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Gazing Through the One-Way Mirror: English-Canadian Literature and the American Presence

by ROBERT THACKER

IN ITS DECEMBER 1991 issue, *English Studies in Canada*, the scholarly journal of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE), published an article by Tracy Ware disputing arguments advanced by Robert Lecker in "The Canonization of Canadian Literature: An Inquiry into Value," which had appeared in *Critical Inquiry*.¹ Lecker followed his essay with an edited volume, *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value* (1991), which Ware, for his part, reviewed in *Canadian Poetry* and so kept up his critique. Viewed only as events, these exchanges illuminate much about literary canons, much about the relation between a society and its texts, and much about literary scholarship as an institution devoted to inculcated values.² More particularly, they exemplify the peculiar critical position of Canadian literature within English studies: in a field run riot by deconstructionists and poststructuralists disputing the very being of literary canons, we critics of Canadian writing have been—most numerous and persistently since the 1970s—assiduously constructing a canon, identifying authors, publishing critiques, books, and reference volumes; that is, creating all the trappings of a literary institution of our very own. (Ironically, most diligent among us has been one Robert Lecker who, as an editor of *Essays on Canadian Writing* and publisher of ECW Press, has contributed volume upon volume to the English-Canadian literary edifice.) That Lecker's article appeared in *Critical Inquiry* says something about his stature as a critic, certainly, and it also suggests the level at which debates over the English-Canadian literary canon are taking place these days—so too does the recent publication of *Studies on Canadian Literature* (1990) by the Modern Language Association.

Broadly seen, these exchanges and publications suggest increasing American attention to Canadian writing as an emerging national literature which, in turn, points to my subject here: the relation between the Canadian and the American literary institutions, especially as each may be seen as indicative of larger cultural

1. This was followed by a response by Frank Davey, and then Lecker's response to Davey's response.

2. While I have isolated these two exchanges as indicative, they are only that: spirited debate over the form, nature, and direction of Canadian literature in English has been a defining characteristic throughout its emergence. F. R. Scott's and A. J. M. Smith's work during the 1920s probably serves as reasonable benchmarks, as does the later work of E. K. Brown, Northrop Frye, Carl F. Klinck, and Desmond Pacey. More recently, Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (1972) is crucial for a variety of reasons. Key essays which serve as foreground for Lecker and Ware are by Davey ("Surviving"), Russell M. Brown, and, most recently, Peter Dale Scott. The latter, while idiosyncratic, is an encyclopedic overview well worth its length.

distinctions. As Canadian literature in English has emerged as a field, what might be called the American literary presence has been felt and sometimes recognized as parallel, but more often it has been ignored, or at least sidestepped. What I want to do here is use the Lecker-Ware exchange as a point of departure for an examination of the relation between the two English-writing literary institutions; the substance of these critics' arguments—along with each person's individual beliefs—concerns me less than what the fact of their exchange says about its cultural contexts.

What is most interesting about Ware's critique is how he envisions the influence of the American literary institution. His harshest remarks have to do with what he calls Lecker's "idealization of American critical practice," whereby "the Canadian literary institution is inferior to, and not merely different from, its American counterpart . . ." As such, Lecker is reflecting a "national sense of inferiority" which "is a dungeon from which [he] has not escaped" (486, 485). The disagreement between these two critics reflects two issues germane to this essay: first, in what ways is the body of texts we have come to call "Canadian literature" Canadian? that is, what is the role of nationalism in critical analysis? Lecker impugns the thematic critics of the 1970s for their naive valorizing of texts solely because of their Canadian origin—without, he holds, acknowledging the emptiness of their actions. Conversely, Ware accuses Lecker of doing the same thing while pretending to do otherwise and, in the process, makes a good case that critics select texts for analysis based partially on extraliterary concerns—being interested in creative writing in Canada, he says, precedes selection, and all critics do something of the sort. The second issue, more important here, is to ask what is the role of the American literary presence—both in its primary texts and in its "critical practice," as Ware calls it—in understanding the formation of "the Canadian literary institution" as it now exists? Put baldly, how is American literature understood by Canadian writers and critics? How is American literature valued by these people? What is its place in the Canadian academy?

