

OUTSIDE CHANTS

ONE OF THE MORE REMARKABLE developments in Canadian studies in the last decade has been the growth in the number of international contributions being made to the understanding of Canadian literature and other aspects of Canadian culture and social structure. Canadian Studies centres have sprung up in countries as close geographically as the United States, as close in cultural history as Scotland and France, as related and as far-flung as Germany, Italy, Denmark, Israel, India, Fiji, Australia, Russia, and Japan — for different reasons, one suspects, and unquestionably with different results. Sometimes Canada serves as a contrast or a parallel with the “home” culture, as for example in Australia. Sometimes it appears to fulfil, as for many years it did in Germany, a romantic dream of open space and rugged wilderness. Sometimes it looks like America’s Poland, a buffer zone of curious politics and uncertain temperament, which might be taken as a “reasonable” trial territory for a possibly unreasonable idea.

Canadian responses to this international interest vary considerably, from the ideologically defensive (“no-one but the Canadian-born can ever know Canada”), to the suspicious but perhaps realistic (“to conquer your opponent you must know him first”), to the blandly indifferent, the serious but puzzled, the curious and welcoming. Undoubtedly much of the variation relates directly to the nature of the enquiry. But often it demonstrates something else: a degree of limitation — possibly unconscious — in the critical approaches that Canadians themselves most commonly bring to their own writers. Thematic still, despite the technical revolution led by Frank Davey and others, Canadian criticism remains as rooted as most literary works themselves are in the mores of the culture. It is grounded in views of society, in the values of the people, in notions of a shared or defined or distinctive nationalism which are often more real in the mind of the writer than in the facts of national experience — but which nonetheless shape the moral and political expectations which so often constitute the active criteria behind critical judgments. Reading Canadian literature, in other words, Canadian critics

repeatedly perceive the indirect dreams and the expressed pleasures and the open critiques of their own society; their literature, for them, in some measure enacts themselves, connects their sensitivities with the values of the culture that has shaped them. This seems to be a perfectly reasonable, right, and proper function of criticism. But it is not the only one. And it is in this regard that critics from outside the culture can teach the insiders some lessons on critical method.

For if the outsiders fasten on the mores and politics of the literature, they often do so with an inexactness that tells more of the culture they themselves come from than of the culture the literature directly portrays. But if they fasten on literary form, they often do so with such a precise focus that they illuminate the suppleness and subtleties of a laconic methodology that within Canada is often ignored — ignored, I think, because the natural cadences of the laconic speaking voice are familiar, therefore seem ordinary, therefore are taken for granted. What the sensitive reader realizes, however, is that the able writer can shape these cadences and these habits of language into an aesthetically pleasing construct, an intellectually pleasing form.

French critical methods are particularly useful in this respect, as Michel Fabre's recent issue of *Etudes Canadiennes* (December 1981) shows. Devoted entirely to essays (by ten Canadian, French, and German scholars) on *The Stone Angel*, the issue demonstrates not only the strengths of Laurence's novel, but also the virtues of two kinds of critical methodology. One kind probes biographical roots and cultural mythologies, the social resonances of the narrative events and the effective allusions, the particularity of the characters and the commonality of the experience. The other kind distinguishes more severely between text and reality, separates *character* from *person*, fastens on the artist's shaping of artifice (conscious or unconscious, but in either event a *donnée*), and explores the novel's use of speech act discourse, its patterns of binary opposition, its fragmentation of time-frames and narrative frames, and the *system* of conventions on which it relies. One critic, disputing others, avers that a literary form does not have to be justified on mimetic or psychological grounds. But presumably this is a formula that can be stated just as adamantly in some inverse way. Seeking (or finding) formal pattern can be as barren an enterprise (whatever the pleasures of intellectual order) as the lamest of thematic descriptions. The fact of the matter is that a good novel succeeds both because it is said well and because it has something to say. That's a reductive way of putting it, but it's a strong challenge to any artist to meet. By extension it's also a strong challenge for any critic (none free of bias) to elucidate, which merely reaffirms that critical enquiry is never adequately seen as a set of absolute pronouncements, but is only comprehensible as an exchange of insights and understandings, and therefore as a collective enterprise that national boundaries affect but do not enclose.

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