Gabriel's Story

by Ian MacRae

I once lived for a time abroad; upon my return to Canada, I was filled with the deep solitude and sense of loss of one who is shorn from language, from culture and place, from familiar ways of living and of perceiving time. A peculiar homecoming: the thrill of arrival, compounded by the warmth of return, pierced by arrows of longing that rove my heart with a nostalgia for remembered dreams. Slowly, of course, this melancholia faded (for me, a passing phantasm: I had returned home, not left it), as new dreams and stories replaced ones that with time—but only with time—became old. I was fortunate one night, sitting alone in a nearly empty, worn-down Toronto movie theatre, awaiting a tattered screening of *Il Postino*, to meet a well-weathered, amicable old Spanish-speaking man; we have gone for many coffees and strolls through parks since, becoming fast friends. This, more or less, is his story—as told by him—in the music of his Colombian Castellano; as translated and transcribed by me, an impoverished (but not poor), starving, *implicated* environmental studies student—the one he has shared with me over this last half year. It is the tale of our culture as told in language, of two great "ruptures" in the European linguistic-cultural formation—the second of which cannot be separated from the inception of the novel. More than anything else, this subject—the novel—(and its spirits of ambiguity, complexity and humour, of scandal and myth, contemplation and time), is the still centre around which, as I was to find out much, much later, all of his words revolve.

In my friend's spirit, with his permission, and without the slightest pretense of effecting the integrity and strength of his conversation, I hope here to share some of my fortune with you.

I will start at the beginning: at the beginning that isn't one. Months after we met, as we walked through Christie Pits one winter evening, the mist of our breathing heavy and still in the cold, crystalline air, I asked what I felt was the most basic of questions: the one I still couldn't understand, "Why—or perhaps better yet, how—can the trace of language tell the story of culture?"

"If each language is a 'world view,' a partial, incomplete, yet powerful and pervasive way of conceiving 'world,' a way of thinking and feeling, a vision of the world that is *other*," he told me, "then by contemplating our own language-as-cultural articulation, as (partial, incomplete) articulation of our collective cultural consciousness, then we might learn many things about our past; a past which, in turn, when brought into the present, has become our selves. Or at least a light to shine on time. More particularly, and of interest to you, in such a way we might learn of human relationships with the non-human other; those relationships which many of your 'enviro-colleagues' seem to see crumbling around their outstretched arms, to dust."

His words that night sliced the still air like ice; two of his phrases stand clear in my mind still, etched as if into glass: "We can't use our minds at full capacity unless we have some idea of how much we're thinking is really thought, and how much is just familiar words running along their own familiar tracks." And then, of poetry, "A poem is as neural as love; the rut of rhythm that veers the mind."[1]

In Kos Diner, on College near Bathurst, where we used to go for coffee after my sessions at U of T's Robarts Library, I would tell him about the environmental "movement", about one of its accompanying philosophies, sometimes called environmental thought, and about the onslaught of fatality which pervades certain aspects of this field. Initially, at least, I did most of the talking, while the old man just sat there, his big bull's chest cloaked in a baggy tweed jacket, elbows propped on table, a shock of salt-and-pepper hair flecking flourescent shadows across the bar. Eyes opaque and darting he contemplated my words, sipped his caffeine, and slowly revealed himself to me as a man of masks. (Instead of Hermes, Giambattista, Franz—these among his many guises—we will use his real name here, Gabriel.) And so, oddly (fittingly?) enough, Gabriel's story begins (again) with an amorphism, a spiritual identity, an illusive mask that is at the same time a real face: "European." An identity, he told me, which extends beyond geographical Europe (to the Americas, for instance, including Canada), and was born with ancient Greek philosophy.[2]

"Are there things characteristic of this identity?" I asked one stark, uneasy November evening, sitting across the formica-topped diner table from him, lighting (another) cigarette in the cold, abrasive light.

Fondling his mug like a long-lost lover, his fingers mashed and stumpy against the yellow, glinting enamel, Gabriel pulled a favourite reference from his bag of literary tricks: Edmund Husserl, the phenomenologist, and his celebrated 1935 lectures on the Crisis of European Humanity.[3] "In Husserl's view," Gabriel replied, "this Greek philosophy, for the first time in history, apprehended the world (the world as a whole) as a question to be answered. It interrogated the world not in order to satisfy this or that practical need but

Photographs by Christine Beevis

because 'the passion to know had seized mankind.'"[4]

Unfurling my hair from its ponytail, I nodded thoughtfully in agreement: this is part of the story I had been taught at FES (Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University), this is the "passion" as the seed that flowered into contemporary science, technology, objectivity ... loss of ... most things of value, I guess, (our rhythms, our biodiversity, our selves, etc.): the epic tragedy that is this Ecological Present, et cetera. A seed whose fruit we have eaten, is inside us, and which has poisoned our soul.

At the same time as he articulated the mythos of 'European' or North American settler culture, there was a notion to which Gabriel always returned: "This is not to negate those American cultures that were here long before our hemisphere's two continents were given their one current name (after an Italian sailor, Amerigo Vespucci) — American cultures, languages, *visions* of world that are, in many cases, still existent, in changeable, changing forms. This, rather, is to name, recognize, criticize,[5] and so perhaps transfigure[6] the present (ecological) moment." This is to state a simple, almost too-obvious truth: "*the overriding contemporary Canadian cultural narratives are European,*" he told me. "Distinctive, heterogenous, *becoming* narratives, certainly, and moving more towards Other narratives every day, especially in the urban centres, but with our languages and systems of law and representative democracy [Gk. *demokratia* < *demos* people + *krateein* rule), with our plastic arts, poetry, the novel and the university, we (as descendents of settlers) are in many ways so much water from the well of this Greek past."[7]

"Isn't this the tyrant of History that shackles us, that limits our futures by over-determining our pasts?" I snap back, adamant and angry; the despots of caffeine and nicotine have enslaved my veins. "Aren't we more than the sum of past mythologies? If not, aren't we then destined only to imitate, to play out the string of an inauthentic existence?"

