

H. Bonheim

Topoi of the Canadian Short Story

Anthologies and collections of short stories are rarely best sellers. Most adults who want some good reading prefer a novel to a short story. For the student of foreign languages, however, the situation is altogether different. He prefers to consume fiction in its shorter forms. Thus Canadian literature is known in Germany more by the short story than any other genre. *The Everyman Anthology of English Short Stories*, first published in 1921, includes a story by Allan Sullivan and one by Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, so that the Canadian short story has had a steady albeit modest representation abroad for some time. In recent years the paperback revolution, together with the Canadian literary renaissance, have made the Canadian short story the most active ambassador of Canadian literature abroad. Naturally the question arises: what distinguishes the Canadian short story from other short stories?

To answer this question I have chosen the forty short story collections and anthologies most readily available in British and Canadian bookshops, altogether six hundred pieces of work, exactly half of them British and American, the other half Canadian, and subjected them to a statistical survey.

Even a first cataloguing of this material reveals some striking differences, but also some striking similarities. For one thing, twenty-two of the Canadian stories were published before 1900, whereas 112 of the 300 Anglo-American stories are of that age: five times as many. The Canadian short story, in other words, is a newer form, something to keep in mind when we compare and contrast narrative techniques. Interesting, too, is that only forty-one of the Anglo-American stories are written by women, as opposed to 103 of the Canadian ones: two and a half times as many. The one group contains only two collections by women, Katherine Mansfield and Nadine Gordimer (one of them a New Zealander and the other a South African). The major Anglo-

American short story writers are men: Poe, Hawthorne, James, Lawrence, Joyce, Hemingway, Faulkner and Salinger. The four most anthologized Canadian writers are Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant, Mordecai Richler and Ethel Wilson, and three of the four are women. Each of these women is also represented in our sample by a collection of her own short stories, to which I added a collection by Margaret Atwood and another by Margaret Laurence. In the nine anthologies most readily available in Canadian bookshops, these five authors are represented by seventy-nine different stories. The unusually high representation of woman writers has consequences for both content and technique. Women writers are less likely to depict warlike adventures or hunting expeditions in the frozen north, so that the old cliché that the Canadian story tends to depict violent physical action is not supported by our sample. The narrative techniques are also affected by this special male/female mix, as we see if we focus on how the Canadian stories end: 8% of the stories written by men end with a character speaking, whereas it is 17% with the stories written by women. Men tend to produce drama by depicting action, women by making their figures speak.

At this point a word concerning the usefulness and limitations of statistics is in order. Whether 8% or 17% of our stories end with speech is of marginal significance; indeed, 8% or 18% would mean as much, or as little, to most readers. The chief advantages of such statistics as are used here are two.

First, the analysis of a wide sampling of texts assures us that our observations are representative and valid or, and this can be just as interesting, that we have stumbled onto a unique phenomenon worth detailed investigation. The special values of a particular work of art can be identified only if we find out, either in a subconscious, un-systematic or in a methodical fashion, what the norms are. The work of art under inspection then represents in its idiosyncrasies a departure from a set of norms recognized and defined. Moreover, statistics, by helping to define the norm, tell us what phenomena we can expect to discover in the next story we sit down to read; that is, they have a prognostic value.

If the conclusions we reach on the basis of statistics are to be valid, the method of sampling must be carefully considered and checked. The commonest method is the one I have used here: the statistics were extracted from a first sampling of one hundred stories in five well-known anthologies, and then compared to the results of a collection of three times as many stories, now using a different principle of

selection: a group of author collections ranging over the whole history of modern Canadian literature. The results were much the same. In other words, the original sampling of one hundred stories would have been sufficient and would have had the prognostic value desired.

Secondly, the statistical method makes it impossible for the critic to select his text materials in a one-sided fashion. Normally the critic has an idea and then looks for evidence to corroborate it. Thus it was a commonplace of criticism that the work "dark" acts as a dominant motif in *Othello*—until the newer computer concordances showed that the word "light" occurs even more often. The critical cliché is thus exploded, or at least put into a new perspective.

Thus I believed the cliché about violent action in the Canadian short story until I tried to substantiate the cliché by analysing my very extensive sample. The cliché may have been valid a generation ago, but a strong representation of works published in the 60's and 70's seems to invalidate it. I had also expected that the Canadian story would tend to begin with the description of bad weather and end by the hero freezing to death in the snow. In 1% of the Canadian stories the hero does in fact die in the snow, including the famous piece called "Snow" by Frederick Philip Grove; but as chance and luck would have it, our Anglo-American selection also includes three stories (by Elizabeth Gaskell, F.B. Harte and Jack London) in which the main character freezes to death. So this hypothesis too crumbles under closer scrutiny. As to the beginning with a description of the weather, this turns out to be a *topos* of the British short story much more than of the Canadian.

