DENNIS LEE'S TESTAMENT

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ABSTRACT

Dennis Lee's Testament

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The future-poetry of Dennis Lee published in *Testament* (2012) is the culmination of four cycles of creativity in his lifetime, each seeking a Real beyond the nihilism of technological modernity. Ultimately, Lee wagers the role of the poet and the future of poetic language on Earth on a non-modern that risks entangling the poet who enters void and embodies its meaninglessness.

CHAPTER ONE: To approach this wager, the thesis first identifies the sources in philosophy of a Canadian Romantic modernism embraced by George Grant in collegial exchanges with Dennis Lee during the period of *Civil Elegies* (1972). Grant elicits a politics out of Nietzsche; Lee extends a poetics out of classical experimental modernism, made intelligible in this thesis by Mallarmé's "cadence" or "rhythm" of things in nothingness and by Beckett's word-play at the impasse of naming. CHAPTER TWO: To think beyond the mastery of the world by technique is to encounter a choice between silence as assumed by Grant and nonsense as explored by Lee during the period of *Alligator Pi*e (1974) and *The Gods* (1979). CHAPTER THREE: The example of Paul Celan and his revisiting of Hölderlin provokes Lee to attend upon cadence at the level of the discrete word, an experiment with the dissolution of language and selfhood

anticipated in the period of *Riffs* (1993) and *Nightwatch* (1996). Here, the undermusic felt to belong to the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) impacts as affect, in contrast to Celan's alienated death-walk. CHAPTER FOUR: In the spirit of "post-internet poetry," and by means of the spontaneous polyphonic scoring of cadence, Lee transforms the modernist impasse at the void into a further contradiction, the living of which may allow the poet access to a non-modern, but at a cost: the loss of poetry to incomprehension and insignificance, the reduction of the poet to a medium of the void, the dissolving of structure into materialities colliding in chance.

KEYWORDS

DENNIS LEE, ROMANTIC MODERNISM, GEORGE GRANT, NONSENSE, CADENCE, FUTURE-POETRY, POST-INTERNET POETICS, TECHNOLOGICAL MODERNITY, PAUL CELAN, VOID, SILENCE, MALLARMÉ

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Testament completes an act of witness commenced in *Un* (2003) and continued in *Yesno* (2007). As indicated by the title word, which in law and theology is a synonym of the term *covenant*, the nature of the act of witness is not to observe and lament but to embody – to take into the self as one's own the things the poet is witness to. What is embodied in the poems of *Testament* is the chaos of degenerating and regenerating cultures and languages of the Earth at the end of the twentieth century. Through a witnessing so pure that it becomes the condition, a future for poetic language on Earth, the promise of a new covenant might be heard as possible.

The purpose of this thesis is to honour this poetic act. I have tried to do so by describing Lee's new work in terms of his evolving poetics and his four periods of experimentation beginning with *Civil Elegies*. Central to this poetics are concepts Lee studied in Heidegger's *Der Unsprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935) and developed beyond their context in high modernism, specifically to account for a non-modernist literature in his *Savage Fields* (1977). Years later, in the poems of *Testament*, Lee is witnessing the collapse of the Orphic tradition of viewing the constancy of an Earth established within the horizons of human knowing or World. Lee instead apprehends a void of barely interpretable experience, infinite mediations, and hybrid materialities that are neither simply Earth nor World. The thesis argues that the various voices and subjects of *Testament* enter the void which has haunted Lee's lifework at every stage, but they enter it with an apocalyptic finality released in Lee's expression by the example of Paul Celan. Whether or not the

void turns out to be the home of cadence or the indigenous tonalities of thing-beings, and whether or not intimations of cadence in *Testament* anticipate a real beyond the impasse of modernity, are questions that compel this thesis.

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From the Nihilism of Modernity to Non-Modern Hope

GRANT, LEE AND THE MODERNIST IMPASSE

In addressing the poetry and thought of Dennis Lee, it is impossible to ignore the philosopher George Grant who denominated for Canadian thinkers in the 1960s the intellectual and spiritual void at the heart of technological modernity. During that time, when *Civil Elegies* was written, the nihilism of technology had its example in the war in Vietnam. Today, as witnessed by the poems in *Testament*, the void of mastery through technique has reproduced itself in the texture of planet Earth.

Yet in spite of his continuing prophetic relevance, Grant cannot be said to stand behind Lee as, for example, the philosopher Bergson stands behind T.S. Eliot and Nietzsche stands behind Yeats. The essay "Grant's Impasse: Beholdenness and the Silence of Reason," written by Lee as homage to Grant at his death, incorrectly suggests the kind of relationship usually indicated by the term "influence." [1] In its need to elucidate and personify for lay readers the philosophical contradiction described as Grant's Impasse, the essay has the effect of concentrating in Grant much nineteenth and twentieth-century thinking about the crisis of value or the crisis of naming that is normally attributed to Nietzsche and Heidegger. This oversimplification is already

[1] Lee "Grant's Impasse: Beholdenness and the Silence of Reason," in Lee *Body Music* (Toronto: Anansi 1998):129-159

underway in Grant who equates Nietzsche the radical historicist as presented by the American thinker Leo Strauss with Nietzsche the arch-philosopher of technological mastery as presented by Heidegger,[2] giving his readers the phrase *technological modernity*. In his act of homage, Lee does not go into Grant's study of these philosophers; he is modestly silent about his own study of them. In relation to Grant, Lee might have used the word "colleague," because Grant affirms in Lee certain philosophical conclusions Lee arrived at himself, and because affirmation runs both ways. After a brief period in the late 1960s when Grant may be rightly said to be an influence on Lee, there are signs of a dynamic collegiality, with the essays that make up *Technology and Empire* (1969) receiving editing by Lee and with poems that would appear in *The Gods* (1979) receiving comments by Grant. When it comes to understanding *Testament* as a product of Lee's evolving poetics – especially the question of the place in it of void or nothingness which this chapter addresses – it is necessary to place beside the poetry the collegial friendship of Grant and Lee, and the fields of Romantic and modernist thought it is set in.

Accordingly, I begin this chapter by presenting early exchanges between Grant and Lee as the context for approaching the experience of void in *Civil Elegies* and, again, in *The Gods*. After this initial look at the phenomenon of void, I will draw back from Lee's work in order to discuss sources of the concept in nineteenth and twentieth-century philosophy that are read differently by Grant and Lee and not disclosed in "Grant's

[2] Ronald Beiner "George Grant, Nietzsche and the Problem of a Post-Christian Theism," in *George Grant and the Subversion of Modernity*, edited by Arthur Davis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1996): 109-138. Only in his *Time as History*, edited by William Christian (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1995), does Grant engage with Nietzsche directly.

Impasse." This wider philosophical picture then becomes the context for engaging Lee's *Testament*, its direct entry into the nothingness that is toyed with in *Civil Elegies*. The consequences of that entry are for later chapters of this thesis to discuss. Reading the correspondence of Grant and Lee beside Lee's poems shows that the dynamic of Grant's argument as presented in "Grant's Impasse" is reiterated in the structure of Lee's long poems and poem cycles, regardless of fundamental changes in his poetic experimentation.

Exploring the dynamics of a literary friendship is productive, not only because there is usually a large amount of source material in the form of letters, editorial responses to each other's works, and shared life experiences to draw on, but also because if one is looking closely for it one can see ways in which the soul of each friend's thought is carried forward in the work of the other, transforming what is in effect a common project. This shared heart at the centre of two friends' work is not always visible at the time to either collaborator, and can often be discovered only retrospectively. In the case of Grant and Lee there is much historical circumstance in support of this friendship, but my chief concern is the evidence that can be found in their formal writings. There, subtleties of transformation can be seen in action. Furthermore, Lee's new poetry continues the process, carrying the intellectual fruit of the friendship into the twenty-first century. This collaboration is necessarily one-sided as Grant did not live to see his prophesies about Canadian fate and imperialism come to pass in the North American Free Trade Agreement nor his thinking about the technosphere come true in the internet.

The friendship began in 1967 when Lee asked Grant to contribute an article to *The University Game*, and when Grant's daughter Rachel left Trinity College at the University of Toronto to attend the open curriculum of Rochdale College that Lee had helped start. That year, Lee read Grant's "Canadian Fate and Imperialism" and absorbed the philosopher's fatalistic thinking about the condition of civil life in Canada.[3] Grant did not write publicly about Lee's works until 1982 when he contributed a short reflection to *Tasks of Passion: Dennis Lee at Mid-Career*. Other than briefly in "Cadence, Country, Silence," Lee did not write on Grant until after the philosopher's death, when he read "Grant's Impasse" at a 1989 conference on Grant at Carleton University.[4]

A worry at the bottom of Grant and Lee's reflections on each other's writing is that modern nihilism has its source in the technological impulse to frame all of nature, both human and environmental, as objective and value-free. Grant recognizes the linking of technology and the Kantian subject-object position in Lee, and quotes the end of Lee's *Savage Fields* (1977): "Lee writes: 'Thinking proceeds by objectivity and mastering what is to be thought.' He asks 'What form of thought can arise which does not re-embody the crisis it is analyzing?' The first statement is clearly true of the modern destiny. The second must drive anybody who asks it not only to be in the future but also to thinking

[3] Noted in Lee "Cadence, Country, Silence" in *Body Music* (Toronto: Anansi 1998): 14. First read at a conference in Montreal in 1972 then published in *Liberté* 14.6 (1972), this essay would be revised for *Open Letter*, *boundary 2*, and later reprintings. During Grant's life, it would be the major place where Lee would deal with his reception of Grant's thought.

[4] These two works remain largely unstudied, except briefly by Mark Dickinson in his doctoral thesis "Notes to a Poetics of Earth" (Trent University 2007) and extensively in Margaret Roffey's doctoral thesis "Dennis Lee: Technology and Reverence" (University of Western Ontario 1996) which examines the influence of each thinker on the other's prose writing, but with little attention to Lee's poems.

what was before the modern paradigm."[5] For his part, Lee notes a similar issue and attributes it to Grant: "Grant's answer was this. Any critical thought about technology is bound to reproduce that technology – right in the assumptions and methods of thinking itself. The attempt will reenact the condition it is trying to judge. We may long to escape the nihilism we're enmeshed in. But we cannot think our way out of it, because we can't stop recreating it in the very texture of our thinking."[6] It is probably the case that Grant is graciously attributing to Lee an idea that was original with himself, but this only shows an indebtedness extending into the deep minds of both writers of which both were aware. In "Cadence, Country, Silence" Lee remarks that Grant has "enabled us to say for the first time where we are, who we are – to become articulate. That gift of speech is a staggering achievement. And in trying to comprehend the deeper ways in which writing is a problem to itself in Canada, I am bound to start with Grant."[7] In a letter of November 1985 telling Lee of his current writing projects, Grant wrote: "It is just immensely good of you to care about what I write and you are the only person who really moves me to life about it."[8] In the same letter, Grant remarks on the context of writing his piece "Dennis Lee: Poetry and Philosophy": "As I told you at the time, it was written at the very lowest part of our lives, at a time when I wanted to express such love and spontaneity and yet when other things penetrated the writing with grimness."[9] The references to "lowest part of our lives" and "grimness" may suggest that in both personal and literary ways the two friends had internalized the condition of modernity that each had struggled to explain

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[5] George Grant "Dennis Lee – Poetry and Philosophy," in *Tasks of Passion: Dennis Lee at Mid-Career*, edited by Karen Mulhallen *et al*. (Toronto: Descant 1982): 235
[6] Lee "Grant's Impasse," in *Body Music* (Toronto: Anansi 1998): 140
[7] "Cadence, Country, Silence" 17
[8] "George Grant to Dennis Lee, November 1985," in *George Grant: Selected Letters*, edited by William Christian (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1996): 335
[9] George Grant to Dennis Lee, November 1985

earlier. Lee characterizes this internalization as "Grant's Impasse," although each writer negotiated the condition in his own way.

A POETICS OF NOTHINGNESS

As Grant recalls, "It was in the baleful flare which the Vietnam War threw on the United States and Canada that I first had the good fortune to become a friend of Lee's."[10] The events of Vietnam haunted all of the several beginnings of the Lee-Grant friendship; from the anti-war rallies at the University of Toronto's Varsity Stadium in October of 1965, to the brief month they shared at Rochdale in 1968,[11] to the early written contributions they made together that year. Grant saw in Lee a philosopher's allegiance to first principles and a mystic's concern with the invisible – a state of non-attachment that is Buddhist in spirit because it allows one to be receptive to the interconnectedness of human action based on an apprehension of the wholeness of life in the world. "Of all the academics who were rightly moved by the searchlight of that war, he was the one who saw that at the heart of those events was an affirmation about being. That affirmation (call it, if you will, a statement about the nature of the whole) shaped what came forth in the actions of our dominant classes."[12] This affirmation, which implicated Canadian civilians in the Vietnam War, carried the realization that "Canada was part of an empire which was

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[10] "Dennis Lee – Poetry and Philosophy" 230

[11] In his biography of Grant, Christian notes that Grant "continued to take an interest in Rochdale after Rachel left, and the consequences were particularly happy." One happy consequence is that Rochdale "brought Grant into regular contact with poet and editor Dennis Lee." Here, according to Christian, is the true beginning of the Lee-Grant friendship rather than encounters in 1965 or Lee's reception of *Lament for a Nation* (1965) or "Canadian Fate and Imperialism" (1967). [William Christian *George Grant: A Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1993): 269-270]

[12] "Dennis Lee – Poetry and Philosophy" 230

trying to impose its will by ferocious means right around the other side of the globe."[13] Furthermore, Lee recognized that this particular apprehension of being was at the roots of Western civilization, comprehending in Grant's words "not only imperial war, not only the greedy structure of society, but also the nature of the multiversity and of poetry, the culture of the cosmopolis and the forms of our sexuality."[14] For a poet and professor to be indoctrinating students in the very impasse of modern Canadian society proscribed by the curriculum of the liberal multiversity was enough to drive anyone into alienation from the world, and perhaps willingly to enter the negative space (where outward and inward mind are felt to be empty or invalid) that Lee names void.

Perhaps this intimation of void or, more subtly, the stirring of void in him ("Is void our vocation?"),[15] was a factor in Lee's leaving the academic world of the University of Toronto in 1967 in order to put the writing of poetry at the centre of his life, accompanied as it immediately turned out by working at the House of Anansi Press and helping to start Rochdale College. The void was also at the heart of the development of his poetry from *Civil Elegies* on, for the private and the public are joined in Lee. As Grant tells it: "When Lee left Victoria College he was not only saying with Chomsky that through research and consultation these institutions had become part of the war machine, but that their very understanding of knowledge, and in particular the understanding of poetry, came forth from the affirmation of 'being,' the essence of which made poetry part

[13] "Dennis Lee – Poetry and Philosophy" 230
[14] "Dennis Lee – Poetry and Philosophy" 231
[15] "Elegy 4," in *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* (Toronto: Anansi 1972): 43

of a museum culture. In that sense it determined what could be 'poiesis.'"[16] Lee had found a temporary solution to the technological imperialism of the liberal multiversity in the birth of Rochdale College, and he was searching for a poetics of being and nothingness that was his own. A letter from Grant to Lee shows that in 1974, two years after *Civil Elegies* and while he was writing *Savage Fields*, Lee was struggling to create a Canadian poetics of being based on patterns he saw in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* and Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Grant responds thus: "Your purpose is to show that these novels are a new form of *poiesis* to distinguish them from other forms of *poiesis*. At the same time, Cohen (as you so brilliantly show) is saying things of the most universal character about being. Cohen's appreciation of *poiesis* is within a particular modern account of being which is modern in its very account of the horror of modernity. Therefore, when you ask me for theoretical books about *poiesis* I am in a difficulty."[17]

Such a *poiesis* had been in preparation during the writing of *Civil Elegies*, but according to Grant it was more completely realized in the long elegy *The Death of Harold Ladoo* in 1976, after Lee had drafted most of *Savage Fields*. Grant saw too that in a comparison of *Civil Elegies* with *Harold Ladoo* "much more immediately happens in the second poem than in the first." He then suggests this immediacy signifies a more genuine existentialism:

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[16] "Dennis Lee – Poetry and Philosophy" 231. From the Greek *poiein* (to act, action, produce), *poiesis* means an act of making that transforms and continues the world. It is also the root of the word poetry. In current usage of *poiesis* both meanings are combined.
[17] "George Grant to Dennis Lee, 10 June 1974," in *George Grant: Selected Letters* 275

> To put the matter perhaps too simply: existentialism is the teaching that all thought about serious matters belongs to the sufferings of a particular dynamic context; while traditional philosophy taught that thought was capable of lifting that suffering into the universal. Both teachings require openness, but traditional philosophy believed that the truth present in existentialism was only a preparation for its transcending. It would appear to me that *Civil Elegies* is written out of the struggle which makes human beings existentialists; while the two later poems [Grant is also referring to "The Gods"] have somehow raised up the sufferings of the particular dynamic context. *The Death of Harold Ladoo* moves back and forth with the fluidity of music, from 'the dynamic context' of a particular friend's particular death to the statements of self and otherness, love and hate, living and dying. Never does the particular dissolve into the merely general, nor does the universal flatten out into abstractions. Because the later poems are more universal, they are more immediate."[18]

To see how Lee comes to this fluent pluralism after the dual viewpoints public and private of *Civil Elegies*, we need to get closer to the void, the source if not the author of Lee's poetry.

NEGOTIATIONS WITH VOID

There is perhaps a single fundamental project going on in Lee's poetry. It resonates in the long-lined *Civil Elegies* of 1972, the brief cries of *Testament* forty years later, and all the major poems in between. That single project also resonates with the thought of George Grant, though the nihilism (the belief that life has no meaning, or the *ennui* that can arise from this belief) Grant sees in value-free, technological ideology has a more positive value in Lee's thought as the void. The presence of Grant is explicit in *Civil Elegies,* a quotation from Grant standing as the epigraph to the poem: *Man is by nature a political animal, and to know that citizenship is an impossibility is to be cut off from one of the*

[18] "Dennis Lee – Poetry and Philosophy" 234

highest forms of life.[19] This impossibility drives the public-minded speaking in the elegies to articulate his political hopes for Canada while negotiating attacks of alienation that arise when he feels himself and others cut off from authentic citizenship. The other presence in the poems, that of private speaking, suffers similar attacks of meaninglessness and ennui in response to personal crises of faith and friendship. In two trajectories, public and private, the poem approaches what Lee explicitly names the "void."

The drama of the poem is that the two voices belong to a single intelligence sitting beside Henry Moore's Archer statue in Nathan Phillips Square in Toronto, reflecting on

> *what can we do here now, for at last we have no notion*
> *of what we might have come to be in America, alternative, and how make public*
> *a presence which is not sold out utterly to the modern?*[20]

This question is in line with the reflections by Grant and Lee on each other's work. Both conclude that while there is no option of thinking a way out of the modernist impasse just mentioned, it is the noble task of the philosopher, as of the poet, somehow to live this impossibility. Accordingly, the two speakers of Lee's elegies heed a call to find a non-modern anyways. At first the poem offers two possible responses to the closed circle of modern thought.

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[19] Lee *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* (Toronto: Anansi 1972): 31. In respect of historical context, further reference is to this edition. There is also the incomplete 1968 *Civil Elegies* (Anansi), and the modestly revised 1996 edition published in *Nightwatch: New and Selected Poems 1962-1993* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart) and reprinted in the 2012 reissue of the poem, introduced by Nick Mount (Anansi).
[20] "Elegy 1," in *Civil Elegies* 34

The first response is to carve out a piece of the Canadian landscape to call one's own:

> *To be our own men! in dread to live*
> *the land, our own harsh country, beloved, the prairie, the foothills–*
> *and for me it is lake by rapids by stream-fed lake, threading*
> *north through the terminal vistas of black spruce, in a*
> *bitter, cherished land it is farm after*
> *farm in the waste of the continental outcrop–*
> *for me it is Shield but wherever terrain informs our lives and claims us*.[21]

Years later in 1980 this sentiment is echoed in an epiphany shared by Lee and Grant at Grant's home in Dundas, Ontario. After Lee recalled the cottage where he had spent his childhood, Grant remarked: "We come to love the good by first loving our own" and said how marvellous it was for Lee to have that "place in Muskoka to love."[22] What Grant was doing, Lee remembered, was giving the poet back his "love for those pines, that rocky shoreline, the ramshackle cottage – giving it back in luminous further dimension."[23] If only these heart-places could entirely fill the void in the speaker, he might alternate between them and urban civilization, "no longer haunted by / unlived presence, to live the cities: to furnish, out of the traffic and smog and the shambles of dead precursors, / a civil habitation that is / human, and our own."[24]

The second response to the modernist void offered by *Civil Elegies* is to acknowledge its presence at times when it is felt viscerally, as when the speaker feels his

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[21] "Elegy 1," in *Civil Elegies* 35
[22] "Grant's Impasse" 129
[23] "Grant's Impasse," 130
[24] "Elegy 1," in *Civil Elegies* 36

"body's pulse contract and / balk in the space of the square … till nothing / worked."[25] To respond physically to the presence of void is also to recognize the pull of earthly things as they seem to inhabit more than one world at once and might in fact do so. The speaker's salient example is Henry Moore's Archer statue: it opens up in a new dimension of space as the space of the square disappears. This ability of the Archer and of the ancient Earth rock it evokes simultaneously to inhabit more than one cosmos announces solemnly to the poet that "space is primal, raw, beyond control and drives towards a / living stillness, its own."[26] It gives to the critic the suggestion that Canadian Romantic modernism, at least as it appears in Lee's poetry, is defined in part by its turn to affect.

