

Reports

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**“Canada in the European Mind”
Debrecen, Hungary, 24-27 October 2002**

A year after the 2nd International Conference of Canadianists held in Bucharest, Romania (26-28 October 2001), whose theme had been “Individual and Community: Canada in the 20th Century”, Central European Canadianists had the opportunity to meet again at another conference, this time in Hungary. The conference was preceded by a meeting of the Steering Committee of Central European Canadianists and included a general meeting of Central European Canadianists in order to prepare for the foundation of their association. The conference venue was the Nagyerdő Hotel, not far from the main building of the University of Debrecen. This time the conference theme, “Canada in the European Mind”, called on the participants to explore various dimensions of the North American cultural space and the subtle network of their projections in a different cultural environment. Besides the Hungarian hosts (24), the Canadian guests (18) – probably anxious to know what they looked like in the European mind, ready to correct and give their own picture of themselves – outnumbered by far the other participants coming from various countries: the Czech Republic (4), Great Britain (2), Poland (2), Romania (5), Yugoslavia (2) and Finland, Ireland, Slovakia and the USA, each represented by one Canadianist.

The speakers of the Thursday night opening ceremony – Judit Molnár from the University of Debrecen, Alan Bowker, Director of the International Academic Relations Department of DFAIT, Ottawa, Don Sparling of the Steering Committee of the Central European Canadianists and Professor Tibor Egerváry from the University of Ottawa (of Hungarian origin) – marked the symbolic circularity of the event. Laurie and Jamie Syer’s concert, which followed, gave a representation of Canada in the universal language of music. In the same way, the Canadian Theatre Poster and Photo Exhibition, opened by Professor Péter Szafkó, Director, Institute of English and American Studies and head of the conference organizing committee, underlined the idea of representation and served as an introduction to the genre most explored by the conference – Canadian drama, illustrated on Saturday by Michael Devine’s workshop entitled “Directing Canada: Acting Canadian Texts”. The conference folder contained a very useful booklet in English – *A Sample of Canadian Theatres* – compiled by Sean Jones and Szabolcs Szilágyi. (The website of the exhibition was: www.yorku.ca/canthr.)

Another festive moment came when Canada’s Ambassador in Hungary, Ronald Halpin, made a bilingual address to the conference participants, followed by a reception. Jamie Sayer’s presentation of Canadian music concluded the event.

It would be difficult to classify and comment upon each of the over forty papers in English and French and the discussions generated by their presentations. Their variety created the image of the multicultural mosaic, a theme that, alongside that of identity, is unavoidable in any conference on Canada. The diversity of the fields tackled reflected the interdisciplinarity

that characterizes Cultural Studies in general, a feature referred to by Alan Bowker in one of his interventions and also in a paper on Marshall McLuhan.

As usually happens, only some of the presenters stuck to the conference theme literally. The paper about Canada represented in European Francophone cartoons (András Tóth) showed an unusual approach to the subject. Those on travelogues – “I dreamed of Canada” by Vesna Lopičić, about a Serbian’s experience in Canada, and Agnieszka Rzepa’s “Canada in the Polish Mind” – demonstrated how Canada is actually “re-constructed” via narratives.

An interesting idea, meant to undermine the usual separation of the papers in the two official languages of Canada in different conference sections, was Lilijana Matić’s presentation in English of a Francophone Serbian writer’s text. Perhaps a thematic organization of the papers could have offered a bilingual section of excellent feminist approaches to the perception of Canada and the construction of its representation by its narratives, such as the section dedicated to Margaret Atwood’s novels. The papers presented there were “The Body and Sexuality in *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (Jeffrey Alyn Smith), with references to birth control in Romania under the totalitarian regime; the intertwining of Gothic, feminist and postmodern elements in *Alias Grace* (Edina Szalay); and an interpretation relying on Foucault and Bordo of Atwood’s “Rape Fantasies” in comparison with Alice Munro’s “Wild Swans” (Nóra Séllei). But references to Atwood had been made in other papers as well, showing that she is perceived as one of the best-known Canadian voices.

