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FROM *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature**

Margaret Atwood

When I started to write this book I intended to produce a short, easy-to-use guide to Canadian literature, largely for the benefit of students and of those teachers in high schools, community colleges and universities who suddenly find themselves teaching a subject they have never studied: "Canlit." Through my own struggles with the same problem I knew there was a considerable amount of material already available, but it consisted primarily of all-inclusive historical surveys, individual biographies, or in-depth academic studies which discuss works often out of print. In Canada there are many authors and many books, but few obvious classics; as a result, those compiling sources or distributing information tend to fall back on long lists of writers and book-titles among which the prospective reader or teacher must scrabble around and choose as best he may. But the inevitable question will be raised, sooner or later, in one or another of its forms: "Why are we studying *him* (instead of Faulkner)?" "Why do we have to read *this* (instead of Hermann Hesse)?" Or, in its true shape, "What's Canadian about Canadian literature, and why should we be bothered?" [. . .]

Until recently, reading Canadian literature has been for me and for everyone else who did it a personal interest, since it was not taught, required or even mentioned (except with derision) in the public sphere. Like many of those who encountered it before, say, 1965, my involvement has been as a writer, not as a student or teacher, and several though by no means all of the patterns I've found myself dealing with here were first brought to my attention by my own work. Also by my surprise at finding the concerns of that work shared by writers with whom—I found myself concluding—I seemed to participate in a cultural community that had never been defined for me. I don't talk much about my work in this book because I happen to believe that an author is always his own trickiest critic. However, I approach many of the patterns, and the problems connected with them, from the writer's point of view, which is perhaps the best one, since that's how the writers themselves approach them. The answer to the question, "What is there to read about in

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this country?" is really also an answer to the question, "What is there to write about in this country?"

Writing Canadian literature has been historically a very private act, one for which even an audience was excluded, since for a lot of the time there was no audience. Teaching it, however, is a political act. If done badly it can make people even more bored with their country than they already are; if done well, it may suggest to them *why* they have been taught to be bored with their country, and whose interests that boredom serves.

But back to my original question. The first part of that question, "What's Canadian about Canadian literature," is answered, I hope, by the rest of this book. The second part, "Why should we be bothered," shouldn't have to be answered at all because, in any self-respecting nation, it would never even be asked. But that's one of the problems: Canada *isn't* a self-respecting nation and the question does get asked. Therefore.

The answers you get from literature depend on the questions you pose. If you ask, "Why do writers write?" the answer will be psychological or biographical. If you ask, "*How* do they write?" you may get an answer something like "With a pencil" or "With pain," or you may get an answer that talks about how the books are put together, an answer that treats the book as a self-contained verbal pattern and talks about style or form. These are entirely legitimate questions; but the one I'm concerned with here is "What do writers write about?"

The character Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* looks at the flyleaf of his geography book and finds a list he has written there:

Stephen Dedalus
Class of Elements
Clongowes Wood College
Sallins
County Kildare
Ireland
Europe
The World
The Universe

That's a fairly inclusive list of everything it is possible for a human being to write about and therefore to read about. It begins with the personal, continues through the social or cultural or national and ends with "The Universe," the universal. Any piece of fiction or poetry may contain elements of all three areas, though the ratio may vary: a love lyric is more likely to be personal or universal than it is to be national, a novel may be about a family or about a man's life as a politician, and so forth. The tendency in Canada, at least in high school and university teaching, has been to emphasize the personal and

the universal but to skip the national or cultural. This is like trying to teach human anatomy by looking only at the head and the feet. That's one reason for reading Canadian literature then; it gives you a more complete idea of how any literature is made: it's made by people living in a particular space at a particular time, and you can recognize that more easily if the space and the time are your own. If you read only the work of dead foreigners you will certainly reinforce the notion that literature can be written only by dead foreigners.

But there's another reason that has to do not with the reader as student of literature but with the reader as citizen. A piece of art, as well as being a creation to be enjoyed, can also be (as Germaine Warkentin suggests) a mirror. The reader looks at the mirror and sees not the writer but himself; and behind his own image in the foreground, a reflection of the world he lives in. If a country or a culture lacks such mirrors it has no way of knowing what it looks like; it must travel blind. If, as has long been the case in this country, the viewer is given a mirror that reflects not him but someone else, and told at the same time that the reflection he sees is himself, he will get a very distorted idea of what he is really like. He will also get a distorted idea of what other people are like: it's hard to find out who anyone else is until you have found out who *you* are. Self-knowledge, of course, can be painful, and the extent to which Canadian literature has been neglected in its home territory suggests, among other things, a fear on the part of Canadians of knowing who they are; while the large number of mirror and reflection images contained within that literature suggest a society engaged in a vain search for an image, a reflection that will answer it, like A.M. Klein's mad poet who "stares at a mirror all day long, as if / to recognize himself."

