

# Self-Loathing In Canadian Studies

*Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value.* Ed. and introd. Robert Lecker. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991. 251 pp.

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The psychological distress that marks this profession, the fact that so many of its members exist in a shamefaced relationship with the machinery that enables their labors, is in part attributable, I think, to literary anti-professionalism, which is, as a form of professional behavior, almost always damaging.

— Stanley Fish, "Profession Despise Thysself: Fear and Self-Loathing in Literary Studies"

Until recently, Canadian critics justly complained of the neglect, not just of individual works, but of Canadian literature itself. According to many of the contributors to *Canadian Canons*, we now commit a graver sin: canonization. Consider Richard Paul Knowles on the effect of academic study on subversive plays: "They are recontextualized and contained within the boundaries of the institution, neutralized and muffled within the lethal embrace of the canon" (92). When Leftist works are canonized, they are "neutralized by the processes of production and recontextualization" (103); feminist works "are recontextualized and their subversive potential thereby effectively defused" (105). He ends his survey of abuses with a comment from Alain Martineau's *Herbert Marcuse's Utopia*: "when the work of art can no longer preserve its critical stance and offer a viable alternative to the irrationality of the world, it is assimilated: it becomes an affirmation instead of a negation of the existing world." Knowles adds this astonishing comment: "In short, it becomes canonical" (106). Follow this logic, and you would conclude that the canonization of Margaret Atwood indicates the sexism of Canadian literary institutions. Progressive critics, by contrast, should be focussing on the most reactionary authors, thereby rendering them powerless. Obviously Knowles needs a more flexible understanding of the relations between knowledge and power. As Terry Eagleton argues in *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991, pp. 46-47), such analyses as Marcuse's exaggerate the power of the dominant ideology by taking "it at face value, judging it as it would *wish* to appear." Certainly (and thankfully) no academic has the power assigned to him or her in Knowles' fantasies, according to which the most powerful critiques are completely defused by their anthologists and commentators.

The point is hardly worth making, save that Knowles' anti-professionalism is shared by other contributors to *Canadian Canons*. Thus Dermot McCarthy fears that "Canadian literary history is doomed to remain a prisoner of its founding monomania, endlessly repeating the same story to itself, moving the same or similar canonic units like chess pieces in an irresolvable stalemate .. ." (45). Denis Salter argues that "no matter how earnestly it invokes the pluralistic values of liberal democracy, the idea of a national theatre is potentially self-defeating and potentially dangerous" (73). Concentrating on the list of the ten most important novels constructed at the Calgary Conference on the Canadian Novel in 1978, Lawrence Mathews turns to ridicule: "It is as if List B were calculated to elicit chuckles of amused condescension from the Canadianist's wealthy cousins, the Faulkner scholar and the Beckett specialist. 'These novels aim low,' one of these might have said to the other, 'but, on balance, they achieve their aim' "(165). Writing as if the resistance to theory were uniquely Canadian, Lorraine Weir investigates the influence of Linda Hutcheon in these terms: "Less radical than the longer-canonized Northrop Frye, Hutcheon balances on the edge of English-Canadian acculturated intolerance of speculative thought, redeeming herself at every possible lapse through invocation of the official values enshrined in our literary tradition" (181). In his

introduction, Robert Lecker adds his approval: in Lecker's words, McCarthy shows how literary history "becomes a con, a 'discursive fabrication' that reveals more about its speaker than the historicized text" (10); Salter is said to reveal the canon as "a con job.. ." (12). As Jane Gallop has been arguing recently in a different context, it makes no sense for professors to disparage academic success. No one suddenly awakes to find herself with a Ph.D. and a university position. These contributors were familiar with the Canadian canons before they chose their specialization. Why are they so unhappy now? With some irony, Mathews refers us to W.J. Keith, who once stated that he and his peers "are conscious of a lowering of the temperature when they cross the boundary into Canadian studies" (cited on 155). However regrettable that statement might be in other ways, it captures the mood of many of these contributors. And, as his attack on List B shows, what instruments Mathews has agreed. To be a critic of Canadian literature in a Canadian university, it seems, is to experience the occasional delusion that there is somewhere else one would rather be.

