

NOTES ON REALISM IN MODERN ENGLISH-CANADIAN FICTION

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A “REALISTIC NOVEL” IS USUALLY TAKEN to mean a novel in which narrative is the connecting thread, in which not only does thought or action lead to subsequent connected thought or action, but does so in groups of words organized into logical sentences, paragraphs, chapters, etc.

But “realistic novels” are also novels written about “reality” — as opposed to novels perceived to be about something which is not “real.” Thus, aside from realistic novels there are novels which are termed gothic, or science fiction, or fantasies, or dream journals, or simply “experimental” — a class of novel which conjures up the image of a fanatically mad scientist blindly pounding at a typewriter (or, latterly, a word processor).

In Canada, the novelistic technique most practised by writers, and most accepted by readers, critics, and academics, has been from the beginning and still remains the conventional realistic narrative, though there have been some interesting innovations. One of the characteristics non-Canadians always notice about Canadian novels is that an amazingly large proportion of them are set in the country. Even of that fiction set not in the countryside but in the city, much portrays the city not as a cosmopolitan centre but as a small town.

There is, I think, a political reason for this.

Canada, like the rest of the “developed” countries, is a place in which the dominant way of life is an urban one. Just as American culture is dominated by Los Angeles and New York, as British culture is dominated by London, as French culture is dominated by Paris, so, too, is English-Canadian culture dominated by Toronto.

But Toronto dominates English-Canadian culture merely in the sense that it is the centre of the media — that it is the place from which the dominant images of television, films, magazines, and books are distributed. But the place of origin of those images is rarely Toronto — like a dutiful suburb Canada watches the television shows that are produced in New York, Los Angeles, and London, goes

to movies originating all over the world, reads imported magazines or designs its own magazines so that they are almost indistinguishable in format and ideology from those that come from across the border.

Canada has not fully developed its own distinct way of regarding its own urban life. Although it is very different to live in a Canadian city than in an American or British one, the articulation of the experience of living in a Canadian city is not part of the national consciousness. The Canadian writer and reader have not developed a common vocabulary for talking about the lives that they share.

On the other hand, Canadian rural literature has its own developed myths, its own way of being talked about. Thus it is in Canada that much of its best fiction describes geographic realities in epic terms, where the characters are almost overwhelmed by their surroundings. I am thinking of the novels of Frederick Philip Grove, Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*, The Manawaka novels of Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro's short stories, the prairie novels of Rudy Wiebe and Robert Kroetsch, David Adams Richards' Maritime novels, the west coast novels of Harlow and Hodgins — one could go on indefinitely. Even those novelists like MacLennan, Callaghan, and Davies, who set their novels in the cities, tend to populate them with those who exemplify the protestant conservative rural ethic which has been the basis of English Canada's — especially central Canada's — economic and moral strength.

REALISM AS A LITERARY MOVEMENT derives its power from the fact that it goes beyond literature — the making of words and books — to making real the inchoate energies and images that lie in the centre of the imagination.

The great characters of fiction are universal: Pinocchio and his nose, Don Quixote's perpetually ridiculous escapades, Captain Ahab in pursuit of Moby Dick, might even be said to exist apart from the novel or folktale or play in which they first appeared; for not only do we remember them for whatever scene the writer placed them in, but we also recognize other situations in which they would be comfortable.

Yet, despite the fact that there is an international consciousness in which such characters can take root, each one also springs from a particular person, a particular place.



When I was growing up, a student in high school and university, I understood that American books were American, British books British — but I had no

idea what a Canadian book was. I had read Canadian books, of course, but although the poetry had struck me as distinct, the novels seemed generally written by people who lived in New York or London.

Then, a little more than ten years ago, I spent two weeks at a friend's house babysitting their cats. On the kitchen table I found four books: *Fifth Business* by Robertson Davies, *As For Me and My House* by Sinclair Ross, *The Stone Angel* by Margaret Laurence, *The Mountain and the Valley* by Ernest Buckler. Each of these books was well-known in Canada — and had been published internationally as well — yet I myself, starting to write in a literature about which I knew virtually nothing, had never felt any particular curiosity about them. They were, I thought, books by people of a different generation from me, so antiquated that I couldn't possibly find in them anything of interest.

