Countercheck Quarrelsome

Cynthia Sugars, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 2016. Pp. xxiv + 966 pp.

Lifting this hefty "handbook," I take comfort in recalling Earle Birney's dilemma when reviewing a truly impenetrable book, *Finnegans Wake*. It was, he confessed "the first book I had ever reviewed without reading more than a sixth of it" (*Spreading* 39).[1] The point is not to absorb it all, but to be sufficiently absorbent. Having reached page 966, I offer my absorbations, as James Joyce might call them, concerning the contest it referees between its two titular terms: Canadian and literature.

Article 301 is a Turkish law making it punishable by up to two years imprisonment to "insult Turkishness." Orhan Pamuk, the Nobel prize-winning novelist, was prosecuted under this law, which was amended to prohibit publically denigrating "the Turkish nation" ("Article 301"). When I read about this punitive statute, I thought that a comparable law could not be passed in Canada, not just because its vagueness allows the state to suppress any dissent, but because we could never agree on what constitutes "Canadianness." "As Canadian as possible under the circumstances" is the famous, self-deprecating winner of a slogan-writing contest ("As Canadian"). The fact that this bashful boast is often cited as an example of Canadian wit adds a extra ironic twist: it exhibits a modesty it knows to be false.

In the *Handbook*, Adam Carter traces a history of how national traits were confidently assigned, for example by John Gailhard in 1687: French (courteous/jovial), Spaniard (lordly/troublesome), Italian (amorous/complying), German (clownish/unpleasant) (43). Later Immanuel Kant retaliated by characterizing the English as arrogant and rude (45). Canadians were not available for diagnosis, but perhaps "apologetic" will serve as one national characteristic, providing we recognize the word as designating an attitude at once deferential and defiant. On the one hand, Edgar Z. Friedenberg found Canadians too deferential to authority, unlike Americans; on the other hand, an apology is a self-justification, as in John Henry Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. If "Canadianness" is recognizable at all in the *Handbook*—although many of its contributors reject such a task as fruitless—perhaps it involves a contrapuntal apologetic, a style of respectful disrespect comparable to what Shakespeare called the countercheck quarrelsome. As A.B. McKillop advised: "a more fruitful way of conceiving of an 'identity' for Canada is by expanding the term to incorporate

within it the potential for contradiction, diversity, and paradox" (*Contours* 6).

Easier said than done. In music, counterpoint is elegantly interwoven, but a literary apologetic (*scusandosi* might be the musical notation) does not function so neatly. Rather than identifying a prevailing Canadian trait, it is a trope, a rhetorical lens for surveying a literary field so that it becomes recognizable as a field, however messy, rather than as a limitless ocean. *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature* is committed in its title to mapping such a field, although its essays are often apologetic in the best Canadian sense of the word. They are wary of "incorporating" diversity and paradox, because it can be a tactic for domesticating differences, depriving them of independent force. This is the charge made against official multiculturalism: it recognizes cultural differences only to pacify them. Furthermore, many of its essays resist domestication as a subterfuge of national literary histories, which imagine the nation as a family, but at the expense of demanding conformity with its tastes. Given the orneriness of recent cultural theory, editor Cynthia Sugars faced a challenge in orchestrating the 48 essays in her anthology.

She follows in the footsteps of Carl Klinck, whose *Literary History of Canada* (1965) not only gave Canadian writers the dignity of a 945 page book, but established which authors and texts deserve attention. He also offered Northrop Frye's influential—and in its way, quite wonderful—conclusion, which proposed so many themes for subsequent refinement or refutation: environmentalism, colonialism, psychic and social alienation, the north, the garrison mentality, regional loyalties. Notably absent was writing by and about women, a "normative gender inequity" (Carole Gerson 337) redressed here, not just in the authors studied but in the literary values promoted. Sugars extends the field of inquiry to include First Nations writing, gay and lesbian literature, popular magazines, the Stratford festival, life writing, children's literature, historiography, book history, disability studies, and more. She is eager to show how literature is intimately bound up with other cultural fields, but also how it infiltrates those fields, bringing their ambitions to critical attention. The *Handbook* is organized as follows:

"Reflections on the Discipline" (essays 1-6)
"Indigenous Literatures and Contexts" (7-11)
"Literary Periods and Genres" (12-27)
"Intra-national Perspectives and Traditions" (28-38)
"Critical Fields and New Directions" (39-48)

This sequence, partly thematic, always historical, designs a field in which the shifting relations between literary, cultural, political and ideological interests are at play. It also includes chapters on Québec and French-Canadian writing, although the two solitudes are still quite solitary. Several chapters deal knowledgeably with both French and English writing, but usually by treating them as parallel rather than intertwined. Studies of feminist theory (Gerson, Cecily Devereux) are exceptional in affirming a sisterhood not confined to a single language, partly because French theory has been so influential (Devereux 854), but also because the theory itself commends such an effort.

Let me jump in at the theoretical deep end before wading into shallower water. It is striking how many themes introduced in Klinck's *Literary History* reappear in a new guise. Nature becomes ecology (Pamela Banting), tradition becomes cultural memory (Richard Cavell, Renée Hulan), canon becomes celebrity (Lorraine York), colonialism becomes "diasporic citizenship" (Lily Cho 527, Mariam Pirbhai), cosmopolitanism becomes planetarity (Erin Wunker). This is not just a matter of putting old wine in new bottles. These transpositions aim to reconfigure the most fundamental human conditions: our relation to the world, to each other, to the past. Such a revaluation is necessary, Wunker says, because "the current moment calls for a retooling of critical approaches so as to recognize these elements at the level of globality" (93). Canadian literature cannot be, and never could be, insular. In this formulation "the current moment"—variously characterized as postmodernity, late-capitalism, globalism or neoliberalism—can have such a radical effect only if it troubles a historical logic to which it contributes its own "palette of ideological propensities" saturating public and private life (Herb Wyile 895). The moment is one of rupture, but it disrupts a social order from which it arises and which it reconfigures. The moment demands heterogeneity rather than conformity, but it makes the same demand throughout late-capitalist culture. (Compare the way Paul de Man read literary works as allegories of undecidability, but found the same allegory in every work.) The good news for literature is that this view accords a privileged role to avant-garde arts, whose hectic forms—transgressive, parodic, ludic, metafictional and self-referential" (David Leahy 408)—contest ideological dominance by envisioning a more hospitable sociability: a better Canada in a better world. For Sally Chivers, disability studies have this salutary effect: by exposing the fallacy of "binaristic thought" (able-bodied/disabled), they enable us to "'see difference differently'" and more compassionately (884, quoting Maria Truchan-Tataryn 885).

Stated so crudely, it may sound like I am sentimentalizing a resurgent, modernist avant-garde, although J.-F. Lyotard argued that postmodernism, far from rejecting modernism, actually fulfills its unrealized critical goals. One irony of the avant-garde is that the splintered forms through which it demystifies hierarchies can make it elitist. For Wyile, Jeff Derksen provides the keenest insights into how neoliberalism disguises its cruelties as benefits, but his poetry does so in a style so "dense, discontinuous, highly allusive, and often enigmatic" as to require a sophisticated reader (903). Only then can it echo Lyotard's battle cry "let us wage a war on totality" ("Answering" 337), as several of these essays do. Martin Jay has shown how totality as a conceptual and social ideal emerged from the romantic association of aesthetic unity, organic community and national politics, with community (*Gemeinschaft*) linking the other two by aestheticizing politics and politicizing aesthetics, notably in a national literature. For Marxists, totality, properly understood, was supposed to promote an "ethical state," although it was also used improperly to justify totalitarianism (*Marxism* 48, 164). Post-structuralism retunes this process so that, not aesthetic integration, but semantic abundance provides a model for social diversity, which promotes ethical politics—a better Canada. In the *Handbook*, totality takes the form of the nation-state, colonial domination, "masculinist modernism" (Gerson 337), governmentality, bio-politics, etc. Chiseling into these monoliths are various polyvalent literary tools, which Wunker's intricate analysis discloses in three feminist writers, and Julia Emberley analyses in four Aboriginal women writers. Their texts articulate a richer link between the personal and political, intimacy and belonging, a link far richer than nationalism or citizenship or assimilation permitted: "What changes is not simply the structure of intimacy, but also the public space itself. In other words, the motion between outside [publicity expanding into planetarity] and inside [privacy contracting into selfhood] becomes a dynamic working of the self into the world" (Wunker 98). This expansive, transnational impulse "reflects skepticism about Canadian identity and cultural nationalism as exclusive and hegemonic" (Wyile 893), but it usually retains some notion of Canadianness through its fidelity to the local, or more paradoxically, to "localities that are at once within and beyond any working definition of what it means to 'be' Canadian" (Imre Szeman and Andrew Pendakis 120). Even more emphatically in ecocriticism, one's concern is global but one's love is bioregional (Banting 731).

