

What Moss Means Now

John Moss, *The Paradox of Meaning: Cultural Poetics and Critical Fictions*. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1999. viii +248 pp.

John Moss occupies a unique position in Canadian literary critical history for a number of reasons. During the 1970s, Moss's *Patterns of Isolation*, among other works, established him as one of the most important thematic critics in the country. By the 1980s, Moss had moved away from thematic criticism's tendency to equate ontology with geography in literary study, and had converted to a version of Canadian postmodernist thinking developed by Robert Kroetsch, Dennis Cooley, Linda Hutcheon, and George Bowering, among others. Once again, Moss was at the forefront of an important shift in the development of writing in Canada, both as a literary critic and as a writer who wished to blur the boundaries between creative work and theory. *The Paradox of Meaning* traces the parameters of this journey from Moss's break with thematic criticism, traced in "Bushed in the Sacred Wood" (1981), to recent essays written from a type of postmodernist approach Moss developed during the 1980s.

All the essays in this collection are instructive for the reader who wishes to know what the Canadian postmodern turn in the 1980s and 1990s looked like, but probably not in as positive a way as the author intended. At their best, the essays in *The Paradox of Meaning* combine a sense of irreverent fun with linguistic play, and are animated by the belief that critical writing in Canada and about Canada truly matters. But these moments are rare. For anyone interested in serious literary criticism and theoretical work on Canadian literary production, Moss's work will frustrate rather than delight. Almost all the essays contain one of the most difficult inheritances from thematic criticism and from early 1980s postmodernist criticism in Canada: the same sense of linguistic play which seeks to erase boundaries between generic divisions largely elides the elements of responsible and usable literary criticism and theory. Most observations become part of the growth of the poet-critic's mind, and very little of that needs to refer to other critical or theoretical terrain, to literary works themselves, or to anything like literary context beyond gestures to a type of Canadian nationalism. Political and moral responsibilities sometimes surface, but often in

the way that Northrop Frye's evocation of the "social" in a work like *Words With Power* (1990) admits that social conditions do influence literature. Thematic criticism borrowed Frye's belief that literature itself ultimately transcends the social because it is part of a parallel mythological structure which ultimately refers to itself (xiii). The substitution of "language" for "literature" is what characterizes Moss's own shift from thematic criticism to postmodernism, but in the end this is not a postmodernism which abandons that thematic tendency to make language the stage of full national and individual presencing. The result here is a collection which tells us much about John Moss and what interests him because he writes himself and his framings into his narratives, but which tells us very little about the books, poems and thinkers he discusses. Most often, Moss substitutes creative exploration for intellectual rigour, when both should have happened together.

Moss himself explains why the collection exists: "they [the essays] have to do with the profound commitment to the primacy of *being* over *meaning*, presence over immanence, engagement over memory or dream" (v). This involves blurring boundaries between the practice of literary criticism and what for Moss is the excitement of creativity in all writing. He calls this "critical fiction" in the dual sense of critical as important, and critical as the activity of judgement. Moss sees criticism as an intensely moral act which matters in a public sense, since the linguistic play he evokes as part of his critical practice is linked to his commitment to developing what he would consider to be a Canadian English language. He believes that such a language exists, and that it is rooted in the idea of place, or in his words, to "Canada as a country rather than a state, as landscape rather than geography, as a culture of infinite particularities, a community of endless diversity, a lovely and necessary and breathtakingly beautiful land" (vii).

At the same time, this version of Moss in the essays of *The Paradox of Meaning* unhooks a consideration of geography from an ontology which would mark a statement like this as thematic criticism. Rather, Moss links a Heideggerian notion of *dasein* to the experience of reading and writing language itself. The paradox of meaning, for Moss, is that meaning itself cannot be teleological, but the desire for meaning must be teleological. Meaning, he says in the title essay of this collection, "renders us meaningless" (52). But this need for meaning that continuously recedes must be confronted,

and even celebrated, in a refusal of meaning if and when it comes. In such a refusal is unfinalisability. Moss sees this sort of refusal as the paradox which shifts criticism from the production of narrative to the listening for the openness of narratives, including the critic's own, since "the critic who has ceased to listen, who has answers not questions, who has displaced emotion, displaced thinking, with thought, is no longer a critic" (52). All of the essays in *The Paradox of Meaning* work towards this blending of personal anecdotes and the situation of Moss as a critic, writer and reader, with more abstract thoughts about criticism, English-Canadian literature and the working of language itself. This is what Moss considers to be post-modern thinking, postmodern reading, and postmodern Canadian writing in Canada and about Canada.

