GENIUS LOCI

The Ghost in Canadian Literature

J. M. Kertzer

Earle Birney's Ghost

BIRNEY'S POETIC BARB, "Can. Lit.," ends with a familiar but still revealing puzzle about Canadian character: "It's only by our lack of ghosts we're haunted." Unlike America, Canada casts no heroic shadows, because our bland citizens lack the historical traumas and the responsive imagination to expose the dreams on which the nation was built or to name its presiding ghost. Our ghost should serve — as Wordsworth advises in "Tintern Abbey" — as "The anchor of [our] purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of [our] heart, and soul / Of all [our] moral being." But the Canadian guardian spirit finds its home too vast and too vacant to fill with images. We have no totemic eagle, only "æromantic hens" — Birney's ungainly phrase probably aimed at poets of the Canadian Authors' Association.

Ironically, according to Birney's paradox we actually are haunted, but only by a palpable absence that identifies, not ourselves, but our peculiar identity crisis. His warning that foreign fancy ("æromantic") cannot cope with Canada conceals his own romantic assumptions. Wordsworth's reassuring tone might be more appropriate to the Wye valley than to the Mackenzie or St. Lawrence, but his effort to touch a spiritual source in "nature and the language of the sense" corresponds to Birney's search for genius and genesis, that is, for the origins of a Canadian *genius loci.* As W. H. New explains, Birney charts the nation's sensibility as it emerges from the wilderness, attains self-consciousness and defines itself through art; but in "a kind of cosmic joke" he finds "nada" within "Canada," silence within our national speech. "Silence and absence become curiously positive virtues," New concludes (260, 266).

Birney's ghost-of-a-ghost is a curious virtue of literary criticism whenever it strives to be specifically Canadian. My purpose is not to characterize the ghost, but to show how its spectral presence haunts the project of defining a national literature. As a spectre of thought, the ghost cannot be captured, but it cannot be exorcised

either. Entrapment and exorcicsm are both necessary yet impossible; they are complementary needs that arise whenever critics investigate what precisely is national about a national literature. We — the community of Canadian readers — trust that "Canadian literature" exists as a viable object of study, but what historical and conceptual expectations do we bring to the project of defining a literature peculiar to our country? In addressing this question, I intend to look back at critics who have fallen from favour, although I will conclude by glancing to the future. I also limit myself to writing in English, although many of my points apply with greater intensity to Québécois writing.

If English-Canadians have a national discourse, what are its unifying principles? Unity is difficult to find in Canadian literature, yet we cannot avoid looking for it because, like Birney's ghost, it is a necessary illusion, a figment that delineates our imagination. By way of contrast consider "The Englishness of the English Novel," an essay in which Q. D. Leavis has no trouble identifying "the true English spirit" as pragmatic, sympathetic, Protestant, wary of absolutes and responsive to "the Shakespearian 'fullness of life' " (311-15). She delights in all that is "very English," but what is remarkable is her own display of "Englishness." It appears in her national pride, in her mistrust of continental Europe, and in her utter confidence that she speaks from the very heart of her culture. The English novel is great because it both draws on and reinforces this centre. Consequently, the merits of particular novels reflect their relation to the central tradition, since the best novels are also the most authentic. Canadians can supply a comparable list of national attributes; Richard M. Coe offers a useful summary. What is lacking in Canadian criticism, for good or ill, is Leavis's confidence in a shared national character and in the centrality of her critical view. I grant that her apparently secure position is actually unstable. She and F. R. Leavis often regarded the critic as an outcast antagonistic to industrial culture, and the Leavises became withdrawn and idiosyncratic in their attitudes (points made by Francis Mulhern in *The Moment of Scrutiny*). Nevertheless, they defend an English tradition that is great in part because it is national, or whose greatness is national in character. It is far more difficult to define a great Canadian tradition and to speak from its centre.

The difficulty in determining how much diversity a national literature can tolerate is itself revealing. Critics such as John Metcalf or John Moss (more recently in "Bushed in the Sacred Wood") reject the national question as a dead end. But even if they could assert standards which were "purely" literary, they still must respond to Leavis's claim that literary merit and authenticity are reciprocal. A national literature helf creates and half perceives. It expresses our temperament; it casts and recasts our history; it speaks for the spirit(s) of the nation. Frank Watt sums up the chief aspiration of a national literature to unite spirit and place:

> Literature is then seen as a force which, quite apart from its motives, contributes to the articulation and clarification of Canadians' consciousness of themselves and

> of the physical, social and moral context in which they live their lives. . . .Canadian writers help to bring alive the shared history, limitations, fulfilments, virtues and depravities which make at least some Canadians feel related to each other and to their land. (236-237)

We can detect Birney's ghostly ghost in Watt's assertion that literature calls into articulate form something that lies "quite apart from" its immediate motives. Its ulterior purpose is to call forth a broad consciousness, which clarifies all aspects of our "shared" life, and which must be elicited by sensitive reading. Note the distinction proposed between the immediate matter of literature and its underlying moral ("virtues and depravities") consciousness. This duality of place and spirit recurs in some form in all accounts of national literature.

