

NOTES AND SHORT ESSAYS

Canadian Literature: European Perspective

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The vital state of Canadian literary studies in European universities was well documented in *Gaining Ground: European Critics on Canadian Literature* (Kroetsch and Nischik, NeWest Press); and now another volume has appeared to mark the level of interest in Canadian literature in German-speaking Europe: *Encounters and Explorations: Canadian Writers and European Critics*. Eds. Franz K. Stanzel and Waldemar Zacharasiewicz (Wurzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 1986). *Encounters and Explorations* had as its genesis an "International Symposium of Contemporary Anglo-Canadian Literature" sponsored by the Austrian universities of Graz and Vienna, a conference which brought together writers and critics from Canada and a number of European countries (including four from behind the Iron Curtain) to exchange views on Canadian Literature, with a special focus on contemporary fiction. The tastefully designed and well-balanced volume which marks that occasion is as much a tribute to the good judgment of its editors as it is to the generally high level of critical acumen exhibited by the chosen contributors.

In an *Editorial*, offering a guide to what is to follow, the editors remark on the need to establish a *context* for European appreciation of contemporary Canadian writing. To facilitate this, they divide the book into five sections. One of these is devoted entirely to "the Canadian-ness of Canadian Literature," with essays on the topic by Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, and Rudy Weibe, as well as an entry by one of the editors, Professor Franz Stanzel, which sums up a round-table discussion on the subject. Other sections include examples of representative contemporary short fiction by Graeme Gibson and Jack Hodgins, personal memoirs of recently dead writers by their contemporaries, academic studies of Canadian novelists and short story writers, and a brief coda—two poems and a note on a peculiarly Canadian topic, the prairie "correction lines" devised by surveyors to cope with the problem of the earth's curvature while demarcating extended "flat" surfaces.

It is arguable that the format of *Encounters and Explorations* might have been improved by placing Professor Stanzel's essay at the beginning, thereby engaging the reader immediately in the problems of contextualizing the literature. The essay is an admirable summary of the range of approaches to the problem of defining national identity which continue to afflict critical studies and which also sometimes bother our creative writers. The discussion takes into account the nature of Canadian regionalism, recognizable national stereotypes, Canadian versus American self-consciousness and concomitant perceptions of reality, the writer's social responsibility, the conflicting claims of readings based on analysis of narrative technique as opposed to those based on sociological perspectives, and the question of

where Europeans can "place" Canadian Literature (in a North-American Studies context, for example, or in a Commonwealth one). The summary ends with a postscript which offers intriguing insights into the "imagology" of Canadian writing (the study of the images of a foreign nation) seen from a European perspective.

The three essays by Canadian writers which complete this contextualizing section of the book offer provocative personal views of the historical and contemporary cultural milieu in which Canadian writers work. The most personal of these, by Rudy Wiebe, is entitled "Canada in the Making"; but it is really an essay on Wiebe in the making, and as such is a valuable view of the myths, images, and experiences which shape one writer's consciousness. Robertson Davies's brief essay—"What Is Canadian About Canadian Literature?"—reveals again the great fund of common sense mixed with original, pithy insights that mark so much of his own fiction. Margaret Atwood's "After *Survival*: Excerpts from a Speech delivered at Princeton University, April 29, 1985" is here published for the first time, and provides not only a neat review of the genesis and critical assumptions behind her famous survey of Canadian writing, but also wittily suggests how a rewritten *Survival* might differ from the original.

Another piece by Atwood is included elsewhere in *Encounters and Explorations*. It is entitled "Stealing Time, Marian Engel: Fragments From One Possible Memoir." While it suffers from a disjointed format—a series of anecdotes about encounters and connections between Atwood and Engel and between other writers and Engel—it nonetheless coheres through a focus on the humor, determination, and courage that marked Engel's personal and professional lives. In the same section Fred Cogswell remembers Alden Nowlan in "Alden as Regional Atavist." Three times as long as Atwood's piece, the essay is an intimate and moving recreation of Nowlan's life, especially in terms of the effect of his personal experience on his work. The essay suffers from too much windmill-tilting, as when Cogswell feels forced to point out at length the limitations and misconceptions of other writing about Nowlan. That said, however, the Cogswell piece—written by a fellow poet who was one of Nowlan's closest friends—must be considered essential reading for anyone who would understand that writer's work.

