

# LEE'S "CIVIL ELEGIES"

*in relation to Grant's "Lament for a Nation"*

R. D. MacDonald

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N HIS ESSAY, "Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space," Dennis Lee describes the psychological and political sources of his poetry. Listening to a busy inner voice which he names "cadence," Lee apparently makes out a path of meaning and appropriates a language suitable to the expression of this inner voice and meaning. However remote or obscure "cadence" may sound, Lee argues that it is encountered only through the immediate particulars of one's own civil space, and he argues that the loss of these distinct particulars through the Americanization of Canada in the 1960's has meant the loss of both cadence and its language of expression. Thus Lee links his own reported sense of inauthenticity, his own lapse into anxious silence, to the fate of a whole nation transformed into a colony by the American mass media:

Canadians were by definition people who looked over the fence and through the windows at America, unselfconsciously learning from its movies, comics, magazines and TV shows how to go about being alive. The disdainful amusement that I and thousands like me felt for Canadian achievement in any field, especially those of the imagination was a direct reflection of our self-hatred and sense of inferiority.<sup>1</sup>

Did Canadians loath themselves? Is American pop-culture the source of Canadian self-loathing and dispossession? Or could it be that Torontonians like Lee uncritically absorbed the metropolitan or imperial viewpoint of New York and Washington only to realize to their chagrin that Toronto (like the remainder of Canada) is also a colonial hinterland? Whatever the truth of the matter, having apparently seen through "our" Americanized perspective, Lee now takes on the satiric stance, the guise of the naïve ironist supposedly unaware of a Canadian tradition distinct from that of the United States:

We kept up with *Paris Review* and *Partisan*, shook *our* heads over how Senator McCarthy had perverted the traditions of *our* country; in some cases we went down to Selma or Washington to confront *our* power structure, and in all cases we agreed that the greatest blot on *our* racial history was the way *we* had treated negroes. [italics mine]

Lee attributes his political awakening and satiric style to the philosopher George Grant, who argued in *Lament for a Nation* that Canada ceased to exist as a nation

in the mid-twentieth century. Lee's use of "our" and "we," his ironic identification of Americans and Canadians, works from Grant's notion of American culture homogenizing Canadian culture and is similar to Grant's ironic torpedoing of unexamined values, especially Grant's strategy of comparing Canada present unfavourably to Canada past and then revealing that Canada past (the British Conservative tradition) had already passed away *before* Canada's beginnings: as Lee himself says, "This under-cutting of a past he [Grant] would like to make exemplary is a characteristic moment in Grant's thought, and it reveals the central strength and contradiction in his work. He withdraws from the contemporary world, and judges it with passionate lucidity, by standing on a 'fixed point' which he then reveals to be no longer there." While this is a strategy that Lee himself had adopted earlier in "Civil Elegies," Lee differs from Grant because at this earlier stage he defines Canadians only in terms of Americans and shows less compassion that does George Grant for both the American and the Canadian and shows little love of the past itself. In "Cadence, Country, Silence" (published two years after "Civil Elegies"), Lee now shows, however, a fuller understanding of how to Grant the loyalists and Canadians differed from the Americans. British North Americans believed that man lived within limits; Americans believed in man's unlimited freedom:

in refusing the American dream, our loyalist forebears (the British Americans who came north after 1776) were groping to reaffirm a classical European tradition, one which embodies a very different sense of public space. By contrast with the liberal assumptions that gave birth to the United States, it taught that reverence for what is subject to sterner civil necessities than liberty or the pursuit of happiness — that they must respond, as best they can, to the demands of the good. And that men's presence here is capable of an organic continuity which cannot be ruptured except at the risk of making their condition worse — that any such change should be taken with fear and trembling. (Grant would not claim that all Hellenic or Christian societies used to live by these ideals, only that they understood themselves to be acting well or badly in their light.) And while our ancestors were often mediocre or muddling, convictions like these demonstrably did underlie many of their attitudes of law, the land, indigenous peoples and Europe.

Lee's summary does not seem to set any distance between himself and Grant, and indeed like many others of his generation, Lee has been amazed and then thankful to find his own faint premonitions spoken aloud by Grant:

To find one's tongue-tied sense of civil loss and bafflement given words at last, to hear one's own most inarticulate hunches out loud, because most immediate in the bloodstream — and not prettied up, and in prose like a fastidious groundswell — was to stand erect in one's own space. I do not expect to spend the rest of my life in agreeing with George Grant. But in my experience at least, the sombre Canadian has enabled us to say for the first time where we are, who we are — to become articulate.

To examine “Civil Elegies” is to find that indeed Lee has incorporated many of Grant’s themes and catch phrases into the tissue of his poetry. Here as in Grant: the nineteenth-century American hope of manifest-destiny is transformed into the twentieth-century Canadian fear of “continentalism”; the Americanization of Canada becomes the “homogenization” of what could have been a distinct identity; the exploitation of Canada’s natural resources by Americans becomes a “sell out,” the selling of a “birth right”; the recovery of any central authority or good is assumed to begin from the immediate particulars of our existence. Finally, Lee seems to pick up Grant’s set of contradictory feelings, anger and yet resignation towards the departure of the potential good that was Canada.

Grant’s “lament” and Lee’s “elegies,” however, express very different meanings and faiths. Unlike the *Lament for a Nation*, “Civil Elegies” does not conclude with a celebration of a departed or distant good; Lee does not in his dismay turn from the dubious authority of reason to the accumulated wisdom of tradition; he turns instead to the promise of the here and now and future of the human city “in the early years of a better civilization,”<sup>22</sup> the natural and human world which is our only genesis and home, our only starting point to a better world.

This faith in the future is highlighted by the unusual nature of the last six lines of “Civil Elegies”: the short three-stress and four-stress lines and the plain, imperative tone embody the stripping of experience to the barest bones of the particular and the barest bones of wish or prayer. Lee’s last verse recalls the earlier refrain of “letting be,” that is allowing another to be himself, not loosely condoning but actively “allow[ing]” (or fostering) another’s goodness. The final lines then comprise a laconic prayer that our natural and human matrix —the “green” and the “grey” — permit us another beginning:

Earth, you nearest, allow me.  
Green of the earth and civil grey:  
within me, without me and moment by  
moment allow me for to  
be here is enough and earth you  
strangest, you nearest, be home.