I remember that instant in its entirety, as if in my memory there sits a speaking mirror. Gabriel, waiting, allows a calming moment to transpire, then soothes me with—of all things—*time*: "The past and the future exist precisely, precisely *now*," he says, slowly, carefully, "in the absolute present, the only fullness in time. Where we imagine; when we remember; where our relationships with and images of past and present and otherness exist. The absolute present is the moment of creation, of memory and imagination, of remembered pasts and imagined futures; of reading, writing, and of change. The present is where the two directions of time—the past and the future—converge. The diachronic and synchronic: the parallel and complementary impulses that obsess poets and set the mythological stage upon which we play out our lives.

"These two attitudes intersect and bifurcate, converge and separate again to form the living fabric that is our culture, our literature." He pauses, breathing deeply. "This, the moment, and these, the impulses, of culture: dynamic, living; these also the times of the novel. Our imitation is authentic. And incomplete."[8]

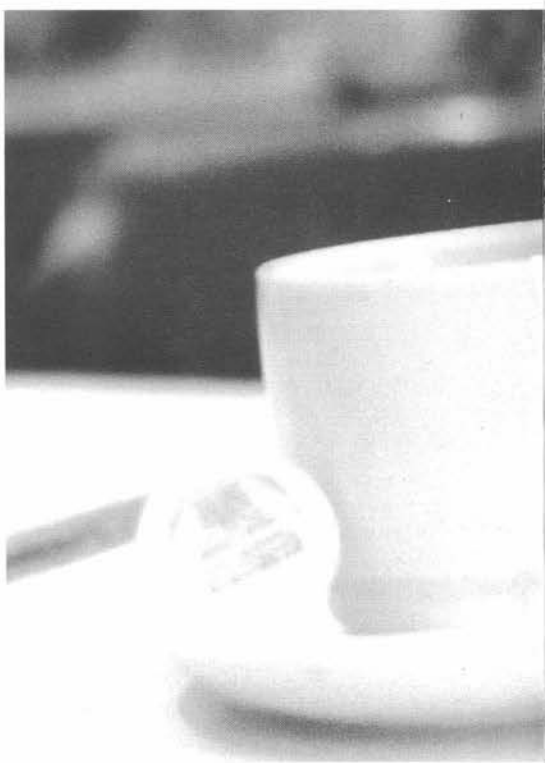
I dare to summarize: Ancient Greece (language and culture), later conjoined with Christianity's mythological universe (children of a book, we are: the Bible), for whatever we think of it all, is an irrevocable—Gabriel says eternal—*presence* in our (European, Canadian) present.

He liked to make this point with an emphatic pound on the formica table, and a quotation from Octavio Paz:

> *what happened did not take place*
> *but is taking place*
> *and silently empties*
> *into another moment that vanishes:*

And so we can see: much of what I transcribe and translate here is one man's personal testimony; it may well have no more value than that. A series of reflections, none of which can be distilled to a systemic theory.

Begrudgingly, over a period of long, cold wintry months, I came to accept Gabriel's perspective. Why, I wonder, looking back now, trying to make some sense of it all, did I take so long? Because, I have come to believe, mine being an "I" obliquely associated to "environmental studies," this "I" was situated in a narrative or mythological framework which tended to see European social-cultural things as not going so well; and so "I" was oriented primarily, eternally, vindictively and angrily and always towards change, resistance, *paradigm* (that ridiculous word) shifts: even, at the ungodly extreme ... revolution. Hence, as perhaps you can well imagine, my angry recoil from Gabriel's long-term view; such deep cultural roots (traced further back still, to North Africa, to Babylonia, and further forward, to Rome, to Islam, to ...) seemed to preclude transformation, change, salvation: my environmental idols. And yet at long last I acquiesced, my petty ideologies beaten down by the stern hand of time—then parried with a thrust of my own: "What of this Greek language/culture/world?" I asked, "What does it tell us about us?"



"Long ago," replied Gabriel, "before this Greek philosophy was even articulated, and in a land far far away, these people who became the deepest root of our past lived in an animate, mimetic, spirit-filled cosmos. Polytheism; a *pre*-literate (not *il*-literate) orality; a human consciousness embedded in a breathing, speaking, sensuous world— from which individual human identities could scarcely be dissociated: these were characteristic of a *poetic* cultural mode, of a *metaphoric* linguistic style. Within the language, the subject and the object were not separate, but rather were linked by a shared energy or power. To sound a name was to evoke potential magic: a word was capable of summoning forces, powers, in the ambient, surrounding world. The mind, and world, as represented in (and articulated by) language, were linked."[9]

"And when you are linked to the trees," Gabriel told me, "when your connection to the life-world out there, which is real and lived and true, is conceptualized (spoken) as real and lived and true, you will not indiscriminately cut down those trees."

