

RECLAIMING THE BODY/ RECLAIMING THE NATION

*a process of surviving colonization in
Dennis Lee's "Civil Elegies and Other Poems"*

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IF MOST OF US THINK OF OURSELVES as residing somewhere just behind our eyes, it is surely because we live in a time that separates consciousness from the objects of consciousness. We are not our bodies, but somewhere in our bodies. In *Civil Elegies and Other Poems*, Dennis Lee takes us on a journey "behind the eyes." We are introduced to a consciousness that is talking to itself, and more importantly, one that is striving to make contact with the world of actual objects, in which it lives, in such a way that value and meaning may be found to inhere in these objects. Lee's world of objects ranges from the natural to the cultural, from falling sumac leaves to Nathan Phillips Square. But there is an even more desperate struggle at hand: the attempt by consciousness to become at home in its own body, the physical surroundings of its own flesh, the first of all perceived objects. The poet discovers, as his stance shifts and wavers, as he is alternately attracted to and repelled by his life in his society, that the problem with the nation mirrors the problem with his body. It may seem perverse to focus on this aspect of "body" in a poem that seems so determinedly "mind," but I don't believe so. The human body is peripheral to no thing, regardless of how it is perceived, and through the language that conveys the image of the body, we are drawn into the questions of colonized perception, language and meaning.¹

Seen from the perspective of the liberal cosmology as defined by Lee, the body becomes value-free, simply another objective part of the universe, "raw material, to be manipulated and remade according to the hungers of one's nervous system and the demands of one's technology."² While Lee is aware that he is part of this cosmology, he does not share its values; instead, he looks to the social philosopher George Grant and the Red Tory tradition that Grant evokes, one which taught that "reverence for what is is more deeply human than conquest for what is."³ Lee is painfully aware of this conquest in the immediate terms of a Canada swamped by an American Empire, and he does not hesitate to say "we did not

want to be American at all. Their dream was wrong.”⁴ Yet the *Elegies* move in a field larger than the political domination of one country by another. Lee is grappling with the numbness of a colonized consciousness, particularly the colonized writer who has reached that dead point in his work where “words [have] become the enemy. To use them as a writer [is] to collaborate further in one’s extinction.”⁵ Colonization leads to isolation, then, from country, body, speech: it becomes space-lessness. This is the day-to-day world in which the poet, again and again, circles his despair.

In the first section of the book, the 16 shorter poems of “Coming Back,” the poet’s experience of his body is largely sensual and sexual. While the body inhabits a world of excellent pleasure and after-pleasure, the poet’s consciousness is haunted by isolation and failure. Sexual love provides a larger unity, a larger frame of reference, but coming back to the world becomes a return to the mind-body dichotomy. “Come over here with your body”⁶ is not the same as “Come over here.” The poet is distanced not only from his own body, but also from his lover, and this tremendous gap gets filled — with silence, with absence that nags and irritates at first, then negates. Breakdown results in “testing the cutting edge on your own flesh”; the “body slouches,” and there is “fragile breathing.” Everywhere the poet’s failure is described in images of the flesh, while the consciousness remains trapped in the prison of itself; as Don Coles suggests,

beneath the conjoined and simple surfaces of the lovers is the complexity of the watching and listening poet, mindful of the past and present joys, seeking to make them last, to fix them in words . . . but [he is] finally distrustful.⁷

In “Sibelius Park,” near the end of the first section, the poet comes to a difficult realization: “in the / bodies we live in we are / acceptable.” The poem has spent its wrenching way working toward this hard-won starting point. It is a kind of reconciliation, and yet the first section of the book ends here with Lee still on the opposite side of the subject-object fence from his body: he is not his body, but rather lives *in* his body. Nevertheless the condition of dwelling “in” the body (and dwelling there “acceptably”) is a step ahead of the condition in which consciousness finds itself solipsistically estranged from the body.

It remains for “Civil Elegies” to follow a similar trajectory, and to discover some of the cultural grounds for this persistent dichotomy. The poet does not “solve” the mind-body problem, for that is not his intention, but he does engage in a process of examining and articulating some of its aspects in the particular context of a colonized Canada, and by moving through several stances, he comes to realize that a tentative claiming and connection can occur. I wish to follow that movement, elegy by elegy through the nine meditations, many of which start with the poet located physically in Nathan Phillips Square, the large plaza in front of Toronto’s city hall.