There are, of course, reflections of us to be found in places other than Canadian literature. There's the placid, jolly, woodcutting and woodchuck-eating "Canadian" in Thoreau's *Walden*; there's Edmund Wilson saying "In my youth, of the early nineteen-hundreds, we tended to imagine Canada as a kind of vast hunting preserve convenient to the United States." (Right on, Edmund.) In Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, Canada is the protagonist's cool fantasy escape-land; if he can only make it there from steamy Mexico, everything will be all right. There's Shreve, the pinkish-grey Canadian roommate of Faulkner's Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!* who is healthy, does exercises and plays Wedding Guest to Quentin's Ancient Mariner. And, for fun, there's the Canadian man who carries off the protagonist's girlfriend in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, the first Lesbian novel; he's muscular, competent, faceless and *heterosexual*. That's more or less the range of Canada as viewed by "international" literature: a place you escape to from "civilization," an unspoiled, uncorrupted place imagined as empty or thought of as populated by happy archaic peasants or YMCA instructors, quaint or dull or both. Watching made-in-Canada beer ads and tourist literature often gives you the

uneasy feeling that the perpetrators are basing their images on these kinds of reflections because that's what everyone, inside and out, wants to believe. But Canadian literature itself tells a very different story.

To say that you must read your own literature to know who you are, to avoid being a sort of cultural moron, is not the same as saying that you should read nothing else, though the "internationalist" or Canada Last opponents of this notion sometimes think it is. A reader cannot live by Canlit alone, and it is a disservice to Canlit to try it. If a man from outer space were to be dropped on an island and supplied with all of Canadian literature and nothing else, he would be rendered completely incapable of deducing anything meaningful about Canadian literature because he would have nothing to compare it with; he would take it to be human literature *in toto*. The study of Canadian literature ought to be comparative, as should the study of any literature; it is by contrast that distinctive patterns show up most strongly. To know ourselves, we must know our own literature; to know ourselves accurately, we need to know it as part of literature as a whole.

But in Canada, as Frye suggests, the answer to the question "Who am I?" is at least partly the same as the answer to another question: "Where is here?" "Who am I?" is a question appropriate in countries where the environment, the "here," is already well-defined, so well-defined in fact that it may threaten to overwhelm the individual. In societies where everyone and everything has its place a person may have to struggle to separate himself from his social background, in order to keep from being just a function of the structure.

"Where is here?" is a different kind of question. It is what a man asks when he finds himself in unknown territory, and it implies several other questions. Where is this place in relation to other places? How do I find my way around in it? If the man is really lost he may also wonder how he got "here" to begin with, hoping he may be able to find the right path or possibly the way out by retracing his steps. If he is unable to do this he will have to take stock of what "here" has to offer in the way of support for human life and decide how he should go about remaining alive. Whether he survives or not will depend partly on what "here" really contains—whether it is too hot, too cold, too wet or too dry for him—and partly on his own desires and skills—whether he can utilize the resources available, adapt to what he can't change, and keep from going crazy. There may be other people "here" already, natives who are cooperative, indifferent or hostile. There may be animals, to be tamed, killed and eaten, or avoided. If, however, there is too large a gap between our hero's expectations and his environment he may develop culture shock or commit suicide.

There's a good moment in Carol Bolt's play *Buffalo Jump*: a high school teacher in the thirties makes his students recite the names of all the wives of Henry the Eighth while a protest march is going past the window. He tells them they aren't in school to watch parades, which just about sums up the

approach to Canadian history and culture that prevailed for many decades history and culture were things that took place elsewhere, and if you saw them just outside the window you weren't supposed to look.

The wives of Henry the Eighth may be taken as standing for the deluge of values and artefacts flowing in from outside, from "there"; America, England or France. The values and artefacts—and they could as easily be symbolized by comic books, portraits of the Queen, The Ed Sullivan Show or marches on Ottawa (!) to stop the war in Vietnam—imply that "there" is always more important than "here" or that "here" is just another, inferior, version of "there"; they render invisible the values and artefacts that actually exist "here," so that people can look at a thing without really seeing it, or look at it and mistake it for something else. A person who is "here" but would rather be somewhere else is an exile or a prisoner; a person who is "here" but *thinks* he is somewhere else is insane.

But when you are here and don't know where you are because you've misplaced your landmarks or bearings, then you need not be an exile or a madman: you are simply lost. Which returns us to our image of the man in an unknown territory. Canada is an unknown territory for the people who live in it, and I'm not talking about the fact that you may not have taken a trip to the Arctic or to Newfoundland, you may not have explored—as the travel folders have it—This Great Land of Ours. I'm talking about Canada as a state of mind, as the space you inhabit not just with your body but with your head. It's that kind of space in which we find ourselves lost.

