

Guest Column

Academic Free Trade? One Canadian's View of the MLA

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IN 1988, IN THE MIDST of the often acrimonious debates about the North American Free Trade Agreement, a button began to appear on Canadian lapels. It featured a section of the Stars and Stripes with a red maple leaf in the place of one star, and a caption read, "No, eh." Through this image, the anti-free-trade side offered parodic resistance to what it saw as the assimilation—not to say wholesale economic engulfing—of Canada by the United States. Typically self-deprecatory, Canadian humor demanded that the rejection be couched in a gentle mocking of the national verbal tic: *eh?* is the terser but less elegant Canadian version of the French *n'est-ce pas?* and the German *nicht wahr?* In some ways the intellectual equivalent of NAFTA, the MLA is much older than the economic institution and somewhat less controversial. Nevertheless, it too is not unproblematic for Canadians, and to see why and how, one needs to understand something of the political and cultural relations between a very small and a very large nation when they adjoin.

Of Mice and . . . Elephants (with apologies to the mice, who know this story too well)

Canada is not small in geographic terms, of course, but its population is about the same as that of the state of California or, if one includes all the outlying suburbs, the city of New York. But population size is only one of the factors that condition Canada's response to the United States and its institutions. When Martha Banta solicited opinions from overseas members of the MLA recently, she foresaw, as she explained in her Editor's Column in the October 1998 issue of *PMLA*, that some were going to see the association as a distant organization dispensing Americanized models of scholarship. For Canadians, however, the MLA, like the nation in which it is based, is perhaps not distant enough. Spatial and cultural



Photograph by Michael Hutcheon

proximity to the United States, a large and influential force, has had diverse effects on Canada-based academics, ranging from fear of what the media refer to as “American cultural imperialism” to pleasure at participating in a larger professional context. But what both these extremes betray is a sense of being secondary, even somehow culturally and professionally colonized. Citizens of the United States were once familiar with this feeling, voiced eloquently by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his exhortation to the American scholar to listen to the courtly muses of Europe no longer. Canada has experienced similar rebellious urgings, but at more than one moment in its history as a French and then British colony. It took a long time to loosen imperial ties never historically severed by revolution: becoming a nation in 1867 through the British North America Act, a British act of Parliament, Canada achieved full legal independence only in 1931 through another British law, the Statute of Westminster; amendments to the Canadian constitution were the sole preserve of the British Parliament until as late as 1982.

Political facts like these have cultural consequences, and the early history of Canada’s literature is familiar to those who study the imperial legacy in other parts of the world. The sense of cultural belatedness and secondariness of settler colonies like Canada is no less real for their having participated in empire’s subjugation of aboriginal peoples. Consequently, it has also taken many years for English and French Canadian cultures to gain the confidence to assert their very existence, much less their specificity, in the face of American cultural power and the global homogenization that has followed from it. Canada persuaded Britain to legislate it out of one colonial situation (a political and historical one), only to realize that it was already trapped in another (an economic and cultural one).

“Fifty-Four Forty or Fight!”

“Fifty-four forty or fight!” was one of the rallying cries for the American annexation of Canada in the last century. But what the ideology of manifest destiny ultimately failed to do, United States mass cultural institutions threatened to accomplish with ease. In response to growing American influence on and control over Canadian culture, the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences was established in 1949 to investigate all aspects of education, culture, and the mass media in Canada. This body, called the Massey-Lévesque Commission after its leaders, reported in 1951 and was at once greeted with suspicion in Quebec for its nationalist and therefore implicitly assimilationist agenda: among its recommendations were the founding of the National Library of Canada (accomplished in 1953) and the creation of the Canada Council. Established in 1957, the Canada Council initially had a mandate to disburse arm’s-length federal funding in support of the study and enjoyment of the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences and the production of related works. In 1978 the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada was formed to assist university-based research, leaving the Canada Council to fund individual Canadian artists and professional organizations.

It is impossible to exaggerate the difference the founding of the Canada Council made to Canadian culture: to offer but one example, its grants to Canadian publishing houses made materially possible the existence of Canadian literature, as well as creating a taste for Canadian writing. Soon, with the aid of government promotion of Canadian literature abroad, foreign interest began to match the local, as Canadian studies centers sprang up everywhere, from Italy to India. Canadian cultural nationalism was born. Its impact on the university curriculum was something I experienced firsthand. In 1972 I was assigned to be a teaching assistant in a new interdisciplinary course entitled Canadian Consciousness. Responsible for part of the English literary component, I was forced to discover the joys of the autodidact: though I had read a few Canadian poems and short stories in high school, I had never taken the one course in Canadian literature available to me in my undergraduate English program. The implicit lesson I had learned all too well was that in Canada *literature* meant British literature first and American literature second.

