

The Wacousta Syndrome: Explorations in the Canadian Landscape

Gaile MCGREGOR

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Over the past decade, cultural analytic methodology has changed and developed such that erstwhile favoured formalism has been replaced by structuralist and post-structuralist methods. These changes have expanded to a considerable degree the scope of interpretation. No longer do we simply see the text or the image as the whole, self-contained object. No longer is the author or the artist considered a transcendent self or bearer of meaning. Rather, now, we have focused on meaning being constructed in the discourses that articulate it; meaning is found in the interactive context of reader and text. This approach greatly expands interpretation to encompass not simply the text but also both the reader's active participation and the determining role of social conditions in the process of meaning production. Context is once again vital, removed from its packing case in the attic. It is again acceptable to recognize, as we always knew, that texts read differently in different socio-cultural conditions and at different periods. Art works derive meaning in part from the conditions of reception, the specifics of context; what Hans Robert Jauss called the "horizon of reception of the audience."

In Canada, art historians and critics have tended to be conservative in defining the range of their exploration of context. Often the context of initiation of the work is emphasized, while the context of reception is neglected; thus, the whole component of dynamic interaction of text and reader is omitted or given little attention. The result

has been that few analysts have discussed works in a specifically nationalistic context, the old 1960's question of Canadian particularity has had little re-examination in the visual arts. However, *The Wacousta Syndrome* changes all of this.

McGregor introduces her concepts through a comparative examination of nineteenth-century novels: Major John Richardson's *Wacousta* is the Canadian example, while James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking* novels represent the American side. Whereas earlier analysts have emphasized the similarities between these Canadian and American books, McGregor probes deeper and identifies telling national divergences, differences especially pronounced in the way each culture views its location, the "interface between civilization and the wilderness." She discovers that while the American author puts considerable emphasis on nature, the Canadian barely evokes it. ". . . [T]he theoretical wilderness / civilization dichotomy does not operate in the Canadian book in the same way that it does in the American wilderness romance. . . . [T]he opposition between wilderness and civilization in Richardson (for certainly there still is opposition) is, rather, the opposition between centre and ground, between 'self' and 'not-self'" (p. 5). Nature in Canada is not merely ignored but often denied. This denial stems, in part, from the profound fear of nature frequently seen in numerous Canadian works, not just in novels, but also in poems and paintings.

Once McGregor has established these basic differences between Canadian and American views of nature, she spends the rest of this long book digging into expected and unexpected nooks and crannies to expose the whole question. She asks how Canadians have dealt with the methodolog-

ical, emotional and psychological implications this divergence suggests, a divergence important not simply to creative endeavours, but also, centrally, to all aspects of society. For example, we are told that the Canadian response to nature causes an "in-built ambivalence, a kind of psychic dislocation," a "self-perpetuating 'double bind' or vicious cycle spawning conceptual problems" (p. 38). We learn that it is the northern frontier, not the western frontier, as in the U.S.A., that is dominant in Canada, and that "while the western frontier is simply a culturally defined interface, the northern frontier is an existential one" (p. 59). This characteristic Canadian existentialism, however, is not straight classic existentialism, because the Canadian version omits the positive, redemptive coda. ". . . [I]t is questionable whether any kind of transcendence – religious, social, or merely 'symbolic' – is imaginatively viable in the context of the Canadian world view" (p. 82). Methodologically, creators concentrate on foreground details, on centrally placed images, on contained spaces. The result, McGregor feels, is a peculiarly Canadian box, one that is, "paradoxically, both existential and arbitrary, natural and self-created, container and frame" (p. 124).

