

## "Lest on too close sight I miss the darling illusion": The Politics of the Centre in "Reading Maritime"

Tony Tremblay

Volume 33, Number 2, 2008

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc133\\_2art02](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc133_2art02)

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this article

Tremblay, T. (2008). "Lest on too close sight I miss the darling illusion": The Politics of the Centre in "Reading Maritime". *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 33(2), 23–39.

# “Lest on too close sight I miss the darling illusion”: The Politics of the Centre in “Reading Maritime”

TONY TREMBLAY

“It’s hard to think of anyone else who can cast a spell the way  
Alistair MacLeod can.” — Alice Munro

MUNRO’S LINES ABOVE BECAME THE TAGLINE — much profiled and quoted on posters and dustjackets — that welcomed Alistair MacLeod’s *No Great Mischief* into the pantheon of great Canadian books. In as much as endorsement can add momentum, this particular endorsement accelerated an already frenzied drive that brought MacLeod’s novel to national and international acclaim. To the casual observer, such praise always seems innocent enough: in this case, one of our leading short fiction writers welcoming another of her ilk into the canon of notables that fiction alone merits. That Munro was not a novelist but, like MacLeod, a serious artist of the short form, simply added the legitimacy of hard-won confraternity to her words of praise. Easily missed in Munro’s good will, however, is the politics of exclusion that endorsement confers. What does the tagline’s exclusionary utterance (“it’s hard to think of anyone else”) imply about the many other major “else[s]” who cast signature spells in Atlantic Canada and other regions of the country? How do we read the special circumstances of Munro’s status in consigning such legitimacy? And to what extent does such praise become *extradiegetic*, a parallel narrative that forms outside the main story that, over time, becomes the story itself, forcing upon other unrelated narratives something of the bias and authority of its own intentions?

In this essay I am interested in exploring these questions by examining how Maritime literature has been read by critics, reviewers, and centralists who endorse our books. For the sake of brevity, I am limiting the focus of my essay to the practices of reading Maritime literature; however, what I say about the literary politics of the three Maritime

provinces can be applied to the literature of Newfoundland with some adjustment for the greater cultural autonomy of the island, as other essays in this collection will explain. Why read the critics rather than the literature? Because as Northrop Frye asserts, “while value judgments tell us nothing reliable concerning the [writer] about whom they are made, they tell us a great deal concerning the cultural conditioning of the person who makes the judgement” (465). My objective, then, is to study that “cultural conditioning” by reading regionalism backwards — that is, as a construction of the centre rather than the margins. My goal in doing this is to think about the practice of professional or expert reading with a mind not only to how we “read region” in this country, but also to how we negotiate the production of our national *mythos*. Because all reading is ideological in the sense that it is a social practice mediated by forces inside and outside the text — by diegetic *and* extradiegetic authors — it is ultimately that mediated practice that I wish to open up here for consideration.

## I

Since reading as illocutionary act (as noun and verb: doing and saying) is an ideological function rooted in the authority of instruction, canon, authorship, and a variety of other highly politicized seductions meant to bring meaning back to the centre, it seems only logical to open this essay by situating Maritime reading practice within the realm of post colonial theory. That theory, particularly its African Marxist variant, seems especially well suited to an understanding of how and to what purpose text is read across large tracts of territory loosely governed from the centre. The uncanny fit of African theory with our own contemporary Maritime writing and literary reception suggests a compatibility that prompts me to view Maritime writers much as Chinua Achebe viewed African novelists: that is, as enjoining art with *social* practice. In an important essay called “The Novelist as Teacher,” Achebe identified the key difference between African and European writers as the degree to which each used art for *social* rather than personal or aesthetic functions. African novelists, he argued, used writing for political and moral purposes on behalf of their communities much more deliberately than did their European counterparts, whose own work, often equally political, tended to mandate *personal* over social freedoms and justice. “Perhaps what [we] write is applied art as distinct from pure art,” Achebe said,

“[B]ut who cares. Art is important and so is education of the kind [we] have in mind” (qtd. in Ashcroft 126). Achebe’s point was not simply to identify education as the site of protest, but to declare art’s social (and therefore provincial) function in a late-imperial world still subsumed by eighteenth-century Christian notions of the innocence and political naïveté of non-western peoples. The overtones of Achebe’s essay thus reverberated for African writers and European readers alike.