While Grant’s *Lament for a Nation* turns finally in a spirit of reconciliation to a distant and shadowy God, the God of eternal order, Lee’s turns finally to the god or power of green earth, that “nearest” and “strangest” of our daily existence. The new good will begin, if at all, from the grainy texture of the near — the mixed matrix of the human and natural world. Not only is the form of their language different (Lee working in the long, and loose-limbed tradition of elegaic verse, Grant in the academic prose of the political philosopher), not only are their Gods different (Lee’s close and Grant’s remote), but their attitudes toward and their accounts of Canada’s history, the failure of a colonial people to achieve an independent nation of their own, are also quite different: Grant emphasizes our fail-

ure to perpetuate what was good in our heritage while Lee, the modern liberal, makes much of becoming “our own,” achieving independence from an out-moded past. While Grant recognizes that English Canadians are seen to be indeed a “dull and costive lot”<sup>3</sup> (especially when compared to their more dynamic neighbours to the south), he argues that British North America (and the unbroken Europeanness of Canada) exemplified a real alternative to the dynamic and revolutionary republican experiment of the United States: though the authority of the British and European heritage had been challenged and weakened by the New Learning of the Renaissance and though the conservative centre of British society had already been eroded by the very fact of colonial expansion, nevertheless there remained a faith that a British North America could be built in the new world, that the new could be made continuous with the past.<sup>4</sup> While in all this, Grant holds dear the humaneness and the wisdom of our predecessors, Dennis Lee does not show the same loving attachment to the past. Indeed Lee’s poems continually question the nature of love or insist upon bringing airy notions of love down to earth: love of one’s own self and friends (see especially “The Death of Harold Ladoo” in *The Gods*); love of one’s spouse or generation (see poem 7 of “Civil Elegies”); love of one’s past or patria (see poem 1 of “Civil Elegies”); and love of the ancient Gods (see “The Gods”). Lee’s Gods (or, their absence) and Lee’s past (or its absence) will certainly seem familiar to the reader of Grant’s *Philosophy in the Mass Age*. To Grant, the men of antiquity did not “see themselves as making events but as living out established patterns.”<sup>5</sup> To Grant, man achieved his sense of freedom and well being “only so far as he cease[d] to be himself, and imitated and repeated the eternal archetypal gestures of the divine such as the creation of the world and the bringing forth of life.” Against this ancient view, Grant places the modern humanist view, a view which I find all too close to that of the mid-twentieth-century Dennis Lee:

Man makes the world and there is no overall system which determines what he makes. To act is to choose what kind of a world we want to make. In our acts we show what things we regard as valuable. We create value, we do not participate in a value already given. We make what order there is; we are not made by it. In this sense we are our own. We are independent. We are not bound by any dependence on anything more powerful than ourselves. We are authentically free because what happens in the world depends upon us, not on some providence beyond our control. The fate of man is in his hands.

As one discovers from the same book (and from *Technology and Empire*), the vast spaces of North America, the intense energy, will, and resourcefulness required of the new settlers by the new land, the removed or hidden God of the American Puritans which paradoxically led the Puritans to seek *any* proof of their election including the “proof” of earthly success — these conditions led Americans to an “exaltation of action over truth and thought” and to the pragmatic phil-

osophy of a William James who took the expedient, the profitable or workable to be the test of truth. Grant makes James into a caricature of the modern American humanist and technocrat by singling out this optimistic declaration of James: "The world stands ready, malleable, waiting to receive the final touches of our hands."

Against this background, Lee's optimism could be seen as an extension of the William James of George Grant. Lee's "wisdom" arises from disenchantment with false hopes, the sense of having been deceived by the gods, the demonic forces, the treacherous passions which have blasted the hopes of his generation. His "stand" or "measure," however, is really little more than the discovery that our earlier beliefs have not worked; therefore there must be something else:

But to live with a measure, resisting their terrible inroads;  
I hope this is enough.  
And to let the beings be.  
And also to honour the gods in their former selves,  
albeit obscurely at a distance, unable  
to speak the older tongue, and to wait  
till their fury is spent and they call on us again  
for passionate awe in our lives, a high clean style.<sup>6</sup>

When Grant uses the term "measure," he implies more than a vague hope: he repeatedly refers to an eternal order not subject to man's tinkering, an order to which we are subject. Lee's "measure" is little more than the quiescent expectation that if we "let . . . be," our furies may run their natural course (i.e., achieve a purgation), which in turn may permit the restoration of "passionate awe" and a "high clean style." Unfortunately, "Civil Elegies," "The Death of Harold Ladoo," and "The Gods" show a dialectical scepticism with little sign of "awe" or a high clean style."

Grant, however, bases his hope upon something substantial. He shows an appreciation of our pioneer heritage, the pioneers' difficult or heroic battle to make a new life for themselves. He shows a respect for the hard discipline of mind and body to ensure their survival, and an understanding of the "worldly asceticism" which has been created in North America by "the meeting of the alien and yet conquerable land with English speaking Protestants."<sup>7</sup> Yet like Susanna Moodie in *Roughing it in the Bush*, Grant recognized the costs and dangers of making a life in the new world: "To know that parents had to force the instinct of their children to the service of pioneering control; to have seen the pained and unrelenting faces of the women; to know, even in one's flesh and dreams, the results of generations of the mechanizing of the body; to see all around one the excesses and follies now necessary to people who can win back the body only through sexuality, must not be to forget what was necessary and what was heroic in that conquest." Lee's attack upon the excesses of his own generation, however, seems

to have emerged almost entirely from his having lived through those passionate excesses of the present; Lee shows little historical sense, a sense which might have resulted in regret for the passing of an earlier way of life that had been good. Again in Lee there is nothing like Grant's sympathetic characterization of John Diefenbaker as a representative figure of courage and integrity, a tragic hero who, despite his fight against the demise of Canada, contributed to the fall or destruction of the nation. And Lee does not even begin to consider, as does Grant, how Canada became a nation distinct from any other. Grant writes of Canada:

It was an inchoate desire to build, in these cold and forbidding regions, a society with a greater sense of order and restraint than the freedom-loving republicans would allow. It was no better defined than a kind of suspicion that we in Canada could be less lawless and have a greater sense of propriety than the United States. English speaking Canadians have been called a dull and costive lot. In these dynamic days, such qualities are particularly unattractive to the chic.