Fifth Business had just been published to much acclaim. *As For Me and My House* was thirty years old — it had first been published in 1941 but had recently been re-issued. *The Stone Angel* was first published in 1964. *The Mountain and the Valley* had come out in 1952, but was now reprinted in paperback.

Not only was there a wild disparity of publication dates, but also of geography: the books were set in places from the Maritimes to the Prairies, almost the whole breadth of Canada.

But despite the wide range of time and place, the books might have issued from one mind — not the mind of a person but of a people. What was being revealed was not the life story of one — or four — individuals, but what might be called our own national character — or at least the national character of a certain kind of Canadian: the anglo-saxon small-town protestant conservative.

Three things struck me about this national soul-baring.

First, that the most hidden secret, the secret that could not be told, yet was completely obsessing, was sexuality.

Secondly, that the bond no one could articulate, yet that surrounded, limited, even nourished their lives, was the bond to the land.

Finally, that although the characters in the books lived their lives as best they could, their lives were largely lived un-lived. That is — they had sacrificed what they wanted to do in order to do what they ought to do. In all cases, it might be added, this sacrifice of desire to duty had disastrous consequences not only for those who made the sacrifice, but also for those around them upon whom they took out their bitterness and resentment.



In Canada, as in many other countries, the 1960's was a decade of tremendous ferment and unrest. The "un-lived lives" of the previous generation became the

fuel for the explosion out of the old constricting bonds into a new utopian hedonism. Along with the desire to topple the old political and moral order came the impulse for an aesthetic revolution.

In art forms other than literature, this revolution was hardly new with the 1960's. Painting had for decades been dominated by forms other than realism. Music, too, had long broken from traditional forms. One could go through other arts, too, everything from sculpture to dance, and one would find that the nineteenth-century realist forms had long since been replaced by a new mainstream — itself ever-changing and constantly being re-developed — a mainstream based solidly on the corpse of realistic/representational art and dedicated, in all its changing forms, to finding a non-realistic basis for artistic expression.

In fiction, the equivalent of painterly realism is of course the narrative novel, a kind of novel which had in many ways reached its peak of expression by the end of the last century.

But what has realism been succeeded by in the contemporary novel?

Modernism — it might be said. First of all James Joyce, who substituted stream-of-consciousness for narrative sequence — and then Stein, Woolf, *et al.* But the experiments of Joyce were one of a kind. And similarly the literary voyages of Stein, Woolf, Ford Madox Ford, Faulkner, all had much to recommend them, but unlike the preceding realistic tradition they did not pave the way for further experiments in the same line. They were not a school, though some might be grouped together in retrospect. They were much more a group of eccentrics, mutually interested, perhaps, but not mutually dependent for the development of techniques which they borrowed from each other and used to “advance” the novel in some recognizable joint way.

In fact, despite the literary experiments of the early part of the century, the mainstream of the English language novel has continued to be that of realistic fiction.

In Canada this is especially true. Although there was, among the Canadian poets, a highly developed formalistic debate, and a participation in the various international theories of poetics, fiction was a different case.

Morley Callaghan, Frederick Philip Grove, Hugh MacLennan, Hugh Garner, Ernest Buckler, Sinclair Ross, Margaret Laurence all shared an absolute formal adherence to the centre of the fictional mainstream. If one imagines a cocktail party of world fiction writers active between 1920 and 1960 one could expect many a bizarre costume. But the English Canadians would have arrived as if dressed for church.

Amazingly enough, that is still largely the case. Of our internationally well-known fiction writers — one might name Robertson Davies, Margaret Atwood,

Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant, Mordecai Richler — none is considered avant-garde or formally experimental.

Despite the prevalence of realism, however, there have been many successful departures from it. One might name such books as Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, Robert Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man*, the deliberately bizarre fantasies of Michael Ondaatje as well as perhaps a dozen other novels and groups of short stories. But these books remain isolated experiments. And although these experiments have often been enthusiastically welcomed by critics eager to see the emergence of a "post-modern" Canadian literature, "post-modernism" in Canada is more alive as a critical theory than as a group of books.

But within the mode of realism itself there have been two interesting innovations.