The response in Africa and Europe to Achebe’s notion of social function has important implications for our work in Canadian studies. The response centered on what I will simplify by calling the *intelligibility quotient*. In Africa, writers buoyed by what they took as Achebe’s affirmation in the face of homogenizing pressures from outside the continent further entrenched their localisms. Some, like Kenya’s Ngugi wa Thiong’o, decided to write solely for an African audience, thus decolonizing literary language and reading practice by making it inaccessible to the west. Ngugi’s own reflections on this decision are instructive:

Wherever I have gone, particularly in Europe, I have been confronted with the question: why are you now writing in Gikuyu? Why do you now write in an African language? In some academic quarters I have been confronted with the rebuke, “Why have you abandoned us?” It was almost as if, in choosing to write in Gikuyu, I was doing something abnormal. But Gikuyu is my mother tongue. The very fact that what common sense dictates in the literary practice of other cultures is being questioned in an African writer is a measure of how far imperialism has distorted the view of African realities. It has turned reality upside down: the abnormal is viewed as normal and the normal is viewed as abnormal. . . . I believe that my writing in Gikuyu language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples. (82)

What might first appear to be Ngugi’s rather narrow personal statement has wider political implications in a postcolonial universe: namely, that in its demand for homogeneity, cultural imperialism fosters provincialism every time.

The European response to this snub to universalism — a universalism defined, quite unconsciously, through the lens of a self-evident pan-European experience — was predictably swift and hostile. There were calls for African writers, newly discovered and democratically welcomed into the commonwealth of literatures, to avoid the indulgences

of the tribe for universal intelligibility. Otherwise, what was the point of emancipation? Why free a man or a nation into solipsism? The message was clear enough: the canon was open for new membership as long as its European standards, tastes, and archetypal tropes were observed. And to ensure that they were, the engine-room of literary production — that vast apparatus of First-World, western-based publishing houses, editors, reviewers, booksellers, academics, and “coalition[s] of lesser gentries” (Anderson 79) — tacitly subscribed to what seemed natural and obvious: that, because the need for *intelligibility* was paramount, the imperial must trump the tribal. Non-European writing could tell its stories of difference as long as those stories fit a particular — if mystical — condition of European enculturation. While the momentum behind African literary *production*, then, was moving toward *decolonizing* literary language and practice in a postcolonial world, the proprieties of European literary *reception* demanded that a *recolonizing* of literary language and practice occur in the name of *intelligibility*. This overview, admittedly, simplifies what was a complex process of literary production and reception, but it outlines nevertheless the basic strictures that governed the negotiation between voices on the periphery of Empire and the organizing machinery at the centre. (That we have any postcolonial literature at all attests to the fact that sufficient accommodation was made, compromising though it was for both sides.)

In Canada and the settler colonies, similar relational politics existed between those who produced and those who supported literary production, even if the scale of disparity and the conditions of accommodation were different than those between First and Third Worlds. The New Zealand experience, to take a remote if similar First-World “settler” example, illustrates the recurrence of the imperial pressures of *intelligibility*. In August 1908, Henry Lanier, a senior editor of the influential New York publishing house Doubleday Page, suggested to by-then accomplished New Zealand novelist Edith Lyttleton that the “tremendous power” of her work was not being “used to best advantage because it had never been turned into producing a novel along more usual and conventional lines.” He advised instead that

if you would write a novel or two, more of the sort that people are accustomed to buy in this country, it ought to be possible to secure a public here which would thereafter take anything good that you cared to put before them. But in the books so far, the people, the

surroundings, the conditions and even the language, are all so foreign to any experiences or ideas which the average American has, that it is extremely difficult for him to establish that basis of human sympathy which a man has got to have for the characters in a novel in order to thoroughly enjoy it. (qtd. in Sturm 260)

What the powerful read as Ngugi's and Lyttleton's provincialism could only be remedied by redress to the centre — to London and New York — not only adding to the superficial work of the writer, but altering much more substantively the *mythos* or movement (the ideological turn) of the *extraliterary* utterance. Divining that mystical and highly political quotient of intelligibility was clearly the only means to securing readership and success.

