

# CANADIAN LITERATURE

## *An Italian View*

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LITERATURE IS NOT A MERE WORD, but the individual expression of man's spirit. Consequently, to study the literature of an epoch means to study the spirit of the man of that epoch. Man lives, thinks and acts within society; he is *for* or *against* society because it is part of his destiny to accept or rebel, and yet, in a group or isolated, he himself is society, therefore presence, therefore history and myth, therefore dimension, breath, parable.

The history of the universe is the history of man, but it is through man that we tell the story of the universe, because he is the only one who can discover it, give it meaning and thence sing of it. Under this aspect, there is not a country in the world that does not have its own poetry, its own literature, primitive or refined, serene or chaotic, vital or creative. And Canada is no exception to the rule.

The task of the scholar is to find out if, beyond the social and political changes which form and reform a country, there are creative forces which endure, which have their own reason for being, whether they are a mere reflex of the time in

which they are produced or whether they go beyond it, to impose themselves on new generations. Art is tradition, even in its most experimental forms.

There is a view in both American and Europe that denies Canada its "own" literature. This view is based more on an ignorance of the political-economic — and therefore cultural — history of the country, than on positive critical facts. It is expected that one speak of Canada in terms of anthropology, ethnology, mineralogy and immigration rather than of literature. To the European mind in particular the idea of literature in Canada is exhausted in a nucleus of Indian legends and folkloric songs, or in those peculiar works of foreign writers who lived for some time in Canada, such as Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* or Constantin Weyer's *Un Homme se penche sur son passé*.

Canada, for the European, is still a pioneer land. Among the Italians this conviction can be attributed to the Italian migratory flow toward Canada and the lack of effective cultural relations between the two countries. But this does not explain how the idea persists also in France and England, countries with which Canada has both language and traditions in common.

Some years ago, writing from London, Mordecai Richler lamented that there the idea of a Canadian literature seemed something similar to the idea of a literature among the aborigenes of Australia. A strange fact this, if we consider the success obtained in England by purely Canadian writers such as Stephen Leacock, Mazo de la Roche, Ethel Wilson and Richler himself. The situation reaches the point where those Canadians who in one way or another have succeeded in arousing the attention of Europe, lose their Canadian identity in the minds of their readers and are seen as products of other countries, France, America or England. For the Europeans, Frances Loring and Florence Wylie are English, Gabrielle Roy is French, and Morley Callaghan is American.

This state of affairs has helped to form in Canadian public opinion and even among certain Canadian writers an unjustifiable inferiority complex in relation to the literature of other countries, with two consequent reactions: a conviction that nothing written in Canada is worth reading on the one hand, and on the other a nationalistic urge to praise and exalt everything that is Canadian. Of the two, the former is the more widespread attitude. The man of middle culture, the clerk or professional man, does not know the names of more than three or four contemporary Canadian authors: Callaghan for his participation in C.B.C. panels; Hugh MacLennan for his contributions to *Maclean's* magazine; Stephen Leacock for his *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* of which passages are read in school; Mazo de la Roche, whose *Jalna* novels are found in inexpensive edi-

tions in most drugstores. But a writer like Frederick Philip Grove, whose work has not appeared on television or been adapted for the cinema, is not even known by name to such people.

If you were to ask this man of middle Canadian culture what he thinks of the literature of his country, he would probably answer, in a modest tone, as if to justify himself, "Agreed, we don't have a real literature, but — excuse me — we are still a young country, hardly at the beginning, and with time, with time, you'll see . . ." A very similar reply might be expected from a university student who would be capable of writing an essay on James Joyce and reading Proust, Lorca and Rilke in their original languages.

Such an attitude, even if understandable, is now unjustifiable. It might have been valid in the last century when, even if there were writers such as Haliburton and Susanna Moodie, and even if it was proclaimed that "Canada is no longer a child, sleeping in the arms of Nature," there was in fact no Canadian literature because there was no Canada; it might have been valid even twenty years ago when, even if there were good works, there were no systematic studies of the Canadian literary panorama. Since then, Canadian literature has been liberated from the colonial condition and has attained an individuality and a voice of its own. To speak of a Canadian literature means in fact to speak of a contemporary literature.

As I pointed out at the beginning of this article, it is the task of the scholar to find out if, beyond the social and political changes that form and reform a country, there are creative forces which endure, which have their own reasons for existence. The task of the anthology of Canadian stories which Roberto Ruberto and I have been preparing, in Italian for the Italian reader and in English for the United States reader, is in fact a recognition of a literature which stands on its own and which has the right to be known and recognized, abroad and at home, as autonomous. As we see it, this literature is adult; the literary masterpiece may yet wait to be born, but this does not change the fact that a substantial production of quality exists.

