

INTRODUCTION
 MANDATORY SUBVERSIVE MANIFESTO:
 CANADIAN CRITICISM VS.
 LITERARY CRITICISM

I

Observers from Mars, or someone equally alien (Americans, say), seeking to comprehend the meaning of "Canadian Literature" might reasonably expect a difficult task, especially if they had some experience with apparently similar rubrics where the first term is "American," "English," "French," or "Classical." Imagine their surprised delight at discovering, on consulting the best available authorities, that the entire phenomenon consists simply of theme — and a single theme at that, survival in a garrison — having only two connotations: sociological and/or autobiographical. "What a paradise for writers!" they would conclude, "no problems of thematic invention; no worries about prosody, structure, genre, style, influence, convention — all the petty details that bedevil authors in other times, other places. They need only dash off a sociological and/or autobiographical treatise on survival in a garrison every now and then, conserving their creative energies to form unions, be public figures, attend conferences, review each others' treatises, and join with publishers to develop ingenious financial proposals to their common employer, the Canada Council." True, the more thoughtful of our remote observers might wonder about the role, if any, of readers in this closed system. "Must be a bit boring for them, always reading the same thing. Perhaps it's reassuring. Something to do, no doubt, with 'national identity' and 'Canadian sovereignty.'"

What a shock awaits the alien when he actually reads the literature himself and tries to reconcile its thematic variety, formal abundance, and technical inventiveness with the simple image derived from official sources. Native readers, conditioned by the same sources, may undergo an equivalent shock: the gulf between their perception of the works and that projected as acceptable through public reporting and literary commentary could make them feel very remote indeed — aliens in their own cultural community. More likely, of course, and more disastrous for Canadian literature, is the probability that untrained readers will find exactly what they have been conditioned to expect, and only that. Thus, Canadian criticism generally fails in its primary task, to mediate between writer and reader, betraying both author and audience with a critical scope too restricted to capture the complex vision and achievement of our literature.

The essays collected in this volume represent a concerted effort to

expand the scope of Canadian criticism. We call them "penultimate" essays because they point the way to an ultimate goal: the consistent practice of a critical craft in Canada that is equivalent and responsive, in range and discipline, to the literature it treats. Towards this end, all the studies in the collection reflect two fundamental premises: that Canadian literature deserves treatment as part of the autonomous world of literature and that the choice of criteria and approach should be appropriate to the work under analysis. It follows, as a corollary to these premises, that privileged criteria or "special pleading" on the grounds of national origin are invalid. That we must state such self-evident canons of responsible criticism, and feel compelled to defend them in an atmosphere of polemical homile, is of course ludicrous — an embarrassing symptom of the immature state of commentary on Canadian literature. These essays do not, after all, propound some startling, new philosophy of literary criticism. This sort of attention and respect has been accorded works from other literatures for decades.

II

What accounts for the disadvantaged condition in which Canadian criticism finds itself? Basically, the problem is one of time. The major achievement of Canadian literature is virtually a contemporary manifestation. Less than two decades ago, Northrop Frye could assert with considerable justification:

... Canada has produced no author who is a classic in the sense of possessing a vision greater in kind than that of his best readers (Canadians themselves might argue about one or two, but in the perspective of the world at large the statement is true). There is no Canadian writer of whom we can say what we can say of the world's major writers, that their readers can grow up inside their work without ever being aware of a circumference.¹

Such a condition limits the possibilities of critical response:

If no Canadian author pulls us away from the Canadian context toward the centre of literary experience itself, then at every point we remain aware of his social and historical setting. The conception of what is literary has to be greatly broadened for such a literature Even when it is literature in its orthodox genres of poetry and fiction, it is more significantly studied as part of Canadian life than as a part of an autonomous world of literature.²

Frye did not, because he obviously could not, take into account the best work (in some cases the only work to date) of such writers as Margaret Atwood,

¹*Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, ed. Carl F. Klinck and others (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 821.

