

The Persistence of the Nation: Interdisciplinarity and Canadian Literary Criticism

IMRE SZEMAN

I WANT TO CONSIDER HERE what I see as the place of interdisciplinary study in Canadian literary criticism.¹ It is my sense that much of what now passes for "interdisciplinarity" in the study of Canadian literary texts, whether explicitly identified as such or not, is hardly deserving of the name. Interdisciplinarity involves a radical questioning of the core assumptions of a discipline, and literary critics have been inadequately attentive to the ways in which a certain sense of the "literary" has in fact prevented a deeper analysis of the status and meaning of literary texts. The danger of making a claim such as this one is that it is apt to sound contradictory or tautological. So before I begin to assess the role of interdisciplinarity in contemporary Canadian literary criticism, I want to take a detour through Stanley Fish's "Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard to Do," which presents perhaps the most well-known case *against* interdisciplinary studies. Though I think that Fish's criticisms are misplaced, a look at his attempt to grapple with interdisciplinarity is an especially helpful one, insofar as it can be used to establish what is at stake in interdisciplinary study, as well as to outline the limits and possibilities of a practice for which so much has been claimed.

The Politics of Interdisciplinarity

As is the case with so many other concepts that have proliferated in the academy over the past several decades, interdisciplinarity is the name for a whole set of often contradictory projects, positions, discourses, and desires. Just as with concepts such as "postmodernism" or "postcolonialism," it would thus be a mistake to set out to define interdisciplinarity once and for all in an effort to get at some core essence that would make all of the varied uses of the term suddenly clearer and less confusing. If interdisciplinarity begins, as

Fish suggests, from “the assumption that the lines currently demarcating one field of study from another are not natural but constructed by interested parties who have a stake in preserving the boundaries that sustain their claims to authority” (232), it is important not to treat interdisciplinarity itself as a natural kind that can be easily identified and assigned a place in some taxonomy of academic practices; to do so would be to reenact the very disciplinary procedures that interdisciplinarity attempts to call into question. Which is not to suggest that interdisciplinarity is thereby a practice or idea that forever eludes definition, or that it is so vague and flexible a term that it can be used to describe almost any project. Rather, what I want to draw attention to at the outset is that interdisciplinarity is a practice or idea that is political through and through. Just as “interested parties” are involved in the construction of the disciplines, interested parties are also involved in taking them apart or in transgressing their established borders. To claim to do interdisciplinary work is therefore always to announce a politics. The politics that is announced, however, must itself be carefully assessed to see what is really at stake in this practice that, after all, draws attention to itself as a new way of producing knowledge, a way that corrects the errors and limits of established disciplinary practices.

So while it may be tempting, in an effort to establish some core similarity in the various uses of interdisciplinarity, to begin by approaching the term through an analysis of its component parts — to begin, in other words, by pondering the connection between “inter” and “disciplinary” in much the same way that Ann McClintock, Anthony Appiah, Arun Mukherjee, and others have examined the meanings of the “post” in “postcolonialism,” “postmodernism,” or both — such an approach would be ultimately misleading. What would be noted immediately through such an investigation is, of course, that the term “interdisciplinary” preserves disciplinarity at its core even as it hopes to somehow transcend or overcome its limits: no disciplines, no possibility of interdisciplinarity. Without any further investigation, it might thus be possible to immediately make claims about the limits of interdisciplinarity and, just as importantly, the limits of its politics. And though Fish might arrive at this conclusion in a more considered fashion, this is in fact the core of his opposition to the entire project of interdisciplinary study. The desire for interdisciplinarity, he believes, is the desire to engage in critique unfettered by the confines placed on cognition by the methods and procedures of particular disciplines; it is the desire to speak from

nowhere, to gaze down on the world and to see it not with the partial vision of a human being but with the eyes of a god. The desire for interdisciplinarity is in this sense the same as what Richard Rorty has identified as the underlying desire of philosophy: to become “more than merely human,” to “escape from humanity” by seeking to make “further redescription unnecessary by finding a way of reducing all *possible* descriptions to one” (377). If for Fish “Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard to Do,” it is because this is a desire that is epistemologically impossible to realize, for in order to undertake critique in the first place, we are necessarily always speaking from within some set of practices that makes the form and character of particular critiques intelligible and meaningful. What this means in the end is that “the blurring of existing authoritative and disciplinary lines and boundaries will only create new lines and new authorities; the interdisciplinary impulse finally does not liberate us from the narrow confines of academic ghettos to something more capacious; it merely redomiciles us in enclosures that do not advertise themselves as such” (Fish 237).

For Fish, what currently goes by the name of interdisciplinary studies thus takes one of three forms. The first involves the borrowing or adaptation of discourses, methodological insights, or research programs from one discipline for use in another. In literary studies, for example, this kind of interdisciplinarity has been characterized by the explosion of “theory” — by the application of the insights of psychoanalysis, continental philosophy, feminism, structuralist anthropology, sociology, et cetera to an analysis of the literary text. The text itself, however, as well as the concept of “Literature” that accompanies it remain roughly the same, and methodological procedures such as close readings continue to be essential to literary critical practice. A second kind of interdisciplinary study is characterized by the expansion of one discipline onto the terrain of others. As philosophy once claimed an institutional priority over all other disciplines (in the form of Kant’s “Queen of the Sciences”), the discipline of English can now be seen as engaged in the “annexation” of territories occupied by other disciplines. English is not, however, the only discipline doing so. As Bruce Robbins points out, “the claims of the Chicago school of economics that the market should be allowed to decide social and moral issues which have as yet been protected by law from market forces (e.g., that the free sale of babies should be permitted) are also claims, we sometimes forget, that free-market economics can explain the subject-matter of other disciplines” (106).