"Three points," he said, as I scribed furiously in Spanish: "Although this poetic or metaphoric linguistic-cultural formation long ago ceased being eminent in the 'European' past, it lies there still, here still, in the present, not dominant, but also not dormant; today, everyday, always, the past is taking place in the present, breathed into life by poets, novelists, readers, all speakers: by all of us. All language, evoking the imaginative connection between name and thing, between speaker's consciousness and the non-human world, is metaphoric.

"Nor is this poetic modality in the absolute, 'global' past: cultures and languages and consciousnesses like these of course still exist, ascendant in their own realms.

"The only universality is plurality. Homogeneity means no escape for anyone, anywhere; homogeneity means death. Literature, poetry—according to a critic of your own, Northrop Frye—restores and maintains the metaphoric use of language, our own metaphoric past: our diversity that is plurality that is life.

"It is not too far a stretch," Gabriel insisted, seeing incredulity over his last statement spreading like an untold secret across my eyes: "Without literature, we die. The novel is a way of being free."[10]

Here, because of time - that great tyrant: o enemy of poets!—I am forced to condense Gabriel's story. After the poetic linguistic-cultural modality, he tells me, a long series of changes take place, transitions marked by long ebbs, flows, and two great apogees, peaks, or "*ruptures*" in European culture. Changes, expressed with and recursively related to language, which are inextricably bound to writing, and therefore the alphabet. And so he asked himself the question I could not yet conceive: "From where, then, the alphabet?"

Systems of pictographic representation were invented in China, Mesoamerica, and Asia (think Egyptian hieroglyphs), before 3000 BCE, in which the symbol evoked the image of the signified thing. (In the Chinese, for example, which maintains a pictographic system, "east" is signified by a stylized image (pictograph) of a sun behind a tree.) These systems also included the *rebus*—verbal puns for concepts for which no ready visual equivalent was available, (e.g. belief, represented by symbols for "bee" and "leaf"). These are *phoenetic* scripts, in which what was transcribed in symbol echoed the *sound* of the thing named; with these inventions, *writing* came into being. And along with it, a shift in the human consciousness, from the life-world "out-there," to a greater emphasis on human-made, externalized symbols.

A limiting factor: the world is complex, and phoenetic scripts soon encompassed copious symbols; (in China,[11] G. told me, a 1716 dictionary lists 40,545 written characters). This, in turn, made them difficult to learn and teach, restricting their usage to that of select scribe-castes.[12]

The Chinese is not the European past, however, or only tangentially so; in our line (that is far from straight) Hebrew scribes invented a remarkable new, simplified semaphoric system around 1500 BCE, designing 22 pictographic or *rebus*-style symbols to reflect the 22 verbal, consonantal sounds they had identified. The first character, the Aleph, was a stylized "A," representing an ox-head with horns: the Aleph was the word for "ox." The second character was the Beth, the system became known as the *Aleph-Beth* ... [our own A, B, alphabet ... the past still in the present]. Virtually every known alphabet stems from this innovation.

The Phoenicians adopted the system, and brought it, along with dates and palm oil, to cultures around the Mediterranean, including Greece. Something essential was involved here: translation. The Hebrew symbols were modified, remaining clearly discernible in their new context, but their pictographic or visually symbolic link to the natural world (and to/within the speaker's consciousness) was lost. "A" was no longer "ox." The mouth went more directly to the name, no longer passing as *essentially* through the vessel of the thing. This is the story of our language, a story of translation and essential connections lost, of fitful movement away, always away from any energetic connection between word and thing.

We were to meet at Kos one cold January evening. I was late; Gabriel awaited me in a side booth, barrel-chest puffed like a peacock's, elbows almost worn through on his tweed jacket, visibly perturbed. His wife was ill; she had never fully adjusted to their exile in Canada; he feared a harsh winter might be her last. (School teachers and petroleum union-organizers in Barrancabermeja, along the Rio Magdalena, they had been forced to flee Colombia during the bloody prelude to Samper's 1994 election). I sat down, conscious of Gabriel's eyes staring through me over the formica's burnished glare; I saw his stumps-of-fingers clutching his coffee mug, greedily soaking in its heat; his nose white and stuck to his face like a squashed cauliflower (a result of injury, he never told me how, why?). Eyes black and sharp as swords, opaque and impenetrable as mirrors, he attacked: "My words are momentary. Change never is. Only its apogees—those moments we mask with names—appear to be. In every man are joined all past ages, and the inertia, the errors, the passions, the urgencies of our time, the swift course of history."[13]

He spat out the words of his roaring for hours, agitated and distrurbingly, uncharacteristically, monologically poetic. Unable to get in an edge-wise word, as if in an FES lecture, I nodded into my cup; an hour or so later, coming to, I heard him say: "Initially in Greece the alphabet was an unwanted interloper. Around 800 BCE *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*—long, oral narratives of a world in which embedded in the natural landscape are signs, omens, guides to instruct human behaviour—were transcribed. The written form was at first fragmented and aphoristic: our contemporary prose is a late development; the way we now *speak*, our oral language, is itself dependent upon a *written* verbal form. With writing, the space between name and thing slashed open. The first histories (of Herodutus) were written; the individual (and her sense of a place in history) was dissociated from cyclical being-in-time: a space (dis-embeddedness) between human and "world," as represented in language; a tearing open of time as accelerated, augmented, enhanced in reciprocal relation with writing. Specifically, with the powers of reflection, the ability to separate one's thoughts from one's body and then look back on them, outside yourself, reified; to have frozen time and rendered it separate, out there, back there, external, separate: which is at one and the same time the text's liberating dream and imprisoning curse."

