

NOVELTY, BILINGUALISM AND MULTICULTURALISM IN CANADIAN LITERATURE – OVERVIEWING ROMANIAN AND INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: This paper overviews several features of Canadian literature, namely its novelty, bilingualism and multiculturalism drawing on both international and Romanian perspectives. It is our belief that a diachronic perspective on such major issues in Canadian literature and a glimpse on its reception by international and domestic criticism could be useful to any study pertaining to Canada, in general and the reception of its literature(s), in particular.

Keywords: Canadian literature, bilingualism, multiculturalism, (perspectives of) Romanian Canadianists, immigrant voices.

Introduction

Despite the country's long history (the foundation of Quebec in 1608, the Constitutional Act of 1791 when the name of Canada was first officially used in creating Upper Canada which became later Ontario and the predominantly French-speaking Lower Canada, later Quebec, etc.), as far as the reading trends and practices are concerned, publishing in the modern sense of the word did not develop in Canada until the 19th century. This is because at first, white communities only consisted of isolated trading-posts and military garrisons, with scattered settlements (both French and English) in the eastern parts of the land. When dealing with the cultural history of reading (in Canada), it could be argued that the small populations of Canada spread on a large geographical area made publishing a real adventure (Chlebek, 2009: 5-6, *passim*) perhaps due to the hostile Canadian environment that prevented pioneering in literature and the arts in colonial times (Keith, 1985: 3-4). As far as practical reasons are concerned, books were needed in small numbers and even bookshops were few and far between. But on the other hand, British and American publishers were able to produce their items at low prices and in numbers that could adequately serve the Canadian market, as well. Unfortunately, only those Canadian writers who reached international best-seller lists could be distributed in Canada on equal (financial) terms with reputed or simply successful foreign authors. This is a feature common to many countries with small or scarce populations, yet the tendency is exacerbated in Canada by the fact that her English-speaking rivals have produced some of the best literary pieces in the modern world.

Moreover, since there was no copyright protection for books (either for the ones originating in the colonies or for those imported from England and the US), the piracy of books was a common practice. Many Canadian authors published their works abroad because literary publishing had to be supported by authors or it came on a subscription basis. Furthermore, literary reviews were ephemeral and more material from foreign reviews than original Canadian one was reprinted in their pages. It is at the end of the 19th century (after Confederation, in 1867) that copyright law in the US was also settled, thus halting the reprint industry in Canada. The publishing industry boosted in Canada in the first half of the 20th

century and by the 1950s four publishing houses that specialized in Canadian literature were set up: Clarke & Irwin, Macmillan, McClelland & Stewart (The Canadian Publishers), and Ryerson (Chlebek, 2009 *ibidem*).

1. Canadian Literature: A “New” Literature

The first signs of literary activity in Canada can be seen in the work of travelers and explorers at the end of 18th century and the beginning of 19th century. However, Canadian and international literary histories (Klink 1965; Jones 1982, etc.), on the one hand and Romanian works signed by reputed Canadianists (Bottez, 2004; Petruț 2005), on the other hand agree on the fact that the first work of a Canadian-born novelist is John Richardson’s *Wacousta or the Prophecy* (not translated into Romanian to this day) which came out in 1832. This is if we leave aside *The History of Emily Montague* (which appeared in England in 1769) by Frances Brooke who spent a few years in Quebec in the mid-1760s while her husband was captain of the English garrison.

