We’re Canadian, eh?

—musings on the phatic and the unsaid in Canada

> One wonders if any other national consciousness has had so large an amount of the unknown, the unrealized, the humanly undigested, so built into it.
>
> —Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden*

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It’s May. 1963. I have returned from my first year at university. Or second, I'm not sure which. It could be 1964. But I know I am wearing my new sweatshirt. It’s blue, light blue, and on it are the words, in white letters curved round a coat of arms:

We are standing on the porch, well not porch exactly, the back step really. My uncle Walter, my dad, and I. This is before they have left the farm, the Allisons. We’ve been off the farm for 5 years now, but this spring we are at the Allisons, north of town. It’s May, 1964, I think. We’ve helped them with the milking, my dad and I, and now we are standing on the back step. We are looking out over the low sweep of land, where on the other side of the highway the water stands in the spring. A coulee I guess you could call it, but we didn’t, we called them ravines. We can smell the wet earth, the slough, in early spring, early evening. And you have to understand that in a land of long winter, interminable some would say,[1] spring comes as sharp and unspeakable release to us. The smells are fresh and strong now

[1] In *Wild Geese* Martha Ostenso has captured something of what it is, for spring to return, when she

that it is evening. We don’t say anything, we stand together and look over the evening. Hands in our back pockets, we rock a bit on our heels.

> my uncle
>
> who stood with us
>
> (my dad and 1)
>
> rocking back on our heels
>
> hands in hip pockets
>
> on the back step of
>
> his yellow one-storey farmhouse
>
> as the heavy cars spun by
>
> on the road south to Estevan
>
> at first whining like mosquitoes
>
> then swaying and grinding
>
> where the coarse gravel
>
> had built up at the sharp turn
>
> in the correction line
>
> and we swelled silent
>
> that spring breathing
>
> the thick wet
>
> nightsmells rushing
>
> from the slough (*Leaving* 19)

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describes the flight of geese in spring and fall in lyrical and mythic terms.

Now and then we nod, slightly. Not to one another exactly, more to the evening than anything, though we are nodding to one another too, we know that. Silence. Minutes of silence. We say nothing. After a few minutes or so my uncle says 'aah-**yuhh**,' my uncle, my lanky uncle, who is so strong he can turn a 100-pound anvil by the point with one hand, and then after awhile I myself say 'yu-uhhh.' My dad doesn't say anything. He is a quiet man, shy and private actually.

I realize that as I tell you this, now, we must sound foolish. Brain-dead perhaps.

But it was a moment we understood. We said as much as we needed to say, we said what we wanted to say. We were affirming—the spring breeze, the wet smells of earth, the frogs that talked to themselves, not shrill the way they would be sometimes, screaming so loud they'd wake you at night, the moon full and so bright you could see everything. Just the three of us standing there, together, there on the back step of May as evening came in. Confirming you might say.

Phatic, I later learned. Many years later I read Roman Jakobson. I had turned into an English professor, avoiding fulfilling, I thought, my mother's worst fears. No, not that she feared I wouldn't become an English professor. She was more afraid I might become one. She had said, tearfully, she hoped I wouldn't turn into one of those snobbish professors. Well, we weren't snobbish then, we were phatic. That's what we were, what we were doing—we were phatic as all get out, the three of us.[2] Emphatically so, you might say. We practically threw ourselves into our silence.

We were in our laconic way being Canadian, my dad, my uncle, and I.

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[2] I find the following passage in *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 3rd. ed., its examples startlingly like my own:

> *Phatic* derives from Greek *phasis*, 'utterance'. A term in linguistics which derives from the phrase 'phatic communion' invented by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942). It was applied to language used for establishing an atmosphere and the communica-tion of feelings rather than of ideas, and of logical and rational thoughts. Phatic words and phrases have been called 'idiot salutations'; and, when they generate to a form of dialogue, 'two-stroke conversations'. Exchanges about the state of the weather and a person's health fall into this category. It seems that the term may also be applied to the kind of noises that a mother makes to her baby, a lover to his mistress and a master to his dog. (705)

It is June 4, 1998, 35 years later, and CBC (the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) is talking about collective nouns. *As It Happens*—the programme is called *As It Happens*, a national daily radio show those of us who tune in to CBC can hear every weekday evening. *As It Happens* is interviewing an American who has studied collective nouns and who in the progress of his research had found himself exploring the explosion of language out of the British Renaissance, when many of the madly inventive collective nouns in English were created. What, for instance? He rattles off a long list of examples, you could look them up. There are so many my wife is still dizzy with them, trying to remember.

"Dozens," she says. "He spoke so fast it's hard to remember them all." Well, what can you remember? "A rascal of boys," "a skulk of foxes," "a murder of crows." I myself missed this part because, though my wife had urged me to listen, I was preoccupied in an authentic Canadian way with the Stanley Cup playoffs on television. I was a middle-aged professor in Winnipeg, in the geographical centre of Canada, which a few years ago had lost its NHL team, the Jets, watching two American-based teams trying to make it into the finals against one of two other American-based franchises.

And since then? Since the Renaissance? Oh, people have suggested many things to him, the scholar: a rash of dermatologists . . . that sort of thing.

What is the collective word for a group of swans? the host, Anne Medina, asks the listeners. And who can resist, the poetry, the correspondence in the names—the median at which we listened, there in the middle of Canada, not to mention the media we find in the very name Medina? She was a medium. "A signet," one woman calls in confidently. "A raft, a raft of swans," says another. Another thinks it is "a float." One suggests "a dignity, it would have to be a dignity."

Medina calls on the scholar. What about a bunch of Canadians? No, nothing for Canadians, he says. He has a lot of terms, hundreds and hundreds of them, but nothing for Canadians. Medina turns back to her listeners. What do you think? What would we call a group of Canadians?

Not a simple matter in a country almost as divided as Spain, a country more uncertain than most about what it is to be itself, what it is it does when it is at home. When it comes down to uncertainty we Canadians know where we're at, we feel we're on firm ground. Equivocation? You can count on that, I guess. Tentative? Sure. Comes to that we'd do well, we're pretty sure of ourselves, we know where we stand.

There is the perennial Canadian question: who are we? (You may know the formulation of Northrop Frye, long Canada's most distinguished literary thinker. The essential Canadian question, he says, is not 'Who am I?' but 'Where is here?') Medina offers one option: "an apology of Canadians." Phone in and let us know, tell us what we would be.

Hers was not such an odd call when you realize that Canadian literature is obsessed with names and naming. In an old and primal act of poetry we enumerate, and so (maybe) make present. We call long lists of names, roll-calls you might think, we call into being, make known, invent, celebrate, rememeber, honour in a peculiar way in blizzards of names. We commemorate in naming, seek in the act something commensurate to our lives. Naming evidently matters in oral cultures and, I'm supposing, it matters in emerging or endangered cultures too. In a crucial way there is in those situations a naming into existence, or attention, a preserving against anonymity and the insignificance that lack of recognition involves. Or the oblivion it ensures.

But that's another story. I was talking about the radio programme to which the callers were asked to contribute.

And so they did. They rose with Canadian fervour to the occasion. Dozens called in—Canadians obsessed with who they might be, thrown into the heady business of self-invention. We heard some of the responses the next day. "A diffidence of Canadians." A few callers, given to rhyme, came up with "a confederation of Canadians" and "a concern of Canadians." How about "a compromise of Canadians"? We got that one too. I never made an actual list at the time, listening here and there on the car radio, and so the words I add may not be entirely accurate, but they do reflect the kinds of definitions we heard. A

consultation. A deference. A patience of Canadians. A fairness of Canadians. A politeness. Quite a few thought we were polite. A concern of Canucks. Or quietness: we who do not shout (as a rule). (I make an enormous exemption for the pugnacious Don Cherry of Hockey Night in Canada fame.) There were still more suggestions. A discretion of Canadians: we who allow others space, perhaps even positions. A modesty of Canadians. If there is one thing on which we Canadians pride ourselves it's our modesty; we'd put themselves up against anyone when it comes to humility. Comes to caution, we're on firm ground there too. You can count on us, we don't know when to stop. Question our irresolution and you're in for a rude surprise.

