

## The Question of the Corpus: Ethnicity and Canadian Literature

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There are, of course, many reasons why ethnic writing should interest anyone whose field is literature, even before he or she makes the association with the Chinatowns or the Little Italys or the native groups that are or may be part of his or her everyday life. To start with, ethnic texts exist. They are published, appear in journals, anthologies, are reviewed. And in literature, no less than in any other domain, phenomena have a way of enduring. They call for recognition, and sooner or later we cannot avoid stumbling on them.

This most elementary of gestures—mere acknowledgment—would already carry us into the thick of the theoretical debate. Along with the rise of feminist consciousness, the success of South American or African or Commonwealth fiction and the reduced resistance towards mass-cultural forms, the arrival of ethnic authors—playwrights, novelists, poets—on the scene has been one of the events that have shaped the culture of the last twenty years. If literature is also a body of works whose scope is institutionally confirmed and institutionally modified, then it is these types of texts that have most directly challenged established perceptions. No other occurrences have had a more concrete impact in those places wherein decisions are made about which titles are to be passed on (are to be placed on teaching curricula) and will therefore count as literature. In comparison, the most talked-about topic on the academic circuit—postmodernism—will seem of more limited range, an in-house transformation that can be dealt with chronologically, by adding a few names on a tested roster, but that will leave basic matters well enough alone.

Let me be precise. That courses on ethnic writing, for example, or women's studies or paraliterature are tacked on in provisional programs hanging in between disciplines, that they are often tokenized, tolerated as a concession to *Realpolitick* and the enrolment crisis, does not detract from their role. On the contrary, their marginality is symptomatic. It is the best

indication of the problems they pose. The developments I have mentioned contest, on different grounds (gender, geography, culture), criteria hitherto male-oriented, eurocentric and elitist in nature. But in so doing they do not just undermine the prestige of the canon and the notion of literature which it helps to propagate. They are difficult items to manage, intellectually and administratively, for the critic and for the teacher; perhaps, primarily, because they put severe constraints on the premises. In spite of the many divergent internal allegiances, literary studies have, by and large, at least in more systematic versions, accepted the view according to which the theorist should concern himself or herself with literariness, with the general principles presiding over the text, rather than with the text as such or with literature conceived as a series of works. The result has been a division of the epistemological labour: in recent formulations of the composition of the discipline, theory is supposed to take place at maximum remove from the reality of the texts and is fully separated from criticism, which is more open to contingency and involves direct, participatory action in literature and its history.<sup>1</sup> As it happens any time we encounter texts whose first and most urgent claim to attention is their being there, the writing of women or of ethnic or of Third World writers encourages us to reverse priorities. In order to properly assess these writers, to determine whether they fit, disavow or generally impinge on current models, we must first read them. And we must attempt to read them on their own terms, bottom-up fashion, or we will be confirming readymade norms. In short, we must think not of literariness but of literature, of a corpus of works whose extension is enlarged or restricted by circumstances (i.e., by the joint action of the consumers of texts and those—ultimately editors and teachers—who propose or sanction official definitions). Thus, these texts and these authors force us to operate at a closer distance from them and the works we will be integrating them to or from which we are to keep them asunder. Thus, too, we are obliged to reconsider the role of observation, of critical experience in theory. Most of all, we cannot but wonder whether observation re-acquires status only in emergency situations, when models break down and we must revise borders and fortunes, or whether some sort of observation, some sort of direct awareness of literature and its range is not always inscribed into the whole process of theory-producing.

I will not be addressing these questions here. It would not be difficult, I believe (the proliferation of theories of reading is proof enough), to show that observation is the real issue in the epistemology of literary theory.<sup>2</sup> But for our purposes a more simple caveat will suffice. In proclaiming the primacy of literariness, twentieth-century theories have themselves been very responsive, more so than they have admitted, to the pressures coming from empirical, critical contact. When the Russian formalist and Prague School structuralist Roman Jakobson tells us that the main criterion for classification, for including a text or excluding it from the literary realm, is the poetic function, the degree to which a text foregrounds its own processes, is self-reflexive, we know that his dictum applies first and foremost to the *avant-garde* modernist writers of the twenties.<sup>3</sup> And it

could not have been otherwise: poets such as Mayakovsky or Plekhanov were members of the same linguistic circles in which Russian formalism originated and contributed to its unfolding. Similarly, the idea that art is irony, so crucial to Anglo-American New Criticism, owed much of its impact to the support and sponsorship of the various Eliots or Pounds or Wallace Stevens, whose texts were its exemplary embodiments and who collaborated intellectually, in essays and articles, with the whole enterprise.<sup>4</sup> Again, theory legitimizes literature and is legitimized by it.

These complicities between theoretical reflection and local aesthetics point to some of the other reasons why literary ethnicity should interest us, regardless of how it is “canadianized” (or whether it is “canadianizable”). Beside the historical timeliness, the visibility, the surfacing in a period which has seen the simultaneous collapse of modernism and formalist or structuralist poetics, there is the mode of existence, and in this ethnic writers must be distinguished from their feminist or Third World or popular literature colleagues.