Localities at once within and beyond. The most inward view appears in Keavy Martin's conversation with the Inuit spoken-word poet Taqralik Partridge. She focuses solely on Partridge's work and never (well, hardly

ever) generalizes about Inuit culture, let alone Canadian literature. Most essays shift attention outward—communally, nationally, globally, "textually" (Ian Rae 390)—and together they raise the question: what happens to Canadian literature as a field when the most forceful cultural pressures are no longer centralizing but dispersive? Is there any point in devising a national literature in a postnational world?

Far from being new, this predicament recurs in literary history: in the "cosmopolitan nationalism" of the Confederation period (Tracy Ware), in the native-cosmopolitan debate in the 1940s (J.A. Weingarten), in the founding of a "national" theatre in Stratford devoted to Shakespeare (Rae), in the "internationalism of…nationalist discourses" in Québec poetry (Leahy 404), in the "transnational nationalism" of celebrity authorship (York 81). Tanis MacDonald ignites the most explosive view by proclaiming that "reductive, racist, sexist, and deeply conservative" cultural nationalism has been sabotaged by a "clamorous, transnational, multipronged, thinking poetry" whose "shatter pattern demonstrates a model of crack propagation, but in fracture mechanics and in Canadian poetry, it is the kinetic energy of the falling object that makes breakage and its widening circumference unpredictable, and ironically prolific" (484, 473, 475).

MacDonald's exuberance points to a widening horizon where, as Frank Davey notes in the very first essay, "Canadian literature" becomes an oxymoron, because its two terms make irreconcilable demands (21-2), one drawing inward, the other exploding outward. Frye often observed that cultural identity in Canada is "inherently decentralizing," regional rather than national, because an imagination rooted in local soil resists political integration (*Divisions* 43). Essays in the *Handbook* study various forms of resistance to centralized authorities. Beyond the national horizon entirely are digital compositions assembled at random by algorithms or internet search engines. These works cannot be Canadian at all because, as Erin Moure observed, a computer program "has no culture" (quoted by Kate Eichhorn 516), unless, perhaps, it is directed to parse only this *Handbook*.

Inevitably, the decision to view Canadian literature oxymoronically is a political one. Many essays show how the peculiarities of Canadian history and its hodgepodge society jeopardize the integrity demanded of a national literature. There can be Canadian literatures in the plural, situated in constituencies based on region, ethnicity, gender and so on, but they cannot be incorporated in a disciplined field without violating their specificities. Most authors in the *Handbook* do not wage war on totality so much as seek to extend its range by weakening its grip. Ethnic writing provides a good example. Part IV extends the field to acknowledge Black (David

