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Belated or Isochronic? Canadian Writing, Time, and Globalization

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Many were born in Canada, and living un-lived lives they died of course but died truncated, stunted, never at home in native space and not yet citizens of a human body of kind. And it is Canada that specialized in this deprivation.

— Dennis Lee, "Civil Elegies" (33)

The age of globalization is the age of universal contagion.

— Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (136)

I HAVE WANTED TO WRITE FOR SOME TIME about the shock of recognition that greeted me when I first read through Roberto Schwarz's *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, and a special issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* on the pasts and futures of Canadian writing seemed like just the occasion to do so. Schwarz's main concern is to examine the central intellectual and theoretical problems that inevitably arise in the analysis of the culture of his native Brazil. What surprised me was how similar these problems were to those found in attempts to theorize the conditions of Canadian culture and, by extension, Canadian literature. I don't want to suggest that the correlation is exact — that is, that there is a precise structural homology between Brazil and Canada that will tell us everything we ever wanted to know about Canadian culture and writing now and in the future. Nevertheless, the similarities are striking enough that they are worth examining, especially since it seems to me that approaching indirectly some old issues in Canadian literature reveals some unexpected interpretive blind spots that require critical illumination.

While Schwarz shows that there are any number of "misplaced ideas" in relation to Brazilian culture, an important set of them circulates around a problem intimately familiar to an earlier generation

of Canadian writers: the way in which Brazilian and Latin American culture has always been experienced as “artificial, inauthentic and imitative” (1). Schwarz suggests that Brazilian culture has, for more than a century and from competing points of view (right, left, modernist, nationalist, cosmopolitan, etc.), been seen as derivative — as existing in relation to the West in the same way that a copy relates to an original. In line with the work of other postcolonial writers and critics, Schwarz points out that the belief that one’s culture is somehow inauthentic or derivative is ideological in the most common sense of the term: it is a false structure of belief passed off as reality in order to suppress an understanding of the true nature of social and political power. What is suppressed in this idea of cultural inauthenticity — in Canada as much as in Brazil — is a recognition of the material, historical circumstances that first established the idea of an “original” culture to which others, by contrast, seem only like copies. The root cause in both cases can be found in the long process of European imperialism and the array of ideologies and concepts associated with it that served to enable, legitimate, and sustain the imperial project: discourses related to its religious and cultural civilizing mission, the discourse of anthropology and its concern with the primitive, Eurocentric discourses of modernization and development, and even the teleological claims of Marxism and its assertions about the inevitability of certain stages of historical development (as in the infamous Asiatic mode of production). As Schwarz shows in the case of Brazil, believing that one’s culture is merely a pale imitation of a more fully and more genuinely realized one produces a social and cultural malaise that seems to be impossible to throw off. This is a feeling that Canadians are well aware of, and, at least in part, it is the attempt to break free of this malaise that has fuelled a great deal of Canadian writing throughout its history.

If a feeling of cultural inauthenticity is ideological in the sense that it constitutes a false belief, then it seems that the solution is simple enough: recognizing the reality behind the illusion should be enough to shatter it and set us free. Besides the fact that this is an entirely idealist solution to a materialist problem, Schwarz explains why it hasn’t been that easy to locate a solution. Once in place, the focus on inauthenticity as the origin of social and cultural problems generates a cultural dialectic that never adequately resolves itself in order to produce the desired end: a genuine national culture. “Nothing seems more reasonable, for those who are aware of the