An American caller proposed two terms, the first along lines the Canadians had submitted. The second, intensifying Medina's own proposal from the previous day ("an apology of Canadians"), offered a less congratulatory reading: "a cringe of Canadians." In that less flattering view Canadians figured as inept and uncertain bunglers. The inventions were quite wonderful, and I wish I had a fuller list for you, but overwhelmingly the Canadians constructed themselves as a people who were prone to understatement, who were unflinchingly self-effacing, unfailingly law-abiding, deferential to a fault, reluctant to raise their voices, and given to apology and negotiation. We were in the overwhelming view of those who called in to CBC (the audience itself may not be an typical sampling of the nation) a peaceful people quietly willing to work things out. Margaret Atwood says that that position "is not to be sneezed at: Canada, having somehow become an expert at compromise, was the mediator [between Britain and the U.S.]" (*Second Words* 378) and that "there's a little truth to be squeezed from this lemon" (379).

Spaniards, shaken by the cod wars with piratical Canadians, might find this hard to believe, but we think of ourselves as a people who would rather talk than fight, who would do almost anything to avoid a confrontation or create a scene (hockey players exempted, always hockey). But—and this but is interesting in its dramatic turn—we are a people who when provoked are somehing to be reckoned with. Or so we tell ourselves. You have only to see the power for Canadians in stories about their involvement

in the last two World Wars—the ambivalence in the pride and the sorrow they feel. I write a late version of this paper listening to Remembrance Day narratives on the radio, stricken to the quick, as every year I am, hearing these accounts.

(they were not going home would hear no snow will not speak under their breath or in a globe loose snow falls through will not sing Christmas in the backs of planes they are home there is snow will never write on a page wide as the world that falls silently on them snow falls gently thickly where they lie in their unsaying forever & ever & ever they are not resting or sleeping or growing under no one will find them there at the going down or the rising of the sun)

And I confess to you that even as a feel an acute sense of loss, and grieving, I am moved, too, by an overwhelming and irrational pride.

David Stouck, in "Notes on the Canadian Imagination," thinking evidently of the reticence which grips the throats of Canadians, identifies the litote as recurrent Canadian trope. Not bad, eh? we say. In self-deprecation, self-irony. More modesty? Lack of confidence? Stouk (though few these days would agree with his meterological terms) explains the capacity for understatement as symptom of inhabiting a polar climate: "In a country where physical survival has been the foremost reality, men of necessity have controlled rather than expanded their emotions and the highly dramatic has always struck a false note in Canadian art" (12-3).[3] Evidntly we are a nation of nordic stoicism.

[3] Desmond Pacey earlier had made a similar argument about the Canadian psyche, assigning its features to the experience of place: it seems to me that the dominant image which emerges from reading Canadian literature in English is of modestly heroic individulas who manage to endure in a society which is ambivalent almost to the point of confusion and in a climate and landscape which alternately threatens and cajoles" (*Selections from Major Canadian Writers,* xviii). Environmental arguments such as Stouck's and Pacey's once were popular, though they are now

Of course one can think of less positive terms, along lines which the American caller proposed, a vocabulary some would find more tempting: "an evasion of Canadians," "a cowardice of Canadians," "a lethargy," "a jelly of Canadians." "A surrender." "An abjection of Canucks."

In due course a ruling came down. On July 1, Canada Day, national holiday in a country that is reticent to declare its patriotism, or is at least tepid in its enthusiasm for such outbursts, day to commemorate the nation from sea to shining sea, the CBC assembled a blue-ribbon panel to decide on what was the most satisfactory collective noun.

A drift of Canadians. That's what they decided on. Neither deft nor daft, but adrift, afloat, afoot in a draft. We're a drift of Canadians, unfocused and undirected, and hardly prone therefore, one might assume at least, to dastardly acts of bullying or discourtesy.

3.

Who can say if the more favourable perceptions reflect anything more than a widely-held wish, or a wish of the small but faithful group of listeners to CBC, to perceive their nation, or themselves as citizens, in a way that borders on the maudlin—and this in the face of a rabid corporatism that threatens to end the very notion of the nation state and the public good? To what extent the diagnoses derive from delusion or vanity is hardly for a Canadian such as myself to say, though I am in my limited experience struck by a directness in Spain which Canadians ordinarily allow themselves only on occasions of international hockey triumphs, little avenues of pleasure which have been increasingly closed to us, rare almost as the cod over which we, we being you and us, collectively, and in unseemly ways, once wrangled.

spain: madrid

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eclipsed by appeals to cultural construction, sometimes in overt rejection of environmentalism. Eli Mandel for example has been particularly insistent on this point.

July 9 1200 noon [1990]

One of the professors at Gijon, Isabel Garcia Martinez, a colleague of our Isabel, Isabel Carrera Suarez, when i said how phatic Canadians are, how often we turn statements into questions, seek consensus, right?, says we're not deferential or lacking confidence, we Spanish, we are forthright & we act.

Certainly in support of the CBC listeners' claims we have the well-known examples that are so often cited: the participation of Canadians in international peace-keeping operations through the United Nations (until recently: I amend this essay several years later, in 2008), a strategy largely initiated by the Canadian government under the leadership of Lester B. Pearson, winner of the Nobel prize for peace. Though there it is again, that paradox: we remember, **I** remember, Canadians remember—those accounts of two world wars, in which Canadian participation figures in stirring narratives of courage and daring and anguish. Canada, the peace-keeper, was forged as a nation, many tell us, in the bloody and violent trenches of World War I—the barbwire of Ypres, the muddy lines at Vimy—and later on the violent beaches at Dieppe. Dieppe—a name in my childhood that meant the cenotaph in my home town, Estevan, is filled with names. And I knew of kids killed on the stony beach (not Dieppe actually, but Pourville, but we all say Dieppe), kids from Estevan, dying quick and violent deaths on the gravel shores of France. We were the shock troops in the allied trenches. We were those who stormed ashore in forlorn and impossible raids. That's what we tell ourselves. It was a fight we didn't pick, eh, but by god when we got there we were to be reckoned with. That's what we tell ourselves. WW I, Canadians tell themselves, was a time of nation-making, its staggering events, when Canadian soldiers acquitted themselves so well, that Canada really found itself as a nation. Ours is an ostensibly peaceful nation which has profoundly defined itself in warfare.[4]

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[4] In an internet call for papers on the Canadian director, David Cronenberg, a correspondent, Jean-Paul Gabilliet, proposed (on Nov 15, 1999) that "Canada is arguably a breeding ground for

We lead our lives of quiet fortitude. And we grieve the terrible losses. (Is that what we do in rehearsing these stories: find occasion to remember the losses? Would this, then, be more in keeping with the kind of Canadian I have been describing?)

But it's true, we have often acted in common purpose, sought a common good. We did, that is, once upon a time. Some of us. It's increasingly hard in these days of Free Trade and NAFTA (North America Free Trade Treaty), market-based governments, and corporate hegemony to find these signs. It grows increasingly difficult to sustain cultural distinction anywhere in the world against the pressures of international, and especially American, corporate capitalism, including the virtual permeation of its electronic culture into the crevices and corners of the globe.

We have had, certainly, a recurring emphasis historically in Canada on transportation and communication.[5] Take the CBC itself: it was formed by an act of Parliament, by a conservative government at that. Then there is the Trans-Canada railway (the CNR) & the Trans-Canada Highway (now Highway #1), by any measures grand acts of linkage, coast to coast. And then there is Gordon Lightfoot, as close to a national troubadour as we've had in recent times, singing his "Canadian Railroad Trilogy," and Stan Rogers, singing about explorers:

Ah, for just one time, I would take the Northwest passage,

To find the hand of Franklin reaching for the Beaufort Sea,

Tracing one warm line through a land so wide and savage,

And make a Northwest passage to the sea. ("Northwest Passge")[6]

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forms of 'the extreme'" in "a visual and mental landscape seemingly so much at odds with the traditional image of the country as a plance of consensus and 'quiet'."

