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Comparative Canadian Literature: Past History, Present State, Future Needs

The past few years have been marked by an unprecedented increase in the volume of literary production in Canada in both English and French, and the upsurge in creative writing has been accompanied by an increase in the amount and variety of literary-historical and critical comment on our two native literatures. This trend, which clearly reflects a growing national consciousness among both English- and French-speaking Canadians, seems likely to continue for some time, encouraged as it is now by government support and by new programs in educational institutions. We can expect to see a continuing and expanding preoccupation with Canadian literary studies as part of a new concern with Canadian studies in general, which have been given massive impetus by the recent publication of the report of the Commission on Canadian Studies. It should be remembered that this is the fourth inquiry into Canada's dual culture in the past quarter century: the Massey Commission reported in 1951 on 'National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences'; the newly established (1945) Social Sciences Research Council studied 'Canadian Dualism' in 1960; and the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism published its four volumes at the end of the 1960s.

With enhanced interest in both Canadian literatures over the last decade or two has come the gradual realization that these two literatures do not necessarily have to be kept separate, and that there may indeed be good reason for studying them together. This possibility, which had occurred to very few observers throughout the history of the two literatures, is now receiving considerable attention, and university students are beginning to ask for courses in comparative Canadian literature or, in more limited numbers, are pressing to write their theses in this area. As yet few teachers of either Canadian literature have even a cursory knowledge of the other one, and even fewer universities have yet provided the administrative or pedagogical framework for orderly development of the new field of study. The outstanding exception is the Université de Sherbrooke, which first proposed an MA in Comparative Canadian Literature in 1962. Yet even in 1976 not a single manual or methodological article is available to guide the neophyte. The result is in most centres a confused situation in which intellectual demand is running ahead of academic supply; in other words, a situation ripe for exploitation by dilettantes and instant experts.

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It is because I am disturbed by the turn events are taking that I venture, despite my own lack of qualification, to write about the past history, present state, and future needs of comparative Canadian literature, not for sympathetic colleagues in Canadian studies, but for the comparatists of Canada. Their interest and their specialized training are urgently needed if order is to be brought into this confused scene before all semblance of scholarly rigour is lost forever.

If one were writing a manual of comparative Canadian literature for comparatists, it would be necessary to begin by defining at length what *is* and what *is not* part of the discipline, thus adding another volume to the bookshelf already resplendent with the names of Van Tieghem, Guyard, Pichois et Rousseau, Stallknecht and Frenz, and Weisstein. Nothing so ambitious is required in the present context, however. It is sufficient to state that for practical purposes comparative Canadian literature embraces both the external relations of our Canadian literatures with other literatures, and their internal relations between themselves. In this short account, I shall include only the two largest Canadian literatures, those written in English or French, which for some scholars will already seem a regrettable narrowing of the field. Furthermore, I must reluctantly put aside the external or international literary relations of our two major literatures, leaving out of consideration the links between English-Canadian literature and the literatures of the English-speaking world, and those between French-Canadian literature and the 'littératures de la francophonie.' It will be apparent that this is a Procrustean reduction, which in the case of the two mother countries alone excludes a variety of useful work already done or in progress on, for example, Wordsworth's influence on English-Canadian nature poets or Lamartine's importance for their French-Canadian compatriots; Scott's role as a model for Canadian historical novelists in both languages (a French-Canadian author published his own version of *Kenilworth* in 1880), Dickens's link with the Montreal stage, Fréchette's idolatory and imitation of Victor Hugo, and other fascinating investigations.

But the exclusion of Canada's external literary relations goes further than merely eliminating the two mother countries from consideration. It also neglects a small but significant number of inquiries into relationships between American writers and Canadian ones, or studies of Australian literary attitudes and Canadian ones, a subject first suggested by John George Bourinot before the Royal Society of Canada in 1893 and since explored in articles by Claude Bissell and Reginald E. Watters, and in an important book by John P. Matthews. It leaves aside, too, substantial works by Auguste Viatte and Gérard Tougas on the parallels between French-Canadian literature and other North American, European, or African francophone litera-

tures, or a remarkable study of Quebec and Haitian literature by Maximilien Laroche. Similarly passed over are comparisons between English writing in Canada and that of the West Indies, India, or Africa, as illustrated in William H. New's collection of short stories from around the world. Most of these neglected relationships are unilingual, but there are a few striking cases of cross-cultural links such as the fortune of Shakespeare in French Canada or that of Molière in English Canada. Thus in excluding Canada's international literary relations from my purview I leave a rich harvest standing in the field.

