"Green of the Earth and Civil Grey": Nature and the City in Dennis Lee's *Civil Elegies*

by Nicholas Bradley

I

In his poetry as in his public and private lives, Dennis Lee has long been closely linked to the city of Toronto. A native of the city and a graduate of the University of Toronto, Lee has worked in various capacities for such Torontonian cultural institutions as Rochdale College, House of Anansi Press, and McClelland and Stewart. He was the city's first poet laureate, and his *Civil Elegies* (1968-1972), set almost wholly in downtown Toronto, is one of the most striking literary representations of the city. Given Toronto's status as Canada's largest, densest, and most populous city, Lee may seem an unlikely candidate for the designation of 'nature poet' and *Civil Elegies* may seem an equally unusual site for an investigation of an ecological impulse in contemporary Canadian poetry. Indeed, Canadian literature typically emphasizes Toronto's specifically urban qualities. Most famously, perhaps, Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) depicts the construction of two of the city's most recognizable landmarks, namely the Bloor Street Viaduct and the Harris Filtration Plant. A visitor to Toronto, moreover, cannot fail to notice the CN Tower, the SkyDome, and the highways that separate the waterfront from the rest of the city. But it is precisely because of the apparent incongruity between setting and theme that I want to discuss *Civil Elegies* in ecocritical terms. Written by a resolutely urban poet and located in a city seemingly divorced from nature, Lee's poem nonetheless provides an extraordinary representation of the city as part of the natural world and demonstrates a profound concern for the environmental health of both the city and the wilderness beyond it. As a result, *Civil Elegies* necessitates a reconsideration of the scope and character of Canadian nature poetry. The poem demands that urban spaces and damaged ecosystems be included in any study of representations of nature in Canadian writing. **[Page 15]**

As its title suggests, *Civil Elegies* consists of a lament, primarily for a Canada whose independence has been all but lost to the United States. The point of view is that of a city dweller who, in the nine sections of the poem, surveys the landscape and citizens of Toronto. This resident decries what he sees as the ugliness of the city, its unthinking citizens, and the complicity of Canadians in American foreign interventions. Lee's speaker also possesses an acute sensitivity to the imminent threat of ecological collapse

and to the extant environmental problems of air pollution, acid rain, and habitat depletion. The poem relies upon the speaker's perception of environmental degradation: his heightened powers of observation force him to bear witness to the pollution of the city. Yet the poem also engages with what Lawrence Buell in *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (2001) calls "the possibilities of urban reinhabitation" (89), by which he means a sustainable, non-anthropocentric way of living in the city. In the connections he draws between nature and both civic and national culture, Lee anticipates the emphasis Buell places on "participation in community…through absorption of history and legend" as a necessary component of urban reinhabitation (84). *Civil Elegies*, then, reveals its ecological sympathies in two principal ways. The first consists of its portrait of the city: the poem makes repeated references to the degraded natural environment—Lee depicts Toronto as a city choking on polluted air, a city in which electrical wires obscure the sky and block out the sun, and a city despoiled by its traffic, parking lots, and "dreary high-rise" towers (49). The second way in which *Civil Elegies* reveals its concern is more complex and engages the broadest themes of the poem: the question of how to exist in Canada and in the world in general is, for Lee, one that revolves around the relation between individuals and the place in which they live.

Civil Elegies is strongly marked by a discourse of toxicity. Air pollution—smog—is the primary environmental characteristic of Lee's Toronto. The first elegy insists repeatedly on the particular quality of Toronto's air, which is noxious because of smog but also clogged by the "spectres" of past generations of Canadians, "never at / home in native space," that haunt Lee (27). The vocabulary of this section of the poem suggests that the ghosts are a form of airborne pollution. As a result of both chemicals and spectres, the air above the city is "fetid" (27), "thick" (27), and "clogged" (28); trees "asphyxiate" (29); and the sunlight does not penetrate to the ground (30). Lee's physical surroundings are thus literally and figuratively unhealthy: if Canada cannot sustain a vital national culture, as Lee proclaims, neither can it support healthy life. The country is both culturally **[Page 16]** and environmentally unwell. The images of polluted air serve a dual function: they illustrate the environmental sickness in the city and they symbolize the toxic culture Lee decries—the urban landscape mirrors the country's psyche. A related concern is the problem of traffic, which like air pollution is a defining element of the city. Just as the pollution clogs the air, the traffic clogs the streets; the speaker notes, meanwhile, the enduring "itch for…greater expressways" (29). By suggesting that the city's residents are complicit in the pollution and unaware of its effects, Lee's alienated speaker further isolates himself from his fellow Torontonians. Oppressed by buildings (28), the solitary speaker stands in contrast to the crowds he observes. The people he watches are all seemingly blind to the city's faults. This opposition, and the resultant sense of individual powerlessness, create much of the poem's tone of futility.