The most idiosyncratic and most conspicuous feature of ethnic texts is also their most controversial one. It has to do with the function of the author. When all is said and done, ethnicity cannot be defined formally: any style, any genre can be ethnic. Nor is content a more reliable discriminant: a work with an ethnic setting or ethnic characters or displaying ethnic themes is not necessarily ethnic. The telltale, indispensable clue is signature. While the mechanism is not fool-proof, does allow complication to creep in (the ethnic name may be the pseudonym of a non-ethnic individual, the writer may adopt an unrecognizable alias, as did Philip Grove here in Canada); it is nevertheless authorship that provides the best rationale: an ethnic work is a work written by someone who, in a particular society, is perceived to be an ethnic.

At the heart of literary ethnicity are, then, two processes, which may interlock but do not have to. In one respect, ethnicity is a perspective: it occurs when ethnics assume voice, speak about themselves, when there is vision from within, writing with inside knowledge. In a second manner, ethnicity presupposes an indirect act of reference, one that does not willy-nilly link the text to the world or the “reality” it is presumed to hark back to, but relies on the figure of the author, and, more specifically, his or her social identity, for mediation. When the work is intrinsically ethnic, contains ethnic material, the writer attests to its authenticity. The events, the characters in the possible world depicted by the text, resemble those in our actual world because they are narrated by someone who can vouch for that resemblance: ethnic authorship is authoritativeness. Should the text not contain any ethnic material, the identity of the writer will ground it to the actual world “contrastively”: the work will be seen as the work of an ethnic who does not express his or her ethnicity overtly. Consequently, no matter how subtly or how effectively it highlights its textuality, an ethnic work will, at the same time, be subject to values of a different order. In Italian-Canadian poetry, for example, texts often name themselves. Titles such as “Italo-Canadian Lirica,” “The Last Message,” “Poem,” and their

variations, are not uncommon. Yet the labeling, demystifying though it be, seems only to increase the text's literalness: rather than distancing the author, it draws him or her nearer. Commenting on a "thin acrobat" and his "feats of poetry," his "5BX plan/for leaving fine/inprints on this endless snow," Saro D'Agostino writes in a poem entitled "Canadian Poet" (in Di Cicco 1978, 67):

I am sentimental, we  
no longer speak to each other  
To him, a palm  
bleeding under the snow  
would indicate poor health

a need to exercise, proper  
diet

F. G. Paci can, in an article on immigrant fiction, place honesty and "plain speaking" above all other desiderata without espousing naive word-forthing realism (1985, 45).

It should hardly be necessary to note that privileging authorship over the personae in the text, subordinating autoreferentiality to reference, have not been among the habits critical or theoretical etiquette has most often recommended in our century. With ethnicity, however, the stakes are much higher. The cultural insidership also accentuates the measure of outsidership, especially in relation to voice. In a novel written in English, a word, a phrase in Japanese or Ukrainian or Italian or Dutch, pronounced by a character belonging to a minority group, will at best be an attempt to create an impression of reality or an instance of the author's fascination with the picturesque. In a novel written by a novelist of the culture of the character, it becomes a feature of the enunciational structure of the work: the convention whereby the words of the character speaking a foreign tongue must be translated into the language of the author or the narrator does not stop us from taking cognizance of and calling into question the latter's own speech, and to collate his or her linguistic choice with the condition of his or her authorship.

The fact is that literary theory has always assumed that literature is produced in an environment self-evidently unitary. When we read about German or Italian or French or English texts, we imagine them, as we have been accustomed to do, as components of an indivisible entity in which language, culture and sometimes territory coincide. Ethnicity introduces a series of wedges, of hyphens in that homogeneity. Since an author may write in one idiom and think in another, since a culture may be represented by a multiplicity of languages, congruence between the linguistic and the cultural can no longer be taken for granted. Each of these dimensions becomes a variable that can combine (relatively) freely with the other, depending on the individual's private history and propensities. Ethnicity is, therefore, a position in the enunciational spectrum. This by itself will endow it with its own special psychological, social or ontological peculiarities (one of the things we have been learning from philosophy and the social

sciences is that language modelizes our view of the world, that, in turn, polyglotism affects linguistic behaviour). In literature, there is no doubt, new coordinates come into play. The language of a minority literature is, as Gilles Deleuze has remarked, a nomadic language, a language that has no fixed roots, that adapts with each crossing of borders (1975, 29ff.). Italian-Canadian authors write in French in Quebec, in English in the other provinces and occasionally in Italian. Not surprisingly, just as it involves a particular spatial frame, ethnicity unfolds according to its own very particular temporal rhythm. In ethnic literature the term "generation" overlaps common critical usage. It designates sub-types, the degree of distance towards the cultural past and the cultural present, of insidership or of outsidership one can or one does assume. Its literary implications are many. By usual standards, the memoir of the landed immigrant who has gained access to a publishable world for the first time in his or her life will be bad literature. Within ethnicity, it will be one in a scale of different discursive possibilities; the gap between it and the work of the professional ethnic writer or of the ethnic who is born in the country and is comfortable with its language is less great, critically, theoretically, than the one that might divide career and non-career writers from within the same dimension.