I am not unaware of the ideological problems in taking the African/New Zealand example as paradigmatic of the Canadian/Maritime one, but such a substitution can be made with only a slight adjustment to the quotient. And the adjustment hinges again on *intelligibility*. Clearly, however, in a relatively homogenous culture like our own, the centrist demand for familiarity, universality, and “conventional” accessibility must be differently nuanced. (That it is nuanced at all reflects the fact that culture is a highly politicized field of relations in which art and literature are the “schooling” [98], in Etienne Balibar's words, by which citizens receive cultural training, thus their ground is strictly controlled.) The question worth asking, then, is not whether, or to what degree, similar pressures of intelligibility inform literary production in Canada, but rather *how*. *How* does ideological persuasion work in an egalitarian and seemingly transparent federation of regions that rejects even the principle of *primus inter pares*? It is precisely this question that I think is important for all *regional* practitioners of culture, whether artists or critics, whether First World or Third.

## II

In the First-World Marxism of Benedict Anderson, we have the beginnings of an answer to the question of *how* persuasion works in a seemingly sovereign, homogeneous system. Anderson's thesis of the “imagined political community” (6) has been invaluable for postcolonialists who have struggled to understand how signifiers like “nation” and “community” have so successfully consolidated consensus among disparate peoples. Putting aside for our purposes the recent criticisms

of this notion of consolidation by subaltern groups, Anderson's theory challenged Clifford Geertz's earlier notion that nations were extensions of a primordial social instinct in humans to coalesce around common affinities. Anderson argued just the opposite cause of a similar effect: that "nation" is an imaginative construction maintained by the consent of citizens after the hard work of institutional producers. "Nations" of "horizontal comradeship" (7), he implied, are *myths* in the Barthesian sense: first, they are what Barthes called "depoliticized" concepts (142), concepts that in masking intention appear unproblematically natural (a naturalness that should remind us of Ngũgĩ's observations above); and, second, they are myths that subject people to their "intentional force" (124), seeming to call people by name.

Canada as a vast land mass imagined into nationhood by a complex web of laws, boundaries, histories, and metaphors is a good example of what Anderson and Barthes were referring to. Our recent election campaigns around the unifying metaphors of "Quebec inclusion" and "universal health care" grew to the proportions of discourse and myth — grew, in fact, to such proportion that few Canadian citizens questioned their involvement in the two metaphors of nationhood or the fact that Canada *is Canada* on the basis of its tolerance for bilingualism and expectation of free medical care. To think of Canada otherwise would seem ludicrous and *unnatural*, even though most Canadians, when pressed, would readily concede the ruptures: first, that slightly less than half the population of Quebec wants to leave the federation, and, second, that our health care system is in crisis. When Prime Minister-elect Paul Martin vowed to fix health care for a generation, then, he really meant that he would be preserving a central metaphor in the "imagined community" of Canada that would consolidate Canadians from *both* founding nations, French and English. That the myth and associated metaphors of health care could mend linguistic division was just good nationalist politics, confirmed again in the special deal that Quebec Premier Jean Charest was able to cut for his province in the First Ministers' Summit on Health that followed soon after the 2004 federal election.

What does this recent political history have to do with Maritime literature and moderate or centrist reading practice? If Anderson and Barthes are correct, the existence of consolidating mythologies in highly mediated cultures pre-determines what people are permitted (and, more

importantly, *persuaded*) to think about themselves: what stories they tell, what affinities they perceive, what foundational truths they perpetuate, and what discrepancies from the register they censor or ignore. In Canada, a tenuous federation of disparate regions stretched over a land too vast for simple myths of origin or purpose (even bilingualism and universal health care, policies that are the envy of the world, struggle for viability), it is not surprising that consolidating myths of “region” compete with those of “nation” in the national narrative. Our size and balkanization demand it. Teachers of Canadian literature have become accustomed to these competing regional myths: the pinched Presbyterian Ontario of Sara Jeannette Duncan and Robertson Davies; the neurotic, broken Quebec of Hubert Aquin and Jean-Claude Lauzon; the magical, surreal west of Emily Carr and Jack Hodgins. Similar myths abound about the east — about the sea and fisherfolk in Nova Scotia’s “ocean playground,” about the red shores and green gables of Anne and Lucy Maud’s Island, and about the “gossiping grasses” and tidal marshes of Charles G.D. Roberts’s Tantramar. These myths of region are voltaged higher in Canada than elsewhere because of the illogic of our federalism, the National Policy and National Energy Program reminders of past sins of homogenization. Among those who have an interest in keeping Canada united, the allowance for greater autonomy for regions makes good political sense, but only under the quasi-imperial condition that the heart of our little Empire remains fixed in the centre. *This is the key contradiction of Canada that colours the special conditions of our literary production and reception.* Just as the regions pay for health care in a constitutional milieu that offers them little control over the National Health Act, so do the regions produce narrative in a wider context of pre-existing myths that have already in large part defined them. Not only, then, are the pressures of intelligibility paramount in Canada, as they are in any federation of states or nations, but they are paramount within a relatively closed system that, as a result of the illogic of its federalism, invites a provincialism that is constructed and monitored at the centre.

