TWENTIETH CENTURY CANADIAN SCINCE FICTION: AN ANALYTICAL NOTE ON CERTAIN DOMINANT THEMES

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Abstract: *Modern science fiction being overwhelmingly an American phenomenon, a distinctive Canadian model or tradition that could be contrasted with the American one emerged only during the last couple of decades. The delayed flowering of science fiction and fantasy in the Canadian literary context is often attributed to a certain atrophy of the fantastic imagination in Canada. Yet, the rare appearance of 'science fictional flights' in pre-Second World War Canlit is best ascribed not to the aridity of the fantastic imagination, but to the fact that the preponderance of works that constitute the 'canon' of Canadian fiction are realistic or naturalistic. Such a marginalization of the fantastic mode appears to be the direct consequence of holding realistic and naturalistic paradigms as effective tools of nationalism.*

Key words *: science fiction, Canadian fiction, nationalism*

CANADIAN SCIENCE FICTION

In her article titled, "Canadian Monsters," Margaret Atwood speaks of this design:

> Canadian fiction on the whole confines itself to ordinary life on middle earth...[In] a cultural colony a lot of effort must go into simply naming and describing observed realities, into making the visible real for those who actually live there. Not much energy is left over for exploring other, invisible realms. (*The Canadian Imagination* 99)

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Obviously the attainment of these targeted goals motivates Canadian literature to turn increasingly to various non-realistic and metafictional forms—which frequently include or approximate, science fiction and fantasy. Despite such a favorable swing, Canadian literary environment appears to be more inhospitable to science fiction in comparison with the nurturing American one.

The enormous output of science fiction in the United States is obviously related to the emphasis placed on research and development in science and technology. The opposite situation in Canada—the tendency to rely on the research and development of others—has surely discouraged the production of Canadian science fiction. In addition, Canada's strong conservative political tradition regards, with deep suspicion, change (the new, the different, the alien, the other, etc.,) which both science fiction and fantasy demand. It is also true that being such an essentially typical American product, the more nationalistic of Canada's writers have every reason to eschew science fiction. Interestingly, America's aggressive attitude towards nature and the unknown, whatever lay west of the ever-advancing frontier, translates readily into the mythology of conquering and domesticating the unknown that finds expression in much science fiction. Conversely, the Canadian attitude prompts, in Atwoodian terms, the image of a vast, threatening, and powerful nature which makes man a victim who is not only incapable of conquest but has to struggle even for survival (*Survival* 31). Evidently such a climate works against the motivating principles of science fiction and probably makes the pre-war Canadian science fiction output negligible. Yet, Donald A. Wollheim who writes off Canadian science fiction as "an undetectable segment," in a December 1942 article titled "Whither Canadian Fantasy?" makes a prophetic observation that Canadian science fiction is like "the untapped Canadian North...still to be exploited." *Destination: Out of this World*, a comprehensive bibliography of Canadian science fiction and fantasy brought out by the National Library of Canada, furnishes the statistical data which proves that this prediction attains fulfilment by the 1970s and 80s. Several titles listed in *Destination* have not only remained for long in the list of Best Sellers but have also helped in shaping a distinctly Canadian 'tradition' or 'canon'.

Incidentally the same inhibiting factors which once stunted the growth of science fiction appear to have prepared the springboard for the genre in Canada, during its period of emergence as a serious literary

endeavour. The inadequate progress in the field of science and technology, and the feeling of being "victimized," when coupled with the Cold War political climate and the suspicions about the intentions of the Untied States, create a sense of impending catastrophe in the Canadian mind. Somewhat like an individual who has a totally illogical tendency to make of his death a universal event, a threatened society too has a tendency to confuse the approaching disaster with the disappearance of civilization and even with the end of history and all humanity. Under the circumstances, Canadian creative writers become obsessed with the vision of universal destruction. Obviously, while the mainstream writers in Canada continue to prefer the familiar orbits around the twin poles of realism and naturalism to communicate this vision, their counterparts in a sub-stream like science fiction seem to have turned increasingly to the concepts of apocalypse and entropy, recognizing in them the potential to translate their fears. In this context, the varied manifestation of apocalyptic and entropic impulses in the Canadian science fiction produced during the three decades of its 'establishment' deserve more critical attention.

The concepts of apocalypse and entropy allow clear-cut categorizations at the theoretical level. In simplistic terms, both these concepts attempt to describe the end of the world. But they also contradict each other in several other ways—apocalypse is metaphysical, based on moral and religious distinction, and promises violent destruction (with a 'bang' in Eliotean phraseology) followed by regeneration; entropy is physical, based on indifferent scientific laws, and brings about slow but irreversible decay (which Eliot figuratively calls 'whimper'). But the literary manifestations of these concepts as seen in Phyllis Gotlieb, Hugh MacLennan, Wayland Drew, and so on, go beyond the prescriptive transparency and blur the sharp distinction of individual categories.

APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

The key figure during the 'establishment' period of Canadian science fiction is undeniably Phyllis Gotlieb. According to David Ketterer, "from the sixties to the early eighties Phyllis Gotlieb was Canadian SF. From a purist point of view, she may still be" (*Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy* 67). Significantly, all the three novels which won fame for Gotlieb and declared the arrival of a Canadian tradition in science fiction, are apocalyptic

in nature. *Sunburst* (1964), Gotlieb's first novel repeatedly focuses on certain images which tally perfectly with many of the "apocalyptic moments" identified by R.W.B. Lewis in *Trials of the Word* (196). In his work, Lewis interprets the most conspicuous symbols of *the Book of Revelation* and lists ten phases of the apocalyptic process. The most indispensable ones, among these—the destruction of (the book's) world by violent means, the battle between 'the forces of light and the powers of darkness', and the appearance of the 'new heaven and earth' —appear to constitute the fulcrum of *Sunburst*.

Beginning with the explosion of a nuclear reactor in the year 1994, the novel reveals Gotlieb's deep conviction of decadence and prophetic confidence of renovation. The focal event of the novel takes place in the year 2024, in Sorrel Park, an isolated midwestern town. Following the nuclear explosion in the vicinity, forty-seven children are born with diverse telepathic ("psi") powers and markedly delinquent tendencies. Now confined to a compound known as Dump, these mutant 'Dumplings' are the object of both fear and official investigation. Using their preternatural powers, the Dumplings break out of their sanctuary and threaten to destroy a computer bank which controls half the world. Their attempts are thwarted by Shandy, a precocious thirteen-year-old girl who is impervious to the mind-reading powers of the Dumplings. Though the plot summary of *Sunburst* reads exactly like that of an American pulp, it gets elevated from the realm of pulp SF because of its subtle handling of the apocalyptic strain.

While the popular religious conception of the apocalypse germinates from the belief in positive new worlds elsewhere and elsewhen, Sunburst offers a secularized apocalyptic vision which stems from the notion of the end of the world as something instigated by man. As Ketterer observes in *New Worlds for Old*, "In a very real sense, the atomic bomb completed the process of secularization that apocalyptic thinking has undergone since medieval times' (94). The apocalypse in Gotlieb is actualized through powerful metaphors—the most effective among these is evidently the 'sunburst' metaphor which operates on several levels. The metaphor refers most obviously to the reactor explosion, which, in destructive power, approximates the dimensions of the biblical apocalypse as drawn in the Book of Revelation (20: 9-15). It also articulates aptly, the physical devastation on the individual and social planes. Shandy's father, a physical wreck of a man, carries on his back, "A sunburst with twisting rays of exploded scar, and between the rays thick brown keloids; with a humped center of ruined

flesh, cracked and oozing" (30). The later reference to the Dump as a "Sore...to be opened up" (42), equates the Dump with Shandy's father's oozing 'sunburst', and the name Sorrel Park which has the resonances of the colour sorrel (reddish brown) implies that the town itself is a further exploded version of the same scar.

In *Sunburst*, as in most apocalyptic literature, along with the possibility of the destruction of the world, one finds the conflict between the forces of light and the powers of darkness. Shandy and her four morally responsible "psi" friends fight against the delinquent, mesomorphic Dumplings. True to the apocalyptic spirit, order and justice win out in the end in Sunburst, through Shandy, the saviour figure. She alone remains impervious to the mind-reading, telepathic, telekinetic powers of the Dumplings; and exhibits a high moral sensitivity. In a world moving towards retrogression and chaos, Shandy represents an oasis. It is in such small advances in civilization that Gotlieb recognizes the possible 'new heaven and earth'.

Gotlieb's continued preoccupation with the same theme and pattern becomes evident in *Heart of Red Iron* (1989). Dahlgren, the scientist who creates ergs suffers the consequences of the vengeful retaliation of the machines. His son Seven is born a mutant (with four arms) when the renegade machine ergs tamper with his genetic structure. In the novel, despite the nightmarish experiences the humans have to endure, what results is human survival and machine defeat. Significantly, the survival in Gotlieb's novels has a distinct Canadian flavour. While survival in American literary texts occasions wild jubilation, in Canadian literary as well as social milieu (as noted by Atwood), "The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival" (*Survival* 33). Such bare survivals characterize Gotlieb's science fiction and set the tone and stance of apocalyptic science fiction in Canada.