APPROPRIATELY, the “Civil Elegies” begin with the absence of bodies and the presence of non-bodies, the ghostly spectres: in their “fetid descent, they darken the towers,” polluting the here-and-now. They occur quite literally as “airborne shapes among the pollution,” and at a first level probably are smog and air pollution. They then become perceived as the ghosts of previous unfulfilled citizens of Canada who look for some action by present-day Canadians which will lay them, grant them a fully-resolved death. These spectres are not merely fabrications of the poet’s mind. He registers them also with his body, perhaps there first and foremost: “whenever / the thick air clogs my breathing it teems with their presence.” Thus these inarticulated lives of the past become a source of physical strangulation. Lee becomes locked in a death struggle with the process of articulation, and only by speaking the names of the past will he be free to breathe. This becomes exceptionally difficult because the language required to express such presences does not in fact exist. Living with a discontinuous past is living in speechlessness, in the disruption of the very rhythm of breathing.

There is even worse news. The spectres not only crave articulation through the poet (in fact, so ghoulish do they sometimes appear that I am tempted to say “through the poet’s blood”), but they are not “citizens of a human body of kind.” At this point in the poem, the body becomes a metaphor for society: the body as object-of-consciousness has extended its boundaries beyond the individual flesh to the civic body structure called the nation. In its isolation, however, colonized consciousness cannot distinguish between body and nation, between private and public. Neither is real, and immediately the poet finds himself caught. His body is not just his flesh, it is all the country, but a country that specializes in depriving itself of both physical and communal existence. For some, this failure to connect with others in the larger civic body beyond the individual consciousness is itself a first death, and Lee cites Chartier, the mad bomber who “blew himself to bits in the parliament john, leaving as civil testament / assorted chunks of prophet, twitching and / bobbing to rest in the flush.” Here, early in the poem, we see the destructive force inherent in alienation from the civic body.

Yet just as the poet despairs, he also yearns for connection and wholeness with the nation — at the very same time as he needs to reject it as unclean and impure. The physical body and the civic state have now become bound together; now acceptance of one must include acceptance of the other. Lee will develop this point further, but at this early stage in the sequence it seems not simply paradoxical but unresolvable, and in fact much of the poem re-phrases and re-examines this problem. The elegy includes, I hasten to add, the vision of what might be, of connectedness with the past through the flesh and bone of one’s ancestors, yet the final stance

becomes a bitter unacceptance, a consciousness alone and more aware of the invisible spectres than the actual sun that "does not shine through."

In desperate retreat from the world, the poet turns to "Master and Lord" in what appears to be a traditional religious prayer. But it is an address to no thing and to no one: "Where are you?" This critical absence creates a despair that leads us to the central problem in the poet's life: "I know / the world is not enough." Objects themselves do not give him a sense of value and he knows that there has to be a larger value to which the world (and its smaller partner, his body) must yield. If that could happen, the result would be the experience of one-ness and real-ness: meaning. But the Lord and Master is itself meaningless, gone. The poet inhabits a world full of objects that have no value, and without value, they disappear. Now it is no longer a matter of feeling alienated from his body: there is no body, only a despairing will and consciousness hanging onto its emptiness, the full dead weight of absence. The poet yearns not just for a past when Master and Lord was present in its fullest meaning, but also for a different consciousness, a pre-abstract shape of mind that would be greater than religion *per se*. In such a time there would be no need for symbols because the distance between flesh and consciousness would not exist: it would be living thought. Recognition of this loss is, perhaps, the first step toward reclamation.