In 1976 my first adjunct teaching position was earned on the feeble grounds that as a Canadian national, I was obviously qualified to teach Canadian literature—or so the Scottish chair of the department assured me. I had my first public departmental confrontation in 1979 with a colleague who opposed the creation of a third Canadian literature course with the words “Why do they need yet another Canadian course?” My angry response (“Because ‘they’ happen to be Canadians!”) was neither politic nor eloquent, but it was heartfelt, for through teaching Canadian students in a department consisting largely of teachers born and educated

in the United Kingdom or the United States, I too had become a Canadian cultural nationalist. A few years later, I found myself teaching a Canadian literature course at the University of Turin to Italian teachers of English who wanted to learn more about my country's literary past and present. From the start, though, I had a difficult time explaining to the class that Canadian literature did not have the same status in the university curriculum in Canada as Italian literature did in Italy. Understandably, they were puzzled: the study of English literature may not have begun in Britain until 1832, but the 1980s seemed a bit late, nonetheless, for the misrecognition of local literature. Yet it is not surprising that an older and a more established society like that of Italy or, for that matter, the United States might not appreciate either the newness, fragility, and vulnerability of Canadian culture or the suspicion and resentment young nations feel toward powerful (and nearby) foreign nations. Indeed, Canada's laws aiming to protect its culture (such as the current legislation restricting Canadian advertising in Canadian editions of United States magazines) are routinely challenged by the United States under NAFTA rules.

Times change, however. The conscious creation of a Canadian literary culture was successful; a student cannot (and would probably not want to) graduate from many Canadian English or French departments without taking courses in Canadian or Québécois literature. Now our writers are known the world over. The biggest change in recent years is one that reflects the demographics of a nation of immigrants—and aboriginal peoples. In what is inaccurately called “English” Canada, the popularity experienced by writers like Margaret Laurence and Stephen Leacock is now being felt as well by native writers like Thomas King and Tomson Highway and by Canadian writers born in India, like Rohinton Mistry, and in Trinidad, like Dionne Brand. Canadian writers from English or French backgrounds are still read with delight in Canada as elsewhere in the world: Alice Munro, Robertson Davies, Michel Tremblay, Anne Hébert. But among the results of bilingual Canada's multiculturalist ideology (established in a policy statement in 1971 and declared law in 1988) has been the flourishing of voices of difference. The “two solitudes” of French and English Canada—to use the evocative title of Hugh MacLennan's 1945 novel—have become the many “other solitudes” that have not only articulated the barriers of cultural otherness but also worked to break them down.

Academic Free Trade: “Maybe, Eh?”

The academic study of Canadian and Québécois literature is one of the obvious differences that define the specificity of scholarship in Canada. Though Margaret Atwood may be studied in English and women's studies courses in the United States, it is rarely her Canadianness (much less her pronounced Canadian nationalism) that is the focus of discussion there. Aside from this difference of content, Canada-based literary schol-

arship has strong ties to that produced in the United States: there has been considerable cross-border traffic, and not only in one direction. Just as the New York and Hollywood entertainment industries have been changed by Canadians such as Lorne Michaels, Leonard Cohen, Donald Sutherland, and Jim Carrey, so over the years the American academy has felt the impact of both Canadians who have worked in the United States, such as Douglas Bush and Mary Louise Pratt, and those who have stayed at home, like Northrop Frye and Marshall McLuhan—to mention only a few who have left their marks on literary theory, my particular area of study. Academics working in Canada, in fields ranging from medieval studies to contemporary French literature, have contributed to international scholarship in major ways. That they are not necessarily well represented in the pages of *PMLA* is not the fault of the journal so much as the result of a complex combination of professional and intellectual conditions that include the obvious drawing power of specialist (international) journals and the less obvious but strong pull of cultural nationalism. Like the Spanish and the Chinese, Canadians have their own learned societies, to whose journals many prefer to submit their research. Like German or Japanese scholars, they may decide, understandably, to commit their energies to those local associations rather than become involved in the MLA, which is usually perceived as United States-oriented. Despite the fact that over twelve hundred Canada-based members of the MLA pay the same dues as members working in the United States, the MLA does not fight national fights in Canada; it does not lobby the Canadian funding agencies on our behalf, for instance. And if it were to try, some academics in Canada would no doubt find such a move imperialistic or at least interfering, arguing that local organizations exist for that function.¹

