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The Canadian Short Story in Croatia: Anthologies and Beyond

Abstract

The article gives an overview of the representation of Anglophone Canadian short stories in Croatia with special focus on the two anthologies published so far in the Croatian language: *Antologija kanadske pripovjetke* (*An Anthology of Canadian Short Stories*, 1991) edited by Branko Gorjup and Ljiljanka Lovrinčević, and *Život na sjeveru: antologija kanadske kratke priče* (*Northern Exposure: An Anthology of Canadian Short Stories*) edited by Antonija Primorac and published in 2009. Whereas the anthology edited by Gorjup and Lovrenčić introduced to the Croatian (but also, due to an interesting turn of events, the Slovak) readership the Canadian authors of the early and mid twentieth century, the latter one edited by Primorac focused on the last two decades of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century and the writing that was to a great extent marked by multiculturalism. Juxtaposed, the two anthologies give a complex overview of the Canadian literary landscape and as such serve as an introduction to a number of Canadian authors still to be translated into the Croatian language.

Résumé

Cet article présente une analyse effectuée à partir d'une sélection de nouvelles canadiennes principalement écrites en anglais et notamment de deux anthologies publiées en croate: *Antologija kanadske pripovijetke* (*L'anthologie de nouvelles canadiennes*, 1990) rédigée par Branko Gorjup et Ljiljanka Lovrinčević et *Život na sjeveru: antologija kanadske kratke priče* (*La vie dans le nord: Anthologie de nouvelles canadiennes*) rédigée par Antonija Primorac et publiée en 2009. Tandis que l'anthologie rédigée par Gorjup et Lovrenčić fait découvrir aux lecteurs croates (mais aussi aux lecteurs slovaques suite à un hasard inattendu) les auteurs canadiens du début et de la moitié du 20e siècle, celle rédigée par Antonija Primorac est consacrée plutôt aux deux dernières décennies du 20e et au début du 21e siècle s'agissant d'une écriture fortement marquée par le multiculturalisme. Ensemble les deux anthologies donnent un aperçu complexe du paysage littéraire canadien et peuvent servir d'initiation à la lecture des œuvres de plusieurs écrivains canadiens qui n'ont toujours pas été traduits en croate.

For a great number of readers, an anthology of writings from a particular literary tradition often serves as the first point of entry into that same literature and, if the anthology is genre-specific, it also serves as an introduction to the history of that particular genre within a literary tradition. The same is the case with the presence of Canadian literature in Croatia: the anthologies published introducing Canadian literature have helped raise the profile of the notoriously invisible Canadianness of Anglophone Canadian authors in Croatian translation.

Le Canada en huit langues

Traduire le Canada en Europe centrale



So far, there have been two anthologies of Anglophone Canadian short stories published in Croatia (and, for that matter, in the former Yugoslavia as well), a selection of contemporary Anglophone Canadian short stories published in an anthology of Commonwealth literature in English (2001) and a number of radio programmes that promoted translations of contemporary Canadian fiction. This article aims to give an overview of the visions of Canada and Canadian literature that these anthologies and short story selections have so far offered to the Croatian audience, with the focus on the two Canadian short story anthologies published, respectively, in 1991 and 2009.

Outlining the Canadian short story tradition: Gorjup and Lovrinčević's anthology

The first anthology of Canadian short stories in the Croatian language, *Antologija kanadske pripovijetke*, edited and translated by Branko Gorjup and Ljiljanka Lovrinčević, was published in 1991 by Nakladni zavod Matice hrvatske in Zagreb and was originally addressed to a much wider reading audience – that of the former Yugoslavia. However, despite the culturally heavy-weight implications of its publisher, Matica hrvatska (closely related to the National Academy of Arts and Sciences and traditionally in charge of translating world classics and fostering national heritage), the anthology did not get much public notice. The reason can be found in its rather unfortunate timing: it came out at the very brink of the war that led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia.¹ On a more positive note, this is still the more available anthology in Croatian public libraries, which can possibly be related to its relatively larger number of published copies.²

In their anthology, Gorjup and Lovrinčević put the stress on the older and middle generation of authors (the oldest author included, Ethel Wilson, was born in 1888 and the youngest, bpNichol, in 1944), giving an overview of twentieth-century Canadian short story production up to the 1980s. The Canadian authors and the Canadian literary landscape it depicted were therefore mostly white, male and middleclass (out of the sixteen stories, four were written by women writers). The editors' intention, according to Gorjup's foreword, was not to try and identify a typically Canadian experience or highlight particularly Canadian aspects of the Canadian short story (and Canadian literature in general), but rather to "introduce the Yugoslav reader to the outstanding choir of literary voices that emit a multiplicity of notes, where