Other writers under scrutiny (in different sections) were Mordecai Richler (Tamás Bényei: “Genealogy and Subjectivity in *Solomon Gursky Was Here*”), Esther Rochon (Voichița Sasu: “Fantasie et mythe”), Anne Hébert (Gabriella Tegyei: “Mises en abîme: *Les Fous de Bassan*”), Gabrielle Roy (Anna Jakabfi: “Existentialism in Canadian Literature: *The Cashier in Focus*”), Antonine Maillet (Zsuzsanna Vajk). Starting from Walter Benjamin’s definition of the story-teller as a kind of literary Odysseus, Barbara Gabriel, in her “Modernist Exile and Postmodern Displacement”, referred to Mavis Gallant as cultural translator, writer-in-exile and writer of exile, discovering in her writings a shuttle movement between cultures which expands the “historical as well as ethical consciousness on both sides”. A most generous list of Canadian short story writers’ names occurred in a paper on “the significance of weather images” (Judit Nagy), while Richard J. Lane’s presentation was concerned with the European reception of Canadian core literary texts (e.g. Atwood’s *Surfacing*).

The theme of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada was present in a paper on their theatrical representation (Katalin Kürtösi) as well as in one about the explorers’ fascination with “the Other” and the discovery of their oral literary traditions (Nancy Burke). It was also the subject of a panel discussion conducted by Richard J. Lane, tackling different aspects, among them the teaching of Aboriginal issues.

The finding of an adequate language to refer to the new space and experience was approached by Klara Kolinska in her presentation of Frederick Philip Grove's immigrants interpreted through Greenblatt's "theory of wonder". Concerned with the "dilemma of diasporic identification", Justyna Sempruch's paper tried to define the status of cultural in-betweenness (or "un-belonging"), with the suspension of time and space in cross-cultural communication.

After the viewing of two docu-drama videos concerning Italian Canadians, one of the sections focused on the Italian-Canadian community and its representation in film, video (Francesca L'Orfano), and literature (Judit Molnár and Licia Canton).

Some of the papers presented stages of longer research projects, such as John Othick's "Underdevelopment in Atlantic Canada: the Case of Cape Breton Island". Gregory J. Reid's paper was an interim report on work in progress on the bibliography of comparative studies in Canadian and foreign literatures in Canada, while Glyn Hughes's paper gave the initial conclusions based upon the answers to a questionnaire on aspects of national pride and shame with particular reference to Canada and Finland.

Only three of the papers in French (Beata Varga, Árpád Vigh, Lucia Zaharescu) were concerned with problems of language.

The conference reminded me of a book exploring what its author, Eugenia Gavriiliu, terms "the Gulliver Syndrome", a subtle network of relationships generated by the impact with a different cultural space and "the Other", a process during which the "stranger" experiences different states of mind due to his/her own cultural conditioning, and ends as an alien in his/her own culture. In Swift's book, the perception of the cultural differences gives rise to four points of view, as outlined by Paul Turner in his Introduction to the OUP edition of *Gulliver's Travels*: 1. a feeling of superiority that makes the rest of the world look ridiculous and mean; 2. the perception of alterity as abnormal and thus grotesque and oversized; 3. seeing the differences as lack of reason and common sense; 4. an awareness of the self that makes the world look like a conglomerate of base animal instincts. Even if the participants' experience was, instead of becoming aliens to their own cultures, probably a better understanding of them, the perception of cultural differences reflected in some of the papers at least one of the four points of view mentioned above. But since the time when Swift speculated about the Pacific Northwest many things have changed and – as Richard J. Lane remarked in his paper – though "contact and trade turned fantasy into reality", the critical and ethical directions have remained constant.

The conference was also an opportunity for the participants to meet former and new acquaintances, socialise and exchange ideas during the receptions, meals and coffee breaks, so that, at the Saturday night closing banquet (preceded by a Hungarian folklore presentation), those who had to leave before the optional trip on Sunday did it not only with a feeling of knowing more about Canada, but also of belonging to a real community.

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