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1608-2008: The Time In-Between. Major Trends in French- and English-Canadian Prose Fiction

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag werden die großen Entwicklungslinien in der englisch- und französischsprachigen Prosaliteratur Kanadas hinsichtlich Thematik und Formgebung überblicksartig vorgestellt, wobei auch auf bestimmte zeitliche Divergenzen bei der Entwicklung einzelner Genera in den beiden Literaturen eingegangen wird. Von besonderem Interesse ist in diesem Zusammenhang das Aufkommen von Realismus und Postmodernismus in der englischen und in der französischen Prosaliteratur. Thematisiert wird ferner der Übergang von einer kolonialen zu postkolonialen Weltsicht, so wie sie sich in den literarischen Texten in beiden Sprachen manifestiert. Abschließend setzt sich der Beitrag mit dem Erscheinen einer neuen Generation kanadischer Autoren auseinander, die jeweils Angehörige von Minoritätenkulturen sind und je nach ihrer Herkunft entweder auf Englisch, wie z.B. Schriftsteller indischer oder mennonitischer Abstammung, oder – wie zahlreiche Autoren karibischer Herkunft – auf Französisch schreiben.

Résumé

Cet article présente un survol des grandes tendances thématiques et formelles qui s'observent dans la fiction canadienne de langues anglaise et française, tout en faisant valoir les différences chronologiques dans l'évolution des genres d'une littérature à l'autre. Nous nous intéresserons particulièrement à l'émergence du réalisme et du postmodernisme dans les œuvres de fiction en anglais, puis en français, et nous tenterons de situer la transition entre la vision du monde coloniale et postcoloniale telle qu'elle se manifeste dans les textes littéraires des deux langues. Nous concluons enfin sur le courant actuel des « cultures minoritaires » chez les écrivains canadiens d'aujourd'hui, en nous appuyant, d'une part et du côté anglais sur les exemples d'écrivains originaires de l'Inde ou ceux d'origine mennonite, et d'autre part, du côté français, ceux d'origine haïtienne.

The euphoria leading up to the Canadian centennial celebrations in 1967 gave rise to a movement in English-Canadian criticism proceeding from the premise that

"[...] English-speaking and French-speaking Canadians have a great deal in common, [and] they share a common mystique" (Sutherland 1977, vii); "[...] those who have read widely in both bodies of literature know that the major Quebec writers demonstrably share the distinctive themes and subject matter treated by Canadians who write in English" (Sutherland 1977, viii).

The thematic approach reflected in these quotations from Ronald Sutherland had occupied the mainstream of English-Canadian critical discourse since Northrop Frye, and in the 1970s was represented by critics like John Moss, D.G. Jones and literary icon Margaret Atwood as well as by Sutherland himself. The reductiveness of thematic criticism, in particular when applied in "comparative" studies of English- and French-Canadian literature, was pointed out by a number of other well-known Canadian critics fairly early on (Davey 1977; Blodgett 1979; Heidenreich 1989). E.D. Blodgett has suggested that the critical approaches practiced in Canada have negatively affected the reception of Canadian works abroad:

[...] one of the reasons the Canadian literatures are looked upon with a kind of benign diffidence by those unacquainted with them derives from our failure of imagination as critics. We have not been bold enough in spirit to find ways of establishing, so to speak, the context that would make them significant to imaginations formed on European cultures. (Blodgett 1984/85, 63).

Yet the thematic approach remained hugely popular and appealing to English-Canadian critics, a fact Margot Northey attributes to "[...] a growing feeling of nationalism and the desire for a recognizable cultural identity" (Northey 1976, 3). Anthony Dawson refers to "[...] the desire currently felt in Canadian academic circles for great works," a desire derived "[...] not only from literary and quasi-literary considerations but from unacknowledged ideological needs as well" (Dawson 1982, 158).