SPIRIT AND PLACE combine in the genius loci. It is a "genius" in the Latin sense of guardian spirit, which was associated ambiguously, according to C. S. Lewis, with both the universal, generative God, and the specific *daimon* of any person. The spiritual double later came to represent the poetic self of a writer (169). Genius is both general ("Genius") and particular ("genius"), but in either case it is a fertile power. The *genius loci* was the deity who presided over a given place, whether a sacred grove or an entire country, and who gave it its distinctive character and energy. When modern critics try to pinpoint what joins spirit to place, they are apt to be less mystical but more vague. George Orwell explains the Englishness of the English by referring to the "air," "flavour" and "*mystique*" of the nation. "Something" "somehow" grants an "emotional unity" by which the "nation is bound together by an invisible chain" (64, 74, 77). Orwell is far from mystical when he confesses the impalpable nature of what he is trying to capture. He has a very practical sense of the deceptions involved in defining a national spirit, which may just as well be based on compelling illusions (71). Still, he trusts that the illusions are shared throughout Britain, that they unify the country and that they colour its national character.

When Birney seeks a Canadian genius, he is closer to Orwell than to Leavis. He is far less confident, however, about the spiritual unity of his country, and registers his uncertainty in what we might call his anti-romantic romanticism. He wants to demystify the pretensions of "æromantic" verse, but only because he seeks a more earthy and authentic mystery. The implications of his pursuit parallel those in René Wellek's explanation of the growth of "romantic historicism" in mid-twentieth century American criticism:

> It is ultimately derived from the body of ideas developed by [Johann Gottfried von] Herder and his successors, who looked for the organicity and continuity of literature as an expression of the national spirit, the folk. . . . Many recent critics are con-

cerned with defining the nature of the American, the Americanism of American literature, often only dimly aware of how much is common to man, modern man, and common to Europe and America (333).

Wellek also notes that the quasi-mystical tendencies of Herder's philosophy were "assimilated to the prevailing rationalist or pragmatist temper of the nation and certainly were rarely pushed to their irrationalist and often obscurantist extremes" (333).

Romantic Historicism and the National Spirit

According to Herder, humanity is divided by fate and choice into distinct geographical/cultural units or *Völker* (nationalities). Frank E. Manuel comments:

> The history of the world for Herder is the history of these *Völker*, their formation as a consequence of the interpenetration of their physical environment and their being, their creation of a mythic cosmology, a music, and a poetry, above all, a language. The union of their original nature, their genius, and the environment reaches a climax in a form-giving moment — it is not quite clear whether this is the discovery of religious or of linguistic identity. But nothing static results. The process of change is continuous as long as the people is alive. (xvii)

Human identity is national in character, because its basis is cultural, historical and collective rather than individual. Identity derives from place, genius, tradition and language, and its highest expression is in religion and the arts (Barnard 7ff.).[1] Birney's satire depends on the comical mishap that Canada's "form-giving moment" has failed to yield a recognizable shape, but in a further irony, his rueful, self-mocking pleasure expresses the Canadian temper he has failed to identify. Although Herder emphasizes language as the key influence, Canadian critics stress place and genius as the physical and spiritual factors appropriate to their nation. Viewed in Herder's terms, Northrop Frye's riddle expressing Canadian perplexity, "Where is here?" (220) takes on a deeper resonance. It refers, not just to the disorientation of the pioneer, or to psychological confusion about identity, but to an unsettling metaphysical plight.

This plight arises because Herder's philosophical idealism is so stubbornly thwarted by Canadian experience. Herder treats mind as the determining reality behind the phenomena of nature and nation. The creative national moment produces a spiritual form, a ghost. Material conditions are decisive, but only because they predispose the growth of mind. Herder speaks of the "*spirit of climate*," which "does not force, but incline: it gives the imperceptible disposition, which strikes us indeed in the general view of the life and manners of indigenous nations" (Herder 20). Literature, at a further remove, is an epi-phenomenon, a network of symbols that give tangible expression to an intangible spirit. Literature is the voice of a people, the highest expression of their history, society and self.

Shifting from German to English romanticism, we find that Thomas Carlyle also treats literature as the "genius" or "national mind" (168, 170) of a country:

> Thus the History of a nation's Poetry is the essence of its History, political, economic, scientific, religious. With all these the complete Historian of a national Poetry will be familiar; the national physiognomy, in its finest traits, and through its successive stages of growth, will be clear to him: he will discern the grand spiritual Tendency of each period, what was the highest Aim and Enthusiasm of mankind in each, and how one epoch naturally evolved itself from the other. He has to record the highest Aim of a nation, in its successive directions and developments; for by this the Poetry of the nation modulates itself; this *is* the Poetry of the nation. (166)

National poetry with its noble physiognomy is the ancestor of Birney's faceless ghost. For Carlyle, reality is spirit (essence), made forceful through will (Aim and Enthusiasm), which in turn shapes the physical world to spiritual ends. History is *Geistesgeschichte*: the perfecting of mind as it leads — according to Hegel — toward self-realization and freedom. For Hegel, too, the course of history, although essentially a spiritual progress, depends materially on a sequence of cultures, all rooted in their own "soil" (80), which nourishes their national genius.[2] Poetry is the voice of their genius and of their history. In Hegel we also find the idea, so seductive that it becomes domineering, that "each particular National genuis is to be treated as only One Individual in the process of Universal History" (53). Since a country is united by a national mind, it can be treated as a single person. The United States becomes Uncle Sam. Canada is more difficult to define, but that difficulty is itself appropriated by the Hegelian model. Canada and its literature are commonly characterized according to a "lexicon of maturation" (Weir 24), by which the country is pictured as a youth striving for self-consciousness.[3]