My only justification for such a ruthless excision is to focus attention more sharply on the internal literary relations, those between English-Canadian and French-Canadian literature. By 'English-Canadian,' I mean Canadian literature written in English: what used occasionally to be called 'Anglo-Canadian,' and what most manuals blandly call 'Canadian Literature.' By 'French-Canadian,' I mean written in French: the distinction between 'French-Canadian' and 'Quebec' literature, by which the term 'littérature québécoise' is now generally used to refer to writing since about 1960, need not concern us here.

Within the more limited framework of comparative studies of English-Canadian and French-Canadian literature, I propose first to recall briefly a few names and titles from the hundred-odd years during which these two literatures have co-existed in Canada; then to survey in more detail the development of comparative studies during the past ten years, 1965–75, and finally to risk some predictions and suggestions for the years to come.

The first useful reference work for Canadian literature in both languages dates, appropriately enough, from the Confederation year 1867: it was Henry James Morgan's *Bibliotheca canadensis, or A Manual of Canadian Literature* (see Bibliography, no. 2.1), reissued a century later by an American reprint firm. Its hundreds of biographical and bibliographical articles arranged alphabetically by author's name still provide the most complete account anywhere of Canadian literary activity up to Confederation. When used in conjunction with Morgan's biographical dictionaries (*Sketches of Celebrated Canadians and Persons Connected with Canada*. Quebec: Hunter Rose 1862; *The Canadian Men and Women of the Time: A Handbook of Canadian Biography*. Toronto: Wm. Briggs 1898; Second Edition 1912), it is an indispensable tool for the student of nineteenth-century Canadiana.

The first history of both Canadian literatures was the *Histoire de la littérature canadienne* of Edmond Lareau. (no. 5.1), supplemented three years laters by his *Mélanges historiques et littéraires* (no. 5.2). 'I have tried not to overlook anyone,' Lareau wrote in his foreword, and his book is a remarkably complete survey of Canadian writing in all genres, moving

easily from English to French authors in successive paragraphs. Particularly interesting, furthermore, is Lareau's attempt to situate Canadian writing in relation to world literature, an attempt that later and more provincial critics frequently failed to make.

Despite these courageous early efforts it was soon apparent that the two cultures were going their separate ways. The first anthologies of Canadian poetry, Edward Hartley Dewart's *Selections from Canadian Poets* (Montreal: John Lovell 1864) and Antonin Nantel's *Les Fleurs de la poésie canadienne: Religion et Patrie!* (Montréal: Beauchemin et Valois 1869) were resolutely unilingual. By 1876 the first prime minister of Quebec, Pierre-Joseph-Olivier Chauveau, in summarizing the literary and intellectual achievements of Canadians (no. 6.5), compared the anglophone and francophone traditions to the great double staircase of the château de Chambord in the Loire valley, which two persons can ascend simultaneously without ever meeting. This was to be the situation for the next fifty years, despite occasional references to French-Canadian writing by John George Bourinot (no. 6.2) at the end of the century.

Sincere and sustained attempts to bridge the gap began in the 1920s and they came from the English-language side. Archibald McKellar MacMechan, although Ontario-born, had been professor of English at Dalhousie for thirty-five years when he published *Head-Waters of Canadian Literature* (no. 5.3), one-third of whose pages were devoted to French-Canadian literature. Three years later the new editor of the Ryerson Press, Lorne Albert Pierce, who in his lifetime (1890–1961) was to do more for the encouragement of Canadian literature than any other person before or since, published his *Outline of Canadian Literature (French and English)* (no. 5.5), which devoted alternate chapters to the two literatures and was warmly received by French-speaking reviewers. Earlier in that same decade, Pierce had included studies of three French-Canadian authors (Louis Fréchette, F.-X. Garneau, Antoine Gérin-Lajoie) among the volumes he had commissioned for his ambitious series, Makers of Canadian Literature. He subsequently gave more specific expression to his bicultural intention in his essay *Toward the Bonne Entente* (no. 6.24) and in later writings to the end of his life. It followed naturally that when he collaborated with Bliss Carman in 1935 to prepare an anthology of representative Canadian verse (no. 3.2.1), the volume included a substantial French component.

