

Language and the Literary Institution: Hungarian-Canadian Examples

Language is the basis of social interaction which, in its turn, is the basis of social structure. This is the elevated theory on which my paper relies. Pedestrian truth as it may be, the evolving interest in Canadian multilingual literature brings home the message that pedestrian truths can indeed be complex.

Consider this fact: up to the present time, half a dozen reports commissioned by the Secretary of State Multiculturalism prove the existence of Canadian literature written in the Hungarian, Spanish, Polish, Italian, Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati and Sinhalese languages. By country of origin, these reports deal with Canadian authors born in Hungary, Poland, Italy, India, Pakistan and seven Hispanic countries, namely: Spain, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Columbia, Ecuador and Puerto Rico (which is, by its official status, not a country). More studies are upcoming. These reports confirm that it is not unwarranted to talk about a Canadian national literature written in dozens of languages. To my knowledge, however, most of these reports (including my own on Hungarian-Canadian literature) are biographical or work-centered and only briefly deal with institutional matters. The evident practical barrier that the different languages represent isolates these Canadian literatures and makes their individual institutional structure almost inaccessible to 'outsiders.' Each of the cultural groups from which these literatures stem, and for which they are written, has its own network of literary institutions: publishers, newspapers and media, and furthermore, the grapevine — that is, oral information about literary life which is one of the most important aspects of any literary institution. All of these mini-structures based on as many languages are unexplored, unmapped *terrae incognitae*.

The paradox of this isolation and ignorance is the more amazing as Canada's multilingual literatures seemingly have so many relations. In my recent book on Hungarian-Canadian literature, I suggested a pentagonal model to illustrate these relations, tying any Canadian literature to:

- world literature,
- the literature of the country of origin,
- the national literature of the new country,
- the other immigrant literatures of the new country,
- and, the literature of the same language group produced in other countries.¹

The problem, however, is that language is a decisive factor in the consideration of each of these extensions. Language is, of course, a means of identification which is an extremely important symbolic action for the immigrant. As long as we only talk about the individual usage of language, this is quite obvious. Identification is, however, a prerequisite of the existence of language-based institutions as well.

In the case of Hungarian-Canadian literature, experience shows that a strong division exists in its self-definition with regard to language. Briefly, this can be summarized thus: once you write in English, you may be a Canadian writer of Hungarian origin, but not a Hungarian-Canadian. This is a common wisdom within the group, and an emotional one at that, countering logical arguments. By definition, there exists a Hungarian-Canadian literature in the English language. It has produced classics such as John Marilyn's *Under the Ribs of Death*² and boasts experts like the librarian-critic John Miska. This offshoot, however, has never been accepted by the Hungarian community as its own. (By the way, this rejection also characterizes the culture of origin — Marilyn's novel, unlike Anglo- or French-Canadian ones, has not been translated and published in Hungary.) This mentality is also evident in the reading preferences of the group. The only remaining Hungarian book dealer in Toronto keeps nothing more than token supplies of the few Hungarian-Canadian publications which have been written, or translated, into English, since its customers are simply not interested in them. This reliance on language is exploited by the country of origin which has, after decades of rejection, eventually found it best to claim her émigré writers as her own, but discourages hyphenation, allowing perhaps such liberty in defining Hungarian-Canadian literature as 'Hungarian literature written in Canada.'

A crucial aspect of the literary institution is the reading public. How sizeable is this among Hungarian Canadians? According to the 1981 census, there were 116,395 Hungarian Canadians living in Canada.³ Of these, 83,275

- 1 George Bisztray, *Hungarian-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: U of Toronto P 1987) 6.
- 2 John Marilyn, *Under the Ribs of Death* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1957).
- 3 1981 Census of Canada Vol. 1, part "Ethnic Origin," table 1.

identified themselves as Hungarians by mother tongue,⁴ and 34,235 still used Hungarian as their primary everyday language of communication.⁵ The current literary segment of the community numbers 65, meaning that roughly 1 out of every 527 persons who actively use the language has published poems, short stories, or novels in his mother tongue, in periodicals, anthologies, or books. (Many of these publications appeared abroad, probably indicating, if indirectly, the particular difficulties of publishing Hungarian works in Canada, whether real or imagined.) The rate of active, practised literacy is not only impressive, it is also disproportionate. We may deduce that there are hardly enough *per capita* readers for each writer. Yet, Hungarian-Canadian authors apparently never cease to wonder why their works are not more widely read. (I'll leave the question of quality and general interest out of this discussion.)