**E**VERY LITERATURE has its mark of originality. And since every literature is in a sense the epitome of the country and civilization in which it has been born and has evolved, it reflects the developments, the anxieties and

the changes, both social and intellectual of that country and that civilization. Italian literature, for instance, tends toward realism but considers aesthetic forms important; Spanish literature is formal, German philosophic, French insidiously experimental; English literature speaks of reality through symbolism. Beyond these characteristic patterns, of form and content, style and idea, are the secret forces of a work of art. Its beauty, its universality, do not rest upon pre-established formulae, but on a mysterious transcendental quality which can reach, and therefore move and exalt, the heart and mind of man. Every valid literature is thus based on reality, either lived or imagined. Myth and the traditional elements of folklore, time and space, dream and sickness, the impulses of childhood and the demands of society, are interwoven in a literary work which — to explain this complex reality — must make use of language. Language is the true maturity of a people and also the obstacle that divides them, because language is idea. When Stephen Spender stated some years ago that Canadian literature lacks *originality*, did he perhaps intend to say that it lacks characteristic elements and therefore a *humus* and a language of its own?

Yes: for lack of originality, Spender labelled Canadian literature “derivative” and “provincial”. A judgment too quick, too easy, and also unjust. It reminds one closely of the sardonic judgments expressed by Alfred de Vigny regarding the French of Quebec in colonial times. But if Alfred de Vigny judged while being outside the tragic reality of Acadia at that time, devastated by internal struggles, religious pressures and a lack of cultural contact with France, Stephen Spender, not dissimilarly, judges on the occasional basis of certain presuppositions: on one side the dependence of Canada on the United Kingdom, on the other its belonging to a continent whose *magna pars* is the United States.

According to the judgment of Spender, Canadian literature would appear as a reflex of one or other of the above-mentioned countries, as one prefers, rather as in the Platonic theory with its relationships between the world of things and the world of ideas. In the first case, one might equate Canadian literature — under the term “colonial literature” — to the literary endeavours of Australia, New Zealand and South Africa; in the second case it would appear as “provincial literature”, as if Canada were a state, like California or Michigan, belonging to the United States. In either case one would deny it its own light and individuality.

But a study that is not superficial demonstrates that neither of these suppositions is completely correct. Canada cannot be associated with the other British dominions both because of the lesser distance that separates it from Europe and

because of its nearness to the United States. In literature the British influence was strong during the last century, but today it is reduced to the key writers who have influenced to a certain degree the literature of all countries, authors like Joyce, Conrad, Dylan Thomas, and so on. If there is a tradition by which most Canadian authors are now influenced, it is the American, that of the United States: Hawthorne, Melville, Eliot, Ezra Pound, Hemingway. Morley Callaghan, for example, was very close to Hemingway when both were reporters for the *Toronto Star* and, later, in Paris; Raymond Knister began his literary career with a review in Iowa; writers like W. O. Mitchell and Sinclair Ross show clearly the influence of Sherwood Anderson and Faulkner. It is easy to note American influences on other Canadian novelists and poets, as it is, after all, to note them on certain Italian writers of the forties and fifties and even on writers as purely English as William Golding. This does not mean, however, that such Canadian writers lack originality and can be incorporated into American literature with the same facility and naturalness as writers from San Francisco and Chicago. Everyone of us has had fathers, professors, books, which have spoken to our souls, often changing them also, but at a certain moment we have learnt to walk alone, to stand by ourselves, to think with our own brains, and to suffer with our own flesh.

Canadian literature is a North-American literature; but it is Canadian to the extent that Canada is Canada and not a part of the United States.

LET US OPEN AN ANTHOLOGY of Canadian poets. The parable runs from deserts of snow to the narrow life of urban metropolises. We are immediately overcome by a vast sense of solitude, of space, of expectancy. It is almost a sense of alarm. Man has not yet dominated nature here, but for this he lives and struggles, for this he suffers and loves and gets drunk. From the one side an old Eskimo song says:

There is fear in  
 Feeling the cold  
 Come to the great world  
 And seeing the moon  
 — Now new moon, now full moon —  
 Follow its old footprints  
 In the winter night.

From the other side, a song of the city, by the young John Newlove, answers:

As one beauty  
cancels another, remembrance  
is a foolish act, a double-headed snake  
striking in both directions, but I  
remember plains and mountains, places  
I come from, places I adhere and live in.

The outer landscape — the ice of the North, the immense lakes, the prairies, snow, winter — is the plasma of the inner landscape. The human psyche here explains itself in jolts, in gestures, through pauses; and the individual sensibility, rather than being refined, seems to be hyper-acute from the long silences, the far-away rumblings, that drama which has no origin. Life is a canal of rapid effusions, a struggle in the sun. The cycle of the seasons, Vico's life-history, seems to have been lived for one half; decadence has not yet peeped through the walls of the houses. The seasons have only two colours; green and white — summer-winter, a trajectory which in Canadian poetry, now ironic and then melancholic, assumes the quality of mythic time. P. K. Page, as in a dream, would say:

In countries where the leaves are large as hands  
where flowers protrude their fleshly chins  
and call their colours  
an imaginary snow storm sometimes falls  
among the lilies.