Yet neither of these two re-edifying answers to the empire of technological modernity is quite enough to hold back the sense of emptiness that arises in the poet when his human will is set against corporate human will in the city. For the speaker confronting this "vast barbaric space it happens that he enters into / void and will go / under, or he must himself become void."[27] With reminders that authentic being in the world is only transient, the speaker begins to contemplate void: "Among the things which / hesitate to be, is void our vocation?"[28] Instead of fastening on to the small loyal certainties that hold good in the face of stalled friendships and the absence of real civic action, the speaker wonders if it might be better to let the world be as it is, letting go and

[25] "Elegy 3," in *Civil Elegies* 39
[26] "Elegy 3," in *Civil Elegies* 39
[27] "Elegy 3," in *Civil Elegies* 40
[28] "Elegy 4," in *Civil Elegies* 43

descending willingly into void. To do so would be to relinquish the eternal aspect of existence while bidding elegiac farewells to all that vanishes in time.

But in this letting go, something odd happens to the speaker. By letting go of all attachment the speaker is in the way spoken of by Buddhists "free to cherish the world which has been stripped away by stages, and with no / reason the things are renewed: the people, Toronto, the elms."[29] Free from the necessity of belonging to a world controlled by the striving of the human will, these things begin to exist, like the Archer statue, in their own spaces. The speaker descends into the void, then listens as the things he had held dear begin speaking of their own accord. In this situation the speaker is also given the wisdom to be able to judge for good and evil the compromises he had made while participating in society.

The writing of *Civil Elegies* was to evoke from Lee a response to the horrors of living in modernity and its particular sufferings. The final elegy spoken by the private citizen presents a final negotiation with void. For the two speakers of *Civil Elegies*, void has presented itself in a number of specific ways. That is because void is never apparent as a unified state: it is always this or that particular experienced void, not an ultimate Void. In his essay "On *Civil Elegies*," Stan Dragland explains Lee's plurality: "Void is difficult to catch partly because it is as unapproachable a ground of being, or measure of existence, as God, for whose absent governance void supplies to Lee a kind of alternative. But void is also elusive because, like so much else, it is protean within the

[29] "Elegy 4," in *Civil Elegies* 44

poem."[30] Dragland then quotes Lee's essay "Cadence, Country, Silence": "We do not encounter Void, we encounter this void and that."[31] Yet oddly, Dragland does not mention the other side of void that Lee notes in his essay.

This other side or dimension of void is a blank Void fundamental to the use of poetic language. It is experienced as the "stillness, even the death, which one must reenter before words can be spoken. This Void underlies each syllable, and affords its perpetual context."[32] However, this Void is only productive of poetry if he recognizes both the particularity of void and the blank field of Void at once in a doubling of experience in which the poet strives to "accept nonbeing at home in what is, and to accept what is at home in nonbeing."[33] For Lee, this act of acceptance is "perhaps the essential act of being human" and is therefore also the "beginning of art, and of much philosophy."[34] In that respect, the experience of void by the speakers in *Civil Elegies* is fundamentally split, having been considered in a variety of contexts involving the appearance of things and beings as well as the speakers' own state of mind.

GRANT'S ROMANTIC MODERNISM

Grant first read Nietzsche briefly during his time at Balliol College, Oxford, at the start of the Second World War, but he did not examine the thinker seriously until the mid-60s when he was provoked by the fondness for Nietzsche on the part of his son William, who

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[30] Stan Dragland "On Civil Elegies," in *Dennis Lee at Mid-Career* 175-176
[31] Lee "Cadence, Country, Silence," in *Body Music* 23
[32] "Cadence, Country, Silence" 22
[33] "Cadence, Country, Silence" 24
[34] "Cadence, Country, Silence" 24

like many had turned to Nietzsche in the rebellious spirit of the 60s. Grant delivered a series of five Massey Lectures under the title *Time as History* on CBC Radio from 12 November to 10 December, 1969. The tapes of the lectures then lingered in the CBC archives until they were edited by William Christian and published under their original title by the University of Toronto Press in 1995.[35]

Time as History is an extended deliberation on the use of the term "history" to describe all facets of "what we must know about something in order to understand something."[36] In this Nietzschean framework to "know about anything is to know its genesis, its development up to the present and as much of its future as we can." For Grant, the account of knowledge as history, which takes up the "genesis of something in order to know it," constitutes a modern account of being in the world and of knowing the rules that govern the natural processes of that world and its cosmos. All of civilization's highest held values and deepest meanings can be subjected to historical analysis, including for Grant the idea of God and avowedly universal truths.

In the method of modernist historical analysis that Grant found in Nietzsche, the implicit goal is to take up history as a guide to timely action for the sake of progress. The human will becomes the driving force behind change in the world. By willing, an individual can master chance and circumstance, turning situations to his or her own advantage. This ideal is worth elaborating here because it extends from the post-

[35] It is unusual that Grant's Massey lectures were not chosen for publication by Anansi in 1969, for Lee was in charge at Anansi from its founding in 1967 until five years later. It may be that Lee's mind turned instead toward the more politically engaged *Technology and Empire* which would be published in 1969.
[36] George Grant "Time as History," in *More Lost Massey Lectures* (Toronto: Anansi 2008): 216

Napoleonic fascination with the Great Man acting in history, through Thomas Carlyle and Herbert Spencer and their progenitor Emerson, to Nietzsche, and then with Nietzsche's mutations of the ideal into Grant.[37]

According to Rüdiger Safranski, a nuance in the Great Man theory of history caught the interest of the prophet in Nietzsche. Could not the *Übermenschen* or creative geniuses praised by Carlyle and Emerson be significant "not only as isolated instances but as heralds of a far-reaching qualitative transformation of the human race?"[38] This inflection of the ideal suits Nietzsche, who always feels "untimely" in relation to the thinking of his age, and therefore writes for the future. Accordingly, his Overman anticipates a certain type of creative human being who has yet to emerge in history, in contrast to the Great Man like Luther or Napoleon who embodies the spirit of his time.[39] Safranski points out that in positioning his Overman in contrast to the "half saint, half genius" hero of Carlyle's thought,[40] Nietzsche is reacting against his earlier *The Birth of Tragedy* and "Schopenhauer as Educator" when he was under the sway of the composer Richard Wagner, who later masterfully re-created the "half saint, half genius" in the hero of *Parsifal*. Nietzsche is actively rebelling against the ideal hero as Parsifal, redeemer of German Christianity, in favour of his Overman as Zarathustra. Saying that he would prefer to look for a hero more like Cesare Borgia than Parsifal,[41] he seems to take up the

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[37] According to the survey of Nietzsche's library and habits of annotation of his books by Thomas H. Brobjer, Nietzsche commented on both Carlyle and Spencer. Emerson was the major thinker he returned to throughout his lifetime.
[38] Rüdiger Safranski *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, translated by Shelley Frisch (New York: Norton 2003): 263
[39] Nietzsche *Ecce Homo*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House 1969): 261
[40] *Nietzsche, A Philosophical Biography* 264
[41] *Ecce Homo* 261

issue of the early influence of Carlyle on Wagner in order to further distance himself from the composer.

To understand what Nietzsche is rebelling against in Wagner, and what Nietzsche protects of Wagner, is also to comprehend what Grant is judging as evil and good in modernity. The sentiments that I have sketched above may be found in Grant's account of modern history, especially the call to modern men, whom he names *creative men*, to burn out the old and bring forth the new, which he names novelty. Yet Grant is sorrowfully aware that what happens when creative men plan the "mastery of the planet" is that the activity of changing the world "becomes ever more an end in itself. It is undertaken less simply to overcome the natural accidents which frustrate humanity and more and more for the sheer sake of the 'creation' of novelty."[42] As early as 1937, when he was nineteen and spending part of the summer under the tutelage of Professor D.J. MacDougal, reading to him and rowing him around in a boat, Grant had been taught to disparage Carlyle and Wagner. A letter from Grant to his mother Maude reads: "Mr MacD scorns so much: Cody, Carlyle, all liberal historians (his examples are Maccaulay, Trevelyan and Fisher), Wagner (I partly understand), Tchaikovsky, all motor cars – in fact everything except the intellectual and medieval quiet and cold worlds that I want to tell him that there is something of change in the world."[43] Mapping the transformation of modernism in nineteenth-century thought feels more recent to us as North Americans than it does is to citizens of older nations because of the shortness of what Grant sees as our history of being in the New World (Grant tends to forget the indigenous civilizations

[42] "Time as History" 232
[43] "George Parkin Grant to Maude Grant, 1937" in *George Grant: Selected Letters* 23

of North America). While the Romanticism of the early nineteenth century passed through Europe relatively quickly, it continued in North America up to the mid twentieth century. As Grant would put it, North Americans can recall within the memory of recent history the beginning of transforming the sublime wilderness of the New World into habitable space. Even if this is so, Grant reminds us in his essay "In Defense of North America" that while the "roots of some communities in eastern North America go back far in continuous love for their place," none of us can feel that we properly originated here, because "in all there is some consciousness of making the land our own."[44] In describing the colonization of the New World by Europeans, Grant is underlining the nation-building of Canada (in part by his grandfather George Munro Grant, who furnished the Canadian motto *A Mari usque ad Mare*). He notes that the unification authorized by the British North America Act is concurrent with the unification of Germany in 1867, and Italy four years later. For Grant, a difference in ideology between the European and Canadian unifications is in the attitude to nature that is reflected in the arts as Romanticism. Europeans had already mastered the land prior to the industrial revolution, so that Romanticism emerged as an alternative to life in industrial cities. In North America, when settlers saw nature as a wilderness to be explored and made habitable, Romanticism became, not an alternative to industrial life, but rather the amazed recognition of the civilization that "we have built and become in so short a time,"[45] in the face of a wilderness seen as threatening human survival. The seductiveness of this amazement, together with the sheer pleasure of creating, results in the articulation of artistic novelty. Underneath the aura of Romantic visions of the sublime are the

[44] Grant "In Defense of North America" in *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: Anansi 1969): 17
[45] "In Defense of North America" 15

stirrings of modernism and industrialization which in Europe had transformed nineteenth-century Romantic expression into experimental modernism in the 1880s; this uneasy mixture of Romanticism and modernism remained in Canadian values and thought up until the 1960s, producing in Grant, Lee and others what may be called a Romantic modernism.

NOBLE SILENCE OR SURRENDER TO NOTHINGNESS

To live as a Canadian enthralled by the fate of the New World is to experience the "historical amnesia" of advanced industrial societies, says Arthur Kroker paraphrasing Adorno. The statement echoes Grant writing about the "forgetfullness of the 'intimations of deprival' by which the horizon of the historical age might be breached."[46] In "Canadian Fate and Imperialism," Grant advises that to "use the language of fate is to assert that all human beings come into a world they did not choose and live their life within a universe they did not make."[47] The language of fate is useful to Grant, allowing him to say that a "central aspect of the fate of being a Canadian is that our very existing has at all times been bound up with the interplay of various world empires."[48] It is logical to extend this statement from its context in twentieth-century geopolitics to the contemporary dispersal of corporate power over the internet, broadcasting and mass media, and the world-wide fascination and shock that greets this dissemination.

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[46] *Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis, McLuhan, Grant* (Montreal: New World Perspectives 1984): 29
[47] "Canadian Fate and Imperialism," in *Technology and Empire* 63
[48] "Canadian Fate and Imperialism" 63

To be a Canadian today, then, is to be in a situation similar to that of indigenous Middle Easterners or others who feel their identities unravelling in the storm of technological modernity. Kroker notes that our current historical condition is best called terrifying by Lee, who saw the disintegration of the Canadian identity in terms of Grant's understanding of modern dispossession. Kroker's phrase is "Silence is the colonial cadence."[49] He is borrowing a concept from Lee's essay "Cadence, Country, Silence," which is subtitled "writing in colonial space." Grant had written: it "may be that all men are at their core homeless beings. Be that as it may, Nietzsche has shown that homelessness is the particular mark of modern nihilism."[50] This quotation further unites Nietzsche and Grant's New World thinking, but Grant takes his vision of the state of what he calls the "New World" one step further by arguing that we in North America "were homeless long before the mobility of our mobilized technology and the mass nihilism which has been its accompaniment."[51] For Canadians, the silence that greeted us at the advent of the New World emerged before the proliferation of industrial technology, when "our wills were burnished in the battle with the land."[52] There is then a doubling of the sense of homelessness that Grant describes. First is the homelessness that arises from the modern position of never being securely at home as a permanent and unified self; second is the homelessness that settlers have felt in confronting the wilderness, building homesteads that only reflected the European homes from which they had come. Mastering of wilderness, when stripped of its Romantic fascination, summoned a silence

[49] *Technology and the Canadian Mind* 29
[50] "In Defense of North America" 17
[51] "In Defense of North America" 17
[52] "In Defense of North America" 17-18

in which the transcendental homelessness of modernity and the homelessness of New World colonization are fused. Grant describes this fusion:

> That conquering relation to place has left its mark within us. When we go into the Rockies we may have the sense that gods are there. But if so, they cannot manifest themselves to us as ours. They are the gods of another race, and we cannot know them because of what we are, and what we did. There can be nothing immemorial for us except the environment as object. Even our cities have been encampments on the road to economic mastery.[53]

Not finding a way to communicate directly with these gods of the wilderness, Grant falls back instead on a re-imagining, reminiscent of Plato's cave, of the situation he sets forth in "Time as History" (written later in the year of the publication of "In Defense of North America" in *Technology and Empire*):

> Our present is like being lost in the wilderness, when every pine and rock and bay appears to us both known and unknown, and therefore as uncertain pointers on the way back to human habitation. The sun is hidden by the clouds and the usefulness of our ancient compasses has been put in question. Even what is beautiful – which for most men had been the pulley to lift them out of despair – has been made equivocal for us both in detail and definition.[54]

From this Platonic rather than Nietzschean regret, Grant offers the only answer true to classical philosophy that is available to him, which is an appeal to thought: "those who cannot live as if time were history are called, beyond remembering, to desiring and thinking. But this is to say very little. For myself, as probably for most others, remembering can only occasionally pass over into thinking and loving what is good."

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[53] "In Defense of North America" 17
[54] "Time as History" 272

For his part, unrestricted by rational certainty and accountable only to cadence, Lee descended further than Grant allowed himself into the colonial silence and modern homelessness of the Canadian identity. Grant graciously acknowledges this daring at the end of "Dennis Lee – Poetry and Philosophy: "In the apogee of technological science the attention necessary for re-collecting and detrivializing can only be a fearful and consummate act. As an older friend watches Lee at the height of his powers, once cannot help wondering what we will owe him in this re-collecting and detrivializing. Luckily it is nobody's business but his."[55] Lee's act of "re-collecting and detrivializing" which could lead to communication with the lost gods of the wilderness described by Grant, because it does two things. Lee both accepts the wager set by Grant for North Americans to "live their fate, but also to let it come to be thought"[56] and he unites the nihilistic void that accompanies a worldview grounded on change with the spiritual void in which divine spirits at the heart of things might sing for themselves the being of things passing in and out of the world. Lee's act, which takes up the challenge to use poetic language in terms that are Canadian, opens up a liminal space in *Civil Elegies* at the point where he feels the burden of colonial silence the most, and allows communion between all manifestations of void. Yet the speaker is careful to note that we do not have "recourse to void. / For void is not a place, nor / negation of a place."[57] This manifestation of void is the nihilistic void grounded in impermanence which cannot be a place or no-place because void is characterized by ongoing change. But void is also **"**not the cessation of the lone self's burden, crowned with the early nostalgias."[58] Void is also the negative

[55] "Dennis Lee – Poetry and Philosophy" 235
[56] "In Defense of North America" 15
[57] "Elegy Nine" 55
[58] "Elegy Nine" 56

space in which Lee's contemplative inward turns take the speaker, quest-like, towards the religious truth of the speaker's present. The next line advises that void is not "rampant around the corner, endlessly possible," as seems undeniably true at high noon in Nathan Phillips Square where the void is here and now for the speaker, who calls upon us to do the impossible in the line following: to "enter void when void no longer exists."[59] Lee has outlined various ways to accomplish this impossible act. One is to acknowledge that more than one notion of what void can stand for is available to us and that we can pass back and forth from one understanding to the other, entering and cancelling out one instantiation of void at a time, in this way letting the void supplant itself. Lee's speaker also tells us that "best of all" is to find a "place to be / in the early years of a better civilization,"[60] including the metaphysical thinking of Canada's own indigenous communities, and the wisdom of pre-modern thought from around the world, and to bring this knowledge to face the present as its judge. To attempt to live indigenously, or as a pre-modern in modern life, is to "learn to live it all again, depart again– / the storm-wracked crossing, the nervous descent, the barren wintery land, / and clearing a life in the place where I belong."[61] In order to make this new beginning, the speaker in the Ninth Elegy makes a request of the void: "Freely out of its dignity the void must / supplant itself."[62] The speaker calls for void to cease to exist either as a purely contemplative space set apart from civil action, or as an existential response to the impermanence of the world in the hands of creative humanity. He asks void to give up its stranglehold on conditioning how we perceive that which we cannot understand and to join with words

[59] "Elegy Nine" 56
[60] "Elegy Nine" 56
[61] "Elegy Nine" 57
[62] "Elegy Nine" 57

like "god, like the soul." Void must "surrender its ownness, like eternity it must / re-instil itself in the texture of our being here."[63] If void is allowed its place in our present lives, it concedes to us the dignity to negotiate between different understandings of the world not subordinate to void (such as god, soul, and eternity), while also reminding us that there are elements of living which a single worldview cannot command into a whole.

Unfortunately for the speaker of *Civil Elegies*, this call to void comes too late to stop the loss of authentic language: "our most precious words / withdraw," no longer to be "charged with presence again in our lifetime." There is a sanctuary sanctified by void where the silenced voices of wilderness gods may meet the "new nouns" of the poet, such as "water, copout, tower, body, land"[64] and where these words may be heard in their meaningful poetic spirit. This final poetic act, linking new nouns won by poetry out of the void to the spiritual beings of the world in which the civil poet is presently living, is pronounced in the form of an invocation to earthly muses at the *end* of *Civil Elegies* rather than the beginning. This reversal lends the nine elegies a cyclical movement, with the speaker finally calling the Earth to come forth and dispel the homelessness of the modern condition in Canada:

> *Earth, you nearest, allow me.*
> *Green of the earth and civil grey:*
> *within me, without me and moment by*
> *moment allow me for to*
> *be here is enough and earth you*
> *strangest, you nearest, be home*.[65]

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[63] "Elegy Nine" 57
[64] "Elegy Nine" 57
[65] "Elegy Nine" 57

TESTAMENT: THE VOID TRANSFIGURED

The action of coming home to Earth on Earth's own terms and by her invitation disappears from Lee's poetic focus for much of his later poetic career. The theme may disappear from view on account of its being a sentiment particular to the late 60s and because the whole question of Earth and World suddenly becomes complicated by postmodernism, to be dealt with extensively in philosophical prose in *Savage Fields*. After 1972, questions of negative theology, Canadian civil existence, and children's play called Lee to write new poems in new styles. But throughout these changes in subject and craft an indebtedness to Grant's thought remains in various manifestations. Lee, as he did in *Civil Elegies*, takes Grant's thought further than Grant himself had done, yet a feeling of beholdenness to his friend remains. In the new meditative adult poems of *Un*, *Yesno*, and *Testament*, Lee's debt to Grant can still be felt, especially as the theme of the vitality and future of the planet re-emerge on an apocalyptic scale. Lee, of course, takes Grant's guidance in his own way and his own direction for, as Grant remarked, Lee's task is his alone. The best approach to this relationship of Lee and Grant, which as I said at the outset of this chapter is practically collaborative, is to examine how Lee characterized Grant's thinking for himself in the essay "Grant's Impasse" and how Grant's thematic characterizations appear in the arrangedness of *Testament*.

Delivered first at a 1989 conference on Grant at Carleton University, Lee's essay "Grant's Impasse" is many things, including the remembering of a dear friend, a biographical history of a great Canadian thinker, a philosophical treatise, and a mapping of literary influence. Lee lends coherence to Grant's work by exploring the trajectory of a

philosophical problem which Grant wrestled with all of his life. It is perhaps by following a precedent in Hugh Kenner's account of Samuel Beckett[66] that Lee names this problem "Grant's Impasse." That condition pervades the Earth and its species, whose cries have continued to remain unheard by the Earth's human stewards. Lee's response was to see if he could "write a book that did imagine the worst. Not by writing editorials or scientific reports; and certainly not in order to wallow in despair. What I wanted was a book that enacted the movements of the moral imagination as it wrestled with our contemporary fate, and tried to look directly into the heart of darkness."[67] This act of imagining that wrestles with an almost unimaginable catastrophe of our present life on Earth, using the language of fate while looking directly into the night of void, is reminiscent of Grant's thought and Lee's elegies for Canadian civil life. But now Lee's poetic horizon has expanded from a civic square in a Canadian city to planetary apocalypse on a grand scale.

Much of "Grant's Impasse" takes up the central themes of Grant's thought as they have been explained so far, but it is necessary to review them in Lee's own formulation in order to see how he absorbed them into his own thought and let them emerge in his new poetry on their own terms. This updating of Grant's writing, which may provide a twenty-first century legacy for Grant's thought, emerges in *Testament* where it offers radically new insights into our state of spiritual and civil belonging in the twenty-first century.

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[66] In *Flaubert, Joyce, Beckett: The Stoic Comedians* (Boston: Beacon Press 1962): 69-70, Kenner describes Beckett as solving the general problem of an "impasse."

[67] Dennis Lee, Online essay, quoted in "Notes to a Poetics of Earth" 70. The essay was originally posted online at www.anansi.ca/dennis_lee.cfm but has since been removed.

