

Seven Myths About Canadian Literature

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In any large body of writing about a subject a certain number of inaccuracies and false opinions are bound to appear. It is the duty of the critic to identify and expose them in a fair-minded and temperate manner. I realize that I am merely scratching the surface when I list seven misconceptions about Canadian literature; there are almost as many as there are books and articles about the subject. I list these seven in no particular order of merit or demerit:

- i) Modern poetry in Canada began with the McGill Movement.
- ii) It's tough being a writer in Canada.
- iii) Regionalism is a bad thing.
- iv) Cosmopolitanism is a good thing.
- v) George Woodcock is a critic.
- vi) Archibald Lampman is the best of the Confederation poets.
- vii) "Malcolm's Katie" is a great poem.

I fear there are omissions enough from this list to irk many of my readers. Let's look at these seven myths one at a time.

I Modern poetry in Canada began with the McGill Movement.

Phyllis Webb had it right when she told Eleanor Wachtel in *Books in Canada* that "when I look back on the way that the history of Canadian literature has been written it's been documented mainly by Frank Scott and A.J.M. Smith themselves and they have created their own little history."¹ One of the most influential documents in setting attitudes toward the history of modern poetry in Canada has been Smith's introduction to the first edition of *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943). In it, Smith delineated two schools of Canadian poetry—the nationalist and the cosmopolitan—and praised the cosmopolitan school as the better

¹ Eleanor Wachtel, "Intimations of Mortality: The Splendid Isolation of Phyllis Webb," *Books in Canada* (Nov. 1983): 14.

of the two and as the true source of modernism in Canada. The kind of poetry he was praising was the kind he had been writing and promoting in critical essays almost twenty years earlier in Montreal. Dudek and Gnarowski point out that Smith made a basic error in the introduction: he had lost touch with the contemporary Canadian scene and "was unaware that in Montreal at the moment two divergent parties were contesting the field."² In truth, he made another mistake. He gave the impression that from the twenties to the forties there indeed *had been* a modernist movement in Canada. There had not. There was a brief flash in the late twenties in a couple of collegiate publications which almost no one read; eight years of silence; an anthology, *New Provinces* (1936), which again almost no one read; another seven years of silence; and then Smith's anthology. The influence of the pro-modernist poetry and criticism written from 1926 to 1943 was virtually nil. Crediting the McGill group with founding modern poetry in Canada is like crediting John the Baptist with founding Christianity. I should add in passing that, if being the first to write in the modernist fashion gets a poet a place in history, then that prize belongs to Arthur Stringer, whose *Open Water* (1914) was the first book in free verse by a Canadian. It came complete with a Poundian manifesto at the beginning.

It was the "two divergent parties," particularly the nationalist *First Statement/Northern Review* group which started modern poetry in Canada. Out of this Montreal ferment of the forties came Layton, Souster, Dudek, Page, and Waddington, to name the most important. They went on to found other little magazines and presses, to write reams of poetry, and to influence younger Canadian poets for four more decades. Smith and Scott themselves profited from the explosion of the forties, Smith publishing his first book, *News of the Phoenix*, in 1943, and Scott, *Overture*, in 1945. Smith's anthology came out a year after *Preview* and *First Statement* had begun and was, at least in part, a result of the renewed interest in Canadian poetry which those two little magazines were generating. We must not confuse reverence for father figures with recognition of achievement.

II It's tough being a writer in Canada.

I remember asking Bill Bissett, after a reading he gave (December 8, 1983) at the college where I teach, how tough it was being a writer in Canada. His reply was that it wasn't that tough for him, that Canada Council grants and other sources fi-

² Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski, *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1967) 45.

nanced him just fine. Bissett may be a bit unrepresentative—he doesn't own a car, house, real estate, or Winnebago, nor does he wish to. He is also one of Canada's few "pure" writers. That is, he writes full time and doesn't have another job, such as teaching in a university English department, to subsidize his writing. His sales bring him almost nothing, yet he survives and continues writing his remarkable poetry.

