

## TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL CANADIAN TALENT

NICK MOUNT<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century, Canadian writers have been doing something they did infrequently in the past: acknowledging and referencing the work of past Canadian writers. Although declining pedagogical and academic interest in Canadian literature has made this development hard to see, writers themselves have been quietly building upon and contributing to something that looks very much like a literary tradition. Canadian writers of course continue to read and be influenced by writers outside Canada, just as they always have: but in their own words, they are now telling us that they are reading, learning from, and responding to other Canadian writers – that there is a Canadian literary tradition that crosses generational and regional borders, and that Canadian writers (and publishers, and readers) are aware of parts of that tradition, the parts that matter to them.

Keywords: Canadian Literature; tradition; canons; influence; epigraphs; blurbs.

In his thoughtful review of my recent book, Alex Good ends with a question and an answer:

Is the CanLit canon, as Mount concludes, a “now recognizable body of writing for critics to describe, students to read, the public to celebrate, and writers to steal from or define themselves against?” That’s the way it’s supposed to work, but it’s not easy to make the case. Frankly, one has to look hard to find the influence of CanLit, at least in terms of books being written as creative response or reactions to any of its canonical works. (Good 2017)

As Good recognizes, my object in *Arrival* was to tell the story of the flourishing of Canadian literature in English and French that took place between the late 1950s and the mid-1970s, the so-called CanLit Boom. I sought to demonstrate not the continuity of that literature, but as the title says, its arrival: the unique set

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<sup>1</sup> Department of English, University of Toronto, 170 St. George Street, Toronto, ON M5R 2M8.  
[nick.mount@utoronto.ca](mailto:nick.mount@utoronto.ca).

of political, cultural, and especially economic circumstances that produced what are still many of the best-known names in Canadian literature as well as many of the publishers and virtually all the readers who made them well known.

But Good's question is a good question, and I have been thinking about it on and off ever since. From my perspective as a reader and a professor of Canadian literature, there is no longer any doubt about what was, before the 1960s, an open question, whether or not Canada even *had* a literature. Unlike our predecessors, today's teacher of Canadian writing has to struggle with which books to leave off the syllabus, not which to include. In every kind and style of writing, from every kind and style of writer, we now have an embarrassment of riches, including annual prize lists that on their own have become impossible for all but the most dedicated reader to keep pace with. As I noted in *Arrival*, Canada has more writers per capita than ever before, about one writer for every 600 Canadians: more than double the ratio that prevailed even during the CanLit Boom, and five times what it was in 1931, before the Internet, before television (Mount 2017: 10). In Alice Munro's 2013 Nobel Prize, we now even have an answer to the once perennial where-is-our-Shakespeare question. But no matter how large, a collection of books and prizes is not a tradition, not what I take Good to mean in his search for "influence", for "creative response or reactions" to past Canadian books by current Canadian books. So the question remains: is there a Canadian literary tradition?

This question has of course also been asked before. Indeed, answering it preoccupied English Canadian literary history for the first half-century of its life, from Archibald MacMechan's *Head-Waters of Canadian Literature* in 1924 through E. K. Brown's *On Canadian Poetry* in 1943 to the peak of cultural nationalism in the 1960s in massive projects like the *Literary History of Canada* and McClelland & Stewart's New Canadian Library: work fundamentally concerned with demonstrating the Canadianness of Canadian literature, most often through the deployment of what Leon Surette called the "topocentric axiom" of Canadian literary history, the importance of a Canadian setting, but also by downplaying international literary influences, especially American, and stressing Canadian antecedents and hence a Canadian literary tradition. If no such tradition existed, critics simply invented one, as John Metcalf devastatingly demonstrated in his 1988 essay "The New Ancestors". Responding to escalating claims by Canadian critics for the influence of an 1896 collection of stories by Duncan Campbell Scott on later Canadian writers such as Margaret Laurence, Hugh Hood, Alice Munro, Sandra Birdsell, Jack Hodgins, and W. P. Kinsella, Metcalf pointed out that in the more than half a century between these writers and the first publication (in Boston) of *The Village of Viger*, the book had sold maybe four hundred copies in Canada and was out of print for most of those years (1994 [1988]: 73). How, as Metcalf asks, could Scott's book be what *The Penguin Book*

of *Canadian Short Stories* called a “gateway ancestor” (1994 [1988]: 91), or what *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* called “a foundation stone in the Canadian tradition of the story cycle” (1994 [1988]: 97), if for most of its life “*the book simply was not available to be read?*” (1994 [1988]: 104; Metcalf’s emphasis). As a final blow, Metcalf telephoned all seven of the writers named by critics as inheritors of Scott’s tradition that were still alive. None had read the book. None had even heard of it. “Was he the one,” asked Jack Hodgins, “who wrote stories about bears and—was it wolves?” (1994 [1988]: 105).

