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Finding a Place for the Subject: Rethinking Place in Early to Modern Canadian Criticism

STEPHEN DANILOVICH

Introduction

PERHAPS NO CONCEPT IS SO CENTRAL to Canadian literary criticism as that of place. Whether it emerges as Charles G.D. Roberts's nativity of the soil, as Jonathan Kertzer's *genius loci* (38), or as Dennis Lee's authentic cadence, place appears again and again as a means for critics to account for that contested two-word term "Canadian literature." The whole of Canadian criticism is summed up by the meeting of those two words, and the notion of place appears to negotiate the very cleavage and/or continuity between them. On the one hand, Canada as such is its geographical boundaries, institutions, and histories; on the other hand, in its meeting with literature, Canada now suggests something "Canadian," a certain subjective quality or distinctive experience, a place of mind. The meeting between Canada and literature is parallel to the transformation of space into place described by humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan: space, a neutral field of possible action, when navigated by a living, experiencing, motivated subject, results in place. In other words, place belongs neither to subjectivity nor to spatiality but emerges out of the slippery and unsettled synthesis between the two.

Yet, from the colonial period's focus on territory, expansion, and settlement to postmodernism's "spatial turn," it seems that spatiality has often had the last word in Canadian literary discourse, whereas subjectivity has ended up with the short end of the bargain — a claim that, as I hope to show, is echoed by a number of critics from the early to modern periods. If the subjective side of place has indeed been a point of neglect, then that is a shame, since, as Tuan writes, we have "privileged access to states of mind, thoughts and feelings. . . . [and] an insider's view of human facts, a claim we cannot make with regard to other kinds of facts" (5). Whatever we can say about Canada as a

nation cannot be said with as much certainty as what each of us can say about being Canadian. Nevertheless, because place remains an ever-present and ever-liminal notion throughout Canadian criticism — or, put another way, because Canadian literature is necessarily literary as much as it is Canadian — subjecthood always finds a way to slip back into the criticism, often through the back door.

To that end, this essay is a preliminary attempt, by no means an exhaustive one, to reread the notion of place in Canadian criticism in subjective rather than spatial terms, focusing on the periods from colonialism to cultural nationalism. I hope to show how ideas of place in early Canadian criticism are not necessarily synonymous with localism or regionalism, an interpretation that has led to the many divisive antagonisms between Canadian literature and world literature, but can be seen more helpfully, and less polemically, as calls for increased self-awareness, self-location, and self-reflexivity by subjects. As Keith Basso observes in *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*, “places possess a marked capacity for triggering acts of self-reflection,” involving a shuttle move “inward towards facets of the self” as much as “outward toward aspects of the external world” (107). What many notions of place in early to modern Canadian criticism share is a search for phenomenological immediacy, a presence of mind among individual writers and readers, and that most central and private of places that we carry with us: our subjecthood. From this end of the space-subject spectrum, critics who discuss Canadian literature set aside topological terms and show a concern with more subjective modes of literary approach — an emphasis on personal authenticity, phenomenology, and the biographical lives of individual writers and critics — as the more fundamental parameters within which we read, write, and do critical work.

Broad terms such as “space,” “place,” and “subject” carry the risk of a transhistorical reading, one that might obscure the unique meanings that they might have held in different periods of Canadian criticism. Rather than deny such differences, I hope merely to point to certain common threads, in line with Basso’s observation that the “sense of place is a universal genre of experience” and that certain “transcultural qualities” inevitably arise as more work gets done to understand place-making as such (148). The space-subject spectrum presented here is intended not in a historical sense but in a heuristic one, a way to see “placeness” as a precarious balancing act between spatial and subjective

registers, always liminal and therefore always on the verge of being displaced, lapsing into one extreme by excluding its other end. Throughout this essay, I refer to the subjective as involving the private, personal, and perspectival realities of our unique experiences as individual readers, writers, critics, and persons, often ineffable and not always explainable by reference to the external world, and I refer to the spatial as involving the Cartesian plane of the external, extended, divisible world, the “objective” outer environment, whether natural or social, neutralized from any single subject position. Finally, in tandem with Tuan, I see place-making as involving those synchronous moments in which these inner/outer dimensions are reciprocal, as in the notion of literary map-making explored by Susan Naramore Maher: a “poetic, symbolic configuration of space” in which the “material matrix” of an environment, otherwise diffuse and dispersed, acquires a subjective dimension of inward depth, becoming “the portal into interior, lyrical musings” (x).

My heuristic approach in this essay shares some affinities with D.M.R. Bentley’s “phenomenological” method, which offered another inner/outer dichotomy — W.L. Morton’s baseland and hinterland — as central to Canadian literary identity (9). In *The Gay]Grey Moose: Essays on the Ecologies and Mythologies of Canadian Poetry, 1690-1990*, Bentley explores how Canadian writers tend to express a preference either for the Canadian hinterland, “a centrifugal flight from authority and enclosure” (81), or for the Canadian baseland, a centripetal “urge to abstraction and unification” (101), a preference that ultimately boils down to these writers’ own psychological and philosophical dispositions. What stands out for me in Bentley’s account, however, are the similarities between the two territories: both hinterland and baseland, the escape as well as the ordering, are inescapably spatial in their very terms. Neither seems to depart from spatial logic, be it bounded space or the transgression of boundaries, or makes explicit the psychological origins of these preferences in orientation, beyond the felt sense that such differences are indeed dispositional. Bentley helpfully illustrates the harmful extremes of either orientation when taken in isolation, as a self-contained system, though the mediating force between the two, if any exists, is not evident except for a brief mention that such attempts to reconcile “contrary urges towards order and freedom” are “sometimes seen as characteristic of Canadian culture overall” (4). The element of something characteristically “Canadian” suggests that a sense of place is being approached, but it remains a tentative suggestion.