Mordecai Richler says that he came back to Canada because it's "bonanza country."³ Even in these tough times there is plenty of money out there waiting to be distributed: the Molson Award, the Bantam/Seal first novel prize, Governor General's Awards, writer-in-residence appointments, Canada Council grants. Canada must have the world's best-travelled writers: Purdy and Birney go north; Layton prowls Greece, Spain, and France; Ken Norris has angst on a variety of South Pacific beaches; Pat Lane and Adele Wiseman view China; and Graeme Gibson writes in residence in Scotland. Little magazines, aided by the Canada Council, breed more quickly than rabbits. In 1984 the Council gave block grants to 113 publishers.

The availability of all this funding and support has turned the Canadian writer into a species of pooh bear, licking the honey pot. George Woodcock is right when he says that "the Canada Council represents the final boxing in of Canadian literature by the structure of institutionalism. If we try to envisage an 'average Canadian writer,' we can see him living near a campus, teaching at least part time at university level, mingling too much for his work's good with academics, doing as much writing as he can for the CBC, and always hoping for a Canada Council Fellowship that will take him away for a year."⁴ Woodcock knows from personal experience whereof he speaks. He has licked quite a bit of honey from his own nose.

Most North Americans have a tendency to whine about things even though we are, in the main, spoiled rotten. We control most of the world's luxuries, and we cry when we can't get more. A look abroad will show us how easy we all have it and how lucky our writers are. Nobody shoots us for what we write or believe. We've had no dirty wars. Our writers are, by world standards, feather-bedded.

³ Graeme Gibson, "Mordecai Richler," interview. *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Anansi, 1973) 282.

⁴ George Woodcock, "Away from Lost Worlds," *Odysseus Ever Returning* (Toronto: McClelland, 1970) 3.

III Regionalism is a "bad" thing.

Regionalism is at the core of the Canadian identity. Screech, tortière, sugaring off, fiddleheads, hoodoos, Social Credit: each of these is recognizable to the average informed Canadian, yet each is associated with a region of Canada. Regionalism does not necessarily lead to national disunity—I can buy screech in B.C.—nor does it lead to bad writing. Again, a list: George Bowering, Alden Nowlan, Ken Norris, Raymond Souster, Rudy Wiebe, Phyllis Webb. Each writer is primarily associated with a region of Canada, but each is read and appreciated all over the Dominion. Each can be read and appreciated anywhere in the English-speaking world, just as Thomas Hardy, Chinua Achebe, or V.S. Naipaul can. In *The Bush Garden* Northrop Frye says that regionalism and national unity are opposites, but it seems to me that, in a country that takes in 5.5 time zones, the most common national experience, the one that defines our national identity, is the regional nature of our country. No poet has successfully spanned the entire nation. Pratt comes closest to it in *Towards the Last Spike*, but even he has to divide the saga of rail-building among three regions.

We must, of course, stress the difference between regionalism and provincialism. Provincialism comes in many forms. It can be the "Writer A is a good writer because he comes from a certain place." This is nationalistic boosterism. It is most commonly found among people who have an economic stake in the publishing industry. But, as John Sutherland pointed out in *Other Canadians*, it is also provincial to look down on other writers because he/she makes use of an explicitly local setting. This second type of provincialism is generally prevalent among academic literary critics and is a part of the "Cosmopolitanism is a 'good' thing" mistake. They seem blinkered by a belief that culture exists only in other lands, preferably in other centuries. It is not to be found at home and in the present.

IV Cosmopolitanism is a good thing.

There has always been a tension between nationalism and internationalism in the Canadian psyche. Historically, we've never come down on one side or the other. Unlike the Americans, citizens of another former British colony, who settled the issue with a revolution, we slid into independence without rejecting colonial ties.

A.J.M. Smith introduced the terms "cosmopolitan" and "nationalist" in *The Book of Canadian Poetry* to describe this tension.⁵ He, of course, favoured the cosmopolitan over the nationalist. In part, Smith's advocacy of cosmopolitanism was a justified response to the uncritical boosterism which once plagued Canadian criticism. But cosmopolitanism causes more problems than it solves. It begins as a form of imitation usually practised by young writers toward their heroes. While still an undergraduate, Smith commenced his career as poet and critic in rebellion against the older generation of Canadian poets because they weren't like the men he admired.

