

BOOK REVIEWS

True Patriot Love. By Michael Ignatieff. Toronto: Viking Canada, 2009. 224 pages. \$30.00.

True Patriot Love is Michael Ignatieff's companion piece to his earlier and well-received account of his paternal roots in *The Russian Album*. In this book, Ignatieff writes of his maternal roots, the Grant family. In contrast to the "old country" and recent immigrant tale of the Ignatieffs, here we find a story of a settled and indeed "establishment" family that played its part in the founding and building up of Canada. In spite of the complementary character of the two works their reception has been strikingly different. Against the widely admired *Russian Album*, *True Patriot Love* has received a far more mixed and critical reception.

Michael Ignatieff is clearly a highly gifted and intelligent writer who has, for more than thirty years, produced thoughtful works both of fiction and non-fiction. At his best he writes with a real power of evocation and a capacity to provoke thought and reflection about not only our contemporary condition, but the human condition itself. While it has its moments of evocation and thoughtfulness, as others have already judged, it must be said that this fairly slim volume fails to live up to Ignatieff's abilities and literary accomplishments. However, what makes all such judgements problematic is, of course, Ignatieff's departure from the role of public intellectual to become the Leader of the Opposition, and quite possibly our next Prime Minister. In spite of the fact that the book was begun some time before Ignatieff's return to Canada and ascension to leadership of the Liberal Party, its publication this year cannot but be seen as a political act, as well as a literary and intellectual one.

The most obvious weakness in Ignatieff's political ambitions is his long absence from Canada. The evident political point of this work is to argue that through the Grants, Ignatieff is as deeply rooted in the country as any, and that it was a family tradition to combine going abroad to establish oneself in the larger world and return to do signal service to the young nation. Indeed, it seems to be an underlying suggestion that such global ambition is necessary for the "nation-building" mastery that Ignatieff sees in his Grant forebears and as being still a requirement in contemporary Canadian politics. Ignatieff also sees his being a player on the international—or at least Anglo-American—stage gives him the basis by which he can bring Canadians to recognize their own global importance as a nation on the cutting edge of such burning questions as how to recognize and integrate collective identities within a culture of rights and individual freedoms. So, read politically, the book claims to not only establish Ignatieff's thoroughly Canadian credentials, but to turn his apparent Achilles heel into a shield of Achilles.

The content of Ignatieff's book comprises five chapters: an opening chapter on the theme of patriotism that introduces us to the Grant family, from Ignatieff's

great-grandfather, George Munro Grant, through his grandfather William Grant, and finally to his uncle George Parkin Grant; there then follows a chapter each on these three figures and the book concludes with some closing considerations on the nature of Canada and a thinly disguised series of campaign pledges. For readers of the *Dalhousie Review*, it is especially Ignatieff's treatment of his uncle, George Grant, that should be of interest. Grant taught at Dalhousie University from 1947 until 1960 and again at the end of his career from 1980 until 1985. Ignatieff's treatment of his uncle is, in fact, both the most disturbing and revealing aspect of this book. It reveals not only that there was and remains a rift within the Grant-Ignatieff family that makes Ignatieff incapable of viewing his uncle dispassionately, let alone sympathetically, nor that Ignatieff is capable of turning his uncle into a straw man useful in presenting his own vision of Canada, but, most importantly, that Ignatieff's treatment of Grant's thought suggests real problems with that vision and Ignatieff's abilities to realize it.