In his analysis of toxic discourse in *Writing for an Endangered World*, Buell observes that *Garbage* (1993), by the American poet A.R. Ammons, is based on various and varying conceptions of toxicity, both literal and figurative (53-5). Ammons's book-length poem finds in garbage a rich source of metaphor; the speaker in the poem centres

his meditation around a garbage dump next to a highway in Florida. Although he does not elide the poisonous nature of the dump, Ammons locates in the garbage a defining, disruptive quality:

> garbage has to be the poem of our time because
> garbage is spiritual, believable enough
>
> to get our attention, getting in the way, piling
> up, stinking, turning brooks brownish and
>
> creamy white
>
> (18)

The very attributes that render the garbage dump a blight on the landscape and an environmental hazard—its size, its toxicity, and the consequent deleterious effects it has on the surrounding ecosystem—constitute, for Ammons, a way of jolting observers out of complacency, a way of getting their attention. Ammons thus claims to employ garbage as a model for aspiring writers:

> I say to my writing students—prize your flaws,
> defects, behold your accidents
>
> (24) **[Page 17]**

He similarly notes, ironically, the political power that environmental crisis can wield:

> toxic waste, poison air, beach goo, eroded
> roads draw nations together, whereas magnanimous
>
> platitude and sweet semblance ease each nation
> back into its comfort or despair
>
> (24)

Ammons takes great delight in, and derives much of the poem's humour from, exploring the often contradictory range of meanings that the notion of "garbage" contains. But while Ammons is able to move back and forth between repulsion and admiration for the garbage dump, Lee's multiple references to the poisoned atmosphere of Toronto resist irony. The smog serves as a defining characteristic of the city, certainly, but more importantly Lee employs the language of toxicity to castigate the citizens for their apathy. Even those who, like the speaker, perceive the decline of the country are essentially powerless. "[T]he few tenacious / citizens of a land that was never their own," Lee writes in the fourth elegy, can only watch "the / ore and the oil and the shore-lines gutted / for dollars by men from abroad" (38). **[Page 18]** The polluted landscape represents less ambiguous terrain for Lee than it does for Ammons.[1] Lee sternly condemns those who have allowed the city's air to become so foul. The excoriating tone of *Civil Elegies* does not permit the playfulness upon which Ammons relies, and the ambiguities of Lee's poem lie elsewhere than in the depiction of environmental decay.

In addition to the emphasis the first elegy places on the quality of Toronto's air, later sections of the poem make similar reference to ecological collapse and to the social conditions that cause such a crisis. Lee refers to habitat depletion (37), acid rain (38), reckless resource extraction (38), consumerism (46), the lack of urban green space (49), the spectre of nuclear annihilation (50), and, repeatedly, to Canada's manufacture of napalm, the military use of which in Vietnam was a crime against the environment as well as against humanity. And the thick air always looms over the speaker, who in one instance describes the "noxious cloud" and the "visible pollutants" as physical evidence of the "imperial way of life" that Canada has embraced (40). The speaker, who in the sixth elegy invokes Wordsworth by describing himself as "one for whom the world is constantly proving too much" (43), equates "the death of lakes" with an abandonment of self-respect, a condition that plagues the entire country (38). Lee's ability to envision the local and the global together suggests that citizenship means not only being at home in Canada, but also acting ethically and compassionately towards the earth itself. These recurring images of decay lend a coherence to Lee's portrayal of Toronto, and characterize city and country as polluted sites.

The crucial term in Lee's inquiry into *existence* is *home*. In an article published in *The Globe and Mail* after the death of Bronwen Wallace in 1989, Lee wrote that "her poems were acts of dwelling, acts of love" (*Body* 107). *Civil Elegies* enacts the speaker's efforts to love and inhabit, in the broadest sense, the place in which he resides. *Civil Elegies* is an attempt at dwelling, but a tormented one. Finding *home*, the poem insists, is the sole means by which the speaker can participate in an ethical, sustainable relationship with the city and with the planet. In his important essay on poetics, "Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space" (1974), Lee declares that "any man aspires to be at home where he lives" (154). *Civil Elegies* asks whether, in Canada, being at home is in fact possible. The poem is cautiously optimistic in responding to its own question. Even if, as the speaker notes, "sea to sea we bartered / everything that counts," some Canadians will resist colonization, sustained by "the long will to be in Canada" (50). Lee's declaration and his insistence on the dangers of complicity recall D.H. Lawrence's assertion in "The Spirit of Place" (1923) that "men are free when they belong to a living, organic, *believing* community" (17). *Civil Elegies*, in contrast, portrays Canadians in a state of estrangement, both from community and from place. Lee's Canadians are not free at all but are instead "the consenting citizens of a minor and docile colony" (41). The political reasons for this estrangement—in large part American neo-colonialism—have been widely noted, but Lee also presents ecological degradation as a primary cause of the speaker's alienation. In his infamous designation, Canada is "a nation of / losers and quislings" (38); Canadians, as he sees them, have betrayed both city and nation. But the poem demands that readers acknowledge the breadth of Lee's condemnation: Canadians have betrayed nature as well as their nation. The great public square— Nathan Phillips Square, in front of Toronto's New City Hall[2]— is marked, as a result, by "the interminable stink of production and transport" (46). Lee's speaker, then, is at once a citizen of "a conquered nation" and a witness to environmental decay (50).

