

INTRODUCTION

Reading the Discourse of Early Canada

Germaine Warkentin and Heather Murray

IN THE ESSAY WHICH stands first in this issue of *Canadian Literature*, Christine Welsh writes of a legacy received on the death of her grandmother:

My grandmother had very few possessions, but care was taken to distribute what little she had among her children and grandchildren. I received a child's sampler, embroidered by my grandmother's mother in 1890 when she was still a schoolgirl. There, woven into the cloth amongst the crucifixes and barnyard animals, was my greatgrandmother's name: Maggie Hogue. Ironically, my grandmother had bequeathed to me that which she had found so difficult to give to me while she was alive — the key to unlocking the mystery of who I was.

Welsh's discovery of her greatgrandmother's identity in the name woven into her sampler provides a unifying image for the project undertaken in the essays collected in this issue. As a group, they are drawn together by several shared assumptions. The first comes from the power of those two words embroidered by a child a century ago, which reminds us that discourse in a given society — the realm of stories and sense-making, power and persuasion — is a larger matter than whatever that society chooses to call "literature." This assumption may begin with the reading of a name or a fragment, but it can take us very far. In one direction it takes us into "literature" itself, and the question of how we define it — and how it defines us. In the academic world this has occasioned current challenges to lower the barriers between canonical and non-canonical works, and between the written and the oral. The assumption of a wide linguistic and symbolic world, worthy of study, can take us outward from our position as scholars of the purely or independently "literary," to a consideration of the way in which literature, and the larger category we will call "discourse," are constructed by society — by whom, for whom, to what ends.

If that is a general view shared by these authors — and, indeed, by many in the academy today — there is another assumption, and one more specific to these papers: that the consideration of the discursive in its broadest sense is what will best open to study Canadian texts from "Before 1860" and allow our sense of con-

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nectivity to them. The discourse of Canadians who lived and wrote in the three and a half centuries between contact and Confederation is a subject to which very few Canadians (inside, as well as outside the academy) have ever paid much attention. For the most part, early Canadian writing has been the preserve of historical and antiquarian scholarship; problematically, however, this material has proven itself stubbornly unaccommodating to narrow “textual” scrutiny, and thus has remained largely unstudied and unread.

The problem of the canon, on the one hand, and of the silence of early Canadian literature, on the other, are intertwined. Most of us — and our critical forerunners, with some notable exceptions — were educated in a system which pays close attention to the traditional canon of literature and its authors and genres, and were taught that the highest or permanent values best reside in those novels, poems, and plays. And to this day, whether or not we consciously search for these “permanent values,” the assumptions persist. This is in part because, as critics, we concentrate so intensely on the Canadian literatures since 1950, which are indeed full of novels, poems, and plays. Despite the agendas within which the early Canadian literatures were written and known in the past, we have been prone to read them through the lenses of these contemporary premises.

But — as Henry Hubert and H  l  ne Marcotte illustrate in this issue — such cultural classicizing (for French Canada) and educational idealism (for English Canada) have a history and a politics, and in both cases have replaced other forms of categorization and study in which the distinctions between high and low genres, oral and written, were blurred or not yet hardened. The development throughout the Canadas of “scientific and literary” or “historical and literary” societies is reason enough to beware of generic separations which may be anachronistic; as contributors Pierre Rajotte and Jennifer and J. T. H. Connor demonstrate, the realms of the scientific and literary (or political) existed not merely in parallel, but in situations of textual interdependency. It is worth remembering that for much of the last century, the term “literature” already denoted the “vernacular” in its widest sense — including scientific, practical, and political treatises — and that even where literary study was most aestheticized, its *raison d’  tre* remained preparation for civil life. And it is worth remembering too, as Carl Klinck has pointed out, that since the rediscovery and study of Canadian texts was first undertaken in just such “historical and literary” societies, the earliest criticism was historical in orientation.¹ Now, just as our finely-honed skills in contemporary textual study can assist with the examination of earlier texts, so will those earlier texts help to situate the genres and styles of the present day.

