

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

***Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies* edited by Smaro Kamboureli and Robert Zacharias (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012)**

Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies is a part of the TransCanada series of texts devoted to exploring the paradigmatic and dramatic changes that have affected Canadian literature and cultural studies in recent years. Much of the material included in the collection derives from presentations for *TransCanada Two: Literature, Institutions, Citizenship* at the University of Guelph in 2007, but with important amendments. Hence, this text represents a continuation of a significant groundswell in the realignment of the cultural criteria defining not just Canadian literature, but also Canadian culture and politics. By clear inference the value of such a self-reflexive examination extends well beyond the borders of Canada and provides a relationship for a broadened redefinition of literature in general as well as Canadian literature and national identity. By tapping identity the entire concept of what is literary and what may be thought of as a cultural right 'to pass freely without let or hindrance' for the marginalised and disadvantaged is rewoven into the literary and historical fabric of the nation. In short, there has been an awakening to the polyphony of voices that were silenced by the legacy of a tarnished national narrative which spoke almost exclusively on behalf of a white body politic.

While it is tempting to extrapolate beyond the boundaries of what is Canadian, it is important to remember that this is still a collection which is grounded in tracking Canadian identity and thus opening up new possibilities for the perception of Canadian literature. It is not a critique of global culture and does not attempt to provide that depth of theoretical footing required of a rigorous philosophical treatise, although constructing identity and not just Canadian identity surely becomes an issue which is probed in light of the Canadian perspective which inevitably must be integrated with a larger world view. All local practice must still be measured against a national narrative, and the national narrative against a world view predicated upon effective reason. But if reason is always amalgamated with the prejudice of perspective, as intimated in several of the essays, it carries with it a silent approbation for truth-seeking claims, an idea that would seem to run contrary to the very project that new perspectives would wish to redress. The idea that any tactic is a good tactic so long as it upends the previous code of British post-colonial dominance is never explicitly stated by any of the authors, but there is some sense of obduracy about such a notion. This is hardly surprising considering the legacy of the past which Janine Brody catalogues in 'White Settlers and the Biopolitics of State Building in Canada'. Brody states her interest is to 'destabilize contemporary national narratives' that would try to impose an historically hierarchic image of cultural diversity in the social fabric of the nation. This interest would imply an ongoing adversarial relationship with the national narrative.

The past is almost always less than honourable in its putative claims for fairness versus actual practice, but the present must also be weighed against this same ongoing capacity for presumably enlightened change. To draw a parallel with the idea of change for change's sake, consider an analogy with Adorno and Hockheimer's Grand Hotel of the

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Abyss, the phrase popularised by Georg Lukacs. Adorno and Hockheimer conceived of an original Hegelian sin in the means by which thought must eliminate all that is not thought, to devour the opposition in its effort to create identity. But the alternative of a 'logic of disintegration' seems to leave not only just the fading melody of a 'ludic' moment, but also the bitter aftertaste of despair (Adorno; cf. Buck-Morss). Nothing is achieved, aside from the pleasure the game provides its privileged players, or as Lukacs puts it, a

considerable part of the leading German intelligentsia, including Adorno, have taken up residence in the 'Grand Hotel Abyss' which I described in connection with my critique of Schopenhauer as 'a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity.'¹

Without labouring the point, this collection of essays pays homage to an informed rationality, and, indeed, most of the essays make a point of consciously eschewing a truculent criticism based on the privilege of superior present knowledge. They avoid the presumption of a blinkered march of progress. Jeff Derksen's opening essay, 'National Literature in the Shadow of Neoliberalism' alludes to this kind of abyss when he suggests that 'hybridity' and 'nomadism' and many more tropes of poststructuralism are perilously similar to the projects of the neoliberal state where globalism is a metaphor for corporatism. The assumption would be that most writers have valid reasons then to 'destabilize national narratives' but do they not then become a part of the national narrativity?

The majority of the writers are sentient of this pitfall of bourgeois neoliberalism. Derksen focuses on it while in 'The Time Has Come: Self and Community Articulations in *Colour. An Issue and Awakening Thunder*,' [sic] Larissa Lai makes a point of enunciating her objectivity by stating (via allusion to *Awakening Thunder*) a desire to be 'free of sexism, racism, classism and heterosexism.' This testament may be laudable, but it is moot as to whether it is ever achievable in the rational realisation of human liberty. The interest is there, however, and the methodology is laid bare by the reinsertion of local events in the national dialogue as disruptions to historical unilinearity and as recognitions of time as a fragmented commodity. The critical issue would seem to be that this history does not succumb to bias and maintains at least a notion of what Hegel would call a *Weltgeist*, a sublation of previous contradictions leading towards synthesis (cf. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*). Yet Hegelian dialectics, however objective, fail to admit the unspoken voice. The historicity of literature as well as its communicative character should presuppose a relation of work, audience, and new work which takes the form of a dialogue as well as a process, and which can be understood in the relationship of message and receiver as well as in the relationship of question and answer, problem and solution. *Shifting the Ground* is about just that: the relation of old work and old voices to new work and new voices in building a collective consciousness. While controversial, it is without question a critically important anthology of texts.

¹ Georg Lukacs, Preface to *The Theory of the Novel* trans. Anna Bostock (London: The Merlin Press, 1971) xiii.
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It is impossible to discuss all the essays here, but they include impressive cultural critiques by Smaro Kamboureli in his 'Introduction,' by Jeff Derksen in his intriguing look at 'National Literature in the light of Neoliberalism' (previously mentioned), by Danielle Fuller, by Janine Brody (previously mentioned), by Robert Zacharias in his evocative "'Some Great Crisis': Vimy as Originary Violence' – a look at the trajectory of governmental control in cultural history, by Monika Kin Ganon and Yasmin Jiwani, by Larissa Lai (previously mentioned), by Kathy Mezei, by Yoko Fugimoto, by Pauline Wakeham, by Len Findley, and by Peter Kulchyski whose concluding essay examines indigenous acts of inscription as writing against the state.

Any personal penchant for a more philosophical text must be countervailed by the ardent pragmatism that dominates the collection. The extensive catalogue of travesties executed in the name of presumably enlightened national policy and the accompanying perception of literature in the past bespeak a broader definition of what is Canadian and what is Canadian literature. To allude again to Lai, 'the time has come.' *Shifting the Ground* is indispensable reading for current re-thinking of national identity, literature, postcolonialism, and the shaping of history.

Christopher Ward