Finally, interdisciplinary studies can also be “the name (whether acknowledged or not) of a new discipline, that is, of a branch of academic study that takes as its subject the history and constitution of disciplines” (Fish 238). This I understand not simply as a description of a new field of historical study, in the sense of a department that focuses on the history of science and technology as opposed to history as such. It also describes a growing field of academic study whose object is not *literary* theory or *political* theory or *social* theory, but *theory* theory, a field characterized by the study of the work of figures such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. This has been the form of my own direct experience with the practice of (what has been claimed to be) interdisciplinarity, both as a student at the University of Western Ontario’s Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism and in the misnamed Literature Program at Duke University, where students and faculty tend to study anything *but* literature. Fish’s point is that none of these versions of interdisciplinary study constitutes a radical undoing of the disciplines in the way that the proponents of interdisciplinarity demand; in each case, the existence of autonomous disciplines is reinforced rather than collapsed. There is, Fish suggests, nothing necessarily wrong with any of these actions. It is just that since they aren’t “truly” interdisciplinary in the way that he believes this term implies, it is misleading to identify them with a term that suggests a radical break with all existing practices.

This is a simple enough trick, and one that has come to define the way in which Fish has lately gone about, in his own Olympian fashion, dispelling problems that continue to preoccupy the rest of us with disarming ease. It is clear, however, that Fish’s elucidation of the supposed epistemological logic of interdisciplinary study barely masks the real object of his critique: it is the political agenda of what he describes as “left cultural theory” that concerns him. Rather than addressing this directly, he tries to neutralize his own political stance under the guise of a disinterested epistemological critique. Fish subsumes a number of what would normally be thought of as widely different political positions under the general rubric of “left cultural theory”: “deconstruction, Marxism, feminism, the radical version of neopragmatism, and the new historicism” (231). What these various positions share, he claims, is an “anti-professionalism” that is opposed generally to current social and political structures and specifically to the institutional arrangement of the university that maintains and legitimates disciplines in their current form. Fish sees

the attack on the disciplines by left theorists as an attempt to break down both the disciplinary barriers within the academy and also the barriers erected between the political work conducted within the academy and the politics of the larger world outside of it. "Radical interdisciplinarity," he writes, "begins with the assumption that the political is always and already inside those precincts and that the line separating them from the arena of social agitation is itself politically drawn and must be erased if action within the academy is to be continuous with the larger struggle against exploitation and oppression" (235). Interdisciplinarity thus becomes a way for a politically motivated set of academics to claim that they are undertaking a "*revolution tout court*" (235) by means of a disciplinary revolution. The assault by these various groups on the limits of the disciplines is an assault as well on the self-imposed political limits of contemporary academic practices; in order for left cultural theory to achieve its political aims, Fish suggests that both limits need to be identified, challenged, and overcome. But of course for Fish these limits *cannot* be overcome for epistemological reasons, which is really another way of saying that, here at least, resistance is futile.

The flawed interdisciplinary logic that Fish ascribes to the activities of left theorists is, however, little more than a parody designed to score political points rather than to accurately characterize what interdisciplinary practice really tries to do. The central insight of all of the various versions of left cultural theory that Fish groups together is that meaning is not natural but is created and, consequently, that all supposedly natural structures are open to question and revision. Left cultural theorists realize that the disciplines are sustained only by the belief that each has its own unique object of knowledge for which it alone has developed the proper and adequate procedures of study: historians believe that they have a special privilege in studying history, literary critics in assessing literature, philosophers in identifying the truth. Among the central contributions of feminism, Marxism, deconstruction, and other contemporary critical practices is to have identified ways in which the reified character of the disciplines *has* functioned politically to rule out certain modes and objects of inquiry under the guise of the internal rationality or scientificity of their own methods. The aim in challenging these structures is not necessarily to know "more" — to know, as Fish claims, the unfettered truth of the world — but to know *differently*. The aim is not to escape the limits of one's particular mode of investigation but to be aware of them, to problematize them, and —

above all — to understand that there inevitably *are* limits and problems in the constitution and creation of every form of knowledge, and that in this sense every investigation is necessarily partial. It is important to understand the meaning of “partial” here. It does not imply that there is a “whole” somewhere out there, a Real that corresponds to the Imaginary, noumena beyond the phenomena of experience to which interdisciplinarity gives us unmediated access. It means, rather, that the pursuit of knowledge is a political activity. Our investigations are partial because they are partisan, a fact that the disciplinary organization of knowledge obscures and hides. Hal Foster has written that “To be unaware of historical or social limits is not to be free of them; one is all the more subjected” (17). The core philosophy of the kind of interdisciplinarity that Fish decries involves the awareness of the limits of what constitutes knowledge, not in order to overcome them once and for all, but so that we do not mistake the present for the inevitable and unchanging nature of things.