There was an immediate response on the French-Canadian side from Lorne Pierce's lifelong friend Msgr Camille Roy, rector of Laval University, who included several chapters on English-Canadian literature in the 1930 revised edition of his *Histoire de la littérature canadienne* (no. 5.7). It is to be noted that at this period 'littérature canadienne' was being used in French to mean 'French-Canadian literature' just as 'Canadian Literature' was used in English to mean the opposite.

These initiatives of the 1920s were not followed up in other quarters, and little more happened in this direction until the Second World War. In 1942 and 1946 Hugh MacLennan wrote two articles for the *Saturday Review of Literature*,' 'Culture, Canadian Style' (no. 6.19) and 'Canada between Covers' (no. 6.18), which sought to interpret Canadian writing to American readers, and in so doing achieved a bicultural view; the same result was obtained more recently when Douglas LePan wrote of 'The Dilemma of the Canadian Author' in the *Atlantic Monthly* (no. 6.16) or Desmond Pacey described 'The Canadian Imagination' in the *Literary Review* (no. 6.23).

In 1946 also two significant publications appeared in French Canada. Guy Sylvestre devoted the spring number of his elegant review *Gants du ciel* to 'La Poésie canadienne-anglaise,' and Watson Kirkconnell collaborated with Séraphin Marion to produce *The Quebec Tradition. Tradition du Québec. An Anthology of French-Canadian Prose and Verse* (no. 3.1.4), a collection of extracts with English translations on facing pages.

Up to this point there had been a number of polite gestures from one literature to the other, but almost nothing one could call comparative study of the two. In 1948 I gave a public lecture at the University of Toronto in which I proposed a comparison of nineteenth-century Canadian novelists, English and French; that same year A.M. Ross's thesis 'The Regional Novel in Canada' (no. 9.1.14), included some French-Canadian novels in English translation, as did Arthur L. Phelps's volume entitled *Canadian Writers* (no. 5.4) in 1951. By the latter date the resonant voice of the late Desmond Pacey was being heard throughout the land, and his articles 'Two Accents, One Voice' (no. 6.24) and 'Areas of Research in Canadian Literature' (no. 6.21) heralded the approach of the contemporary period of comparative studies in Canadian literature. The second of these articles is a classic of brevity and rigour; Professor Pacey returned to the same theme in one of his last articles, 'Areas of Research in Canadian Literature: A Reconsideration Twenty Years Later' (no. 6.22), in which he noted little progress over the previous two decades. 'What I am pleading for, obviously,' he reaffirmed, 'is an altogether more scholarly and systematic approach to our study of Canadian literature,' and if one inserts into his sentence the single word 'comparative,' Pacey's plea underlines our need for 'an altogether more scholarly and systematic approach to our study of comparative Canadian literature.'

While Desmond Pacey was attempting to arouse his English-Canadian colleagues, the cause was being taken up in French Canada by the librarian of the Quebec Legislative Library, Jean-Charles Bonenfant, who compared the role of literary criticism in the two cultures (no. 9.4.1) and sketched the admittedly limited impact of English-Canadian literature on that of French-speaking Canada (no. 6.1) in two articles in *Culture*. The latter question had been more formally treated in an MA thesis directed by Desmond Pacey at the University of New Brunswick in 1954 (no. 6.3). Meantime the need for

English-speaking Canadians to acquaint themselves with the growing literature of French Canada was being stressed by Mary Finch in the *Ontario Library Review* (no. 6.13) and by Louis Dudek in both English and French articles in *Canadian Literature* (no. 6.8) and *Lettres et Écritures* (no. 6.10) and more recently in *Culture* (no. 6.9). During the same early 1960s the Laval sociologist Jean-Charles Falardeau was urging the need for comparative studies of English- and French-Canadian literature as an index of differing mentalities in his lectures under the title *Roots and Values in Canadian Lives* (no. 6.12).

