



# 加拿大地域主义 文学研究



*A Study of Regionalism in  
Canadian Literature*

丁林棚 / 著



北京大学出版社  
PEKING UNIVERSITY PRESS

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# Introduction

The notion of place plays a prominent part in the genesis of literature. As a repository of social space as well as geographic space, place emerges as a recurring theme particularly in regional literature. Furthermore, as an indispensable element of human experience, place in literature engages critical attention because the text functions as the psycho-spatial locus of the discursive system that is believed to be inhabited by an authorial presence firmly lodged in the confines of spatiotemporal dimensions. In a postmodern epoch characterized by a blossoming of theoretical perspectives and a widening of critical horizons, place captures more attention from both social theorists and literary critics. The entry of place into literary criticism is made possible by the belief that places are “combinations of the material and the mental” (Cresswell 13), and that places are “historically contingent” (Pred 279), hence “a process” (Massey 155). Place and literature are intimately entwined in the production, interpretation, categorization and perception of literary discourses. The interference of region with the economy of literary representation further complicates the situation. Region, as an ordered reconfiguration of place(s) invested with the power structure of sociopolitics, ideology, economy, culture, knowledge, and with the value inscription of subjectivity, further problematizes the aesthetics of literary exemplification grounded in a firm pursuit of the universal. Origin, identity, and authenticity pose as baffling central issues in literary as well as sociological discourses. In synchrony with the talk of British and American literatures, there arises a new critical inquiry of other literatures, those which are timidly teetering on the outskirts of Euro-American discourse. Questions regarding the identity, authenticity, and canonicity of these “other” literatures fall under the scrutiny of a wide array of theories such as post-colonialism, post-modernism, ecocriticism, and so forth. If issues like self, identity,

meaning and truth are ruthlessly called into question in today's context, then time and place, as two of the most essential and indelible constituents or coordinates which constrain the existence of a subject in a certain nook of reality, dwell inescapably at the very centre of epistemological and ontological inquiries.

In the domain of Canadian literature, there is also evidence of the phantasmagorical influence of political reflections on place, the nation-state that is different from Britain and America. And Canadian literature has been pigeonholed into a variety of categories such as Commonwealth literature, North American literature, New World literature, and what not. These classes of nomenclature involve a cultural taxonomy dependent on spatiality, ineluctably embroiled in a political anxiety over identity and status. In the pre-Confederation era, place used to be a major concern for a good number of writers, such as Susanna Moodie and Anna Jameson, the latter of whom viewed Canada as a colony "not yet identified with the dearest affections and associations, remembrances, and hopes of its inhabitants [...]. Their love, their pride, are not for poor Canada, but for high and happy England [...]" (Bennett and Brown 71). Apparently, for many of the writers before Confederation, Canadian literature was a regional variety in the entire corpus of British literature. However, over the formative years of Canadian literature, the regional status of Canadian literature has gradually ramified into a nexus of issues concerning the inherence of locality to literature, especially to a literature so much tied to its local consciousness and political anxieties, as well as to cultural concerns of the textual representation of a nation-state well defined in terms of both geography and politics.

One can easily imagine the pandemonium when the vexatious notion of region is injected right in the heart of Canadian literature itself. No sooner had Canadian literary critics broken the fetters of conceptualizing Canadian literature as a regional literature than they found their edifice of national literature crumbling into a myriad of splinters, each of which disdainfully proclaiming itself as different or unique, strongly accusing the nationalists of their indifference to difference. Indeed, when one diverts one's eyes to the larger political and cultural scene of the nation, one is greeted by a din