Coming to, I breathed deeply, trying to shake the shrouds of eco-doom from my skull; these meetings were beginning to exhaust me. Too much philosophy; not enough phun. Sipping my coffee, glancing at the door (for what? for whom?), I tried (with the pause of time) to stay his torrent of words. He flowed on, relentless:

"Then came Socrates (469?-399 BCE): oriented more toward the verbal, perhaps able to write little more than his name; followed by his student-disciple Plato (428-348 BCE), tending more towards the written; the richness of their works (a fresh world, seen from new, post-rupture perspectives) and their significant linguistic differences signifies the apogee of our first rupture: from the poetic to an analogic; from a world and language 'this-is-that,' to 'this-is-put-for-that.'[14] Children began to be taught to write in schools; the written form, and the monotheistic God (not gods) of Judaism, then, around 200 AC, of Christianity, became (in the European

spirit) culturally ascendant. The Socratic dialogues, with the orator's rhythms interrupted by continual requests for clarification, were attempts at shocking the poetic-mimetic mind and language out of its metaphoric connectedness and into the new, ruptured, analogic world.[15] A new linguistic- cultural formation emerged: from a mimetic, embedded, metaphoric world, to an analogic world and language; the subject and object—like the speaker's consciousness—at a further remove from nature, concept, phenomena: from the thing named. This, the first rupture of which I speak."

"In metaphorical language the central conception which unifies human thought and imagination is the conception of a plurality of gods. In the analogic, or metonymic mode, this unifying conception became a monotheistic 'God,' a transcendent reality or perfect being which all verbal analogy points to. Indeed, in analogic thinking, monotheism is practically a requirement; as Christian theology gained cultural ascendancy, thought began to take on a deductive shape in which everything followed from the perfection of God. That these traits later belonged to Western science is not the issue; rather, in the process of deconstructing and reassimilating some metaphoric forms to new linguistic-cultural codes, tension was bound to arise, and did, and was reconciled normally through allegory, a special form of analogy, a technique of paralleling metaphorical with conceptual language in which the latter has the primary authority. This was made possible with the invention of continuous prose, the main instrument of thought in the metonymic period, and which, perhaps, culminated in the metonymic universe of Kant."[16]

Anology, in turn, remained the most-operative or ascendant European linguistic-cultural mode (at least, according to Gabriel ... but then the more I translate our conversations, transcribe his thoughts, wander over the gaps in my notes where my words should have been, the more I wonder just what exactly he knows) until the birth of the European Modern Era. When the space within the linguistic symbol cleaved even wider, the subject and object (humanity/nature) rendered (with Kant's Crisis of Representation) completely, conceptually (again, impossibly) separate; when single truths were chased, along with God, from the temple, myths profaned. "'The word *profane*,' said Gabriel, "comes from the Latin *profanum*: the place in front of the temple, outside the temple.[17] At this time *He* became a choice, both a question and an answer; the individual's piety henceforth pertaining only to his subjective universe. The resulting void is filled by the historical and psychological exploration of myths."[18]

"We have jumped ahead," said Gabriel, slowing down now, breathing deeply, drawing his monologue to a close, fingering his cup, gathering his momentum, now seething forward again: "for we speak now of the second *rupture*, that convergence of fifteenth and sixteenth century European social phenomena which tore the old linguistic-cultural formation apart when, when?—was it with Copernicus or Galileo, with Cervantes of Don Quixote, the printing press, or First (American) Contact, when the old, analogic mode could not withstand the ripping and tearing that was the stumbling upon of America, the discovery (because imagined, because desired, because invented, and then named) of the *other* that had no place in the old, analogic equation; when the trajectory of singular, deified Truth reversed the polarity of its slope, turned over at the "hump" of the cultural curve (to borrow from calculus here, at the metonymic max/min point, where slope=0) and the analogical language, which was a sacred language, a verbal response to God's own verbal revelation, everything tied neatly into His universe, could no longer hold. Who knows the moment— was it when on-stage Hamlet uttered "Words, words, words," thus acknowledging that he himself had been written; a self-awareness that seems hardly possible within the epic literary traditions of the metonymic age, when words still coincided with things, when the word was still believed, when everybody knew the endings of the stories and so seeing the end in the beginning — the retelling of the story, and not the telling: a plot configuration that created more repetitive, cyclic, some-would-say earthbound models of time—was practiced in place of the rabid desire to get to the end, to know, to progress, develop, to tell, that marks our time, our linearity, our goal-oriented world, our narrative plot configurations, our ecological ends?[19] Nobody knows 'when' these grossly generalized, still-changing transitions occured, precisely because there is no moment, no single dawn of the European Modern Era.

After two cups of coffee, riding the raging freight train of his own rhetoric, perhaps his disquiet over his wife's poor health finding voice in this roar, how Gabriel rambled on that evening. It was this night, alternatively at full attention, and then at the fading, liminal bounds of interest, that I decided to bring a tape recorder to our next meeting. But he was not done, no, not yet: "The individual was placed now slowly, fully, in historical, linear time; and so autobiographies were written, paintings were signed: the European individual had shouldered clear a space on the stage. There, in the Globe Theatre, in paintings, and in people's *vision* (this is vision as a learned, taught perspective) background had, for the first time, been differentiated from fore: nature was now behind *man*, and dead; *man* was in the foreground, dominant over a dead and deanimated world. Language, responding to and as connective tissue of the cultural matrix, was also rendered separate: the continuous tenses (background) were set into relief behind the preterite senses (foreground: the plot). And this became the accepted narrative mode. 'Paul, *sipping* his tea, *turned* on the stereo, and the party began.'"