The main thing that Lee says spoke to him in Grant's work was not an idea but an experience: it was "Grant's attempt to articulate something which could scarcely be thought at all within modern assumptions: the reality of being beholden."[68] The term *beholden* appears three times in *Testament* – in the poem "hiatus": "The blank where *evil* held. / The hole called *beholden*;[69] in the poem "ancel," but in the negative: "Deathbreath of the unbeholden";[70] and in "diggity": "What comes / to be is / beholden."[71] With respect to the experience of being beholden in the modern era, Lee says that we do not have "rational categories which allow us to speak of being unprovisionally claimed, beyond all bargain of convenience: of being beholden by the very nature of things."[72] This ineffability, as we have seen, is built into the grammar of modern thought whose "categories have been shaped to parse a world of objective facts and subjective values," and if there is a "truth which can't be accommodated within those specifications, it will remain un-thinkable within the terms of modern rationality."[73] Yet, as Grant saw, it is Lee's task to descend into the void created outside of itself by modern thought and try and give voice to that loss. But what is at stake this time in the wager is the prospect of the *real* disappearance of many of Earth's species by the process of extinction. *Testament* opens with a nightmare about this wasteland caught in the poem "inwreck."

Here, there is a sense of the "dearth" of something the poet does not name, though he plays on the half rhymes of dearth, death, and Earth. God, as the nexus or central point

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[68] "Grant's Impasse" 130
[69] Dennis Lee "hiatus," in *Testament* (Toronto: Anansi 2012): 45
[70] "ancel," in *Testament* 46
[71] "diggity," in *Testament* 112
[72] "Grant's Impasse" 130
[73] "Grant's Impasse" 130

of connection among a system of things ("godnexus"), has disappeared from meaningful discourse, together with the "fate of the land" – the notion of a natural wilderness untouched by human manipulation, both victims of the same modern rationality which promoted the "wordy desyllabification of evil" into objective relativities and subjective value judgments. Yet for a time there remains open, for those like the poet who suffer modernity like a paralysis, a "small / crawlspace for plegics" through which they may enter and descend, in the fashion of Orpheus, into the void where poetry is born. After a tense countdown of "4, 3, 2, 1, un," the speaker summons up the nerve to descend.[74]

After this descent the speaker confronts scrambled nouns such as "Lymphflange and cowsprocket; neurotectonics; organs.com" – all fusions of objects with postmodern techno-jargon matching minds in the continuous state of being "re- / formatted to the new."[75] Modern consciousness, turned outward toward the natural world, views nature as "not merely neutral, but raw material for our use," according to Lee's description of this mindset in "Grant's Impasse." Lee includes under the heading of nature not just "trees and lakes, but other peoples, outer space, our own bodies."[76] This reduction of the natural world to raw material stockpiled for human use is the theme of the poem "brainrays," where "Icecaps shrink in the brainrays. Leaf protocols gone skewy, mind-to- / green ratios a / barbous disproportion."[77] In relation to both inner and outer worlds, the speaker of the poem is lamenting the loss of a poetic language for signifying the state of the Earth's beings. In "names," the speaker acknowledges a fear that the destruction of Earth

[74] "inwreck," in *Testament* 7
[75] "rupture," in *Testament* 8
[76] "Grant's Impasse" 138
[77] "brainrays," in *Testament* 10

could bring about the loss of any subject for poetic language and that names will lose their relationship to the beings of the Earth. The creatures facing extinction cannot be remembered in language. The condition that the "names will end, that the / naming will end" can already be heard in the "Syllabic unhitchings" of contemporary language, accompanied by the mass indifference of the "galactic nevermind" toward these intimations of deprival. Further, the poet's inability to properly name this condition of the modern impasse in poetic language results in "disarticulations of the stilled will"[78] which paralyse that naming.

Lee ascribes the incapacity of modern language to interrogate its own condition of speaking to the first stage of entering Grant's Impasse, where Grant asked the question: "what happens when modern reason tries to criticize its own condition? If technical thought reaches for something beyond itself, something qualitatively different from its own assumptions and techniques, what can it achieve?"[79] Lee then provides Grant's answer: "Any critical thought about technology is bound to reproduce that technology – right in the assumptions and methods of the thinking itself. The attempt will reenact the condition it is trying to judge. We may long to escape the nihilism we're enmeshed in. But we cannot think our way out of it, because we can't stop recreating it in the very texture of our thinking."[80] The early poems in *Testament*, corresponding to the initial stage of *Un*, dwell on this impossibility to think outside of the modern condition, with the hope that by searching the capacities of language to embody the negative, the poet can discover emerging objects calling him to be beholden.

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[78] "names," in *Testament* 22
[79] "Grant's Impasse" 139-140
[80] "Grant's Impasse" 140

The poem "admire" is particularly reminiscent of the call to *let things emerge into being and pass away out of being* with reverence. It nods to the pairing of wilderness and civic life that emerged renewed in *Civil Elegies* in 1972, but in a new poetic language which cautiously locates and names the existence of selected objects: "Totting this / boulder, that cedar, this / street that square, tick by / tock to admire."[81] By affirming the physical existence of these beings, the poet, surrounded by the negative apocalyptic landscape of his imagining, wins back a moment of beholdenness. This intimation of grace leads the speaker to exclaim: "to / be is a bare-assed wonder, and in the / lethal occasions of earth it hunkers blessed."[82] This moment cannot last. It is subject to the modern impasse in which objects proceed into poetic remembering while other "unredeemable names / devolve in their / liminal slouch to abyss."[83] The totting and ticking of the beholden poet in "admire" becomes in "hiatus" a last-ditch effort in the liminal space to "gather the crumbs of hiatus"[84] before these names pass into the abyss. This task in its elusiveness recalls the modernist creed set at the end of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins."[85] Here in Eliot's Wagnerian reimagining of the *Parsifal* Grail myth the speaker is meant like Parsifal to ask about the meaning of the fragments. Since those fragments are latent with spiritual meaning, the curiosity extended to them by the speaker, as Parsifal, represents the promise of regenerating civilization. Lee, in contrast, is more interested in exposing a gap in modernist logic, in a "hole called *beholden*," where the hole "can not be leached from

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[81] "admire," in *Testament* 26
[82] "admire" 26
[83] "hiatus" 45
[84] "hiatus" 45
[85] T.S. Eliot "The Wasteland," in *The Wasteland and Other Poems* (London: Faber and Faber 1968): 43

memory" that in the past the "earth meant otherly."[86] Treating the Earth as otherness, or even acknowledging the rights of other-than-human beings of the Earth, is to take an ethical stance. To allow Earth's species to devolve out of our knowing as autonomous others is an act of evil brought about by the human mind,[87] and by entering deep into the conditions that conjured that industrial act, while acknowledging the evil latent in the intention, is to be on the path to rediscovering a redeemable good. Lee's speaker in *Un* wants to descend as far as possible into this "hole called beholden," into both the forces of good and evil, discovering a source of moral judgment in human acts performed upon the planet. To wrestle "phantom glyphs" out of the void so that they may "resound" again with spirit is to achieve a good.

ETHICAL JUDGMENT OF THE IMPASSE

Lee had described the impasse in Grant's thinking, the knowledge that when modern thought descends into the condition it is trying to judge, that thought cannot re-emerge unchanged by the void it has passed through. This much is well known of Grant, but Lee takes Grant's "disarticulations of stilled will" a stage further into the impasse by noting that Grant uncovered in his thought "two states of checkmate."[88] Lee goes on in his essay to explore these two checkmates, but before doing that he reports an insight into Grant's method. The insight is that in Grant's essays there was a "lot of bad news," but there was "other news as well."[89] Lee chooses in his essay to separate the bad and the good in order

[86] "hiatus" 45
[87] "hiatus" 45
[88] "Grant's Impasse" 140
[89] "Grant's Impasse" 140

to explain Grant's checkmates, but he does not separate them artificially in *Testament*. The emergence of good news, of hope, from the techno-wasteland made visible by Lee's descent in the opening poems of *Testament* marks a significant shift in theme from the opening poems of *Un* to the poems first published in *Yesno*.

Where the *Un* poems descended willingly into the bad, so that some trace of what holds good might be heard, the *Yesno* poems distinguish traces of the good from the bad and places them both on the same poetic field. By holding good and bad together, I mean that both co-exist as poles of value sufficient to allow moral judgment to be exercized. The *Yesno* section of *Testament* attempts, in the poem "noful," to sieve through the contemporary use of language, applying either "yesward" or "noful" to distinguish the good from the bad. The poem alternates "noful" and "yesful" in three lines each, suggesting a layering or simultaneity until they are joined in the final line. For Grant, this act of distinguishing good from bad represented the first stage of his impasse, the attempt to "judge particular techniques"[90] among the developments of technological society. The poem "noful" divides up on one side the techniques (which, being a part of ourselves, also include techniques of being human): "the species lacunae the alphazed shambles," "the corporate borgias the aquagoth vaders," "chromutant the decibel swoosh of warmwarning." On the other side of this imaginary moral ledger are technical developments distinguished as "yesward": "the clearwater improve & biogrit slog," "the stewards emergent in homewhether stab," "the jiminy wakeup in planetude lost."[91] In the last line of "noful," the speaker brings the yes and no, as well as the here and now, back

[90] Grant "Technology and Empire" 141, quoted in "Grant's Impasse" 140
[91] "noful," in *Testament* 80

together, to be measured, strung over a perilous void threatening annihilation: "and noful-but-yesward the herenow & bountyzip nowhere."[92] The difficulty of the first stage of the modernist impasse is that the logic governing this judgment of particular techniques – which are good and should be continued, and which are bad and should be rejected – is the same logic which allows the speaker to arrive only at *solutions* to the impasse, as if only more efficient and more progressive techniques and technology could solve human problems. Lee quotes Grant's late essay "Thinking about Technology" to this effect:

> When we are deliberating in any practical situation our judgement acts rather like a mirror, which throws back the very metaphysic of the technology which we are supposed to be deliberating about in detail. The outcome is almost inevitably a decision for further technological development.[93]

Thinkers who dare to challenge the whole process of ascribing value in a technological society, who realize that technocratic man has "lost sight of something more basic than the effectiveness of a given technique," will inevitably find themselves "tongue-tied."[94] Lee echoes this dead-end checkmate in the poem "DNA," which articulates the faltering of the modern brain to think both "yesward" and "noful" in the face of the technological impasse. We are not equipped to affirm both the yes and no at the same time – having "No DNA for the crunch– we got / neural nothing. No yesno receptors; no template for cosmochaos. / No filter for earthly redamption."[95] Yet despite this impossibility, the speaker knows we somehow have to take the stance of thinking the yes and no simultaneously. The speaker of the *Yesno* poems is back at square one.

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[92] "noful" 80
[93] George Grant "Thinking about Technology" from Grant *Technology and Justice* (Toronto: Anansi 1986), quoted in "Grant's Impasse" 143
[94] "Grant's Impasse" 143
[95] "DNA," in *Testament* 92

There was a second attempt by Grant to break out of the impasse, to attempt to conceive the other-than-technological reality which Grant felt he was deprived of. This second attempt plunged him into what Lee denominates as "white space, unthinkability, ground zero."[96] We have seen this white space before in the discussion of void and in the poem "names." In the "second stage," Lee argues, "we can find we can no longer *name* – not in the world of public discourse, predictable enough; but scarcely even to ourselves – the thing we lack."[97] This incapacity to name, which "engenders an all-but-withering despair," makes modern thinkers "mute as rational beings, even in the privacy of our best intuitions." Whereupon "the nihilism of the modern project seems complete."[98] While Lee articulates this impasse as a philosophical endgame won by modern nihilism, he also leaves room for Grant's alternatives to this condition.

The first alternative, despite the impotence of thinking outside of the bounds of technical progress, is that we should "work at the practical level to achieve good ends – or at least limit evil ones."[99] This ordinary ameliorative behaviour is shown in "noful." Moreover, we should pay attention to moments in our lives that point to a "different reality from anything technology knows of,"[100] even if we cannot directly put the experience in words. This attentiveness to moments of being beholden is rewarded by the poet of *Testament* with a "central *yes* of confirmation [as] when we witness an act of pure integrity, be it public or private." An emergent *yes*, free from its negative, appears briefly

[96] "Grant's Impasse" 144
[97] "Grant's Impasse" 144
[98] "Grant's Impasse" 144
[99] "Grant's Impasse" 148
[100] "Grant's Impasse" 148

in "whatcan" as the "original yes."[101] However, this affirmative response is called in response to an experience which is not prepared for by Grant, but by Lee's reflection on Grant.

Lee notes that Grant's stance toward the impasse reveals its deepest meaning in that the "desolation it produced was the mark of our fittedness for good." The opposite position is to believe there is no impasse – which would be worst of all: "to live in a hell and not know it. It would mean we had reneged on our glimpses of saving knowledge."[102] In his new poetry, Lee makes the effort praised by Grant to imagine this hell on Earth, and calls his readers to do good toward the planet, but in doing so he also takes Grant's thought in a different direction. That different direction is the "necessity of reconceiving modern thought itself."[103] What Lee calls for is a

> still-undiscovered form of relativity, where everything that is – external world and consciousness alike – exists in the order of necessity, and can be analyzed across the board as structured and value-free; and at the same time, everything exists in the order of good and evil, beholdenness, the categorical claim of truth. The world is factual; the world is meaningful; both truths are true.[104]

Beyond distilling the good out of the evil, Lee holds two or more alternative worldviews together in a state of overlap, both offering a claim to truth. The original yes affirms both realities simultaneously, because, as shown in "what can," the "original yes" emerges as a response out of the co-presence of the modern and the non-modern confronting Earth's ruin: "What can, cog- / nostic with earthwrack, be / (who?ishly) known to co- / here

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[101] "whatcan," in *Testament* 95
[102] "Grant's Impasse" 151
[103] "Grant's Impasse" 153
[104] "Grant's Impasse" 157

co-now with the / ratiosacral flex of / original yes?"[105] The form of modern reason "worthy of the name" of co-presence with the "original yes" would be one that could "move responsibly among two or more dimensions of polyphasic truth."[106] Lee performs an example of this polyphasic logic in "biscript." The language of this poem blurts and scrapes, performing an "earthscan in biscript" or a "doublespeak" which itches to "parse with a two-tongued heart."[107] The purpose of this polyphonic language in *Testament* is to "praise with a broken art."[108]

But even though he formulates his own answer to Grant's impasse, transforming the impasse from an arresting state to a productive one, Lee gives a final nod to Grant by recognizing one of the philosopher's intuitions as pivotal. This is: "we would do well to begin, not from general doctrines or theories, but from our everyday experience of non-provisory claiming in the everyday world."[109] It is out of the experience of being claimed that one comes to the polyphasic truth that all things one is beholden to co-exist in multiple spheres of truth or worldview. This hypothesis is performed in the action of "diggity" where "things wriggle free of their names" as shackled in the order of modern truth, and begin to assume co-presence with "Squiggles of *ing* on a / field of native null."[110] As these free-beings begin to gain dynamism and intensity, they are allowed to "lurch to / protobang" and claim our attention with a joyous and laughing

[105] "whatcan" 95
[106] "Grant's Impasse" 157
[107] "biscript," in *Testament* 97
[108] "biscript" 97
[109] "Grant's Impasse" 157
[110] "diggity," in *Testament* 112

"aeonic ah- / *ha!*" and the exclamation: "What comes / to be is / beholden."[111] Our response to these things by which we are beholden illuminates our knowledge of ourselves as beings capable of plurality of thought and of existing on a planet that is diverse. In Lee's words: "All we would need is a passion to identify things by which we know ourselves, experientially, to be claimed."[112]

The ultimate call to human beings to look for experiences which show that truths and logic can move polyphastically between plural orders of truth is given in the poem called "*yesno*." To inhabit the liminal space where one may negotiate between truths, to open up a dynamic creative space on the planet as our proper home, is to "habitate crossbeing / to ride both reals at once."[113] As in "galore," it is here that "nouns ignite" moving in the "dance they denote" so long as they are "co-phonic, Co-founded. Cofoundered."[114] These new poems on the state of the planet's health in the twenty-first century provide a home for Grant's thought in twenty-first century discussions of technology.

But this is only one reading of these passionately complex poems, and does not account for what hope lies in a polyphasic approach to greeting Earth's species crying out in woe, calling for human beings to recognize the coming environmental apocalypse. What does this situation do to poetic language itself? The nihilism of modernity greets the language of a non-modern hope in such a way that, as mentioned in the poem

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[111] "diggity" 112
[112] "Grant's Impasse" 157
[113] "*yesno*," in *Testament* 125
[114] "galore" in *Testament* 128

"galore," "hope disorders words."[115] As we have heard Lee mention in a number of contexts, when confronting void the modern poet is necessarily driven into either meaningless language or profound silence. In order for poetic language to play a role beyond unifying existence in a single philosophical viewpoint, the babbling and silence must be transformed, just as void and the modern impasse have been transformed, into a poetic language that uses nonsense and nothingness to reclaim a privileged place – a privileged place for poetry as the reflection of politics, the entire planet's state of affairs.

[115] "galore," 128

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The Transformation of Nonsense and Silence

POETICS IN TRANSITION

Following the publication of *Civil Elegies* in 1972, Lee withdrew from House of Anansi Press and took note of what he and other writers of his generation were doing. A new poetics was in the air, released in part by what would come to be called postmodernism and in part by a cultural nationalism that, like George Grant's *Technology and Empire* (1969) and Thomas H.B. Symons's *To Know Ourselves* (1975), defined Canada as an alternative to the American experiment in nation-building. To Lee, this poetics was imminent in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Loser*s (1966), where the force of the American imperium was personified in the character "F," a Nietzschean with the view that since technological modernity denied access to Being, then the only path to salvation lay in a masochistic embrace of the full experience of mastery through technique. And the new poetics was clear in the lethal, machine-like purity of the hero of Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970). What was unclear was how this new aesthetic, which Lee was participating in himself, was related to the Romantic modernism that he inherited from Grant and Heidegger. To ask the question that Lee undoubtedly asked himself in the 1970s, was this new poetics an extension of literary modernism, perhaps a radical literary modernism, or was it a poetics that broke the modernist impasse to touch an as yet unnamed non-modernism?

Grant, as we have seen, supported the first interpretation, responding in 1974 to an early draft of Lee's critique of Cohen and Ondaatje: "Your purpose is to show that these novels are a new form of *poiesis* to distinguish them from other forms of *poiesis*. At the same time, Cohen (as you so brilliantly show) is saying things of the most universal character about being. Cohen's appreciation of *poeisis* is within a particularly modern account of being which is modern in its very account of the horror of modernity."[1] In the 1970s, there was no precedent for the second interpretation – a non-subjective poetics oriented toward ontology – unless one was able to translate such a poetics out of indigenous literary texts. Grant's next sentence identifies Lee's problem and his own: "Therefore, when you ask me for theoretical books about *poiesis*, I am in a difficulty." Obviously a lot depends on how a thinker defines the term *Being*. As Grant suggests, following Heidegger, even to use the term is to place oneself in the modernist paradigm. Perhaps that is one of the several reasons why Lee does not define Being. Instead, he does the next best thing and defines, in evolving formulations, the idea of cadence – the kineaesthetic quality given off by a thing or being as it impacts on the body of the poet in real or remembered time. Because of Lee's constant deference to this experience throughout his career, the critic can witness him constructing a new poetics (modernist or non-modernist) by studying the concepts that cadence associates itself with after 1972. Foremost among those concepts, as we will see, is silence, or, to be precise, the *choice* between silence and nonsense – the only possible authentic responses to the condition of Grant's Impasse. What if in the movement of a poetics closer to the void there came a

[1] "George Grant to Dennis Lee, 10 June 1974," in *George Grant: Selected Letters* 275

point where silence and nonsense overlap? Then we would have a different poetics from the one that Lee started out with. I am going to propose that this is what happened over an intellectually stressful period when Lee wrote several drafts of *Savage Fields: An Essay in Literature and Cosmology*, sending a version to Grant in 1974 and finally publishing the book in 1977 (it is referred to in the next chapter). During this period, Lee published a body of children's nonsense verse that he had begun writing in 1965. *Alligator Pie* was published in 1974, two years after *Civil Elegies*; *Garbage Delight* was published in 1977, the same year as *Savage Fields*. But before pursuing the intellectual biography of *cadence*, the term, it is necessary, in order to mark a starting point for Lee's transition to an alternative to classical modernism, to posit his poetic assumptions around the year 1972.

ROMANTIC MODERNISM AND THE EXAMPLE OF RILKE

The poet as medium of energies occurring in poetic language, because those energies occur in the cosmos, is a figure of Romanticism with its interest in natural language theories. Herder writes in his "Essay on the Origin of Language" (1772): "And even within us, where reason to be sure often displaces emotion, where the sounds of nature are dispossessed by the artificial language of society – do not with us the highest thunders of rhetoric, the mightiest bolts of poetry, and the magic moments of action [that is, drama], come close to the language of nature by imitating it?"[2] This sentiment, when echoed by the English Romantic poets, especially Coleridge, involves a supernatural, not

[2] Johann Gottfried Herder "Essay on the Origin of Language" (1772), in Bruns *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1974): 49

a natural, source for a so-called *energeia* or activity that is thought to resonate on occasion in a poet's soul and language but is otherwise silenced by the noise of industrial society. The notion survives into modernism in the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, one of Lee's spirit-guides. Rilke is worth elaborating here, because he defines the fate of the poet at the modernist impasse in a way that anticipates Lee at Grant's Impasse. Rilke simulates on the page the withheld mysteries of spiritual voices together with the stuttering tongues which attempt to welcome these voices. In the opening of *Duino Elegies*, his speaker famously wonders if by crying out to "angelic orders" he would be heard, and, if heard, would he be able to endure the terror and awe of their "stronger existence."[3] Turning from this impasse to the material world for available poetic subjects, the speaker notes that poetic customs and images have lost their power to "promise a meaning in some human future."[4] Yet the speaker also hears breathing voices on the wind, coupled with the "uninterrupted news that forms from silence," pulling him away from the ground of the Earth.[5] The speaker mediates this gravitational push-and-pull towards and away from the ground of the world for most of the remaining elegies until he decisively questions the destiny of the poet in the ninth elegy.

