

## DIALOGUE

FROM A CONTINUING CORRESPONDENCE between Lorraine Weir  
and Laurie Ricou:

Dear Lorraine,

Your recent note — especially your comments on *Canadian Literature's* support of “Canadian Realists,” and its allegiance to the “ordinary reader” make me start with awareness of our differing perceptions. I recall George Woodcock urging me, more than ten years ago, to write on someone other than Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence. I assume he gave the same advice to many other potential contributors. No doubt the editors' collective decisions over 27 years have established a certain identity, but it does not look to me like support of any one kind of writing. From within the office, a relative newcomer notices a continual effort to have the new writer join the established writer, to have the novice critic join the experienced critic, to have a new approach side by side with a familiar one.

As for the “ordinary reader,” there are, of course, degrees of such. I recognize that a university magazine, with a circulation of 2,000, is not likely to be read by too many people clinging to the overhead strap on the Bloor line. But I have discovered that *Canadian Literature* is the one journal on our subject in my son's high school. We have to think of that library, and of the 200 copies which we send to countries where neither English nor French is the first language. To do that, I try to keep in mind a potential audience of the brightest, most interested of my first-year students. That's an audience — for both writers and academics — that's worth talking to.

Sincerely,  
Laurie

Dear Laurie,

I'm not surprised that your son's high school library subscribes to *Can.Lit.*; the social context of the school — one of Vancouver's few, thoroughly respectable high schools, located in an upper-middle-to-upper-class area of the city, the school's one-time librarian a graduate of U.B.C. with an M.A. in English, special

interest: Canadian literature — makes the subscription virtually inevitable and the journal's unabashed allegiance to what I will call 'Kerrisdale values' part of my argument. As John O'Neill has summarized those values, "clarity is next to godliness," clear language being, above all, "accessible" to those whose tender sensibilities would be offended by anything which made them feel less than already well-informed and in control of their world. The fact that a journal which was founded precisely to counter such assumptions now tacitly assumes them should, I think, be an occasion for vigorous self-examination.

You refer to the constraints imposed by the journal's economic circumstances — the need to retain subscriptions, including the two hundred in countries where Canada's two official languages do not constitute the norm. This raises a number of interesting points not the least of which is your implicit assumption that *Can. Lit.* must keep its language simple and its arguments grounded in Aristotelian rhetorical conventions for fear that those readers whose first language isn't English may toss out anything else. Like your understanding of the ideal reader as a bright, interested college freshman, this image of the non-native speaker of English seems to me to be, on the one hand, patronizing and, on the other, economically simplistic. Given the enormous circulation of the many journals all over the world which are to varying degrees open to the use of technical language and the study of texts which are unlikely candidates for membership in Leavis' "Great Tradition," I find it difficult to understand *Can.Lit.*'s editorial stance purely in terms of economics. An economic stance is, in any case, a political stance and it is specifically with the consequences of *Can.Lit.*'s ideological commitments that I am most concerned. Perhaps I would be less so were there other journals of Canadian literature which were actively pursuing very different programs and offering those of us who work in the area a clear choice of other options. While there are certainly those who *say* that they are following a different, more "theory"-oriented course, I don't see a substantial difference in their products. Name-dropping and the incorporation of clichés from the various *Coles Notes* handbooks of literary theory surely is no improvement at all. Better not to dabble in theory (like *Can.Lit.*, among others) or to theorize honestly but without a home-base (like the Tessera collective).

To those who do have the luxury of a home-base, the challenge seems to me to be obvious. Neither Leavis nor Orwell (nor, for that matter, Matthew Arnold) is adequate any longer to the task of dealing competently with the complexities of contemporary theoretical and literary debate. Adherence to Kerrisdale values and neo-Aristotelian essay conventions render the writer singularly unfitted to the task of thinking about contemporary writing in Canada or anywhere else. Whether we are working with the texts of Nicole Brossard or b.p. nichol, of Jovette Marchessault or Wilfred Watson, of Margaret Atwood or Timothy Findley, of Daphne Marlatt or Alice Munro, the challenge is to move

beyond platitude and convention and, by thinking with and through texts which seek to subvert the norms of Kerrisdale, to respond in a writing worth hearing, worth thinking.

To deconstruct the assumptions of a culture is, as these writers as well as theorists from Freud and Marx to Derrida and Irigaray have told us, to deconstruct the language of that culture. *Can.Lit.* may look in the opposite direction but it cannot halt that massive process of rethinking the languaging world. In the meantime, *Can.Lit.* and Canadian journals of similar ideological persuasion are effectively suppressing the very response which they should be fostering. After all, the freshman year is only the beginning. What of the reader who has become literate in theory by the end of his or her senior year? And what of the graduate students who, well-informed about their discipline as it is in the 1980's, enter Canadian studies to find that they must spend the rest of their lives presenting freshman introductions?

