

# Crossing Borders: Variations on a Theme in Canadian Studies

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## Introduction

I live  
on all the edges there are.

(Atwood 1966:16)

Literary borders are porous and unstable. Postmodernism and other aesthetic conceptions probe the foundations of genres and literary conventions and erode them. Transcodification, hybridisation and intertextuality are the new words defining the attempts at survival of relics and scraps from past and different traditions, co-existing in the Canadian landscape. The cultural boundaries crossing Canada are visible in the kaleidoscope of ethnic populations living in the great cities, where they mingle, or in the still closed communities, trying to preserve their own way of life in some rural area. The proud Canadian flags welcoming visitors on the arrival at International Airports or after the crossing of the border between USA and Canada subsume the cultural wealth of a national entity built on a multiplicity of voices, habits, memories.

It is no wonder if porosity – the precariousness of borders – is one of the main themes in Canadian literature in English. Such an awareness is translated (translation being another Canadian keyword) into the search for generic nuclei and languages, shifting from one literary state to another. This sense of precariousness, of change, of adaptation to new circumstances create the peculiarity of a literature where the past is still there, lurking under the surface of the cultural soil, while the writer has to cope with the confusing, conflation/explosion of new events. The lack of a ‘classic’ tradition, unless it derives from an experience lived in another historical time, in another country, questions the roots of national identity, and makes the writers explored in the following pages of this collection trespassers of narrative borders in a world linguistically and generically impervious and garbled.

In «Enchanted Village» (1950), one of the most famous short stories by the Canadian science-fiction writer A.E. van Vogt, the lonely astronaut rambling in the deserted plains of Mars in search of water and food, visits a mysterious village, whose lost inhabitants were so different from him that water, food, dwellings, even music are useless and unpleasant. Only after a long struggle, on the verge of death, the astronaut succeeds, he believes, in adapting the village and its resources to his needs, without realising that he has totally changed, and has become a quite different being: a Martian (a Canadian?) creature.

In *Canada* (2012), by the American writer Richard Ford, the main character approaching the border between USA and Canada at Port of William Creek, Saskatchewan, where the boundary is totally artificial, man-made, muses: «A border was two things at once. Going in and going out» (261). For the Canadian writer such a distinction is basically meaningless in the sense that 'in' and 'out' are relative terms, and he/she is in/out or in-between. Maybe the border itself is his/her own favourite dwelling.

The papers collected in *Crossing Borders* focus on works written by Howard O'Hagan, Sheila Watson, Margaret Laurence, Jane Urquhart, Alice Munro, Aritha van Herk, Antonio D'Alfonso, Margaret Awood, Olive Senior and by many contemporary metropolitan ethnic writers. They explore topics such as: liminality and in-between-ness, the perception or trespassing of borders, the various connotations of the theme concerning the crossing of geographical, historical, linguistic, symbolic, metaphorical, psychological and identity borders, as well as the borders between gods and human beings. As the majority of the works analysed are by women writers, the borders between male and female worlds and genres are increasingly redrawn.

The first two papers deal with Howard O'Hagan's 1939 novel *Tay John* and with one of Sheila Watson's short stories, entitled «Antigone», first published in 1959. They do not investigate the crossing of a geographical border, although the topic is implicit in the characters' action, but the complex notion of in-between-ness, the standing between two cultures, two linguistic domains, two psychological conditions and two ways of life. In her reading of *Tay John*, Viktoria Tchernichova dwells on the two main characters of the novel, the Métis and legendary hero Tay John and on the figure of the narrator. They can be seen as a symbolical exploration, on the one hand, of a literal creolization and, on the other, an intellectual one. The notion of in-between-ness is predominant also in Biancamaria Rizzardi's paper. The short story «Antigone» is set on a bridge, on a contact zone between two possible ways of life, between a public world of impositions and order and the unruly world of nature, between the realm of reason and the sphere of imagination, change and flux. Watson's story is full of images that come from different sources: the present-day world of the story, Greek myth, the Hebrew and Greek scriptures, and the perceptions of the characters of the story. Out of all sorts of snippets and pieces, Watson creates another bridge over the river, an allegory demonstrating that «there is life if one can escape to it».

It is worth noticing that both O'Hagan's novel and Watson's short stories are works that cross various literary genres: the mythical realism of O'Hagan juxtaposes Indian legends and elements of the European novel, while the short story by Sheila Watson can not only be read as a rewriting of the Sophoclean tragedy,

but is also a complex and subtle mix of past and present literary history, of myth and reality.

On the other hand, the Métis appear again in one of Margaret Laurence's most anthologised short stories. Oriana Palusci reads «The Loons», first published in 1966, as the hard core of Laurence's still unfinished narrative world, in which the creative sources of the broader Manawaka canvas are sketched, through the paradox of a fictional language exploring not only the limits of autobiography, but the marginality of the female narrative I/eye. The young Vanessa McLeod, of Scottish-Irish heritage, lives in a marginal place, and meets the Métis girl Piquette, who is even more peripheral than herself, using her memory to rewrite a past she can understand only after a certain number of years, when her Métis double is dead.

