

Survival of the Nation(al)? Notes on the Case of English-Canadian Literary Criticism

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In an age of 'internationalism' and 'multiculturalism,' societies have *not* become 'post-national'. Current events in Central and Eastern Europe alone testify to the ongoing relevance of the 'national' as a force in late twentieth-century politics—even though concrete definitions of this 'national' vary according to specific social, cultural and ideological conditions.¹ There has been a strong tendency in recent literary and cultural criticism to pronounce the nation dead as a valid concept for discussing the formation of cultural identities; it has been superseded by a poststructuralist and/or postcolonial attention to heterogeneity, difference, diversity and related concepts. However, throughout the 1990s, as questions of communal identities and values have become more urgent again in many societies, the national has resurfaced in critical discourse,² with simplistic cultural nationalism fortunately playing a relatively minor role. Rather, contemporary criticism, like historical and political studies, tends to view the national as a flexible construct whose precise contexts of construction at a given cultural and political moment have to be analyzed and made explicit.

The following notes will sketch the history of these contexts for the criticism of English-Canadian literature. As a society and culture notoriously preoccupied with its national identity—or rather its apparent crises—anglophone Canada offers itself as a paradigmatic case for this kind of study. The factors of this concern with national identity have themselves changed with the course of time: Canada had to develop a stance of cultural nationalism to achieve decolonization from Britain; the country has also traditionally suffered from the legacy of having *two* European 'founding nations,' which resulted in the deep division between English Canada and Québec and the 'two solitudes' of their respective

cultures. Additionally there is the ethnic plurality within modern Canada as one of the world's most important immigration countries. Within such constellations, English-Canadian literary criticism has, since the nineteenth century and almost uninterruptedly, participated in various discourses of the nation and its distinctive 'Canadian-ness'.³

The Confederation of 1867 established the Dominion of Canada and marks the beginning of the country's autonomy in political and historical terms. The years leading up to and following this event saw the first outbursts of Canadian cultural nationalism, which was prominently linked with demands for a recognizably (English-)Canadian literature. In this early phase the desire to construct a distinctiveness of the emerging nation through its literature was so strong that missed chances were openly lamented. In 1884, for instance, the critic John Logan complained that the white settler culture had failed to "amalgamate" with the indigenous culture found in the colony:

I doubt not but the day will come when [. . .] we will produce a great writer, or even great writers; but will they be founders of a 'distinctive literature'? I think not, unless they write in Anglo-Ojibbeway, and educate a nation to look upon Nana-bo-john as a Launcelot or a Guy of Warwick.⁴

If this was a missed opportunity, another strategy of making Canadian literature distinctive was adopted frequently: indigenous peoples and other typically 'local' elements—especially nature and landscape—are standard components in nineteenth-century English-Canadian literature, and critics of this literature favouring a "national-referential" aesthetics⁵ also helped to establish the 'locality' of motifs and themes as cornerstones of 'Canadian-ness'. Thus Thomas D'Arcy McGee, a poet-journalist and fervent promoter of Canadian nationalism (as he had earlier been of Irish nationalism), demanded in "Protection for Canadian Literature" (1858) that Canadian literature "must assume the gorgeous coloring and the gloomy grandeur of the forest. It must partake of the grave mysticism of the Red man, and the wild vivacity of the hunter of western prairies."⁶ The conviction that the 'Canadian-ness' of Canadian literature is most obviously established by the 'sense of place' it conveys, also underlies the first anthologies of Canadian poetry. Edward Hartley Dewart's *Selections from Canadian Poets*

(1864) was expressly offered as a contribution to the "formation of a national character,"⁷ and of the poems assembled in this volume, only those in the "descriptive" section are deemed to have a "national" potential. In the introduction to his *Songs of the Great Dominion* (1889), William Douw Lighthall freely admitted that poems without a local touch were expressly omitted from his collection:

The present is an imperfect presentation of Canadian poetry from a purely literary point of view, on account of the limitation of treatment; for it is obvious that if only what illustrates the country and its life *in a distinctive way* be chosen, the subjective and unlocal literature must be necessarily passed over [. . .].⁸

Lighthall here points to the reductivism always inherent in a focus on the national in literature: aesthetics are de-emphasized for the sake of literature's extra-literary reference. Despite this limitation, some Canadian criticism continued in the same vein until well after World War I. Lionel Stevenson's "Manifesto for a National Literature" (1924), for instance, claims that "Canadian art is almost entirely devoted to landscape, Canadian poetry to the presentation of nature."⁹ However, writers and critics informed by modernist ideals now also started to reject a literature that was "heavy with Canadian topics," as F. R. Scott writes in his poem "The Canadian Authors Meet" (1927).¹⁰ They emphasized the need for a criticism that would privilege aesthetic quality rather than national relevance and reference. In a "Rejected Preface" for the anthology *New Provinces* (1936), a milestone of English-Canadian literature which he co-edited with Scott, A. J. M. Smith programmatically emphasized that

we do not pretend that this volume contains any verse that might not have been written in the United States or in Great Britain. There is certainly nothing specially Canadian about more than one or two poems. Why should there be? Poetry today is written for the most part by people whose emotional and intellectual heritage is not a national one; it is either cosmopolitan or provincial [. . .].¹¹

In 1942, Ralph Gustafson's preface to the first edition of his anthology of Canadian poetry optimistically declared the phase of ardent Canadianism passé: "A Canadian poet can no longer consider that his poem derives importance solely because it is *written*."¹² Yet, during a symposium on

Canadian culture held more than three decades later, Gustafson again felt obliged to remind his audience that “content alone has never yet made a good poem. An Eskimo eating maple syrup on snowshoes is not a good Canadian poem.”¹³ Modernism had apparently not eradicated the national from Canadian critical discourse, and in the 1970s, the concept could easily be reawakened in a new cultural-political context.

The kind of Canada-minded criticism against which Gustafson raised his voice came to be named and castigated as ‘thematic’ criticism. It gained a strong impact around the nation’s Centennial in 1967, as Canadians embarked on several new waves of national crisis and national affirmation. The upsurge of English-Canadian nationalism in these years has to be seen in connection with Québec separatism as well as a pronounced anti-Americanism. A century after Confederation, Canada considered itself as the prime victim of U.S. imperialism and felt that it had entered a neo-colonialist phase of its history. In the words of the ardently nationalist critic Robin Mathews: “Canada has a three-part history of colonialism, first as a French colony, then as a British colony, and now as an economic colony of the U.S.A.”¹⁴ Since the country was so highly dependent on the United States in economic terms, *cultural* nationalism focussing on a homogenized self-image with a set of shared defining features became the driving force in the affirmation of a national identity. Thus a massive promotion of the national arts and letters was launched; the Canada Council, founded in 1957 as a national cultural agency, generously sponsored what was unfavourably termed a “‘Can.Lit.’ industry”¹⁵ of prolific writers, an effective Canadian bookmarket and a considerable increase in academic interest—if perhaps not a wide public actually *reading* Can.Lit. At a time when structural, text-orientated criticism was the critical vogue in Europe and the United States, English-Canadian Literature and its criticism were thus once more strongly context-orientated and heavy with Canadian topics—not least because a considerable number of academic teachers and critics were also very active as writers of Can.Lit. (and vice versa) and expressly understood themselves as champions of the new nationality. Studies influential at least in academic circles, like D. G. Jones’ *Butterfly on Rock* (1970), Northrop Frye’s *The Bush Garden* (1971), John Moss’s *Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction* (1974) and in

particular Margaret Atwood's frequently quoted *Survival* (1972), are only the tip of a critical iceberg that tried to establish a national cultural mythology of garrison mentalities (Frye) and victim complexes (Atwood).¹⁶ Or, in the words of the novelist George Bowering: "The Canadian Centenary was perhaps the worst thing that ever happened to Canadian criticism because we started counting mooses and snow forts instead of paying attention to writing."¹⁷