Here in the ninth elegy, the speaker welcomes the human being as a dweller on Earth compelled by the fleeting nature of life, by the suffering uniqueness of each being whose fate it is only to appear once and never again. The speaker is vexed that despite the fact of this perishing singular existence, human beings try to achieve a lasting permanence on Earth. Rilke's speaker characterizes this as an attempt to contain the

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[3] Rainer Maria Rilke *Duino Elegies,* translated by Edward Snow (New York: North Point 2000): 5
[4] *Duino Elegies* 9
[5] *Duino Elegies* 7

spiritual voices of the cosmos within "our voiceless heart" and "hold onto it forever."[6] For Rilke's poet, the "purely unsayable things" like the labour of a life or the totality of the experience of love are universal even if they cannot be spoken, and perhaps the modern poet, like Lee's speaker at the end of *Civil Elegies*, is here "just for saying" of the names of the beings and things of the world, such as "*house, bridge*" and "*column, tower*."[7] Rilke's speaker anticipates a realization by Lee that while the unsayable should be noted by the poet, "*here* is the time for the sayable, *here* is its home."[8] By *here*, the speaker means the place where the things we live with in the world are falling away, their place being filled by a human "will without image."[9] The poet should "speak and attest" to this state of loss at the place where human will is reshaping the ground of language. In the silences between the hammer-strokes of human will, the heart and the tongue persevere in praising the world to the angels even as the image of the world as a sacred being recedes. By this determined poetic act the things of the world are kept alive as part of us in poetry.

THE POET AS NIGHT WATCHMAN

Since Lee read Heidegger, it is also useful to acknowledge the influence of Rilke as Heidegger presents him. Describing the purpose of Rilke's poetry, Heidegger writes that the venturesome poet experiences openly what is unholy to the modern soul, so that he can bring to mortals "the trace of the fugitive gods" by following the track of the fleeing

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[6] *Duino Elegies* 53
[7] *Duino Elegies* 55
[8] *Duino Elegies 55*
[9] *Duino Elegies 55*

gods into the "dark of the world's night."[10] To venture into the dark night of the imagination and sing of what can be held despite that thing's impermanence in the world: this is the option left to "poets in a destitute time."[11] The mark of such poets is that for them the "nature of poetry becomes worthy of questioning."[12] As poet-philosopher of a destitute time, Rilke orients his song-poems towards the questions: to what purpose is he a poet, "whither his song is bound, and where the poet belongs in the destiny of the world's night."[13] Heidegger draws his question "what are poets for in a destitute time?" from the poem "Bread and Wine" by Hölderlin, a poet he regards as Rilke's precursor. In his elegy on "The Death of Harold Ladoo" Lee quotes this question of Hölderlin's, applying it to himself and to the memory of his murdered friend and writer:

> *For often now at night*
> *when the stillness begins to*
> *tick, or if I take on too many meetings,*
> *there is a question, not my own, which stymies my life:*
> *'What good are poets in a time of dearth?'*
> *Hölderlin asked that, master of poets. Who knew.*
> *But I just get embarrassed.*
> *Alienation and Integration: The Role of the Artist in Modern Society.*
> *Panel at 8, Discussion 8:30, Refreshments.*[14]

Lee places himself as poet, and Ladoo as subject, in the still night of the world which Rilke wanders deep into in order to sing – the same night that gives Hölderlin strength: "frenzy, / Wandering, helps, like sleep; Night and distress make us strong / Till in that cradle of steel heroes enough have been fostered, / Hearts in strength can match heavenly

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[10] Martin Heidegger "What Are Poets For?" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper 1975): 141
[11] Heidegger "What Are Poets For?" 141
[12] Heidegger "What Are Poets For?" 141
[13] Heidegger "What Are Poets For?" 142
[14] Lee "The Death of Harold Ladoo," in *The Gods* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart 1979): 52

strength as before."[15] The silent pagan time of night assists both of Lee's poet-guides in persuading the gods to be held in the delicate vessel of poetry, though poetry cannot always contain them because, in the words of Hölderlin, only at "times can our kind bear the full impact of gods."[16] Lee acknowledges this power to "speak in the silence"[17] of night, yet he simultaneously shows how that capacity is mocked by "too many meetings"[18] and "the gab of the age."[19] He brings together meditative silence and the everyday babbling which define the oral horizons of the poet in modernity. Through that combination of silence and noise, the poet realizes that the gods are "not dead, they stalk among us, grown murderous,"[20] given the opportunity in a time of dearth to surface on earth only in "hellish politics, in towering minds, / entranced by pure technique, and in an art refined by / carnage and impotence, where only form is real."[21] If in favour with the gods, the poet becomes a priestly medium singing from his position in limbo to address the condition of the modern world, only to "bludgeon the corpse for signs of life, achieving / impossible feats of resuscitation" only to "pronounce it dead again."[22] In this way, modernist poetry is diagnostic of itself, at once naming the symptoms and being part of the disease. Poetry that does not take up this obligation to its time is, at least to the speaker of the elegy on Harold Ladoo, "deaf and blind, a coward's pastorale."[23] This is what Lee means when he updates the role of the poet in a destitute time in "biscript" in

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[15] Friedrich Hölderlin "Bread and Wine," in *Poems and Fragments*, translated by Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil 2004): 327
[16] Hölderlin "Bread and Wine 325
[17] "The Gods" 32
[18] "The Death of Harold Ladoo" 52
[19] "The Gods" 32
[20] Lee "The Death of Harold Ladoo" 53
[21] Lee "The Death of Harold Ladoo" 53
[22] Lee "The Death of Harold Ladoo" 53
[23] Lee "The Death of Harold Ladoo" 54

Testament, calling the poet to "praise with a broken art."[24] To write poetry despite everything, even if the words on the page turn out to utter only nonsensical babble or meanings hidden in silences, is the duty of a poet in a time of dearth. This is the picture of the poet drawn for Lee by the high modernism of Rilke and Heidegger. They could in the storm of modernity still speak of an Earth and World and Sky, and Lee would hang on to this post-classical cosmos even as it imploded in his mind while writing *Savage Fields*. To witness Lee approach the nothingness that is generated and barely contained by modernity is to watch him trying to capture the void in those two positions left to highminded poets: silence and nonsense. Now I will go back where I began, to the term *cadence*, to trace the history of its alteration.

GENEALOGIES OF CADENCE

Lee suggests that it is necessary to view his poetry at any period of his life as the instance of a poetics or set of principles guiding a poetic practice and to survey this chosen poetics over the course of his career as a poet. He does so himself by his lifelong habit of writing an essay reflecting on a volume of his poetry soon after it is published, and by adhering throughout these essays to the core poetic term *cadence*. He is always undertaking an experiment when he writes serious poetry and discovering what he has achieved after the fact. If we were to put together these various self-critical essays written over the years, we might have a sense of a whole *trajectory* of Lee's experimentation.

Characteristically, Lee has already offered this overview in the unpublished

[24] Lee "biscript," in *Testament* 97

typescript of his Ralph Gustafson Lecture given at Vancouver Island University on 17 October, 2012. Here, he traces the history of his struggle with cadence from the time of *Civil Elegies*, when it animated long lines and phrasing groups, up to the time of *Testament* when cadence is active in isolated words. The aim of this chapter is to understand the implications of a poetics of cadence meeting pure language, but to understand it in a broader context than the one initiated by Lee who, in acting as his own literary critic, is drawn to the direct experience of apprehending cadence or what we might call the phenomenology of the creative process. In relation to the broader context, the term *cadence* belongs to literary modernism as much as it belongs to Lee. It can be found in "Music and Literature," a lecture given by Stéphane Mallarmé at Oxford (1 March, 1894) and Cambridge (2 March, 1894), where it means *rhythm*. Because there is in the cosmos a "universal musicality," the poet according to Mallarmé should not describe the material world in the fashion of Realism but "seize relationships and intervals, however few or multiple," to "conceive an object in its fleeting moment, its absence."

> To do this, we simply compare its facets and dwell lightly, negligently upon their multiplicity. We conjure up a scene of lovely, evanescent, intersecting forms. We recognize the entire and binding arabesque thus formed as it leaps dizzily in terror or plays disquieting chords; or, through a sudden digression (by no means disconcerting), we are warned of its likeness unto itself even as it hides. Then when the melodic line has given way to silence, we seem to hear such themes as are the very logic and substance of our soul.

The task is made easier because cadence is said to pre-exist the natural poetry of language, so that "verse is everything, from the moment we take pen in hand. As long as there is cadence, there will be style and versification [*Style, versification s' il ya a*

cadence]. That is why the careful prose of discriminating writers – ornamental prose – can always be thought of as broken verse; it plays with its own tones and hidden rhythms [*les rimes dissimulées*], like a thyrsus of infinite complexity."[25]

The rhythms Mallarmé speaks of are the presence in poetic language of a "great symphony"[26] which can perhaps never be reached but can be tuned in more clearly "when human language has been reduced to its essential rhythm."[27] In one letter, he experiences a particular thought as the subject of a "vibration, that is, an impression" and from that physical resonance in his chest he begins a poem. All these phenomena lead into Nothingness which surrounds a poetic utterance: "My work was created only by *elimination*, and each newly acquired truth was born only at the expense of an impression which flamed up and burned itself out, so that its particular darkness could be isolated and I could venture ever more deeply into the sensation of Darkness Absolute."[28] These sentiments, minus the dialectic of the One and the many in which they are framed, are in a tradition with Lee's *cadence*, without being a direct influence.

First mentioned by Lee in an essay in 1972, the concept of *cadence* becomes progressively defined over forty years by the different kinds of poetic experimentation in which it is found. There are four periods of experimentation, each marked by a published volume and by its companion essay. Accordingly, in reflecting on *Civil Elegies*, "Cadence, Country, Silence" denominates cadence as the energy of a thing's presence,

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[25] "Music and Literature," in *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays and Letters*, translated by Bradford Cook (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1956): 45, 44, 48
[26] "Letter to Paul Valéry, 5 May, 1891," in *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays & Letters* 102
[27] "Letter to Léo d'Orfer, 27 June, 1884," in *Mallarmé* 99
[28] "Letter to Eugène Lefébure, 17 May, 1867," in *Mallarmé* 96

apprehended kinaesthetically in the poet's body. While silent itself, cadence "chooses" or "seeks" to issue in a poem's movements, its "articulate gestures of being."[29] This is Heideggerean language, as is the information that cadence can go mute in poets and other subjects suffering the conditions of colonization. The empire of technological modernity is one such colonization. Next, accompanying Lee's children's verse of the 1970s, the essay "Roots and Play" extends cadence to include the rhythms heard in the speech patterns of a population – in this case, children of a specific culture. Cadence exists at a deep level in the "release of animal energy" that animates nursery rhymes, skipping songs, nonsense verse and other forms of "play."[30] Belonging to the same creative period is the pairing of *The Gods* with "Polyphony: Enacting a Meditation" which speaks of a *plurality* of cadences – the tonalities of various beings existing in relation to each other. Scored on the page in modulations of a speaking voice or sometimes voices (not as arm's-length lyric monologue), cadence as polyphony registers the presences of thing-beings, while transforming the space they stand in from alien expanse to resonant place.[31] Next, in company with *Riffs* (1993) and *Nightwatch* (1996), "The Luminous Tumult" compares cadence to the melodic improvisations of jazz soloists. Lee's short spontaneous poetic equivalents have "almost no distance on the experience they're about; at their riffiest, they aren't about the experience at all – they *are* the experience."[32] Across four decades, from the long monumental lines of *Civil Elegies* to the brief intimacies of *Riffs*, Lee handles the word *cadence* with reverence. In 2012, reflecting on his twenty-first

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[29] Dennis Lee "Cadence, Country, Silence," in *Body Music* (Toronto: Anansi 1998): 5, 25. First published in *Open Letter*, series 2, number 6 (Fall 1973)
[30] Dennis Lee "Roots and Play," in *Body Music* 42. First published in *Canadian Children's Literature* 4 (1976)
[31] Dennis Lee "Polyphony: Enacting a Meditation," in *Body Music* 51-70. Originally published as "Enacting a Meditation" in the *Journal of Canadian Poetry* 2.1 (Winter 1979)
[32] Dennis Lee "The Luminous Tumult," in *Body Music* 169. Based on an interview by Donna Bennett and Russell Brown in *Poetry Canada Review* 14.2 (1994)

century poetry in the Gustafson Lecture, Lee continues to define cadence as the existence of a thing as it may be heard in the beauty of its motion – "the pulsing coherence of what-is, transmitted as a rich untamed array of kinaesthetic frequencies." Cadence communicates "the energies of things being themselves – of their being-at-all."[33]

BIOGRAPHY OF SILENCE

Cadence is inseparable from a second concept that comes into play as early as 1973 and is named in the title of Lee's critical essay of that year as *silence*. "Cadence, Country, Silence" reflects on the conditions of the writing of *Civil Elegies*, reporting that after publishing the first draft of that sequence in 1968, three years passed in which Lee's ability to put even twenty words on a page would cause him to wince at their "palpable stiffness and falsity."[34] Because he had been engaging cadence as a civil poet, he had to confront those forces in civil space – the space in which men and women are political animals – that were causing him to be alienated and inarticulate. For a Canadian public poet in the 1960s, the political condition that silenced authentic speech was the re-colonization of Canada by the American economic and technological empire. The poet in colonized space is thrown into a position of homelessness first-hand. Attempting to explore the condition in poetry, then, is to discover that "*words* of home are silent."[35] There is no language with which to express the feelings of civil belonging that accompany the experience of being at home in one's own land, and the danger of this

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[33] Dennis Lee "Re-Greening the Undermusic" Unpublished typescript of the Gustafson Lecture given at Vancouver Island University, 17 October 2012, p. 18
[34] "Cadence, Country, Silence" 9
[35] "Cadence, Country, Silence" 18

silence is that a poet may lose poetic language entirely. Yet in this state of contradiction, with silence polarized against voice, it may happen that the poet experiences a transcendence in which silence and voice are discovered to be necessary partners that make each other possible.

This is the argument of Ann Munton, who explores silence in Lee's early work. She shows that in the 1967 *Kingdom of Absence*, his first published book, Lee employs the conventional voicings of absence inherited from British literary tradition as found in sonnets and other traditional verse forms which he moodily imitates. He engages these conventional techniques and sentiments to the point of exhausting them, then becomes open to the silence that comes to a poet who stands outside a received literary tradition for the first time. Munton argues that this was the process by which Lee developed in his own poetic voice the phenomenon she calls *simultaneity*[36] first heard in the 1972 *Civil Elegies*. Simultaneity is the voicing together of silence and cadence arising from the condition of tongue-tied political belonging of Grant's impasse.

With *The Gods*, Lee's next book of experimental poetry, cadence confronts two impasses to the articulation of poetry. The first impasse involves an "alien reality"[37] such as that allegedly populated by animal spirits. The imagination "snickers" and "stammers, it races and churns" in a playful, sometimes nonsensical language by which the poet addresses these beings while bereft of a "common syntax" in which they can be named. This impasse widens into a second and larger impasse involving the secularizing nature

[36] Ann Munton "Simultaneity in the Writings of Dennis Lee," in *Tasks of Passion: Dennis Lee at Mid-Career* (Toronto: Descant 1982): 145
[37] "The Gods," in *The Gods* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart) 1979): 29

of modern language. The speaker of "The Gods" cannot make the polyphonic world of the gods emerge as an imaginative reality because language in the condition of modernity offers the poet no choice but to "speak in silence" or "squeak in the gab of the age."[38] The speaker is aware of both the rapid and meaningless production of noise or "Hallmark gabble" and of the contrasting inability of silence to articulate the "time and dimensions" of the gods' "naked incursions"[39] into the speaker's reality. Ultimately, the speaker achieves, in Munton's phrase, a position of *simultaneity* in relation to this choice and stands inbetween everyday gab and reverent silence as he searches for meaningful poetic utterance. This position is described by Lee in a famous phrase arising out of Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin: "to hold the ground in the nothing of the night." That stoic choice places Lee's speaker in a fatal positions at the mercy of both the "shrunken time" of the speaker's professed faith (if any) and of the invisibility of gods (if any) who "strike the measure" of the speaker's existence and yet whom the speaker cannot come to know.[40]

Lee's poetic stoicism undergoes shifts in content and form over the course of his mid-career. The cadences of the 1993 *Riffs* express the speakers memories of shared personal ecstasy with a lover in belonging and non-belonging to one another in various ways, and this outpouring of feeling overflows into moments of authentic connection with the world. In his essay on Ezra Pound, titled "For and Against Pound: Polyphony and Ekstatic Form," written about the time *Riffs* was conceived, Lee defines *ek-stasis* according to its Greek etymology as a "standing-out-of – by the experience of intense value" when the promise of a livable external world is renewed, regaining its sense as a

[38] "The Gods" 32
[39] "The Gods" 32
[40] "The Gods" 32

place where human beings can be at home.[41] Both of these fields of ecstatic experience correspond to moments of epiphany when an "intense experience of value" toward objects and beings emerges out of a world in which it had not been possible beforehand to know if these things were "innately valuable, valuative, or meaningful."[42] The vocal phrases of *Riffs* explore ecstatic cadences together with their stoppages in babbling miscommunication and increasingly extended silences. The dramatic action of the poem is mirrored in the 62nd riff where the two lovers of the poem go "from silence, / nothing to / words to back to back to silence."[43] Sometimes this silence is welcomed because the feeling of ecstatic connection is so shattering – the speaker is "relieved we could not speak."[44] Sometimes the speaker wishes for a chance for the lovers to share a silent moment, announcing that "when we sit down to gab, I get / babel and urspeak."[45] Silence can also be debilitating when communication collapses into triviality and persistent boredom, as is the experience for Lee's speaker when words go "yack."[46] He proclaims that "I happen in the spaces," or the silence between words, but then acknowledges that when "life goes mute again," he has "no place to be"[47] except in the heart of the other lover. Trusting to a home-place in the heart of an other creates a dangerous "recalcitrant wholeness,"[48] where living and speaking have been broken apart into tense fragments and brief epiphanies, to be recast as an uncanny unity wrought with fissures and fault-lines. The speaker in this state is glad that he "could not speak," and broods about whether the

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[41] Dennis Lee "For and Against Pound: Polyphony and Ekstatic Form" in *Open Letter: Long-liners Conference Issue*, edited by Frank Davey and Ann Munton. Vancouver: Sixth Series 2-3 (Summer-Fall 1985): 194
[42] "For and Against Pound: Polyphony and Ekstatic Form" 194
[43] Dennis Lee *Riffs* (London: Brick 1993): 45
[44] *Riffs* 48
[45] *Riffs* 7
[46] *Riffs* 43
[47] *Riffs* 43
[48] *Riffs* 48

love affair was even a "*ping* on the face of silence?"[49]

In 2012, as we saw, Lee still continues to define cadence in relation to the "being-at-all"[50] of things. Against this constancy, there is over the same four decades a progressive minimalization of language in Lee's art, the silencing of certain cadences in phrases and individual words and the emergence of new speaking voices, which he describes in terms of a movement from one voice in his early poetry to two voices in *Civil Elegies* to "a whole panoply of voices" in his late work[51] – the more voices, the fewer words. And silence? It begins to be felt not as the impasse in the articulation of voice that may be overcome by cadence but as the nothingness in which a poem stands, felt in the spaces with which the lines of the poem seem to move, the spaces that *make* the lines move. The multiplication of cadence, the vibrations of more entities in relationship, requires the move toward silence brought about by the subtraction of verbal material. This principle of an economy of mediation brings us to the critical question of this chapter. What happens when language begins to be subtracted altogether? Then, theoretically, a point will have been reached where the void is transformed: no longer the nothingness of absolute silence, the void becomes the opening into a nonsensical undermusic which meets the assumed silence of the poet imitating the quiet of his language. These two forces, silence and nonsense, overlap, pushing and pulling Lee's poetic language into simultaneous processes of degeneration and regeneration. For the remainder of this chapter I will describe this state of play, which is the key to the poetics in which Lee's new poetry can be appreciated.

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[49] *Riffs* 48
[50] "Re-Greening the Undermusic" 18
[51] Lee "Re-Greening the Undermusic" 16

THE NEGATIVE OF LANGUAGE

In his *Un*, *Yesno*, and *Testament* poems, Lee confronts the silent void behind language in association with an earthly future without much hope, other than perhaps a fool's hope. One can distinguish a coherence in Lee's encounter with the void in the first of these volumes, with the poet-speaker monitoring the collapse of a familiar and traditional Orphic speech linking him to nature. Language in these poems is transformed in order to account for the loss of the direct relationship of words to things. Out of this de-signification, the speaker has begun to search for a new lexicon that matches the state of mixed-up genetic processes deforming and reforming the natural world. This is the subject of the poem "slub" which also introduces the first sequence of poems in *Testament*:

> *I want verbs of a slagscape thrombosis.*
> *Syntax of chromosome pileups.*
> *Make me*
> *slubtalk; gerundibles; gummy embouchure.*[52]

Lee's speaker calls for a language that can account for a landscape of slag (slagscape), for genetic manipulation or cancerous cell growth (chromosome pileups), for a linguistic word flow that resembles life-blood thickening and clotting in possible heart attack (thrombosis). When spoken, this language might sound like a saxophonist playing with a mouth full of gum (gummy embouchure), or speaking while drawing out the words and twisting them, like making a thick knotted nub in a thread (slubtalk). These verbs do not appeal to common sense. For instance in "inlingo," Lee turns "scrag" into "scraggy,"

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[52] "slub" in *Testament* 9

positioning his new word halfway between scrag (to roughly handle or beat up) and scraggly (thin or bony in appearance) to describe the state of the "lingo lost" that is poetic language.[53] This lost speech is hidden in the "thickets of / glitch & scrawn" that govern everyday use of language in the twenty-first century. The poet-speaker's hope is that underneath this computational lexicon he may hear muted voices where cadence dwells. To reach it, the poet enters language beneath signification and finds significations actively colliding together to transform that language. Lee's metaphor for this downward search is that of explorers of underwater caves who "hopalong / underword, head for no exit, /grapshrapnel yore spelunking."[54] In an inversion of the myth of Orpheus as the primordial namer, the poet searches in the negative space of language, in the "underword," for a "Fractal untongue."[55] The act of "untongue" is an undoing of the habitual speech so that the poet might find a new tongue in which to speak.