To make that connection is the objective of many of these essays. Christine Welsh, as a Metis woman and film-maker, conducts a dialogue with the past by searching for the silent figure of her foremother — a woman of historical significance, but erased from history, whose voice can only be reconstituted by a critical

act which reads the spaces between the lines. Hélène Marcotte examines Canadian poetry in the bilingual journals of the late 18th century and notes the different cultural agendas which each linguistic group reveals and the different codes in which they communicate; while Pierre Rajotte traces the same variations in the form of the popular lecture. Both he and Gilles Thérien draw our attention to the way the enunciation of a theme or a type creates the effect of the “real”; similarly, Denis Lafrenière describes the construction of the “Indian” as a particular template of spirituality within the schema of providential history animating the Jesuits’ account of North America. In Denis Saint-Jacques’ analysis of the reception of Du Calvet’s *Appel à la justice de l’État* we meet a figure transfixed by cultural paradox: a French nationalist in an English nation, he is at the same time a Protestant in a Catholic community; what language of protest will he speak, and who will hear him? The speakers of Chinook Jargon and Mitchif, examined by George Lang, have disappeared into the same paradox: expert practitioners in a genuinely multilingual milieu, they have been erased from the linguistic map of Canada by the very success of the enterprise they served. Mary Lu MacDonald and Henry Hubert each look closely at literary values as they are projected in the texts of specific institutions — the newspaper and the academy — both of which remain central to the formation of discursive structures in Canada today; while Daniel Vaillancourt notes the subtle moment of transition from one kind of writer (an annotator speaking to a similar metropolitan mind elsewhere) to an *écrivain* (a writer who addresses in his own voice the audience he has evoked to listen to him). Suzanne Zeller studies the authority with which one man, a scientist, took charge of a particular kind of discourse and used it to serve his purposes (in turn co-opted to larger political ends); while Jennifer and J. T. H. Connor show how medical or scientific controversy can function as an encoded language of political and reformist debate.

In other words (quite literally), the contributors wish to query the silence to which the early Canadian literatures have been consigned, and to ask whether a realignment of agendas might bring into focus the discourse of those who gave birth to the communities we now inhabit, of Maggie Hogue and her daughters, of the anonymous scribes and notaries of Quebec, of the feuding medical practitioners of Upper Canada — the diarists and eulogists, journalists and letter-writers, chroniclers and rhymesters, the world of those once important and now forgotten, and those whose “texts” are to be found only in the words of others. We assume, of course, that such a realignment would have an effect on the study of “Canadian” discourse in general, and that it might make those of us who read and study contemporary literature more aware of the direct effect of non-canonical genres and institutional frameworks on the way we write today, on what we will permit to be said, and what we require not to be said. The essays which follow narrow and focus these issues, in order to provoke a dialogue with our discursive past.

This dialogue began in informal discussions that occurred at the 1987 meeting of the "Towards a History of the Literary Institution in Canada/Vers une histoire de l'institution littéraire au Canada" project in Edmonton, and it was carried forward in the working conference "Before 1860, Discourse/Language in Canada: Avant 1860, discours et langages au Canada," held at the University of Toronto in April, 1990; it is continued in this issue of *Canadian Literature* and, we hope, beyond it. Most of those involved have been academics occupied with the teaching of Canada's literatures, and most have had the experience of teaching early texts from tattered photocopies to students for whom the authors are unknown even by name. For students in English-Canada one fact that quickly emerges is that precisely the experience that they are undergoing in the classroom has been re-enacted over and over again in the past of Canadian literature. English-Canadian literature, having forgotten its past, is always "beginning": statements announcing its inception "at last" have been made in the 1820s, in the 1860s, in the 1880s, in the early twentieth century, in the 1920s, in the 1940s, and in the 1950s. Quebec, for reasons alluded to here by Mary Lu MacDonald, has had a stronger link with the beginnings of its own literary history; although (as Jack Warwick has demonstrated in another context)² the construction of such a sense of literary history can occlude the oral or "popular" contexts in which such texts were originally formed — a relationship which Daniel Vaillancourt here attempts to re-establish.