NINETEENTH-CENTURY romantic historicism appears in Canada in Edward Hartley Dewart's introduction to *Selections from Canadian Poets*:

> The literature of the world is the foot-prints of human progress . . . A national literature is an essential element in the formation of national character. It is not merely the record of a country's mental progress: it is the expression of its intellectual life, the bond of national unity, and the guide of national energy. It may be fairly questioned, whether the whole range of history presents the spectacle of a people firmly united politically, without the subtle but powerful cement of a patriotic literature. (ix)

Once again, the nation is conceived of as a single intellect, which shares in the mental progress of humanity but leaves its own foot-prints in its own soil. The idealism is less exuberant than Carlyle's, but it is sustained by Dewart's enthusiasm for Confederation. He stresses the unity of a new country which, he acknowledges later in the same paragraph, already has a "tendency to sectionalism and disinte-

gration" (x). His insistence on union, however, is not merely political; or rather, his politics derive from a view of history that regards Canada as a single mind with its own "national character" and "mental progress." Although some of his terms may sound quaint to us today, they are not so different from Watt's, quoted earlier. It is remarkable how often Dewart's ideas recur in different guises whenever Canadian criticism becomes nationalistic, if not openly patriotic. One implication of my argument is that literature conceived in national terms must always be nationalistic, and will tend to draw on the romantic figures enunciated by Dewart.

The quoted passages illustrate a current of thought that sweeps from Europe to North America, with Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's *History of English Literature* (1864) offering the strongest defense of the environmental/national thesis in literature. Dewart reveals, however, that romantic historicism cannot cope with the material diversity of Canada, which challenges the theory's devotion to spiritual unity. Herder notes the essential unity of all humanity (5), a unity expressed differently in the many *Völker*, which in turn display a more specific unity determined by place, language and tradition: "For every nation is one people, having its own national form, as well as its own language" (7). Despite his studious attention to physical conditions of climate and geography, Herder ultimately relies on idealism to secure the indispensable unity of a nation. The great goal of organic unity, which runs through romantic theories, depends on spirit as an invigorating energy. A *Volk* shares not just a country, but a spirit of place and a spirit of climate. Thus the motto of the United States, *E pluribus unum*, announces a political determination to make one out of many. While the individuality of Americans is certainly respected, their motto expresses a common spirit of liberty, which is a liberty to be the same, to share the same national dreams. Herder emphasizes that spiritual unity is ultimately transcendental: the "national mind" is shared by all citizens; or in the loftier Hegelian view, it is a fragment of the Universal Spirit of History. This idealist principle ensures that there will always be a ghost — a spiritual ideal that confers unity — haunting a national literature.

Birney's ghost-of-a-ghost expresses Canadians' wariness of national unity and its idealized forms. To Herder, who disapproved of centralized government, colonialism and "cultural miscegenation" (Manuel xxi), Canada would be an anomaly, a land without a ghost. Because its anomalous position has persisted since 1867, however, it casts doubt on the theory that it infringes. In defiance of Herder, Canada has remained intact (so far) even though its climate and terrain are diverse, its regions are openly antagonistic, and its two main language groups compete with other ethnic traditions. In defiance of Herder, some historians argue that Canadians are actually united by their differences, because they share "particularist habits of mind" (Careless 8).[4] This curious drama appears in Dewart's complaint about "sectionalism and disintegration" at the very moment of Confederation. Nevertheless, he is pressed by his concern for a national literature to insist on a common

spirit nourished by poetry and rooted in a native soil. The best Canadian literature must be "autochthonous," Charles Mair exhorted in 1875; it "must grasp with its roots, and be nourished by, the inner and domestic life of the people. . . . [it] must taste of the wood, and be the genuine product of the national imagination and invention" (152). Unfortunately, this earthy ideal has spiritual sources that fit awkwardly into the realities of Canadian history and literature, with the result that we often find critical ambitions torn by conflicting impulses.

Canadian Criticism and the Genius Loci

Early Canadian critics like Mair found the local soil unsuited to their hopes for a transplanted literature conceived according to the romantic model. Romantic historicism leaves a rich legacy of glorious but unfulfilled promises, which I have summed up in the figure of the ghost-of-a-ghost. The ghost will continue to haunt Canadian criticism as long as we conceive of our literature as the national voice of a *genius loci*. I am not recommending that we reject this literary model, only that we recognize its problematic nature. The following topics are all expressions of the problem.

1. Critical Vocabulary

Romantic historicism bequeaths a legacy of images that we can hardly resist, because they seem so natural, but that are tendentious and unreliable. When we trace them to their idealist origins, we see why they are inconsistent in a Canadian context. For example, I have already used the metaphor of "transplanting" to describe the growth of Canadian literature. It is one of many figures derived from a vocabulary of soil, roots, fertility and cultivation. Imagery of organic process is compelling in the double sense that it imposes itself on us, so that we use it without question; and that it conveys comforting assumptions about the relation between literature, spirit and place.

Wilfred Eggleston is the critic who, in *The Frontier and Canadian Letters*, most fully develops the figure of transplanting: he explains how difficult it was to uproot, transport and transplant European culture in a new cultural soil (23ff., 28ff.).[5] What begins as a helpful analogy gradually works its way so thoroughly into the texture of his argument, that the tropes of planting, nurturing and flowering take on the force of literal statement. When he seeks the "working laws or principles" (18) of cultural transplantation, he moves beyond physical and cultural conditions, which he documents carefully, into a philosophy of history. That philosophy proceeds by extending the gardening analogy, even though it was adopted only as a working hypothesis (23). A figure of speech has turned into a theory of cultural growth. In Herder's theory, "soil" denotes not just place, but the spirit of place. It is not surprising, therefore, to find Eggleston revealing his idealist premises in such phrases as ,"The climate of spiritual values is an intangible factor"

(38) and "a shift to such cultural, intellectual social and spiritual values as may feed the spirit" (55).