These are, in big schematic chunks, the major problems. As I have stated, they pertain to the notion of literature and to theory in general. How can they be contextualized? If both the existence and the mode of existence of ethnic works are theoretically relevant, if they provoke us into revising some of our attitudes about the history of criticism or its relation to literature, or about the impact of language and culture on the text, how are these works to be assimilated to the rest of Canadian literary production? Clearly, one thing ethnicity prompts us to do is to put the focus back on the adjective "Canadian." What awaits us with ethnicity is, said bluntly, the logical antecedent of all critical/theoretical syllogisms about literary Canada. Literature on a national scale came into being, in this country, by census-taking, when it was decided, towards the end of the sixties, that there were enough writers of value with enough common concerns to warrant the collective labeling. An historical gesture, adding or subtracting works to some core corpus, the counting of heads in a place such as Canada, may be, to borrow from Frye, relentless, a perennial beginning.<sup>5</sup> Criticism in Canada has always been a plural operation with a double or triple birth as its goal. It has ratified theories or methods, helped establish the literature of the nation and, in intent at any rate, the nation itself. To reconstitute the corpus with ethnic texts is therefore to re-enact a foundation myth, one in which the social and the theoretical and the literary mingle.

On this score, when it comes to sketching the essential theoretical contours of a criticism that has acknowledged the existence of ethnic texts, we have already in Canada the proper resounding board: it is thematic criticism, the school or movement which was, in other periods, most consistently and most deliberately engaged in all three of the above activities.

Much has been said about Northrop Frye, Ronald Sutherland, Margaret Atwood, Doug Jones, John Moss and their work. From our

vantage point, now that their criticism can be historicized, two lines of argument would seem to be the most profitable to pursue.

The discourse of thematic criticism was informal and methodologically never explicit. Neither Frye, nor Atwood, nor Sutherland, nor Jones, nor Moss discusses in detail the notion of theme or indicates how a theme is drawn out of a text or by which deletions, combinations, reconstructions the themes of a series of books become the single superordinate pattern governing all of them. On this count, and for their social commitment, Canadian thematologists must be distinguished from any of their counterparts abroad, of whatever denomination, who cultivated a more refined and philosophically and methodologically more properly motivated aloofness from their objects of study.

At the same time the opposite is also true: the divergences are counterbalanced by the parallels. In the mid-seventies a good portion of the polemic against the thematic critics came from quarters advocating recourse to structuralist procedures (e.g., Blodgett 1979, 128). Through the usual irony of history, it is structuralist narratology that today thematicism most immediately calls to mind. The strategy of the Ronald Sutherland who tells his students to read "a large number of books by English-Canadian and French-Canadian writers," who tests the "transcending themes and patterns" (1971, n.p.) on more books, or of the Doug Jones and the Margaret Atwood who replicate the exercise themselves (in, respectively, *Butterfly on Rock* [1973] and *Survival* [1972]), is the same strategy of the Russian folklorist V. J. Propp, who derived his celebrated arch-fable of thirty-one functions from an analysis of one hundred folk tales and was one of the precursors of the structuralism of the sixties (1968). Many of the concepts of thematic criticism could bear quick translation into structuralist or proto-structuralist parlance. For Atwood, the themes the critic enucleates strengthen cultural unity in so far as they become a conscious tradition which will then generate other texts (235-47). In Soviet semiotics culture is both an aggregate of texts and the rules by which those texts are produced.<sup>6</sup> The "maps," "diagrams," "mirrors" the thematic critics refer to when they explain the role they attribute to myths or themes are synonyms for "model," one of the more conspicuous notions of the structuralist conceptual apparatus. Indeed, in the thematologists' penchant for environmentalist themes one could, today, find traces of structuralist admonishment about the nature-culture dichotomy: if for Lévi-Strauss the incest taboo underpins all societies (without the interdiction against the perpetuation of natural bonds women would not circulate [1949, 1-35]), for Frye the "imminence of nature" (1971, 247) and the measures (the culture) taken to defend against it are at the heart of the Canadian experience.

Vice versa, there is a thematic underside to structuralism that has yet gone almost unnoticed. The early formalist distinction between story-line and plot, *fabula* and *sujet*, was first proposed in an essay on thematics (Tomashevsky 1965). A. Zholkovsky and Y. Scheglov have devised a technique of analysis of literary texts, applicable to single works and a writer's "poetic world," which hinges on the interaction of semantic, thematic struc-

tures and stylistic devices (1975, n. 1). The Italian semioticians Cesare Segre (1979, 71-84) and Silvio D'Arco Avalle (1975, 21ff.) have coined the notions of "schema of representability" and of "macro-sign" to indicate conventionalized themes that delimit or prescribe the range of the "narratable" in a given period. In 1985 the prestigious French literary journal *Poétique* devoted a whole number to thematology, with most of the articles being written by critics of structuralist formation.<sup>8</sup>

The affinity with structuralism must be stressed not to vindicate some critics, to retrieve for them some belated methodological credibility. Canadian thematicism was, for the worse as for the better, an ideology of theme: Sutherland, Jones, Atwood used the concept for very specific purposes but in very unspecific guises. Nonetheless they do partake of the ethos of a period, and it is well to remind ourselves of it. As with structuralism, the key axiom of thematic criticism is the assumption of coherence, "total coherence," in the words of the Northrop Frye of the introduction to *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957, 15). The patterns that are uncovered may encompass the whole literary production of the nation only synecdochically, by a statistical leap of faith. But linkages are postulated, and the themes do turn into filters for the cataloguing of other texts. Theoretically it is on this basis that thematicism must be confronted.