As early as 1974 a seminal article by the poet and critic Frank Davey, "Surviving the Paraphrase,"¹⁸ warned that thematic criticism with its high esteem for Canadian-ness but otherwise anti-evaluative tendency would reflect negatively on the quality of the country's literary production. Thematicists also tended to ignore certain 'un-Canadian' writers. Thus John Metcalf, another writer-cum-critic, was keenly aware that as a writer of novels and short stories he seemed to fall through the country's dominant critical grid:

I don't think I stand *anywhere* in the CanLit Scheme. I haven't got a Garrison Mentality and I'm not at Stage Three or a Victim or on Cloud Nine or whatever the fuck all that twaddle was about. My work suffers from a paucity of Indians and Myth.¹⁹

The criticism of national thematic criticism and its reductiveness became pronounced towards the end of the decade, for instance during the Calgary Conference on the Canadian Novel in 1978. The writer Barry Cameron summarized the issue:

. . . such criticism looks at language not for itself, but primarily as a referential or representational tool that points to something beyond or outside language. But verbal stances or attitudes or visions in novels can only exist in verbal structures; they do not derive from the physical, geographical, or social environment in which the writer lives, but from the particular verbal forms and conventions, the language, that a particular society employs to speak of its physical, socio-political, psychic, and spiritual life in that place.²⁰

Many critics in the 1980s recorded with relief that the surge of cultural nationalism of the previous decade seemed to be abating. The volume *Future Indicative* (1987) edited by John Moss, the former thematicist, hails a new internationalism of Canadian critics and literary theorists under

the impact of postmodernism and poststructuralism: "They have been deconstructing the box in which we have tried to contain our culture; not peering over garrison walls but walking right through them."²¹ But it was not only the (belated) arrival of new modes of international criticism that caused the watershed in Canadian criticism. Critics were also responding to a significant re-conception of Canada's official social and political self-image: recognizing that immigration was essential for maintaining its population size, Canada now started to officially promote itself as a society committed to multiculturalism and acknowledging the cultural contribution not only of its first nations, but also of its many immigrant groups. A policy of multiculturalism had already been instituted in 1971, but the Multiculturalism Act of 1988 explicitly protects and supports the individual's right to preserve his or her cultural heritage and mother tongue.

In the light of this new political image of the nation, critics of Canadian literature now embarked to celebrate cultural values other than essentialist Canadian-ness, counting the variety of ethnic voices rather than 'typically' Canadian themes and motifs such as moose. In a volume of interviews with Canadian writers of the mid-eighties,²² questions concerning their Canadian-ness are characteristically avoided; writers are no longer expected to act as spokespersons for a 'national' literature; if they *choose* to speak for a group, this is usually one with a certain 'ethnic,' 'gender' or 'regional' identity. Diversification and decentrement became the new critical catchwords of English-Canadian literary criticism²³—resulting in a drastically changed image of Canadian literature in anthologies,²⁴ literary histories and teaching curricula.

Ironically, however, the decentring of 'Canadian' literature did not mean that Canadian literary criticism became post-national. Rather, the national was reconstructed in terms of the new political ideal of a society with many (e.g. ethnic and regional) voices. Even if (English-)Canadian identity became increasingly complex and difficult to define, the quest for some kind of nationally definable identity survived, and several Canadian critics managed to fuse basic assets of postmodernism with the desire to define Canadian-ness. They reconceived the nation as *distinctively* heterogeneous, decentred and many-voiced, thus adapting postmodernist creed to

Canadian needs. Linda Hutcheon, for instance, argues that when postmodernism arrived in Canada, "the form it took was a distinctly Canadian one."²⁵ The poet, novelist and critic Robert Kroetsch (1989) hailed Canada as a quintessentially postmodern country that has adopted "disunity as unity" as a specifically "Canadian strategy" and celebrates multiplicity, diversity and difference: "There is no centre. This disunity is our unity."²⁶ As Paul Goetsch observes, Hutcheon and Kroetsch are "not content with just practicing a postmodern form of multiculturalism; they also wish to create a master narrative through which postmodernism will acquire special importance in Canada."²⁷ This strategy may result in a paradoxical construct of the nation, but the national *per se* continues to matter.