What I have been working toward in my reading of Fish’s attack on interdisciplinarity is an *affirmation* of precisely the form of interdisciplinary practice that he rejects. It is a sense of “being interdisciplinary” that I take to be encapsulated in Foucault’s opposition of genealogy to history. For Foucault, the history practised by historians — that is, in the disciplinary practice of history — introduces a “suprahistorical perspective: a history whose function is to compose the finally reduced diversity of time into a totality fully closed upon itself” (“Nietzsche” 154). Genealogy, on the other hand, is characterized by the desire to maintain “passing events in their proper dispersion” (146), to insurrect “subjugated knowledges” (“Two Lectures” 81), and by a concern with popular knowledges “that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition of scientificity” (82). Foucault’s radically new vision of (among other things) sexuality, the penal system, and the construction of knowledge in the West more generally could not have been developed without calling into question the very basis of the disciplinary practice of historical research and writing. It was only by paying attention to everything that history discounts as knowledge that Foucault was able to produce a counter-memory in opposition to official disciplinary memory. One of the lessons of Foucault’s work is that it is necessary to be vigilant about the limits of one’s own practices. If there is anything that could be identified as interdisciplinarity without having

to thereby provide a definition or delimit a particular practice, it is this strategy of *vigilance*: the need, even as one studies a literary text, a history, or a culture, of destabilizing the sanctity of these very objects of study by asking what, for example, a literary text *is* and what it is that allows us to identify and assign it so easily to its own specific field of study. Again, in opposition to history, which “is given to the contemplation of distances and heights: the noblest periods, the highest forms, the most abstract ideas, the purest individualities,” genealogy “shortens its vision to those things nearest to it — the body, the nervous system, nutrition, digestion and energies” (“Nietzsche” 155). It sees all the things in history that the discipline of History misses. It looks at what is closest, but — and this is an important distinction — “in an abrupt dispossession, so as to seize it at a distance” (156). To be able to “seize at a distance” is an apt description of the vigilance that interdisciplinarity promises. And the best way to ensure this is to be aware of the ways in which other disciplines construct the object of knowledge that has become so familiar as to be unquestioned in one’s own discipline — to maintain, in other words, a perpetual estrangement from one’s own practices even as one continues to practise them, and in so doing to ensure the openness of the discipline to modification, transformation, and even wholesale change.

What I have described here, however, is exactly the kind of interdisciplinarity that Fish deems impossible for still other reasons than the imputed desire to leave the disciplines behind altogether. He musters one last objection: it is impossible to be both simultaneously “inside” and “outside” of a discipline in the way that “seizing an object at a distance” suggests. “Once you turn,” Fish writes, “from actually performing literary criticism to examining the ‘network of forces and factors’ that underlie the performance, literary criticism is no longer what you are performing” (240). There is apparently no middle ground: you are either outside or inside, and to be outside is simply to be inside yet another discipline. But what if one’s examination of what underlies the practice of literary criticism is brought back to bear on the criticism of literature? What if one goes outside in order to come back to an inside whose boundaries can no longer be quite so comfortably identified as one’s disciplinary home? What precisely prevents one from doing both, from being critical of one’s practice and still engaging with it, if in a modified form? Isn’t it precisely this struggle that makes it so difficult and challenging to undertake academic study today? Fish argues that the problem here is that

“an illegitimate inference has been drawn from a legitimate thesis. The thesis is the one that we began with: disciplines are not natural kinds; they emerge in the wake of a political construction of the field of knowledge. The illegitimate inference is that since disciplinary boundaries are constructed and revisable, they are not real” (240). It would then seem to be the case that left cultural theorists have failed to clear one last epistemological hurdle. Except that what would be the impulse to challenge disciplinary boundaries if they weren’t real, if they didn’t have a real effect on the world, if they could be dispelled simply by analysis? The illegitimate inference made here is in fact by Fish himself, because the necessity of the either/or inside/outside binary that Fish supposes here can only originate from the belief that *any* investigation of the constructed nature of disciplinary boundaries means that a discipline can no longer discipline. The assumption is that if literary critics learn that literary criticism has a history, it thereby cannot possibly have any hold over us any longer. It is, Fish appears to be suggesting, only those practices that we remain unaware of, those that we find natural to such a degree that they seem to be part of the natural world itself, that we can participate in in good faith. Which is the practical equivalent of insisting that everything is fine just as it is, and that change is not only difficult but dangerous — a political claim, not a philosophical one.

Interdisciplinarity and Canadian Literary Criticism

What is the significance for Canadian literary criticism of the kind of interdisciplinary vigilance that I have outlined in my reading of Fish’s position? My point is essentially this: although I disagree with Fish’s characterization of interdisciplinary study, I nevertheless agree that most of what currently passes as interdisciplinary work in Canadian literary criticism takes one of the three forms he outlines: the adoption of theoretical discourses, the expansion of one discipline onto the terrain of others, or the disciplinary study of disciplinarity. It is the first of these forms — the increased use of theory in the study of literary texts — that has most commonly been viewed as what would count as interdisciplinarity *within* the discipline of Canadian literary studies. The idea that interdisciplinarity might pose a challenge to the discipline itself does not seem to have been seriously considered anywhere that I know of; it seems to represent a terrifying rather than an exhilarating possibility. This terror is most commonly

quelled through the substitution of an interdisciplinarity that ensures the conduct of business as usual, though now under the sign of a radically new and supposedly more political practice whose very newness further ensures that the business of literary criticism will continue to boom.