Eggleston is betrayed by his own vocabulary. A "strictly *native* literature" (2) must derive from the spirit of the frontier, not from the colonial spirit. But the frontier spirit proves to be positively anti-literary and anti-imaginative: "The adverse influence of frontier life, in short, was capable not only of blocking the emergence of native artists, but also of killing off the literary ambitions of experienced writers among the immigrants" (73). At this point the argument becomes circular. "Inspiration" cannot come from abroad; as the word implies, it must be breathed in from the local atmosphere. Unfortunately the *genius loci* remains breathless until Canada is transformed into "an organic outgrowth of Western European culture" (30), in which case the genius is not local at all. A truly Canadian art is impossible.[6] One solution to the dilemma is proposed by Douglas Le Pan in "A Country without Mythology" in the hidden figure of Manitou, the unrecognized spirit of place. By shifting mythology, Le Pan reinstates the romantic genius in native dress. This tactic is used at much greater length by D. G. Jones in *Butterfly on Rock*. But Eggleston has explicitly refused this avenue: "the spirit and philosophy of the new North American society was to be European, certainly not Indian, or anything else" (30).

2. Genius as Genesis

Romantic historicism bequeaths to national literatures the duty to rediscover and celebrate their origins, a duty that is bound to puzzle Canadians whose origins are so diverse. Genius should be genetic — another term favoured by Herder — in the sense that it identifies a nation according to its moment of birth. Arguing against Eggleston's frontier thesis is "The Case of the Missing Face," an essay in which Hugh Kenner notes wryly that the "surest way to the hearts of a Canadian audience is to inform them that their souls are to be identified with rock, rapids, wilderness, and virgin (but exploitable) forest" (203). He condemned this "half-conscious self-identification with the aboriginal wilderness-tamers" (204) as a hindrance to mature literature, and urged Canadians to "cut the umbilical cord to the wilderness" (207). But the imagery of genesis and originality, which he employs in mockery, actually reveals a national duty that Canadian writers and critics cannot ignore.

I REALIZE THAT MANY CRITICS propose a pursuit of origins as the phantom goal of literature. Virtually any theory concerned with repetition, that is, with literature conceived as a process of renewal and rebellion, will find expression in the endless quest for origins. From the vantage of national literature,

however, origin means Herder's form-giving moment, the creative instant when spirit and place first join. If a writer can touch the native spirit at its moment of genesis when it broods over the virgin soil, then the two competing aspects of genius described by C. S. Lewis will harmonize: the writer's individual genius (talent, vision, inspiration) will merge with the national Genius and give it voice. Accordingly, Canadian writers often feel, or are encouraged by their critics to feel, that they have a duty to rediscover the land as if for the first time. They must be imaginative pioneers. Margaret Atwood invokes Susanna Moodie, and turns her into the spirit of the land she once detested. Margaret Laurence appeals to Catherine Parr Traill, George Bowering to George Vancouver. Jack Hodgins reinvents Vancouver Island. As Barry Cameron notes (111-2), attempts to define a Canadian tradition usually take the form of hunting for a source, which will create "Canada" as a unified, cultural presence, and which will authorize a legitimate line of descent. Numerous poets have followed Archibald Lampman into the woods, not only because they were heeding Wordsworth's advice, but because they reinterpreted Wordsworth's guardian spirit as the *genius loci.*

Critical studies such as *Survival, Patterns of Exile* and *The Wacousta Syndrome* are committed to the same belief. When Atwood says in *Survival* that for the sake of argument she will treat all literary works "as though they were written by Canada" (12), her off-hand remark conceals a grand assumption, which is sustained by the same rhetorical ploy that turned America into Uncle Sam. She asserts rather than proves the psychological unity of her subject: Canada is to be treated as a single person, a patient whose neuroses take the form of literature. Arguing on this basis, she can then track to its colonial and Calvinist sources the *genius loci*, or as she calls it, "the Canadian psyche" (73). Similarly, when McGregor studies the Canadian "langscape," she devises a composite word to probe the point of fusion, not only between subject and object, but between land and language, place and spirit. To describe the peculiarly Canadian qualities of this encounter, she too returns to Frye's garrison and Richardson's *Wacousta*, where she detects the genesis of the Canadian imagination. The same border-line confrontation, she suggests, must be repeated by subsequent writers as they re-enact the primal discovery of the land. True, McGregor is no idealist; she analyzes the encounter in cultural, psychological and ideological terms. But directing these terms in all their manifestations is a Canadian frame of mind genetically shaped by frontier and colony.

3. Merit and Authenticity

For Q. D. Leavis, the literary merits of the best English novels are inseparable from their accuracy in expressing the Englishness of England. Individual talent, æsthetic skill and national character harmonize perfectly. She never worries that cultural and creative values might drift apart, so that poor novels might perversely

be more authentic than good ones. Canadian critics hope for the same balance, but they find authenticity a problem, because it is another name for the national ghost. Frye begins his "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada* by praising the volume for treating weaker writers who nevertheless are truly Canadian. The greatest literature "pulls us away from the Canadian context toward the centre of literary experience itself" (214). Canadians lack such classics, he admits, but in the meantime our literature, precisely because it is inferior, gives us a clearer view of the "Canadian context." For Leavis, merit and authenticity reinforce each other; for Frye, they tug in different directions.