As far as narrative technique is concerned, too, the Canadian story is very much part of the British-American tradition. 10.7% of the Anglo-American stories and 11% of the Canadian stories begin with the speech of a character. At least in terms of some of the statistically graspable facts, the Canadian short story does not (or not yet) have a marked profile of its own.

Nevertheless, the empirical data do suggest some tendencies of interest. I should like to look first at some matters of theme and then some matters of narrative technique.

1. There is a strong incongruity between the social class of the characters in Canadian short stories and the class of the intended reader. Frank O'Connor has noted that the short story in general tends to devote itself to what he calls "submerged population groups", but this observation is especially applicable to the Canadian

story. On the one hand there are Eskimos, Indians, first-generation immigrants, inhabitants of the urban ghettos, criminals, bums, pioneers; on the other hand, the readers of these stories: not only the sons and daughters of the educated middle classes that throng the universities, but also the subscribers to university quarterlies, coterie magazines, and purchasers of New Canadian Library volumes at \$3.95 each. By and large the Canadian short story is in this respect like the classical American short stories of Mark Twain, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway: the fictional figures described are only rarely the sort of people who could be imagined reading a collection of short stories. This is obviously not the case in the tradition we often identify with the names of such authors as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield. Many of the stories of these authors are preoccupied by problems of social class, but by and large they depict the class of people that reads them. The Canadian story tends to show the reader a kind of person that he will find strange, even exotic; the world portrayed is not, however, an aristocratic one, as in the old-style romance, or in the silver-fork fiction of the 19th century, but the world of the socially unassimilated, underprivileged.

2. The Canadian short story of the period up to the second World War shows more actions which are physical and violent than does its Anglo-American counterpart of that period. The modern Anglo-American story has more and more devoted itself to everyday experiences, everyday events. This is a direction which the Canadian story, as I have pointed out, has taken only in very recent years.

3. The Anglo-American story has also taken a turn which has been called "internalization": a shift from the depiction of dramatic events in the outer world to a focussing on psychological processes. It is striking that thirty-six of our Canadian short stories, that is 11% of them, involve the death of one of the main personages, usually but not always a violent death, whereas our sampling of the 20th century Anglo-American short story reveals only four violent and two cases of natural death (six stories = 2%). Since exactly 10% of our earlier Anglo-American stories end in the death of one of the main characters, we can see that at least in this respect the Canadian short story has some of the qualities of an earlier tradition. Short stories are often more closely knit and carefully organized than are novels, so the kind of action with which the story ends or with which it is primarily concerned affects most of the other aspects of the narrative system: atmosphere, characterization, theme and narrative technique.

4. There is a notable tendency in the Canadian story to what Lubbock has called panoramic report. That is, scenes and people are described and their actions are traced at a distance, as it were, whereas the more recent Anglo-American tradition has strongly favored scenic report and the dominance of dialogue. The Canadian short story writer has only partly adopted this tendency toward dramatization.

Let us summarize our findings thus far. Character and plot of the Canadian short story hark back to a literary tradition which repeatedly prefers the more exotic character and the remarkable incident to a reflection of the familiar and everyday. The tendency to prefer everyday subject matter and a psychological and dramatic approach do show themselves in the Canadian short story, but with some delay. The "classical" Canadian short story tends to reflect themes and attitudes we associate with 19th century rather than contemporary fictional practice. If we examine the technique of the Canadian story in the narrower sense of the term, we find only a few but nevertheless interesting special qualities:

1. Treatment of time. The preference of the modern Anglo-American story is for scenic rather than panoramic presentation. Thus the time scheme involves minutes and hours rather than, as in the Canadian stories, days and weeks. In the Canadian story the frame of time, even in the present period, tends to be wide and strongly telescoped. This can also be seen as a quality of 19th century practice; at that time the short story was more closely related to the novel, and was often expected briefly to survey the whole life of a person rather than his adventures, say, on a particular afternoon. The modern story, oddly enough, is more likely to meet the neoclassical demand for the unities of time, place and action: for compression as opposed to epic breadth.

2. The narrative modes. The Canadian story is more likely to begin in the mode of description than is the Anglo-American story of our century: 42% as opposed to 34%. This finding supports the observation of Northrop Frye that the Canadian is more likely to ask "Where is here?" than "Who am I?" But there is an interesting difference in the stories by Canadian women. Although they are just as likely to open their stories with description, they describe people rather than places. However this preference for the description of persons rather than places in the Canadian woman writer probably

reflects not only particularly female interests, but the fact that the five women writers in our sample are all alive and of our time, whereas the older section of our sample, which goes back to the time of Confederation, is dominated by the male writer. In other words, the shift from descriptions of place to descriptions of person is not only a male/female difference but a difference between more traditional and more contemporary modes of fictional exposition.