Perhaps this is because spatiality in its very terms — premised as it is on extension and divisibility — makes any such coming together and bridging of distances difficult to imagine. It seems that the predilection for spatial terms and territories in Canadian literary criticism, whether between nationalism and transnationalism, nativism and cosmopolitanism, or, as Margaret Atwood put it, “here” and “there,” necessarily sets up a false choice within the selfsame spatial logic, alternating between closure and openness with no means for situating a self (which ostensibly does the closing and the opening) (18). Such oscillations cannot help but unsettle the sense of place into a divisive dualism, even an impossibility, and it might be the missing account of a mediating subject position — an account of perspective — that is the chief culprit after all.

No doubt the “subject” has been a fraught term in contemporary critical theory. From poststructuralism onward, critics have most often aligned it with a kind of Kantian idealism or a politically problematic brand of neoliberal individualism. Because of this, critical theory has instead tended toward a view of the subject as a site rather than a static identity, a contingent intersection of forces interpolated from the “outside,” so to speak, rather than an indivisible interiority or essence. This tendency to think of the subject in spatial terms is part of criticism’s general tendency to want a detached, topological, objective view of literature — not to be swallowed up by the melodramas of character identification, the “purely” literary or aesthetic experience or text-in-itself, but to circumscribe those experiences from a spatial (and special) vantage point. The relative “placeness” of a subject in the unique encounter with a text is substituted for a superior, because broader, critical focus on the spatial surround, on extratextual forces and factors.

There is one problem with the spatializing of subjectivity: space is not synonymous with mobility. Separated from temporality — from change — spatiality is fixed and static, defined by implacable positions and unbridgeable divides. As Tuan points out, subjectivity requires both space and time to be realized in full; like the space-time observer in physics, the possibility of changing one’s frame of reference across time determines one’s positionality at least as much as the spatial coordinates of a Cartesian plane (130). This is more than a bit of scientism, as I intend to show: the call for both spatial and temporal understandings reappears throughout the early Canadian criticism, often in tandem with a search for a distinctively “Canadian” perspec-

tive, though not loudly enough to be heard. Over the years, the spatial creep into subjectivity has lost an account of the *relativity* of spatiality, causing unforeseen theoretical problems that continue to be replayed and revisited. The chief one is the denaturing of the subject as a viable avenue of literary study — as somehow too relativistic, too personal, too quaintly individual to provide good material for critical work. The more that spatiality has encroached on the subject, the more that the subject becomes a secondary manifestation of more primary sociological, historical, and material powers — and ultimately not worth our time as critics if we want to get to the bottom of things. Even if the subject-as-site once had the laudable intention of opening the subject to influence, contingency, and ultimately change, ironically it has served to fix the subject in a spatial gridlock of deterministic forces. This is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, however: it is spatiality that most imagines the subject fixed in place to begin with, confined to a position and incapable of relationality. But it need not be imagined that way.

Cynthia Sugars once observed in a seminar that critics appear to be writing most of all about themselves. To recover this side of criticism means retrieving the subject from its suspected complicity with a complacent or regressive politics, which also means giving up on the idea of Canadian criticism as the inexorable march of progress toward an ethically superior alterity or relationality. Instead, let us situate the subject in neutral terms. By treating the subject as a means, not an obstacle, to bridging those divides between self and other, we might recover it as that ambivalent site of struggle, of otherings and openings — we might see how it is through subjective means that we can most resist the trappings of a self-referential, solipsistic subject, rightly maligned by much critical theory. Inasmuch as critics have fallen short of the call to subjectivity, however, satisfied with spatiality and its logic of peripheries and thresholds, the conversation has been forestalled, deferred, and returned, always in search of the subject at its centre. Fortunately, all that it takes is a subtle reorientation in focus to retrieve a place for the subject that has always been there in the literary discourse. Finding a place for the subject means taking up Basso's simple but profound point that places "are as much a part of us as we are part of them" (xiv) — that "People, not cultures, sense places" (xvi) and that "*We are*, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine" (7). Without further ado, let us locate the subject in the many ideas of place that permeate Canadian criticism.

Colonial and Confederation Periods

John Gibson's introduction to *The Literary Garland* (1843) sets up the question of place that proceeded to trouble critics for over a century. The problem is best encapsulated in his statement that "the progress of literature has been co-equal with that of the settlement of the wilderness; and that if the latter has been made to bloom and blossom as the rose, the literature of Canada likewise blooms and blossoms beautifully" (33). A direct link between place-making and literature is laid out for us, but on closer inspection we notice certain telling details.