Thus, Lee's speaker in *Testament* moves from articulating the speech beneath the body of language in the negative (as in "inlingo"), towards reaching a new affirmative name for this kind of speech (as in in "galore"). He names it "Lingotectonics" and ties this tongue to hope: "If hope disorders words, let / here be where. / Lingotectonics. Gondwana nar- / ruption vocale."[56] The shift of naming from the negative (un-) to the positive (hope, Lingotectonics) of a future for poetic speech suggests there is a further project, beyond the reconstituting of Grant's thinking, developing throughout *Testament*. This project, marked sectionally by the poems of *Un*, *Yesno*, and new poems added to the

[53] "inlingo" in *Testament* 33
[54] "inlingo"
[55] "inlingo"
[56] "galore" in *Testament* 128

new volume, is a single poetic meditation whose trajectory dramatizes what happens in the "underword" that is the home of cadence, where out of the negative an affirmation arises.

POLYPHONIC CADENCE OF THE LIFE-WORLD

The underworld home of our authentic being can be better heard if with twentieth-century phenomenology we understand ourselves to be bodies in or of Earth. As such, we are entangled in the multitudes of relationships and sensations affecting countless bodies in what Husserl denominated as the *Lebenswelt* – the "life-world." Husserl, as far as I know, did not speak of the play of these relationships and affects as a musicality, though Mallarmé did and Lee certainly does, especially in his essay "Body Music." In these terms, Lee's new poetry can be said to embody the energies of cadence transforming poetic language on the level of Earth. Lee's earlier notions of cadence creating new poetic language are described as occurring on the level of the body. "Body Music" approaches these questions through a study of the crisis of traditional metre in English-language poetry after 1850 as it gave rise to an idea of local coherence in the modernist poem and in the cosmos. The term *cadence* is used only twice, being replaced elsewhere in the essay by the term *body music*: "Body music is the mind of poetry. Its rhythms think who we are and what the world is"[57]; for the poet it is also "the inner experience of kinaesthetic rhythm, when there is no literal stimulus to the muscles."[58] This under-music hums in the interiority of the body, in the natural creative and destructive resonance of

[57] Lee "Body Music," in *Body Music* 227
[58] "Body Music" 214

Earth, and in the depths beneath words. These resonances of the interplay of worldly systems in flux are felt by the poet as a "kintuition," defined as the "capacity to register rhythm with no identifiable mediation, direct or indirect."[59] In regard to the range of "kintuitive" response to these polyrhythms, Lee expands his definition of "Body Music" to include both the "kinaesthetic dimension of a poem" and the "rhythmic coherence of what is. The body music of world. Cadence; cosmophony."[60] Body Music can be at odds with discourses of subject and object, which disable the cadential rhythms as they develop in the body and push their way into voice: "How can the / tonguetied of object / sub- / jection not garble what pulses in / isbelly?"[61] Yet, in a statement that is fundamental to why he writes poetry, Lee says "Kinaesthetic polyrhythm is one alternative to the impasse of modern reason – to the inability of technical thought to know the world, except by shrinking it to its own value-free categories. Polyrhythm thinks beneath the impasse, within the impasse, *beyond the impasse*"[62] (my italics).

NONSENSE AND THE BODY MUSIC BEFORE SPEECH

These polyrhythms, to which a language of logical sense-making does not correspond in full, always seem to be on the edge of breaking out into babbling nonsense as the language travels from body to brain and then to mouth and hand. This is true both in Lee's nonsense verse and in his meditative poetry. Listening into the polyrhythmic stresses within the lines of "The Thing" –

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[59] "Body Music" 214
[60] "Body Music" 214
[61] Lee "galore"
[62] "Body Music" 227

The Thing! the Thing! it started to sing,
It warbled! it babbled our names!
Then, leaping and snorting and clapping its hands,
Straight into the hideout it came![63]

– once can hear the poem's various metres occuring in the same cadential universe as:

If it walks like apocalypse. If it
squawks like armageddon.
If stalks the earth like anaphylactic parturition.[64]

The common appeal to a particular kinaesthetic body music in these two examples reveals a field of cadenced nonsense underlying both kinds of writing. This comparison deserves further substantiation to unite notions of nonsense with the fevered and worrisome body music of *Testament*.

The subject of nonsense is one that Lee has studied as a sometime writer of children's poetry. Yet he doesn't regard the spirit of his children's poetry to be grounded in literary nonsense. In "Roots and Play," he advocates a children's poetry that appeals to the ear as well as the imagination, and while this is a traditional inclination of Victorian nonsense verse with its sources in oral nursery rhymes and popular ballads, he sees in his writing for children the exfoliation of a serious poetics. Because the kinaesthetic principle of cadence at the heart of poetics is reticent to enter critical discourse, it has often been mistakenly referred to as nonsense, but the actual term *nonsense*, Lee says, "is better

[63] Lee "The Thing (Robert Service meets Martin Heidegger)," *Nicholas Knock and Other People* (Toronto: Macmillan 1974): 23
[64] Lee "apocalypse," in *Testament* 71

reserved for something different: for work which weaves together logic and irrationality, and in the process demolishes many of our assumptions about the way things are."[65]

Leaving nonsense verse to be its own specialized category, Lee widens his poetics to locate the oral forms of children's poetry in phenomenology – the philosophy of embodied experience. In terms of this embodying, a good nursery rhyme is an *incantation* because "The sheer sounds and rhythm enact a spell of some kind: one that meshes both with the way the muscles of the body want to move, and with some primitive intuition of how the world fits together and flows."[66] The expression of this bodily rootedness may sound like nonsense – Lee quotes the "Jack be nimble" rhyme – but verse of this sort appeals to the reality of the coherence-seeking sensorium of childhood which is cued primarily by the oral. Lee writes for the ear, reaching the attention of children by a more diverse route than logic.

Nonsense goes beyond children's verse, being a facet or an affect of some Earth-embracing polyphony that makes the poet dream of a common language. It may be heard explicitly in Lee's forerunner Al Purdy, searching for a nonsense language that communicates in "Kikistan Communications." This poem locates the common language between the Anglo-Canadian poet and two Inuit women on one of the Kikistan Islands. It is a "runes / in the tea leaves"[67] language, full of improvisation and "odd sounds in my throat / strange vocal doodles / as my adam's apple bobs / up and down like water

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[65] "Roots and Play," in *Body Music* 41
[66] "Roots and Play," in *Body Music* 47
[67] "Kikistan Communications," in Al Purdy in *North of Summer: Poems From Baffin Island* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart 1967): 67

coming / deep in an old wooden pump / that sounds something like 'guáy-au-góu.'"[68] This last word is not dismissed by the two mirthful Inuit women, even though it is vocal nonsense at home in the poet's throat. This speech of the body is rooted in a "memory summoned from childhood / when for other kids / it was everyday magic / that made things happen / and then unhappen."[69] It is fundamental to the poem's speaker who sees himself innocently "hunting for other children / in a happy grunting language / subversive to commonsense."[70] The language of make-believe at the heart of the child's imagination is the playful beginning of all poetic-making for Lee, going beyond the traditional construction of children's verse and into the interplay of silence, cadence, polyrhythms, and the undoing of language.

NONSENSE BEASTS AND THE DELIRIOUS SIDE OF VOID

To see how Lee's vocal doodles play with elements of chaos entering into poetic language, it is useful to see how the Victorian nonsense verse of Lewis Carroll deals with notions of disorder, while noting that the vocal nonsense of Lee and Purdy and the nonsense word-games of Carroll are categorically separated. Describing nonsense verse in Carroll, Elizabeth Sewell writes that the game of nonsense consists of the "mind employing its tendency towards order to engage its contrary tendency towards disorder, keeping the latter perpetually in play and so in check."[71] This language game of order

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[68] "Kikistan Communications" 67. There is an internet archive held by the University of Saskatchewan of Purdy reading this poem and some others. It is perhaps necessary listening for the correct pronunciation of Purdy's half-nonsense word "guáy-au-góu."
http://cdm15126.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p201201coll1/id/2856
[69] "Kikistan Communications," *North of Summer* 67
[70] "Kikistan Communications," *North of Summer* 67
[71] Elizabeth Sewell *The Field of Nonsense* (London: Chatto and Windus 1952): 48

checking disorder is opposed to the playful language of make-believe which chaotically engages disorder. The two kinds of nonsense, logic game and exuberant bodily play, are separated by Gilles Deleuze who argues that Carroll's nonsense acts as a surface perforated by paradoxical lines which subdivide linguistic nonsense into "series, propositions and things, or between dimensions of the same proposition," but which only occasionally reach deeper underneath the surface of language.[72] Extending Deleuze's thought, Jean-Jacques LeCercle writes that Carroll's "nonsense is a very mild form of *délire*" which admits the "incomprehensible into language and so treads on language's frontiers, but simultaneously dismisses it (especially in Carroll's works) as 'a pedagogic trick – to teach children their way into communicative language.'"[73] It is only in his later poems such as *The Hunting of the Snark* that the incomprehensible delirium of language at its own frontiers begins to overpower Carroll's impulse to assert order. This overpowering delirium is felt as well by Lee's child protagonists when they face the consequences of willfully undoing imaginative worldviews and the playful language that belongs to them.

According to Sewell, the threat of overpowering disorder in poems like *The Hunting of the Snark* is owing to encounters with nothingness. This nothingness is personified in multiform monsters – Jabberwocky, Snark, Boojum, and other nonsense beasts – who threaten to overwhelm the nonsense logic of the poems. When Carroll allows these avatars of nothingness to enter his poems the poems are "failures as

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[72] Gilles Deleuze *The Logic of Sense*, edited by Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press): 86

[73] Jean-Jacques LeCercle *Philosophy Through the Looking-Glass* (1985: 79), quoted in Marnie Parsons *Touch Monkeys, Nonsense Strategies for Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1994): 18

Nonsense,"[74] which is to say they become something else – something which strays closer to *délire* and is taken up by Lee in his children's verse. While the Jabberwock remains a lesson in disorder and nothingness framed within the closed system of logic in Wonderland, the Snark is more sinister, and delirium and the void enter into Carroll's poetry when the Baker in *The Hunting of the Snark* warns the reader to "beware of the day, / if your Snark be a Boojum! For then / You will softly and suddenly vanish away, / And never be met with again!"[75] In spite of his wariness, the Baker himself meets the Snark and disappears, "In the midst of the word he was trying to say, / In the midst of his laughter and glee, / He had softly and suddenly vanished away– / For the Snark *was* a Boojum, you see."[76]

Similarly, nonsense beasts appear in Lee's children's poems where speakers and subjects play openly with nothingness in the form of void. Like Carroll's *Snark*, Lee's nothing-beasts generally devour things and beings in the world. In "The Poodle and the Grundiboob," the treacherous Grundiboob consumes its dinner on the moon, followed by everything in sight, including its dining companion the poodle.[77] However, Lee's most impressive beast, for its ability both to consume and disappear into nothing, is the antagonist of the poem "The Thing," where it is referred to, without a proper name, as a "*large Thing-Which-is-Not*."[78] This name evokes Heidegger's concept of Being in its absence, as hinted in the subtitle of the poem: "Robert Service meets Martin Heidegger." The Thing consumes space and even itself in a manic chase through the city until the

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[74] Sewell *The Field of Nonsense* 147
[75] Lewis Carroll "The Baker's Tale," *The Hunting of the Snark* stanza 10, lines 37-40
[76] Carroll "The Vanishing," *The Hunting of the Snark* stanza 9, lines 33-36
[77] Lee "The Poodle and the Grundiboom," in *Nicholas Knock and Other People* 30
[78] Lee "The Thing," in *Nicholas Knock* 24

young male protagonists bury it in a grave, effectively banishing it into the absent and empty silence which we saw Lee to be wary of in his meditative poetry. This act of annihilating playful attitudes toward the void leaves the boys in an active state of lament, having banished absence from their world. The disappearance of the capacity to play with void results in a victory of silence over nonsense which the poet cannot allow. The poet must maintain a hold on the presence of *délire* as it appears in the formation of poetic language or risk the annihilation of that language entirely.

Much of the action of Lee's children's poetry occurs in the depths of this void where sounds come together and language originates. Laurie Ricou makes this connection when he notes that Lee's children's poems "begin and end before language, and carry us to the magic of surface, to the pleasure of what is there, in sound and repetition, in echoes of child language, rather than in conventional significances."[79] The magic of Lee's children's poetry is heard as an incantation on the page which originates in a silence prior to speech where sounds, gestures, pre-conscious knowing, and bodily senses intermingle in child-like play and multiple voices, and out of which poetry emerges.

But with respect to this stage of Lee's career, the stage of *The Gods* and of the first children's verse projects, it is apparent that his relationship to nothingness is wary, playful and reverent, as is consistent with an attitude to the void as the home of Being. In this poetics, which may be associated with Heidegger in his later writings on language,

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[79] Laurie Ricou *Everyday Magic: Child Languages in Canadian Literature* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 1987): 135

speech cuts the subject off from the immediate presence of the world; silence returns the subject to it. Nonsense may also accomplish the act of dis-signification, breaking the bond of word and thing so that the thing may be restored to its original absence from language. In that primordial state, the thing is free to speak itself as a being in its own right, not in signification ascribed to it by man the namer. Exploring this hypothesis in *On the Road to Language* as the moment before speech where the unity of word and being dwells, Heidegger confirms a Romantic modernism.

This chapter began with the question of whether in the 1970s Lee's poetics is grounded in modernism or is in transition to a non-modern. The evidence so far suggests the former – that Lee is experimenting with silence and nonsense, languages of the void, and that he is experimenting within the tradition of negative discourse and designification that extends from Hegel to Mallarmé and Heidegger. Lee is not yet ready to enter the "underword" pictured in *Testament* where beings are given voice in their own indigenous tonalities by a poet who is superfluous except as a re-shaper or crafter of the various energies which are colliding together. Yet the evidence that would help answer the question of the nature of Lee's poetics in the 1970s is not all available. Against Lee's comfort with Heideggerean modernism, there is a powerful impulse to transition on his part. This is apparent in the 1980s in his need to express his experiences, outside of modernist poetic language, in ecstasy (*Riffs*) and self-negation (*Nightwatch*). And the impulse to depart from modernism is clear in his rewriting in *Savage Fields* of the modernism surrounding Heidegger's concepts of Earth and World. It would also be necessary for Lee to pursue cadence down to the level of the life-world where language

is made and unmade, an adventure prepared for him by Paul Celan, as we will see in the next chapter.

3

Paul Celan and the Redefinition of Negation

A NEW AUDIBILITY OF CADENCE

Readers of Dennis Lee's public poetry going back to *Civil Elegies* might have concluded that he had acquiesced in the death of literature when he published *Un* in 2003 with poems like

> *Flin-*
> *tinlyexcaliburlockjut.*
>
> *Tectonic aubade.*[1]

For thirty years, Lee was self-consciously a poet of Earth in the lineage of Hölderlin, Rilke and (taking him as a poet) Heidegger: "Upon the earth, and in it, historical man grounds his dwelling in the world."[2] Then, Lee was tuned to resonances in things and beings which he termed *Cadence*. Embodied in his poetry, this cosmic undermusic was assumed to be relevant to human civilized effort. Suddenly, with *Un*, Lee's work began to move away from recognizable connections with nature or civilization, and was becoming no longer a link between the two. Expansive poems meant to stand as public monuments gave way to what, to Lee's astonishment, "seemed more like dense objects

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[1] Dennis Lee "excalibur," in *Un* (Toronto: Anansi 2003): 36. *Yesno* followed in 2007, then *Testament* in 2011 which presented selected poems revised from the first two volumes and added new poems.
[2] Martin Heidegger "The Origin of the Work of Art" [1935], translated by Albert Hofstadter, in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, edited by Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (New York: Modern Library 1964): 673

made out of – what *were* they made out of? Words obviously, but words with only a fitful resemblance to English."[3]

The new poetry seems to have approached the realm of uninterpretable experience, blended materialities, infinite mediation and mashup, with messages generating and regenerating themselves restlessly by computational processes in the fashion of digital poetry. I explained this effect in the last chapter, tracing the overall trajectory of Lee's poetics as it approached the apprehension of cadence in increasingly smaller units of language, finally being reduced almost to the discrete word and even the discrete verbal element. To look beyond these felt materialities is to imagine a void in which cadence discloses its nature, unencumbered by language, as the undermusic of all life on Earth, resonances of the relationships which in their totality constitute the life-world. Lee was led to this intersection of the grandest context of cadence and the smallest particles of human language by his life-long concern to hear cadence in the silent impasse of technological modernity. He was always facing mystically in the direction of cadence as a cosmic real. Perhaps it is lucky for him that, as he says in the 2012 Gustafson Lecture, instead of looking into void he was able to look backward to the fractured German of the Romanian-Jewish poet Paul Celan. The lecture, written partly to discover the nature of the new poetry he had begun writing, tells how Celan's breaking German down to its root words put Lee in a new relationship with cadence as it began "taking over individual words, […] Demolishing some, re-making others, mashing them

[3] Dennis Lee "Re-Greening the Undermusic." Typescript of the 2012 Gustafson Lecture, given at Vancouver Island University on October 17, 2012, p 15

together."[4] He said elsewhere that he was "not just hearing the music across sentences, but up through the centre of words."[5] Cadence meets civilization in the digital age. At the same time, a lesson of history was updated. Celan dissolved the German language into its elements so that it could be purified of the evil it had done in preparing a population for the Holocaust in which so many, including his parents, died. Lee's collapsed language anticipates the extinction of the species of Earth. Both poets are sensitive to the complicity of language and even poetry in the violence it makes possible; both bring words to a point where they must "undergo the very disintegration they were trying to articulate."[6] In his Gustafson lecture, Lee describes in detail the process of breaking and re-making words which he sees as necessary to re-imagining the possibilities of changing how we view and use language in our lives. But much is left unsaid here.

In his description of cadence at play in the depths of words, Lee does not account for the philosophical or the aesthetic influence of Celan on his poetry. That is presumably because the relationship of Lee to Celan is not a superficial matter of influence but rather of Lee's tapping deeply into a word-choosing music that Celan also heard. The relationship is buried in Lee's work as Celan's attempted dialogues, references, and indebtedness to poets and thinkers are buried in his own poetry. For example, a poem in *Testament* seems to be a salute to Celan whose name in the alphabet used in Romania offers the transliteration "ancel" as the poem's title:

Deathbreath of the unbeholden.

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[4] "Re-Greening the Undermusic" 16
[5] Telephone interview in *FFWD: Calgary's News and Entertainment Weekly* http://www.ffwdweekly.com/Issues/2010/1016/words5.htm
[6] "Re-Greening the Undermusic" 17

Mouth of the lorn.
Mining for syllable
rectitude, you struck clean seams of
lesser, of lesion, of
pitted implacable least.
Homefree at last in a whiteout of shock & Seine.

The poem following it, titled "trump" and suggestive of the last trumpet, has the line: "The earth is in shock. You must bear it." The relationship of this line to Celan's commonly cited "The world is gone, I must carry you" is largely musical or cadenced.[7] Concentrating on that undermusic, Lee seems unaffected by many aspects of Celan's poetry – notably, his context in modernist surrealism (Breton, Éluard, Char). Apparently, in hearing a particular poetic tonality in Celan, Lee heard a clearer cadence in that tonality. I suggest that this is the case, and that the source of that musicality is Hölderlin, the father-figure to both Celan and Lee, kept alive in Celan's poetry as both prophet of the natural world and as demented nonsensical babbler, and in Lee's poetry only as vibrations charged with presence that some words have when they echo a greater-than-conscious connection to the planet. By so crediting Hölderlin, I will go on in this chapter to place Lee's recent work in a philosophical relationship to the poetry of Celan, perhaps showing in Lee a hope that may not be obvious to his readers.

REVISITING HÖLDERLIN WITH PAUL CELAN

Lee first read Hölderlin during a fourth-year undergraduate seminar on German literature at the University of Toronto in 1961-62. In "Body Music," he advocates for Hölderlin's

[7] Lee *Testament* 46, 47. Celan "Vast, Glowing Vault," in *Poems of Paul Celan*, translated by Michael Hamburger (New York: Persea Books 2002): 251

place as the originator of modernist "polyrhythmic innovations" on our poetic "map of usable ancestors."[8] The musical quality of Hölderlin's verse can be "of any kind: shifts of voice; sudden memories; associative musings touched off by something as slight as a double take on the sound of a word."[9] This undermusic is understood by Lee to be "heterogeneous in nature"[10] as cadence and the presence in Earth-poetry of this energy. It is the voicing of cadence as sensed through a "kintuition" by the body – a "direct apprehension of a body music that lies beneath or beyond actual words, and furnishes the rhythms by which they move"[11] – that is the bridge between poetic form and the energies of a cadential place for an Earth-poet. For to be on Earth is to be in a *place* on Earth. Where was Hölderlin's place on Earth?