The first chapter on patriotism contains the best prose in the book. Ignatieff here evokes effectively, if not always without risk of cliché, a sense of how ordinary life is infused with an attachment to larger shared realities, and in particular attachment to one's *patria*. Ignatieff is aware that as long as he invokes hockey and snow he is on relatively safe ground, but that when one turns from climate and recreation to treating the more developed realities of shared history and culture, one is, in Canada, on decidedly uncertain ground. Ignatieff tells us that in Canada we have no shared or uncontested national mythology that might make us one people. Rather for Ignatieff the country must be, if it is to hold together, an "enduring exercise of empathy." The other side of Ignatieff's vision of Canada is that it is distinct from the United States in holding to notions of collectivity—both in terms of internal collective groups such as the aboriginal peoples and the Quebecois, but also our taking up of social democratic principles of collective welfare embodied in such things as public health care. Finally, and this emerges in the final chapter, what can draw Canadians together, beyond the stance of empathy and a culture of individual and collective rights, is the work of "nation building" projects. Ignatieff lists a few, such as a highspeed rail link between Windsor and Quebec City, or a national energy policy. While the suggestions are not without merit, this is hardly the stuff to stir the collective Canadian imagination. Their difference from 1970s mega-projects and deeply divisive central planning needs to be far more clearly articulated. Ignatieff sees Canada, in spite of its nearly century and a half of existence, as still not really a nation, or one only just begun and so needing mastery, building, and pride. Ignatieff's absence from the country, his lack of immersion into the deeper life of the country, is then no great loss, as Ignatieff tells us the country we are to love is not the reality we live in, the one "before our eyes," but the one "imagined in the future."

The tale Ignatieff tells of his great-grandfather and grandfather, each remarkable in his own way, is one he can be justly proud to tell. Certainly Ignatieff can hope to see himself in these forebears who combined intellectual and literary life with practical activities very much in service to the development of Canada. While this

was largely in service to Canada as a member of the British Empire, this narrower and more colonial vision can largely be ascribed to the historical context in which George Munro Grant and William Grant were formed and came to understand their callings. Indeed, Ignatieff is able to commend his forebears for moments of insight into the suffering and depredations that British Imperialism imposed on the Aboriginal, Métis and other minorities. The great event of George Munro Grant's life was his cross-Canada expedition with Sanford Fleming of 1872, which he recounted for Canadians in *Ocean to Ocean* as part of an effort to sell the idea of a transcontinental railway. In telling this compelling story, Ignatieff tends to underplay the Imperial motives of his forebear and to emphasize his great-grandfather's sense of the possibilities of the largely undeveloped West. By contrast, the great event of William Grant's life was the First World War. Here, Ignatieff contests his uncle's account of how shattering this experience was for William Grant, emphasizing instead the arrival of nationhood to Canada attained in the war and William Grant's subsequent sense of his role as principal of Upper Canada College in forming the new generation of Canadians to this task.

Ignatieff's differences from George Grant in describing the character of William Grant's response to World War One sets the tenor of the rather strange chapter dedicated to George Grant. There are two things in this chapter that become confused in Ignatieff's telling: the intellectual disagreement between Grant and Ignatieff and their personal and familial differences. This confusion of the personal and the intellectual culminates in Ignatieff speaking of Grant's most famous work, *Lament for a Nation*, as "an act of revision, even falsification, of his own heritage." He tells us, "*Lament's* real purpose was to reappropriate the family tradition as a defence of a conservative Christian Canada." He tells us, "To the world outside the Grant-Ignatieff families, *Lament* was a masterpiece of rhetorical invective ... Inside the family, *Lament* was seen as a reckless reckoning, with slights imagined and real, going back to wartime London." It would seem that Ignatieff is not immune to such a charge of reckoning himself, but this time more directly through personal psychologizing. Particularly priceless is Ignatieff's charge that "in George's act of ventriloquism, the ancestors spoke, and they spoke in support of *his* vision of Canada." In an act of bizarre self-deconstruction, Ignatieff engages in exactly such an act of ventriloquism in the final chapter, where he tells us what rhetorical questions and views "the ancestors" would provide to us today. (And apparently our ancestors would not be at all disturbed to find our country had shed its British and Christian character, but rather they would be concerned deeply with our lack of a national energy policy.) While Ignatieff freely engages in reductive analysis of his uncle, the book reveals in the very act of such belittling something of Ignatieff's own psychological insecurities and the hold of this "irresistible and magnetic" uncle against whom he had to define his own thinking.

The pity is that in the process of slaying his uncle, Ignatieff fails to give the reader insight into the intellectual power of his uncle's thoughts. Putting aside all the drama of this almost Hellenic family dynamic, where this book fails intellectually in providing a real intellectual confrontation between Ignatieff and George Grant.