Gibson's if-then structure makes literature entirely derivative from settlement and its national-economic agenda: if the latter blooms, then, and only then, will literature follow. As in the spatializing logic discussed above, literature is made into an extension or sub-domain of the state and its nationalizing interests. It becomes impossible, from a postcolonial perspective, not to see Canadian literature as complicit in the logics of economic nationalism, settlement, and ecological devastation that underpin the country's mercantile-colonial history. With literature subordinate to the state, the derivation extends to the subject — the individual reader or writer — as a nationalizing agent as well: any attempt to read literature for the subjective experience alone, whatever its "literary" value, becomes an obfuscation of the underpinnings of literature in national-institutional power. Already in Gibson's introduction, Canadian literature has become thoroughly spatialized, circumscribed by the nation, its limits obvious for all to see.

To give Gibson some credit, his position was difficult. He was responding to arguments circulating in his time that "Canada is not a literary country" because "the poor emigrant, yielding to the stern laws of necessity, was forced to devote his time and energies to obtain a provision for his family" (32). Because material survival overshadowed any literary instinct in early Canada, Gibson believed that what was needed for the development of literature must be the reverse: material wealth, "easy circumstances, . . . the wished-for leisure" (32). And because Canada was headed in that direction, he had no doubt that literary achievement was predestined for the nation. Unfortunately, in adopting a stance opposite to that of his detractors, Gibson did not leave the original terms of their point of view: in both positions, literature remains totally and exclusively a product of capital and of nation, with no hope for other factors, other influences or possibilities. Far from

refuting the critics, Gibson inadvertently played into the assumptions that made literature a lesser concern in the eyes of Canadians. If literature is a side effect of settlement and economic growth, then there is no reason to bother with literature; instead, become capitalists and nationalists, and literature will take care of itself.

This seems to be patently wrong — one is no guarantee of the other. And if a lack of material safety is no condition for making literature either, then we are left with a third alternative, which Gibson did not consider: it is when literature can finally disconnect itself from a reliance on material gain, whether for the bare necessities or for the luxuries of profit and wealth, that literature can grow into its own. Gibson, in rallying against those who equated financial poverty with literary poverty, went too far toward the other extreme, equating financial wealth with literary achievement. All that Gibson needed to claim was that literature could develop precisely once money was no longer the determining factor — not because the country could now become rich. The distinction is subtle but makes all the difference: as long as literature is seen to be derived from capitalism or nationalism, the spatial logic sinks in, likening literature to expansionism and settlement, granting it no inner life of its own, no value on its own terms.

Gibson's position was part of a broader pervasive attitude of "materialism" that critics in later decades began to notice. Thomas D'Arcy McGee, in "A Canadian Literature," explains that the real challenge of Canadian literature was the particular subjectivity of colonial Canadians, "plain, hard, matter-of-fact," and "of worldly materiality" (42). In other words, they prioritized the practical world of material gain, which, it is implied, forecloses the literary impulse: after all, why attend to subjective states of mind if external and material circumstances are what matter most? Most interesting, though, is the ending of McGee's essay, his claim that "a Canadian literature would tend to the creation of a thoroughly Canadian feeling. Not as ignoring British sentiment and exalting nativism, but in the acknowledgement of all elements, foreign and provincial; the dispelling of all separate 'clannishness,' and the recognition of all nationalities in one idea and in one name" (42-43). Notably, McGee sets up an opposition between a distinctively Canadian "feeling" and regionalism and "nativism": the recovery of a subjective sense of Canada, rather than planting us more firmly within our spatial limits, would elevate Canadians to a shared realm of human commonality.

Here McGee uncovers the very liminal meeting between spatiality and subjectivity that generates place: provinciality and locality on the one hand, and feeling on the other, the capacity for experience as such, free from fixedness in any one location. It is the combination of the two that makes place, and it is this liminality of place that is shared by all places, “all nationalities” (43). In other words, McGee realizes that to develop a particular Canadian subjectivity is not the same as a commitment to space, region, or nation: in fact, developing a more thorough subjective relationship to our surroundings is precisely, and unexpectedly, what raises us from spatial provinciality to something like a universally shared human condition, “in one idea and in one name” (43). A more thorough subjectivity allows us to surpass those spatial divides between foreign and provincial — unlike the pursuit of material gain and political expansion, which remain firmly ensconced in “clannish” regionalism.

William Douw Lighthall, in his introduction to *The Songs of the Great Dominion*, raises the same pressing question about the role of subjectivity, in somewhat bombastic terms: “But what would material resources be without a corresponding greatness in man?” (129). Lighthall argues that what is needed for Canadian literature to take root is a kind of authorial exceptionalism, really a distinction of authors from their environments, a separation of subjects from their surrounding spaces. Lighthall reveals that doggedly to pursue a Canadian understanding of Canadian literature forecloses the possibilities for the less restrictive, more subjective, indeed more literary modes that might arise: “[F]or it is obvious that if only what illustrates the country and its life *in a distinctive way* be chosen, the subjective and unlocal literature must be necessarily passed over” (131). Both Lighthall and McGee anticipate the divisions between nativism and cosmopolitanism that define later periods of Canadian criticism: note, however, that more than a choice between nationalism and transnationalism it begins as a choice between the nation and the subject, or between Canada and literature, which remains as ever the real fork in the road.