While some of these authors may bear a grudge against the (supposedly) indifferent Hungarian-Canadian reading public, the confines of this circle provide virtually the only comfort and acknowledgment to them. The size of the local group itself is essential for the continuous literary activity of Hungarian-Canadian authors. From the years between 1951 and 1985, I was able to identify 76 writers (some of them now deceased) who resided in this country and published with some regularity in the traditional genres of belles lettres in Hungarian. Out of these 76 writers, 32 reside, or resided, in Toronto or its vicinity within a 100 km radius. Although I was unable to find sufficient personal data about 23 of the 76 writers, we may assume that some of these were also Toronto residents. At any rate, with 32 authors out of 76, Toronto takes a 42% share of the concentration of Hungarian-Canadian authors in this country. This share corresponds to the relative concentration of Hungarian Canadians in the Toronto area. According to the 1981 census there were 35,050 residents in Toronto and four other urban centres in the vicinity (Guelph, Hamilton, Kitchener and area, St. Catharines-Niagara) whose mother tongue is Hungarian.⁶ Relative to the national total of the same category (quoted above), the ratio of this group is 42%.

Even more striking are the publishing statistics. According to my data, between the early 1950's and 1985 129 volumes of Hungarian-Canadian literature were published, several of these not in Canada but in the United States or overseas. However, out of the 129 volumes 83 (or 64%) were published in Toronto or its vicinity. Counting only the volumes published in Canada, the percentage is even higher: 73%, that is, 83 out of 113.

While the role of Toronto in the development of Hungarian-Canadian literature is overwhelming, this segment of Canadian literature is in all conceivable respects an urban phenomenon. Aside from a few writers living in Toronto's rural surroundings such as Ennismore and Stouffville, all other Hungarian-Canadian authors of the post-war decades reside/d in cities: six in Montreal, four in Ottawa and Winnipeg each, two in Calgary and Vancouver each, and one in Kingston, London, and Saskatoon, respectively. At the same time, not more than 60% of Canadians whose mother tongue is Hungarian currently live in the eight cities where their authors reside/d (one can but assume that the percentage was about the same in previous decades). There should surely be reasons for such strong concentration of the Hungarian-Canadian literary institution. If statistics do nothing else but verify the obvious, so will the sociological speculations below, at least to some extent.

Since Hungarian-Canadian literature is a post-World War II phenomenon, its evolution coincided with the arrival of the 'displaced persons' of the war in the early nineteen-fifties, who were soon followed by the mass immigration of the refugees of the revolution of 1956. To make the picture complete, we should note that the immigration from Hungary has been going on, although on a small scale, since the early 1960's. The whole post-war Hungarian immigration made Toronto the city of the largest Hungarian concentration in North America.

How does the size of the community contribute to the development of literature? It is a seemingly unsophisticated but by no means irrelevant assumption that statistical probability may have something to do with the manifestations of the literary talent, inasmuch as there is an increased chance of literary ambition among a larger number of population. While this assumption is just too obvious indeed, one can demonstrate that a significant concentration of one nationality results in a more complex organizational infrastructure, which in its turn is related to four interconnected phenomena:

1. In a larger community, the writer may find more encouragement and feedback from his friends, readers, or audience. For all their uniqueness and integrity, the three truly significant Toronto poets: George Faludy, Ferenc Fáy (d. 1981), and Tamás Tűz, were/are symbols in the eye of the local Hungarian community.
2. More heterogeneity of a community (which is predictably correlated with its size) means a higher statistical chance that a writer eventually finds readers or audience who share his specific values, whether he is an experimentalist, a moralist, a source of entertainment, of nostalgia, and so on.
3. In a larger group, there is a greater probability for the demand that literary consumption be institutionalized. Consequently, publishers (of journals and books) may be able to make a living. Also, book distribution

4 *Census*, part "Mother Tongue, Official Language, and Home Language," table 1.

5 *Census*, table 6.

6 *Census* vol. II, part "Population: Ontario," table 1.

(through bookstores and libraries) contributes to the feeling in the individual writer that he is doing something socially meaningful.

4. If there is a certain number of writers who find either shared cultural interest, or a shared economic or political interest, with each other, they may establish a formal or informal writers' association. Through acknowledged self-representation, such associations may receive societal support, such as government grants for anthologies or individual publications. In the late 1970's and early 1980's a Canadian-Hungarian Authors' Association had its headquarters in Toronto. It had over thirty members from the whole country, but mostly from the Toronto area. Between 1977 and 1983 the Association published five anthologies of its members' writings.

