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Listening to Voices from Elsewhere: CanLit Going Global

Abstract

This paper traces a trend in contemporary Canadian literature: many Canadian authors (especially those of non-British and non-French origin) are producing work that, by transcending the boundaries of the nation-state and the traditional categories of Canadianness, becomes more global in character. This results from the fact that contemporary Canadian experience is often the experience of a country other than Canada. Whereas the earlier generation of “transcultural writers” (a term Carolyn Redl uses to refer to writers that are rooted neither in Canada nor in the country of origin), like the mainstream writers, set their fiction almost exclusively in Canada and searched for Canadian identity and an answer to Frye’s question, “Where is here?”, more and more younger writers, especially those writing since the passage of the Multiculturalism Act in 1988, are asking, “Where is there?” Sometimes they examine the old worlds through the prism of the security of the new world, and sometimes they write about countries to which they have no cultural attachment. Although some nationalist critics warn that this trend poses a threat to the very existence of Canadian literature (or at least to the traditional concept thereof), my paper argues that the work of these authors neither stands in opposition to the Canadian literary tradition nor poses a threat to it. It co-exists with it, complements it, and enriches it with new perspectives, aesthetic techniques and contributes to knowledge of other cultures.

Résumé

Cet article examine une tendance dans la littérature canadienne contemporaine : beaucoup d’auteurs canadiens (surtout ceux qui ne sont ni d’origine britannique ni d’origine française) produisent des œuvres qui sont, en débordant les frontières de la nation-état et les catégories traditionnelles de l’identité canadienne, plutôt globales dans leur caractère. Cela résulte du fait que l’expérience canadienne contemporaine est, dans la plupart des cas, l’expérience d’un pays autre que le Canada. Alors que la génération précédente des « écrivains transculturels » (terme que Carolyn Redl emploie pour faire références aux écrivains qui ne sont attachés ni au Canada ni à leur pays d’origine), comme les auteurs du courant prédominant, plaçaient leur fiction presque uniquement au Canada et recherchaient l’identité canadienne et la réponse à la question de Frye « Où est ici ? », de plus en plus de jeunes auteurs, particulièrement ceux qui écrivent depuis l’adoption de la Loi sur le maintien et la valorisation du multiculturalisme au Canada en 1988, posent la question « Où est là-bas ? ». Parfois, ils examinent les vieux mondes à travers le prisme de la sécurité du nouveau monde, parfois ils écrivent sur des pays avec lesquels ils n’ont aucun rapport culturel. Bien que certains critiques nationalistes avertissent que cette tendance représente une menace à l’existence même de la littérature canadienne (ou au moins à son concept traditionnel), mon article affirme que les œuvres de ces écrivains ne sont pas en opposition avec la tradition littéraire canadienne et ne la menacent pas non plus. Elles coexistent avec elle, la complètent et l’enrichissent de nouvelles perspectives, de techniques esthétiques. De cette façon, contribuent à la connaissance d’autres cultures.

Data collected in the 2006 Canadian census show that 19.8 per cent of all people living in Canada are foreign-born (Statistics Canada). It means that nowadays the Canadian experience is often also the experience of a country other than Canada. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that a great number, if not a majority, of the most critically acclaimed voices of Canadian letters today are immigrants, making Canadian literature – as Clifford Krauss of *The New York Times* aptly calls it – “a multicultural amalgam of exotic flavours and imagery” (E1). Non-English-sounding names like Rohinton Mistry, Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai, M. G. Vassanji, Denise Chong, Hiromi Goto or Shani Mootoo now appear side by side with the names of other well-established and distinguished Canadian writers such as Robertson Davies, Timothy Findley, Margaret Atwood or Alice Munro. In the field of literature, as in social life, we can thus see a rather belated recognition of what has been a reality in Canada for decades: its cultural diversity. As a result, Canadian literature now often comes from and deals with different corners of the world, be it India, Sri Lanka, Eastern Europe, or East Africa; alternatively, it may appear rootless and simultaneously global, like Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* or much of Douglas Coupland’s fiction.