What the vigilance that comes from interdisciplinarity means for literary studies, and not just Canadian literary studies, is what Marxist critics such as Terry Eagleton, Raymond Williams, and Tony Bennett have been suggesting for some time: that we always keep in mind that “literature” is not “some objective and fixed body of texts to which the word ‘literature’ is applied merely as a descriptive label. We are speaking of a concept — the concept of a circumscribed set of texts felt to be of special value — which exists and has meaning solely within the discourses of literary criticism” (T. Bennett 7). As Bennett points out, Marxist criticism has itself worked with a slightly different concept of literature, which names texts that are “uniquely defined by [their] capacity to reveal or rupture from within the terms of seeing proposed by the categories of dominant ideology” (8). In early Marxist criticism, as in the work of Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno, these two senses of literature tended to overlap, and Marxist literary critics limited themselves to the study of the ways in which the great literary works of Western culture embodied or challenged hegemonic ideology. With Antonio Gramsci’s interest in popular literature, Ernst Bloch’s analysis of fairy tales and detective novels, and Walter Benjamin’s travelogues and essays, there begins a slow expansion of what constitutes this second sense of literary, culminating in the project of “cultural studies” associated with the activities at the Birmingham Centre in the 1960s. And it is perhaps only with cultural studies, and certainly not with all variants of it, that an interdisciplinary *literary* practice emerges. This is not because the expansion of culturally significant objects worthy of academic study displaces literature as a relevant object of inquiry but because the study of other cultural practices and artefacts as at least potentially politically, socially, and semiotically significant implies that literary critics can no longer equate the whole of culture with the written word. This is in turn significant because it promotes a vigilance about what has become one of the greatest shortcomings of contemporary literary studies: a tendency to “read” in an increasingly minor and class-specific cultural form a blueprint (a reflection, a mediation) of dominant cultural and social formations. An ability to see literature for what it is — a socially and historically defined form of writing

that has become curiously ossified into both a specific kind of commodity and a kind of writing interpreted by a rather large group of professionals (and sometimes by no one else) — can only work to usefully complicate the character of our analyses of literary texts; it may also lead critics away from the text to a broader analysis of cultural consumption and production, an analysis in which literature no longer plays *only* the part of a sacred, romantic artefact that can only be deciphered by a priesthood trained in the appropriate methodologies of the day.

I want to discuss two forms of supposed interdisciplinarity in Canadian literary criticism in which an inviolate, disciplinary sense of the literary text is nevertheless retained. Or perhaps I should say, in an effort to temper what is probably an excessive and unsupported generalization, that a disciplinary sense of literature is *largely* retained in these discourses; enough has changed in the academic study of literature over the past several decades that it is now hard to find examples of strictly belle-lettristic forms of criticism. The first form involves the use of contemporary literary theory as a new, apparently more sophisticated way of approaching Canadian texts. What the use of theory means for the study of Canadian literature can be seen, for example, in John Moss's introduction to *Future Indicative* and, indeed, in the essays contained therein. The essays either directly take up the question of literary theory in the study of Canadian literature or exemplify the use of such theory. They do so with the promise of adding something new to the interpretation of Canadian literature — in the hope, for example, of getting beyond the concerns over identity and nation that have haunted Canadian criticism and that have refused to be exorcised. The title of the volume, Moss suggests, carries with it implications of such change (1). What hasn't changed, as least as indicated by the title of Moss's introduction, "The Presence of the Text," is the status of the object that links this vast plurality of theories together: the literary text. Moss writes that "Although some of the critics here might seem to address literature itself only in passing, so involved are they in the machinations of theoretical discourse, there is not one who fails to illuminate, alter, open, challenge, or somehow enhance our experience of literature, *as literature*, and specifically (given the context and the base from which they work) our experience of Canadian literature" (3; emphasis added). Even though the abundance of new theoretical approaches to the literary object suggests that the category of literature is being radically challenged, it is nevertheless clear that for this

kind of theoretical interest in the text the literariness of the literary remains essential.

Such theoretically motivated readings of Canadian literature are inevitably linked to an idea of national literary-critical maturity. As in various attempts to periodize “Third World” or postcolonial literature, as in the work of Edward Said (“Yeats”), Frantz Fanon (*Wretched*), Barbara Harlow, and others, the supposedly immature period of Canadian literature (and criticism) is linked to an overt concern with nation — with the question, that is, of the Canadianness of Canadian literature. To argue for the maturity of the Canadian literary critical enterprise is thus to argue that references to the nation, or at least to what Robert Lecker has called the “national-referential aesthetic” (4), should be drained away in favour of more formal or (recently) more theoretical approaches to the text. This can be seen, for example, in Frank Davey’s famous attack on thematic criticism in *Surviving the Paraphrase*, which Moss identifies as one of the historical precursors of the project of the *Future Indicative* conference (1). What Davey calls the “extra-literary” or even “anti-literary” factors that caused Canadian criticism to be “reluctant to focus on the literary work . . . without any recourse to cultural explanations or apologies” had to be put aside so that it could “do what the criticism of other national literatures has done: explain and illuminate the work on its own terms, without any recourse to cultural rationalizations or apologies” (Davey 1). What I am suggesting is that rather than indicating the degree to which Canadian literary criticism is now “grown up” and *interdisciplinary*, the introduction of theory has tended to reinforce the *disciplinary* construction of the literary text. While an interest in theory may have renewed both Canadian literary criticism and — as Ian Angus suggests in his review of another attempt to “add” theory to the Canadian scene, *Canada: Theoretical Discourse/Discours théoriques* (209–26) — Canadian studies more generally, it has also tended to reduce vigilance about the nature of the literary text itself and the investments that go into the study of it. I am not trying to suggest that theory hasn’t expanded our understanding of Canadian literature in important and significant ways. What I am claiming is that the addition of theory alone does not guarantee interdisciplinarity in the way that I have defined this term — a practice that draws attention to the arbitrary ways in which disciplines have carved up the study of the world, and so also to the ways in which our understanding is always partial and partisan.

