

Perspective, Identity, and Canadian Literature

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John Harker raises an important and provocative issue: In a period of international outlook in this country, how can Canadian literature be sustained in schools as an instrument of national identity? For my purpose, I want to alter the question: In a time of international perspective, how might Canadian literature in schools inform and extend individual perceptions of national identity within a multicultural society? Three points underlie my question. First, to heighten a sense of national identity is to effect change. Second, social change is based ultimately in individuals. Third, Canada is itself an international microcosm. Because I share Harker's conviction about the potential of the arts in human life and recognize the relevance of his concern, my intention is not so much to dwell on the details of the issue he raises as to extend it.

While I am intrigued by the relationship developed between alternative Canadian perspectives – nationalism and internationalism – and the state of Canadian literature as well as Canadian identity, I want to say that both perspectives are relevant in our time. We need a sense of who we are, our own national vision or myth. However, we also cannot develop as a nation and society in relative isolation, whether politically, economically, technologically, intellectually, or socially. Though we may deplore excesses in perspective in either direction, our future is inevitably tied to both. Thus, we need to look at the alternatives as complementary. Further, regardless of whether the current perspective in this country were mainly national or international, the issue of Canadian literature in schools would require a continuing commitment.

One might illustrate the idea of such an interrelated perspective in other countries by noting their emerging acceptance of Canadian cultural artifacts. Thus, some films, television programs, and works of art are becoming known beyond Canada. In literature, the writing of Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Robertson Davies, and Margaret Laurence, among others, is receiving international recognition. These are not simply cases of individual artists "making the big time"; rather they represent

instances of other countries being both national and international in their outlook. Through this outlook, people in other cultures not only gain some extended sense of who we are; we, as well, may be enabled to see ourselves more sharply through their reflected perceptions.

These observations are not meant to lessen the seriousness of the concern that Harker expresses but to extend the context for responding to it. Thus, I return to the idea that, whatever the national perspective in Canada, Canadian literature in schools would need continuing support and development. To examine a current situation, I draw on the regional area that I know best. In the Alberta high school English program, half the emphasis within Grade 11 literature is on Canadian writing. In the literature component of five other English courses, one-quarter to one-third of the required emphasis is on Canadian works. Anthologies of Canadian poems, plays, and short stories, as well as longer works, have been authorized to support this Canadian emphasis. Whatever the perceived adequacy of this Canadian emphasis, if we recall that a generation ago some of our universities were questioning whether the state of Canadian writing warranted courses in Canadian literature, we might conclude that progress has been made.

But what if, through some miracle, official jurisdictional provisions for Canadian literature in schools matched our most ambitious hopes? What might we do with and within these provisions about literature in relation to national identity? Official sanction makes participation in Canadian literature possible. What is done and how it is done determine largely the degree to which students engage in the literature and what they take away from it. This may be the larger concern within the issue raised.

Let me probe some dimensions of this concern: Canada is a multi-cultural nation. Whether relative newcomers or descendents of earlier immigrants and of original races, collectively we carry a diversity of ethnic and cultural roots. Against this context one might ask regarding Canadian literature in schools and national identity, "Whose vision or version for whom?"

In relation to the aim that Canadian youth should know about the literature of their country, the question may not pose any difficulties. At the least, the literature can be selected, presented, taught, and explored as an area of knowledge. However, when national identity is introduced as a related element, the responses to the question become complex. At this point, one is tempted to suggest that the resolution lies either in indoctrination or in a *laissez-faire* attitude. However, such glib alternatives answer neither Harker's question nor mine.

To respond to both, we need to start from the position that each student brings to school a personal identity which incorporates both a sense of

being Canadian and an intimation of an earlier heritage, even though these may be only partly articulable: We all need to create our personal histories for an individual sense of significance and for our own survival. Students do not come to Canadian literature programs as blank pages to be written on. And if we hold that social change reposes in individuals interacting in a social context, then each must be enabled to write individually on these pages as a consequence of a personal interaction with the literature, with the teacher, and with multi-ethnic peers.

Further, as we propose that Canadian literature may be a factor in contributing to national identity – to change – within programs, we need to provide for the interaction between the background, experience, and values that each student brings and the background of experience and values that literature offers, for the progressive merging of the familiar and unfamiliar that is central to learning. And if we are to develop and confirm students as independent learners, with the prospect that theirs will be a life-long engagement with Canadian literature, then we will have to allow and encourage them to pursue individual intentions within the intentions of each program. Ultimately, and at best, though Canadian literature may contribute to what it means to be Canadian, it may contribute more to what it means to be human – to refined consciousness of human characteristics, to humane (or inhumane) values, and to the civilizing (or not) features that we share with other people in the world. This may be the real test of Canadian literature and identity. Part of the strength of Canadian literature may lie in the fact that it bridges the gap between the known and the unknown.

Against this background I want to share some thoughts relating to the continuing development of Canadian literature in schools. These ideas are not new; they arise out of my knowledge of what some teachers of English and of Canadian studies have been doing in schools.

1. An aesthetic work requires an aesthetic response. We might start in classes by structuring situations in which students respond collaboratively to Canadian literary works. In the course of such a response, they are enabled to bring their individual experiences, constructs, identities, and values to the literature. Through their interaction with the work they can begin to mediate between their world views and those inherent in the work. In their interaction among themselves they can become aware of both differences and similarities of views, based on heritage and experience, within the social group. On this base the teacher can build.
2. Within a multicultural class, in the conventional meaning, we might extend the process by inviting and encouraging students of different cultures to share their customs, their stories, and their own literature

in relation to the works being studied. In both historical and personal contexts, identity is not stable but evolving. It involves both a taking on and a giving, and, at best, an enriching and a refining.

3. To read is not enough. We need to provide a parallel and related strand of writing in which students can create their own literature and their own art-like works ranging from stories of their families, through personal literature-like responses to literature, to their own poetry, stories, and plays. Thus, within their classes, through these creations students can develop a complementary sense of literature as well as become more competent writers. As they share their work within their writing community, they may also sharpen their insights about themselves and their society.

4. Within this country, there are dazzling instances of teachers who have successfully tried such approaches as well as remarkable examples of student work that has ensued. Accounts of such practices need to be solicited, published, and shared as confirmations of the uses of literature and as instances of the means.

5. For two decades, Language Arts teachers' associations, as well as the Canadian Council of Teachers of English, have made Canadian literature part of their concern through conferences, workshops, and publications. We need to seek ways of greater co-operation, as equal partners, among the associations, teachers at all levels of education, publishers, librarians, and other interested individuals and groups.

Quantity of content is not enough. Other problems constrain creative implementation. Within the range of demands made upon the teacher by English curricula, Canadian literature has to struggle for space. Eruptions of anxiety about the state of literacy, however well intentioned or valid, tend to erode the confidence of teachers and students. The consequent apprehension may be limiting the exciting approaches to Canadian literature evolved in what Harker describes as the promising '70s and may have reduced the willingness to take informed risk in classrooms – a quality that the best teaching always demands. These and other related problems are a complementary issue that needs to be addressed if Canadian literature in schools is to flourish.

I browse through a history of a small community, one of many such books printed in Alberta during the last ten years. Off the pages flow the family stories of four generations and from 12 different countries that took root in this land. They tell of hardship and courage, success and failure, achievement and pride. Together they built schools for their children and halls for their culture. Within this small society, their stories collectively project one image of what being Canadian may mean. The

heritage of Canadian literature is important and significant for students. However, if their experience with literature is to transcend the level of knowledge to understanding, it needs to recognize the history, experience, and identity of students as well.

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