However understandably, however beneficially, literary nationalism produced exaggerated claims for the influence of past Canadian writers, “new ancestors” like Scott. At the time, Metcalf was right, about Scott and in general: the influence of earlier Canadian writers on his generation, the generation of the CanLit Boom, was negligible to non-existent. Most still-known modern writers up to and including Metcalf’s generation either did not know earlier Canadian writers (partly because they were rarely taught in their schools and universities), or, if they did, did not look to them for inspiration. Young Canadian poets, said Leo Kennedy in 1928, have “no worthwhile tradition of their own” (1967 [1928]: 36). “In most parts of Canada,” said Mordecai Richler for novelists in 1961, “only Mazo de la Roche and snow have been there before you” (1961: 26). But the field has since changed dramatically, precisely because of the achievements of the writers, publishers, teachers, civil servants, and readers of the CanLit Boom, the literature and the literary infrastructure they created and left behind. Canadian writers now have actual ancestors, actual influences, actual traditions. Unlike the kind of tradition that T. S. Eliot had in mind in the essay from which I take my title, it is not one that writers must know, and there is more than one of them. But it is now there for them to use if they like, and on the evidence on my reading over the last twenty years or so, some are doing just that.

Before we get to the present, let me return briefly to the past as a measure of just how much has changed. It is worth recalling, even if should not surprise us, that the first poem published in book form by a settler poet born in what would become Canada, Oliver Goldsmith’s 1825 “The Rising Village”, openly positions itself within a British literary tradition, a response in title and theme to a 1770 poem by Goldsmith’s great-uncle and namesake, *The Deserted Village*. As Daniel Coleman showed in *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada*, early English Canadian identity was largely modelled on British identity, including its literature, usually with a time lag of about forty to fifty years. Even the so-called Confederation poets – Charles G. D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, Archibald Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott, et al. – “inevitably looked elsewhere for masters and models upon which to pattern the Canadian poetry of the dawning era”, first and especially to British Romantics like Keats and Shelley (Bentley

2004: 18). It is perhaps more surprising to recall now that that most stereotypically Canadian of novels, Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* – published in 1908, three centuries after Champlain established the first permanent European settlements, billions of years after the rise of Turtle Island – contains not a single Canadian literary reference among its many quotations and allusions, not unless you count Matthew falling asleep with the *Farmers' Advocate* or Anne reading the etiquette section of the *Family Herald* (Montgomery 2004 [1908]: 180, 216). And lest we wonder if the absence of Canadian literary references in *Anne* is a consequence of the novel's popular (i.e., American) aspirations, recall too that Sara Jeanette Duncan's much more highbrow and otherwise fiercely Canadian novel *The Imperialist*, published just four years earlier, also contains no Canadian literary references. The Murchisons' family library is "filled with English classics", their coffee tables with British and American periodicals (Duncan 2005 [1904]: 63, 158) – a textual mirror of Duncan's own literary models of Rudyard Kipling, William Dean Howells, and Henry James.

As I discussed at length in an earlier book, *When Canadian Literature Moved to New York* (Mount 2005), English Canadian literature began as an offshoot of British literature but grew up thinking continentally, from about the 1890s on looking increasingly to American literary markets and models. In this regard not much changed until the nationalist imperatives of the CanLit Boom. The most prominent English Canadian novelist of the post-war era, Hugh MacLennan, for example, began writing under the influence of Hemingway, shaped his stories for American readers, and published his first and best-known novels in New York. Richler also began in Hemingway's shadow and later took Saul Bellow as his model. Mavis Gallant's favourite writer was Proust. Michel Tremblay's early influences included H. P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe. Marie-Claire Blais said she was "very much influenced" by Colette, Jean Cocteau, and Virginia Woolf, among others (Callaghan 1965: 31). Alice Munro said that "in terms of vision, the writers who have influenced me are probably the writers of the American South (...) Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, Reynolds Price, Wright Morris. (...) I'm sorry these are all Americans but that's the way it is" (Metcalf 1972: 56).

Given its overwhelmingly European and American influences, it is not surprising that Canadian literature up to and during the CanLit Boom should provide very few examples of the kind of influence that Good seeks, creative responses to earlier Canadian books. Margaret Atwood revisited the nineteenth-century memoirs of Susanna Moodie in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), pretty much exactly the kind of response I assume Good has in mind. George Bowering turned a postmodern lens on the exploration journals of George Vancouver in a long poem, a radio play, and a novel, *Burning Water* (1980). In

