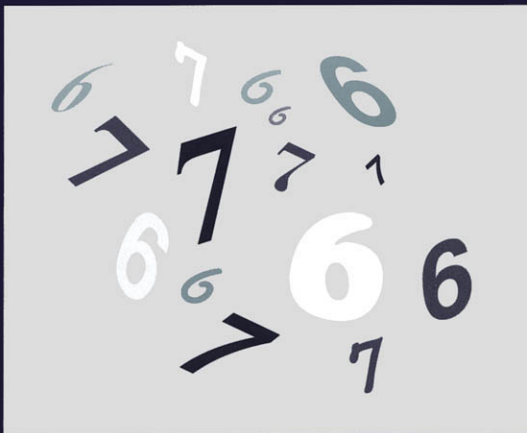


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REAPPRAISALS:
CANADIAN
WRITERS

CONTEXT NORTH AMERICA

Canadian/U.S. Literary Relations



Edited by Camille R. La Bossière

University of Ottawa Press

CONTEXT
NORTH AMERICA

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Canadian/U.S. Literary Relations

Edited by Camille R. La Bossière

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REAPPRAISALS
Canadian Writers

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General Editor

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C.R.L.

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Introduction

CAMILLE R. LA BOSSIÈRE

In the next two centuries . . . a horrifying spectacle, fraught with the unknown, and perhaps also with the highest hopes. . . .

NIETZSCHE, *Genealogy of Morals* (1887)

[Canadian writing] is a literature of dangerous middles. It is a literature that, compulsively seeking its own story (and to be prophetic after all: this will still be the case a century from now), comes compulsively to a genealogy that speaks instead, and anxiously, and with a generous reticence, the nightmare and the welcome dream of Babel.

ROBERT KROETSCH,

"Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue" (1981)

And now you're standin' on my doorstep. . . .

JERRY RAGAVOY and B.B. KING,

"Ain't Nobody Home" (1971)

IN HIS INTRODUCTION to *Studies on Canadian Literature: Introductory and Critical Essays* (New York: MLA, 1990), editor Arnold E. Davidson discreetly alerts his public to "the temptation to create a unifying narrative." Differences, discontinuities, and privacies must be respected, as he suggests, and especially so in first encounters. Davidson accordingly provides an *avertissement au lecteur* that is virtually a *nonintroduction*: "The essays in the present collection need only brief introduction, largely because each speaks for itself, in a distinctive and even delightfully idiosyncratic

voice." The temptation to totalize is generously resisted in an introductory narrative that invites the reader to browse through *Studies on Canadian Literature* at will, to sample particulars from independent sites as individual interest may lead or need may arise. As Davidson describes its intention, "this volume is designed not to be read cover to cover, like a single-author monograph. . . ." *Mieux vaut laisser faire à chacun ce que bon lui semble.*

And yet, the shape of "the chief 'narrative' set forth" by the volume so introduced bespeaks considerable deference to an ideal of unity—to the wholeness, harmony, and radiance that mark the classical work of art. Davidson's assemblage of essays in *Studies on Canadian Literature* makes "a whole" of remarkable symmetry: "eight essays on Canadian writing in English; eight essays on Canadian writing in French; four essays that cross and conjoin that linguistic divide." Nor is the problem of ending the chief narrative left without an equally elegant formal resolution. Invoked in the last sentence of Davidson's introduction, the last essay in *Studies on Canadian Literature*, "Reading across the Border" by Robert Kroetsch, recapitulates the book's balancing counterpoint in a sequence of ironic musings numbered 1–20.

Davidson's ordering of cross-border readings in *Studies on Canadian Literature* stands very much in contrast with Ildikó de Papp Carrington's in *Canadian-American Literary Relations* (Special Issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* 22 [1981]). There, for better or for worse, the arrangement of discourses is remarkably asymmetric, undialectical, unfugual. One essay follows another in a series the disposition of which—Janet Giltrow's "Westering Narratives of Jonathan Carver, Alexander Henry, and David Harmon," for example, precedes Carrington's own reading of Joyce Carol Oates—tacitly parodies the decorum of traditional linear histories. It is in this respect only that her *Canadian-American Literary Relations* is designed to be read from beginning to end. The sense of unity to which Carrington's gathering of essays refers is distinctly left for the reader to furnish from outside its pages. Of the potential hazards run by the reader of the chief narrative set forth by *Canadian-American Literary Relations*, the least pronounced must almost surely be the temptation to totalize.