[5] In *The Bush Garden* Northrop Frye has written this: "In Canada the enormous difficulties and the central imortance of communication and transport, the tremendoous energy that developed the fur trade routes, empire of the St. Lawrence, the transcontinental railways, and the northwest police patrols have given it the dominating role in the Canadian imagination" (168-9)

[6] Here is the URL to the Stan Rogers website where there is a lot of information on him: http://www.stanrogers.net/

And the hours on the telephone.

Consider: Canadians spend more time than anybody on the telephone. Or once did, so I have heard, and so find that I am unable to press this claim past hearsay. (Again, the recent changes in telephone services and the enormous impact of the internet may well have altered things.) God how we love to talk—on the bus, in the pubs, with barbers and hairdressers, on television, at bonspiels, over coffee in the kitchen. In our quiet way we talk. You may not have noticed: sometimes we talk so quietly you might not notice. Consider: the reputed inventor of the telephone was a Canadian by the name of Alexander Graham Bell. (This too, Bell's supposed Canadian status, is subject to uncertainty: some with excessive concern for accuracy, try to retain old ties and origins, might say he is Scottish. Or American, simply because.) And that's not counting his long obsession with the deaf and his difficulties with signing codes. The Bell telephone. It doesn't figure, but it rings true in a way—all these silent people talking their heads off. Keeping in touch as we say. Phatically. It rings a bell.

Nicole Markotic has written a whole novel about him, Bell. And in *Connect the Dots* (how's that for a title? how's that for a Canadian title?)[7] she writes of a young girl's musings about telephone wires passing over her home: "we believe, through the thick wiring, through our heavy soaking mitts, that we can feel the pulse of sound, voice rhythms, vibrations that join our house, our talking, to the dialogue going on above our heads" (13). She writes too, in dismay, about Bell's views on signing systems for the deaf and dumb.

Let's take for a moment the example of the Canadian railways. In the early days of Confederation the government of Sir John A. Macdonald, seeking to consolidate and to extend the

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[7] In another inspired title the poet Sharon Thesen has called her book, *The Beginning of the Long Dash*, after a phrase once common to listeners of CBC radio, the announcing of the precise time from the Dominion Time observatory. The official signal consisted of a distinct sound coming after a series of bleeps, and for years it was announed as coming at the end of the long dash.

fragile young dominion of Canada (first composed as a coalition of the two Maritime jurisdictions, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, plus the larger Upper Canada and Lower Canada), courted on the far West Coast a part of the continent we now call British Columbia. The government sought, too, to lay claim to the vast regions to its own west and to the east of British Columbia, the area we now call the Prairies. A major part of its strategy was to lay down a railroad from coast to coast, cutting latitudinally across the continent and countering the north-south pull of geography and the force of American expansion from the south. The story of that effort several decades later attracted the attentions of E.J. Pratt, for years the most renowned poet in Canada. In *Towards the Last Spike* he develops Macdonald’s policies to link and to unite what would becme an expanded and stronger Canada as acts of visionary art, a steel syntax (to steal a metaphor from F.R. Scott) that woud write the nation into fuller being, against the very cosmos itself, the stars themselves aligned against the enterprise. Out of that Pratt seeks to write a national myth.

Then there is the CRTC (the Canadian Radio and Television Commission), meant to oversee communications and media in ways that would enhance the identity of Canada, though its activities have been altered and its powers radically eroded in this day of satellites that can so easily cross all national borders. Since then we have had the Canada Council, a national and public agency designed to support the creation and flourishing of arts in Canada. The government as patron who invites us to talk with one another. Further, Canada has been the site of two of the most renowned (and perhaps reviled) theorists of media in the twentieth century—Harold Innis[8] and Marshall McLuhan. It has also been, more regally

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[8] I am struck by a passage from James W. Carey's *Communication as Culture*, in which he pays tribute to Harold Innis in these astute words:

> Innis' work, despite its maddeningly obscure, opaque and ellipitical characer, is the great achievement in communications on this continent. . . . Innis demonstrated a natural depth, excess, and complexity, a sense of paradox and reversal that provides permanent riddles rather than easy formulas. His texts continue to yield because they combine, along with studied obscurity, a gift for pungent aphorisn, unexpected juxtapostion, and sudden illumination. (142)

How amazingly is he like Robert Kroetsch, guru of prairie postmodernism, and devotee of the phatic in all he says to friends. "Is <u>that</u> right?" he says, again and again—in wonder and in affirmation, “Is that <u>right</u>?,” as if he and they, all of them, arrive at things together, share in laconic ways an understanding. We speak, Kroetsch says, we speak to one another in our own

perhaps, home for Northrop Frye's essentially social vision[9] within which he has worked out his fondness for comic and utopian narratives.

4.

D.G. Jones, strongly influenced by Frye, has written in his critical book on Canadian literature, *Butterfly on Rock*, of "the inarticulate presence of a dream that resides in the silence of the snow-covered land" (27). Jones loctes the symbolic, and the unrealized, Canadian in "the inarticulate ground of our experience" (32). The Canadian is a "drowned Adam" or a "sleeping shepherd" who lies dreaming under the snow where s/he is buried (49) and where, "though invisible or lost" there, "the authentic breath of the spirit . . . continues to exist" (66). Jones' ruminations find poetic expression in F.R. Scott's metalingual texts which configure the Canadian landscape, especially the Precambrian landscape, as a surface through which language might be read, discerned, and brought into fuller expression. I cite Scott here because, though he himself was erudite and eloquent, the language of which he conceives in his poems of Canada is largely mute, undeveloped, and contained, whatever release or completion he may project for it. Here, for instance, in "Old Song," he constructs the St. Lawrence river as organ of speech, a throat, on the verge of voice,[10] Orphic perhaps:

> far voices
>
> and fretting leaves
>
> this music the

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way.

[10] Margaret Atwood, in "Northrop Frye Observed," also notes that "Frye is of course a social thinker" (*Second Words* 404), and has this further to say:

> Frye's push towards *naming* [the recurrent features of literature, especially], towards an interconnected system, seems to me a Canadian reaction to a Canadian situation. Stranded in the midst of a vast space which nobody has made sense out of for you, you settle down to map-making, charting the territory, the discovery of where things are in relation to each other, the extraction of meaning. (*Second Word*s 405)

hillside gives

but in the deep
Laurentian river
an elemental song
for ever

a quiet calling
of no mind
out of long aeons
when dust was blind
and ice hid song

only a moving
with no note
granite lips
a stone throat

(*Selected Poems* 15)

5.

It is perhaps not surprising that some have found in Canadians a rueful humour, bordering on wisdom and commonly taking the form of ironic self-mockery. Northrop Frye in *The Bush Garden* (he is here speaking of early Canadian poetry) notes "a humour of a quiet, reflective, observant type . . . and clearly coming from a country which observes but does not act a major role in the world" (167). We can find, for instance, the comic archetype of the ‘little’ Canadian, who has featured prominently in the

work, among others, of Duncan Macpherson of cartoon fame. We find that character, too, in Stephen Leacock's "My Financial Career," excruciatingly funny to Canadians who see in the bank customer's anxious negotiations something of themselves. Their world, like his, is a place in which large powers outside their control loom and impinge on their lives. Leacock's brand of kindly humour offers one version of making a way through that life. Similarly, Elizabeth Waterston has identified to her satisfaction "the peculiar brand of Canadian humour" as "wry, sly, rueful" (*Survey* 96). Our national sense of irony, Beverly Rasporich argues, means that Canadians, "living as a small power, only too well know the incongruity between the ideal and the real, between what is hoped for and what is possible" (I10). Rasporich, writing on a well-known comedy team, Wayne and Shuster, as quintessentially Canadian in their humour, supposes that "Their preference for parody and burlesque is expressive of a colonial mindedness that continues to haunt the Canadian psyche":

> They are dependent for their laughs not on comic invention but incongruous imitation. Shifting between parodies of Shakespearean plays and American classics [their baseball skit is a favourite], Wayne and Shuster have implicitly demonstrated over the years the status of the country they represent, the middle position of a colonial power sandwiched between Uncle Sam and John Bull. ("Canadian Humour and Culture: Regional and National Expressions" 109)

The point is, I think, a shrewd one. Canada (outside its own borders: internally is a different matter) has hardly been a colonizing or aggressive nation, but it is situated painfully near an enormous imperial power, one which is hard of hearing and full of self-regard. Canada itself is populated by people who know they exercise no military or political clout in the world, and very little cultural power either. It is perhaps to be expected that they would themselves show few signs of assertion, much less any sense of being in charge. You can speak, of course, but is anybody listening? The Canadian sense of humour may well reflect that condition and help to explain that the famed, and perhaps fanciful, Canadian modesty is as much enforced as elected.