The outlook that writers such as Sutherland, Jones and Atwood espouse cannot adequately accommodate ethnic texts. Before anything else, the corpus which thematicism gives rise to is a system, and in structuralist or parastructuralist systems every item has the same weight: no impurities, no discrepancies are tolerated. The metaphors Canadian critics have resorted to in order to epitomize the options available to anyone approaching Canadian literature could not here be more revealing. In the heraldry of most wide circulation, the icons are, it is well known, either an ellipse with two centres or two separate circles.<sup>9</sup> Expressed long-hand, this amounts to saying that the choice is between a system of systems, a Canadian literature with a mainstream in which authors from Québec and from English-speaking Canada share similar predicaments, and two systems, two literatures that do not touch. What is important, for us, is that in each case the notion of system is preserved and, secondarily, that the closure of the systems is ensured by the equivalence between culture and language. For thematic criticism one language has one culture. It is the formula adopted by most anthologies or most histories of literature in Canada, and it remains intact in most studies of immigrant poetry or fiction, where the question of the relation between language and culture is never broached.

The addition of ethnic texts shifts the emphasis from the model and the cohesion it imposes on the corpus to the internal dynamics. Gravitational pulls, force fields can be discerned. The elements of a set, be it a single work or a group of works, exist hierarchically, asymmetrically; dominant and subordinate voices, majority and minority cultures, official and non-official languages permute with each other.

These changes redirect some of the other valences of the theory. With thematic criticism, the method and the contents recovered (the environ-

mentalist slant of the books its authors have written) and the unilingualism intertwine. The concept of theme permits the assembling together of some texts on semantic, rather than stylistic or strictly linguistic terms, the texts yield a pattern, the pattern pits nature against culture, this reinforces the initial hypothesis (that literature should be studied thematically). Whereas the critic who abides by the two-circles option will choose French or English for his system, in the approach whose reach is *mari-usque-ad-mare*, the voice that speaks is, to quote from Doug Jones' *Butterfly on Rock*, "the voice of the land" (5), a more neutral speech, but, again, monologicistic. With ethnic texts the "I-it," culture-nature dichotomy will become an "I-you" relation. Dualities take place within culture, which is plural, a constellation of systems rather than one big system.

All of this should nudge us towards the more contemporary area of post-structuralism: where multiplicity is, there difference, intertextuality, polyphony, dialogue and the other notions that constitute the most powerful *argot* of current criticism will more likely and more legitimately be. However, if the notion of system is to be the backdrop, the touchstone of our reasoning, post-structuralism will have to be enlarged into a chronological category. The slippage we have been describing cannot be consigned to any one single, exclusive theoretical orbit. Ethnicity, the retrieval it entails (culture as a criterion, together with the thematizations' language), demands no critical heroics, no hyperbolic postures: the nihilist jocundity of deconstruction will not serve it better than the strict, stoic vision of the structuralist for whom man and meaning are rule-governed. Vanguard criticism has seized on the suggestion that discourse may be inherently fragmentary and multivocal to liquidate some of the notions literary theory had previously relied on. For Barthes, who is here, as usual, the compendious figure, work and text are not the same thing. The latter is an abstract, immaterial *construct* consisting of all the relations that infiltrate a book as a finished entity and requiring for its study a semiotics of *signifiante* (with the work a semiotics of communication will do) (1982, 43-61). Once the literary is associated with the textual, with the decentring mechanisms that deconstruct sense and the book as such, authorship, be it the one publicly made of ethnic writers or the authorship-geniality of the Romantic tradition, loses most of its theoretical prerogatives: it will be a concept valid for communicational writing, and no more. Contemporary or not, such an approach, by claiming an intrinsic essentiality for literary discourse, would take us back to old formalist positions: literature would be that by virtue of its deviation from some standard.

The in-betweenness of ethnicity, its simultaneous tangencies with language and culture, would seem, rather, to call for paradigms that assert both stability and instability, the centrifugal and the centripetal. To put a tag on some of these strategies, we might mention, within the humanities, one of the outgrowths of classical semiotics, polysystem theory. The definition of system it proposes (an "open structure . . . a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options"—Even-Zohar 1979, 290) certainly improves on structuralism: by preserving the unity of the whole and the diverging texture

of each of the items, it responds to the critiques of the earlier movement and, probably, to the critiques of those critiques. Or we might turn to the sciences, some of which have for some time now been more concerned with the notion of complexity than with the notion of structure. In the interdisciplinary research sponsored initially, and perhaps not insignificantly, by biology and related fields but whose epicentre has been expanding to the social sciences and the arts, extremities cooperate. Order and disorder, hazard and necessity, the single and the multiple coexist in space and in time, recursively. They are co-present and they precede and follow one another. Order breeds disorder, disorder leads to order. And so with hazard or necessity or the other elements of the other dyads.<sup>10</sup> After the pendulum swings of the last few decades, old organicist metaphors may now, in the eighties, be perhaps revisited (and updated) without preconception.<sup>11</sup>

To illustrate the appropriateness of tensional strategies and their advantages over approaches that highlight either coherence or incoherence, let us go back briefly to Italian-Canadian literature, the poetry in particular.