of voices trying to enunciate their own regional identities. Apparently, the colonial or regional status of Canada in history has triggered a host of issues which all have, so to speak, helped internalize the regionality<sup>①</sup> of Canadian literature itself. Instead of interrogating the validity of the regionality of Canadian literature, critics, historians, and theorists call into question the homogeneity of Canadian literature in the current socio-political contexts of Canada. For one thing, can a homogeneous "Canadian literature" speak the truth of the Canadian culture that has ever been so illusory and nebulous to define? What role do politics and region play in the production of regional literature? Writer Eli Mandel observes that region is one's home of origin, "the overpowering feeling of nostalgia associated with the place we know as the first place, the first vision of things, the first clarity of things" ("Images" 50). Observing on the necessity of local consciousness of the Canadian verse in the early twentieth century, T. E. Hulme felt "the desire to reproduce the peculiar quality of feeling which is induced by the flat spaces and wide horizons of the virgin prairie of western Canada" (qtd. in Woodcock, *Meeting* 7). As George Woodcock reiterates Hulme's sentiment, this "sense of locality," is "indispensable to a consciousness of regional identity" (*Meeting* 7).

In fact, regionalism has been a rather controversial subject in the realm of literary criticism. Thomas Hardy, William Faulkner, and Hamlin Garland, for instance, have been among the most celebrated writers concerned with the literary representations of their regions. Literary regionalism in Canada, however, means more than "local color." The notion of regionalism is a socio-historical as well as geopolitical derivative; and regional divisions in Canadian literature are not a mere regional dissectionalism based on geographic splittism, but a dynamic cultural complication of various factors which weave an interactive fabric of social,

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① The word "regionality" should be treated as having a dual significance. A distinction should be made between the "regionality" and the "regional status" of Canadian literature. I use the word regionality to refer to both the peripheral status of regional literature and to regional adherence in Canadian literary works, but with more emphasis on the latter implication. However, "regionalist" will be used in later text to stress the writer's regional adherence in his work.

political, economic, as well as psychological forces that shape the regional collective consciousnesses latent in the texts. And the dynamics of regionalism to some extent dilutes, if not dissolves, the geographic determinism of regionalism in literature and draws the topic into a larger interdisciplinary context, thus fixating literary regionalism in a more complicated lattice wrought with a variety of elements such as ethnic, cultural, political, etc. In his study of New World regionalism, David Jordan contends that regionalism in the New World "has particular implications [...] [and] it has never been far removed from politics" (3). In a holistic sense, to sever literary regionalism from its political connotations and other related factors would jeopardize the subject itself and alienate literary regionalism from its social and cultural roots. In a word, literary regionalism is a multi-faceted issue that embraces a variety of disciplinary considerations. Based on this, it is necessary that we have a look at the wider atmosphere of scholarship for an explication of regions and regionalisms formulated by scholars outside of the literary scene.

## I. Regions and Regionalisms

Despite the long-standing dispute over regional sectionalism, the very concept of region is still somewhat elusive, veiled in a mist of cognitive indeterminacy. First and foremost, Canada is considered to be a nation of "two solitudes," as the title of Hugh MacLennan's novel suggests. The country is divided into two distinctive regions with different languages, cultures, and political traditions, namely, Quebec and the rest of Canada. Even outside of francophone Canada, there is a persistent vision of Canada as a nation of intrinsic cultural heterogeneity. Proceeding from the perspective of political science, Franks expresses his worry about "how Canada is counted" (1) to achieve a substantial perspective on the nation. He interestingly counts Canada as a nation of "one nation-state, two founding languages, and cultures, four regions, ten provinces, and a plurality of groups and interests" (1). While one dismisses this mathematically-informed formulation of Canada with a chuckle, one still doubts whether any perception of Canada based on a largely political

transformation is legitimate at all, especially when it comes to an assessment of Canada's literary and hence cultural lives. Nevertheless, to do Franks justice, he does make a distinction between region and province; therefore regional literature is not an equivalent of provincial literature, despite the fact that every year anthologies of literature swarm university libraries with an ever-increasing emphasis on provincial disparities. Franks' division of Canada's regions into four is made in terms of their political representations. As he contends, "[r]egionalism finds a place in the Constitution. The present senate is composed of 24 members each from the Maritimes, Quebec, Ontario, and the west, with the addition of six senators from Newfoundland and one each from the Yukon and Northwest Territories" (9). Rather than adhering to a political vision of regionalism, it is necessary to approach a more socio-historical version of regionalism in the study of literature, because a political and economic mapping of Canada is inevitably arbitrary. Such a division of Canada only reduces the nation into groups of interest on the basis of their common political and economic value systems.