The Cultural Contexts of English-Canadian Anti-Americanism

WITHOUT ASSIGNING positions on these matters to either of the individuals involved here, lurking behind Ware's comment about a "national sense of inferiority" is a welter of English-Canadian cultural concerns, among them anti-Americanism. Stretching back to the Loyalist—what Americans refer to as Tory—experience during and after the American Revolution, exacerbated since by differences in the relative sizes of the two countries and in differing philosophies and temperaments, such attitudes might be seen as a fundamental English-Canadian cultural characteristic. It may even be a defining one. As early as 1930, P. E. Corbett, an academic who wrote on Canadian-American relations, published an essay in the *Dalhousie Review* entitled "Anti-Americanism"; there he writes "The fact is that we constantly indulge in acrimonious criticism of

things and persons American—a habit so ingrained in us that it passes without comment or justification” (295). And University of Toronto historian Frank H. Underhill, a frequent and pointed commentator on Canadian-American matters between the 1930s and 1960s, once wrote that the “oldest and most tenacious tradition in” the Canadian “communal memory centres around our determination not to become Americans”; more recently, Seymour Martin Lipset took Underhill’s point here and distilled it: Canadians, he writes, are “the world’s oldest and most continuing anti-Americans” (Underhill Search 222, Lipset Historical 122).³

Evidence for these attitudes from the nineteenth century is not difficult to locate. It may be seen in the 1830s in the writings of Thomas Chandler Haliburton and, more particularly at mid-century, in the anti-Americanism evinced by Susanna Moodie in her *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852). Given her background and the rough frontier conditions in which she found herself upon emigrating to Upper Canada during the 1830s, surrounded as she was by uncouth Yankee squatters and “late-loyalists,” Moodie’s feelings are hardly surprising. Throughout the nineteenth century, British North Americans were engaged in both pursuing and maintaining English values while, at the same time, keeping a close eye on the United States. Sara Jeanette Duncan’s *The Imperialist* (1904) illustrates this sort of cultural bifurcation abundantly. During this century, after fighting two world wars and, in the process, drifting ever farther away from Britain and thus into the cultural and economic influence of the United States, English Canada developed the cultural bifurcation which Margaret Atwood and others have elaborated as a kind of schizophrenia.

Indeed, already well planted in English Canada’s cultural beginnings, anti-Americanism (or, viewed more positively, English-Canadian fear of the U. S.) became something of a concomitant to discussions of Canadian culture in post-World War Two Canada. In 1951, for example, the Massey Commission—The Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences—reported its findings and became a lightning rod for such discussions, most of which took place in the universities and in their publications. And as Paul Litt has recently argued, much of this presupposed a widely held view of American encroachment, particularly at the level of popular culture (see also Innis, Underhill). Thus just after the fanfare surrounding Canada’s Centennial in 1967 came the 1970s with its outpouring of interest in Canadian literature in English; that Margaret Atwood’s star burst forth at this time—in 1972 she published both *Surfacing* and *Survival*, the animus for each being anti-Americanism—seems wholly appropriate, for the ground had been well prepared in the 1950s and ’60s.

3. Like another well-known English-Canadian cultural trait, the colonial mentality, anti-American feelings are seldom broadcast; they are merely fact. Much of Underhill’s writing, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, dealt with the relation of Canadian nationalism to its putative opposite, continentalism; that is, American culture—especially “low” culture represented by film, television, and other popular artistic forms—was an insidious force which would de-Canadianize Canada, leading to a homogeneous North American continental culture. Underhill argued against the nationalists, seeing the United States as simply farther down the same path Canada was heading (Francis 165); see also his “Notes on the Massey Report.” The most ambitious attempt to synthesize the cultural traits of English Canada vis-à-vis the United States is Lipset’s *Continental Divide*.

