

# DESIGN AND TRUTH IN GROVE'S "IN SEARCH OF MYSELF"

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**A**N IMPORTANT SOURCE for the study of a writer is the body of his own statements concerning his life and works. This is as true for the study of Frederick Philip Grove as for other writers. In *In Search of Myself*, in letters, in published and unpublished lectures, and in notebooks Grove comments at length upon the genesis and composition of his works, his relations with publishers, colleagues, and friends, his views on the literary questions of the day, and his vision as a writer. Until recently, the most influential — and certainly the most frequently quoted — source of such statements was Grove's autobiography, *In Search of Myself*. That book was indeed the cornerstone of critical thought concerning the writer: from it commentators derived their conception of the novelist, their understanding of the shape of his career, and their knowledge of the composition of his books. Following Desmond Pacey, whose pioneering study, *Frederick Philip Grove*, was based upon a reading of the then unpublished autobiography, critics emphasized the cosmopolitan nature of Grove's early life; noted the importance to the future novelist of the trips to Siberia and Biskra, and of the twenty years spent as an itinerant farmhand in the United States and Canada; and characterized Grove's life in this country as that "of a lonely immigrant, unknown to fellow-writers and rebuffed by publishers, resolutely creating literature in shacks and barns during the long northern winters."<sup>1</sup>

The publication of Douglas Spettigue's two studies, *Frederick Philip Grove* and *FPG: The European Years*, and of Margaret Stobie's *Frederick Philip Grove*, has forced critics to recognize that the novelist's account of his life in *In Search of Myself* is often inaccurate and at times without any basis in historical fact; and consequently, that the critical conception of Grove and the body of commentary on his writing must be reassessed in light of the new biographical evidence. There are some signs that such a reassessment is underway. The commentaries that have appeared to date suggest, however, that critics are uncertain how to evaluate *In Search of Myself* in light of the biographical discoveries, and that some have simply dismissed Grove as a "congenital liar," none of whose statements can be trusted.<sup>2</sup> Certainly enough of Grove's autobiographical remarks

have been questioned to make commentators uneasy about citing any of them in support of a critical argument. In lieu of more reliable information, and perhaps in the belief that the Canadian section of the autobiography is accurate even if the European is not, some critics continue to quote Grove's statements about his career as a writer in Canada, but most simply avoid any reference to *In Search of Myself* at all.<sup>3</sup>

If the image of Grove prior to the publication of Spettigue's studies was that of a poverty-stricken but indefatigable author "resolutely creating literature in shacks and barns during the long northern winters," the image now gaining currency is the one that emerges from André Gide's "Conversation avec un Allemand quelques années avant la guerre," an image far from flattering. In a review of *FPG: The European Years*, Michael Darling questions the need for the final two chapters of that book — in which Spettigue re-examines Grove's Canadian writing in light of the new biographical evidence — and suggests that Spettigue adds those chapters because he is "more sympathetic" than to conclude his study with the Greve-Gide interviews. According to Darling, those interviews represent the "low point" in Greve's European career.<sup>4</sup> In one sense Darling's remark is surprising because the Greve story does not of course end with the second Gide interview in 1905, but with Greve's disappearance in 1909; in another sense the remark is understandable because reviewers generally have focused upon the Gide interviews as the most revealing and certainly the most interesting evidence Spettigue uncovered concerning Felix Paul Greve. Stanley McMullin, for example, states: "The most intriguing insights into the working of Grove's mind occur in the short-lived relationship between Greve and Gide."<sup>5</sup> But what does Gide's record of those interviews reveal about the elusive Greve? According to Darling the portrait that emerges is "of a rather pathetic clown, a poor actor, and a self-confessed liar"; and although some critics might deny that Greve was either a "pathetic clown" or a "poor actor," few would object to Darling's description of him as a "self-confessed liar."<sup>6</sup> After all, at one point in the first interview Greve himself states: "Il faut que je vous avertisse, Monsieur Gide, que je mens constamment."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Spettigue himself places considerable emphasis on the portrait of Greve that emerges from the 1904 interview and returns to Greve's confession of mendacity late in *FPG: The European Years* to explain the novelist's intention in *In Search of Myself*.

There can be no doubt that Spettigue's portrait of Greve as a congenital liar has influenced Grove criticism. In a review of *The Master Mason's House* one critic, for example, writes:

Unkindly, one might suggest that [Grove] was a literary con man, or more kindly, that he derived much of his psychic energy and creative power from the life secret which he cherished, guarded, and never revealed to anyone. He must be having a good laugh right now, whatever sphere he dwells in, as he looks down and sees

the work that scholars must do to untangle the threads he tangled [,] as they follow up the false clues he planted, and try to find the buried paths he so successfully camouflaged.<sup>8</sup>

What is striking about these comments is not only that the range of possible responses — from the “unkindly” to the “more kindly” — is so limited, but that any distinction between them almost immediately disappears when, after setting forth the possibilities, the critic pictures Grove as in fact a “literary con man” intent upon tangling threads and planting false clues.