Moss's work is at its most coherent in the 1981 essay "Bushed in the Sacred Wood," a speculative piece that contextualizes the thematic criticism of the early 1970s, questions some of its literary judgements, and asks for movement beyond its basic principles. He does this without completely dismissing thematic criticism itself because the success of thematic criticism deserves serious scrutiny:

For a time, thematic criticism seemed to animate us and yet to absolve us from the burden of being ourselves, free us from the outside world, celebrate the best we had and were. Criticism, literature, and society seemed in perfect harmony. The querulous opponents of so-called thematic criticism would do well to consider how this came to be.
(22-23)

Moss does some of this when he lists some of the major works of thematic criticism, including his own, and observes that extreme forms of this criticism were based on questionable criteria that lauded works which seemed to fit thematic criticism's occupation with patterns and archetypes and which lent "to the literature itself an aura of insularity that is erroneous and demeaning" (23). Moss does not stop there, however, but discusses in general terms how the cultural naturalism of the 1970s worked symbiotically with the search for the "Canadianness" of literary works. Moss concludes that literary criticism in Canada should no longer use national identity as the primary criteria of critical practice:

It is time now that Canadian literary criticism serve the literature itself, time to stop considering literature a map of our collective con-

sciousness; a mirror of our personality; a floodlight illuminating the national sensibility. It is time to consider Canadian literature as literature and not another thing . . . Canadian criticism must learn to correlate, discriminate, evaluate. (27)

This call for change is all the more impressive because Moss himself was one of the architects of thematic criticism.

But the other essays in *The Paradox of Meaning* show that Moss never abandoned thematic approaches. The concern of thematic critics with a type of nationalism that glances off history and politics without actually invoking either has remained in Moss's work since 1981. For example, the 1983 essay "Invisible in the House of Mirrors" begins with a discussion of language as a Borgesian labyrinth, then moves to something that eerily sounds just like thematic criticism:

In Canada, poets in English must use a language that evolved into a coherent system in some other place than our own, through time upon the surface of which we float, the jetsam of an alien history. The sense of individual being within the Canadian landscape can sometimes be so ephemeral as to make the place, our place, seem virtually uninhabited. (90)

Compare this to a passage about what Moss calls "the geophysical imagination" in his 1974 book *Patterns of Isolation*:

Canada is a vast landscape and the context of innumerable regions. Its geography and climate impose an isolation of place, of many places, upon the consciousness of its populace. They separate community from community, and link them together . . . because there is only the barest imprint of civilization here and there in clusters across an expansive and imposing surface, regions in Canada are largely self-defining . . . each, in effect, is a pattern of consciousness, a focal pattern. (125)

Although these passages are about different topics, some of the details are so similar that it would be hard to tell whether one was written before or after Moss's supposed break with thematic criticism. This same tendency shows up in a 1996 essay called "Gender/Wilderness," where Moss observes that "our language and culture bring to us notions of wilderness as demonic, or, at best, a void; a place for forty days to test one's godhood, or one's manhood;

adversary or absence; dehumanizing, dehumanized” (198). Although Moss goes on to discuss how pleasure in the wilderness is not accounted for in such a paradigm, his confident assertion that this paradigm exists unproblematically in language and culture marks it as part of the assumptions thematic critics made about nature’s absolute relation to culture. It does not take much now to contextualize a paradigm based on assumptions of white, European supremacy, particularly when these assert that wilderness is empty because there are little traces of white settler activity there. Nor does it take much to discuss how the natural world could be interpreted as “dehumanizing” despite the ways in which many writers in Canada have sought to humanize the wilderness or have had Romantic beliefs about nature’s necessary otherness to culture. But Moss makes little effort to discuss how wilderness as a concept is imagined or invented, a strategy which would salvage these generalizations.

The curious “throw-back” quality to many of the essays in this collection is heightened in essays where Moss attempts to discuss gender or race. Moss says in his Foreword that “some readers will find the feminism awkward” because he is “a male of a particular age” (vii). In “Mrs. Bentley’s Gender” the awkwardness of the feminist analysis lies in Moss’s decision to not discuss gender in detail. The essay begins with praises for Bronwen Wallace’s *The Stubborn Particulars of Grace*, moves abruptly to Ethel Wilson’s *Swamp Angel*, which Moss calls “the modest manifesto of a woman’s will to prevail” (176), shifts to the way that Moss composes on a computer, moves back to a paragraph about Wallace’s short stories and then discusses two narrative types: the labyrinth and the jigsaw puzzle (178). Presumably Moss wishes to call attention to his own process in a postmodern insistence on frames and modes of idea production, but it is unclear where this fits into the rather generalized discussions of Wallace and Wilson.

