

Canadian Literature in Canadian Schools Again or Why Doesn't the Saskatchewan River Flow Eastward Any More?

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I must begin by saying how gratified I am by the comments of both Chorny and Robinson in response to my paper. Theirs are thoughtful discussions which themselves constitute significant contributions to a necessary vigilance concerning the place of Canadian literature in Canadian schools.

Where Chorny and Robinson create difficulty for me is not in what they say individually but in what they say with reference to each other. Put simply, they contradict each other and leave me in the unhappy state of having to decide whether to agree with one while disagreeing with the other, disagree with both, or ignore them entirely. I have chosen to do none of these things. Rather, I believe that the value of their combined commentary lies both, as I have said, in their individual contributions to the discussion of Canadian literature in the curriculum and, more importantly, with what the disparity between their reactions says about the place and nature of Canadian literature in our schools in terms of the issue I raised initially, an issue which continues to dominate our contemporary national history.

But first to what they have said. If I have understood him correctly, the gist of Chorny's argument runs as follows. Canada is a multicultural entity, so the necessary point of departure when establishing the place of Canadian literature in the school curriculum is a recognition of the varied cultural experience which Canadian students bring with them when they encounter literature in the classroom. He goes on to contend that this encounter is interactive, involving the learner and the text, and that to dismiss the former at the expense of the latter is unrealistic. In these terms, it is the response of the student to the text as framed by the student's personal history that is important. And, given the multicultural nature of Canadian society, this response must necessarily be in the first instance individual, local, and immediate before it can become national in

perspective. Moreover, Chorny sees growing recognition of this necessity in Alberta schools.

Not so for Robinson, however. The localism which Chorny finds essential Robinson sees as growing out of "a sense of myopic pride" and productive of nothing more than "parochial, mental inbreeding." In Robinson's view, when Canadian literature was rapidly being accepted in schools during the 1960s and 1970s, it was given credibility as literature in its own right; its validity alongside other world literatures seemed about to be established. But more recently there has emerged a self-conscious preoccupation with regional literature which Chorny sees as necessary but which Robinson finds stultifying. Local histories and local literatures are for Robinson just that – local, limited, and limiting. Robinson also does not share Chorny's belief that teachers are granting increasing validity to their students' individual responses to literature. Rather, Robinson detects a trend to "intellectualize" Canadian literature – to turn it into a subject to be studied, not a response to be experienced and lived through. For Robinson, the odour of the ink horn pervades, the response of the learner is forfeit, and the good things which Chorny finds happening in Alberta evaporate when one moves one province eastward along the course of the Saskatchewan.

What can be made of these contradictions, and how do they relate to the thesis of my original paper? First, neither Chorny nor Robinson is given to confusion regarding educational realities, and they are not, according to their own lights, confused in their commentaries here. But the contradictions between them remain and demand explanation. How is it that one sees hope in a growing awareness of students' ethnicity as a starting point toward greater national consciousness through literature while the other sees this awareness as stifling and counterproductive to a legitimate teaching of Canadian literature in schools?

It would be comforting if an explanation of these differences could forge a reconciliation, but this would be to misrepresent what Chorny and Robinson say and would lose sight of its significance. I will begin by reiterating the point I made in my original paper to the effect that our school curriculum reflects our aspirations for the future of our country. What we would have our children learn and become reveals what we would have this nation evolve into. Ours is not a desire so much to repeat ourselves as to realize our aspirations for the future through education in the present.

But our present is a Canada not of two but of many solitudes. In recent years, we have sewn together the fabric of our country where it was once rent by inequalities, distinctions, and discord between French and English

Canadians, and we have come to recognize and welcome the multicultural composition of Canadian society. However, at the same time and possibly as a result of our attention to these more visible diversities, we have remained less aware of other threats to our nationhood. These are not so much issues which divide us as a sense that as a nation we lack conviction concerning where we are in history and conceptual space (a lack of conviction which has been vividly shown recently in the Meech Lake accord where political expediency at the national level has combined with parochial self-interest at the level of the provinces to produce a disintegration of the constitutional structure of this country – all under the slogan of “political will”). The result is a combination of internationalism, wherein we look outside ourselves for identity, and intense regionalism, wherein we retreat into our immediate localities for security. On one hand, we adopt an international perspective which permits us to escape from our own national situation and encourages us to be released into a broader context which, because of its dimensions, dissipates our national awareness. But, on the other, when we return home, it is very close to home, to our region or province but not our nation.

So it is that the contradictions between Chorny and Robinson reveal a fundamental element in our contemporary national consciousness. Canadian literature, caught between regionalism and internationalism, seems in danger of falling through the cracks in our sense of national identity. It is at once threatened with becoming isolated and fragmented in regional insignificance and endangered as a subject to be studied devoid of individual meaning for students. Both conditions are alike in that they deny the possibility of an emerging sense of national reality among students in schools.

Given this situation, one would hope that it is not too grandiose a notion to suggest yet again that it might be through the study of who we are as a unique collection of people revealed by our own authors and poets that a hope for the future exists. By developing a sense of Canada as a national entity, one clearly made up of regions and their disparities but one which gains its identity from a growing consciousness among its people of the collectiveness of these regions even while recognizing their disparities, literature in schools can make a contribution to Canadian life far beyond simply providing one component in the school curriculum. Chorny is right when he says that the study of literature can be humanizing. But what remains to be determined is the nature of this humanizing, the kind of Canada and Canadians we would have as our future. This is the real topic of my original paper: it is not a paper about literature so much as one about a continuing search for national survival.