The following two papers deal with the contemporary poet and novelist Jane Urquhart. Barbara Nugnes's reading of Urquhart's early collection of poetry, *The Little Flowers of M.me de Montespan* (1983), highlights the paradoxes and ambiguities which underlie the emotional and literary experience of crossing the Canadian borders. On the one hand, Urquhart's choice of a foreign setting for her poetry (the collection of poems is set in the seventeenth century, at the court of Louis XIV) seems to be inspired by the urge to escape from her familiar reality into a world of unlimited imagination and possibility; on the other hand, her choice of imaginative exile turns out to be a precious vantage point, revealing with unexpected clarity the outlook and concerns of a contemporary Canadian writer. Once again, Urquhart's personal view of the foreign landscape is a fundamental key to her worldview. Urquhart seems to translate the language of the foreign landscape into her own language, thus providing another convincing example of the utter impossibility of leaving one's origins behind.

The second paper on Jane Urquhart, by Andrea Binelli, investigates her 1993 novel *Away*. Through the recollections of the main character, the reader is involved in the story of an Irish family who moves to Canada at the time of the Great Famine. As in *Little Flowers of M.me de Montespan*, Urquhart's obsession with landscape constitutes a structuring force within the narration and particularly in relation to the shaping of collective identities. Boundaries and acts of trespassing, as is often the case with Irish-Canadian literature, are thus to be regarded as complex signifiers which voice the intimate as well as the political by means of an allegorical encoding. What is at stakes here is Urquhart's deployment of a geographical lexicon in order to confer a metaphorical and yet recognizable status to her captivating and demanding narration.

The next step takes the reader of *Crossing Borders* to the vital issue of translation in Canadian Studies, considered as a bridge between languages and cultures, a complex rewriting process, which crosses the divide between creative

writing in the source language and *transportation* into a new linguistic and cultural milieu. Sabrina Francesconi compares two Italian versions of Alice Munro's 1985 short story, «The Progress of Love», paying attention to the source text language at all text ranks, essential, as she states, in order to render the freshness and immediacy of Munro's very personal style, which makes her short stories so dense and captivating. Instead, Eleonora Federici discusses the multifaceted difficulties in translating Aritha van Herk's novels. A Canadian of Dutch origins, who is well-aware of the translating process, of the role of landscape and space, and of gender issues, as seen through her critical essays, van Herk continuously hybridizes the English language with culture-bound words from Dutch. Federici underlines that the translator should be aware of the rich intertextual humus in rewriting space and gender, the European past and the Alberta landscape.

Similar questions are raised in Joseph Pivato's paper on Antonio D'Alfonso, an Italian-Canadian author who writes in three languages, English, French and Italian. Pivato recurs to the image of «a bilingual mind» in order to trace, by the following four different «conflicts», an enigmatic figure, who is at the same time a poet, an essayist, an editor, a translator, a publisher, a critic, a filmmaker, a teacher.

The 1990s are seen as a crucial decade for the reformulation of ethnicity and gender in Canadian literature, as Deborah Saidero argues, through the massive presence of 'minoritized' women writers (Anita Rau Badami, Dionne Brand, Kulyk Keefer, Kerri Sakamoto), who dispute and thus de-stabilise the Canadian literary canon. Saidero insists on how a number of contemporary women writers of the city contrast «the danger of ghettoization inherent in the multicultural mosaic by moving toward a crossing of borders and boundaries typical of transculturalism». On the other hand, Coral Ann Howells engages in the mapping of diasporic writers – she analyses six novels published after 2000 – who challenge the very notion of what a Canadian novel might be. Howells dwells on the vital issue of the «reconfiguring process» by the «reconstructors» of Canadian literature. For instance, she begins her analysis by showing how the traditional signifier of Canadian identity, that is landscape and place, are dismantled and defamiliarised by a wide-spectrum of ethnic writers, experiencing different viewpoints, for instance, on the city.

Among the female ethnic voices, which populate the new literary map of Canadian literature in English, a special place is occupied by Olive Senior, a contemporary Jamaican writer living in Canada. Manuela Coppola's paper deploys a sociolinguistic approach to investigate the question of language and identity in the poetry of Olive Senior, with particular reference to the semantic field of botany. By analyzing the occurrence of phytonyms along the Jamaican



continuum in the poetry collection *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994), Coppola suggests that Senior's strategic use of language variation recreates and gestures to a transnational community of readers which transcends territorial, linguistic and cultural boundaries.

The last paper of the collection takes the reader back to a 'canonical' writer such as Margaret Atwood, who has always played and continues to play on edges between genres and linguistic domains. Mirko Casagrande focuses on the sacred-nature hymns that open each section of *The Year of the Flood* (2009), showing how Atwood uses a «spliced language», which features a mixture of religious and scientific elements and contributes to the crossing of borders between literary genres. By means of an eco-linguistic approach, the paper analyses the eco-religious discourse of the hymns by investigating their hybrid language as well as the lexical items relating to nature and science.

The fact that most of the papers collected in *Crossing Borders* are written by Italian scholars (ironically also Pivato's contribution lies in an Italian/Canadian context), pinpoints not only the strength of Canadian Studies in our country, but witnesses the growing relevance of the Canadian literary experience in Europe.

Canadian studies thrive on borders, which are crossed and crossed over again, underlining the impossibility/improbability of representing/translating the existence of a homogenous Canadian identity. As Margaret Atwood writes in «Evening Trainstation, Before Departure», a poem from her first collection *The Circle Game*: «I live/on all the edges there are» (1966: 16).

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