

Literary History: Convergence or Resistance?

THESE HAVE BEEN TRYING TIMES for cultural and intellectual historians, especially for those who are interested in literature. Despite widespread enthusiasm for cross-fertilization between disciplines, relations between literature and history in the past few decades have seemed noticeably detached. In the Canadian field, it is rare to find articles on literature in the major history journals or to see literary studies meaningfully synthesized into interpretations of the past. Although history's estrangement from literature has its origins in the late 19th century, its immediate causes flow from developments in the 1960s and 1970s.¹

Within the discipline of history, the expanding impact of social science brought about a reorientation of historiographical values that degraded cultural and intellectual studies generally, and literary history in particular.² Many social historians rejected literary history on the grounds that it was elitist and esoteric, or dismissed it as methodologically suspect because it relied on evidence that was considered inherently unreliable and resistant to verification. While some literary historians initially tried to defend their "unscientific method" in the face of this empiricist critique, others were reduced to pleading with their colleagues "to treat literature seriously".³

At the same time, the negative perceptions of literature that infested historiography were reinforced by the "war on history" that was being waged in literary criticism.⁴ The enthusiasm for literary history and evaluative criticism that had traditionally dominated literary studies was eclipsed, though not eradicated, by American formalist as well as by French structuralist and poststructuralist theories. These theories, which were predicated on the belief that all "thinking is inescapably

- 1 See David Harlan, "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature", *American Historical Review*, vol. 94, no. 3 (June 1989), pp. 581-609.
- 2 The challenges faced by cultural and intellectual history in responding to the legitimate critiques of social history are more fully described in: Laurence Veysey, "Intellectual History and the New Social History", in John Higham and Paul Conkin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore, 1979), pp. 3-26; Robert Darnton, "Intellectual and Cultural History", in Michael Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca, 1980), pp. 327-54; William J. Bouwsma, "Intellectual History in the 1980s", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. XII, no. 2 (Autumn 1981), pp. 279-91; Roger Chartier, "Intellectual History or Sociocultural History: The French Trajectories", in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca, 1982), pp. 13-46; and Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 380-572.
- 3 Leo Marx, "American Studies: A Defense of an Unscientific Method", *New Literary History*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Fall 1969), pp. 75-90; and John V. Fleming, "Historians and the Evidence of Literature", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. IV, no. 1 (Summer 1973), pp. 95-105. See also John Schellenberger, "English and History: Yet Another Plea for Correlation", *The Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. XII, no. 2/3 (1984), pp. 174-88.
- 4 Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Literary Criticism and the Politics of the New Historicism", in H. Aram Veeser, ed., *The New Historicism* (New York, 1989), p. 213.

Graham Carr, "Literary History: Convergence or Resistance?", *Acadiensis*, XXIII, 1 (Autumn, 1993), pp. 159-179.

linguistic”, deprecated the documentary authority of literature.⁵ By insisting on the hermetic integrity of the text and privileging the subjective position of the reader in the literary process, criticism rejected the determinative influence of authorial intent and historical context as irrelevant or unknowable. To the extent that literary critics showed any interest in historiography, their concerns were mainly to deconstruct its narrative distortions or question the presumed truth of empirical research.⁶

Although the gulf between mainstream historiography and criticism remains wide, there is some recent evidence both of a “return of literature” in the discipline of history and of an emergent historicism in literary studies.⁷ This convergence is less the result of direct exchanges between historians and literary critics than a reflection of more generalized paradigmatic shifts in the epistemology and practice of contemporary scholarship. Drawing on fields such as anthropology, linguistics, sociology and philosophy, and influenced, too, by modern feminism, multiculturalism, neo-marxism and postcolonialism, historians and literary critics are reconfiguring the topical parameters of their research and integrating new interpretive strategies into their work.⁸

For their part, social, political and intellectual historians have become increasingly interested in cultural studies, particularly those involving problems of meaning and representation. This is evident in the growing literature on popular culture, rituals of symbolic behaviour and literacy, as well as in the numerous studies on the metaphoric properties of texts and their changing reception over time.

- 5 Leo Findlay, “Otherwise Engaged: Postmodernism and the Resistance to History”, *English Studies in Canada*, vol. XIV, no. 4 (December 1988), p. 386. For a useful summary of these critical trends, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford, 1983).
- 6 For summaries of this critique of historiography, see Linda Orr, “The Revenge of Literature: A History of History”, *New Literary History*, vol. 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1986), pp. 1-22. Of course, two of the main protagonists in this critique were intellectual historians, not critics. For an assessment of their work, see Lloyd S. Kramer, “Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra”, in Lynn Hunt ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1989), pp. 97-128.
- 7 Harlan, “The Return of Literature”, pp. 581-609; and Veese, ed., *The New Historicism*.
- 8 These trends are discussed and debated in Dominick LaCapra, “Intellectual History and Its Ways”, *American Historical Review*, vol. 97, no. 2 (April 1992), pp. 425-39; Russell Jacoby, “A New Intellectual History?”, *American Historical Review*, vol. 97, no. 2 (April 1992), pp. 405-24; Jonathan Rée, “The Vanity of Historicism”, *New Literary History*, vol. 22, no. 4 (Autumn 1991), pp. 961-83; Richard Lehan, “The Theoretical Limits of the New Historicism”, *New Literary History*, vol. 21, no. 3 (Spring 1990), pp. 533-54; Carolyn Parker, “History and Literature: ‘After the New Historicism’”, *New Literary History*, vol. 21, no. 2 (Winter 1990), pp. 253-72; Bryan Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, 1990); Joyce Appleby, “One Good Turn Deserves Another: Moving beyond the Linguistic; A Response to David Harlan”, *American Historical Review*, vol. 94, no. 5 (December 1989), pp. 1326-32; David Hollinger, “The Return of the Prodigal: The Persistence of Historical Knowing”, *American Historical Review*, vol. 94, no. 3 (June 1989), pp. 610-26; Peter Schöttler, “Historians and Discourse Analysis”, *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 27 (Spring 1989), pp. 37-65; Lynn Hunt, “Introduction: History, Culture, Text”, in *New Cultural History*, pp. 1-22; and John Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience”, *American Historical Review*, vol. 92, no. 4 (October 1987), pp. 879-907.

In exploring these topics, many historians are borrowing methodological practices from literary criticism, such as discourse analysis, deconstruction and semiotics.

Meanwhile, within literary studies the “disabling opposition between texts and their cultural contexts” is also disintegrating.⁹ This is signified in Britain by the rising influence of neo-marxist cultural studies, associated with figures such as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and Terry Eagleton, and in the United States by the arrival of a body of criticism that is styled as the new historicism.¹⁰ The new historicists distance themselves from conventional literary history by claiming that it falsely “distinguish[es] literary text and history as foreground and background”, thus limiting the scope for constructive analysis. Instead of merely identifying the “means” by which “literature reflects or refracts its contexts”, they aim to “re-negotiate...relationships between texts and other signifying practices”. Motivated by the understanding that “every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices”, these new approaches have enlarged the framework of literary history to include issues such as the social construction of aesthetic value or the ideological basis of cultural power.¹¹

Because of the strong nationalist imperative in Canadian studies, historical inquiry has always had a prominent role in the country’s literary scholarship.¹² But given the convulsive changes that are occurring in the disciplines of history and criticism, it is especially appropriate to examine the position of English-Canadian literary historiography at this time by analyzing a cross-section of recent works that reveal the methodological range and topical diversity of current research in the field.