In 1969 Spettigue pointed out that although Grove critics based their commentaries upon the novelist’s autobiographical statements, they were reluctant to examine the autobiography in any detail. The commentaries that have appeared since 1973, the year in which both Spettigue’s *FPG: The European Years* and Stobie’s *Frederick Philip Grove* were published, suggests that critics are now willing to dismiss *In Search of Myself*, again without submitting it to much scrutiny. In a review of Stobie’s book, Stanley McMullin, for example, describes Grove’s autobiographical statements as a “romantic smokescreen” that scholars have penetrated to reveal “how often [the novelist’s] actual state of affairs was different from the picture he wished to present.”<sup>9</sup> Alec Lucas’s remark is even more striking. In a review of Desmond Pacey’s *The Letters of Frederick Philip Grove*, Lucas states quite bluntly: “Scholars have trained their guns on the wondrous autobiography that fascinated Pacey (and Grove) and, owing largely to the work of Douglas Spettigue, they have reduced it almost to ruins.”<sup>10</sup>

Undoubtedly such repudiations of *In Search of Myself* are in part a function of the previous critical reliance upon that work: having accepted the autobiography as factual, critics feel betrayed. (Spettigue’s revelations prompted one critic to remark concerning Grove: “He was a stranger, and he took us in.”)<sup>11</sup> Although in the short run critics may choose simply to dismiss Grove’s autobiographical statements, and thus the image he creates of himself in *In Search of Myself*, in the long run Grove criticism must come to terms with that image and with the questions implicit in the discovery that the autobiography is historically inaccurate. We must come to terms with *In Search of Myself* because the image the novelist creates in that work permeates all his writing, and is central to our understanding of his fiction and of his place in Canadian literature. We must come to terms with it, too, because literary criticism is concerned not only with historical facts — for example, when and in what order Grove wrote his novels — neither of which has yet been conclusively established — but with, among other things, the novelist’s vision of himself as a writer and his conception of the art of fiction. In what follows I consider how Spettigue’s biographical revelations alter our understanding of *In Search of Myself*, what light the extant manuscripts of the autobiography shed on the composition of that work, and how Grove’s account of his life is shaped by the stance he adopts in the Prologue.

UNDERLYING THE CRITICAL DISMISSAL of *In Search of Myself* as “a pack of lies”<sup>12</sup> is the assumption that autobiographies must be historically accurate, and that because Grove’s is not, it is necessarily a sham, a “mask” behind which the novelist conceals his “true” self. That assumption is questionable, and given its implications for Grove studies, merits more scrutiny than it has yet received. The assumption is questionable for at least two reasons. First, it ignores the fact that autobiography differs from biography precisely in that whereas a biographer endeavours to provide an historically accurate account of his subject’s life, an autobiographer attempts to articulate his own vision of himself at the time of writing, of who he is and of how the events of his life have shaped his development. What the autobiography offers, consequently, is not the historical facts, but the autobiographer’s vision of himself. Secondly, the assumption that autobiographies must be historically accurate involves a failure to recognize that an individual’s life is shaped less by historical events than by one’s reaction to and understanding of those events, and that each of us constantly reinterprets his or her own past. In Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners* Morag Gunn observes: “A popular misconception is that we can’t change the past — everyone is constantly changing their own past, recalling it, revising it.”<sup>13</sup> We continually reshape our past in accordance with our changing understanding of ourselves.

Of course, not all autobiographies diverge as markedly from the verifiable facts as Frederick Philip Grove’s. In a recent study of André Gide’s autobiography, *Si le grain ne meurt*, C. D. E. Tolton observes that “even if a reader admires the style or enjoys the anecdotes [in an autobiography], he must still respect the truth of the work for it to be successful *as an autobiography*.” That observation leads Tolton to ask: “Just how much licence with the truth can the autobiographer be allowed and still remain worthy of our respect?” The answer he gives with regard to *Si le grain ne meurt* is instructive. After pointing out the many historical inaccuracies in Gide’s autobiography and citing Roger Martin du Gard’s comment that “Gide’s self-portrait was always slanted with the opinion of posterity in mind,” Tolton states:

Gide traces not only the self that actually existed, but also aspects of himself which he only believed to exist. Very few people are infallible in their self-appraisal, and even fewer could be counted on for as much honesty as Gide in an autobiography. Gide’s factual discrepancies, in Martin du Gard’s eyes, would become only normal human failings, associated with the larger question of most people’s incapacity for completely honest self-portrayal. They would have little bearing on the total impression of the autobiography. Gide confessed that facts external to himself could indeed become twisted in his memory, but the personal emotion evoked by the events remains constant. His nephew, Dominique Drouin, laughingly pointed out that Gide’s 1931 account of a story which Drouin had told him

at the end of the First World War so distorted the original version as to become pure invention. In consternation Gide investigated what might have happened, and, somewhat relieved, surmised that while he might have telescoped two different stories, he had not, after all, invented a new one: "Car, en tout cas, ce que je n'avais pu inventer, c'était mon émotion . . ." We may and must believe that even where there are doubtful facts in *Si le grain ne meurt*, the emotions are honest. *It would seem that this is all we can hope for from any autobiography.* This is especially true when the autobiographer is . . . using his own life and a narrative form primarily in the interest of polemic. Provided that the emotional state he associates with each event is honestly depicted, Gide will have fulfilled his obligation to the autobiographical genre.<sup>14</sup>

According to Tolton, the autobiographer's primary obligation is to be true to his own inner life, his own vision of himself. Readers of autobiographies, he asserts, "are able, indeed almost always *obliged*, to excuse inconsistencies in factual details . . . [and] even conscious distortions of truth."

The relevance of Tolton's statements to an understanding of Grove's *In Search of Myself* is to be found, in part at least, in Douglas Spettigue's comments concerning the Prologue to that autobiography. For although in his first book on Grove, Spettigue questioned the accuracy of the Prologue — as of the autobiography as a whole — he nevertheless affirmed that "emotionally the whole Prologue rings true," an affirmation he repeats in *FPG: The European Years*, adding that it is not only emotionally but to some extent biographically true as well.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Spettigue reports his own surprise at discovering just how much of *In Search of Myself* has its basis in verifiable facts. "What emerges from a close comparison of Grove's account of his life with the facts," he remarks in the Introduction to the NCL edition of *In Search of Myself*, "is an astonished sense not only that the life story is so fictionalized but also that so much of it is true."<sup>16</sup> Critics to date, however, have focused primarily on the more unsavoury aspects of Grove's past and marvelled at the measures he took to ensure that his early life remained buried.