In January 1961, according to John Felstiner's biography, Celan visited Hölderlin's tower-like home at Tübingen on the river where he lived and worked as a carpenter from 1807 until his death in 1843.[12] During this visit he wrote a poem, "Tübingen, Janner," balancing Hölderlin's sense of vision and the dementia-induced madness of his later life. The poem is comprised of doubled German prefixes, made-up words, and repetitive verse which multiplies the sense of each reality Celan presents as encountering in Hölderlin's tower. Felstiner shows how in "Tübingen, Janner" the "hard articulations share the baffled, sometimes brilliant darkness into which Hölderlin descended."[13] These articulations appear as a riddle bracketed in the poem.

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[8] Dennis Lee "Body Music" in *Body Music* (Toronto: Anansi 1998): 217
[9] Lee "Body Music" 217
[10] Lee "Body Music" 217
[11] Lee "Body Music" 220
[12] John Felstiner *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1994): 172
[13] Felstiner *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 172

The riddle is a line from Hölderlin's poem "Der Rhein": "*Ein Räthsel ist Reinentsprungenes*,"[14] meaning a riddle, or mystery, or enigma is the purely originated or clear-sprung. In this image, Hölderlin is exploring the problem of origins and free will. He compares the birth of a child and the birth of the Rhine river, arguing that there is no human whose free will and strength to rise above the necessary conditions of his or her existence is as great as that of the Rhine. Hölderlin wonders where there would be a human as "happily born as the Rhine / From such propitious heights / And from so holy a womb / To remain free / His whole life long and alone fulfill / His heart's desire, like him?"[15] The problem is that discovering a single originary spring of the waters of the Rhine is itself a mystery, because a network of glacier runoffs, mountain streams, and underground springs converge at different points to form the river. A poem cannot realize pure origin; "even a song may hardly unveil it,"[16] Hölderlin writes, indicating that origination and the place of a thing is an aesthetic question.

MALLARMÉ AS GUIDE TO THE RHINE RIDDLE

A poem is both an artifact and an utterance. Because it must be constructed or spoken, its origin is always tied to the conditions of life the poet experienced while conceiving and writing. Consequently, creating or discovering a poem of pure origin is impossible to realize, but one can come close. It may be partly for the teasing proximity of pure origin

[14] Hölderlin "Der Rhein," in *Friedrich Hölderlin, Poems and Fragments*, translated by Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil Press 2004): 500
[15] Hölderlin "Der Rhein" 501
[16] Hölderlin "Der Rhein" 501

that Celan was attracted in his youth to Stéphane Mallarmé, translating a few of the symbolist's poems into German after moving to Paris in 1948. Towards the end of his life, Mallarmé put his faith in an ideal book that encompassed the entire essence of all that is. Too pure to ever be written, *Le Livre, instrument spirituel* exists as unvoiced prophecy necessary to the continued existence of art.[17] No single human being, including Mallarmé, "one of the unpossessed" who in the conditions of modernity is incapable of creating an authentic grand performance, can be the author of such a super-book. Since the book would contain within it the author who would write it, it is necessary to imagine that it "bears no author's name." The book of all earthly existence can only be sensed in its absence as a musical hymn of "all harmony and joy; an immaculate grouping of universal relationships come together for some miraculous and glittering occasion"[18] that disappears on the blank white page as the page is effaced by writing. For Mallarmé, the hymn of his aesthetic vision of the universe can be approached by changing the printed layout of poetry from traditional rhyming iambic verse into a free verse imagistic symbol that attempts to address all sides of human experience.

Celan renounced Mallarmé's aestheticism and its ideal of realizing in poetry the presence of pure art. Thanks to Felstiner's cataloguing of the Celan archive, we know that Celan mentioned Mallarmé directly twice in his published work: one is Celan's translation of Mallarmé's poem "Rondel" appearing in the *Insel Almanach* in 1959 and the other is in the *Meridian* speech where Celan challenges the attitude that art is

[17] Stéphane Mallarmé "The Book: A Spiritual Instrument," in *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, & Letters*, translated by Bradford Cook (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press 1956): 25
[18] "The Book: A Spiritual Instrument" 25

essential given.[19] Here Celan ask of poetry to rise to the challenge of confronting the idea of poetry as art. Should we continue otherwise to "take art for granted, for absolutely given? Should we, to put it concretely, should we think Mallarmé, for instance, through to the end?"[20] Celan advocates instead for a poetry that is rooted in the world in which it grew, not in an otherworld from which it is received as inspiration. He believes that a poet finds in "something as immaterial as language, yet earthly, terrestrial"[21] a way of touching upon a world of interconnectedness that remains potentially available so long as the riddle of a singular origin for poetry remains unclear. Poetry, then, circles, oscillating "via both poles" of language as they refer respectively to the terrestrial world of human making and the immaterial world that art envisions as timeless utopia. Celan names this encircling which bisects the world of poetry into two a *meridian*. This dividing line allows a poet to encounter an impossible connection. That is to say, a poet orienting himself in a specific place and time can recall and evoke other places and times that, in the proclamation of Celan, the poet knows "do not exist," yet simultaneously knows "where they ought to exist."[22]

It is at Hölderlin's Tübingen tower in January that Celan begins to prepare a place and time for the poet-sage to reappear in the present and answer his riddle with a prophecy. In *Economy of the Unlost*, Anne Carson points out where this emergence will take place. She notices that in his own poem, Celan divides Hölderlin's word

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[19] Felstiner, John "'Here were go round the prickly pear' or 'Your song, what does it know?' Celan vis-à-vis Mallarmé," in *Mallarmé in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Robert Greer Cohn (Cranbury: Associated University Presses 1998): 210
[20] "The Meridian" 43-44
[21] "The Meridian" 55
[22] "The Meridian" 54

Reinentsprungenes over two lines connected by a hyphen, into *Rein-entsprungenes* so that while it continues to mean "purely originated," the word also sounds as "Rhine originated" or even "*Der Rhein*-originated."[23] This sacred riddle of Hölderlin's undergoes a triple movement in the hands of Celan. First the riddle is preserved, and then it is cracked open so that possible prophesies may spring out of it. But in a final movement of the poem, Celan unleashes the full torrent of language which begins to drown and plunge the visionary poet in babbling and madness, so that if Hölderlin were to "come into the world, today," and "if he spoke of this /time, he / could /only babble and babble / over, over, / againagain."[24] Celan presents us at the end of this poem with a new riddle, contained in brackets: "Pallaksch. Pallaksch." This is an untranslatable nonsense term that "Hölderlin was given to uttering in his late years," Felstiner explains, and "sometimes it meant Yes, sometimes No,"[25] or better yet it can read *Sometimes Yes/ Sometimes No, Sometimes No/Sometimes Yes*. Like the Rhine riddle, Celan never offers a singular answer to why Hölderlin's babbling may hold the key to how poetry creates in *this time*, but he does offer a clue, a strange one because it was published by Celan in the poem "Sprich Auch Du" (1955), eight years before the publication of "Tübingen Janner."

In "Sprich Auch Du," Celan calls upon the reader to "Speak," to "have your say," so long as the reader keeps "yes and no unsplit / and give your say this meaning / give it the shade."[26] Celan is affirming that under conditions of traumatic loss, where it feels impossible to articulate the full truth of what is gone, we must still continue to speak. He

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[23] Anne Carson *Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan* (Princeton NJ Princeton University Press 1999): 132
[24] Paul Celan "Tübingen, January," in *Poems of Paul Celan* 155
[25] Felstiner *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 173
[26] Paul Celan "Speak, You Also" in *Poems of Paul Celan* 69

echoes a private sentiment he sent in a letter to relatives in Israel in 1948, to justify why he moved to Paris rather than to the newly named Jewish state: "There's nothing in the world for which a poet will give up writing, not even when he is a Jew and the language of his poems is German."[27] In order to continue writing, Celan had to remain close to the losses that he experienced during World War Two, including being uprooted from his Romanian home and the deaths of his parents. In "Sprich Auch Du," he writes firmly that the poet whose only proper subjects have disappeared, "speaks truly who speaks the shade,"[28] giving whatever shadowy articulation that he can to what he has lost. This injunction to keep yes and no unsplit found a ready listener in Dennis Lee, who titled his second volume of new poetry *Yesno*.

NEGATION FOR LEE AND FOR CELAN

Three years after the publication of "Sprich Auch Du," during his acceptance speech upon receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen, Celan further explained how the subject of his poetry changed for him when he fled Romania for the city of Vienna. Here is another precedent that met a negative theology already articulate in Lee since *Nightwatch* (1996): "Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went though. It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could resurface,

[27] *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* 56
[28] Celan "Speak, You Also" 69

'enriched' by it all."[29] This speech, given on January 26, 1958, provides a dated link between the call by Celan to "keep yes and no unsplit" of "Speak, You Also" and the "sometimes yes, sometimes no" of "Tübingen, January." To "have your say," despite the fact that there are no words to describe where you are headed, is an "attempt to find a direction." Even if at first his verbal probings were only babble, by writing poems "I tried," Celan recalls, to relearn how "to speak, to orient myself, to find out where I was, where I was going, to chart my reality."[30] To "look around" in the negative space "where death is" is to see death "Alive!"[31] and recognize again life amongst death. "Negation," Carson writes, "requires this collusion of the present and the absent on the screen of the imagination."[32] In "Speak, You Also," keeping No, not from Yes (as Carson translates it) means to place in between Yes and No the "poet's power to cancel their difference, his license to double the negative of death."[33] But for Celan, this canceling of difference appears to mean more than the articulation of a poetic negative theology that uncovers a trace of life in death for the poet. Rather a lost-poem is an attempt to travel infinitely, across a landscape full of the overwhelming presence of death. This appears to be the sense Celan intends when he says that a poem, as an example of language or conversation, may be "a letter in a bottle thrown out to sea with the – surely not always strong – hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on a shoreline of the heart."[34] Lee has a sense of Celan similar to that of Carson, but articulates clearer than she does the presence in contemporary poetry of a "spirit at the heart of the linguistic

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[29] Paul Celan "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen," in *Collected Prose*, translated by Rosemarie Waldrop (Manchester, Carcanet Press 1986): 34
[30] "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen" 34
[31] Celan "Speak, You Also" 69
[32] *Economy of the Unlost* 95
[33] *Economy of the Unlost* 109
[34] "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen" 34-35

mayhem." And "If we listen kinaesthetically to the destruction," he says, "we also hear regeneration. The *no* and the *yes* at once."[35] Rather than the convergence of babbling tributaries to form the Rhine, as the mysterious origin place where letters meet to become meaningful utterances, Lee riddles that "Being-at-all still coincides with the Big Bang" – an unknowable event from which "some fractal of the originary *yes* still resonates: that abruptly there *is* something, rather than nothing at all."[36] Negation in this sense is, according to Carson, a "verbal event" for there are "no negatives in nature, where every situation is positively what it is."[37] But for Lee, at the end of the day, poems must pass through a negative space in which they must be ready to give up their quality of being constructed poetry, so that words may return to being the heralds of the voices of beings of the Earth, sussing out "a fresh encounter with that blighted, pre-lingual immediacy."[38] Here poetry "can learn to sense the cornered, tortured, possibly-still-vital being of earth as it hums at the heart of language. But it will hear the regeneration only if it audits the carnage."[39] Since one cannot be sure if this is a Hegelianism echoing in Lee's education in the German writers, we need to look at his intellectual history with the question of Being and its negation.

In his recent work Lee takes up Celan's call to "keep yes and no unsplit": "With a *yes*, with a *no*, with a / *yesno* … to habitate crossbeing. / To ride both reals at once."[40]

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[35] "Re-Greening the Undermusic" 22
[36] "Re-Greening the Undermusic" 23
[37] *Economy of the Unlost* 95
[38] "Re-Greening the Undermusic" 23
[39] "Re-Greening the Undermusic" 23
[40] Dennis Lee "*yesno*" in *Testament* 125

It may be wiser to "stay / vif in detritus," than to be "lulled by the blessingbait green"[41] – in other words, to stay open or lively (*vif* is a version of the French *vive*) amongst rubble rather than be won over by the alluring mirage of Earthly health that is a perfectly manicured suburban lawn.

EARTH-WORLD

The warning of Lee regarding the "blessingbait green" resonates as the current poetic rendering of a statement first made in his 1977 book *Savage Fields*: "To bring the problem into focus, consider an ordinary lawn. What could be more natural than a lawn? It's green; it's made of soil and grass and weeds; it drinks away from the earth and oxygen from the air. It's got chlorophyll. If anything is part of earth, a lawn is."[42] Yet Lee sets beside the affirmative *Yes* of earth-belonging, a negative truth that denies earth's claim: the "lawn is only there in front of its house, after all, because somebody bulldozed a space and put it there. It is intrinsically part of world. Underneath it runs a miniature jungle of pipes and sewers; one day two men came along and unrolled the sod on top of them. It has its perimeter and slope, even its particular colour, because some member of world willed it that way."[43] Styled as a work of literary criticism, *Savage Fields* presents Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* as avatars of a new cosmology in Canadian literature, mapped as a conflict

[41] Lee "*yesno*" 125
[42] Dennis Lee *Savage Fields, An Essay in Literature and Cosmology* (Toronto: Anansi 1977): 5
[43] *Savage Fields* 5

between two competing spherical fields of being. Attempting in the spirit of Heidegger[44] to undo the absolute dichotomy of one side versus the other, enforced by the terms *nature* versus *civilization,* in favour of mutually-existing heterogeneous zones of forces which overlap entirely making up a savage field in which everything planetary exists, Lee renames the spheres *Earth* and *World*. Each sphere animates the whole field, at war with itself and with each other in an antagonism that encompasses all beings.

Like the warning to keep *das Nein nicht vom Ja*, any commonsense judgment regarding which realm a thing belongs to is impossible. A paradoxical situation arises when what appears to belong to one domain "turns out, on closer reflection, to be equally a member of the other."[45] This is not to say that the terms are interchangeable and therefore meaningless and without value, but rather that "everything in the world must blur back into earth" and everything that consciously belongs to world can "never exist without a basis in the natural domain, and must express itself through things which are undeniably of earth."[46] What, then, is the answer to the apparently nonsensical question that Lee poses as a followup to asking how natural is a lawn: "What could be earthier than a telephone?"[47] The answer could be everything – well, sometimes yes, and sometimes no – or it could be nothing – well, sometimes yes, and sometimes no. But as with any paradox, aporia, or antinomy, for a poet to resist the impulse to make a choice or claim a truth is cowardice.

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[44] Lee mentions in a footnote in *Savage Fields* 113 that "The terms 'world' and 'earth' have been adopted from a lecture of 1935 by Martin Heidegger 'The Origin of the Work of Art.' An English translation is included in his *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, [1971], translated by Albert Horsadter. 15-87."
[45] *Savage Fields* 6
[46] *Savage Fields* 6
[47] *Savage Fields* 6

To prepare for such an opportunity for choice, it is necessary to make the distinction that the positive *yes* belongs to Earth and affirms everything is of Earth, and the negating *no* is a force that belongs to World and allows for nothing else but World. Lee makes this claim of World: "*Viewed from the vantage-point of world, there is nothing but world*." World's main purpose, Lee argues, is to dominate Earth by adopting everything that belongs to Earth and so "reducing earth to modes of existence which it can control," effectively transforming nature into natural resources. This and any other act of becoming World involves a conscious intent. For Lee, beings of Earth are driven by "self-conscious instinct," whereas World is the "ensemble of beings which are either conscious, or manipulated by consciousness for its own purposes."[48] It is the central role he gives to consciousness in the formation of world that marks one of Lee's major departures from Heidegger's use of the two terms.[49] In this, Lee reverts to a Nietzschean rather than a Heideggerean vision of modernity: "Heidegger does not take will-driven consciousness to be the defining attribute of world (as I do, in this essay at least). He recognizes its significance, but he concentrates rather on world's capacity to be open to the demands placed upon it by the presence or absence of 'the gods' …. My account of world as characterized essentially by consciousness is more secular, and perhaps more shadowly modern, than his."[50] In order to control the resources of earth and sustain a vision of World, conscious effort must be applied to prevent raw material from slipping

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[48] *Savage Fields* 4

[49] For Lee's other reasons for departing from Heidegger's conceptions of *world* and *earth*, see *Savage Fields* 113-114.

[50] Lee connects Nietzsche's phrase *will to power* with the action of *world* at least once in *Savage Fields*: "The bullets, bulldozers, mental structures, rigid moral assumptions and will to power which define the stance of world (in these books) are infinitely extensible" (*Savage Fields* 7); and Lee takes the trouble to document the copy of Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* which Leonard Cohen used as inspiration for the character F. who is the figure of willful modern mastery in *Beautiful Losers*: "Friedrich Nietzsche. *Twilight of the Idols*. In *The Portable Nietzsche*. (New York: Viking, [1954]. Page 486. Nietzsche's emphasis.) This is the edition Cohen used; there are several direction quotations from it assigned to F." (*Savage Fields* 125)

back into Earth. World protects its claim of mastery by acts of negation. When World "masters but still cannot know earth, it attacks and destroys it."[51] Differing slightly from Lee, Carson sees with Celan that negation is a verbal event: "There are […] no negatives in nature, where every situation is positively what it is."[52] Carson sees that "negation depends on an act of the imagining mind."[53] The fundamental difference between the two poet-critics' view of negation is that, for Carson, "negation is present only in language and its power remains a resource of the users of words"[54] while for Lee, acts of negation are physically undertaken with dire consequences by human beings in their everyday participation in world-maintaining and world-conservation. Lee's poem "noth," where the word "nothing" becomes the "present participle of the unexpected verb 'to noth,'"[55] describes the act of auditing the carnage of the negative position:

> *And are creatures of*
> *nothing.*
> *I noth you noth we*
> *long have we nothed we*
> *shall noth, staunch in true*
> *nothing we*
> *noth in extremis, noth until*
> *habitat heartstead green galore & species*
> *relinquish the terrene ghosthold;*
> *crumble to alphadud; stutter to rumours of ing*.[56]

By engaging in practices of negation – by *noth*-ing – one is able to understand the action of annihilating the earthly natural terrain (*terrene* means *of* or *like earth*), and all of Earth's various inhabitants. This annihilating action takes place in language, but is not

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[51] *Savage Fields* 9
[52] *Economy of the Unlost* 95
[53] *Economy of the Unlost* 95
[54] *Economy of the Unlost* 95
[55] "Re-Greening the Undermusic" 15
[56] Lee "noth" in *Testament* 56

confined to it. *Noth*-ing also results from our bodily actions. It is the poet's task to detect the presence of active *noth*-ing in language, just as it is the ecologist's task to detect the role and consequences *noth*-ing plays in various ecosystems. For a poet as steward of the Earth, for whom the breakdown of language and the breakdown of the planet's ecosystems are related, a change in the practice of one domain can show as changes in the other. The destruction of the environment on a grand scale defies the poet to communicate a meaningful response – the extent of its desolation cannot be aestheticized into poetry. Yet as the last line of "noth" suggests, even the act of managing a stuttering response out of the crumbling "alphadud" of useable language offers a feeble hope that humans will be strong enough actors to change the way they collude in the mass destruction of the planet. A stutter of hope represents the first noises of a new worldview beginning to mediate its claim to materiality. While for Carson negation is a linguistic call to the presence of an abyssal nothingness eclipsing Being, for Lee negation is a willful act concealing some element of what is, in favour of another aiming to emerge.

Not merely a critical assessment, but a poetical distinction divides Lee from Celan. Ultimately, Celan is a *No*-poet. Carson recognizes clearly this affinity of Celan with the force of *no*-saying when commenting on the neologism Celan creates in his "Weggeveizt":[57] "'Noem' translates German *Genicht*, a word Celan made up possibly out of the noun *Gedicht* ("poem") and the negative adverb *nicht* ("not"). So "noem," a poem

[57] The stanza Carson is referring to reads: "Etched away from / the ray-shot wind of your language / the garish talk of rubbed- / off experience - the hundred- / tongued pseudo- / poem, the noem." From "Weggeveizt" in *Poems of Paul Celan* 214-215. It is one of many of Celan's poems that are difficult to translate into English without losing some of their intentions. The poem is full of multiple meanings and negations. For instance, Hamburger translates "An-erlebten" as "off experience" so as to call forth the reading of both senses of the word as "to offer one's services" (*Anerlebten*) and "at experience" (*An erleben*) that Celan may have combined with the babbling intent in which it is read.

that both is and is not, a verse nothingness, a poeticized negativity."[58] The line reads: "Mein-/ gedicht, das Genicht,"[59] which Hamburger translates as "pseudo- / poem, the noem,"[60] but could just as easily read, "My-poem, the Noem." Lee, on the other hand, is a poet of *Yesno*. He believes that the force of what is ("Being-at-all") still "coincides with the Big Bang" and that some "fractal of the originary *yes* still resonates: that abruptly there *is* something, rather than nothing at all."[61] Lee's own neologism, which he settles on in *Savage Fields*, does not depend on negation, but rather on a faith in the realness of the entities and forces that exist in both spheres of Earth and World. He chooses the term *planet* to denote everything that exists, including our galaxy and all of outer space as it "affects," or can be thought of by, the "inhabitants of our planet."[62] The whole cosmological space of planet depends on a constantly oscillating "interplay of world and earth" having the "character of strife,"[63] with each entity at war with itself under the same conditions. In the period of technological modernity we are in, World's stranglehold over Earth is never static. Lee argues that everything on Earth is "already coloured, charged, configured by the lines of force of world,"[64] yet constantly "Earth sets about reclaiming its aberrant, hubris-driven civil offspring with an implacable calm, for all world is *earth*. The victory is assured."[65] The forces of World deal with this paradoxical dilemma of World's subjects returning to re-calcified Earth-stuff by perpetually aiming to re-conquer Earth's objects, in order to "keep the second-by-second controls world already exerts

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[58] *Economy of the Unlost* 113
[59] "Weggeveizt," in *Poems of Paul Celan* 214
[60] "Bitten Away," in *Poems of Paul Celan* 215
[61] "Re-Greening the Undermusic 23
[62] *Savage Fields* 8-9
[63] *Savage Fields* 10
[64] *Savage Fields* 7
[65] *Savage Fields* 8

from slipping."[66] The greater danger is that one field will overtake the other entirely and ruin the dynamism of the planet forever – an act which would allow no more possibilities for rebirth, or creation, or poetry.

