

Resentments and Megalomanias

Robert Lecker. *Making It Real: The Canonization of English-Canadian Literature*. Toronto: Anansi, 1995. 276 pp.

Robin Mathews. *Treason of the Intellectuals: English Canada in the Post-Modern Period*. Prescott, Ont: Voyageur, 1995. 192 pp.

To borrow from George Bowering, a writer who has engaged Robin Mathews over the past three decades almost as much as I have, *Treason of the Intellectuals* is a short, sad book, one much more about Robin Mathews "in the post-modern period" than about English Canada. Mathews begins *Treason of the Intellectuals* in nostalgia for two conflicts that began his career as a public intellectual: his arrest in 1963 in Edmonton on what he describes as "trumped-up charges for acting against municipal corruption" (9) and his more extended and valuable involvement in the late 1960s in lobbying for regulations that would ensure Canadians fair treatment in academic hirings—an involvement which brought him and his colleague James Steele, he notes, "heavy public attack." This self-presentation as lonely hero resisting a culture saturated with ignorance and treachery permeates *Treason of the Intellectuals*. Few of the contemporary Canadian "intellectuals" who have argued for more social equity from gender, race, ethnic, or regional positions—Mukherjee, Cooley, Bannerji, Bissoondath, Brand, Philip, Kamboureli, Godard, Simon, for instance—are mentioned by Mathews. Others who have attempted more general left-of centre critiques of Canadian culture and of the difficulties created for Canada by global capitalism (and whose analyses Mathews often seems to be trying to join or emulate) are similarly ignored or, like Linda Hutcheon, Joyce Nelson, and myself, condemned as having deliberately or inadvertently become inheritors of Nazi ideology and American "radical individualism." Mathews creates these omissions and condemnations, together with his own self-celebration, in a book in which he otherwise pleads for a "political sense of community." Ironically and somewhat sadly, the only radical individualist who convincingly emerges is one Robin Mathews.

Mathews is particularly sensitive about the possibility that his own standing as a white British-descended Canadian may have been compromised by claims advanced by Canadians of other ethnicities, arguing repeatedly that considerations of class must have priority over

those of ethnicity and colour. In a revealing passage he recounts his once having chided Eli Mandel for perceiving himself and his parents as outsiders to "the white Anglo-Saxon hegemonic superiority group." Mathews relates that he told Mandel that his own working class British-born Roman Catholic father had, by emigrating to Canada, "entered a class that placed him and his family in much more uncomfortable economic and social circumstances than the Mandel family had faced in Estevan, Saskatchewan" (78). In another passage he argues that many recent non-white immigrants to Canada have class and language advantages over native-born Canadians that insulate them from racial prejudice—a claim that seems surprisingly out of touch with the experiences of various Chinese-Canadians who have dared to build 'monster houses' in Vancouver or Toronto, or with the Toronto encounters with racism recalled by novelist Bharati Mukherjee (1981). As in his attacks on left-oriented cultural commentators, there is a strong sense here that Mathews resents what he perceives as any encroachment upon his own personal intellectual territory of cultural commentary and grievance by collectively founded critique, whether this critique be ethnic, racial, feminist, or marxist.

The central argument of *Treason of the Intellectuals* is that what Mathews terms the "blood and will" philosophy of Nazi Germany did not die with the Third Reich but carried on through the work of Heidegger to influence A.J.M. Smith, Northrop Frye, Jacques Derrida and, through Derrida, recent Canadian thinkers like Linda Hutcheon, Robert Kroetsch, myself, and William Thorsell. In a kind of unwitting reversal of Holocaust denial narratives, Mathews argues that Nazism, with its focus on "earth, blood, Will, and almost mystical bonds with social purpose" (68) has become the ruling ideology of North America and postmodernism. As with many Holocaust revisionists, it is difficult to tell whether Mathews is deliberately misrepresenting facts—here the writings of people like Frye, Derrida, and Hutcheon—or whether he has simply, in rage and resentment, ventured far out of his intellectual depth. The difficulties with his arguments are numerous: a confusion of postmodernism and poststructuralism, an equating of postmodernism with pluralism, an apparent unawareness of national differences among postmodernisms, an apparent unawareness of Derrida's writings on aphasia and on the metaphysics of presence, a general unawareness of the importance of difference in poststructuralist thought, an homogenizing of poststructuralism (particularly noticeable when he attributes Foucauldian and marxist discourse theories to Derrida), an unawareness of the Saussurean roots of poststructuralism (he describes poststructuralism on more than three occasions as a philosophy that posits a transcendent "Real"), and an unawareness of the marxist orientations of various European poststructuralisms.