A better example of the conflict occurs in Dick Harrison's *Unnamed Country*. Beginning with the orthodox assumption that place and spirit are intimately and eloquently allied, Harrison examines dozens of western novels in order to identify the prairie mentality. At first he prefers writing which is authentic: "From a *purely literary standpoint*, the work of Begg, Hayes, and MacLean is no more accomplished than that of Mackie, Ballantyne, or 'Zero,' but it shows a certain promise which was not fulfilled in the writing that followed. The early "realists' documentary impulse might have provided a base from which an *authentically western regional literature* could have risen . . ." (66, my emphasis). The first group are not better writers, but they are more realistic and accurate. Elsewhere, however, Harrison shifts ground when his evidence threatens to lead to the wrong conclusion. Of the many early novels examined, he judges only a few to be valuable, even though they are not typical. Most novels are romantic, optimistic and sentimental, whereas the few important ones are pessimistic, tragic and (more or less) realistic. Because the evidence does not seem to bear out the theory, Harrison must change the basis of his judgment. To defend the authors whom he prefers (Grove, Ross), he shifts his critical ground from authenticity to literary merit, and the tension between the two standards is, to my mind, not resolved.

The problem is all too familiar. We often study authors whom we do not consider particularly "good," but who are "important" in historical or cultural terms. Canons and standards of excellence are now the subject of much critical debate, and this unease with objective standards should alert us to the difficulty of aligning the true (authenticity) and the beautiful (merit), especially when we limit ourselves to Canadian truth and Canadian beauty. John Metcalf comes to mind as someone who would sweep away all inferior writers. More diplomatically, John Moss distinguishes between the conflicting demands of æsthetic excellence and thematic validity, and calls for a return to the former: "It is time now that Canadian literary criticism serve the literature itself, time to stop considering literature a map of our collective consciousness; a mirror of our personality; a floodlight illuminating the national sensibility. It is time to consider Canadian literature as literature and not another thing ("Bushed" 175-6). The trouble is that as long as the literature in question is specifically Canadian and "not another thing," then we

cannot make so clear a distinction. Moss's final phrase (echoing T. S. Eliot), which calls for a formalist purity of æsthetic and critical response, sounds nostalgic. His assurance that "Nationality must be recognized as having more to do with nationalism than with art" (176), ignores the tenacity of romantic historicism.

4. Nationalism

As we have seen, for Herder, the unity of a nation is spiritual in nature. A fragmented country like Canada, which he would not consider a true nation at all, is far too jumbled to achieve authentic unity or to speak in a single, literary voice. Jacques Derrida insists further that for *all* philosophies, whether idealist or materialist, unity of any kind ultimately must be recognized as spiritual essence. Unity is a spectral projection of the mind, as it wanders through the labyrinth of language.[7] Therefore the *genius loci* is bound to reappear whenever writers get nationalistic or stress the political unity of the country.

Its resurgence is apparent even in the writing of history. In his survey of Canadian historiography, Carl Berger detects an oscillation between idealist and materialist theories, and notes that at times of intense nationalism, idealist views reappear and take on a romantic tone. On the one hand we find historians like Frank Underhill and Harold Innis who insist on the "material realities" of staples, markets, technology and political institutions (98), because they mistrust the way constitutional historians rely on patriotic but impalpable matters of spirit, sentiment and moral union (96). On the other hand we find the Canadian ghost re-emerging in Berger's characterization of Arthur Lower's "pantheistic feeling for the mystery of the forest" (115) which extends to an obsession with Canadian unity and the " 'national soul' " (125).[8] Similarly Berger notes the assumption made by the Massey Commission in 1951 "that there were important spiritual resources in the nation that inspired its people and prompted their actions, and that national unity, while resting on material foundations, belonged ultimately to the realm of ideas" (179).

A BETTER EXAMPLE for our purposes is provided by W. L. Morton. He argues that geography and settlement have given Canada "a distinct, a unique, a northern destiny" (4), which pervades all aspects of Canadian culture from manners, to politics, to literature. Like Herder, Morton insists on physical conditions, especially the ruggedness of our "perpetual" frontier (72), but he accounts for the unifying force of environment by appealing to spiritual qualities: "The line which marks off the frontier from the farmstead, the wilderness from the baseland, the hinterland from the metropolis, runs through evey Canadian psyche" (93). After asserting that Canadians share in the native spirit of their land, Morton, like Eggleston, proceeds to reverse his perspective. He argues that the same rugged,

hinterland conditions which forged our national identity, also made the country utterly dependent on foreign metropolitan centres. Subservience is pervasive and has shaped all aspects of Canadian life:

> That is, the whole culture of the northern and maritime frontier, to succeed as well as survive, required from outside a high religion, a great literature, and the best available science and technology to overcome its inherent limitations. These very limitations of climate and of material and human resources made the frontier dependent on a metropolitan culture for those essentials. The alternatives were extinction or complete adaptation to the lowest level of survival in northern conditions. (94)

All the "high," "great" and "best" cultural features, which previously were indigenous, now are transplanted. For Morton as for Eggleston, native (i.e. Indian) values prove to be unacceptable. Both authors are describing a historical process rather than a static condition, a progressive shift in authority and autonomy from Europe to Canada. But what are shifting are the very cultural values that, they earlier claimed, should spring naturally from the local soil.