"And so the speaking individual (foreground, subject) was rendered separate from the deanimated, dead background (nature, object). And the European individual entered into the fullness of her contemporary being. And began the never-ending struggle to demarcate those new, mythical boundaries of self, ever-shifting, with rights and laws; struggled slowly, and over much time, to legislate himself into a being cleaved separate from the sensate cosmos."

On this note Gabriel was off, again: "All of creation had become an object when the Greeks had been able to cap-

ture it in a metonymic word-cage; a word of which they (unlike earlier humans) were no longer a part: nature. But the world, nature, remained alive. Now, with the European Renaissance (touched off, perhaps, by a recovery of lost languages in Italy, by greater polyglossia, by the excavating of languages which had not God, but humans, at the center of the linguistic universe), the fundamental assumption shifted from the world as alive and death as an anomaly to the world as dead and life as the anomaly. But this nihilistic understanding of the lifelessness of nature was deeply unsettling; the transition, the reconciliation of old verbal and thought modalities to the new, was accomplished, among other things, through the rise of dualism, that precursor and conceptual necessity of contemporary science, technology, loss of ... etc."[20]

Thus "the crisis of modernity" was born.

So that our darkest moments, blending their shadows into an infinity of choices, within a self-enclosed and somewhat paranoid, possessive, individualized sense of self, alienated and disenchanted,[21] become almost pathological.

This, Gabriel's second rupture, in the time called Renaissance, when he insists our own linguistic formation—what he calls the Modern—came into being; here we ruptured from the analogic, metonymic or philosophic to the vulgar, demotic, or scientific mode, in which the priests and scribe-castes speak the same, *formal* language as, say, Gabriel and I, and you: citizens all. The world again rich, new, seen from new perspectives: the glorious, improvised play of Shakespeare, Rabelais, Cervantes, Newton, Galileo, da Vinci, magicians, mechanics, dreammongers all. The will, the imagination, the desire to 'discover' America: the expansion of the power of (first) the Spanish crown, the primal scene of the clash with the Spaniards and Americans, the "magnificent wound" at the base of our American (hemispherical) culture —the knowledge of all that died so that we could be born—marked as it was by a violent eroticism, was allowed to unfold: a still-unhealed rape: the phallus, as well as gunpowder, being a crucial weapon used to subdue.[22]

Gabriel was sitting beside me in a narrow, wooden, graffiti-splattered booth—on this night, in Sneaky Dee's: inexplicably, Kos was closed. We drank draught from tall, cold glasses. The bar was crowded, smoky, the music thumping, his jacket unchanged. A compressed digit fingered the side of his blunted, now-red cauliflower nose, he paused, stilled himself, then let me have it; as he did so, I turned the tape recorder on. "The language-mind," he said (coining his own term), "slowly released from its singular, deitic stricture with this last rupture, was at last free to fulfill the promise of its Greek seed: the world (demythologized: the new myth) could be more completely interrogated, with fewer and fewer social sanctions. But as knowledge broadened, became wider, deeper, slowly, over time, and particularly in the nineteenth century, it also became specialized, compartmentalized, divided into schools and intellectual sects; the 'whole,' that *cosmos* so important in Greece, was torn asunder: the concrete, human lifeworld was fragmented, dissociated from its sensuous, situated, perceiving context: we began to know more and more about less and less. Knowledge, applied, like language, is a tool; these tools were leveraged to exact a greater fare from the nonhuman earth, which consequently suffered large gashes, great scars, and massive explosions called open-pit mines, clear-cuts, and split atoms. Materially, our life became—it is the only word—easier; but a strange, new ataraxic sickness took shape, corroding our souls."

I brushed my long hair back from my eyes, drained my glass, filled it again, drained it again. G.'s remained untouched. In the space of my consciousness liberated by the tape-recorder's whirring, I made googly-eyes at tattooed girls drinking beer. "This is a strange ailment," I heard him say to the tape, much later, "one that condemns us to incessant development and prosperity—by means of which we multiply our contradictions, inflame our sores, and exacerbate our tendencies toward both human and nonhuman destruction. This is development as the dominant cultural narrative of our impoverished age. But at last, in the failures of superimposed belief systems or ideologies; in humanity's unquenchable thirst to be free; and in the manacled state of the breathing earth, the philosophy of progress has shown its true face: a featureless blank. We now know that the kingdom of progress is not of this world: the paradise it promises us is in the future, a future that is impalpable, unreachable, perpetual. Progress has peopled history with the marvels and monsters of technology but it has depopulated the life of man. It has given us more things but not more being."[23]

Over our table the "crisis of modernity" spread its mushroom cloud into the sky.

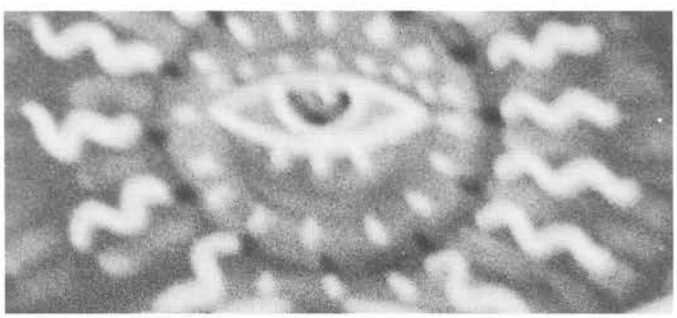
Thus the dominant stream of European humanity, Gabriel's story goes, *forgot how to be*. The seeds of our current ecological strife, long since sown, in our own time have reached full flower.