No discussion of place in Canadian criticism would be complete without Charles G.D. Roberts’s “The Savour of the Soil.” Even as the essay appears to advocate for a regionalist literature, however, the subject hides in plain sight. Roberts argues that literary authenticity must come from writers who draw on home for inspiration, which appears to be an argument for nativism, as his metaphors of growth and ground

seem to imply. Closer inspection, however, reveals that this soil is entirely psychic in nature — its material being “emotion remembered,” its nativity being “that which nourished . . . childhood and youth” and ultimately whatever “feeds and fosters . . . growth” (251). More than nativist nostalgia, Roberts’s call for artists to look home turns out to be a call for more subjective, more personalized modes — the home is one’s psychic reality. To “savour . . . the soil” amounts to “a demand for sincerity and sympathy”: that is, to spring forth from one’s genuine subject position rather than curtail it or look elsewhere (or outward) for inspiration (251).

Finally, Sara Jeannette Duncan is perhaps the most articulate voice in this period when it comes to highlighting those subject/space divisions that we have explored thus far. Duncan resists the plainly topological assumptions of her contemporaries, who went so far as to blame the uncertain condition of Canadian literature on “the fault of the climate”: the most direct link between literature and space that one could posit, which seems to be extreme only until one realizes that it is the honest and logical conclusion of making literature derived from its surroundings, whatever they might be (32). To this end, Duncan’s criticisms of her contemporaries are not limited to a simple geographical determinism; Duncan extends them to those who give economic or national reasons for the state of their literature as well. Reminiscent of McGee and Lighthall, she argues that “money and the moneyed can neither command nor forbid the divine afflatus. The literary work produced solely by hope of gain is not much of an honour to any country” (33). All of these ways of “relegating the responsibility for our literary inactivity” — to regionalism, nationalism, or economic progress — are “too plausible to be tenable” for Duncan (33).

Her statement that extraliterary determinism is “too plausible to be tenable” is to say, simply put, that the thoughts themselves encourage literary inactivity, whatever their truth value might be. The more plausible the relationship between literature and its surroundings, the less tenable it is to *do* literature — literature being an activity, a practice, not a guaranteed by-product. What happens when the relationship between authors and their spaces is so direct, Duncan points out, is that literature is “produced solely by hope of gain” — it becomes the extension of the national-economic priorities of the state (33). In other words, the belief enacts itself: believing literature to be a mere feature

of the environment makes it so, ultimately giving it up to the nationalizing agenda.

If space cannot be the source of the literary impulse, then Duncan's alternative is evidently subjective in its terms: "[T]hose who are called to [authorship] obey a law far higher than that of demand and supply. Genius has always worked in poverty and obscurity; but we never find it withdrawing from its divinely appointed labour" (33). The mystical rhetoric might be difficult to square away, but from a secular point of view it is clear that literature for Duncan is a deeply personal affair, a matter for individual subjects that cannot be prescribed or predetermined. How exactly we are "divinely appointed" matters little: it is a kind of negative theology that she gives us, pointing to the inevitable failure in rendering the creative impulse derivative, whether to climate or to capital. The tendency to explain art away, for Duncan, is a "spirit of depreciation" (35). In making art a side effect of some other cause, we are left with only the hopeless paradox of "forcing" literary authenticity through every means but literary ones, whether through criticism or through political commentary, a futility best described by Goldwin Smith: "There is no use in attempting to galvanize into life anything, whether literary, political, or commercial, which has not life in itself" (125).

Circulating in this period are the classical problems of free will and determinism that pervade questions of Canada as a place, a space, or a literature: is literature a product of its writers, or is it a product of the environment and conditions in which they write? Are writers themselves only an extension of their country, or do they exist as agents in their own right? Finally, is there such a thing as literature on its own terms, or is literature always an expression of something extraliterary? Whatever one's answers might be, no one likes reductive binaries — and perhaps both sides could agree on that. The more thorough and comprehensive answer appears to require a "both-and" approach: a liminal, always-tense, pluralistic interaction that reduces neither side to a mere by-product of the other. However, in our reading of these binaries — much like in our reading of place — we are rarely so even-handed, tending to bear down with an emphasis on one or the other side, an emphasis that ultimately amounts to our own sense of the human experience. These dualisms cleave right through the middle of Canadian criticism from its onset, and, as I will show, the divide between subject and space grows more and more polemical in later periods.

Modernism through A.J.M. Smith

It is the effort to recover a place for subjectivity that motivates A.J.M. Smith and his “critical enquiry into first principles” (“Wanted” 221). Like Duncan, Smith looks for alternatives to the “materialistic” and the “mercantile” — the supply-and-demand logic of capital and glib nationalism — by looking to “things of the mind and spirit” (221). Again, we need not become theological to recognize this as a plea for subjective, associative, phenomenological modes firmly grounded in personal experiences. For Smith, it is the “atmosphere of materialism” (222), “an exaggerated opinion of the value of material things” (221), that pervaded Canadian literary culture and meant that “literature as an art has fought a losing battle with commerce” (222). The affinities between spatiality and materialism are clear if we recognize that both are premised on extensions — matter being primarily defined by extension — and depend on a neutral Cartesian plane of substance. Neither has an account of the perspectivism of a relative subject position, of the spontaneous eruptions of affects, or of the interiority of conscious experience as such.