5. History as Myth as History

The *genius loci* is not just the spriit of place, but the spirit of the history and culture of that place. Because the figure blends spirit with matter, the ideal with the actual, it readily expresses how myth informs history, how history strives to rise into myth, and how myth in turn lapses into history. It used to be common for English Canadians to lament that somehow they had no history or myth. Birney's poem, "Can.Lit.," expresses both the dilemma and the romanticism that provokes the discontent. Such complaints have dwindled but not disappeared, even in the present, post-national age.[9] I would argue, on the contrary, that our vexed desire for a national literature has obsessed us with history and myth, which we produce in abundance, since they offer the two main discourses for interpreting national identity. They provide two ways of identifying — or failing to identify — the Canadian ghost. The two styles dominating literary criticism until recently have been historical and mythological. As Barry Cameron's chapter in the fourth volume of the *Literary History of Canada* reveals, most of the studies published before Frye are literary and cultural histories; following Frye, we find a varied mixture of history and mythology.

I do not wish to enter the long debate between history and myth, only to observe that Canadian critics are inevitably tossed between the two, depending on whether they regard the *genius loci* as immanent or transcendent, that is, within or beyond the patterns of history. I noted in the previous section how historical studies drift towards idealism and even myth; Donald Creighton's "Laurentian thesis" is a prime example. The reverse is true as well: in literature, myth often lapses into history. Works like *Tay John* and *The Donnelly Trilogy* trace a fall from an age of

heroes to an age of mundane reality. Instead of apotheosis, we find *Götterdämmerung.* The arguments, shuttling back and forth between history and myth, recall René Wellek's observation that the mystical and irrationalist tendencies of Herder's philosophy were assimilated to the rationalist temper of America. A similar caution has caused Canadian critics to treat myth in the cool, orderly way that Frye does; or to keep it at a cautious narrative distance, as in Rudy Wiebe's treatment of Indians and Métis; or to convert myth to parody, as in Robert Kroetsch's novels.

Kroetsch has said in conversation: "I have considerable disdain or distrust for history. History is a form of narrative that is coercive. I don't trust the narrative of history because it begins from meaning instead of discovering meanings along the way. I thing myth dares to discover its way toward meanings . . ." (*Labyrinths* 133). Other comments show, however, that Kroetsch cannot leave history alone. In one mood, at least, he would like to advance "beyond nationalism" (as he entitles one essay) and its persistent idealism. This resolve leads him to Michel Foucault's notion of "genealogy," which opposes history by being a dissenting, anti-metaphysical mode of enquiry. But as Foucault admits later in the essay cited by Kroetsch, "The genealogist needs history to dispel the chimeras of the origin" (144). Genealogy cannot supersede history; it conducts a running battle with it. Similarly, Kroetsch disdains the supreme promise of history — the identity and destiny of a nation as rooted in its origin — but he remains dazzled by it. In "Beyond Nationalism," he tries to exorcize the phantom of history, but even as he does so, he honours the ghost by generalizing freely about the peculiar qualities of Canadian experience and literature. He rejects nationalism, yet he preserves the national character. In *The Crow Journals*, where he records his plan to write the mythic history of a prairie town, he again reveals his fascination with origins and genesis (69), and with the "genius of place, of that new old place, [that] must be located in the literature itself, not in the absent gods" (17). The new old place is located at the narrative juncture of history and myth. Kroetsch has an aggravated case of the Canadian malaise. He mistrusts the ghost, which corresponds to what he calls "meaning": it is the promise of unity or spiritual presence. Yet he is enchanted with the ghost as well, and even includes an equivocal spook in *What the Crow Said.* The oscillation between history and myth, falling and flying, becomes a structural principle in the novel.

6. Exorcism

Following the publication of *Survival* in 1972, the condemnation of thematic criticism by Frank Davey, Barry Cameron and Michael Dixon, Russell Brown, and by W. F. Garrett-Petts, expressed not so much a scorn for theme as such as for the historical and mythological biases that dominated Canadian writing. These biases reinforce what Francesco Loriggio calls "an ideology of theme" that is cohesive or

federalist in emphasis (59, 63). My purpose in this essay has been to trace some implications of this centralist ideology, which current critics condemn, not only because it is thematic or nationalistic, but because it is essentialist. It evaluates literature in so far as it expresses a national, mythical or æsthetic essence — our ghost. Current criticism, whether semiological, deconstructive or feminist, challenges notions of both essence and place. Since the *genius loci* is the essence of place, it is particularly vulnerable to the postmodern critique, whereby literature is set in a no man's land rather than in a native soil. The implications are unsettling for any national literature, because the national ghost is given no place to settle. Spirit can hardly unite poetically with place, when spirit (idealism, unity, genius) is rejected as a domineering illusion cast up by language, and place (the ground of being, thinking and speaking) is merely a construction. The question therefore arises: is it possible to exorcize the ghost of the Canadian imagination?

