

INTRODUCTION:

WHO'S AFRAID OF COMPARATIVE CANADIAN LITERATURE? QUI A PEUR DE LA LITTÉRATURE CANADIENNE COMPARÉE?

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The most daunting obstacle facing those who study comparative Canadian literature is a political one – its “national” classification. Regardless of one’s perspective, there is no avoiding the fact that the word “Canadian” in the field’s name poses a major challenge, since not all writers whose work falls under the rubric consider themselves Canadian. “Any critical practice that uses an adjective like ‘Canadian’ to delimit its object of study,” as Sylvia Söderlind points out, “is inevitably engaged in a nation-defining, if not a nation-building enterprise” (“Nation” 4). Toujours est-il que le mot nation n’arrive pas à conjurer une dénotation ou une connotation singulière vu les particularités linguistiques, culturelles, régionales et historiques du Canada – nous penserons d’emblée aux Premières Nations, au Québec, à l’Acadie, à Terre-Neuve pour lesquelles le concept de nation relève tant de l’histoire et du politique que de l’imaginaire. Néanmoins, l’étiquette nationale n’est pas forcément aussi restrictive qu’elle le fait souvent entendre, puisqu’il existe différentes manières de la percevoir. Aussi tôt que les années 1880, Emmanuel Sieyès définissait la nation simplement comme “un corps d’associés vivant sous une loi *commune* et représentés par la même *législature*” (3). La définition nous paraît valable alors qu’elle localise le national dans le civique. Les gens, ici les écrivains sont unis essentiellement parce qu’ils habitent un même

ressort politique et se partagent une entité civique, et non culturelle ou ethnique, qui peut se vouloir intérieurement plurielle. This of course does not preclude them from belonging to specific ethnocultural groups, such as the more traditional nations, usually configured along linguistic or religious lines. Indeed, the reason some scholars consider Canada the quintessential postcolonial confederation is that even its government acknowledges that it has always had “a number of ‘national’ bodies” within its territory (Reid 107).

Despite its politically problematic name, comparative Canadian literature remains as vital as ever at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This is particularly true considering that what are still tentatively branded the country’s two “littératures officielles,” or “official literatures” (Beaudoin and Lamontagne 9, 14), have cultivated a seemingly deliberate lack of interest in each other. The uncultural orientation of the criticism of both English Canadian and Québécois literature is particularly surprising, since the two literatures repeatedly portray such culturally, politically, and linguistically complex universes of internal difference and inherent diversity. In English-speaking Canada the tendency has been to deem the country’s whole literary production Canadian, yet to embrace an imperial monolingualism and avoid examining texts in any language other than English or English translation, including French. In fact, one of the most curious aspects of anthologies and literary histories that claim “to be representing English Canadian literature only” is that they often include “translated pieces by Gabrielle Roy and Louis Hémon” (Sugars 121), as do many courses on Canadian literature taught in our English-language universities. Not surprisingly, many Francophone writers and critics are not overly impressed with a purported Anglo-Canadian national inclusivity that frequently culminates in both their language and their literature being either ignored or effaced through their absorption into an Anglophone mould called “Canadian Literature.” The impression they get is that their culture, as well as they themselves, are not quite Canadian (Beaudoin and Lamontagne 7-8), a feeling shared by Anglo-Québécois writers who too often are confined to a kind of “nowhere littéraire” by “the ROC (Rest of Canada)” (Charest, 2007). Although, we can note that among the 2006 Giller Prize finalists, three of the nominees were indeed Québécois (Rawi Hage, Pascale Quiviger, Gaétan Soucy).

