The Influence of Painting on Five Canadian Writers

Alice Munro, Hugh Hood, Timothy Findley, Margaret Atwood, and Michael Ondaatje

by John Cooke

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PREFACE

In 1985, Yankee fans took the Toronto Blue Jays' bid for the American League East Championship with ill grace. Before the first game of the September series, the Yankee home crowd booed so loudly during Robert Merrill's rendition of "O Canada" that the anthem couldn't be heard. The third game featured a new singer, and brought more trouble. After the opening lines of the Canadian national anthem, Mary O'Dowd stopped; she had forgotten the lyrics. She fetched a copy from the dugout and bravely continued, but in a melody never before heard by the visiting Blue Jay fans.

They were probably irked but not surprised. Here was another story to add to their list of American ignorance of things Canadian. The list includes remarks extending from the well-known to the obscure–from Al Capone's quip, "Canada? I don't even know what street it's on," to a Texan's rejoinder, on being informed that the province of Ontario is larger than his state, "That's all right, we'll just wait for it to melt." Canadians remember that not only gangsters and defensive Texans often fail to take Canada seriously. American presidents have had trouble even learning the names of Canadian prime ministers. When Kennedy referred to John Diefenbaker as "Diefenbawker," he might simply have been speaking like a Bostonian, but Johnson clearly had Lester Pearson confused with someone else when he called him "Mr. Wilson."[1] Such misapprehensions persist. In 1980, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Canada has twelve provinces, two more than Canadians themselves are aware of.

Canadians pay attention to these misapprehensions partly because America's political and economic power forces their accommodation to what the diplomat John Holmes calls "Life with Uncle." But Canadians themselves have not always been sure what street they're on, so they have looked outward to other cultures to define themselves. After World War II, they looked to the Yankees to the south, as they had looked before to their former mother countries, England and France.

Only in the mid-1960s did Canadians come to define themselves by looking at their own land. This change in focus was reflected, in part, by a new attitude toward the nations through which they had long defined themselves: their search for identity elsewhere became a subject for jest. About the time of their Centennial in 1967, for instance, a popular joke was that where Canadians had aimed for a combination of French culture, English politics, and American prosperity, what they had after a century was American culture, French politics, and English prosperity. Margaret Atwood defined the Canadian temperament in a similarly light manner in her version of the three blind men and the elephant—in this case, an Englishman, an American, and a Canadian confronted with a hamburger.[2] The Englishman, Atwood says, will tell amusing stories about it, the American will turn it into a symbol, and the Canadian will be puzzled, asking himself about the hamburger's history, its relationship to himself as observer, its existential status as hamburger.

Atwood's point is not simply the Canadian's fascination with American food. His cautiousness and earnestness also mark him as a recognizable Canadian type. He is, in a word, dull, one example of why the Quebec novelist Mordecai Richler has called Canadians the world's "elected squares."[3] Canadians have long reveled in accounts of their own dullness, as if home offered nothing worth looking at. In a 1956 poem, "From Colony to Nation," the Quebec poet Irving Layton described Canadians as "a dull people," who had settled into "the empty look" of a Mountie or a dairy farmer as if into "a legacy." By 1976, the University of Toronto scholar Northrop Frye, making the almost obligatory comparison to America, could joke about the vaunted Canadian dullness when he wrote, "We can't have a great literature in Canada because we're too safe, sane, dull, humdrum—not

enough lynchings, one critic suggested."[4] In the twenty years bracketed by those examples, the Canadians' attitude toward their affliction had changed, from the defensive to the jocular. About the mid-point, Canadians began looking with wit at their legacy.

My fascination with this change prompted this book. After three visits to Canada in the 1950s, I remembered it as the place where warm iced tea was the national drink. Canadians were to me a tepid people, and I didn't see how such writers as Atwood, Richler, and a company of other accomplished writers could have been nourished on this beverage.

My original intention was to discover how work like theirs could emerge so quickly from a national literary tradition almost as empty as the look Layton found on a Mountie's face. At first, Canadian literature seemed to me like the national literatures of other countries that had formed the British Commonwealth. As in Nigeria, South Africa, and Australia, Canadian writing began to flourish in the 1950s. In Quebec, the new literature and visual art was striking enough to warrant the name it was given – "The Quiet Revolution." By the end of the 1960s, writing was thriving in all the country's other regions the Maritimes, Ontario, the Prairies, and British Columbia. So marked was this outpouring that the *Literary History of Canada*, which appeared in 1965 after nearly a decade of work by Canadian scholars, came out in a second and radically expanded edition in 1976; yet a third was soon in process.