Marian Engel's *Bear* (1976), the main character finds an autographed first edition of John Richardson's 1832 novel *Wacousta* in a deserted library, surely a metaphor for something (Engel 1976: 90). Aside from these isolated examples and Newfoundland's return to its folklore in the 1970s, English Canadian writers of the CanLit Boom did not respond to earlier "canonical works" because Canada had no such works, not in their minds. "Rampant with making", said Dennis Lee in *The Death of Harold Ladoo*, "we recognized / no origin but us" (1976: 9). French Quebec had a more recognizable canon, but Québécois writers of the 1960s did not revisit rural classics like *Maria Chapdelaine* and *Trente arpents*; they burned them down.<sup>2</sup>

Today – by which I mean something like the last twenty years – Canadian writers continue to read and be influenced by writers outside Canada, just as they always have. Reading knows no borders and Canadian literature especially was always cosmopolitan, of necessity. But on the evidence of their books and interviews, Canadian writers are also doing something they did infrequently before this century: learning from, acknowledging, and, yes, responding to earlier Canadian writers. As I said, my examples come mostly from my own reading, which leans literary, from an indiscriminate mix of small, medium, and large publishers, probably more fiction than poetry.

Let's begin with simple expressions of admiration or affection for earlier Canadian writers, something rare enough in the past. Among writers, if not readers, I suspect Mavis Gallant (1922–2014) tops this list. Clark Blaise (b. 1940) calls her "Canada's greatest writer" in his autobiography (1993: 125). Michael Ondaatje (b. 1943) said in 2014 that "I know authors who admit that the one writer they do not read when they are completing a book is Mavis Gallant. Nothing could be more intimidating". Michael Helm (b. 1961) discovered her stories at nineteen and is still reading them (2014: 15). Steven Heighton (b. 1961) goes back to her *Collected Stories* every few years, "sometimes every few months" (2017). Lisa Moore (b. 1964) calls Gallant's craft "invisible and inimitable, no matter how much other writers would like to imitate it" (2012: 143).

For Grace O'Connell (b. 1984), the books she re-reads almost every year are the *Deptford Trilogy* by Robertson Davies (1913–1995): "Treated as one novel, the three of them together are as close to a masterpiece as I've ever encountered" (2018). Ontario writer Kevin Hardcastle (b. 1980) includes Cape Breton writer

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<sup>2</sup> Hubert Aquin, 1964: "In a country which is blacking out, the writer who attempts to breathe life into what is killing him will not write a Stendhalian tale of French-Canadian *carbonari*, but a work as formally unwholesome as the one taking place in him and in his country" (Aquin 1988 [1964]: 57). Cf. the famously fiery ending of Marie-Claire Blais's first novel, 1959's *La Belle Bête*.

Alistair MacLeod (1936–2014) among his “literary heroes”, calling him “the one Canadian writer that I truly loved” (2015: 89–90). At his 2019 Giller win, Ian Williams (b. 1979) began by thanking Margaret Atwood (b. 1939) for writing the first book he bought with his own money and said she was “like my literary mother” in an interview after the ceremony (Bresge 2019).

As more lasting homage, consider references to past Canadian writers preserved in books themselves. Miriam Toews’s *All My Puny Sorrows* (2014), for example, nods to Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* (1964) and takes a drink at Toronto’s Park Hyatt rooftop bar, itself a literary tradition (Toews 2014: 105, 123).<sup>3</sup> In Jonathan Goldstein’s 2001 novel *Lenny Bruce Is Dead*, an aspiring writer once urinated beside Leonard Cohen (1934–2016) in the bathroom at Bens Deli (Goldstein 2001: 57), as clear an image of Montreal literary tradition as I can imagine. Spencer Gordon’s *Cosmo* (2012) includes a funny, moving story made up of emails from a bankrupt Cohen to a Subway executive about an endorsement deal. In Lauren B. Davis’s novel *Our Daily Bread* (2012 [2011]), an inveterate reader names Alice Munro (b. 1931) in the same breath as Homer, Rilke, and Graham Greene (Davis 2012 [2011]: 142). In Catherine Leroux’s *The Party Wall* (2016 [2013]), the prime minister of a future, post-apocalyptic Canada “knows his classics,” including Margaret Atwood (2016 [2013]: 73). In Atwood’s own latest, *The Testaments* (2019), Gilead co-founder Aunt Lydia has a copy of Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) among her private selection of proscribed books, on the shelf next to *Jane Eyre*, *Anna Karenina*, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, and *Paradise Lost* (Atwood 2019: 35).