The Grant portrayed here is pure caricature. Ignatieff defines Grant as a Christian conservative who gave up on Canada when it shed itself of its British Imperial and Christian character. None of this is simply wrong, but it utterly fails to grasp the depth and power of Grant's argument or the nobility of prose and sentiment inspired. *Lament for a Nation* and Grant's larger intellectual accomplishments are reduced to Throne and Altar pessimism and their true motivation ascribed to familial *ressentiment*. Grant's account, as he makes explicit, is rooted in the personal and familial, but that is only its beginnings—indeed even his consideration of Canada is but a beginning point to an overarching consideration of the nature of modernity and technology, of the place of the human in the contemporary age. Grant was anything but a traditional conservative—indeed, much of *Lament for a Nation* consists of criticism of both Canadian and British conservatism. Grant was fully aware that his deep sense of the fatality of Canada was something his forefathers would not accept. Grant was not appropriating this tradition for himself, but rather seeing it as an unstable and impossible romance. Grant saw in this conservative tradition an unsustainable amalgam of an attachment to older traditions of loyalty and piety with a naïve acceptance of modern technology and progressivism. In fact, Ignatieff's own stance only testifies to the truth of his uncle's analysis: he simply seeks to appropriate the modernizing progressive elements of that older Canadian patriotism while abandoning its sense of piety and imperial loyalty. To engage in my own ventriloquizing, I would argue that Grant would see Ignatieff as simply siding with modernity and technology, engaging in exactly the kind of easy oblivion a sense of eternity that the older order sought, however fitfully, to keep alive. Grant's account of Canada was not out of an adherence to a narrow parochialism for its own sake—rather Grant's attachment to the specificities of the older Canada was out of a sense that their loss was indicative of a deeper nihilism at work in modernity itself. That is, the parochial was for him but a means toward, an intimation of, the eternal. Grant was no narrow “Christian conservative”—indeed he saw in other religions and traditions equally powerful ways to be open to the eternal; it is just that for most Canadians, this was our way and it was now gone.

I agree with Ignatieff that Grant's understanding of this transition in Canada's history—the quiet revolution in both English and French Canada—was a misreading. But Ignatieff fails signally to really present an alternate account. (In fairness, Ignatieff's Massey lectures, *The Rights Revolution*, especially Chapter 3, present a far more thoughtful discussion.) In this book, speaking of Expo '67 and the Charter and public medical insurance all in fairly vague terms is hardly a compelling repartee to Grant's fatal vision; Grant would see it all as so much window dressing. Ignatieff's language of mastery and nation-building would, to Grant, sound as only so much popularized Nietzscheanism. If Ignatieff had built Grant into the compelling intellectual figure he is instead of belittling him, he could have risen to the task of a real consideration of how Canada can be within the context of the contemporary age.

But this is where Ignatieff's absence from the country seems to be such a liability. In 2000 in *The Rights Revolution*, Ignatieff wrote that “the exercise of

writing these lectures has deepened my attachment to the place on earth that, if I needed one, I would call home.” The implication seems to be that Ignatieff does not need a home. *True Patriot Love*, in spite of its title, seems to be premised on this claim. The loyalty Ignatieff testifies is only to the Canada that should be—but one’s home is never or never simply, what should be—it *is* before our eyes. In a way, Ignatieff and Grant share a common view: that Canada is not actually present—it has either died or is yet to fully be: the present Canada, the living actual, day-to-day Canada is not a reality for either uncle or nephew, living with longing for the past or for the future. On the penultimate page of this book, Ignatieff suggests that we must have simultaneously a “non-ironic belief in the promise of” Canada, while also possessing a “national pride that is ironic.” The only sense I can make of this is that we can love straightforwardly only the Canada of the future. Oddly for a trained historian, Ignatieff signally fails to turn his patriotism toward the real history of the country, its inner development and, above all, its richly articulated constitutional and political structures. Ignatieff too easily buys into the view that our history is only one of division and opposition of simply given peoples. He calls for “a complex unity of us all”—without bringing out the extent to which this is already real and has been the work of generations of Canadians. Most disturbing is Ignatieff’s failure to recognize the role of the provinces in this work. Provincial trade barriers are simply incomprehensible—as though there is only a national sovereignty and no provincial sovereignty as well. In Ignatieff’s history, there is the Charter of Rights—but the divisive failures of Meech Lake and the Charlottetown accords, the near collapse of the country in 1995, the disastrous consequences of the National Energy Policy of the 1970s seem to play no role in his narrative of patriotism—how are provincial and regional distinctions part of, not enemies of, this patriotism? Certainly the contemporary challenge in Canada is to integrate the recognition of the Quebecois and aboriginal nations in the context of an ever more diverse plurality of peoples. Yet a patriotism of the actual Canada before us must be a federal patriotism, that takes one beyond subjective empathy—laudatory and necessary though it may be—to forms of constitutional recognition of a unity that is more than complex—that is inwardly divided and articulated. The Canada of such a patriotism is not to be “nation-built,” as if we were Iraq or Afghanistan, but to be inwardly developed on the basis of our existing and real institutions and history. Such a patriotism would not, as Ignatieff suggests, require “us to rise above our differences,” but would be found in and through them.