- 1) Interestingly enough, this anthology got a second life in Slovakia, where it was published in more or less the same format under the title *Tichá hudba: Antológia anglo-kanadských poviedok* (*Silent Music: An Anthology of Anglo-Canadian Short Stories*) with translations by Alóyz Kentz and Marián Gazdik (the latter was also the author of the Afterword) and with Branko Gorjup's foreword (Bratislava: Juga, 2000). The Slovakian version included the following stories that were not included in the Croatian edition: Basil Johnston's "Cowboys and Indians", Barry Callaghan's "The State of the Union", Janice Kulyk Keefer's "Going Over the Bars". The anthology is at the same time missing the following stories included in the Croatian edition: W. P. Kinsella's "The Grecian Urn", Matt Cohen's "The Secret", George Bowering's "The Clam-digger". The reason for these differences, according to Marián Gazdik, one of the translators, was related to problems with obtaining copyright (in a conversation at the conference "Canada in Eight Tongues", Budapest, 22 October 2011).
- 2) Compare its 1000 copies to the official 500 of the 2009 anthology, *Život na sjeveru*.



each note had been shaped by this spacious and multifaceted country” [“cilj je ove antologije da jugoslavenskog čitatelja upozna s izvanrednim zborom literarnih glasova koji odzvanja mnoštvom tonova, a svaki ton oblikovala je prostrana i mnogolika zemlja”] (Gorjup, 11).

Despite these initial reservations about the very possibility of thinking in terms of a particularly Canadian experience or literature, the editors reluctantly concluded that the readers would be bound to make particular deductions about similarities recurring throughout the stories, especially about those related to the influence of the *genius loci* on the subjects and themes represented (cf. Gorjup, 13). And indeed, one cannot but notice how the spirit of the place – and particularly the spectre of the harsh climate – quite vividly haunts a number of stories included in the roster, supporting Margaret Atwood’s image of Canadian literature and experience as defined by the notion of survival. For example, the landscape’s influence on the protagonist’s psyche and destiny can be found, often alongside the hazards of a harsh climate, at the heart of the story in Sinclair Ross’s “The Painted Door”, Margaret Laurence’s “The Loons”, Hugh Hood’s “Thanksgiving: Between Junetown and Caintown” and Hugh Garner’s “One-Two-Three Little Indians”. Furthermore, as a metaphorically laden backdrop to the story it can be found, quite literally, at work in Jack Hodgins’s story “Separating”. In addition, Quebec’s wilderness plays an ominous supporting role in Mavis Gallant’s “A Broken Heart”, while the Ontario farmland in Alice Munro’s “A Stone in the Field” possesses a more melancholy, deadening presence. The numbing urban landscape can also be seen as a bit player in a less tangible and more surreal manner in Leon Rooke’s “Wintering in Victoria” and Timothy Findley’s “Dinner along the Amazon”.

With its sixteen stories, Gorjup and Lovrinčević’s anthology gives an overview of the twentieth-century Canadian short story, ranging from the modernist, Hemingway-esque prose of Morley Callaghan’s “Wedding Dress”, through the social realism of Garner, to playful takes on the fairy-tale in Margaret Atwood’s “Bluebeard’s Egg” and George Bowering’s “The Clam-digger”. The grim humour of Ethel Wilson’s politically charged “We Have to Sit Opposite” is juxtaposed with the surreal humour of W. P. Kinsella’s “The Grecian Urn”, alongside the post-modern narrative experiments of Matt Cohen’s “The Secret” and bpNichol’s “The True Definitive Story of Billy the Kid”. All in all, the selection works as a compact introduction to the most prominent styles and themes in Canadian short stories of the greater part of the twentieth century, opening up the question of what makes Canadian literature Canadian – perhaps precisely in spite of the editor’s pronounced reluctance to tackle the issue in his foreword.

Translations of the Canadian short story in the context of world literature in English

Subsequent to Gorjup and Lovrinčević’s anthology, a selection of contemporary Canadian short stories was included ten years later in an anthology that gave an overview of the short stories written in English in the Commonwealth countries. This anthology, edited by Igor Štiks and Dragan Koruga, was – rather problematically – entitled *Veliki safari kroz carstvo engleskog jezika* (*Great Safari through the Empire of the English Language*). It was published in Zagreb in 2001 by Naklada MD as part of the publisher’s series of anthologies of short



stories from a number of literary traditions (general editor: Roman Simić Bodrožić). Štiks and Koruga's anthology was an exception in the series "Živi jezici" (Living Languages) in that it did not offer a cross-section of short stories and authors coming from one particular national literary tradition. Their aim was to show a variety of contemporary Englishes and the richness of literary traditions coming from countries that used to be a part of the British Empire. However, the imperialistic-sounding title and organizing principle met with some criticism in the Croatian press (most notably by Biljana Romić in *Zarez*, the fortnightly journal for literature and culture). The anthology introduced the following Canadian authors and short stories: Margaret Atwood's "Hair Jewelry" (from *Dancing Girls*, 1979); Alice Munro's "Wild Swans" (from *The Beggar Maid*, 1979), Rohinton Mistry's "One Sunday" (from *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, 1987), Leon Rooke's "The Heart Must from Its Breaking" (from *Myth & Voices*, 1993), and Guy Vanderhaeghe's "Man Descending" (from *Man Descending*, 1982).