Postcolonial criticism is the second place in Canadian literary

studies where there is at least the potential for an interdisciplinarity that is defined by *more* than mere theoretical borrowing. Here, too, this is a promise that has tended to remain unfulfilled. The problem is not with the characterization of Canadian literature as postcolonial. Though I believe that the objections to the extension of postcolonialism to “Second World” literature made by Arun Mukherjee and Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman have a good deal of merit, it seems to me that framing Canadian literature in the terms of postcolonial criticism is essential — essential, that is, “so long as we do not impose a single kind of postcolonialism, and so long as we do not presume that the postcolonial perspective is the only way to frame one’s vision” (D. Bennett 196). For example, the argument that Stephen Slemon makes in “Unsettling the Empire” for the inclusion — indeed, for the centrality — of Canada and other Second World countries in the practice of postcolonial criticism is a powerful one. What troubles me about Slemon’s article, and about postcolonial criticism more generally (if again I can generalize about such a heterogeneous practice), is what I see as a continual, uneasy slippage between postcolonialism as something to do primarily with literary texts, and postcolonialism as the description of broader discursive and cultural formations, as a common historical experience shared by peoples around the globe, as a reading strategy, as a historiographical principle, and, perhaps most importantly, as a mental or phenomenological state related to the experience of colonialism and postcolonialism. The almost exclusive interest of postcolonial critics in the study of literary texts, especially the novel, is troubling not merely because “the novel has been an elitist and minority form in developing countries when compared to the poem, song, television, and film” (Brennan 56). It is also troubling because the study of this postcolonial “minority form” has been taken as the main way in which these other postcolonialisms are revealed and explained. Postcolonial critics often seem to be primarily interested in assessing and analyzing the second set of postcolonialisms, and it is through an analysis of the literary text, bolstered by the epistemological principles of postcolonial theory, that they take themselves to be doing just this.

As a critical practice, postcolonial literary criticism promises a genuinely interdisciplinary approach that might be able to deeply question the status of the literary itself. After all, postcolonial criticism has of necessity to take into account and deal with supposedly “extraliterary” factors, such as history, politics, race, sexuality,

and class. It is its detailed attention to the history and character of imperialism and colonialism and its impact on textual production that gives postcolonial criticism its claim to be a unique field of study — more so, it seems to me, than the “intra-” disciplinary need felt by English departments for a field that indiscriminately has to deal with all literary texts written outside of England and the United States. One of the most important things that postcolonial critics have added to our understanding is the degree to which cultural and discursive domination is a necessary and essential aspect of colonialism and imperialism. Furthermore, they have shown how the “literary” was one of the most important tools in the production of imperialism and colonialism, and how imperialism and colonialism were themselves necessary conditions of possibility for the construction of the category of literature (Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* is especially important in this respect). Consequently, they have also shown how resistance to colonialism has taken a number of forms besides outright political insurrection, as exemplified in the writing of what Harlow has called “resistance literature.” In the whole range of contemporary theoretical approaches to the text, postcolonial criticism has perhaps been the most concerned with making sense of the text by paying attention to what lies outside of it, or, rather, by showing how the inside and the outside of the text are in fact opposite sides of the same coin.

It is for this reason that Harlow expresses the hope that the study of resistance literature might challenge and change Western definitions of literature, specifically by including politics as a central element of literary practice (13–14). As opposed to Western modernism, for instance, Harlow suggests that examples of “formal virtuosity” in the work of resistance writers is “part of their historical challenge, their demand for an access to history which necessitates a radical rewriting of the historiographical version of the past” (86). I think that while postcolonial criticism has done a great deal to destabilize accepted disciplinary notions of what is involved in studying a literary text, it has nevertheless rarely been willing to challenge the category of literature itself. Part of this, of course, has to do with its specific disciplinary concern, i.e., with its specific interest in showing the ways in which the development of literature is unthinkable without colonialism, and how colonialism cannot be fully understood without attention to the operation of literary discourses. But there is also a celebratory view of postcolonial literature (as resistant, as a uniquely expressive and symptomatic cultural object, et cetera) that tends to retain the assumptions of Western literary critical practices about