Mulling this all over now, pausing the tape as I write, I am forced to take G.'s line of reasoning to its logical conclusion and wonder how, with said subject-object gap in our language, our consciousness, our very conception of world, the very ways in which we think and act and are, our being—how, with European humanity dominant over a dead and nonspiritualized nature, can there be any hope? For nonhuman nature, for us? The European linguistic-cultural trajectory has been inserted by Gabriel, and by my FES courses, into a nice, neat, declensionist, apocalyptic narrative: there can be no reconciling our position in the world. The water in the well of our own past has been poisoned.

The tape rolls on; "By the way," I hear Gabriel's booming Spanish baritone say, "the European novel, at this time, was also born."

Born to roam with absolute freedom into the space created by the divorce between words and things, to render all that fell into its orbit ambiguous, playful, humourous, sparing nothing from the suction of its centripetal pull, from its omnivorous appetite in incorporating all previous literary genres and existent speech types, the only literary genre younger than writing and the book. Born to explore, discover, to dance with deadly seriousness in this gap, to investigate the heretofore unknown existential concerns of the new "European" individual: "with Cervantes," (the tape whirs) "the nature of adventure; with Richardson, the secret life of feelings; with Balzac, man's rootedness in history; with Flaubert, the *terra* previously *incognita* of the everyday; with Flaubert, the intrusion of the irrational into human behaviour; with Proust, the elusive past, with Joyce, the elusive present; with Thomas Mann, the role of myths from the remote past that control our present actions,"[24]—et cetera, et cetera, Gabriel droned on, buoyed by his theme, obviously annoyed with the popular music pumping from Sneak's speakers, the four-four time like that of a military parade, marching us without variation toward the homogeneous horizon of our own deaths.

"In short, the European novel—seized by this very same European passion to know, which we cannot deny as part of our own identity—has investigated, one by one, throughout its history (which is comparable to that of an individual artist), all of the existential concerns which Martin Heidegger (Husserl's pupil) identified as being neglected in his monumental *Being and Time*; or, to put it another way, humanity's concrete lifeworld (*die Lebenswelt*), which has been obfuscated by Modernity's myriad masks—in the proc-



ess which Heidegger called "the forgetting of being"—is held, in the novel, under a permanent light."

Yeah, sure. I gulped heavily, paid our bill, and stumbled home confused, enlightened, and dreadfully alone.

The next time I met Gabriel—once again, thankfully, at Kos—his step was light, his cauliflower nose less red, his salt-and-pepper hair freshly cut: clearly he was in a better mood. "Today's subject," he told me, holding court in a another monologue, when dialogue had been his preferred style, and speaking quickly, as if pressed for time, "is humour and the novel. Irony, parody, countless folkloric forms, laughter in endless guises had existed up to this (inception of Modern) time; but humour - a particular species of the comic: *that which renders ambiguous everything it touches,* only came into existence with the Modern Era. The birth of humour," he told me, admitting (even he!) that this seems a bit of a stretch, "is therefore all tied up with the invention of the novel. The preceding linguistic-cultural formations did not permit such utter, modern ambiguity: God had been truth, analogies depended upon Him, epics were not to be questioned; now all this was thrown into question. Questions, spaces ... an uncertainty and complexity that the novel embraces ... ergo ambiguity, therefore humour."[25]

"The first European novel?" I asked him." *Don Quixote,* by Cervantes," he said, "Part I published in 1605."

An absolutely hilarious, infinitely sad novel, in which Don read a lot of old books (romances of chivalry, to be exact), and believes what he reads, believes that the world is based still on analogy, then ventures out into the new, ruptured, ambiguous world, where he ends up doing battle with windmills and cloud-shadows, loving serfs as princesses and assaulting innocent peoples, so great is his deception, so profound is the world's change.

"Nothing is as simple as it seems; every reading is a mis-reading: these are themes of this great novel. It requires a great courage to have as one's only certainty the wisdom of uncertainity: a welter of contradictory truths. This is Quixote's wisdom; born, Dear Reader, in some world that might be Spain, upon the pen and the sword of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra."

That night, as we were parting ways on a thawing spring College Street, Gabriel asked me to read Edmund Husserl's 1935 lectures on the European 'crisis.' In the tone of his voice, in the soft, burgeoning, almost-ecumenical April light, I could sense our time together drawing to a close. "The crisis Husserl spoke of seemed to him so profound that he wondered whether Europe was still able to survive it," he said, as if preparing me for something. "The roots of the crisis lay for him at the beginning of the Modern Era, in Galileo and Descartes, in the one-sided nature of the European sciences, which reduced the world to a mere object of technical and mathematical investigation and put the concrete world of life, *die Lebenswelt* as he called it, beyond their horizon."[26]

I trudged off the next day to Robarts like the dutiful little melancholic page-boy that I am, that I was, and climbed toward the apex of Husserl's apocalyptic pyramid. The more precise the idea, it seems, the higher the phenomenolgoical summit, the more language must be splayed out engross it, to stabilize it with the widest possible base; the more trapdoors and undercurrents-of-ideas the writing needs to anticipate, name, and so subvert, losing the reader as if in a labyrinth. Primary data. I love it.