Thematic criticism as practiced in Canada can be seen as a manifestation of a colonial world view in that it canonized works it perceived as defining a Canadian society characterized by its "otherness," such as the uniqueness of the pioneer experience, the circumstances of its urbanization, its extreme climate, and its geographic diversity. While this approach, with its nationalist agenda, sought to demonstrate that Canadian literature testified to the existence of a distinctive Canadian "cultural identity," as Northey and Dawson suggest, it reinforced the colonial view by underlining the specificities of its "otherness" from an old-country perspective. In other words, the canon resulting from thematic criticism defined Canadian cultural identity in terms of contrast to and difference from the European "founding nations," implicitly acknowledging them as its operative models. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, colonial texts are marked by the fact that "[d]espite their detailed reportage of landscape, custom, and language, they inevitably privilege the centre,

emphasizing the 'home' over the 'native,' the 'metropolitan' over the 'provincial' or 'colonial' [...]" (Ashcroft/Griffiths/Tiffin 1989, 5). It was not until the emergence of an extraordinary number of "minority culture" writers on the Canadian literary scene, beginning in the late 1980s, that the thematic approach to literary criticism lost its ground. Works by writers like M.G. Vassanji and Rohinton Mistry, but also recent novels by Sandra Birdsell and Miriam Toews, exploded the traditional thematic frame of reference that had constituted the mainstream in English-Canadian criticism, which was quite simply unable to accommodate them.

What follows is an attempt to analyze generic trends and disparities in genre periodization in French- and English-Canadian prose fiction from a historical and quasi- sociological perspective rather than from a thematic one.

Historical asymmetry

It was in the 1960s and 1970s that many of the thematic reference works long seen as being definitive appeared. But attempts on the part of thematically oriented critics, literary historians and anthologists to trace symmetrical or parallel developments in the two literatures were problematic from the very beginning.

The earliest works of prose fiction to appear in the colonial territories that were to become Canada were hardly companion pieces, in terms of either theme or genre or period. Frances Brooke's *The History of Emily Montague*, published in 1769, which Norah Story identified as the first Canadian novel written in English (Story 1967, 109),¹ is just one example of the problem of periodization and attribution in colonial literature. It can be argued that this designation reflects a British bias, in that it establishes a prose work written in English as the first Canadian novel, preceding the first Canadian novel written in French by almost a century. In fact, Frances Brooke came to Quebec, where her husband was a garrison chaplain, as an adult, and spent a total of five years there before returning to England. *The History of Emily Montague* was first published in London, England. It is an epistolary novel describing life in Quebec from a distinctly British point of view.

Two French-Canadians, Philippe-Ignace Aubert de Gaspé and his father, Philippe-Joseph Aubert de Gaspé, each published a novel a few decades apart. *L'influence d'un livre* by Philippe-Ignace Aubert de Gaspé appeared in 1837 and is generally acknowledged to be the first French-Canadian novel. *Les anciens Canadiens* by Philippe-Joseph Aubert de Gaspé was published in 1863. The Aubert de Gaspé family had established itself in New France in 1655, and the novels of its descendants situate them unmistakably as emerging from directly within French-Canadian colonial society and culture.²

1 In a different entry, Story mentions that Frances Brooke was a "temporary resident" of Canada (Story 1967, 254).

2 The two French novels romanticize seigneurial life along the St Lawrence in the 18th century, incorporating legends and folklore of the region. They also present the French-Canadian perspective of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham and the consequences of the Conquest.

Throughout the 19th century, the works of the most important French- and English-speaking prose fiction writers could not have been more different. The Samuel Slick novels of Thomas Chandler Haliburton (1836) or John Richardson's *Wacousta* (1832) had no *pendants* whatsoever in French-Canadian fiction,³ whereas the French-Canadian *romans du terroir*, the best-known of which are the *Jean Rivard* novels of Antoine Gérin-Lajoie (1862-1864), depicting life in the remote rural regions of Quebec, had no counterpart in English-Canadian literature until the 1920s and 30s, in the novels of Frederick Philip Grove, Robert Stead, and Martha Ostenso. While the *roman du terroir* has been seen as belonging to a didactic genre, the *roman de mœurs*, the English-Canadian novels just mentioned can be more properly attributed to the genre of realism.

