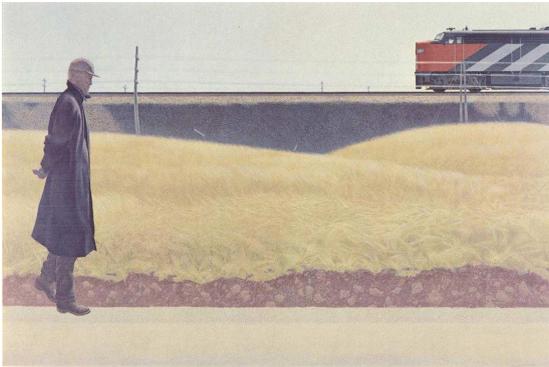




Horse and Train (1954)



Ocean Limited (1962)



Dog on Bridge (1976)



Winter Sun (2005)

ON BEING WHERE THERE IS NOTHING

Not long ago, on Monday the 14th of August, 2006, to be exact, I was talking with Alex Colville on the phone, mostly about the difference between life here in the Canadian Maritimes, more specifically here in Sackville, and life in Europe. The conversation was occasioned by my letter of the day before, sent as a fax directly from my computer here in Sackville—in which I wrote about the difference public money makes in the offering of such services as surgery (since I had recently undergone an operation in Luxembourg, identical in intent to one I had in Halifax more than a year and a half ago, and the difference in quality was astoundingly evident in the hospitals, as well as in much else).

Very soon in our conversation he remarked that, after his return from the military service, he and Rhoda “wanted to settle someplace where there was nothing—and this before the appearance of Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*.” As we went on talking he emphasized this thought of “being where there is nothing” by recounting a couple experiences he had back in the 1950s and 1960s.

He knew a man in New York, whom he identified as Lincoln and who came from a wealthy family and was at the time in a leadership position of the New York Ballet: in a taxi on the way to a ballet performance (which, Colville said in passing, meant a lot to him) this man Lincoln remarked that Colville’s decision to settle in Sackville was a wise one—that he knew many other talented artists who, moving to centers of culture like New York, ended by being absorbed into the bustle and doing nothing of their own.

Then, too, he and Rhoda had become friends with a British physician, whom he identified as Andrew and whose wife and Rhoda had become very close; the two had moved around a bit in the world before deciding to emigrate to Canada. This physician was also interested in music and agreed to conduct the Anglican Church Choir. But when a third of the Choir did not show up for practice one day the man said, “That’s it—we’re leaving on the next plane.” And they did.

In the days following our conversation, this “being where there is nothing” has stayed on my mind. What might “nothing” here mean? One might understand it as a simplifying hyperbole for “being where it’s quiet, where there are not many activities going on, where one can proceed with one’s work undistracted by surrounding bustle.” And no doubt here is part of the meaning—as when Colville remarked in the documentary interview filmed by the CBC in 1967 (Telescope: Alex Colville at Home), that after the war he and Rhoda had contemplated becoming lighthouse keepers—and that he did not wish to participate in the “art game.”

Or one might understand it as a direct and personal statement of a principle, as the reference to Sartre’s book seems to suggest. In an interview filmed in 1969, Martin Heidegger stated the principle very abstractly:

<i>Warum ist überhaupt Seiendes und nicht viel mehr Nichts? Warum hat das Seiende den Vorrang, warum wird nicht das Nichts als identisch mit dem Sein gedacht? Das heißt: Warum herrscht und woher kommt die Seinsvergessenheit?</i>	Why are there determinate things at all, and not rather nothing? Why do determinate things have the primacy, why does the nothing, as identical with being, not get thought through? That is: Why does the oblivion of being dominate, and where does this oblivion come from?
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But then I wonder what it means to think nothing as identical with being—and to say that the refusal to think the nothing through might end in the oblivion of being (the inability and the unconcern to wonder what all goes into the business of making determinations about the way things are).

