

1.

I hear Glenn Gould--that recluse--his Brahms Intermezzi. Quiet (even bland) pieces, I must say. I turn in my bed--- and I cough. Had I been seated in a concert hall, Glenn might have complained or quit playing and retreated to the studio--as I have done, come to think of it. Moments earlier: over the broadcast waves came that CBC jingle and the strangely reassuring voice--"Here is the CBC News." I must have heard a reference to P.E.T. before the voice lulled me back to sleep. Until 4:07--at which point, G.G.'s Brahms restored me to consciousness.

"I live on Pacific Avenue in the centre of the city of Brandon, Manitoba, Canada, my bed perpendicular to the Assiniboine River, which is just down and north from the City Centre Hotel, mere meters from the Canadian Pacific Railway, which spans the breadth of this land, running east and west, from sea to sea to sea...blah blah blah."

God, the floor is cold. My feet have just now alighted.

I stagger to the BR. Meanwhile, Glenn continues to tinkle the ivories. He's at work on one of his favourite European composers. I raise the seat. Please don't make any of your funny noises, Glenn.

He used to slouch while seated. He used to.

## Part 1 --- de Texte

4:07-4:21 a.m.

Pierre died today. I've just heard the news on the radio--although I must confess that I was half-asleep at the time.

My alarm went off, and the radio came on.  
At four in the morning.

I must have set the time wrong.  
Am always doing that.

So what to do now?

Compose a speech? Why not?  
Mornings are the best time to compose, I'm told.  
We'll see.

## Notes for a Speech on (Canadian) Flagmaking

It is four-oh-seven a.m. June the 30th, 1997.

Well. Pierre Elliot Trudeau. Dead.

Was it today? Or yesterday? I can't be sure now.  
He might have died yesterday, and we're only hearing about it now. Unless I was dreaming that he died.  
Perhaps he's not dead. Perhaps he's still alive.  
At any rate, I'll have to wait now.  
I'll have to wait for the News at Five.

Frankly, I don't mind waiting. I've done a great deal of waiting in my lifetime. Mainly, I wait for ideas.

I'm a flagmaker, you see. I make Canadian flags. And in order to make each flag distinctive, I need original ideas. And in order to receive those ideas, I must wait for them. I must wait for them to come on their own terms. There's

absolutely no point in  
2.

Whenever I think of hockey,  
I suppose it's inevitable that I  
wax nostalgic. I think of those  
years and years of road hockey  
games:

the long cold afternoons  
the January skies going black  
the soaked moccasins & mitts  
the clash of sticks  
the slap of the sockie  
the overheated little bodies  
the coughing and horking  
the greenies  
the picking-sides  
the sucks  
the sucker punches  
the puck hogs  
the snotty noses  
the lippy kids  
the fat lips  
the blood on the snow  
the cross-checks  
the crotch shots  
the spearing  
the butt-ends  
the cherry picking  
the bumper-shining  
the shouts from passing  
    motorists  
the shots of dad's rye  
the camaraderie

I recall those nights when my  
skates were carving up the  
ice at the local rink. I'm in a  
battle for the puck. I find open  
ice--but I'm challenged at the  
blue line by some West End kid  
who thinks he's a hotshot. I'm  
stripped of the puck and made  
to look like a fool. Later, away  
from the play, when no one's  
watching me--except my dad--  
I elbow that arsehole in the jaw.

forcing an idea before its time has come.  
For example.

It wasn't until the end of the Stanley Cup playoffs this year  
that my latest idea came to me:

*A Gordie Howe flag. A Gordie Howe flag.*

Why not? Why in the hell not? We've put Gordie on a  
pedestal. There's no denying in it. So why not put him on a  
flag? It's perfect. Besides, Gordie is a prairie boy.  
*Not like Wayne Gretzky.*

How many Canadian boys and men (girls and women, too, I  
might add) have aspired to be like Gordie Howe? Play hard  
and play fair--especially when everyone's eyes are on you.  
But when nobody's looking? Don't be afraid to raise an  
elbow. If you dislocate someone's jaw or knock out a front  
tooth, so be it. Ya do what ya gotta do to stay in the game.  
(Remember Bobby Clarke's slash in 72? Atta boy, Bobby!  
We were behind you all the way. Bobby, by the way, was a  
Flin Flon boy).