Canadian short stories on Croatian Radio 3

Between 1992 and 2009, Canadian short stories also appeared in Croatian translation in the form of the spoken word on the Third Programme of Croatian Radio, where Biljana Romić, the editor of the "Daleki glasovi" (Distant Voices) programme and Ana Grbac, the editor of the World Literature programme, promoted contemporary Canadian fiction within a broader, global framework. Biljana Romić, who has also edited and translated a number of books of Canadian fiction into Croatian for Konzor, a small publishing house based in Zagreb, particularly endorsed contemporary Canadian authors critically engaged with the state's official policy of multiculturalism, such as Neil Bissoondath, Janice Kulyk Keefer, Yeshim Ternar and Paul Yee, as well as Robertson Davies, Barry Callaghan (whose book of poetry, *Hogg*, translated by Borivoj Radaković, was also published by Konzor) and Mordecai Richler.

In addition, the author of this overview edited and translated a series of shows on new Canadian fiction entitled "New Canadian Fiction" for Ana Grbac's World Literature programme, which were aired between 2005 and 2007. The shows featured an excerpt from Douglas Coupland's *Eleanor Rigby* (2004), Yann Martel's "We Ate the Children First" (2004) and an excerpt from his *Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* (2004), Jessica Grant's "The Loss of Thalia" (*Making Light of Tragedy*, 2004), M. A. Jarman's "Love is All Around Us" (*19 Knives*, 2000), an excerpt from Miriam Toews's novel *A Complicated Kindness* (2004), several short-short stories from Sheila Heti's *The Middle Stories* (2004), Zsuzsi Gartner's "Anxious Objects" (*All the Anxious Girls on Earth*, 1999) and Wayne Johnston's "Catechism" (first published in *The Walrus* in 2005). The idea for a new anthology that would introduce Croatian readers to a younger generation of Canadian writers as well as to the more recent fiction by the already established authors sprung from editing and translating these stories for the radio.

Charting the contemporary Canadian literary landscape: *Northern Exposure*

The main goal of the 2009 anthology of Canadian short stories was to compose a collection that would start where Gorjup and Lovrinčević left off – in the 1980s – and show the complex contemporary face of Canadian literature and culture at the turn of the century, defined in great part by multiculturalism. Playing with the stereotypical image of Canada in its title, *Život na sjeveru: Antologija kanadske kratke priče* (*Northern Exposure: An Anthology of Canadian Short Stories*), it aimed to show that the received image of a bilingual and bicultural Canada, still fairly dominant in Croatia, no longer held. Furthermore, it set out to show how Canadian culture was rapidly de-centralizing with the growth of new literary and art scenes outside of Toronto and Montreal – most notably in Vancouver, Winnipeg and St. John's in Newfoundland. The second aim was to throw a light on the multicultural fabric of contemporary Canada and on the continuous relevance of the immigrant experience for the Canadian identity and culture by choosing stories written by the most prominent and critically acclaimed contemporary authors. In accordance with these objectives, and unlike Gorjup and Lovrinčević's selection, the anthology *Život na sjeveru* was divided thematically into four sections that aimed to identify some of the recurring themes that could be said to reflect particularly Canadian obsessions and experiences. Within these four sections, both the writers of the older and younger generations were equally represented, enabling the reader to compare and contrast the ways in which they approached a particular theme or tradition.

The first section, entitled "In search of belonging", brings accounts of immigrant experiences of Canada. Whether the stories describe the impressions of the first settlers entering (to them) unchartered territories, or whether they describe the contemporary experiences of immigrants arriving in Canada from all four corners of the globe, the stories illustrate the continuing importance of the immigrant experience for Canada and its culture. The section opens up with the story written from the point of view of child immigrants from the European north in David Bezmozgis's "Tapka" (*Natasha: And Other Stories*, 2004) followed by that of an Indian Parsi in Rohinton Mistry's "Lend Me Your Light" (*Tales from Firozsha Baag*, 1987). M. G. Vassanji's short story "The Refugee" (*Uhuru Street*, 1992) describes the trials of migration and the arrival of a member of the Indian minority in East Africa, and is followed by a rendition of the experience of colonial injustice in the Caribbean in Dionne Brand's "At the Lisbon Plate" (*Sans Souci, and Other Stories*, 1989). Indirectly, the immigrant experience also features in the background of several other stories in the anthology: in Douglas Coupland's story "Little Creatures" (*Life After God*, 1994) the main character imagines the awe the first settlers must have felt when faced with the magnificence of British Columbia's landscape, and in Zsuzsi Gartner's "Anxious Objects" the protagonist imagines the helplessness of men when faced with the merciless cold and the snowstorms of the prairie winter.