Because of the now dominant tradition in Canadian poetry collections of extensive allusion buttressed by lengthy notes and acknowledgements, twenty-first century shout-outs to even Canadian poets are numerous, more than I can list and certainly more than I know. What is striking, however, is that although the references tend to be international or Canadian teachers or contemporaries, some are to older Canadian poets and poems. Peter Norman’s “Dr. F Attends a Show” in *Water Damage* (2013) is “after” Atwood’s “Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein” (1966); his latest, *Some of Us and Most of You Are Dead* (2018), is more “terminal poems” in which each uses as the last word of each line the corresponding word from poems by Canadian poets from Charles Sangster (1822–1893) and Archibald Lampman (1861–1899) through Margaret Avison (1918–2007), Milton Acorn (1923–1986), Dennis Lee (b. 1939), and Gwendolyn MacEwen (1941–1987) to George Elliott Clarke (b. 1960), and Ken Babstock (b. 1970), and many others. David McGimpsey’s “Montreal” (2007) references A. M. Klein’s well-known

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<sup>3</sup> The rooftop bar of the Park Hyatt (then the Park Plaza) appears in Austin Clarke’s *The Meeting Point* (1998: 170) and figures prominently in Atwood’s first novel *The Edible Woman* (1969, ch. 8).



1944 poem of the same name (McGimpsey 2007: 80). Michael Lista's *Bloom* (2010) includes remixes – “creative plagiarisms” (Lista qtd. in Mooney 2010) – of poems by Klein (1909–1972), Irving Layton (1912–2006), George Johnston (1913–2004), Eric Ormsby (b. 1941), Robyn Sarah (b. 1949), and Karen Solie (b. 1966). The penultimate line in Stephen Cain's *American Standard / Canada Dry* (2005) re-uses the title of Layton's canonical poem “Whatever Else Poetry Is Freedom” (1958); the final line rewrites the last lines of Al Purdy's equally canonical “The Country North of Belleville” (1963) (noted by Percy 2008: 59). Layton provides an epigraph for fellow Montrealer Jason Camlot's *The Debaucher* (2008), a book that calls its author the “epigone” – imitator, follower – of another Montrealer, Leonard Cohen (43). Daniel Scott Tysdal's “Cohen” (2006) tells its addressee, not entirely ironically, that “You're the closest thing I have to a tradition” (2006: 22). George Elliott Clarke's *Red* (2011) contains both an elegy for Layton (Clarke 2011: 107) and a poem “à la manière d'Irving Layton” (“To the Muse”, Clarke 2011: 43); a year later, Clarke published an essay that turned his “youthful admiration for the anthologized Layton” (Clarke 2012: 115) into a decidedly adult argument for reading all of Layton.

If we move from allusion and revision to something like what Layton seems to have provided for Clarke – encouragement, a model or muse that suggests possibilities as much or more than a style to be copied – we find more examples of something that looks very like a tradition. Starting with Clarke, who read Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* (1941) even before he encountered Layton and says the novel's story of the Halifax explosion “haunted me my entire life”. Many years later, that story produced Clarke's long poem marking the explosion's centennial, “Achieving Disaster, Dreaming Resurrection” (Arsenault 2017). Randy Boyagoda (b. 1976) read Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business* (1970) while growing up in Oshawa and “saw possibilities for myself” in Dunstan Ramsay's adventures after his small-town origins, “above all from student of ideas and stories to teacher and author and storyteller” (Boyagoda 2018: 14). David Chariandy (b. 1969) read Davies' novels as a Trinidadian Canadian teenager growing up in Scarborough and discovered in them the joy of entering worlds very different from his own. It wasn't until reading Austin Clarke's *The Meeting Point* (1967), however, that he found a representation of his own family and thus a model for writing himself. In Chariandy's words, Clarke made his writing career “seem possible” (Medley 2017). His 2017 novel *Brother* is dedicated “For Austin.”

Another Trinidadian Canadian writer, André Alexis (b. 1957), found as a teenager a “shared experience” not of identity but of place in earlier Canadian novels like *Fifth Business*, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, *Surfacing*, and *The Stone Angel*. “It was like discovering that half my soul was shared by Margaret Laurence”, he said in 1995. “I don't feel myself particularly part of any branch of the Canadian literary tradition, but I don't feel

myself disconnected from it either”. Especially, Alexis found an opening for himself as a writer in the work of a previous chronicler of his adopted home of Ottawa, Norman Levine (1923–2005). Because Levine had covered the day-time world of Ottawa so well, Alex set his first stories about the city after dark: “The night world became my province because I didn’t want to repeat Levine’s work” (Alexis 1998).

Haisla/Heiltsuk author Eden Robinson (b. 1968) grew up loving Stephen King but learned that silence and pauses could be as important as words from Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970): “For the next three years I wrote bad copies of it and it changed what I wanted to write and the way I wanted to write it” (Koeverden 2017). In the acknowledgements to her debut novel *The Break* (2016), Métis writer Katherena Vermette (b. 1977) thanks “those who blazed the trail”, including Robinson, Beatrice Mosionier (b. 1949), and Lee Maracle (b. 1950). Newfoundland poet and novelist Michael Crummey (b. 1965) says of Ontario poet Al Purdy (1918–2000) that his work was “the first time I’d heard a voice in poetry that reminded me of hearing my father and his friends talking around a table” (Johnson 2015). In an afterword to the advance reading copy of her 2018 collection of linked stories, *Late Breaking*, K. D. Miller remembers from her first encounter with the form in Margaret Laurence’s *A Bird in in the House* (1970) “a feeling of being granted permission to do what I was already doing” (2018: 280). Perhaps the best example of what I meant when I suggested in the final lines of *Arrival* that the legacy of the CanLit Boom is its inheritors today is provided by the Cree writer Tomson Highway (b. 1951), who says of his experience studying Canadian writers like Laurence, Davies, and Purdy at the University of Manitoba in 1973 – by which time Canadian literature was being taught at Canadian universities – that what he took from them was not their stories or style but simply the thought that “if they can do it, maybe I can, too, one day” (Highway 2017: xxviii).