3. **Beginnings.** The beginnings of Canadian short stories occasionally show a consciousness of the writing process which the modern Anglo-American story tends to avoid. Rudy Wiebe, for instance, starts his story, "Where is the Voice Coming From?", with the sentence, "The problem is to make the story." Only two of the modern Anglo-American stories begin with such a reflection on the writing process itself or with a reference of the writer to himself or to his reader, whereas fifteen of the three hundred Canadian story openings include this element in an obvious way. But this difference of 4% represents only a dozen stories or so, so that its significance may be questioned. About 80% of all the Canadian stories begin with description or report of an action, just as do the Anglo-American ones. Only a few begin with the self-reflections of the narrator, with general comments of an abstract kind or with the speech of one of the characters. Despite the special love of the Canadian writer for description, this mode tends more and more to be subdued and to be mixed with report and speech. Too much description, as we know from reading late 19th century novels, can have great drawbacks. For one thing, the reader's attention may be lost. For another, blocks of description can slip off onto the fictional genre which was called a *sketch* in the 19th century, that is, into the genre we associate with the work of Washington Irving. Whereas most of the stories of Duncan Campbell Scott begin with a block of description, stories of the 1960's and 1970's have a much stronger infusion of action and dialogue. The Canadian short story of the last decade is in this respect hardly to be distinguished from its Anglo-American counterpart.

4. **Endings.** The Canadian short story of our time, although it seems at first glance to display a bewildering diversity of themes and forms, uses certain narrative techniques again and again. I have room here to list only four of the chief topoi of story endings. Each topos may appear separately or in conjunction with the others, and represents a minor stylistic deviant from the norm of the usual declarative sentence. All four appear together in the concluding sentence of Mavis Gallant's short story, "The Accident":

And didn't they leave us here?

This sentence has the following qualities:

- It
- 1) is very brief (by which I mean six words or less),
 - 2) it begins with a conjunction,
 - 3) it takes the form of a question and
 - 4) it contains a negation.

Over half of the Canadian stories surveyed here end with a sentence using one or more of these four topoi:

Topos 1:

Brevity. We find in our sample fifty-nine endings of six words or less:

That's nice, dear. (Cohen)

That's all you are. (Gallant)

She is mortal. (Rule)

He sighed. "Sedan." (Scott)

"Yes," she said. "No." (Thompson)

Just hush. (Wiebe)

Topos 2:

Conjunctions. Sixty-eight stories have a final sentence which begins with *and* or *but*:

And, already, so did he. (Gallant)

And don't start asking me why. (Helwig)

And behind that, . . . contempt. (Hood)

But you have no appreciation. (Metcalf)

And so Charcoal died. (Scott)

And they were laughing together. (Wiebe)

And how the Crees wailed that summer along the great river, ahh, how they wailed. (Wiebe)

Topos 3:

Question. Not so frequent, but nevertheless worth remarking, is the concluding, and therefore, unanswered, question which also tends to be a syntactic fragment:

A drop of brandy? (Behrens)

What's the weary use? (Knister)

What did you bring me? (MacLeod)

Why can't I? (Munro)

What's on the other side? (Thompson)

Or is it a knock? Ah-h-h-h-h-h (Wiebe)

Topos 4:

Negation. Almost 25% of the stories in our sample (seventy-two out of three hundred) include a final negation:

He never did. (Friedman)

"I never will!" she screamed at him. (Gustafson)

I didn't. (Layton)

I didn't go to his. (Richler)

But you have no appreciation. (Metcalf)

For I do not, of course, understand the Cree myself. (Wiebe)

As in the last example, what is often negated is in some way the act of communication or expression itself:

She didn't say a word. (Kroetsch)

And the question was never answered. (Leacock)

. . . and they sing ballads no more. (Raddall)

But he never answered any of my father's letters. (Richler)

She didn't answer . . . (Ross)

She could not answer . . . (Spencer)

. . . and we left him without another word. (Thompson)

. . . Sonny . . . was too busy to reply. (Valgardson)

Everyone stared, but he could not stop. (Wiebe)

Nobody heard her. (Wilson)

Or the figure departs, often in silence, not to return:

The man walked straight ahead and didn't look back. (Bailey)

The next day he was gone and was never spoken of. And never a question was raised. (Carrier)

Then she took his arm and they went together in silence. (Scott)

. . . nor was he ever seen again. (Scott)

. . . and they did not see her again. (Thériault)

She too had gone away. (Wiebe)