Yet our stodginess has made us a society of greater simplicity, formality, and perhaps even innocence than the people to the south.

*(Lament for a Nation, p. 70)*

In "The Death of Harold Ladoo," something of this stodginess, this unheroic reserve is attributed to Dennis Lee himself, the admiring "Wasp kid" from the suburbs, who as it turns out, however, is a cannibal (though a quiet one) like everyone else (pp. 46-47). In "Civil Elegies," these dubious traits are attributed to the Canadian politicians, the "honourable quislings," the Paul Martins who helped to further the American empire and Vietnamese war (pp. 47-48). Lee's undercutting of the virtues of the compliant or quiescent way undermines finally the call for quiet decency which he presents at the conclusion of both "Harold Ladoo" and "Civil Elegies." One is left asking: if the quiet Canadian is the source of our failure to be, is Lee's own quietness any more legitimate? Is the quietness of conclusion merely a strategy dictated by the imperatives of the elegaic convention? If so, why has not Lee avoided this disease of "style" when elsewhere he has been so self-conscious and doubting of the deceptions or distortions of literary style?

**T**O ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS one must look more closely at the relation between "Civil Elegies" (1972) and "The Death of Harold Ladoo" (1979). Before that, however, I must concede that even as Lee describes the "whole chaotic gospel" ("Civil Elegies," p. 47), "the adrenalin highs" (p. 48), the romantic passion of his generation, he notes that what was really true was their quiet loving: men and women who "handled each other gently" ("Ladoo," p. 48); beneath the rage to write and the colossal egotism, "a deep tough caring" (p. 48); beyond "the very act of words . . . the plain gestures of being human

together" (pp. 48-49). Here as elsewhere, Lee in retrospect subordinates literature to life, but his declaration that there was a quiet loving centre to their creative fury is not borne out by his main account of their past. Certainly Ladoo's monomaniacal drive suggests nothing of this loving calm. And Lee's own words as they swing self-consciously from celebrations of the supposed absolute to negations of those less-than-absolutes, suggest the careening course, the oversteering and overcorrecting manoeuvres of a drunken driver. It seems to me that as Lee pauses in midcourse, in his excoriation of his group as "god's hit men," cultural revolutionaries who were not in control of even their own lives, he also begins to negate the small hope, the "civil words" of "The Death of Harold Ladoo," and the "earth you nearest and dearest" of "Civil Elegies" as the starting points of a new life. In "The Death of Harold Ladoo," he speaks "civil" (public or civilized) words from a mere "private space," caught once again by "salvations" that turn "demonic" — "for [each salvation] too gets cherished as absolute":

Even that glorious dream  
of opening space to be in, of saying  
the real words of that space —  
that too was false, for we cannot  
idolize a thing without it going infernal. . . .

These words refer (surely?) to his earlier poem "Civil Elegies," and they undercut the hopeful conclusion of "Civil Elegies," hope for the "early years of a better civilization," the hope for "new nouns" to replace the withdrawal of our "most precious Words," and the modest hope of honed-down prayer that the "nearest," the "green of the earth and civil grey" be "home." From the vantage point of seven years ("Elegies" [1972] — "Ladoo" [1979]), even that modest hope now seems extravagant and the "quietist fadeout" all too possible ("Ladoo," p. 57). The escape from the dilemma of neither indifference or mad commitment apparently lies in the realization that "Everything matters and / nothing matters. It is harder to live by that on earth and stubborn than to / rise full-fledged and abstract, / and snag apocalypse" ("Ladoo," p. 47). The obvious weakness of "Civil Elegies," however, lies in Lee's tendency to overstatement ("rising full-fledged and abstract") which necessitates correction, but the main source of this unevenness would then seem to reside in Lee's ahistorical understanding and hence his comic-strip presentation of Canada's formation and development.<sup>8</sup>

Poem 1 of "Civil Elegies" takes place in the April morning sun, a time of beginnings; but resting in the city square and "brooding over the city," the speaker is oppressed by the unredeemed, squat existence permitted by the city: it is a place of "guttled intentions," a claustrophobic space in which the past is experienced merely as an oppressive, dead weight; the symbol of the "unlived life" of the past and present are the furies or spectres, the surviving vestiges of

lives never fully lived. Showing the unreality of those lives, he “casts back” and presents a comic caricature of the Rebellion of 1837. The cause of the rebellion is simply the patricians who made “their compact against the gangs of the new.” The act of rebellion itself becomes “regeneration twirl[ing] its blood” and the outcome, a silly farce:

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 gunfire, gawked and bolted south to the fort like rabbits, the rebels for the most part bolting north to the pub: the first spontaneous mutual retreat in the history of warfare. Canadians in flight.

The past (our forebears) becomes a “dead weight” oppressing our lives in the present: “the dead persist in / buildings, bylaws, porticoes — the city I live in / is clogged with their presence.” The excuse that our ancestors, if not heroic, were at least good men is answered by, “good men do not matter to history”; moreover the “good men” were merely quislings involved in the forceful, criminal and imperial actions of the American nation. Against this past, in the city he “longs for,” men “would complete their origins”; they would discover and take possession of their origins, achieve a genuine presence by turning against the modern and American empire:

And the people accept a flawed inheritance  
and they give it a place in their midst, forfeiting progress, forfeiting  
dollars, forfeiting Yankee visions of cities that in time it might grow  
whole at last in their forebears, becoming their own men.

This is the hopeful dream. The nightmare is the un-lived and unloved past, the “acquiescent spectres” who “gawk and slump and retreat” and who block the life-giving rays of the springtime sun.

While it is all too easy for a Canadian to fall into line with these “patriotic” sentiments, the poem and the feelings are badly muddled. If our “forebears” were as cowardly and comical as Lee’s heroes of 1837 and if our heritage were merely a weight deadening our life, how could we “accept this flawed inheritance” and how could we “belong once more to (our) forebears” by “becoming (our) own men”? Lee shows no redeeming virtues in our forebears and shows no generous sympathy for their insufficiencies.