Laure Conan's *Angéline de Montbrun*⁴ (1884) stands alone in both literatures as a part-epistolary, part first- and part-third person 19th century novel whose narrative and psychological complexity has intrigued academic critics to this day (cf. Blodgett/Potvin 2006). An account of the love story of a young girl who is disfigured in a riding accident and dissolves her engagement, and the loss of whose father parallels her threatening loss of faith, the novel has been variously viewed as the story of a "beautiful soul" and its exemplary renunciation of life, as an account of the personal life of Félicité Angers, as the unconscious revelation of an Electra complex, and even as an allegory of the situation in Quebec before and after the Conquest (cf. Heidenreich 2006).

The thematic and generic differences between the two literatures can be explained by the very different issues that preoccupied writers in English- and French-Canada at the time, and the very different realities in which they lived. The French-Canadians were still trying to come to terms with the trauma of the Conquest, as evidenced in the nostalgia that constitutes the dominant tone in *Les anciens Canadiens* and that also manifests itself in the sense of loss described in *Angéline de Montbrun*, the latter attesting, as well, to the dominant role of the church in French-Canadian society. In both English- and French-Canada, there was increasing interest in developments in the United States, but while the Nova Scotian Haliburton playfully satirizes his American neighbours to the south as well as the Nova Scotian colony, the *roman du terroir* constitutes an earnest injunction to French-Canadians to remain on their land and not to heed the siren call of American manufacturers to head to the United States.

It was only with the appearance of novels that can be designated as belonging to various sub-genres of realism that English- and French-Canadian prose fiction briefly, and to a limited degree, showed certain parallels.

3 A notable exception is William Kirby's *The Golden Dog* (1877), a historical novel of New France, likely inspired by Philippe-Joseph Aubert de Gaspé's *Les anciens Canadiens*, which had been translated and published in English in 1864.

4 Laure Conan was a pseudonym. Her real name was Félicité Angers.

Realism in Canadian prose fiction

The emergence of realism in Canadian literature roughly coincided with its demise in Europe. By the beginning of the 20th century, prose fiction from Europe bore the hallmarks of interior monologue, stream of consciousness and unreliable narration, characterizing what came to be known as modernism, associated with names like Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce.

The fact that in comparison with the European literatures realism, and particularly social realism set in urban centres, appeared so late in both French- and English-Canadian prose fiction has generated a considerable degree of scholarly interest. Northrop Frye, for instance, advanced a phylogenetic theory to explain the occurrence in Canadian literature of patterns long almost obsolete in other contemporary literatures.⁵ Ben-Zion Shek, on the other hand, adopted a socio-historical perspective to explain the late emergence of social realism in the context of the French-Canadian novel (Shek 1977).

In English-Canada, realism as a genre came to be identified with the harsh realities of prairie life as represented in the novels of Frederick Philip Grove, Robert Stead and Martha Ostenso, published in the 1920s and 1930s. These novels had companion pieces in Quebec, for example in Félix-Antoine Savard's rurally set *Menaud maître draveur* (1937) and Ringuet's⁶ *Trente arpents* (1938). Urban novels of social realism, however, show fewer parallels in the two literatures. Earle Birney's *Down the Long Table* (1955), while it dramatizes conditions during the Depression of the 1930s, is framed by the social activism of the protagonists, which is set in the 1950s. Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion* (1945), on the other hand, documents the appalling conditions of the working class in Montreal leading up to the Second World War.

Thematically, the late emergence of realism, and particularly social realism, in Canadian fiction can be attributed, on the one hand, to the perceived uniqueness of the experience of life in western Canada, which in the 1920s and 1930s was still very much a pioneer society and, on the other hand, to the phenomenon of urbanization and the social problems associated with it. However, the fact remains that unlike the situation in developing tribal cultures, Canadian writers in Canada have always had access to the literatures of their respective parent cultures: they were surely aware that, in the European perspective, their works would be seen as anachronistic.

The use of narrative structures that were growing or had already become almost obsolete in Europe can be explained by a number of factors. One is that realism may have been seen to be the most effective vehicle to transmit the realities and the harshness of pioneer life (in the rural novels) and the social problems created by urbanization, particularly in Quebec. Another factor is the national consensus-

5 Northrop Frye, "The Narrative Tradition in English-Canadian Poetry" and "Silence in the Sea," both in Frye 1971. It should be pointed out that Frye is not talking about Canadian prose fiction here, but is drawing analogies between E.J. Pratt's epic poems and Old English poetry.