The poem is in fact structured by the act of bearing witness. At the beginning of the

first elegy, the speaker sits in the great square in front of New City Hall, "brooding over the city" (27). The ninth elegy ends, several hundred lines later, with an apostrophe to the earth: **[Page 19]**

> Earth, you nearest, allow me.
> ………………………….
> allow me for to
> be here is enough and earth you
> strangest, you nearest, be home
> (51)

"Earth," in this instance, offers multiple meanings, referring to both planet and local place. And the poem's trajectory is certainly more complicated than the broad movement from the local to the global that my juxtaposition of the poem's beginning and end implies. Lee's speaker in various instances shifts his focus from Toronto to the Canadian Shield, Ottawa, Montreal, and Germany; he has an eye turned to historical events as well as to contemporary politics. Yet the contrast between the particular and the universal shows that Lee is keenly aware of the multiple meanings of *home*. In *Civil Elegies home* variously figures as city, country, and planet. The return home and the plea to "Earth" indicate the poem's optimism about the possibility of reinhabiting Toronto. The poem contains an extraordinarily complex vision of the city, placing contemporary Toronto in a dynamic network of relations with other places and historical events, national and international.

Reconciling himself to this toxic place, his home, becomes an obsession for Lee, one which the speaker pursues throughout the nine sections of *Civil Elegies*. I want to suggest that it is in its investigation of the meaning—and the possibility—of *home* that the poem's ecological vision lies. The broader question of *how to be* is, in the poem, simultaneously a philosophical, political, and ecological problem; indeed, the poem blurs the divisions between these categories. Although the poem's consideration of *being*, of *existence*, is typically analysed in terms of nationalism (Jonathan Kertzer's *Worrying the Nation* [1998] provides a useful commentary), Lee's insistence on the interconnectedness of all things urges the reader to consider *existence* in ecological terms as well. The question, for Lee, is not only of Canada's surviving American influence; it is a question of the survival of humans in the place called Canada.

Lee links, for example, city life and Canadian nationhood to the redemptive properties of the non-urban wilderness. Much like Al Purdy in some of his best-known poems,[3] Lee admires the heroic, foolish persistence of farmers on the Canadian Shield, where "men who had worked their farms for a lifetime / could snap in a month from simple cessation of will" (34). But the nearly futile labours of the settler-farmers, the speaker notes, have been replaced by the violent efforts of the mining industry. Lee **[Page 20]** more overtly praises Tom Thomson's intimate knowledge of the back country. The painter, Lee writes, "[w]as part of the bush" (34). But Lee also places great faith in human creations, in art as well as in the able, masculine artist, who, the speaker notes, is

in fact as vulnerable to the outdoors as the farmers and all other humans. "The Archer," the sculpture by Henry Moore in the public square, serves as a locus for the enduring "resonance" that Lee so values: "the Archer declares / that space is primal, raw, beyond control and drives toward a / living stillness, its own" (33). The sculpture, Stan Dragland maintains, "seems not to have been created by Henry Moore, but by the earth itself, like the Laurentian Shield" (82). Of crucial importance to Lee, then, is the intersection between the human and natural worlds that art provides. "The Archer" is ostensibly a marker of civic culture. But as Dragland notes, it softens the distinction between human and wild space. Through the sculpture, wilderness enters the city, while the vibrancy of the work of art serves to counteract the "interminable stink of production and transport" that marks the square (46).