Nineteenth century literature is conservative, timid in technique and forms and is mainly derived from British models. For instance, Bottez (2004: 22) argues that Richardson’s novel is a historical romance in the tradition of Walter Scott, also marking the first appearance of the Indian in Canadian literature, perhaps under the influence of James Fennimore Cooper. *The History of Emily Montague* is an epistolary novel in the manner of Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (Keith, 1985: 42; J&J Jones, 1982: 19). Moreover, in terms of literary activity in 19th century Canada, some provinces are ahead of others, i.e. while Nova Scotia was developing a sense of community that could be explored through the sophisticated medium of satire (by means of Thomas Chandler’s Haliburton’s *The Clockmaker*), Ontario was still being cleared and settled by pioneers, and the earliest literature of permanent interest from what was then called Upper Canada portrayed the challenge and impact of the pioneering experience (Keith, *idem*, p. 18). Such an instance are the works of two sisters coming from England, Catherine Parr Traill (who mainly wrote children’s fiction and guidebooks) and Susanna Moodie (renowned for her *Roughing It in the Bush*, the account of her colonial experience in Ontario, later modernized by Margaret Atwood in her collection of poetry, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*). Regarding the contribution of the two sisters to the Canadian literary tradition, John Moss, the compiler of *A Reader’s Guide to the Canadian Novel* comes with the following explanation: “Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing It in the Bush*, arguably a novel in any case, plays a significant role in the evolving Canadian tradition and is represented; her sister’s book, *The Backwoods of Canada*, while delightful in its own right, remains a document of the past and is left out” (1981: XI). On the one hand, Moodie’s experience as an immigrant in the new land is considered to be told in an arrogant and snobbish way to amuse Victorian England (Chambers, 2006: 33). On the other hand, she confesses to have moved from feelings such as love for Canada “very nearly allied to that which the condemned criminal entertains for his cell – his only hope of escape being through the portals of the grave” (1962: 100) in *Roughing It in the Bush*, to trust in a promising destiny for the country in *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush*:

“The time is not far distant when she (Canada) shall be the theme of many tongues, and the old nations of the world will speak of her progress with respect and admiration. Her infancy is past, she begins to feel her feet, to know her own strength, and see her way clearly through the wilderness. Child as you may deem her, she has already battled bravely for her own rights, and obtained the management of her own affairs. Her onward progress is certain. There is no if in her case. She possesses within her own territory all the elements of future prosperity, and she must be great!” (1989: 7)

These are the main literary figures retained by the Romanian professor Monica Bottez who dealt with this early stage of English Canadian literature in her *Infinite Horizons*. The short outline of the history of the book and literary history above could be also provided as an explanation for the late reception of Canadian literature in Romania as compared to British and American literature in general. If the circulation of original Canadian literary material started to take place in the 19th century, it should come as no surprise that such a “new” literature was printed in Romanian periodicals no sooner than the beginning of the 20th century (the poet W.H. Drummond in a Romanian review of 1915), not to mention that book-length treatment was given only in the inter-war period (translations from popular fiction, i.e. Mazo de la Roche’s *Jalna* series in the 1930s and 1940s).

2. A Bilingual Literature

As the two founding nations of Canada, a name that was first officially used in 1791, when the province of Quebec was divided into two provinces by an act of Parliament, i.e. the predominantly English-speaking upper Canada, which became later Ontario and the predominantly French-speaking Lower Canada, later Quebec, the Anglophones and the Francophones in the two Canadas contributed to “the specific Canadian duality that Margaret Atwood had called the Canadian schizophrenia – referring to the identity problem of a country inhabited by two “Founding Nations”, with two different languages and two cultural traditions” (Bottez, 2004: 13). The value systems of Upper and Lower Canada are probably best illustrated by a phrase that moulded the general view on Canada, i.e. Hugh MacLennan’s lines from R. M. Rilke for his novel *Two Solitudes*: “Love consists in this,/ that two solitudes protect,/ and touch, and greet each other” (quoted in Steele, 1982: 61).

In *The Two Cultures in the Canadian Novel* (Steele, 1982: 55), the critic Ronald Sutherland argues that being bilingual in Canada could be far more complicated than simply having the capacity to speak both English and French as there were economic, social, psychological, and historical factors to be considered. This is because

“For a long time in Quebec, English was identified with economic power and social ascendancy. Thus, for the Anglophone to learn French meant no more than acquiring a second language, but for the Francophone to learn English meant the possibility of losing a mother tongue, or re-enacting the Conquest, and of betraying his heritage. Moreover, to climb in the business world right in Quebec, the francophone was humiliatingly obliged to learn English; the Anglophone could choose to remain blissfully unilingual.”

The statement comes after the establishment of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in 1963 meant to secure an equitable partnership between the two founding nations.

