

Thematic Cluster / Groupe thématique d'articles

(Re)Vision(s) of Canadian Literature(s)
(Ré)vision(s) de(s)[la] littérature(s) canadienne(s)

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It is a fitting coincidence that the twentieth anniversary issue of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* carries a thematic cluster of articles about Canadian literature. In the spirit of the initial mandate of the *Review*, special attention was always paid to Canadian literature(s) and Canadian literary scholarship. Over the years the journal has tried to live up to its commitment (see in this context the twenty-year cumulative index at the end of the present issue). The four articles in this cluster, Robin Howells's "Dialogism in Canada's First Novel," Irene Gammel's "Baroness Elsa's Intimate Biography," and Sonia Mycak's "The Decentred Subject in Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*," and Elspeth Cameron's "Sweet Sub/Versions," comprise a representative spectrum of areas of scholarship on Canadian literature: early Canadian literature (Howells), the nineteenth-century (Gammel), contemporary Canadian literature (Mycak), and theory (Cameron).

Also, the authors themselves represent the international character of scholarship on Canadian literature: two are Canadian, one British, and one Australian. What is missing, of course, from both the articles and their authors, is francophone scholarship and French-Canadian (Québécois-Canadian) literature as well as an inquiry on indigenous and ethnic minority writing. This is regrettable and is the result of the fact that the presentation of a thematic cluster at this time was never planned. When the editor came to decide, for the anniversary issue, on the selection of contributions from the already accepted articles, it became apparent that a group dealing with Canadian literature could be (should be?) published together, instead of distributing them over a number of issues. Moreover, while some of the articles were regular submissions to the journal, others were invited papers which were initially presented at the fourteenth annual conference of the British Association of Canadian Studies at Cambridge (March 1993). This explains, incidentally, why some of the texts do not fulfill our usual definition of Comparative Literature.

In spite of the diverse origin and motivation of individual articles, it seemed, in addition, that their contents facilitate the shaping of a modest thematic cluster. In English-Canadian scholarship, in particular, it has been acknowledged that feminist criticism is an approach which has exercised great influence on the study of Canadian literature(s) and that its impact has been recognized internationally (B. Rajan, "Criticism and Scholarship," W. New, ed.

History of Canadian Literature: English Canadian Literature, 1990, 152). The articles in this thematic cluster are all reflections on feminist points of view and raise further questions about Canadian literature. While re-visiting certain authors and texts, they are not only reviewing them, but also revising traditional views and accentuating differences and differentiations.

Robin Howells's article is about an early Canadian literary text and it demonstrates the fruitful application of a revised Baxtinian framework, which facilitates the perception of unsuspected complexities and meanings in *The History of Emily Montague*. (The application of systemic frameworks, on the other hand, such as the Polysystem Theory, the Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature, or the *champs littéraire* would probably, if not exclude Frances Brooke's novel from Canadian literary life of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, assuredly link it either to the English system of its time or to the system being created by today's views of Canadian literature in English.) In any case, pre-twentieth-century English-Canadian literature has been paid relatively scant attention (in contrast to French-Canadian literature). Irene Gammel's article discusses a rarely used text that may have considerable bearing upon our reading of Frederick Philip Grove, also known as Felix Paul Greve. Texts such as Baroness Freytag-Loringhoven's memoirs challenge established views both pragmatically and from any number of theoretical points of view, be they deconstructionist, sociological, psychological, or feminist. Sonia Mycak's discussion of Margaret Atwood demonstrates how theoretical frameworks can illuminate our reading of a literary text: Mycak's use of Lacan and Kristeva in reading Atwood writing about truth and the female body results in a new interpretation of the images of dislocation, dismemberment, and disintegration in *Bodily Harm*. Elspeth Cameron deals with problems of the canon and argues, using Aritha Van Herk's texts and her "readerly discourse," for a more inclusive and fluid canon of English-Canadian literature. Questions about actual canon formation in Canada are always intriguing because of the relative scarcity of empirical research. Statements such as "in Canada, it is a relatively small group that makes the decisions about what books are fit for canonization: university teachers of English who specialize or dabble in Canadian literature" do not exhaust the subject (quotation from Lawrence Matthews, "Calgary, Canonization, and Class: Deciphering List B," Robert Lecker, ed. *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value*, 1991, 155).

Finally, it ought to be mentioned that the two editors/prefacers of this thematic cluster, as far as they know both males, formulated the title "(Re)Vision(s) of Canadian Literature(s)" as a tongue in cheek homage to Derrida and Post-Modernism, but which can be taken seriously, too, as it seems to designate quite aptly salient facets of the four contributions.

ROBIN HOWELLS

Dialogism in Canada's First Novel: *The History of Emily Montague*

All utterance, says Baxtin, is dialogic. Any given utterance occurs in relation to context: time, place, interlocutory situation. It is implicitly engaged with all other utterance — reworking, replying, anticipating — and with the reality that it seeks to attain. Insofar as it incorporates multiple discourses, it is a dialogue with itself. The condition of all language is that of interaction and change: open, dynamic, ever-renewed. As such, it mimes the condition of the world. ("Monologic" utterance is the authoritarian attempt to close the dialogue, to have the final and self-consistent word, to fix the world.) Literature organises and structures the multi-voiced character of language. It orchestrates, as Baxtin would say, the polyphony. Thus he has a special interest in quotation, direct or indirect, as speech engaged with and framed by speech. He places particular value on the introduction of orality, and popular or paralitrary genres, within the received literary orders. (The dialogic overlaps with the carnivalesque and implies a politics.) He rejoices in comic disruption and rewriting. Parody, doubling and multiplying are means of breaking down the solemn and the unique, relativizing the absolute and putting discourses into unresolved play.¹

Prima facie there are various ways in which *The History of Emily Montague* might fit this bill. It is an epistolary novel. At the time of its publication — 1769 — the novel was low on the hierarchy of genres. It dealt with the everyday. The epistolary mode in particular offered informality and immediacy. With its customary plurality of correspondents, the letter-novel might be said to be innately dialogic. Certainly it mirrors, in Britain and France, the highly sociable culture of the period. *Emily Montague* combines the concrete and relatively "popular" freedom of English literary models with the greater decorum and stylisation of the French. Its author, Frances Brooke, had already negotiated this relation as a translator from the French. A woman of letters, she raised in her writings various public issues, including gender. A "wife," she had spent the

¹ On dialogism, see Baxtin 1981; on the carnivalesque, 1968; on quotation, Baxtin/Vološinov. The theorist's failure to provide or maintain a consistent definition of dialogism might itself be seen as an illustration of the principle.