In between, we may think of being where there are no effective institutions—as in a wilderness, whether an Arabian desert, an Himalayan peak, one of the Polar regions, or out on the high seas. In such places we find ourselves abandoned to the earth and the heaven, snow or ice, wind or water, burning sun or starry night. In such places, too, we may recall our usual condition as one where a network of human organization sustains us—not only conspicuous social institutions such as rescue services, hospitals, schools, legislatures, police and sanitation departments, prisons, recreational parks and public utilities serving us with water, power, and means

of communication; but also routines of our own individual labors, whether at home or at work. Social institutions and individual routines usually intertwine—or, better, derive from and illustrate a basic unity we may, with Heidegger, call “world.” Where and when this network, world, prevails—as in the bustle of any self-assured urban center—it tends to absorb us, even to rip us under as a rip tide may do in a strong surf. On the other hand, where and when a world falters—already on the outskirts of civilized regions—we find ourselves thrown back upon our selves, on whatever abilities we can muster in the face of raw circumstance; for we may no longer rely on previous, otherwise established services, ambitions and accomplishments.

This intermediate “being where there is nothing” may prove devastating, namely when we lack the necessary resources. But it can also be instructive, as in dramatic and usually short episodes of “wilderness training,” but even more in less dramatic but sustained sojourns in the provinces. One then learns the difference and the precarious relationship between the human network and what the network encloses—sometimes called “nature,” also “heaven and earth” or “raw circumstance at the moment” or “earth, air, fire and water”—in any case, that over which the network, our world, extends, on which it depends, from which it derives its sustaining resonance, to which it eventually crumbles—and which also interprets, i.e. assigns various meanings to it. The more we find firmly established within our world the patterns of response to what the world encloses (the more, that is, the world appears self-generating and self-sustaining), the more easily we may find ourselves convinced that what’s real, what *is*, lies exclusively within the network, and the less we find ourselves ready to begin anew, i.e. to base our responses on raw circumstance at the moment.

Being where there is nothing, we find ourselves invited to begin directly. On our own, we *need* to look and hear for ourselves, actually discern the elements surrounding us on all six sides, and adjust our responses to what we discern: rebegin right *there*. Yet surely the invitation to rebegin lurks in the practice of any craft, even if its voice more readily fades to a whisper relative to the possibly much louder invitation to continue in the manners already “tried and true,” effective and efficient, and recognizable to others.

The opposite of beginning freshly is to *merely* continue. And where there are lots of things going on, the exigencies of continuation easily drown out the exigencies of beginning freshly—whether in artisanal work or scientific research.

And especially in creative composition, whether visual, auditory, or literary. In the practice of these arts, being where there is nothing defines the primary condition of work. And not at all because it might be essential that a composer produce something differing from the likes of previous productions. Novelty does happen and, for some centuries now, has distinguished artistic from artisanal work in western civilization; in Egyptian and our own Gothic cultures novelty played no role whatsoever. Rather, being where there is nothing first allows the difference to become prominent and thematic—the difference, to repeat, between the covering we call the human network, or world, and what it covers, namely circumstance in its rawness, what forces itself upon us when and where “there is nothing.”

Forces itself upon us not as anything determinate, but precisely in its indeterminateness, whereupon we may learn that the determinations we do in fact make, and must make, issue from the covering rather than from the covered. Forces itself upon us in a way essentially different from, yet often confused with the way the network of human concerns—as the expectations of the field in which we live and work—appears to force itself upon us.

Is there no way of being where there is nothing other than venturing into some wilderness or settling where the network in fact makes only weak claims on one?

But these are not two separable things, nothing and world. The world *is* nothing. That is, while generally appearing to be *everything*—to regulate all legitimate human concern and effective response (initially defining, as it does, our place, our daily routines, our careers)—it can show its “true colors,” show itself to be the opposite, namely *not* to regulate, *not* to define: to be empty, and horrendously so. The first emphatic experience of its emptiness takes the form of despair: the network holds nothing out for us. Yet, as Augustine and Dante, Kierkegaard and Heidegger especially testify, each in his own way, such experience sets the stage, the condition, for the greatest joy—the joy of discovering raw circumstance together with the activation of one’s own self, i.e.

responses of one’s own, shaped by but not derived from the accumulated responses enmeshed within the network—rooted, rather, in the rawness of circumstance. That the world “in itself” is nothing can become pronounced anywhere, anytime. Not everyone must move to Sackville.

The “nothing” of being where there is nothing dispels the prevalence of, our trust in, the familiar patterns of behavior and the network of expectations essential to these patterns. A certain freedom, then.

