

SIGNS OF SPRING

CANADA'S CONTACTS with Slavic and East European cultures range from the military to the folkloristic, the sociological to the geographical. So which of the following is the "typical" link: the long, cold border with the Soviet Union? the prototypical "peasants" of prairie settlement policy? an Orthodox spire with onion-shaped dome? the intricate egg designs of an Edmonton Easter? a Doukhobour settlement? a memory of a pogrom? the relief of Archangel? pyrogies? the challenges of Sputnik, 1956, and 1968? the names of centre forwards and cabinet ministers? Too many items in this list are simply clichés, the easy signs of identity and demarcation. But what lies beyond them? Generalizations are misleading. This issue of *Canadian Literature* attempts not to locate a monolithic commonality but to hint at the variety of contacts — and to consider these several contacts as history has translated them into literature *and* as literature has translated them into signs of cultural persistence.

As long ago as Stephen Parmenius's travels, Hungarian eyes turned to North America. The process of contact went on. One way of counting *contemporary* East European literary connections seems like an alphabetic progress towards arithmetic infinity: Balan, Busza, Czaykowski, Faludy, Fiamengo, Gzowski, Ignatieff, Iwaniuk, Kostash, Krizanc, Kulyk Keefer, Kurelek, Layton (Rumanian-born Lazarevitch), Mayne, Newman, Parizeau, Rajic, Ravel, Ryga, Skvorecky, Slavutych, Sunkaski, Szumigalski, Vizinczey, Waddington, Zonailo, Zend. The hidden and the oblique connections add dimension to this catalogue of names: the Cossacks who ride through the pages of Rudy Wiebe's *The Blue Mountains of China*, the Hungarian art teacher in Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, the fictional Ukrainian grandmother who "tells" W. P. Kinsella the stories of *Red Wolf Red Wolf*, the travel texts of Daryl Hine's *Polish Subtitles*, the Bulgarian translations of John Robert Colombo, the Russian iconographies of Al Purdy and R. A. D. Ford. (The reverse direction traces other paths still: the "influence" of Tolstoy and Sholokov, of Turgenev and Pasternak, expansive writers on the world's expanding stage. Or the glimpse of lightness lined by Kundera. Or the confinement of Kafka's corners. Borders open, and borders close.) For inevitably language limits some forms of contact — it walls people away as well as preserves them from outside influence.

So do expectations and preconceptions. In recent years, contacts are blocked by Iron Curtain images. Real enough (*comrade, commissar, camp*), these, too, are tropes of expectation, though perhaps they are changing. As the curtain lifts, it discloses the open spaces of the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas. In glimpses. As metaphors. *Glaznost* has become an English word. But it still asks for translation. And what, after all, does “openness” mean? Getting beyond the sign to the meaning has always been at issue.

It is Clifford Sifton to whom Canadian historians have granted an ambivalent pride of place in establishing one form of connection between Canada and Eastern Europe, and a long dominant image of place and person. For it was Sifton who introduced what he considered “peasant stock” into the prairies at the turn of the century, presuming (did he consciously ask the question, I wonder?) that they would be absorbed into the Anglo-Celtic mainstream. From this perspective, “Culture” (is it always so?) seems to have been the intellectual property of the previous majority, already in place; but such attitudinal “definitions” of culture (and of “peasant”) are the sort that spawn exclusionist ethnic jokes, the slur-words of schoolground malice and “adult” aside. What Sifton didn’t apparently imagine was that a new people would bring culture with them, and value culture sufficiently to keep it, in its new contexts, alive; that there would be writers and storytellers among the new immigrants, creatively working with a variety of “unofficial” languages; and that these additional cultural connections would, over the course of time, modify the “mainstream” and encourage it along braided channels.

Does Canadian culture recognize this process yet? (It’s happening, continuing to happen.) Or is it still so in love with elegant Easter eggs that it continues to refuse its *otherself*, to demarcate resistant lines of difference (ironically) by shaping signs of spring?

W.N.

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IDEOLOGY

Rhea Tregobov

On stretched plastic handles, the grocery bags have their own momentum; like political belief or religious conviction, carrying you a bit further than your body meant to go.