For one writing from the vantage point of the discipline of history, three dominant impressions emerge from this literature, most of which was written by specialists in English or modern languages. First, the field of English-Canadian literary historiography is clearly expanding and attracting critics whose work is informed by poststructuralist and feminist theories, as well as by the concerns of the new historicism. This positive development is offset by the degree to which the field continues to be dominated by conventional methods and subject choices that reflect an inherently conservative view of the function of criticism. Finally, while many of the works examined here point up legitimate differences in the way that literary critics and historians conceive of and interpret history, some reflect a perverse lack of interest in the contemporary focus of the discipline, a problem that stems from an absence of meaningful dialogue during the past three decades.

9 Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago, 1987), p. 256.

10 For a discussion of these trends, see Patrick Brantlinger, *Crusoe’s Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America* (New York, 1990) and Carolyn Porter, “Are We Being Historical Yet?” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 87, no. 4 (Fall 1988), pp. 743-86. Both of these works make clear the descriptive limitations of such categories by noting that there are many critics, such as Edward Said, Frank Lentricchia or Sacvan Bercovich, who write literary history but do not conveniently fit the usual labels.

11 H. Aram Veaser, Introduction to *The New Historicism*, pp. xi-xii.

12 See Robert Lecker, “The Canonization of Canadian Literature: An Inquiry into Value”, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Spring 1990), pp. 656-71.

One place to begin such an investigation is with reference works and documentary sources that are being published as an inducement to future research. In an area of scholarship that demands scrupulous accuracy, Patricia Lockhart Fleming's *Atlantic Canadian Imprints: A Bibliography, 1801-1820* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1991), is one of the most comprehensive finding aids imaginable. A province by province chronological listing of more than 300 books, almanacs, broadsheets, journals, reports and sermons, Fleming's "descriptive and historical bibliography" (p. ix) provides detailed notes on the production features, contents and publication histories of locally printed manuscripts. Although Fleming does not interpret this information, her bibliography is suggestive about the scope of local political and intellectual discourse and the development of the publishing trades. Above all, it is clear that local printers were dependent on governments and religious organizations for most of their custom and that imaginative literature accounted for very little of their work.¹³

Still, the lack of poetry or fiction imprints is deceiving, for some indigenous writing was published in local newspapers and almanacs. A case in point is Thomas McCulloch's *The Mephibosheth Stepsure Letters*, which were published serially in the *Acadian Recorder* (1821-23) and have now been reprinted in a definitive, scholarly edition by the Centre for the Editing of Early Canadian Texts (CEECT) under the editorship of Gwendolyn Davies (Ottawa, Carleton University Press, 1990). In addition to the 25 letters that comprised the original series, the CEECT volume includes 35 pages of explanatory notes and a lengthy editor's introduction (pp. xiii-lxxi) on McCulloch's life and the critical reception of his work.

Dedicated to publishing "major works of English-Canadian prose" (p. xi), the CEECT series reflects the centrality of the canonical impulse in the writing of Canadian literary history, which seeks "to honor and preserve the culture's traditionally esteemed objects...and to illuminate and transmit the traditional cultural values presumably embodied in them".¹⁴ According to Davies, the scholarly edition of the *Stepsure Letters* is "appropriate" (p. xiii) on exactly these grounds, as a "tribute" (p. xiii) to McCulloch's "reputation as the founder of Canadian humour" (p. lii), as well as "to the durability of...[his] persona...and the liveliness of his message" (p. xiii). But if the ostensible purpose of this volume is to ratify McCulloch's place in the canon and affirm the normative criteria of "transcendence, endurance, and universality" for which it stands, an equivalent, related goal is to legitimize the enterprise of canon formation in Canada. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith points out, the strategic logic of canonicity endeavours to

13 Judging by Fleming's research, the only fictional or poetic work that was published separately in this period consisted of a handful of doggerel verses and a clandestine version of the *The Memoirs of Fanny Hill, A Woman of Pleasure*. On the reluctance of local publishers to support fiction and poetry, see Carole Gerson, *A Purer Taste: The Writing and Reading of Fiction in English in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto, 1989) and George L. Parker, *The Beginnings of the Book Trade in Canada* (Toronto, 1985).

14 Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Contingencies of Value", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 10, no. 1 (September 1983), p. 2.

mask behind an aura of scientific objectivity and empiricism the reality that "all value is radically contingent".¹⁵

By any measure, the CEECT version of the *Stepsure Letters* is a *tour de force* of literary archaeology and a model of technical editing. No effort, and presumably little expense, was spared in preparing an "ideal copy" (p. lxiii) of the text.¹⁶ Working with materials from Canadian and Scottish archives and aided by an extensive network of technological and bibliographic support, Davies and her assistants subjected the different published and manuscript editions of the letters to intense scrutiny, the nature of which is described in excruciating detail. The end result is a supporting apparatus that is nearly as long as the text itself and includes approximately 100 pages of emendations and variations that distinguish the CEECT version from the relevant copy-texts. Of course, the paradox of this achievement is that in eliminating stylistic inconsistencies and correcting McCulloch's "accidentals" (p. liv), the editors have developed a "perfected" (p. lxiii) version of the *Stepsure Letters* that never existed historically. Under the circumstances, it is legitimate to wonder whether the industrial-strength nature of the project is primarily a tribute to McCulloch or to an academic enterprise that must document the existence of a Canadian literary tradition in order to solidify its own cultural authority.

The close relationship between documentary preservation and the scholarly rituals of canonicity is also manifest in Richard A. Davis, ed., *The Letters of Thomas Chandler Haliburton* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1988) and Laurel Boone, ed., *The Collected Letters of Charles G.D. Roberts* (Fredericton, Goose Lane Editions, 1989). On the most immediate level, it is significant that these collections concentrate on the private lives of individual writers, for conventional literary history has always been grounded in biography and shaped by romantic notions of the author as creative genius.¹⁷ Furthermore, like their colleagues at CEECT, the editors of these volumes have gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure that the collections are as comprehensive and accurate as possible. Every known scrap of correspondence has been published in chronological order and supplemented with detailed annotations and descriptive introductions.¹⁸

Because Haliburton and Roberts wrote hundreds of letters — the Roberts collection alone runs more than 600 pages — and were in contact with well-known figures in literature and politics throughout their adult lives, the sheer volume of

15 Smith, "Contingencies of Value", pp. 10, 11.

16 The preface names 15 people, including Davies and Mary Jane Edwards, the "Principal Investigator and General Editor" of CEECT, who were involved in the research and editorial preparation of the text.

17 On the origins of the romantic conception of the artist, see Martha Woodmansee, "The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions for the Emergence of the 'Author'", *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4 (Summer 1984), pp. 425-48.

18 As Laurel Boone explains, the Roberts volume "is as complete a collection as the editor was able to make it; no letters have been knowingly omitted, and no letters have been abridged". The collection even includes postcards and telegrams, although it excludes "inscriptions on photos, books, or other items,...contracts or business and financial papers...and [l]ists, poems, and other enclosures that are still with the original letters" (p. 7).

correspondence provides some insights into their personalities and careers. Yet from an historiographical standpoint, the significance of these collections derives less from their revelations about the authors than from the logic that justifies these projects in the first place.