Unlike the sculpture, the tourists in the ninth elegy who pose for photographs next to the Moore are itinerant and demonstrate no particular connection to the local place. Lee's speaker, on the other hand, is a committed resident of the city, though his dedication to civic life renders him a deeply divided character and his attachment to the city has profound psychological effects. "Buildings oppress me" (28), he states in one instance, but at the end of the poem he admits that the city is "the place where I belong" (51). He reveals a Larkinesque sympathy for the mundane lives within the city houses, its residents "sustained in fits and starts / by the deep ache and presence and sometimes the joy of what is" (51). In the sixth elegy, Lee's speaker explicitly addresses his own relation to the country and to the contemporary city, revealing an ambivalent stance towards the world and demonstrating the ambiguity on which the poem depends. Here the speaker adopts a prophetic tone, claiming that "though I do not decry technopolis I can see only the bread and circuses to come" (43).[4] Even as he looks ahead to "a senseless procession / of holy wars" in which Canada serves as weapons-carrier to the United States, Lee looks backward, obliquely comparing the American empire to that of ancient Rome. He follows his quotation from Juvenal (*Satires* 10.81)—"bread and circuses"—with the strange admission that "I can't converse with friends without discussing Rome" (43). As a consequence of his knowledge of imperial history, the speaker claims, he "cannot get purchase on life." The tension in this brief passage—the sixth elegy is only thirteen lines long—between Juvenalian rancour and a suggestion of individual powerlessness is typical of the poem as **[Page 21]** a whole. The speaker's strong, immediate reactions to Canada's "drift to barbarian / normalcy" register in his body, but the stiffening and numbness he describes prevent him from taking any action. The speaker is paralysed by the world he observes and thus silenced, too stricken to "decry technopolis." Lee does concede that the country is "protesting" during its descent, but there is little evidence or result of this protest in the poem.

Unwilling to retreat from the city and from the world, Lee's speaker finds himself in an existential, voyeuristic bind[5]: he cannot embrace the obscenity of the world he observes nor can he stop watching. If Toronto is a decaying city, it is also quite literally Lee's home, the place to which he belongs. Glen A. Love contends in *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment* (2003) that contemporary versions of the pastoral reveal doubt about the future of the natural world in light of the

impact humans have already had on the landscape. "What has changed profoundly in present-day writing is the conception of the bountiful earth and its assumed otherness and permanence," he observes (84). Lee is certainly not a pastoral writer in the sense that Love intends and *Civil Elegies* is too deeply concerned with broad existential, national, and civic concerns to be classified solely as 'nature poetry.' But Lee does participate in the shift that Love identifies, from seeing in nature "a model of certainty" to seeing the opposite. Throughout *Civil Elegies*, Lee's speaker is confronted by the visible results of human abuses of the environment, and despite its mildly optimistic conclusion the poem displays scant faith that Toronto's environmental health will be restored. The tone of Lee's elegies does, however, recall another aspect of the pastoral. In *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), William Empson notes that

> One strong help for the pastoral convention was the tradition, coming down from the origin of our romantic love-poetry in the troubadours, that its proper tone is one of humility, that the proper moments to dramatise in a love-affair are those when the lover is in despair. (13)

There is no question that Lee's speaker suffers from moments of despair; his love-affair with his country is destroyed when he is betrayed by its citizens and politicians. The concluding elegy, moreover, demonstrates the humility to which Empson alludes. The appeal to earth with which Lee ends the poem places the individual in a position subordinate to the physical place itself. Having already attacked Canada's leaders for their willingness to see "yank and gook and hogtown linked in / guilty genesis" (42), the speaker at the poem's close assumes responsibility for discovering a way to be at home in Canada. **[Page 22]**

Although it makes gestures to an evolving pastoral tradition, *Civil Elegies* more accurately disrupts a binary opposition of Arcadia and dystopia. Buell contends that "the case for persistent arcadianism in the Canadian lyric, whatever the environmental data, seems to be at least as strong as the case for a poetry of distrust or terror" (*Environmental* 60). But Lee refuses these categories. Instead, the poem expresses a vision of a threatened natural world that may yet be rehabilitated despite human activity. Lee's speaker haunts Toronto's public spaces, but he is no typical *flâneur*. Instead, both self-conscious and hypersensitive to his surroundings, he observes and decries the indications of ecological collapse. If *Civil Elegies* is an explicitly political poem, a condemnation of Canada's participation in American imperialism, part of its political function is to link the environmental health of country and city to their cultural health. In other words, Lee conflates these various categories: Toronto and Canada have a political and cultural future only if their ecological survival is assured.

The first elegy contains a brief lament for those Canadians "never at / home in native space" (27); as Dragland notes, "*Civil Elegies* begins with Lee's version of being cut off, but it moves back into the possibility of citizenship" (72). The poem claims that Canadians have utterly failed to act ethically. Lee describes Canada as the willing victim of neo-colonial exploitation, "the / ore and the oil and the shore-lines gutted / for dollars by men from abroad" (38). As in Margaret Atwood's contemporary *Surfacing* (1972),

the ruthlessness of American industry is perceived as a threat to Canada's very existence. Lee identifies Toronto's air pollution as a symbol of Canada's apparent willingness to participate in American imperialism; "the / gaseous stain above us," he writes, is an environmental marker of our "complicity" with the American empire, a parodic stigma on the crucified city (41). In "What Is a Nation?" (1882), Ernest Renan famously defined the nation as "a soul, a spiritual principle," the constituent parts of which are "the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories" and "present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form" (19). In Lee's poem, soul, desire, and will are utterly absent from the Canadians he observes; according to Renan's terms and Lee's vision, Canada therefore ceases to be a nation. Yet *Civil Elegies* simultaneously emphasizes a material vision of the nation. Lee's conception of nationhood is rooted in the physical dimensions of a particular place; the soul, to use Renan's term, cannot be divorced from the body. Canada's redemption, for Lee, requires a healing of both soul and body, both culture and environment. **[Page 23]**