6 A pseudonym. His real name was Philippe Panneton.

building agenda, which can be seen to manifest itself in the relatively unambiguous narrative structures valorizing the courage and endurance of the pioneers and condemning social conditions and injustices associated with or caused by industrialization and urbanization. Yet another factor may be the “conservative ethos” referred to by Anthony Dawson, and the fact that the “overt morality” of work written in the realist vein tended to appeal to the nation-building agenda of Canadian literary institutions of the time.

The case of one of Hugh MacLennan’s novels, the much-invoked *Two Solitudes* (1945), deserves special mention in this context. As I have observed elsewhere (Heidenreich 1994), the critical reception of the novel since it was first published in 1945 is a veritable goldmine for the literary sociologist. The *Montreal Star* hailed it as a “masterpiece,” going on to say: “Truly it is impossible, in this chronicle on National Unity, not to note the generous and intelligent effort and the marvellous success achieved by a Canadian writer to help in solving our national problems” (cited in Cameron 1981, 186). As Elspeth Cameron points out, most critics, including the French-Canadians, saw in the novel “[...] a deep respect and affection for French-Canada” (Cameron 1981, 186).

It can be argued that MacLennan’s novel prefigured the symmetrical configuration imposed on French- and English-Canadian prose fiction by the adherents of thematic criticism, who saw Canadian literature as having a programmatic consensus-building function. Philip Stratford comments on the heavy-handedness of MacLennan’s didacticism in this context:

His method sets the scene for the noninitiate, suggests the scope of the story and foreshadows its theme. He [MacLennan] has frequently justified his didactic approach, stating that when he began to write it was the Canadian novelist’s responsibility to provide the reader with an historical and social frame of reference that was lacking in the literature of a young country, of the sort that writers in older cultures could implicitly rely upon. (Stratford 1986, 17)

The fact that the French-Canadian reception of the novel was so positive is astonishing, given that *Two Solitudes*, notwithstanding the parallel symmetry suggested in its title, in fact reiterates the world view of British colonialism. In his portrayal of a variety of characters from two family dynasties, one French-Canadian and one British-Canadian, there is not one French-Canadian character possessing the *Modellcharakter* that could “help in solving [Canada’s] national problems.” This role is reserved for the “English” Captain Yardley, who represents the norms and values to be affirmed. It is clear that the optimism of the novel’s ending, represented by the future union between Paul Tallard, Athanasé’s son, and Heather Methuen, Captain Yardley’s granddaughter, is based on the premise of French assimilation.

The transition from a colonial to a post-colonial world view

For whatever reasons, few Canadian prose works written in either English or French reveal the attributes characterizing modernism as a literary movement. Among the French-Canadian works, one can cite Anne Hébert's novella "Le torrent" (1950) and André Langevin's novel *Poussière sur la ville* (1953). Both writers, however, were already influenced by the modern existentialism and the *nouveau roman* that were emerging in France rather than by classic modernist models. In English-Canadian prose fiction, A.M. Klein's *The Second Scroll* (1958) and Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* (1954) are among the only novels to diverge radically from the resolutely realist mode prevalent at the time. Klein's novel, with its dominant allusive structure, inscribes itself in the Joycean tradition while Watson's straddles the Faulknerian mode of interior monologue and the hyper-consciousness of the *nouveau roman*. These texts can be perceived as post-colonial in their disregard of the perceived Canadian repertoire of norms and values, which figured so prominently in the realist novels that preceded them and most of those published contemporaneously with them.

To pinpoint the transition from a colonial to a post-colonial world view, we can look, in French Canada, to texts of the 1960s and 1970s appearing in the wake of Quebec's *révolution tranquille* and, in English Canada, to a number of highly diverse novels, most of which bear salient characteristics of the *Bildungsroman*. The French-Canadian novels in question coincided with the emergence of distinctly postmodern, metaliterary novelistic forms and will be discussed in that context. In English-language novels of the same period, however, it is in various incarnations of the *Bildungsroman* that we can trace the emergence of a post-colonial world view.