Another cause of cosmopolitanism is the relatively high number of foreign born and/or educated professors in our university English departments. Not knowing much about Canadian culture, and often homesick, they tend to deny the country any cultural achievement. From my undergraduate years in Ontario, I recall a seminar on critical theory in which a fellow student quoted from "the best satirist this country has produced" [his words]. The professor piped in with "I don't recall Twain ever having said that." The student had been quoting from Haliburton.

My Canadian literature students become quite upset when I tell them that Benedict Arnold was a patriot and George Washington a traitor. Recently I was talking to a perplexed graduate of one of B.C.'s universities. He wants to do an M.A., but his honours supervisor has told him that there is no university in Canada with a "decent" graduate programme (his own university has one, by the way). This same young person tells me that the latest ethnic joke on his campus is the B.C. joke: "How many British Columbians does it take to put in a light bulb? One, but he welds it to the ceiling." The joke is a shot at the B.C. government's push for "skills," as opposed to academic, training. But it is also a reflection of something else. It is a natural result of cosmopolitanism: a national inferiority complex. Earle Birney had it for a while in "Can. Lit." ("it's only by our lack of ghosts/we're haunted") and in "North of Superior" ("O none alive/or dead has cast Excalibur into/these depths"). Canada is an emptiness, a land without an identifiable (i.e. Old World) culture or landscape. Colin Partridge says, "in the making of new cultures the distinctive processes are bestowing names, re-shaping imported and indigenous values and fashioning a unique mode of self-articulation. These experiences contribute to modes of perception that have no counterpart in older socie-

⁵ A.J.M. Smith, *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1943).

ties."⁶ Any attempt at creating a literature in a foreign country based upon the exclusion of the "merely" local is doomed to failure, for the product will be sterile colonial imitation of the writing of another culture. Margaret Atwood shows the absurdity of this position in "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer." The pioneer goes insane because he is inflexible. He brings his culture to the new land and cannot cope with its failure to take root in its new soil. At the risk of straining the metaphor, I should point out that, when imported plants or animals do take to a new country, they tend to do disastrous things to native species.

Over forty years ago, W.W.E. Ross wrote that a poet is inevitably associated with a place and that the cosmopolitan doctrine as espoused by Smith was not tenable. "I have a horrid suspicion," he said, "that the 'Cosmopolis' will turn out to be not 'world city' in general but one of London, New York, Paris."⁷ It keeps Canadians from knowing themselves.

V George Woodcock is a critic.

George Woodcock is a one-man publishing enterprise. He turns out books more rapidly than most of us write letters. He is a poet, editor, biographer, and man of letters, but he is not a literary critic. An extended look at his criticism reveals it to be a kind of formula writing, reliant, in the main, upon three basic strategies:

1. comparison of Canadian writers to some classical story or character
2. plausible sounding statements which, when examined carefully, say nothing
3. constant reference to "intensity" (never defined) as a touchstone of excellence.

Odysseus Ever Returning provides the most obvious example of the classical reference syndrome. In it he has the following essays: "A Nation's Odyssey: The Novels of Hugh MacLennan," "A Grab at Proteus: Notes on Irving Layton," and "The Song of the Sirens: Notes on Leonard Cohen." The classical allusion provides an easy-to-grasp notion, a quick (alas, too quick) way of fixing in the reader's mind Woodcock's thesis about a writer. Its effect is to lead to a too simple conclusion about MacLennan, Layton, and Cohen. It is a continuation of a too old tradition in

⁶ Colin Partridge, *The Making of New Cultures* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodoje B.V., 1982) 30.

⁷ W.W.E. Ross, "On National Poetry," *Canadian Forum* 25 (1944): 88.

Canadian literature—trying to explain a writer by making him the local equivalent of a character or writer from some other nation's literature. To put it another way, it is an example of the pernicious effect of cosmopolitanism upon Canadian criticism.