Yours,  
Lorraine

Dear Lorraine,

"As I walk past the hedges of Kerrisdale all I see / is a translation of the open." My hedges and my Kerrisdale also have something in them of Rilke opened through Bowering. And if I understand anything about theory (I suppose, somehow all learning begins with dabbling, but I take it, we're both thinking especially of semiotics and deconstructionism) it is that texts are radically indeterminate. Perhaps neither Kerrisdale (that text) nor this journal is so monolithic nor so closed nor so committed to the great tradition as you want to believe. I know that clear and accessible language does not always leave this reader very close to godliness nor feeling in control. Libby Scheier's poems can be as challenging to Kerrisdale norms as Daphne Marlatt's — and more likely to offend the complacent. Speaking of which, take your own letter: it's clear, and I've been thinking queasily about my unspoken ideological commitments ever since I read it.

But rather than bleat defensively about a dozen other points where I was offended, let me say, most importantly, that this morning I was writing about Daphne Marlatt and reading Phyllis Webb. And yes, I agree: to read *through* those texts we do need different models and theoretical frameworks, and different conventions of the essay (and editorial?). Certainly a new terminology will enable us to recognize or understand the hitherto misunderstood and invisible.

*Canadian Literature* is making efforts to respond to the challenges you make (on behalf, I know, of many other readers and non-readers). I want to encour-

age the response you claim we are repressing. *Canadian Literature* is a university journal, but it is not, I hope, exclusively an academic's journal or a single discipline's journal. We invite our readers and contributors to teach us how to read across the boundaries of disciplines, and of the disciplines within disciplines. We intend to keep ourselves open to the many things Canadian literature is, and to the ways in which it can be translated.

Sincerely,  
Laurie

Dear Laurie,

Polemical clarity is one thing, and theorizing often quite another. You refer to what I "want to believe" but I think I'll avoid *that* hermeneutic circle and simply invite you to reread *Can.Lit.*'s editorials of, say, the past six years. Seldom directly concerned with the other materials printed in a given issue, each editorial is a soap-box opportunity, the item of commerce typically a "home truth," a safe smug cliché about the Evils of Technology (#101) or the Decline of Literacy in the Modern World (#87) or the Great Quest for Canadian Literature/Identity, etc. replete with critics or navigators charting the hitherto unexplored Vast Continent (#100). And so on as the present exchange takes on the character of another Epic Quest, this time evidently an extension of the Quest for the Perfect Theory. There isn't *one*, of course, and — in any case — no one speaks outside of some theory/ideological stance/critical lexicon. As the cliché goes, language is never "innocent" or "transparent."

What I'm arguing for is support by *Can.Lit.* of self-conscious, intellectually challenging use of whatever theory a writer chooses to use in application to whatever primary text/s, provided that the result is a thorough-going, intelligent essay, however demanding the requirements of a given theory may be in terms of jargon, syntax, philosophical and linguistic assumptions, and so on. I'm arguing, in other words, for *Can.Lit.* at least to approach the standards of *PMLA* as it is now, and eventually to consider that at least one essay every two issues which reached the standard of, say, *New Literary History*, or *The Georgia Review* or *Poetics Today* would profoundly enrich the journal. Such a change would also make possible the publication of essays on Canadian subjects which, because of their Canadian focus, are rejected outside Canada and, because of their theoretical focus, are rejected inside Anglo-Canada.

The models I've listed are all academic journals intended for a specialist audience of one kind or another. Which raises what seems to me to be *Can.Lit.*'s problem of split identity: on the one hand, a magazine for anyone interested in Canadian culture; on the other, an academic journal funded by a university and

publishing essays almost exclusively by academics. But there's no lack of magazines of the first sort in Canada today; what we need is for the journal to have the courage of its academic convictions, set aside its colonial past, and get on with the job of attending to the task of literary criticism as presently, and diversely, constituted in the profession. For every high school library that doesn't subscribe to *NLH* there must be a dozen academics who do!

Yours,  
Lorraine

Dear Lorraine,

No, I think the split or multiple identity is what is needed. Now, especially, when we recognize that "there isn't *one*," that Canadian literature, and theory, are plural.

I leave aside my disagreements with your reading of our Editorials, to endorse your argument for enriching the journal with essays which apply theoretical approaches to Canadian subjects. I hope our readers and potential contributors will find a sense of the many spaces available for them in the interstices of our exchange. Thanks for the challenge.

Sincerely,  
Laurie

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