Nevertheless, as the contributions from abroad to the October 1998 *PMLA* Forum reveal, *PMLA* and the MLA have important roles to play outside the United States. The Forum section and the special-topic issues appear to be especially appreciated, and as a very widely circulated general literary journal, *PMLA* is seen to represent a broad spectrum of subjects and approaches, even if many would argue that the publication mostly reflects United States critical and theoretical paradigms and concerns. This focus results because most of the articles submitted (and thus accepted) are written by academics working in the United States, even if born or educated elsewhere. The only way to change this balance is to urge those in other nations—including Canada—to submit more articles to the journal: it seems churlish to complain about the lack of national representation when the solution to that lack is under our own control.

As an institution, the MLA is perhaps more United States-centered than its journal, as is fitting for the Modern Language Association of America, after all. Despite a decade of involvement on the Executive Council and various committees, I must confess that I still have moments when I feel distinctly foreign in the organization and even distant from some of its concerns. This is inevitable, for the MLA has a locally

oriented activist, interventionist dimension as one of the most effective defenders of the humanities in the United States. But as someone accustomed to the arm's-length, autonomous funding system for research and the arts in Canada, I found new and puzzling the political structures and conditions that demanded such manifestly important interventions as the MLA's stand on the various debates about the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts. It is not that the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada or the Canada Council do not always have to fight for more funding; it is just that the political mechanisms for doing so are very different when the government is not allowed by law to intervene directly in the composition or decisions of the organizations.

The MLA does not fight local—that is, national—battles for Canadians, and perhaps it should not. But in many other significant ways, the MLA is also the voice of the profession at large—and a powerful voice it has often proved to be. We all benefit from its strong defense of literary and language studies, and its widely heard radio programs have done much in the United States to create an interested and informed audience for academic scholarship. We also profit one and all from the research tools it painstakingly compiles year after year: who would want to work today without the help of the *MLA International Bibliography*? As the professional voice of over thirty thousand language and literature teachers and scholars, the MLA has responded to the demands of its members that it tackle important shared professional issues—even if not always as quickly or as forcefully as some of its constituencies might wish. The current overreliance on adjunct and part-time teachers by the university system is just one such pressing issue in Canada, as in the United States. Though the MLA can never singlehandedly alter the economic situation that has brought about the underfunding of education almost the world over, the organization has taken the lead in analyzing the situation and suggesting pragmatic remedies. It has done this through many initiatives, including the work of its Committee on Professional Employment, and by taking a leadership role in the coalition of professional associations that is working to attack this systemic problem with systemic action, so to speak. New proposals—from the Graduate Student Caucus and the Delegate Assembly—promise continuing and, I trust, effective action on this front. Here lies the hope for the future, and not only in the United States: the fact that Canadian members of the MLA have actively participated in these interventions and will benefit from them means that the cross-border traffic is, once again, two-way.

Looking back to the 1880s and the earliest issues of *PMLA*, or, as it was then known, *Transactions of the Modern Language Association of America*, I realize that certain important issues have persisted across time as well as national borders. As Martha Banta points out in her first Editor's Column, in January 1998, there are shared generational, pedagogical, curricular, and also geopolitical concerns. Yet on balance I have

come to feel that, on a professional as well as an intellectual level, academic free trade of this kind has real advantages—for both sides. Mice have always had a few things to teach elephants (often, though not only, about mobility and self-preservation), and a friendly elephant's imposing presence can sometimes be more comforting than threatening.

Notes

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¹A sample constitutional mandate of a local—that is, national—organization is that of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English: “To promote the interests of those teaching and studying English languages and literatures in Canadian colleges and universities by facilitating the dissemination and exchange of research and the exploration of professional issues, by organizing scholarly and professional meetings, by seeking to improve working conditions, by representing the interests of members before provincial and federal decision-making and funding bodies, and by supporting the interests and aspirations of members entering the profession.”