In the end, it is unfair to assess Ignatieff’s understanding of the country or suitability for high office on the basis of this book. He has done much better elsewhere. But it is a pity that he did not rise fully to the challenge of his own family, with all its tensions and contradictions. For something of the tensions and contradictions of the country are there found in miniature. To see a more fulsome comprehension of these *aporia* might have proved illuminating not only of a domestic drama, but also of the country this family has so notably served.

Canadian Literature at the Crossroads of Language and Culture. Selected Essays by Barbara Godard, 1987–2005. Edited by Smaro Kamboureli. Edmonton: NeWest, 2008. 412 pages. \$36.95.

In reviving the self-reflexive metaphor that Barbara Godard invokes in her essay “Structuralism/Post-Structuralism: Language, Reality, and Canadian Literature,” we might indeed think of her as Scheherazade: the quick yet fore-thinking heroine of discourse from *One Thousand and One Nights*, ever deferring her own finality and ever educating her enraptured audience. Godard’s name may ring bells for any scholar who has been even perfunctorily interested in the fields of women’s studies, feminist theory, literary theory, Canadian literature, Canadian studies, or translation studies in the past thirty years. She has published and presented widely, has been editorially active for numerous field publications, and has served her numerous academic communities through her membership, mentorship, and collaboration—and this is to say nothing of her specific work at and through York University, where she has taught since the early 1970s. It comes as a mild but pleasant surprise, then, that *Canadian Literature at the Crossroads of Language and Culture* is her first book, and indeed, an admirable attempt to ‘collect’ a critic and theorist who has worked very hard to avoid her own intellectual and political stasis.

These essays on literary and cultural theory selected by Smaro Kamboureli run the representative gamut of Godard’s interests between 1987 and 2005. Her theoretical concerns are generally post-structural, and they pursue what Godard herself notes as “the dual impetus of feminist criticism, deconstructive and reconstructive” (63).

Her significant body of work on Quebec (mostly women) writers and the poetics of translation is here represented in the essays “Critical Discourse in/on Quebec” and “A Literature in the Making: Rewriting and the Dynamism of the Cultural Field,” while her work on the cultural ‘gaps’ housing first-nations and aboriginal writing are evident in “Writing Between Cultures” and “The Politics of Representation: Some Native Canadian Women Writers.” Other notable essays such as “Deterritorializing Strategies: M. Nourbese Philip as Caucasianist Ethnographer” and “Notes From the Cultural Field: Canadian Literature from Identity to Commodity” serve as monuments to Godard’s interdisciplinarity as a scholar of the Humanities; the latter essay—perhaps her most widely known—traces the history of the literal and figurative governmentality of Canadian cultural nationalism from its roots in the Cold War to its present incarnation as a bargaining chip in the globalizing world of transnational capitalism. Similarly, the collection’s last (and most recent) essay, “Relational Logics: Of Linguistic and Other Transactions in the Americas,” works towards a theorization of the social and literary imaginaries of ‘the Americas’ (including Canada, Quebec, Mexico, Latin America), and examines what she cites as “an emergent hemispheric discourse” of publically macro/micromanaged diversity.

