

control of Plath's voice, a voice increasingly controlled by her daughter, is illustrated nicely in Frieda's description of how thankful she was that her father allowed her to hear recordings of Plath when she reached the appropriate age. Though Plath's oeuvre is remarkable, her poetry possessing a unique force, her language conveying a violent momentum of revolutionary transgressions, it is often as if Plath, her work and any approach to it, is somehow stagnated. Any attempt to review this important reissue of *Ariel* seems, too, suspended; Frieda Hughes's foreword continues to place the reader yet another step outside any true appreciation of Plath's poetic genius.

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Gabrielle Helms. *Challenging Canada: Dialogism and Narrative Techniques in Canadian Novels*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2003. Pp. x, 214. \$65 cloth.

One might claim for the study of national literatures today what Theodor Adorno claimed for philosophy in the mid-twentieth century: that while it "once seemed obsolete, [it] lives on because the moment to realize it was missed" (3). If, as the story now goes, the construction of national literatures from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries partook in teleological narratives of a reconciliation of the citizenry with each other and with the land itself, such that each would reflect and express the other in a mirroring dialectic, and relatedly, partook in narratives of a rise to self-consciousness of a essential underlying *national character*, then the realization of such unifying and essentializing nationalistic narratives has for a long time now been challenged and critiqued as variously impossible and undesirable. Yet somewhat paradoxically, far from consigning the study of national literatures to the dustbin of history, the fragmentation of these narratives has, over the last two decades or so, produced more of such study than ever.

Gabrielle Helms's *Challenging Canada: Dialogism and Narrative Techniques in Canadian Novels* is a recent contribution to the ongoing critique of what Helms takes to be the still hegemonic ideology of the Canadian nation. Canada has been widely regarded, in a phrase once quoted approvingly by Northrop Frye, as the "peaceable kingdom," a land of equality, moderation and sensible negotiation. Such a view, however, masks a history of violence,

oppression and discrimination. Helms' first chapter provides a general introduction to her project. The dominant ideology of Canada, Helms maintains, has been rightfully challenged in certain Canadian novels of the last three decades and her study will employ narratology and Bakhtinian theory in order to analyze formally how these works launch such various ideological challenges and to what purposes. The study will resist essentialism, universalism, teleology, humanism and unifying synthesis—the *bete noirs* of contemporary criticism. Her second chapter is a more detailed consideration of the current status of Bakhtin, a theorist who, as Helms acknowledges, has enjoyed, or suffered, an immense popularity since the 1980's and whose key concepts might be said to have reached a certain saturation point in literary studies. On the whole she argues that Bakhtin is more than "yesterday's 'fave rave'" (19), that he continues to provide theoretical tools for important critical interventions. In addition to employing his theories, however, one must read him critically. The subsequent four chapters engage in specific readings of Canadian novels: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* in chapter three; Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic* and Aritha van Herk's *Places Far from Ellesmere* in chapter four; Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash* and Thomas King's *Green Grass Running Water* in chapter five; and Margaret Sweatman's *Fox* in chapter seven. This arrangement allows Helms in each respective chapter to consider the challenges posed to Canada by four, structurally subordinated and marginalized perspectives: Asian writers, women writers, first nations writers and the working class—although there is considerable overlap amongst these categories within and between the various chapters. The concluding chapter reflects more generally upon the significance of these various ideological challenges to the Canadian nation and notes further works and genres that would repay a similar narratological and dialogical analysis.

Helms's desire to combine the cultural and political criticism that has been dominant in literary studies over the last two decades with a more rigorously formal analysis drawn from narratology and Bakhtinian theory is laudable. In the Canadian context at least, too often such criticism has, despite the *de rigueur* quoting of two or three continental or post-colonial theorists, been little less thematic than the older paraphrasing criticism it self-consciously sought to displace. It is just that the paraphrases have changed, away from the "garrison mentality," "survival" and the like, to discussions of such themes as stereotyping, conflict and marginalization. A more rigorously formal analysis promises greater understanding of how ideologies are operating in these texts and how they are being resisted and even, perhaps, the particular role that the literary plays in these processes. As Helms notes, such a desire parallels the impetus behind Bakhtin's writings themselves, which sought to avoid the

equally undesirable polarities of a detached formalism and a crude reduction of literature to the ideological. Furthermore, Helms is surely right to assume that Bakhtin's great concern with the centralizing and de-centralizing forces of language within communities continues to hold significant promise for analysing Canadian culture from the macro level of federalist politics to the micro level of myriad conflicts and issues between its constitutive individuals, groups and regions. Despite the frequent invocation of Bakhtin, a close, careful analysis of what such centripetal and centrifugal linguistic and ideological tensions might mean in terms of the formation of national consciousness and the resistance to it, remains very much to be accomplished. Similarly laudable is Helms's insistence that while Bakhtinian analysis remains an important critical perspective, it must itself be subjected to criticism in order to resist assumptions too often made, such as that dialogism is always and necessarily desirable or politically progressive, and to resist collapsing dialogism into a liberal pluralist rhetoric that forms one of the dominant ideologies of the times, one which is too often simply a mask for ongoing domination by particular groups. Any future employment of Bakhtin which seeks continuing relevance will have to bear such a critical perspective in mind along with Helms's further proviso that in analysing dialogism one must pay more attention than does Bakhtin to the differentials of power which determine in specific contexts, who gets to speak, what they might be permitted to say and who will listen.