The first has been the development of the Canadian taste for the writing and reading of short stories. Thus while short stories are a form which hardly exists in some literatures — and is a commercial disaster in most others — in Canada they are often considered to be Canada's leading prose product. And thus it is not only internationally but also at home that many of our most widely read writers are principally authors of short stories.

Of these writers the best known work in the traditional narrative form; but there are also many experimentalists among the short story writers, who although they have not attained the commercial success of the realists, have made careers and gathered audiences for a form other than pure realism.

Not so among the novelists. There is no figure in Canada comparable to Italo Calvino, or Gabriel García Márquez, or Carlos Fuentes. There are, of course, admirers and even imitators of the new forms of writing, but no Canadian writer has yet struck a widely responsive chord with his own original form of writing.

By this I don't mean to say Canada has not its visionary writers. Canada's best novels are completely achieved in the imagination, full and resonant re-seeings of their fictional worlds — but they are visions of Canada itself, the land and its people — not a world of formal or aesthetic play. Thus, for example, Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear*, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, Robert Kroetsch's *Badlands* are novels in which an actual re-seeing of the land is the most important event in the novel.

In this we encounter the second major way Canadian fiction has changed its idea of realism.

Nineteenth-century novels had characters playing out their dreams with each other against a static background. But in many Canadian novels, the climax of the novel occurs when the characters turn away from each other to re-examine — and re-make — the relationship between themselves and the stage on which the more superficial action of the book is set.

This strange innovation — solving the problems in the foreground by re-arranging the background — is well suited to Canada and Canadians.

The Canadian reality is a discontinuous one in terms of history. In this way it is radically different from European countries. Countries of the Old World might be seen first of all as having a dual history of man and landscape — that is the land, the way it has been used, the edifices and civilizations that have literally been built upon it — and parallel to the history of human alteration of the landscape runs the history of the various peoples and empires that lived there. Between person and earth has been a gradually evolving relationship. Obviously it begins at the time when the peoples of Europe, as everywhere, lived an existence dependent on hunting and primitive agriculture. But over many millennia, the hunting and agriculture became increasingly sophisticated, even aided by machines — and thus the once primeval forest landscape was de-forested and has become an agricultural and industrialized land-mass.

In the New World, the change from primordial land mass to industrialized and technological society was a much more sudden one. Most of the agricultural heartland of Canada was primal forest or untouched grasslands as little as two hundred years ago. Most of it, only one hundred years ago, still maintained its integrity. Only the building of the transcontinental railway at the turn of this century changed Canada from a country in which native peoples could still dream of living well, in the old way, to one in which a modern technological way of life seemed the only long-term possibility for survival.

Furthermore, the rapid and drastic change which Canada underwent was not a change made by those who had habitually lived there. It was a change imposed by settlers from across the ocean, a change based on ideas that had originated elsewhere.

The difference between English-Canadian literature and European literatures might be said, therefore, to reside in the fact that while for European literatures the Garden of Eden is a place described in the Bible, in Canada the Garden of Eden is secretly — and guiltily — thought to be what there was before the white man came and destroyed North America.

It follows, naturally, that the literatures of the two continents have different ideas of "grace." To European writers grace is a spiritual state attained in the relationship between man and God. But in most Canadian novels, grace is to be found in a redeemed relationship between man and nature — a climax where somehow, through some form of penitence or madness, the white European man or woman bursts out of his whiteness and throws himself upon the mercy of the world of nature — which he has previously violated — and then is forgiven and made whole.

CANADA IS AN IMMENSE COUNTRY which overpowers its inhabitants' capacity to hold in their minds the idea of where they live.

The difficulty of holding the physical idea of Canada in the imagination is equalled by Canada's inability to imagine itself politically. Thus while the rest of the world has spent the last few years mired in the problems of sagging economies, Canada — whose economy is sagging deeper than most — has continued to be preoccupied by the saga of bilingualism, the patriation of the constitution, and controversy over switching to the metric system.

The Canadian novelist, who after all reflects as well as invents his times, must like everyone else try to fill in his consciousness that most bizarre gap — the lack of a country. This he does by continually re-inventing the country in which his novels would take place — if there were a place for them to take place in.

