editorial

THE VERY IDEA

SOME RECENT CRITICS have recently been led to declare (with brazen absoluteness) that the term "Canadian literature" is *unacceptable* — presumably to them, though it doesn't seem to stop there — from which it follows (and here one might prepare for the preposterous rather than the logical) that *any* journal using a national adjective in its title *must* be behaving absolutely. National adjectives, from this curiously fixed perspective, *must* be fascist in intent, *must* be authoritarian in desire, *must* require that authors and writings serve a single state design, *must* champion patriarchal unitary values, and *must* give precedence to conventional systems and holders of power and ignore all expressions of alternative possibility. It's hard to find an egalitarian way to dismiss such mustiness; absolute expectations encourage short replies. Speaking at the ADE Summer Seminar in 1990, however, I addressed this issue at greater length. What follows is a slightly edited version of my comments at the time, which seem, in the face of current debates, to bear repeating.

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Behind the invitation that summoned me to take part in this panel there lay, to my ear, three questions: 1. Why did I write a history of Canadian literature? (to which my silent reply was a surly *Why not?*), 2. Is it even possible to consider literature in national terms (to which the answer is *Of course*), 3. Isn't this dangerous? (to which my answer is *Maybe, maybe not*). This last answer, and the assumptions behind the questions themselves, need annotation. For the assertion *Maybe / maybe not* doesn't declare indecision; it simply refuses the absolutism of a single answer to a complex premise — which in itself says something about the writing of histories of literature and about my assessment of the cultural politics of questions about literature and nationhood.

For in the long run, it all depends on who's asking the questions, who's trying to answer them, and what terms such persons use in coding and decoding the exchange in which they're engaged. For example, I teach at the University of B.C. a course that is listed in the *Calendar* as "Commonwealth Literature," and recently

at another university I taught a variant version of this course under the rubric "Post-Colonial Literatures." Because asking "What's in a name?" is a broadly social as well as a specifically literary question, and because it involves usable power and the assumption of authority, it should not be too hard to see that both of the course names to which I have referred raise potential difficulties. Trying to find an adequate term to describe the plural group of English-language literatures that have developed since the seventeenth century *outside* the United Kingdom and the United States has, in fact, preoccupied for the last 25 years a number of critics who study these literatures. The term "World Literatures in English" had some vogue for several years; "New English Literatures" can still be heard in some quarters; "Terranglian Literature" — a Texas term — was essentially a non-starter. "Commonwealth," of course, implies to some ears a false and implicitly political (or covertly imperial) unity; "post-colonial," for its part, raises questions about areas of applicability and starting date. If "post" covers everything since European/non-European contact, then when, except conceptually, is "pre"? And does the term, in this use, misleadingly construct "Europe" as the world's *only* colonizing power? It's a context in which the phrase "being left at the post" acquires new resonances.

But the challenges to those terms are also political and just as problematic. If "Commonwealth" is intentionally boundary-marked, how can a course in "Commonwealth literature" (or literatures, in the plural) adequately open to discussions of South African, Fijian, or Pakistani writing during the times when these societies are not strictly speaking in the Commonwealth, which in practice it does? If "Commonwealth" is rejected because it is presumed to articulate a hegemony, yet it refers to societies that are clearly resisting the imposed inheritance of imperialism, does that not mistakenly presume that the "Commonwealth" is a fixed structure, not open to redefinition by those societies who, for all their anti-imperialism, still claim to participate in it? If "Commonwealth" is rejected *by Americans* in these terms, and the area studied then redefined *in American terms* — such as "Black Literature" — does that not suggest a new hegemony in the making, one that is constructed from inside the U.S.A. instead of from without? Clearly the term "Black Literature" *does* carry meaning in the United States, as it does in the Caribbean, Canada, and Australia, but in each of these places the term has a separate meaning, with separate cultural implications. South *Asian* critics and writers, moreover, customarily resist the unitary category "Black" — as in the phrase "Black British Literature" which includes (but does not include) them — as do Maori and other Polynesian cultures. Further, African and Black Australian writers and critics have recurrently drawn attention to the fact that *Black* Americans are also Black *Americans*, not unaffected by the society in which they live, and not *native* to it, making "Négritude" an idea in theory more than in empirical reality. And the term "Third World Literature," which constructs some numerical hier-

archies (who decides who's First and Second?), effectively cuts out Canada, Australia, and New Zealand from consideration because they're ostensibly "White," carefully admits black but not white South Africans, and doesn't think to deal with the ethnic and racial plurality that the so-called "settler societies" — as well as India and Fiji — are still in the midst of separately figuring out.