Its editors labored hard to construct a national literary tradition. But contributors recurrently considered Canada's regions separately, and my ownreading suggested that writers from various regions could be yoked together only by violence. So I narrowed my horizon to Ontario, where much excellent writing was being done by, among others, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Michael Ondaatje, Timothy Findley, and Hugh Hood, all of whom began publishing in the mid-1960s. Even Ontario proved an awkward subject. The back cover of the American edition of Timothy Findley's first novel, *The Last of the Cray People*, carried the news that "Timothy Findley lives *near* Ontario, Canada." While yet another example of American ignorance of Canada, this line contained an unintentional slice of truth for Ontarians themselves weren't always sure where Ontario was. As late as

1977, Atwood could say that Ontario was the only region without "an authentic voice."[5] A decade later an Ontario voice, both authentic and lively, can be heard. My aim is to describe how it developed in Ontario fiction after 1965.

As the opening of this preface indicates, one of my intentions is to put this fiction in a cultural context for an American audience, as Edmund Wilson did the writing from Ontario and Quebec in the early 1960s. Wilson went to Ontario searching for the Iroquois and ended up praising Morley Callaghan, Hugh MacLennan, and "The Quiet Revolution" in Quebec. When he collected his impressions in *O Canada* (1965), Canadians found his rendition of the national anthem as strange as Mary O'Dowd's. But they listened. If the Yankee fans had listened on the first night of that 1985 series, they would have heard Robert Merrill singing, worth the price of admission by itself.

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The World's Hardest Map

I

A Canadian confronted with a poem will say, "This is where it fits into the universe." Margaret Atwood used this illustration in 1971 to suggest that a "love for synthesis" is "peculiarly Canadian."[1] Atwood herself would demonstrate the attraction of synthesis in *Survival*, her study of Canadian literature published the following year. Beginning with the argument that Canadians were lost in their inhospitable landscape, Atwood concluded, "What a lost person needs is a map of the territory, with his own position marked on it so he can see where he is in relation to everything else." She went on to provide that map, to show how Canadians could fit into their world.

So intractable is the Canadian world, so in need of something like a "map," that even its foreign observers quickly start to act like Canadians. I first began this book with a map that shows a "love of synthesis" comparable to Atwood's in *Survival*. I reproduce it here as an example of the urge toward order that Canada calls forth in its observers:

> Walker Court lies at the center of the Art Gallery of Ontario. The court is about fifty feet in diameter; at its circumference pillars rise thirty feet to a ten foot entablature which is surmounted by a translucent dome. The pillars open onto a gallery encircling the central court. In the Greek revival style popular in the mid-nineteenth century, the court emanates an Old World air, the air of old Toronto, the most British of cities in Ontario, the most British of Canada's provinces.

> When I first saw Walker Court, I was struck not so much by the architecture as by its adornments. Spaced around the entablature were eight names in bright red paint–Nipissing, Huron, Algonquin, Ojibwa, Iroquois, Petun, Ottawa, and Neutral. They were what remained of "The European Iceberg," a recent exhibition of figurative Continental art. And in the gallery surrounding the court hung a dozen American abstract expressionist paintings–by Helen Frankenhalter, Robert Motherwell, Hans Hofmann, Larry Poons, Ellsworth Kelly, and Kenneth Noland.
>
> The court reflects the attenuation of British influence and the strength of two other determinants of Ontario culture in this century. Both the title of the recent exhibition and the Indian names reflect the persistent Canadian search for identity in the Northland where the native peoples prospered. The American paintings represent the American culture that has been massively influential in Canada since World War II. The energy of these forces from the north and the south is a decided contrast with the muted white of the architecture. The vibrant red names and the bright, wild American paintings draw our attention as they have Canadians'.

This map is useful, for it takes into account important ways that Canadians have sought to define themselves. For much of this century Canadians looked outward to their vibrant northern and southern borderlands, hoping to find in them a shape and an energy missing at home; and the most powerful images of Canadian identity, most obviously those provided by Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven, have been provided by the visual arts. But the lines of this map are too clear, its colors too certain. As with so many observers, both native and foreign, the unwieldy Canadian nation provoked in me an excessive desire for order. The desire to synthesize, to classify, to find informing symbols, myths, or even syndromes has dominated cultural and literary criticism of Canada. Again and again, its observers try hard–usually too hard–to make everything fit in.