At the core of regionalism is the ubiquitous question of identity. Traditionally, Canada is believed to consist of five major regions: British Columbia, the Prairie Provinces, Ontario, Québec, and the Atlantic Provinces. And there emerged on April 1, 1999 a new region called the Nunavut Territory, which, together with the Northwest Territories, established in 1988, might stand as a new Arctic region in Canadian cartographic and literary topographies. Quite mysteriously, even the boundaries of the North can be somewhat elusive. Preston argues: "Note, however, that a 'sixth [region], the North, which consists of two territories and parts of some provinces, and which is quite different in every respect from the rest of Canada, is frequently overlooked" (5). And even within a single region, there could be vast differences. Take the Atlantic region for example. Newfoundland has always been considered to be the most backward of all provinces in Canada. And it was affiliated to the Confederation only in 1949 and varies tremendously in history and political interest from its neighbouring provinces such as P. E. I., Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. Little wonder that this polyphonic expression of Canada

has resulted in a crescendo of propositions such as to adjust provincial boundaries to create a more "natural" miscellany of regions, as embodied in Ottawa Mayor Marion Dewar's ideal that "there ought to be thirty provinces in Canada in place of the present ten" (Preston 5). This voice of geographic splittism reflects what geographers call "formal regionalism."

The model of "formal regionalism" has been the most pervasive perception of regions before the 1970s and its lingering force is still palpable today. It classifies regions according to their common environmental features such as climate, topography, and so on. These formal regions mainly comprise the prairies, the northern territories, the Atlantic, etc. The natural landscape has triggered the inspiration of a great many writers who reveled in the geographic wonders of Canada in their travel writings and personal journals and records of confrontation with the harsh environment. Nevertheless, formal regions can also exist on features other than geography such as ethnicity, religion, and language. For instance, Westfall thinks "French Canada [...] is a formal region based on the criteria of ethnicity and culture" (9). Formal regionalism has held profound sway on prairie writers, who mainly play the role of a "documentary geographer" preoccupied with the landscape of the region (Calder 55). Calder observes that such a definition of region "has not changed since [...] 1949" (55), when Edward McCourt stressed the role of the writer as "a pictorial artist" whose job is concerned with photographic descriptions of the landscape (*The Canadian West* 49). Following Edward McCourt, Henry Kreisel is perhaps the most influential advocate of formal regionalism. He famously observed in 1968 that "discussions of the literature produced in the Canadian west must of necessity begin with the impact of the landscape upon the mind" (257). Laurie Ricou also champions this view of region, saying that writers should capture the qualities of a region through their "encounter with a specific distinctive landscape" (5). Examples spring to the mind. The most celebrated prairie classics are Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* (1925) and W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1946). More recent examples include Sid Marty's bioregional novel about the Rockies *Leaning on the Wind: Under the Spell of the Great Chinook* (1995), Sharon Butala's

*Wild Stone Heart* (2000), cowboy writer Andy Russell's *Trails of a Wilderness Wanderer* (2001), etc.

The formalist conceptualization of regionalism fails to account for the miscellaneous nature of the Canadian experience widely acclaimed as a multicultural mosaic. Contemporary literary critics and Canadianists favour a more dynamic view of region rather than the conservative spatial hypothesis. A theory that has arisen in response to formalism is functional regionalism, which, according to Janine Brodie, "does not propose concrete regional boundaries that isolate one region from another," but intends to see regions "as part of an interconnected whole in which one regional configuration is largely a function or an expression of another" (141). Starting from the multiple perspectives of history, politics and spatial economics, Friesen notes that functionalists see regions in terms of "the political and social differences created over a certain span of time by the spatial patterns of language, religion, and economy and by popular discussion of community stereotypes" (6). Although inevitably rooted in a spatial division, this theory elicits a mutual exclusivity to define regions by transcending the provincial boundaries. In the literary scene, Dick Harrison, Eli Mandel, and W. H. New stand as the most prominent figures championing the functional conceptualization. Cultural identity surfaces prominently in the literary discourse of these critics who seek to assert the diversity of regional impulses. In his *Unnamed Country*, which bears traces of the heavy influence of formalism, Dick Harrison goes beyond geographic determinism and dives into the cultural baggage of the prairie life, arguing that the prairie becomes "less a thing 'out there' which must be shaped physically as well as imaginatively and more a territory within the psyche which must be explored and understood" (189). However, Harrison further implies that the prairie remains a concrete reality all the same, awaiting fictions to "make [...] [the] place entirely real" (ix). Eli Mandel also argues that the "theoretical basis of literary regionalism is rather weaker than the historical or geographic but a sense persists that writers work out of locale or area, boundaries of some sort, defining sensibility" ("Writing West" 39). For functionalists, geographic boundaries are but a given, and the role of the artist is to fill the regional