One of the thematic fixtures of anthologies of poets of this group is a sort of recitation of the *ethnos*. Texts teem with portraits of relatives, of ancestors. In one recent collection we run into such titles as "My People," "My Father," "The Photograph of My Grandfather Reading Dante," "My Grandfather Didn't," "The Man Called Beppino," and they are only some of the poems that dwell on the subject overtly. The evocation of ancestry interfaces with another quintessential theme. The "I" of the texts is continuously dislocated from a "there" or a "before." "Immigrant," "exile," "wanderer," "nostalgia" are among the terms that recur most often. They allude to a duality that is depicted as aberrant, as monstrous; an ethnic is, in the image of one of the poets, someone who "strides the Atlantic/legs spread like a Colossus" (DiMichele in Di Cicco 1978, 62). More than the return to Italy, a stratagem duly attempted and always rejected, the commemoration of genealogy acts as a magical antidote to displacement. Fathers, grandfathers are totemic figures summoned in defence of the self. They counterbalance temporal discontinuity with biological continuity. "I am not alone, I have never been alone," we read in a poem by Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, "Ghosts are barking/in my eyes, their soft tears washing us down to/baltimore, out the chesapeake, round the atlantic, round the world/back where we started from" (37).

To understand literary ethnicity we must be able to appreciate this basic-ness. The declaration of genealogical membership is one of the simplest modes of structuring literature. The long lists of descent in Homer or the Bible—the rhythm of "begat begat begat," as Robert Kroetsch has phrased it (1981, v)—are pure succession, primordial narrative. More importantly, for linguistics discursive competence is not acquired until one is able to deploy deictic elements, those parts of speech—pronouns, possessive adjectives, adverbs—which organize the spatiotemporal coordinates and bring into play the notion of belonging to and being away from.<sup>12</sup>

To evoke the origin is, thus, to originate discourse. Italian-Canadian literature can be "about" any subject, with different intensity and different sophistication. Voice, tone and talent vary. But in as much as it accepts

itself as Italian-Canadian, as ethnic, it will reiterate, somehow, inside itself, one of the degree zero requirements of all literature: the acquisition of language. Not style, not literary language but, very starkly, language in its cognitive, communicational function. The writer who writes from the perspective of harmony, who experiences no gaps between language and culture, who belongs to one of the majority, official cultures, has always many choices: the obverse of his or her discourse is another discourse-form, another style, any other of the virtualities of the language he or she is so totally within. The individual ethnic writer, who often learns through acculturation the language he or she publishes in, has those choices too, but they are incrustations sitting on top of the other initial, fundamental impulse, which "reduces" literature to speech (or to the "plain speaking" of Paci's formula) and the obverse of which may be silence. In the meta-fictional representations of Italian-Canadian literature, the ethnics who can speak out, who have no use for reticence—usually younger, second-generation characters—are budding or aspiring intellectuals, often very self-consciously militant: the objective of the protagonists of Marco Micone's *Voiceless People* is to "replace the culture of silence" with "immigrant culture," to lure, coax or persuade fellow ethnics into speech by writing texts in which they can "find themselves" (1984, 71). Those who stay forever silent—older immigrants—affirm the same values passively, negatively. Knowing a language for them is synonymous with the ability to write. "I'm a worker and didn't go to school," a father tells his daughter in one of Mary Di Michele's poems, "but I would have liked to be an educated man,/to think great thoughts, to write them,/and to have someone listen/. . . If I had the language like you . . . I would write poems too about what I think" (1984, 167).

Texts vehicling such a poetics can only fit ambivalently within a Canadian corpus, big or small. Italian-Canadian poetry is poetry *because* of, and not despite, its sentimentality, its willingness to say its identity; it is composed of works whose "reductions" proclaim the sociocultural or the sociolinguistic to be literary, for which to emerge into literature is already to do literature. But, precisely, qualities of this kind destabilize a system. Ethnic minimalism brings into the picture aspects that by official norms are of extraliterary (i.e. documentary or "sociological") relevance and that, rehabilitated, are incommensurable. On the other hand, ethnic novels, poems or theatre permit us to better grasp some lines of convergence within what is a necessarily multicentred Canadian corpus. The search for ancestry and roots, through voyage and/or memory, is one of the *leitmotifs* of such complex Canadian novels as David Godfrey's *The New Ancestors*, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, Jack Hodgins' *The Invention of the World* and Audrey Thomas' *Blown Figures*. From the publishing dates of these works (all of them were written in the last two decades) one can suspect that their authors were not unfamiliar with the issues that the debate on ethnicity was raising during that same period. A reluctance to posit these thematic linkages would tie us to an unimaginable and disturbing logic. We would have to believe that the events that have touched off the phenomenon of ethnicity are either