In some of these novels, the attainment of insight and self-knowledge coincides with the affirmation of the protagonist's *Canadian* identity as opposed to the mythologization of one's European descent, the home of one's ancestors. In Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974), Morag comes to realize that Canada can be "home," that where she is "from" is where she was born (415). This realization allows her to acknowledge her adoptive family and the fact that it has been growing up with them rather than the mythification of her Scots ancestry that has made her who she is.

In Robertson Davies's *Fifth Business* (1970), it is Dunstan Ramsey's war experience abroad and encounters leading to his initiation into the complex world of European religious and cultural paradigms that permit him to break out of the oppressive constraints of Deptford, which stands in for small-town colonial Canada. Although his childhood experiences remain unforgotten, and in fact determine how he experiences his adult life, his tenuous connection with his past as an adult remains upheld only through the figure of Paul Dempster alias Magnus Eisengrim, whose emancipation from Deptford has been even more radical than Dunstan's own.

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) and Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree* (1983) recount the experience of growing up in communities of visible and stigmatized minorities, Japanese-Canadian and native-Canadian, respectively, both at the mercy of a hostile British-colonial society that seeks, in different ways, to obliterate their difference. The quest for insight and self-knowledge, a typical feature of the *Bildungsroman*, is resolved in these two novels through the protagonists' obtaining documentary evidence of the attempt at the cultural erasure of their respective minority groups. The resolution, but also the quest itself, is emancipatory in both the personal and cultural sense and leads to an emancipatory activism on behalf of the protagonists' respective communities, an activism that targets above all the colonialist values that, in oppressing their culture, have stifled their personal development and identity and threatened the collective memory of their communities.

Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959) and Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness* (2004), two coming-of-age novels published 45 years apart, can be seen as literary bookends emanating from very different "ethnic" communities, one Jewish, one Mennonite. Both novels condemn the prejudices and hypocrisies of their respective communities, but while *Duddy Kravitz* illustrates the way in which an old-country ideal, which the protagonist has internalized but not understood, has been corrupted by the crass materialism of the new world, Nomi Nickel lacks the exposure to a broader community outside her own to gain true self-knowledge and a nuanced understanding of the community of which she is a product. In the two novels, it is cultural misunderstanding (*Duddy Kravitz*) and lack of experience and cultural understanding (*A Complicated Kindness*) that prevents the attainment of insight and self-knowledge of the protagonists. In these two novels, notwithstanding the fact that anti-Semitism plays a role in *Duddy Kravitz*, the protagonists are "postcolonial" in that their conflicts and inner development are determined by the constraints and deficiencies of their immediate communities rather than by a colonial superstructure.

If in English-Canadian prose fiction variations of the *Bildungsroman* lent themselves to describing manifestations of the hitherto prevailing colonial world view, another development can be seen to illustrate the patriarchal aspects of the conservative colonial hierarchy in English Canada. This was the emergence of an astonishing number of highly successful women writers. While there had always been strong female authors of prose fiction on the literary scene, among them Mavis Gallant, Margaret Laurence, Adele Wiseman and Ethel Wilson, since the early 1970s we have witnessed an explosion of women-centred narratives written by women. The list includes Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Carol Shields, Aritha van Herk, Jane Urquhart and Sandra Birdsell, to name only a few. While the works of these writers for the most part lack the feminist militancy found in some of Quebec's women writers of roughly the same generation, such as Nicole Brossard, France Théoret, Louky Bersianik or Madeleine Gagnon, they explore the everyday manifestations of patriarchy and gender difference in ways that are, arguably, equally subversive. Like

their French-language counterparts, English-Canadian women writers problematize conservative patriarchal values and illustrate symptoms of their dissolution.

Margaret Atwood's novels and short stories constitute the most overt condemnation of a society in which women are at worst objectified and at best seen as enhancing attributes of the male image. In her earlier novels, such as *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Surfacing* (1972), but particularly in her scathing dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), the protagonists' experiences and self-images derive from societal values in which misogyny is but one of the many manifestations of exploitation, marginalization and repression.