Chariandy), Asian (Eleanor Ty, Pirbhai), Jewish (Norman Ravvin), and Arab (Elizabeth Dahab) authors. What these groups share are experiences of dislocation, "contrapuntal recollection" (Dahab 641) and family conflict arising from clashes—comic, tragic, ironic, weird—with Canadian institutions. To focus solely on their commonalities, however, even by labeling them all "ethnic," is to vitiate their differences. Their vitality lies not in what they share, but in their distinctiveness. Nor are they defined solely by their fractious encounter with Canada, a limitation that would trap them in what Pirbhai calls "the hegemony of hyphenation" (as in Asian-Canadian). She stresses the role of "stories of elsewhere" depicting experiences that preceded immigration and were brought to Canada (588). Similarly, Chariandy distinguishes two critical approaches to Black Canadian literature, which he calls "roots" and "routes" (541). The first is archeological; the second studies patterns of migration and contestation. If these overlapping approaches are applied to other communities, they reveal peculiarities rather than commonalities. Black writers, for example, confront the official myth that Canada, unlike America, was always a tolerant "post-racial" society, when in practice it has imposed its own "exclusionary politics of race" (540), a politics defining what "race"—that most elusive of categories—is supposed to be in a society that is not supposed to notice it.

Several essays offer materialist or post-structuralist analyses to expose Canadian literature as disoriented in the Marxist sense of offering imaginary solutions to real problems. In this view, authority, which politics always seeks and eventually respects, is deconstructed by rhetoric, which literature displays at its most prolific. Political thought is about governance, but ironically is itself ungovernable, and must be forcibly constrained by social institutions through the ideologies in which they entrench themselves. Most essays explore the material conditions making these institutions (universities, journals, awards, theatres, publishers) influential. The New Canadian Library series, which shaped so many CanLit courses, is a familiar example (Gerson 339), but so were mainstream magazines like *Maclean's* and *Chatelaine*, whose "ethos of enjoyable self-improvement" encouraged modern consumers to feel at home in Canada by exploring its regions. Faye Hammill and Michelle Smith quote an enticing 1934 advertisement for Ford cars: "'I used to be afraid of traffic,' one woman writes, 'but now I go everywhere,'" or at least she can drive to the end of the road, where the mysterious Canadian wilderness beckons (360, 361, 364).

Other essays (Wunker, Emberley, Gerson, MacDonald, Cho, Chivers, Wyile) treat literature as privileged to reveal how ideological constraints

are imposed and at what cost. Pierre Macherey praised the "watchful gaze" of literary texts for exposing the "false consciousness [of] spontaneous ideology" by putting it on critical display, exposing "myth and illusion as visible objects" rather than as invisible beliefs (*Theory* 132-33). Canadian literature can be treated as offering such a gaze, especially when it looks back at its own pretensions. A danger of this retrospective gaze is that it may encourage "presentism" (Davey 32): using present norms to condemn past faults. Janice Fiamengo offers a polite rebuke to postcolonial frameworks that, with the best intentions, "seem quite tone-deaf to the emotional valences" of women's narrative of settlement (265). But any celebration of "the symbolic consensus of Canadian social life" (Szeman and Pendakis 117)—in other words, Canadianness—can be undone by analyzing the symbolism in which it is expressed. Using Dionne Brand and Erin Moure as examples, Cho discloses the vicissitudes of citizenship in this way, but her approach also allows us to read E.J. Pratt's "Towards the Last Spike" as a faltering apology for nationhood. Whatever Pratt's intentions, his poem illustrates how a vast, inventive, corrupt political project—nation building—is destabilized by the mock-epic style in which it is rendered.