Ironically, neither Haliburton nor Roberts took much of a literary interest in their correspondence. While Haliburton occasionally seized the opportunity to express strong views on justice, office-holding or the rights of authors, he engaged in correspondence principally as a means of exchanging social courtesies or conducting personal business. This was even truer of Roberts, who, according to Fred Cogswell's introduction, looked on letter-writing as a necessary "chore" (p. 11). Although most of the missives that make up the Roberts collection are little more than glorified memos, it is precisely this "functional" (p. 12) quality of the letters, together with the author's "complete unawareness that he was putting himself on display" (p. 11), that, in Cogswell's view, makes them worthwhile historically. Because they touch on "the many facets of a man's life and the required day-to-day adjustments — personal, financial, and aesthetic — called forth by many correspondents and many different situations", they are, he argues, "a good deal more interesting and subtle" than the "literary productions" written by some authors "with an eye toward posterity" (p. 11).

Apart from seeming forced and fetishistic, such logic demonstrates that the publication of these collections is motivated by concerns that have little, if anything, to do with the epistolary form as a mode of discourse.¹⁹ The implication that the letters somehow enjoy more integrity for being mundane is an expedient rationale, but one which overlooks the internal evidence that Roberts was constantly contriving ways to satisfy his overdeveloped ego and longed to be memorialized in posterity. Furthermore, in glossing over the indifferent literary quality of the letters, Cogswell ignores the point that they lack introspection and are remarkably superficial about the immense changes that supposedly affected his life. Considering that Roberts travelled extensively in North America and abroad, lived through two world wars and the Great Depression, suffered and caused no end of domestic heartaches and witnessed the modernist cultural revolution from start to finish, the most singular thing about these letters is that they are almost completely disengaged, emotionally and intellectually, from the public sphere.

Ultimately, however, the problem with Cogswell's logic is that it conflates the archival utility of documentary evidence with historical value by assuming that all sources are potentially relevant and therefore equally deserving of publication. Nor is he alone in refusing the distinction. Paraphrasing Desmond Pacey, Laurel Boone argues that collections such as these underscore "the importance of providing primary source material for the genuine study of literature in any depth" (p. 8). While no one can dispute this claim in the abstract, it is disingenuous to assume that these letters would have been published in their entirety save for the canonical

19 Drawing on a distinction made by Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Bruce Redford argues that correspondence "straddles the barrier between 'fictive' and 'natural' discourse". See Bruce Redford, *The Converse of the Pen: Acts of Intimacy in the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter* (Chicago, 1986), p. 9.

stature that Haliburton and Roberts enjoy. Driven by the documentary requirements of the canon, the literary historian functions in this instance like a “compulsive anthologist” whose job is to accumulate evidence in order to ratify a version of the past that already exists.²⁰

Not surprisingly, many of the literary and critical assumptions that justify the research and publication of reference works and document collections are intrinsic in interpretive history too. This is particularly the case with biography, which is one of the most traditional forms of literary history and an integral element in the process of canon formation.²¹ By any measure — from its anachronistic title, to its antediluvian obsession with genealogy, to its structural separation of the author’s life and works — Patricia Monk’s *The Gilded Beaver: An Introduction to the Life and Work of James De Mille* (Toronto, ECW Press, 1991) is a conventional biography. Yet because De Mille was not a “great artist” but merely a “craftsman of popular literature” who wrote “competently and professionally within the conventions and demands of that craft” (p. 222), Monk is forced to resort to unusual measures to secure his place in the hierarchy of Canadian literature. One strategy is to invest the biography with an air of mystery by means of several fanciful, and often self-serving, devices. *The Gilded Beaver* begins with the epigram that biography is “a form of fiction” which does not reflect “the personality and sympathies of the biographer” (p. 6) and ends with the revelation that “three previous attempts to write a biography of De Mille have been interrupted by the author’s death before the work was finished” (p. 251). In between De Mille is characterized as “elusive” (p. 13), “very elusive” (p. 251), “intriguing” (p. 14), “shadowy” (p. 14), or “somewhat bewildering” (p. 172), and there are constant reminders about the “layers of misinformation” (p. 13), “problems and confusions” (p. 14), that obscure his place in the “jigsaw puzzle” (p. 15) of literary history. At one point, Monk even conjectures about what De Mille might have achieved had his life been different (p. 251).

If the stylistic pretensions of this strange manuscript can be dismissed as an idiosyncrasy, the characterization of De Mille as a paragon of national identity is fully consistent with mainstream Canadian literary history. According to Monk, De Mille embodies timeless values and experiences that are distinctively Canadian. He is, she claims, “a dyed-in-the wool Canadian personality” (p. 13) whose life reflects a “very Canadian irony” (p. 251) and “seems to anticipate the stereotypical Canadian” (p. 250). Although he “spent a great deal of time observing Americans”, De Mille survived the experience and remained “unshakably Canadian” (p. 251), which means that he “spent a great deal of his life trying to reconcile the discordant elements of his personality, much as modern Canadians are trying to reconcile the various regions and provinces of their country into a harmonious confederation” (p. 251).

20 The phrase is taken from A.J.M. Smith, “The Confessions of a Compulsive Anthologist”, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. XI, no. 2 (May 1976), pp. 4-14.

21 See Peter Nagourney, “The Basic Assumptions of Literary Biography”, *Biography*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Spring 1978), pp. 86-104; and Ira Schabert, “Fictional Biography, Factual Biography, and their Contaminations”, *Biography*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Winter 1982), pp. 1-16.

While the misshapen logic of this analogy attests to the determinative power of canonical thinking, Monk's penchant for ephemeral generalizations and presentism are also symptomatic of serious deficiencies in her view of history. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese explains: "History, at least good history, in contrast to antiquarianism, is inescapably structural....[It] must disclose and reconstruct the conditions of consciousness and action, with conditions understood as systems of social relations".²² Unfortunately, none of this happens in *The Gilded Beaver*. Despite relentlessly grubbing out the trivia of De Mille's life and resolving minor queries about his publications, Monk treats this information in isolation from the broader social or cultural context. Nor does she take advantage of the impressive scholarship in Maritime history or cultural studies that has been published in the last two decades. Instead, obsessed by facts for their own sake, she connects De Mille to the only historiography that really matters, the chronicle of the canon.

The limitations of Monk's work are all the more glaring in comparison with Elizabeth Rollins Epperly's intellectually engaging and fluidly written study, *The Fragrance of Sweet-Grass: L. M. Montgomery's Heroines and the Pursuit of Romance* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1992). Like most of the other works on Maritime literary history that are discussed here, Epperly's book is conventional insofar as it concentrates on a single author rather than a social aggregate, and it seeks to validate her reputation. But *The Fragrance of Sweet-Grass* transcends the narrow constraints of this approach by relating its subject, at least in part, to larger social and literary phenomena. In particular, Epperly challenges the invidious stereotype of Montgomery as a writer of naïve formula romances by describing her "view of the world" as "essentially female and sporadically feminist" (p. 248). She argues that Montgomery's fiction was marked by subtle, yet persistent, tensions between "autonomy and conformity" (p. 145) that grew out of her experiences as a woman and a writer, and that her heroines' quests to find their own voices represent the author's parallel search for identity and narrative authority in the act of writing. According to Epperly, these metafictional and feminist concerns converge most fully in the *Emily* novels, which portray "the artist as a young girl and woman" and provide "a fascinating double portrait...of reading women reading and writing themselves as women" (p. 145).