A third group of Marxist theorists, each familiar with and to some extent building on the earlier work of Anderson and the postcolonialists, has covered this particular ground before. As critics of nation and region, Ian McKay, Neil Smith, David Harvey, and Derek Gregory have challenged readers to think about “uneven development” as a strategy



of Empire, whereby centralized concentrations of power — in Canada, ideological control-rooms like the CBC and the National Film Board — *produce* or *solicit* stories of the margins in an effort not only to control the periphery but to affirm as well their own status at the centre. The most familiar of these theorists to us in the east is McKay, whose study of Helen Creighton's creation of "the folk" as emblematic of Nova Scotia culture explores one of the central consolidating myths of our region. In his own words, McKay's theory addresses "the ways in which urban cultural producers, pursuing their own interests[,] . . . constructed the Folk of the countryside as the romantic antithesis to everything they disliked about modern urban and industrial life" (4). McKay's ideas should, by now, be familiar, as should those of the Marxists of place. The widely discussed revised edition of Anderson's 1983 book was released in 1991 and re-released in 2006; Neil Smith's notions of "imagined geography" in *Uneven Development* have been in circulation since 1984; and McKay's book elicited much excitement and debate in the mid 1990s. Though these ideas have been in circulation, however, they have had little impact on literary reception, a fact that should, by now, be more revealing than surprising. That the latest studies of our literature make only passing reference to these ideas — the result being that contemporary readers continue to read Maritime literature through the same realist and/or romantic frames as others have for the last fifty years — suggests that the desire for an eastern literature of transcendence still preoccupies the minds of expert readers. Is it coincidence, then, that the most comprehensive nation-wide discussion of Canadian books selected Frank Parker Day's folksy *Rockbound* as the only Maritime winner of Canada Reads; that the L.M. Montgomery Institute recently hosted its eighth international conference, making it the longest-running conference of its kind in the region; or that Shelagh Rogers, the former host of CBC Radio's *Sounds Like Canada*, continues to wax nostalgic about her ritualistic summer trips to Cape Breton while re-reading Alistair MacLeod with a dram of Glen Breton Single Malt scotch in hand? If professional readers are to be believed, our literature has become a heritage tourism industry, the subtexts of which use myth extradiegetically to consolidate power in recognizably colonial ways.

To understand the ways in which this industry mediates cultural production in the regions is to realize that "uneven" readings of our leading writers are not the result of misreading but of reading as an

ideological practice, a practice dependent on the same pressures of conformity, if different standards of inclusion, that faced African writers. An altogether more sophisticated way of reading Maritime literature is to examine how it has been read in the wider ideological environment that is Canada, an environment in which artists and citizens in an ever-weakening federation of provinces are actively hailed and rewarded for their *agreement with* prevailing myths of nation. Fidelity to these pre-existing myths offers entry into the inner circle — the best central Canadian publishing houses, the most enthusiastic reviews in our largest-circulating dailies, the highest profile in national media, the largest volume of book sales, the friendliest celebrity endorsements, and the greatest likelihood that book rights will be picked up internationally or optioned for film. This exchange trades on the cultural currency of “intelligibility,” and, as Slavoj Žižek reminds us, on most citizens’ need to belong, regardless of what “local forms of identification” must be sublated into “universal ‘patriotic’ identification” (42). “By being a good member of my family,” Žižek continues, implying conformity to the various quotients of imperial intelligibility, “I thereby contribute to the proper functioning of my Nation State” (42). Market conditions, small publishers, and other regional disparities — factors long thought to be reasons for denial of entry into the inner circle at the centre of the country — stand to be re-examined in light of this more contemporary Marxist thinking of Anderson, McKay, and Žižek, especially given our nation’s insatiable need for constant avowal of its central myths (Paul Quarrington’s *King Leary*, to the delight of Hockey Night in Canada’s host Ron MacLean and other institutional producers of our hockey myth, won this year’s Canada-Reads competition).