It was at this time too that James Steele and Robin Mathews gained prominence decrying the "Americanization" of Canada's universities. In the same spirit Heather Robertson, who has since gone on to become an historical novelist of some note writing about Canada's wartime prime minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, published a column in English Canada's national magazine, *Maclean's*, entitled "Confessions of a Canadian Chauvinist Pig." It begins: "About a year ago I met a member of the Committee for an Independent Canada outside a radio studio after a hotline brawl about Canadian nationalism. 'Whew,' he said, looking guilty, 'I almost admitted I was anti-American'" (96). Robertson uses this as a point of departure to proclaim and dissect her own anti-American feelings with considerable, and unusual, candor. Canadian academics of nationalist leanings—and without question this describes most critics of Canadian literature—certainly share the values of their larger society and, given Litt's arguments, have probably a stronger sense of wariness toward the United States and its influences than the so-called "person on the street" who is not professionally engaged in what in Canada are called "the cultural industries."

To illustrate further, a piece Robertson Davies published in *Harper's* in 1989 about his opposition to the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement is indicative. As a novelist, dramatist, critic, and Professor of English at the University of Toronto (1963-80), Davies is a person with long and detailed experience of Canadian-American cultural relations. He maintains that his opposition to the pact is "pro-Canadian" not "anti-American" (43). His slant on history is instructive and bears quoting at length, since, however it is labelled, the English-Canadian wariness toward the United States remains a very real cultural value:

After the American Revolution, Canada also received many thousands of political refugees from the new republic. When I say 'refugees,' I use the word in its fullest sense, for they had been deprived of civil rights, of land and money, their children were driven from the schools, and they were subject to all the harassment of the losers in any war. Many of these Loyalists had been prosperous in the American colonies before the revolution, and in Canada they were tireless in their labors to re-establish the economy and the educational and religious institutions that they had been forced to leave behind in the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Does it seem to you that I am talking about a nation of losers, of exiles and refugees? Modern Canada is a prosperous country, but the miseries of its earliest white inhabitants are bred in the bone, and cannot, even now, be rooted out of the flesh. (45)⁴

The urgent and visceral importance of the Loyalist experience to English Canada is inescapable as a foundation myth for English-Canadian culture, irrespective of its relative emphasis throughout the country, owing to its historical sway among intellectuals. It is, moreover, a foundational fact upon which Canadian wariness of the United States is based. Davies continues to the present and compares the two countries:

In psychological terms, Canada is very much an introverted country, and it lives cheek by jowl with the most extroverted country in the world—indeed, the most extroverted country known to history.

.....

4. Davies likely means "earliest English-speaking white inhabitants" here, since the French were in Canada first.

It is absurd to say that one psychological orientation is superior to the other. Both have their value, but difficulties arise when they fail to understand one another.

The extroversion of the United States is easy to see. The United States assumes that it must dominate, that its political and moral views are superior to all others, and that it is justified in interference with countries it thinks undemocratic, meaning unlike itself. It has also the happy extrovert characteristic of seeing all evil as exterior to itself, and resistance to that evil as a primary national duty. (45, 46)

Whether one agrees completely with Davies' pronouncements on national character or not, the view he takes is certainly arguably held by many English Canadians. Ultimately, Davies acknowledges that "a strong link" between our two countries "already exists" and he fears the Free Trade Agreement because the existing connection is "sufficient without turning the link into a shackle." This fear—it is a fear—is based on the English-Canadian experience and informs that group's point of view; succinctly, Davies encapsulates these attitudes by paraphrasing Arthur Lower: "we Canadians love England but don't like Englishmen, and . . . we love Americans but can't stand the United States" (47).⁵ Exactly so.