Smith’s solution to this materialist atmosphere, however, is somewhat unexpected and what I consider to be a misstep: the “philosopher critic” is his answer to revitalizing literary culture (“Wanted” 223). According to Smith, what is most needed is “a body of critical opinion to hearten and direct” Canadian writers, without which writers “are like a leaderless army” (222). This view is best summed up by his following admonishment of Canadians: “The heart is willing, but the head is weak” (224). Smith calls for *less* subjective sensibility, and *more* intelligent criticism, which would appear to go against the subjective modes of literary approach that I have been describing. One might rightfully accuse him of overestimating his own role as a critic; however, it is possible to read his valorization of that role more sympathetically as the call for a better understanding of literature as such. After all, the critic’s role is to understand literary value, in part to delineate what makes good or bad literature. Instead of a vanguard of scholars, a literary priesthood, what Smith actually might be advocating is a better reckoning with what literature as such *is* — better definitions, more open understandings, in light of the many reductions of literature operating in his time.

Elsewhere in “Wanted — Canadian Criticism,” Smith demonstrates that this was indeed his view of the problem. He claims that the prelim-

inary work of critics should be to encourage the Canadian writer to “put up a fight for freedom in the choice and treatment of his subject” (223). This is already very different from the call for an elite class of critics who will demarcate what those subjects can be. Moreover, his claim that “any subject whatever is susceptible to artistic treatment” can be understood not only as an openness to any and all literary subjects but also as an acknowledgement of the *subjective* means by which literature is arrived at — the subject position, free to associate and to imagine (223). This is the real recovery of those “things of the mind and spirit” that Smith alludes to earlier — his demand for a critical vanguard is a somewhat hasty and contradictory add-on (222). By positioning criticism as a necessary precursor to literature, he makes the familiar mistake of rendering literature, once again, helpless and vulnerable to more primary, extraliterary influences.

Despite this move, Smith ultimately demonstrates his commitment to subjective modes in his criticism of the overly spatial nature of Canadian poetry: “Canadian poetry . . . is altogether too self-conscious of its environments, of its position in space, and scarcely conscious at all of its position in time. This is an evident defect, but it has been the occasion of almost no critical comment” (“Wanted” 223). Here I generally agree with Smith and find this to be true of literary criticism even today: without terms for both space and time, the subject position becomes diffuse in spatiality, determined by its peripheries, its spatial and material surrounds; following such a determination, subjective modes of literary engagement become hollow as well. What time introduces is the relativity of space, perceived as it is from a shifting and changing observer. Perspective and positionality as such become the necessary reconciliation of space-time — the here and now of subjective phenomena. This might be the sort of phenomenology that Smith is grasping for in his search for “an adequate and artistic expression” of Canada: the revelations that come with psychological, affective states as they come unbidden, independent of agenda or outcome and therefore, in some fundamental sense, more authentic, free from imposed or imagined censors alike (223-24).

A.J.M. Smith refines these views in his introduction to *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, written fifteen years later. He states outright the arguments teased out above: the necessary freedom for literature to *be* literature and the resulting subjective truths that rise to the surface when art as art is diligently carried through: “Poetry . . . is most reveal-

ing when it is most itself. What it tells us about society is something we have to catch as an overtone from what it tells us about an individual" (3). Exploring the individual subject becomes the very means of revealing its social and cultural undercurrents. Therefore, "significant tests" of literature, Smith writes, "are sincerity and vitality rather than loftiness of aim or solemnity of treatment" (4). Not a social agenda but a subjective authenticity is key: "Does the poet mean what he says? Is his poem alive?" (4). It is such authenticity that defines his praise for Archibald Lampman: "His best poems have a timeless and placeless significance which, paradoxically enough, rises out of their faithfulness to the local scene and to the specific experience" (16). Smith's description of Lampman's poetry might be the best account that we have so far of the paradoxical and liminal nature of place: it is by attending faithfully to the specific experiences of one's current positionality that a writer's work ends up elevating itself to something beyond its regional confines.

Smith's subtler points have been lost in the embattled nativism/cosmopolitanism divide, for which Smith is most known and most criticized. The unfortunate consequence of the polemic between nativism and cosmopolitanism is the forced choice that it sets up between literature that is regional and Canadian, vulnerable to parochialism or conservatism, and a more universalist literature that glosses over the local, appearing ideationally to be disconnected from reality. Literature ends up between a rock and a hard place. The distinction, however, is false. All along, Smith has been seeking to recover a more thorough embeddedness in subjectivity, phenomenology, and authentic experience; however, as with Lighthall, his oppositional rhetoric sets up the subjective as paradoxically "unlocal," divorced from its surroundings and therefore universal and cosmopolitan. One might see it as the reverse trap of spatializing the subject: a subjectification of space, resulting in an imaginary phenomenal realm somehow apart from all locality. The result is ultimately the same: we lose our sense of place, and the polemics continue.