But if Spettigue's and Stobie's studies reveal the points at which *In Search of Myself* diverges from the verifiable facts, they also demonstrate that at a very early stage in his life Grove began to reshape his past and thus slowly to evolve the image of himself he embodies in his autobiography. Although details — like the precise date of his birth and the number of sisters — change, the image Grove creates of himself in the autobiography develops with remarkable consistency. The process of evolution is apparent in Felix Paul Greve's letters to his German publishers, Rudolf von Poellnitz and Anton Kippenberg; in André Gide's record of his "Conversation avec un Allemand" (1904); in the biographical notes Greve sends Franz Brümmer in 1907; in Fred Grove's letters to Isaac J. Warkentin; in the biographical notes the novelist sends Ryerson Press in 1925, in articles like Grove's "Apologia pro vita et opere suo" (1931) and "The Plight of Canadian

Fiction: A Reply" (1938), and in the novelist's letters to Arthur Leonard Phelps, Watson Kirkconnell, Richard Crouch, Lorne Pierce, Desmond Pacey, and others. As Douglas Spettigue himself notes, "the core of [Grove's] account of his background in the autobiography is to be found in the lies told to Gide in 1904."<sup>17</sup> Those lies constitute Grove's response to and attempt to cope with the world in which he found himself. It is important to note that they predate his immigration to Canada.

If, after the excitement of Spettigue's revelations concerning Frederick Philip Grove's European past, students of Canadian literature have found Desmond Pacey's edition of the novelist's letters unrevealing — and the reviews suggest they have — it is not because Grove simply buried his past, but because he slowly reshaped it in terms of his changing understanding of himself. Thus the man who declared to Franz Brümmer in 1907 that he "was firmly convinced that in the future [he] would somehow, somewhere in the world, be a centre," gradually came to feel that he had a crucial role to play as a spokesman for Old World values in the New World. Although Alec Lucas asserts in his review of *The Letters of Frederick Philip Grove* that "the 520 letters of Grove's Canadian period . . . lift Grove's mask at least a little," he is almost immediately forced to acknowledge that "even in the intimacy of letters to his wife" the novelist plays out the role he created for himself.<sup>18</sup> Grove did not simply play that role: he lived it. And in his autobiography he sets his vision of himself before his readers. *In Search of Myself* will remain a central document in the study of Frederick Philip Grove because in it the novelist sets forth the vision that shaped both his life and his fiction.

In *FPG: The European Years* Spettigue is clearly uneasy about the liberties Grove takes with the historical facts and about whether the novelist's reshaping of his past disqualifies *In Search of Myself* as autobiography. In the closing pages of his study Spettigue raises the question of whether Grove's autobiography really involves a "search for the self," as its title suggests: "if this book did represent FPG's search for the self within," he asks,

would it not have dealt honestly with his peasant antecedents, the family's financial and marital problems, his relations with his sister, his father, his mother, his friends? With the shock that allegedly made him a liar on his mother's death? With the trauma of university days, the Wilde imitations, the assumed elegance, the extravagance, the attempt through his youth to be what he was not? With the dishonesty, with the humiliation of imprisonment? With the strain of poverty and overwork? With the flight to North America? He had nothing to fear, surely; in the nineteen forties few who had known him were living, few at least who would be likely to notice or take an interest in his book. After two World Wars his publishers were not going to pursue him. He could not expect Elsa to be interested in him now — she hadn't been much interested apparently in 1909.<sup>19</sup>

Spettigue concludes that because Grove was "carefully concealing much of the

truth about himself" the autobiography is not in fact a search "by the author for the author." Although he stops short of disqualifying *In Search of Myself* as autobiography because it does not involve a sustained search for self, he does imply that such a search characterizes the best autobiographies. *In Search of Myself*, Spettigue suggests, is simply a "conventional autobiography" that "conform[s] to a pattern in Canadian confessional writing." Grove, he asserts, "hides" his "real" identity within the autobiography: it is not the autobiographer but the reader who engages in the "search."

Spettigue's comments raise serious questions about Grove's intention in *In Search of Myself*. Certainly Spettigue is right to question the use of the word "search" in the title of the autobiography, for nothing in the Prologue or in the main body of the work suggests that Grove intends to engage in such a "search for self"; on the contrary, the novelist makes it clear in the Prologue that he *knows* why he has failed as a writer and that he attributes his failure not to his own inadequacies but to the circumstances in which he was forced to write. Although he professes doubts about his ability to explain his failure, he states that he sees "the reasons clearly enough" (*ISM*, 11). Grove's intention in the autobiography is actually much closer to that of an apologist than to a confessional writer: he does not propose to search his past in order to discover the essential truth about himself, but to explain why his "struggle [as a writer] has been such as to make defeat a foregone conclusion" (*ISM* 6), and thus to defend himself against his own feeling of failure. Grove uses his own life story and the genre of autobiography to demonstrate that life in Canada is inimical to the arts, and that he did not succeed as a writer in this country because no one could possibly do so.