Clearly, there is a correlation between demographic, lingual, and institutional factors generating the development of the literature of a given Canadian cultural group. Beside the size of the nurturing community, however, the density of this community is another significant factor. Early 20th century rural forms of Hungarian-Canadian writing were also produced in tightly knit, albeit small, Hungarian communities, notably at Békevár, Saskatchewan (now called Kipling). If it is true that many immigrants tend to share a feeling of loneliness and alienation in the acculturation process, then the individual will probably feel little inclination to express himself in mother-tongue writing if he is isolated from others who use the same language and whom the writer perceives, maybe erroneously, as potential readers. In short, both the size and the concentration of a cultural group are directly correlated with the development of its literature in the mother tongue.

No research has been conducted as yet about the Hungarian-Canadian literary institution. When I prepared my report, however, for the Multicultural Directorate ten years ago (which later formed the basis of my more recently published book), I approached fifteen Hungarian-Canadian authors with a questionnaire and interviewed each of them. Some of their answers are directly, if only subjectively, related to their experience with the literary institution of their group — occasionally, also with the Canadian literary institution. (Again, the use of language is instrumental in the evaluation of both attitudes.) No updating of the original interviews has taken place since. Consequently, the following references by the authors to the literary institution may not entirely reflect the present situation.⁷

We can divide the full sphere of references to the literary institution into a more limited and a wider sphere. The former refers primarily to the situation within the respective language group (Hungarian-Canadian, as the case is); the latter, to the authors' attitude (or, if generalized, the group's attitude) toward the Canadian literary institution. The role of heritage languages in the former group is the more obvious, as language is the primary factor of group cohesion. In the latter relationship, the opposition of ancestral (Hungarian) and official (English and French) languages is the criterion that determines the value and relevance of responses.

Among the intra-group aspects, the effect of the mother-tongue institutions on the author is particularly striking. Thirteen authors read the Hungarian language press regularly, although these publications come mostly from Hungary, secondarily from countries other than the North American ones, and only in the third place are they printed in North America. Group solidarity among the authors is highly developed: fourteen kept in regular touch with other North American Hungarian writers, although only six felt that they belonged to some (informal) literary group, and only four had regular contact with (periodical) publishers. On the other hand, when the question of group solidarity became interconnected with an inquiry into the author's artistic integrity, they gave responses demonstrating a tendency toward dissociation from the group — a tendency that traditional literary criticism would label as 'artistic individualism.' Only five respondents identified their artistic aims with those of any Hungarian, Canadian, or other literary group or movement; this number almost coincides with those who associated with literary groups. To the question: "[Primarily] for whom do you write?" six authors answered that they wrote for themselves, five for "all Hungarians" in the world, four for "everyone" (notwithstanding the language barrier); only one wrote for "emigrant Hungarians," and none for Hungarian Canadians specifically. While all respondents agreed that North America's Hungarian community was ideologically heterogeneous, this (potentially conflict-laden) circumstance did not, in their admission, influence their literary activity.

Only one question was directly related to institutional values of the Hungarian-Canadian writers' community. Respondents were asked to rank three traditional functions of literature. The majority regarded the moral function of literature as the most significant, followed by communication, and enjoyment. Obviously, the wish to bequest the inherited values, and secondarily, the acquired experience, far outdid the attempt to cultivate 'pure' literature, or gain success through entertainment. One may but assume that this order of priorities reflects a traditional view of the functions of literature which may be the opposite of the priorities of the North American reading public. Control data to corroborate the conjecture are nonexistent, however.

7 Text of the questionnaire and the tabulation of the responses appeared in my book on Hungarian-Canadian literature, 79-84. In the tabulation, totals of answers occasionally do not agree with the total of respondents, as more than one answer was accepted to certain questions.

As we have seen, the responses Hungarian-Canadian authors to the often interrelated questions show an erratic pattern, revealing a good deal of contradictions and confusion about the self-definition of both authors and their group. Cohesive trends are counterbalanced by responses indicating unwillingness to take sides. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of writers regarded criticism as an important receptive and moderate institution. This appreciation of criticism referred to a hypothetical institution, however, since all but one respondent found no established Hungarian-Canadian literary criticism existing to give them credit and feedback. Sources of criticism were given as other writers, family members, and random individual opinions of community readers, in this order. Again, no control data are known to me to determine whether a healthy and influential critical institution does (or can) exist in the literary life of any Canadian language group.