Whether their authors know it or not, Canadian books are possible because of previous Canadian books, both the bulk produced during the CanLit Boom and earlier works that the nationalist enthusiasms of the Boom worked to restore to memory and make part of a tradition. As Patrick Coleman says in his recent study of novels in French and English set in Montreal, Gabrielle Roy’s *Bonheur d’occasion* and Hugh MacLennan’s *Two Solitudes* (both published in 1945) put Montreal on the literary map. “The next generation could write their novels in part because Roy and MacLennan had written theirs” (Coleman 2018: 24). Coleman’s claim could apply equally to the later Montreal novels of Heather O’Neill, most obviously *The Girl Who Was Saturday Night* (2014), a novel whose narrator reads *Bonheur d’occasion* (125) and updates *Two Solitudes*. It is unlikely that Emma Hooper’s *Etta and Otto and Russell and James* (2015) or even Hiromi



Goto's *The Kappa Child* (2001) could have been written without a body of Canadian prairie literature before them to clear the ground, so to speak – even if the explicit conversation of the latter is with Laura Ingalls Wilder rather than Sinclair Ross, W. O. Mitchell, or Margaret Laurence. As its publisher says of another recent take on the prairie novel, W. Mark Giles's *Seep* (2015), Giles “steps in the footsteps of his predecessors who limned the Canadian prairie”, in his case I'd say especially the postmodern steps of Robert Kroetsch (1927–2011).

As Good suggests, it is indeed hard to see evidence of the influence of Canadian literature on later writers in terms of books (if not individual poems) “written as creative response or reactions to any of its canonical works” (Good 2017). But book-length responses to specific books are uncommon in any modern literature, even if their long usefulness in the classroom – pairings such as *Jane Eyre* with *Wide Sargasso Sea*, or *Robinson Crusoe* with *Foe* – has exaggerated their frequency. Further, because of the accruing cultural capital and because the trick depends on readers knowing the source text well, writers of such responses usually respond to *very* well-known books – world classics, not Canadian classics, such as (to give Canadian examples) Timothy Findley's response to *Heart of Darkness* in *Headhunter* (1993), Margaret Atwood's response to the *Odyssey* in *The Penelopiad* (2005), or André Alexis's to the *Divine Comedy* in *Asylum* (2008). In all of Canadian literature I can think of just one clear example of a Canadian work that is a book-length creative response to another Canadian work, Tomson Highway's rewriting in *The Rez Sisters* (1986) of Canada's best-known play, Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles-soeurs* (1968).<sup>4</sup>

Consider, however, a much briefer but equally significant way of signalling that a book is a response to another book: the epigraph. Unlike a response that runs throughout the book, an epigraph usually indicates a conversation or shared concern with some aspect of the source book rather than with the source as a whole – but a crucially important aspect, something the writer has decided is at the heart of their book, important enough to declare in a sign hanging over the door. Here, at the start of many Canadian books, we find more evidence for both influence and response. Robert McGill's first novel *The Mysteries* (2004), for example, takes both the name of its small Ontario town and its epigraph from

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<sup>4</sup> The case could be made that Heather O'Neill's *Lullabies for Little Criminals* (2006) is a creative response to Canada's best-known novel, *Anne of Green Gables*, a book O'Neill says in a postscript to the first Canadian edition that she loved as a kid (“P.S.” 2006: 5). Both Anne and Baby are eleven when their stories begin; both are orphans, Anne really and Baby effectively. Both see themselves as ugly ducklings. They both love telling romantic stories, to themselves and others. (Teachers tell them both to stop.) Both love adventures and are good at getting into trouble. Like Anne, Baby is smart and excels at school, a Tom Sawyer surrounded by Huck Finns. Both survive for a time by escaping into their imagination. And both have to learn to *stop* doing that, to learn and accept who they are. Both end in the arms of family.

Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912). Going back farther still, Eden Robinson's first novel *Monkey Beach* (2001 [2000]) takes its epigraph and major theme from a Haisla proverb. The second section of Ken Babstock's *Airstream Land Yacht* (2006) opens with an epigraph from Alice Munro's *Runaway* (2004); Ian Williams' debut poetry collection *You Know Who You Are* (2010) uses for one poem an epigraph by Margaret Atwood (Williams 2010: 58), and the book itself takes its opening epigraph and its title from Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978). Ottawa writer Joanne Proulx's latest novel begins with a Munro epigraph; so does Cape Breton writer Lynn Coady's new novel. From Winnipeg, Sarah Klassen quotes the best-known words of an earlier Cape Breton writer, Alistair MacLeod – "All of us are better when we're loved" – to open her short-story collection *A Feast of Longing* (2007); from St. John's, Larry Mathews takes the title and epigraph for his novel *An Exile's Perfect Letter* (2018) from a poem by Leonard Cohen. One epigraph for Giles's *Seep* is from Cohen's novel *Beautiful Losers* (1966), F.'s admonishment to "Connect nothing!" (neatly, the other is from E. M. Forster's *Howard's End*: "Only connect!"). For her young adult novel *The Strange Gift of Gwendolyn Golden* (2014), Philippa Dowding uses an epigraph from a poem by Gwendolyn MacEwen; for her novel-in-stories about a young adult, *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl* (2016), Mona Awad uses an epigraph from a novel by Atwood. British Columbia writer Gillian Wigmore's first novel *Glory* (2017) opens with epigraphs from two classic western Canadian novels, Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* (1939) and Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* (1959). Given the words Wigmore chose from the latter – its own epigraph, "when you fish for the glory you catch the darkness too" – *The Double Hook* likely also gave *Glory* its title.

Epigraphic connections are also evident between recent Canadian writers and Canadian writers who themselves emerged after the CanLit Boom, up to and including contemporaries. For her second novel *Blood Sports* (2006), Eden Robinson went with an epigraph from her University of Victoria writing teacher Mark Anthony Jarman (b. 1955); for 2017's *Son of a Trickster*, she found epigraph, explanation, and trigger warning all in one in Thomas King's 2007 children's book, *A Coyote Columbus Story*: "all of Coyote's stories are bent". The epigraph for Zoe Whittall's first novel *Bottle Rocket Hearts* (2007) is from Douglas Coupland's *Life After God* (1994). Anne Carson (b. 1950) provides an epigraph for Karen Solie's first book *Short Haul Engine* (2001); Marilyn Dumont (b. 1955), for Vermette's *The Break* (2016). The first of three epigraphs in Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's *Islands of Decolonial Love* (2013) is by Lee Maracle (b. 1950), the second by Richard Van Camp (b. 1971). Métis writer Cherie Dimaline's new novel *Empire of Wild* (2019) opens with an epigraph from Canadian poet Paul Vermeersch's *Self-Defence for the Brave and Happy* (2018), published just the year before.

Epigraphs do not necessarily indicate influence, at least not formal influences. For that we have to turn to the books themselves or to statements by their authors – such as Eden Robinson’s admission, already noted, that she learned silence from Michael Ondaatje. According to its acknowledgements, Michael Christie’s new novel *Greenwood* (2019) “owes its inspiration to many other books”, including Hugh Garner’s *Cabbagetown* (1950) and Timothy Findley’s *The Wars* (1977). Besides leaving him Ottawa at night, André Alexis says Norman Levine was “influential in his simplicity, in the purity of his language, in the directness of the emotions and in the fidelity to place” (Alexis 1998). Alexis also cites as Canadian influences the religious and metaphysical tone of Margaret Avison’s poetry, the humour of Mordecai Richler, and the literary experiments of bpNichol and the Four Horseman (Alexis 1998). The work of Kwakwaka’wakw poet Garry Thomas Morse provides abundant evidence of the persistence of another experimental tradition in Canadian poetry, the New American poetic as filtered through George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt, and many others. Newfoundland writer Michael Winter (b. 1965) says that “everything he learned about prose between *Creaking in Their Skins* and *One Last Good Look* came from Norman Levine”.<sup>5</sup> Alistair MacLeod’s influence is palpable in the opening story of Nova Scotia writer David Huebert’s debut fiction collection *Peninsula Sinking* (2017). Alice Munro, especially, has influenced Canadian writers in a range of genres and styles. As the *Montreal Gazette* said of Andrew Pyper’s first novel *Lost Girls* (2001 [1999]), parts of it read like “the secret love child of Alice Munro and Stephen King” (Waters 1999). Miriam Toews’ *A Complicated Kindness* (2004) includes a copy of Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women* (71) and like it is a Bildungsroman that becomes a Künstlerroman, a portrait of the artist as a young woman. Lisa Moore is “deeply influenced” by Munro, especially the bravery of her multifaceted representations of women, their desires, and their rages.<sup>6</sup> When Metcalf made those calls to writers supposedly influenced by Duncan Campbell Scott, Sandra Birdsell (b. 1942) told him her main influences were actually Sherwood Anderson, Flannery O’Connor – and Alice Munro (Metcalf 1994 [1988]: 105).