Clearly, the recovery of subjective authenticity necessary for place is something of a tightrope walk between extremes, with the trappings of nativism and cosmopolitanism on either side. In fact, the extremes are bridged when we discard their spatial differences and read both of them as advocating a particular subjectivity. As much as cosmopolitanism is described as a "universal, civilizing culture," it is nevertheless one of "ideas," suggesting a subjective frame of mind rather than

some ideational civilization “out there” (A. Smith, Introduction 5). Similarly, nativism is typically associated with the country’s inescapable underpinnings in its colonial past, but it is equally about “what is individual and unique in Canadian life,” suggesting once again a subjective commitment to one’s unique experiences more than to any historical-material determinism (5). Rather than travelling outward by the roads of nativism or cosmopolitanism, it is by travelling inward to their commonalities (what John Sutherland calls their “inroads”) that we see how both nativism and cosmopolitanism lead back to the centrality of the subject and the importance of attending to the here and now; both become extreme parodies of themselves when they are read as extensions into the spatial world (Sutherland 379). It is perhaps to avoid such polarizing polemics endemic to spatial divides that Smith drops his native/cosmopolitan distinction in later editions of *The Book of Canadian Poetry*.

His arguments remain relevant today by pointing out how neither spatiality nor materialism gives us alternatives to the entrapments of commerce, commodification, and the logic of supply and demand in which everything becomes an extension of power and management. The subject, of course, is illusory in such a view; this might mean that the subject is precisely the means to resist it. A simple spatial metaphor is at play here: do we imagine the subject as “smaller” than the nation, and therefore nested within it, as part of the whole? Or do we imagine the subject as “apart” from the nation altogether, in an entirely different space, phenomenological or otherwise? The first requires a single spatial plane shared by both and confining them; the second is rather multidimensional, admitting other spatialities and perhaps the element of time, the possibility of change. It is the second spatiality — the space of *detachment* — that Smith offers in his essay “Eclectic Detachment.” More than an alternative spatiality, however, it is a *subjective* emplacement that he offers: “[T]here are some things [that the Canadian poet] chooses to attach himself to. I emphasise *himself*. It is someone, a person, a poet, who is attached or detached. The term *detachment* in this context has nothing to do with objectivity or impersonality” (or, if I may add, spatiality); “[i]t is actually an affirmation of personality” (8).

Cultural Nationalism and Thematic Criticism

The periods of cultural nationalism and thematic criticism have much

to offer in support of my argument in this essay. For instance, the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences features a telling passage in its report on how “our literature must first find its centre of gravity” since “our writers are subject to the pull of a variety of forces” (391); the inkling of a subjective centre is there, but it quickly lapses into the diffuse rhetoric of “universalism” that entrapped A.J.M. Smith (392). In “Introduction: Mandatory Subversive Manifesto: Canadian Criticism vs. Literary Criticism,” Barry Cameron and Michael Dixon protest against the “Balkanizing spirit” of Canadian criticism — that is, its spatializing divides — by recovering something like place, a “mediation between the student and his cultural heritage,” and ultimately arriving at subjecthood, “an informed citizen capable of independent judgment” (143).

Northrop Frye’s body of work, popular in this period, is nothing if not a rallying call to resist circumscriptions of the literary, thereby freeing up a personal and existential phenomenology of the imagination. Frye sets up the centripetal/centrifugal or subject/space distinction in his famous assertion that, “If no Canadian author pulls us away from the Canadian context toward the centre of literary experience itself, then at every point we remain aware of his social and historical setting” (“Conclusion” 821-22). The “centre of literary experience” for Frye is foremost a phenomenological and existential centre, as evidenced by his exploration of linguistic modes in *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of “The Bible and Literature”*: whereas the centrifugal impulse sees language as reacting to its environment, adopting rhetorical or descriptive aims, the centripetal impulse draws language inward, toward increasingly more spontaneous and hallucinatory modes, out of which mythopoetic eruptions of the imagination come unbidden and unmediated by sophisticated or scientific ends (88). It is the avoidance of such an imaginative centre of experience, according to Frye, that has forestalled the Canadian sensibility from engaging with the subjective “Who am I?” — substituting it for the spatialized and subordinate question “Where is here?” (“Conclusion” 826).

Frye, like the critics surveyed so far, wishes to supplant the long-standing pre-eminence of regionalism in Canadian criticism with an even more proximal site, something like the here and now of the subjective imagination. Until writers do so, Frye argues, literature will continue to externalize “the enemy,” be it nature or the social, rather than engage with “the theme of self-conflict, a more perilous but ultimately

more rewarding theme" ("Conclusion" 834). A constant deference to external space leads to the "garrison mentality," which doggedly pursues the logic of spatial extension, building roads and raising villages, yet hesitates to draw inward, where the "real terror" awaits: the subject perceiving herself as subject, realizing herself as apart from her environment, as a distinct personality ("Conclusion" 831).