Instead then of coming to sympathetic terms with the human background, Lee in his utopian vision of Canadians coming into “their own” turns to the physical background — the natural or geographical milieu, the hinterland — of the metropolitan present; but this route to becoming “our own men” is also unconvincing and contradictory though it works in a familiar way from the pastoral naturalism of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts, E. J. Pratt, A. J. M. Smith, and the Group of Seven, and from the nineteenth-century romanticism of Wordsworth who suggests,



too, that man cannot live his cities until he has lived the countryside. Any Canadian reader is likely to be enthralled by childhood-summer-vacation memories recreated as follows:

to live  
 the land, our own harsh country, beloved the prairie the foothills —  
 and for me it is awakened by the rapids by stream-fed lake, threading  
 north through the terminal vistas of black spruce, in a  
 bitter cherished land it is farm after  
 farm in the waste of the continental outcrop —  
 for me it is Shield but whatever terrain informs our lives and  
 claims us.

Here Lee substitutes the natural world for the human world, geology or geography for history or tradition. But again he is unconvincing in offering this source of “regeneration” because he does not adequately face what it has meant to live the Shield, what has indeed been the historical necessity, the economic and human necessities which have been part of that experience of the Shield.

While Poem 3 is a capsule history of man on the Shield, it is little more than a recycling of the polemical slogans of Canadian nationalists: until we own our means of production, we shall remain the slaves of the foreign or multinational (i.e., American) corporation. What the slogan overlooks is the older Canadian recognition (expressed in T. C. Haliburton, Susanna Moodie, Sara Jeannette Duncan, Stephen Leacock, and Hugh MacLennan) that the Americans have taken possession of our economy because they have been a more dynamic, entrepreneurial people than Canadians. Moreover, Lee seems to overlook the “virtues” of a more cautious, orderly, and conservative people — virtues suitable to a northern geography which permits only a small margin of success and safety. He does show the “barren Shield” breaking the settlers and “towing them deeper and deeper each year.” He does recognize a “despotic land” where father “reaped stone” and sons gave way to drunkenness and passivity. And he does effectively foreshorten our economic history from that period of agricultural failure to the modern technological age where the sons of the pioneers (their birthright sold out, their mines owned abroad, their ores refined abroad) stare helplessly after their future:

now what  
 races toward us on asphalt across the Shield —  
 is torn from the land and the mute oblivion of  
 all those fruitless lives, it no longer  
 stays for us, immemorial adversary, but is shipped and  
 divvied abroad though wrestled whole from the Shield.

But what would Lee have: pioneers still attempting to eke out a pastoral existence on glacial till? And in a mining economy would the Shield be any less “imme-

morial adversary,” any less exploited or alien for our owning our own means of production and for our refining and recombining the elements of the Shield at home rather than abroad? To quibble further with Lee’s economic history: is not much of the smelting and refining now done in Canada? How else do we account for the moonscape of a Sudbury? Lee’s romantic and literary nationalism does not confront the complexities and consequences of our own industrial society in large part precisely because the “enemy” is assumed to be foreign, or multinational or American. And what, by the way, is a “TV mind”? Is it any more than the quick-draw epithet of a “literary mind”? Facile sloganeering of this kind again prevents one from coming to terms with or rebelling against a technological society.

Yet in Poem 3, Lee does attempt to show how a more dynamic spirit might be achieved; he holds up a “radiant” life against the “unlived lives” of Poem 1, and attempts an answer to the prayer of Poem 2 which asks how we are to make a start in a world where “sometimes a thing rings true” but where that momentary truth fails to hold:

I know  
the world is not enough; a woman straightens  
and turns from the sink and asks her life the  
question, why should she  
fake it? and after a moment she  
shrugs, and returns to the sink.

Poem 3 answers the sense of void and the difficulty of making a start out of emptiness, but the answers prove insufficient. The longing for a more than nominal or symbolic reality — “Master and Lord, there was a / measure once. / There was time when men could say / my life, my job, my home / and still feel clean. / The poets spoke of earth and heaven. There were no symbols” — is answered through the primitivist works/symbols of Henry Moore and Tom Thomson. Both work within or out of naturalistic forces, which in turn work upward and outward from a dark, uncontrollable primal: “Great art” then is in the service of something much larger than the merely made-up or individual and is “less than the necessity which gave rise to it”:

when the monumental space of the square  
went slack, it (the statue) moved in sterner space.  
Was shaped by earlier space and it ripples with  
wrenched stress, the bronze is flexed by  
blind aeonic throes  
that bred and met in slow enormous impact,  
and they are still at large for the force in the bronze churns  
through it, and lunges beyond and also the Archer declares  
that space is primal, raw, beyond control and drives toward  
living stillness, its own.

In the Moore sculpture, nature, the artist and artifact “complete their origins.” Similarly, Tom Thomson’s work is shown to complete nature or the Laurentian Shield. But even Thomson’s “work in the shield” is not seen to be sufficient for a new beginning. Though from the darkness of the Shield the “radiance of the renewed land broke over [Thomson’s] canvas,” Thomson or Moore or Christ or any of the other “ignition” points of our past are insufficient precisely because they are of the past, not the present: to become “our own” means making our own beginning. The difficulty at this point, however, is Lee’s suggestion that as we are in the void we are incapable of answering to a call from beyond the void:

Small things ignite us, and the quirky particulars  
 flare on all sides.  
 A cluster of birches, in moonlight;  
 a jackpine gnarled and  
 focussing heaven and earth —  
 these might fend off the void.  
 Or under the poolside arches the sunlight, skidding on  
 paper destroyers  
 kindles a dazzle, skewing the sense. Like that. Any  
 combination of men and time can start the momentary  
 ignition. If only it were enough.  
 But it is two thousand years since Christ’s carcass rode in glory  
 and now the shiny ascent is not for us, Thomson is  
 done and we cannot  
 malingering among the bygone acts of grace. For  
 many are called but none are chosen now. . . .