Apart from its revisionist thesis, Epperly's work is historiographically significant because of the methods and perspectives that she employs. In contrast to the conventional topocentric concerns of Canadian literary history, the key referents for this study are feminist theory, social psychology and criticism about the romance novel as discursive genre. While *The Fragrance of Sweet-Grass* makes effective use of these sources, it is disappointing that Epperly's work is not rooted more deeply in an historical context. Except for a bibliographic reference to the survey text, *Canadian Women: A History* (1988), she completely ignores the relevant literature on women's history, gender relations and social mores in Canada.

22 Fox-Genovese, "Literary Criticism and the Politics", p. 217.

One disadvantage of this reduced perspective is that it restricts Epperly's ability to discuss the relationship between gender, cultural values and the romance genre. Because "literary texts are *historical* products organized according to *rhetorical* criteria", one of the challenges of literary historiography is to define "the internal laws and historical range of a specific genre".²³ In order to do this, it is necessary to think about genre not simply as a means of "classification and prescription", but "as a system of historical and literary expectations and assumptions". The critic cannot "use history simply as a kind of background, as a given from another discipline which will illuminate our own", but must "probe ideology in its specific deployment of literary form".²⁴ Although she refers in passing to studies of romance fiction by John Cawelti, Janice Radway and Bonnie Kreps and notes Montgomery's "confinement" to "the women's genres of domestic romance and children's fiction" (p. 6), Epperly does not fully probe the ideological content of these genres as rhetorical structures.²⁵ Instead, she focuses on the more abstract problem of the meanings of romance and romantic "in their popular — and not strictly literary — senses" (p. 10).

Some of the tensions between the conventional fixation with single author studies and the desire to push literary historiography in new directions can also be seen in the essays that make up Alan R. Young, ed., *Time and Place: The Life and Works of Thomas H. Raddall* (Fredericton, Acadiensis Press, 1991). Although it is obvious from the outset that the organizing motive behind this collection, and the symposium on which it is based, is to rehabilitate Raddall and restore his rightful place in the Canadian canon, a number of the articles are openly critical of his work or pursue issues that deviate from canonical evaluation altogether.

Predictably, the case for beatification is put vigorously in Elizabeth Waterston's lead essay, "Thomas Raddall, Historical Fiction, and the Canadian Romance" (pp. 11-24), which traces Raddall's blood-lines in Canadian fiction. According to Waterston, Raddall's work culminates the genre of historical romance in Canada because it encompasses all of the themes that appeared individually in the "landmark novels" (p. 13) of his predecessors. But apart from his artistic lineage, Raddall's claim on significance derives from his ability to write fiction that is "steeped in universal meanings" (p. 20), even as it "embodie[s] our dreams of a national past, our romance of Canada" (p. 11). Echoing Monk, Waterston even

23 Franco Moretti, "The Soul and the Harpy: Reflections on the Aims and Methods of Literary Historiography", trans. David Forgacs, in *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms* (London, 1983), p. 9. According to Catherine Gallagher, "there is normally some sort of tension between ideology and literary forms, but...forms are nevertheless also historical phenomena, parts of those transideological structures that are...called discourses". See *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832-1867* (Chicago, 1985), p. xiii.

24 Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History* (New York, 1988), p. 99.

25 For a good example of a genre study that explores the historical relationship between sentimental romance and feminism in 19th century American fiction, see Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction* (New York, 1985). Another example of a revisionist approach to genre studies involving popular fiction is Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London, 1987).

suggests that Raddall's historical fiction is "peculiarly important...at this crucial moment in Canadian life" (p. 11).

Picking up where Waterston leaves off, Alan Young's "Thomas H. Raddall and the Canadian Critics" (pp. 25-42) contrasts the critical acclaim that was showered on Raddall in the 1950s with the subsequent neglect of his work. He argues that Raddall is the victim of a triple bias against popular fiction, regional literature and the historical romance that has been perpetrated by "the pundits of academe and the self-appointed spokespersons of Canada's intelligentsia" (p. 34), as well as by other "purveyors of what in Canadian literature is supposedly good for us" (p. 39). There is some truth to the claim that certain literary genres have been read out of the canon and that Maritime regionalism has been relegated to the margins of criticism by the fervour to promote a national literature.²⁶ Yet for all his bombast about its inadequacies, Young's purpose is not to dismantle the canon, but to restore Raddall's "reputation" in "the critical hierarchy" by revaluing the importance of historical fiction and romance "in the great cathedral of fictional genres" (p. 41).

Beyond their strict devotion to the canon, however, these articles are significant because much of the case that is made for Raddall is built around his alleged competence as an historian. In this context the claims that are advanced by Waterston and Young are doubly relevant because they reflect out on the genre of historical fiction and back on their own work as literary historians. Both critics hold Raddall's work in the highest esteem: Waterston praises him as an "accurate historian" (p. 23), while Young applauds his "historical research and scrupulous historical accuracy" (p. 38), as well as his grasp of "the art of narrative", which "Trevelyan and others" define as "quintessential to the writing of history" (p. 39). Of course, as the American critic David Perkins reminds, although "literary history is usually considered to be a mode of criticism...it is also a mode of history" and, as such, it must be assessed in relation to those norms.²⁷ Unfortunately, the problem with Waterston's and Young's reification of Raddall is that the values they celebrate do not correspond to the concerns of contemporary historiography.

To begin with, it is thanks in large measure to the insights of literary criticism that the relationship between narrative and history has now become deeply problematic for many historians, few of whom cite G.M. Trevelyan as the last word on the subject.²⁸ More importantly, the correlation between accuracy and historiographic excellence is naïve in its commitment to documentary empiricism. This point is driven home effectively by Barry Moody's "The Novelist as

26 See Janice Kulyk Keefer, *Under Eastern Eyes: A Critical Reading of Maritime Fiction* (Toronto, 1987), pp. 19-32.

27 David Perkins, "Discursive Form Versus the Past in Literary History", *New Literary History*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Spring 1991), p. 359.

28 For some discussion of recent debates on narrative and history, see Allan Megill, "Recounting the Past: 'Description', Explanation, and Narrative in Historiography", *American Historical Review*, vol. 94, no. 3 (June 1989), pp. 627-53. A recent Canadian application of these concerns can be found in: Kenneth C. Dewar, "Where to Begin and How: Narrative Openings in Donald Creighton's Historiography", *Canadian Historical Review*, LXXII, 3 (September 1991), pp. 348-69.

Historian: The Nova Scotia Identity in the Novels of Thomas H. Raddall" (pp. 140-53). Far from being accurate and scrupulous, Moody demonstrates that Raddall's historical research was highly selective, to the point of deliberately ignoring available evidence. Furthermore, he argues that the great weakness in Raddall's account of Nova Scotia history stems less from his factual inaccuracies than from a failure of interpretation brought on by his inability to comprehend the changes wrought by modernization. Although Raddall's mythology of Nova Scotia history has "a clear beginning in the crucible of the eighteenth century, a golden age in the middle, and a tragic conclusion in his own time" (p. 153), Moody points out that the middle part of the story is "missing" (pp. 150, 153) because Raddall "refuses to explore" (p. 152) the period when society went wrong. Burdened by "longing and bitterness" for a past he cannot explain, and "increasingly alienated" (p. 152) from the realities of the present, Raddall exploits history for selfish purposes, "to impress upon a still-malleable public mind his interpretation of Nova Scotia's past, built by his valiant common Englishman, his Everyman...created in his own image" (p. 152).