Ironically, though, and again in contrast with Davidson, Carrington prefaces *Canadian-American Literary Relations* with a narrative that wraps up her collection into a substantial unity. This volume of essays, she recalls in her introduction, finally came together, "crystallized," as a discussion of a single theme: "Who or what is a Canadian? The essays in this collection . . . repeatedly ask that question." It goes without saying that the question of moment goes unanswered by *Canadian-American Literary Relations*: "the Canadian sense of identity" remains a "question mark," its editor is bound to say. But the prospect of discovering that one essence and one

voice in some future time, Carrington leaves it understood, continues to beckon, entice.

As the reader of these first few pages of introduction to *Context North America* may already have surmised, my intention in this *avertissement au lecteur* is to begin, like Davidson, with what amounts to a *nonintroduction*, since each of the essays in the present collection speaks for itself, each in its own way. The ideal moderator is hardly visible. And, again like Davidson, I invite the reader to go on to browse, since the chief narrative set forth by *Context North America* is surely made for such, filled as it is with wide-open spaces between sites of varied construction.

The present volume of essays, though, must make its appeal in a manner more like Carrington's—that is, without benefit of a nice formal symmetry of design. This is not to suggest that *Context North America* is made to discourage the reader from travelling the length of its pages. Quite the contrary. My hope is that some readers will be tempted to take in this volume as one would a symposium, a gathering of sometimes sharply discordant voices, each in the presence of the others, arranged in a spirit of friendly provocation for the purpose of mutual enlightenment. What *Context North America* as a whole is intended to do, in other words, is to exemplify for the reader's meditation the question of *how* the literatures of Canada might aptly be studied, discussed, and disseminated—which is to say, contextualized—in these days of heightened discontinuity and increasingly ambiguous borderlines both between and within the many narratives that make up “North America.” In the open invitation to shared reflection and understanding that *Context North America* extends as an exemplum, however limited and idiosyncratic it may be, of that contemporary condition, there is a measure of hope.

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From Adam to Multi-Ethnic Cowboy: The New History, Politics, and Geography of North America in a Canadian-American Context

J.J. HEALY

WHEN the words “Context North America” first crossed my desk, the first thing that came to my mind was a group of twelve-year-old boys, hockey, and the border. Discussion of a topic like this invites one to break down borders that, once they are established, take on an ontological force. Passing from an ordinary hockey rink in Cornwall, Ontario, to a more sumptuous but still ordinary one in Massena, New York, one loses the element of the ordinary at the border. There, the body registers its presence on ritual ground by a shifting uneasiness that ranges from discomfort to panic. The United States Immigration Service, to its own as well as outside eyes, becomes the Angel Gabriel guarding the Promised Land, the passage to a country whose Manifest Destiny among the nations of the earth is to be again the Eden that, in an earlier and fatal history, humankind squandered. Massena, New York, to a disenchanted Martian eye, is simply what it is: a collection of buildings and a bunch of people on flat ground, without much—apart from the name—of an echo of other Massenas in older worlds; except, of course, for an atmosphere of belief—almost, one is inclined to say in an Emersonian way, Overbelief—that pervades the aspect and the gestures of the populace. In this hockey rink, the original youthful home of Pat Lafontaine, now of Buffalo Sabres fame, then just back from an Olympic gold-medal victory for the United States over the Soviet Union, is a hometown hero who has just joined the great historical pantheon of American heroes, which could include Paul Bunyan, Johnny Appleseed, Wild Bill Hickok, Joe DiMaggio. The mythological flows everywhere, shaping, sculpting emotions, beliefs, body checks, into its own image. Willie Loman walking down mainstreet Massena is, with appropriate adjustments, a Jay Gatsby waiting on the American Dream.

All of this from a border crossing with a group of youngsters from Ottawa on their way to a hockey tournament in Massena. None of them have read R.W.B. Lewis' *The American Adam*, but they have absorbed the notion that when they cross the border they will be in the presence of difference, caught in this sense of the word difference, in a moment of unapprehended postmodernism.

Their American peers, who will be making the return journey a week later, will also, rather like the interminable rabbits of Richard Adam's *Watership Down*, sniff the air and feel, as young Americans ought to, an oppressive force emanating up route 401 from Kingston and Fort Henry, down route 16 from Ottawa: the musty, history-soaked, retentive anxieties of British North America. Nothing may be said. But equally miraculous absorptions have taken place; and, once again, innocence is abroad: Huck now has a hockey stick, and the hockey rink is, in a way that is inconsistent, but under forced interpretation probably workable, the Mississippi.