Until about 1965, nevertheless, the voices raised on behalf of a parallel or comparative study of both Canadian literatures were solitary ones: those of Lorne Pierce, Desmond Pacey, Jean-Charles Bonenfant, Louis Dudek, and Jean-Charles Falardeau. It is only during the past ten years that these voices have become a chorus.

The new interest becomes apparent in the multiplication of bibliographies (nos. 1.1–1.7), anthologies (nos. 3.1.1–3.2.8), and periodicals having a bilingual or comparative character (nos. 4.1–4.5). The bibliographers had been active for many years. The annual 'Letters in Canada' issue of the *University of Toronto Quarterly* had been providing a bibliographical and critical survey of books in both Canadian literatures since 1937, making it the oldest continuously appearing survey of either English-Canadian or French-Canadian literature. From 1959 to 1971 the newly founded *Canadian Literature* included annual checklists of English-Canadian and French-Canadian literature, noting not only creative works but also critical articles. The first five years (1959–63) of this compilation were cumulated by Inglis F. Bell and Susan W. Port in 1966 (no. 1.2). Since 1959 also, Carl F. Klinck had been distributing annually a mimeographed listing of theses in English-Canadian literature, which gradually included more and more comparative Canadian titles: the last issue prepared by Professor Klinck was published in the *Journal of Canadian Fiction* in 1972 (no. 1.4), where it has been continued by Stephen Barnwell (no. 1.1). Simultaneously Antoine Naaman and his colleagues at the CELEF (Centre d'étude des littératures d'expression française) of the Université de Sherbrooke have begun producing general repertoires of Canadian literary theses (nos. 1.3 and 1.5) and the National Library has brought its annual comprehensive listings of *Canadian Theses* up to 1970–1. For comparative studies, the most encouraging development was the appearance in the *Journal of Canadian Fiction* of Bruce Nesbitt's monumental bibliography of Canadian literature in both languages for 1972 (no. 1.6). It is to be hoped that this undertaking will be continued.

The desire to read at least some representative samples of both Canadian literatures in the original language has prompted the appearance of several bilingual anthologies: a centennial collection by H. Gordon Green and Guy

Sylvestre in 1967 (no. 3.12), selections of poetry like the *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English and French* (no. 3.2.6) and *Poésie. Poetry 64* (no. 3.2.5), A.J.M. Smith's updated *Modern Canadian Verse in English and French* (no. 3.2.7), or John Robert Colombo's *How Do I Love Thee: Sixty Poets of Canada (and Quebec) Select and Introduce Their Favourite Poems from Their Own Work* (no. 3.2.2). Apart from poetry there are as yet few bilingual anthologies.

Among the periodicals, some older reviews like the *University of Toronto Quarterly* and *Culture* had frequently been hospitable to articles and surveys concerned with Canadian literature. It was only in 1959, however, with the founding of *Canadian Literature* by George Woodcock, that an important journal devoted exclusively to Canadian writing in either language became available. Since that time more specialized comparative periodicals have begun to appear: *Ellipse*, a quarterly published at Sherbrooke since 1969, devotes each issue to parallel presentations of English- and French-Canadian writers, and the *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, established at Fredericton in 1972, has published an increasing number of reviews and articles on French-Canadian literature or common themes. Finally, the newest arrival, the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue canadienne de littérature comparée*, founded in 1974, has provided another vehicle for 'comparative Canadian' articles.

As was noted earlier, the idea of preparing a joint history of both Canadian literatures is not new, but the need for such parallel histories has been perceived more clearly over the past ten years. In 1964 Guy Sylvestre wrote in the foreword to *Canadian Writers. Écrivains canadiens* (no. 2.3):

> Si on compare l'histoire des deux littératures nationales du Canada, on a vite fait de remarquer que l'une et l'autre ont suivi une évolution parallèle, et qu'elles ont plus de caractères communs qu'on ne le croit habituellement. (p v)

This point of view received support almost at once from Edmund Wilson's *O Canada: An American's Notes on Canadian Culture* (no. 6.31) and more ample illustration from the publications of Ronald Sutherland (nos. 6.28–6.30, 10.30–10.37) and from Clément Moisan's prize-winning essay (no. 6.20).