### III

In the remainder of this essay I would like to move from schema to evidence, illustrating how this exchange has worked to create a mythology of “Maritimeness” that readers outside the region desire. David Adams Richards seems the logical writer to consider in this context for not only is he the Maritimes’ most stridently independent literary talent in a generation, but he has also been vocal about how this “exchange” and the pressures of conformity have affected his work. In an article written in 1996, he equated the exchange with “crystals of instant soup”:

The trick is to pretend it's your wisdom, as you step up to the podium to read. If you do this well enough, you'll win the Pulitzer Prize. Carry this handbook guide written out for you . . . :

A single mother suffers  
 Men do not *understand* women  
 A drunken father is brutal  
 Fights in police cars are bad  
 Ignorance and violence are male  
 The age of intellectual comfort has come.

It's all true, though you might not know any of it well, or why it is. But there is a checklist in the handbook for all of these things now. It has been prepared for you. . . . It takes a lot of encouragement to swallow. But the payoff means you belong to the inner circle, the compassionate ones of gentle autumn book launchings and luncheons with [the] privileged. (73-74)

Richards's critical reception best illustrates the punitive side of this highly mediated exchange, because from the time of his first novel in 1974, he has consistently annoyed institutional readers by refusing to obey "the quotient." His imagined New Brunswick is *not* romantic, idyllic, or sentimental, a fact that has been consistently highlighted by clearly offended reviewers of his work. Janis Rapoport was the first to scold him for his disobedience in a review of *The Coming of Winter* in the *Globe and Mail* thirty years ago. "[Richards's] Maritime climate," she observed, "contributes a mood of unremitting sadness that accentuates the oppressiveness of [the book's] events as well as the moroseness of the characters who live them" (34). Peter Stevens's "Two Gloomy Weeks Inside N.B." commented similarly on the novel's characters as "all leading dead-end lives, relieved only by stupendous drunks or the loveless chasing of girls" (44). Thirty years later, nothing had changed. In an otherwise judicious review, Paul Gessell in *The Ottawa Citizen* described *River of the Brokenhearted* as "unrelentingly grim, the kind of grim to be read while wearing a hair shirt and reclining on a bed of nails." Richards's characters, he added, are "a broken-down drunk," "a rebellious and rather stupid young woman," and a supporting cast "sent straight from hell" (J1), their interactions "played out against a backdrop of broken families, abject poverty, meanness, corruption and covetousness" (J2). In sum, he concludes, Richards's "fiction is as emotionally draining as a month of funerals" (J1).

If the tendency in Richards criticism has been to place disproportionate critical emphasis on what reviewer-emeritus William French called the “ungrammatical lives” (C17) his characters lead, a more considered reading of Richards’s grammars reveals a carefully mapped fidelity to each character’s sense of place, not to some sociological abstraction like welfare tribulation or chronic despair. Contrary to the critical consensus, then, the abundant evidence of Richards’s use of form as synchronic rather than diachronic register reflects an author’s ultimate gesture of goodwill to characters, a gesture that allows them the freedom to succeed or fail on their own terms. The freedom he gives them to perceive on their own elevates them, in his mind, above mere simulacra.

When read as an experiment in the formal evocation of place-based consciousness, *The Coming of Winter* unfolds as a fugue-like composition of voices that demarcate the *conditions* of place: what it means to be a New Brunswicker, to grow up in an insular town, to be predetermined *from the inside* on the basis of family, neighbourhood, and class. When Clinton Dulse, the father of the novel’s main character, accompanies his son to negotiate with the man whose cow his son shot, the interior world of the Miramichi is opened for our viewing. What we see is a small-town world where history and memory are made dynamic in consciousness:

But the man knew [Clinton] also and *that was the point*. The man, staring at him, knew his history of drinking and whoring, of dropping nets out of season — of where he lived and what he did, of his wife and dead son and *that was the point*. So that it became not [his son] that butchered the cow but Clinton — it became Clinton that must explain himself to the man. (87; emphasis added)

Only the evocation of consciousness by emotive grammars could provide this inside view. Richards does not tell us who the man is because Clinton, whose consciousness we inhabit, knows exactly who the man is, and “*that is the point*.” Consciousness does not provide itself with discursive cues. Richards does not engage here in ideological issues of class, nor does he prejudice Clinton or defend him. Instead, he presents him as he is perceived by others.