Having defined the Canadian mythopoeitic impulse, the "box," then McGregor, like Jauss, looks at Canadian creators' responses to these conditions. She ranges over a prodigious amount of material and draws many provocative conclusions, only a few of which I can mention here. Of considerable interest is her characterization of the "Canadian symbolic ego . . . as feminine . . ." (p. 155), her identification of the predominance of a defensive Canadian stance rather than an offensive American one, and her analysis of revealing family situations. It must be noted, however, that McGregor

does not see these traits, as well as others, as being wholly negative. (At times that search for the positive seemed to me to be a bit forced. She, a Canadian, doth protest too much.) These features come together in a penetrating discussion of two of Canada's archetypal literary figures: the fool-saint and the magician. It is the first, the "fool-saint, passive, peaceful accepting, . . . [who] hold[s] the secret for escaping from the terrors of the existential world" (p. 202). The second, the magician – potentially another aspect of the saint character – the heroic, assertive mode, is most clearly exemplified by political figures: Sir John A. Macdonald, William Lyon Mackenzie King, and Pierre Elliot Trudeau. From the saint and magician thesis and antithesis McGregor finds a synthesis: the artist or self. Examining how the Canadian artist or author operates (passively and with a sense of impotence in the face of fate), the author discovers a "middle voice," an ancient Greek mechanism, and an unusual concentration on "the utter solidity yet curious vulnerability of the physical" (p. 323).

The book concludes with two chapters which draw together the various strings identified previously, to do nothing less than "to seize hold of . . . the enigma of their presence, to place them, to determine how they fit in" (p. 344). Photography, both still and moving, provides the metaphor for Canadian creators' representation of reality, their response to what is called "subjective" and "objective" modes of history. Identifying a Canadian tendency to discriminate between form and content, McGregor feels that the successful Canadian creator has normalized his relationship with history, since "while the content of a given work (symbolized by photographs) asserts the discontinuity of experience, the form (symbolized by movies) asserts a counterbalanc-

ing and palliative wholeness" (p. 400).

The final chapter considers what kind of Canadian literature emerges. Although the tragic mode seems to be on the way out generally, this book suggests that the trend is reversed in Canada.

The sense of being engulfed by an inimical universe, the emphasis on human limitation, and the covert determinism to be discerned in our literature undercut any illusion of freedom ostensibly offered by our modernity, while our suspicion of transcendence rules out both the explicitly religious and the romantic-transcendental varieties of consolation (p. 414).

Returning to the Greek example, McGregor concludes that Canadians have a "temperamental bent towards the tragic and its complement the comic vision" (p. 415). Thus, "Canadian literature inclines towards tragedy / comedy while American literature tends to be variously romantic and / or ironic" (p. 415).

The galloping synopsis of the contents of *The Wacousta Syndrome* only delineates in the barest way the breadth and scope of the thesis. I trust, however, that my synopsis does not simply outline the contents but also indicates the number of concepts and the web of their interconnections. This book is very much like an onion: you peel and peel until you are convinced that you have reached the heart of the matter, only to find that there are all sorts of other layers you never expected; this is a very dense, complex book. Another feature also makes this volume a challenging read: McGregor strove to emulate the stylistic characteristics she saw in Canadian writing. These include the anonymity of the author and the obfuscation of the author's viewpoint, since "Canadian writers . . . tend to erect a great

many barriers between the reader . . ." and the authorial stance (p. 310). McGregor succeeded well, for barriers abound. Sentences are long and convoluted and filled with jargon. Yet a conscientious reading will uncover that "magic clarity," that bridging of gaps previously considered unbridgeable, that makes this cultural analysis totally engrossing and broadly applicable.

The material covered here is primarily that of literature. Much of the discussion is based on Canadian novels of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Luckily comprehension of the argument is not predicated on previous knowledge of these books for, unless you are an unusually dedicated reader of "Can. lit.," you will not be familiar with all the material used as examples. Canadian paintings are used on a number of occasions to illustrate themes. The author discusses these works refreshingly, as a sensitive observer, not as a trained art historian or cliché-ridden critic. This book is about Canadian society, about the way we see ourselves, and the way we think we see ourselves. Too often in cultural criticism and analysis today, each element of cultural expression – literature, art, or music – is examined in isolation, with the result that both content and methodology have little connection or application to other expressive modes. This daring integration has avoided that pitfall. McGregor's scope merits admiration, her analysis emulation, and her conclusions serious consideration.

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