For Husserl, the crisis was very real, and its founding tenets were principally spiritual in nature, and were only gaining ground in dominating the European spirit, and natural science and its laws of nature were part of the problem, in fact, any solution which this European spirit came up with, as long as it functioned along the rut of its old, familiar tracks, was destined to fail, to reinforce or consolidate the dominant (and implicated) mythos. In the end, though, he saw hope only in the "spirit, which alone is immortal." A hope which "I," at this time, after reading so many Environmental narratives, one of which concludes (to segment a quotation, to represent this complex text simply, unfairly): "What I am saying is that given the dominant perspective which is now moving us toward globalisation of the world economy, I see no hope"[27] ... this was a hope which I could not share.

And so when I sat down that very next evening not too long ago, across the formica table from Gabriel, I couldn't help being all pink-cheeked and proud. I'd read Ray Rogers: *Nature and the Crisis of Modernity*; I'd read Neil Evernden: *Natural Alien*; I'd read John Livingston: *Rogue Primate* and those other deep ecologists; I was ready: the linguistic-cultural events that had haunted our nearly six months of conversation had been cleanly aligned into well-thought out, declensionist, apocalyptic historiography. From his story—with his guidance—I had made meaning! The mind, continually distanced from "nature," as represented in the abyss of the verbal sign; the alienated European consciousness thus able to utilize (destroy) that which it was no longer a part of, until the production of refuse all but equals our culture's consumption, and we are locked into our own solitude, stranded, all alone. We are doomed; *we think and perceive and speak and act in this distanced, alienated, domineering way; this is our science, our dominant cultural narrative: we destroy.*

All of my questions had been answered.

(I didn't yet realize that the idea, notion, story of apocalypse, and the linear time upon which both it and declensionist narratives depend, are based on the "B" -word, the Buh-dup-bup-bup Bible. That book being, like it or not, still the principal skeletal framework of the European mythological universe).

I sat down, the cold diner light now familiar and comforting, and told Gabriel my story. He paused, sipping his coffee, drained it; rolling up a torn sugar packet, he shot it (three-pointer! I thought) into his drained mug, then proceeded to blow my head off: my environmentalist's ideas, marooned on the fringe of culture, isolated from its roots: were sentimental and foolish. More to the point, he said (I have the tape; the technology reveals it):

> I think it would be naive to take the severity of this view of the Modern Era as a mere condemnation. I would rather say that Husserl and Heidegger laid bare the ambiguity of this epoch, which is decline and progress at the same time and which, like all that is human, carries the seed of its end in its beginning. To my mind, this ambiguity does not diminish the last four centuries of European culture, to which I feel all the more attached as I am not a philosopher but a novelist. Indeed, for me, the founder of the Modern Era is not only Descartes but Cervantes.
>
> Perhaps it is Cervantes whom the two phenomenologists neglected to take into consideration in their judgment of the Modern Era. By that I mean: If it is true that philosophy and science have forgotten about man's being, it emerges all the more plainly that with Cervantes a great European art took shape that is nothing other than the investigation of this forgotten being.[28]

"We are the past in the present," he said, his eyes like ice-augurs boring into mine, "to transfigure the present (to change, to resist: activism: your environmentalist's idols) what is required is recognition, revelation, vision: the naming of what is beyond our European mask. It is ingenuous and hypocritical to naively wish that we were something else, to endeavour to end this blood-drenched nightmare that you have told me is our ecological present, without first knowing what the essential oscillation of our true cultural illusion is. But do not be mistaken: our search, never-accomplished, is not for a definition, an identity, a cultural 'character,' but is rather

for something that is more like a movement, a dream—this dream that is our literature. This hypocritical tendency, this inability to understand and question yourselves, is embedded deeply within the North American spirit, and within the popular environmnental movement itself. It is a tendency which impels one to negate those aspects of reality and identity which one considers disagreeable, irrational or repugnant, and which thereby denies your European roots, your own concrete (because embodied) situated truths, mythologies — your role in the ecological present — and thereby isolates your subcultural (environmental) branch within a prison of inconsolable solitude. It is a branch that (its own critics show) has never been successful, and which, as long as it continues to refuse to probe the mythological depths, will never be successful (the roots of this eco-present, part of the broadest cultural moment, are unfathomably long and mythic); a branch, isolated, which will eventually wither and die. While the tree—the strength that you refuse to draw from—will remain. This hypocrisy, turning parts of one's life into a lie, is a mask of the worst kind: one that parades as a learned truth. To change, you and your environmental friends might climb this tree that they are, not run from it, from themselves, from their culture that they themselves have made, and which is destroying the earth."

"The stakes are high, certainly; but the act of the critical imagination, that activity which consists not only in knowing ourselves but, just as much or more, in freeing ourselves, is the act I believe your sentimental environmental

naïveté overlooks. Criticism unfolds the possibility of freedom and is thus an invitation to action. Recognition can function as the core, the trunk, of the environmentalist project to transfigure ..."[29] he raged, roared on and on; then paused, sunk his eyes like bullets deeply into mine: "because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude do not have a second opportunity on earth."[30]

Head bowed over the table, long braids floundering in my mug, I watched his shadow hovering across the formica surface. Slowly, he got up and left me, forever; I watched as he disappeared, vanished into the table-top, as if into a speaking mirror.

