

Bruce Elder's Acceptance Speech
Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts
Friday March 23, 2007
Rideau Hall

The anguish that thoughtful people of our time feel is essentially an acute form of the feeling that Homer narrativized in *The Odyssey* – that is, nostalgia which, according to the meaning of the original Greek is the pain of returning home (*nostos*: return home; *algos*: pain). The anguish of our time is a call to go back, to return to some more primal, more immediate, perhaps less articulate but certainly more genuine state – a vocation issued by the Ground of Being summoning us to return to the destiny It sets forth for us. But this call comes from afar, and calls us to an Afar, from the Beyond-being which is also the Unmanifest. For this call, which can speak only through anguish and to anguish, is the Unmanifest's form of self-disclosure inasmuch as the Unmanifest discloses itself in the form of absence which always provokes anguish.

Only in foundering can the call of the Absent One be heard. Hence this anguish, too, can be understood as an opening, for it serves to make us ready to hear the call from the Ground and to prepare us for the only form of presencing of Unpresented can abide – the marks that it leaves on be-ings as It withdraws so they can come forth into being. Our anguished foundering can disclose what reason cannot: it can disclose the Divine's anguished love for beings. The idea that the Omnipotent should be required to undergo anguish is repugnant to reason, but it can be disclosed by our anguish because our anguish resembles Its anguish.

History, to be sure, teaches us that those who wait in despair are very close to salvation and that anguish itself is very close to insight. A turning point for me came with the recognition that reason – that is the reason as moderns conceive it – is the adversary of thought. It was this that really allowed me to begin thinking. The fate of the modern, technological era involves the degradation of the external world by reducing it to the empty and unsubstantial nothing of mathematical abstractions. But even this degradation creates an opening for a new creation. Ahead of us there lies an opening – an emptiness that harbors possibilities and is pregnant with the promise of new world-founding acts.