It is a marked shift from the previous generation of immigrant or “transcultural” writers (a term Carolyn Redl uses to refer to writers that are rooted neither in Canada nor in the country of origin) who set their fiction almost exclusively in Canada and who were, like the mainstream of Canadian literature, involved in search for Canadian identity – at least that is how their works were generally interpreted by literary critics in the 1960s and 1970s. This new generation of Canadian writers, however, no longer raises Frye’s question ‘Where is here?’, considering it “no longer necessary, valid, or even appropriate” (Staines 28). For them, Staines writes, “here is now an indefinable area, encompassing Canada and the world, an area with no centre and therefore no periphery, with neither the possibility nor the need of definition” (Staines 28). As a result, they have become more outward looking and cosmopolitan, prone to ask more often ‘What is there?’ (Staines 28).

The beginnings of the “globalization” of Canadian literature are usually placed in the 1980s when Canada adopted its multiculturalism policy, officially declared and entrenched in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms of 1982 and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988. The policy was instrumental in fostering the production of a literature that is unique in its diversity of subject matters and different methods of expression. As Fujimoto argues, multiculturalism also had an enormous psychological effect in that it helped immigrant writers “to gain a more secure emotional base from which to reinterpret and re-evaluate their past” (326). In addition, according to Janice Kulyk Keefer, multiculturalism enhanced general acceptance of immigrant literature and fostered its publication and distribution as in Canada, since before then “no immigrant artist writing of a non-Anglo-Celtic country of origin [...] could hope to publish her work and have it received in any significant way” (103-104).

Although the first signs of what was to come were very visible in the 1980s, Joy Kogawa’s 1981 novel *Obasan* being among these signs, the true beginning of the international phase in the development of Canadian literature was the publication of Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* in the early 1990s. This novel is often regarded as emblematic of the transnational or – what some call – “postnational turn” in English Canadian literature (cf. Mount 162). It is set in Italy towards the end of the Second World War, and it brings together quite an unlikely



set of characters, isolated outsiders of different cultural backgrounds, “all spirits of a kind, rootless, and drifting away from home” (Iyer 11): Hana, a young nurse from “Upper America”, as she calls her homeland; Kip, an Indian sapper; Caravaggio, a Canadian thief whose name is of course identical with that of the Italian baroque artist; and a severely wounded Englishman, incapable of remembering his own identity, who, as it turns out in the end, is Hungarian Count Almásy, a desert explorer who worked for the Germans during the war. Yet this knowledge seems not to matter in the novel because identifications such as race and nation are no longer viable and should therefore be disposed of. Ondaatje seems to suggest that even strangers who come from different places in the world can develop strong communal bonds, even a love relationship (Hana and Kip), across boundaries of colour. “Erase the family name! Erase nations!” exclaims the English patient, aware of the deforming power of nation states, longing for freedom from nationality and national ties that inevitably lead to sorrow and suffering as they carry in their core a potential for war and oppression (Ondaatje 139). These two sentences thus summarize the novel’s central desire: the creation of new kinds of social structures beyond the nation-state.

The globalization of contemporary Canadian literature is, however, not only manifest in its settings and subject matters, but also in the audiences of its writers. You can walk into any English-language bookstore anywhere in the world and find titles by Canadian writers, the shortlists for top literary prizes regularly feature Canadian authors among their ranks, and Canadian literature is being translated into other languages. *The English Patient* is again a good example here. It has been translated into more than thirty languages and its universal quality has enthralled millions of readers worldwide. The novel became a major international best-seller after it was awarded the Booker Prize (now the Man Booker Prize) in 1992 and adapted into an Oscar-winning film in 1996. As an article in the *Edmonton Sun* comments, there is no other literary award in the English language that would be more effective for increasing sales internationally (“Booker...,” Spotlight 13). A further effect of the novel’s worldwide success was that it brought Canada and its culture into the international literary spotlight. In most Canadian media, Ondaatje was celebrated as a national cultural hero, “a kind of ambassador for Canadian literature” (Roberts 151). Brian Johnson of *Maclean’s* referred to him as “[Canada’s] most international author” (qtd. in Sugars 84) given the fact that he had been nominated alongside writers from other countries and he had won the prize that had eluded such Canadian literary celebrities as Robertson Davies, Mordecai Richler and Margaret Atwood (Ondaatje in fact shared the Prize with the English writer Barry Unsworth).