Richards develops characterization in his other novels with similar detachment. His characters are therefore good and bad, heroic and cowardly, spontaneous and calculating. Their actions sometimes correspond to others’ expectations, sometimes not. Occasionally, characters rise

above what gossip and reputation allow them to think of themselves. This disjunction between individuals and community, so important in Richards's later novels, is not the author's comment on the moral superiority or depravity of the folk, but the result of a point of view that narrows and widens dynamically to reveal multiple perspectives. John Delano in *Winter*, a character who will resurface in later novels to become something of Richards's Marlow, is a good example of this incongruity between actions, instincts, and words. Dismissed as self-serving by most of the other characters in the community around him, John struggles throughout *Winter* to come to terms with the accidental death of his best friend and to find a way of providing for his best friend's girlfriend, who is left pregnant and alone in the wake of the death. The outcome of John's struggle is less important to Richards than the anguish of the struggle itself, which he manifests as a fuzzy abstraction in John's unconscious mind. John is, in effect, confused by his emotions. He is also in spiritual turmoil. Alcohol and his own worst tendencies only defer a resolve that his loyalty to his dead friend cannot deny. Sooner or later he will go to her: "He kept glancing from side to side as he drank but more often glancing up the road toward her place, her home as if he knew in himself he must see her now" (128, 134). To read John as insensitive, or his deliberations as the tentative or monotonous stumbles of a teenage drunk, is to miss the care that Richards took in putting him in conflict with his own developing maturity. Like Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, Richards's John Delano is a character in moral crisis whose delinquency on the outside refracts a spiritual anguish deeper within.

Richards handles humour in more pointed ways that have led institutional readers to excise its often class-based overtones from the record. The result is that professional readers have rarely noted the humour of *Lives of Short Duration* or *River of the Brokenhearted*, his funniest works. *Lives'* Little Simon is a pixie of Dickensian proportion, whose antics always turn back on the gentry to reveal the contradictions by which they live (and for which these episodes are never mentioned):

[Little Simon] was caught stealing cookies. [His foster mother] called him in front of the other boys, told him that when he stole he stole not from her but from the other boys. And she looked at the others and shook her head. He was standing behind her and stared at her broad ass and her slip which showed and her scuffed

brown shoes. He remembered how one night when she was watching TV she took out a pack of doublemint gum, “The most boring gum God ever created,” opened the stick carefully, tore a quarter off, wrapped the rest away and began to chew. And he’d watched how she’d chewed that bit of gum, putting the rest in her pocket, so that you could still see tinfoil sticking out. The night she caught him stealing cookies she told him he had no pride. “No pride,” she said. “No pride — like a little animal — not an ounce of pride.” And he winked at everyone, his large eyes and thin face, his slender fingers with the nails long and dirty. (207)

In its tendency to implicate the powerful, humour that is an index of grievance makes expert readers like Gessell wary, thus they sidestep it. Ironically, however, readers’ opprobria about coarseness and violence in Richards’s work masks a habit for censure that, as Frye’s comments above help us to understand, tells us very little about Richards and a great deal about these readers, the most vocal of whom have come from outside the region. Their scolding of him for breaking the covenant of “more usual and conventional lines” (Sturm 260) must therefore be seen as completely ideological in its insistence that stories from the Maritimes should avoid dark humour for the purple tones of heart-rending nostalgia for the old world, the agrarian ethos, and the triumphs, not humiliations, of poverty. That Richards has gone on record refusing to alter his vision to make it conform to their Canadian-appropriate myth (a myth that must deny regional and class disparities in order to affirm the robust health of the federation), has resulted in the critics’ retort that he is stubborn and idealistic, or that his treatment is anthropological, the result of fieldwork in social welfare rather than commiseration for a people he knows more intimately than they do. By that logic, institutional readers have decreed that his characters are untypical Maritimers (they are not frightened, hopeful, loving, confused, funny, and adrift), but are rubes who live outside of what has been consigned as *natural* in Canadian/Maritime fiction.