In Carol Shields's prose narratives, the feminist thrust is subtler, but Shields's use of irony and understatement is often as hard-hitting as Atwood's. Consider her short story "New Music," in which the protagonist's father is described as "adoring" his daughter, but whose "adoration was often shaded by exasperation – which one can understand." (Shields 2000, 143) One reason for the father's exasperation, presumably, is that his daughter consistently opts for "second-best": she spends years researching the life and works of the relatively obscure Renaissance composer Thomas Tallis rather than working on the famous William Byrd, which she has been encouraged to do; she opts for a wobbly, cheap table rather than a proper desk; she is "as faithful to old clothes as she is to inferior wallpaper" (Shields 2000, 146). Throughout the short story, it is obvious through a myriad of details that the heroine does not feel entitled to "the best," to write something that can lay claim to being definitive. Until the end, that is: "Yes, Byrd. Why not?" (Shields 2000, 152). Her decision, in the end, to write about Byrd, after having published the definitive work on Thomas Tallis, has consequences in the reversal of roles in the conjugal relationship. Her husband "[m]ore and more [...] tries to stay out of her way and more and more he refers to himself in the third person. He's an ordinary man, no one to make a fuss over. [...] Nevertheless he finds himself opening his ears to the new music that's overtaken the house" (Shields 2000, 153).

Alice Munro uses similar strategies of irony and understatement in many of her short stories to convey the silencing of women by the dominant men in their lives. In "The Moons of Jupiter" (1983), for instance, it is the vulnerability of her father, gravely ill and in hospital due to a heart condition that enables Janet, the protagonist, to recognize that his judgmental attitudes and his withholding of affection and approval are in large part responsible for her own crippling feelings of inadequacy, vulnerability, and rejection.

Postmodernism

Robert Kroetsch has remarked that in English-Canada, the movement from social realism to postmodernism took place within approximately two decades, namely in the 1970s and 1980s (Kroetsch 1974, 1-2), an observation also made by Linda Hutcheon in her introduction to *The Canadian Postmodern* (Hutcheon 1988). Both Kroetsch and Hutcheon acknowledge the relatively late emergence of postmodern-

ism in English-Canadian fiction, Hutcheon suggesting that this can be more plausibly explained by Canada's conservative cultural history as a colony than by a sort of literary derivativeness seen by some critics to be inherent in cultural backwaters (cf. Hutcheon 1988, 2-3).

What makes the emergence of postmodernism in Canadian writing particularly significant is the way it is interpreted in the Canadian socio-political context, that of Quebec on the one hand, and that of the rest of Canada on the other. In any literature, postmodernist writing signals an emancipation from traditional conventions. As this manifests itself predominantly in the parodic features of postmodernism, the emergence of postmodernist writing in Canada represents an emancipation in a broader sense, namely emancipation from the colonizing "parent" cultures.

In Quebec, the emancipatory function of postmodernist writing takes on a highly ideological dimension. The emergence of the self-referential, parodic novels of writers like Hubert Aquin (notably *Prochain episode*, 1965, and *Trou de mémoire*, 1968) and Jacques Godbout (for example *Le Couteau sur la table*, 1965, and *Salut Galarneau!*, 1967) coincided with the Quebec nationalist movement arising from the *révolution tranquille*. Hence the equation, in Quebec, of the revolutionary separatist movement with the artistic avant-garde in general and postmodernist writing in particular gave rise to a perception of the latter as being part of a generally emancipatory movement. Nor did this perception change with the publication of subsequent works by writers like Marie-Claire Blais (*Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*, 1965), Roch Carrier (*La Guerre, yes sir!*, 1968) and Michel Tremblay (for example, *La grosse femme d'à côté est enceinte*, 1978), whose surrealist parodying of social realism evokes the "magic realism" of Latin-American writers and their thematic and formal subversion of a genre that could not be more closely associated with the European "master narratives".

In English-Canadian prose fiction, postmodernism took a different direction. But while postmodernist writing in English Canada is not associated with emancipatory movements to the degree that it is in Quebec, it can be viewed as a form of cultural emancipation from dominant European and U.S. American models, both social and literary. Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (1966) uses a postmodernist technique of superimposing disparate and contradictory historical, mythical and philosophical constructs which takes his narrative into the realm of the fantastic and the grotesque, one that is situated at the juncture of the old world and the new. Novels like *The Studhorse Man* (1970) and *Alibi* (1983) by Robert Kroetsch use strategies of sustained allusion and cultural dislocation, strategies that simultaneously affirm and call into question the validity of European cultural paradigms in the new world. Timothy Findley uses a similar technique in *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984), a retelling of the story of the Deluge and Noah's ark. Findley's *Famous Last Words* (1981), on the other hand, uses a purported historiographic record to challenge and subvert a supposedly objective historical discourse, obliterating the distinction between what is perceived as fictive and what as real.