Where Frantz Fanon once declared that "every culture is first and foremost national" (*Wretched* 174), hermeneutically suspicious theorists now condemn the nation-state as an imperialist relic, although Kurds, Palestinians and some Québécois might disagree. Postcolonial critics share this suspicion, but Diana Brydon and Bruno Cornellier's meticulous history of postcolonial theory reveals a bewildering variety of views, some that still "valorize national belonging" (759), others that pose Canada apologetically between colonized and colonizing positions (760, 767)—guilty, with an explanation. Alan Filewod offers his own countercheck quarrelsome when he declares that "'true Canadianism' (or to use its more recent signifiers, 'Canadian identity' or 'national unity') can never be achieved: it is the constant projection into the future of a nostalgia for a perpetually re-invented past" (quoted by Rae 397-98). The *Handbook* suggests, however, that "Canadianism"—understood as a credible social fiction, sometimes consoling, sometimes incriminating, always gazing ahead and behind—is achieved in precisely this way. It is made credible in and by literature, where imagination is freest, but it is also, the more polemical essays insist, contested by the "asignifying rupture" (MacDonald 487) of literary language, which exposes a national imaginary as both necessary and incredible. The value of a national literature, then, is not to show us who we truly are, but to reveal we are never who we thought we were. Similarly, Dionne Brand warns that "'[n]ational identity…is a dance of artificiality,'" and

this applies, Chariandry explains, equally to "state-aligned identities," to "immigrant or 'ethic' identity" and even to "Black identity" (553). A "dance of artificiality" could describe literature, and since all dances are artificial, this literary choreography is doubly so. At issue here (but thankfully beyond the scope of this review) is the ontological status of imagined things. I would only note that these things include poems, cities, national borders and laws.

I doubt that it is ever possible to stop dancing. Nationalism has proven to be a tenacious ideology because it is so adaptable and so readily wins devotion: "both problem and possibility" according to Szeman and Pendakis (117). Emma Laroque's chapter offers a welcome possibility by showing how Metis writers now reject the stereotype of "itinerant hybrid" once glamourized in cultural theory, in order to "re-root the Metis with home(land), community, culture, and agency" (140). The five essays on Native literature take a nuanced view of nationality, which remains precious to people who feel deracinated, and I applaud Laroque's caution that we should "not privilege theory over people" (142). No doubt her warning will itself elicit further theorizing. For example, Emberley argues with fine academic polish that "colonial epistemic encounters and contestations" constructed "aboriginality" by maintaining "an oppositional and hierarchical duality" that "came to substitute for the actual experience of Indigenous peoples and nations" (209). Because "actual experience" cannot announce itself directly in their literature, however, it must be figured through an "Indigenous uncanny," which "refuses the formation of hardened or irrefutable regimes of 'truth'" (212-13), even as it evokes an authentic national—in the sense of First Nations—life.

Laroque's caution recalls an old rivalry between arguments that select texts to confirm a theory being endorsed, and those that survey a variety of texts in order to explore a historical period or region, for example: Maritimes (Tony Tremblay), Newfoundland (Paul Chafe), Prairies (Alison Calder), Pacific Coast (Nicholas Bradley). The chicken-and-egg question about whether theory or practice takes priority always confounds itself. Working inductively, Bradley stresses the fluidity of Pacific coast writing ("no single vista encompasses everything" 710), until fluidity becomes his controlling motif. Chafe worries that no "critical lens" can "examine meaningfully the range of texts now defined as 'Newfoundland literature,'" (677), yet he cannot avoid relying on an environmental focus. Working deductively, Chivers uses a "social model of disability," which "propels cultural inquiry" to "crip" critical awareness, that is, to "cripple" it in a beneficial way by "embrac[ing] a fluidity of structure" that destabi-

lizes identity politics (883, 884). Also deductive is Tremblay's use of an "exchange-value" model to define historical periods in which "the macro-economic plight of the Atlantic region becomes mapped onto its citizens" (663). Their plight is depicted poignantly in literature which progressively refutes the insulting "myth of deficiency" (664) foisted on Maritimers by endowing them with an agency which, I suspect, his economic model does not quite permit. In effect, he summons theory to privilege people over theory. In a larger view, Canada is the theory; Canadians are the people, rendered Canadian by the theory.