Anti-Americanism and the Canadian Academy

TURNING FROM cultural traits, broadly construed, to their application in literary studies, the case of Margaret Atwood is instructive. In "Canadian-American Relations: Surviving the Eighties" (1981), she offers a glib-sounding but quite precise analysis of the cultural relations between Canada and the United States; describing her time as a graduate student in English at Harvard during the early 1960s, she writes:

About this time it became fashionable to talk about the absence of a Canadian identity. The absence of a Canadian identity has always seemed nonsense to me, and the search for it a case of the dog chasing its own tail. What people usually mean by a national identity is an advertising gimmick. Everything has an identity. A stone has an identity, it just doesn't have a voice. A man who's forgotten who he is has an identity, he's merely suffering from amnesia, which was the case with Canadians. They'd had their ears pressed to the wall for so long, listening in on the neighbours, who *were* rather

5. Davies' comments also help account for a succession of Canadian cultural occurrences or occasions that have struck me over the years—and here I am speaking as a student of both cultures—as passing strange, if not bizarre. Most recently, there was a controversy in Canada during late 1991 over Mordecai Richler's *New Yorker* article which surveys, for an American audience, the history of Quebec and summarizes the ongoing impasse between that province and the rest of Canada (Richler Reporter). Although the most contentious aspect of Richler's piece is his assertions about anti-semitism among Québécois, some of the negative reaction in Canada to Richler's essay, certainly, owed to where the article appeared: it amounted to an airing of Canada's dirty laundry for the Americans. Had the piece appeared in a Canadian magazine, such as *Saturday Night*, there likely would not have been much reaction; but the *New Yorker*? Canadians have grown accustomed to observing in safety the dissection of American problems from north of the border; the reverse appears to have made them uncomfortable and so excited ire. (An ironic note to this episode is that, for once, the reaction to Richler's piece transcended Canada's two linguistic solitudes.)

After the controversy began, Richler characteristically—while speaking in New York City—threw more fuel on its flames by pronouncing: "You have to appreciate that Canadians, French and English both, are extremely sensitive. I wrote an article that some felt, with more than a small amount of justification, held them up to ridicule." He goes on to acknowledge that "Canada's passionate interest in the . . . article did not extend to into the United States" (Cole). The sensitivity which Richler notes is far broader than he acknowledges, and for English Canadians generally, and intellectuals in particular, it informs their perception of the United States, a country which for them attracts just as it repels. (Richler's views were subsequently published in a more extended form in *O Canada! O Quebec!: Requiem for a Divided Country*; among other reactions, some Quebec nationalists have called for the book's banning.)

loud, that they'd forgotten how to speak and what to say. They'd become addicted to the one-way mirror of the Canadian-American border—we can see you, you can't see us—and had neglected that other mirror, their own culture. The States is an escape fantasy for Canadians. Their own culture shows them what they really look like, and that's always a little hard to take. (385)

Atwood's metaphors cut both ways and ring equally true: the one-way mirror notion is quite appropriate for the U. S. as well, since its overarching cultural concern is itself. This essay, moreover, is particularly significant here: it was originally an address at Harvard where Atwood, as indicated, had been a graduate student; she wryly notes that Canadian critics have frequently noted the "noxious influence" of Frye on her famous overview of English-Canadian literature, *Survival*, without mentioning the "noxious influence" of Harvard's Perry Miller, saying "Canadians tend to be touchy about imported noxious influences: they want all noxious influences to be their very own" (385-86).

Elsewhere in the essay she notes that during her first year at Harvard she had to "fill in" the gaps in her literary education:

As it turned out, I had only one gap, the others having been adequately filled in by the University of Toronto. My gap was American literature, and so, to my bemusement, I found myself reading my way through excerpts from Puritan sermons, political treatises of the time of the American revolution, and anguished essays of the early nineteenth century, bemoaning the inferiority not only of American literary offerings but of American dress design, and wondering when the great American genius would come along. It sounded familiar. Nobody pretended that any of this was superb literature. All they pretended was that it was necessary for an understanding of the United States of America, and it was. (382)