Any discussion of Canadian literary traditions in the last twenty years would have to include the increasing influence of creative writing teachers and mentors: of Larry Mathews and now his student Lisa Moore in St. John’s, for example, or Lynn Crosbie and Dionne Brand in Toronto, or Keith Maillard and Zsuzsi Gartner in Vancouver, or the school of John Metcalf, both at his home in Ottawa and through his imprint for the Windsor publisher Biblioasis. (Ironically, CanLit’s fiercest critic has replaced CBC Radio producer Robert Weaver as its most

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<sup>5</sup> As told to John Metcalf; Metcalf interview, Ottawa, May 18, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Email correspondence, Jan. 4, 2019.

dedicated employee, with at least two books dedicated to him by other writers – K. D. Miller’s *All Saints* (2014) and Caroline Adderson’s *A History of Forgetting* (2015) – and more acknowledgements than I can count.)

Finally, consider the blurb that evokes another Canadian writer: not now as evidence of one reader’s recognition of similarity or influence, as in the Pyper–Munro comparison cited above (blurb in the paper edition of *Lost Girls*), but as evidence of the publisher’s assumption that *other* readers will appreciate the comparison and shop accordingly. An unscientific survey of my own bookshelves suggests that Munro again leads the pack, again in company with wildly different writers:

- “told in the tradition of Richard Linklater’s *Boyhood* and Alice Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women*” (Nadia Bozak’s *Thirteen Shells*, Anansi, 2016)
- “If you crossed the best of Michael Ondaatje with the best of Alice Munro, Alix Hawley is what you’d get” (*My Name is a Knife*, Vintage Canada, 2018).
- “rivals Alice Munro” (Alexander MacLeod’s *Light Lifting*, Biblioasis, 2010, sixth printing)
- “the emotional clout of Alice Munro” (Lisa Moore’s *Open*, Anansi, 2002)
- “the anti-Munro” (Zsuzsi Gartner’s *Better Living Through Plastic Explosives*, 2011, Penguin Canada 2012 paper edition).

Other Canadian writers regularly evoked to help sell Canadian books include Davies, Richler, Cohen, and Atwood, as well as many later writers, both as subjects and authors of blurbs. A sample:

- “reading Spencer Gordon’s *Cosmo* is like jet skiing over Niagara Falls while Leonard Cohen whispers in your ear” (Coach House, 2012)
- “twisted cousin to Robertson Davies’ *World of Wonders*” (Paul Quarrington’s *The Spirit Cabinet*, 1999, Vintage Canada 2000 paper edition).
- “possibly the cockiest, brashiest, funniest, toughest, most life-affirming, elegant, scruffy no-holds-barred writer to emerge from Montreal since Mordecai Richler” (Zoe Whittall’s *Bottle Rocket Hearts*, Cormorant, 2007, second printing).
- “Not since Margaret Atwood’s *Power Politics* has the love poem been this honest, this intelligent, this gripping” (Lynn Crosbie’s *Liar*, Anansi, 2006)
- “a small-town story of longing and loss in the manner of David Adams Richards” (Michael V. Smith’s *Cumberland*, Cormorant, 2002)
- “alongside Barbara Gowdy in the front rank of writers” (Michael Winter’s *The Architects Are Here*, 2007, Penguin Canada 2008 paper edition)

- “in the short story pantheon with Alice Munro, Lisa Moore and Zsuzsi Gartner” (Heather Birrell’s *Mad Hope*, Coach House, 2012)
- “in the lyric lineage of Dionne Brand and M. NourbeSe Philip” (Canisia Lubrin’s *Voodoo Hypothesis*, Buckrider, 2017)
- “takes her place alongside Alice Munro, Robertson Davies, Margaret Atwood and Mordecai Richler as the loveliest quintet of Canadian writers” (Miriam Toews’ *The Flying Troutmans*, 2008, Vintage Canada 2009 edition)

Apparently, Canadian publishers now believe something they did not before, not even in the heyday of the CanLit Boom: that Canadian readers can be motivated to purchase Canadian books by comparing them to other Canadian books. They believe a Canadian literary tradition is known to Canadian readers. The “reaction to any of its canonical works” they hope for is not another creative response, but something equally important to the existence of any literary tradition, even if usually left out of histories of those traditions: the decision to buy a book.

Any reader of Canadian writing will have thought of associations I have missed: more writers who have admired or learned from other Canadian writers, more allusions, more retakes and remixes, more influences, more epigraphs and blurbs connecting Canadian writers across the generations and across the country. My aim here is not to be comprehensive but to suggest through the number and variety of even a sample of such associations that Alex Good need not worry: it is actually not hard to find the influence of CanLit, not if you turn to the books and writers themselves.