The decline of either Earth or World affects the other, and consequently the whole planet. At least two clues in his recent poetry suggest that Lee believes it is our World-sphere that is falling apart. The first appears in Gordon Teskey's afterword in the special issue of the *University of Toronto Quarterly* dedicated to the centennial of Northrop Frye's birth. Commenting on poems by Lee included in the issue (both friends were students of Frye's), Teskey notes that "Dennis Lee's melted down elegies for everything" are "brief, swollen-tongued cries from the end of the world" which "lose us among 'signatures of loss' and the 'spoor of extinctions' … calling forth our lives at the limit of the capacity for speech, and beyond any capacity for culture."[67] It is no coincidence that Teskey uses the phrase "end of the world." Of the two poems Lee picked to include in the volume for Frye, the first, "hydro," deals explicitly with the human impact on oceans and their turning the world's coastal comforts into a "new swaddle of no-go."[68] In the final line of the poem, Lee prepares for us an apocalyptic realization that if the ocean's "placental" waters continue to rise, and we continue to pollute them, there will be nothing to name our relations to the planet's waters except for a "new hydro of gone."[69] The second poem, "*tap*" (which also features the word *gone* in its second line) ends with the

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[66] Lee *Savage Fields, An Essay in Literature and Cosmology* 7
[67] Gordon Teskey "Afterword: Of Greatness in Criticism," in *University of Toronto Quarterly* 81 (Winter 2012): 179
[68] Dennis Lee "hydro" in *University of Toronto Quarterly* 81 (Winter 2012): 87. This poem also appears in Lee's *Testament* 11.
[69] Lee "hydro" in *Testament* 11

question: "Misters of techabye fixit, where did the world go?"[70] This line is a call to the technology wizards who, through the process of innovation, are charged with the task of creating new, liveable worlds. But perhaps by striving ceaselessly toward the new, they have only eradicated the old.

THE POEM AS THOU

With the language of a planet falling into a final silence, an answer to the question of what is left of poetry without a planetary home can be found in "Vast, Glowing Vault," the Celan poem that we saw Lee echoing at the beginning of this chapter in the line "The world is gone, I must carry you."[71] Derrida spends considerable effort on an exegesis of this poem, and his strongest point is that "there is a necessity or duty toward you," – an *I must* – when the "world is no longer there or here."[72] In this engagement of I with you: "I am alone in the world as soon as you depend on me, as soon as I bear, and must assume, head to head or face to face, without third, mediator, or go-between, without earthly or world ground, the responsibility for which I must respond to you in front of you for you. I am alone with you, alone to you alone; we are alone."[73] A poem here is not the mediator of a relationship to an Earthly other, but a fragile *you* that calls to be "entrusted, sole survivor, to our care" so we "carry it, save it at any price, be it beyond the world."[74] As our planet degenerates, it is possible to hear again, this time in the words of Lee, the call of the "endangered energies of earth," to "let them shape the music of

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[70] Dennis Lee "*tap*," in *University of Toronto Quarterly* 81 (Winter 2012): 87. This poem also appears in Lee's *Testament* 15
[71] Paul Celan "Vast, Glowing Vault" in *Poems of Paul Celan.* 251
[72] "Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue – Between Two Infinities, the Poem" 158
[73] "Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue – Between Two Infinities, the Poem" 158
[74] "Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue – Between Two Infinities, the Poem" 158-159

words," letting the "energy and the endangerment" enter the "musical substratum of the poem."[75] Whether as poets or as people of earth, we are responsible for carrying endangered others with us wherever it is we are going, "be it beyond the world." There is a chance, when we are alone together, without the promise or security of an established world, that poetry can learn "to sense the cornered, tortured, possibly-still-vital being of earth as it hums at the heart of language. But it will hear the regeneration only if it audits the carnage."[76] Poetry, and language in turn, must suffer the end of the world as we know it, for the sake of the Earth and for those who wander the planet.

The hypothesis about poetry approaching the end of the world makes sense when we think that in the face of global environmental crisis we need to change the way we live. Either we need to effect a change in how we see and act in the world, or else we continue to behave as we do, until the forces of Earth – in the form of global warming and the stress on ecosystems – make it necessary for us to adapt our world in order to survive. Whether by chance or necessity our world is collapsing, and we must ask the question of our actions. In the present context, we ask it of art, but we could just as easy ask it of any aspect of our civilization – can poetry survive without the planet? Well yes, and no. Poetry can survive the end of the world, but not the destruction of the Earth.

[75] "Re-Greening the Undermusic" 22
[76] "Re-Greening the Undermusic" 23

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A Self-Dissolving Poetics and the Affirmation of Cadence

POST-INTERNET POETRY

In 2011, Lee's poetry of the immediate future was heard online, read by himself and his peers in Canadian literature: Margaret Atwood, Leonard Cohen, Michael Ondaatje and others.[1] This performance event seemed to feature not so much a literary text as multiple media interacting in a concrete depiction of the restless techniques of making and re-making typical of digital culture. The poems came from a single-authored typeset book; they were performed orally by several collaborative celebrity poets; they were co-expressed by dynamic computer graphics; and they were released to find their fortune on the internet.

This multimedia occasion provides an opportunity to place the *Testament* poems in relation to technological postmodernism in the same way as *Civil Elegies* was put in the context of experimental modernism, and for the same reason – to make visible Lee's poetics as it departs from the techno-aesthetic assumptions of his age. Earlier, the representative figure of the literary avant-garde was Stéphane Mallarmé; here, it is Kenneth Goldsmith who, in "The Writer as Meme Machine," describes internet poetry conceived in open interaction with modes of archiving information as producing an

[1] http://vimeo.com/25465023 *Yesno*, produced and directed by Brian D. Johnson. Based on *Yesno* by Dennis Lee (Toronto: Anansi: 2007)

"effortless non-understanding" and a quality of being "vast, instantaneous, horizontal, globally distributed, paper thin and, ultimately, disposable."[2] According to Christian Bök, one of its practitioners, meme poetry is written for "a robotic culture that must inevitably succeed our own."[3] This depiction of technological postmodernism has become commonplace. Brian Massumi anticipates it in his first essay on the emergence of the simulacrum to which media poetry might belong: "postmodernism stutters. In the absence of a gravitational pull to ground them, images accelerate and tend to run together." In this typical airless space, "we are left speechless. We can only gape in fascination. For the secret of the process is beyond our grasp. Meaning has imploded."[4] These attributes might apply to Lee's new poems even on their own, independent of the digital setting in which they were placed. Yet while conveying the distraction of high-speed reinvention, Lee's new works are not mindless. They are generally compelling in their human speaking, ranging from a polyphony of voices passing through each other to a lyrical monologue conveying the emotions of elegy: shock, denial, grief, despair, resolution. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, Massumi proposes another reason for the simulacrum's resemblance to the "Real" of another medium: "Resemblance is a beginning masking the advent of a whole new vital dimension. This even applies to mimicry in nature. An insect that mimics a leaf does so not to meld with the vegetable state of its surrounding milieu, but to reenter the higher realm of predatory animal warfare on a new footing."[5] It might be said that Lee's written poetry, through a ruse of

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[2] Kenneth Goldsmith "The Writer as Meme Machine: How has the Internet Altered Poetry?" *The New Yorker* online (22 October 2013): 3. http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-writer-as-meme-machine

[3] Christian Bök (2009), quoted in Goldsmith 3

[4] Brian Massumi "Realer than Real: the Simulacrum according to Deleuze and Guattari," in *Copyright* 1 (1987): 90

[5] "Realer than Real: the Simulacrum according to Deleuze and Guattari" 91

disguise, mimics the digital world so that his work has the possibility of regaining an even footing with the self-proliferating mass of online poetry.

In an updated article to his "Writer as Meme Machine" in *The New Yorker,* Goldsmith applies the name "post-Internet" to the new artists and poets whose work mimics digital forms in different mediums, including the written page: "For these artists, unlike those of previous generations, the Web is just another medium, like painting or sculpture. Their artworks move fluidly between spaces, appearing sometimes on the screen, other times in a gallery."[6] This statement might be true of Lee, who is oblivious to the world of online poetry, yet generous about lending his creativity to it and to film, television, musical concerts, and improvisational jazz.[7] What the conceptual poetry movement resists is the idea that the Web was a "distinct rupture in the way poetry was made" and that after the Web, we would "never write the same way again."[8] Goldsmith's examples tend to be found-poetry updated and manipulated, while Lee's *Yesno* poems (which are not found-poems) similarly re-use non-poetic language in such a way that they refute the idea that the internet is the only performance space worthy of poetry in the twenty-first century. In the online performance of *Yesno*, with different voices invoking the underlying musicality and voice of his writing, Lee's poems jump off the printed page into a new life in cyberspace. A major difference between Goldsmith's examples and Lee's work is that Lee does not restrict his sources of inspiration to documents proper to

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[6] Kenneth Goldsmith "Post-Internet Poetry Comes of Age" *The New Yorker* online (10 March, 2014) http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/post-internet-poetry-comes-of-age

[7] Jim Henson and Frank Oz, directors *The Dark Crystal*, scriptwork by Dennis Lee (1982); Jim Henson *The Labyrinth*, story by Henson and Lee (1986); Jim Henson Associates and CBC-TV *Fraggle Rock*, song lyrics by Dennis Lee (1982-1986); Osnat Netzer *Ten Songs of Yesno*, a song cycle for bass voice and 92-key piano. WMP Hall, New York City (May 2014); Lee with five musicians, Soulpepper Theatre (25, 26 October 2014); Lee with jazz trio, Robert Gill Theatre (8 October 2014)

[8] "Post-Internet Comes of Age" *The New Yorker* online (10 March, 2014)

popular culture, but explores the poetics of several discourses, including the scientific language that provides the foundations of digital technology. The manipulation of language by both Lee and the post-internet poets results in a re-working of scientific, journalistic, and popular discourse into imaginative poetry against those languages intended use. In Goldsmith's example, the "same words mean one thing as a legal document and another as poetry."[9] *Testament* stands at an interesting juncture in Lee's career, mediating between the found poems that Goldsmith champions and the voiced poems of Lee's earlier writing. Having negotiated the conflation of creative man and technological control described by Grant, Lee now mixes fundamentally uncreative scientific language together with traditional poetry styles in artifacts projecting new compound nonsense terms proper to his intuition of cadence, all within a fluctuating vortex of free-form riffs. A poem from *Testament* which shows this poetic vortex at play to the point of confusion is appropriately titled "flux":

> *As stuttle inflex the genomes.*
> *As bounty floundles.*
> *As coldcock amnesia snakes thru*
> *shoreline/sporelane/syngone –*
> *hi diddle*
> *template, unning become us,*
> *palimpsest gibber & newly.*
>
> *I spin the yin stochastic, probble a*
> *engram luff, & parse haw*
> *bareback the whichwake, besoddle a thrashold flu*x.[10]

As scientists gene-split DNA, shuffling and flexing the strands to create new artificial genomes, Lee's poem takes language and forces it to stutter, announcing its articulations

[9] "Post-Internet Comes of Age" *The New Yorker* online (10 March, 2014)
[10] "flux" in *Testament* 102

and meanings by creating new word combinations that enter the realm of poetry for the first time. Referring to one particular example of uncreative writing, Goldsmith describes the resulting writing as "terse and dry, calculating and claustrophobic, the way you might imagine a serial killer's inner voice to be. If Samuel Beckett wrote crime novels, they might read like this."[11] Goldsmith is right to call upon Beckett, but for stronger reasons than he allows.

THE MODERNIST IMPASSE DISSOLVED

Exploring the relationship between *Testament* and the writing of Beckett, who as indicated earlier is one of Lee's avatars of the negative way, may help us to begin answering the question compelling this chapter: how are we to make sense of a poetry that is made to appear incomprehensible in its construction? How does such poetry work to re-distribute visions of possible futures for imaginative creation? These questions may be approached by identifying an element in Lee's poetics at play in *Testament* – an element demonstrating that Lee has given up the impasse of Earth/World and is entertaining a new impasse. That new impasse, if embodied fully, may offer new futures for the humanities in the digital age. This move to a new position in Lee's later career is performative: it takes up the position of the poet as an actor bound to the future upon which poetry is wagered. According to this wager, I will consider Lee as a poet in the difficult world of Grant's impasse, placing beside him the example of Beckett as the "stoic comedian of the impasse," in Hugh Kenner's characterization. This pairing will show how a poet or novelist as medium actually routes poetic practice through void,

[11] "Post-Internet Comes of Age" *The New Yorker* online (10 March, 2014)

silence, and nonsense. And how out of this routing the poet or novelist evokes a new and typically musical field for the literary imagination, a field beyond the command of robots. Bringing Beckett into the discussion in this way shines light on Lee's aesthetic options, while also satisfying the broader aim of the chapter involving an answer to the question: how does modernism find a non-modern within its own impasse?

What Goldsmith is getting at with the comparison to Beckett is that the contemporary writer cannot depend on the human capacity for creative imagination, but instead must take the calculating language of sense-making and logic out of their worldly situations and place them in poetry so that the words become luminous by the fact of their very existence as words which appeal to ears of a reader. In a chapter on Beckett's indebtedness to the tradition of James Joyce and Gustave Flaubert, Kenner uses the Cretan paradox to show how modernist narrative takes a novel's speakers as essential to the action of writing:

> All Cretans are liars, said the man from Crete. It [the paradox] has always been inherent in the novel, the supposed narrator of which is part of the narration. That a puzzle out of logic classrooms should confront you on the threshold of a familiar form [the novel] should occasion no surprise.[12]

Kenner is showing how literature takes number logic to the threshold of a paradox, which the writer, and "Beckett in particular ... sought to solve …. How to deal with an impasse."[13] Kenner is referring to a Beckett narrator, but it is not a stretch to extend his consideration to the speaker in Lee's poetry. That is, framing Beckett's impasse in terms in which the writer is both the creator of a work of literature and a character given a voice

[12] Hugh Kenner *Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians* (Boston: Beacon Press 1962): 69
[13] *Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians* 70

within that work, and seeing how that paradoxical impasse can be solved, it is possible to take Lee's reading of Grant's Impasse out of its fatalistic permanence and re-orient it towards solving the problem of how the poet as technological wizard and the poet as receptive vessel for otherworldly energies can be reconciled.

In the face of the impasse, Beckett's "first strategy is survival," Kenner says, with Beckett realizing that if

> it is impossible to carry competence further, he will see what can be done with incompetence. And plucking the fruit of incompetence – plays that seem unable to get the title character onto the stage, novels that issue merely from the fact that someone is sitting in bed writing a novel, or that founder amid logical perplexities of their own propounding – he evolves meanwhile, since his mind is never still, a yet more comprehensive theory of what the writer is doing with himself, and a yet more general set of rules for the game he plays.[14]

Like Lee, who audits the destruction of any useful language for poetry in *Testament*, Beckett "penetrates into the heat of utter incompetence" where even the "merest three-word sentences, fly apart in his hands."[15] Kenner goes on to describe Beckett in terms consistent with Lee's negative theology, naming Beckett as the "non-maestro, the anti-virtuoso, habitué of non-form and anti-matter, Euclid of the dark zone where all signs are negative, the comedian of utter disaster."[16] By embodying the destruction of suitable literary language, Beckett's writing is "released from the impasse of virtuosity if it is sufficiently, literally, even idiotically faithful to its nature."[17] That writing being the

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[14] *Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians* 75
[15] *Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians* 77
[16] *Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians* 77
[17] *Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians* 83

nature of words written on a stack of pages by a man alone writing with no care for the success or failure of what is being written.

This is precisely the condition faced by Beckett's narrator Molloy, who describes himself at the beginning of the novel of his name only as being in his mother's room, not knowing how he got there, "perhaps in an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some kind,"[18] at the mercy of a man who comes every week to give him money and take away the pages he is writing, which the reader is now supposedly reading. Lee's *Nightwatch* (1996) opens in similar conditions. It is night in the poet's neighbourhood in Toronto. The speaker confesses wistfully that he could be out gallivanting, driven by id, affirming the Ginsbergian spirit of the urban night, but instead he is in his dark house listening to the trash cans rustling in the wind. The forty-year-old speaker, mirroring Lee himself, is describing the events of his life gone sour since the idealistic beginning of his poetic career. From the circumstance of a night past, when he was driven into wildness by 9-to-5 mass media jobs and "hopes come partway true,"[19] the speaker realizes that his life has come apart. The speaker's recounting of his life gains velocity, descending simultaneously into his apparently bottomless memory and the dark night where "fitful inklings" of thought "coalesce and come, / reverberant,"[20] and the outside world begins to fade away from the action.

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[18] Samuel Beckett *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove 2009): 3
[19] Dennis Lee "Nightwatch," in *Nightwatch, New & Selected Poems 1968-1996* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart 1996): 169
[20] "Nightwatch," in *Nightwatch* 171

In comparison, Molloy, lying outside in an older woman's garden, enters into what he calls a "night of listening" where he begins to hear something that is "not clear, being neither the air nor what it moves" and is perhaps the "far unchanging noise" that the "earth makes and which other noises cover, but not for long."[21] As Molloy listens deeper and deeper to the noise heard when one fully listens, he begins to lose his sense of identity to "another noise, that of my life becomes the life of this garden as it rode the earth of deeps and wildernesses."[22] It is seductive to lose oneself in the vast receptivity of night, where Molloy recalls that "I was no longer that sealed jar to which I owed my being so well preserved, but a wall gave way and I filled with roots and tame stems for example, stalks long since dead and ready for burning, the recess of night and the imminence of dawn, and then the labour of the planet rolling eager to winter."[23] In this position of being a medium, Molloy claims that "sounds unencumbered with precise meanings were registered perhaps better by me than most."[24] He remembers hearing words for a "first time, then a second, and often a third, as pure sounds, free of full meaning," after which these words "engraved themselves in my memory."[25] The words then pass through Molloy's over-calculating mind to be presented on the written page for the reader. For Kenner, the role of this narrator is "not the engineer's but the scribe's, or the medium's ('I'll say it as I hear it')."[26] This role is linked by Kenner, quoting Elizabeth Sewell, to the strategies of nonsense verse and pure poetry used by Carroll and Mallarmé.

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[21] *Molloy* 44
[22] *Molloy* 44
[23] *Molloy* 44
[24] *Molloy* 45
[25] *Molloy* 45
[26] *Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians* 77

They strategically create a complex situation in order to be able to manipulate and mirror in a poem the elaborate and complex order of the cosmos.

MEDIUM OF THE VOID

The nomenclature of poet as medium refers both to the Latin word *medius*, literally "middle," and to the figure who assists in the act of communicating between the seen and the unseen. A medium poet such as Lee occupies a mediating position between the world of common measuring and the chaos which defies rational or logical comprehension. By another definition of medium, the poet is an agent of exchange who intervenes in the balance or transmission of physical forces. Here, we are close to the radical impersonality of the poet as spiritual medium praised by Mallarmé: "I would become Nothingness again. Which means that I am impersonal now, not the Stéphane you once knew, but one of the ways the spiritual universe has found to see itself, unfold itself through what used to be me."[27] In his essay "Crise de vers" Mallarmé directs the poet towards a "pure poetry" that comes about through attending to the relationships, intervals and spaces between objects in nature, not the objects themselves. The philosophical climate for this anti-representation and anti-realism had been prepared by Hegel's dialectic of negation and signification by which the act of naming in speech abolishes the object as it is experienced in the play of the senses and replaces it with a concept, investing that absence, now negated, with meaning. Mallarmé stresses only the negating side of the dialectic in its annihilation of a world. "When I say: 'a flower!' then from that

[27] Mallarmé *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters*, translated by Bradford Cook (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1956): 94

forgetfulness to which my voice consigns all floral form, something different from the usual calyces [outer covering of the buds] arises, something all music, aroma and softness: the flower which is absent from all bouquets."[28] This purity available to sensation once sensation is severed from a world of posited objects, is modified during the development of Mallarmé's poetics. As described by Gerald Bruns, a new notion enters Mallarmé's thinking in 1866 – the void, to which he now attributes or sees as the context of beauty. In a letter to Henri Cazalis, soon to be the author of a study of Buddhism entitled *Le Livre du néant* (1872), Mallarmé in crisis writes that he came upon "twin abysses": "The first was Nothingness, which I found without any prior knowledge of Buddhism."[29] Four months after this letter, Mallarmé writes that "after I had found nothingness, I found beauty."[30] A beauty that belongs to nothingness and that can be revealed only in nothingness is spoken of by Hegel in relation to the absolute that rests upon negation, absence, the void. Mallarmé seems to have realized this of poetry through the effort of his own experience.

> Beneath a wave of sensitiveness, I was able to understand the intimate relation of Poetry to the Universe; and, to make Poetry pure, my idea was to divorce It from Dreams and Chance and link It to the idea of the Universe. But, unfortunately, since my soul is made for poetic ecstasy alone, I had no Mind at my disposal (as you have) to clear the way for this idea. And so you will be terrified to hear that I discovered the Idea of the Universe through sensation alone – and that, in order to perpetuate the indelible idea of pure Nothingness, I had to fill my brain with the sensation of absolute Emptiness.[31]

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[28] *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters* 42
[29] *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters* 88; see Gerald L. Bruns *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1974): 102.
[30] *Mallarmé* 89-90
[31] Letter to Villers de l'Isle-Adam, in *Mallarmé* 91. See 24 September, 1866, in Bruns 103.