Both hockey teams, even at this tender age, are part of what we now call narratives of nation (Bhabha). There is the well-rehearsed, confident American master narrative; there is that series of regional and national novella accounts that, with appropriate diffidence, diffusion, and non-assertion, make up a great Canadian narrative, one that often seems to attain its most solid credentials as a counter-narrative to the American one.

Canadian/American relations, literary or otherwise, boil down to a tale of two narratives. Any attempt to juggle them for comparative or contrastive purposes probably has to begin with the American one, mainly because the United States got off the ground as a nation in 1776, nearly a hundred years before the British North America Act of 1867, and in numbers and power overshadows Canada. Its self-images have been so replete and sufficient inside that power that, from the perspective of its mythos, Canada unannexed, remained an annex, an anomaly of a benign, marginal sort. Northrop Frye once noted that all societies, in the process of developing an identity, draw a magic circle of mythological language around themselves, giving them an account of who they want to be—distinctive, particular, often touched by divine approbation (*Bush* 35). The fascinating part of the American project of becoming the first new nation of the modern period (Lipset) was that its historical genesis took place at the high point of the Enlightenment, the genesis moment, par excellence, of modern Western history, one that connected the secular, universal ideals of the eighteenth century to the theological eternities of established seventeenth-century Puritan beliefs. The atmosphere of this nation was, to say the least, charged with an appetite and an aptitude for the symbolic.

The confluence of these forces, even without the accretions of subsequent political power, gave to the United States as idea, language, act,

a kind of ontological affirmation that even France, with its more radical, militantly ideological revolution, never managed. France, in figures like de Crèvecoeur and de Tocqueville, had the best eyes for what was under way in the United States, but that, and the Statue of Liberty, was about it.

On this utterly symbolic ground, any fact, episode, or person could be transformed into symbolic meaning; to become American was to enter into the visibility of this national discourse, to be subsumed into a grammar of national transcendence.

It is important to acknowledge the extent to which this process was visited on the United States. Context North America, in this originaive American moment, had a good deal of Europe attached to it. Edmundo O'Gorman and other historians have documented the ways in which notions of America were fed into the Americas as a projection of European eschatological, utopian-dystopian hopes and fears, all laden with images of desire (Chiapelli, O'Gorman, Todorov). Reformation, Counter-Reformation, Renaissance, Enlightenment were all in attendance on the Americas. Almost every European footprint on this continent was pre-scripted, a heaven/hell/haven-away-from-home. North America was writ so large across European culture and had so many functions to perform inside the politics of its own knowledge and belief that even before Hawthorne's Puritans put up their first prison-house, the site on which they did so was already locked deep into the prison-house spaces of European moral and social theologies. The United States was invested with the anxieties and aspirations of a whole civilization; it was the *Manhattan* that would break through the ice-fields of history. Its rendezvous with destiny was contracted to a regime of universals—philosophical, political, moral—to which Emerson and the Transcendentalists gave a distinctive American cultural expression. To have worked Plato and Christ into the routines of Concord was no mean feat. Henceforth, any contingent, specific phenomenon could be shuttled, even from its moment of apprehension, into the relevant contact-point with a Whitmanesque task eternal.

This is, at once, very American and very not-Canadian.

Canada/British North America did not receive most-favoured-nation status from God, the *philosophes*, or any of its European source cultures. On the contrary, it would always feel dependent, abandoned, attached to the colonial-imperial pragmatics that, with spasms of neglect, impatience, and greed, characterized the relationship with the Colonial Office. Presumably, the departure of the Loyalists from the United States after the Revolution could have generated a *voortrekker* myth, although resentment tied to class is not the best ground for myth. A family compact, however, is a long way from the Adamic, is so entrenched in the economics and politics of institutional self-preservation, is so much, at times, like Lot's

wife frozen in Arctic spaces in a wrapping of Union Jack and authority, that it hardly qualified, even for its representatives, as a myth. It may work in a sputtering way for narrow moments of Canadian time and place, but before it could really take off, even in that late-Minervan moment of the sixties, it had to be strained through Frye's image of the Canadian imagination as a garrison mentality and associated with Atwood's notions of the victimage and survival mode as the portrait of *homo sapiens* as Canadian. Throw into this conspiracy script ghost regiments of Red Tories still beating the drums of stubborn retreat (Horowitz, Taylor), and the ensemble becomes more than a match for the triumphalist theatricals of the United States.