²*Literary History of Canada*, pp. 821-22.

Robertson Davies, Hugh Hood, Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, and Al Purdy, to name only a few. The achievement obvious in this considerable body of Canadian literature demands reconsideration of Frye's evaluation and his view of an appropriate critical attitude. Yet our literature continues to be studied primarily as a part of Canadian life and almost exclusively in its "social and historical setting."

To what extent Frye's remarks are responsible for this critical anachronism is a debatable point. No doubt some "disciples," justifiably respectful of Frye's unequivocal genius and international reputation as a critical theorist, continue to reflect the dated letter of this particular pronouncement and ignore the liberal spirit of his general theory. Of at least equal significance as contributing factors, however, would seem to be the very bulk and explosiveness of literary activity itself coupled with the coincident upsurge in preoccupying national self-examination during the past decade. Together these factors have severely restricted both the time and the climate of opinion essential to a deliberate, objective evaluation and appreciation of our writers' accomplishments from the disinterested perspective of "an autonomous world of literature." In consequence, the largest bulk of commentary on Canadian literature takes the form of reviews and review-articles, the traditional medium for first opinions and topical responses.³ Many of our writers have received no other form of critical recognition. Even if the reviewer has the training and inclination to give a work full critical consideration, press deadlines and word-limitations will abort the enterprise. Most reviewers, however, are journalists, "free-lancers," or creative writers, who tend to consider the immediate social and historical characteristics of a work not, like Frye, as secondary aspects of literary achievement, but as the only values worth considering. Thus, whether it starts from Frye's premises or their diametrical opposites, the major part of our literary commentary ends up at the same point, firmly fixed within the boundaries of "social and historical setting."

The appearance, side by side, of writers and journalists in the review section of our public press is emblematic of a third critical problem connected with time. Writers cannot wait for the critical evaluation process to mature. They must live, and reviews — however much they underestimate, simplify, or distort the writer's achievement — serve nevertheless the essential purpose of providing immediate public attention in the marketplace. Thus, Canadian writers often review each others' work and generally publicize the literary enterprise through various forms of public exposure. Encouraged, for better or worse, by such institutions as the Canada Council, many writers are continually on display as personalities and performers; some are forced, willingly or unwillingly, into the role of cultural guru. Most, in fact, earn more from a six-week reading tour than from years of book sales. The real problem for criticism in this situation is

³A glance at the bibliographies in Frank Davey's *From There to Here: A Guide to English-Canadian Literature* (Erin, Ont.: Press Porcepic, 1974) amply demonstrates this predominance of reviews. Davey's book devotes considerable attention to formal and rhetorical values, but is necessarily limited by its function as an introduction, its review-length entries, and, to some extent, by its post-modernist bias.

one of objectivity. All this movement, public exposure, and mutual dependency, among what is really quite a small community, forges a tight coterie including not only the writers themselves but also their commentators. Likes and dislikes, jealousies and hero-worship, vested interests and competitions are inevitable, and probably healthy, in such a situation. The critical enterprise, however, suffers. Hyperbolic praise or hyperbolic blame takes the place of judgment; "free-lance" commentary is more free with the hatchet and the back-scratcher, the tar-brush and its whitewash equivalent, than with the tools of analysis. Even with the best intentions, a critic may allow the writer's personality to influence his judgment of the work, may even substitute one for the other. Under such circumstances, "social" setting becomes paralyzing in its limitations.