II

It is in his attention to the meaning of *home* that Lee most clearly anticipates other contemporary Canadian poets who have written about the natural world. Lee has worked in several ways—as editor, correspondent, mentor—with Don McKay, Jan Zwicky, Tim Lilburn, Roo Borson, and Robert Bringhurst, and his thematic concerns are closely linked to those of his collaborators.[6] The examples are numerous. Borson's "Collected Landscapes" (1981), for instance, offers hope for the discovery of wilderness even in an urban world much like Lee's Toronto:

> As we breathe the slender air between
> buildings and civilized trees,
> the remaining wildness
> is us.
>
> (*A Sad Device* 62)

More recently, Borson's *Short Journey Upriver Toward Oishida* (2004) employs as the collection's central device the motif of travelling through nature in order to discover home. In their non-poetic writings, too, the use of the language of ecology to envision the function and character of poetry is common within this group of poets. In *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, the first of his three volumes of translations of Haida oral myth-texts, Bringhurst uses metaphors drawn from the natural world to explain the relation of languages and literatures to each other:

> Every language and its literature—written or oral—is also a world, linked to other worlds, of which the speakers of that language are often unaware. Every language and its literature form an intellectual bioregion, an ecosystem of ideas and perceptions, a watershed of thought. The several hundred oral literatures indigenous to North America—though constantly remade in the mouths of oral poets and new to every listener who comes from somewhere

> else—are parts of the old-growth forest of the human mind. (17)

Bringhurst elsewhere identifies a fundamental ecology in literature itself, and explains that a story comes both from an individual storyteller and that individual's culture and also from humanity generally, from "the community of which that speaker, that culture, this species, this genus all form small concentric parts" (*Prosodies of Meaning* 49). Bringhurst, whose Kanchenjunga Press published Lee's *The Death of Harold Ladoo* in 1976, also shares with Lee a strong interest in polyphony, not only as a compositional **[Page 24]** technique but also as an ethical approach to both literature and life. The multiple voices in polyphony may well be non-human: listening beyond the human realm, for these poets, is a vital part of becoming at home. In the foreword to his *Selected Poems* (1995), in fact, Bringhurst explicitly admits his interest in the knowledge possessed by the non-human world:

> Like the twitter of bats, the chatter of oilbirds and the clucking and moaning of dolphins, [my poems] began as tuneless and investigative songs: as desperate attempts at echolocation. Those who imagine that bats and birds have nothing to say may therefore take the view that I have nothing to say either. (11)

Another example of faith in the communicative power of the non-human world appears in Don McKay's "Winter Solstice Moon: An Eclogue" (2000); the speaker in the poem hears the ocean "saying those great unsayings to itself" (66). Like his colleagues, Lee remains conscious of what McKay terms in *Vis à vis: Field Notes on Poetry and Wilderness* (2001) the "important distinction between poetic attention and romantic inspiration" (27). Behind this poetic attention lies a faith that wilderness contains bodies of knowledge that humans can only struggle to comprehend. Lee's conception of *cadence*, which he defines in "Cadence, Country, Silence," as "a kind of taut cascade, a luminous tumult" (152), has affinities with, for example, Zwicky's claim in *Wisdom and Metaphor* (2003) that "Being is the interconnectedness, the resonant ecology, of things" (86-L). Zwicky explains that "metaphor is one way of showing how patterns of meaning in the world intersect and echo one another" (6-L), and she claims that "those who think metaphorically are enabled to think truly because the shape of their thinking echoes the shape of the world" (Foreward, n.p.). For Bringhurst, McKay, and Zwicky, as for Lee, paying close attention to the non-human properties of a particular place—whether termed "void," "cadence," "polyphony," or "ecology"—is a necessity for making a home in that place.

These expressions all suggest attempts to engage with a radically different and non-human part of the world, one that the poets recognize but do not pretend to comprehend in full. To be at home in the world is to respond to this difference without assuming human superiority. For Lee and the other poets, such an approach to nature tends towards a form of spiritual vision. *Civil Elegies* is ambivalent and self-contradictory even in its relation to spiritual matters, though it is readily apparent that the poem is moralistic. Christian images appear throughout the text. In the first elegy, **[Page 25]** for instance, Lee employs an image of crucifixion to describe the city (27); the second elegy

addresses an absent "Master and Lord" (31); the third elegy makes reference to Christ's resurrection; and further Christian references follow. Yet *Civil Elegies* is not an uncomplicated Christian poem. Kertzer notes that "Lee mocks his own nostalgia for religious solace by summoning a style that diverts him from heaven back to earth" (102); the speaker in the poem will not abandon the earthly world for any other. His pessimism leads him to insist that "we are not allowed to enter God's heaven" (50); but then, according to the speaker, "nor is God." *Civil Elegies* is both a visionary poem and one deeply invested with Christian mythology, but Lee's skeptical speaker refuses to make any clear expression of faith.