Since I have attacked Lecker's anti-professionalism elsewhere, I will turn to his skills as an editor. The inclusion of three pieces on Québécois writing is especially welcome. The informative papers by Lucie Robert and Sherry Simon in particular show, in their assumptions of constructive roles for nationalism and the university, a sense of purpose lacking elsewhere in the volume. Notice the contrast between Knowles' remarks and Robert's comment on the study of Québécois theatre: "The creation of advanced programs of theatre study in some Quebec universities meant that this new vision would be passed on and enriched through research" (123). Simon demonstrates that the reconsideration of canonical works is as legitimate as the attempts to revise canonical lists that so pre-occupy English-Canadian critics. In Quebec, according to Simon, "Revisionist assault on the canon . . . comes less in the form of an alternate list of works than in a shift in the site at which this essential link [between representation and value] is discerned" (167). Her conclusion summarizes the best aspects of this book: critical "disagreements show how the cultural arena is in fact a field of overlapping and competing versions of reality — and that power consists precisely in the ability to create and sustain representations and their interpretations" (179). Such instructive work comes as a painful reminder of what Canadian academics lose from remaining "two solitudes."

Despite my reservations, then, all of the essays in *Canadian Canons* are worthwhile, except Stephen Scobie's "Leonard Cohen, Phyllis Webb, and the End(s) of Modernism," which is in no way an essay "in literary value." I will conclude by considering McCarthy's well-researched and lucid "Early Canadian Literary Histories and the Function of a Canon," since this subject coincides with my own interests and those of this journal. Implicitly arguing against Lecker, McCarthy demands a longer historical perspective: "Just as the university as cultural institution in Canada cannot be understood in terms only of the last twenty-five years, so the significance of the literary canon which has issued from it cannot be understood in so narrow a framework" (31). More pointedly, he argues that "*The Literary History of Canada* (1965) does not represent an act of literary autogeny" (31). McCarthy then convincingly establishes the "topo- and logocentric premises" that cause early critics from E.H. Dewart to Lionel Stevenson to interpret Canadian literature "as the 'voice' of the 'people,' and in the canonical privileging of only those works or oeuvres which express the 'spirit of place' or 'spirit of the people' — these being, for all intents and purposes, one and the same" (32). So far, so good, though McCarthy does not observe that, as Donna Bennett argues in her contribution to this volume, these Canadian critics were acting no differently from their contemporaries in other national contexts. My objection is to McCarthy's larger argument that nationalism is an "extra-literary" concept to which Canadian literary history remains mistakenly attached. It makes no sense to refer to an "extra-literary" concept unless you retain a New Critical belief in intrinsically literary values. If McCarthy wishes to do that, he should not be citing Barbara Herrnstein Smith with approval. Like Lecker, McCarthy tends to see nationalist values as contingent and therefore illegitimate; he does not see the contingency of all values, which is Smith's point. And like Lecker, McCarthy suffers from

canon envy. Whereas Lecker contrasts Canadian aesthetic conservatism to the "delegitimation crisis" of American criticism, McCarthy moves in the opposite direction: "It is not possible to state with equanimity that the Canadian tradition, like the American, has achieved a 'stable canon'... . Perhaps there will never be a Canadian canon but only a tradition of canonic anxiety" (45). Most Canadian critics are content to live with an unstable canon, but McCarthy hopes to escape it: "Not until the writing of Canadian literary history and the concept of the canon escape their nationalistic premises, and the topocentric / logocentric orientations which structure them, will that history and any canon it produces achieve a broader range of socia-cultural function.. ." (45). Under such conditions, Canadian literary history would be neither possible nor desirable. It is the self-afflicting desire to get beyond nationalism that causes such distress to Canadian critics. The desire makes us ashamed of what we do, and that shame leads to delusions of inferiority. Why, this is Canadianist anti-professionalism, nor am I out of it.

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