In his opening of Poem 3, instead of providing premature answers to how we are to move beyond “unlived lives” and the “void,” instead of now offering a genuine prayer to the absolute Lord and Master, Lee continues to examine or to “honour the void.” Poem 3 works from the Old Testament stories of a wayward people who sell their birth right, a people who have violated their “immemorial pacts” with the land by selling it before they lived it, a people who must then suffer the consequences of the violated covenant by “botch[ing]” their cities and filling their city squares with the “artifacts of death” — that is, the Moore statue of the Archer.

**A** REMINDER OF THE DIRECTION that “Civil Elegies” as a whole is taking: the middle of the long poem (Poems 4 through 7) continues to delineate the course of the void. The last two poems, 8 and 9, move from the state of void or detachment to attachment redefined and to an annunciation of the slippery but “lovely syllables” of the world, “the ache and presence joy of

what is," the world where no thing (not even nothing) holds and the world which thereby demands the human response of "letting be."

Before that, however, let us consider Lee's void — Poems 4 to 7. Poem 4 continues to delineate a fallen world, a wasteland where things hold back or fail to hold fast. Lee's meditation carries with it the dark pessimism of the Old Testament, an Ecclesiastes-like vision of a world where nothing holds or is secure. In the world then where things "hold back" or "hesitate to be" or "will not come real" or will not "hold," Lee asks whether our vocation might be that of void itself. In the first verse paragraph he asks whether we "are not meant to relinquish it all, to begin at last / the one abundant psalm of letting be." A long diverse catalogue of transient things, of things not holding, does suggest that life is a letting go, but also indicates the difficulty of willingly "letting be":

goodbye the lull of the sun in the square, goodbye and  
goodbye the magisterial life of the mind, in the domination  
  of number every  
excellent workaday thing all spirited  
men and women ceaselessly jammed at their breaking  
points goodbye who have such little time on earth and  
  constantly fastened  
how should a man stop caring?

The point of the catalogue, however, is not to suggest the difficulty of not caring but to take us through the "rigours of detachment" — "letting it bring us down till every / itch and twitch of attachment loses its purchase" — so that we achieve a state of emptiness, an openness or receptiveness to a new fullness of being. The poem's development seems to conform to the recurring pattern of the Old Testament: having separated ourselves from God, we return to him by means of a remorseful and willing acceptance of the hurtful consequences. Whatever the source of Lee's hope, he abruptly declares that "at last we / find ourselves in the midst of what abounds," and he prophesies: "now they / move at last in the clearness of open space, within the / emptiness they move very cleanly in the vehement enjoyment of their bodies." Out of the anguish of spiritual alienation and the willing sacrifice of all unessential attachments emerges something like an abounding grace.

But once again Lee's argument turns back upon itself: how can this individual salvation be real when the letting go or the "gut[ting]" and "peddl[ing]" of our nation (our collective soul) goes on? He turns then to those who go down in "civil fury" rather than in distant hopes of beatitude — "how should they clutch and fumble after beatitude, crouching for / years till emptiness renews an elm tree." And so though he turns back for the moment to the ascetic Hector de Saint-Denys-Garneau who turned inward to "nothing but desert and void," the final lines of Poem 4 celebrate the bloody fury of the few, a civil fury which will

not forestall the Modern and the American but will at least permit the fullness of “shame abounding,” “a few good gestures between the asphalt and the sky,” the achievement of a stand that will give a full account of our situation — “Yet still they take the world full force on their ends, leaving the / bloody impress of their bodies faced forward in time and I believe / they will not go under until they have taken the measure of empire.”

While Lee has described two alternatives to the Americanization of Canada — (1) the religious alternative of detachment from the world for the achievement of spiritual abundance, (2) the political alternative of protest, facing the world and taking “full measure of empire” — he does not finally suggest what relation (if any) there can be between these two alternatives nor suggest which course is the wiser. As we have seen, the inwardness and passivity of Hector de Saint-Denys-Garneau finally mean spiritual bankruptcy. How then are we to distinguish Lee’s hope of a trustful openness to the particulars of the world, the awaiting of a new abundance, of new beginnings — how is this worldly passivity or receptivity superior to Garneau’s passive acceptance of the world within? Again, if the political rebel is to take “full measure of empire,” what base is he to measure from? Will civil fury itself make for clean or pure or authentic gestures? Will fury itself refine or synthesize an adequate “measure” or understanding of Canada’s demise? Are the rebels against the new (like the Tories of 1837) to base their stand and their understanding merely upon fear of the new or upon the wisdom of the past? Both these bases seem unlikely, given Lee’s earlier contemptuous presentation of the un-lived lives of our Canadian ancestors. I contend then that Lee has not thought through the implications of his liberal/conservative political philosophy.

Poem 5 continues to examine the contraries of the passionate and dispassionate by juxtaposing the civil fury against the indolent reverie of the citizen at ease in the civic square of the noon-day sun. What brings the two separate feelings — the uncaring ease and the indignant concern — together are the children playing in the square unmindful of the spectres overhead, the “fitful” nature of momentary existence, and the civil atrocities committed by imperialistic Americans and compliant, colonial Canadians. The speaker complains ironically of the children awakening the adult from his indolent, uncaring state:

It would be better maybe if we could stop loving the children  
and their delicate brawls, pelting across the square in tandem, deking  
from cover to cover in raucous celebration and they are never  
winded, bemusing us with the rites of our own  
gone childhood; if only they stopped  
mattering the children.