According to Romanian views on the issue (Petruț, 2005: 51), the two literatures of Canada should be considered from a comparative, thematic viewpoint in the context of literary identity and no major differences are found except for the language of their works. Other European critics (Heidenreich, 2008: 104, *passim*) claim precisely the opposite, namely that, at least throughout the 19th century, the fictional works of English and French Canadian writers could not have been more different. For instance, the Samuel Slick novels of Haliburton (1836) or Richardson’s *Wacousta* (1832) had no correspondents whatsoever in French-Canadian fiction, whereas the French Canadian *romans du terroir* (e.g. Antoine Gérin-Lajoie’s *Jean Rivard* novels) depicting life in the remote rural regions of Québec, had no counterpart in English Canadian literature until the 1920s and 30s when the novels of

Frederick Philip Grove, Robert Stead and Martha Ortenso came out. Furthermore, the *roman du terroir* was regarded as belonging to a didactic genre while the English Canadian novels mentioned above can be more properly attributed to the genre of realism. The German scholar further explains the thematic and generic differences between the two literatures by the very different issues that concerned writers in the English and French-speaking Canada of the time and the different realities in which they lived. Thus, the French Canadians were still trying to get over the trauma of the Conquest but what brought the two nations together was the increasing interest in developments in the USA. However, while classics such as the Nova Scotian Haliburton playfully satirized his American neighbours to the South, as well as the Nova Scotian colony, the *roman du terroir* can be interpreted as a piece of advice for French Canadians to remain on their land and not answer the call of American manufacturers to head to the United States. The author concludes that it was only with the appearance of novels in the realistic stance that English and Canadian fiction showed certain parallels to a limited degree.

The Canadian critics that reflected on the two cultures proposed a number of geometrical symbols meant to define the relation between them, parallel lines, the “horizontality” of English Canada as opposed to the “verticality” of Quebec, a spiral, an ellipse or a double helix. As far as the nations’ relation with a mother culture goes (either English or French), English Canada chose to maintain the relations with such an English culture (be it British or American), while French Canada supported the idea that it was a separate fragment that followed its own destiny on the North American continent. Even more, it was asserted that French Canada privileged prose as a more popular and less literary way to address its public, while in the English-speaking part poetry was preferred (Petruț, *idem*, p. 64).

At the level of the Romanian reception, both Canadian cultures are both represented since criticism on English and French Canadian authors started to come out since the Inter-War years. However, the most intense period of reception is the post-communist one when Canadian concerns are institutionalized by means of the foundation of Canadian Studies Centers and academic courses in the field.

3. A Literature of Immigrants

Apart from the literary voices of the two founding nations, immigrant writers are also an important part of the Canadian ‘mosaic’ or ‘salad bowl’, the alternatives to the American ‘melting pot’. As Staines remarks,

“the Canadian preference for a mosaic structure in which all the ethnic and social regions retain their distinctness is central to an understanding of the nation. As a country, Canada is not only a mosaic of ethnic cultures but also a mosaic of regions, each with its own sense of identity; the nation, therefore, exists in a dialectic of regional and ethnic tensions” (1977: 3).

The literature of immigrant writers was grouped under the more generic syntagm of “ethnic literature” (Palmer, 2011) used to designate those immigrants who do not belong to Canada’s founding European cultures: the Catholic French and the Protestant Anglo-Celtic, also embracing the aboriginal inhabitants of Canada, the native Indian and Inuit. The literature of such authors or the writings about ethnic experience, in general was regarded as outside the literary mainstream and was less critically dealt with in classic literary histories. The expression “Canadian ethnic literature” is complex and depends on combinations of such variables as the writer’s ethnic identity, the language of writing or translation and the literary

expression of ethnic themes. A comprehensive definition of Canadian ethnic literature would include the writings of immigrants, literature by authors who perceive themselves as belonging to an ethnic minority and write from this perspective (usually in English or French); and works that deal with immigrant or ethnic experience but are not necessarily written by a member of the group portrayed. Another name used to designate the literature produced by immigrant writers is “minority culture” literature (Fr: *écritures migrantes*) (Heidenreich, 2008: 111).

Davis (2000: xv-xvi) speaks about ethnicity as “the lived experience of Otherness, is an enigmatic entity, often paradoxical and conceptually elusive.” He further claims that ethnicity intersects with race, marginality and identity, rendering any theoretical ground as constantly shifting. To ask what is ‘ethnic’ in Canadian literature is to obtain as many answers as there are writers and texts. Therefore, the multifarious ways in which ethnicity is registered and articulated in literature makes it virtually impossible to offer a single working definition of the term. As far as the ethnic writer is concerned, his between-worlds position involves an intense re-working of issues such as oppositionality, marginality, boundaries, displacement, alienation and authenticity: a process that requires constant variation and review. Moreover, the author’s claim is that ethnicity comes under various shapes, evoking manifold responses; it is both celebrated and condemned, sought and rejected, and constantly redefined. The in-betweenness of ethnic identity, its tangential relation to language and culture would thus seem to call for paradigms that simultaneously assert or confirm stability and instability, the centrifugal and the centripetal.