The tale of two nations as myth and countermyth that I have just sketched speaks to the features of contact, community, rupture, war, kinship, and mutual dealings over a couple of centuries. Memories that feed on defeat and lost histories rehearse themselves, stay alive in submerged feeling, for generations. It may be that grievance is the richest soil for myth, a possibility borne out by the South, and by Québec, but not absent from the English-Canadian mind, which gathered its chips of remnant power in British North America from the ashes of a great defeat in an American beginning. The pathos of the grievance-countermyths of English Canada have, even in their often muted, contracted, sporadic, and derived expression, an element to them of Munch's painting *The Scream*, which the more expansive, empowered myth-narratives of the United States do not have. An imperial myth has, inside its own terms of reference, no doubt, no memory of humiliation, no representation that would resist its sense of itself as immaculate, chosen by history, complete.

There are, then, these differences and connections that span the whole period of Canadian and American history. Yet, the language and the terms I have used for my Massena border excursion are particular to one moment of academic, intellectual time in both countries. For the United States, the relevant time-frame is roughly 1940–70; for Canada, 1950–70. We can give these dates a rough age reference: in the United States, we would be dealing with a renaissance of cultural nationalism between World War Two and the souring of Vietnam; in Canada, the opening bracket of a similar determination could be the Report of the Massey Commission, and the closing one, the declaration of the War Measures Act in 1970, which inflicted a loss of innocence on both Québec and the Rest of Canada from which neither, in spite of much constitutional perspiration, has ever quite recovered.

The American Adam and the virgin land were macro-explanations projected onto Anglo-American history by Anglo-American scholars writing from Anglo-American institutional (political, social, academic)

spaces. The image of Emerson that I floated over Massena, the notions of Puritans and frontiers—the whole aura, to use Walter Benjamin’s word, of America as a self-reflexive transcendental signifier living its history under the aspect of benign, plastic eternities—had its modern beginning in F.O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* in 1941 (Gunn 183–93). This is not to deny the preceding liberal, nationalist account of American cultural spaces by Van Wyck Brooks and Vernon Parrington. But it was essentially Matthiessen who sparked off the revalorization of America by figures like Perry Miller, Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, R.W.B. Lewis, Alfred Kazin, Charles Feidelson, and Roy Harvey Pearce. Matthiessen got hold of Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Melville in a vital, renegotiated way that pulled the transcendentalist project of the eighteen-forties, in its charged, utopian ambitions, into a different but equally charged America of the nineteen-forties (Ruland 275–87). The socialism of Matthiessen got lost in the subsequent messianic shuffle and in the euphoria of a double liberation: *from* the colonial cringe of Anglophilia that had marked, according to Parrington, patrician high culture in the United States; *for* a new sense of special election as the heir, protector, and proper interpreter of a Western civilization that found itself, in postwar Europe, broken and defeated (White 447). In this context, the heirs of Matthiessen, as himself the remembrancer of the transcendentalists, inscaped ponds, Alamos, blades of grass, and the idea of America as dream, prospect, possibility. America was not, in this idyllic space of empowered nation, a predicament, to use Marius Bewley’s Jamesian word. It would become, in a post-Vietnam context, a predicament again. But in my Matthiessen-Massena-Messianic moment, even the lamentations and jeremiads of the seventeenth-century Puritans began, especially in the work of Sacvan Bercovitch, to echo the after-current of the American Renaissance.

My first reaction to the theme of Context North America was, in effect, to subscribe to the post-Matthiessen “inside” reading of the United States from the perspective of one generation of American scholarship. My offsetting reaction to this instantaneous Adamics was to place next to them their equivalent myth-words from a burgeoning Canadian renaissance in the Centennial sixties. Confederation was suddenly a hundred years old, and the brokerage and compromise of colony fell away before a brave new national world that had survived as the attic of North America (Davies), a bush garden (Frye), a precarious homestead (Rotstein), a garrison, a land that Voltaire, generalizing on Labrador, felt that God had given Cain, one into which loyalty had been wrongfully and recklessly expelled, but that its lawyers, soldiers, farmers, and subsequent immigrant groups had translated into a civil order. Northrop Frye, just before his death, regretted the culturally underdetermined character of Canada at the time of Confederation in 1867 (“Cultural Development” 10); it could equally be said that the

1967 celebrations were, if anything, overdetermined. This was so much the case that even those Canadians who despaired of an independent future for Canada and who saw its first century as its last wrote, spoke, and were heard within a field of national dreams (Creighton; Grant, *Lament*).