The ironic signals here are in the “maybe” and again in the “perhaps” of “Perhaps we should bless what doesn’t attach us, though I do not know / where we are to find nourishment.” While the anaesthetic attractions of the void are enter-

tained, the poem surely presumes the inevitability of human caring, the necessary pain of human caring. And so in the midst of a nightmare vision of “bacterial missiles” released “for the love of mankind” and his sense once again of “acquiescence press[ing] down on us from above,” the speaker becomes aware that the children make us aware of our having “no room to be”: “It is the children’s fault as they swarm for we cannot stop caring.” The poem shifts again to a haranguing catalogue of American war crimes — “For a man / who / fries the skin of kids with burning jelly is a / criminal” — and the criminal complicity of Canadians — “And the consenting citizens of a minor and docile colony / are cogs in a useful tool, though in no way / necessary and scarcely criminal at all and their leaders are honorable men, as for example Paul Martin.” The criminal act-and-consent refers specifically to American/Canadian collaboration during the Vietnamese war. Lee’s metaphor for criminal complicity, the numb indifference of the modern citizen, becomes a German civic square during the holocaust of World War II. His banal language mimics the clichés of modern mass-advertising and the dull, inactive disposition of the modern citizen/consumer:

In Germany the civic square in many little towns is  
hallowed for people. Laid out just so, with  
flowers and fountains and during the war you could come and  
relax for an hour, catch a parade or  
just get away from the interminable racket of the trains,  
  clattering through the  
  outskirts with their lousy expendable cargo.  
Little cafes often fronting the square. Beer and a chance to relax  
And except for the children it’s peaceful here  
too under the sun’s warm sedation.

So once again, brought back to life (almost it seems, despite himself) by the impingements of the children, the speaker again begins a haranguing catalogue of the sellouts of history, the “old story” of “imperial necessity,” of the tired and quiet and diplomatic and “honorable” men who helped make the imperial necessities possible.

The conclusion provides a political definition of the void — “And this is void, to participate in an / abomination larger than yourself . . . to fashion / other men’s napalm and know it, to be a / Canadian safe in the square and watch the children dance and / dance and smell the lissome burning bodies. . . .” The ambiguous syntax permits the children dancing to be those in the German or Canadian square dancing for joy or those of Vietnam dancing in pain from napalm. The close (perhaps even causal) relation between private pleasure and public pain is caught in the close joining of “dancing” and the “smell of the burnt flesh.” Double-dealing hypocrisy is again summed up in Lee’s double-edged syntax: “it is the sorry mortal / sellout burning kids by proxy acquiescent / still

though still denying it is merely to be human.” The line could mean that our very inability to imagine, or accept or believe the full extent of our cruelty gives proof of our being “merely” (or at the very least) humane. It could also mean that as we refuse to accept that it *is* our human nature to commit such acts, we show ourselves less than “human.”

ONE CAN NOW DISCOVER the base from which Lee takes his stand against “imperial necessities,” against the “abominations” larger than ourselves, the temptations of indifference. The past merely records past failures but does not provide guidance. The alive present, our children, force upon us concern, duty, a sense of natural justice: the liveliness, joyfulness, and fragile helplessness of the children awaken us to our need to preserve them and our own humanity which starts from these beginnings.

Nevertheless, in Poem 5, though conscience is awakened, the individual will to resist the slide to “barbarian normalcy” remains inactive — “numb in my stance I hear the country pouring on past me gladly on all sides.” Consciousness itself, his preoccupation with the precedent of ancient Rome’s decline, dislocates his feelings and will and disengages him from the ongoingness of life — “the upshot is not that I am constantly / riddled with agonies / my thing is often worse for I cannot get purchase on life.”

Poem 7 brings the experience of the void even more closely home. Just as the child has brought the adult to an awareness of duty but failed to incite him to action, the relationship of lovers again suggests no easy release from the general drift to “barbarian normalcy.” Indeed lovers are shown projecting and imposing false roles upon each other and then upon discovery of the falsehood, turning in anger against each other, iconoclasts smashing the false selves. The hope of a new start out of destruction is undercut by Lee’s lovers yet again erecting false images which will yet again have to be torn down. Only rarely, he suggests, do the lovers achieve the plain but difficult reality of marriage — “a difficult rhythm together around / their job and the kids, that allows for a tentative joy and often for a grieving together.” The iconoclasm of lovers becomes a metaphor of politics — “do we also single out leaders because they will dishonour us, because they will diminish us?” Having chosen leaders who will necessarily enact failure (“bulldozed by Yankees, menaced by slant-eyed gooks”), the citizen is as unlikely to come to terms with “our claimed selves” or to terms with the “difficult world” as the lover is to achieve “the difficult rhythm” of marriage. Disillusionment, the exposure of falsehood, does not here lead to the restoration or beginning of a genuine private and public life.

Poems 8 and 9, nevertheless, achieve a conclusion of sorts. Having considered

various aspects of the void, Lee returns full circle to the Civic Square “each time there is nothing” and asks again what we can commit ourselves to. The answer, despite the dialectical turns of the poem (especially the attraction of Saint-Denys-Garneau’s ascetic detachment), resides in the diverse stir of the mundane world. The opening catalogue of Poem 8, like Whitman’s catalogues celebrating the all in the many, presents the various and vital imperatives of here and now:

catching the news boy’s raucous cry of race in the street and the war  
 and Confederation going  
 smelling the air, the interminable stink of production and  
 transport and  
 caught once more in the square’s great hush with the shopper’s,  
 hippies,  
 brokers, children, old men dozing alone by the pool and waiting,  
 feeling the pulse in the bodies jostling past me driving to climax and  
 dollars and blood,  
 making my cry here quick and obscure among many in transit —  
 not as a  
 lyric self in the skin but divided, spinning off many selves to attend  
 each lethal yen as it passed me — thinking of  
 death in the city, of other’s and also of my own and of many born  
 afterwards,  
 I saw that we are to live in the calamitous division of the world  
 with singleness of eye and there is  
 nothing I would not give to be made whole.

Whereas Whitman exhibits a glutton’s delight in the dynamic diversity of life, Lee shows the painfulness of diversity and shows a desire to forsake the “calamitous division of the world” in order “to be made whole.” He entertains then the ascetic alternative of Hector de Saint-Denys-Garneau: in him, “the glitter was made single”; he retreated from the nonchalance, the unconscious vitality of his worldly comrades to become the ascetic, aristocratic worshipper, “a man made / empty for love of God, straining to be only / an upright will in the desert, until at last the world’s hypnotic / glitter was made single in the grace of annunciation.” But once again “the kids” and the vital particularity of the world itself recall the speaker from the ascetic route of Garneau, to the recognition that modern man has lost the “lore of emptiness” and thereby lost the bearings necessary for surviving the “lonely inward procession.” This recognition is consistent with Lee’s sceptical liberalism, the disillusionment with or casting off of past truths and consistent with his modernist cynicism, his stripping of Garneau’s spiritual pretensions to uncover false, ignoble underpinnings of motive: “you Hector / our one patrician maker, mangled spirit, / you went all out for fame and when you knew you would not survive in the world you turned to sainthood.” Garneau’s “detachment,” his inward pilgrimage, becomes no more than the “exquisite pene-



tration” of the self, an onanistic intercourse or preoccupation with the self — “it was the fear of life, the mark of Canada.” In the last verse paragraph the speaker warns that “of high detachment there are many counterfeits” and declares that his first obligation is to live in and to construe the world itself:

And I will not enter the void till I come to myself  
nor silence the world till I have learned its lovely syllables,  
the brimful square and the dusk and the war and the crowds in  
    motion at evening, waiting to be construed  
for they are fragile, and the tongue must be sure.