The effect of this negation-topos is often that which is achieved in film by the gradual withdrawal of the camera, which shifts from the scenic or close-up view to the panoramic. A uniquely Canadian version is a final shift to the myth of the great north, to a vision of vast expanses of frozen rivers and lakes which is presented to the mind's eye. Often this vision is not of central relevance to the action of the story. In such

cases all the lyric registers are pulled, the descriptive adjectives tumble out in profusion, the sentences are twenty, thirty and forty words long:

. . . he thought he could see the mountains, white-covered, their crests glittering in the falling sun, then forest upon forest, after that the barren tundra and the blank solid rivers, and beyond, so far that the endless night had already descended, the frozen sea. (Atwood)

When they got on the high part of 401 the city was a sea of light right down to the harbour. Then darkness. Then the islands. Then the greater darkness beyond the islands. (Godfrey)

I am going to starboard under the stars on the current down the river down east past the plains of Abraham, farther, to where the river yawns its mouth eleven miles wide, bearing me away at last to the darkness, the sleety impossible impassable Gulf. (Hood)

But soon it was lost in a wilderness of snow, trees, and frozen lakes. (Levine)

Only the briefly golden river lies before him, whatever its name may be since it must have one, bending back somewhere beyond that land, curling back upon itself in its giant, relentless spirals down to the implacable, and ice-choked, arctic sea. (Wiebe)

These are lyric tours de force which have few counterparts in the modern Anglo-American tradition of Joyce and Hemingway, a tradition of sparse and unlyrical understatement that still dominates the work of the 1970's, despite the outbursts of the "fabulators" and "post-modernists." Perhaps the frozen-north-lyricism of the above passages, almost all of which were first published in the last decades, constitute not just another topos of narrative conclusion, but a new direction which will draw after it converts and imitators.

Admittedly, Canadian story endings also have in common with their Anglo-American cousins a wider set of poetic poses than this, especially the last-minute rhetorical heightening we might expect of verse rather than of prose narrative: a shift of style register, often accompanied by a shift of tense from the past to the present or the use of alliteration, simile and metaphor. Of our sample of three hundred stories, only forty-two fail to contain one of these elements. But the four topos discussed in detail occur more often in the Canadian stories than in the control group of three hundred Anglo-American samples:

	Canadian (n=300)	Anglo-American (n=300)	sum (n=600)
1. Brevity	59	43	102
2. Conjunctions	68	52	120
3. Question	22	11	33
4. Negation	72	47	119

The differences are not great. But consciously or unconsciously, even the most recent Canadian short story writers continue, more strongly than do their Anglo-American counterparts, to draw on a traditional set of topoi for their effects.

There is one narrative technique, however, with no counterpart outside the Canadian short story. This is the development of a set of conventions for representing in the Anglo-Canadian short story the speech and actions of Franco-Canadians. If we examine a couple of dozen stories in which the French Canadian plays a role, we find a special breed of fictional figure—usually of a lower social class than that of the English *dramatis personae*, rural rather than urban, and to be approached with care:

“Go and play with her, Martha,” my mother said to me once. “Maybe she’d like to. Poor little thing. Always working. She could help you with French. Show you the cows and chickens . . .”

The thought of approaching that thin fierce-looking dark girl . . . filled me with terror but, because I didn’t want to admit—and defend—my cowardice, I just said crossly that I didn’t like her.

“Yes, she does look a bit common,” my mother said.

Joyce Marshall, “The Accident”

The speech of these “common” people is characterized by a number of differences of phonology, of diction and of grammar. They do not say “it is” but “eet eez”, they do not live in houses but in ‘ouzes, they use heavy admixtures of “Franglais” like “le barman” and “le weekend,” and sprinkle their speech with the terms of the Quebec *habitant*: one drinks one’s *vin ordinaire* sitting in a *fauteuil* in the *petite salle*. They sometimes use a child-like grammar, getting their word order, their prepositions and their verb forms wrong: “he do” and “she go”. When they write letters, they tend to leave out much of the usual punctuation and to write proper names and places in lower case rather than in capitals.

Like the stage Irishman, the short story Franco-Canadian is a mixture of sectional prejudice, of sympathetic observation and of literary tradition. The Franco-Canadian seems to represent an opportunity to

the Anglo-Canadian writer to demonstrate his skill in the differentiation of character. The character with a noticeably deviant speech pattern is easy to separate from the herd of fictional figures; he is by and large a sympathetic but rather primitive outsider who adds spice and variety to the fictional construct.

Here too we have a particularly Canadian phenomenon, with its own special set of narrative conventions and topoi. Perhaps the growing self-consciousness of Franco-Canadian separatists will help bring about a change in these conventions, and the sympathetic underdog with the funny accent will undergo, in fiction as in reality, a gradual metamorphosis. Should this happen the Canadian short story will lose one of that set of special topoi which now gives it a flavour of its own.