damage,” Schwarz writes, “than to steer in the opposite direction and think it is enough to avoid copying metropolitan trends in order to achieve an intellectual life with great substance” (3). The desire to reject everything foreign, to isolate and destroy the bacteria that have invaded the national host in order to leave it pure and free of disease, was the motivating idea behind Brazilian cultural and economic nationalism in the 1960s, just as it was in Canada during the same period. Not surprisingly, in neither case was nationalism successful in eliminating the contagion of the foreign and leaving behind a healthy body that could be identified as purely Brazilian or Canadian: from the beginning, the opposition between the national and the foreign at work in cultural nationalism was an unreal one that did “not allow us to see the share of the foreign in the nationally specific, of the imitative in the original and of the original in the imitative” (16). On the other side of this dialectic, rejecting nationalism while embracing what might be seen in contrast as a more cosmopolitan perspective is equally problematic. Giving up on the idea that there can be an authentic national culture by treating this idea as “a provincial phenomenon associated with archaic forms of oppression” seems to represent a step forward (5). At the same time, as Schwarz points out, given the context of the international mass media against which these suggestions were framed in the period after the 1960s, “an emphasis on the international dimension of culture becomes no more than a legitimation of the existing mass media,” and this is not “emancipatory or aesthetically acceptable” (5). If these two positions mark out the territory of possible solutions to the crisis of an inauthentic culture, then there doesn’t appear to be much hope that Brazil can overcome the sense that it possesses a derivative culture; neither solution is adequate, and in fact each generates new problems of authenticity, whether in the form of a mythologized, exclusionary nationalism developed in opposition to the taint of the foreign or in the form of a false cosmopolitanism that represents little more than an acceptance of the global order and Brazil’s place within it.

It seems to me that at the core of the problem that Schwarz identifies in Brazilian culture — at the heart of what permits this arrested dialectic of inauthenticity to circulate endlessly — is a sense of *belatedness*, of having arrived too late on the historical scene, at the end of a Western modernity that had completely mapped out the global landscape in advance. If the points of overlap between culture in Brazil and Canada are not already clear

enough, then they emerge more fully around this temporal figure. The sense of belatedness has been central to the problem of Canadian culture and literature as well. For example, it makes an appearance at an important juncture in Northrop Frye's conclusion to the first edition of the *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*. What is finally posed famously as a spatial question — "Where is here?" — emerges from a consideration of the unique temporal problem faced by Canadian literature and culture:

English Canada was first a part of the wilderness, then a part of North America and the British Empire, then a part of the world. But it has gone through these revolutions too quickly for a tradition of writing to be founded on any one of them. Canadian writers are, even now, still trying to assimilate a Canadian environment at a time when new techniques of communication, many of which, like television, constitute a verbal market, are annihilating the boundaries of that environment. (826)

For Frye, Canadian writing comes into the world too late for it to be organically distinctive or authentically representative of the national space in which it originates. Canadian writing is belated because the world is moving too fast for it to assimilate both its successive phases of development (which arrive and speed by without any internal, national compulsion) and now, decisively, the new technological environments being produced transnationally. The net effect of this — what we would now describe as globalization — is to annihilate what, in the preface to *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*, Frye identifies as "the sense of a specific environment as something that provides a circumference for an imagination" (iii). In other words, even if Canadian writing were somehow able to "catch up" so that it would no longer experience this sense of belatedness, it would then find that the conditions for cultural specificity — that is, for a truly national literature — have been thoroughly eclipsed. The two solutions to the problem of inauthenticity outlined by Schwarz are more or less reproduced in Frye's consideration of Canadian writing. Here, too, there seems to be no way forward, since it is neither possible to assert a real national distinctiveness nor to claim in an unproblematic way assent to a global cultural playing field whose rules were established outside Canada.