As it has been mentioned earlier, the group does not function and interact as a self-sufficient entity only, but has developed various ties with other groups — notably, the mainstream Hungarian and Canadian literary establishment. A major dilemma of these infrastructural group contacts is the hypothetically easier access to publishers in Hungary than in Canada, because of the generally shared use of the same language with the country of origin. Roughly half of the interviewees had already published in Hungarian journals and periodicals by 1979, and even those who had not, would have liked to do so, with one exception. Interestingly, the majority of the authors also tried their luck in the Canadian media. They also attempted writing in English, although very few individual bibliographies demonstrate success in publishing anything in English.

Responses to the questionnaire prove that individual Hungarian-Canadian authors have repeatedly tried to identify with the two major groups that they can logically belong to (that is, the Hungarian and Anglo-Canadian literary institution), although as a collective they were not entirely successful with the first group, and failed with the second. Beside the natural desire to communicate with a reading public, also success (implicitly assuming recognition beyond the confines of the cultural group) was somewhat important among the ambitions of most authors. Satisfaction with one's work and social prestige attained through literature appeared in equal proportion as the main indicators of success. Four authors made no secret of the fact that material aspects did, in principle, also have some weight.

Did the Canadian literary establishment appreciate the zeal of Hungarian-Canadian authors to participate? Responses to questions inquiring into publishing conditions prove very minimal appreciation. Of the fifteen writers (all but one of whom had one or more volumes in press or production at the time of the interviews) only one received a publication grant; two received subsidy from their publisher (probably Hungarian-Canadian). All but one

stated that lack of funds prevented them from publishing more of their works. Two respondents categorically and three conditionally, believed that the Canadian government should support their publishing and/or creative activity. A measurable distrust of the chance of being fairly represented by organizations appears from responses to a question about the kind of government support. The authors stated that grants should be awarded directly to individual writers or publishers with good manuscripts on hand, but not to (cultural or social) associations. In spite of their failure at participating in the institutionalized Canadian literary scene, Hungarian-Canadian writers felt, by a slight margin, that they would be able to contribute to Canadian literature, the limited diffusion of their mother tongue notwithstanding.

As we have seen, the modest success of the Hungarian-Canadian authors at establishing literature as an institution within their cultural group was by no means matched with the recognition of the Canadian literary establishment. If nothing else, the much more distinguished success of the same authors at creating a quantitatively and — even more importantly — qualitatively impressive literature, makes Canada's cold shoulders very hard to take. The result is that lingual in-breeding is still the only form of artistic expression available to these authors. They even enjoy some protection within the confines of such a narrow circle and may find comfort in the occasional favourable review which appears in the Hungarian-language press. If anything is printed about their works in the Hungarian-Canadian press, it is likely to be appreciative. Naturally, some of them deserve this appreciation, while others would need genuine criticism, guidance or even discouragement. At any rate, with no alternative, our authors — who are tied to their language amidst a confusing system of encouragement and rejection — will certainly stay within the strictures of the literary system of this language group.

While the average Hungarian-Canadian author — the 'ideal type' — may have stopped wondering about the paradoxes of Canadian literary life or would never comprehend them anyway, it is still worth mentioning at least one, super-paradox. With this, we have arrived at the other side of the issue: the place of Hungarian-Canadian literature *vis-à-vis* Canadian institutions.

The essence of this paradox is the conflict between enlightened pioneering governmental plans and the rigidity of existing institutions. While it is not my intention to compare the wisdom of the federal government to the idealist rationalism of Frederic the Great, Peter the Great, Joseph II of Austria, Portugal's Marqués de Pombal, or Denmark's Struensee, nevertheless, I think there is at least one similarity between the two. Like Europe's enlightened rulers and politicians, Canadian multicultural policy established ideals which were far ahead of the contemporary state of public

consciousness and provided opportunities whose implementation often has, or will be, stranded on the pettiness and/or inflexibility of Canadian cultural institutions.