The process of secularization of apocalypse takes a new turn with Jim Willer's *Paramind* (1973). Unlike Gotlieb who defines apocalypse only in terms of the fight between the forces of good and evil, and attempts to chalk out a credible process of rebirth, Willer seems to associate apocalypse with the "sense of the end". In *Paramind* computers take over the world and subvert the political system which makes possible a government by the people for the people. During the first stage of the cataclysmic changes drawn in *Paramind* what gets realized is a government by the machine for the people, but inevitably the computers aim for a government "by the machine, for the machine." In the novel the effect of impending apocalypse is achieved by

conveying to the readers the sense of the immediacy of destruction. The credibility of this process is enhanced through the association of the imminent disaster with the readers' prejudices and perceptions about machines and technology.

Among the novels shaped by apocalyptic imagination in the 70s' Matt Cohen's *The Colours of War* (1977) appears to occupy an important place. In the novel, Canada and the United States are in a state of civil disorder. Food and fuel shortages, corrupt governments, armed forces in the streets and outbreaks of violence are just some of the "colours of war" which Cohen identifies. Obviously, in *The Colours of War* the apocalyptic transformation results from the creation of a new condition, based upon a process of extrapolation and analogy. If (as stated by Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending*) "Apocalypse depends on a concord of imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicted future" (8), *The Colours of War* easily meets the necessary requirement.

The tendency to actualize what might be termed as an epistemological or philosophical apocalypse, is occasionally seen in Canadian science fiction. According to David Ketterer, in science fiction, philosophical apocalypse can be made possible in three ways: "by presenting a radically different image of man, by pointing to the existence of a previously unsuspected outside manipulator, and thirdly, by radically altering man's vision of human reality" (*New Worlds* 81). Hélène Holden's *After the Fact* (1986) and Monica Hughes' *Invitation to the Game* (1992) appear to follow Ketterer's third privileged path. In *After the Fact*, Holden attempts to find out just 'what happens to a civilization after a major catastrophe when all attempted standards are questioned'. The novel emphatically establishes that the human race would revert to a primitive state. What is envisaged by Holden is an apocalyptic transformation tuned according to the mythic structure of death and rebirth, for which the cycle of the seasons is the model.

The privileged position of apocalypse in Canadian science fiction of the 1980s probably facilitates the entry and gradual elevation of entropy to the position of a controlling metaphor. Despite being a related concept, entropy remains precluded from the Canadian literary scene till this period, owing to the strong hold of realism on Canlit. Apocalyptic art, deeply rooted in Western culture and tradition easily reconciles with the principles of realism, even when it contradicts some of realism's more stringent rules. Entropy, on the other hand, is not so much a mode, or style, as a basically

different way of perceiving one's raison d'être, teleology, and the meaning of the world around us—none of which could be expressed without violating basic principles of realism. Canadian science fiction, therefore, begins to show an increased interest in entropy only at a time when realism is at low ebb. In addition, while the progressive recession of the nuclear threat makes apocalyptic visions look anachronistic, growing dependency on scientific principles to explain the fate of the universe makes entropic visions relatively rational.

VOICES IN TIME

Hugh MacLennan's *Voices in Time* (1981) becomes extremely significant in this context. It is not only an ambitious excursion into science fiction by a mainstream Canadian writer, but also a serious exploration into the possibilities offered by the concept of entropy. In the novel, MacLennan interweaves the voices, set like flies in amber, of three men who represent three different generations. The principal pattern in the novel is woven by the voice of John Wellfleet, whose family history is reconstructed from papers found in the post-nuclear-holocaust ruins of Montreal. Wellfleet's older cousin, Timothy, host of Montreal Television's current affairs show invites the old, frail Conrad Dehmel, Wellfleet's stepfather, to appear on his sensationalistic show and then wrongly accuses him of being a Nazi. As a result, Dehmel is assassinated by a concentration camp survivor. MacLennan seems to conclude that, "murder of truth led to the murder of people" (120), and finally to the destruction of a civilization. Such an 'intelligible' summary of the novel fails to bring out some of its deeper thematic and conceptual currents.

Viewed from the temporal parameters, *Voices in Time* appears to move freely in time and space, regardless of the ensuing confusion. Beginning in 2039, two decades after the "Destructions," the novel drops back to the late 1960s' shuttles to 1909, then back to 1918-19, resumes in 1932, and continues in Germany until 1945. After returning to 2039, the sequence more or less reverses itself. The narrative thus apparently jars our sense of reality and presents a hypnotized world under the reign of entropy.