In blowing my mind, Gabriel really blew down the walls of my environmental solitude; evaporated the nostalgic sense of loss that I'd felt upon my return to Canada in a mist of condensed dream. Time, he told me, the absolute tyrant, excised and transmuted in the space of reading those lies that tell the truth: fiction. Time, in the novel, compressed, rendered visible, a movement toward meaning: the implacable phantasm of the future and the over-determining dictator of the past collapsed into an eternal, imaginative now. This, the time-space of change, of imaginative responses to this ecological present. The novel, therefore: the ideal vehicle for the reintroduction of the individual into the fullness of her or his own authentic time, and through time, into her or his identity. With the novel, and with Gabriel's story, I have learned to try to be free, like the novel, like the air, a liberated dream. Just yesterday, I cut my hair.

NOTES

1. This notion of "European identity" is taken from Milan Kundera's reading of Edmund Husserl's celebrated 1935 lectures on the Crisis of European Humanity, in *The Art of the Novel*, translated from the French by Linda Asher (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1988), p.3.

2. Edward Husserl, "Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man," in *Phenom and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 196), pp.149-192.

3. Ibid.

4. In our age the imagination operates critically. True, criticism is not what we dream of, but it teaches us to distinguish between the specters out of our nightmares and our true visions. Criticism is the imagination's apprenticeship in its second turn, the imagination cured of fantasies and determined to face the world's realities. Criticism tells us that we should learn to dissolve the idols, to be like air, a liberated dream. (325)

5. Rimbaud says: *Jeest und autre*. Paz: "Otherness is what constitutes us. ...I maintain that those realities we call cultures and civilizations are elusive. ...I hardly need to repeat that the other Mexico (Canada) is not outside of but within us: we could not extirpate it without mutilating ourselves. It is a Mexico which, if we learn to name and recognize it, we can someday bring to an end by transfiguring it. Then it will cease to be that phantasm that glides into reality and turns it into a blood-drenched nightmare." (291) The blood-drenched nightmare that our natural world (both human and non-) is now living. Naming...the primordial act of the writer, story-teller, poet.

6. This phrase is an homage to Thomas Mann's essay, *"The Well of the Past."*

7. This paragraph is a combinant of ideas from Carlos Fuentes (on time): *Latin America: At War with the Past* (Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1985), pp.72-73; from Octavio Paz (on literature) *Convergences and Divergences: Essays on Art and Literature*; and, even, a few of my own.

8. This paragraph drawn upon ideas articulated first by Giambattista Vico and echoed and augmented by Northrop Frye, *The Great Code* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1990).

9. This latterase is borrowed from the title of Ben Okri's book, *A Way of Being Free* (London: Phoenix House, 1997).

10. The Chinese never strayed from their pictographic system (now simplified); many languages in their contemporary linguistic tree use the same system of signs--they can reach other's writing, but cannot understand the spoken words (dialects). Tone, intonation, is what differentiates these languages. Thus I am told there is little sarcasm in China (sarcasm being largely tone-dependent); a void in laughter-producing genres that is filled by an abundance of slapstick comedy. Knock you head getting out of your birth on a train in China, and fellow passengers will laugh long and hard.

11. Much of this discussion comes from David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

12. This last sentence from Pablo Neruda, *The Nobel Address*, in *The Oxford Book of Latin American Essays*, Ilan Stavans, editor (New York: Oxford UP, 1997).

13. Abram (pp.108-109), writes:
Plato was teaching, then, precisely at the moment when the new technology of reading and writing was shedding its specialized "craft" status and finally spreading, by means of the Greek curriculum, into the culture at large. The significance of this conjunction has not been well recognized by Western philosophers, all of whom stand--to a greater or lesser extent--within Plato's lineage. Plato or rather the association between the literate Plato and his mostly nonliterate teacher Socrates, may be recognized as the hinge on which the sensuous, mimetic, profoundly embodied style of consciousness proper to orality gave way to the more detached, abstract mode of thinking engendered by alphabetic literacy. Indeed, it was Plato who carefully developed and brought to term the collective thought-structures appropriate to the new technology.

14. This, and the idea of Eric Haverlock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), as discovered in Abram, op.cit.

15. Frye, 1990, (The Great Code), pp.9-10.

16. Much of the subsequent discussion is taken from Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, and here, from *Testaments Betrayed*, translated from the French by Linda Asher (New York: HarperCollins *Publishers*, 1995), p.9.

17. Martin Heidegger, as quoted in Kundera, 1993, ibid., p.8.

18. Some of the ideas and language of this last sentence are borrowed from Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time" in *On Narrative*, edited by W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: The Univerity of Chicago Press, 1981), pp.175-6.

19. The ideas and language of this paragraph are taken from Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1992), pp.89-90. This is the text that nudged me in the direction of Vico and Frye.

20. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, p.97.

21. This last phrase is borrowed from Ilan Stavans, *The Latin Phallus*, p.228.

22. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press, Inc. 1985), p.225.

23. Kundera, 1986, p.5.

24. This discussion stems from Kundera, 1995, p.10. Kundera is himself referring to Octavio Paz's "fundamental idea": that humour is an invention of the novel, and was birthed with the Modern Era.

25. Ibid, p.3.

26. Raymond A. Rogers, *Nature and the Crisis of Modernity* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1994), p.173.

27. Kundera, 1986, p.3.

28. The language and ideas of this discourse come from Paz, 1985, op.cit., p.215 & 23.

29. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, translated from the Spanish by Gregory Rabassa (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1978), p.334.

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