

Where Is Here? Literary Strivings of „Little Brother“

[Review of *Chapters in Contemporary Canadian Literature* by Jiří Flajšar, Pavlína Flajšarová, and Vladimíra Fonfárová (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2012)]

The literary achievement of the upper part of the North America has seldom been seen to be of great importance. This perception may be seen as a consequence of the harsh living conditions, severe nature or lack of tradition from which a high-valued literature would flourish. Canadian literature, as well as its history, seems to be a young bride when compared to the Nestors of world literature; on the other hand the Canadian literary scene has been struggling for nearly three centuries, having a plenty of time to give birth to a fine piece of work. “There is a blaze of light in every word,” sings Canadian poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen in one of his famous songs. Is there a blaze of light to be found in Canadian literature, a light that would show us the way, as Paul Celan knew, to the “north of the future”?

Jiří Flajšar, Pavlína Flajšarová and Vladimíra Fonfárová attempt to answer this question in their collaborative book. The study is divided into nine parts, with each author covering three sections. The articles are not rendered, as one would expect, in chronological order according to the dates of author focused upon; they do, however, follow a thematic scheme, with to various writing styles coming together. Was this to keep a vigilant reader from becoming fatigued by a single academically-charged style? If so, it works. From the typographical point of view, the text is well-structured and lucid; it meets all formal standards of an academic publication. Perhaps, being an outline, the reading would be easier if the names of authors were in bold; an index of their names should have been considered as well.

The book opens with a summary of all Canadian literary texts divided into genres, followed by a brief insight into Canadian literary criticism. The whole study is concluded by a section covering the Czech translation of Canadian writers and topped off by a guide to useful books and links relevant for fellow-researchers. The goal of this study is “to provide a brief yet informative study” which is “designed for Central European students of Canadian literature and for the researchers at the early stage of their research.”¹ Nevertheless, it might be put to question whether to separate the French and English written literary works, since language to a great extent determines our minds and perception of the world (not only in a sense of politics as might be misunderstood by the Québec tensions). As the Prague-born Franz Kafka, for example, should be also understood in the Czech context even though he wrote in German, a parallel can be drawn here regarding English and French. Jiří Flajšar accentuates this problematic issue in the first part, where he states that from the very beginning Canadian literature “aim[ed] to portray the challenge of life in the new country, as well as to compare it to European culture and environment of the old country.”² Flajšar stresses the major periods in the history of Anglophone Canadian literature. The insightful selection of the authors reviewed is presented in largely established ways, except perhaps for the “darker reading” of the works of mid-19th century poet and playwright E. Pauline Johnson.

1 Jiří Flajšar, Pavlína Flajšarová, and Vladimíra Fonfárová, *Chapters in Contemporary Canadian Literature* (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2012), 6.

2 Flajšar, Flajšarová, and Fonfárová, *Chapters in Contemporary Canadian Literature*, 6.

Jiří Flajšar also composed the section of the survey on the works of Canadian poets. His reconstruction of the main currents after WWII, however, seems to be rather a compilation: hardly no space is devoted directly to close readings of the poetry itself. Only once is a poem quoted directly (a work by Lucy Maud Montgomery, on p. 27). Flajšar highlights two periods—the 1920s and 1960s—as the most important and influential decades of flourishing of Canadian poetry. Later in the text, the role of literary magazines such as *The McGill Fortnightly Review*, *The Canadian Mercury* and *The Canadian Poetry Magazine* is described; here the importance of these publications in introducing new groups of challenging writers is explored. Surprisingly enough, there is no mention of the avant-garde magazine *CIV/n* founded in 1953 by a group of McGill University poets including Louis Dudek, his wife Aileen Collins and Irving Layton (although both men are mentioned later in the text). Not only was the magazine the very venue in which Leonard Cohen launched his prolific career, but from a philosophical and aesthetic point of view the publication's editors sought to embody the traditional *Weltanschauung* of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound as a sort of antipode against the histrionic and personal tone of confessional poetry of the late 50s and 60s. Finally, Flajšar touches upon the youngest generation of Anglophone Canadian poets, mentioning the anthology *The New Canon: An Anthology of Canadian Poetry* (2005). The author tries to unveil the criteria for the selection of writers, stressing “the unmistakable style of each poet” and “the stylistic diversity of contemporary Canadian poetry.”³ Nevertheless, Flajšar could have been more specific with the names of the poets; just to give a hint what the Czech reading public should not fail to notice.