It's the separateness, and the recognition of the range of possibilities, that leads me back to the question of "Canadian" literature. There's a current resistance to this term, too — as to any that appears to declare an expectation of cultural unitariness. But this seems to me as much a construct of interpretation as of expression, and to assume that current political contexts — and current critical fashions — are constant and have always been so. It is, however, scarcely more than three decades ago that the first courses in Canadian literature were being *offered* at the University of British Columbia, and *this* university was one of the pioneers in developing Canadian literature as a "legitimate" area for academic enquiry. To discover that during the 1980s Canadian writing has become a serious area of academic study throughout Europe, Asia, and the South Pacific — as well as in Canada — still comes as a surprise to many academic doubters who questioned the validity of this enterprise thirty years ago and who thought *the very idea* of Canadian literature a contradiction in terms. Others see this international development (in a curious variant of what Australians call a "cultural cringe") as a ratification of their "pioneering" faith; still others interpret it as the rest of the world catching up to reality at last. There's no reason why all these international approaches need be the same. And there's no reason why the reactions to them should be mutually exclusive. The point is that a resistance to writing by Canadians was (and is), broadly speaking, a political act — one born variously of arrogance, ignorance, blindness, a resistant faith in the closed canonical values of tradition or heritage, Euro-centrism, Amero-centrism, declared standards of taste and judgment, assorted boundary lines, and a failure of imagination. An interest *in* Canadian writing is *also* political: but it depends to some degree on a redefinition of cultural priorities, which is what anyone committed to a fixed system of values of course finds debilitating, disconcerting, misconceived, or wrong.

It was both to combat the cultural dismissal (whether explicit or implicit) that was expressed by the widespread failure to consider Canadian writing at all, and to enquire into the value systems that are expressed within Canada (and the validity of connections between literature and society), that Canadian literature courses got going. In other words, there was a mix of reasons for devising the courses and a mix of expectations from them, and it should not be surprising that much criticism in the field sought to enumerate (usually by overgeneralizing) some "distinctive" feature of cultural nationalism. Such generalizations might in retrospect seem naive, but they, too, deserve to be considered in context. In the days when a Canadian author or two might be tacked on to the end of an American Literature

class — *if there were any time left at the end of the term* (I'm referring to 1956 or 1957) — the very structure of consideration conveyed the idea that Canadian culture was merely a postscript, an afterthought, an extension. I'm reminded of a primary school textbook that children were required to use in Vancouver some fifteen or twenty years ago. It was an American publication, which editorially at one point placed a footnote mark beside the word "Canada" — the definition at the bottom of the page read "Country north of the U.S.A." My problem was not with the American identification in itself; it was with the normalizing effect of this perspective in Canada. Why should we know ourselves, I asked — or be required to know ourselves — only through other peoples' eyes? Why should we passively accept a version of Tradition that does not attach value to our own several perspectives and patterns of expression? Why should we think it necessary to choose *between* ourselves and others for social models when it's clear that Canada in practice borrows readily from others and permits multiple models? (Why should we try to define ourselves in terms of the neat categorical *Either/Or* when our collective practice seems to favour the more chaotic *Both/And*?) Lines from a poem by the Zimbabwean writer Felix Mnthali describe the politics of unequal cultural contacts, in terms that resonate here as well as in Southern Africa; the poem is called "Neocolonialism":

> Above all, define standards
> prescribe values
> set limits; impose boundaries
>
> and even if you have no satellites
> in space
> and no weapons of any value
> you will rule the world
> . . . . . .
> for the game will be played
> according to your rules
> and therefore the game will be played
> only when you can win
>
> (*The Penguin Book of Southern African Verse*,
> ed. Stephen Gray; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989: 310)

Unquestionably, the multiple strands of Canadian culture are deeply influenced by the United States — more so (nowadays and for a long time) than by those parts of the world once described metaphorically as "parent" countries. To try to read "Canada" without acknowledging this influence would be to distort both history and current experience drastically. But how to interpret the result? And what to accept as an influence? Or is "free will" in this context not even a relevant term? Some Canadians know how to use the recognition that their familiarity

with the United States gives them in order to recreate American symbols for Americans—it was a Canadian who wrote *Rambo* for Hollywood. But Hollywood, for its part, has also constructed several imaginatively effective snowbound versions of Canada, and these typify, even as they perpetuate, some of the paradigms of relational hierarchy, and the myths of purity and boredom, that have led to the Afterthought Syndrome in canonical design.