The dominance of entropy becomes more obvious in *Voices in Time* when the protagonist looks back on the events in Nazi Germany and Quebec that have culminated in his shattered twenty-first-century world, and identifies two crucial phases in history—the destructive eras of feminist

ascendancy and the constructive eras of moral order and masculinist ascendancy. Both the destructive as well as the constructive phases in the novel appear to represent tendencies which trigger entropy, when read in close conjuntion with the explications of the concept given by Planck and Arnheim. While Max Planck argues that, it is "the hypothesis of elementary disorder, which forms the real kernel of the principle of increase of entropy and, therefore the preliminary condition for the existence of entropy" (*Eight Lectures* 50), Rudolf Arnheim adds that "the increase of entropy is due to...a striving towards simplicity, which will promote orderliness and the lowering of the level of order" (*Entropy and Art* 52). In their final effect these two tendencies amount to the same thing: one would feel equally lost in a totally chaotic environment, where no two elements are in an orderly relation with each other, and in an environment consisting only of uniform elements, where the surplus of orderliness would render all differentiation impossible.

TOLERABLE LEVELS OF VIOLENCE

Robert G. Collins' *Tolerable Levels of Violence* (1983) is another work of the 80s with obvious entropic overtones. The plot outline of the novel reads like that of a popular thriller. In the novel civilized values have broken down, in 1999, to the point where a daily violence rating is as normal as a weather forecast. On many days it is wise to stay barricaded in one's home. The novel opens in a rural setting west of Ottawa with the protagonist John Cobbett, an English professor at National University, burying a thug. Mrs. Cobbett shot the man, a member of one of many marauding gangs at large in North America, after she caught him attempting to rape her nine year old son. Now Cobbett must defend his home against gang retaliation.

The fictional world encountered in *Tolerable Levels of Violence* is thus a terrifying one because in it all social order has collapsed and violence unleashed. People who populate this terrain feel the pressure to turn themselves into 'isolated systems': "they take in a decreasing amount of information, sensory data, even food" (32). Yet, isolation, instead of guaranteeing survival offers only slow disintegration and death. The Second Law of Thermodynamics which states unequivocally that 'the entropy of a closed system must increase' perhaps leads to a better understanding of *Tolerable Levels of Violence* in which the society undergoes gradual decay and disintegration.

THE GAIAN EXPEDIENT

An entropic vision of similar nature is seen in Wayland Drew's *The Gaian Expedient* (1985). Drew's novel explores the fictional potential of James E. Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis which attempts to establish that "the entire range of living matter on earth constitutes a single living entity [called Gaia], capable of manipulating the earth's atmosphere to suit its overall needs" (*Gaia* 9). Some of the nightmares of Lovelock get actualised in *The Gaian Expedient*. According to Lovelock, if "Gaia's intelligence network and intricate system of checks and balances [are] totally destroyed, there would be no going back...[A] planet that broke all the rules, would fall soberly into line, in barren steady state, between its dead brother and sister, Mars and Venus" (*Gaia* 46). In the novel, unrestricted exploitation of nature speeds up the process of entropy and by the end of the twentieth century, civilization disintegrates leaving only a hidden colony on the remains of Canada's west coast. But after nearly a hundred years, the slow but steady forces of entropy catch up, making decay and dissolution of the physical world inescapable.

Entropy at the level of human factor can sometimes mean gradual reduction from the animate to the inanimate. In the title story of Andrew Weiner's *Distant Signals* (1989), the destruction and the eventual dumping of human beings become a significant symbolic representation of the entropic process. 'D street' in the fictional world of Weiner is the place where people are deleted at the touch of a button. Here people are quickly forgotten because a bus—"the exit mechanism"—changes the social mix and extinguishes the human identity. The story makes evident the possible dehumanizing effects of technology—the valorization of "things" over people and the consequent objectification—which lead to entropy.

CONCLUSION

The proliferation of science fiction in Canada, during the post-1960 period, appears to be a response to abruptly changing social conditions. Being the product of a social milieu which is in a state of flux, science fiction becomes a genre better equipped to meet the challenges and demands of rational living and serves as a vehicle to express the hopes, fears and aspirations of a people. Hence the successive appearance of apocalypse and entropy in Canadian science fiction during its period of 'establishment' apparently remains in correspondence with the dominance of a sense of impending destruction and an ever-present feeling of menace in Canadian

consciousness and literature. Though apocalypse and entropy originated in different conceptual frameworks and have different overall meanings, in Canadian science fiction, they become literary metaphors with an analogous effect: of projecting a sense of loss and danger. The continued presence of such visions in Canadian literature can thus provide a significant insight into the process of shaping the Canadian mind.

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