The poet's consciousness pours out, and finds a slumber-state norm where people are placidly eating bag lunches on the concrete benches by the pool, in sight of the Henry Moore sculpture, the Archer. He then feels his "body's pulse contract and / balk," as if there were circles closing in around him, driving toward their centre, his consciousness. The commotion in the forearms announces the experience of on-coming void: all the world goes slack and begins to recede, and the speaker is without hold or purchase. As this happens, he searches for some point of reality that will anchor him, and as he connects with the knotted space generated by the Archer, there is a corresponding response in his forearms. They are not *just* disappearing into the void, for there is also this simultaneous discovery that within the void there lies a node of space so charged that it is real — austere, primordial, even threatening, but *real*. The poet senses bedrock reality in the Moore because it is the artistic embodiment of the landscape of the Canadian Shield that the speaker (and his progenitors) first started living in. The void all around the Archer is the direct result of the failure of these citizens to measure up to the land.

We soon discover how often the landscape has defeated Canadians. Like the void, it, too, is vast and barbaric; it, too, tows the bodies under, as void pulls them under, as empire drags them under. The speaker is beginning to attach himself to these historical realities of defeat and sell-out. He is scarcely able to articulate what they mean at this point since he is still registering viscerally the wash of

experience (of both void *and* the Archer), and his nervous system and its mind have only begun to explicate what his body already knows: the assault of Canada-as-void on the nerve ends, and through the Archer, the implications of failure.⁸ The speaker sees that the artist, a Christ figure, may enter this void and give it meaning, but Lee the poet cannot fully believe this achievement since he sees both Thomson and Christ collapse into carcasses, finally decaying. The creative artistic meaning and the creative religious meaning are both somehow betrayed and terribly undercut by the death of the body. Without recourse to the meaning implicit in art and faith, and faced with the truth of Canada's innocent greed and violence, the poet has little alternative but finally to honour the emptiness, honour the void. This understanding can only come after the experience in the Square, which explains why the elegy is so difficult to read: it has to recreate the encounter in the reader without the reader knowing what the encounter is about until the poem itself unwinds. Through this enactment, we come to the beginning of acceptance.

LEE CANNOT PROGRESS through the *Elegies* in anything like a linear fashion towards self-knowledge. He moves back and forth, attracted to absence, repelled by absence, drained of the will to continue, alternating between what he feels and what he scarcely dares to hope. He moves in and out of various states of perception, often so quickly that we have little time to register the shift. It is these shifts (occurring often in the same line) that collide and carry and announce in us the perceptual space the poet is in. His is a poetry that moves by qualification, gliding on an interior monologue of "but" and "and" and "yet." As the poet's consciousness examines the world, it comes to the void, and what the poet does with this absence will determine his relation with his body and his country.

A central problem already stated as "I know / the world is not enough" becomes re-phrased now as "If only / here and now were not fastened so / deep in the flesh and good-bye." By implication those objects to which the poet says good-bye—the lakes, the earth, the corner stores—these are part of his flesh. The death of the lakes becomes then the gutting of his self-respect, and the poet feels this as more than metaphor. The larger civic or national body is no different from his flesh; good-bye to Canada is good-bye to the flesh. We have seen this conjoining before and while this is hardly a positive connection, it does represent, I think, a movement beyond the purely world-denying, body-denying rhetoric of the earlier stances. The body is inextricably bound to the world and the poet is groping his way towards some sense of acceptance of both, following the tacit recognition that the nation exists first and foremost in its citizens' flesh and blood.

Yet the poet is hounded by absence and returns there again and again. At

that centre he becomes momentarily free to see the world anew. He discovers within the emptiness there is a regenerative possibility: if he gave up trying to own the elm trees (for example), they might be released into a valuative existence of their own, might begin to “move very cleanly in the vehement enjoyment of their bodies.” Here is the renewed earth full of sexual-like energy; the trees are wild, clean, un-self-conscious bodies, or perhaps, phrased differently, theirs is a consciousness more vast than we can fathom. The emphasis on renewal and re-creation makes the poet aware that this power underlines the void, is co-existent with the void, and is forever available to him *by virtue of his body*. The elms become evidence of the procreative power latent in all of earth’s “objects,” including the body of the poet, and which mind-consciousness alone cannot perceive. This is the beginning of reclaiming the body, for it is a *reclaiming*, a re-discovery of the connecting power between earth and blood. But the poet does not trust this new knowledge, so that it is immediately undercut, massively rejected: “What good is that in a nation / of losers and quislings?” At the very moment when a new perception arises from the contact between the body and the full force of the all-sexual earth, a perception born of emptiness that promises a renewal of the body through a vision of primal energy, the poet rejects all. His reason is clear: any renewal that does not include the civic body is inadequate. Nowhere in the *Elegies* does the debate between attachment to, and detachment from, the world become so formalized, so stanza to stanza, as here in the Fourth Elegy. While stanzas 1 and 3 argue that detachment is healthy and (ideally) would allow one to be in the world without constantly grasping at it, stanzas 2 and 4 (there is a stanza break at the bottom of page 43) suspect any attempt to break from citizenship as pure escapism. This debate continues, of course, throughout the poem, with each side modifying the other.