IN 1931 GROVE PUBLISHED an article entitled "Apologia pro vita et opere suo," and like that article *In Search of Myself* appears to have developed out of the novelist's growing sense in the 1920's and 1930's that he was writing in a cultural wilderness. In the 1931 article Grove defends his life and works with considerable confidence; he had, after all, published five books in the preceding six years, and in three cross-Canada lecture tours had established a reputation as a gifted speaker. Although the novelist speaks repeatedly in the article of the possibility of failure, he looks to the future with considerable confidence. "I aim," he proclaims at the outset, "at building the sort of work which, while like the pyramids, taking time to build, will also stand for some little time after being completed." Early in the "Apologia" he shifts into the first person plural, and in the final paragraph asserts:

what we are trying to do cannot become clear till at least a trace of the walls of that edifice becomes visible which we are trying to erect: so far, we have put

down only a few of the foundation stones. And so we come back to this: either our day has been, or our day will come; we only know that, in our aim, we are not of this day of false fronts and shoddy. But we also know that, if our lives and works are to be of any value whatever (and we sometimes doubt it), they will be so precisely on that account.<sup>20</sup>

In the autobiography, begun in the summer of 1938, Grove is much less confident. Having published only one book in eight years, and reduced to soliciting subscriptions for a private printing of *Two Generations*, he is forced to acknowledge that he has failed to gain an audience for his work. Although he still looks to the future for his jurisdiction and although he still affirms that "the artist should always build his work as if it were meant to last through the centuries" (*ISM*, 426-27), he is forced to acknowledge that his achievements have fallen far short of his own minimum expectations. What is more, Grove is haunted in the Prologue and throughout the autobiography by the spectre of old age, and with it the decline of his mental powers. This is not the first time he has despaired of gaining an audience, but now he feels that "[his] day has been" and that old age is upon him.

In *Experiment in Autobiography* H. G. Wells states that he "began [his] autobiography to reassure [him]self during a phase of fatigue, restlessness and vexation," and notes at its conclusion that "it has achieved its purpose of reassurance."<sup>21</sup> *In Search of Myself* appears to have been occasioned by a similar need. At no time was Frederick Philip Grove's career at a lower ebb than just before he began his autobiography in the summer of 1938. In a journal entry dated April 6, 1938, the novelist asks himself what the first three months of the year have brought him and he replies:

They have been three months of the profoundest economic depression through which I have lived; and, therefore, of the most frantic endeavours to break it. Everything seems to have gone wrong. There is practically no income: \$4.75 a week or within a few pennies. I have to have many trifles. But, in order to be able to spend 23¢ on a box of matches, I have to plan for weeks ahead to gather the sum together by pennies. The strange thing is that, within this great, relatively prosperous country, it would be entirely within the possibilities for a man like myself who refuses to apply for help, to starve to death if he persists in doing what he was meant to do, namely in standing face to face with things, instead of immersing himself in them. Of course, I am too old now in any case. But, had I foreseen what has happened — that, as a writer, I should be forgotten in my retreat — would it have made any difference in the past when I was still young enough to do other things? As a matter of fact, I am just obstinate enough not to mind for myself; I could live in a hovel and go on, damning the world. But my wife? And my boy?<sup>22</sup>

It is in this despondent state of mind — so effectively evoked in the Prologue to *In Search of Myself* — that he begins to write the story of [his] struggles as a writer.<sup>23</sup>



The two extant drafts of *In Search of Myself* confirm Grove's statements in his letters that he initially conceived the autobiography as a sequel to *A Search for America* "dealing with the 26 years following the years treated in the older book" (*Letters*, 337; cf. pp. 327, 330). In the opening pages of the earlier of the two drafts, the narrator, Phil Branden, summarizes his first twenty years on the North American continent and recounts the events that followed his decision to become a school teacher in Canada. It is only in this early stage of composition, and then only once, in a letter to Lorne Pierce, the editor of Ryerson Press, that the novelist gives the tentative title of the book as "In Search of Myself" (*Letters*, 337). He does so, I suspect, only to link it with *A Search for America*, the most financially successful of his earlier works, and thereby with luck arouse Pierce's interest in publishing it. The title Grove almost always uses when referring to the autobiography in the years between its conception and subsequent publication is the "Life of a Writer in Canada," a title that accurately reflects both his initial choice of subject and the focus of the published work. Interestingly, the title that appears on the last manuscript draft, which for the most part covers only the European years, that is, from the novelist's birth until 1919, is "My Life[: ] The Life of a Writer in Canada."<sup>24</sup> At no point in the composition of *In Search of Myself* does Grove waiver in his desire to demonstrate that his "struggles [as a writer] had been such as to make defeat a foregone conclusion" (*ISM*, 6). "Canada," he contends in "The Plight of Canadian Fiction: A Reply," an article he completed shortly before writing *In Search of Myself*, "is a non-conductor for any kind of intellectual current."<sup>25</sup>

If Grove's subject in *In Search of Myself* is his career as a writer in Canada, why in the last manuscript draft and in the published work does he include an account of his European past? And why in giving that account does he not reveal his former identity as Felix Paul Greve? It is impossible to answer either of these questions conclusively. Grove could conceivably have written an apologia for his life in Canada in which he either gave no account of his years in Europe or completely revealed his German past. The basis for the inclusion of the European section is, however, laid in the initial draft of that work, for in the opening pages of that manuscript, as in the published book, it is clear that Grove's feeling of failure is inextricably bound up in his belief that he had shown considerable promise as a young man in Europe and that, given the circumstances of his birth, education, and travel, he was ideally prepared to be a "spokesman" for the "pioneers" he encountered on the North American prairie (*ISM*, 226). In recounting his life in Canada Grove apparently realized that he could not make his readers understand the enormity of his failure without first leading them to realize the promise he had shown as a young man. So he includes in *In Search of Myself* the account of his life in Europe that he had shaped over the preced-

ing decades to explain to himself and to others why he had become an author and what qualified him to write about pioneer life in western Canada.

