own recalcitrant and dogged persistence in writing fiction? There seems no more social point to making novels in the twentieth century than there would be in crocheting doilies if the Ice Age were once again advancing over our continent. And if I persist in writing novels, who will be a reader? I belong to no impoverished so-called “developing” nation; if I did, my work might be of romantic or revolutionary interest, condescended to perhaps but at least considered. Nor am I a citizen of the supernations; if I were a significant writer there, it is highly likely that I would be published in all parts of the world because it is essential for every nation on earth to know what the U.S.A. or the U.S.S.R. considers important. No, I belong to the unlikely northern half of North America, a nation materially rich enough to be envied by almost everyone but socially and politically meaningless. Canada makes the world news only when the Soviet Union destroys our hockey team, again, in an ice arena, or when a Canadian Very Public Person spends a weekend in a New York hotel with a U.S. rock star. Is there any point in my writing novels?

Well, let me tell you something: I once had a brilliant chance. It happened five years before I was born; in the fall of 1929 when my parents bundled up their young family and tried to get out of the Soviet Union. Together with thousands of other Mennonites who had been living there for seven generations, they left their villages and what property they had and flooded into Moscow. Officially there was no hope for them, but they wanted to make one last desperate attempt, by means of a massive gathering together, to importune, to force, to shame, whatever you want to call it, the government into letting them leave the Soviet Union. And it worked, to an extent. For no known reason, in November 1929 about 3,800 Mennonites were given exit visas, put on trains as “landless refugees of German origin,” and shipped helter-skelter to Hindenberg’s Germany. Some 14,000 others were sent back, either to their villages or, almost as often, to prison camps somewhere in the farthest reaches of the world’s largest nation. My problem is that my mother, father, two brothers, and three sisters were among those 3,800 who were shipped out.

I began to get a clearer view of my problem in the middle sixties when the writings of Alexander Solzhenitsyn began to be known in the West; this climaxed of course with the vivid drama of his expulsion from the Soviet Union. I read

everything he published, books upon books, and they were truly magnificent. Dear God, what a writer! And what a platform from which to address the world: secret police, torture, hunger, imprisonment, and exile, all rooted in the Stalin purges by terror which affect everyone on earth to this day much more directly than the horrors of Hitler. I even thought of a possible short story called "Lucky Solzhenitsyn." Then, this past summer, all that Russian awareness was revived for me with a particular strength.

Two of my father's brothers and their families also made that flight to Moscow in 1929; they were sent back, and the brothers disappeared into Stalin's Gulag never to be heard of again. But one of their sons, my cousin Peter, 19 years old that autumn in Moscow, did survive fifty years in the Soviet Union and in 1979 he was allowed to settle in Germany under the Soviet-West German *Umseidler* agreement negotiated by Willy Brandt. In 1980 I lectured at the German Association of Canadian Studies in Gummersbach, and at that time my cousin was living within two miles of where I spoke; but neither of us knew the other existed. Now in July 1983, we discovered one another. When I saw him coming towards me through a crowd of people, it seemed I was seeing the face of my father as he was just before he died. And Peter greeted me in that marvellous Russian manner of full embrace and triple kissing, laughing, "You look just like a Wiebe, a real Wiebe!" A wonderfully cheerful, tiny man who had been to the Gulag twice, the last time in 1952 when he was arrested because a group met in his home regularly to read the Bible and pray. Though they couldn't prove that he was spreading anti-Soviet propaganda (officially there is religious freedom in the Soviet Union) he was nevertheless sentenced under Article 58 of the Criminal Code, sentenced to 25 years of hard labour. Now he tells me, "It was all right, I had only four years, only four, they let me out in the Khrushchev Amnesty after Stalin died." And he holds me, laughing and laughing, there is no limit to his happiness at meeting me.

In 1956 when he returned home four thousand miles from that prison camp near the Chinese border, I was graduating from a Canadian university and I wanted to become a writer. I had every chance, to be whatever I wanted. But what could I write, really? An immigrant child born in an obscure corner of an unimportant land. I have been writing fiction for 25 years now and the question is still there, it does not go away. *What* can I write? Or should I say *whom*?

