

Notes on My Emigration

Steve Reinke

Scratch an idealist—a Utopian, a nostalgic—(cut them open with a pocket knife) and underneath you'll find a hypocrite, endlessly repressing history, buying souvenirs, wishing to decrease the suffering in the world through compassion, etc.

— Plato

Has life in the American Midwest changed since the terrorist attacks of September 11? Probably. But I haven't been here long enough to know. Instead I'm continuing to trace a rupture in the mythical landscape of America that occurred about a decade ago.

God still operates here, but in a diminished capacity. Religion has been secularized (personalized, corporatized). God was never really efficacious enough for the Americans anyway. Who needs mysterious ways? This is the land of direct action, concrete results. It's amazing He lasted this long. Still, one needs a higher power, an axis to orient personal growth, a linchpin for twelve-step programs. God's replacement: guardian angels. These angels aren't from the Bible (tiny, eternal satellites of God, rank upon rank, arcane and spooky). That would be too old-fashioned. And they aren't really the greeting card angels, either. How can a Christmas tree ornament (little girl with a trumpet and curly hair, puffed-out cheeks) be a moral compass? Instead, these new-age angels are American loved ones. They have crossed over to the next realm (died) but still they can't stop talking.

These loved ones appear to Americans in dreams and visions, as well as through mediums such as John Edwards. (I sometimes watch his syndicated daily TV show, *Crossing Over*. He comes out and says to the audience: "I'm seeing a dog. Does anyone know of a dog who's passed? He's standing on a hill. He's standing on a hill and wagging his tail.") It seems the dead always have the same three messages: I forgive you, everything is alright, and everything will be alright. Clearly, spiritual life here has been reduced to hugs. But that's okay, as their main spiritual quest is the unearthing of childhood traumas, the discovery of repressed memories. Amazingly, it is a spirituality without faith, a spirituality with no discernable basis in the spiritual. (The one bookstore in my Chicago yuppie neighbourhood carries only cookbooks, financial planning books and self-help books in which the spiritual and psychological are blurred into a single goal-oriented blob of step-by-step instructions. Oprah seems to have something to do with many of the best titles.)

Follow your dead. Follow the trail of your dead, and their mumbling, insistent voices. Children are the future, but our dead are our history, our roots, our identity and heritage as suffering, incomplete consumers. We need to know what they have done to us and hidden from us, so we can move from these traumas with a sense of completion. Who needs God? Americans need to know who to blame and what to buy.

Americans had been unable to believe in the existence of terrorists. After all, none of them had discovered any repressed memories of terrorist abuse. They had focussed instead on the more immediate and real threat of serial killers, alien abductors, and Satanic ritual abusers. Perhaps that is why the question asked most often in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks was “Why do they hate us?” and, amazingly, the only answer they could come up with was “They are crazy jealous. Freedom-hating.” They never ask such questions of serial killers (they’re sick, usually with excess creativity), alien abductors (they’re just doing their jobs as scientists/earth-colonizers, both rational, sensible endeavours) or Satanic ritual abusers (they’re pure evil, or possibly perpetuating the behaviour of their Satanic ritual abusers, which waters down the evil). This mythological landscape, I know, doesn’t quite make a coherent system. But it does maintain the delicate, impossible balance between total solipsism and absolute conformity necessary for the American way of life.

Americans are nostalgic Utopianists, solipsistic confessors: options not available to Canadians. Joseph Beuys said that every nation gets the artists it deserves, and A. A. Bronson has written that Canadian artists are bureaucrats. We are a nation of bureaucrats and educators. Occasionally our artists speak as bureaucrats and educators. More often we ironically displace the discourses of bureaucrats and educators into satire, parody, pastiche: Vera Frenkel, Gary Kibbins, General Idea, John Greyson, Germaine Koh, Stan Douglas, Andrew Paterson, etc.

Autobiography is impossible in Canada. In America all confessors are heroes, as long as they don’t leave out the juicy details. We Canadians are either annoyed or mortified and just want them to shut up. We find the supposedly heroic aspect of public confession silly, appalling. It is improper discourse. The bureaucrat/educator can only speak as a representative, and then only with the aid of some kind of displacement.

Canadians never speak of love, for love is not an appropriate topic. But we do speak of death, and when we do, it is possible that all irony drains away: Hoolboom, Phil Hoffman, A. A. Bronson (though not, of course, General Idea). In England, as death approaches, irony increases. Irony there is rhetorical, something to be deployed. Irony here is more fundamental, constitutive. It is the life-force of Canadian discourse. It’s what we’re made of.