One place it *can* be hard to see that influence, perhaps the reason for Good’s difficulty, is in classrooms. For a brief period after and because of the CanLit Boom, Canadian literature became required in many Canadian high schools and ubiquitous, even popular, in Canadian universities. Today, only French Quebec, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia still require high school graduates to read some Canadian literature, and at eleven of Canada’s largest twenty universities (English and French), students can complete a major in literature without any of it being Canadian.<sup>7</sup> Other factors have also contributed to the decline of Canadian literature in today’s classrooms, such as the shift in K-12 classrooms away from books to digital resources (especially YouTube, at least in my children’s experience here in Ontario) and the dominance of school libraries and bookfairs by foreign publishers.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See my *Arrival* (2017: 292). As far as I can tell, Quebec only requires French-speaking secondary students to study Quebec writers. See <https://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/en/teachers/quebec-education-program/secondary/>, under Languages.

<sup>8</sup> See the section on school classrooms and libraries in *More Canada: Increasing Canadians’ Awareness and Reading of Canadian Books*, a report prepared after think-tank sessions among

Although with much less direct effect, literary criticism has also made it hard to see a Canadian literary tradition except as an adversary, something to be challenged and dismantled. This is not new: if the first half-century of Canadian literary criticism was devoted to inventing a tradition, most of its second half-century has been devoted to tearing it down. In 1989, a year after Metcalf exposed Scott's new clothes, Robert Lecker took a page from the American canon wars and called the entire Canadian canon a nationalist construction, pretty much the consensus view thereafter. Sixteen years later, in 2005, the inaugural TransCanada conference in Vancouver again aimed to "unmake" CanLit (Kamboureli & Miki 2007: xv). And in 2018, the editors of *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins* declared, again, the need to say "no" to CanLit (McGregor, Rak & Wunker 2018: 9).<sup>9</sup>

It is important to understand, because easily misunderstood, that when the more recent versions of these critiques say "CanLit" they don't actually mean *CanLit*. *Trans.Can.Lit*, the proceedings of the TransCanada conference, is subtitled and about the study of Canadian literature, not Canadian literature itself. "To us", say the *Refuse* editors, "CanLit means both the industry and the field of academic study" (McGregor, Rak & Wunker 2018: 17), a definition that would I think surprise Canadian writers. There is almost no discussion of Canadian writing in either book: their contributors have political and social concerns and are mostly interested in writing by themselves and other academics, mostly international theorists. Despite the now often-remarked generational divide in "CanLit," the *Refuse* critics are in this fundamental sense direct descendants of their *Trans.Can.Lit* predecessors, and the major difference is a natural evolution rather than a departure: from what Laura Moss worried in 2007 had already become "literary study as social activism" (Moss 2007: 17), the *Refuse* critics have just dropped the cloak of literary study and become social activists.

And good for them: the world needs activists more than literary critics or historians, maybe now more than ever. My small point as a literary historian is simply that seeing and presumably teaching CanLit as a conversation among academics and choosing your texts accordingly is not likely to help Alex Good or students see it as a conversation among writers. If, however, you turn to Canadian literature, that conversation is increasingly apparent. In their own words, Canadian writers are telling us that they are reading, learning from, and responding to other Canadian writers – that there is a Canadian literary tradition

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Canadian publishers and other interested parties (including myself) in 2017–18.

<sup>9</sup> Criticism and history of Canadian literature has of course continued throughout these and other critiques, but both inside and outside the discipline it is the critiques that tend to attract attention. I doubt Good has read, for example, Coleman's history of the Montreal novel, but he not only read *CanLit in Ruins*, he reviewed it for the *Toronto Star* (Good 2018).



that crosses generational and regional borders, and that Canadian writers (and publishers, and readers) are aware of parts of that tradition, the parts that matter to them. It is therefore better in most cases to use the plural, to speak of traditions rather than a tradition, but they are streams in the same big river, with headwaters now much further upstream than Archibald MacMechan could see.

We need not exaggerate this tradition, as cultural insecurity once did. There are many fine Canadian writers with little interest as writers in their predecessors, and writers who acknowledge Canadian debts have almost certainly learned as much or more from writers elsewhere. Unlike for T. S. Eliot, knowing any one literary tradition is no longer “nearly indispensable” to a writer (Eliot 1975 [1919]: 38). “If I met my twenty-year-old self now”, says Phoebe Wang in her contribution to *Refuse*, “I would tell her that she did not need to fit herself or her imagination into a tradition” (Wang 2018: 150). Like Eliot’s version, to write within a Canadian tradition does not necessarily mean following the past; it can also mean challenging the past, reinventing the past for present purposes. It might even be best not to use the word “tradition” at all, given its baggage. The word is not necessary to my argument, the point of which is just to say that Canadian writers are responding to Canadian books, for the simple reason that there are now Canadian books for them to respond to.

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