Of the remaining works in the collection, Michèle Lacombe's "Gender in the Fiction of Thomas H. Raddall" (pp. 87-97), and Chris Ferns's "Building a Country; Losing an Empire: The Historical Fiction of Thomas H. Raddall and J. G. Farrell" (pp. 165-73) are relevant less for their critiques of Raddall than for their attempts to shift the focus of literary historiography away from issues of personality and evaluation and toward the ideological structure of narrative forms. Both critics draw on semiotic criticism as well as Mikhael Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. Lacombe explores the contradictions in Raddall's work between the conventions of the romance genre and "the gender roles he is trying to erode" (p. 95). Adopting a conceptual framework that has parallels with recent historiographical research on the social construction of gender, she demonstrates how the "problem of gender" is fundamental to all of Raddall's work, including "the most innocent and resolutely masculine of his tales" (p. 88).²⁹ By comparison, Ferns's study focuses less on the interior social discourse of Raddall's fiction — the dialogue between characters — than on the discourse of the author. In particular, Ferns shows how the narrative structure of Raddall's fiction consistently works to evoke his conservative ideology by "reinforc[ing] the sense of the authority and reliability of the narration" (p. 158) and marginalizing voices from outside the mainstream, such as those of "the French, the Indians, the lower classes" (p. 159).

If all of the works examined to this point underscore the degree to which literary historiography has centred on the study of individual writers and texts, another sign of the inherent traditionalism of the field is the persistence of thematic criticism.³⁰

29 See Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago, 1988) and Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis", *American Historical Review*, vol. 91, no. 5 (December 1986), pp. 1053-75. For a recent Canadian work on the concept of gender, see Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto, 1990).

30 For a range of perspectives on the dominance of thematic criticism see Barry Cameron and Michael Dixon, "Mandatory Subversive Manifesto: Canadian Literature vs. Literary Criticism", *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Summer 1977), pp. 137-45 and Leon Surrette, "Here

One theme that is a particular favourite in the topocentric world of Canadian literary history is the idea of the border. Fittingly, it is addressed by Russell Brown's essay, "Borderlines and Borderlands in English Canada: The Written Line" (pp. 13-70), which is part of the interdisciplinary *Borderlands Monograph Series, #4* (Orono, Canadian-American Center, 1990).³¹ Reflecting on the near "allegorical status" (p. 20) that the border has attained in Canadian culture, Brown has put together an impressive taxonomy of the myriad expressions of "border consciousness" (p. 14) in imaginative literature. He argues convincingly about the potency of the border as a communal symbol and points out the fundamental irony that it is both a defining element of Canadian community and an object that defies "specifiable" meaning (p. 54).

The intriguing element of Brown's work is that its subject matter, interpretive strategy and cultural values derive from the myth and symbols approach to history that became fashionable in the United States and Canada in the 1970s. Although the "holistic, consensual, and ideational model of culture" that informed myth and symbols history has largely "given way to an overwhelming interest in class, ethnicity, race, and gender" that emphasizes "division and opposition", Brown's work is notable for its continued emphasis on "eclecticism but unity" as well as for its fixation with the relationship between culture and the unitary concept of the nation.³² The inherent positivism of Brown's approach is manifest on a spatial level in his argument that the border is simultaneously a sign of "pervasive doubleness" (p. 35) and "difference and division" (p. 33) as well as an affirmation of "unifying balance" (p. 39) which, by virtue of its "ambiguity...produces richness rather than dissonance" (p. 54). But the emphasis on thematic similarities also carries over into an undifferentiated view of time. Even though Brown's typology of border consciousness is conceptual in nature, he freely juxtaposes works from different historical periods within each category, thus precluding the possibility that the meaning and popularity of symbols may shift over time.³³

Other traces of the myth and symbols approach can be found in Brown's methodology and handling of evidence. Although he draws on a variety of fictional and some non-fictional texts, his reading of this literature is unmediated by references to other kinds of evidence. Instead, Brown extrapolates directly from individual novels or stories to make general statements about the culture as a

Is Us: The Topocentrism of Canadian Literary Criticism", *Canadian Poetry*, X (Spring/Summer 1982), pp. 44-57.

- 31 Brown has also written previously on this theme. See Russell Brown, "Crossing Borders", *Essays on Canadian Writing*, vol. 22 (Summer 1981), pp. 154-68. There is some irony in Brown's fixation with this topic, for in the late 1970s he wrote a celebrated article that was deeply critical of conventional nationalist thematics and argued for a structuralist approach to Canadian literature that looked on imagery as a cultural code. See Russell M. Brown, "Criticism, Culture, Text: Beyond Thematics", *Essays on Canadian Writing*, vol. 11 (Summer 1978), pp. 151-83.
- 32 Christopher Wilson, "Containing Multitudes: Realism, Historicism, American Studies", *American Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 3 (September 1989), p. 468 and Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., "A New Context for a New American Studies?" *American Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 4 (December 1989), p. 589. See also Jeffrey Louis Decker, "Dis-Assembling the Machine in the Garden: Antihumanism and the Critique of American Studies", *New Literary History*, vol. 23, no. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 281-306.
- 33 One exception is Brown's brief reference to the relationship between the sanctuary theme and the politics of the 1960s and 1970s (pp. 24-5).

whole. As critics of thematic history, including the myth and symbols approach, have rightly pointed out, the problem with this "totalizing" strategy is that it is deterministic in its equation of "textual meaning" with "audience reception, and popular belief".³⁴

The inherent determinism of the thematic approach to history can be seen even more vividly in Terrence Craig's *Racial Attitudes in English-Canadian Fiction, 1905-1980* (Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1987). Like Brown's essay, Craig's work is essentially typological: he traces the evolution of racial attitudes in the novels of selected "charter" and "non-charter-group" (p. 94) writers according to the nature and "intentions" (p. 1) of their messages. Unlike Brown's work, however, *Racial Attitudes in English-Canadian Fiction* is organized chronologically and covers three general categories of fiction. These include works that: (i) are an "unconscious repetition of prevailing popular beliefs and myths" and are "closely related to ethnocentric pride"; (ii) "openly" present "a racial theory...as part of a more comprehensive philosophy" and (iii) "are written specifically to deal with discrimination" (pp. 19-21). According to Craig, while invidious racial stereotyping was characteristic of late 19th and early 20th century charter group fiction, the period since the Second World War has seen a "multicultural synthesis" (p. 95) that is more tolerant of cultural dissimilarity and hostile toward racism.

Despite its predictable conclusion, *Racial Attitudes in English-Canadian Fiction* is a convenient point of reference for readers who look to cultural evidence primarily for its descriptive value. Others will question the depth of Craig's historical analysis and the validity of his "sociological" (p. 1) approach to literature. At the most basic level, there are serious problems with the sweeping definition of race that is used in the book. Although race is clearly an issue in many of the works that Craig describes, he applies the term loosely to a range of attitudes that would be more accurately, if less sensationally, described as ethnocentric, nativist or intolerant on religious grounds.³⁵ Similarly, while he makes some use of the relevant historiographic literature on racism, nativism and immigration, his discussion of these sources is confined to the introduction, rather than integrated into his analysis of the fiction. Through a curious inversion of criticism's valid complaint about traditional historiography, Craig relegates history to the status of neutral background information that is primarily useful in illuminating fictional texts.