Margaret Atwood's trenchant ruminations on Canadian humour would indicate that that pretty

much is the case, though in her analysis Canadians turn out to be considerably less affable and a lot more crippled than some of the other accounts would indicate. Atwood proceeds by considering what might characterize national humour in England, the United States, and Canada. Here is her summary:

> If laugher and audience in English humour are saying "I am not like them, I am a gentleman," and if their American counterparts are saying, "I am not like them, I am not a dupe," Canadian laughers and audiences . . . seem to be saying, "I am not like them, I am not provinical, I am cosmopolitan."

Atwood goes on to say that the

> concealed self-deprecation, even self-hatred, involved in such disavowal, the eagerness to embrace the values of classes and cultures held superior, the wish to conciliate the members of those other groups by deriding one's own[11]—these are usually attitudes displayed by people from oppressed classes or ethnic groups who have managed to make their way out of the group, alienating themselves in the process ("What's So Funny?" 188).

6.

Others—Robin Mathews being one of the most notable—have discerned in Canadian literature an ethical recognition of communal or social heroes. Priests, teachers, social workers—these sorts of figures occupy the moral centres of many Canadian stories, and so, Tommy Douglas, leader of the socialist party in Canada was recently named the Greatest Canadian. I think the point holds even if others found the analyses insufficient: a widespread readiness to discern in Canadian letters a

[11] Most pointed, perhaps, are Atwood's words about Paul Hiebert's novel which satirizes the poetry of Sarah Binks, sweet songstress of Saskatchewan: "much of the humour . . . is based on the assumption that there is something intrinsically unpoetic about Saskatchewan and especially about farms and Regina . . . and that a poet from Saskatchewan is a contradiction in terms. . . . Throughout the book Saskatchewan (and by extension Canada . . .) is treated as funny *per se*" (182).

communally minded disposition[12] is in itself telling. In expansion of such an argument critics have noted that Canadian protagonists would be unlike those we find in American literature, at least in those texts which until recently have formed the American canon. Those texts, the argument holds, have celebrated the lonely and grand hero who either leaves his (and I say "his" advisedly) society or is cast out of it. Canadian writing in Mathews' view offers instead those who represent, and who in small but admirable ways enact, collective values. They, he argues, do not act so much in exile and withdrawal, as in consensus and persuasion, and typically they stay at home to work things out. To the extent that the claim holds (and I think it largely does) it again may well be because Canada exercises no great power in the world and its citizens seldom think of themselves, or are in a position to think of themselves, individually or collectively, as shakers and movers. The stance derives, too, I would think, from the history of Canadian settlement and its purposes, the Confederation never having sought to set an example to the world nor to have seen itself as ordained, somehow, to direct it.

One of the consequences has been that Canadians in the past have tended to be politically progressive (in spirit) but cautious (in form). It is no accident, perhaps, that Canada once commonly produced a now-almost-extinct creature that was called the Red Tory. The Red Tory, though cautious, was humane and given to thinking about the public good. Take the obituaries that have appeared upon the death of Dalton Camp, once one of the most powerful members of the Tories, and for many years an esteemed journalist. Here is the headline in *The Globe and Mail* [Tuesday, Mark 19. 2002. A3]: "'Great voice of decency' changed PC history." The article on Camp includes a tribute from Prime Minister Jean

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[12] James W. Carey has argued that Americans tend to theorize communications in terms of power and control: "The archetypal case of communication, then, is persuasion; attitude change; behavior modification; socialization through the transmission of information, influence or conditioning" (42). By contrast, in what Carey likes to call a "fiduciary" view of things,

> communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but the maintenance of society in time . . . ; not the act of imparting information or influence but the creation, representation, and celebration of shared even if illusory beliefs. If a transmission view of communication centers on the extension of messages across sgeography for purposes of control, a ritual view centers on the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality (43).

Chrétien, member of a rival party: "'I always admired his abiding commitment to making Canada a stronger, more prosperous and more humane nation . . . as a journalist, he was a persuasive voice for a large and generous vision of Canada.'" Frye, in his introduction to Thomas McCulloch's *The Stepsure Letters*, speaks similarly of the kind of "charity" which the red tory displays as always radical. In like spirit many Canadians have believed in government as agency for social progress and, more recently, for cultural definition. Many have done so until the last decade or so, at least, when a series of market-driven governments have risen to the fore, particularly in the federal government and in the more prosperous provinces.

Our 'heroes' as a result are seldom larger than life, isolated, and undergoing journeys that lead them through supreme tests or physical ordeals into radically transfiguring experience (those that historically were grand figures have scarcely been accorded any such status in Canadian imagination). Canadian literary heroes and heroines are more commonly domestic, social, sociable—characters who define themselves, unglamorously, unromantically perhaps, as living within society. They act as 'female' we might say, figures who listen and commiserate, keeping their thoughts pretty much to themselves.

An example might help. W.O. Mitchell has written one of the best-known and most-loved Canadian novels, *Who has Seen the Wind*. Set in the Depression Prairies, it tells the story of a young boy, Brian O'Connal, as he grows up. The novel has all the makings of the larger-than-life. Outside of the town where Brian lives is a symbolic landscape populated by figures of mythic and comic proportion. One of them is Brian's uncle, Uncle Sean, given to venting his indignation in cursings and railings. Another is the Young Ben, Brian's age, and poetic emblem of the Prairie. In complexion, in undress, in bodily shape and movement, he is marked as one with wild life. His father, Old Ben, shows all the signs of the comical reprobate. Without malice, he is given to outlandish behaviour and scandalous impropriety. The Bens exist virtually beyond the reach of the town's values and definitions.

They exist, too, outside the terms of a civil order. So too does an unofficial prophet, Saint Sammy, who is given to the simple and the wondrous. Saint Sammy provides a good example of what

D.G. Jones has diagnosed in psychological terms. As instance of the repressed, the impulsive, and the instinctual, Sammy counts, Jones thinks, as authentic (Butterfly 34). According to Jones we can find a pattern in Canadian writing within which “delinquents, criminals, buffoons, or madmen” are one with “wise fools” (Butterfly 37).

In one scene some young boys from town, the young protagonist Brian among them, have made their way out of town to see Sammy, a few of them maliciously to molest and ridicule the liminal man. Immune to their torments, Sammy, the blue-eyed, long-bearded Sammy, emerges from the piano box (music box, musing box) in which he lives, to recite his poetry of creation. His speech is a prairie parody of Genesis in which the farmers of a blighted land become keepers of the garden whose muse Sammy has heard and whose music he sings. His is an incantation of cosmic proportion. He denounces, naively, those who “have played the harlot an’ the fornicator in the sighta the Lord!” (fear not dear people, there is no hanky-panky in this novel), his imprecations and shakings of fists eventually answered, it seems, when a huge wind destroys the property of a particularly offensive farmer. Sammy laments, too, with old and trembling voice, the blight which has afflicted the Canadian Prairie, a new lost Eden: “‘An’ there is sorra an’ sighin’ over the facea the prairie—herb an’ the seed thereoff thirsteth after the water which don’t cometh! The cutworm cutteth—the rust rusteth an’ the ‘hopper hoppeth!” (*Wind* 196). A pure and blessed simple, a little “touched,” as we say, Saint Sammy, the Book of Genesis rising and falling in his mind, the wind rising and falling in his face and washing through the prairie grass, recites his story of how the world came to be.

Strictly speaking this is not phatic language, and it is certainly a long way from silence. But it does express, beautifully, the value of the simple and common in Canadian writing. And it speaks, too, however briefly, of a civic structure: the Eden of which Sammy incants exists in the “district” of Eden, a term which even as it gestures toward a mythic place, names the prairies in a way that is familiar to its people as a measure of civic and even political organization.