Thus formal study in English at (reputedly) two of North America's best universities diverges here on the point of whether or not American literature is an important concern to English studies. That Atwood—arguably among the brightest graduates of the leading Canadian English department, student of Frye, headed for literary renown of the first order—emerged with a gap in American literature, a very wide one from the sound of it, seems a significant point. Doubtless this was also true for most Canadians awarded the Honours B. A. in English, the usual preparation for graduate studies, during the 1960s and 1970s. Familiarity with American writing, generally speaking, simply has not been required within Canadian English departments; there the British tradition in literature—along, very often, with the British themselves—has reigned. Over the past decade, of course, non-British subfields have made inroads—Canadian, American, and theory—yet arguably American seems to have remained an idiosyncratic emphasis in the Canadian English department.⁶

There are numerous reasons for this, among them the history of the develop-

6. Along this same line, I would note that I could not imagine an article on the Canadian canon appearing in *English Studies in Canada* in the late 1970s; such was the attitude of ACCUTE toward Canadian literature that the Association for Canadian and Québec Literatures was founded as a kind of anti-European learned literary society. But this may have been cyclical, given Desmond Pacey's description of the founding meeting of ACCUTE, at University College at the University of Toronto in 1952, where he says Canadian was given equal time with British literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and drew a better crowd). Even so, my sense of Canadian literature's status within Canadian English departments, at least through 1980, is summarized by Earle Birney in a speech to the Canadian Library Association: "I was taught by men who regarded Canadian writing as something to be brushed off—dust beneath the chariot wheels of English literature" (Pacey Study 70).

ment of the university in Canada, English studies as a discipline, and that of the English department at the University of Toronto in particular. Regarding some of the first Professors of English at universities in pre-World War One Canada, Patricia Jasen has written that these men “tended to be conservative in outlook and distrustful of democracy in varying degrees, and several of them promoted the imperial connection as Canada’s best protection against the encroachment of American materialism and social disorder—symbolized, for them, in the excesses of the academic revolution [at universities in the U. S.]” (554-55). Thus Canadian universities were products of two parents: “the church (all denominations) and the Old Country.” Within this development, English studies were seen to have a central utility in communicating the values of each founding line and so they played a key role in disseminating the university’s Arnoldian notion of “culture”—“the best that has been thought and said” (Groening 514; see also Murray). For its part, the English department at the University of Toronto was certainly the most influential—of the over 1200 Ph.D.’s in English awarded in Canada before 1986, almost 500 were from Toronto; until 1962, only three Canadian departments even awarded that degree (Harris 291).⁷ Emphatically, then, Canadian universities and their English departments were *not* American. Instead, they embodied a particularly English-Canadian view of “culture,” one derived from Britain and Canada’s colonial past, and one which bore the stamp of an anti-American wariness present in the larger culture, but amplified among the intellectuals whom the universities involved—whether student or teacher.

Together with the quotations from Atwood’s piece—themselves detailed elaborations on Davies’ more general points—these facts suggest how cultural assumption became institutionalized. For English Canadians the United States is both escape fantasy and pariah—a country which by its overwhelming presence attracts as it repels English Canadians. The extent to which the United States’s experience might be seen as an analogue for Canada’s experience is, it appears, something Canadian intellectuals do not very much want to think about and, given the emphases of their universities, are likely ill-prepared to do so in any case. Indeed, a primary refrain in the search for the Canadian identity is stated emphatically in Davies’s *Harper’s* article: “Americans are precisely what we are not and what we don’t want to be” (47). Such assertions have taken on the weight of shibboleths (Frye spoke of “the tedium of a perpetual identity crisis”). In reviewing the literature of Canadian identity definition, about the only certainty is that English Canadians are, as Davies asserts, *not* Americans.