If forced to take a position on the matter, I would have to say  
that Pierre has--or did have--a lot in common with Gordie  
Howe. Pierre wasn't a sissy, even though he had a sissy  
name. *Elliot*. He wasn't afraid to raise an elbow in the  
corners. He wasn't afraid to raise a finger either--his middle  
finger. *Remember Salmon Arm? I remember it well.* His  
only mistake was that they caught him on camera.  
Personally, I don't think it bothered him in the least. Pierre  
didn't mind if you called him a snob. Snobs don't care a whit.

*My next idea. P.E.T.--in the centre of the Maple Leaf,  
giving the f-sign to the people of Canada. A stupid  
smirk on his face. Yes, I do think it has some possibilities.  
After the funeral, of course.*

Please don't mistake me for a nationalist. Or a patriot. I  
would never stoop that low. Please, I'm not an  
embarrassment to my country.

3.

A train whistle sends Pierre rolling north to Churchill. Inside his berth, his private dining car, to be precise, Pierre articulates an idea, his vision of Canada: "Ah, those f--ing peasants."

A Salmon Arm peasant of German-Canadian extraction is beside himself: "C'mere and say that you bilingual bastard. We do not eat poutine in these parts. We eat bratwurst and fresh fruit."

The Flagmaker is in his studio--hammering, ripping, cursing, smashing, pummelling, hollering whilst breaking things, cracking open yet another bottle of Club beer, listening to his favourite Joni Mitchell chanson ("Ladies of the Canyon," let's say. Or better yet, one of her American jazzman impersonations), spitting up, cursing, weeping (a la Chekhov), hallucinating, browbeating, stapling, taping, laughing uproariously in the face of absurdity, invoking his Muse (namely Ornella--of whom more will be spoken later), stabbing, throwing up, tearing, sawing, blubbering, wailing, sniffing at the critics ("Those gasbags don't know shit!"), shouting out "I'll show you" or "Bonus!" or "You ain't seen nothin' yet" to the BTO tune of the same name, stammering a la Randy Bachman, chuckling, clucking, torching, mangling the poetry of Maggie Atwood ("You fit into me like a fish hook in the

I make flags, yes. But I don't make the kind of flags that you can run up a flagpole. My flags are too heavy for that sort of nonsense. My Gordie Howe Maple Leaf, for instance, is made from the real thing:

chipped pucks  
chipped teeth  
broken hockey sticks  
stitches  
hockey poems  
arm splints  
various speeches by T.C. Douglas (the barnburners)  
duct tape  
spit  
the Western Producer  
C.C.M. jockstraps  
C.C.F. Manifesto  
Bohemian beer  
pitchforks and wheat  
Eaton catalogues  
seed catalogues  
etcetera

It's all put together roughly in the shape of a flag. Some people (those damn critics who think they know it all) complain that my flags don't look like flags at all. That's exactly the point, I reply. Others have expressed their delight at having to use their imaginations when viewing my flags. *They like the intellectual workout, I suppose.*

To be honest, I find it very difficult working with whole objects. That's why I prefer working with parts--objects that have been broken down into constituent parts. At which point, I reconstitute them. I make them whole. (Or as whole as possible under the circumstances). I wouldn't mind if you said my work had that unfinished quality to it. It'd all be the same to me.

I make flags out of whatever's at hand--garbage mainly--Canadian garbage. Not trash, as they say in America the Beautiful. Garbage is cheap and plentiful in Canada. I work with all kinds of garbage. I'm not choosy:

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eyeball") and so on and so forth. At some point, (generally, in the middle of the night under a full moon with a chorus of clanking and banging traincars from the CP railyards on Pacific), R.M. Schafer restores order to the chaos.

That Yankee troubadour, son of Woody--I speak of Arlo--might have saved himself (and us) some grief if he'd kept his garbage and that interminable song "Alice's Restaurant" to himself.

Speaking about beer. I recall those tall cool bottles of Molson Export, straight from the depanneur on rue Peel. I lined my apartment with those empties, never once realizing how those bottles would lodge themselves in my memory and come back to play such a decisive role in my vocation. No, back then I would carelessly crack open a quart of biere and slug it back. My only entertainment came from a tinny radio that I bought from an oldtimer on rue Parc. He invited me in for a beer, and we made the transaction that way. "It was a good radio, son," he told me. And it was a good radio. Many a night I fell asleep, blissfully, intoxicated by the music of Beau Dommage or Robert Charlebois or Oscar Peterson--as I imagined it. (My radio, you see, would often sputter and fade into static). In the gloom of the Montreal night, my eyes would

Kraft Dinner boxes  
Hansard  
unemployment insurance stubs  
Labatt 50, Pil, Club, Schooner, various stubbies  
Frank and Saturday Night magazines  
Molson Golden  
gopher tails  
jugs of Calona Royal Red  
fish bones  
dried spliffs  
dried loaves (of French Bread, "meme")  
dried love letters  
liquor (of all kinds)  
Lepage's Glue  
beaver skins & Beaver magazines  
L'Etranger & Nausea  
Assiniboine River mud (and River water)  
etcetera

My flags are distinctive, in other words. Why bother making them if they look like any other run of the mill flag? Is it art? Please, don't try to patronize me. My flags are the real thing, even if they don't fly. Art is fake.