peripheral to Western history or have left and leave untainted the "serious" writer, both of which are suppositions that rub violently against facts: the great voyages and migrations to the new worlds beyond Europe have been one of the underlying prerequisites of much of modern history, and their effects—though still largely to be properly pondered—have surfaced with conspicuous regularity in the literature of our century. The preoccupation with origins is a constant of modernism, some of whose most influential authors have been *émigrés*. Far from diminishing the *Zeitgeist*, ethnic literature completes it, shows us all of its facets. It mediates between circumstances that would otherwise appear highly disparate, between the writer who ventures on his or her meanderings with radical, eccentric resolution and the writer for whom such reality has become almost platitudinous, the prose of everyday life. Critically, it confronts us with the realization that, while the deliberate, exotic, "high-literature" restlessness of the various Pounds, Eliots, Joyces, Becketts, Nabokovs is steeped in history, the writers who, in Canada and elsewhere, are not *émigrés* but emigrants or sons and daughters of emigrants, and therefore one of the clichés of the century, have the same spirituality built into their identi-kit.

On another level, ethnicity installs temporality within the corpus of which it is a part. Since emergence into literature may be real (as it is with non-professional ethnic writers), a system would be carrying with it images of its embryonic phase.

Each of these instances, if unrecognized, would alter our perception of ethnicity or of the whole. To deny ethnic texts their difference would be to deny or to cast doubt on their literariness. To deny the parallels with other Canadian or modernist (or modernist Canadian) texts would be to deny their actuality. To deny their incidence on the corpus hosting them would be to deny or to ignore the mechanisms by which minority texts enter official ambiance. Today's world being what it is, even when current Canadian ethnic groups have been fully integrated, other groups will be appropriating one of the national languages, and as long as such groups produce literature, new beginnings will have to be recorded, and criticism will have to accept its inaugurative function.

There is one final reason for favouring tensional totality over other approaches. Thinking about Canadian literature here in Canada, I have argued, has often taken the form of the foundation myth. Criticism has discovered its theoretical or methodological vocation as it has discovered the literature it was to study or the nation it was to help unveil. That cybernetic embrace, in which theories are at once shaped by and presume to shape the society around them, is, I have further been contending, a fate criticism in this country should not attempt to escape: it is dictated by the very make-up of the Canadian corpus. Vis-à-vis the past, however, the advent of ethnic texts also changes the reality mandating and being mandated by literature, and this deserves to be commented upon.

Although it would not be entirely fair to identify thematicism with federalist ideology, the cohesiveness, the uninterrupted plenitude it stood for accords well with an optic that had the nation and all its concomitant

conceptual apparatus as its unit of measure. The intellectual milieu in which Frye or Sutherland or Atwood or Jones belongs is the one nurtured by Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan and George Grant. If the nature-culture dichotomy of the thematists can profit from a recollection of the works of Lévi-Strauss, their sensitivity to nature as geography, as expanse cannot be understood without reference to *Empire and Communications*, *Understanding Media*, and *Technology and Empire*: the recurrences their criticism uncovers promote the unity of the land, much as telecommunications do (the Greek from which "symbol" derives does, after all, mean to "throw together"). This discourse about the space and time of technology, literature and the arts, still the most distinctive and attractive expression of the Canadian mind, could, and did, manage to ignore or to back away from ethnicity without too much difficulty. Its substance—the power of technique, the fear of nature conjugated with the need to master it—was articulated in a period in which modernization was still the only foreseeable and defensible future. The massmediologists, philosophers or *littérateurs* who were the leading figures in Canadian culture firmly believed in the unassailable intellectual and moral primacy of those relations of affiliational, consensual sociality (class, profession, etc., rather than family or race) that are the epitome and lifeblood of both modern civil life and the modern state. Frye, McLuhan, Grant and the critics really did not have much choice. In the fifties and the sixties, the decades in which they wrote some of their most influential texts, ethnicity was a non-existent and discredited topic, a residue of more primitive, non-modern phases, soon to be expelled by progress. Nazi eugenics, World War II concentration camps hung too heavily over post-war memory for the social sciences or thinkers in other disciplines to be able to grasp the full significance of the then budding civil rights movement and the positive non-discriminatory, non-chauvinistic ethnicity that accompanied it. With different shadings and intent, Canada's intelligentsia sought above all to protect, to reinforce the durability of the large, the whole. Frye's glossings of Earle Birney's line about Canada being a country haunted by a "lack of ghosts" (1977) are in this at one with McLuhan's more supra- or inter-nationalist pronouncements about the global village (the oxymoron clearly privileges the adjective). Even a writer so obstinately deprecatory towards technology and modernization as George Grant failed to see that filiation and descent, the hereditary, the small, the local, the intra-national, were, when set against homogenization, affiliation or consent, some of the pockets of resistance he was looking for: in *Technology and Empire* (1969) one does sense some discomfort, since Grant does intersperse his text with some very fleeting allusions to ethnics and ethnicity, but non-British emigrants are like a shadowy, amorphous mass of extras in a movie in which the unmistakable, chiselled-out protagonists are the Calvinist "will to technique" and the original encounter with the "other." Strangely, given Grant's analyses of the devastations technology wreaks on our feeling of time and history, arriving before or arriving after counts for nothing, does not modify the terms of the affair. The macro-plot of the country is the one forged out of the experience of the first people who set foot on the land,

and its legacy binds everyone equally, be it the pioneer or the individual settling in Toronto or Montreal or Vancouver, for whom "otherness" is impersonated by his or her Québécois or Ukrainian or Dutch or Japanese or Anglo-Saxon next-door neighbour.<sup>13</sup>