Whether, why, and how we should attempt to reconstruct these "beginnings" is, of course, problematic. Throughout the western world, many literary theorists of the mid-century reacted against the antiquarian, editorial, historical scholarship of the nineteenth century by concentrating criticism on the text and nowhere else. But at the present time we are seeing a return to historical scholarship in its various forms and schools: the "new literary history," "new historicism," "cultural materialism," "social archaeology." ("Discourse analysis," which has proven itself amenable to historical work, underpins all these critical forms, and provides a common methodology, explicit or implicit, for the papers in this volume.) Different as these approaches are, commonalities may be discerned. Such analysis requires that the critic cross-pollinate literary and social perspectives in analysing discourse of whatever sort. It requires a willingness to examine the use of genre and narrative structures in the most "factual" of historical accounts; to look at rhetoric and metaphor in the driest scientific tract; and, conversely, to consider the material determinants of the airily poetic. These material determinants would include the economic, cultural, and engendered circumstances of the writer, and the available conditions of textual production and reception. But it is quite possible to defend such cultural/historical analysis as a theoretical position, yet fail to consider why examination of earlier discourses in Canada is a compelling need. As Gilles Thérien points out at the end of his study of the captivity narrative in early Québécois literature: "Si on peut dénoncer le caractère fantasmatique de la

recherche de l'origine, on ne peut pour autant nier l'utilité de ce fantasme quand il s'agit d'écrire ce que nous sommes."

It was, of course, this question of "who we are" which emerged with full force as an ethical problem in the summer of 1990, while these papers were being prepared. Repeatedly in the months since then, the First Nations people have claimed their right to have a public voice: and it does not trivialize these concerns to see them as rhetorical — questions of representation, of speaking and "speaking for." Our current constitutional crises, after all, often take the form of public debates over the status of pieces of paper, signed — or not signed — generations ago. And in these painful rethinking of confederation and nationhood, the question of "authority" — legislative, judicial, discursive — is posed in the most fundamental way. The insistence with which First Nations people draw attention to the discursive world and its "constitution" mandates careful reading and critique of discursive practices in Canada in both official languages, and at every level: federal, provincial, municipal, in organizations and the media — and in those poems and novels so responsible for defining who "we" are.

This examination demands analysis of linguistic and symbolic fields in their overlaps and mutual interdependencies: detection of the comparative, intergeneric, and intertextual. For the earlier literatures, this means that textual features need to be examined not only in terms of their relations "within" the text, but their relations to the political and social codes of a time long past, and possibly ill-recorded. The question of method, then, of necessity occurs, directly or by example, in all of these essays.

For Gilles Thérien, past narratives must be read in terms of the available genres, *topoi* and *tropes* of the discursive field of the day; Denis Lafrenière demonstrates how narrative and symbolic structures can be accommodated to the "grammar" of a colonialist project; both are attentive to the vanishing act accomplished through symbolizations of the Native "other." This textual situation requires the critic to learn to read what is not at the centre, what is not represented; this is the task undertaken by Christine Welsh, who queries the very definition of the "historical," and its cultural specificities. The problem of reading the absent is particularly acute for those who would recover oral discourses of the past, a dilemma which faces George Lang in reconstructing the geography of an oral and inter-linguistic zone. The question of comparative work is also raised by a number of the writers in various ways (Hélène Marcotte, Mary Lu MacDonald, and Pierre Rajotte); they, along with Henry Hubert, initiate inquiry into the institutional — and para-institutional — settings of early discourse, and the relation of the "what is said" to social structures. This latter problem recurs in the papers of Jennifer and J. T. H. Connor and Suzanne Zeller, who bring together the seemingly-divergent discourses of an earlier day to show their mutual encoding.