The temptation for Mitchell would have been to centre the novel on the innocents and the

primitives and to find not only its dramatic or symbolic appeal in their world, but its moral order as well. In many American texts this, or something close to this, could well have happened, and often **did** happen. We have only to remind ourselves of how often American characters have lit out for the territories, or found themselves, tried, transformed, and restored, in the wilderness. The allusion to Mark Twain is not so gratuitous as we might suppose, since Mitchell was himself strongly influenced by American humour, having for reasons of health lived for several years in the United States. And Twain himself derived heavily from the nineteenth-century Canadian humourist Thomas Halliburton. In any case, *Who has Seen the Wind* finally does not find its moral centre out on the Prairie, though it does locate lyrically in those spaces a natural justice and goodness. In the end, Mitchell's novel locates its understanding and its expression of what best represents human aspiration, in a small-town philosopher, a small-town minister, and two small-town teachers. Principal Digby stands as one who can respect the integrity of the Bens, and even protect innocents against the active persecution of the town bigot, Mrs. Abrercrombie. In a way, we might say he, a moral figure, protects the amoral (the Bens) from the immoral (mainly Mrs. Abercrombie). He also is able, in a *literary* way, to honour the innocence of childhood, invoking Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" to explain what has happened to Brian once he can no longer experience "the feeling" of wonder he once had. Digby believes too in community, within which knowledge and intelligence serve a human good. In a way what he values is a higher innocence, and his sense of ultimate value lies squarely within the measures of public welfare. And so, Brian O'Connal, on the verge of adulthood, having revisited the prairie after his father's death (as often he has sought in it some power of sustenance whenever he suffered the traumas of growing up), knowing (we read in Mitchell's poignant language) "the dark well of his mother's loneliness," commits himself to a civic life: "He turned and started for home, where his mother was" (240).

7.

Maybe it's a blessing that we don't have a fixed identity, or any clear single mark, we

Canadians,[13] and that we don't have large figures who participate in stabilizing or enforcing that identity. Heroes need imperatives, don't they? Indicatives at least. That must indicate something. They know what's going on, those chest-beaters: they need to know what's going on, announce things, tell others what to do. They issue instructions, take command. There can be none of this self-doubt for them, little room for hesitation. No fumbling in the dark for someone, anyone, to verify their thoughts, someone to assure them—there there, they are there, they are ok.

Can you imagine Ulysses trying to talk his mates into a voyage? Heroes don't look for approval. They don't want opinion, almost never speak in ingratiating or vulnerable ways. They're supposed to know, for god's sake, they do and they take action. Heroes stand alone, they don't need you. Heroes are exempt from chummy and demeaning talk, no phatic murmurings for them.

Let's face it, they're bullies too. Sometimes they are too impatient to negotiate or to observe a little give and take. Too certain of themselves to listen or to talk things out.

As for Canada we had 'heroic' figures in our history of explorers and in the conduct of First Nations people, for instance, and in the astonishing acts of endurance and strength that sustained the voyageurs. We can discern large acts in nineteenth-century poems of settlement too— for example Kate and Max in Isabella Valency Crawford's *Malcolm's Katie* (1884), Macdonald in E.J. Pratt's *Towards the Last Spike* (1952). The historical John A. Macdonald by any reckoning cut a colourful and extraordinary swath. But hardly anybody was looking for a Great Man, Pratt convinced hardly anybody, and he bides his time, Sir John, eh?

Having no time and little inclination for bold acts of courage, then, the typical Canadian presumably would be slow to speak, downright reluctant even, at times, though, god knows, most of my

[13] Robert Kroetsch has on occasion argued that anonymity should be cause for rejoicing among Canadians inasmuch as existing without name means you go unnoticed and unchosen by those that would threaten you. Kroetsch: "we are reluctant to venture out of the silence and into the noise, out of the snow . . . . For in our very invisibility lies our chance for survival." ("The Canadian Writer" 15).

male friends are non-stop wall-to-wall talkers.

We do find in some Canadian texts at least another version of phatic. This other one is noisy, garrulous, redundant, anything but subtle. Where one is reticent and inclined to litote, this one is ebullient and given to hyperbole. In oral manifestations, the phatic can move toward the affective and address some "you" who is evidently present to the speaker's overtures. I am thinking here for example of Robert Kroetsch's *The Words of My Roaring* and *The Sad Phoenician*, which burgeons with bravado, bristles with protest, though the words are as much mock as determined. The texts enter an arc in which a voluble and insistent speaker seeks not only to connect with an auditor, but to mesmerize him or spring her into action. Here is part of a longer poem, "Pitch 'n' Toady," written by Jon Whyte, in which the rambunctious voice of a carnival pitchman spills in rhyme and elision, slides upon slur of word and syllable. By emphatic stress and simple beat, through profusion and energy, by returning again and again to terms of address ("lady," it says, "lady") it makes overtures. It opens a phatic sense of sharing, takes pleasure in extending itself into social acts of cajoling and scolding:

> Listenname, listenname
>
> wudja believe
>
> I wouldn't deceive
>
> you've gotta believe
>
> it's all the same believers' game
>
> now for the first time
>
> high time prime time
>
> lady, if you don't buy
>
> won't try can't try bug off
>
> I haven't got time to waste on thrillseekers
>
> billseekers, chillseekers, daredevils or fair devils
>
> OK

Grabbem razorblades ballpoints teethbrushes

combs 'n' penknives

wudja trust

trust me

really free

for the time and take of your lives

wudja trust

gotta trust

must trust

lady, would I take you

lady, if you don't want the goods

don't handle the merchandise

(*Draft* 189-90)

8.

I would turn too to moments of not speaking in Canadian literature. They are many and powerful. Critics have long identified the figure of the inarticulate Canadian,[14] but few have spoken of the characters' crises as they involve special utterance, language designed to seek or to affirm connection. You find the characters often in prose fiction which derives from or refers to rural regions (where fluency is often suspected of being glib, false, disingenuous, 'Eastern': don't become an English professor). You also find it in recnt poetry—in texts, oddly, which derive from considerable verbal

[14] Douglas Spettigue has written that there is bias in Canadian fiction against eloquence which "may help to account for its fondness for the pathos of the inarticulate victim, the stories of children and the animal story" (50).

sophistication. [15]

There is a good instance in a poem written by Al Purdy. The speaker, an old and almost senile man, talks in distraction, uncertain of his memory, halting in his phrasing. His voice wanderers and halts as memories begin to resurface, waits as it seeks to recover its purpose, as in the end it trails off into doubt and confusion. I'm suggesting we hear a dignity, an 'authenticity' or a 'presence' in the voice, one which is so ungainly it is almost artless in expression:

> when you can't tell anyone
>
> when there ain't none to tell
>
> about whatever it was I was sayin
>
> what I was talkin about
>
> what I was thinkin of—?
>
> ("My Grandfather Talking" 59)

The absence of listener, at least the felt sense of absence—"there ain't none to tell"— as much as the effects of an unfocused mind mark the old man's sense of disconnection and his quiet wish to be heard.

I would turn to a poet amazing in tact and pacing, Phyllis Webb. In *Naked Poems*, for instance, she moves in delicacy from line to line, word to word. Here is one small entry, one among other small parts to that poem. The words that follow float low on the page on which they are printed, sit beneath a large sheet of whiteness. Across the vast quiet that space marks, the few brief words enter minimally, gently, on the bottom of the page:

YOU

took

[15] Ann Mandel has argued that, though silence and loneliness may well have marked agriculturally based texts concerned with landscape, urban texts are more given to acts of language and are articulated by writers "who can build that city of language, [and] form a community to answer the silence of space" (128-9).

with so much

gentleness

my dark

(*The Vision Tree* 71)

The novels are jammed with inarticulate characters, the poems replete with references to voices and language locked in the land or released only with special care from the mind.