Two critics suggest the difficulty of exorcism. In *A Tale of Two Countries*, Stanley Fogel condemns the Canadian fixation on national identity, because it has kept our writing claustrophobic and naive. While postmodern Americans debunk national myths, conservative Canadians still pursue the phantom of identity, which contemporary criticism has already discredited. "National identities are inflated constructs, products of advertising and politics" (30), not of literature, whose duty on the contrary is to explore such delusions. Americans have identified their ghost, and grown tired of its false glamour, while Canadians have not. Nevertheless, Fogel has no qualms in praising American critics who have "defined and redefined the contemporary American sensibility as it is manifested in American fiction" (7). He readily traces that sensibility to its origins by summarizing the familiar history of the "American dream": "With both beneficent and deleterious consequences, the myth has taken hold of and shaped the American character" (10). Therefore he has not dispelled the illusion of an American genius, only rejected some of its manifestations as facile, while elsewhere the wily American temper continues to animate the work of Coover, Pynchon and Gass. He has displaced the ghost and rendered it more sophisticated, not exorcized it.

A more subtle displacement occurs in Barbara Godard's survey of criticism written since the 1970s. She notes with some disapproval that when critics like Davey, Cameron and Eli Mandel purged their analyses of paraphrase and Canadian content, they drifted toward phenomenological and historical positions. In view of the preceding discussion, this drift should not be surprising, since it leads back toward the safe ground of myth and history. Godard in effect complains that these critics were not radical enough, but the remarkable grip that history still has on Canadian critics is confirmed by Linda Hutcheon's *The Canadian Postmodern*, which presents as the pre-eminent Canadian literary form, " 'historiographic metafiction,' " which is "intensely, self-reflexively art, but is also grounded in historical, social, and political realities" (13). This anti-formal mode is more problematic than earlier

models of writing and criticism, but it retains their appetite for history and their tendency to read history as myth and myth as history. Like Fogel, Hutcheon finds a more sophisticated home for the ghost, but one that is still "grounded" in the national soil.

GODARD TAKES THE MATTER a step further by treating Canadian writing as a discourse of "the Other," rather than of national genius:

> Canadian literature is a deterritorialized literature. At the centre of its concerns is the Other — women, natives and immigrants — to produce a hybrid, "littérature mineure," an a-signifying language, in which cultural difference is difference encoded within language itself. . . . The hybridization and dissemination occurring within the Canadian literary discourse as the writing of these minorities is included are themselves emblematic of the place of Canadian literature within world literature, as the rise of the repressed, dislocating and undermining the logic of the literary systems of the Anglo-American world, produces a limit to writing. (44)

"Littérature mineure" is Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's term for a "deterritorialized" discourse which shadows and disrupts mainstream culture. It is the marginal literature that a minority writes in a major language.[10] Yet with this counter-definition, we return to our point of departure. The Other is not a ghost (spiritual presence), but then neither was Birney's ghost-of-a-ghost. The Other is a mirror image of the Genius, not its essence but its absence, not its significance but its "a-significance," not its central focus but its "dissemination." It is the Canadian way of erasing history and myth. Just the same, Godard is still concerned with literature that is characteristically Canadian, and so is drawn to speculate about that character. Hegel suggested that a nation should be considered as a single person; Dewart pictured Canada as a Victorian-Canadian gentleman. When Godard favours women, natives and immigrants, she deliberately works against traditional stereotypes, but even in doing so, she is forced to give "emblematic" features to something that defies definition. I suspect that any "Canadian literary discourse," no matter how antithetically defined, will retain a trace of a ghost. To the example of Birney's "Can. Lit." we might add A. J. M. Smith's poem, "The Plot Against Proteus," which comically expresses the quest of critics to capture the ever-changing, formless-form of the *genius loci.*

The ghost cannot be exorcized because it is a local version of a defining feature of literature. Recalling C. S. Lewis's distinction between "genius" as individual ability, and "Genius" as a universal, generative power, Geoffrey Hartman describes an endless contest between the two. When he traces the resurgence of the *genius loci* in romantic poetry, he finds a paradox whereby each requires yet contradicts the other, so that they co-operate and conflict whenever writing is defined as na-

tional in character. On the one hand, the regional genius is comforting and protective. It roots a writer in his or her own soil; it confers identity by serving as the voice of local history and national destiny; it fosters a native, "natural" and vernacular art (317-19). On the other hand, the *genius loci* always retains something of its vast, demonic origins. It becomes transgressive, as it breaks out into a "higher destiny" of inspiration and prophecy (313). It then promotes anxiety about the talent of the individual poet and the worth of his or her country (373). If on the one hand, the *genius loci* provides a base for identity, on the other hand it disperses identity. In Wordsworth's introspective treatment of the figure, for example, Hartman finds a hesitancy that sounds surprisingly like Birney's attitude:

> Wordsworth creates a new and distinctly Hesperidean mode — deeply reflective, journeying constantly to the sources of consciousness. There are no ghosts, no giant forms, no genii in the mature Wordsworth. He is haunted by a "Presence which is not to be put by," but it is a ghost without a ghost's shape, not a specter but an intensely local and numinous self-awareness. (330)

For Hartman, the conflict of genius with Genius expresses a permanent identity crisis, not only within national literatures but within literature itself (329). It expresses the desire for a consummation of meaning, expressed as a holy marriage of spirit and place, but the marriage is precarious because a demonic agent is never far away (333). This legacy remains with us, and is aggravated by our longing for a national literature. The menacing, impersonal destiny that troubled romantic poets, today appears as the radical instability of postmodern textuality and intertextuality. Anxiety about one's country now appears as doubt about the ground of any identity, as it is tossed in the waywardness of discourse. Instead of the romantic "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," we now find the postmodern "Portrait of the Poet as Nobody" — A. M. Klein's earlier title for the poem. Whether we choose to read his poem as an elegy about the betrayal of the *genius loci*, or as a postmodern parody about the disappearance of the author, the ghost remains figured in the poem, invisible yet waiting to re-emerge.