Significantly, this non-interpretive approach to history has an analogue in Craig's treatment of literature, and together they reflect an attitude toward evidence that Robert Berkhofer describes as "contextual fundamentalism". Instead of digging below the surface narratives of novels and short stories, or exploring the relation between aesthetic form and ideological content, such an approach simply "'guts'...texts for propositions about ideas and behaviours, past and present". Implicit in this approach is the conviction that "texts are basically self-interpreting"

34 Veeseer, Introduction, p. xii; and Wilson, "Containing Multitudes", p. 468.

35 Recognizing that "some of the attitudes" he describes "may seem more nativist than ethnic", Craig partly justifies his use of the term racism by complaining that "nativism seems a very mild, almost euphemistic term for such a destructive ideology" (p. 2).

and “determinative, that is conceptually coercive, of the ‘reading’ they are to receive — regardless of the reader’s values, politics, interpretive paradigm, or interpretive community”. Because “‘facts’ are discovered, not created or constituted by the frameworks that enable their existence”, literary history that is written from within this paradigm becomes a “quest for one meaning — usually read as authorial intention” that accepts documents “at their face value as proving, that is, telling, a story to which they [the historians] are already committed”.³⁶

Thematic criticism is particularly susceptible to these teleological assumptions. But Craig’s writing of history is also predicated on the related conceit that literature is the transcendent voice of truth and moral leadership in society. As he explains in the introduction: “The more or less concrete facts of history do not record the all too common incidents of racial discrimination which characterize Canadian life at the grass roots level. Their presence can be indirectly assumed from sociological studies and public opinion polls, but *it is only literature that properly presents their scope and their meaning in context*” (p. 18; italics added). Undeterred by his own evidence that literature encouraged negative racial attitudes in the early 20th century, Craig embraces the “valuable educatory aspect of...fiction” (p. 67) and celebrates its “potential as a catalyst for the eradication of racism” (p. 56). Noting that “literature has a responsibility and an established function to draw attention to social problems and to provide the moral leadership to search for solutions” (p. 1), he praises writers whose work “gives to literature a new freedom to tell the truth” (p. 83).

Paradoxically, this view of literature collapses the writing of literary history into a socially didactic form of canonization that ignores aesthetic issues altogether. Imbued with the ethos of whig positivism, Craig searches out the pioneers of liberal humanism in Canada. Thus, Morley Callaghan’s Peggy Sanderson is “the first true anti-racist figure in Canadian literature” (p. 106); Howard O’Hagan’s Tay John is “the first successful half-breed in the Canadian novel” (p. 98); Gwethalyn Graham’s “frontal assault on anti-Semitism” in *Earth and High Heaven* is “a first in Canada” (p. 98); and A.M. Klein and Rudy Wiebe are “the first Canadian authors to rise significantly above not only regional ethnic conclaves within Canada but also provincial and national territoriality to take in the entire world” (p. 141).

At the other end of the critical spectrum is Sylvia Söderlind’s *Margin/Alias: Language and Colonization in Canadian and Québécois Fiction* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1991). Part of a new series on Theory/Culture edited by Linda Hutcheon and Paul Perron, *Margin/Alias* explores the relationship between postmodernism and postcolonialism in five works by Leonard Cohen, Hubert Aquin, Dave Godfrey, André Langevin and Robert Kroetsch that are “concerned...with the definition of a Canadian or Québécois identity...and with the search for a language in which to express its specificity” (p. 6). Despite their postmodern fixation with language, Söderlind argues that the “manipulative strategies” employed in these texts consciously subvert the post-structuralist agenda

by centring the writer as a “controlling” force (p. 231) in the text, even as they declare his marginality from mainstream culture.

But for Söderlind the paradox of this “centre/margin dialectic” is that the marginality it implies “is more figurative than real” (p. 233). Although postmodernism may be a “metaphorization of postcolonialism” (p. 233), her reading of Québécois and Canadian fiction “puts into question the analogy between literary and political radicalism” (p. 229). In particular, Söderlind is struck by the frequency with which male writers who dominate the postmodern canon appropriate the margin metaphor in ways that signify “a fundamentally centrist, patriarchal ideology” (p. 234). The imagery of sexual exploitation, which is “the fundamental paradigm of colonization” (p. 115), conforms to “a pre-existing master narrative of sexual relationships, where the submissive position is marked feminine” (p. 234). At the very least, she argues, this “discourse of marginality” (p. 3) obscures the extent to which the postmodern aesthetic is ethnically and sexually “mainstream” (p. 233). The more “extreme” consequence of this appropriation is that it “denies the reality of...marginality” (p. 233) altogether.

At its best, Söderlind’s dense and often dazzling reading of Canadian and Québécois literature provides a compelling reinterpretation of the ideology of postmodernism that reflects the political and literary impact on criticism of feminist theory and poststructuralism. But for all its brilliance, *Margin/Alias* exemplifies some common weaknesses in the new historicists’ approach. The most obvious, though not necessarily the most problematic, involves Söderlind’s obscurantist language and mannered narrative style. Although the historicist agenda is partly designed to force new thinking through linguistic disorientation and tries to centre attention on the critic as the primary figure in postmodern discourse, it is difficult to resist the notion that much of Söderlind’s postliterate wordplay — margin/alias, ex-centric — esoteric jargon — “the sylleptic gesture of deterritorialization” (p. 232), “a diagetic intratextual communication” (p. 43) — and self-reflexiveness — “I found myself constantly ‘marginalized’ and manipulated by these texts” (p. 234) — is sheer mystification.³⁷ Worse still, some of these linguistic contortions mask a fundamental insecurity about her argument. The book is littered with “suspend[ed]” (p. 38) questions, statements that “anticipate” (pp. 44, 50) deferred conclusions, and observations that “will turn out to play a central role” (p. 22), or “will lead to some interesting speculations in all my readings” (p. 23). Söderlind begins one chapter by explaining its aim “in simple terms” (p. 8), only to confess 30 pages later that her discussion “has done little to clarify” (p. 38) the issue.

For all its rhetorical shock value, *Margin/Alias* is not nearly as revolutionary as it pretends. Its concern with identity and colonialism has parallels with traditional English-Canadian cultural concerns and there is nothing very radical about its structure either. As Carolyn Porter points out, when stripped of its polemics, much of the new historicism resembles conventional formalist criticism in its dependence

37 See Jacoby, “A New Intellectual History?” pp. 419-20 and Appleby, “One Good Turn”, p. 1328 for pointed critiques of this aspect of historicist criticism.

on close readings of selected texts.³⁸ This is certainly the case with *Margin/Alias*, for five of its seven chapters involve deconstructions of a single novel. Nor is the book as deeply politicized as Söderlind's strident tone suggests. Like many new historicist texts, *Margin/Alias* crackles with the language of engagement: terms like subversion, radicalism, ideology, resistance or control are its stock in trade. But while Söderlind vociferously declares her desire to examine the "political force" (p. 5) of postmodernist fiction and insists upon the "political integrity" (p. 233) of the postcolonial struggle, her stance is partly the posturing of radical chic.³⁹ In a book that is, on one level, all about naming, Söderlind legitimizes her reading of postmodernism by reciting an impressive list of theoretical icons, from Barthes to Saussure. Yet the weight of this literary hagiology is deadened by her corresponding failure to cite any authorities on postcolonialism, or Canadian and Québécois historiography. Söderlind's complete dependence on Mason Wade's *The French Canadians, 1760-1967* (1968) merely drives home the point that "if new historicists are to take history seriously, they need to pay much more attention to what...[is] going on in history departments".⁴⁰