What a lost person needs is a map of the territory, with his own position marked on it so he can see where he is in relation to everything else. Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as *our* literature, as the product of who and where we have been. We need such a map desperately, we need to know about here, because here is where we live. For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive. [. . .]

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I'd like to begin with a sweeping generalization and argue that every country or culture has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core. (Please don't take any of my oversimplifications as articles of dogma which allow of no exceptions; they are proposed simply to create vantage points from which the literature may be viewed.) The symbol, then—be it word, phrase, idea, image, or all of these—functions like a system of beliefs (it *is* a system of beliefs, though not always a formal one) which holds the country together and helps the people in it to co-operate for common ends. Possibly the symbol for America is The Frontier, a flexible idea that contains many elements

dear to the American heart: it suggests a place that is *new*, where the old order can be discarded (as it was when America was instituted by a crop of disaffected Protestants, and later at the time of the Revolution); a line that is always expanding, taking in or "conquering" ever-fresh virgin territory (be it The West, the rest of the world, outer space, Poverty or The Regions of the Mind); it holds out a hope, never fulfilled but always promised, of Utopia, the perfect human society. Most twentieth century American literature is about the gap between the promise and the actuality, between the imagined ideal Golden West or City Upon a Hill, the model for all the world postulated by the Puritans, and the actual squalid materialism, dotty small town, nasty city, or redneck-filled outback. Some Americans have even confused the actuality with the promise: in that case Heaven is a Hilton hotel with a coke machine in it.

The corresponding symbol for England is perhaps The Island, convenient for obvious reasons. In the seventeenth century a poet called Phineas Fletcher wrote a long poem called *The Purple Island*, which is based on an extended body-as-island metaphor, and, dreadful though the poem is, that's the kind of island I mean: island-as-body, self-contained, a Body Politic, evolving organically, with a hierarchical structure in which the King is the Head, the statesmen the hands, the peasants or farmers or workers the feet, and so on. The Englishman's home as his castle is the popular form of this symbol, the feudal castle being not only an insular structure but a self-contained microcosm of the entire Body Politic.

The central symbol for Canada—and this is based on numerous instances of its occurrence in both English and French Canadian literature—is undoubtedly Survival, *La Survivance*. Like the Frontier and The Island, it is a multi-faceted and adaptable idea. For early explorers and settlers, it meant bare survival in the face of "hostile" elements and/or natives: carving out a place and a way of keeping alive. But the word can also suggest survival of a crisis or disaster, like a hurricane or a wreck, and many Canadian poems have this kind of survival as a theme; what you might call "grim" survival as opposed to "bare" survival. For French Canada after the English took over it became cultural survival, hanging on as a people, retaining a religion and a language under an alien government. And in English Canada now while the Americans are taking over it is acquiring a similar meaning. There is another use of the word as well: a survival can be a vestige of a vanished order which has managed to persist after its time is past, like a primitive reptile. This version crops up in Canadian thinking too, usually among those who believe that Canada is obsolete.

But the main idea is the first one: hanging on, staying alive. Canadians are forever taking the national pulse like doctors at a sickbed: the aim is not to see whether the patient will live well but simply whether he will live at all. Our central idea is one which generates, not the excitement and sense of adven-

ture or danger which The Frontier holds out, not the smugness and/or sense of security, of everything in its place, which The Island can offer, but an almost intolerable anxiety. Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back, from the awful experience—the North, the snowstorm, the sinking ship—that killed everyone else. The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival; he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life.

A preoccupation with one's survival is necessarily also a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival. In earlier writers these obstacles are external—the land, the climate, and so forth. In later writers the obstacles tend to become both harder to identify and more internal; they are no longer obstacles to physical survival but obstacles to what we may call spiritual survival, to life as anything more than a minimally human being. Sometimes fear of these obstacles becomes itself the obstacle, and a character is paralyzed by terror (either of what he thinks is threatening him from the outside, or of elements in his own nature that threaten him from within). It may even be life itself that he fears; and when life becomes a threat to life, you have a moderately vicious circle. If a man feels he can survive only by amputating himself, turning himself into a cripple or a eunuch, what price survival? [. . .]

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Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that Canada as a whole is a victim, or an "oppressed minority," or "exploited." Let us suppose in short that Canada is a colony. A partial definition of a colony is that it is a place from which a profit is made, but *not by the people who live there*: the major profit from a colony is made in the center of the empire. That's what colonies are for, to make money for the "mother country," and that's what—since the days of Rome and, more recently, of the Thirteen Colonies—they have always been for. Of course there are cultural side-effects which are often identified as "the colonial mentality," and it is these which are examined here. [. . .]