One of our intentions in collecting a set of essays that lead away from these privileged contexts of sociological immediacy and authorial personality is to redress the critical imbalance resulting from a hitherto concentrated focus, underlying both contexts, on the word *Canadian* in such locutions as "Canadian literature" and "Canadian criticism." As Eli Mandel has said, "as soon as we add the word *Canadian* to criticism, we move the object of our concern into a particular space and time, a geographical and historical context, where what might normally remain simply an element of the background — the sociology of literature — becomes the foreground."⁴ Such undue emphasis on *Canadian* accounts for the limitations as criticism of many influential studies that go well beyond the scope of reviews, particularly D. G. Jones's *Butterfly on Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature* (1970), Margaret Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), and John Moss's *Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction* (1974). All treat works of Canadian literature as if they were primarily repositories of indigenous themes and images documenting localized historical, psycho-social, mythological, and political concerns. None treats the works as autonomous verbal structures with a literary integrity of their own; in short, each violates the harmony of form and content. Yet form and content are complementary and symbiotic; *how* a writer has done something is the primary determinant of *what* he has done. In practice, the thing-crafted can be separated from the craft only at the cost of distorted perspective. *Survival* and *isolation*, for instance, are not unique to Canadian literature. Canadian authors may use these universal themes in characteristic ways that reveal a common cultural focus, but the existence and nature of such a focus can be determined only within a consistent series of comparative contexts. Particular themes must be situated within the total form of a particular work; that work within the author's canon; that canon within the national literature; that literature within the context of literature in general. Atwood, Moss, and Jones adopt a method contrary to this critical induction. Their approach treats the whole of Canadian literature, in effect, as a vast, uncontextualized commonplace book (or, to be modern, data-bank) from which isolated fragments are selected arbitrarily to support

⁴"Introduction," *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, ed. Eli Mandel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 3.

an individual deductive hypothesis of what the "Canadian consciousness" might be. This method, and the preoccupation with content it necessitates, corresponds to the operating procedures of the sociologist and produces, once again, a sociological, not a literary meaning for the term *Canadian*. Again, too, such studies are symptomatic of immediate responses to a young literature, and two of the three are written by people whose familiar *métier* is the novel or the poem, not the critical study. Each covers a wide range of works and imposes a kind of preliminary pattern on the seething phenomenon of our national literature, making it comprehensible and approachable to a large number of hitherto uninterested readers. Criticism will build on the ground they have laboured, and it would be ungracious not to recognize and commend their labours. We must not, however, follow their sociological bias.

As early as 1955, George Woodcock argued against a Canadian version of New Criticism exclusively "devoted to the task of textual analysis." He proposed, instead, an ideal for this country: "The Canadian critic, when he emerges, will have a wider task to embrace; he will have to be something of a psychologist, something of a sociologist, something of a philosopher, something of a mythologist, besides having a developed consciousness of formal values and an imagination that is both creative and receptive."⁵ If Canadian criticism has avoided the claustrophobia of narrow textualism, it has nevertheless fallen into the equally stifling trap of parochialism by fulfilling only part of Woodcock's ideal. As the studies of Atwood, Moss, and Jones illustrate, we have critics in abundance who are "something of" a psychologist, sociologist, philosopher, or mythologist, but precious few who display "a developed consciousness of formal values."⁶ Yet such values are the key to an understanding of what *Canadian* means as a literary term. Form is the universal in art, and its study permits us to discern how our writers have made specific adaptations and choices which distinguish them from the common background of literature in general. To ignore such values and search only for sociological uniqueness in our literature is to deny ourselves a clear perspective on Canada's cultural identity. We remain stricken by what Eli Mandel has termed "a form of national schizophrenia": "It [Canadian criticism] tries to find its boundaries outside itself, in some imperial world of literary tradition beyond nationality, and it seeks, both in its origins and in its development, for an authentic identity — something that expresses itself as a sort of conceptual space between its works of literature."⁷ In these essays, we search too for this "conceptual space," but we recognize that the quest will be of necessity a long one made up of small steps, and it cannot be shortened by pretending that literature consists only of content:

⁵"Views of Canadian Criticism," in *Odysseus Ever Returning: Essays on Canadian Writers and Writings* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), p. 136.

⁶Woodcock argues that "the foundation of *Canadian Literature* recognized the maturing of the art of criticism in Canada." In our judgment, it announced a birth, but is nonetheless important for that. See "Introduction," *The Canadian Novel in the Twentieth Century: Essays from Canadian Literature*, ed. George Woodcock (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), p. vii.