At this point, a valid objection might be raised that Frye's emphasis on subjectivity seems inconsistent with the impersonal poetics that Frye advocates elsewhere. The importance that he places on poetic lineage appears to emphasize impersonal tradition, supporting a high modernist image of the artist that bears little resemblance to the subjective immediacy outlined thus far. The point is further supported by Frye's frequent decrying of any conscious, volitional, or intentional attempt to write poetry: "Poetry cannot be written by an act of will" ("From 'Letters'" 58). This seems to leave the subject with little to do. If, as J. Russell Perkin observes, Frye "relegates to secondary status much psychological as well as social and political criticism," then he leaves us with neither the subject, as personality or psychology, nor society, with its social and political agendas, as the origins of literary impulse (213).

Indeed, if our only critical terms are the dichotomies of individual/society, personal/political, or subject/space, then the one persistent feature becomes the slash, which threatens to obscure how these concepts are, and perhaps always have been, reciprocal and mutually informing. Frye believes that such an originary dynamic reciprocity is precisely the realm of literature: it is when Cartesian distinctions such as self/other or subject/space cease to matter that language acquires its poetic and imaginative strain. In metaphorical language (the language proper, Frye argues, of literature and poetry), "there is relatively little emphasis on a clear separation of subject and object: the emphasis falls rather on the feeling that subject and object are linked by a common power or energy," a bridging that only metaphor can express (*Great Code* 24-25). In this context, poetic impersonality more closely resembles the transpersonal, which accounts for the importance of myth in Frye's criticism: unlike an impersonal objective world, the transpersonal is not a negation of the personal but an invitation to relate personally to non-human worlds, allowing for an inclusive continuum between self and other rather than an opposition between them. In contrast to the mystical and boundary-dissolving language of the poetic imagination, Frye presents discursive and rhetorical languages as the sources of our many subject/

object oppositions, because of their indexical nature, pointing as they do to shared reality or to social consensus: such language “is naturally Cartesian, based on a dualism in which the split between perceiving subject and perceived object is the primary fact of experience. For the artist,” in contrast, “whatever may be true of the scientist, the real world is not the objective world” (“Lawren Harris” 208). True poetry for Frye is therefore neither individual nor public, neither a private autobiography nor a mouthpiece for social concerns, but a third alternative that relates the two by stepping outside the human-centric altogether.

For Frye, it is literature itself, personal yet impersonal, authored by subjects yet existing as material objects, that grants it its anti-realist and, indeed, mystical airs, undoing the split between “something made and something found” (“Lawren Harris” 209). His poetic imagination shares a certain irreducible liminality with placeness: both collapse those bounded Cartesian dualities and divides between self and other that otherwise predominate in rationalistic modes, premised as they are on a firm split between inner and outer worlds. Although his famous critiques of things such as the garrison mindset seem to pit Frye against notions of place, what he is against is a rampant outward-looking spatiality — a material determinism that excludes the subjective realm, finding no value in literary experiences beyond their existence as epiphenomena.

In “Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space,” Dennis Lee provides another remarkable example of that precarious mediation of subjectivity, in space and in time, that retrieves a sense of place. He describes cadence — the phenomenological source of his literary inspiration — as “a kind of taut cascade, a luminous tumble” (152), metaphors that imply a processional sense of temporality, an unfolding in time, or what he later calls “the energy of infinite process” (153). Notably, it is his turn toward subjective interiority that most recovers that element of time missing so far in the spatializing registers of Canadian criticism: “If I withdraw from immediate contact with things around me,” Lee writes, “I can sense it churning, flickering, dancing, locating things in more shapely relation with one another without robbing them of themselves” (152). Such a phenomenological clarity, achieved by an internal withdrawal, might seem to be a denial of social relevance, of political concerns, or of the material realities of one’s circumstances — and it is. But it is a denial that does not end there, in an isolated and solipsistic subject, allowing Lee to reckon more

intimately with those unnoticed undercurrents, the alienation that he feels in the civil space of Canada, which otherwise would have gone unaccounted for. To write pre-emptively with an agenda — to make literature subordinate to some other cause, no matter how ethical or important — is to write what Lee calls a “bad poem”: “A bad poem . . . is something a poet made up” (153).

In contrast, “We never encounter cadence in the abstract; it is insistently here and now,” Lee writes (154). Cadence is “presence,” which we can read either as cadence itself or as one’s own presence in the here and now, one’s own attentiveness to phenomenological states. And as the here and now — that is, space and time — cadence is contrasted with content: “[C]adence teems; content has the other task, of *filling out the orderly space* of its own more limited being” (153; emphasis added). Lee reveals how the teeming here and now of spatiotemporality — the position of subjective experience — is the true wellspring of the literary impulse, whereas the imposing on literature of an orderly spacing of content and form is literature’s “more limited being,” a derivative form of literature and perhaps, after all, the work of literary criticism.