In relegating Richards to what Jorge Luis Borges spoke of as the sphere of *unacceptable* localisms, these readers display a familiar colonial posture: what Homi Bhabha calls the desire “to construe the colonized [citizens of imagined spaces] as a population of degenerate types . . . in order to . . . establish systems of administration and instruction” (23). Inhering below the surface of these reviews, then, is always the question *Why doesn’t David Adams Richards write more like Alice Munro or Alistair*

*MacLeod, our acceptable regionalists?* That Richards doesn't or won't — as John Moss has repeatedly said, he is a writer without precedent or company in Canada — proves that decrees and myths of normalcy are as much created by institutional producers as affirmed or rejected by writers in this country.

#### IV

If the foregoing Marxist analysis of our reading practice is accurate, what does it reveal about the writers from our region who are embraced? Does it tell us anything about the resilient popularity of Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, the story of a plucky young girl who is able to transcend the harshest reality of modernity — she is deracinated, an orphan — by rooting herself in the rich loam and nineteenth-century agrarian romance of the Island? Does it shed any light on Mary McKinney's assessment of Montgomery's novels as "set[ting] a pattern of Canadian life that was charming yet practical, romantic but not silly, venture-some but not bold" (6)? In other words, comfortably and affirmatively Canadian. Does it explain the continuing desire of our national media to maintain the illusion of the "mythic east" despite evidence to the contrary, such that Will Ferguson can write recently in *Maclean's* that "There are times I wonder if Prince Edward Island really exists. The rolling hills and church spires, the arc of ocean, the red earth at sunset — a rich vermilion colour somewhere between rust and blood: PEI is less a province than it is a pastiche, a patchwork of pastoral idylls sewn together like a warm quilt" (38)? No wonder central Canadian readers are so disturbed when Richards's Gary Percy Rils stabs Jerry Bines in the chest on Christmas Eve (*Wounded*). Finally, does the Marxist analysis above help us to understand on a deeper level the reception of Alistair MacLeod's work — "awash in sentiment," writes Sandra Martin in the *Globe and Mail*, "with one leg in 18th-century Scotland and the other in 20th-century Canada" (R4) — or the resounding critical indifference that has attended the fine realist fiction of Susan Kerslake, the bleakness of her fictional world less pleasing to outsiders than the transcendent world of Ann-Marie MacDonald? I am not implying that Montgomery, MacLeod, and MacDonald are not fine writers (they indeed are), but that the question we should start asking about our literature is to what extent its reception and success are a function of meeting the standards

of another's "intelligibility quotient," a quotient that, in MacLeod's case, seems perfectly attuned to the times, his over-educated, new-world orphans suffering just the right ennui in these uncertain days. As Stephen Henighan has said, "Until frenetic commercialism, and the nostalgic reactions bred by it, relax their grip, there can be no rural or regional novel which surpasses dewy romanticism" (210).

## V

Imperialism's siege of the tribal is fundamental in the distinction Frye makes between "the decentralizing rhythms of culture" and the "centralizing tendencies" of "political and economic developments" (470) — and more acute still in an age of technology and globalism, both of which seek to commodify uniformity as "best practice." In such an environment, myth and nostalgia play key ideological roles in the maintenance of nation-appropriate metaphors. In Canada, a cultural program of nostalgia, literally *homesickness*, polices and reinforces an east-coast Celtic ethnicity that is Old World, racially white and homogeneous, near-pathological in its demands for thematic integration in all the arts, from literature to music, and architecturally resistant to interrogation. The model of the Maritime idyll that Charles G.D. Roberts first popularized must therefore be both delusional and functional, offering the wistful hope of a non-existent permanence if the centre is to hold:

Yet will I stay my steps and not go down to the marshland, —  
 Muse and recall far off, rather remember than see, —  
 Lest on too close sight I miss the darling illusion,  
 Spy at their task even here the hands of chance and change. (20)