The writer and critic Janice Kulyk Keefer proposes the concept of a 'transcultural' instead of 'multicultural' Canadian literature²⁸ because this concept—in her definition—also encompasses the formerly dominant ethnic voices alongside formerly marginalized ones. But even with such a pronouncedly decentralized concept, Kulyk Keefer's transculturality does not transcend national borders; she, too, claims that there is a distinctly *Canadian* case of transculturality. At a time when politics was sparking yet another crisis of Canadian identity, Kulyk Keefer perceived a strong longing in her country's community to retain the national as a frame of reference. The 1995 referendum on Québec separation and the discussion preceding it, accompanied by demands for greater independence in other provinces, posed a threat to Canada's political unity but at the same time revived public concern about the national:

Given our present constitutional crisis, many Canadians feel that we are in desperate need of a collective and centripetal ethos, a national sense of self which will unite instead of divide. Ironically, just when our newest writers have set out to celebrate difference, to subvert or at least open up a social formation which has for far too long denied any significant form of power to minority groups and the conspicuously other, many Canadian readers are expressing a desire for an atavistic construction of national identity: something coherent and stable, monolithic and monologic. At a recent conference held at the University of Guelph and organized around the topic, 'Canada: Break-Up or Restructure,' countless speakers from the floor—members of the general public and, most prominently, senior-level high-school students—articulated precisely this desire that Canadian artists and academics provide for them a unified, immutably distinctive sense of what it means to be Canadian.²⁹

A similar perception was expressed by the South-Asian-Canadian writer and critic Arun P. Mukherjee during a conference in 1995, to which he was invited to discuss theoretical frameworks for reading 'minority' literatures:

And yet on 30 October 1995 I knew what it means to be part of a nation and what it means to wish that your nation survives. I am talking about the referendum that night. We have really been through a very traumatic time and similar to the last two weeks of the referendum we have been almost ill [. . .]. 'Nation' is also something that postmodernists and globalizers make fun of, thinking it's a *passé* institution. And yet, when a nation is in the process of forming, you don't know what else you want; first of all, you want to preserve it.³⁰

Too many critical concepts currently in vogue are too locationless for Mukherjee to do justice to a phenomenon such as South-Asian-Canadian literature—a literature that may form networks across national borders with other South-Asian literatures world-wide, but which is also localized in Canada and thus different from literature produced by South-Asians elsewhere.

The last two quotations seem to testify to a new sense of the national community among English-Canadian critics in the allegedly post-national 1990s. This is not a nationalist stance as in earlier phases of Canadian cultural criticism. Kulyk Keefer in the quote above is clearly critical of a popular "desire for an atavistic construction of national identity." At the same time, she does not ignore that desire. A greater awareness of communal needs and values and the idea that Canadian literary criticism should again be more concerned with this community emerge in a number of critical writings of the 1990s. In 1993 Frank Davey, who had so vigorously attacked thematic criticism in the 1970s, published a study entitled *Post-National Arguments*, focussing on the heterogeneity in Canadian literature but ultimately ending on a note of regret since the loss of recognizable 'Canadian-ness' in the more recent of the texts discussed suggests "a world and a nation in which social structures no longer link regions or communities, political process is doubted, and individual alienation has become normal."³¹ The suggestion that Canadian writers and their critics should be *engaged* in the discourse about their country and its community has been pronounced most vehemently by Robert