Atwood did not just identify this malady; in 1977, she suggested an antidote. After referring to the allure of American culture, she observed that if Canadians were going to have junk, "it might as well be indigenous junk."[2] As Canada entered a particularly awkward age in the 1960s, Canadian artists began not only to look more at their home ground but simply to depict its "junk" without pressing it into a coherent shape. They looked more often at their world as Atwood does in her 1987 review of Bronwen Wallace's poetry

collection from which I take my epigraph. In her verbal still life of the cover, Atwood lists objects– "a very ordinary television set," second-hand furniture, a kitchen stove with a tea kettle. The interior, Atwood stresses, is not infused with a symbolic order; there is "not a candle or a chalice," no suggestion of "the Holy Grail." In Atwood's description, "love for synthesis" is renounced for the magic inherent in disparate "common things."

Like most long affairs, the Canadians' "love for synthesis" did not cool quickly. Nor has mine, but I have tried to follow the lead of Atwood and her contemporaries by turning to less schematic models than the Walker Court for my broader subject, contemporary Ontario culture. I will approach it as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Richard Wagner's portmanteau word for a vast opera to which many arts contribute, or a "combine," Robert Rauschenberg's name for his untidy constructions incorporating painting, found objects, writing, and taped sound. As these models suggest, contemporary Ontario artists have joined together loosely–to paint, write and sing about what they find on their home ground. It is in this interdisciplinary context that I approach my more specific subject, what the novelist Marian Engel called "the great bulge of creativity" in Ontario fiction.[3]

Engel chose her words well, for the emergence of Ontario fiction in the mid-1960s was part of an awkward process. The bulge of creativity occurred as Ontario writers, other artists, and critics moved from certainty to uncertainty, redefining what they looked at, how they looked at it, and who did the looking.

In the early 1960s, Ontarians thought they knew how their world fit together. To them, Ontario was "Central Canada," the center of the nation and the key to its identity. They fashioned cultural maps–or, to use their favored term, myths–to describe this national identity. Those who looked were mainly visual artists.

In the following decades, a new way of looking at Ontario took precedence. It reflected the judgment of one of Alice Munro's characters that Ontario was "the hardest map in the world to draw."[4] The new Ontario artists accepted their inability to draw this map. They no longer saw Ontario as emblematic of Canada as a whole or even as a coherent region itself, but rather as a conglomeration of disparate local societies. Unconvinced by the

myths advanced about a Canadian identity, they turned instead to the documentary, which begins with the welter of topical data (Atwood's "junk"), moving from them toward a pattern, but usually not getting there. As Michael Ondaatje observed, the documentary may lead to a road, "but it's still not a road, it's bushes and trees."[5] And not only were those who looked at Ontario more various—writers and musicians as well as visual artists—but they looked from an interdisciplinary perspective, as novelist-painters, painter-musicians, and critic-novelists.

Ontario art after 1965 is typified by these transformations—from the national to the local, from the mythic to the documentary, from an art of painting to an art of mixed forms. I will consider them in turn before suggesting how the new uncertainties came to foster a surer sense of identity among Ontario artists than the coherent cultural maps they had long sought, how Ontario artists found, as Atwood wrote of Bronwen Wallace's book, things "in common."

II

National views of Canada, long associated with Ontario, were under attack by the mid-1970s. In "Surviving the Paraphrase," an influential essay published in 1976, Frank Davey wrote that "the bulk of Canadian literature is regional before it is national—despite whatever claims Ontario or Toronto writers may make to represent a national vision."[6] Soon even Ontario and Toronto writers were admitting the strength of regional definitions of culture. Atwood, who had provided a national vision in her widely read *Survival* (1972), acknowledged that about 1975 "regionalism replaced nationalism as something to feel self-righteous about." But the proponents of the national vision clung to it. They had good reasons.

The fragmented Canadian landscape alone suggests why they had needed a unifying national myth. Canada is an unwieldy mosaic of ten provinces which fall into five cultural regions. Most of its population lies in pockets close to the American border, forming a 3,500 mile long archipelago that is tenuously linked by an enormous communications and rail system. (Well might the 1987 Vancouver World's Fair take communications as its theme, "World in Motion—World in Touch" as its motto.) Northrop Frye captured the feel of the landscape when he called Canada "an obliterated

environment," although even that phrase might wrongly suggest it was ever coherent.[7] Similarly, to the Ontario novelist David Helwig, "Canada is an economic and geographic absurdity that has to be reconciled each day in the minds of its inhabitants if it is to exist at all."