Professor Sutherland's first contribution was a paper read at the 1966 Learned Societies meeting and subsequently published in *Canadian Literature* (no. 10.37) and in his collection *Second Image: Comparative Studies in Québec/Canadian Literature* (no. 6.29). In it he affirmed that:

> when French-Canadian and English-Canadian novels are examined together, it becomes evident that there are many significant parallels, parallels which loom all the

more fascinating as one discovers the improbability of inter-influence. It also becomes evident, interestingly enough, that a good number of the accepted differences between the cultures of French Canada and English Canada do not in fact exist. (p 3)

The five other articles in Professor Sutherland's collection make similar demonstrations in a variety of thematic areas by drawing on a total of about 100 novels selected in almost exactly equal numbers from each literature. The volume concludes with a 'Note on Translation and Comparative Studies in Canada' (pp 157–65), of which the present paper is merely an expanded version.

Professor Moisan's essay, begun in 1966 but not published until 1969 (no. 6.20), embraces all the major genres in a series of chapters which offer a parallel study while focussing more closely on certain historical, linguistic, critical, sociological, thematic, and technical questions.

The great bulk of scholarly writing in this area over the past decade has been in the form of theses and specialized articles on limited aspects of comparative Canadian literature: comparisons of authors, of single works, of literary genres, or of themes. I have already mentioned the parallel presentation of writers in each number of the journal *Ellipse*; in addition certain pairs of poets and novelists have been compared and contrasted in a few articles and theses (nos. 7.1–7.8).

Fragmentation reaches an extreme form when single English- and French-Canadian titles are compared, as has been done for some 'classics' of an earlier period like Ralph Connor's *The Man from Glengarry* (no. 8.3) or Philippe Aubert de Gaspé's *Les Anciens Canadiens* (no. 8.6). Recently the same comparisons have been undertaken between notable works of the contemporary period such as Anne Hébert's *Le Torrent* (no. 8.2), W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* (no. 8.5), or Hubert Aquin's *Prochain Episode* (no. 8.4). Unfortunately the supply of Canadian classics or of notable contemporary successes is somewhat limited, and this vein will probably soon be exhausted.

At the more abstract level of genological studies, very little has been done (nos. 9.1–9.4.1): the investigations conducted to date have been almost exclusively in the form of short articles, and few theses have been attempted. Here then is a promising avenue for future inquiry, particularly in the light of recent renewed interest in questions of literary theory.

Statistically the most numerous comparative category is that of thematic studies (nos. 10.1–10.40): indeed, one suspects that some of the newcomers attracted to this field cannot readily conceive of any other type of comparative study. One notes too the frequency with which the novel is seized upon as the subject of comparative thematic investigation. Perhaps it is inevitable that thematic studies of prose fiction, because of their relative simplicity, will

continue to be made, particularly by those students of Canadian literature who still subscribe to a dichotomy of form and content. Until now a limited number of themes (the physical geography of our land, our two national identities, the rural-urban polarity, and our essential loneliness) have received a disproportionate amount of attention, and the result has been a high percentage of repetition in the reports of these analyses.

If *too many* students are attempting thematic analyses, however, *too few* are concerning themselves with comparative stylistics, for which our two Canadian literatures, frequently dealing with similar subject matter, offer challenging raw material. Also neglected has been the study of our literary relations in Canada, as indeed the whole area of our bilingual and bicultural literary history. Some of the best work in this area is now being done by the social historians, who are moving into the vacuum left by literary scholars who refuse to read anything more than thirty years old. Fortunately there is some evidence of a modest revival of literary-historical studies in Canadian literature in both language groups. The best example is no doubt the impressive work being produced at the Centre de recherche en civilisation française of the University of Ottawa, first under its founding director Paul Wyczynski and more recently under the historian Pierre Savard. In English-Canadian studies, Carl Klinck, Desmond Pacey, Reginald Watters, and a few others have throughout their whole careers put forward by counsel and by example the claims of literary history and its related disciplines: historical bibliography, literary biography, and the history of ideas. There is still a woeful lack of *facts* in Canadian literary studies: the 'petits faits significatifs' that Taine demanded are just as indispensable for scholars today, and their absence invites shoddy documentation and shallow generalization, the two ugly sisters of Canadian literary studies.