⁷*Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, p. 3.

The forms of literature are autonomous: they exist within literature itself, and cannot be derived from any experience outside literature. What the Canadian writer finds in his experience and environment may be new, but it will be new only as content: the form of his expression of it can take shape only from what he has read, not from what he has experienced.⁸

Thus a novel written in the Sahara may exhibit themes of survival and isolation and contain much sand imagery, and a novel written in the Arctic may exhibit themes of survival and isolation and contain much snow imagery; but they are both novels and, as such, are autonomous, transcending national and geographical boundaries. The themes are commonplaces of fiction; the snow and sand are commonplaces of environmental experience. What gives them individuality and significance is the author's particular use of the formal resources of the novel.

Comparative formal criticism requires learning and experience of a kind seldom found outside the academy. Yet the learned critic in Canada has done little to counter the inhibiting preoccupation with indigenous content at the expense of form. Such inertia is again largely a product of time. Those scholars with the widest background in literature are seldom specialists in Canadian writing. Some are, but their number is small, and the assimilation of an entire body of unfamiliar literature with responsible care is not the work of a moment. Allowing graduate students to specialize in the field is an increasingly popular alternative, but this remedy must be approached with caution. If specialists in Canadian literature lack broad grounding in other literatures, they will simply tend to reinforce parochialism. Then, too, because of its youth and explosiveness, the major creators of our literature are still living: "as critics we have lived beside the archetypes of our own tradition."⁹ Such proximity is disturbing to most scholars whose experience is with literature that has been sifted, weighed, and distanced by time. We suspect that some of the most talented critics in Canadian universities have hesitated to engage professionally with our literature for this reason alone. One purpose of our collection is to encourage them to do so. There are certainly risks in any form of pioneering, but the literature has ripened for harvest: what we need are more skilled reapers.

To focus on form is to place works of Canadian literature in their most immediate and proper context, the autonomous world of literature. We have not yet discovered what the word "Canadian" means in this context. We have not yet discovered the ways in which Canadian writers as a group handle form, and transform it. We have not yet discovered, in other words, whether there is anything indigenous about our literature, as literature. The journey to that discovery will be a long one; these essays represent twelve steps along the way.

⁸*Literary History of Canada*, p. 835. Frye's assertion here reflects, of course, a concept that is central to all his writing.

⁹George Woodcock, "Introduction," *Poets and Critics: Essays from Canadian Literature 1966-1974* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. ix.

III

The collection was primarily motivated by experience in the classroom, and is intended as an aid to those who, like its editors and most of its contributors, teach Canadian literature day-to-day and experience a lack of critical direction behind the subject. Margaret Atwood asserts that the teaching of Canadian literature is a political act.¹⁰ It is certainly an act of criticism, of mediation between the student and his cultural heritage, and is, or should be, "political" only in the fundamental sense that it aims to develop an informed citizen capable of independent judgment. Such an aim accords with the ideal of education in any society: to preserve continuity and community by transmitting from one generation to the next essential "lore of the culture." Among Western societies, of course, the sheer volume of accumulating "lore" has paralyzed efforts to agree upon what is essential, and educational institutions have responded with a kind of sympathetic explosion: the house of learning has fragmented into a bewildering array of "disciplines," "sub-disciplines," "interdisciplines," "departments," "courses," and "half-courses." The task of determining which combination of these fragments constitutes essential lore has been irresponsibly delegated to the young themselves under the manipulative banner "freedom of choice." Only a parody of freedom exists where alternatives and consequences of choice are unknown and cannot be determined. "Canadian literature," as an academic subject, is a recent creature of this Balkanizing spirit.