Lecker, who has published widely on the problematic *and* the importance of a Canadian canon for the Canadian self-image.³² His collection of articles, *Making It Real*, was completed "in the months leading up to the second Quebec referendum on the futures of the province and Canada. In such a political climate, no one who writes about Canadian literature can pretend that they are engaged in an apolitical activity." By no means does Lecker wish "to return to the days of using criticism to celebrate Canada for Canada's sake. Those days of feel-good criticism are long over. But I want to encourage critics of Canadian literature to recognize the national bias that informs their work, and to ask whether this bias has extraliterary connections that need to be explored."³³ This exploration has to take place within a flexible, constructivist notion of the national. Lecker rejects radical postmodernist positions that have threatened to decentre the imagined community of Canada almost into annihilation. However, his conception of the national is tinged by poststructuralist thinking itself: the nation according to Lecker can only be conceived today as a unity whose very instability must be shown; one needs "a vision of the nation that you propose in order to destabilize it."³⁴ Critics who approach Canadian literature with such a notion of the national can help to imagine *and* constantly reimagine the country and will thus help to retain Canada alive and real for its community:

[. . .] those involved in the study and teaching of Canadian literature need to reassert the Canadian aspect of what they do. [. . .] It does not mean finding Canadian themes in, say, [Michael Ondaatje's] *The English Patient* or [Rohinton Mistry's] *Such a Long Journey*. It does mean that we consider these books different because they are written by Canadians, and that one aspect of studying them involves an investigation of this difference. In order to do this, Canada itself needs to be reimaged. This process or reimagining should be an explicit part of Canadian literary study. It is a necessary form of critical positioning. Those who teach Canadian literature carry a conception of the country. This conception needs to be foregrounded.³⁵

As this sketch of English-Canadian literary criticism has suggested, the national has survived as a leading concept in this criticism from the nineteenth century to the final days of the twentieth. Since the national is not an essence but a social and cultural construct, it has been defined

and redefined repeatedly throughout this history, but it has never been entirely discarded. Canadian literary criticism has thus been offered in these notes as a paradigmatic case for studying the changing relevance of the national in literary criticism—a study that seems relevant at a time when nationalism in its most bigoted and dangerous forms raises its head again in many regions world-wide. Should and how can literary criticism engage with the national discourse(s) of the societies in which it is practiced? The Canadian case clearly exemplifies the blinding limitations of a simplistic, culturally nationalist criticism, the last instance of which in Canada was the thematicist vogue of the 1970s. But the Canadian case also reveals an ongoing concern with the national in the more dynamicized concepts of Canadian-ness developed since the 1980s. To quite a number of contemporary critics, the national as a framework for discussing Canadian literature is still a valid concept through which they can participate in Canada's continuing discourse(s) of identity. That this is an engagement which literary critics *should* practice, especially at a time of strong public feeling about the state of the nation, is emphasized by Robert Lecker. It is the only way, after all, for critics (as professionals) to take part *critically* in their country's national discourse and thus to prevent this discourse from relapsing into blind nationalism. A lesson to be learned from earlier phases of Canadian criticism is, however, that concern with the national should not entirely preoccupy the critic, who has many options to complement the national with other categories—the global, the local, the multi-, trans- or intercultural, and, of course, the traditional categories of literary aesthetics.

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NOTES

¹As Anderson and Hobsbawm have shown in their seminal studies. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), and Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge: Canto, 1990).

²The well-known volume edited by Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London/New York: Routledge, 1990), had an important initiating function in this debate; see also the entry on "nation/nationalism" in Bill Ashcroft et al., *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London/New York: Routledge, 1998), with notes on further reading.

³For examples of the ongoing discussion in the 1990s see, for instance, Frank Birbalsingh, *Novels and the Nation: Essays in Canadian Literature* (Toronto: TSAR, 1995); Jonathan Kertzer, *Worrying the Nation: Imagining a National Literature in English Canada* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1998), or two thematic issues of *Canadian Children's Literature* (86 and 87/1997) on "What's Canadian about Canadian Literature?"

⁴*The Search for English-Canadian Literature: An Anthology of Critical Articles from the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Carl Ballstadt (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1975) 116.