The academic study of Canadian writing, that is, began in Canada for reasons involving a desire for an expanded version of received definitions of canonical greatness (Eurocentric, androcentric, Judaeo-Christian), and a resistance to the neighbourly cultural politics of American expansionism. It began in other places largely for more disparate reasons involving the politics of cultural comparison — post-colonialism, regionalism, feminism, bilingualism, multiculturalism. These differences have led to variant readings of literary texts — but there's no reason why a Canadian reader's interest in a Canadian text should be identical with that of a reader whose interest is contextualized elsewhere. Nor will all Canadians agree about their literature or their culture. Nor is a comparative desire intrinsically more valid than a national one, or vice-versa. Neither Nationality nor Foreignness will guarantee *authenticity* or *objectivity* in composition and criticism, even if one could readily conceive workable definitions for these words. But in this regard, what is a "Canadian text"? It's probably on this question, more than any other in the field, that critics perennially stumble, recognizing problems involving definition, nationa*lism*, historical change, class power, and the textual containment of a unitary "identity."

The main problem is one involving interpretation. The adjective "Canadian" may not be as neutral as many critics have in the past liked to believe; but nor is it necessarily as monolithic as many current critics now claim. The all-encompassing monolith is, in other words, as much a critical construct as a uniform National Identity ever was, and it's just as misleading. National adjectives, simply because they are currently being read as the articulation of a presumptive *set* of usually middleclass, fixed, authoritarian, systematic, unitary, hierarchical, and androcentric values, do not give up their function as descriptive indicators of social source. Nor does the replacement of national adjectives with forms of a new Internationalism erase the fact of nationality or ultimately silence the expressions of cultural differences that variously derive from particular social experience. What does have to be recognized is: 1. that a national adjective does not in and of itself describe a literary virtue; 2. that nationality and nationalism are not identical, and that both change over time, in the process altering critical definitions and expectations of cultural distinctiveness; 3. that an exclusive equation between cultural validity and a set of particular cultural features that are taken to be distinguishing signs of nationality is an exercise in critical (as well as political) totalitarianism; and 4. that any requirement that a work of literature adhere to a set of social directives,

and serve the causes espoused by one particular system, in order to be accorded nationality or value or both nationality and value, is in the long term probably futile, and in the short term, however seemingly efficacious, intellectually absurd.

Such recognitions undoubtedly contribute to the current critical uneasiness about the teaching of "national literatures." If national*ism* is a fascist construct, runs one form of the argument, then teaching literature in the context of nationalism must be a covertly if not openly fascistic exercise. No distinction is made in this syllogistic construction of the problem, however, between the context of nationalism and the context of nationhood; and no distinction is further made between the essentially nineteenth-century unitary definitions of *nation* that were invoked in the name of European imperial expansion (definitions which would include the paradigms embraced during World Wars I and II) — George Stewart, Jr., reviewing Charles Mair's *Dreamland* in January 1869, for example, rhetorically intoned: "It is time we had a literature of our own. . . . Without a national literature what is a nation?" (*Stewart's Literary Quarterly Magazine*) — and the complex exchange of ideas involving shifting conceptions of *nation* that is still being articulated in the latter years of the twentieth century. What's being worked out as "post-national," in this context, is less "international," however, than it is "post-imperial," a distinction which has repercussions in the remodelling and reconceptualizing of notions of colony and canon.