Is it unfair to answer Lee by saying that “Civil Elegies” itself does not sufficiently attend to the “lovely syllables of the world” and that he does not show a “sure[ness]” of tongue that might make one believe that he has honestly encountered the basics of the human and natural worlds? As I find Lee’s stance in “Civil Elegies” to be carping and unsympathetic, I see little evident hope of his coming to loving terms with any lovely or benign basis of life.

The last poem of “Civil Elegies,” however, promises reconciliation with the less-than-perfect world. It is not a world remade into the remote forms of a “Cold Pastoral,” not the timeless world of Keats’ “happy boughs that cannot shed [their] leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu,” but instead a world built out of a tissue of world-weary detail — “rusty leaves hang[ing] taut with departure,” “crisp leaves blow[ing] in gusts, tracing / the wind’s indignant lift in corners”; it is a “dying civilisation,” and a city of “bare familiar streets.” It is a world of change toward Autumn, to decline and fall, a human experience of “void.” But finally the void like everything else is shown to be merely a season subject to the passage of time (and indeed not truly perceived until past — “we enter void when void no longer exists”). But even if void were to become “a mood gone absolute,” it would be limited: “we should (still) have to live in the world” making our lives “on earth.” And so as the departing Autumn leaves exemplify the transience of all things including the void itself, Lee records his emergence from the void “dis-abused of many things of the world / including Canada and [I] came to know that I had access to them / and I promised to honour each one of my country’s failures of nerve and its sellouts.” In the last poem, hot satirical indignation has been transformed into a dutiful and ironic chronicling of our less-than-perfect reality. But even this kind of distanced complaining becomes a “game” better left behind for the basic business of living the only world we have. Against his earlier complaints about the void and the distant Gods, Lee celebrates the unavoidable and more basic reality of earth-bound human existence:

But we are not allowed to enter God’s heaven, where it is all a  
drowsy beatitude, nor is God, the realm above our heads but  
must grow up on earth.

Nor do we have recourse to void.  
 For void is not a place.  
 Void is not the high cessation of the lone self's burden,  
 crowned with the early nostalgias;  
 nor is it rampant around the corner, endlessly possible.  
 We enter void when void no longer exists.

The overview or larger-view achieved at the close of "Civil Elegies" suggests optimistically that change brings not only the destruction of the old but also the beginnings of the new — "the early years of a better civilisation." Letting go, clearing out the rubbish of the past, implies the promise of renovation; the anthropomorphized leaves of autumn (like the emigrant settler) conform to a natural law of change and renovation:

The leaves, although they cling against the  
 wind do not resist their time of dying.  
 And I must learn to live it all again, depart again —  
 the storm wracked crossing, the nervous descent, the barren wintry  
 land  
 and clearing a life in the place where I belong, re-entry  
 to bare familiar streets, first sight of coffee mugs.

To live well then is to live in accord with the God who "must grow up on earth" and to find "a place among the ones who live on earth somehow, sustained in fits and starts / by the deep ache and presence and sometimes the joy of what is." The final lines of the poem then are a plain, stripped-down, prayer to the God who is now Earth. In a traditional Christian prayer, Lee's petition would be for God's "Grace," but Lee's prayer here is worked out of a studied pedestrian language, an appeal to the natural and human worlds "green of the earth and civil grey" and an appeal to let be — "allow me for to be here is enough." The final prayer is in accord with the contemporary liberal faith that change, the destruction of the old truths or old order, allows a truer hold on life, a truer accommodation to the ongoing human condition. As Lee celebrates the possibilities of the immediate present, he loses any sense of the continuity of time past, present, and future or of the continuity of space — the connection of there here and there:

Earth you nearest allow me.  
 Green of the earth and civil grey:  
 within me, without me and moment by  
 moment allow me for to  
 be here is enough and earth you  
 strangest, you nearest, be home.

Lee's concluding poem is consistent with what has gone before. Throughout, truth or truism or preconception has led to disillusionment and to a hope of a

more basic truth. The "truth" sloughed off is first experienced as the void: the deeper truth now exposed is the possibility of renovation or regeneration out of destruction, an Autumn which promises Spring.

Despite his many snipings at the "continental drift to barbarism," Lee's own first principles seem to me all too North American, too naively optimistic, too unconsciously or thoughtlessly destructive. Can we trust that just as we clear the forests to make new human settlements, we can also "clear" our minds or clear the past, the heritage of tradition that has remained a part of ourselves as we have migrated from other continents and other times? Lee's attitude seems to me all too consistent with the destructive inclination that D. H. Lawrence saw in the Americans in *Studies in Classic American Literature* or that Ivor Winters saw in *Maule's Curse*, the American assumption that the old world could be left to itself and the new world transcend traditional wisdom. Both Lawrence and Winters characterize this faith in the present and future as murderous, destructive to any sense of authority or order. Despite Lee's attack upon American imperialism, the brutal spirit, the violence done by the Americans against other peoples and the earth, Lee's own "Civil Elegies" expresses a belief in renovation through void (letting go and letting be) which verges upon an anarchistic faith. He does not show in the texture of his poetry a close or loving concern for the actual and nearest, he only indicates a generalized world of "coffee mugs," "dreary high rises," and "people plodding past through the raw air, lost in their overcoats."