The reason why Frederick Philip Grove did not reveal his former identity as Felix Paul Greve is perhaps implicit in what I have stated thus far. Grove undertook *In Search of Myself* not as a confession but as an apologia: his intention was not to seek the essential truth about himself, and thus achieve a greater self-knowledge, but to defend his career by demonstrating that his failure was inevitable. Grove's subject — and the focus of the published work — is thus his years as a writer in Canada, that is, the years from 1912 to the time he began writing *In Search of Myself*. He added the European section to his "Life of a Writer in Canada" in order to set his failure in what he regarded as its proper perspective. The vision he presents of Europe and of his early life there is one seen from this side of the Atlantic by a man who feels that after decades of "often titanic endeavour" (*ISM*, 4) he is a failure, who feels finally that he is "an exile from [his] youth and its promise" (*ISM*, 236). To demand that Frederick Philip Grove search his German past is to demand that he examine his life from another point of view and that he write a different book.

IN "DESIGN AND TRUTH IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY" Roy Pascal defines autobiography as "the reconstruction of the movement of a life, or part of a life"; however, he hastens to add that it necessarily "imposes a pattern on [that] life, constructs out of it a coherent story."

Autobiography means . . . discrimination and selection in face of the endless complexities of life, selection of facts, distribution of emphasis, choice of expression. Everything depends on the standpoint chosen. . . .

Pascal in fact argues that the "interplay" — he also calls it a "collusion" — between past and present, between the events of one's life and the particular standpoint from which they are reviewed and interpreted, is "not merely a condition of all autobiography, [but] its very essence." Moreover, he asserts that the "significance" of autobiography "is more the revelation of the present situation than the uncovering of the past."<sup>26</sup>

In the Prologue to *In Search of Myself* Grove outlines the circumstances that impelled him to write his autobiography and establishes the standpoint from which he proposes to reconstruct his life in this country. An accurate understanding of the standpoint he adopts is essential to a recognition of the pattern he imposes on his experiences, and of the image he creates of himself as a writer. The mood is established in the opening lines:

It was a dismal November day, with a raw wind blowing from the north-west and cold, iron-grey clouds flying low — one of those Ontario days which, on the lake-shores or in a country of rock and swamp, seem to bring visions of an ageless

time after the emergence of the earth from chaos, or a foreboding of the end of a world about to die from entropy.

It was into such a country of rock and swamp, a few miles north of Lake Erie, that my business took me that day. I was driving my old and battered car and, having come a not inconsiderable distance, I felt chilled and cheerless. At last I entered upon a straight, rutted marl road which led for miles over a clay-coloured dam thrown through a morass dotted here and there with the dead stumps of huge trees of a departed generation: swamp-oak, white ash, and pine, now blackened by carbonization. (*ISM*, 1)

Into this dreary, life-forsaken landscape the novelist drives "to fetch a girl for the Sisyphus task of a household drudge" (*ISM*, 1). The further up the road he proceeds, the more deeply rutted and impassable it becomes, until he finds his way blocked by a washout. While forlornly considering what action to take, he suddenly thinks of the events of the preceding evening and realizes that his present despondency has its source in those earlier events. "My profound feeling of misery no longer seemed to proceed from any momentary quandary," he states, "but from something I had lived through the preceding night" (*ISM*, 2). His immediate physical predicament in effect becomes a figure for what he regards as the plight of a writer in this country.

The novelist relates that a friend, "the librarian of a great city" (*ISM*, 3), who periodically drives to the Groves' isolated, ramshackle farmhouse to keep the writer supplied with "six or ten" of the best recently published books, had on the preceding evening brought him "the biography of a Frenchman still living" (*ISM*, 3) whom Grove claims was once a close personal friend. In their youth, the novelist asserts, this critically acclaimed French writer had frequently deferred to his slightly younger friend and "had prophesied . . . the most brilliant of futures" (*ISM*, 6) for him. Compared to the Frenchman — whom Spettigue has identified as André Gide — Grove considers himself a failure, and proposes to write his autobiography to explain why he has not fulfilled the promise of his youth. In the Prologue Grove makes it immediately clear, however, that the chief reason for his failure is to be found less in himself than in the fact that he "never had an audience";

for no matter what one may say, he says it to somebody; and if there is nobody to hear, it remains as though it had never been said; the tree falling in a forest where there is none to hear, produces no sound. A book arises as much in the mind of the reader as in that of the writer; and the writer's art consists above all in creating response; the effect of a book is the result of a collaboration between writer and audience. That collaboration I had failed to enforce. . . . (*ISM*, 6)

Although in this passage Grove places the onus for such "collaboration" on the writer, the Prologue as a whole suggests that there are a number of factors which in this instance absolve him of responsibility. On the one hand, he establishes early in the Prologue that in his youth he was recognized as a man of consider-

able talent destined for a brilliant career; on the other, he depicts this country as a dreary land of "rock and swamp," a wilderness inimical to the arts. Thus, whereas "in the crowded capitals of Europe" (*ISM*, 4) the French author has written works that fill "eighteen pages" of bibliography, and consequently has earned the distinction of seeing his biography published within his lifetime (*ISM*, 4), "on the lonely prairies of western Canada" the Canadian novelist has "in spite of often titanic endeavour . . . lived and worked in obscurity, giving expression at the best, to a few, a very few mirrorings of life in the raw such as it has been [his] lot to witness" (*ISM*, 4). Grove proposes to explain why in spite of acknowledged talent and in spite of prodigious effort his failure was inevitable; and thus he sets out to dramatize the plight of a writer in Canada.

