Imagining Quebec

Quebec and Canada. Quebec in Canada. Quebec out of Canada. Since the late eighteenth century, this issue of Quebec and Canada has been at the heart of Canada's national self-construction. Writers and literary critics, with their need for symbolic representation, have persistently worked at finding a metaphor that can adequately represent the relationship between Quebec and the rest of Canada. In 1945, Hugh MacLennan borrowed "two solitudes" from Rainer Maria Rilke (who was using it to describe two lovers) and this metaphor certainly has currency in English Canada (a photocopy with the full quotation appeared on a bulletin board near my office just before the recent referendum). As early as 1876, Pierre-Joseph-Olivier Chauveau had suggested the famous "double spiral" staircase at the Château de Chambord, which two people can climb while catching only glimpses of each other, and without meeting at all. Phillip Stratford's 1979 image is more uncompromising: parallel lines that never meet. E.D. Blodgett suggests a "gitter," German for a "lattice-work fence, a grid of interwoven strands whose common threads relate and distinguish, but do not unify" (33). Patricia Smart borrows an image from a text by Nicole Brossard, of two women back to back: "Brossard's image is one of touching but not of fusion, of separate identities respected and shared as both partners look not at each other, but—supporting each other—out to the world. Transposed, it becomes an image of two nations and two projects, an adjacent but not common space, a border shared in which both cultures find strength in difference." In 1969, D.G. Jones chose *Ellipse* for the

title of a journal devoted to the translation of poetry from one official language to the other, because the outline of an ellipse is traced by a point whose distances from two other points always add up to the same sum.[1] What these images figure is equality and difference at the same time, sometimes with the addition of a kind of abstract interdependence. English and French in Canada are "equal partners" in these metaphors.

What this "two nations" theory leaves out is that anglo-Canada has most of the territory, most of the population, and most of the votes in the House of Commons. Despite the very prominent role francophone Canadians have played in Canadian history and do play in Canadian public life, if asked to describe a "typical Canadian" most Canadians, whether francophone or anglophone, would describe a British-descended anglophone. And further, although anglo-Canadian conceptions of Canada may ignore Quebec (along with the First Nations and many ethnic minorities), Quebec is implicitly always there, subsumed under the label Canada.

One thing is certain: these metaphors make clear that Quebec is already a nation, whether it becomes an independent state or not. Although English-Canadians tend to see it as part of the whole, Quebec in these writers' views is always a separate entity. Where English-Canadians might visualize a hole, Québécois see a whole and always have. Thus if Quebec leaves Canada, what remains will not be a nation because it has never seen itself as one (which is why we are reduced to calling it "the rest of Canada"), and even its statehood will have to be reconstructed. Some serious revisions of the ways in which Canadians and Québécois have constructed their "imagined communities"[2] will have to take place, whatever happens. And English-Canadians have to do more work than the people of Quebec, who have been imagining Quebec as a nation since the Conquest. So this editorial is an attempt to start imagining.

The "gap" that Quebec's departure would produce in the national highways, seaways and thoughtways seems, at first glance, unimaginable. It would leave a hole in the middle of not only the national imaginary, but also the national territory. But clearly we can't ask Quebec to stay in Canada just so the map won't be messed up. To try to express its over-reliance on territory to represent the nation, Abraham Rotstein once called English-Canadian nationalism 'mappism' (qtd. in Crean 11). But let's look at the hole in the map. It is an imaginary hole; if Quebec separates, those sailing along the St. Lawrence or driving down the 401 are not going to drop off the

edge of the world, after all, or even (if the European experience is anything to go by) stop at a border crossing. Nor is Quebec (if one uses the divorce analogy so popular in the media) going to leave town. The territory of Quebec will be there, filled with people speaking French, no matter what happens. In English Canada one often hears the heartfelt wish that it would be nice to have the debate over with. This isn't going to happen either. The debate will go on, just as the debate with the United States goes on, because we share borders. The issue is, then, whether we want these borders to be the borders of different states or not, and if so, how this impinges on other metaphysical territories.

Canada is unusual in the world for its ability to manage, non-violently for the most part, the conflicts inherent in having two major nations in a single state. (Neither of these two nations has done so well in dealing with the First Nations, one must add.) Given the current spate of vicious wars driven by nationalist rhetoric, Canadians might well see our impasse as an opportunity for producing a model that could resolve our crisis *and* perhaps prove useful elsewhere, if only as inspiration. A shift in Quebec's role in the Canadian federation might be viewed as leading the way in a larger world shift from a time when the nation was the only conceivable player in international relations, to an age where global capital, multinational corporations, international tourism and immigration, and United Nations peace-keeping—not to mention Benetton ads or the Internet—have started to produce a different way of thinking the world.