Troubling Mathews' analyses throughout is evidence that he may be less than fully literate. At one point he quotes George Bowering's amusing satire of Mathews' views, "Brown Mountain," published in *Craft Slices* (1985) and detailing the efforts of kindly "Americans" who in 1960 "wanted to see poetry get started in Canada." Apparently unaware of the satire, Mathews ingenuously (or disingenuously) complains that in 1960 poetry was "already 200 years old" in Canada (86). He also misspells Bowering's title as "*Kraft Slices*." At another point he quotes Rosemary Sullivan's sardonic remark that in Pinochet's Chile "you knew who the targets were: extremists who somehow deserved it" as proof that Sullivan has fascist sympathies (106). At another he translates Peter Dale Scott's remark that literature should be "more and more grounded in the problematics of a global hegemony" as meaning, in less "fancy" language, "more and more a part of the modern world in a U.S. imperial system" (174). In reading my *Post-National Arguments* he repeatedly reads my accounts of the regrettable spread of globalism and trans-nationalism in Canadian culture as constituting an endorsement of globalism. Again, it is hard to know whether such reading is ingenuous or disingenuous.

Mathews also recurrently complains about what he calls "inflated language"—usually just before offering a misunderstanding of that language. His positivist attachment to "simple" language and conviction that "specialist terminology" conceals "[n]ot exactly difficult stuff" (45), belies his self-portrayal as progressive critic. The examples he offers of "simple" language show it to be habitual, normative language, that language whose concealed hegemonic assumptions many dissenting writers and critics today seek to reveal and destabilize through use of the sorts of specialized vocabularies, neologisms, parody, irony, and word-play that Mathews condemns. The difficulty with Mathews' belief in non-complex language is not only that such language—like any language—carries ideology, but that it also can conceal the very capitalist ideologies he claims to oppose. "Simple" language at its most problematic is a consumerist language that invites passive, non-critical reading. Indeed, "specialist terminology" can require readers to do more work than does everyday "simple" language, but then citizenship and social opportunity also require work. It is the capitalist "U.S." market economy that Mathews so dislikes that most wishes the uncritical reader-consumer. 'Differently' written texts encourage the reader's involvement in the production of different meanings and desires. Although such texts also can illuminate educational barriers that exclude some readers (Mathews evidently among them), they do not, as he argues, produce these barriers. It is our economic culture, with its carelessness for difference, and investment in consumerist readings, that produces them. It is our instrumentalist

governments eager to replace even postsecondary education with 'skills' and 'training.'

As his various comments on ethnicity, race, and regionalism suggest, Mathews has little interest in difference. His professed goal, as ludicrous as it may seem in the context of his various contemptuous remarks about his intellectual colleagues, is a "harmonious Canadian community" (46). This community is to be homogenous, founded on "communally agreed upon values" and "traditional bases" (46). The goal is similar to the one that Robert Lecker appears to wish for in *Making It Real: The Canonization of Canadian Literature*—a book that also, like *Treason of the Intellectuals*, displays a strong and unconvincing sense of critical solitude, fear and misunderstanding of poststructuralist theory, and difficulties in reading.