what a literary text is and what it does. It is this unwillingness to question the definition of literature as a written object that, above all else, reveals the internal logic of a culture and permits the sometimes too easy slippage of the insights learned through textual study to the description of entire cultural and political formations. This feature of the literary text often gets expressed as its ability to represent the social and individual "mind." For example, as the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* make clear at the outset of their book, the rationale for studying the literature of the formerly colonized world is primarily to examine how it encodes and exhibits the effects of colonialism on the "perceptual frameworks" of colonized peoples (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1). Diana Brydon has recently stated much the same thing: "Postcolonialism is neither a thing nor an essentialized state; rather, it is a complex of processes designed to circumvent imperial *and* colonial *habits of mind*" (11; second emphasis added). A consequence of this connection of "mind" and "literature" is that as much as postcolonial criticism attempts to take into account political and historical factors, postcolonialism is inevitably reduced to what Fanon has described as a "massive psychoexistential complex" (*Black* 72), without, however, his detailed attention to the material factors that are also involved in (post)colonialism. What Arif Dirlik has criticized as postcolonialism's "culturalism" in its understanding of Eurocentrism and the ideologies of the West as exclusively cultural phenomena thus becomes further exacerbated in literary studies. The insight that an understanding of culture is important to understanding colonialism and its aftermath becomes all too often an assertion of the primacy of the cultural. This in turn means that it is often forgotten that colonialism, imperialism, postcolonialism, neoimperialism, et cetera are not primarily, or even most importantly, literary-historical categories, and consequently it becomes difficult to see "capitalism as the foundation for European power and the motive force of its globalization" (Dirlik 307).

It is easy enough to raise the objection at this point that postcolonial criticism partakes in a kind of academic division of labour, and that its focus is specifically on the cultural or literary instances of postcolonialism. There remains, after all, an enormous amount of work to be done on the specificities of the cultural aspects of colonialism and postcolonialism. But there are at least two problems with such an attempt to limit the field. First, postcolonial criticism arises at least initially as a challenge to the limits of social-scientific studies of colonialism, imperialism, and their aftermath. In particular, it tries

to emphasize that the division between culture and politics is artificial, and that each realm can only be understood in relation to the other. Second, postcolonial critics would not, it seems to me, want to accept such a limitation of their practices. Postcolonial analyses of literary texts are always seen as having implications greater than mere disciplinary insights into form or genre; it is a politically, not taxonomically, motivated project. It is curious, therefore, that when Slemon argues for a more radical postcolonial criticism that does not merely take the form of an “add-on discipline” within English, he nevertheless continues to contain this radicality within the category of the “literary,” the primary concern with the text being to establish “the struggle for power” (40) that occurs in literary representations.

The Persistence of the Nation

As with the desire to self-consciously introduce contemporary theory into Canadian literary criticism, the desire to see Canadian literature as postcolonial may be yet another substitute practice for the narrowness of an older version of Canadian criticism. In this case, just as with the introduction of theory into literary criticism, Canadian criticism is again made the protagonist in a narrative of critical maturity. I can't help but wonder, however, if it is not precisely what would by contrast be the *immaturity* of Canadian criticism that has already made it potentially more interdisciplinary in my sense of the word than is usually thought to be the case. The troubling question of Canadian identity and the relationship of the nation to literature and to criticism has for some critics, such as Frank Davey (*Post-National*), been now definitively left to the past. However, as long as the question of the specificity of Canadian literature remains — i.e., what makes Canadian literature “Canadian” — the issue of the relationship of literature and criticism to the nation cannot be so easily dismissed or superseded. If Sylvia Söderlind's review of *Future Indicative* can be taken as an example, this question will continue to emerge even in theoretical approaches to Canadian literature. This does not mean that criticism has to slip back into what Lecker describes as a “national-referential aesthetic” (4), whose existence and persistent grip on our imaginations has in any case always been something of a fish story; there are far fewer texts of “thematic criticism” than one might imagine from all the worries about it, far fewer certainly than critical texts belonging to other national

literatures that try to make the same kinds of connection between geographic space, distinctive national characteristics, and literature. Nor is it something that should be lamented. The need to think about the function of criticism and literature in the context of the nation has meant that criticism in Canada has long had to worry about the construction of the institution of literature, and has had to approach literature as more than an autonomous, self-enclosed practice whose relationship and importance to cultural life is self-evident and unquestionable (a fact that Northrop Frye and Eli Mandel have both made abundantly clear).

I don't wish to be overly congratulatory: the centrality of the nation in Canadian criticism has also proved to be parochial, and has tended to reinforce a notion of national literatures as "natural kinds" in a way that has placed limits on effective criticism. Canadian critics have certainly at times been little more than what Christopher Clausen has described as a "cultural army protecting the territory and honor of the nation. As with American literature a century ago, the separateness that must be asserted at all costs is cultural independence of the former colonial power, for in this paradigm any wavering about full literary independence would suggest limits to the nation's political independence and national character" (68). While the connection between literature and nation can be limiting, however, it should be recognized that it can also be productive; since the category of national literatures has not proved to be easy to abolish, it is the potentially productive aspects of such a category that may prove important to examine and use. Critics who have chosen to reevaluate thematic criticism, such as T.D. MacLulich, have begun, perhaps without even realizing it, to do just this. MacLulich claims that for both disciplinary *and* interdisciplinary reasons, "Canadian literature is inevitably a subject in which political and literary considerations overlap" (17). He argues, on the one hand, that the rationale for constituting Canadian literature as an identifiable disciplinary field, or a subfield within the larger discipline of English literary studies, can only be "some form of literary nationalism" (17). On the other hand, he sees the current interest in theory as simply an extension of a desire to see literature *as* literature (as in Davey's attack on thematic criticism in *Surviving the Paraphrase*), whatever might be the site of its national or social origins. Removed in this way from its social context, "hybrid literary-political categories such as Canadian literature become meaningless" (33). Which is to say that the contexts that enable the production and circulation of texts *necessarily* arise

in any meaningful study of Canadian literature. When they do not, this is the result of a concerted suppression of context in the interests of establishing a legitimate, disciplinary object of study.