The Canadian mosaic includes German, Italian, Icelandic, Jewish, Norwegian and Ukrainian voices to which Chinese, Hungarian, Spanish and Japanese writing may be added since the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the context of literary reception, it is ascertained that the texts of these language minorities are “literatures of lesser diffusion” (Dimic, 1988: 145). Such literatures reflect the pressure of assimilation that affected the ethnic writer’s view of himself or his people and sometimes a crisis of identity is obvious, especially in the second-generation of English-speaking ethnic writers who relate to their immigrant parents. However, in certain writings such dislocation is rendered in a condescending tone and the authors feel proud of their ethnic roots; such is the case of Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981) where the Japanese-born writer protests against racial discrimination and unfair treatment of her ethnic minority, vindicating her Japanese Canadian people (Palmer, *ibidem*). A similar topic is approached by Kerri Sakamoto in her *Electrical Field* (literally rendered in Romanian as *Câmpul electric*) set in a quiet suburb in Ontario and having a Canadian-born daughter of Japanese immigrants as narrator. The novel is an account of the experiences of a small community of Japanese Canadians in the 1970s.

Canada has also been the first country in the world to define and introduce multiculturalism, becoming a model, a source of experience for many other multinational or multi-ethnic countries, by passing the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988. Multiculturalism has been regarded as a means of strengthening Anglo-Saxon dominance by diverting the energy of ethnic minorities into cultural activities. It has contributed tremendously to establishing a climate of mutual respect among the heritage cultures of the Canadian mosaic. Numerous new ethnic voices of hyphenated and hybrid identity have been heard from previously silent groups of Ukrainian-Canadians, Czech-Canadians, or Chinese-Canadians. The dynamic interaction of Canadian multicultural society was also described as “kaleidoscopic”.

Studies of literary reflections on ethnicity are important to the ongoing redefinition of Canadian literature because “literary criticism in Canada has always been an enterprise in which the central purpose was the discovery or determination of Canadianness, a mode of

inquiry that intrinsically invalidates the notion of a single literary tradition” (Davis, 2000, *idem*). Canada is a nation of immigrants and succeeding groups of immigrants are influenced by, and themselves influence, those who settled before them. Papers on immigrant Canadian fiction in its multiple and shifting forms, ethnicity, immigration, inter-group relations, and the history and cultural life of ethnic groups in Canada have been collected in the interdisciplinary journal *Canadian Ethnic Studies/ Etudes ethniques au Canada* founded in 1969.

Many of Canada’s celebrity immigrant writers, such as Yann Martel, Michael Ondaatje or Carol Shields (whose works have also been translated into Romanian in the post-communist years), were born and brought up in other countries. The Sri-Lankan born Michael Ondaatje has been intensively discussed by our Romanian Canadianists in their works (Bottez 2004, Petruț 2005, Irimia 2006), not to mention the post-communist literary periodicals. Other more or less reputed ethnic voices have been included by R. Albu in her *Canada anglofonă. Limbă și identitate/ Anglophone Canada. Language and Identity* (2008) in a chapter entitled “Mozaic literar canadian/ Canadian Literary mosaic”: Aritha van Kerk, George Varhey, Rudy Wiebe, and the Romanian-born writers Flavia Cosma, Kenneth Radu, Barbara Sarpegia and Eugen Giurgiu. Similarly, Michaela Mudure, in her *Canadian Readings* (2009), introduced to the Romanian public diasporic writers such as Monika Lee, Susan Helwig, Janice Kulyk Keele or Nega Mezlekia.

Conclusions

In our paper we overviewed some of the major features of Canadian literature, namely: its novelty which is a consequence of its late establishment in the 19th century that contributed to a later reception in other cultural spaces (including the Romanian one); bilingualism, accurately tackled by both Romanian Canadianists and international critics, despite their opposite views on the issue (*cf.* Petruț, 2005 vs. Heidenreich, 2008); and immigrant voices that are also made known to the (Romanian) public via fragments from their works (as collected by Michaela Mudure in *Canadian Readings*, 2009) or translations (from Michael Ondaatje, Yann Martel, Kerri Sakamoto, to name but a few).

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