Much as Mathews' recent attempts to critique the operations of imperialism and globalism in Canadian culture have benefited from the work of many others, so too have Lecker's comments on canonicity in Canadian literature been built on a decade or more of Canadian feminist, regional, postcolonial and other criticism. Like Mathews, however, Lecker presents himself at the beginning of his book as an isolated hero. Other Canadian critics, he declares, have declined to write on issues of canonicity, culture, and nation. "Contemporary Canadian criticism," he writes, is "unable or unwilling to comment on the country." But Robert Lecker will bravely step forward. "I have to take this risk" (ix). In actual fact, there has been no shortage of recent criticism willing to talk about the country. In book form, there has been Sylvia Söderlind's *Margin/Alias: Language and Colonization in Canadian and Quebec Fiction* (1991), my own *Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the English-Canadian Novel Since 1967* (1992) and *Canadian Literary Power* (1994), Himani Bannerji's anthology *Returning the Gaze: Essays on Racism, Feminism, and Politics* (1993), plus commentaries by writer-critics such as Neil Bissoondath's *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (1994), Nourbese Philip's *Frontiers: Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture* (1992), and Dionne Brand's *Bread out of Stone* (1994). In article form, recent criticism that comments on Canada would take many pages to list. Granted, many of these books and articles discuss Canada from perspectives Robert Lecker might not welcome, but Lecker can hardly claim to be facing Canadian cultural questions alone, like some Horatio at the Mercier Bridge.

His self-construction here is itself similar to the one he made in first publishing the opening chapter of this book, "The Canonization of Canadian Literature," in *Critical Inquiry* in 1990. There he presented himself as the only Canadian critic sufficiently aware and theoretically

informed to have raised questions of canonicity and canon-formation in his backward country—as an astutely poststructuralist and New Historicist Robert Lecker, eager to follow the leads of John Guillory, Stephen Greenblatt, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, a Lecker, I think it is fair to say, virtually unknown to his colleagues back in Canada. (Interestingly, this is a persona Lecker now appears to have abandoned. He has moved back to a more familiar incarnation, the Leavisite Lecker who wishes there were one "true Canadian canon" [68], and who cannot entertain the possibility of a country having more than one concurrent canon.) In this new publication of the *Critical Inquiry* essay he has added what seems to be another deception. "The Canonization of Canadian Literature" received considerable feedback and commentary when it first appeared, by myself in the form of a response that accompanied it, by Tracy Ware, and later by Barbara Godard, and in its new form appears to have been revised to take into account some of that criticism. Lecker writes in his introduction, however, that the *Critical Inquiry* essay was "an abridged version" of the present chapter. Was Lecker capable of writing such an unabridged version before receiving Ware's, Godard's, and my comments? I am skeptical.

There are so many problems with the essays in *Making It Real* that no reviewer can hope to take on all of them. The best chapters are the three in Part Two, "Canon-Making," chapters in which Lecker investigates closely defined and empirically grounded questions. In "Anthologizing English-Canadian Fiction" he compiles statistical charts on the frequency of anthology inclusion of 123 Canadian fiction writers from 1920 to the present. While questions can be raised about the criteria Lecker employed in selecting his 65 anthologies, and about his decision to exclude regional and period anthologies, the data he has compiled should be useful to other researchers, particularly his data on individual authors. Some of his analyses are not useful—for example his observations on "experimental" writing in which he declines to see "experimental" as relative to the conventions of a period. Other analyses seem to call for more data—about different kinds of publishing houses, or particular editors and their backgrounds—in order to avoid simplistic attributions of changes in preferences to changing times.