As Ondaatje’s Booker win “provided a sense of vindication for Canadian literature generally” (Aspinall 13) and made Canadians proud in the world, there was no doubt about the author’s Canadianness. For example, an editorial from *The Toronto Star*, which was published following the win, referred to him as a “Canadian who presents his prose, poetry, plays and films against the backdrop of a global canvas” (“Ondaatje’s Honour” A22). Although the editorial acknowledged that Ondaatje’s country of origin was outside Canada – “born in Sri Lanka, educated in England and now a Canadian teaching international literature at York University” – it maintained that Ondaatje had become “a perfect model of modern Canada,” suggesting that the writer had not only acquired Canadian citizenship, but also appropriated Canadian cultural values and characteristics. Ondaatje is, according to the author of the editorial, “a modest man

not given to boasting – a very Canadian characteristic”. In addition, “as most Canadians, he volunteers his time and talent for the community” (ibid.).

In the international context, however, Ondaatje’s nationality became an object of dispute around the time of the Booker nominations and award announcement. As Gillian Roberts points out, Canadian journalists responded to these debates with anxiety. She mentions the example of Kenneth Oppel of *Quill & Quire* who expressed disapproval of a British reviewer’s description of Ondaatje as “a Sri Lankan poet, domiciled in Canada” (qtd. in Roberts 152). Oppel argued that it “appeared as if Canada were simply an accidental, and probably temporary, resting place on a longer voyage” (qtd. in Roberts 152). According to Roberts, Oppel’s response was indicative of an anxiety about Canada losing its claims to Ondaatje “in the face of his possible transcendence of the nation” (Roberts 152).

This, however, does not mean that Ondaatje has never encountered reproach from his fellow citizens for not writing about Canada. For instance, when he won his first Governor General’s Award in 1970 for *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, the former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker “damned the book as being un-Canadian and said that it should never have won an award” because “it wasn’t about Canadians” (qtd. in Wagner). Following the publication of *Anil’s Ghost* in 2000, Noah Richler asked Ondaatje in an interview for the *National Post*, “Canada doesn’t make it in... Too cold?” (B5), implying that there was something vaguely wrong with him not writing about his adopted homeland.

The same media discussion about Canadian literature and the constitution of Canadianness re-emerged a decade later, generated by the presence of three Canadians on the 2002 Man Booker shortlist: Yann Martel, Carol Shields, and Rohinton Mistry. Although Canadians generally welcomed this news with great satisfaction, all the three authors underwent scrutiny for their Canadianness because none of them was born in Canada and two of them set their novels outside Canada. Again, however, this investigation was instigated mainly by foreign journalists. For example, a British reviewer of *The Guardian* responded to the triple Canadian nomination saying, “Remarkably, half of the shortlist is made up of Canadians, or at least writers who have Canadian passports, led by Chicago-born Carol Shields” (Gibbons 13), thus making a distinction between Canadians by nationality and Canadian citizens or holders of Canadian passports. The authors had their Canadianness questioned because Shields was born and raised in the USA, Mistry in India, and Yann Martel was born in Salamanca, Spain, although to Canadian diplomat parents who moved their family to wherever their career took them. Another factor that added fuel to the flames was that Mistry’s novel *Such a Long Journey*, an elaborate saga of three generations of a Parsi family, was, like his previous two novels, set in the tumult of today’s Bombay, and Martel’s *Life of Pi* was about a little Indian boy named Piscine who survived a shipwreck and then sailed the Pacific on a raft with several animals, including a Bengali tiger and a zebra with a broken leg. The post-national dimension of his novel made a German interviewer ask Martel, “I assume you consider yourself a citizen of the world?” to which the author responded unequivocally, “No, I’m Canadian” (Sielke 30). Martel thus confirmed his self-identification as Canadian.