We get, certainly, in Margaret Laurence an acute sense of characters who find it extremely difficult to release their voices. The reasons are multiple and complex, usually involving some combination of puritanical suppression, patriarchal intimidation, and cultural constraint. It is there, powerfully, in what is probably Laurence's best-known novel, *The Stone Angel* (1964), narrative of ninety-year-old Hagar Shipley in the last months of her life. As she revisits her past in a series of wrenching retrospections, she again and again regrets what it is she has never done or said. On one occasion she recalls making love to her husband Bram and her inability at the time to acknowledge her passion: "It was not so very long after we wed, when first I felt my blood and vitals rise to meet his. He never knew. I never let him know. I never spoke aloud. . . ." [81 old text]. When her second son, faithful but neglected Marvin, is leaving to enlist as an underage soldier in World War I, she similarly cannot bring herself to speak what it is she most needs to say:

> When Marvin came to say good-by, it only struck me then how young he was, still awkward, still with the sun-burned neck of a farm boy. I didn't know what to say to him. I wanted to beg him to look after himself, to be careful, as one warns children against snowdrifts or thin ice or the hooves of horses, feeling the flimsy words may act as some kind of charm against disaster. I wanted all at once to hold him tightly, plead with him, against all reason and

reality, not to go. But I did not want to embarrass both of us. . .

She wants to say, above all else she wants to say, but she does not. "I wanted to" she says, "I wanted all at once to." "But I did not" (129).

The scene continues as Marvin makes the first overture:

"Mother—"

"Yes?" And then I realized I was waiting with a kind of anxious hope for what he would say, waiting for him to make himself known to me.

But . . . Words would not come to his bidding, and so the moment eluded us both. He turned and put his hand on the doorknob.

"Well, so long," he said. "I'll be seeing you." (130)

There is a moment of silence, a painful expectance, and then the laconic refusal to respond. Marvin's farewell we should read, surely, within the enormous restraint of his family's culture. In that hearing it shows neither coldness nor stupidity, but an enormous sense of tact and, in terms of my interest here, the power of litote and the force of the unsaid.

The evasion finds itself repeated heart-breakingly across the text. At another point Hagar refuses to comfort her dying son, John, favoured son. "'Mother—'" he calls out to her, calls upon her, vocatively, seeking her. But she scarcely returns anything to him, does not reach out to touch him, just as, earlier, when she was still young, she had refused to comfort her brother, Dan, dying of pneumonia. At that time Matt, her other brother, brought out the shawl which their dead mother once wore, brought it from the drawer in which Dan had kept it with his childhood. He asks Hagar to put it on and to hold Dan as he is dying, so that he will think it is his mother there holding him. When she refuses Matt turns angrily on her, knowing what the gesture would mean to his brother. But still Hagar balks: "'I can't, Matt.' I was crying, shaken by torments he never even suspected, wanting above all else to do the thing he asked, but unable to do it, unable to bend enough" (25). The pattern is here too, forcefully: I can't / wanting above all else to . . . but unable to. "I felt I must . . . . But I didn't" (45). At every turn we

witness a reluctance to speak, the felt need to say something. The terrible block between what it is that Hagar most wishes to do and to express, and what it is she cannot bring herself to do or say, finds its most succinct and most characteristic form in her occasional but silent outbursts when, remembering Bram, she cries out in her mind: "*Bram, listen—*" (116). The dash with which Laurence marks these unspoken and broken overtures stresses the terrible lack Hagar feels in her withholding. The brief unspoken expression succinctly expresses what it is she most wants but finds herself unable to seek. "Bram," she thinks of saying, announces in that opening her overture, the noun of address that seeks a particular figure, his attention. The verb that follows, "listen," spells out what it is that she would ask of the figure she has just, in her mind, addressed: she wants him to listen, she has something to say to him. She wants to make contact with him, not sure quite what it is she has to say, or quite how she would say it. Then the dash that suspends the hesitant feeler, breaks it off in uncertainty.

In the end, dying, Hagar manages to speak the words she always needed to say and to bless her son Marvin, who comes to her seeking confirmation. When she does, Marvin repeats, to the very word, what it is he said, 50? years earlier, hanging at the door for his mother's blessing: "'Well, so long,' Marvin says. 'I'll be seeing you'" (304). Once more, the sheer brevity of Marvin's speech, its almost casual phrasing, conveys the strongest emotion, a point which Hagar confirms when she tells us he asks after her wishes "gruffly" (304), voice of a man fighting to manage his emotions.

The final death-bed scene consolidates many earlier passages. None of them is more important to my theme than the many references, deftly woven into the text, about mothering—its power and, in Hagar's life, its crippling lack. Hagar's final speech—"There. There." (308)— echoes a rich weaving of those very words throughout *The Stone Angel.* At one point a nurse, tending to Hagar, puts a reassuring arm around her shaking shoulders: "'There, there. It'll be all right'" she says (258). Earlier, Hagar's daughter-in-law spoke kindly to her: "'There, there'" (76). Hagar, herself, moved by her husband's words, "'Hagar, please—'," "wanted to say 'There, there, it's all right'," but, she says, "I did not say that" (85). The words, so unavailable to Hagar, we hear as well when Doris consoles her stricken

husband—"'There, there. There, there." Doris speaks what Hagar herself describes as "the mother-word" (66).[16]

These experiences centre on what linguists call phatic language. It is possible, I would argue illuminating, to read *The Stone Angel a*s narrative of Hagar's profound need to enter phatic language and of her final releasing into it, when she blesses her son Marvin. In fact, it would be easy to read Margaret Laurence's books as stories of such frustrated utterance. There is the larger pattern of impedence, certainly, by which most of Laurence's female protagonists are bound to the words within their minds, profoundly reluctant or fearful to utter, which is to say to outer, them. In *The Diviners,* Laurence's last major book, a version of bildungsroman, the containment concerns those discouragements which its protagonist, Morag Gunn, faces in seeking to become a writer by releasing the material from within her. More commonly Laurence's novels focus on themes of human isolation, suppressed love, and fearful gropings to connect. The protagonists all pay a terrible price for the drastic discrepancy between what they think and what they say or hear. "'What goes on inside isn't ever the same as what goes on outside.

---

[16] It is striking that within Hagar's immediate family, it is her brother, Matt, her husband, Bram, and her two sons, John and Marvin, who prove most able to mother and to speak the mother words.

Laurence, herself, was perfectly willing to speak as mother, nurturing, comforting, supporting, encouraging dozens of writers, members "of the tribe," as she called them, through years of prolific letter-writing. She draws ouit the phatic power in those acts when in one of the letters collected in *a very large soul* she writes "I guess that letters, to me, are a kind of sustenance, a way of being together with friends" (95). In another letter she writes more fully of that function, lamenting

> that we are all very lonely, isolated, etc, etc, and you cannot be a writer without being that, but you are also a human being, who wants most terribly to make contact, to touch the people you care about, to comfort your kids . . . . but for me there are earthly contacts, and I thank God for them, however much I may not be able to be adequate to their needs. (47)

Laurence has often remarked on this situation. Here, for instance, is what she said, years earlier, in interview with Donald Cameron:

> "I feel that human beings ought to be able, want to be able to communicate and touch each other far more than they do, and this human loneliness and isolation, which obviously occurs everywhere, seems to me to be part of man's tragedy. I'm sure one of the main themes in all my writings is this sense of man's isolation from his fellows and howl almost unbearably tragic this is." *(Eleven Canadian Novelists 105*)

It’s a disease I’ve picked up somewhere,” one of the protagonists admits (FD 34).

In *The Fire-Dwellers*, for instance, a middle-aged figure by the name of Stacey Cameron, shelters and sustains herself within a rich inner life of memory and fantasy. She has been driven there, in part, by the unavailability of her husband, Mac MacAindra. Stacey, even more acutely than Hagar, finds herself lying awake at night or sitting tensely through the day, silently rehearsing the word she most wants to speak: “Mac—”. The dash, in frequency and prominence, registers even more powerfully than it did in *The Stone Angel,* the character’s deepest yearnings for contact, self to self. Yet she remains fixed, on one side of the dash, before the long dash, her time nearly up, longing to declare herself and make herself known. The gratification she would find, and needs to find, in the present finds its subsitutions in idealized memories of the past and large fantasies about the future.