The second Woodcock strategy, what we might call fogging, is also evident in *Odysseus Ever Returning*. I will leave aside empty epithets (such as "excruciating banality" [19] and "imitative virtuosity" [114]) and focus on some of the larger clouds of glory. In "A Grab at Proteus" he says of Layton: "He can make a compassionate statement in well-turned verse of almost Marvellian grace and graciousness"⁸ What does "almost Marvellian" mean? Like Marvell? Almost like Marvell? In the same essay he speaks of "the lugubrious solemnity with which the younger writers cloddishly trample with rough cries in their obsessive dance on Mount Venus" (89). Assuming that he does not mean the base of the thumb (which is how the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines "Mount of Venus") but is setting his sights somewhat lower, we can still see that the image is absurdly grotesque and that he is simply puffing up his statement. Why not say that younger poets suffer from a joyless obsession with sex? The statement sounds learned and allusive, but it does not make its point. When Woodcock says "intensity," he almost always means "something good." In his introduction to *Canadian Writers and Their Work*, he attributes to Crawford a "lyrical intensity" and to Carman "great imaginative intensity". In his introduction to *Canadian Poetry 1*, he praises the Confederation poets for "their intense involvement"⁹ with the natural setting" and of Dorothy Livesay he says that "her intense feminism [is] . . . less political than concerned with the personal intensities of the passional life."¹⁰ In volume two he describes Phyllis Webb as a writer of "poems high in moral intensity and intense even in doubt" and (to vary things a little) portrays George Bowering's verse as "tense lyrical form, with the theory unobtrusive."¹¹ To read Woodcock is to get the impression that our writers are all wound a little too tightly and might, any moment, break loose with a loud "boing" like a spring out of a decrepit alarm clock. He doesn't explicate enough; he doesn't tell us in what their intensity lies or by which criteria he defines and measures intensity. He approaches dangerously close to the "quiet intensity"

⁸ George Woodcock, *Odysseus Ever Returning* (Toronto: McClelland, 1970) 84.

⁹ George Woodcock, introduction, *Canadian Writers and Their Work*, ECW Poetry Series, 1 (Toronto: ECW, 1982) 19, 10.

¹⁰ George Woodcock, *Canadian Poetry 1* (Toronto: General and ECW, 1982) 22, 27.

¹¹ George Woodcock, *Canadian Poetry 2* (Toronto: General and ECW, 1983) 21, 25.

sort of pseudo-criticism which George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* mocks.

As a supporter, as an editor, as an interpreter of the cultural scene, and above all as a man who cares (and who cared when almost no one else did), Woodcock's service to Canadian literature has been unsurpassed. But, as a critic, his influence has been deleterious.

VI Archibald Lampman is the best Confederation poet.

This misconception is largely based upon extra-literary considerations. Lampman died young. There is a tendency among our critics to do for him what Shelley did for Keats: to depict him as a sensitive youth, an alienated artist whose poetic temperament made him too fine for the crassness of everyday life. Margaret Coulby Whitridge describes him as "a shy, introverted, and modest young man,"¹² and Michael Gnarowski calls him "most tragically fated in his personal life."¹³ He is a Canadian Keats who went on to his reward before writing his odes. If "unheard [melodies] are sweeter," how much better must be unwritten poems than the ones he left us.

Although critics agree on Lampman's greatness, they cannot agree on much else about him. L.R. Early sees him as a conservative: "Lampman and his contemporaries shared a respect for tradition which may offend the iconoclastic aesthetics of our own century."¹⁴ James Steele sees him as an innovator: "It seems to me . . . that almost everything of real substance that has been said by modernist poets in Canada was said first, in one way or another, by Lampman."¹⁵ That he can generate such divergent assessments is not a result of his excellence or complexity but of his essential blandness.

Lampman is a poet of limited achievement. He wrote about a limited number of scenes from nature in a limited number of forms. He was obsessed with one idea: the "dream" he sought so fervently. A few of his sonnets and (perhaps) a half dozen

¹² Margaret Coulby Whitridge, introduction, *The Poems of Archibald Lampman* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1974) xiv.

¹³ Michael Gnarowski, Introduction, *Critical Views on Canadian Writers: Archibald Lampman* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1970) xiii.