In claiming the American role as an “escape fantasy” for Canadians, too, Atwood is noting that such concerns allow Canadians to avoid “what they really look like,” something that is “hard to take.” Both of these matters bear on the

7. Harris’ book details this story abundantly. What is more, in various ways he suggests the much larger influence of Toronto’s English department in the definition of the field in Canadian universities. Although it has long had members who took their advanced training at British and American institutions, Toronto’s department has also disproportionately hired their own Ph.D.’s. So, by disproportionately staffing departments at other Canadian universities and maintaining itself as the largest department in the country, Toronto’s department has largely defined the field.

question of English Canada's attitudes toward American literature, since by its noxious omnipresence the United States both overwhelmed and subverted: ever aware of the extroversion of their neighbors, fascinated by its excesses (the Civil War, 1890s anarchists, the World Wars, Civil Rights, Vietnam, Watergate—rather like Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire"), Canadians *have* "kept their ears pressed against the wall, listening to the neighbours," as Atwood says. At the same time, this omnipresence has led, seemingly oxymoronically, to a certain disdain towards so-called "high" American culture—and here literature leads the list—for to look at it closely might be to see in it an analogue to the English-Canadian experience or, worse yet, to be influenced by it. *This* animus, this fear, is evident yet.

Not to over-psychologize, but the assertion of the British continuity in literary studies, the very tradition retained and revered by English Canada's universities generally, but particularly evident at Toronto, might be seen as a kind of avoidance reaction. It might also be seen as a conscious retention of the imperial tie, held on to the more tenaciously by literary scholars because of the nature of the work, the critical assumptions driving that work, and the "mission" of dispensing culture—thus the continuity of influence from Beowulf to the present was deeply valued. This emphasis in the English-Canadian academy has cut two ways: the British connection has been valorized while, concurrently, the American one has been, if not denigrated, then minimized, even ignored.

To illustrate, as early as 1931 E. K. Brown, one of the few early members of Toronto's English department to take American literature seriously, was writing in *Saturday Night* about "The Neglect of American Literature" in Canada. Though written over sixty years ago, much of what Brown says still resonates and, more to the point, helps to explain the neglect of which he writes; after discussing the place of American literature and culture within the academy, Brown points up an additional element, a commonly held belief which he sees in English Canadians: he calls this myth "our particular form of snobbery which is, as Professor Underhill has said, a conviction of our superiority to the Americans" (42). Davies has himself spoken of the same thing, seeing in Canadian attitudes toward Americans what he calls "the flawed virtue of somebody else" (Dark Hamlet 43).

In literary criticism, this has translated into what can only be called a weird assumption on the part of many Canadian critics that an American critic—no matter how well informed—can never *really* understand Canadian writing. Thus James Reaney, writing in *Poetry* (Chicago) in 1959, asserts that "It is debatable whether much Canadian poetry is exportable as yet. What strikes a bell with us because we see in it a containment of our weird environment may therefore get nowhere with either Britisher or American" (186; see *Litt Muses* 106-07). Much more recently, one of the leading critics of Canadian literature in English, W. J. Keith, while speaking of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, observes that "It is doubtful whether an American can ever fully comprehend the national (not merely nationalistic) tensions underlying the novel." In Keith's own words in the same essay, this "contains a condescending superiority" (12, 15) and it is itself

of very doubtful persuasion.

And though questionable, these attitudes are often fostered by experiences with Americans and American organizations which do seem to cry out for such disdain. Thus Keith notes the problems involved for Canadians when, commenting on American imperialist tendencies, he reports that in the 1960s he "was obliged to resign" his MLA membership "for political reasons. I objected to the imperialist implications of my being exhorted—and expected—to support resolutions that applied only to the United States and that were written by academics who seemed oblivious to the existence of any other 'American' (let alone 'North American') country with different attitudes and problems" (7). In so saying, Keith nicely illustrates the English-Canadian cultural trait of being concurrently drawn toward and repelled by things American.