The Fire-Dwellers finds its climax, after a rapid series of changes that signal a coming closure (Laurence is profoundly committed to the narrative of travail, discovery, and modest growth), when Stacey and her husband, deeply shaken, are returning home from the ocean where one of their kids has nearly drowned. One son, Duncan, hauled out of the water, virtually dead, is revived by a lifeguard whom the older son, Ian, has fetched. Ian, horrified, asks “Will he be okay? Mum—will he be okay?” Then, reassured as much as he can be, he turns away so that neither his mother nor the young lifeguard can see him. “But Stacey sees that his shoulders are shaking with his dry sobbing, which he has to deal with himself” (268). Here is what happens as the family drives away :

> Mac starts the car and speaks to Ian in a low, gruff voice.
>
> Ian?
>
> Yeh?
>
> You did fine.
>
> Stacey looks at the two unbending necks in the front seat.
>
> —That’s the most Mac will ever be able to say. They’re not like me, either of them. They don’t want to say it in full technicolor and intense detail. And that’s okay, I guess. Ian gets the

message. It's his language, too. I wish it were mine. All I can do is accept that it is a language, and that it works, at least sometimes. And maybe it's mine more than I like to admit. Whatever I think that I think of it, it's the one I most use. (269-70)

This passage, too, gains much of its power from the enormous understatement of the father's words. Clipped though they may be, they offer versions of blessing and confirmation. Phatic, they gather the force of the novel, all of its emotional fissures and all of its characters' painful fumblings to come into touch and to speak their unspeakable love. The language is not peculiar to the men, though it is one that most of them favour. But—and it is important to note this—it is a language, the power of what is said in not saying, and it works, sometimes. For Stacey too, Stacey herself acknowledges it and honours it.

We could point to related texts—to Ernest Buckler's novel *The Mountain and the Valley,* say, set in the Annapolis valley, to its moments of sought connection or lost connection. We could turn as well, as Laurence herself once turned, to Sinclair Ross, a novelist who enabled her in many ways to become the writer she was. Ross, too, writes of prairie puritans in their terrible reticence, their crippling inwardness, and he puts his characters into worlds which are if anything even more severe than are Laurence's.

He favours as setting the Dirty Thirties, a devastating time on the Canadian prairies when the effects of the international economic depression were compounded by a severe drought that created massive crop failures and destruction of farms. In his short stories, many of the best collected in *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories*, Ross writes of characters whose lives are blighted in almost every respect. Typically we have in the narratives a young farming family, the wife given to hopes for a finer existence, for a breath of art and beauty; the husband, dogged, unasking, faithful to back-breaking and fruitless labour.

In "A Field of Wheat" the farming couple, Martha and John, get dealt the grim fate that we know awaits them. A promising crop, the most promising in years, is destroyed, suddenly, by a hail storm.

John, always the strong one, once more upholds the family, quiets them, deals in stoic dignity with the loss, holds his wife against all desolation. "Both of them wanted to speak," the narrator tells us, "to break the atmosphere of calamity that hung over them." That is what they wish, "but the words" which Ross writes with such understanding of them and their circumstances, their terrible need to uphold one another in a few words— "the words they could find were too small for the sparkling serenity of a wasted field" (80).

And then, stricken, feeling wasted and cheated, Martha heads to the barn to unloose her hurt and anger, to charge her husband with her disappointments and stupidities. The passage that follows is deft in its pacing, as it takes us into the quiet of the barn, the slow movements of Martha, walking through the stables, looking, up one side, down the other, the intimate sounds of horses feeding on hay, the rub of their flanks against the stalls.

And then she sees John, is about to call out to him. But she stops, she has noticed something.

> She had not seen him the first time she passed because he was pressed against one of the horses, his head pushed into the big deep hollow of its neck and shoulder, one hand hooked by the fingers in the mane, his own shoulders drawn up and shaking. She stared, thrust out her head incredulously, moved her lips, but stood silent. John sobbing there, against the horse. It was the strangest, most frightening moment of her life. He had always been so strong and grim; had just kept on as if he couldn't feel, as if there were a bull's hide over him, and now he was beaten. (81-2)

The passage gains special force by migrating the sought comfort from human to animal, from wife to horse. For surely John is in need of such connection but can only allow it for himself, perhaps find it, only in such a moment—silent, anonymous, non-human, alone. What reasons lie behind that shift we might begin to construe, but whatever they may be, they do not diminish the shocking moment. We discover what is sought in deepest need, what goes unacknowledged between husband and wife, and what remains, quite likely out of necessity, unspoken. How striking it is that the horse should serve as

comfort, source for a sustaining touch. Its phatic value.

In case you are tempted here to assign the displacement to the deficiencies of men, I should add that Martha herself admits the legitimacy of her husband's behaviour. She has come to the stable determined to speak her mind and to air her grievances—stupid man bought no insurance, has enslaved us here to nothing. She is on the verge of speaking, but she does not speak. She "moved her lips," but then she simply "stood silent," stunned surely, but recognizing too her husband's need to go undiscovered and uncalled: "She crept away. It would be unbearable to watch his humiliation if he looked up and saw her" (82). The end is understated, in an almost unbearably moving language we are to take as hers, the dignity of quiet acceptance in the face of catastrophe, her decisions scored in the rhythm of the sentences:

> Her hands were quick and tense. John would need a good supper tonight. The biscuits were water-soaked, but she still had the peas. He liked peas. Lucky that they had picked them when they did. This winter they wouldn't have so much as an onion or potato. (82)

"He liked peas," we read, hearing in the brevity and simplicity of that sentence Martha's concern and her anxious attempts to regather herself in the preparation and serving of the peas. She thinks of the last remnants of their garden as if they could in some small way answer John's needs: he "would need a good supper tonight." The food, we realize, serves in Martha's mind at least not so much as physical sustenance as emotional or psychological comfort, and she has this at least to offer: "she still had the peas." Almost phatic I am tempted to say, this meal she prepares, thinking of its small consolations.

Laurence has written in tribute to Ross's writing an introduction to *The Lamp at Noon,* which includes "A Field of Wheat," in which she states that the "emptiness of the landscape, the bleakness of the land, reflect the inability of these people to touch another with assurance and gentleness" (11). Assuredly so. They haven't the touch. And yet these moments, those scenes in which the characters more than anything wish for, or most desperately need something like that reach, scenes that are realized immediately and often, touch us deeply, strike us with all that is said in all the characters' unsaying and

all their unasking.

9.

In postmodern poetry we find another version of silence. We can find here too, as we have already briefly seen, a hesitance in expression. But it derives more from delicacy of phrasing, gentleness of proceeding, I think, than reluctance to speak or fear of expression.

Everything will be hesitation, disposition of parts, their alterations and relationships—all contributing to the rhythmic totality, which will be the very silence of the poem, in its bland spaces, as that silence is translated by each structural element in its own way. (Bruns, *Modern Poetry* [quoting Mallarmé] (112).

I would turn by illustration to one of my favourite poets. I quote a piece by Douglas Barbour. It is called "SONG 64: new year's eve—new year's morning / 71-72." It is crucial in reading this poem to respect its topography, its play of line and space, instrumental in its sounding. Listen, it too says: listen.[17]

out .   out there

    they sing / the planets sing

. . . .

[17] "The spatial field across which the poet casts his words (or, rather, across which the words arrange themselves) is gratuitous in traditional verse, but . . . it must be understood to be an integral part of the poem itself, in the same way that silence forms an essential part of any musical composition." (Bruns 113)

are you there?   who

cares?   where

are you

anyway?

(*Song Book* n.p.)

The lines, inasmuch as we respect the lines, and in this kind of poem it is crucial that we do so, inflections of uncertainty emerge dramatically. We don't read: "Are you there? Who cares? Where are you anyway?" Rather, in the lines reside the pauses, the stresses, of someone reaching out, feeling his way toward articulation. It is not "Who cares?" but "who [pause, pause] **cares**," a weight falling expressively on the word 'cares,' after the small suspension. The speaker does not say, uninterruptedly, "Where are you anyway?" He asks, hesitantly, "where [pause] [stress] **are** you?" The former, more standard lining would, I think, register a voice that is more urgent, preemptive; accusing perhaps. Barbour's lining, more given to pause and difficulty, would score a voice that is feeling its way into utterance, tentative in arrival. The unsettled nature of its wishes is further emphasized in the almost unexpected addition of the adverb, "anyway," its attachment drawing out the word, yearningly, after a pause saying, stressingly: where are you/ **anyway**?

