

The Silence That Says Nothing: The Poetics of Dissent

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“The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.”
—George Orwell, *Why I Write*, 1946 essay

“We were so easy to deceive / We were so easy to control / We didn’t even know there is a war.” —Leonard Cohen, *There Is A War*

In the proud tradition of dissent in world literature, from Voltaire to Vidal, where does Canadian poetry fit in? Especially right now, with the wrenching of Canadian military policy from peacekeeping to waging war? It would seem we are busily crafting a safe and comfortable silence for ourselves—what Pablo Neruda called *“the silence that says nothing.”* (*Songs of Protest: North American Friend*) Neruda wrote those words in direct response to literary critics who derided his polemical poetry: *“Why doesn’t your poetry / speak to us of dreams and leaves / of the great volcanoes of your native land?”* (*I Am Explaining a Few Things*) Once again, as when he witnessed Franco’s thugs bomb innocent civilians in Spain, Neruda was forced to respond to the CIA-backed overthrow of the Allende government that shattered Chile. He could not, would not abandon the moral obligation to speak out: *“I exist not if I do not attend to the pain / of those who suffer: they are my pains.”* (*Songs of Protest: So Is My Life*)

Neruda next tackled those who shirked their social conscience: *“dissolute poets who have lost / Whitman’s faith in the human race.../ my only rebuke against you / is for the silence that says nothing.”* (*Songs of Protest: North American Friend*) Perhaps this is one of the pitfalls of Canada’s government-subsidized literary system: its tendency to create self-censorship. There are of course some commendable exceptions: the anthology *The Common Sky—Canadian Writers Against the War* published by Three Squares Press; Penumbra Press’s *Waging Peace*; and the well-crafted online chapbook *100 Poets Against the War*, compiled in 2003 by Todd Swift in response to the American invasion of Iraq. Still, why does it take *ad hoc* efforts like

these to marshal the literary forces of conscience? Where are Canadian literature's most venerable presses?

The dominant trend of North American literature in general and Canadian poetry in particular these days is either shamelessly self-referential or subtle to the point of featurelessness. Whether that 'self' is the individual, that individual's culture of origin, or the larger self of the man-made world, it's what I call 'sophisticated navel-gazing'. In the foreword to my collection, *The Charlatans of Paradise*, I wrote: "*In the trajectory toward the universal, contemplation of the self is only going halfway.*"

Obviously, being humans, we have a need to examine what it means to be human. That's only natural, and necessary. But there's an odd double standard at work here. On one hand, literary critics disparage what they call 'confessional' writing. On the other, much of the work by our most renowned writers is precisely that, well disguised by adept literary technique. Isn't speaking through a poetic 'voice'—however remote from the self—confessional, fully intimate, when stripped of its mask?

It's natural for a younger poet to be self-absorbed, as part of the natural development toward maturity. One must first explore the self in order to have some ground from which to examine the wider world on a secure footing. But when the reigning literary orthodoxy institutionalizes the self-absorbed to the exclusion of all else, we have a problem. Patrick Lane makes an interesting observation in this regard: "*The search through the 'interior self' for valid expression of art today reminds me of Chinese poetry during a thousand years of totalitarian dictatorship by the elite.*"

And then there's the creative writing axiom about not 'intruding' into the poem with authorial presence. This strikes me as the same fallacy as the notion of journalistic and historical 'objectivity'. It's fine to argue the poet should 'show and not tell', that readers must be allowed to draw their own inferences. But taken to its logical extreme, this penchant for 'subtlety' can result in so much pabulum, "*the silence that says nothing.*" At what point are we contributing to

the numbing of the masses in the same way as the rest of pop culture? At what point does our avoidance of hard issues become complicity?

The problem is one of timing. The esthetic needs to be appropriate to the time. As the biblical proverb puts it: *“A time for everything under the sun: A time to plant and a time to uproot; a time to pull down and a time to build up.”* When your neighbour’s house is burning down, it’s time to grab a hose, not stand by and discuss how beautifully his grass is trimmed. Cohen’s lyric in *There Is A War* echoes George Orwell’s lines in a poem written in 1935: *“And later still the times were good, / We were so easy to please, / We rocked our troubled thoughts to sleep / On the bosoms of the trees.”*

Orwell lived in his prime through one of the worst periods of fascism and mass murder in recent history: the Second World War. In his 1946 essay, *Why I Write*, he explained: *“in a peaceful age I might have written ornate or merely descriptive books... As it is I have been forced into becoming a sort of pamphleteer. It seems to me nonsense, in a period like our own, to think that one can avoid writing of such subjects.”* Desperate times call for desperate measures, as the saying goes.

Whatever the method chosen—whether the raw-throated polemic or the sly satire—poets have traditionally been the voices of conscience. Irving Layton once said his mission was to *“disturb the accumulated complacencies of people.”* San Francisco Poet Laureate Lawrence Ferlinghetti believes poets are *“the antennae of the race... the conscience of society.”* Yet he never loses touch with the pure sensuous joy of his art. *“A poem should arise to ecstasy, somewhere between speech and song.”* Calgary poet Richard Harrison argues for a subversive subtlety by citing Milton Acorn: *“Acorn used to say that a revolutionary poem had to disguise itself as part of its subversion: the best revolutionary poem... would be so attractive as a poem that it would get into the minds of the capitalist and then, once there, its message would go off and do its disruptive work.”* All of this carries resonances of Gandhi’s adage: *“It is a duty to resist evil.”*

Today Canada's corporate media and literary prize juries ask the same self-serving question as Neruda's critics. Whether it's fear of rocking the fragile boat of our subsidized cultural industry, or out of sheer self-absorption, they seek consent, not dissent, from poets—again, *“the silence that says nothing.”* And so we have poets winning awards for books for doing just what Orwell disdained: indulging a fetish for the ornate and personal in a time of war.

Not to say we couldn't use some healing silence. But healing comes after the cessation of hurt. 'Til then, everyone needs to pick up a bucket and try somehow to put out the fires of war, each in his or her own way. To savour silence we must first have earned the freedom to have it. That's the hard-won lesson we remind ourselves of every Remembrance Day. *“A time for everything under the sun,”* voices raised in outcry against murder and atrocity, or softly in the meadows of peace.