As Pascal's comments on autobiography suggest, the stance Grove adopts at the outset of *In Search of Myself* shapes the account he gives of his life. Grove's own title for the autobiography, "Life of a Writer in Canada," is a more apt description of the work than the title of the published book because all the elements of *In Search of Myself*, including Grove's account of his European past, are organized as a revelation of his present situation. In the Introduction to the NCL edition of *In Search of Myself* Douglas Spettigue suggests that Grove's book follows

a pattern in Canadian autobiographical writing whereby the author as an immigrant or of an immigrant family exalts his European past into a sort of Golden Age of culture and affluence. Mrs. Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* is one clear example; *In Search of Myself* is another. According to this pattern, the artist comes to Canada as to a land of promise, but the promise is not realized, or not in the way he had expected. Instead he suffers isolation, humiliation, poverty, and neglect until he emerges from this ritual descent to a sober realization of the nature of Canadian life and his relation to it. (*ISM*, xi)

What Spettigue's comments suggest is that Grove shapes his European past in terms of his present understanding of himself; indeed, Spettigue himself argues that the "literary intent" of the European section of *In Search of Myself* and of "the first section of Part III" is ". . . to build up a sense of early promise to emphasize the fall."<sup>27</sup> Certainly Grove characterizes his life in Europe as a period of great wealth, culture, and travel to contrast those years with the time spent in poverty and neglect "on the lonely prairies of western Canada" (*ISM*, 4) and on his small farm outside Simcoe, just as in the Prologue he recasts his relationship with the "young Frenchman," exaggerating the promise of his youth, to heighten the pathos of his own subsequent failure. Similarly, the novelist shapes the account of his life in Europe and of his years as an itinerant farm labourer to demonstrate, on the one hand, that he was a "cosmopolitan," and on the other, that he "had fitted [him]self to be the spokesman of a race" (*ISM*, 226), facts that serve both to heighten the injustice of his failure and to place the

responsibility for it on shoulders other than his own. Concerning Grove's background B. K. Sandwell wrote in 1945:

Of the first forty years of his life, one half had been devoted to the acquisition of a very rich and wide-ranging education in various European universities, and to extensive travel in many parts of the world; the other half had been lived in the closest contact with the soil and with the life of the great generality of North American people. There could hardly have been a better preparation for a literary career of the most important kind.<sup>28</sup>

Because of his "unique" (*ISM*, 226) background Grove begins to feel at a very early stage in his Canadian career that it is his task to record "the age-old conflict between human desire and the stubborn resistance of nature," the conflict that underlies the autobiography itself. "Perhaps, very likely even," he states, "I was foredoomed to failure in my endeavour; in fact, I seemed to see even then that I was bound to fail but the attempt had to be made" (*ISM*, 227).

To recognize that Grove organizes *In Search of Myself* to explain his failure is to acknowledge the limitations of that autobiography — and of autobiographies generally — as an historically accurate account of the autobiographer's life. "Every historian," Pascal remarks, "knows how critically he must use autobiographies, not only because of conscious polemical intentions in the autobiographer, but also because of the unconscious polemics of memory."<sup>29</sup> Certainly it would be misleading to assume that while the European section of the autobiography is largely fictional, the Canadian section is for the most part historically accurate. Although the Canadian section may be, relatively speaking, more historically accurate than the European, the novelist shapes all the events recounted in the autobiography to justify his failure. And just as he recreates his European past as a time of great wealth, culture, travel, and promise, so he reconstructs his years in Canada to emphasize the poverty, isolation, humiliation, and neglect he suffered.

In *Frederick Philip Grove* Spettigue notes how Grove organizes events in *In Search of Myself* to indicate that "a malevolent destiny or touch-of-death [is] upon everything associated with him." Concerning the "Russian manor-house" in which he was allegedly born, Grove states: "Incredibly, within an hour or so of the event, the hospitable house . . . was struck by lightning and burned to the ground" (*ISM*, 15). As Spettigue notes, this is the first of many similar events in the autobiography:

As a second example of the malevolence of fate, he records that a French Catholic priest in North Dakota persuaded him to go to Winnipeg to take up teaching — the priest was subsequently killed in a train accident (*ISM*, 240). Similarly, when the Groves drove East in 1929 their car coasted into Port Hope and stopped there, out of gas, in front of a branch of the Royal Bank. Completely without funds, Grove was granted credit by the manager, who had heard one of Grove's Canadian Club speeches. The manager, 'suddenly' died, 'two days later' from 'causes

unknown' (*ISM*, 404). As a matter of record, it was the previous manager who had died, of pneumonia, two weeks before Grove's visit, but Grove appropriated that death for his purpose.<sup>30</sup>

Did Grove consciously "appropriate that death for his purpose" or in the decade that had passed, had he unwittingly reshaped that event in his mind? Whatever the answer, throughout the Canadian section of the autobiography Grove can be seen similarly reshaping events.

Thus, in *In Search of Myself* the novelist asserts that in 1917, as a third-year, extramural student at the University of Manitoba, he was awarded two \$150 scholarships, one in French and the other in German; but that because "payment of the amounts [was] conditional upon attendance at the university, [he] forfeited both to the next-in-line" (*ISM*, 295). Circumstances apparently conspired against the novelist. "It has been my fate throughout life," Grove reflects, "in all material things. It was always the next-in-line who got the prizes" (*ISM*, 295). However, as Margaret Stobie points out, the University of Manitoba's records indicate that Grove was in fact given the money for the French award, but that the money for the German scholarship was given to the runner-up, "a practice," she notes, that is "still commonly followed in many universities to divide up scholarship funds." If, as Margaret Stobie suggests, "Grove's memory deceived him" when he gave his account of the scholarships in *In Search of Myself*, that deception was part of the process by which he reshaped the events of his life to justify his failure as a writer.<sup>31</sup>