IN 1921 OSIP MANDELSTAM WROTE: "Just as a person does not choose his parents, a people does not choose its poets." I would not begin to compare myself to the greatest Russian poet of the twentieth century, but his

words, for me, are profound. The poet is parent to his people; the poet makes his people known and recognizable, an acting and speaking manifestation; he begets them, he enfleshes them, yet, he gives birth to them. I was born and grew up in a rocky bushland of northern Saskatchewan, a landscape homesteaded, cleared, and broken to the plough (wherever it was cleared, most of it was still poplar and spruce thick as hair, you had to walk sideways to get between the trees, literally), a place where the temperature varied 150 degrees, easily, between winter and summer, born among a people who had run to the opposite side of the world to escape one of the bloodiest revolutions and civil wars and anarchies and starvations known in history, and to me it was all *invisible*. It was the world I fell into at birth, and I could not *see* it. "How do you write in a new country?" my friend Robert Kroetsch asks. How can you see yourself without a reflector? Kroetsch continues: "People who feel invisible try to borrow visibility from those who are visible. To understand others is surely difficult. But to understand ourselves becomes impossible if we do not see images of ourselves in the mirror — be that mirror theatre or literature or historical writing. A local pride [he uses the phrase of William Carlos Williams] does not exclude the rest of the world or other experiences, rather, it makes them possible."

The true writer writes her people, her place into existence. Out of herself; and in this sense "birth" is a more natural image than "inventing." People and landscapes and historical events do not create poets: it is exactly the reverse. The American Civil War did not make William Faulkner, nor the Russian Civil War Mikhail Sholokov. The literature I devoured as a child was most definitely not made by people who had lived on the prairie or rocky Canadian bush; they knew nothing of picking rocks and Mennonite hymn singing and Low German and the swampy ooze of muskegs breathing steam from subterranean fires in the rigid winter like spirits breathing upwards through the snow. So, growing up in such a place, among such people, *what* could I write? *Whom* could I write? Listen, let me tell you. Let me tell you the story of a Cree man named Maskepetoon, The Broken Arm, who was born somewhere around 1805 near the North Saskatchewan River, whose picture George Caitlin once painted. All the places where he lived can be seen to this day, as can the place in the Peace Hills (south of Wetaskiwin, Alberta) where he met the Blackfoot man who had killed his father. But, instead of killing him immediately, Maskepetoon told him to mount his own horse:

The Blackfoot looked at his friends without hope, then mounted in one swift movement and waited, his face clenched to accept whatever hit him first. Maskepetoon looked up at him.

"Both my hands are empty," he said then. "You took my father from me, so now I ask you to be my father. Wear my clothes, ride my horse, and when your people

ask you how it is you are still alive, tell them it is because The Young Chief has taken his revenge.”

Slowly the old Blackfoot slid from the horse and faced Maskepetoon empty-handed. Then he took him in his arms and held him hard against his heart.

“My son,” he said, “you have killed me.”

Listen, let me tell you another story, of an American woman who comes to Alberta from Illinois with her husband and three sons in 1906 to “make a better life for themselves” as they say, and how her first apprehensions about the prairie gradually gather into a profound fear. The story is called “After Thirty Years of Marriage,” and she fears not merely loneliness, it is space, it is the singleness of woman’s work, it is her silent self. This goes beyond fear into primordial terror so deep she cannot even talk of it, but she must finally face it in her winter house, which is both her shelter and her prison; only when she puts her very head into the centre of the terror is she able to sleep without headache or dream, to sleep at last.

There are a thousand stories for any prairie writer to tell, whether the world at large listens or not. I have told only a very few of them, and once the stories have been made, of course, they will be there forever; or at least as long as there is a human ear and eye to perceive them. This came to me in a new way recently while I was reading aloud “The Angel of the Tar Sands.” That very short story tells how the operator of a giant bucket dredging up sand for oil processing at Fort McMurray cuts into the body of an angel buried fifty feet below the earth’s surface. Who knows what we will encounter now that we have the technology to rip up the entire earth in an organized way.

And that thought about the Athabasca Tar Sands, of course, brought me back irrevocably to my United Republics of Total Death; for the sands are right there in the northern Alberta space of the Primrose Air Weapons Range where the United States government wants to test the ground-hugging Cruise missile because the terrain of northern Alberta is so much like the terrain of the Soviet Union. Developing the endless, brutal possibilities of our United Republics.

So though I would like to speak of men and of angels, I am nevertheless brought back to death — where I began. I do not believe that writing is like death. Making things with words is not at all like being killed. I once wrote that writing was like climbing a mountain, a mountain which did not and would never exist unless you climbed it. That is still a good way of saying it, but perhaps it is too ego-oriented. Let me try again.

Let me say that writing is like taking a long journey. You must travel every day, and every day you decide roughly where you would like to go, what you would hope to see, but you never know if you will actually get there. You do not really know where you will eat that day, or what, nor where you will be able

to rest, if at all, and you may not even have a place to sleep when night catches you. The only certainty is that you are travelling and that travelling with you is another person. This is a person you love; you are together in everything you encounter, whatever you eat, wherever you rest or sleep; whatever the circumstances there you two are together. And that is enough. Together you are enough for anything, anything in this world.