Its teachers, however, need not fall victim to the pressures of compartmentalization and isolation. Because the teacher functions as critic, all the principles and arguments for treating the work of Canadian authors as a particular manifestation of the literary art apply to the classroom as well as the journal. Students must recognize in our literature insights which not only validate their immediate experience as Canadians but also situate that experience within the tradition of their common birthright. Such recognition obviously demands more information than any single teacher, course, or subject can provide; but the class in Canadian literature does serve as a locus, rare in the student's education, for the conjunction of cultural universals with Canadian particulars. The potential in this unusual situation for the development of critical judgment is considerable: where else can students encounter so direct an opportunity to explore the complex relationships between art and experience, to analyse not only the lines of inference between evidence and conclusion but also the sources of their mental sets, presuppositions, and values? The scope and discipline of their critical method will determine the extent to which teachers can further this process. Students do not need more random information; they need the means to recognize and assimilate what is essential. Our contribution to an informed citizenry may have severe practical limits, but we can make a significant contribution to their capacity for independent judgment.

¹⁰Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 14.

In accord with these aims, essays were included in the collection primarily on the basis of method, not content. Although the collection deals with a large number of authors and a wide variety of genres, neither individually nor collectively do the contributors attempt an "overview" or "survey" of Canadian literature. All treat theme and setting as elements of formal technique. This common focus and the individuality of each approach develop a broad spectrum of critical models providing a useful alternative to the predominantly sociological monotone. Included here, for instance, are a number of comparative stylistic and imagistic studies widely diverse in concern and method: Kertzer traces the influence of Rimbaud in *Une Saison dan la Vie d'Emmanuel*, Cude sets Davies against Twain, Bailey explores the limits of Jungian myth in Laurence's Manawaka novels, Davey defines the meaning of characteristic stylistic devices in Atwood's poetry, and Blott analyses Ondaatje's use of cinematographic techniques in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. The resources of generic form are dominant concerns in the studies of Carson on Canadian historical drama, David on visual poetry, and of MacLulich and Cameron, both treating adaptations of the journal form from divergent perspectives. A number of critics — Campbell on Wright, Thompson on Hood, and MacDonald on Grant — demonstrate the uses of rhetorical analysis in diverse ways.

These groupings are arbitrary, and serve merely to exemplify the categorical range of critical approaches in the collection. Most essays fit more than one category, and all categories could be greatly refined. To stipulate further how the essays might be grouped and approached for application, however, would presume on the prerogatives of the critic or the teacher, and we have been presumptuous enough already in this introduction. Our hope is that each essay will be read for the formal insights it contributes to an understanding of its particular subject and that the collection will serve as a "secondary source" in another sense: as a stimulus and guide to the discovery of significant meaning through the analysis of form and craft.

IV

An American now living in this country once told us that works of Canadian literature should never receive an unfavourable review. She meant, we think, to be kind, but if the term "elitist" has any meaning at all, such an attitude surely exemplifies it. Condescension, the notion that Canadian writing cannot stand and should not be subjected to the full light of disinterested critical scrutiny, is repugnant and destructive. To study Canadian works as part of the autonomous world of literature and not as a subclass of sociological data or a protected national species is, in our view, not an ethical matter; it is a logical one. Yet the issue involves questions of value. Our national literature can achieve its full potential only if we develop a trained audience with the critical awareness both to demand the highest accomplishment of our writers and to appreciate that accomplishment when it occurs. As mediator between writer and audience, therefore, the critic assumes a responsibility that is both daunting and stimulating.

Finally: to all those critics, reviewers, and scholars who regularly, or occasionally, demonstrate the principles we advocate, our respectful apologies for the neglect you suffer in this introduction. Like all forms of sociological criticism, subversive polemic is a blunt instrument for discriminating analysis. And to our contributors, who endured the two long years it took to collect a suitable group of original essays and who suffered our presumptuous demands for revisions and rewritings, we offer our gratitude and respectful appreciation. We must also render special thanks to the editors of *Studies in Canadian Literature*, without whose encouragement and insight this collection might never have been published.

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