NOTES

[1] "Herder's central political idea lies in the assertion that the proper foundation for a sense of collective political identity is not the acceptance of a common sovereign power, but the sharing of a common culture. For the former is imposed from outside, whilst the latter is the expression of an inner consciousness, in terms of which each individual recognizes himself as an integral part of a social whole. To the possession of such a common culture Herder applies the term nation or, more precisely, *Volk* or nationality. The principal source of both its emergence and perpetuation is language. It is through language that the individual becomes at once aware of his selfhood *and* of his nationhood. In this sense individual identity and collective identity become one. . . . A *Volk*, accordingly is not a substantive entity in any biological sense, a *thing* with a corporate existence of its own over and above, or separate from, the individuals who compose it, but a relational *event*, a historical and cultural con-

tinuum. An individual's consciousness of belonging to a distinct community, likewise, is not a biological fact, but a derivative social and cultural process, the result of the continuous interaction — in both a temporal and a spatial sense — between the self and the socio-cultural setting of its environment. The individual, far from being enclosed within himself or genetically constituted to be a German, or Italian, or Greek *a priori*, derives the awareness of himself as a member of a particular national community from the social milieu into which he is born, from his contact with the world around him." (Barnard 7, 31)

[2] "The general principle which manifests itself and becomes an object of consciousness in the State — the form under which all that the State includes is brought — is the whole of that cycle of phenomena which constitutes the *culture* of a nation. But the definite *substance* that receives the form of universality, and exists in that concrete reality which is the State — is the Spirit of the People itself. The actual State is animated by this spirit, in all its particular affairs — its Wars, Institutions, etc. . . . In history this principle is idiosyncrasy of Spirit — peculiar National Genius. It is within the limitations of this idiosyncrasy that the spirit of the nation, concretely manifested, expresses every aspect of its consciousness and will — the whole cycle of its realization. Its religion, its polity, its ethics, its legislation, and even its science, art, and mechanical skill, all bear its stamp. These special peculiarities find their key in that common peculiarity — the particular principle that characterizes a people . . ." (Hegel 50, 63-4).

[3] ". . . so central has the lexicon of maturation been to our understanding of the condition of literature in this country. In this teleological reduction of texts to 'stages,' of literature to the 'growth' of the country, of individual production to the norms of the marketplace, lies the crucial move within the strategy of containment which has been characteristic of critical discourse in English Canada for more than a century" (Weir 24-25).

[4] "In the Canadian scheme of values there was no all-embracing sovereign people but rather particular societies of people under a sovereign crown. They were exclusive rather than inclusive in viewpoint. Their guide was adapted organic tradition more than the innovating power of the popular will. And they stressed the nearer corporate loyalties of religious and ethnic distinctions — Scots, English, and Irish, as well as French — instead of broad adherence to a democratic state. . . . And the result may be that each of them [the Canadian regions], in whatever varying degree, could exhibit something common, to be called Canadianism, as they viewed the whole country from their own regional, ethnic, or class position, seeing it largely in their own perspective but accepting its limitations and need of continual adjustment, while also feeling the shared benefits it provided" (Careless 8, 11).

[5] Eggleston is influenced more immediately by Van Wyck Brooks' *The Flowering of New England* (1936) and by Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Frontier in American History* (1921), but Turner's theory of the spirit of the frontier (the "environmentalist thesis") clearly follows in the line of romantic historicism.

[6] For a comparable reason, Hegel judges that America does not yet have its own history, or in his special sense, is not yet "in" history because it has not cultivated a historical consciousness: "What *has* taken place in the New World up to the present time is only an echo of the Old World — the expression of a foreign Life" (Hegel 87).

[7] "All dualisms, all theories of the immortality of the soul or of the spirit, as well as all monisms, spiritualist or materialist, dialectical or vulgar, are the unique theme of a metaphysics whose entire history was compelled to strive toward the reduction of the trace. The subordination of the trace to the full presence summed up in the logos, the humbling of writing beneath a speech dreaming of its plenitude, such are

the gestures required by an onto-theology determining the archeological and eschatological meaning of being as presence, as parousia, as life without differance. . ." (Derrida 71).

[8] For a summary of Lower's views see his essay, "Canadian Values and Canadian Writing" in *Mosaic*, 1 (October 1967): 79-93.

[9] For example, Linda Hutcheon remarks in *The Canadian Postmodern*, "What [Stanley] Fogel sees as important to postmodernism in America — its deconstructiing of national myths and identity — is possible within Canada only when those myths and identity have first been defined" (6).

[10] It is discussed in thir book *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure*, part of which has been translated as "What is a Minor Literature?" *The Mississippi Review*, 11:3 (Spring 1983): 13-33.

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Harold Rhenisch

The walls here hold up the roof,
which holds up the sky.

To understand the necessary physics:
drink a tree right out of your hands,
whisper a spider with your heels.

Not all houses can be beautiful,
because not all men

have suffered Robert Kroetsch & Co., Movers,

to deconstruct their house,

but there! there! it's gonna be alright,

the stars will appear
through the mosquito light
and the wind will suck at the grass stems
with its teeth.

I promise.

Look, when the government
pushed down Hans Feldt's
orchard house in Naramata,