space with cultural material by enunciating a continuum of human truths that will be of universal value. Functionalists disdain the monarchy of the impassive geography that formalists worship, endowing the writer with an unprecedented power in the process of regional identity formation. The writer no longer functions as the medium by which the land itself expresses its identity; instead, he takes an active part in the construction of the region's identity through the writing process. The abolition of geographic boundaries naturally broadens, or, to a certain extent, narrows the scope of regionalism. For example, Canadian Mennonite writings such as Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness* (2004) and Rudy Wiebe's *The Blue Mountains of China* (1970), along with his novels of the north *The Mad Trapper* (1977) and *A Discovery of Strangers* (1994), largely fit into this category of regionalism.

Indeed, formalists tend to deem regions as static, avatarized and fossilized in the geographic features of a land. Nature is thus relegated to an asocial and ahistorical landscape devoid of human interaction. In contrast to the formalist effacement of the social façade of regions, functionalists view regions as "effects or consequences of historical relationship" (Brodie 141), thus adding a temporal dimension to the conceptualization of region. Functionalism confers power upon humans in the cultural production of regions, viewing regions as processes that embody the political, economic, social, and cultural interactions of the people within the region or across regions. However, as a mode of theorization contingent on political economy and social difference, it reduces the interrelations among regions to a matter of political or economic domination or subordination. Regions are often perceived in connection to each other in terms of periphery and center, metropolitan and rural, wilderness and civilization. More precisely, functionalism instigates a value system regarding regional differences and often results in a host of binary oppositions.

In response to the predominance of the center-periphery paradigm in literature, there has arisen an alternative approach to regionalism beyond a holistic national narrative. Regional literature is deemed to be largely consequent upon a nation-wide celebration of regional differences and

distinctiveness, grounded in the belief in “limited identities” of “the regional, ethnic and class identities we do have” (qtd. in Reid 74). This perspective on regionalism is espoused by a group of historians and literary critics as well, such as Ramsay Cook, J. M. S. Careless, Kenneth McNaught, and George Woodcock. By challenging the national narrative arising out of a singular cultural matrix, the framework of “limited identities” shifts the focus on the locality, region or social group in promotion of a primary sense of social, ethnic, and literary self. This has been echoed in McCourt’s earlier manifesto of the Canadian West: “True regional literature is above all distinctive in that it illustrates the effect of particular, rather than general, physical, economic and racial features, [...] if it does not illustrate the influence of a limited and particular environment it is not true regional literature” (*The Canadian West* 15). However, the discourse of regional identity within a limited framework is also problematic, for it tends to mitigate against the multiplicities of identity difference of a region by promoting a limited number of salient regional features subservient to the hierarchy of the national master narrative. The vocabulary of “limited identities” therefore turns out to be a preservation of the order of social fragmentation only within the contours of the grand narrative of the nation.