In 1983, at the triennial international conference on "Commonwealth Literature," held in Guelph, I chaired a panel that was trying to suggest some alternatives to national modelling not just as a basis for instruction but also as a conclusion to which criticism might lead. Panel members considered the theoretical paradigms offered by feminism, discourse analysis, regionalism, deconstruction, race studies, and Marxism, for example, none of these necessarily in isolation. The *reactions* to the panel were culturally absorbing. Some listeners objected to *-isms* in principle, as though they were not speaking from within one already; others applauded; still others condemned any comparative departure from the tried, established, and presumably true. But a greater disparity derived from differences of national perspective. The panel itself was multiethnic, two-gendered, international. But endorsement of the panel's suggestions came primarily from British, American, and settler-society listeners; critics from the "newer nations" (those from Malaysia and Fiji, for example) questioned what they heard as the authoritarianism — the replacement imperialism — of yet another system from outside their own territory, looming at them as the New Answer before they'd yet had time to think about the world from a (national) perspective they might call their own.

A poem by the Singapore-born poet Shirley Lim is apropos. It's called "Cross-Cultural Exchange (Singapore 1986)" — Singapore 1986 being the site of the next triennial Commonwealth conference after Guelph — and it reads in part this way:

> The pink-and-glossy man wants the little chap
> to bring back the water glasses. He settles
> on the platform and calls for questions. The plain jane
> from the Ministry of Culture wants to know
> how to be modern without becoming Ike and Tina
> Turner. Her chinese convent voice is constantly
> apologizing on the edge of rudeness.
> We don't have a national culture, she complains,
> nervously eying the Aussies and Kiwis
> and the jolly-brown woman from Papua New Guinea.
> We have value-added industries, central
> provident fund, cheap taxis, housing
> development board, glass hotel and,
> of course, the people's action party.
> But we don't have a national culture. . . .
> The pink-and-glossy man sits up smacking his lips.
> It's just the kind of question he relishes.
> You must remember, he begins, in the beginning
> was the word. You people speak English
> very well, it shows how civilized you are
> and that you are ready for a national culture. . . .

There follows a Second Reason and a Third:

> . . . we in New Zealand have seen it all:
> landfall, mountains, lakes, hotsprings, native trouble,
> sheep, and angry god. You can learn from us.
> As we can learn from you. Next question?
>
> (*Modern Secrets*; Aarhus: Dangaroo, 1989: 94-95)

The barbed ironies tear in a variety of directions here, but most particularly they expose the closest imperialism of assuming that single answers are uniformly acceptable (whether they come from within or without), of acquiring other peoples' nationalism as a "neutral" language of Internationalism, and of pretending that two-way exchanges between numbered first, second, third, and fourth world societies even approach, in political reality, a gesture of equality.

In principle, that is, Shirley Lim's poem objects to appropriation — even to the sorts of appropriation that sometimes mask as the expansion of the canon to include writers and works previously deemed peripheral. For in some cases to "centralize" a marginal perspective will implicitly deny it its power. If, for example, its "marginal" intent is to overthrow the systems of hierarchy implicit in a given canon, can it any longer do so once it becomes "acceptable" within that system? If it has not wholly replaced that system? But once it conceives of that system as a "whole," and in binary oppositional terms, is it perhaps not also demonstrating the degree to which it is complicit in the very language, the system of dominant power, that

it says it seeks to replace? The difficult relation between authority and alternatives remains at issue.

The conundrum I am dealing with here involves a series of apparent contradictions or circularities:

> To assert Difference is to deny Empire.
> To deny Empire is to recognize Empire.
> To recognize Empire is to admit the power of Empire.
> To admit the power of Empire is to transfer to Empire
> the capacity to determine Difference.
> To reclaim Difference, or the speech natural to the
> margin, it is necessary to dispute the Empire's
> claim upon the effective language of discrimination.
> Hence to assert Difference is to deny Empire.
> And seemingly so on.

Recasting these terms reinterprets the process: that is, to assert pluralism is to deny homogeneity, or the uniformity that rests in a fixed authority. This doesn't deny the presence of authority, though it allows that authority itself may be plural. Indeed, the declaration of plurality can also be an exercise of power, a measure to dissipate the potential power of the perceived margins. For meaning is not fixed, nor can interpretation be thoroughly useful if it's always automatic. Which returns me to Canada and Canadian literature.