In Quebec, in contrast, the practice has been to largely ignore Canadian literature in English. Some scholars contend that Quebec’s lack of enthusiasm about English Canadian literature reflects its antithetical view of translation; whereas Anglophones tend to envisage translation as a way to “établir des ponts entre les deux cultures,” Francophones generally perceive it as “un symbole de domination politique et un agent d’assimilation linguistique” (Ladouceur 106, 107; Simon 99). However, given Quebec’s history of acknowledging English Canadian cultural figures only after they are lionized outside the country, notably in France and the United States, one suspects that its coolness toward English Canadian literature reveals a political reluctance to engage with English-speaking Canada in terms of its own specific culture

in general and its literature in particular. Selon Rémy Charest, “le Canada anglais demeure une autre solitude, une référence qui n’ajoute aucune plus-value aux livres traduits en français, que ce soit en France ou au Québec” (2007). Ou encore, comme l’observe Nancy Huston, “nous sommes peut-être ouverts aux autres cultures, mais il n’est pas sûr que la culture anglo-canadienne fasse partie de celles que nous sommes disposés à accueillir” (ct. in Beaudoin 483). The frequent outcries about culturally uninformed Parisian translations of English Canadian literature (Kröller 67) can thus begin to ring false, especially since the main reason the French have come to dominate the translation of English Canadian literary works is that Quebecers have so systematically avoided the subject. Osons espérer que certaines traductions québécoises récentes d’auteurs anglo-canadiens tels Bill Gaston (aux éditions Pleine Lune), Jane Urquhart (aux Fides), C.S. Richardson (à Alto) ou David Gilmore (à Leméac/Actes Sud) entameront une nouvelle tendance littéraire au Québec même.

The conspicuous lack of interest by English-speaking Canadian and Franco-Québécois critics in each other’s literature has been described as a case of “wilful ignorance of the other linguistic majority” (Söderlind, “Arguments” 685). Yet both “national” groups may be right for being weary of comparative literature, for the discipline appears to be inherently anti-national. As Franco Moretti argues, comparatists “have always been too shy in the presence of national literatures,” as if there were a universe of national literatures “and then, next door, a sort of little parallel universe where comparatists studied a second set of literatures, trying not to disturb the first set” (68). The reality, though, is that there is only one literary universe, which single literature scholars and comparatists examine from contrasting perspectives. Indeed, concludes Moretti, “The point is that there is no other justification for the study of world literature (and for the existence of departments of comparative literature) but this: to be a thorn in the side, a permanent intellectual challenge to national literatures—especially the local literature” (68). The conflict between national literatures and comparative literature may not be as pronounced in Canada, since Canadian comparatists are fully aware that neither English Canadian nor Quebec literature has ever been completely dominant within its territory, with the first being overshadowed by British and, to a lesser degree, U.S. literature and the second by French literature. Still, like their counterparts elsewhere, Canadian comparatists cannot help but notice that the two “official” literatures have a proclivity to accentuate what Freud terms “the narcissism of minor differences” (72). With their discipline’s focus on the literary, they are also quite conscious that what are often considered national characteristics are based much more on the nationality of the author than on textual traits.

Perhaps because of the peripheral nature of all its literatures, Comparative Canadian literature plays a paradoxical role. To begin with, it is national, in the sense that it explores Canadian cultural phenomena and, possibly, even promotes Canada. But it is also anti-national in that, by examining the totality of literary production in Canada, it reveals that the country does not possess a single national literature but a

series of them, notably English Canadian, Québécois, French Canadian, and the First Nations. Au fait, selon Barbara Godard la déterritorialisation serait l'assise fondatrice de toute littérature anti-nationale produite effectivement au Canada: "Canadian literatures thus need to be theorized as a problem in comparative literatures, as (a) field(s) of relational differences" (181). En se penchant tout particulièrement sur des questions textuelles, la littérature canadienne comparée peut aussi exhiber à quel point les caractéristiques nationales peuvent s'avérer superficielles. For instance, if Louis Hémon can produce a Québécois classic like *Maria Chapdelaine* after having lived in Quebec for less than two years, perhaps "the national spirit" is not as deeply imbedded in the populace's genes as nationalists would like to believe. Similarly, when Douglas Coupland uses his life experience in Canada to write a novel that almost immediately becomes part of the literary canon of the United States, *Generation X*, he suggests that the English Canadian national may not be radically different from that of the country's southern neighbour. Moreover, the Coupland case is neither unique nor restricted to English-speaking Canadians. Despite having been born and raised in French-speaking Quebec, Ernest Dufault managed to metamorphose himself into that most iconic of U.S. authors, a cowboy writer—specifically, Will James. As well, while someone like Jacques Godbout has attempted to reclaim James as a Québécois writer (*Alias Will James*), such a move is possible only so long as the focus remains totally on the (self-effaced) identity of the author. Judging by his texts, James would appear to be very much a U.S. writer.