Even if Moss’s own process is meant to evoke either a puzzle or a labyrinth, the basis for his structural intent remains so enigmatic that it is not easy to tell whether Moss is using structural experimentation to discuss gender. This is a major problem in “Mrs. Bentley’s Gender,” since the rest of the essay is a pastiche of observations about major authors like Audrey Thomas, Margaret Atwood or Alice Munro, with a discussion of the women in Robert Kroetsch’s *Badlands* thrown in. Some observations make little sense,

like the one that few people will probably ever read Kristjana Gunnars' *The Prowler*. Others seem dated, like Moss's contention that women writers resist what he calls narrative connection, which marks all women's writing as necessarily postmodernist because it resists masculinist narrative teleology. This allows Moss to discuss Kroetsch's "debt" to feminism's critique of patriarchal narrative strategy, a debt this reviewer is unsure that Kroetsch actually owes.

"Gender/Wilderness" suffers from the same tendency to discuss writers on a common plane, and features the same leaning towards essentialism, without a single reference to feminist philosophy or criticism to provide context for the discussion. While Moss understands that absolute difference between men and women is discursively produced, he does not move much beyond this position because his own rhetoric prevents more in-depth inquiry into this problem. Here is part of a typical passage containing these elements:

Begin with *Genesis* or with Aristotle. Begin with the *I Ching* or with Jacques Lacan. Begin within the pages of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* or Robert Kroetsch's *Badlands*, or within numerous other contemporary works of Canadian fiction. Begin with documentary accounts of wilderness experience by men and by women that are true for the writer writing even if, on analysis, they are not as close to the truth as their non-fiction designation implies. What we have, in each beginning, is clarion assent to the almost universal notion of separate male and female realities . . . if the form of the male story is essentially linear and leads through time, ultimately, to transcendence, the female story is spacial and leads to grace. (197)

Although writing like this is embarrassing to read because it evokes essentialism without problematizing it very much, Moss's discussion does include a more complex narrative about his own journeys through the Arctic and deconstructs his own desire to anthropomorphize wilderness as female, positioning himself as the white male who discovers, names and explores. Moments like these show how good Moss is at talking about his own experiences in critical ways when he sticks to a more autobiographical style.

Moss is at his best when he writes as a reviewer, because to some extent all of his critical work reads like an eloquent, intimate conversation with the people he writes about, or with their texts, for there is often little difference between them. Moss inhabits his own

text and its production as he inhabits the texts of others and the result, when it works, are moments of clarity produced by his passionate, intimate readings. In the essay "Critical Readings," which is a collection of different reviews he has written, it is clear that work by Kroetsch, Marlatt, Bowering and Atwood really matters to him, and that mattering is the matter of language which, he sees as a kind of performance of Canada itself. At such moments Moss writes, not as literary critic writes, but as a member of the intelligentsia, a critic who wants criticism to be part of the literary world it maps out. Moss's generalist style and lyrical prose suits reviewing, as he himself says: "when reviewing is done well, it's transparent and immediate . . . when criticism is done well it is a creative work, with a life of its own" (155).

Unfortunately, "Landscape, Untitled" and "Invisible in the House of Mirrors," both originally published in 1983, read more like review essays than critical essays. The difficulty is that Moss presents "Landscape, Untitled" in particular as an analysis about the ways Canadian poets fit the English language to the Canadian situation. This is an interesting topic, but the essay is filled with generalizations and inaccuracies which undermine the argument. In his Introduction Moss says that most quotations are from a single (unnamed) anthology because he wrote the essay when he was out of the country. This admission is intended to contextualize Moss's rather sweeping statements about Canadian poetry in the essay, but any piece that purports to be about Canada's "postcolonial" condition will suffer from the unexamined assumptions of canon that all mainstream anthologies, of necessity, bring with them. In the course of "Landscape, Untitled" Moss makes numerous factual errors that perhaps are the result of his decision to rely on one anthology as his primary source. These include his assertion that the Inuit "have dozens of words for snow; the English have only one. Canadians have none" (69), which is a linguistic myth that has long been refuted. Others include: incorrect dates for an unnamed poem by Standish O'Grady, incorrect dates for several poems by Joseph Howe, mis-assigning Isabella Valancy Crawford to the generation of poets immediately after Howe, and a reading of a 1893 sonnet by Wilfred Campbell—originally published in the *At the Mermaid Inn* column—as a poor effort rather than as the parody it was intended to be. Moss also makes outdated generalizations which will anger scholars of pre-twentieth century poetry written in Canada, most

notably that early Canadian writers wrote bad poetry because their language could not deal with the new “realities” of the New World. Although few would disagree that language creates sets of discourses that influence how “the world” is seen, Moss’s assumption that “bad” poetry is the result of alienation from language and from the environment looks as if it is drawn from the pages of Margaret Atwood’s *Survival* of 1970.