In Frye's case, however, a different possibility emerges from his consideration of the significance of mass communication and mass media on Canadian culture and writing; three decades or more later, these concerns, more pressing than ever, are still dealt with only infrequently by both Canadian critics and writers. With respect to Frye, Richard Cavell has argued in his excellent examination of what he describes as the "Frye-McLuhan debate" (249) that, by the 1970s, Frye was no longer defending the virtues and verities of literary culture and its inherently civilizing qualities. Influenced by McLuhan's ideas on the function of contemporary media and on Canada's position as a "counter-environment" or as a "borderline" country — borderline not merely because Canada was poised between the foreign and the national, the cosmopolitan and the bush, but also because it was beyond these dichotomies — by 1980 Frye took as a solution to the problem of belatedness what he'd once seen as a threat to Canadian literature. "In an 'instant' world of communication," he writes, "there is no reason for cultural lag or for a difference between sophisticated writers in large centers and naïve writers in smaller ones. A world like ours produces a single international style of which all existing literatures are regional developments" (qtd. in Cavell 262). In this way, the global modernity that once consigned belated nations such as Canada and Brazil to the cultural periphery offered a technological solution to the historical-metaphysical problem of cultural inauthenticity. We should remember that the relationship of the original to the copy is also a temporal one: the copy is deficient not merely or even primarily because it reproduces all of the features of the original but also because it comes after it in time. If the problem of cultural inauthenticity is understood as a temporal problem, then a solution to cultural belatedness and its consequent cultural malaise might be to flatten time. The ideological order of succession of cultures (primary, secondary, tertiary, etc.) is thus dismantled. In effect, this is what Frye claimed on behalf of McLuhan: the problem of Canadian belatedness is resolved once and for all by the creation of a single global time in which it is no longer possible to position oneself as out of sync with the main currents of modernity.¹

Frye's solution to the problem of Canadian cultural specificity has been largely accepted by contemporary Canadian writers and critics: we are all cosmopolitans now. Hardly imagining itself any longer as inauthentic or as secondary to more established literatures, Canadian writing is now spectacularly self-confident and globally

respected. We are well past posing the kind of lament that Dennis Lee offers in one of the epigraphs to this essay. Yet for all of the welcome success of contemporary Canadian writing, something should trouble us about Frye's embrace of the instantaneous present and the international style as a joint solution to the problem of Canadian culture. As Cavell points out, Frye's evocation of the "international style" in *The Modern Century* was "made in the service of his larger theory that the forms of literature are autonomous; given, however, that these 'autonomous' forms are those of classical European literature, they simply resurrect [A.J.M.] Smith's distinction between native and cosmopolitan" (256). It is not clear whether, a decade or so later, his evocation of an international style is any less Eurocentric in its claims or in its suggestion that we are all cosmopolitans now because, having never been properly established in the first place, not even a residue of the provincial voice has been left behind.

It seems to me that what has been substituted in this vision of "a single international style of which all existing literatures are regional developments" is merely one ideology about time and culture for another. What I have been describing as belatedness Paul Smith, drawing on the work of Johannes Fabian, has described as the denial of "allochronism": the denial to the "other" of contemporaneity with the West, which means that the other may then be seen as primitive, underdeveloped, and uncivilized and therefore in need of intervention by the West in order to make it modern, developed, and civilized (12). With this, Smith contrasts the new rhetoric and ideology of contemporary global capitalism. Globalization has been represented repeatedly in both popular and academic writing through a series of by now familiar images: that of a "fully global space replete with an ecstatic buzz of cyber communication, or of an instantaneous mobility of people, goods, and services, or of a global market place hooked up by immaterial money that flashes around the globe many times a minute" (13). Smith insists that these images of globalization do not represent the reality of the global present. Rather, they constitute a concerted attempt to conjure away the contradictions created by an intensified neoliberal capitalism that has in fact deepened the divide between the North and the South, the West and the rest. It does so by projecting an image of a world that is *isochronic*, a world in which everything happens at the same time and thus in which the problems and contradictions produced by an earlier, imperialist capitalism are done away with

just as surely as are the limitations of time and space. This rhetoric has become so thoroughly embraced by even many progressive political and social groups around the world, who have come to see globalization as inevitable and largely unchangeable, that it has become hard to believe what everyone nevertheless senses: far from changing anything, this isochronic dream of capitalism is merely a way of “denying allochronism to the other in a new way” (13).