This assertion, which negates any act of representation, and which opens up instead a nothingness or void in which the universe reaches the subject through sensation, prepares us for the world of cyberspace and the virtual.

Lee comes to the virtual by a number of paths, among which Heidegger's thinking about being and nothingness is prominent.[32] This process might be found to begin, poetically speaking, at the end of *Civil Elegies* where the notion of the void is wrestled free from inauthentic attempts to possess void – an impulse invited by the nihilism of technological modernity. The seeker enters true nothingness by being a non-seeker, like Beckett's incompetent narrator or like Mallarmé's impersonal spirit who approaches the void through a process of self-annihilation. While this Buddhist insight of Lee's may derive from the ninth-century Bengali sage Saraha who is quoted in an epigraph to *Civil Elegies*, there is also beneath the text a habit of reading of negative theology from Meister Eckhart to Simone Weil, which became a project in Lee's forties. One might add to these specifiable sources the reverberation of *le néant* in T.S. Eliot's poetry: *The Waste Land* draws from Wagner's *Parsifal* the sense of Lenten darkness and absence before a potential Easter glory.[33] Lee's reading may have found an adequate summation in the following statement: "The classical negative way proceeded, not by a scintillating growth of spiritual insight and ecstasy, but by detachment *from* those things. It didn't matter if they happened to you, or if they never did. But it mattered that you would almost certainly take them for the goal, the object of the exercise. And that is what you had to

[32] Isaías Naranjo "Visions of Heidegger in Dennis Lee and Robert Kroetsch," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 70.4 (Fall 2001): 869-880
[33] William Blissett "Wagner in *The Waste Land*," unpublished essay

relinquish – that spiritual attachment – till you were simply waiting on God in the darkness or waiting in darkness, period. Which is the primary modern experience of it."[34]

There cannot be a poetics of the medium without a concept of the void. For the void is the negation of pure meaningful presence fundamental to an act that calls for mediation. That act is an extension of the nihilism of man fated to constantly mediate his own experiences in history. If Mallarmé in his perception of "two abysses" is saying the same thing as Lee's speaker at the end of *Civil Elegies,* where

> *Freely out of its dignity the void must*
> *supplant itself,*[35]

there is a second nothingness that reveals itself beyond the crisis of naming. This second nothingness is the nothingness spoken of by the Buddha in which, for Mallarmé, a pure beauty can be found or in which, for Lee, a few certainties can be perceived as the suffering particulars of existence.

The position of the poet as medium is subordinated to the emergence of sensations of the poetic process responding to void. This position takes from early literary modernism the impersonality of the poet. Mallarmé saw this passivity to be a result of autonomous unfolding of the idea described by Hegel: "My thought has thought itself through and reached a pure idea. What the rest of me has suffered during that long agony,

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[34] Dennis Lee "Poetry and Unknowing," in *Body Music* 186. Based on an interview in 1993 by Michael Higgins, Pete Hinchcliffe, and John Porter.
[35] Lee "Ninth Elegy," *Civil Elegies* (Toronto: Anansi 1972): 57

is indescribable."[36] This reduction of the expressive Romantic poet to the function of catalyst in poetic processes would develop into an acceptance of the medium itself as author, with all the issues of spacing, sound, intertextuality and typography that interest, and are reproduced by, the French theorists. Strangely, Lee, after going against the grain of modernist fragmentation and writing a poetry that is personal and spoken, suddenly produces after the year 2000 a poetry in which the self is reduced because of sentence fragments often lacking overt subjects. Bruns calls attention to the absence of the poet from the poetic process as described by Mallarmé, using the evocative phrase "the song of Orpheus in his absence."[37] But the suggestion that the song that sings the world into being goes on somehow without the archetypal singer Orpheus applies more to Lee, who in *Testament* constantly laments the loss of the bond between words and things and who, unlike Mallarmé, is not prepared to disappear into a totality of universal relationships but refers back in his language-forms to the world of things. What happened around the year 2000 was that Lee, while reading Celan, found that cadence was now choosing its own new words out of his unconscious, and choosing verbal elements that simultaneously made sense and nonsense in multiple ways.

POETRY WITHOUT A POET

How did Lee begin to greet the poetic novelties that surprised him on his holiday in Barcelona and that would later become collected in *Testament*? His *Nightwatch* published ten years earlier in 1996 had perfected the long conversational line that lent itself to the

[36] Letter to Henri Cazalis, in *Mallarmé* 93-94
[37] Bruns *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language* 117

confessional elegy, beginning with *Civil Elegies* of 1972. This poetics emphasized the speaking voice over the hard-edged juxtaposition of imagism. Now Lee was suddenly writing whole poems such as

> *Flin*
> *tinlyexcaliburlockjut.*
>
> *Tectonic aubade*.[38]

What was happening, in Lee's own words, was that "the language itself was breaking down and being re-made. And I started to realize that it wasn't enough just to speak about the pressure we've put on earth; language itself was under the same pressure, I had to listen as intently as I could, to discern the new forms it was taking."[39] This statement is an explanation after the fact of novelty, the emergence of a new poetry. And the discovery of Lee's role as that of medium.

Lee's personal experience of the new poetry appearing first as nonsense prompted further reflection on Cadence in "Re-Greening the Undermusic." Cadence in this reflective essay has become "the pulsing coherence of what-is, transmitted as a rich, untamed array of kinaesthetic frequencies." Instead of reducing the world to a human syntax, it "communicates the energy of things being themselves … embodies and epitomizes their kinetic gestalts in the material rhythms of poetry." Cadence is a "teeming rhythmic energy" … "a polyphonic journey on the page" … a "cataclysmic music."[40] The problem, however, is that the poet inhabits an imagery that speaks its language in a new

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[38] "excalibur," *Testament* 40
[39] Dennis Lee online essay www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88v/dennis-lee-explains-un.html
[40] "Re-Greening the Undermusic" 4, 10, 19

and unique way. He is unable to identify what emerges in the collisions executed by Nietzsche's "Lord Chance." The poet cannot discover his discoveries. The way out of this linguistic situation may be, as Jane Bennett puts it, to "play the fool,"[41] like Molloy in Beckett. That is, to assume a starting point that is "less the acceptance of the impossibility of 'reconcilement' and more the recognition of human participation in a shared vital materiality"[42] of things and words. This recognition may begin by allowing the release of words from syntax into forms determined by commonalities of sound and of theme. This is the primary impression left by a poem of Mallarmé's where, for example, one might find arranged together several heterogeneous images all involving absence or departure: an empty room, a shell, a dead nymph reflected in a mirror. Here, we are in the world of affect instead of the world of intentional consciousness afforded by linguistic structure. Loss of syntax allows the things mentioned to recover their properties as vibrant objects. The poems in which these objects cohabit are also materialities. Words are dice thrown across a page.

Again Beckett shows how this disorder remains musical. In his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, written when he was 26, Beckett had no qualms in announcing to the reader that his characters were not doing as the author intended but instead were doing "just what they please, they just please themselves. They flower out and around into every kind of illicit ultra and supra. Which is bad, because as long as they do that they can never meet."[43] Struggling against hedonistic liberalism is the

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[41] Jane Bennett *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things (*Durham NC: Duke University Press 2010): 16
[42] *Vibrant Matter* 14
[43] Samuel Beckett *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (New York: Arcade 2011): 117

protagonist Belacqua who "drifts about, it is true, doing his best to thicken the tune, but harmonic composition properly speaking, music in depth on the considerable scale is, and this is a terrible thing to say, ausgescholossen,"[44] that is to say locked out or excluded. But there is a further problem in that this cataclysmic and non-harmonic music which is reluctant to cohere "is truly equal of Belacqua" and truly equal of the cosmos: "Their movement is based on the principle of repulsion, their property not to combine but, like heavenly bodies, to scatter and stampede ... And not only to shrink away from all that is not they, from all that is without and in its turn shrinks from them, but also to strain away from themselves."[45] This is all to say, in another way of putting it, that the cohesive whole that Grant imagined is impossible in conditions where the universe, poetic subjects, and the poet are all subdivided and at odds with themselves. The problem is that it remains the poet's job to convoke these things within the form of a poem.

It is important to see that Lee's poetry, in attempting this feat of convocation at the level of language, is a recycling of linguistic rubble. He reflects on this project in "The Regreening of Language," echoing McLuhan's imperative that "The medium had to be re-made as much as the message."[46] He inherits a Lamartine sentiment when he writes that "consciousness voids all over the bowl of sky."[47] And he picks up on an aesthetic principle of Mallarmé in the phrase "signatures of loss."[48]

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[44] *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* 117
[45] *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* 119
[46] Dennis Lee online essay, www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88v/dennis-lee-explains-un.html
[47] "brainrays," *Testament* 10. See McLuhan "Joyce, Mallarmé, and the Press," *Sewanee Review* 62.1 (January-March 1954): 38.
[48] "hydro," *Testament* 11

These signatures are shown in *Un* where Lee writes of the loss of "Mind, and a home, and a rupture … / Surd journeys to scrambled states of once … re- / formatted to the new," while holding the tenuous ground of "heart- / precious the / archaeological now."[49] In this articulate rubble, the critic might engage in the "archaeological character" of Agamben's genealogies as critique, "whose aim is to make intelligible a series of phenomena whose kinship has eluded or could elude the historian's gaze," where the "*archē*" is "not a point of origin."[50] Critical genealogies concentrate on *plans de clivage*, perhaps similar to what Lee calls "rupture," with enquiry beginning at an arbitrary crossing of diachrony and synchrony. Such enquiry might note a traffic pile-up of scribal and typographical mediation together with referent impulse to interpret things as texts in relation to a final revelation:

> *Scribblescript portents unfurl, world-*
> *to, world fro.*
> *And to comb the signs, to*
> *stammer the uterine painscape*
> *in pidgin apocalypse*[51]

Oral culture is mentioned as a possible redemptive force:

> *Song sinister. Song*
> *ligature:*
> *sing* counter.
> *Are there bonks, are there glyphs, are there*
> *bare alingual grunts that*
> *tonguefastly cleave to the iflift of*

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[49] *Un* (Toronto: Anansi 2003): 4, 35
[50] Giorgio Agamben *The Signature of All Things* (New York: Zone Books 2009) 31, 32
[51] "Pidgin," *Testament* 14

habitat mending? the judder of unsung un-
sung?[52]

In contrast to a "rain" that "signifies like plague of indigenous nada,"

speakspace
puckers. How it
swivels and clots & ka
boom! *Percur –*
vations in meanfield. Skewed
mentrics. Bunched losswaves. Impromptible knots of rebeing.[53]

The subterranean power driving such strangulated and often technological language is often revealed in a single word, such as "Lingotectonics." Here, images as colliding materialities have a chance or random relationship to each other in a game without rules: it is nothing more than "52 pickup," constituting

Grammars of outcome,
twin –
twined in collision/collusion.[54]

Recall Lee's amazement at these verbal fusions: "These things … were they even poems? They seemed more like dense objects, made out of – what *were* they made out of?"[55] Finally, the images-as-objects are both vital and emotionally neutral (though a poet's anguish can be felt in the spaces between them). This neutrality is consistent with techno-scientific discourse, and especially the discourse of digital media.

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[52] "song," *Testament* 67
[53] "boom!" *Testament* 86
[54] "whistledown" in *Testament* 87; "twin" in *Testament* 91
[55] "Re-Greening the Undermusic" 15

Medium poets give up their privileged place as poetry's sole creator for this position of neutrality in order to articulate their sense of loss. For Georges Bataille, poetry is the "least degraded and least intellectualized form of the expression of a state of loss."[56] Poetry signifies for Bataille "creation by means of loss," so much so that he tied the meaning of poetry to sacrifice. The expending of the poet's spirit, creating by engaging their sense of loss, ceases to be symbolic and begins to engage the "very life of the one who assumes it," taking the poem beyond its representative function to affect the poet, "condemning him to the most disappointing forms of activity, to misery and despair, to the pursuit of inconsistent shadows that provide nothing but vertigo or rage."[57] This is a bleak description of poetic practice when spoken of abstractly, but that is because these residual feelings of alienation do not easily lend themselves to abstraction out of context easily.

Lee is one of the medium poets whose poetry engages his entire living being. His word for the poetic intimations of what underlies a society's language is "cadence" and his society is English-speaking Canada in the grip of technological modernity. When attuning himself to the activity of cadence by removing himself from everyday civil-belonging, from immersion in productive goings-on, Lee can sense cadence "churning, flickering, thrumming" in a way that locates civil things in "more shapely relation to one another."[58] Initially cadence sounds "without words;" the sensation "isn't auditory. It's

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[56] Georges Bataille "The Notion of Expenditure" in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, translated and edited by Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1985): 120
[57] Bataille 120
[58] Dennis Lee "Cadence, Country, Silence," in *Body Music* 3

more like sensing a constantly changing tremor with your body: a play of movement, torsion and flex – as with the kinesthetic perception of the muscles."[59]

In *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, Beckett provides his own term for this phenomenon on the level of the body as Belacqua encounters the mediating void of night. Beckett's term is "wombtomb," which he also links to "Limbo."[60] There are stirrings of possible inspiration for Molloy here, where Beckett goes on to describe how Belacqua prefers, out of his three states of mind, the freedom of this cessation of his will and the disappearance of identity of both himself and the city, the forests, and all beings into the dark gulf of void. Like Lee's public speaker at the stroke of noon in *Civil Elegies*, Belacqua's third being was "without axis or contour, its centre everywhere and periphery nowhere, an unsurveyed marsh of sloth."[61] Beckett tells us that if Belacqua were free to dwell in this negative position he surely would, but he is constantly drawn back into the "dreary fiasco of oscillation" or impasse that "presents itself as the only alternative."[62]

Lee remembers in "Cadence, Country, Silence" one of the first times when he felt that technological modernity, utilizing the media, had entered into his mind and body. He felt this invasion in 1965 during a protest against the Vietnam War at a teach-in at the University of Toronto's Varsity Stadium. He came to realize two things: "The first was that the American government had been lying about the war on a colossal scale. And the second was that the Canadian media, from which I'd learned most of what I knew about

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[59] *Body Music* 3-4
[60] *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* 121
[61] *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* 121
[62] *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* 121

Vietnam, were spreading its lies."[63] Shocked by the power of this hypocrisy, Lee came to realize that "imperial influence was not confined to the media. It also included my head. More and more of the ideas I had, my assumptions, even the instinctive path of my feelings, seemed to have come North from the States unexamined."[64] This realization produced Lee's first strong feelings of loss, which grew, as we saw in chapter 1, into *Civil Elegies*.

The frustrating side to such sensations of loss, limbo, and oscillation is felt in the attempt to commit overwhelming cadences to representation on the page. Lee remarks that the "rhythm of what I've written is such a small and often mangled fraction of what I sense, it tunes out so many wavelengths of that massive, infinitely fragile polyphony, that I almost despair."[65] In a similar vein of thought, Bataille says that the "poet can use words only for his own loss."[66] In a flurry of editing "words, images, bright ideas that are borne along in cadence," a Lee poem carries the poet across a median line as the poem becomes "what remains" or is residual; the "local cadence minus whatever is extraneous to its shapely articulation."[67] For Lee, a poem "wants to exist in two ways at once. As a teeming process which overflows every prior canon of form" and as a "beautifully disciplined structure, whose order flowers outward from the centre of its own necessity."[68] The despairing poetic act which keeps a poem from ever becoming a unified whole, or in other words from circumscribing the entire sensuous field of cadence, is not

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[63] "Cadence, Country, Silence," *Body Music* 13
[64] "Cadence, Country, Silence," *Body Music* 13-14
[65] *Body Music* 4
[66] *Visions of Excess* 120
[67] *Body Music* 5
[68] *Body Music* 5

the failing of a poet as medium. It is the state of the civil space he lives in. The alienation Lee experiences as a poet is the muting of cadence by the languages of technological modernity.

Lee's poetic consciousness is divided, at least as far as language and media practices are concerned, because of his belief that Canadians are living in a country that has become an "American client state" where we "speak the same tongue as our new masters," which results in civil alienation not being transparently evident in our writing.[69] Using his friend George Grant's example of the English Loyalists' confrontation with the American doctrine of essential freedom, Lee points out that the "refusal of America issued, in part, from a disagreement in what it meant to be human."[70] Grant's argument as articulated by Lee is that, by refusing the essential freedom, the Loyalists were refusing the "point of generation of technological civilization" and its "view of everything but our naked wills – the new continent, native peoples, other nations, outer space, even our own bodies – as raw material, to be manipulated according to urges of our desires and the dictates of our technology."[71] As we have seen, with Bataille, to refuse the societal need to provide a rational necessity for all civil engagements is to risk having one's voice marginalized as noise or nonsense. Even Beckett's speakers can only manage surviving on the fringes of society for so long. Lee recognizes that in the thralldom of technological modernity "there is no court of appeal outside that circuit."[72] It is in the next sentence that Lee finally comes to the problem of extending a political voice to the natural world. In

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[69] *Body Music* 11
[70] *Body Music* 15
[71] *Body Music* 15
[72] *Body Music* 16

technological modernity, "we can observe this worldview destroying the planet, but that does not give us access to a different worldview."[73] This realization of the inability of poetry to prevent the destruction of the planet would become the ground for the experiment of *Testament* thirty years later. When writing "Cadence, Country, Silence," Lee believed that only way to dissent from liberal modernity is "to fall silent, for we have no terms in which to speak that do not issue from the very space we are trying to speak against.[74] Here, for Lee, when the media heap myriad impressions on our senses, they are masking colonial forces – those Grant would call empire. Thus, for an "English Canadian, exploring the obstructions of cadence means exploring the nature of colonial space."[75] Lee is referring again to the ease by which American colonization of Canadian culture can occur because colonizer and colonized speak the same language.

But Lee's *Testament* poems no longer speak the English language as it is commonly spoken today by Americans and Canadians. The language of *Testament* is sometimes barely recognizable as a unified language at all. There are words borrowed from Latin ("terminus"),[76] German ("nichtlichkeit"),[77] phrases combining French and Italian terms on their own and used in combination ("fleur de ciao"),[78] an astonishing number of visual symbols standing in for words and pauses all necessary to the form of the poems yet without sounds for themselves (primarily dashes, colons, and "&s"), place, peoples, and animal names ("Beothuk, manatee, ash"),[79] and words that stand in for

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[73] *Body Music* 16
[74] *Body Music* 16-17
[75] *Body Music* 10
[76] Lee "olduvai" in *Testament* 20
[77] Lee "toxibelle" in *Testament* 21
[78] "toxibelle" 21
[79] Lee "whistledown" in *Testament* 87

sounds ("*yip yap yip*").[80] These words defy systematization into a single imperial language, just as the forms of certain poems act as disordered sonnets which unravel as they reach their endings, as in the phrase "Bad *abba* the endgame" in "tale."[81] These examples are also Lee's least overtly philosophical poems: so varied in theme and brevity they resist conforming to a philosophical discourse – even to Grant's thought which as shown earlier only surfaces from time to time as a muffled voice and memory among other blighted voices and fading memories. This overall resistance at all levels to a unifying principle suggests that as the singer of the poetry enters the destruction to the point of no return, even the systems of empire are not safe from the carnage of world-end: "slipaway Sydney. / London. / Manhattan. Mumbai: / nostril meniscus, then ciao."[82] The singer is concerned that there may be no civil society left, not even the empire of technological modernity, of which to sing.

To wager the future of poetry on an underlying polyphonic music that must never cohere or reach a final note, and which takes up the role of the poet as a theme in the song, is critical resistance in the face of forces of annihilation and destruction. On one hand, it seems that poetry is hardly worth making when the beings of the planet call for human care. But, on the other hand, by freeing words from their syntax in universalizing and homogenizing languages, and by intuiting word-sounds as musical resonances and rhythms in correspondence with the animation of beings and things, is to accord the species of Earth a future on their own terms in an ecological polyphony. A recent collection which broadcasts an indigenous musicality is appropriately titled *Global*

[80] Lee "*yip*" in *Testament* 38
[81] Lee "tale" in *Testament* 130
[82] Lee "slipaway" in *Testament* 13

Chorus: 365 Voices on the Future of the Planet. One voice is that of Jay Ingram, who includes Lee's poem "whistledown" from *Testament* as an illustration of thinking about how humanity can "throw off the cognitive shackles" by acknowledging that "poetry uses language in unfamiliar ways, people keep thinking about the words after they've finished reading."[83] Ingram detects in the *Testament* poetry the nervous optimism that he believes is fundamental to being human in the twenty-first century. This nervous optimism is strongly felt in the last poem of *Testament*, where Lee acknowledges that there is still a story for the poet to tell. In the telling of this story are hints of salvation, recognition of the limits of humanity and the planet, the possible finality of extinction. Yet foremost among these sub-themes is the understanding that even though the "breadcrumbs are gone" that a poet may follow to discover truth, the ending of all that is, by remaining un-shown, means that "the story goes on," and the poet can re-emerge as the story's Orphic mouth-piece, mediating to humanity the call of the Earth and its species for a future.

Yet in order to become the vessel of this song of the Earth, the poet must give up any sense of self-identity as a poet – this is a problem that remains to be solved. One answer – a pan-Orphic answer – could be that poetic making is a power of any being in existence, and it is the natural inclination of other listening beings to question why a particular being is singing and to whose ears? Another answer – a negative-Orphic one – is that poets wager themselves in an exchange in order to secure a future for poetry. In the end it may be that when he gives up the status of creative thinker par excellence, the poet

[83] Jay Ingram "August 2," in *Global Chorus: 365 Voices on the Future of the Planet*, edited by Todd Maclean (Victoria: Rocky Mountain Books 2014): 239

is greeted with the realization that by the very fact of poetry's uselessness poetry begins to de-privilege the human subject as sole master of the universe, and in effect teaches humans to begin to listen again to the call of the unheard.

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