

# Canada and Its Discontents

Glenn Deer

*Make every lyric a work of treason,  
A criminal's code, an arsonist's song.  
Genius is hideous, degenerate:  
Let your poems, this culture, incriminate.*  
—George Elliott Clarke, "To X.X.," from *Blue* (40)

I keep George Elliott Clarke's declamatory *Blue* at my elbow on my desk as a defense against the complacencies of the news of the day, that lulling sound sung in our ears by the editorialists and financial pundits, who tell us to deal with the withering of the markets by smiling and putting on a happy face: "*Let your poems, this culture, incriminate,*" proclaims Clarke.

While the globe swirls in economic turmoil, Canadians cannot afford to be smug about our financial future, nor our publicly subsidized culture, nor believe that our inflated international reputation as a space of utopian social contentment can be sustained by mere hopeful thinking. Here in Vancouver, the discontented gap between the affluent and the impoverished homeless grows, even while the city prepares to put on its finest face for the international exposure of the 2010 Winter Olympics, an event that most Vancouverites will only be able to afford to watch from their televisions or computer screens.

According to Adrian White, a British social psychologist at the University of Leicester, Canada is ranked amongst the most contented nations in the world. The colour coded *World Map of Happiness* (2007) devised by White graphically shows that Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, Iceland, the Bahamas, Finland, Sweden, Bhutan, Brunei, and Canada are the ten happiest nations in the world, and these nations are significantly more content even than the global economic superpowers of the United States (ranked 23rd), Germany (35th), France (62nd), and China (82nd). The three most discontented countries according to White's survey are the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, and Burundi. Such measurements of "subjective well-being,"

based on questionnaires answered by 80,000 people around the globe, reflect the respondents' satisfaction with health care, housing, and education, and such indicators favour relatively affluent countries like Canada. But despite these strong indicators of current "happiness"—a slippery concept at best—Canadian literature displays a remarkable propensity for healthy discontent, grumbling about our relative weaknesses, lampooning our belated cosmopolitan development, and *kvetching* about either our lack of worldly competitiveness or the absorption of our once distinctive ethos by the machinery of global modernity.

The recurring sources of human discontent are legion, as the content of this late autumnal issue of *Canadian Literature* will attest, but there is readerly satisfaction, even happiness, in providing an ear for the articulate venting of our discontent. Literary misery finds appreciative company in the arms of many readers, if not for the sympathetic commiseration of others who also feel the pain of the writer's human position, then for the less noble itch for *schadenfreude*, that sinewy and delicious German loanword for the unforeseen pleasure we take in the misery of others. Happiness is such a complex, delicate, and ultimately mysterious affect, and bears a tangled relationship to its shadow sides: discontent, melancholy, and depression.

According to Jacques Poulin's brilliantly comic allegory of social life, *Les Grandes Mareés* (1978), the focus in this issue of Sophie Bastien's article, the contrived pursuit of happiness can paradoxically undermine its attainment. Such is the case in Poulin's novel where a translator of comic strips—Teddy—finds himself transported by helicopter to an Edenic island in the St. Lawrence River by his employer who ostensibly tries to enhance the translator's "happiness." Teddy is happy in his solitary literary work, and he appreciates at first the arrival of an agreeable and pretty female companion, dark-eyed Marie. However, he soon finds his island getaway invaded by a stream of annoying personae, including the lascivious Featherhead, a sullen Author, a Professor of Comic Strip History, an Ordinary Man, a social Organizer, and a supernatural therapist named Gélisol. As Sophie Bastien's article emphasizes, the archetypal oppositions between the individual and the collective, nature and culture, complicate our search for happiness, and our lives are caught in an ebb and flow beyond our control, as Poulin's novel suggests, "le titre en connote la puissance et le mystère *Les Grandes Mareés*."

Can we achieve happiness if we make the effort? (Or can we at least discover the winning formula in one of the hundreds of self-help books that offer us the keys to felicity?) Darrin McMahon's intellectual history

of *Happiness* (2006) reminds us that the contemporary belief that we are entitled to happiness—or that unhappiness is a malady to be remedied by an array of counsellors or self-help books—would be regarded as naïve and bound for disappointment by earlier civilizations. The classical Greek understanding of happiness, *eudaimonia* (good + spirit), “has deep roots in the soil of chance” (11), and respects the powers of fate, the whims of the gods, or the *happenstance* that makes or mars our fortunes. Early Western culture accepted that happiness was determined by good luck, that human beings are quite helpless in controlling felicitous outcomes, and the Middle English term “hap” (luck) is etymologically embedded in our own understanding of happiness. In McMahon’s fascinating history of continuously evolving Western thought on the nature of happiness, a radical break occurs with this fatalistic view during the Enlightenment, a break that is famously reflected in the new individual liberties that are regarded as self-evident truths and “unalienable” rights in the 1776 American Declaration of Independence: that citizens have the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The rapture of this pursuit has recently been echoed again across the US border where many Canadians gaze with envy at a renewed American presidency, whose passionate oratory evokes the possibility of recovering happiness, however it might be defined, in troubled economic times: “Yes, we can,” asserts Barack Obama. Meanwhile, in the chillier northern half of the continent, with a minority government, and a discontented and divided electorate, Canadians contemplate more uncertain coalitional prospects for the future. Many are thinking less of the grander possibilities of happiness, and are humbly willing to settle for what appeared in our 1867 Constitution Act as the subsistence contentment of “Peace, Order, and Good Government.”