The section of *Encounters and Explorations* which includes critical essays by European critics is somewhat uneven, but nonetheless worth having. Konrad Gross's essay, "Margaret Laurence's African Experience," is a quixotic, stimulating, but all-too-short commentary on the links between Laurence's African experiences and writing and her later work. Walter Pache's "Narrative Models of the Canadian Short Story" looks at two recent collections of Canadian stories (*Making It New: Contemporary Canadian Stories*, edited by John Metcalf in 1982, and *Fiction of Contemporary Canada*, edited by George Bowering in 1980) and examines their critical biases, which he suggests might provisionally be called "the difference between the realistic and the experimental, or between the modern and the post-modern." Contextualizing his analysis by beginning with a historical perspective, Professor Pache offers a detailed and critically astute set of observations about the kinds of fiction the anthologists espouse, and their "unashamedly controversial statements." His conclusions about the need to consider current theoretical discussion as well as the creative work itself in order to make sense of the "renaissance" of the short story in Canada, are convincing and grounded in solid evidence. A different approach is taken by Helmut Bonheim in "F.P. Grove's 'Snow' and Sinclair Ross' 'The Painted Door'—The Rhetoric of the Prairie." This essay is also concerned with narrative technique, and offers an analysis of the rhetorical devices used in each of the stories. Although there are useful readings of a number of individual sentences, there is too little sense of movement toward meaningful conclusion in the essay, so that at the end the reader is left with the awkward feeling of being unable to "see the

forest for the trees.” Waldemar Zacharasiewicz’s essay on Jack Hodgins, “The Development of Jack Hodgins’ Narrative Art in His Short Fiction,” on the other hand, compels the reader steadily forward as it links analysis of narrative techniques with persuasive readings of the various stories in *Spit Delaney’s Island* and *The Barclay Family Theatre*. [In fact the only quibble one might have with Zacharasiewicz’s essay is the overabundant use of footnotes—there are 38 of them!]

Overall, *Encounters and Explorations* makes a valuable contribution to the study of contemporary Canadian literature. With the poems and stories deleted, it provides a useful model for future European studies of creative writing in Canada.

Mexico in 1992 or *Cristóbal Nonato*, Carlos Fuentes’s Latest Novel

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Cristóbal Nonato (1987), Carlos Fuentes’s last novel, is a commentary on what Mexico might be like in five years if its leaders do not change their present policies. The main narrator of the novel is Cristóbal, an unborn fetus who, like Christopher Columbus five hundred years earlier, is discovering a new world, the world outside of his mother’s womb. Through satire and clever linguistic play, an image of Mexico in 1992 begins to unfold: grotesquely deformed in its culture, language, and religion, mutilated in its territory, and buried in its own pollution.

Though there is frequent use of Mexican slang, the novel’s sociolinguistic referent is that of the educated Mexican who also knows English. Its allusions to Mexican and World literature and history are recurrent. Its punctuation and some of its vocabulary are akin to blasphemy since they conform to English practices. The reader, who is shocked at first, and repelled throughout by the punctuation and some of its language, soon realizes that the erosion of Mexican Spanish parallels the disappearance of Mexican society, culture, and institutions as we have come to know them. The use of language in the novel is also comical. In a Joycean manner, the narrator is constantly playing with language. Mexico City has grown so fast that it is necessary to hire the well-known Irish “novelist” Leopold Bloom so that he can name the new streets, neighborhoods, and places that appear daily. This novelist-narrator cleverly anglicizes Mexican place names and hispanizes English words creating a comical, though grotesquely sad, new reality.

Each section of the novel is titled with fragments of Ramón López Velarde’s “La suave patria” (The loving Fatherland), a political ode which exudes the optimism of some Mexicans soon after the Revolution at the beginning of this century. The content of each section contrasts sharply with the ideals expressed in its title and satirizes a leadership which has managed to lead Mexico to the point of no return in less than a hundred years. The author also satirizes the inaction and complacency of Mexicans who would rather believe that a loving, divine protector is going to