Similarly the chapter "The New Canadian Library: A Classic Deal" makes publicly available fascinating documentary materials regarding the establishment and development of McClelland and Stewart's NCL series. Some of Lecker's commentary, particularly his comments on the role of the marketplace, however, are much less than fascinating. Novels, he suggests, can vanish after publication because "they never aroused much interest when they were first published," or because "the public had not judged them worthy of being kept in view" (156). This confidence in free market judgment is simplistic because it ignores the

different marketing resources publishing houses may have, the promotional investment choices publishers regularly make, and the halo effect a book can receive by being preceded by a popular work by the same author. A 'public' may not get the chance to become interested in a book, or may be over-stimulated to become so. Later in the essay Lecker expresses surprise that Jack McClelland could create, through clever marketing, interest in books which the public had earlier not "wanted." Lecker writes, "Usually books that are out of demand are dropped from the canon. The evolution of the New Canadian Library, however, demonstrates that just the opposite may occur: in this case, books that were out of demand . . . became the very works considered to be worthy of inclusion. . . . In the topsy-turvy world of the New Canadian Library, what was not wanted was often what was wanted most." What is topsy turvy here? one might ask. Public wants are almost always created.

This chapter and the following one, "The Rhetoric of the Back Cover Copy: Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*," like many parts of Lecker's book, are marred by Lecker's stylistic habit of lapsing into series of short, breathless sentences that suggest drama, conspiracy, and individual skulduggery which the facts he is presenting do not support. Commenting on how the criticism of Ross's novel has often made it into a sign of a more abstract critical or cultural construct, Lecker writes: "I'm back to my starting point: *As for Me and My House* is finished, dead. It has become a critical guide. Its author has become a teacher. Does anyone feel particularly saddened—or maddened—by this loss?" Presumably Lecker thinks someone should be so saddened or maddened? But why?—no text can exist outside its interactions with the interpretations its readers have given it, or outside the larger contexts of literary, critical, and public discourses. Lecker's tracing of the rhetorics of the *As for Me and My House* back covers does create an interesting and instructive story. But in both chapters, Lecker over-narrativizes, hinting at plots and individual motivations where there may be none. Two chapters which have promise as critiques of institutional process thus founder on Lecker's inability to see past the possibility of weak, greedy, ambitious, or conflicted individuals.

Part Three, "Reading Canonical Criticism," contains chapters on Frye's "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada* and on my "Surviving the Paraphrase." Lecker begins each one with suggestions of conspiracy—it is a "curious absence," he writes, that "no critique devoted exclusively to Frye's text" has been written (192). "For some reason . . . critics have been 'reluctant to focus' on 'Surviving the Paraphrase' as *writing*" (207). Yet there are likely and mundane explanations for such critical oversights—critics may have become

bored with the essays, or now find them of little relevance, or find the piecemeal comments they have already received in various places sufficient. Critiques focused on the essays may have been rejected on various grounds by journal editors. However, the suggestions of conspiracy allow Lecker to situate himself once again in the role of hero-adventurer *outside* of critical practice: "I do know that I offer here the first extended reading of Frye's conclusion" (192). (Apparently he has learned nothing from Tracy Ware's admonishment [1991] that no self-heroizing liberationist gesture can disengage a critic from discursive and institutional history.) Again he excessively narrativizes the texts he examines, transforming Frye's essay into a romance in which Frye and Lecker jointly arrive in a promised transhistorical garden, and my essay into a escape-from-wilderness journey that manages to gain paradise without surrendering wilderness. His devices are mainly ones of mistranslation—through hyperbole, metaphor (changing D.G. Jones into a sacrificed Christ), projection, fantasy (speculating on what the authors might have been feeling at particular moments in writing in the essays), and covertly flawed steps in logic, as when he writes "'the traditional subject of the novel has been the person who is 'isolated' by his not being able to fit comfortably into society.'" In other words, the problem of being different . . . is a universal problem of archetypal status" (223). Possible institutional readings are once again lost in Lecker's rush to personalize and attribute individual motive.