In keeping with such encouraging aims and perspectives, Helms's work is most promising in those places where she is engaged in close, detailed discourse analysis modelled, most centrally, on Bakhtin's *Studies in Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *Discourse in the Novel*. One of Bakhtin's most politically and theoretically suggestive concepts is the idea of internal dialogism—the notion that what we might think of as our *own individual* consciousness is itself always an ongoing struggle between competing voices and perspectives which we have internalized. Helms provides some strong analysis of the internal dialogism of the first-person (“homodiegetic”) narrators in *Obasan* and *Slash* which offers worthwhile insight into the formation of the consciousness of these specific, marginalized national subjects in the historical contexts within which they are formed.

The study, however, would have been strengthened as a whole, if it had more consistently sustained such detailed analysis of the texts employing narratology and Bakhtinian discourse analysis, and if the analysis had more consistently led to fresher and more compelling insights into these novels and into the interrelations between novels and the nation more generally. The part chapter devoted to *Obasan*, for example, supports virtually every point

made in the discussion with citations of earlier critical discussions of the novel where the particular point has been made previously. While one commends Helms's scholarship and intellectual honesty in making such frequent citations, one is likewise left with the impression that her discussion needs more of its own to contribute. Indeed, her particular thesis with respect to *Obasan*, that it is, in Linda Hutcheon's well worn phrase, an "historiographic metafiction" which points to the constructed nature of historical narratives and thence to political commitment, is very close to Donald Goellnicht's 1989 essay on the work, an interpretation which has been rehearsed and built upon in various later discussions. When Helms arrives rather late in her discussion of *Obasan* at what is to be her own focus—a detailed analysis of the internal dialogism that constitutes the narrator's conflicted consciousness—she segues too quickly out of the discussion. While the analysis she does provide is suggestive, she thereby misses the opportunity to employ Bakhtinian theory to contribute more strongly to our understanding of the work and the troubled formation of national consciousness more generally.

The discussion of *Green Grass, Running Water*, to take another example, embarks upon a very promising formal description of the complex narrative structure of the work, a description which promises to employ the careful and often useful distinctions made by narratology, such as attention to focalization, to shed more light on this novel's challenges to the narratives of Canadian nationhood. As Helms rightly points out, a really compelling analysis and interpretation of this novel's narrative structure has yet to be produced in the growing body of critical literature devoted to it. Yet while Helms provides some excellent description of the narrative structure, her interpretation of its purpose is rather unremarkable, the sort of thing any lecturer introducing the novel to undergraduates might be likely to suggest: "the fragmented narrative structure gives authority to the voices of all characters involved in the novel, refusing a monologic voice . . ." (116).

Finally, in terms of *desiderata*, a critical study entitled *Challenging Canada* would have benefited from a more thorough engagement with the important critical and theoretical discourse on the interrelations between literature and the nation, both in the specifically Canadian context and beyond. In her introduction, Helms notes in passing that she accepts Anderson's conception of the nation as an "imagined community" and further notes several works of recent years with which her thinking is aligned, such as W. H. New's *Borderlands* and Jonathan Kertzer's *Worrying the Nation*. Yet apart from some suggestive, although also somewhat confusing, references in her chapter on Sweatman's *Fox*, to Bhabha's remarks on the troubled project of nationalist pedagogy, the body of Helms's analysis does not sufficiently grapple with the

problematic of the nation in relation to the particular texts she is discussing. In her conclusion Helms asserts her disagreement with Frank Davey that much of the Canadian literature of the post-centennial period has been post-national. The nation, she suggests, continues to be a viable if a much contested form. What is required is a new nationalism based on heterogeneity, non-essentialism and difference. Her ideas here, however, require more development and engagement with contemporary debates on the question. A good starting point would have been Kertzer's *Worrying the Nation*, which takes such concerns as one of its central topic and traces their development throughout a lengthy history. *Challenging Canada* provides moments of very suggestive analysis drawn from narratology and Bakhtin. Furthermore it provides a clear, informative and scholarly overview of the historically and politically inflected criticism on seven Canadian novels of recent decades, several of which are now central to the revised multi-cultural canon that has taken shape over these years. I found myself both agreeing with the readings of the various novels, recognizing strategies I have used to teach some of them, and yet feeling a certain sense of fatigue with these critical models and the interpretations drawn from them. Helms herself perhaps shares this experience when she queries if Bakhtin is "yesterday's 'fave rave'." Have the current critical models reached the same saturation point which readers experienced with Gaile McGregor's *Wacousta Syndrome* twenty years ago, a study which now appears as the last blast of the old Frygian/Atwoodian thematic criticism? I look forward to future studies that might, without being conservatively reactionary, challenge our current critical certainties as much as these novels challenge Canada.

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