What is missing in Frye’s assessment of the fate of Canadian writing, just as surely as in our collective joy over the vigour of contemporary Canadian writing on the global stage, is a level of analysis that might get us beyond the dilemma of cultural identity outlined by Schwarz. Instead of replacing a lamentable belatedness with a problematic acquiescence to global capitalism’s isochronic dream, I think that we need to dig deeper to find the root cause of the inauthenticity felt in both Brazil and Canada if we want to determine the direction of Canadian literature in this new millennium. Schwarz concludes that “the painfulness of an imitative civilization is produced not by imitation — which is present in any event — but by the social structure of the country” (15). Put even more bluntly, “it is not copying in general but *the copying of one class* that constitutes the problem” (11). It is perhaps easier to see this in the case of Brazil than that of Canada, largely because of the more extreme social hierarchies produced by the institution of slavery and the latifundia. The parallels between the two colonial situations — and again I mean them to be suggestive rather than determinate — should nevertheless prompt us to see Canadian writing in a different way. Schwarz notes that in Brazil, before the nineteenth century, the imitation of Europe by the ruling class did not constitute a problem. Far from it — its estrangement from the masses and its close connection to the culture of the “home country” were two of the chief sources of its legitimacy as the class in power. It was independence — which, just as in Canada, did not involve a revolution — that created a new set of political relations that consequently had an effect on Brazilian culture. Independence left the ruling hierarchy largely in place, even as it introduced “modern” forms of citizenship, ideas of freedom, and concepts of political emancipation. The ruling hierarchy thus faced a dilemma: “deprecating the bases of its social pre-eminence in the name of progress, or deprecating progress in the name of its social pre-eminence” (12). The drama of cultural inauthenticity arose out of this dilemma.

As the modern, progressive forces of an expanded democracy came to the fore over time, it became less and less possible to assert the authenticity of the old, happily imitative, colonial order in Brazil against the new conditions of citizenship. At the same time, in order to maintain political power, the indigenous ruling class had to assert a cultural difference from the masses, who in Brazil — just as in Canada — have themselves never been troubled by the idea that their culture doesn't quite measure up to some outside standard. Brazil's unhappily imitative national culture — or at least that part of the culture that has claimed to represent the entire nation — arose as a longing for an earlier, less problematic, class hierarchy in a new situation in which it became necessary to produce a culture *ex nihilo* — neither working-class culture nor colonial culture but something else, which lacked the material support to truly sustain it.

When we accept global capitalism's isochronic rhetoric to lend support to the current global success of Canadian writing, we are in effect burying ever deeper the structural conditions that produced our earlier feelings of cultural inauthenticity. We do likewise when we take the current success of Canadian literature as evidence of a kind of Canadian exemplarity with respect to the modern (Marshall McLuhan) or the postmodern (Linda Hutcheon) that has permitted Canadian culture to be a hothouse for global culture *avant la lettre*. In both cases, we are suppressing our ability to ask deep questions about the political and social function of Canadian literature with respect to everyday life in Canada, especially as expressed in class terms. In opposition to this isochronic ideology, I think that it is worth retaining the idea that Canadian culture is a belated culture in order to remind ourselves of the social and political bases of our sense of what culture is and how we imagine its relationship to the production of the nation. Diana Brydon has suggested that “withholding the status of ‘authentic’ colonialism from countries such as Canada . . . makes it harder for all Canadians to identify and combat the particular kinds of postcolonial experience they are currently undergoing as they watch their economy shrink, jobs disappear, and cultural sovereignty erode” (11). It is equally the case that failing to understand the political and social function of Canadian literature as it relates to class makes it difficult to understand the ways in which Canada is more like Brazil than we might ever have imagined.

NOTE

¹ See also Frye, Conclusion: "The writers of the past decade, at least, have begun to write in a world which is post-Canadian, as it is post-American, post-British, and post everything except the world itself. There are no provinces in the empire of aeroplane and television, and no physical separation from the centres of culture, such as they are. Sensibility is no longer dependent on a specific environment or even on sense experience itself" (848).

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