Yet we may wonder. Any response at all requires an earned ability to detect what the situation requires: both a recollection allowing recognition and an anticipation allowing volition; both retention and protention (Augustine, Husserl, . . .). And circumstance itself: How can it ever be absolutely raw, in the sense that it would bear no traits, no signs of our interpretation, no marks of any preliminary or prejudicial response? Without at all doubting the possibility of fresh response, we may all the more wonder about it—both that and how it can emerge out of its opposite, namely prefixed, routine, dull response within a corresponding oblivion of circumstances, a kind of cover-up.

Contrary to what we might believe in our youth, liberation from oblivious routine, this inauguration of fresh response, this pristine disclosure of circumstance—these *also* liberate, inaugurate, disclose our *inheritance*, the techniques of response and ambitions of disclosure originally governing our endeavors and otherwise shrinking into constrictive routine. The symphonies composed by Mozart in the 18th century, as also the jam sessions emceed by Norman Granz in the 20th century, rebegin and so reveal the original forms and ambitions governing musical composition in their respective genres at the time—and so for us at other times. The careful investigations of a Sherlock Holmes similarly rebegin and so reveal the modern liberal understanding of societal forms and the corresponding manners of detecting their transgression. For all the openness of mind required by and evident in basic research (into, say, atomic or genetic structures), the practice of such research calls into play—and so rebegins and reveals—the now long-established techniques and ambitions of modern science, and also of our technology-driven institutions.

It is essential, then, to distinguish two versions of our inheritance: the original tradition of technique and ambition, and the worn-out routines and hopes resulting from the tradition on the wane. The one remains in essence rooted—better, it roots us—in raw circumstance; it requires from us constant renewal, continuous re-creation. The other, essentially uprooted, provides the illusion of self-sufficiency, self-evidence, and safety—a bulwark *against* the rawness of circumstance; it invites us to fall in line with prevalent protocols. The first *is* only in reincarnation—*is*...nothing. The second *is* all by itself—is, it seems, everything.

Unless we recover the original, the derivative absorbs us entirely. Thus one sure way of assuring the continuation of rootless routine is to insist on producing work that departs from the routine by moving forward—by innovating. For one then simply re-equips the routine, ornaments it, adds “bells and whistles” distracting us from its essential emptiness. Liberation occurs rather by returning it to its source, raw circumstance itself, to *moments* of response. Those who spurn the canon live in a kind of limbo—in desire devoid of hope—and essentially rehearse its hulk. Again in that interview of 1969, and in a rather general if not abstract way, Heidegger remarks on this paradox:

<i>Eine der großen Gefahren unseres Denkens ist heute gerade die, daß das Denken—also im Sinne des philosophischen Denkens—keinen wirklichen ursprünglichen Bezug mehr hat zur Überlieferung.</i>	One of the greatest dangers of our thinking is today precisely this: that thinking—here in the sense of philosophical thinking—no longer has any effective and originating relation to, any bearing on, what comes down to us.
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For, I would add, being where there is nothing then takes on another sense, a kind of revenge, where nothing means anything at all. Offering a concrete counterpoint to this thought, Alex Colville states in a 1973 interview conducted for German television:

I suppose the good thing about being a Canadian artist is that one lives, *I* live, in a country where there seem to be interesting, absorbing, and important things going on. As I suppose there is anywhere in the world. But since Canada is a new country, one having no cultural tradition, these things

have not been brought into artistic form, so that one does not have the feeling that everything has been done. It is perhaps logical that this situation makes me more aware of traditions than people who, say, live in a country with a long tradition. For I have the material, the content that has not been made into art before and I need formal systems to help me to make it. And so I can look to, say, a great European tradition to borrow these forms.

What this means—to borrow forms from the tradition, to *receive gladly* one’s tradition—Colville suggests in this passage from a letter dated 24 November 2005:

I have for a long time been an admirer of Brunelleschi’s buildings which are contemporary with Donatello’s work and Piero della Francesca’s—early or mid 15th century. This has to do with the interest I have mentioned in the idea that a person living in the present, when searching for cultural precedents similar to his own, directs his attention to a similar period—in this case a beginning period, sometimes called archaic, as the 13 to 15th centuries—thus the Greek Hellenistic period is like 16th century (and perhaps 17th cent) Italian culture. It is the sense of its being the same time of day—morning, not evening.

Yet only that day dawns that the night has prepared. The one lets us see and know, the other we must learn to acknowledge.

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