While I do not wish to claim an alliance with MacLulich's own particular brand of literary nationalism, and while I have theoretical reservations about the possibility of locating and identifying the influence of context on the text (a procedure that can quickly deteriorate into the most reductive forms of biographical or sociological criticism), what MacLulich identifies in the hybrid category of "Canadian literature" is a dialectic in which each term works continuously to undo the presumptions of the other. That this literature is "Canadian" raises the question of how literature might, or indeed must, be understood as related to broader nonliterary social and political forces, since it is only there that the "meaning" of "Canadian" can be established, however provisionally. Asking this question also means that one must become aware of the fact that literature is itself constituted within the circuits of ideological operations of which the belief in the ahistorical autonomy of literature is itself one of the chief and most powerful examples. On the other hand, the inevitable lack of identity between works of literature and the national identities that they are supposed to express or participate in reveals "Canadian" to itself be an ideological construct of some considerable power, even at a time when the influence of the nation is supposed to be on the wane. One example of this power, I would suggest, is the way in which the fluidity and malleability of "Canada" has managed to produce a sense of the nation that is able to continually mask under the sign of the "good, caring nation" all sorts of historical and social travesties — for example, the incredible and historically unprecedented concentration of wealth and power in a very few hands, the degree to which Canadian society remains beset by racism, the extent of governmental corruption at all levels, and the fact that Canada spends as little on social services as the United States, a country to which it likes to favourably compare itself.

The inevitability of having to continually return to the nation in the case of a "peripheral" country like Canada, which Peter Worsley has described as "the world's richest underdeveloped country" (22), rests on the fact that it is *only* some concept of the nation that enables a sense of national-cultural difference that can potentially be read as a political difference. The sense that it is archaic, pointless, or ideologically suspect to define and defend national characteristics may be theoretically sound. The alternative, however, which is one

form or another of internationalism or cosmopolitanism (which now goes by the name of globalization), has a tendency to eliminate political struggle (such as the struggle for national sovereignty) and, perhaps unintentionally, to legitimate mass media and cultural imperialism by a tacit acceptance of it. This is a point that has been repeatedly made in other national contexts throughout this century by thinkers as various as Sun Yat-sen, Fanon, and, more recently, the Brazilian cultural critic Roberto Schwarz. One solution might be to think of the nation as a potential space for political activity, while at the same time unthinking the unitary vision of the polis that the nation has often implied. This solution has become well recognized, I think, by a number of critics of Canadian literature, who have formulated a similar dialectic with respect to the nation. Lecker writes that “the problem today is how to write literary criticism that is postnational *and* national” (6). With respect to postcolonial criticism, Brydon argues that “the goal throughout is a commitment to establishing and sustaining difference: the differences that make Canada Canada, *and* the differences that continue to challenge the national formation of an immigrant, capitalist culture” (16). In the work of Neil ten Kortenaar, this dialectic takes a new form in which the terms of this postcolonial confrontation with the nation is itself seen as “nationalist in inspiration” (12). This is a claim that can only renew again the critical encounter of criticism with the nation. It is perhaps here, in a continual, unending dialectic of literature and the nation, that a genuine interdisciplinarity can enter the literary critical study of Canadian texts.

I want to end by clarifying two final points. First, it is clear that what I have suggested about the possibilities of interdisciplinarity in the study of Canadian literature harkens back to an earlier phase of Canadian literary criticism. For example, much of what I have said about the impossibility of separating text and context in Canada echoes Frye’s conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada*, as well as Mandel’s introduction to *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*. In a sense, then, interdisciplinarity has long been a feature of Canadian literary criticism, even if for much of the past three decades it has been repressed or actively denied. A natural question to ask might be why these questions return now. What is it about the present situation that makes the nation once again a relevant and important issue for literature and criticism? Frye’s wistful characterization of Canada’s cultural belatedness, in both the conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada* and at greater length in *The Modern Century*, of Canada’s

attempt to form an identity at the very moment when a rampant modernity was in the process of erasing the possibility of cultural difference, makes him seem like a critic of globalization *avant la lettre*. The fact that it is possible to identify Frye's meditations as part of a discourse on globalization reminds us of just how long worries about cultural imperialism and the formation of a global monoculture have preoccupied critics. At the same time, there is no doubt that it is in the present moment, suffused as it is with discussions of the relations of the global and the local, that the fate of the particularity of cultural identity will be determined for a long time to come. It is at the moment when so many critics are proclaiming the end of the nation as we know it that the issue of the nation and cosmopolitanism, of national literatures and *Weltliteratur*, forces us to rethink the ways in which we have long understood the relationship of literature to culture.