Rather than claiming that these writers are all religious poets, I want to suggest that they all demonstrate some form of faith, and especially faith in the natural world.[7] In his long poem "Conversations with a Toad," for example, Bringhurst writes that "The animals give us our speech and the means / of our thinking, just as the dreamers' / masks open the doors of our dreams" (24). Bringhurst does not explain *how* this transaction occurs, but he is convincingly sure that it takes place. In his ecocritical analysis of Wordsworth, Karl Kroeber defines an ecological vision as "one that assumes that all human beings bear profound responsibilities toward others, not just other humans, but other life forms—along with their and our habitat" (61). Kroeber astutely observes the proximity of such a vision to more conventional expressions of spiritual or religious belief. "That we exist not in elitist isolation but interdependently," he writes, "is a conviction that imposes concrete and difficult ethical burdens—a prime reason why ecologically oriented poetry must resonate with moral if not spiritual overtones" (61). Writing in praise of Lee's *The Gods* (1979), Denise Levertov celebrates the poem's "searching out of the ground and air of reality and the sacred" (56). This searching characterizes not only *Civil Elegies*, too, but also the poetic strategies of Lee's colleagues.

A fundamental part of the ethical burden of ecological thinking lies in humanity's understanding of its own relation to the natural world. "There are two levels of nature," Northrop Frye notes in *The Great Code* (1982):

> the lower one, expressed in God's contract with Noah, presupposes a nature to be dominated and exploited by man; the higher one, expressed in an earlier contract with Adam in Paradise, is the nature to which man essentially belongs. (139) **[Page 26]**

A tension between these two levels exists in *Civil Elegies*. Lee's speaker sees in Toronto the consequences of the lower level and instead advocates the higher as a more ethical response to the natural world. Lee thus participates in what Laurie Ricou calls "a myth that explains a different connection, not of possession but of communication…and respect" (4). Kroeber, Frye, and Ricou, like Lee, write from within the literary sphere, but their observations resonate with those of the theorists of what is known as deep ecology. Arne Naess's "platform of the deep ecology movement," for example, claims as its first tenet that:

> the flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth has intrinsic value. The value of non-human life forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes. (29)

In his essay "Four Changes" (1969, revised 1995), a seminal expression of deep ecology, Snyder writes that "what we envision is a planet on which the human population lives harmoniously and dynamically by employing various sophisticated and unobtrusive technologies in a world environment that is 'left natural'" (42). Although he admits that parts of the essay in its original form sound "naive and utopian" (46), in later prose works Snyder expresses very closely related ideas. In "Coming into the Watershed" (1992), for example, he advocates an intimate connection between individuals and the places which they inhabit: "Living in a place—the notion has been around for decades and has usually been dismissed as provincial, backward, dull, and possibly reactionary. But new dynamics are at work" (231). "The Rediscovery of Turtle Island" (1993) likewise calls for a keen understanding of the relations between people and the places they call home, insisting that "[bioregionalism] doesn't mean some return to a primitive lifestyle or utopian provincialism; it simply implies an engagement with community and a search for the sustainable sophisticated mix of economic practices that would enable people to live regionally and yet learn from and contribute to a planetary society" (247). Such an engagement and search are very closely related to Lee's understanding of citizenship as expressed in *Civil Elegies*.

In *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995), Buell identifies Robinson Jeffers as the leading example of an ecocentric poet: "In Jeffers, if anywhere, the Emersonian dream of nature as humankind's counterpart seems to have been purged of its theistic residue and to have assumed the status of an ecological ethic" (162). Indeed, Jeffers's anti-anthropocentrism and his conviction of the ultimate insignificance of human life remain radical today, **[Page 27]** some forty years after his death. Even Snyder and Bringhurst, who in their different ways are indebted to the Californian poet, do not follow Jeffers to the limits of his poetics of inhumanism. But Lee presents an altogether different model for the ecologically-minded poet. He neither disregards the city as an important site of human achievement nor dismisses the possibility of cultural change. Relentless in his vision, Jeffers ultimately advocates a retreat from the human world into the world of hawk and rock. Lee, on the other hand, is an activist poet whose troubled voice is rooted in the city and in the lives of its residents. He does not forego escape entirely, but he always returns, as another poem, "400: Coming Home" (1972), enacts.[8] Although this poem describes the drive along Highway 400 south to Toronto as interminable and lonely, it does imply that the urban destination will eventually be reached. In *Civil Elegies* Lee links civic, national, and ecological concerns, the structure of his poem and of his argument mimicking the intricate connections of an ecosystem. The relations between city and wilderness occupy Lee's vision; he does not assume the role of woodsman (as does Snyder) or even of keen observer of wildlife (as does McKay, for example), but instead stands as a committed city dweller possessed of an unusually broad understanding of *home* and of a fine eye for the symptoms of a poisoned environment.