Even so, such condescension on the part of Canadian critics of Canadian literature towards their American colleagues illustrates the ongoing situation of such studies within the Canadian academy, despite the evident growth in it as a subfield over the past two decades. Turned around, of course, it suggests something of why American writing gets the scant attention it does in Canada: the two fields are, in fact, competing beneath the weight of the British canon. Writing in 1974 in a reprise assessment of "Areas of Research in Canadian Literature," Desmond Pacey felt compelled to take a swipe at attitudes toward Canadian writing in those departments most responsible: "It is disappointing that the English Departments of our universities, and especially the English Department of the University of Toronto, who have been so concerned with and illuminating about the history of ideas in relation to English literature, should have paid so little attention to the history of ideas in relation to Canadian literature" (Areas 65). Pacey's swipe is well-aimed, as Robin S. Harris' *English Studies at Toronto: A History* (1988) demonstrates: although from early years it was the practice there to speak of the department's subject as "English and American literature,"—against, as Pacey notes, Canadian literature—Harris admits that the department has been characterized by "the absence of a substantial number of what might be called technical specialists in the American and Canadian fields . . ." (185).⁸ Without question, then, serious scholarly inquiry into Canadian writing as viewed in Canadian English departments during the mid-1970s was often seen as a mere appendage, a very doubtful necessity. Canadian literary studies in Canadian universities had little respect. Though more problematic, given the cultural issues involved, Pacey might have said the same of American literature.

8. The basis for this interpretation is found throughout Harris' book—such is his detail that the shared subordinate roles of both Canadian and American literature within the department is evident, seemingly, wherever one looks. Indeed, American has a superior status only when seen in reference to Canadian literature at Toronto. A long-taught course, "American and Canadian Literature" (1934-1963, initially assigned to the fourth year, later the first), is described with the phrase "ninety percent of the content was American" (120). More tellingly, though, doctoral thesis topics illustrate the department's emphasis: between 1967 and 1976 just under ten percent of these were on American topics (and only five of almost two hundred were on Canadian topics); between 1975 and 1984, thirty-six were American and twenty-three Canadian of the three hundred accepted for the Ph.D. (Harris 168, 186—the two-year overlap is in Harris' presentation).

*American Literature, Canadian Literature,
and "The Anxiety of Influence"*

AMONG THE supposed "lack of ghosts" with which Canadian literature has been haunted has been the American cultural presence. Indeed—though some critics blanch at the suggestion—there is a sense in which Canadian literature is an American literature: both are generically "American," borne of experience on this continent, whether it derives from an "errand into the wilderness" or innumerable "garrisons" dotting a harsh landscape. Both are, indeed, "American" in this sense—neither derivative from the other. Yet, just as American literature and Canadian literature are "derivatives" of British literature—as they are, without question, at least in the formal sense—so too can Canadian literature be seen to have derived—in more senses than just the formal, certainly—from American literature (see MacLulich). For example, it is something of a commonplace that the Poets of the Confederation offered a romanticism heavily affected by American Transcendentalism, or that Walt Whitman influenced Canadian letters in a variety of ways (Richard Maurice Buck has received considerable attention in this regard) and there are a myriad of other Canadian-American connections: that of the American Transcendentalists on the Group of Seven, Hemingway on Callaghan, Faulkner and other writers from the South on several figures.⁹

That such is so is hardly surprising, given the nature of literary influence, certainly, but more than that given the nature of each nation's evolution to a sense of itself as a separate cultural entity, one distinct from its European roots. Thus in "Literature in a New Country" (1960), Hugh MacLennan asserts the parallel between Canada's literary development and that of the United States about a century earlier. As Atwood noted in her reading of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American literature at Harvard, the story does sound familiar, and from MacLennan, to Atwood, to Robert Kroetsch, to (most recently) Peter Dale Scott, for Canada the most logical precursor *is* the United States. Elaborating, Scott speaks of Canada's "situative anxiety" and cites William Cullen Bryant's "1825 lecture 'On Poetry in Its Relation to Our Age and Country' [noting how American authors] were debating how to forge a new national literature by judicious realignment with a foreign past" (12). Indeed, just as the United States had its Emerson proclaiming that country's separateness in his "The American Scholar," so too might John Sutherland be seen sounding something of the same note when, in his introduction to *Other Canadians* (1947), he attacked A. J. M. Smith's attraction to European modes in his *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943), saying, among many other things, that "It is quite apparent that the American example will become more and more attractive to Canadian writers; that we are approaching a period when we will have 'schools'