Canadians have also had to reconcile their fragmented history. In his influential "Conclusion" to the 1965 *Literary History of Canada*, Frye suggested that Canada moved directly from a pre-national to a post-national sense of identity, so that a Canadian could not even ask "Who am I?" but only pose some such riddle as "Where is here?" Others have noted similar discontinuities in the arts. In 1974, the Albertan writer Robert Kroetsch said that "Canadian literature evolved directly from Victorian into Postmodern"; in 1985, the Toronto art critic Barrie Hale argued that Painters Eleven, Ontario's major group of painters in the 1950s, moved from a local to an international focus, eschewing the national.[8]

Confronting so disjunct and discontinuous an entity, Canadians have tried to rationalize their great loose baggy monster of a country, hoping that, surely, there must be a slim something called "Canada" inside trying to get out. Both before 1965 and too often since, they constructed models to describe this Canada's shape. Study after study has been similar in intent to a 1987 book, *A Passion for Identity: An Introduction to Canadian Studies*, in which "A major theme uncovers a unity that holds Canada together despite linguistic and regional differences."[9] The motivation of such studies was put well by the Ontario poet Al Purdy, who said, simply, that Canada is "an opposite nation talked into existence."

In the years leading up to Canada's Centennial in 1967, Canadians did not just talk about national identity; they embodied it in national symbols. They resolved to choose a new flag, an undertaking that preoccupied Canadians both in the capital and on the street. When *Canadian Art* held a national competition for the design of the new flag, 789 people submitted entries. The nation was also celebrated in architecture like the new Robarts Library at the University of Toronto, which was built in the shape of a national symbol, the maple leaf. Expo'67 in Montreal during the Centennial year was the capstone of the national celebration.

After the Centennial, the national mania subsided. Soon Ontarians began to understand Mort Sahl's quip about the country's search for a flag after nearly a hundred years as a nation. When asked what he thought of a nation still without a flag, Sahl answered, "Well, it's a start." Others thought so too. In the aftermath of the Centennial, commentators began to suggest that looking for Canada might be a fruitless task. In 1968, the historian J. M. S. Careless delivered an influential address to the Canadian Historical Association titled "Somewhat Narrow Horizons," in which he criticized national approaches in Canadian historical studies.[10] Three years later Frye, who had himself advanced national models, adopted a regionalist position. He flatly asserted,

> The question of Canadian identity, so far as it affects the creative imagination, is not a "Canadian" question at all, but a regional question. Every part of Canada has strong separatist feelings: there is a separatism of the Pacific Coast, of the Prairies, of the Maritimes, of Newfoundland, as well as Quebec. Ontario, of course, began with a separatist movement from the American Revolution.

Frye's analysis works well for Canada's regions . . . except Ontario. The "of course" with which he introduces the province correctly suggests he is begging his case. Ontario doesn't fit; it had separatist feelings in the late 1700s, not in 1971 when Frye was writing. Ontario–"Central Canada"–is what those in other areas see themselves separating from.

Ontario is the most difficult of the Canadian regions to describe precisely because it has so consistently viewed itself as the center of the tenuous national fabric. The major comprehensive histories of Canada have been written by Ontarians–Donald Creighton, Harold Innis, and A. R. M. Lower among them–who provided "Canadian" views of the country's development. Unlike Canada's other regions, Ontario has no autonomous identity. Unlike Quebec, it has no political, religious, or linguistic cause to unite it, and unlike the Prairies, no regional mythology. Ontario, moreover, has been the most torn by different cultural models. Its people long viewed it as the most British of the Canadian provinces; after World War II they viewed it, less comfortably, as the most American. The novelist Hugh Hood

was a poor wordsmith but an acute cultural critic when he observed in 1987 that "Ontario is only Ohio with a few letters added."[11]

Other commentators have not sought a cause but simply noted Ontario's lack of cohesion. In 1974, the literary critic Germaine Warkentin stated baldly, "Ontario is not a region of Canada. No image of place informs it, for as a geographical entity it is as various as any of the larger nations of Europe."[12] The reviewer of a 1975 exhibition of Canadian paintings concluded that Ontario was the hardest region for which to choose the artists, for it "is large and varied enough to include every conceivable current direction" in art. Such diversity suggests why, until the publication of Robert Bothwell's *A Short History of Ontario* by Hurtig Publishers in 1986, there was no single work attempting to explain how the province came to assume its current form.