Our lot today seems rather hapless, but there is nothing like a zesty banquet of studied vituperation to spur the mind out of the mire of passive melancholy. If we cannot abide the state of the house, then kick against the pricks. Certainly the essays in this issue show that Canadian literary discontent has been simmering quite nicely in the shadow of (post)modernity. Mark Johnson’s article on Richler’s *Cocksure* challenges previous assessments of a book that both scandalized and delighted many with its satiric obscenities. Reinhold Kramer, in his recent scholarly biography of Richler, *Mordecai Richler: Leaving St. Urbain*, precisely pinpoints the skill of Richler’s critical “counterblast” (203), yet in novels like *Cocksure*, the author is “divided” between an avant-garde “metafictionally playful, boundary-testing, hip” form and a “moralizing” stance that shows the “pitfalls of the

1960's freedoms" (192). Mark Johnson astutely confronts the contradictory logic of Richler's discontent, arguing that *Cocksure* is a melancholy allegory of "the political subject in postmodernism," and that Richler anticipates the critique of the postmodern "depthlessness" and the "subject's immersion in mediascapes and artificial environments," a critique that is later echoed in the cultural interventions of Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard. Richler's discontent with the empty, simulated artifice of postmodern environments does not place the author, however, above the target of his discontent: While Richler is the critic of the contemporary image-making machineries, he is also subjected to his own critique. Discontent thus turns its venom against itself. Such narrative self-denigration is also evident in the Kierkegaardian ironist, the character of Ed, who is the focus of Stephen Dunning's discussion of Guy Vanderhaeghe's "Man Descending," and *My Present Age*. As Dunning demonstrates, Ed denounces the contemporary world, and "the culture's unconscious spiritual bankruptcy and despair have come to brief consciousness," yet Ed has not yet moved beyond the despair of his discontent, nor realized a possible remedy in the example of "the elusive person of Bill Sadler, the placard-wielding, religious ethicist who alone escapes narrative censure."

Jenny Kerber's article on monocultures and militarism in Stead's classic prairie novel *Grain* shows how an ecocritical discontent with the appropriation of agricultural land and labour is usually overlooked. Stead's novel, in Kerber's view, continues to be relevant to current concerns over the pressures of centralizing and "intensive monocultures and ever-larger economies of scale" that threaten ecological diversity, a diversity that is essential for the continuing health of the planet.

The monocultural pressures on labour and landscapes are also reflected in the pressures on individuals to conform to normative body images. Amelia Defalco's article on Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* explores the individual's discontent with the aging self. Hagar Shipley's discontent with her aging body arises from her own unhelpful life narrative, a framework that divides her identity into negative oppositions such as "young or old, true or false, original or deformed, insightful or blind." Certainly, the culture of simulated experiences, and the worship of youthful appearances that are ceaselessly reinforced by popular culture, television, and advertising contribute to such constrictive and damaging norms. The contemporary discontent with the aging self, and the denial of temporal processes, is reflected in Hagar's "denial of change," and her "inability to tolerate a shifting narrative identity."

Her discontent results from a distorted investment in a static self based on her memories of her youthful self, and the result is a painful and frustrating experience of her current body as a “deformation” rather than a part of a naturally human process of transformation.

Finally, discontent with the facile harmonies of Canadian multiculturalism is expressed in the contemporary Canadian texts for adolescents examined by Benjamin Lefebvre. Exploring novels by Beatrice Culleton, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Deborah Ellis, Glen Huser, and Martine Leavitt, Lefebvre demonstrates how these authors resist the simplistic resolutions of the young adult problem novel. These authors explore the profound complications and discontent that arise from poverty and family breakdown, and the oppressive effects of “racism, sexism, patriarchy, and homophobia.” But these books remain open forms that “avoid singular ideological stances and clear narrative closure.” Such texts for the next generation of Canadian leaders, thinkers, and activists will hopefully allow the young reader to think through the problems of the world while resisting monocultural impositions. If the next generation can move beyond the empty simulations, cults of status, and misguided expectations that have plagued our social life, perhaps their chance for securing some measure of Canadian happiness will be more realistic than ours.

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