I am not suggesting that these admirable essays are too entangled in theory. The need for a conceptual prism to refract reality through discourse is familiar in cultural studies today. It appears in Jennifer S.H. Brown and Frieda Esau Klippenstein's entertaining chapter on first contact literature, told from both Native and European perspectives, where the immediacy of "eyewitness" testimony percolates through editors, translators, publishers, stereotypes and popular tastes (232). Still, after polishing my own prism, the "apologetic," I felt I had stubbed my toe on reality when Jonathan Dewar reminded me that Prime Minister Stephen Harper recited a formal apology in Parliament to Indigenous people (160), just as Brian Mulroney had apologized for the cruel internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. Dewar then assesses the practical apologetics of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It, too, can offer only an imaginary (ritual, symbolic, performative) solution to terrible problems, but as he shows, it serves a very real need. Although the Commission's efficacy is open to interpretation—as any symbolic act redressing the past must be—its sincerity is not in doubt. This apologetic resonates through the *Handbook* whenever it studies how Canadian literature emerged from a settler colony, whose pioneers felt entitled to the land they occupied and whose proselytizing religion justified violent social engineering.

It would be far too moralistic to say that what is most worthy in Canadian literature is its effort to expiate past sins. Literature is not just a talking cure. But just as much Aboriginal writing is an agent of healing, so much Canadian writing is about witnessing past injustices and through sincere acknowledgment, earning a belated legitimacy in the country. Note how this acknowledgment, whether performed in Parliament or in fiction, is at once self-effacing (apologetic) and self-serving (legitimizing), and therefore must be sincere if it is to succeed. Only a sincere apology, duly accepted, can be "felicitous," according to speech act theory, and so gain legitimacy. How does one know when an apology is sincere? asks Drew Hayden Taylor, and then replies, "but the healing must start somewhere"

(quoted by Dewar 160-61). Lionel Trilling has shown how romanticism enlists sincerity to mediate between art and life. It is one of the romantic virtues (sympathy and taste are others) that make the aesthetic and the social responsive to each other. Sincerity resounds as a poetic voice within a text, which summons public responsibility beyond it: it is a stylistic effect that achieves moral force. As deployed in the *Handbook*, it is a way, not only of making literature responsive to historical injustice, but of recognizing that history, and its injustice, as Canadian. This apologetic is expressed through forms of aesthetic reprimand: in gothic imagery and the "countermemorial tradition" (Sugars 448), in the Indigenous uncanny (Emberley), in the "spectral or ghostly hauntings of Black cultural legacies" (Chariandy 551), and in other temporal twists like avant-garde nostalgia (Leahy 408). Even here, however, there is a danger of domesticating differences. As Ty objects, ethnic communities are indeed haunted, but by ghosts from different traditions, so it is unwise to use "the gothic, ghosts, or haunting as an overarching trope" to characterize Canadian literature in general (569). By distinguishing these spectres, however, one can observe how they complicate and enrich the dance of Canadian cultures.

Especially revealing in this respect is Marie Carrière and Catherine Khordoc's thoughtful study of *l'écriture migrante* in Québec, where the term "ethnic" is mistrusted (as Jacques Parizeau discovered) and the relation between immigrant writers and *les écrivains de souche* (old stock still simmering) has been hotly debated. At issue are the competing pressures of exclusion and inclusion, both subject to use and abuse, as well as the rival claims of aesthetic and social evaluations. On the aesthetic side, "literature is not inherently in the service of community affirmation"; on the social side is its beneficial power to evoke "habitability, a notion of open and diverse situadedness [sic]" (628). Although the place rendered habitable in this case is Québec, Carrière and Khordoc show that whether the terms "Canadian" and "literature" are oxymoronic or companionable, their juxtaposition reveals how any national literature must reconcile two ambitions: to be stylistically deft and politically adept. I like to call them literary merit and cultural authenticity, but they reappear in the *Handbook* under different names, as they tug against yet require each other.