For all this, here too, extreme and heroic alternatives are not the answer. A philosophy of ethnicity, should there ever be one, cannot be a philosophy of pure difference. In ethnic literature language has a sort of indefiniteness attached to it. Yet when the writer uses an official language he or she is accepting its borders. That dimension, though it does not coincide with his or her culture, is also within his or her spectrum of possibilities. And literarily it is fundamental: the national is, more often than not, for the ethnic writer, the dimension of reception, of the public that will grant him or her his or her status, in relation to which he or she acquires his or her authoritativeness. Historically, the dialectic is, if anything, more inescapable. As reliable surveys of the phenomenon explain, ethnicity is a reaction to modernization but is engendered by it: no ethnics exist in simple, one-group societies.<sup>14</sup> Like the concept of modernity, itself not coterminous with modernization, the concept of nation must also comprise features that are its opposite, that are inimical to the impulses animating it (the *ethnos* divested of all its extensions recedes into the family, into the genealogic body—nature, or a version of it—to the pure, projecting, collective volition out of which nations are built).

The circularity between the social and the literary brings us back to the question that has been looming over this paper from the beginning. Every language has many dialects and every country is many cultures: inter-reference and inter-diction are closer to the rule than to the exception in literature. In Canada the cleavages and connivances between the one and the many, the large and the small are more marked, more pronounced, linguistically, socially and literarily. The internal borders that in other nations centralization appears (but only appears) to have effaced, here are still visible to all. It has been the cultural function of ethnicity to insert permanently the consequences of that visibility in Canadian intellectual discourse. The problem in contemporary Canada is not just how to react to the lack of national ghosts (to the ghost story *manquée* that is Canadian literature) but also how to react to the superabundance of unmonumentalized, nondescript, small-time, small-space ghosts hidden in every household or under our skin. Pier Giorgio Di Cicco is speaking about a yet to be charted *arche-topos* of Canadian literary culture when he says that he is not alone or when he calls those presences, "too maudlin to pity," that people his mental life, "the best we have to feel human about" (37). For, to repeat, ethnicity, the different temporalities (the past as present), the multifocality, the stepping in or out of selves, of positions it allows, is an ontological condition. Or, better, it is the condition by which the ontological takes the guise of the sociocultural. What we must ask, then, is whether the correlation, the homology that obtains between Canadian society or Canadian literature and society, literature as such does not also obtain with criticism or theory. Whether the stock-takings, the self-inventories that Frye

identified as the typical Canadian critical act are not another name for criticism *tout court*. Whether, that is, we cannot invert the route, and just as we use theories about literature in general to interpret Canadian literature, we cannot use Canadian literature or Canadian criticism to interpret, to "read" theory.

## NOTES

1. The theorists who have correlated the distance to and from the text to the kind of critical activity are many. The most recent and most rigorous is S. J. Schmidt (1979).
2. For an overview of the problem see J.J.A. Mooij (1979).
3. Roman Jakobson's influential, much-anthologized essay "Linguistics and Poetics" may be found in S. Chatman and S. R. Levin (1967).
4. For New Criticism and irony the pivotal text is Cleanth Brooks' *The Well-Wrought Urn*.
5. Actually Frye uses the adverbial form. The sentence which is the source, from the article "Conclusion to a *Literary History of Canada*," now part of *The Bush Garden*, reads: "Perhaps it is not too fanciful to see this need for continuity in the Canadian attitude to time as well as space, in its preoccupation with its own history, its relentless stock-takings and self-inventories" (1971, 223).
6. The most representative text on this aspect of Soviet semiotics is Y. M. Lotman's and B. A. Uspensky's "On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture" (1978), particularly 218 ff.
7. See also, in English, "The Literary Sign," in S. Chatman and U. Eco (1979).
8. Of particular interest in this issue are C. Bremond, "Concept et thème" (416-423), G. Prince, "Thématiser" (425-433), M. Brinker, "Thème et interprétation" (435-443), P. Cryle, "Sur la critique thématique" (505-516).
9. On these two images see P. Stratford, "Canada's Two Literatures: A Search for Emblems" (1979).
10. For this and other aspects of the paradigms now being debated in the sciences see E. Morin, *Science avec conscience* (1982), especially the section entitled "Les ingrédients de la complexité" (87-252). Morin discusses recent developments in the sciences at greater length in his monumental *La Méthode*, of which two volumes have appeared thus far. He explores the relation between scientific paradigms and the social sciences and culture in *Sociologie* (1984). In literature proper the order-disorder paradigm is best represented, with an eclecticism in anthropology predominant, by René Girard. See his *La violence et le sacré* (1972).
11. This, and how it pertains to Canadian criticism, should be worked out in detail. Here I can offer only some brief remarks. Not much attention has been paid to the internal contradictoriness of the centripetalist and the centrifugalist approaches. Both camps include in their theories elements that could fit in the theories of the other, but only to reject them, to better corroborate their own teleologies. Structuralists study single texts to get to or to confirm norms, deconstructionists posit meaning so that they can report its dissolution. In my view that contradictoriness is their "content": both sides express symptomatically, negatively, what needs to be asserted positively. It goes without saying that the fault does not always lie with the theorists. Sometimes contradiction is the very essence of their work, and if it is not credited it is only due to the neglect of those who borrow the theory or to the interference of events. A good example is Bakhtin. Dialogism, the principle he is most often remembered for, is, to be sure, his major contribution to literary theory. But he also wrote long, elaborate essays on plot construction (the "chronotope"), the relation between the author and the hero, the *Bildungsroman* (the last two are in *Esthétique de la création verbale* (1984), a collection of works still untranslated into English. They are essays perhaps less appealing than the others but are, as always with Bakhtin, magisterially conceived and highly pertinent for a rounded-out appraisal of their author. Their existence presents us with a Bakhtin who is divided, a master of the impasse. When we look back from these essays, dialogism is at the centre of the ambiguity. The text, for Bakhtin, is a hodge-podge of alien discourses and