9. Most of these connections—especially that between the Romantics and the Confederation poets—are so commonplace as to make supporting citations seem superfluous. On Whitman, see McMullin; Paula Blanchard offers a succinct discussion of the influence of the Transcendentalists on the Group of Seven (171-75), and Atwood talks about Faulkner's influence on her work and that of her contemporaries (Gillen).

and 'movements' whose origin will be American. And perhaps it is safe to say that such a period is the inevitable half-way house from which Canadian poetry will pass towards an identity of its own" (59).¹⁰ Both MacLennan and Sutherland recognize, of course, the inevitable influence of an antecedent American literary culture on Canada's incipient literary culture. Such a realization, too, is at the core of the "Native" versus "Cosmopolitan" debate which itself looked in all likelihood to an American antecedent (Kokotailo).

This is not to say—and I am certain that none of the commentators I cite here were or are suggesting as much—that Canadian letters are in some way necessarily derivative of American literature. Rather, borrowing Harold Bloom's well-known phrase, "anxiety of influence," I am asking whose anxiety it is, anyway, Canadian writers or Canadian critics? That is, perhaps in fearing too great an influence on Canadian writers, Canadian critics may well have been engaged in something of the same sort of Freudian fear of the father that Bloom defines, and, accordingly, the paucity of serious comparative work—in which a critic strives to treat each side of the analysis coequally—may be partially the result of such fears. Among a wide range of other matters, one of the most convincing points in Peter Dale Scott's essay is the degree to which anti-Americanism is apparent in critical writings on Canadian literature—he cites articles by T. D. MacLulich, W. J. Keith, and Gary Boire—and speaks of "an uncritical xenophobia" Boire "shares with his opponents" (31) despite a radically different critical stance. At the same time, Bloom and Freud to one side, such critics may well be seen as culturally indisposed to pursue American connections and, recalling Atwood's experience at Harvard, ill-prepared by their graduate studies in any event. As to the writers themselves, and like authors everywhere, Canadians have taken their influences wherever they could. In a well-known early interview, for example, Alice Munro somewhat apologetically acknowledged the influence of American writers on her work—especially Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, Reynolds Price, and Wright Morris—along with painter Edward Hopper. She is apologetic because these people are Americans (Metcalf 56).¹¹

Viewed in isolation, that Munro feels the need to apologize for her American influences seems silly, yet the cultural attitudes such an action reflects suggest a great deal about the position of American literary studies in English Canada. Coming from the too loud neighbors on the other side of the one-way mirror that is the border, American stories—like American everything else—are an unavoidable presence to English Canadians. This presence, combining with broader English-Canadian cultural traits vis-à-vis the United States—the need to define a difference while seeing the U. S. both negatively and condescendingly—has helped to create what might be called a critical conspiracy of silence. Canadian departments of English have viewed American literature warily, a

10. The whole of this essay is germane to my discussion, as is the book from which it is taken, *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada*.

11. For an elaboration of this argument as it relates to Munro specifically, see my "'Oh, Writing Makes My Life Possible': Alice Munro and the Anxiety of American Influence."

necessity, but a doubtful one. This has been as much a culturally based reaction as any critical decision; its net effort, moreover, is that broadly based comparative analysis of Canadian and American writing has been hard to come by, despite the obvious and extensive American influences exerted on the writers themselves. Nationalism does play a key part in critical exegesis, in the rejection of texts and topics as well as in their selection. At the same time, as Scott argues, it is only "by the comparison of these two emergent-nation critical traditions that a true sense of Canadian distinctiveness could be isolated" (23). What this has meant in Canada, particularly during the rise of the literary institution which is Canadian literature in English, is that the American presence, though emphatic presence it is, has been largely held at bay, kept at arm's length, acknowledged but not examined.

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