Daniel Vaillancourt's paper concentrates these different angles of vision to focus on a specific moment in the development of "literacy" and the literary — a moment, he demonstrates, which is literally transcribed into the texts under consideration; in turn, the performance of that transcription creates the discursive position for the reader-to-be. If Christine Welsh's search for the voices of her foremothers models the project of creating a new account of the discourses of early Canada, Vaillancourt's image of the *écrivain* calling literacy into being provides a paradigm for its objectives. Here we see clearly the range of issues that need to be considered: the intersection of cultural worlds, the remaking of discourse which results as various forms of contact take place, the individual's situation within one or many institutional frameworks, the problematic choices of stylistic register and genre made by writers and audiences as they mould and break discursive forms.

There are, of course, absences from the essays here, which point to in-progress or possible work to come. Gender issues need to be considered, not only the different textual forms used by women and embodied in Maggie Hogue's sampler, but the interface between the discursive stances adopted by men and women. It should be noted, too, that with two exceptions all the papers deal with the discursive productions of Euro-Canadians; again, with these two exceptions, the languages treated are French and English. While the question of political discourse appears in many papers, there is no direct treatment of speeches, proceedings, or debates, nor of legislative or judicial constructions. Other areas where there is much to explore include the symbolics of cartoons, sketches, and topography, and the rhetoric of domestic, mercantile, military, and economic cultures.

To examine the past *as* discourse would be to turn upon those days the tools we currently find profitable for our own times. Some recent examples from the newspapers show current intersections of the socio-political and the rhetorical. Interestingly, the Spicer Commission, whose self-proclaimed search was for the poetry of a nation, was counted a failure primarily on stylistic grounds ("short on lyricism, long on bureaucratism")³; and financier Conrad Black's attack on the "socialist hordes" comprising the new Ontario government gained legitimacy by deploying the conventions of the classical invective.⁴ A recent editorial in the *Globe and Mail* quoted two management specialists on the very questions we have been addressing here. "Canadians in general have a unique outlook," they observe: "in many cases, they believe that the future will mirror the past, and they are reluctant to change. While Canadians currently enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the world, they have become used to the idea that their country should be able to sustain that standard of living indefinitely."⁵ What the speakers object to, it would at first appear, is an unthinking mimeticism, an inability to take a national future boldly into our own hands. The stakes of their argument become much clearer when we remember how compellingly the image of the mirror has functioned in the Canadian imaginary⁶ in the interests of both "survival" and remembrance,

embodying the notion that our Canadian identities are formed through a reflective relationship to our surroundings and to our past — reflective in all the senses of that word.

These are thematic and generic issues taken from the standard repertoire of literary analysis and applied in unexpected areas. Those who pursue the project we advocate here will need to consider the constitutive power of discourse itself, its power to make and unmake writers and audiences, to permit or deny the discussion of issues. The writing and assembling of these essays is thus heuristic, rather than descriptive or prescriptive. It is an invitation to take up a thread from Maggie Hogue's sampler and follow it wherever it goes.

NOTES

- ¹ "Bookmen and Scholars," *Aspects of Nineteenth-Century Ontario: Essays Presented to James J. Talman*, ed. F. H. Armstrong et al. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1974), 327-33.
- ² *The Long Journey: Literary Themes of French Canada* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1968).
- ³ "Spicer Report Is 'Short on Lyricism, Long on Bureaucratism,'" *Globe and Mail*, 15 June 1991: A1.
- ⁴ "Socialist Hordes Have Their Day," *Financial Post*, 10 September 1990: 11.
- ⁵ Alan M. Rugman and Joseph R. D'Cruz of the Faculty of Management Studies at the University of Toronto, quoted in "Pushing Canada to Hone its Competitive Edge," editorial *Globe and Mail*, 16 April 1991: A14.
- ⁶ See Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972): 9, epigraph from Germaine Warkentin, "An Image in a Mirror," *Alphabet 8* (June, 1964): 73-4.