In addition to collating these essays into a single book, *Canadian Literature at the Crossroads of Language and Culture* offers a valuable gift in the lengthy

interview that Kamboureli conducts with Godard in lieu of an introduction. This conversation, which Kamboureli calls a “cultural memory document” (14), allows Godard to reflect on her own remarkable education: as a student of Malcolm Ross, Albert LeGrand, and Roland Barthes, as a young scholar roaming the halls of L’Université de Paris VIII, Vincennes, alongside Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze, as a co-worker of Hélène Cixous, and as a translator/interpreter for lectures by Luce Irigaray. But perhaps more importantly, the interview allows her to weigh in on the various institutionalizations of, within, and without Canadian Literature of which she has been both witness and agent, from her early experience as a graduate student laying the groundwork for the study of comparative Canadian Literature to her continuing role in engaging theory (semiotics, narratology, feminist theory, post-structuralism) in the fields of Canadian social and literary criticism. The role of the public intellectual and the social scholar is also a topic on which Godard does much opining; in lamenting the increasing corporatization of the university and the subsequent loss of collegiality and social commitment amongst faculty resulting from “the rise of careerism” (47), she resists the corporate turn by vehemently stressing the undeniable humanist connections between research, writing, teaching, and public citizenship that universities must begin again to heed if they are to maintain/regain their societal relevance.

As an introduction, the interview form is doubly appropriate in emphasizing the ethos of the essays that follow: that theory and criticism are never, should never, close or conclude, but that they should activate, remain, exalt, and revisit dialogue that remains open. It is no coincidence that the essay “Canadian? Literary? Theory?” ‘concludes’ in ellipsis Because of this regular deferral of conclusion Godard is not often an ‘easy’ theorist to read; her insistence on text-as-participation is palpable, so the interruptive typographical play characteristic of much post-structural textual (re)production enriches many of the essays by enacting their content. In explaining her title for the above essay, for example, she theorizes that “[i]nterrogatives insert gaps, interrupt the flow narrating the (im)possibility of Canadian theory Question mark, inserted to problematize, to frame this textual in(ter)vention as diacritical pro-ject, functions as substitute for the hyphen, trait d’union, which works (the) in-between incommensurable terms, the space of différend, shunting back and forth, separating, conflating Canadian/theory” (175, my ellipses). In this way, much of her writing itself “elides the boundaries between the creative and the critical act” (190) and manages to stress discontinuity over continuity in the face of totalizing institutional and economic forces. Godard’s focus on what she calls “breaks and becomings” (37) in reality, logic, narrative, nation, etc. come to characterize her theoretical gaze(s) across disciplines and genres—not as a celebration of chaos nor a hopeless concession, but rather as “a way of addressing crisis, of opening to adventure” (37) and of exploring how we might further account for literature as sociopolitical practice.

Godard’s work has long answered Frank Davey’s call for respectful contention in Canadian letters, as nearly all of the essays here begin or end as answers, responses, reactions, expansions, and refutations of the work of her peers. In the

still-often incestuous and overly familiar milieu of Canadian literary criticism, this book reminds us not only of the courage required to deconstruct the various systems and institutions which in fact support us as scholars, but of the critical citizen's responsibility so to do. Her deconstructive analyses of several of CanLit's theoretical master-narratives (by Northrop Frye, Linda Hutcheon, Robert Lecker, Robert Kroetsch, Kamboureli herself, and others) never negate the value and relevance of their subjects, but rather re-contextualize them, re-think them, re-place them, and most importantly, respect them as significant entities in the fluxing fields of CanCrit. Whether one considers oneself a postmodernist/post-structuralist/feminist/activist or not, there is no denying the importance of this book to the fields of Canadian Studies, Literary Theory, and Women's Studies. The seemingly long wait for *Canadian Literature at the Crossroads of Language and Culture* is sure to be nothing compared to the shelf-life that it will certainly have. And yes, a critical book with staying power seems immediately oxymoronic. But like Bakhtin, from whom Godard has learned much, this is theoretical criticism that insists upon moving, mutating, repeating itself with difference, and making its intellectual activity contingent upon its readers, where/whenever they may engage with it.

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