The striking feature of the macro-myth imperative in both countries was the way these narrative metaphors dealt in the idea that their societies sprang originally from a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American wilderness emptied of Europe and, consequently, of older history and ancient meaning. The Adams, gardens, and garrisons spoke more to the desire on the part of the charter groups in both countries for a sense of transcendental Ending. These myth-words smoothed over the facts, tensions, and demographic realities in either society at any contingent moment of time, past or present. They had about them a need for justification, in the Christian sense of the word, and drew on a repertoire of Biblical motifs to construct a coded and privileged narrative of nation. From the perspective of a couple of decades later, these Anglo-American and Anglo-Canadian initiatives have the shape of a charter-group ethno-genesis. Yet, in that period, which saw in Canada a massive expansion of cultural and educational institutions carrying the social and political stamp of charter-group Anglo assumptions, the myths became canons—ecclesiastical and academic—and, under threat from later developments of disbelief, especially in the United States, these canons moved from the realm of description into that of prescription. The clouds darkened and the optics of ethnogenesis gave way to the doomsday sounds of charter-group decline.

But this is to anticipate a later moment of Context North America, one that worries about the closure of the American mind and the erosion of Western values. Putting the two national-myth moments together also erases the difference of power and, hence, of hegemonic reference that both have in relation to each other and within their separate countries. Lionel Rubinoff put an important part of the Canadian case in this way: "The peculiar character of Canadian history and historiography—that it is not eschatological or teleological—and of Canadian Federalism—that it imposes no occult commitments upon its members, such as 'The Canadian Way' or 'The Canadian Dream' or 'The Great Mission and Destiny of Canadian History'—is surely a source of great strength and virtue. . . . Whereas the European and American existence is defined by an ontology driven by a teleology, the essence of Canadian existence derives from an ontology that is free of teleology" (47). There is some truth as well as some self-congratulation involved here, in which the negative quality of *not* being teleological in the American or European mould stands in for *being* Canadian in a special, morally empowered way.

Rubinoff does locate that vital part of Context North America, in both its American and Canadian aspect, as a volatile ground of ontologies, teleologies, identities. His way of putting a sensible, non-imperial case for Canada also expresses that aspect of the Canadian psyche that makes it often sound co-dependent on things American. Canadian/American relations have been a subject fretted over more voluminously and continuously in Canadian social and political history than any other topic. In the atmosphere of Canada, the United States is everywhere, even underground, at the roots of language, perception, and the recognition of community (Lee).

The reverse is not true. Frank Underhill, quoting Merrill Denison, put the situation in a nutshell: "Americans are benevolently ignorant about Canada, whereas Canadians are malevolently informed about the United States" (225). This, in a ventriloquistic way, is vintage Underhill. To get the real flavour of the man, we could turn to his analysis of the Massey Commission Report of 1952, a document that had an impact on the rejuvenation of cultural reflection on Canada in Canada, with some similarities, especially in its contributing writers, to the Matthiessen phenomenon in the United States. It was as if the American Renaissance had gone Canadian and institutional. There is more than a whiff of Rubinoff to the Underhill assault on Massey's English-Canadian assumptions. He moved in on what he called the four founding fears and hopes of the Report: (1) "The oldest and most tenacious tradition in our communal memory centres around our determination not to become Americans." (2) "If we could get off by ourselves on a continental island, far away from the wicked Americans, all we should achieve would be to become a people like the Australians." (3) "If we allow ourselves to be obsessed by the danger of American cultural annexation, so that the thought preys on us day and night, we shall only become a slightly bigger Ulster." (4) "The idea that by taking thought, and with the help of government subventions, we can become another England—which, I suspect, is Mr. Massey's ultimate idea—is purely fantastic" (212).

Underhill could find no free-standing sense of Canada in this juggling of nightmare imperial options, playing once more the role of Goldwin Smith to Massey's Parkin and Grant. The co-dependency dimension of Canadian/American contact, from the Canadian point of view, has always turned this aspect of Context North America into allegory and psychohistory. The United States, because of its annexationist-assimilationist threat to British North America historically, and the cross-border influence of its cultural and communication industries in the twentieth century, forms the irrational *a priori* of the English-Canadian unconscious. It enters Canadian discourse as an emotional, highly symbolized,

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This series is the outcome of symposia on Canadian writers presented by the Department of English, University of Ottawa. The object is to make permanently available the criticism and evaluation of writers as presented by scholars and literary figures at the symposia. Where considered significant by the editor, additional critical articles and bibliographical material are included.

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