By the late-1970s, the "somewhat narrow horizons"—the regional model of Canada advocated by Careless in 1968—needed to be narrowed further. A decade after his address, Ontario had three distinct cultural areas. Until the mid-1960s the culture of Ontario had been perceived as the culture of Toronto. This is not to suggest that those outside the city accepted its leadership; a popular joke was that hatred of Toronto was what held the province together. As the city grew more powerful during the 1960s, a rebellion of sorts occurred and the outlying areas around Kingston in the Southeast and London in the Southwest rejected Toronto's cultural leadership in favor of their own local cultures. This development was clearest in London. By 1968, when three exhibitions by London visual artists were held in the province, the phrase "The London School" had gained wide currency. The Kingston awakening was quieter but still intense. Two of its novelists, Matt Cohen and David Helwig, would begin quartets in the 1970s detailing the features of the Southeast.[13]

As these two areas defined themselves locally, Toronto lost the easy certainty of being "the meeting place," as its name is said to mean in Huron. It had long been that for the province, but by the late 1960s it had expanded so fast—its population grew by 80,000 a year during the decade—that even the city itself lacked a sense of identity. It had become a modern North

American city—no longer "Hog Town" or "Toronto the Good," two sobriquets which still described it accurately in 1960.

The growing awareness of Toronto's formlessness is demonstrated well in a conversation in the early 1970s between Alexander Calder and two Torontonians, the painter Harold Town and the writer Barry Callaghan. Calder begins a joke about the cheapest hotel in Toronto. "It's about a maid, a shit and a fuck in this hotel," he says, but he can't recall the rest, nor can his listeners.[14] That Toronto had become a city without a punchline did not bother its writers. Like those in the Southwest and Southeast, Toronto writers by the 1970s had given up trying to provide one. Rather, they turned to depicting "the common things" Atwood describes in my epigraph. Whether they found "common magic" or simply a world as salty as Calder's language, they were the first generation in Ontario to look concertedly at the features of their city.

III

Others continued to advance cultural maps for Frye's "obliterated Nation." Those who sought an integrating cultural myth were continuing what had been the dominant approach in Canadian criticism since at least World War II. In 1948 Douglas LePan had written a poem titled "A Country Without a Mythology," and Toronto-based critics in particular sought to provide one. At their head was Frye, the foremost mythic critic in the western world. Toronto critics, in what has been called "The Frye School," recurrently sought rubrics to categorize their fractured land: in 1965, Frye himself posited a "garrison mentality"; in 1972, Atwood suggested patterns of survival; in 1974, John Moss advanced "patterns of isolation"; in 1985, Gaile MacGregor presented "the Wacousta Syndrome."[15]

Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* is typical of such approaches. In it she is seduced by the "love for synthesis" she would soon begin to question. Working from the assumption "that every country or culture has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core," Atwood concludes that their inhospitable landscape has led Canadians to define themselves as victims (31). She provides an elaborate classification of Canadian victims: eleven varieties each subdivided into five "victim positions." Even so somber a system as Atwood's is reassuring in an

"obliterated environment." It is "unifying and informing"; it gives Canadians the map to their world.

Cultural models like Atwood's are created by an urge to order on the part of the commentator – a need to show readers where they are "in relation to everything else." This is the kind of order that Frye created in his influential *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), which provides a system explaining all literature, a circular model of four myths reflected in four interlocking genres. That impulse has been uncommonly strong in Toronto, the motivation not only behind Frye but, as Atwood has noted, behind Harold Innis and Marshal McLuhan, "those other megasystem thinkers of the University of Toronto."[16]

The urge to order is reflected again and again in the microsystems Ontario critics employ in dealing with their literature. Donald S. Hair's premise in discussing Marian Engel's 1976 novel *Bear* is characteristic. "The starting place for the academic critic," he writes, "is the classification of a work, the attempt to see it in relation to other works. If we start in this way with *Bear*, we must say that it is a romance, and that the conventional action of romance – quest in search of treasure which is guarded by a monster – lies behind the action of this novel."[17] Even more than other academic critics, those in Ontario want to classify, to overcome that monster and establish a stable order. Too often they enter a kitchen like the one on the cover of *Common Magic* to find not an aluminum tea kettle but the Holy Grail.

Coherence is the starting place for so many Ontario critics because the Canadian nation itself has so long resisted it. As Frye has observed, first in 1965 and often thereafter, Canada, unlike the United States, is an inductive nation.[18] While Americans began with a clean break from England and a written constitution from which the national identity was refined, Canadians made up their story as they went along, not happening onto a constitution until they made their final break with England in 1982. It is not surprising, then, that Canadian critics have been preoccupied with creating an integrating myth.

Even as some Ontario writers continued to weave their unifying myths into the 1980s, others championed the documentary mode. Two major studies summarize its role in Canadian literature. In 1969, the poet Dorothy