The mention of comparative stylistics leads us to a topic that deserves a whole article – or a whole book – to itself: literary translation in Canada. It has already been the subject of an extensive but unpublished research paper prepared by Michael Gnarowski for the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (no. 12.3.4). New developments are crowding in to render even this recent inquiry obsolete: at the Université de Montréal theses on translation problems are now being submitted for the MA (Translation), and at other Canadian universities annotated translations of Canadian literary works are being accepted as master's theses. In the summer of 1975 the literary translators of Canada gathered at the International Book Fair in Montreal to launch their own professional organization. Increased translation grants from the Canada Council have encouraged publishers to extend their offerings of translations of Canadian books: Harvest House has almost twenty translations in print in its French Writers of Canada series, and Le Cercle du Livre de France has embarked on a new collection of French

translations of English-Canadian novels, Collection des deux solitudes, of which almost a dozen have already appeared.

It is quite clear that French-English and English-French literary translation in Canada is entering a 'boom period,' as Philip Stratford's invaluable bibliographical listings (nos. 12.1.5 and 12.1.7) make abundantly clear. Here again our academic supply is falling behind public demand. We shall need better facilities and materials for training literary translators, greater attention to the particular problems of English-French and French-English literary translation, and new techniques and publishing outlets for reviewing and criticizing translations. In all these areas the published material to date is lamentably inadequate.

Throughout the preceding pages I have noted some 'future needs' of comparative Canadian literature, and ventured a few personal opinions: let me summarize them now.

(1) We need a systematic collective bibliography of comparative Canadian literature, which will include both the external and internal relations of our Canadian literatures, and which can be kept up to date by annual supplements. The compilation following this article is a pioneer effort in this direction, but it probably omits as many items as it includes, being the work of only two individuals.

(2) We also need a methodological manual to provide an introduction to the discipline and to illustrate possible types of investigations appropriate to the material.

(3) Comparative Canadian literature must be integrated into the organizations, professional and academic, concerned with comparative literature in general. It should be the rule, rather than the exception, that students wishing to work in comparative Canadian literature should first have had an introduction to the methods of comparative literature as a whole.

(4) The practical implication of the preceding assertion is that at least some Canadian comparatists will have to interest themselves in comparative Canadian literature and give it the benefit of their experience and expertise. Comparative Canadian literature is unlikely to become a respected scholarly activity without the professional support and example of trained comparatists. Here, after all, is the most immediate field of application for comparative studies, and it is a field desperately in need of organization and examples.

When some progress has been made on these organizational and methodological matters, we shall be able to look for changes in the work being done. In the first place let us accept the reality of the existence of at least two Canadian literatures in different languages, and of the need for

research and publication in each separately and also in combination with the other. Let us move beyond the 'token chapter' approach by which studies of English-Canadian literature (Rhodenizer, 1930; Eggleston, 1957; Atwood, 1972; Waterston, 1973) make futile gestures towards Canadian writing in French by including a single and often superficial chapter on French-Canadian literature. Each Canadian literature needs and has a right to its own particular studies and criticism, without making any concessions to the other. Yet in addition to these particular studies of a single literature, there is a need for a balanced and comparative view of both major literatures, arrived at on the basis of a close and equal knowledge of both. Secondly, such comparative studies as are undertaken should be conducted according to the established methods and standards of comparative literature, and should not be limited to elementary juxtapositions of titles or authors having some minimal similarities. Nor will such studies be limited to thematic sorties over well-travelled ground, or to an undue preoccupation with fiction as a sociological document, which good fiction rarely is. Perhaps we may even hope to see a widening of horizons to include some consideration of the relationship between Canadian literature and the fine arts in Canada.

In short, let the comparatists and the specialists in Canadian literature among us work together to ensure that comparative Canadian literature becomes and remains a serious, demanding, and fruitful scholarly discipline. May it never be a meeting place for chauvinists, an enchanted garden for collectors of exotica, or a haven for refugees from the rigours of research in major world literatures.

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