Consider multilingual national literature. The Multiculturalism Directorate has, for a number of years, supported different Canadian literatures with translation and publication grants, through aid for promotion and distribution, by making it possible for writers to meet amongst themselves and with their readers. As early as 1978, it helped the Hungarian-Canadian community establish a Chair of Hungarian Studies at the University of Toronto to disseminate knowledge about Hungarian language and literature in Canada. In 1984 at a conference in Ottawa, the idea was conceived that Canadian national literature should be re-written to include the existing literatures of all cultural language groups.⁸

Were these generous, and often expensive, steps successful? Success can hardly be measured by the attitude of the reading public. Alas, this attitude is as unpredictable as it can be. Measuring success by its impact on two major institutions: the publishing and information media and the academy, the answer is rather negative. Two decades after launching multiculturalism and (implicitly) multilingualism, the mainstream Canadian literary establishment has not shown any convincing signs of change. It is questionable whether the universities, as so-called depositories of human resources where scholars of all languages can be found, have fared better.

Clearly, if you do not write in English or French, you are still not a Canadian author. At the present time, there are no journals, handbooks, or other sources which would provide balanced and up-to-date information about the developments of different Canadian literatures and their institutions (such as: which newspapers regularly publish literature, who are the publishers, associations and their officers, or the literary experts). One may, of course, recall that the 1983 edition of the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* actually printed several articles on individual 'ethnic' writers. The criterion, however, was that these writers wrote in one of the official languages. According to the *Companion*, Hungarian-Canadian literature consisted of four authors: George Jonas, John Marilyn, and Robert Zend — all three wrote in English — and the widely translated George Faludy. This same Hungarian-Canadian literature, like the Polish-Canadian, was not acknowledged with an individual entry in the 1985 edition of the *Canadian Encyclopedia*, which did print articles on German, Italian, Jewish, and Ukrainian-Canadian literature, to name a few. Once a selective cultivation starts, it is perpetuated and eventually canonized by other

publications. Three anthologies of multicultural Canadian literature in English translation, published in the 1970's, have invariably printed pieces by Faludy, Jonas and Zend only, implying that no other Hungarian-Canadian writers deserved general public attention.⁹

Another institution which is concerned with literature is the academy. While at several universities individual courses deal, at least partially, with the literature of selected cultural groups in Canada, courses that discuss major literary achievements in several non-official languages exist only as exceptions.¹⁰ Among university disciplines, Canadian Literature would be the most natural to study the non-English/non-French literatures. Unfortunately, university calendars normally do not include detailed course descriptions. Therefore, it is impossible to find out without extensive inquiry how many of the currently offered courses have multicultural components. If Canadian Literature has lived up to logical expectations, fine. If not, however, as an academic discipline it has no defense against a charge that it still only represents an arch-conservative, pre-multicultural attitude towards its subject matter.

Comparative Literature, while less frequently found in university curricula than Canadian Literature, could be a substitute for the latter in assuming the study of multilingual Canadian Literature. Comparative Literature, however, has its own identity problems. Its traditional canon, rooted in the literature of hardly more than half a dozen European countries plus the United States, is clearly unfavourable towards accepting the degree of pluralism that multilingual Canadian literatures pose. Today an opposite tendency: denial of canons and assertion of value relativism is rampant in our field. It is ethically questionable, however, whether the desire to study Canadian literatures comparatively should exploit the present anarchy. The integration of multilingual Canadian literatures into the field of Comparative Literature should happen without compromising general aesthetic norms.

Last but not least, we should examine the disciplines which have so far made the best use of Canadian literatures in non-official languages: namely, those extensions of both history and social science that focus on the process of immigration to, and settlement in, Canada. Unlike history and sociology in general, Canadian immigration and ethnic studies have extensively explored immigrant literatures in search of pertinent references. Though appreciative of the pioneering effort of our colleagues in history and

9 Cf. *Made in Canada*, eds. D. Lochhead and R. Souster (Ottawa: Oberon Press 1970); *Poets of Canada*, eds. V. Coleman and S. Mayne (Buffalo: Intrepid Press 1969); *Volvox*, ed. M. Yates (Port Clements: Sono Nis Press 1971).

10 Professors Padoisky (University of Ottawa), Palmer and Rasporich (University of Calgary) have informed me that they teach such courses.

8 Proceedings of this conference were published in *Canadian Literature, Supplement 1: A/Part* (May 1987).

sociology who first called academic attention to Canadian multilingual literature, the study of this literature cannot be integrated into ethnic studies. There are too many methodological and value differences between literary and socio-historical studies as we know them in their present form. Let me provide three examples.