The ecological vision of the poem forms a central component of the caustic and sustained attack Lee directs against Canada's leaders and citizens alike. Lee is perhaps more ecologically radical than politically radical; it is useful to recall Frank Davey's classification of Lee at "the near right," along with such cultural nationalists as Margaret Atwood, George Grant, and Jack McClelland (47).[9] Although I hesitate to call *Civil Elegies* a radical poem, the origins of the term—*radix*, for *root*—suggest a productive way of reading Lee's work. Even if his vision of nationhood is conservative and reliant upon a contrast with the United States, its emphasis on the importance of place and of environmental health is, from an ecological point of view, progressive. The ecological vision I identify in the text extends beyond a regard and compassion for the natural world and encompasses a concern for wholeness. A poetics of the Canadian city, Lee suggests, has as its basis a keen understanding of the need to reconcile the individual with both the human and the natural worlds, and to discover a source of transcendent value or meaning within the city itself. But this task is extraordinarily difficult, as *Civil Elegies* shows; Lee's poem depicts the Canadian city as a site of both redemption and despair.

Ultimately, *Civil Elegies* is a politically committed poem and *also* an ecologically committed poem. In addition to the politicians and citizens he **[Page 28]** condemns, Lee includes the speaker himself in this critique; the speaker is not simply an observer of the street, but also a participant in the pattern of contradictions that constitutes the city. Lee writes that "there are / few among us who are competent at being" (44). Beyond the question of *how* to be, meanwhile, lurks the question of whether human existence will continue to be possible. Even as Lee's speaker struggles to reconcile himself to the world he observes, the poem repeatedly affirms that the world itself has been jeopardized by human activity. Dragland observes that, for Lee, "to be alive in Canada in this century is to be lodged in paradox" (66). Lee does not resolve this paradox, his grappling with which continues to wield a major presence in other, later works. In *The Death of Harold Ladoo* (1976-9), another elegy, Lee presents "how to be in the world?" (*Nightwatch* 51) as the poem's fundamental question. But Lee suggests here, more than in *Civil Elegies*, that making a home in Canada is an impossibility. "For eight straight years of crud in public places / we worked to incite a country to belong to" (51), he writes in a passage tinged with a profound sense of personal failure.

Failure receives a still more explicit treatment in *Nightwatch* (1996), a long, introspective sequence in which Lee returns to the themes that permeate *Civil Elegies* and implicates himself in the betrayal of Canada:

> But it's back to the shame and the
> scotch, for as a citizen I
> reneged.
> ....
> And when the country, my beautiful
> gutless Canada, lay back
> and spread for a star-spangled buck,

in the time of the great betrayal, Mulroney ascendant,
I signed a crummy petition.

(184)

From *Civil Elegies* and *The Death of Harold Ladoo* to *Nightwatch*, Lee shifts from the elegy to the confessional lyric. The guarded public voice of *Civil Elegies* has become in *Nightwatch* intimate and even more self-chastising. This passage is marked by the speaker's self-castigation and by a recognition of the futility of his efforts to resist American influence and intervention. Although the sexual metaphor suggests violation, Lee accuses his country and its citizens alike of acquiescence and complicity. Brian Mulroney here replaces Paul Martin as the great betrayer of Canadian interests, but Lee's themes in the later poem echo faithfully those of **[Page 29]** *Civil Elegies*. I cite these examples not only to show the persistence of these thematic concerns throughout Lee's poetic career but also to point towards his reluctance to resolve them.[10]

Civil Elegies, in particular, strongly resists any resolutionary reading. The poem suggests that both environmental decay and complicity with American imperialism are examples of the "nation's failure of nerve," a refusal to consider the ethical implications of being in the world (41).[11] Its union of political and environmental concerns is one reason that *Civil Elegies* remains a text of vital interest. Even though Toronto and Canada have changed significantly since the time of *Civil Elegies*, the poem contains an ecological and political critique as significant today, I would argue, as at the time of its writing. Dragland writes that "if that era of American imperialism has now passed, the relevance of *Civil Elegies* has not, and will not as long as the U.S. extends its single-minded power all over the world" (74). The American foreign policy of George W. Bush signals that Lee's vision of Canada's place in the world remains of central importance. Not only is Canada still a beleaguered ally of the United States, but the son and namesake of the "honourable man" that Lee names as complicit in the American atrocities in Vietnam, Paul Martin, is now the Prime Minister of this country (42). The environmental problems that afflict the Toronto of Lee's poem, moreover, persist. The city's skyline is still stained by smog and car traffic continues to clog the streets around Nathan Phillips Square and throughout the city. That the poem ends in a prayer suggests that the speaker retains some hope for the future of his city; a glance today at the city itself indicates that the speaker's prayer has not yet been answered.