Do I restore, re-shape, re-configure, reform, re-align, re-assemble, re-cast objects whose primary usages have been exploited? Do I breathe life into exhausted forms? No, of course not. I make use of any old thing that's been chucked away. I make flags from junk.

Is it a lofty vision? Some have called my vision lofty. I won't protest, just don't expect me to boast about my achievements. Some have called me an artist. I have no opinion on the matter. I would rather say to my patrons: "Think again, brother. Think twice, sister." I make flags. Yes, I may sell myself short in other areas, but that doesn't hide the fact that I am first and foremost a Canadian flagmaker. In and of itself, that's who and what I am.

It's my contribution to our society. A modest contribution, to be sure. Nevertheless, how many flagmakers do you know?

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flutter open, glancing out at those brave soldiers--those empty bottles of Molson Export --silhouetted, standing watch over the drunken form of the would-be flagmaker. Let me say that there was no anxiety of influence in that boy's being. He took inspiration from wherever he could find it. And it has always served him in good stead.

Did the 20th century belong to Canada? I think the question is open for debate. Nevertheless, let's consider some of this country's luminaries. Here's a partial list. We've excelled in so many spheres: hockey, politics, entertainment, and so forth. We've managed to keep the Americans entertained--and they didn't even know until quite recently that some of their favourites weren't actually American. Guess we pulled one over on them there. No wonder they felt duped. No wonder they don't trust Canadians.

One constant in this country must surely be hockey. Another one must be Question Period. As a matter of fact, the arenas of hockey and politics have given the average Canadian citizen plenty of entertainment over the years. We only have to reflect on the scraps and the brawls, on some of the backroom politicking--the Night of the Long Knives comes to mind. Look at the way Kim Campbell was dispatched. She thought she was real hot stuff--posing nude behind that lawyer's garb, for instance. Pretty spicy for a PM. The Brits loved her for it, but what do they know? They fell head over heels in love with Maggie

Could you count them on one hand? Probably.

Let me, rather, point to others who have made contributions to our society:

Flora McDonald (my fave), Thomas Scott (a hall's named after him in Winnipeg), Mel Hurtig, Sink Stevens, Frank (the Big M) Mahovlich, Wayne and Shuster, Peter M. (the Big M's brother), Corey Hart, Rocket Richard, the Pocket Rocket, Leonard Cohen (now there's a real crooner--why hasn't he ever gone into acting?!), Alex Trebek, Shania Twain (part-Native or so she claims), the guy who invented basketball, Fay Wray (from Medicine Hat, no less), Danny Finkleman, the guy who produced Meatballs, John Candy (he never forgot Canada), Tiger Williams, John Kordic (may he r.i.p.), the Poppy Family, the creative geniuses at K-Tel (from Winnipeg, "Go Winnipeg"), that Newfoundland beauty queen who socked someone at a bar in St. John's, Herb Gray & Deborah Gray (brother and sister, I think), Jim Carrey, Peter Newman, Eddie Shack (who will always be goin' down the track), George Grant who's not well known, George Fox who's better known, the cheese poet, either Flo or Eddie of Flo and Eddie, Jurgen G. and Vicky Gab (what a pair of cards), the Crash Test Dummies (Winnipeg again), Elwy Yost, the Frum family (not David), k.d. lang who told the world to get off meat, F.P. Grove (or Greve), and on down the list until you get to, last but not least, Guy Lombardo, Marshall McLuhan, Monty Hall, and John Crosby. There are so many, too many to list. Even Lucien B. and Jacques P. (who will go down in history) have made their contributions known.

If you want to include others such as W.A.C. Bennett, the son of Wacky, Ernest Manning, the son of Manning, Bill Vanderzahn, Grant Devine, the entire Devine caucus (some of them convicted criminals), then you'd have to form another list. The problem is that lists are seldom ever complete. On the other hand, why would anyone want a complete list anyway?