“Invisible in the House of Mirrors,” an essay meant to be a companion piece to “Landscape, Untitled,” is little better. Moss’s understanding of Canadian poetry is limited to older work by mainstream canonical authors such as Atwood, Bowering, Kroetsch and Marlatt, whose differences even from each other become flattened due to Moss’s insistence on reading them as poets who “must use a language that evolved into a coherent system in some other place than our own, through time upon the surface of which we float, the jetsam of an alien history” (90). This is another thematic reading of Canadian writing as a coming-to-terms of non-Native people with the empty, difficult landscape into which they are thrown with only the language of the colonizer to help them. It is surprising that such things are still written about Canadian poetry, given the changes that have taken place in Canadian literary production and criticism, and more generally in Canadian society during the last twenty or thirty years. The low point comes when Moss praises what he sees as the possibilities for non-Native people to which John Newlove’s “The Pride” gestures: “In ‘The Pride,’ John Newlove creates disturbingly authentic images of the landscape, alive with the Indian past. But those are all stories; only stories. When the exact right words come to us—then, then we will *become* the Indians and they us, and the land will be ours and we its living voice. For the Indian, word and image, place and self, were fused. It is they, then, who Newlove says are ‘our true forbears,’ waiting to be” (98). Anyone with even passing familiarity with Native writing and thought in a Canadian context will find this combination of essentialism and cultural appropriation appalling and misinformed. Moss never works his way away from settler discourse, which for him still continues to haunt all Canadian literary production in a delightful way—our estrangement and uncertainty in language must be related to our uncertainty as a nation and this must, as Linda Hutcheon has observed in *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988), make us ripe for postmodernism (19). It is no wonder that so many of these

articles have been published outside of Canada, where non-Canadians can perhaps more easily accept this version of Canada as the land of settlers who are never settled about their environment. In this version of the world, “we” are always white settlers, and “we” create homologies between the disruptions of form and the unreality of settlement itself, in a territory that is supposed to produce that language of displacement. “We,” however, still control the production of meaning, however ambiguous the product may seem to be.

The more creative essays in *The Paradox of Meaning* show how Moss himself loves words and loves the linguistic play he can evoke. Here is where Moss’s belief that the critical impulse must be autobiographical because literary criticism “is an obligation inseparable from our human will to persist” (64) receives its fullest treatment. Those who enjoy criticism that is not detached from the critic’s own experience will like Moss’s panegyric to Kroetsch, “This is a Poem.” In homage to Kroetsch’s own elliptical and playful style, Moss plays with the idea of the essay’s title, interspersing this with observations about language and the caesurae between grammar and corporeality. At one moment, Moss says “I wrote Kroetsch and asked if I could inhabit his life. I offered to be unobtrusive; to live it as if it were my own. He demurred through strategic silence. I may have had the wrong address” (3), which points out the misfires of language: the gap between addresser and addressee, the impossibility of being outside of text, text itself as being, Kroetsch’s own silence within this admission. But this play gets tiresome when few ideas come of it, as in this passage about Kroetsch as name:

Caught in the snare and delusion of my own rhetoric, suddenly I realized, Kroetsch is not Kroetsch. I wasn’t sure whether I meant the man or his canon or his cultural presence, or possibility all three. But of the essential paradox I was certain. Robert Kroetsch is a verb . . . Kroetsch, an empowering euphemism for being-in-time; not Heidegger, here, but Canadian maverick, and the hell with transcendence.

(5)

What has been said here about Kroetsch? Other than the rather obvious fact that Kroetsch has discursive presence in language, not much. Moss’s subsequent discussion deals with his confusion of a speech Kroetsch made with a 1987 talk by Derrida, that he then confuses with an appearance in the same building by Atwood. Other than his delight in the confusion of speakers, the tumble of memo-

ries in his own mind and his desire to have his readers see how he can play with the truth of a story, there seems to be little point to these anecdotes, whether they are invented or not.

In the end, it is not that Moss's claims for a type of postmodern, joyfully alienated "Canadian" English fails to illuminate the work of Kroetsch, Marlatt, or Bowering. It is that this version of them is presented as what there is in the critical landscape of Canadian literature, and more than that, that they represent a grounded mode of being for Canadian rhetoric. To sound like Moss for a minute, this is Canada as being, being Canada even in nothingness. This is form as function, which is form without content. This is Canada as a land of arid absences, without other histories, other contexts, or even other words for it. In the end, sadly, this is where and with what Moss leaves us in *The Paradox of Meaning*.

Works Cited

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