In more recent Canadian and *québécois* prose fiction, the tendency has been for the postmodern moment to recede, as has been the case in other literatures as well, and to give way to a movement characterized by a kind of hyper-realism, on the one hand, and a thematization of post-colonialism on the other. This new wave in prose fiction writing in Canada is due in large part to the emergence of a new generation of “minority culture” writers, some from India, North Africa, the Caribbean and elsewhere, and some from minority cultures long established within Canada.

Minority culture writers

Since the last decades of the past century, there has been an explosion of “minority culture” writers in Canada, the term “minority culture” perhaps requiring definition. I count among “minority culture” writers not only those whom Gilles Dupuis and Klaus-Dieter Ertler have identified with *écritures migrantes* (Dupuis/Ertler 2007, 13), such as Dany Laferrière and Gérard Étienne, Haitians who write in French, and M.G. Vassanji and Rohinton Mistry, both of (East) Indian origin who write in English, but also writers from “minority cultures” much longer established in Canada, the Mennonites being a salient example.

While “minority culture” writers have long manifested a presence on the Canadian literary scene, the new wave of “minority culture” writers is different in that the immigrant experience, formerly seen as a difficult process of cultural assimilation, no longer constitutes the centre of interest of their work. What characterizes these writers is rather the cultural hybridity of their protagonists. Ursula Mathis-Moser has described Dany Laferrière’s work as representing “*un univers esthétique hybride et postmoderne*” (Mathis-Moser 2007, 238). These epithets can be applied not only to French language *écrivains de la migration* but to those “minority culture” writers of roughly the same generation writing in English. It can be argued that it is this hybridity, determined not only by geographic and cultural dislocation but also by intertextuality and autoreferentiality, all of which have come to be seen as hallmarks of the postmodern, that today stand at the centre of the Canadian canon, in both English- and French-Canada.

The past decade or so has also seen the publication of a series of highly successful novels emerging from a “minority culture” long established in Canada, namely the Mennonite. Recent novels by Rudy Wiebe (*Sweeter Than All the World*, 2002), Sandra Birdsell (*The Russländer*, 2001), David Bergen (*Sitting Opposite My Brother*, 1993) and Miriam Toews (*A Complicated Kindness*, 2004) have focused, respectively, on specific periods in Mennonite history and on intercultural relations with the contemporary Canadian majority or mainstream, and although these recent works are hardly “postmodern” in terms of their narrative strategies, they tend to thematize the dislocation and marginalization that has characterized the Mennonite experience, affirming “hybridity” in a postcolonial if not a postmodern sense. Their prominence on the contemporary Canadian literary scene, along with that of the other “minority culture” writers mentioned, suggests that in 2008, in Canada, “[...] the oppressive po-

litical and cultural assertion of metropolitan dominance, of centre over margin" (Ashcroft/Griffiths/Tiffin 1989, 11), has been dismantled.

Conclusion

The demographics of large Canadian urban centres have created social and educational policy issues that will have a strong impact on Canadian culture, including literature. In Toronto, where 54% of school-aged children are non-white,⁷ there is discussion about creating Afro-centric schools. In Quebec, there has been heated discussion about allowing the wearing of the *hijab* in schools and universities. In Winnipeg, where it is predicted that by the middle of the century at the latest the population will be 20% aboriginal, large cultural institutions such as the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and the Winnipeg Symphony are thinking about ways to win subscribers from this population group, whom the Manitoba Arts Council is actively targeting with its Artists-in-the-Schools programmes. In short, post-colonialism is asserting itself in Canada with a vengeance, and its literary manifestations are already making themselves felt. In this era of economic and cultural globalization, Canada, including the way it is reflected in its literature, is a country that Europe, with its own migratory populations, may want to watch.

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