In ethnic studies, we often encounter the term 'immigrant experience' or 'Canadian content.' From the perspective of these disciplines, the two terms refer to interesting content data: events, characters, or settings. For most literary scholars, however, the same plot elements may appear as pedestrian, self-evident platitudes. That is not to say that literature does not carry social information. However, this information should be sought beyond the obvious phenomena. How and when irony as one form of alienation from the traditions and institutions of the old country appears in the development of any given Canadian literature is one such example of socially valid literary evidence. Hungarian tradition, for example, has long revered folk literature, yet in the 1970's the Hungarian-Canadians, László Kemenes Géfin and György Vitéz, repeatedly mocked folksiness in their poetry, thereby distancing themselves from the tradition. How and when the awareness (possibly latent) of aesthetic quality appears as a notion in any Canadian literature, and how this phenomenon is correlated to the evolution of this literature as an institution, may be yet another example. A good knowledge of language and cultural tradition are indispensable for such analyses.

Also unacceptable from a literary point of view is the indiscriminate use of the term 'ethnic' in socio-historical texts to denote non-English/non-French-Canadian literatures. On previous occasions I have repeatedly taken issue with this term, suggesting to reserve it only for the earliest stage of any Canadian literature, but never use it to denote the whole body of Canadian literature written in non-official languages.¹¹ In my aforementioned book, I also suggested certain criteria to determine whether any literature was still in its ethnic phase or had developed into a more complex, historically and aesthetically self-aware institution (*Hungarian-Canadian Literature*, 11-13). As useful as 'ethnic' is as a historical category, aesthetically it denotes a naive, primitive, shapeless sort of writing which is an embarrassment to all but socio-historians.

Finally, there is a tendency among socio-historians to separate the history of the immigrant cultural groups from their overseas background. My understanding is that this tendency is not a dominant one, but official

11 Cf. e.g. "How Long Is An 'Ethnic' Ethnic?" (unpublished paper, read at the Conference on Central and East European Ethnicity in Canada, University of Alberta 1983); *Al/Part*, 112-3; cf. also *Hungarian-Canadian Literature* 13-15, with reference to Hungarian-Canadian literature only.

multiculturalism shares it. As a literary scholar, however, I cannot imagine writing about Hungarian-Canadian literature without implicitly writing about Hungarian literature and culture at the same time. Immigrant cultures cannot be torn away from their organic historical context — their past — or we will never be able to appreciate their evolution in the new country.

Clearly, the history of the literary institution in Canada should be based on research, not personal observation. It is time, however, that some institutions undertake the enormous task of sponsoring and producing such an integrated history. By all indications, Canadian literatures written in languages other than English or French are as much first-generation phenomena as is immigration. For example, after spectacular development in the 1960s and 1970s (in this latter decade, 56 individual volumes by Hungarian-Canadian writers were published, not to mention anthologies), the past ten years have resulted in considerable stagnation in Hungarian-Canadian literature. Perhaps it is doomed eventually to wither away along with that of other cultural groups. Would it not be a pity if these small worlds perished unrecognized?

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JOSEPH PIVATO

Italian-Canadian Writing: A Polysystem

Italian-Canadian writing is part of several systems which can be described in historical, social, literary and linguistic terms. Italian-Canadian writing has close ties with immigrant culture; this includes the specific experiences of Italian immigrants and the general history of world migrations. Thus this literature can be approached by way of the social sciences of literary anthropology, or the sociology of literature, or ethnic studies. In terms of the literary systems, Italian-Canadian writing can be examined as a new literature that is being evaluated by both readers and critics. In the context of Canadian literatures, Italian-Canadian writing can be explored in the light of contacts and interference with English, French and Italian literatures. In the systems of world literatures we could consider if there is an Italian literature outside of Italy.

In order to get some sense of Italian-Canadian writing in terms of polysystems theory we will briefly consider two aspects: the social-literary dimension of critical recognition, and the cultural context of the immigrant experience and oral folklore. We must also keep in mind that Italian-Canadian literature has been written and published in English, in French, in Italian and in some dialects, and thus has a linguistic complexity that would seem to lend itself to a polysystems approach.

RECEPTION

As a recognizable body of writing, Italian-Canadian literature did not exist before 1978. That year two books appeared: Pier Giorgio Di Cicco's *Roman Candles: An Anthology of Poems by Seventeen Italo-Canadian Poets*, and Frank Paci's novel, *The Italians*. The initial shock of disbelief over the publication of these books soon gave way to serendipity with the realization that a distinguishable body of work was being produced, writing that was speaking for a group of people who, up to that time, had remained silent and invisible in mainstream Canadian society. It is no small irony that in Québec Marco Micone produced the play entitled, *Gens du silence* (1979) to describe these people. We soon discovered that there were writers of Italian