The discussion on how to determine the “Canadianness” of a writer has also penetrated into Canadian literary criticism. Some Canadian critics have, instead of celebrating Canada’s entry onto the world’s literary stage, resurrected the old question regarding what constitutes



Canadian literature. While their predecessors in the 1960s lamented that Canadian literature was off the literary map and “too embarrassingly parochial to achieve international recognition” (Sugars 79), these critics have chosen to bemoan the death of a distinctively national literature, most passionately Stephen Henighan in *When Words Deny the World* (2002). In his book he expresses a very negative view of the changes happening in the last 15 to 20 years. He claims that Canadian literature has become too globalized. He blames Canadian publishers for promoting only works acceptable to a global audience and authors who have a potential to rise to international stardom while ignoring others who may have something important to say about Canada itself. “The sniping of foreign book reviewers shouldn’t concern us; every national literature contains books that are central to local readers but which do not travel,” writes Henighan (176). At the same time he reproaches certain authors for choosing settings outside Canada in order to conform to the pressures of global markets. According to Henighan, the global content of recent Canadian literature is detracting from its Canadianness.

Henighan, however, never really explains what he thinks makes a text Canadian. Such apparent avoidance is not surprising as Canadian cultural identity has never been easy to define. Neither has its representation in literary works. Literary critics in the 1970s attempted to identify some themes common to Canadian literature. They decided that themes, such as survival, isolation, wilderness, and the Great White North, were “true reflections of a uniquely ‘Canadian’ experience” (Boucher). Does it mean then that unless a text is concerned with beavers, bears, maple leaves, and the wilderness, it cannot be truly Canadian? If we admitted this, we would end up with a somewhat absurd situation in which even excellent works written by Canadian-born authors and set in other countries or containing “few if any significations of Canada and of Canadian polity” (Davey 7) would be excluded from the body of Canadian literature. Writers, as Lorie Boucher points out, are, however, more than passive products and mirrors of their era and culture. They “routinely overcome their environmental boundaries and write outside of their cultural context” (Boucher).

Therefore, maybe a time has come for Canadian critics to do away for good with thematic criticism, which considers a literary text noteworthy and valuable only if it says something about Canada and Canadians. Perhaps it was justifiable or even meaningful back in the 1960s and 1970s, when Canada, through the critical pens of Margaret Atwood, D. G. Jones, and James Moss, was obsessively searching for a national identity, but it has little relevance today, when Canada has reached another stage in its development and evolved from a homogeneous national entity (however imaginary that homogeneity was) to a diversified post-national polity.

It is perfectly understandable to want a clear-cut definition of what constitutes Canadian literature and a uniquely Canadian perspective. Such a “unified set of qualifying cultural elements” would probably give rise to a comfortable sense of Canadian identity (which Canada has always sought) and contribute to national pride, yet it would not reflect the Canadian reality (Boucher).

Canadian literary texts are as diverse as many of Canada’s citizens. As a 2001 special issue of the *Canadian Geographic* entitled “The New Canada” points out, “the distribution of ethnicities in Canada mirrors remarkably closely the composition of the world’s population, a phenomenon apparently not duplicated in quite this way in any other nation” (qtd. in Kröller 7).

As a result, contemporary Canadian literature is becoming increasingly global in its character (especially as regards its settings), portraying Canada as a nation of multiple cultures whose “artistic inspirations flow from south, east, north, and west” (Verduyn 109). If the histories of other cultures, as these statistics suggest, have become part of the Canadian history, why should texts produced in Canada be only about Canada? If there is no uniform Canadian consciousness, how can a text be described meaningfully as “Canadian”? Maybe it is indeed high time the Canadians moved beyond purely nationalistic approaches to literature and culture and learned to think beyond nations, as Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* demands.

Janice Kulyk Keefer claims that “a poem or novel or short story could deal with Bombay, Sri Lanka, Trinidad and never once mention death-in-the-snow, wheatfields, or the annual tides of gold and crimson sweeping over the Laurentians – and still be intensely Canadian” (105). According to her, the “Canadianness” of “transcultural” writers lies in their being situated “on the bridge between cultures” and in their freedom to “turn [their] gaze in any direction, to critique, to defend, to redress wrongs” (Keefer 105). Regardless, if it is this or something else that makes these authors Canadian, it is evident that their work neither stands in opposition to the Canadian literary tradition nor poses a threat to it. It co-exists with it, complements it, and enriches it with new perspectives, aesthetic techniques and contributes to knowledge of other cultures. “And all Canadians, whatever their colour or ancestral culture, are the richer for it” (Keefer 105).

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