The chapters “Canadian Literary Criticism” and “Translation” were the undertaking of Pavlína Flajšarová. In the literary-criticism section she opens with five basic questions dominating the scene since the second half of the 19th century, with the most important first one “was there a Canadian literature to speak of?”⁴ loosely following the opening quotation of Northrop Frye “Where is here?”⁵

It is true that in this chapter more questions are raised rather than answered, however, stimulating they prove to be, e.g. Archibald Lampman's enquiries into the place or the province where poetry and fiction can flower, i.e. in rural areas and in the city, respectively.⁶ Can we apply to Lampman's statement that a city is the province of fiction whereas rural areas set the scene for poetry writing? What is the role of modern urban area, and, embracing William Carlos Williams's most vital issue, how does the conflict between wild nature and modern progressive civilizing areas determine the life of human beings in modern times? Flajšarová sees Edward McCourt and John Sutherland and more recently W. H. New and Robert Kroetsch as representing the right critics to tackle these issues in order to find “a cultural resonance beyond its formal elements.”⁷

“Hollow Ground or Buried Treasure” is the heading chosen by Vladimíra Fonfárová to introduce her installment concerning the Canadian novel. Like the previous essays, her study opens with a general discussion of Canadian literature as a mere pendant in the jewelry box of its English and American sisters. According to Fonfárová, a crucial cultural change occurred in the 1950s and 60s, followed by institutional support—e.g. by The Canada Council. Literary prizes and funds have been granted

3 Flajšar, Flajšarová, and Fonfárová, *Chapters in Contemporary Canadian Literature*, 34.

4 Flajšar, Flajšarová, and Fonfárová, *Chapters in Contemporary Canadian Literature*, 13.

5 Flajšar, Flajšarová, and Fonfárová, *Chapters in Contemporary Canadian Literature*, 5.

6 Flajšar, Flajšarová, and Fonfárová, *Chapters in Contemporary Canadian Literature*, 16.

7 Flajšar, Flajšarová, and Fonfárová, *Chapters in Contemporary Canadian Literature*, 23.

since 1957 and undoubtedly the positive impact of such institutions for burgeoning writers cannot be diminished. These institutions create a certain arbiter of selection from among the myriad of published works; the question is, however, whether selection by committee is the best way of determining artistic value. The issue of awarding prizes and its relation to the forming of literary canons is beyond the scope of this study, however interesting it would be to find out what was written outside the mainstream to provide an insight into the “off-off” byways of Canadian literature. How do these official sanctions and financial incentives play a part in the commercialization the tastes of mass readers? Fonfárová responds to this important question in the affirmative; in her conclusion she argues that postmodern Canadian novels “transcend the boundaries of what is traditionally understood as ‘high-brow’ literature and have the ability to educate and refine the taste of mass readers.”⁸

The linguistic intercourse between English and French, as well as an overview of Canadian works being translated into Czech, is the topic of the last two sections. While in the first of these Flajšarová highlights the position of a language (in translating discourse) as “the tool of the conqueror, the conquered, and cultural bridge builder,”⁹ thus covering up the animosity between two different cultural backgrounds. She emphasizes how a work might be used (or misused) as a tool to achieve political goals. In the next section Flajšarová offers an outline of works dominating the Czech editions of Canadian literature. Later in the chapter Flajšar, marks a turning point in 1877 when Longfellow’s *Evangeline* was published, then he continues with a brief analysis of particular decades. Nevertheless, when discussing acts of translation, one would expect to hear from translators themselves; it is a pity that Flajšar fails to provide us with discussions and comparisons of the renderings of e.g. Tomáš Hrách, Miroslav Jindra, Václav Procházka, etc.

Michal Kleprlík

8 Flajšar, Flajšarová, and Fonfárová, *Chapters in Contemporary Canadian Literature*, 63.

9 Flajšar, Flajšarová, and Fonfárová, *Chapters in Contemporary Canadian Literature*, 83.