You're probably thinking: well, it's a love song, that's why we get this language. I suppose love poems lend themselves to the phatic, some declared or undeclared need to bring ourselves into nearness and intimacy, to lament whatever flesh falls away, Persephone lost to the poet, the lost poet. I would think of other poets too—Daphne Marlatt, Eli Mandel, bp nichol, say. I am also reminded of another accomplished poet who is perhaps less known. D.G. Jones, whom earlier I mentioned as critic, has written some of the most sensuous and most elegantly phrased poems in Canada. I offer one section

from a remarkable long poem, "Kate, These Flowers . . . (The Lampman Poems)." Jones marks the silences with the use of conventional punctuation, and the typography of his lines. Both register the speaking lover's rhythm in delay and stress, something approaching a nervous breathlessness. If you listen you can hear—he can hardly breathe a word:

Kisses are knowledge, Kate
aphasia confounds us with a new
tongue
        too Pentacostal [sic?], too
Eleusinian, perhaps, for us
moderate Anglicans

You blush and the immoderate blood
riots like a rose
                we are both
exposed
        I who hate Sundays
dream how I will boldly
rush out and overnight paint
Ottawa crimson
                I come
secretly to the fold, would find
election in your mouth

(*A Throw of Particles* 49)

10.

But we’re Canadian, eh? (And it is here, finally, that I may have something new to say.)

We're folksy folk, us Canucks, we like to talk, get together, go for a beer. That little squiggle at the end of the sentence, hanging there like a cuneiform appendix, isn't that sociable? Phatic? What linguists call phatic—language to check the circuits, keep them open, the switches on. You know how lovers wheeze & hum? You know, you’ve heard them, and blushed, those embarrassing moments when you overheard them. That's phatic, what they’re talking. You know how even big lugs talk to pets and babies. Nice pussycat, yes, you’re a nice pussycat aren’t you? Phatic. Phatic, through and through. Emphatically. A nation that speaks in near obeisance, seeks confirmation, checks in, checks and rechecks the wiring—how’s it goin’ Dave?—questions itself in spasm and stutter, it can't believe in heroes, can it? Not great big ones. We haven’t got time, we’re talking, eh? Not too readily, but we talk, in our halting ways we feel our way toward speech.

We talk to anybody who will listen. Even to those who won’t. We even talk to ourselves. My mom always talked to herself. And so do I. When it comes to phatic, when it comes right down to it, we know little restraint, there’s no stopping us. And yet, what of the silent and restrained Canadian? You find that figure all over the place.

We Canadians do not make assertions, right? All our indicatives we convert into interrogatives, with that little tick we stick at the end, eh? When it comes to interrogatives, we’re in, no question. Deferentially, of course. Most of the time at least, when we are not swept up in the virulence of literary wars or fantasies of hockey triumphs.

We are the people who say “eh,” eh? But how do we hear that “eh”? Is it soliciting? One student of Canadian culture, Rick Salutin, takes a somewhat unflattering view of the tick:

> No-one has yet defined this Canadian voice but I would say without knowing how to prove it, that this is the voice of cold people, living in a huge and underpopulated country next door to a domineering southern neighbour. In other words, Canadians talk as if they feel small. The feeling

comes out in the most commonly repeated Canadian phrase, "Eh?" These are diffident people, they end almost every statement with a question. Even when they [Bob & Doug Mackenzie] are angry and say "Take off," they add, “eh?” (Salutin in Rasporich 110).

Another view would see the “eh” as seeking solidarity, connection, confirmation. Dialogic, some might say: we are seeking conversation, some give and take in that reciprocity.[18]

Canada is not a country that starts wars or seeks colonies. As a rule that is, though our First Nations people might have a problem with that claim. One thing, though: there is no such word as "unCanadian." The very notion is laughable. What would it be to be out of bounds or to not qualify? A people of no fixed or singular identity, we do not make assertions, do we? All our indicatives we convert to interrogatives. That’s being deferential, isn’t it? So we might suppose, and I suppose we are, aren’t we? When it comes to invoking the interrogative we’re ready, no question, eh?

This reading is clearly related to Salutin’s claim, but it would see the expression more as an affirming than a defensive gesture.

Whatever we make of the phatic in the larger culture, we can find its presence in the oddest texts.

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[18] Grooming, that’s where it all began, one scholar would say: our species’ talk is based in a verbal stroking that is a form of social grooming,. See Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language*. London: Faber, 1996, where he locates verbal grooming in a more general behaviour: “At the root of it all . . . are the long sessions of grooming so peculiarly characteristic of primate societies. Here, in some imperfectly understood way, lies the key to the processes that give primate societies their cohesion and sense of belonging.” (35). At one point Dunbar says “the pressure to evolve language may well have come through the need to form and service female alliances . . . rather than through either male bonding or male hunting activities, as conventional wisdom has always assumed” (150). Clearly, if Dunbar is to be believed, the phatic language of which I am speaking would be located behind all human speech. I am supposing that the prominence of such language is important in Canadian writing.

[18] The poem uses only twenty words in total, and only ten different words. From a simple base, “nothing but darkness outside my window,” it breaks, disperses, and repeats those words across the page, the hesitant repeatings registering how shaken is the speaker. The final words, “the shape of / water,” serve some kind of explanatory function, by virtue of their position and their semantic departure, presumably distilling the experience and bringing it to a higher level of understanding. And yet what is “the shape of / water” exactly? The sense of an elusive something (memories of the mother quite possibly, in an acute sense of her absence) is all the more emphasized then.

E.J. Pratt, whom I earlier mentioned as a mythologizer of the Canadian Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, and celebrant of grand narratives of connection, wrote *The Titanic*—he did, so help me, years and years before the movie came out!—in which we encounter the central Pratt ethos: the need for dignified heroism under enormous distress, faced with the most elemental and, yes, titanic of struggles. One might expect of such a poem a language of confidence and command. What intrigues me in this poem is Pratt's odd concern with phatic language. In the 'conversation' among the various ships which shared one region of the Atlantic with the Titanic shortly before it sank, and as it sinks, there is a crucial failure in language. Though at one point the Baltic "heard" and several steamers "answered" the Titanic's "call" for help (*15 Canadian Poets X 2 19)*, the Titanic (actually the wireless operator, of course, but this is a Pratt poem and in metonymy the machinery overruns humans), refuses an overture: "Say, 'Californian', shut up, keep out, / You're jamming all my signals" (*15 Canadian Poets X 2* 2).

Faced with the Titanic's obstinacy, its surly refusal to hear, its impolite silencing, the Californian "Unclamps the phones" (22), and is as a result unavailable—"deaf" is what Pratt writes—when the Titanic shortly thereafter sends its desperate pleas for help. In hubris the Titanic closes the circuits, spurns the overtures, and in the end pays for its sins of incivility. In a sense it is sunk for its rudeness, its spurning of the phatic.

How Canadian can you get?

11.

Hey, what do you say when you want to get a bunch of Canadians out of a swimming pool? All right guys, outa the pool, eh?

It's a peaceable kingdom. Or so some have said, and might have believed too, once, want still to believe.

12.

Even Robert Kroetsch in a style that is not common to him, or well-known in him, seeks the phatic moment. The move is one that takes him from his more characteristic hyperbolic or rambunctious way of writing, or, alternatively, an erudite, ironic, and hermeneutic mode, to one that is highly personal and that expresses almost unbearable loneliness. That state is felt in the brevity, the repetitions, and the silences of his lines:

nothing

outside

my window

nothing but
darkness

(*Completed Field Notes* 104)

We hear a large gulf between wish and situation. “Mother—” the poet writes. But she isn’t there, she often isn’t. There is no one to speak the mother words. And no one to hear them.

13.

I dunno. I dunno if any of this interests you or if you would agree. Or if I myself am convinced. This too is a kind of language, it too works. Sometimes. Even for us.

We’re Canadian, eh?

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