Finally, it is important to emphasize again, by way of conclusion, the main claim that I have been making in this paper. I don't want what I have said here to be taken as an attack on the study of literature *as* literature. As well as being an unavoidably significant historical artefact, literature remains an important object in contemporary life. So of course it is important to think about the meaning of literature and literary meaning. My claim is a different one: being interdisciplinary *is* hard to do. It is harder than simply adopting new approaches to literature, in the fashion of literary anthologies for undergraduates that present, in supermarket fashion, a range of exotic and apparently interchangeable ways of reading literary texts from which one is then free to pick and choose depending on one's own tastes. What interdisciplinarity demands is a deep confrontation with this very sense of *reading* as a critical activity, a confrontation that asks dangerous historical, cultural, political, and institutional questions about the activities to which we have become accustomed. Such a confrontation is to be valued for its ability to estrange us from the habits of our disciplinary practices. This is not a confrontation that takes place to one side of our practices. Understood as a kind of perpetual vigilance, it is, rather, a mode of critical activity that is ongoing and that is hopefully always already part of our reflections. This has not always been the case in Canadian literary criticism. Yet it seems to me that it is only through this kind of perpetual interdisciplinary vigilance that literary criticism can loosen up those frustrating blockages and barriers that have confined it to a rather limited textual politics when there is so much more that it can and should do.

NOTE

¹ I want to thank Donna Palmateer Pennee and Kathleen Mclean for their enormously helpful and detailed comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

WORKS CITED

- Angus, Ian. *A Border Within: National Identity, Cultural Plurality, and Wilderness*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1997.
- Appiah, Anthony. "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 336-57.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. New Accents. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Trans. Peter Demetz. New York: Schocken, 1978.
- Bennett, Tony. *Formalism and Marxism*. New York: Methuen, 1979.
- Bloch, Ernst. *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*. Trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenberg. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1988.
- Brennan, Timothy. "The National Longing for Form." *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi Bhabha. New York: Routledge, 1990. 44-70.
- Brydon, Diana. "Introduction: Reading Postcoloniality, Reading Canada." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 56 (1995): 1-19.
- Clausen, Christopher. "'National Literature' in English: Toward a New Paradigm." *New Literary History* 25 (1994): 61-72.
- Davey, Frank. *Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone-Canadian Novel since 1967*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993.
- . *Surviving the Paraphrase*. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1983.
- Dirlik, Arif. "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism." *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Padmini Mongia. New York: Arnold, 1996. 294-320.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove, 1967.
- . *Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove, 1968.
- Fish, Stanley. "Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard to Do." *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing, Too*. New York: Oxford UP, 1994. 231-42.
- Foster, Hal. *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*. Seattle: Bay, 1985.
- Foucault, Michel. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ed. Donald F. Bouchard. Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1977. 139-62.

- . "Two Lectures." *Power/Knowledge*. Ed. Colin Gordon. Trans. Colin Gordon et al. New York: Pantheon, 1980. 78-108.
- Frye, Northrop. Conclusion. *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*. Ed. Carl F. Klinck. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1965. 821-49.
- . *The Modern Century*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1967.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from Cultural Writings*. Ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. Trans. William Boelhower. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985.
- Harlow, Barbara. *Resistance Literature*. New York: Methuen, 1987.
- Lecker, Robert. *Making It Real: The Canonization of English-Canadian Literature*. Concord, ON: Anansi, 1995.
- MacLulich, T.D. "Thematic Criticism, Literary Nationalism, and the Critic's New Clothes." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 35 (1987): 17-36.
- Mandel, Eli. Introduction. *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*. Ed. Mandel. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971. 3-25.
- McClintock, Ann. "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism.'" *Social Text* 31-32 (1992): 1-15.
- Moss, John. "Introduction: The Presence of the Text." *Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian Literature*. Ed. Moss. Proc. of a Symposium on Literary Theory and Canadian Literature. 25-27 Apr. 1986. Reappraisals. *Canadian Writers* 13. Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1987. 1-4.
- Mukherjee, Arun P. "Whose Post-Colonialism and Whose Postmodernism?" *World Literature Written in English* 30.2 (1990): 1-9.
- Robbins, Bruce. "Interdisciplinarity in Public: The Rhetoric of Rhetoric." *Social Text* 25-26 (1990): 103-18.
- Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1979.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf, 1993.
- . "Yeats and Decolonization." *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. By Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward W. Said. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990. 69-95.
- Schwarz, Roberto. *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Popular Culture*. Trans. John Gledson. New York: Verso, 1992.
- Slemon, Stephen. "Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World." *World Literature Written in English* 30.2 (1990): 30-41.
- Söderlind, Sylvia. "Back to the Future: Plus or Minus Canadian?" Rev. of *Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian Literature*, ed. John Moss. *Queen's Quarterly* 96.3 (1989): 631-38.
- Sun Yat-sen. "The Principle of Nationalism." Trans. F.W. Price. *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*. Ed. Elie Kedourie. New York: Meridian, 1970. 304-17.
- ten Kortenaar, Neil. "The Trick of Divining a Postcolonial Canadian Identity: Margaret Laurence between Race and Class." *Canadian Literature* 149 (1996): 11-36.

- Williams, Patrick, and Laura Chrisman, eds. *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Worsley, Peter. *The Three Worlds: Culture and World Development*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984.