In "Civil Elegies" Lee fails to realize that the "nearest," the "within me, without me and moment by moment," the here-and-now of the natural and human worlds are in large part the consequence and continuation of what is supposedly remote in time and place. Thus his characterization of Canadians as a "stunted" people because they were never fully "at home" (which means they didn't sufficiently give up their past home), his comic caricature of the mild rebellion of 1837 as non-history because the rebellion failed to become revolution, his terming the past a "dead weight" "oppressing" the present — these presentations of Canada indicate to me an all too familiar imagination incapable of appreciating much more than the bold, the novel and the "dynamic." Can we really believe that the man earlier oppressed by the dead weight of the past could muster the vitality and receptiveness to appreciate the "coffee mugs" and "dreary high rises" of the present? We are told that through the void he comes to a fresh possession of the "near," but the "near" has not been shown with any plausible or striking detail.

I conclude then that Lee's anti-historical attitude is even more disturbing than that of the forward-looking Americans, for they at least revere their Colonial architecture, their old towns, their wars and heroes, their wild west and their constitution. Lee, like a caricature of Thomas Chandler Haliburton's American, Sam Slick, seems to say: if only Canadians did not have such a stodgy reliance

upon precedence, law, and custom; if only we had gone through the "clearing" of a genuine revolution; if only we could be less cautious, less worried about consequences; then surely we would come into "our own." Haliburton's Sam Slick, however, also employed the metaphors of spontaneous combustion and the maelstrom to indicate that the forward-looking, individualistic dynamism of America may lead to catastrophe. As Lee seems unaware of these implications or consequences that a T. C. Haliburton or George Grant warns against, his poem seems insufficiently thought out and thereby muddled.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Boundary* 2, 3, no. 1 (Fall 1974), 156.
- <sup>2</sup> "Civil Elegies," in *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 56.
- <sup>3</sup> George Grant, *Lament for a Nation* (Toronto: Carleton Library, 1970), p. 70.
- <sup>4</sup> This summary of Grant is more fully developed in my article, "The Persuasiveness of Grant's *Lament for a Nation*," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 2, no. 2 (Summer 1977), 239-51.
- <sup>5</sup> *Philosophy in the Mass Age* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1959), p. 16.
- <sup>6</sup> Dennis Lee, "The Death of Harold Ladoo," in *The Gods* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979), p. 59.
- <sup>7</sup> George Grant, "In Defense of North America," in *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: Anansi, 1969), p. 19.
- <sup>8</sup> A reader has indicated the possible unfairness of this view of Lee's "ahistorical understanding" by drawing my attention to Lee's *Savage Fields: An Essay in Literature and Cosmology* (Toronto: Anansi, 1977). In this book published five years after *Civil Elegies* and two years before *The Gods*, Lee explores the relation of modern man to history and nature.  
 In *Savage Fields* Lee writes of the modern "ontology" in which man (World) sees himself at odds with nature; in this "false dualism" or "strife" man presumes that he can turn the natural world (Earth) entirely to his own purposes while ignoring the inevitability of earth returning all, including man's work, to earth (pp. 6-8). Beyond the "savage strife" of World and Earth, Lee imagines Planet, a "seamless whole" (p. 9), a holy flowing unity, a magical state (p. 64), a "luminous unified field of here and now" which he finds at the heart of Leonard Cohen's religious vision. In Cohen, "trees, elbows, radios, young ladies — all *are* magic, *are* holy, *are* eternal" (p. 72). Lee argues that the movement of Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* is based on the following proposition: "In the economy of the whole novel, Book One imagines the possibility that the Isis Continuum [the seamless unity] is real here and now, and that sexual ecstasy and the dislocation of rationality give entry into it. Thus the ontology of savage fields is overcome by a dionysiac ontology" (p. 82). Cohen's novel, however, does not complete this end: Cohen's "demolition job" on reason and technique is so complete that the "governing consciousness had already shot its bolt before the third movement began"; and thus as Cohen "took the line of least resistance," his conclusion became a "cop-out" (p. 94). Lee is very understanding of this failure of imagination. In the post-Nietzschean world where man exists in "radical freedom" beyond a numinous God or history (pp. 97-100) and where man can only invent himself and where all is merely a matter of construct or

technique, the only possible "conclusion" might well seem the following: "and yet [we] must go on spewing out new I's like a machine gone amok. Still trying, desperately and pathetically, to cram itself inside one — any one — forever" (p. 101). At his own "conclusion," Lee admits that he had been working at *Savage Fields* for five years and that his voice too "kept sounding false, excluding too much of what [he] was" (p. 109). Indeed Lee generalizes once again his own sense of inauthenticity to include the modern intellectual condition itself: "Thinking proceeds by objectifying and mastering what is to be thought. The process is erratic and intuitive, yet the overall drive is towards systematic clarity of idea which takes possession of the subject and wrings the structures from it, leaving behind the husk of one more object" (p. 110). This is a dismal view of modern thought or criticism or history and runs quite contrary to the intent of George Grant in his book upon Nietzsche, *Time as History* (CBC Massey Lectures 1969, published 1971): here one's duty is to think or "enucleate" the other man's thought, not to objectify and to dismiss the dead structure of another's thought. Grant then presupposes the possibility of a sympathetic, historical understanding: "for myself, as probably for most others, remembering only occasionally can pass over into thinking and loving what is good. It is for the great thinkers and saints to do more" (p. 52). Lee, however, sees little more than the possibility of setting one's mind against the other for the sake of overcoming and mastering the other: "To think sanely must be to think against thought and to think more deeply than thought." At best it seems, "thinking can be faithful to its situation only by sitting still, and unclenching and waiting to see what will happen" (pp. 111-12).

With such complexities it could be argued that Lee must express more than a cartoonist's version of our history. His "Civil Elegies," however, is such a remote and unloving caricature and so deliberately "ahistorical" that his concluding speculation upon a better time, "the early years of a better civilisation," can only be looked upon with Lee's own amused disbelief. One must ask how such a "better civilisation," such a "construct," could follow and ask the more basic question of whether an anti or ahistorical mind can truly think through the form of an elegy.

## STORY

*Russell Thornton*

Out of the unknowable  
Rung centre

Of the dark  
Constellations are flung like frigid sparks.

With the watery hammer eye  
The precise white fire

Of the desperate suns is struck —  
A last-ditch light