Stephen Leacock, in his humoristic tone, tells in a story that "the solitude of the dark winter nights was that of eternity." But especially in Canadian prose, the ever-present element of the man-nature struggle comes out with violence. At times, nature dominates the pages of the writer and overcomes the man who traverses and labours it. Man faces it with fury, or bewilderment, or resignation: the resignation before fate which we find in Greek tragedy. But pessimism is a poison which has not yet reached him. In the story "Essence of Man" by Alan Sullivan there is man's victory over the snow; in Frederick Philip Grove's "Snow" there is that of the snow over man. In Grove's remarkable book, *Over Prairie Trails*, nature explains itself to man and explains man; this man is a god-made man, patient, tenacious, stoic, bombastic. Grove, here, is a pantheist. But in Sinclair Ross's story, "The Lamp at Noon", nature is only the furious background of the drama of solitude, of cold, of white nights, of blizzards, and of the desperate and stubborn life on the farms of the prairie. The characters of Helen and Paul,

with all their weaknesses and their stoicism, their faith and their disbelief, their need of love and of death, acquire almost symbolic value. This nature is not always generous with man, and the panic feeling of death which often grasps man becomes, in such stories, a sacred element. Such writing could not be done except in Canada: a lonely land, according to A. J. M. Smith, whose beauty is of dissonance and

of strength  
broken by strength  
and still strong.

The flora and fauna play another important part in this literature. There are the immense forests of firs in Ontario and the isolated bushes of the prairies; there are the wild animals — the bear of the North, the eagle of British Columbia, the wild duck of Alberta, the beaver of the lake regions. A series of stories also exists to which, as a typically Canadian creation, the label “animal story” is seriously or ironically applied. In this field Charles G. D. Roberts is a master. Then there are the Indians, now characters in stories and now their narrators.

Of course, at the very beginnings of Canadian literature we find the Indians’ own stories, legends and poems, typical of which are the songs of the Haida, which place at the centre of creation the sun, the crow and the bear. In these stories, which are to Canadian literature what the Provençal writings are to the Romance languages, one can recognize not only echoes of Christianity but also resemblances to the characters and myths of Orpheus, Prometheus, Samson and Hercules. The Indian myths are anterior to the arrival of the white man, and the similarities they show to Mediterranean myths make one pose the existence of a universal human mythology of Asian origins, or perhaps rather of a way of personifying needs common to all men of all races.

The Indians appear — as characters, comic or dramatic — in the short stories of earlier Canadian writers like Gilbert Parker, Duncan Campbell Scott and Alan Sullivan, and in those of such contemporaries as W. O. Mitchell, Hugh Garner and William McConnell. Through such stories one can almost follow the decline of the red race and the adaptation of its life to that of the white man. In the stories of today, the Indian appears usually in European dress, either as a vagabond or a worker with a regular job; his woman is no longer a squaw, but plucks her eyebrows, uses lipstick and drinks whisky. At times, as in McConnell’s “Totem”, a solitary character tries to remain faithful to the tradition of his ancestors through struggle against white civilization, but he is mocked by his own people.

In Canadian literature there is also a cosmopolitan element, which is to be explained by the fact that contemporary Canada is a mosaic of nationalities. In this sense, one can say that each writer has immersed in Canadian literature a sensibility and a particular style. Some, born in Europe, arrived in Canada with a literary background already adult. Others came as children. Grove arrived in Canada towards his twentieth year, after having passed through Paris, where he had made contact with Mallarmé, Verlaine, Jules Renard and André Gide; he was born in Switzerland and had studied archaeology in Paris, Rome and Munich. Brian Moore, born and raised in Ireland, is a Canadian by acceptance. Malcolm Lowry, an Englishman, took Canadian citizenship, lived in Canada for almost fifteen years, and wrote stories inspired by his Canadian environment. From England came also Leacock, and such poets as Roy Daniells, Ronald Hambleton and Wilfred Watson. Henry Kreisel arrived in Canada less than twenty years old, having escaped Nazi persecution in Vienna. Ethel Wilson was born in South Africa, and Jane Rule, author of a brilliant first novel, *The Desert of the Heart*, in New Jersey.

A varied and rich, stimulating, active, creative literary world emerges from all this. The Canadian note in it is very difficult to define. It consists in a mode of living and feeling in an atmosphere which is easier to intuit, to perceive, to assimilate, than to explain. In this way Canadian literature speaks for itself. The characters of Leacock's *Mariposa*, for example, are not those of Mark Twain's *Mississippi*; the Montreal which Callaghan presents in *The Loved and the Lost* belongs in feeling as well as geography to another country from the New York that Dos Passos describes in *Manhattan Transfer*. We find ourselves before two Americas, the America of the United States and that of Canada. Practically two worlds: so close, yet so different. Canadian literature is a reality and no longer only an aspiration.