In 1962 Mrs. Grove objected to the emphasis critics placed on the poverty she and her husband endured, and observed that it occupied only a "short period" in their lives.<sup>32</sup> But it is precisely the poverty and neglect upon which Frederick Philip Grove himself dwells in *In Search of Myself* and out of which he creates the image of himself as a writer. It is the image of Grove writing *A Search for America* "with lined gloves on stiffening fingers" (*ISM*, 193), and years later, when confronted by the *Saturday Evening Post's* request for a typescript of that work, being forced to type each word of his most recent draft over three times because his typewriter ribbon had worn thin and he could not afford to buy a new one (*ISM*, 360). In 1948 Northrop Frye described Grove's life as "a pitiful record of frustration and heartbreak, combined with a dogged insistence on writing as he felt without compromise. He is apparently our only example of an artist's fight for survival in an indifferent society."<sup>33</sup> Certainly that is the image the novelist creates in *In Search of Myself*. In reaction to that image critics have more recently asserted that "in spite of his complaints against lack of recognition in Canada, [Frederick Philip Grove was] one of the most honoured Canadian novelists of his generation" (*Letters*, xvi). In fairness to the novelist, however, it should be noted that the Governor-General's Medal, the honorary degrees, and other marks of recognition usually cited in support of this statement were given

to him in the years after the autobiography was completed.<sup>34</sup> When he wrote *In Search of Myself* Grove was looking back over the decade of the thirties, and particularly over the years from 1933 to 1939, during which despite all his efforts he was unable to secure the publication of a single book. What he could no longer forget was the poverty and the neglect; what he could no longer evade was his own profound feeling of failure.

IN HIS STUDY OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY Roy Pascal points out that an author's autobiography is "not simply a statement of what a man was and is"; it is also, he notes, "in some sort a polemical statement, another contribution to his life's work, not a resumé of it. It is an active contribution, not a closing of accounts."<sup>35</sup> Spettigue's discovery of Grove's German past necessitates the recognition that *In Search of Myself* is not only the novelist's self-portrait, but "in some sort a polemical argument," another of Grove's attempts to win an audience for his work; it is another "Apologia pro vita et opere suo," a defence of his literary aspirations occasioned in this instance not by the attacks of critics, but by his own profound feeling of failure. In the Prologue to *In Search of Myself* the novelist makes it clear that his autobiographical impulse originates in and is guided by an overwhelming need to defend his career as a writer, to explain that his failure was really a "foregone conclusion." He offers that explanation in the hope that it "might more than compensate for the failure to have made [him]self heard so far" (*ISM*, 11). There is no resignation, no closing of accounts.

Throughout his life in this country Grove was haunted by the spectre of failure and of "a coming senescence" (*ISM*, 457). When he arrived in Canada to begin life anew he was thirty. By the time he returned to writing and published his first book in Canada he was forty-three. He felt and claimed to be much older than he was. He believed that time was running out on him, and was impatient of success. Above all things he feared failure and the decline of his mental and emotional faculties. But if he feared these things he also found his inspiration in them. He saw the spectre of failure and decay in the boarded-up White Range Line House, and the experience inspired him to write *Settlers in the Marsh*; he saw that spectre, too, in the palatial but decayed Rugby farm, and fashioned *Fruits of the Earth*. Out of his fascination with and fear of "a coming senescence" he created characters like Whiskers in *A Search for America*, Sigurdson in *Settlers of the Marsh*, Percy and Ada Weatherhead in "The Weatherhead Fortunes," Martha and John Elliott Senior in *Our Daily Bread*, Blaine in *Fruits of the Earth*, Sam Clark in *The Master of Mill*, and of course, the senile old man in the Prologue to *In Search of Myself*.

Grove's portrayal of the senile old man is particularly striking. "There ye can

still see the hole where they pulled him out, with two towing trucks," the old man remarks concerning the "smart-aleck salesman from Tilsonberg" whose speeding car struck the washout and careened off the road.

'Him, I say, but I mean his car.' And once more he focused his mind's eye in that absent way of his; and then he burst out laughing in his sterile, cackling hilarity. 'Do you know what he did?' He took his elbow out of the window of the car and raised one foot to the running-board. Then, as if to smooth out a kink in his spine, he pressed his left hand into his side, just below the ribs. And once more, under that dismal sky, he surrendered himself body and soul to the impulse of his overpowering merriment, slapping his raised knee with his right hand between guffaws. It was an incomprehensible, obscene, drenching torrent of mirth before which one could only stand gasping. 'Yeah,' he ejaculated at last between his bursts of gaiety, 'the blasted fool broke . . . broke his . . . broke his neck!' And six, seven slaps of his open palm resounded in succession on his knee while his head, swinging from side to side as if severed on its pedicel, hinted at the entire inadequacy of mere laughter to express to the full just how funny this trifling mishap had been. . . . (*ISM*, 10)

What Phil Branden, the narrator of *A Search for America*, states concerning Whiskers is really true of all these characters: "He was the walking Death-in-Life; he stood for the end of all things mortal, for ambitions foiled or misguided; for that disappointment which is the more heart-breaking when it is unconscious. He stood for Old Age looking back on Youth; for failure incarnate, such as in the essentials awaits us all, no matter what our apparent success may be."<sup>36</sup>

The spectre of failure and decay haunts Grove's writing because it haunted his life, and in his autobiography he wrestles with it once again. He uses the form of the autobiography and the events of his own life to demonstrate the truth of the belief — widely held at the time — that a great literature had not developed in Canada because, as E. K. Brown was to argue in 1943, economically the situation of our literature is, and has been, "unsound"; politically we exhibit a "colonial spirit" and show little interest in things Canadian; and culturally we cling to frontier values, admiring "the man who can run a factory, or invent a gadget or save a life by surgical genius," but questioning the value of "the aesthetic or contemplative life."<sup>37</sup> Given these conditions, Grove argues, his own failure was inevitable. To recognize that Grove writes *In Search of Myself* to justify his failure is to acknowledge its limitations as an historically accurate account of the writer's life, but it is not to lessen the value of the autobiography as the novelist's vision of his years in the country.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Desmond Pacey, *Frederick Philip Grove* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1945), p. 10.
- <sup>2</sup> In a review of *FPG: The European Years* entitled "A Mask for All Occasions: The Identity of FPG," *ECW*, 1 (Winter 1974), 50-53, Michael E. Darling speaks of the "growing portrait of FPG as a congenital liar." In *FPG: The European*