The functionalists’ celebration of the imaginative power of the writer has also given rise to what R. Douglas Francis identifies as “mythic regionalism” (570), a perspective that privileges the mental power in cultural and literary production. The proponents of “mythic regionalism” tend to view regions as “more than physical or economic phenomena” (Francis 572). Instead, regions are more mentally constructed than determined by reality. For them, regions are “mindscape” (Francis 572). For instance, Marshall McLuhan remarks that the nation consists in the “hidden borders in men’s minds” (241). Westfall also argues that “[r]egional writers take the cultural material of a place and transform it into a mythology that the people of the region can identify as their own. Without this mythology the cultural region would not exist” (11). This mode of conceptualization is typified in Robert Kroetsch’s famous remarks: “In a sense we haven’t got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction

makes us real" (*Creation* 63). For instance, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, which is often coupled to ecofeminist mysticism, serves as a mythic representation of the Canadian north which expresses its regional identity "through metaphor" (Adamson 83). Alberta-born writer Aritha van Herk is obsessed with the north in *Places Far From Ellesmere*, a *geografictione*, which explores the conjunction of geography with autobiography and criticism in her description of the rigid territories of the Canadian north whose boundaries extend to Siberia, Russia. The book is no longer confined to the geographic limits of Alberta, and the author delights in being a Northerner, calling it "a state of mind" (23). In fact, the north epitomized in various authors often spans a wide spatial range from British Columbia to Northern Newfoundland, covering part of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario. At the same time, these provinces also are affiliated to other categories of regionalism. Such a plural and dynamic view of regions gives full play to the mental power in the creation of the regional identity so that regions often take on a mythic aspect. The regions fictionalized in literary works are no more than imaginary localities that partake of the real places of the author's immediate circumstances. These localities are conceptualized, ideologized, and sometimes mythicized, and the condensation of the spatiotemporal truths in a specific setting often adds more potency and magnitude to the empirical world. Meanwhile, the mythic mode of regional definition is also temporally dynamic; historical, cultural, and social forces contribute to the mobility of regions. In plain terms, regional boundaries constantly change over time. In literary studies, the employment of mythic regions holds more validity insofar as critics acknowledge the necessity of the ways of life of a locality in molding regional writing. While anthologies of literature can base themselves on geographic definitions of the sources, literature *per se* must needs concern itself with the humanistic values of the regional, which in turn entails a valorization of geographic biases and restrictions. Critics such as W. H. New and Eli Mandel turn to subscribe to the mythic mode of perception. New argues in *Articulating West* that "Westerners" should not "pander to 'Eastern' Stasis" for fear of marring the "real distinctiveness and its [the Canadian West] mythic potential" (xiv).



Similarly, Mandel holds that “we are to find our folklore outside of our own boundaries and that we must discover once more that literary and physical frontiers do not coincide” (“Romance” 57). The prairie for Mandel therefore serves as “a sort of complex conceptual framework [...], a mental construct, a region of the human mind” (“Images” 47). New also acknowledges that regions in literature “are only loosely tied to geography and hence alter their meaning from place to place. But they remain useful, at least, in the Canadian context” (*Articulating West* xi).

Clearly, mythic regionalism equips the writer with an introspective power in finding the region’s identity from within, preventing sheer geographical determinism while allowing for the writer’s imaginative freedom. As a result, the perception of regions is based on not only geography but also a multitude of factors. Mythic regionalism can cover not only the prairies, the Maritimes, the North, but also regions grouped together according to particular common features, such as the Canadian backwoods, the wilderness, and so on. Meanwhile, it implies a stress on the mental mapping of regions while simultaneously foregrounding a conceptual mobility in understanding the boundaries between the regional and the national/universal in the age of regional agglomeration and globalization. Furthermore, it contributes to the categorization of aboriginal literature as a form of regional literature; regional not in a geographic sense, but in terms of ethnicity and culture. In turn, regional particulars and universals are internalized and mythicized thanks to the privileging of the latitudes of literary imagination.

In the final analysis, regions are essentially the product of human thought and activity, and the evolution of regions are dependent on a diversity of forces such as sociology, politics, economy, and culture. Nevertheless, by giving priority to the mental power in the construction of regions, mythic regionalism downplays the factors of reality and tends to be rather vague and elusive. Furthermore, mythic regionalism seems to have been derived from a misrecognition of cause and effect in human cognition; critics categorize regions by starting from the products of human imagination such as poetry, novels, and myths, instead of taking the physical place as the point of departure. Mythic regionalism thus reverses