While *Margin/Alias* exemplifies many features of the new historicist challenge to conventional readings of the novel, K.P. Stich, ed., *Reflections: Autobiography and Canadian Literature* (Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 1988) represents another alternative to traditional history that lies beyond the boundaries of fiction and poetry. Several essays in this collection explore the link between history and discourse analysis by persuasively examining the relationship between first person narratives and the emergence of autobiography as a distinctive literary genre. Jack Warwick's "Gabriel Sagard's 'je' in the First *Histoire du Canada*" (pp. 27-33) makes the important point that the autobiographical self is a relatively modern concept by examining how the expression of "personal testimony" (p. 29) in the prose of a 17th century Recollet missionary deviated from a style of reportage that had previously "subordinate[d] the self" (p. 31) to the "collective identity" (p. 30) of the church and God. In "*Roughing It in the Bush* as Autobiography" (pp. 35-43), Michael Peterman amplifies the association between modernity and autobiography by perceptively linking the development of the genre to the ambiguous cultural status of women in the 19th century. Challenging conventional interpretations which define *Roughing It in the Bush* as fiction, Peterman documents the autobiographical content of the sketches and describes the revealing adjustments that Moodie made to her work in the course of preparing different versions for different audiences. He argues that, unlike fiction, the relatively fluid parameters of autobiography enabled women "to record a part of their lives and values without

38 Porter, "History and Literature", pp. 254-8.

39 The ostensible shallowness of the radical tendency in new historicist criticism is discussed in Edward Said, "Reflections on American 'Left' Literary Criticism", in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 172, Palmer, *Descent into Discourse* and Steven Watts, "The Idiocy of American Studies: Poststructuralism, Language, and Politics in the Age of Self-Fulfillment", *American Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 4 (December 1991), pp. 625-60.

40 Brook Thomas, "The New Historicism and other Old-Fashioned Topics", in Veenser, ed., *The New Historicism*, p. 195. See also Palmer *Descent into Discourse*, p. 52 and Jacoby, "A New Intellectual History?" p. 416.

pretending to upset conventional notions of male and female roles and without pretending to artistic or egoistic significance" (p. 42).

This discussion of the generic confusion between fiction and autobiography is taken to another level by Robert Lecker in "An Other I: Autobiography and Aesthetics in Clark Blaise" (pp. 93-101). He argues that all of Blaise's work, both fiction and criticism, is "intensely self-reflexive" (p. 99) and signifies a desire to "re-create himself" as a "fictionalized character" (p. 99). Smaro Kamboureli pursues a similar point in "The Alphabet of Self: Generic and Other Slippages in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*" (pp. 79-91), showing how Ondaatje exploits novelistic and autobiographical tropes to "deconstruct" the apparent "biographical intent" of the book. By focusing on the "double autobiographical condition" (p. 84) of the author who is both a metafictional artist and a character in the text, a figure in the present and a protagonist of the past, Kamboureli and Lecker help to situate the genre of autobiography in the context of contemporary history and postmodern cultural style.

Given the blurred distinctions between fiction and autobiography, it is not surprising that one of the most contested issues in this collection is the relationship between authenticity, empirical verifiability and historical truth in autobiographical writing. As Timothy Dow Adams explains in "The Geography of Genre in John Glassco's *Memoirs of Montparnasse*" (pp. 15-25), the "bewildering variety of personal narratives that deliberately confuse the lines of longitude and latitude in the geography of the genre" make it extremely difficult to "distinguish between metafiction and fraud, between docudrama and hoax, between a dishonest distortion, an authorial misrepresentation, and a lie" (p. 18). The most enlightening examination of the problematic relationship between autobiography and historical truth emerges from a comparison of Adams's work with Michael Gnarowski's incisive "Notes Towards a Sometime and Probable History of John Glassco" (pp. 1-14). Condemning the "quotable authority" (p. 3) that *Memoirs of Montparnasse* has attained in Canadian cultural history, Gnarowski draws on extensive archival research to expose the layers of fabrication and plagiarism in the text, as well as the extra-literary manoeuvres that Glassco "orchestrated...to lend historical credibility and literary substance" (p. 2) to his work. Disgusted by Glassco's untrustworthiness and self-aggrandizing, Gnarowski discredits the *Memoirs* as autobiography because they fail the test of empirical proof. While Gnarowski's methods and conclusions appear to be credible from the perspective of materialist historiography, his definitions of historical truth and autobiography seem overdetermined in light of Adams's sharply divergent, yet fundamentally historicist, reading of the text. According to Adams, *Memoirs of Montparnasse* is rife with lies and inventions because it is a postmodern parody of autobiography in which Montparnasse, not Glassco, is the protagonist. In a conclusion that goes to the heart of the poststructuralist critique of historiography's correlation of empirical evidence with truth, Adams proposes that the *Memoirs* be interpreted as "a sophisticated mixture of narrative and historical truth" (p. 24), rather than simply be tested for their "researchable fidelity quotient" (p. 19).

If many of the essays in *Reflections* underline the relevance of genre studies to history and signal an interest in areas of literature that have previously been

unexplored, Robert Lecker, ed., *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1991) continues this trend by turning critical attention inward at the discourse of criticism itself. Traditionally, the history of criticism has been seen as a branch of aesthetic philosophy which traces the evolutionary chain of critical theory from Aristotle to the present. In common with recent American and European scholarship, however, the essays in *Canadian Canons* depart radically from this approach by focusing on the politics of culture and the institutionalization of literary value in English Canada and Quebec.⁴¹ As Carole Gerson explains in "The Canon between the Wars: Field-notes of a Feminist Literary Archaeologist" (pp. 46-56), one of the central tenets of this scholarship is that "The contours of a canon are governed not by the inherent qualities of certain texts, but by the values attributed to them by those in power according to their current agendas and the particular configuration of national, aesthetic, and sexual politics that best serves their interests" (p. 46). Therefore, according to Dermot McCarthy, "Early Canadian Literary Histories and the Function of a Canon" (pp. 30-45), the function of canonical enquiry is to expose "the fundamental 'organizing' power of the canon as structure and its insinuations into cultural life as...a political force" (p. 31).

Several pieces in the collection adopt this approach by looking at the values that have shaped Canadian drama, novel and poetry canons. The one constant in this history has been the inextricable relationship between nationalism, canonicity and the legitimation of Canadian culture. According to McCarthy, "the writing of Canadian literary history has been organized around the extra-literary concept of the 'nation'" (p. 32) for so long that even works that "attempt to get beyond the nationalist impulse, are necessarily grounded in it all the same" (p. 45). But the political force of the canon has other ramifications too. In a convincing essay that makes extensive use of unpublished sources, Carole Gerson shows how a small "literary power network" (p. 52) of male writers and critics exploited their personal contacts with publishers and businessmen in the 1920s and 1930s to promote a vision of Canadian literature that effectively excluded women from serious recognition. Although many women writers attained recognition between the wars, their status in the canon was never secure because they were marginalized by male critics who idealized virility in literature and dismissed female writing as sentimental and irrelevant to the ascetic demands of modernism. Like Gerson, Denis Salter also explores the impact of extra-literary forces on the development of Canadian drama in "The Idea of a National Theatre" (pp. 71-90). Salter describes how individual actors, managers and patrons successfully used their prestige to entrench the idea that theatre was high culture and that Canadian drama should be derivative of elite English and European models. In the process they transferred the theatre into an instrument of "cultural assimilation" (p. 72) by promoting drama

41 See, for example, the special issue on "Canons", edited by Robert von Hallberg, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 10, no. 1 (September 1983), Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *The Institution of Criticism* (Ithaca, 1982) and Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848-1932* (rev. ed., New York, 1987).

that evinced a “homogeneous set of moral/artistic values” (p. 90) while screening out alternative “political and cultural concerns” (p. 89).