The collection's subtitle essays on Canadian canon-formation are those of Part One, "Canon and Context": "The Canonization of Canadian Literature," "A Country Without a Canon," and "Privacy, Publicity, and the Discourse of Canadian Criticism." About the first two I have already written a great deal in my *Critical Inquiry* response and in a chapter of my *Canadian Literary Power*. The contradictions between them—the asking for interrogation of an hegemonous Canadian canon in the first and the lamenting the lack of an hegemonous canon in the second—remain from their earlier publication. "Privacy, Publicity, and the Discourse of Canadian Criticism" addresses the question of how Canadian criticism (by "Canadian criticism" Lecker does not really mean Canadian criticism but Canadian criticism of Canadian literature) has changed in the past forty years. His facile answer, worked out over forty pages, is that it "has become a private affair, removed from public access" (69). The problem with this conception is that it assumes that there can be only one "public," and that any splitting of this public, or splitting from it, creates "private" communities. Lecker's thinking here resembles that of Mathews' in its inability to see specialized public communities as anything other than cliques or factions, and their discourses as other

than "jargon." "Private" for Lecker in this essay takes on many of the meanings which the present Harris government in Ontario gives to "special interests."

As its title suggests, Lecker's analysis is founded throughout on a unitary notion of "public" embedded in a false binary. "To be outside or inside," he writes, adding arbitrary connotations to this construction. "Public or Private. Park bench or boudoir." To be "public" is to be open and natural. To be private is to be confined and feminine. To question such thinking, as I did in 1965 in writing about the "ostensibly private" world of discussions among writers, by which I hoped I was indicating that that world was *a* public one, is for Lecker merely to express uncertainty: "the word ostensibly suggests that . . . Davey remained uncertain about the possibility of asserting privacy over publicity. . ." (81). A second binary which Lecker constructs is between "theory" and Canadian nationalism, arguing that the arrival of poststructuralism (he does not use this term, preferring the more reductive "theory") implied "that nation didn't really matter (language mattered) at a time when Canadian critics felt compelled to believe that nation really did matter" (90). In fact, Canadian nationalism at the time of which Lecker writes, and its ally thematic criticism, were grounded on theories, however incoherent the theorizations. Rather than newly introducing "theory," poststructuralisms offered alternative theories, and helped make the theoretical grounds of nationalism and thematics more visible.

Inspiring this essay is an astonishingly naive concept: a Canadian 1950s and 60s golden age that is both pre-Babel and prelapsarian. Then, Lecker writes, "Readers, writers, and critics shared a common language, and this common language allowed them to participate in public debate. . ." (95). Commenting on Barry Cameron's account of how thematic criticism attempted to fabricate a hegemonous Canadian unity, he writes, "This is the kind of statement that can be made in 1990, when publicity—and the value of 'collective concern,'—is almost dead. Cameron seems to welcome the decline of publicity. I find this tragic. It may be welcoming disaster" (84). But Lecker's golden age of public discourse never was. It was at best a pretence, a "we" invented by critics who claimed to speak in the name of all Canadians. There were always exclusions— other unacknowledged "publics"—variously constituted by class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, gender, and region. Lecker's nostalgia is for an hegemony and illusory homogeneity that might be a dream for a book publisher or a national literary critic but create very different possibilities for many others.

Both Lecker's and Mathews' books offer idealist visions of a simpler Canada, one in which all Canadians read from the same books, speak one jargon-free language, and politely refrain from mentioning

ethnicity, colour or region. Both seem to be symptoms of a period in Canada in which cultural certainties and privileges, particularly those of white professional males, have been shaken. Both writers resent the claims of new arrivals, whether it is Lecker lamenting "European theory" or Mathews ridiculing "post-modernism" and arguing that poor native-born whites have more to claim to grievance than have middle-class immigrants of colour. Both display critical megalomania, Lecker by suggesting that no one but he is bold enough to address the critical and cultural problems that need to be dealt with in Canadian literature, and Mathews that only he, among the more capable Canadian "intellectuals," is free of the continuing ideological influence of the Third Reich. And both, alas, have been obsessed with Frank Davey.

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Frank Davey