At the literary extreme stands Oscar Wilde's aesthetic boast: "All art is quite useless" (*Dorian* 4); at the political extreme is George Orwell's provocation: "All art is propaganda" (*Collection* 90). Between them is a struggle to accommodate the nation (a diverse cultural formation) to the state (a political unit). Their union forms a pushmi-pullyu worthy of Dr. Doolittle: the nation-state. There are many ways of judging literary excellence, and I

am not advocating some pure, formalist vantage that distinguishes masterpieces from kitsch, or even good kitsch from bad. I am only insisting that some such judgment is unavoidable and worthwhile. There are also many ways of judging the cultural astuteness of literary works considered in their national (or feminist, or postcolonial, or ecological) context. Again, there is no secure vantage yielding an authentic view. All nations, no matter how hospitable, cohere by excluding, not only foreigners, but many of their own citizens. During the recent federal election there was much talk about defending "Canadian values," a troublesome phrase that should refer, not just to what is most humane in Canadian life, but to the prejudices that produced Japanese internment, anti-Semitic quotas and residential schools.

A powerful tradition, now much disputed, encourages the counterpoint of artistic merit and cultural authenticity. Ideally, the finest works should provide the keenest insight into the culture that produces them, and is produced by them. As several essays show (Andrea Cabajsky, Fiamengo, D.M.R. Bentley, Ware), this ideal was proclaimed after Confederation and prevailed well into the twentieth century. Its influence has never quite died, nor I suspect will it, because its dialectic bequeaths such a rich legacy of promise and disillusion, glory and monstrosity, idealism and guilt. The greatest hopes produce the greatest failures, but at least both are great – as in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*. Who can resist such literary wealth? It reappears in MacDonald's exuberance, noted above, or more soberly in Terry Goldie and Lee Frew's survey of gay and lesbian literature, where works deserve attention, first, simply for their subject matter, but increasingly for their "homotextual" skill: Jane Rule's novel is "literate"; Dionne Brand displays "the extreme care of her craft"; Daniel David Moses is admirable for "a resonance and a poetic expression" making him "an important writer who is gay" (868, 869, 872). The harmony of art and life also promises a canon of the finest works portraying a nation sustained by common experiences, especially when those experiences are imaginary. Most Canadians will never see the Northwest Passage, but in Stan Rogers's haunting song and Earle Birney's "Pacific Door" readers join in the bleak discovery that Canadian imagination is stimulated by "the simple unhuman truth of this emptiness" (*Strait* 3). They commune in a northern mystique, provided Birney's artistry convinces them to do so. The nice oddity here is that his poem alienates readers, but invites them to share their alienation, whereas Canadians who enjoy no such kinship will feel alienated in a different way. As later essays in the *Handbook* protest, no writer should be compelled to feel alienated in only the proper Canadian way.

111

Ideally there should be a counterpoint of merit and authenticity, but some nice perversity drives the two apart, so that inferior writing (however judged) sometimes provides better cultural insight (however viewed), than do masterpieces. Worse is better. Years of honest effort have not convinced me of Susanna Moodie's artistic glory, but she is indispensible, Julie Rak argues, for showing how literary genres have been ranked and how they direct knowledge about what counts as Canadian (815). In Klinck's *Literary History,* H. Pearson Gundy lamented that much early writing "is now unread and all but unreadable" (*Literary* 174). Charles G.D. Roberts agreed that Canada needed better poets, not just Canadian poets (Ware 298), as did the francophone editor who offered "honneur au pays et à ses écrivains" even as he condemned "ces vers médiocres" (Cabajsky 246). Reversing the calculus (better is worse), Chafe discovers that "so much" of the "best" contemporary Newfoundland writing "completely deconstructs the notion of a literature that is definitively 'Newfoundland'" (680). Most distressing are works whose literary merit is exceptional but whose ethics are dreadful, as in Céline's novels, Ezra Pound's poetry, or Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, which Harold Bloom praised as an "anti-Semitic masterpiece" (*Anxiety* xlv). In Canada, Duncan Campbell Scott's sympathetic but racist portrayal of Natives does not necessarily make him a bad poet, and it is worth studying his verse to show how skillfully he offends us. Worse still, George Elliott Clarke found in T.C. Haliburton's writing "the harmful effects of racism exceeding any possible literary or historical merit" (Hulan 793), but that makes it all more authentic in displaying his racism as a Canadian value at the time.