- Years* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1973) Spettigue himself describes Grove as a "congenital" liar: "As we have seen from the Gide-Grove interviews," Spettigue states, "FPG is a self-confessed liar. As we have also seen, the lying probably was at least as much deliberate as congenital" (p. 214).
- <sup>3</sup> As recently as 1979 Grove's autobiographical account of the origin of *Fruits of the Earth* was quoted in an explication of that novel. See D. J. Dooley, *Moral Vision in the Canadian Novel* (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1979), p. 14. Dooley does not acknowledge that Grove dates the incident in 1893, when Greve was a school-boy in Hamburg.
  - <sup>4</sup> Darling, p. 53.
  - <sup>5</sup> Review of *FPG: The European Years*, *Queen's Quarterly*, 81 (1974), 125.
  - <sup>6</sup> Darling, p. 53.
  - <sup>7</sup> "Conversation avec un Allemand quelques années avant la guerre," *N[ouvelle] R[evue] F[ranaise]*, August 1919; rpt. in a revised form in *Incidences* (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1924), p. 137.
  - <sup>8</sup> Miriam Waddington, a review of *The Master Mason's House*, *Humanities Association Review*, 28 (1977), 297-98.
  - <sup>9</sup> Review of Margaret Stobie's *Frederick Philip Grove* in *Canadian Literature*, No. 60 (Spring 1974), p. 107.
  - <sup>10</sup> "A Last Testament," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 17/18 (1976), 307.
  - <sup>11</sup> Ronald Sutherland, "What was Frederick Philip Grove?" *Inscape* (Grove Symposium issue), 11 (Spring 1974), 8.
  - <sup>12</sup> Armin Arnold, a review of *FPG: The European Years*, *ESC* (1975), p. 244.
  - <sup>13</sup> (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), p. 49.
  - <sup>14</sup> *André Gide and the Art of Autobiography: A Study of Si le grain ne meurt* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 59, 67, 68. The italics are mine.
  - <sup>15</sup> *Frederick Philip Grove* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969), p. 23; *FPG: The European Years*, p. 23.
  - <sup>16</sup> *In Search of Myself* (1946; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), p. ix.
  - <sup>17</sup> *FPG: The European Years*, p. 214.
  - <sup>18</sup> Lucas, p. 307. The italics are mine.
  - <sup>19</sup> *FPG: The European Years*, pp. 214-15.
  - <sup>20</sup> *The Canadian Forum*, 11 (1931), 422.
  - <sup>21</sup> *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (Since 1866)* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1934), p. 705. Quoted by Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 193.
  - <sup>22</sup> "Thoughts and Reflections," pp. 51-52. The journal is in the Grove Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, University of Manitoba Libraries, University of Manitoba, Box 22, folder 2.
  - <sup>23</sup> *The Letters of Frederick Philip Grove*, ed. Desmond Pacey (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), p. 333.
  - <sup>24</sup> That manuscript is in the possession of the novelist's son, A. L. Grove, who kindly permitted me to examine it.
  - <sup>25</sup> *UTQ*, 7 (1938), 460.
  - <sup>26</sup> Pascal, pp. 10, 11, 12.
  - <sup>27</sup> *FPG: The European Years*, p. 20.
  - <sup>28</sup> "Frederick Philip Grove and the Culture of Canada," *Saturday Night*, 61 (No-

- vember 24, 1945), p. 18; rpt. *Frederick Philip Grove*, ed. Desmond Pacey (Toronto: Ryerson, 1970), p. 56.
- <sup>29</sup> Pascal, p. 19.
- <sup>30</sup> *Frederick Philip Grove*, p. 7.
- <sup>31</sup> *Frederick Philip Grove* (New York: Twayne, 1973), p. 46.
- <sup>32</sup> Transcript of the CBC "Wednesday Night" radio programme, "The Search for Frederick Philip Grove," Grove Collection, Box 23, folder 6, p. 21.
- <sup>33</sup> "Canadian Dreiser," *The Canadian Forum*, 28 (September 1948), 121-22.
- <sup>34</sup> Grove completed the autobiography in 1940. In 1941 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada; in 1946 he was awarded an honorary D.Litt. by the University of Manitoba, and an honorary LL.D. by Mount Allison University; in 1947 he received the Governor-General's Medal (Non-Fiction) for *In Search of Myself*.
- <sup>35</sup> Pascal, p. 19.
- <sup>36</sup> *A Search for America* (1927; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971), p. 59.
- <sup>37</sup> *On Canadian Poetry* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1943), pp. 6, 13, 19-20.

## WE ARE A CONVERSATION

*E. F. Dyck*

I say *whales* and they sound, under the city.  
 You say *trees* — ah, dear binaries —  
 and we argue *time*, its ecstasy, its arrow  
 rooted in — no — its history, our consequences.  
 We trade in stories:  
*This is the lay of man*, I sing  
*This is the song of branches*,  
 and you trace your verb to this phrase  
 now by my side and the night.

You laugh with me — my story is  
 that I bought a pregnant heifer  
 and having never owned a living  
 thing I am excited — the end again  
 eludes me, I grow desperate, push  
 it to calving, heifer to milk cow —  
 I sell the beast.

We remember a small boy, a bull calf quivering  
 the red verb blade, its twitch and two testicles  
 in his palm, nouns, and the waiting dog;  
 remember a little girl with her secret words  
 father, brother, lover — all verbs  
 searching for nouns, flight and bump.