Notes

1. As Buell notes (*Writing* 51-2), Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* (1985) is similarly marked by a discourse of toxicity. DeLillo writes about both environmental pollution and cultural detritus; while the form and tone of *White Noise* differ markedly from those of *Garbage*, the two works merit some comparison because of the range of meanings their authors associate with

pollution. *Civil Elegies* differs from these American texts primarily in tone in its use of toxic discourse. Whereas both *White Noise* and *Garbage* are comic works, Lee's poem is distinguished by its tone of high moral seriousness. [back]

2. Ann Munton observes in "Simultaneity in the Writings of Dennis Lee" that "Nathan Phillips Square is an appropriate location in which for Lee to set his meditation, because as the economic and cultural capital of Canada, Toronto is the obvious target for his anti-colonial attack, and this square in particular is the heart of the city" (151). However, in *Civil Elegies*, Lee shows little interest in writing about the rest of Canada. Even though it includes the dedication "Pro patria" (23), the poem is, as Lee's notes to the text acknowledge, "highly local" (53). Although Lee uses his observations in Toronto as the basis for his national critique and lament, we must be careful not to *equate* Toronto with the rest of Canada. *Civil Elegies* focuses simultaneously on city and country, and the dual focus must not be overlooked. [back]
3. I am thinking in particular of "The Country North of Belleville," "Roblin's Mills," and *In Search of Owen Roblin*. [back]
4. In "The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition," Robert Kroetsch employs a similar term to describe the United States: "To the south of us is a huge technocracy, a world of power. Canadians are aware of power, but they have also experienced a sense of being powerless…. The world of technocracy is a world of communication. But it is also a world where communication, uniquely, fails" (53). Both Kroetsch and Lee envision Canada as a nation whose citizens, wittingly or otherwise, serve the ambitions of the American political and military establishment. In the sixth elegy, Lee suggests that Canadians are blind to their participation in American endeavours, but only because they deliberately avoid any self-scrutiny: "no man will use a mirror to shave," Lee writes, "in case / he glimpse himself" (43). [back]
5. George Grant refers to *Civil Elegies* as an existentialist poem in his essay on Lee, "Dennis Lee—Poetry and Philosophy": "it would appear to me that *Civil Elegies* is written out of the struggle which makes human beings existentialists" (234). [back]
6. In "Be-wildering: The Poetry of Don McKay" 881-8, Stan Dragland identifies Lee, McKay, Zwicky, Bringhurst, and Lilburn as the most prominent of those Canadian poets who explore the connections between lyric poetry, philosophy, and the environment. [back]
7. Lilburn is the exception; his writing is frequently and overtly devotional. [back]
8. "400: Coming Home" is one of the short poems included in *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* (1972), which won the Governor General's Award for poetry. These poems, only loosely connected to *Civil Elegies*, are gathered under the sectional title "Coming Back." [back]
9. *Civil Elegies* takes as one of its epigraphs a quotation from Grant's *Lament for a Nation*. Lee writes about his relationship with Grant and his work in "Cadence, Country, Silence" and at length in *Body Music*. [back]
10. *Civil Elegies* models itself, to an extent, on Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (1923). Lee's first collection of poems, the largely unremarkable sonnet sequence called *Kingdom of Absence* (1967), refers still more specifically to Rilke. With phrasing

that strongly anticipates the final stanza of *Civil Elegies*, the eleventh sonnet addresses the German poet directly:

Rilke, master of ripeness, and the things'
celebrant, rapt, be near to us in limbo
....
for we who are your music must applaud.
(16)

Although the poems in *Kingdom of Absence* are not as accomplished as *Civil Elegies*, the themes and the vocabulary of the sonnets prefigure those in Lee's later poetry. The sixth sonnet, for example, alludes to the "void" that occupies such a prominent position in *Civil Elegies* and "Cadence, Country, Silence":

I know a few who, strung up in the city,
numb, bemused or raging, pitch their lives
among that wrack and colonize the void.
(11) [back]

11. For a discussion of the influence of Heidegger on Lee, see "Visions of Heidegger in Dennis Lee and Robert Kroetsch," by Isaías Naranjo in *University of Toronto Quarterly* 70.4 (2001). See also Lee's own *Svage Fields" An Essay in Literature and Cosmology*. (1977). [back] **[Page 31]**

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