How so? In ways that involve the process of conceptualizing the subject — in the classroom, for example, or in a history of literature: and as an irrelevance, an appendage, a territory of difference or similarity, an entirety, a national necessity, a field of alternatives, a process itself (still in flux), a cultural network. These are, obviously, competing approaches or expectations. When Canadian literature was being taught in Canada as a postscript to British or American literature, it was read in a context of nation-building, with literature interpreted as an expression of cultural "greatness." The equation between the idea of greatness (as conceived in culture and often articulated as morality) and the fact of political recognition (the opportunity to exercise power) was less openly declared, if probably unquestioned as the operating criterion in critical discriminations. When a second, third, and fourth definition of nationhood replaced the first, judgments of literary worth and designs of pedagogical organization also changed. A model involving a fixed set of cultural attributes gave way to a model involving the linear progress of historical development, which in turn gave way to models of Canada involving a mosaic of classless opportunities, a cultural role as international honest broker, the tensions of regional inequalities, biculturalism, gender and race-related disparities, economic territoriality, independence, dependence, cultural multiplicity, and the shifting fields of speech in time and place. In other words, in practice, the very idea of Canada is recurrently being reinvented — just as other national and cultural

ideas are. Such recent books as Richard White's *Inventing Australia* and Graeme Turner's *National Fictions* exemplify how social assumptions about nationhood and the impact of cultural models can be analyzed and queried, with implications for reading. To read "Canada," it is necessary, I think, to pay attention to the shifting contexts and expectations to which I have been referring. To read the writing that has emerged from Canada, it is *possible* and usually very *productive* to pay attention to the ways in which social contexts have had an impact on verbal design. But it isn't, inevitably, *necessary*. Verbal designs can attract numerous responses, to which problem-centred (rather than nation-centred) courses in literature pay specific but varying forms of attention.

But one last question to ask in this connection is this: Who does the designing — of the course, the model, the metaphor, the premise, the centre, the problem? Inevitably this will affect the outcome; and for any given text, it's possible to design a way of reading that embodies various conflicting or overlapping categories. For example, *a* particular *Canadian* text might also be read as late Romantic, nineteenth-century, colonial, sentimental, gender-marked, class-biased, Presbyterian, narrative, popular, and marginalized. Each of these adjectival categories constructs a "problem" which a course in literature *could* address. "Canadian" texts — by which I mean those written by writers inside Canada's territorial limits and those written by Canadians abroad — can function instructively in a course designed (across national boundaries perhaps) to address any one of them. Is it worth reading them? Of course. Is there already a canon of received texts? Yes. And is that canon being questioned? Also yes: in part by histories of literature.

Not to consider the possibility of including a Canadian text in such enterprises as an international anthology or a cross-cultural comparative study might well be a deliberate decision, determined by intention, space, and time. Contrarily, it might simply declare the ignorance of a designer who had not thought to ask if there were any text in Canada appropriate to the occasion. To insist by way of reaction that a Canadian text *must* appear in all such anthologies would be arrogant. Another face of arrogance, however, is for those in control of the canon — whoever they are and whatever the canon — to presume that their boundaries are adequate for everyone, and that that canon is already closed. For anyone to tell *me* that I *cannot* construct a course in Canadian literature, that I *cannot* study the literature written in my own country — with or without reference to its social, verbal, and intercultural contexts — because *their theory does not justify it* would, for example, be an absurd exercise of power. Clucking one's tongue by way of reply — and saying "The very idea!" — acts out a quiet defiance. It also indirectly declares that the language of perceived margins has the longstanding capacity to circumscribe — if not immediately to displace — the language of presumed centres of authority. The *ability* to recognize the plurality of cultures, voices, attitudes in literature seems to me an advantage, not a limitation, for a critic and teacher. The

willingness to embrace what is implied by pluralism, which may be a rarer attribute in educational institutions, would, moreover, facilitate the discussions of models of various kinds (whether national, ethical, multicultural, or poststructural) as intellectual alternatives rather than as threats to the fabric of an entrenched and accepted version of what is believed to constitute civilization.

W.N.

MARLATT'S STEVESTON

Scott McFarlane

i gather
        and picture you.
You and the river,
always the river and its lapping,
napping rhythm, nightmare nap,
        and the places of the place,
        caught still and still caught,
                hot
without breeze, without ripple,
and you, casting yourselves at once from the river
onto familiar shores and snagged into
the sea (see) that is me, and i cast.
        and the need for a cool glass of water.
sweltering summer of '73
granted
Canada Council's Canada.

Marlatt and Marlatt off to Steveston,
    travelling those lines that never end
but do,
    Munro in wonderland,
setting her camera,
the angler and the bait,
joined by the tension of

        the riddle.
            (and the ocean).