

Palla, Mária

**[Henighan, Stephen. When words deny the world: the
reshaping of Canadian writing]**

The Central European journal of Canadian studies. 2003, vol. 3,
iss. [1], pp. [139]-141

ISBN 80-210-3361-4

ISSN 1213-7715 (print); ISSN 2336-4556 (online)

Stable URL (handle):

<https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/116048>

Access Date: 19. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk
University provides access to digitized documents strictly for
personal use, unless otherwise specified.

Stephen Henighan. *When Words Deny the World: The Reshaping of Canadian Writing*. Erin, Ontario: Porcupine's Quill, 2002, 211 pages. ISBN 0-88984-240-x

In his collection of well-informed and thought-provoking essays deliberately inviting debate, Stephen Henighan examines the contemporary English-Canadian literary scene. Himself a writer of novels and short stories, Henighan concentrates mainly on fiction, as he admits in the Introduction, whose personal tone is characteristic of the whole volume, short-listed for the Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction in 2002.

Henighan's book is divided into two large sections consisting of chronologically arranged essays. Entitled "Writers and Words", Part One highlights significant authors and issues from the last decade of the previous century, while Part Two, bearing the title of the whole volume, contains more recent writings and examines the situation of the English-Canadian novel under the influence of Free Trade and globalization. Since several of the essays were published individually earlier, there is some repetitiveness about the collection as a whole.

At the beginning of the book such icons of English-Canadian literature as Irving Layton, Timothy Findley and Josef Škvorecký form the target of Henighan's critical analysis. Orwell the critic is invoked in the first article, which indicates Henighan's disregard for fashionable trends and reputations when evaluating literary quality and forming independent opinions based on precise observation. Henighan places his critical views in context by providing the publication details of his essays and a summary of various responses they received, thus making his readers consider different aspects of discussions.

In his highly readable, jargon-free writings we can, nevertheless, glimpse a critic well-read in the theories of our time, as suggested by his concern with post-colonialism or the use of language. Regarding the latter question, he urges Canadian writers to learn from their Latin American colleagues and rely more on local detail to avoid homogenization and "docile imitation of the imperial centre" (the quotation marks are his), which is now the powerful southern neighbour the US, its influence having replaced British dominance. Henighan also calls for narrative innovation and the protection of artistic freedom, challenging those who, in their (self-)censoring zeal, would go so far as to impose rules concerning the "appropriation of voice".

Henighan's essays are argued from a consistent viewpoint, that of someone fearing the disintegration of his national culture and literature under the threat of commercialization. That is why he stresses the importance of reading and discussing each other's works in the Canadian writers' community. With the purpose of protecting Canada's fragile literary world, he also looks for signs of emerging Canadian literary traditions, for example, in the form of collections of linked short stories, from Margaret Laurence's *A Bird in the House* to Connie Barnes Rose's *Getting Out of Town* (to mention only two of the numerous volumes he lists), and he attacks the growing

Toronto-centrism of the Canadian media and publishing industry as represented by the Giller Prize.

Although he criticizes several works for their lack of historical context and evasiveness, among them Michael Ondaatje's international best-seller *The English Patient*, he never fails to provide examples of what he considers to be better writing – for example, Wayne Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. He emphasizes what he believes to be the way for the Canadian novel to develop: "a route combining local detail, historical engagement and structural inventiveness". He always articulates his views with erudition and presents his arguments clearly so if one decides to disagree with Henighan, one knows where he stands.

"Innovation usually originates in marginalized precincts of the artistic world" may be one of his disputable statements, but it is exactly its implication that Canada is an off-centre country on the cultural margin and therefore capable of innovations and great literary achievement that explains why we in our Central European region can relate to the questions of contemporary Canadian literary life so easily. The situation of the countries in this region is similar to that of Canada in this respect: in spite of the strong literary traditions they can rely on, these countries are in a peripheral position regarding political, economic and cultural power.

Just like Canada, they are among the places that the United States floods "with junk culture for the masses". One can only wish what Henighan says about Canada were true in this region as well: "this aggressively marketed US schlock drives out local schlock, leaving national writers to the task of sustaining the country's 'imagined community' by producing the books bought by the local middle class to confirm its cultural superiority and sense of identity. Popular culture is imported, high culture is local." Instead, we often see a colonial attitude in the local imitation of the US junk, which thus reinforces local schlock.

On the other hand, when comparing North American and European integration, Henighan is right saying that a stronger homogenizing tendency results from this process in Canada under US dominance than in Europe, where there is no such single dominating power. His book is worth reading for what he has to say about the potentials in the development of the novel form in culturally marginalized countries, using Latin American examples in which it is possible to study how to integrate peculiarities of local setting and history in a work of literature and to achieve universal appeal at the same time. Henighan is a reliable source in this respect as a professor of Spanish-American literature and culture at the University of Guelph who has visited several Latin American as well as European countries. The setting of his latest book, *Lost Province: Adventures in a Moldovan Family*, takes place right here in our neighbourhood.

Henighan's book will prove to be a good read for those with a keen interest in Canadian Studies in our region because of the above-mentioned parallels that we can discover in it between Canadian culture and our own. In addition, we gain more intimate knowledge of contentious issues, books and authors in

contemporary Canada than dictionary entries can ever provide. Henighan's often idiosyncratic views, reminiscent in their style of the controversial essays of John Metcalf, who actually prepared this book for the press, are sure to produce an inspiring effect. We can feel literary life pulsating in Stephen Henighan's work and we emerge from it with more information about, and definitely more concern for, Canadian culture and literature.

Mária Palla

Kodolányi János University College, Székesfehérvár, Hungary