⁵See Robert Lecker, *Making It Real: The Canonization of English-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1995) 4.

⁶*Towards a Canadian Literature: Essays, Editorials and Manifestos*, eds. Douglas M. Daymond, Leslie G. Monkman, vol.1 (Toronto: Tecumseh, 1984) 44.

⁷*Selections from Canadian Poets with Occasional Critical and Biographical Notes and Introductory Essay on Canadian Poetry*, ed. Edward Hartley Dewar, repr. (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1973) ix.

⁸Daymond, Monkman 131.

⁹Lionel Stevenson, *Appraisals of Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1926) 11.

¹⁰*The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*, ed. Margaret Atwood (Toronto: OUP, 1982) 91.

¹¹Daymond, Monkman 275.

¹²*The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse*, ed. Ralph Gustafson, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984) 25.

¹³*Voices of Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Culture*, ed. Judith Webster (Burlington, VT: Association for Canadian Studies in the United States, 1977) 19.

¹⁴Robin Mathews, *Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution* (Toronto: Steel Rail Educational Publishing, 1978) 1.

¹⁵See B.W. Powe, *A Climate Charged* (Oakville: Mosaic Press, 1984) 63.

¹⁶See D.G. Jones, *Butterfly on Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1973); Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971); John Moss, *Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974); Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972).

¹⁷*Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian Literature*, ed. John Moss (Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1987) 15.

¹⁸Repr. in Frank Davey, *Surviving the Paraphrase: Eleven Essays on Canadian Literature* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1983).

¹⁹John Metcalf, *Kicking Against the Pricks* (Downsview, Ontario: ECW Press, 1982) 8.

²⁰*Taking Stock: The Calgary Conference on the Canadian Novel*, ed. Charles Steele (Downsview, Ontario: ECW Press, 1982) 28.

²¹Moss (1987) 3.

²²*Speaking for Myself: Canadian Writers in Interview*, ed. Andrew Garrod (St. John's, Newfoundland: Breakwater Books, 1986).

²³See also Martin Kuester, "The Decentering of Canadian Literature," *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien*, 18.1 (1998): 26-39.

²⁴The text of the Multiculturalism Act is reprinted, for example, in a landmark anthology edited by Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond, *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions* (Toronto: OUP, 1990); another more recent programmatically multicultural anthology is Smaro Kamboureli's *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature* (Toronto: OUP, 1996).

²⁵Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English Canadian Fiction* (Oxford: OUP, 1988) 1.

²⁶Robert Kroetsch, "Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy," in his *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New* (Toronto: OUP, 1989) 21-33, here 21 and 31.

²⁷Paul Goetsch, "'The Long Saga of the New New Criticism': Political and Cultural Implications of Poststructuralism and Postmodernism in Canada," *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien*, 14.1 (1994): 75-86, here 80.

²⁸Janice Kulyk Keefer, "From Mosaic to Kaleidoscope: Out of the Multicultural Past Comes a Vision of a Transcultural Future," *Books in Canada*, 20.6 (1991): 13-16; and "From Dialogue to Polylogue: Canadian Transcultural Writing During the Deluge," *Difference and Community: Canadian and European Cultural Perspectives*, eds. Peter Easingwood et al. (Amsterdam / Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1996) 59-70.

²⁹Kulyk Keefer (1996) 60f.

³⁰Arun P. Mukherjee, "How Shall We Read South-Asian-Canadian Texts?," *Post-colonial Theory and the Emergence of a Global Society*, eds. Gordon Collier et al., *ACOLIT Special Issue*, 3 (Frankfurt a. M.: Institut für England- und Amerikastudien, 1998) 77-96, here 77.

³¹Frank Davey, *Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone-Canadian Novel since 1967* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993) 266.

³²See, for instance, *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value*, ed. Robert Lecker (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1991).

³³Lecker (1995) ix.

³⁴*Ibid.* 10.

³⁵*Ibid.* 237.