As frequently occurs in the *Elegies*, the poet recoils from his world, here from the possibility of beginning anew *in* the world, and now veers towards the extreme asceticism of the French-Canadian poet, Garneau, who saw “not lost souls but a company of lost bodies.” Once again the poet expresses his “appetite” for such emptiness, and for the peace it would presumably bring. Unable to accept the denigration of the civic body, unwilling to allow the earth’s power of renewal to carry him, he yearns once again for the extinction of the difficult world. He sees now that he will die on occupied soil, that the body of the nation is not only unclaimed, but virtually unclaimable since it is completely occupied by the service to empire. Only different levels of sacrifice remain, and just as the mad bomber died, so there are those who “take the world full force on their nerve ends, leaving the / bloody impress of their bodies” on the underside of the mind-driven machinery of empire. Once again we have circled back to the most barren of places, where there are few alternatives but death.

As the poet rallies his strength to denounce the criminals of sell-out, he attempts to move from a private hopeless stance to an angrier position confronting war and genocide and “the lousy expendable cargo” of bodies thundering to their deaths. When bodies are value-free, raw material, Lee is suggesting we are all criminally implicated: our minds become fascists willing to sacrifice our bodies; indeed, they are scarcely able to appreciate any other possibility. The poet implies that we can accept the “lissome burning bodies” of the Vietnamese children because the self we call “we” is divorced from the body. We do not own our bodies just as we do not own our nation — and he calls this a failure of nerve. When the body is no longer valuable in its own right, then clearly the nerves have no choice but failure. A consciousness that is without prime knowledge of its nerves and flesh and blood is a totalitarian consciousness in the service of empire. Here, more than ever, it becomes apparent that consciousness cut off from its flesh is death. The poet passes through this lethal field without offering any solutions, but he is slowly coming to understand that the problem of the reoccupation of his own body is central to this quest to be made whole in a colonial space. At the moment he is stiff and “numb in [his] stance,” unable to get “purchase on life.”

THE POET CONTINUES TO DOCUMENT his failure to achieve some first place of solidity, and by so doing, begins to come to terms with his “need to fail and be hurt.” He shows how the lives of his friends and lovers are equally touched, although it is occasionally possible for them to come to “some kind of ease in their bodies’ loving.” We are reminded of the mind-body dichotomy of “Coming Back,” but this goes further: the poet senses that a kind of sado-masochism “draws them together for love and the kill.” Love and death fuse; consciousness is now totally cut off from the body’s last redemptive quality, unity through sexual love. We arrive at one of the most lonely and bitter positions in the poems. Yet, as the poet makes clear, there is some part of the man that needs to *live* these “postures of willing defeat,” that lives through them in order to go beyond. In these continual articulations of the meaninglessness and failures to connect, he creates a *gestalt* that begins to promise a moment of being “with our claimed selves, at home in the difficult world.” However ironic these words may be, however slight their promise, it becomes a step beyond the bitterness and isolation beforehand. As the poet shifts his stance again, he comes to face Garneau and his exact solution to all the poet’s alienation: the divine void.