The movement for an independent Quebec can be seen as a regression to a narrow, ethnicity-based nationalism, a view that Jacques Parizeau certainly lent credence to in his post-referendum speech and which the voting patterns supported (rural francophones were more pro-independence than urban francophones, for example). The rest of Canada suffers from this sort of nationalism too, a fact made clear by the backlash against Sikhs entering Legion Halls wearing turbans and Hong Kong Chinese moving into Vancouver—not to mention the moans of various commentators about the costs of bilingual services. (Compare these, somebody, to the cost of Quebec separating!) English-Canada is usually happy to point a finger at Quebec's lapses, while ignoring its own. If English-Canada feels Quebec should not revert to narrow nationalism, however, then English-Canada must be prepared to forsake such attitudes itself and entertain a Canada which makes allowances for national differences (for Quebec and the First Nations)

within Confederation. A revision of Canadian nationalism must also take into account the growing number of Canadians whose background and appearance doesn't match that of the "typical" white British-descended Canadian: these Canadians are tired of having to make clear that they and their families have often been here as long or longer than those "typical" Canadians, and that yes, indeed, they do speak surprisingly good English (or French). Now is a good time for both francophone and anglophone Canadians, especially the "pure laine" Québécois and their dyed in the wool Anglo-Celtic counterparts, to choose to adjust their nationalism to the specific realities of our current history, rather than trying to impose an Old World model (dated even there) on a New World nation.

What does national independence mean in the late twentieth century? In Montreal last summer, I was startled to see big posters in the Metro assuring riders that if they voted "yes" in the referendum, they could continue to carry Canadian passports and use Canadian money. "Who says?" I thought grumpily to myself. But then I began to wonder about an independence movement that was advocating what looked like dependence. If you're independent, you have your own passport and money, right? But then I thought about Canadian money—whose head is on it? And didn't Canadian passports once say, "A Canadian citizen is a British subject"? In fact, paradoxically, if it had not been for anti-British pressure from Quebec (where any difference between Canadian English-speakers and the British is often elided) we would probably still sing "God Save the Queen" and fly the Red Ensign. Then, of course, I thought about the irony that Europe, once that paradigm of model nations, all with their languages and cultures neatly packaged as distinct, is now struggling to embrace, guess what, a common currency and passport. Not surprisingly, it is the nations that adhere to the old model of an ethnically and linguistically "pure" nation that have the most trouble coping with internal difference. What is Germany going to do with the Turkish guest-workers, whose German-speaking and German-educated children are rather implausibly expected to be prepared to go "home" to Turkey at some unspecified point in the future. And a similar quandary is produced for the French imaginary by Algerian and other Islamic residents. Canada's view of the nation has always had to accommodate huge violations of the convention of "pure" nationhood. It can be argued that the rest of Canada has much more to lose than Quebec if we prove unprepared to accommodate more revisions in this model.

It is not enough to concede that Quebec is a distinct society; Quebec must be given powers that will actually support Quebec's desire to remain distinct, even if these powers are not shared by other provinces, in other words, asymmetrical federalism. Charles Taylor, Professor of Philosophy and Political Science at McGill, writing in 1990 after the failure of the Meech Lake Accord, notes that those who reject asymmetrical federalism are ignoring the fact that Canada is already functioning under this model. Quebec has more control than the other provinces over taxes, retirement benefits, immigration, culture, language policy and many other aspects of its political life. The issue is not whether we can allow such a thing to happen (it already has), but whether we can manage to express this situation in constitutional language that the Canadian federation can agree on. In other words, we have a translation problem.

Taylor argues that the failure of various attempts to amend the Constitution (and the results of the recent referendum also support this point) mean that we cannot go on tinkering, we cannot go on acting as if Quebec must be a province "just like all the others." Quebec has never been that. The insistence on this sort of abstract "equality" usually comes as a last ditch attempt to contain a group that is, in fact, just getting close enough to some real power and privilege to become perceptible to the majority. The offer of equality, then, obscures the difference that has hitherto accounted for a long history of inequality and, in essence, denies both the history and the difference at the same time. What is called for, instead of "offers" that would require Quebec to give up powers it already has, is an effort to imagine a new relationship. As Michael Ignatieff points out in *Blood and Belonging*, those of his generation have "spent their entire adult political life wondering whether the country either can or deserves to survive" (111). If Canada is to survive, both sides, instead of falling back on old metaphors and images, must make a new effort of the imagination, an effort that—if we are lucky and very very clever—will lead to a new political association, a new "imagined community" that really works. M.F.

1 I would like to thank Louise Ladouceur, who collected the set of images of the two cultures I refer to above. They are from a draft of her doctoral dissertation in Interdisciplinary Studies at UBC, which will examine what happens in and to the translation of Canadian plays from one official language to the other. Her kindness in letting me use this material should not be taken to mean that she agrees with my ideas on Confederation. I would also like to thank Laurie Ricou and Sneja Gunew for reading the editorial and making helpful comments on it.

2 Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* 2nd ed. rev. and ext. (London: Verso, 1991) is the source of the phrase "imagined communities."

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