

# TOWARDS A GLOBALECTICAL READING OF COMPARATIVE CANADIAN LITERATURE

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**216** Taking British and American literatures as examples, and in light of Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur* proposed as far back as 1827, David Damrosch, one of the leading scholars in the field of World Literature, in one of his articles in 2010, problematizes the notion of national literatures. Exploring the question of world literatures versus national literatures, Damrosch laments that "we have habitually construed our national traditions in narrow and inconsistent terms, playing a double game of language and geography that has policed internal and external boundaries alike." He further contends that "for nations in which various languages were spoken, creating this equation [between nation and national language] meant marginalizing the minority languages or repressing them outright" (27). Canadian literature can certainly be read as a case for this argument as the question of Canada's national literary space is complicated by issues of migration, language and multiculturalism, and Canadian writers writing in non-official languages have been marginalized.

Thus, in this brief article I focus on a narrower area of Comparative Literature: Comparative Canadian Literature. At a time when Comparative Literature and language programs in Canada are struggling to survive, the argument that I make in this short piece may run counter to trends, but is therefore all the more pressing. Historically Comparative Literature has faced resistance, and the notion of the 'death of the discipline' has been circulating for over a decade. Thus far, the discipline has not perished, and it is with the hope of not only its survival, but its increasing relevance, that I argue that we, the scholars of Comparative Canadian Literature, need to move forward in a direction that will allow us to acknowledge the existence of lesser-known writers who have called Canada home and continue to write in their heritage languages. In fact, Canadian literature is rich in linguistic diversity and cultural complexity in ways that have yet to be fully recognized by the body of accompanying

literary criticism. Nonetheless, the discipline of Comparative Literature in Canada has typically focused on the study of English and French Canadian literatures.

A cursory look at Canadian literature anthologies and university syllabi reveals that Canadian literature is studied and taught predominantly in two official languages, with an occasional nod to literatures in aboriginal languages. It may be time for Canadian comparatists to read Canadian literature globalectically. Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his recent article suggests that "the globalectical approach is...a method of both organizing and reading literatures: any text can lead the reader from the 'here' of one's existence to the 'there' of other people's existence and back. In organizing the teaching of world literature, a reader should start from wherever he or she is located" (42). Thiong'o further argues that "a globalectical imagination also calls for changes in attitudes to languages: monolingualism suffocates, and it is often extended to mean monoliterature and monoculturalism" (42). In this context, we could expand our comparative study to what remains unexplored within Canada.

Canada's policy of bilingualism has constructed an environment of linguistic hegemony: English and French enjoy official status, which relegates other languages to the margins. If Comparative Literature programs require students to study disparate literatures and cultural texts, where is this same diversity located in the national context? In other words, where do heritage-language cultural texts fit into Canadian definition of its own national literature and its multicultural socioscope? In the scholarly world, some journals have recorded the Canadian literary activity in heritage languages. For example, *Canadian Fiction Magazine* (see issue numbers 36 and 37), *Exile*, and *Canadian Ethnic Studies* have published special issues providing details about authors writing in other languages. Also, Watson Kirkconnell, from 1937 to 1965, reviewed Canadian literature in languages other than French and English annually in the *University of Toronto Quarterly*. But other than these specific instances, there has been relatively very little scholarly production in this area. In fact, Canada has a vivid history of authors writing in non-official languages; some of these authors were established and well-known in their own countries before they moved to Canada.

While doing my research on Canadian literature in South Asian languages, I found that writers in Canada have created works in various languages including German, Polish, Ukrainian, Hungarian, Italian, Arabic, Russian, and many more.<sup>1</sup> Canada has seen a rich mix of authors writing in their heritage languages: Joseph Škvorecký, Pablo Urbanyi, Nicolas Prychodko, Mykhailo Petrovsky, Arved Viirlaid, and Saad Elkadhem, among others. My research has focused on literatures in Hindi, Gujarati, and Urdu. Writers of South Asian origins in Canada have also been producing literature in Punjabi, Bengali, Tamil and other languages. Some of the South Asian Canadian authors penning in non-official languages include Jay Gajjar and Smita Bhagwat writing in Gujarati, Suresh Goyal and Manoshi Chatterjee writing in Hindi, and Ikram Brelvi and Ashfaq Hussain writing in Urdu. These writers have published novels, short stories, poetry collections, essays and plays. They are recognized authors

in their culturally specific communities in Canada and abroad. However, the majority of Canadian authors writing in non-official languages have very little financial support, if any, and thus have to often publish either in community newspapers in Canada or outside of Canada: most of their books are published by off-shore presses for cost effectiveness and then brought back to Canada for distribution via different community networks.

Yet, literary history in Canada has taken very little note of the heritage language literatures. This lack of attention is partly due to the argument about the very definition of Canadian literature. The difficulty of defining Canadian literature has stemmed from the debate about the nation, which has been constituted as multicultural, but bilingual.<sup>2</sup> Jars Balan, in 1982, noted that “undoubtedly the most significant gap in our knowledge is Canadian literature in languages other than English or French, which has been excluded from most discussions and assessments of Canadian letters” (ix). Comparatists could fill the gap. But, of course, there are challenges. David Damrosch, in a discussion with Gayatri Spivak, speaking of world literature, recently asserted that “The three intertwined problems are that the study of world literature can very readily become culturally deracinated, philologically bankrupt, and ideologically complicit with the worst tendencies of global capitalism. Other than that, we’re in good shape” (456). This is certainly true of Canadian literature as well. In a capitalist economy based on marketability, works of the lesser-known writers do not get published or translated. Then, there are the larger, much more complex issues such as the constant questioning about the value of arts and humanities education and eroding funding. Canadian universities have been moving towards corporatization, and in this paradigm language programs have not been doing well for many years, and many have closed; if our students cannot study languages, then the next generation of scholars cannot read literatures in various languages, leading to the continued marginalization of literatures in minority languages. However, this provides all the more reason for us to continue resisting the closures and promoting and demanding the importance of language education for our students and faculty.

Assessing and compiling literatures in a number of languages can be a daunting task, but certainly one worth undertaking. India provides us with an example of how this might be done on a national scale. Indian literature is produced in a number of languages and cross-linguistic translations are encouraged through funding and awards provided by various literary academies. Canadian writers, translators and scholars need to push for more funding to encourage more literature in heritage languages and translations of those works. Comparatists will need to be involved in translation projects, putting to use their multilingual talents. Availability of translations will allow Canadian literary historians to take note of the heritage language literature, and provide instructors at all levels of Canadian education the possibility to teach these works in classrooms, this all being part of a process of canonization. Comparatists are also well situated to write about heritage language literature in scholarly journals. Canadian journals focusing on Comparative Literature could

help draw attention to this literature by publishing reviews of Canadian literature in minority languages, and thus reestablish the tradition that Kirkconnell started in the early twentieth century.

Limiting the vision of Canadian literature merely to those texts written in English and French places non-productive limits on the vision of a nation-state where literature is produced in many languages and where in 2011 approximately one-fifth of Canadians, or 6.8 million people, reported a mother tongue other than English or French (Statistics Canada 13). We cannot speak of trans-Canadian literature and moving beyond the national borders until we have fully recognized what lies within our borders. Sure, let's study literatures from around the world, but let's also not forget the world at our doorstep. After all, if comparatists don't acknowledge and study the richness of Canadian literature in all its incarnations, who will?

## NOTES

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1. See Batts.
2. These are much broader issues by themselves, and beyond the scope of this short article.

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