We watch as Garneau’s body vanishes. First there is “the palpable void that opened between the bones of your spine,” then the ever-continuing death-wish: “feeling inside you the small incessant gush of the cardiac lesion” until finally the body becomes “sick” and “destroyed,” and nothing remains of the man but his

"upright will." At the expense of losing the world, Garneau experiences his (auto-erotic) real-ness with God. But Lee cannot do this; he discovers that his multifarious attachments have, in the end, thankfully prevented him from going into the void with a radical misunderstanding of the process involved; they have enabled him to draw back from this neurotic version of detachment. He watches as Garneau dies again, bleeding, watches his "blood lap wide on the lake at sunset," disappearing entirely "as the ferns come shouldering up through [his] body." The poet knows now what his choices have become: all the world, or none of it. In confronting this negation-of-the-world in Garneau, confronting it in terms of the death of the body, the poet comes to see "his own wrong start."

He is now able to resolve not to enter void "till I come to myself." This sense of journey and arrival is, I suggest, one of a fuller acknowledgement of the body as self; the space of Garneau's void is replaced by the space of the body. In much the same way, the poet refuses to reject the world before he learns its language. This act of resolving to honour the body and the world more fully reclaims them from meaninglessness, and this in turn triggers a wide variety of external particulars to flood his consciousness: the "square and the dusk and the war and the crowds in motion at / evening." Through his body, he has come closer to the brimful fragile world; through it, he has heard the world and now must speak it, make it his. In the final elegy, it becomes clear that reclaiming the body is necessarily a reclamation of speech itself.

For the final time, the poet shifts back to doubt: "What if there is no regenerative absence?" and he celebrates those who "do not salute the death of the body / before they have tasted its life." He now declares that he himself was guilty of a similar offence, of adoring the void neurotically. But that has passed, and he has reached a point of absolute first beginning, where even the void has "gone void." He discovers he is able to "honour each of [his] country's failures of nerve" and this is full acceptance of the body, human and civic. He realizes that defining what the void is not is a renewed function of the body's speaking, the attempt by the poet to articulate his new perspective, his new claims. Out of this acceptance a language is created, and it is no longer the language of bitter acquiescence, but a new language which struggles to find new nouns — and one of them is "body," another is "land." This final stance, full of green earth and civil grey, is the first tentative gesture of wholeness at home.

In *Civil Elegies and Other Poems*, Lee handles a dual progression; one movement yearns to complete itself in self-annihilation while the other moves towards self-renewal and re-birth. Lee comes first to a rejection of Garneau's version of the void and then to an acceptance of the absence that he feels everywhere so deeply. But it is an acceptance that is the courageous outcome of a long process of slow, articulated reclamation. He has slowly gained back his right to be, to

actively *live* in colonized space, a space which deals in the strangulation of speech and the disruption of language. The constant qualification and shifting stances attest to the difficulty of first words, particularly first words that are spoken without the alliance of consciousness to "motherwit and guts." This quite literal "bloody-minded" union asserts the values of the organic and the flesh in surviving colonization. Moving through colonized space becomes, then, a process of re-discovering one's flesh and the nation that lives through that flesh; it becomes a journey inward. It becomes not only a journey that stumbles upon this place of mapless emptiness, but also one that slowly seeks to re-shape such a place and fill in the blanks of the map. By the end of the poem, Lee is ready to begin his own process of re-claiming the world, moving out from the isolated consciousness to include a larger frame of reference. The journey behind the eyes ends in a place quite different from where it began. With the full resources of a new place, the poet begins to live in his body and in his country.

NOTES

- ¹ While the ideas about consciousness that emerge in this essay are derived from several writers, I would like to acknowledge the work of Owen Barfield, *Romanticism Comes of Age* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1967) and Shirley Sugarman, ed., *Evolution of Consciousness: Studies in Polarity* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1976).
- ² Dennis Lee, "Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space," *Boundary 2*, 3, no. 1 (1974), 159.
- ³ "Cadence, Country, Silence," p. 159.
- ⁴ "Cadence, Country, Silence," p. 160.
- ⁵ "Cadence, Country, Silence," p. 163.
- ⁶ Dennis Lee, *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 18.
- ⁷ Don Coles, review of *Civil Elegies and Other Poems*, *Toronto Globe & Mail* (April 1, 1972), p. 23.
- ⁸ As readers, we have to be prepared to accept that "Nathan Phillips Square" equals "Canada" at this point. The questions that arise from this assumption deserve another essay.