The second section, "Let me (re)tell you a story", deals with a recurring theme in contemporary and Canadian literature in general: playing with the myth and the mythical, and the line between the real and the unreal. Here the place of honour is reserved for Margaret Atwood, who is represented with two brief short stories: the re-telling of the ancient Greek myth of Procne and Philomela's metamorphoses in "The Nightingale" (*The Tent*, 2006), and



the re-writing of the story of Hamlet – which, over the centuries, has gained almost a mythical status itself – from Gertrude’s point of view in “Gertrude Talks Back” (*Good Bones*, 1992). Atwood is juxtaposed with young Sheila Heti, whose short story “The Girl Who Was Blind All The Time” (*The Middle Stories*, 2004) questions the fine line between reality and the imagined. Timothy Findley’s short story with elements of horror and the supernatural, “Dreams” (*Stones*, 1988), is followed by Yann Martel’s “We Ate the Children Last” (2004), a dystopian science-fiction meditation on human nature and the limits of what is humane. The borderline between the real and the mythical world is played with in Alistair MacLeod’s story “As Birds Bring Forth the Sun” (from the eponymous collection published in 1986), which introduces elements of Gaelic folklore that break the surface of everyday reality among settlers in Nova Scotia and the lives of their offspring in urban Canada.

The third section plays with the inevitable theme of life as determined by the cold climate and Atwood’s afore-mentioned – and by now much contested and discussed – concept of survival as emblematic of the Canadian experience. The everyday battle with wind and snow as well as with the indifferent snow-plow drivers serves as a metaphor for the main character’s inner struggle to come to terms with his beloved’s death in Jessica Grant’s “The Plow Man” (*Making Light of Tragedy*, 2005). Descriptions of a seemingly endless, deadening winter in Regina serve to highlight the emotional numbness of the narrator in Wayne Johnston’s “Catechism” (2005). The notion of travel to a warmer climate as well as the concept of travel as escape from the cold – both emotional and physical – underline the plot of Alice Munro’s “Hotel Jack Randa” (*Open Secrets*, 1994) and Lisa Moore’s “Meet Me in Sidi Ifni” (*Degrees of Nakedness*, 2005), where the idea of escape to a warmer place is connected with an attempt to rekindle a failed relationship.

The final section, entitled “Inner Voices”, attempts to capture inner, individual obsessions and fears. It opens up with Guy Vanderhaeghe’s “Dancing Bear” (*Man Descending*, 1982) and its depiction of one’s dependence on others in old age and of imminent death. Carol Shields’s “Good Manners” (*The Orange Fish*, 1989) gives a lucid description of repressed traumas that subconsciously create the reality of the protagonist. Zsuzsi Gartner’s “Anxious Objects”, in a comedic yet moving manner, depicts parents’ fear of separation from a small child as it grows up, while Douglas Coupland’s “Little Creatures” riffs on the idea of the father and son road trip through British Columbia as a meditation on what makes humans human.

Like any other anthology, *Život na sjeveru* was inevitably determined on the one hand by the personal interests and preferences of the editor and on the other by the publisher’s page limitations. Authors that might have otherwise found their way into the anthology had there been more space were Katherine Govier and Barbara Gowdy, Douglas Glover and M. A. Jarman, David Gilmour and Neil Bissoondath. The balance of genders in the anthology reflects the remarkably balanced gender representation in Canadian contemporary literature, where the abundance of quality authors of both genders makes the issue of positive discrimination non-existent – a fact that was noted upon with some interest by a number of Croatian interviewers (cf. Savičević Ivančević, 2010).

Sadly, the publication of this anthology also marked the end of the “Živi jezici” series started in Naklada MD and brought over to Profil International publishing house by its general editor, Roman Simić Bodrožić. This event signalled a major turn in mainstream Croatian publishing

recently, away from the literary to the purely commercial, officially justified by the publishers by the recent economic recession (even though the Croatian state still heavily subsidizes the same publishers). We can only hope that the future will bring about a change of events and that the translation of belles-lettres – including the Canadian short story – will regain its significance in contemporary Croatian culture and thus continue to delight and inform its readers.

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