"'Is there something about Canadian experience that makes writers contrived and stilted?'" lamented Sheila Egoff in 1962 (quoted and refuted by Deirdre Baker 826). That merit and authenticity may disqualify each other is not the fault of Victorian writers who fail to meet today's high standards or a deficiency in Canadian writing generally. It is a peril of any national literary history, whose twin commitments vie for authority. In this larger view, the *Handbook* is not a search for "Canadianness" but a history of that search conducted by literary and social authorities competing for cultural capital, later challenged by critiques claiming a recuperative authority of their own. Timothy Brennan charts the history of a "national longing for form"—its scope corresponding to Canadian history—which aspired to define a nation by articulating its origin, its sense of belonging and its destiny. Although this epic form is now deplored as a totalizing regime, its longing for hospitable communities within an ethical state remains, indeed has been intensified by the passions illustrated above. The

search may be futile, as Filewod warns, but futility is itself a vital literary motive—comic, tragic, ironic or weird—expressing perpetual need. It invigorates the postmodern sublime, the fertility of rhizomatic textuality (what could be more organic?), and Jacques Derrida's vision of justice as "an experience of the impossible" rendered almost imaginable ("Force of Law" 15). Lost causes are the only causes worth fighting for according to the movie *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, in which Jefferson Smith's epic filibuster (another rhizomatic form) offers futility as a patriotic American virtue. Although Mr. Smith does not go on to Ottawa, the *Handbook* demonstrates that utopian ideals are an essential critical and literary stimulus. In discussing postcolonialism, for example, Brydon and Cornellier prefer to reserve the term for critiques that "make an effort to decolonialize" (756), that is, to liberate subjected nations from invasive authorities, which have deformed both minds and bodies. This implies that bodies, minds and societies can always be improved. The recuperative critiques in the *Handbook* expose literary crises, cultural inauthenticity and historical injustice demanding "recognition and redress" (Hulan 781), inspired by a duty to envision a better way of imagining a better Canada. It is comforting to see this Victorian civic virtue reappear in essay after essay.

Finally, because I cannot do justice to all 55 contributors to the *Handbook*, I conclude by praising their extensive research and critical expertise, on which I have drawn freely. To those whom I have neglected or misrepresented, my apology.

Notes

1 An author's name followed by a page number, or page numbers alone refer to essays in the *Handbook*; otherwise see the Works Cited.

Works Cited

"Article 301: Turkish Penal Code." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Article_301_(Turkish_Penal_Code).

"As Canadian as Possible." http://dougdyment.com/hscott.html.

Birney, Earle. *The Strait of Anian: Selected Poems by Earle Birney*. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1948.

——. *Spreading Time: Remarks on Canadian Writing and Writers, Book 1: 1904-1949*. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1980.

Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: a Theory of Poetry.* 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997.

Brennan, Timothy. “The National Longing for Form,” *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi Bhabha. London: Routledge, 1990. 44-70.

Derrida, Jacques. "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'." *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. Ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, David Gray Carlson. New York: Routledge, 1992. 3-67.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth.* Trans. Constance Farrington. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967.

Friedenberg, Edgar Z. *Deference to Authority: The Case of Canada*. White Plains N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1980.

Frye, Northrop. *Divisions on a Ground: Essays on Canadian Culture*. Toronto: Anansi, 1982.

Jay, Martin. *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.

Klinck, Carl F. et al., eds. *Literary History of Canada: English-Canadian Literature*. 1965. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1976.

Lyotard, Jean-François. “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” *Modern Literary Theory.* 4th Ed. Ed. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. 329-37.

Macherey, Pierre. *A Theory of Literary Production*. Trans. Geoffrey Wall. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

McKillop, A.B. *Contours of Canadian Thought.* Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1987.

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. Dir. Frank Capra. Columbia Pictures, 1939.

Orwell, George. *A Collection of Essays.* New York: Harbrace, Brace, Jovanovich, 1953.

Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1973.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Ed. Michael Patrick Gillespie. New York: Norton, 2007.