In short, in the ideological sphere of Canada, the modern Tantramar of "chance and change," not unlike the modern Maritimes, must *not* be revisited, leaving only the Tantramar/Maritimes of nostalgia's dim memory. However, as Frye cautions and as this essay has illustrated, "if we try to annex culture ["a progressively liberalizing force in society" (473)] to a centralizing political or economic movement, we get a pompous and officialized imperialism in the arts" (471). Rather, the literature of a culture that has come of age contests "its mythical and metaphorical biases" (476) not only in the interest of good art but more importantly because that culture recognizes that art, as McLuhan said, functions as counter-environment to the political and economic forces that swirl



endlessly around it. If Canada is indeed a nation of immigrants, an evolving federation of regions, subcultures, and tribes, then non-expert readers must begin to challenge their institutional brethren to move out from the centre with a genuine desire to read, listen to, and see what our artists are saying. The Tantramar, then, *must* be revisited. Play-acting on CBC Radio with a single-malt scotch in hand amounts to nothing more than posturing in the imperial court. As the pre-eminent postcolonial reader Edward Said reminds us, serious artists long ago moved out from under the cloud of that kind of colonial pomposity:

Better disparity and dislocation than reconciliation under duress of subject and object; better a lucid exile than sloppy, sentimental homecomings; better the logic of dissociation than an assembly of compliant dunces. A belligerent intelligence is always to be preferred over what conformity offers, no matter how unfriendly the circumstances and unfavourable the outcome. (7)

In the reading culture of Canada, Said's words are cold comfort indeed for Richards, Kerslake, and others who refuse to pick from the available metaphors in constructing their alternate spaces.

### WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 1983. London: Verso, 2006.
- Ashcroft, Bill, et. al., eds. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Balibar, Etienne. "The Nation Form: History and Ideology." Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, eds. *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. Trans. Chris Turner. London: Verso, 1991. 86-106.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. 1957. Trans. Annette Lavers. London: Jonathan Cape, 1972.
- Bhabha, Homi. "The Other Question . . ." *Screen* 24.6 (1983): 18-36.
- Ferguson, Will. "Mythic Isle." *Maclean's* 12 Aug. 2002: 38-40.
- French, William. "Searing Fidelity About Grim Losers." Rev. of *Nights Below Station Street*, by David Adams Richards. *Globe and Mail* 14 May 1988: C17.
- Frye, Northrop. "Myth as the Matrix of Language." *Georgia Review* 38.3 (1984): 465-76.
- Geertz, Clifford. "The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States." 1963. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1973. 255-310.
- Gessell, Paul. "The Grim Writer." Rev. of *River of the Brokenhearted*, by David Adams Richards. *Ottawa Citizen* 23 Aug. 2003: J1-2.
- Henighan, Stephen. *When Words Deny the World: The Reshaping of Canadian Writing*. Erin: Porcupine's Quill, 2002.

- Martin, Sandra. "MacLeod Celebrated at Authors' Fest Opener." *Globe and Mail* 26 Oct. 2002: R4.
- McKay, Ian. *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1994.
- McKinney, Mary. "She Knew 'The Story Girl.'" *Evening Times-Globe* 28 July 1962: 6-7.
- Munro, Alice. Promotional Endorsement for *No Great Mischief*, by Alistair MacLeod. McClelland, 1999.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. "Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature." *The Arnold Anthology of Postcolonial Literatures in English*. Ed. John Thieme. London: Arnold, 1996. 79-83.
- Rapoport, Janis. "Deeply in Luxuriant Gloom." Rev. of *The Coming of Winter*, by David Adams Richards. *Globe and Mail* 5 Oct. 1974: 34.
- Richards, David Adams. *The Coming of Winter*. Ottawa: Oberon, 1974.
- . *For Those Who Hunt the Wounded Down*. Toronto: McClelland, 1993.
- . *Lives of Short Duration*. Ottawa: Oberon, 1981.
- . "The Turtle, the Handbook, the Dark Night Air." *Nashwaak Review* 3 (1996): 67-75.
- Roberts, Charles G.D. "The Tantramar Revisited." *Stubborn Strength: A New Brunswick Anthology*. Ed. Michael O. Nowlan. Don Mills: Academic Press, 1983. 18-20.
- Said, Edward. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.
- Smith, Neil. *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984.
- Stevens, Peter. "Two Gloomy Weeks Inside N.B." Rev. of *The Coming of Winter*, by David Adams Richards. *Windsor Star* 26 Oct. 1974: 44.
- Sturm, Terry. "Popular Fiction." 1991. *New Zealand Literature*. Ed. Janet Witalec. Vol. 134 of *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Detroit: Gale, 2003. 260-89.
- Zizek, Slavoj. "Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism." *New Left Review* 225 (1997): 28-51.