Unfortunately, like many critics before him, Lee does slip in his balancing act of space and time, thereby losing the subject. As the subtitle of his seminal essay suggests, “Writing in Colonial Space,” Lee focuses on notions of civil “space,” on “Here” (166) and “hereness” (less on the “now”), and even resists any “chronological sequence” or “sequential ‘explanation’” of his condition, casting time to the wayside (154). Is this a mere preference of expression or something more? The result is that Lee paints a subject passively pervaded by the alienation of Canadian civil consciousness that, however accurate, provides little account of how such alienation comes into being in the first place — and of how it might yet be changed. Without the temporal side of the story, readers are left with few alternatives to this encroachment of state power on a subject that, again, is helplessly surrounded. The subtle emphasis on space over time in his account threatens to lose the essential point that Lee makes elsewhere, that it is “we” — subjects, writers, critics, persons — who have invited the alienation, “who have betrayed our own truths,” our own subject positions, “by letting ourselves be robbed of them” (165).

A similar language of deferral or avoidance characterizes the often caustic critiques that Atwood directs toward Canadian literary culture. In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, she explores how

the avoidance of self-knowledge by Canadians is the result (no surprise by now) of subordinating Canada to a broader spatiality: "[T]here' is always more important than 'here' or . . . 'here' is just another, inferior version of 'there'" (18). In the following lines, Atwood sums up how the avoidance of one's subjectivity is the very cause of that false polarity between nativism and cosmopolitanism: "A person who is 'here' but would rather be somewhere else is an exile or a prisoner" (i.e., nativism); "a person who is 'here' but *thinks* he is somewhere else is insane" (i.e., cosmopolitanism) (18). One solution remains: recognizing and accepting *here*, which means no longer to spatialize *here* in relation to *there*, no longer to spatialize at all, but to rid one's self of circumferences entirely, plunging headlong into subjective-phenomenological immersion.

Moreover, Atwood admits that her own arrival at these conclusions is phenomenological rather than historical: "It's more helpful to start with a recognition of the situation you find yourself in, whatever it may be, and then look back to see how you got there" (12). Elsewhere, she advocates the "initial gut response" in reading, which, whenever it is reduced to an analysis of content or form ("the meaning or the shape of the 'message,'" mirroring Lee's "orderly space"), makes literature "all work and no play" (29). More than a case for frivolousness, this is an argument for subjective immediacy in facing a literary work: a sense of playfulness and possibility attends the holistic apprehension of reading and of writing, the synaesthesia of content and form experienced as one whole. It is the reduction of that literary experience to its components that makes art into work, tracked into focused registers of outcomes and efficiencies, departing thereby from the ever-suspended, under-determined, "playful" here and now of immediate aesthetic apprehension.

Ultimately, Atwood's notion of survival might be best understood as the obscuring of subjectivity: survival is "an ever-present feeling of menace . . . from everything surrounding you," resulting in (or caused by) a lack of interiority or inner origin (30). Atwood points to the strange complicity that attends such a sense of helplessness when it becomes "not a necessity imposed by a hostile outside world but a choice made from within" (34). Her moralizing tone, admittedly harsh, threatens to obscure the value of her more fundamental point, similar to Lee's points about retrieving authenticity by first admitting one's inauthenticity. To see "one's victimization as unchangeable" indicates more precisely (and more sympathetically) a loss of that "geography of the mind,"

one's "map" of subjective experiences, in which positionality can also be navigated and new perspectives discovered, which is not to deny that victimhood is real; it is the "unchangeable" spatial fixing that is the crucial misstep (18-19).

All considered, the period of thematic criticism finds itself along a divide similar to that of nativism and cosmopolitanism: on the one hand, the particularity of phenomenologies, of cadences and subjective mappings; on the other hand, the universal and archetypal registers of "universal literature," "the purely literary," and "literature as such." As ever, the two extremes depend on each other: a close inspection of subjective modes leads precisely to a more thorough self-location in one's broader milieu (as Lee demonstrates for us); in turn, an account of Literature, that universal category, gives us the terms for approaching the manifold particularities of our personal literary experiences. This negotiation is what Cameron and Dixon refer to in describing the literature classroom as "the conjunction of cultural universals with Canadian particulars" (143) or what Robert Kroetsch refers to as "a literature of dangerous middles" between "the vastness of (closed) cosmologies" (i.e., spatial understandings) "and the fragments found in the (open) field of the archeological site" (i.e., subjective excavation) (71). It is the very range between the individual and the universal, the vast distance yet the reconciliation between them, that makes this period in Canadian criticism an especially fruitful one for foregrounding place as a liminal category — irreducibly subjective yet expansively spatial.

Conclusion

There has always been a place for the subject in Canadian criticism — and it has often been obscured by place as such. Failing to account for the subjective side of place means that a diffuse spatiality is all that can remain of the once liminal and always tense negotiations between subject and space, private life and public life, literature and nation. Even if the work of subjective excavation depends on an inward move, an irrelevance of (and irreverence to) the external world of the social, political, and material, this very turning away makes those realities open to reimagining, reconstitution, indeterminacy, process. To describe a naively subjective approach to literature as necessarily a form of political complacency or uncritical escapism is to cut this work off prematurely, as Thomas King has argued well in *The Truth about Stories*. The result

is a determinism that pigeonholes the literary text as primarily a product of the many institutions that surround and supersede it. But along these familiar binaries of inner and outer, the subject and the objective world, the irreducibly individual and the all-encompassing sociological and political, literature remains as ever a borderline case. By recovering the often neglected subjective end of those spectrums, the role of place in Canadian criticism can begin to feel much less confining.

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