¹⁴ L.R. Early, "Archibald Lampman," in *Canadian Writers and Their Works*, ECW Poetry Series 2 (Toronto: ECW, 1983) 138.

¹⁵ James Steele, "Lampman's Achievement," in *The Lampman Symposium*, ed. Lorraine McMullen (Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1976) 125.

other poems ("Heat" comes to mind) are very good. His attempts at political comment ("The City of the End of Things" and "The Land of Pallas") are not. In depth of statement, in variety, and in solid contribution to Canadian poetry Archibald Lampman is not the equal of Bliss Carman. He must be judged on what he produced and not on the pathos of his life.

VII "Malcom's Katie" is a great poem.

The tremendous vogue which Isabella Valancy Crawford has recently enjoyed—and which is now, one hopes, fading—is a result of the coming together of feminism and myth criticism, with an added dash of the alienated artist syndrome, after the fashion of the Lampman supporters. (Like most Canadian artists, Crawford was badly treated by her society. Perhaps at last the country is becoming worthy of her.¹⁶) Both the feminists and the myth critics laud her for extra-literary reasons. Clara Thomas's "Crawford's Achievement" (*The Crawford Symposium*) will serve as an illustration of the first group. Thomas would place Crawford within a special group—"what she does need is to be considered as a woman-artist of the nineteenth century and to be placed among her own kind" (131)—and would judge her by special criteria—"even if the works would bear only the most indulgent and nationalistic criticism, Isabella Valancy Crawford merits respect and attention" (131). With these two considerations in place, she can conclude that "in the widest context of women writers only the Brontës in background, family situation, and I believe, talent and temperament" are her equals (133). There is an absurd species of relativism operating here. Thomas defines and limits the context until Crawford becomes the proverbial big frog in the small pond. Such special pleading does nothing for Crawford's reputation or the feminist cause.

In his introduction to the University of Toronto Press reprint of Crawford's *Collected Poems*, James Reaney uses myth criticism, not to define Crawford by what is around her (i.e. the context) the way Thomas does, but by what is hidden beneath her. He indulges in the pursuit of what might have been, claiming that Crawford's poetry suggests a lot more than it actually contains, that hidden just below the surface, but never quite articulated, is a realm of myth and archetype. "She had a mind that was no doubt daily thinking about an iconic backbone, of Eden, Beulah,

¹⁶ Kenneth Hughes, "'The Helot' and the Objective Correlative: Ontario and Greece," in *The Crawford Symposium*, ed. Frank M. Tierney (Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1979) 96.

Fallen World, Hell," he guesses.¹⁷ If only she had been able to attend Victoria College, University of Toronto, in the mid-twentieth century! Furthermore, Reaney sees her as an important influence on other, more recent poets, "whether they know it or not," who are divining below the surface upon which only she sat, "raising the beneath, the submerged architecture of icons and identities to visible articulation" (xxxiv). Would that we all would be judged on our potential and not on our production; on what other people believe we were thinking and not on what we wrote.

In truth, Crawford's poetry is even less accomplished than Lampman's. Tragically, she had to rely on her pen for an income and was forced to pander to popular taste. "Malcom's Katie" has flashes of power and beauty, but only flashes. The plot line is absurd; the characters are atrociously drawn; and the much vaunted "nature as Indian figure" passages (in Parts II and IV) are popular racial stereotyping of the worst sort. Crawford's reputation should be based on her excellence as a poet, not on her gender or on her imagined preoccupations.

VIII Conclusion

My aim is not to destroy reputations, divorce writers from Canada Council funding or enforce xenophobic rules in the assessment of literature. I do think we should stop following the path of least resistance and start doing more spadework. Let us stop excusing mediocre writing on the grounds of the writer's tough life. Let us have the conclusions drawn after reading the literature, not before. Finally, let us judge the literature by literary criteria. If enough critics take up the challenge, we shall be able to add to my list an eighth myth—"Myths one through seven continue to be believed."

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¹⁷ James Reaney, introduction, *Isabella Valancy Crawford Collected Poems* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1972) xx.