Significantly, this connection between elite authority and conservative aesthetic values is discussed in a number of articles that update the focus on canons to the contemporary scene. In “Calgary, Canonization, and Class: Deciphering List B” (pp. 150-66), Lawrence Mathews suggests that there is a “causal connection” (p. 165) between the “class interests” (pp. 153, 165) of the academics who attended the 1978 conference on the Canadian novel and the stylistic and political conservatism of the works they identified as “most important” (p. 151). Likewise, Stephen Scobie argues, in “Leonard Cohen, Phyllis Webb, and the End(s) of Modernism” (pp. 57-70) that the “intrinsically conservative” (p. 57) nature of the postwar poetry canon is reflected by its “equivocal” (p. 58) response to postmodernism. Finally Richard Paul Knowles claims, in “Voices (off): Deconstructing the Modern English-Canadian Dramatic Canon” (pp. 91-111), that the theatre canon either “omits virtually all...explicitly political drama that is subversive or ‘ex-centric’ on a formal or structural level” (p. 101), or “muffle[s]” such plays within in its “lethal embrace” (p. 92).⁴²

Ultimately, any discussion about the hegemony of the canon and its ability to “neutralize[e]” (Knowles, p. 92), or exclude, subversive voices turns back on the nature of canonical enquiry itself. In his Introduction (pp. 3-16), Robert Lecker describes canonical enquiry as a “field of contestation” (p. 3) that is “deliberately aimed at destabilizing authority” and “interrogating the forces that constitute and determine canonical activity” (p. 3). But while this description accurately conveys the oppositional fervour that runs throughout *Canadian Canons*, there is some evidence that such claims are overblown.⁴³ In particular, Dermot McCarthy questions whether the whole notion of canonical stability is really “a fiction needed by both its proponents and its challengers” (p. 30) and suggests that “the contemporary anti-canon impulse may actually be a feature of the canon-structure or canon-formation” (p. 31) that does not “represent a dismantling of the forces that have constructed it, so much as a reconfiguring of it in terms of other powers” (p.

42 Lucie Robert makes the same point in her study, “The New Quebec Theatre” (trans. David Homel), in *Canadian Canons*, pp. 112-23. The idea that alternative views are inevitably co-opted by association with the canon is strenuously argued by Lorraine Weir in “Normalizing the Subject: Linda Hutcheon and the English-Canadian Postmodern” (pp. 180-95). Instead of focusing on critical evaluation of imaginative literature Weir attacks a contemporary critic who has attained canonical status in her own right, accusing Hutcheon of “subvert[ing] the work of deconstructive theory” (p. 182) by “normaliz[ing] the subject through sheer force of decorum and civility” (p. 183).

43 Caroline Bayard argues that “while canons might belong to another age in which humanistic values reigned supreme”, they are less relevant in the contemporary context which rejects the notion of the “objective, universal, transcendent reader”. See “Critical Instincts in Quebec: From the Quiet Revolution to the Postmodern Age, 1960-1990”, in *Canadian Canons*, p. 130. For alternative views that stress the fluidity of the English-Canadian canon, see Tracy Ware, “A Little Self-Consciousness is a Dangerous Thing: A Response to Robert Lecker”, *English-Studies in Canada*, XVII, 4 (December 1991), pp. 481-93 and Frank Davey, “Canadian Canons”, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Spring 1990), pp. 672-81. Ware and Davey are responding to Lecker’s article, “The Canonization of Canadian Literature”.

30). While *Canadian Canons* clearly challenges the traditional evaluative basis of conventional literary historiography and signifies a desire to repoliticize the field, many of the essays in the collection remain bound to conventional practices in the writing of literary history. Despite the impressive consensus about the relationship between stylistic and political conservatism in shaping canons, as well as the plausible claims regarding the exclusionary nature of their authority, most of the works — with the exception of Gerson's and Salter's — are overly speculative about the social dynamics of cultural power and too reliant on vague concepts such as "class interests". In centring attention on the figure of the critic and the body of texts that comprise the canon, the contributors have effectively substituted one form of author-driven textual determinism for another. Above all, the mechanistic descriptions of the canon as an institution of singular, uncontestable authority leaves little scope for the agency of audiences as active respondents, an omission that seems especially problematic in a collection that deals with both performative and non-performative culture.⁴⁴

Nor does *Canadian Canons* consistently address the material realities of cultural production. As Robert Lecker explains in the introduction, "the ideal examination of any canon would include an analysis of market forces; of the publishing and bookselling industry; of curriculum development in schools and universities; of government attempts to patronize a national literature and its supporters; of the dissemination of literary value in newspapers, magazines, scholarly journals, and books" (p. 4). But except for the work of Gerson and Salter, few essays venture with any precision in this direction. Acknowledging this problem, Lecker suggests that this gap is symptomatic of the reality that "space remains a function of cost" and that the book is a "product of the economic forces that helped to shape the Canadian canon" (p. 4). But while this explanation may be accurate as far as it goes, it begs the larger issue of whether the new historicists are methodologically equipped or conceptually predisposed to deliver on their materialist agenda at this time. In retrospect, the failure of English-Canadian critics to address the points that Lecker raises may signify the relative lack of influence that British cultural studies have exerted here by comparison with the more formalist tendencies of the new historicism. On balance, however, these shortcomings are more than compensated by the sense of historiographical renewal that works such as *Canadian Canons* inspire.

While some historians may disparage the new approaches to literary history because they are suspicious of formalist theory or believe that critics have not gone far enough in relating their work to contemporary historiography, these criticisms avoid the realities of English-Canadian literary history. Paradoxically, the main obstacle to growth and development in this field is the continued hegemony of the methods and approaches that are the most recognizably historical in their factual empiricism, chronological linearity and commitment to comprehensiveness in archival research. Without minimizing the competence of studies that identify and

44 As Jon Klancher points out, the problem of the audience is "the most unexamined assumption in the armoury of cultural history and criticism": Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (Madison, 1987), p. 8.

retrieve new literary sources, and without dismissing the need for revisionist assessments of previously neglected authors and works, the problem with orthodox literary history is that it has failed to keep pace with the changing courses of both criticism itself and historiography. Circumscribed by the prescriptive teleology of the canon, as well as by a residual faith in the narrow, documentary function of historical research, traditional literary history has become vulnerable to challenges on all sides.

It is in this context that current efforts to politicize critical inquiry by exploring the social construction of literary value or the complex relationships between cultural meaning, period aesthetics, discourse and genre are so important for English-Canadian literary history. In directing attention toward the canon, postcolonialism, gender or ideology, and in asking fundamental questions about the relationship between evidence, narrative structure and truth, these critics are addressing issues that are conceptually and methodologically relevant to the discipline of history as a whole. Drawing from the lessons of literary theory, however, the more immediate question is whether there is an audience of English Canadian historians who are prepared to read these texts and respond.

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