Enfin, le directeur et la directrice de ce dossier ont voulu fournir un espace du moins préliminaire pour faire retentir interrogations, inquiétudes, apories qui parsèment ce champ d'études passionnément (forcément?) contentieux. Les contributrices et contributeurs de ce dossier n'ont pas eu peur de la littérature canadienne comparée. Leurs travaux proposent non pas des solutions toutes compréhensives, mais des outils possibles d'analyse pour saisir la multiplicité et les différences irréductibles des écritures canadiennes. Leurs approches, baignées dans la réalité actuelle d'un monde aux frontières certes poreuses et les complexités de l'échange culturel, nous semblent indicatrices d'une (inter)discipline sans discipline et en pleine effervescence.

Selon Kristy McKay, la nature changeante et insaisissable des différentes littératures du Canada serait la source même de la plupart des problèmes méthodologiques auxquels font face les comparatistes. En tenant compte des contributions monumentales de Clément Moisan et de E.D. Blodgett au domaine des études canadiennes comparées, McKay s'interroge sur les limites d'une approche trop binaire d'une part et trop cloisonnée d'une autre. Son analyse rejoint celle de Söderlind, dans la mesure où elle propose la traduction comme et outil et objet d'étude capable d'ouvrir le comparatisme canadien aux différences internes de ses littératures.

In his essay, Pascal Gin examines exactly how contemporary literary production by minoritized, migrant, diasporic, and globalized writers in Canada calls into question the ability of national literatures to absorb such heterogenous and, at times, seemingly deterritorialized bodies of writing, either discursively or institutionally.

Thus, in light of the transnational orientation of so much of the writing currently being produced in countries like Canada, he suggests that Canadian comparatism will have to embrace a "certain conception of the *Weltliteratur*."

De son côté, Roland Walter démontre les allégeances de la critique canadienne comparée aux études diasporiques, dites transnationales. Axées sur les oeuvres ou encore la *transécriture* ("transwriting") d'auteurs de la diaspora africaine du Canada anglais et du Québec, les analyses de Walter cèdent à une conceptualisation de la diversité bien au-delà d'un multiculturalisme faussement harmonieux, la liant plutôt aux principes de l'interstice et du désaccord.

Pamela Sing, on the other hand, explores how cultural phenomena are transformed as they travel across various regions of the country. In her examination of how the motif of the person who metamorphoses into a werewolf, or loup-garou, is represented in Québécois, Franco-Canadian, and Métis literature, Sing shows the striking connections among numerous versions of the story. In particular, she establishes how the loup-garou motif itself is fundamentally transformed when it comes into contact with that of the Indigenous windigo.

Frédéric Dorel and Christine Evain, in turn, explore the evolution of contemporary Canadian literature by focusing on the "tribulations" of the publishing industry in both English and French. According to the authors, whether Anglophone or Francophone, the history of Canadian literature is the history of its "*quasi impossibilité*." Consequently, Dorel and Evain examine the strategies that publishers and editors used between 1960 and 2005 to promote Canadian literature. This was a formidable challenge, not only because of the relatively small size of the domestic markets, but also because Canadian publishers have always faced "un public sceptique," not the least at home.

Finalement, dans son article, Sylvia Söderlind se penche notamment sur l'anxiété critique des comparatistes littéraires devant leur objet d'étude multidimensionnel. Or, le malaise que suscite le comparatisme s'avère non seulement à être nécessaire, mais aussi productif. Le plaidoyer de Söderlind pour une critique *translittérale* ("trans-literal"), inspiré par les théories de la traduction ainsi que les stratégies narratives d'auteurs contemporains tels Leonard Cohen et Nicole Brossard, se veut une pratique éthique de langage, d'écriture et de lecture osant aller à la rencontre de l'autre.

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