a finished, unique, unrepeatable enunciation. Literary dialogue occurs between speech-forms and texts, and between two interlocutors, one of which interprets the other. In the first instance it is the text's dispersiveness that is overestimated, in the second, the role of the author. How keenly aware Bakhtin was of this doubleness is shown by the frequency with which the word "problem" appears in the titles of his books or of chapters in books, and in direct statements. In the notes of 1959-1960 published in English as "The Problem of the Text" (1977-78), he writes (5): "Two factors defining the text as utterance: its intention and the implementation of the intent. The dynamic interrelationship of these factors, their struggle, shaping the character of the text . . . , Freudian slips and lapses (expressions of the unconscious). Change of intent in the process of implementing it. Failure of phonetic intent." An example of indirect contradictoriness is the Barthesian *communication-significance* antinomy I have already referred to. After having admitted the necessity of *communication*, Barthes just ignores it and its commerce with *significance*. It is as if he were concerned solely with the ineffability of the text (without any communicational features, no transference of meaning between languages, no transcoding of texts from one medium to another could be effected). Paradoxically, exaggerated claims for centrifugality turn it into its contrary. By insisting on a text's incapacity to convey stable meanings, one is providing a guide to its sense. In the criticism of the Russian formalist, the procedures of a work were its theme: twentieth-century avant-garde writers and avant-garde critics have both semanticized style.

This is why the polemics about paraphrase that dominated Canadian criticism in the middle of the seventies seem, to me anyway, somewhat off the mark. It is true that paraphrase is not the text. But that cannot be the end of it. It is also true that paraphrase is quite a bit of what there is: without it we would not be able to understand any work. When we read, particularly longer works, we are continuously processing information into more manageable, memorizable sets. All commentary rests on summaries of sentences that are reconstructed and combined, hence on summaries of summaries, on ersatz sentences, on words that are our own and not in the text. (An exhaustive survey of the cognitive, psychological, semantic aspects of paraphrase is T. Van Dijk's *Macrostructures* [1980].) Highly devotional literature may throw in many monkey wrenches, by rendering global summaries difficult to achieve, as we read or after, or by eliciting a sufficiently large number of intertextual linkages to blur sequentiality. At some level—the sentence, the paragraph, the fragment—some topic, some unit of meaning, however, must be available if there is to be comprehension. It should be noted that scientifically oriented theorists have not been the only ones to recognize the importance of summary: Poe classified poems according to the kind of memory (long term, short term) they activated during reading. Moreover, many of the devices of modern literature can be, and have been, employed for centrifugal and centripetal purposes: *mise en abyme*, mythological reminiscences, intertextuality itself can also reinforce local or global coherence of a text. Finally, by necessity, we summarize when we talk about form, since we cannot quote every single textual item.

12. On deixis a classical text is E. Benveniste's "La nature des pronoms," in *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (1966).

13. For a moment in *Technology and Empire* Grant seems on the verge of conceding that "other later arrivals from Europe" may have "so placed their stamp on North America as to have changed in essence what could come from that primal" (26). However, he quickly regains his composure, and after a short rebuttal he concludes: "As for pluralism, differences in the technological state are able to exist only in private activities: how we eat; how we mate; how we practise ceremonies. Some like pizza, some like steak; some like girls, some like boys; some like synagogue, some like the mass. But we all do it in churches, motels, restaurants indistinguishable from the Atlantic to the Pacific" (26). The obvious rejoinder is that in his argument he mixes improperly a conception of medium as extension and a conception in which the medium is the instrument of territorialization, the agency by which a geographical and cultural dominance is established. As a mediator between the individual and the environment, as a second skin, the medium affects everyone in the same manner: its impact is ineluctably global, universal. But in this case it will override nationhood too: media do not recognize the authority of customs agents. As telecommunications, as purveyors of spatial/statal unity they can, instead, be meddled with: individuals or groups can erect very resilient borders. Restaurants may be all in brick and cement and plastic but it matters



whether they are in a ghetto or not, how they are culturally encapsuled by those that use them.  
14. An excellent survey of the issues ethnicity raises is A. D. Smith's *The Ethnic Revival* (1981).

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